

Civilization vis-à-vis Farmhands in India

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ABSTRACT

The paper critically examines the notion of civilization as portrayed in *Sannapu Reddy Venkatarami Reddy's 'Farmhand'*. Civilization generally refers to a highly developed society with well-organized social structures, rich cultural heritage, advanced education, innovative technology, and specialized industries. Civilization's very essence is development. The short story questions how one perceives development. The short story challenges this traditional notion by presenting a contrasting definition of civilization, highlighting the disconnect between societal expectations and the realities of rural life. This short story displays how the domination of civilization devalues hard work and dedication and subverts the notion of civilization, exposing a pervasive tendency to prioritize comfort over hard work. Through its thought-provoking narrative, "*Farmhand*" invites readers to re-examine their understanding of civilization and its true meaning. This paper explores the fresh insight presented in the story on civilization, particularly in the context of marginalized communities and the impact of modernization on farmers in India.

Keywords: *Civilization, Marginalized community, Farmers, Modernization.*

Understanding the origin of a word is crucial for grasping its accurate meaning and usage. The etymology of "*civilization*" reveals its French roots, stemming from terms like "civil" and "civile," which are derived from the Latin "civitas," meaning city. As noted by the National Geographic Society, the word "civilization" is closely tied to the Latin concept of "civitas" or city. Its first recorded usage was in France in the mid-18th century, specifically in *Victor de Riquet, Marquis de Mirabeau's* book "*L'Ami des Hommes*" (1756), a French

revolutionary politician. This historical context provides valuable insight into the word's evolution and its association with urban development and societal progress.

While the term “civilization” may have originated in the 18th century, the concept dates back to ancient times, with civilizations such as Mesopotamia(around 4000BC), Egypt(around 3150BC), and the Indus Valley(around 1800) having advanced social, cultural, and technological achievements. Ancient Greece is famously regarded as the cradle of Western civilization, where citizens took pride in their "civilized" status resulting from their historical awareness, agricultural innovations, and relatively progressive treatment of women. However, the notion of a "civilized society" has evolved over time. As Katherine Blouin states, initially, religion formed the basis of civilization, promoting fraternity and compassion in contrast to greed and luxury. Religion cultivates moral goodness in a man. Later, this religious foundation was supplanted by a secularized perspective. As such, civilization is a dynamic concept, adapting to changing values and beliefs throughout history. Civilization is not a static concept. Despite these changes, development remained the core theme of civilization. The traditional notion of civilization - being a developed society - seems to have changed according to the short story ‘Farmhand’. The short story ‘Farmhand’ displays a civilization that has no trace of the word ‘development’ and redefines civilization as an escape from hard work.As we delve into this thought-provoking narrative, few profoundquestions emerge: “How does our present society define the essence of civilization?” and “Can we expect societal growth when farmers, ashamed to identify themselves, abandon farming?”

The concept of civilization has a rich and complex history, with various definitions and interpretations emerging over time. Dating back to *Mirabeau*, who first used the term in his writing to describe a group of people as "polished, refined, and mannered, as well as virtuous in their societal existence." Similarly, *Britannica* defines civilization as "the condition that exists when people have developed effective ways of organizing a society and cultivate interests in art, science, and other creative pursuits." These definitions highlight the importance of a society that values both aesthetic and intellectual pursuits. However, the concept of "civilization" is often associated with comfort and ease, as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "a place with comfortable living conditions." Similarly, in the short story, the characters aspire to a life of comfort and security. However, this desire for a comfortable life creates a paradox for hardworking individuals like Obulesu, a farmer who toils to make ends meet. Ironically, his diligence and dedication to his craft make him an unsuitable match for the daughters of the families, who seek a life of ease and luxury. The

society demands him to be civilized. This societal pressure makes it even more challenging for hardworking farmers like Obulesu to survive and thrive in a world that values comfort over hard work and traditional values. Does the meaning of 'Civilization' differ from person to person, or is it just a word that disguises our true priorities?

The story portrays the lives of farmers and the effects of civilization on them, particularly in the context of marriage and societal expectations. At its core is Obulesu, a diligent farmer admired by the entire village for his unwavering dedication to his craft, even amidst devastating drought conditions that drive most farmers to abandon their lands and cattle. Once, every household in the village proudly owned yokes, but now, not a single one remains - except for Obulesu's. His uncle, Dubbengatanna, and the villagers admire him for his unrelenting work ethic, toiling tirelessly in the fields. This testament to Obulesu's character underscores the resilience and diligence of farmers in the face of adversity, earning him accolades as "a great worker".

“What a farmhand he is!..... Our fellow is a great worker” (Farmhand,144)

Through Obulesu's story, the narrative highlights the unyielding spirit of farmers, who persevere despite the challenges posed by nature, financial losses and societal expectations. Obulesu's choice of hard work over comfort made him sacrifice his well-being, leaving him to the relentless demands of the civilized world.

Despite working hard as a farmer in the fields, he had to face the effects of the so-called civilized society. Being a farmer was an honour in the earlier days. Farmers have been a focus of governmental concern and attention across centuries, from ancient to the present day. But the way common people treat the farmers has changed. Now farming is a less respected occupation, especially in terms of giving a bride. Narsaiah, the father of Obulesu, finds it hard to find a match for Obulesu. Upon learning that Obulesu is a diligent farmer, the girl's family would take withdraw the alliance. Therefore, the family members and well-wishers decided to keep Obulesu's occupation a secret.

“If they know that he is a farmhand, they will surely not give him the girl” (Farmhand, 144)

The neighbours of Obulesu, admire him secretly. Dubbenkatanna, who is proud of his nephew, loves spreading this great attitude of Obulesu to everyone he meets. Dubbenkatanna says

“In this era, our fellow is the only man.” (Farmhand,143)

But, this manliness of Obulesu claimed by Dubbenkatanna is of no use. The families of the potential brides need a man who would provide a comfortable life free from any kind of hard work. Their irony is that Obulesu is known for his hard work in the fields. This is not the attribute desired by the potential brides and their families. Subbanna says

“How does it matter how manly he is? Not one family is coming forward to offer him a girl in marriage.” (Farmhand,143)

In the earlier days, a man proficient in agriculture skills secured the hand of the most desired bride. But in this present civilized society, no one would think of marrying a farmer. This story poignantly illustrates the shift in societal values, where the once-esteemed profession of farming is now deemed unworthy, especially for the purpose of marriage. This reveals the transformed thought pattern of society. Society has seemingly forgotten the importance of those who till the land and feed the nation. The potential brides' families believe that being part of a farming family requires relentless hard work, which they wish to avoid. In their eyes, "civilization" means avoiding hard work and embracing a life of comfort and ease.

“Everyone is looking for an employed person or a businessman in a groom, and no one lifts his head to look at one who pokes the buttocks of bullocks” (Farmhand, 145)

The people desiring a superficial “civilized life” in the short story, the potential brides, their fathers, and their families, prioritize marrying into a comfortable and well-off household, where survival is effortless. In contrast, farming requires hard work and dedication, making it an unappealing option for potential in-laws. As a result, finding a suitable bride for Obulesu becomes challenging, leading relatives to think this is because of his "backwardness" in terms of civilization. In an attempt to rectify this, Narsaiah encourages Obulesu to adopt symbols of modernity, such as a motorcycle, Western-style clothing, and a mobile phone, to counter criticisms and present a more "civilized" image to society. This effort aims to bridge the gap between Obulesu's traditional farming lifestyle and the expectations of a more glossy, urbanized world.

Obulesu's modern disguise is short-lived, as he swiftly removes the suffocating garb of civilization the moment he steps back into his rural world. The trousers and T-shirt, symbols of his father's desperate attempts to modernize him, are hastily discarded, replaced by the comfortable traditional clothing, lungi. This quiet rebellion shows the truth: the modern facade is a hindrance to his true calling as a farmer. Despite the pressure to conform,

Obulesu's heart remains rooted in the earth, his spirit unwilling to be tamed by the artificial trappings of society. By reclaiming his traditional attire, he boldly asserts his identity, refusing to sacrifice his authenticity on the altar of societal expectations.

In a poignant realization, Narsaiah and his family come to understand that material possessions and outward appearances were mere facades. Despite Obulesu's newfound modernity – a mobile phone, a motorcycle, and trendy clothes- the family's perspective of him remained unchanged. The moment they discover he still toils as a hardworking farmer, they reject the alliance, exposing their notion of civilization as rooted in escapism. This epiphany leads Narsaiah to understand that

“Civilization is not having a Smartphone, wearing a T-shirt and trousers, acquiring TVs and mixies but simply moving away from hard work.” (Farmhand,151)

Narsaiah realizes that it's not his son's uncivilized appearance that is the problem, but the very fact that Obulesu is a hardworking farmer. Surrendering to societal pressures, Narsaiah gives up his son's future to the allure of city life. He plans to sell their cattle, take loans, and send Obulesu to Bengaluru, hoping he'll find a job and settle down. This decision marks a departure from their rural traditions and the hard work that defines them. Narsaiah's reasoning gives the painful truth:

"Obulesu is not going to Bengaluru because he is unable to survive; he is going because he is unable to get married" (Farmhand, 152).

“He is going there for the sake of fathers who think it civilized to raise lazy girls” (Farmhand, 152)

The story concludes with Obulesu leaving behind the land and the life he knows, forced to abandon his roots to appease the expectations of the society and to make himself accepted for the prospect of marriage. This heart-wrenching ending underscores the sacrifices made to conform to societal norms, leaving the reader wondering about the true cost of "civilization".

Conclusion:

In "*Farmhand*", the author masterfully shatters the facade of civilization, exposing the hypocrisy of a society that craves ease and comfort while devaluing the hard work and dedication of rural life. The civilized people desire to lead their lives easily without any hardships just as the fathers of the girls in the story do not want their daughters to work hard.

Through the story, Venkatarami Reddy reveals a stark truth: civilization, as perceived by civilized people, is not about progress or refinement, but about escaping from the rigors of manual labour. This poignant narrative highlights the tension between traditional rural values and the urbanized aspirations of modern society, where the dignity of hard work is sacrificed at the altar of superficial respectability. Ultimately, *"Farmhand"* challenges readers to reexamine their understanding of civilization and its true meaning.

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