Novels dealing with socio-political themes have formed the single largest category in the domain of Indian English fiction. From Mulk Raj Anand to Aravind Adiga, there have been a large number of writers who have successfully tried to capture various problems afflicting the body politic of the country.

Kota Neelima’s Shoes of the Dead is the third novel by the US based writer of Indian origin. Devoid of digressions like subplots, it is a quite focussed novel that makes an intensive study of the problem of insolvency of farmers leading to suicides in a large number of cases. Set in the fictional Mityala district, the novel points the accusing finger at the politician-moneylender nexus which refuses to recognize the real cause of suicides. While the political interest of the ruling members of parliament lies in minimizing the number of suicides – in the official records, that is – the moneylender/business class seeks to capitalize on the failure of crops and insolvency of the peasant borrowers in the most inhuman manner.

The story begins with the suicide of Sudhakar Bhadra, a peasant belonging to the district of Mityala. His brother Gangiri Bhadra, who is educated and employed in government service in the district town is upset not only over his brother’s death but also the generally growing number of suicides by cotton farmers of the region. The official apathy is seen in not recognizing the deaths as due to debt-related depression. This irks Gangiri to breaking point so that he resigns his job and with retirement benefit of twelve thousand rupees in his pocket, he decides to devote himself to changing the system.

Being an intelligent and educated young man, he has the knack of going deep into the problem. He is confident enough to approach the collector and ask to be included in the district suicide review committee. Gradually, the reality dawns upon him. The reduced number of debt-related deaths suits the progressive image of the member of the Parliament from the area, KeyurKashinath, son of the powerful Democratic Party leader Vaishnav Kashinath. The sarpanch Lambodar and the moneylender Durga Das are his two proxies on the committee and they see to it that cases brought before the committee are not declared patra or eligible for compensation to victims of debt related depression. The moneylender who holds most villagers in debt bondage is happy to see people die insolvent because he can then confiscate their mortgaged land and re-sell it at a huge margin. The sarpanch has a share in this sordid trade because the land thus procured will help him open an industrial park later with the help of a business house.

Gangiri unravels the true picture in which the agriculture department head, the police chief, a bank manager and the government doctor are collaborators. They are made to speak the truth in the committee. The method employed by Gangiri is blackmailing the evil-doers by discovering their weak points. The M.P. tries to save his skin through a clever strategy by apparently aligning with Gangiri but gets converted himself. Such is the magic of Gangiri (a revised form of Gandhgiri?)! Gangiri is also able to convert Durga Das at great personal risk. Finally, unable to see his nephew die in his arms due to starvation, he commits suicide. But even in losing the battle of life, he wins over the conscience of...
people so that even Lambodar falls in line. There are some good
caracters also who help him. They include the district collector
Gul, and journalists Nazar and Videhi.

Being a journalist herself, Neelima is well aware of the
ways of politicians -- how the game of one-upmanship is played
out by political rivals and how the shrewd moves of one are
checkmated by the other. She knows the official mechanism
involved in executing various administrative measures and so the
narrative shows realities.

Even though the narrative is devoid of titillation or
exoticism of any type, it captivates the reader with its brilliant
dialogues. Through the protagonist, the writer presents a set of
peasant-friendly measures which would stem the growing tide of
suicides. The novel displays a limited use of literary graces, as for
example, fine alliteration followed by anti-thesis in the following
passage that describes the death of a child:

Padma held Balu close as each bond of blood came
undone, each silken thread of affection snapped. The silver of her
sparkle of his eyes, the gold of the goodness of his heart awaited
her permission to return from where they had come. And, though
she had called the dust to be her son; she could not let the earth
reclaim him yet. (267)

Or look at the following poetic description: “There were
places in the room for the light to rest, for the morning to linger,
and for the noon to get dressed. There were places in the spaces
between glass vases and book cases for one day to exchange
notes with the next” (79).

The protagonist who is desired by the people to sacrifice
himself, to walk in the “shoes of the dead” (267), realizes finally
that “he could no longer do the job of searching for a conscience
in a city of effigies” (272). Some disconnect here between his
vision and his patience! On the whole a good read.