BACKDROP OF *HARD TIMES*

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In 1854 Charles Dickens began publication of his tenth and his shortest novel *Hard Times*. Although he had planned to take a break from his writings for a year, circumstances dictated otherwise. *Household Words* was facing a drop in readership, which the publishers believed, another serial from Dickens could redeem. The editors proved to be correct. Dickens began preparing for the novel by a visit to Preston in January 1854. The cotton mill workers were organizing a 'strike', and the mill owners responded by shutting down the mills, thus, preventing factory "hands" from returning to work. Dickens reached the spot when the strike was in its 23rd week. Dickens noted that there wasn't any boisterous protests, but a "pervading quietness and order", although the affected numbered about 20,000 to 30,000. Dickens admired the workers' ability to stand unitedly, however, he did not support the lockout, calling it a grave "error". Dickens felt that both the sides, the workers and the owners failed to find any workable solutions. Hard times became very popular during its serialization.

Hard Times is the record of a changed era. The English now walked ahead the Georgian times when families stayed and worked together on farms, when life revolved around agricultural engagements. Men were now flocking to cities, the great industrial hubs, in search of work. The land remained witness to the change with cities becoming overcrowded and filthy, with increased deforestation to meet demands of new space to set up factories. In these factories men, women, and even children, were forced to work for long hours, under extremely unhealthy conditions, and all for a pittance. Overcrowding resulted in

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dirt heaps that, accentuated by lack of drainage and sanitation contaminated the waters. All this misery of the "hands", the working class, to ensure that the owners earned huge profits.

Thus *Hard Times* is a novel of social protest from 19th century England. It is about the difficulties and hardships of the society of the times. The novel is divided into three books with strong Biblical allusions. Book 1 is "Sowing"; book 2 "Reaping"; and Book 3 "Garnering". The first two refers to Galatians 6:7, "as you sow so shall you reap". Whatever action flows in the first book evolves into outcomes in the second. Each character has shares reserved. In the final book or book 3, the characters of the novel, like Ruth, garners whatever is left. This is a book that has been a favourite topic for discussion with literary stalwarts down the years.

John Ruskin loved the novel because it explores multiple social concerns. However, Thomas Macaulay found a holistic comprehension of the politics of the times. George Bernard Shaw asserted that Hard Times is a novel of "passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world". However, he found Skackbridge's oratory to be a middle class fantasy. He feels the novel failing to provide a true picture of trade unionism of the times. F. R. Lewis initially found the book to be a moral fable. Walter Allen found the novel to be the best critique of the industrial society. G. K. Chesterton found the story harsh, and George Orwell identified the "generous anger" of the author as the strength of the narrative. The sheer number of popular adaptations of the novel is another proof of its popularity.

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Hard Times is a saga of contemporary social, economic, and politics. Thus it is always helpful to understand the environment Dickens lived and worked in. It was the period of Queen Victoria (1837 - 1901); the most influential British ruler since Queen Elizabeth. The nineteenth century was a period of tectonic changes and expansion in all fields. It was an era of reform, of industrialization, scientific progress, literature, new orders of government, and world expansion. But, it was also a time of struggle for expression of independence. The labouring class rose in power and prosperity and even became successful in making the government heed his voice.

It was a period of conflict within the self, manifesting as intellectual and spiritual disturbances both within the individual and within the society. People were jubilant at the material success and the amassing of material wealth. However, some felt that the price of the success, in terms of humanity, was too great in its exploitation of the majority for the prosperity of the minority; the labourers or the working class surviving in inhuman conditions for the betterment of the few capitalist owners. While people of the period suffered hard headed Utilitarianism, literature produced was majorly idealistic and romantic. Science was paving its way into the palace of religious faith. The Roman Catholic Church was becoming increasingly popular in England. Even in politics there were severe dearth of clear-cut issues.

Not only England, but the whole world was facing political and economic disturbances. The Americas were engaged in Civil War. France was trying to restore herself after losses at the Napoleonic wars. Germany was emerging as a great power.

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The industrial revolution may have added considerably to national coffers, but it created deplorable living conditions for the poor workers. Rural population was fast migrating to the cities in search of jobs in the factories. The number of immigrants from poverty-stricken Ireland was steadily rising. In addition there were the jobless soldiers returning to England after the fall of Napoleon. The power-loom increased unemployment; surplus labour caused wage shrinking. Whole families, from children as young as 4, women, and even old men worked in the factories, the mills, and the mines. Small children were preferred as they were made to work long hours on a pittance. Such children have always found a slot reserved for them in the narratives of Dickens. Working for long hours in badly ventilated cramped spaces resulted in huge scale deaths due to tuberculosis. The Parliament took serious note of the situations, and began taking the necessary reformatory measures. The Health Act (1802) and the Child Labour Law (1819) brought in some alleviations for this class. However. It was not until 1832 Reform Bill that the scenario altered. With this Bill the binary system of Parliament was established with representations from the rising middle class gaining access in matters of State. Slavery was ended in 1833 by the Emancipation Bill (1833). Next came the Poor Law (1834) that further made the government unpopular, by forcing the poor to workhouses where they had to remain absolutely dependent on government doles. Another novel of Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, gives an insight to these workhouse conditions, as *David Copperfield* does to Debtors' Prisons. The latter was more horrific than the former.

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Charles Dickens has been hailed as one of the greatest Victorian novelist, and *Hard Times* is "…a relentless indictment of the callous greed of the Victorian industrial society and its misapplied utilitarian philosophy."