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## "Class Division and Class Struggle: A Critique of Punjab 1984"

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to depict the representation of class in the visual narrative Punjab 1984 directed by Anurag Singh. It underscores the existence of classes in society through the inherent class conflict and power structure. It confirms the overpowering influence and authority of dominant classes which leads to the elimination of a rebellious element at the end of the narrative.

### **Introduction**

The word 'class' denotes the division of society on the basis of the financial status of people. The root word of 'class' is the Latin *classis*. 'Class' was included in the English language in the seventeenth century with the development of capitalism. The economy that existed before capitalism was feudal in nature, which was marked by a hierarchical relationship between landlord and tenant. However, the capitalist economy had production or manufacture as its basis with a momentary relation between employers and employees. 'Class' is concerned with basic changes in the economy and the impact of those changes on relations in society. With the changing times, the word has started connoting social difference or conflict among classes in society. Class' also implies a group of phenomena with similar characteristics. It refers to a collection of shared economic, political and cultural features. Marxists, Weberians and many sociologists agreed on the point that class has an economic basis i.e. its foundations are situated in the economic sphere. The development of the society from the ancient times to the modern ones can also be analysed as the progress of feudalism into capitalism which finally evolved into socialism. The huge change from feudalism to capitalism is caused due to the existence and efforts of the bourgeoisie. And the evolution from capitalism to socialism is primarily due to the industrial proletariat (created due to factory production by industrial bourgeoisie). Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max

Weber (1864-1920) have made the most elaborate and influential commentaries on the category of class.

Karl Marx's perusal and analysis of 'Class' involved the scientific examination of the economic basis of classes and the relations of conflict between them. He understands classes in the context of their relation to the means of production. He makes a bipartite division of the society into the categories: The Capitalist and the Proletariat. The capitalists own the means of production and the proletariat is employed by the capitalist for wage or salary. They do not own anything other than their labour power. With the advancement in industrialisation, the hold of the capitalists on wealth and power would also expand. The proletariat or the working class would only expand in terms of size and thus, undergo exceeding poverty. Thus, Marx's analysis of social classes is fundamentally in the context of the system of production. Further, Marx identifies class consciousness in the working class which makes the workers aware of their rights and empowers them to protest. They form unions to collectively discuss common interests and work towards common goals. The economic circumstances of a society form the group of people into workers who unite on the basis of common situations and motives. Class conflict or struggle between classes originates in the unity of workers who collectively reject the capitalist system and start a revolution. The social classes are basically economic groups and class hierarchy is maintained by the inequality in the income of the various classes. Generally, there are three social classes in society- the upper, middle, and lower classes. The upper class comprises the owners of capital, the middle class consists of people into varied professions, and the lower class is composed of the workers. According to Karl Marx, the conflict between these classes forms the basis of society. The society evolves due to the class struggle that generates friction among classes. In addition, the owners of the means of production possess the power to decide or alter the character of a society. An individual is born into a particular class i.e. the class his family belongs to. In his lifetime, he has the freedom to alter his class. According to his peculiar circumstances, he may move above or below his class i.e. he may attain a lower or higher status due to his economic status, which is determined by his occupation. A person has the chance to better his class with his consistent and systematic efforts.

### **Analysis**

The film presents the harassment and exploitation of the common people of Punjab through the life-story of Shivjeet Singh, and his mother Satwant Kaur. It underscores the maltreatment of the lower-class survivors and victims at the hands of upper-class perpetrators. The exploiters possess the power to dominate, manipulate, and compel the sufferers according to their will.

The protagonist belongs to the class of farmers who possess moderate means. They have a decent house, use public transport for commuting from one place to another, and own disputed property. The family has a comfortable lifestyle with no desire to acquire more. Earlier, the father tills their land for earning a sufficient income in exchange of the produce. After his father's death, Shivjeet leaves college and starts farming. It is the need of the hour as he is the only earning member now. And he, probably, knows that this will be his ultimate

calling. They are contented with their resources. The son is aware of his property rights, and would not let any intruder claim even a small piece of his land (*Punjab 1984* 0:22:55-24:06).

In fact, most of the people who are in one way or the other at the receiving end of the violence, belong to the farming community. When the film begins, the group of pilgrims huddled in a room waiting for the cross-fire to cease, also seem to belong to a similar class (*Punjab 1984* 0:02:42-03:50). This could be intentional on the part of the director to depict the fact that the people from the middle or lower classes were the most affected by the tumultuous times. This is because they could be suitably oppressed by the upper classes. With limited means and influence, they were already at a disadvantage which was sufficiently exploited by the ones in authority.

In addition, the people protesting after operation Blue Star also seem to come from similar households (*Punjab 1984* 0:31:20-32:22). This hints at the religious leanings of these people which are more pronounced than those of people with more resources. They are so pained at the destruction caused to Harmandir Sahib that they want to visit the holy place right away. This emotional attachment to a place of worship is characteristic of such a class. It underscores their firm belief system and spiritual values. They are even ready to risk their lives for the Gurdwara. It is only when the police fires shots to threaten them that they are forced to retrace their steps. Unfortunately, these are the very people who got caught inside the Gurdwara during the operation and were later labelled as terrorists to complete official lists. The red stamp on such lists indicates the finality of the decisions taken by the authorities. Their religious fervor was intentionally as well as wrongly equated with militant tendencies (*Punjab 1984* 0:33:24-58). They, who were ready to sacrifice themselves for the holy place, were declared a threat to the sanctity of the place.

Jagdev Singh alias Jagga joins hands with a police official Deep Singh Rana to oppress Shivjeet and his family. The disputed land is under trial at the court of law but Jagga wants to intimidate Shivjeet so that, Jagga is able to win the case and acquire the land. Shivjeet and Jagga belong to similar class but Jagga alleviates his authority by taking Deep Singh's help. He has to move across classes (socially) in order to gain that strength. His power magnifies when he has the support of Deep Singh whom he lures with undue favours like liquor (*Punjab 1984* 1:41:43-53). Interestingly, Jagga wants to acquire the land for want of more resources which bears testimony to his urge for social mobility. He wants to be financially stronger, and does not mind befriending people above his class or authority. Deep Singh unlawfully arrests Shivjeet, tortures him, and wants to murder him for promotion. Shivjeet is forced to admit to the crime he did not commit or to let Jagga have the land through the use of physical harassment. He is subjected to physical torture of varying degrees and varieties (*Punjab 1984* 1:05:00-06:30). The state thus, indulges in repressive apparatuses to exercise control over him. Somehow, Shivjeet manages to escape the clutches of the police, and recognises the cause of the radicals as his own. He is in a vulnerable state at that time, and gets influenced by the revolutionary mindset of the movement.

Shivjeet's mother visits one Darshan Singh Bhoopuria who is known to

look for the missing youth at his own level and expense. He enjoys a good public image of being a savior in times of distress. He is extremely good at influencing, sweet-mouthing, and manipulating innocent people, and is comparatively quite well off. He has a palatial house, abundant resources, and the authority to exploit people's emotions (*Punjab 1984* 0:47:55-49:41). In reality, he exploits impressionable minds and makes them function as pawns for getting back or eliminating his opposition. In fact, he is planning to take advantage of the movement as well. He appears to be quite close to the pivotal point of the radicals' movement. He knows the ways and means to turn things and situations to his advantage. He threatens Satwant to discontinue the search for her son through Deep Singh Rana, gets Dhidwandi killed by Shivjeet's accomplice, wants to cause widespread by blasting bombs in buses, and even plans to rule over Khalistan if it ever comes into existence.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the youth who join the radicals also come from similar households. They are the ones whom police illegally harasses in police station compelling them to get influenced by the radicals. This brings to light the vicious cycle of the exploitation of such classes, the escape of the youth, their joining the movement, and taking suitable revenge, and finally, figuring on the list of wanted militants. In a way, this system of dominance and subversion bred militant ideas in impressionable minds. The youth of such classes was targeted because it was easier to exploit the already oppressed. The radicals or their representatives employed ideas, emotions, and sympathies to affect the ideology of the youth. They preached about the atrocities they have endured due to the system. Incidentally, the atrocities committed on most of the youth were similar in nature. This united them in sorrow and sympathy. The radicals took advantage of this fact. They would make the recruits imagine a prosperous and liberated world which can be created only with their efforts of eliminating all the obstacles. They, thus, employed ideological apparatuses to form militants of innocent young boys and men. In the words of Louis Althusser, "No class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the state ideological apparatuses"(146).

Such movements function like well-oiled machines until the recruits continue accomplishing tasks in the name of faith and honour. Once they start thinking about the repercussions of their actions, they become useless for the movement. This implies that this system interpellates the youth to discourage them from thinking about any alternative to such movements. The youth has been already tortured by the authorities to such an extent that they start believing in the lost cause of the movement. They are in a way taking revenge for all the harassment they have been subjected to. Such movements seem to be the only way of getting back at the authorities. When Shivjeet and his friend Jagtaar are on a mission to blast a bus and its passengers just to terrorise the authorities, he finds his mother sitting in the same bus. This is when he realises the consequences of his deeds. He understands that this path or way of hurting common people for answering back to the authorities is not justified. He corrects his decision by removing the bombs from the bus. This is when their superior Sukhdev Singh remarks that these pawns are of no use now. They have started thinking on their own (*Punjab 1984* 2:03:25-50). When Shivjeet observes a tussle between Darshan

Singh Bhoopuria, and Dhidwandi on ideological terms, he sides with Bhoopuria. He is sent on a mission to eliminate Dhidwandi. When he's about to kill the spiritual man, he realises his mistake and is not able to fire a shot. Dhidwandi's religious belief awakens Shivjeet out of the imposed stupor. He understands that he's killing the wrong person, so, he stops (*Punjab 1984* 2:11:51-13:02). His accomplice, however, kills the man in front of his eyes. This is another instance which confirms the fact that Shivjeet has begun to comprehend the movement and its cause way too well.

Towards the end of the visual narrative, Shivjeet realizes he has been used by the radicals as a pawn to achieve their personal gains. He punishes them by killing both the superior and Darshan Singh Bhoopuria (*Punjab 1984* 2:19:57-20:51). He refuses to remain just a puppet in the hands of such manipulators. By now, his hatred for Deep Singh Rana has reached an undefined level. It is for the exploitation he experienced due to the police official. Before returning home, he murders Rana as well. These two episodes could be the beginning of a change, a revolution. Marxist criticism predicted the culmination of unending oppression on the proletariat by the bourgeois in a revolution by the working class to overthrow the system. Shivjeet kills the oppressors, and gets killed before entering his home (*Punjab 1984* 2:33:52). This could be an abrupt end to an initiated change in the society. He's killed by Jeeti's husband who is a police officer, and is aware that Shivjeet is a wanted criminal. In a way, this action also highlights that the upper classes will always exercise dominance, power, and control over the other classes. All the efforts put in by such classes will be in vain due to the authority that the upper classes inherently possess.

### **Conclusion**

The film is a partial depiction of the pain of lower and middle classes. It does present the victims and oppressors as members of two distinct classes with varied resources. These resources determine their power and dominance. They are able to exploit the victimized and take undue advantage of their desperate situation. The film ends with the killing of the protagonist to underscore the control of the oppressive powers on a rebellious subject.

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