

Premchand: Life, Times, Works

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4A.1 Biographical Note:

‘Premchand’ was the pen-name of Dhanpat Rai, an ordinary middle class individual from Lamhi in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In childhood, he was witness to poverty and deprivation in the immediate surroundings of U. P., Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, only to realize later that the condition of the rest of India was no better: the country suffered untold exploitation at the hands of the British colonial regime.

Premchand was born on 31 July, 1880. He was pampered by his mother for being the first male child in the house after three sisters, two of whom had died at a young age. At the local *Madarsa* Premchand had his initial schooling and learnt both Urdu and Persian. These were additional to his mother tongue Avadhi. His knowledge of the broader world came from English that he learnt in the Middle school. At the age of 36 in 1916, he passed the Intermediate examination and did B. A. in 1919. He had lost both his parents by the time he was fifteen years old. This may have partly necessitated his early marriage which did not prove successful. He **decided later (1906) to marry** a widow Shivrani Devi and settled down with her in comfort and peace.

In 1900, Premchand started his teaching career in a government-run school. The job continued as he moved from one place to another in Uttar Pradesh and later became the deputy inspector of schools. Early in this phase, Premchand had undergone the trauma of seeing his collection of short stories *Soze-Watan* (The Lament of the Nation) confiscated by the authorities for its alleged seditious content. This had happened in 1908. The book was banned by the British government for being provocative and subversive. Certainly, Premchand’s anger for the British rule in India brought to him several revelations vis-à-vis the nature of oppression. He realized that no conciliation was possible between the

oppressor and the oppressed and an alternative political paradigm was the need of the hour. Such insights about life can be identified clearly in his writing.

In Kanpur his writing career took concrete shape and he expressed his views on politics and society in an Urdu journal, *Zamana*, which in turn made him acutely aware of the existing phenomenon. This happened in the second decade of the twentieth century. In this process an ideological evolution took place and Premchand's creative skills were further honed to experiment and innovate. This was also the period when he shifted to writing in Hindi in preference to Urdu. It was a demanding decision since he had to learn Hindi from scratch. In Premchand's view, Hindi would give him wider reach and connect him with people far beyond North India. The socio-cultural requirements of the emerging nation at the time stood to gain from modern ideas at the grass root level; Hindi being closer to Avadhi, Braj and other dialects was considered more accessible to the common masses. It can be said that Premchand proved to be one of the makers of Hindi prose, whereas the new linguistic medium broadened and enriched his comprehension of issues immensely. As a result, he wrote socially-oriented fiction in which important questions such as child marriage, prostitution, the role of youth in society, etc. got highlighted.

In 1921, Premchand heard Mahatma Gandhi in a political rally and felt immensely inspired by the message of the great national leader. In consequence, Premchand resigned his job and took to writing full-time. His decision to quit the government job and adopt the Gandhian perspective to depict the reality of his time was indeed a form of resistance. Being in service of the British government, how could he oppose the colonial regime? Would that not amount to assisting the rulers in the act of colonization? The decision to resign from service proved to be the turning point in Premchand's literary career and made his endeavour more sharply critical and focused. Premchand edited several journals (*Hans*, *Jagaran*, *Madhuri*, and *Maryada*) in this phase and established his own printing press called the Saraswati Press. He consciously developed a mode of writing that would orient the reading public toward debating and analyzing problems and concerns.

4A.2 Social and Political Background

Early decades of twentieth century India were marked by antagonism between tradition and modernity, faith and rationality as well as loyalty to the colonial masters and love for one's motherland. The years around the First World War were particularly crucial in terms of gaining knowledge of happenings at the economic and social level. There was a whole section of the educated middle class that raised questions about policies of the colonial regime. Was the War good for India? How did it contribute to the interests of Indians through the length and breadth of the country? In addition, the issue regarding unity in the country around commonly shared concerns assumed vital significance. All these necessitated publication of newspapers, magazines and books as also establishment of libraries, book clubs and cultural forums. The narrow scope and elitism of erstwhile education system stood questioned by spread of ideas in the common idiom and through fictional narratives such as folk tales, short stories, novels, poems, essays, etc. Close on the heels of First World War came the infamous Jalianwala Bagh massacre in which thousands of innocent men, women and children were gunned down in Amritsar by the British army. This sent shock waves through the country. The celebrated author and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore returned the title of knighthood to the government in protest against the massacre. Mahatma Gandhi's rise on the political horizon at this time lent an edge to the National Movement that scaled new heights and inspired people to spread the message of freedom from slavery. All this had its roots in the economic exploitation and impoverishment of India under British policies.

The urban India of the time was able to see the condition of the peasantry in a new light; the fate of this productive section of population was entirely in the hands of the state-supported landowners who exploited the agriculturists cynically. Not to be missed in the context was the stranglehold of caste system, religious rituals and age-old prejudices of one section against another. There is no wonder that literature of the day addressed these issues with utmost seriousness and engagement. A whole trend of realist writing led by Premchand emerged as a consequence of this phenomenon. Realization had dawned at this time that India's obsolete social structure came in the way of attaining independence;

the country could be united under one cause, that of freedom, only when ills such as untouchability, gender inequality and other injustices were done away with.

4A. 3 Works

Premchand wrote close to three hundred short stories, the most popular amongst them being: “Panch Parmeshwar” (The Holy Panchayat); “Shatranj ke Khilari” (The Chess Players); “Sawa Ser Gehun” (One and a Quarter Seers of Wheat); “Kafan” (The Shroud); and “Boodhi Kaaki” (The Old Aunt). These depict various facets and aspects of life in India. More importantly, they emphasise the depth and profundity of community values in Indian society. In the many novels that Premchand wrote, such as *Sevasadan* (The house of Charity), *Nirmala* (name of the protagonist, literally the ‘pure one’), *Premashram* (The Abode of Love), *Rangabhumi* (The Stage), *Karambhumi* (The Field of Action), *Kayakalpa* (The Metamorphosis) and *Godan* (The Gift of a Cow), we come face to face with poverty and exploitation of Indian peasantry as also the difficulties that people in general confronted. These latter works of long fiction are of epic proportions in that they capture issues and concerns of great sweep; in them we have a panoramic view of India’s socio-cultural landscape. The multiple layers of experience as well as varieties of sensibility that Premchand wove into the texture of these novels bear testimony to the wide range of his creative involvement. Even as the writer shared with the reader his own sympathies for the common folk, he also pointed an accusing finger at the causes behind the oppressive Indian phenomenon.

Critics have noted a pronounced idealistic streak in Premchand’s early writing. It is believed that the trend was rooted in the reformist movements of the nineteenth century India. As an educated middle class individual, Premchand drew inspiration from the prominent Arya Samaj figures who laid great stress on education as also other early visionaries such as Vivekananda. The latter boldly interpreted matters of faith as well as modernity to cover the lives of the poor and downtrodden in the country (Premchand also wrote a long biographical account of Vivekananda). ‘The King of Fiction’ (*Katha-*

Samrat), as he was appreciatively referred to, Premchand also set much store by the youth in whom he saw hope for a new and progressive India. These youth, scattered in a large number of Premchand's short stories and early novels, state their views with courage and conviction.

Later, however, Premchand saw the prospect of hope receding, with political struggles getting embroiled in clashes driven by narrow sectarian tendencies. Around the nineteen thirties, his interests turned toward a more assertive and strident politics along socialist lines; he stated unequivocally that India could achieve her political goals of justice and equality only through a Bolshevik-type orientation. It seems Premchand's last novel *Godan* published in 1936, a few months before his death, underlined the need to reject the exploitative social structure in its entirety.

4A. 4 Premchand's Contemporaries

Premchand lived in a period when most of the writers in colonial India considered themselves to be part of a great cultural mission; they worked towards the furtherance of the nationalist cause aimed at attaining freedom from British imperialism. Each writer in this mission interpreted freedom in his/her own way and strengthened the collective resistance to foreign domination. Premchand's contemporaries included the thinker-editor Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, the nationalist poet Maithilisharan Gupt and Chhayavadi (Romantic) poets such as Jaishankar Prasad, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, Mahadevi Varma and Sumitranandan Pant. Prasad made a substantial contribution to drama as well as fiction, whereas Nirala and Mahadevi Varma wrote analytical comments, sketches, short stories and reminiscences. There were lively debates and meaningful exchanges among them many a time. Outside the domain of Hindi, such mature voices as those of Bangla writers Rabindranath Tagore and Sharat Chandra Chatterjee and Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal provided inspiration to Premchand and his fellow writers. Soon, others like Mulk Raj Anand (English), Sajjad Zaheer, Sadaat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chandar and Faiz

Ahmad Faiz (all Urdu) Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Yash Pal, Vrindavan Lal Varma and Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (all Hindi) joined the literary campaign. Zaheer, Anand and others floated an All India Organization of Writers under the name 'Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in 1936. Its inaugural session was addressed by Premchand as its President who read out his historic statement titled "Sahitya Ka Uddyeshya" (The Aim of Literature) on this occasion.

What is to be particularly kept in mind is that National leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi took keen interest in the writing of the period and regularly corresponded with litterateurs. Names of Tagore, Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand, among others, come to mind in this regard. The common thread that bound all these writers and leaders was the mission of ousting the British from India to establish a democratic regime. Politics, literature, and social thought worked to that end.

4A. 5 Premchand in Our Times

Premchand has continued to remain an inspiring presence in Hindi writing and influenced a large part of critical thought in the academic world. He has been translated in almost all languages of India as well as English and other European languages. He received wide acclaim in Russia in the nineteen fifties and became a significant literary figure as also a constant reference point in countries of the socialist world, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, East Germany and Cuba. Premchand was interpreted in an entirely new manner in the nineteen seventies in the wake of socio-political changes in India that democracy had ushered in. The country was witness to a variety of ideological and philosophical developments manifested in political shufflings and sharp debates about issues of vital importance. These were offshoots of the increasing social crisis as the underprivileged and deprived in India were subjected to economic and cultural domination even after the attainment of freedom. Premchand's birth centenary in 1980 became an occasion to investigate a different set of preferences and values in his short and long fiction, as many journals brought out special numbers devoted to his writings. The same happened with an

increased gusto when the 125th anniversary of his birth was observed in 2005 in the country.

During Premchand's time, the mode of writing was **explanatory** **descriptive?** and didactic. This was because rural masses in colonial India were illiterate and could not be approached at the developed level of complex representations. For this reason, Premchand had to become a teller of tales, so to say. At the same time, he had to convey the message in clear terms. This made his writing didactic, indeed pedagogic. Still, one can discern a great amount of subtlety at the level of ordinary people's responses captured in his fiction. His writing earned wide appeal and in the later years, he made a great comeback, as is clear from the full-length and short films made on his fictional works. *Godan*, for instance was filmed in the nineteen sixties. The same happened in the case of the short story "Do Bailon Ki Kahani" (The Story of Two Bullocks) on which the film *Heera Moti* was based. Still later, Satyajit Ray made two films based on Premchand's "Shatranj Ke Khilari" (The Chess Players) and "Sadgati" (Salvation). At present, short films made on his stories are more than twenty. This doesn't include adaptations that are legion. Many are being added to the list every year. There is no doubt that Premchand has turned out to be a whole phenomenon in our time.

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