



## Sundaram's *Min Piyasi (The Fish is Thirsty)*: The agony of social discrepancy

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### Abstract

Tribhuvandas P. Luhar (1908-1991) is well-known through his pen name 'Sundaram' in literary world. Sundaram was a celebrated poet, critic and prose writer of Gandhian era in Gujarati literature. Sundaram's *Min Piyasi (The Fish is Thirsty)* is a story of an old man, who is forced to leave his village because of poverty and the materialistic approach of his gambler son. Sundaram's short stories reflect the rural and urban consciousness on the mixed facets of Gandhian philosophy and advancement. His prime aim seems to represent human nature and the disordered movement of destiny essentially. The hypocrisy of urban culture, issue of generation gap, etc. have been vividly manifested in the story. The story focuses on an interesting note of religious and devotee of God, who ultimately receives emancipation in the form of death from worldly pains after facing the entanglement of life.

**Keywords:** social discrepancy, Gandhian philosophy, materialistic attitude, devotion, senselessness, agony, advancement

### Introduction

Tribhuvandas P. Luhar (1908-1991) is well-known through his pen name 'Sundaram' in literary world. Sundaram was a celebrated poet, critic and a prose writer of Gandhian era in Gujarati literature. He received a number of prestigious awards like Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak in 1934 for *Kavyamangala*, Narmad Gold Medal in 1955 for his poetry collection *Yatra* and Mahida Prize in 1946 for criticism. He was also awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for Gujarati writers in 1968 for his work of criticism, *Avalokan* and Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award in 1985.

The first phase of Sundaram's literary writings started when India's freedom struggle against British hegemony was carried out in India. He also took part in that movement actively and faced jail, hence known as *satyagrahi*. Afterward, while his stay in Aurobindo Ashram Pandicherry, he shifted towards mysticism and spiritual development. The distinguished Gujarati poet Umashankar Joshi was his contemporary; hence Sundaram is often compared with Umashankar for his excellence in creative writings. Sundaram wrote about 57 short stories in his entire literary career. His short stories are integrated in total five collections entitled *Hirakani Ane Biji Vato* (1938), *Kholki Ane Nagarika* (1939), *Piyasi* (1940), *Unnayan* (1945) and *Tarini* (1977).

Sundaram confesses that he has been 'attracted towards short story' always and it has remained a 'distinctive experience' to him'. He is of the view that 'Muktak ( ) can be written in one line, but story cannot be made of single line' (Dave 29). He very frankly confesses that 'the internal fear that he felt while writing the first story, the same he feels intensely while writing the last one. The fear is that of intricate art of story'. He thinks that it has provision to occur mistake to a large extent that it should be considered a grace of art at that moment if story is written successfully (Dave 29). Sundaram's short stories reflect the rural and urban consciousness on the mixed facets of Gandhian philosophy and advancement. His

prime aim seems to represent human nature and the disordered movement of destiny essentially.

Sundaram's *Min Piyasi (The Fish is Thirsty)* is a story about an old man who is forced to leave his village because of poverty and the materialistic approach of his gambler son. The old man is a folk singer, though he used to sing devotional songs (Bhajans) not for earning livelihood, but for the self-satisfaction in the village. His favourite profession turns him towards tragic mode in his life. His son forces him to sing before the public in the city and please them to earn money.

The story entitled *Min Piyasi*, despite its loose structure, remains impressive from literary point of view. The characters of this story are shown suffering intense thirst, excited and longing for something. The wretched plight of an old man remains appealing factor of this story. He says to God: "My Lord! What days have you brought for me? There must be something wanting in my devotion. That is why you have flung me in this flaming fire" (206). He prays to God to relieve him from that painful task. The story begins with contradiction. On one hand the writer depicts the senselessness materialized from social activities of urban people towards the religion-centered mentality of old man while on the other hand the old man's yearning for village and God. He seems to worn out by affliction at both ends. The urban culture seems to him money-centered where emotions, devotion or any interesting human activity have no place. Such attitude of urban people seems rather absurd. The agony is that this city doesn't seem honest enough to confess the absence of sensibility. The urban people show that they are more interested in the devotional songs sung by old man, but all seem a mere hypocrisy. Their interest to listen devotional songs is meant only for entertainment. The mere curiosity of civilized people attracts them towards an old man. The writer aims at introducing the people like an old man's son seeking benefits of worldliness under the name of divinity. The people in place of worshipping the divine power seem interested only

in gaining something out of it. The divine and pure element like Bhakti devotion has been attached with the dirty aim and applied to seek comforts is a tragic part of this story. The old man's consciousness towards such attitude of selfish people remains an integral part portrayed artistically in the entire narrative. The old man's agony towards harsh attitude of this materialistic world seems a type of value paid. The writer has drawn a picture of an arrival of old man and his family in a city to earn their livelihood. To that old man singing before public is new and first experience. Though, he seems fully merged in his songs. His son has introduced him before the people to earn money only and not for any divine purpose, expose the naked facets of meanness of society.

The writer seems to satirize the urban culture unknowingly. A couple of young men talk on the revival of art. They wish to catch the photographs of invaluable art. In order to improve or uplift the status of art and artists, the civilized people do not have any concrete scheme, but these people show their mere sympathy. The hypocrisy of urban culture has been manifested through this event in the story: "What art is lying hidden in our villages!... That art should be saved... what a performance they gave...(186). They show their feeling that they are the people to realize and patronize art.

The pain of an old man is that he is forced to leave his native place and involve his two grand-daughters in the profession of singing to earn their livelihood. He loves his grand-daughters too much hence consider himself a criminal because they are victimized under the name of devotion. When his son trains the old man and the girls in order to beat the others, the old man advises him: "You can do anything with me. But you shall not turn these girls into street dancers. I don't care even if we have to starve!" (195) He seems to repent over his sin and shows his affection and tenderness towards them. He is helpless to trade his divine profession.

The helpless old man thinks that if one of his sons would have been alive, he would not have to suffer much. One of his sons dies due to the lightning that struck his field. He reminds his son that he shouldn't be so greedy. God will protect them. However, his son shows his anger in response that if God is protecting them, then why they are made homeless and landless beggar. The son who brings him to a city was a gambler earlier. Hence, he lost everything in a village including house and a land. The profession he accepts in a city was once a matter of glory and devotion to an old man. He was singing the devotional songs of God and used to offer Prasad every time and not to earn anything from people while his stay in a village. The old man suffers a lot when of his son dies in a mishaps and another involves in a gambling. One can judge the pain and sense of detachment of old man have been generated because of such history.

The old man wishes to sing devotional song in order to please the Almighty and receives his blessing to relieve him from worldly pains. Though, he is placed in a wretched predicament to use his art of singing to earn livelihood. He is caught in a do or die predicament. The writer seems to compare his position with a fish that lives in water, yet thirsty of water. He finds only two solutions: either God can survive him or death can end his misery. He wishes that the electricity running through wires fall upon him so that he would soon be at his feet. The

dramatic conflict of this character is felt thoroughly in the story. The son often scolds him 'to be careful while singing'. The old man remains the victim of such intolerable and unwilling situation. He is shown dragged forcefully in that plight. He cannot resist the wretched plight is a pity because the cause of his agony is his own son. The writer manifests such irony of the old man vividly.

The dreaming technique in the story represents the nostalgia of an old man for rural life. He feels thirsty because he sings the devotional songs with full dedication. Sundaram extends the plot by adding the episode of singing devotional songs at the rich man's bungalows' where old man with his group is invited. To the greedy son of old man this programme seems like a festival since he thinks of receiving more money from that merchant. He is eager to reach at the place and keeps all the instruments of singing in a ready position. The writer introduces the car, bungalows, carpet, glasses of cold water, electric fan, and dish full of Prasad to highlights the luxurious lifestyle of rich people. The entire environment makes the old man upset when he sees all this pomp of royal culture. He imagines how was his world of devotional songs, his native village, the little stars shining in the sky at night, and the liberty of his favourite profession and now this suffocating urban world. Now it's impossible for him to return his native land hence to come out of this wretched plight and meets the death. This part of the narrative seems the first immediate incident towards death of an old man.

The death of an old man is not an accidental, but seems to develop since the beginning of the story. He dies every moment since he was forcefully engaged in trading devotional songs. His gradual dying has already been in force since his son assigns him that unwilling task of earning livelihood. Prior to his physical death, he was completely broken by heart since he left his village. The writer justifies the fact that involvement of self in an unwilling task is no more than a death to old man.

The writer shows the justification of the title of story through the thirsty fish that live in the water yet remains thirsty, similarly the old man in the end gets thirsty, in spite of plenty water around, he cannot satisfy his thirst. He says to God that there is so much of water all around. The roads have been washed. In the wombs of this earth there are tanks and tanks of water, and there are ponds filled to the brain."Even in water the fish is thirsty. And, when he sees it, he can laugh only (207). He thinks that 'should I curse the world? Even, when a little girl says to him: Grandpa, shall I sing "Even in water the fish is thirsty?" The old man feels both the question and its answer are now very clear to him. While giving his consent, the old man adds that 'take it in any sense, but these words of Kabir are true' (207).

Sundaram as a storyteller has manifested his strength and limitation in this story. The variety of issue occurred in that era for example upliftment, symbolism, affection towards poor people and anger against the evils and hypocrite courtesy of urban culture and love for rural culture: everything has been exposed here. The story focuses on an interesting note of religious and devotee of God, who ultimately receives emancipation in the form of death only from worldly pain after facing entanglement of life.

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