

Premchand: Radicalism versus Nationalism

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Premchand was the first important author to write about peasants in India in a language they themselves used. He left behind a large body of work which spanned three important decades of Indian history: a period of struggle against foreign rule. He wrote more than three hundred short stories, one incomplete and seventeen completed novels, biographies, plays, articles and translations from writers like Tolstoy and Gorki.

Premchand's writing is not only an important document of the nationalist movement, but also of peasant conditions at this time. His fiction is true to the historical record and complements the social history of this period, thus bearing out David Craig's contention that the more effective a piece of fiction in its own medium, the more reliable it is as sociological evidence.¹ In a predominantly illiterate society, literature can speak for peasants who exist " . . . in silence, withering like grass under a huge and heavy stone"² and supplement the paucity of records, autobiographies and documents. It can interpret rows of figures and statistics in human terms. Premchand's work shows another interesting development. From early portrayals of Gandhian solutions to all peasant problems, he gradually moved to a point where the logic of his fiction demanded violent and radical social change. His confrontation with economic and social reality made pat solutions impossible. An influential group of Indian critics, including his son and biographer Amritrai, interpret this development as a conversion to Marxism. At the other extreme, some critics put down the changes in his later work to "better characterisation, thought given to cause and effect . . . descriptions becom[ing] more psychological and true and less artificial . . ."³ or because "the political, moral and economic lessons [of the] earlier Premchand . . . [had ceased to] inhibit the effects of his art" and his final concern now was "with a deeper psychological penetration of his characters".⁴ The truth lies somewhere in between: a disillusionment with simplistic solutions, and hence changes in both theme and technique.

Who was Premchand and what circumstances caused him to become the

first story-teller of peasant India? He was born in 1880, as Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, in one of the poorest districts of what was then the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, in a village called Lamhi. His family belonged to a subsection of the Kayastha caste which was considered by many conservative high-caste Hindus to belong to the *sudra* or lowest caste. On the other hand, Kayasthas had traditionally held occupations that required literacy as they were often 'patwaris',⁵ as Premchand's own grandfather had been. Thus, Premchand was both literate and familiar with an illiterate and underprivileged world not previously depicted in Hindi literature. In other ways, his life was typical of his caste and class. At fifteen, he contracted his first marriage: it ended disastrously, his wife returning to her father's house after a few years. He started his career as a teacher in 1899 and remarried a child widow in 1906. He had been writing continuously for quite some time under the pseudonym of Nawab Rai. Then, in 1908, the British government proscribed his first collection of short stories and forbade him to use his pseudonym. It was after this that he adopted the pen-name of Premchand under which he was to write for the rest of his life.

In 1909, Premchand was transferred to Mahoba, the capital of Hamirpur district in south-eastern U.P. and there he contracted dysentery and stomach ailments that were to plague him for the rest of his life. In 1914, he moved to Basti and, in 1916, to Gorakhpur, two of the poorest districts in U.P. His stay in the eastern districts was crucial to his creative life, for his first-hand experience of the conditions of the peasants made him realise that they were the most neglected and worst exploited segment of Indian society. Henceforth, he was to view himself as "the chronicler of village life."⁶

While in Gorakhpur, Premchand obtained his B.A. and a teaching diploma. But his career as a teacher came to an abrupt end when he heard Gandhi make a fiery speech in 1921, calling for non-cooperation with the government. Along with thousands of others, he left government service and decided to devote his life to literature. He set up his own press and published two journals in the 1930s. When these ventures turned out financial disasters, he even tried to earn money by writing film scripts. In 1936, he presided over the first convention of the Progressive Writers' Association. In October of the same year, the disease he had picked up in Mahoba finally killed him. He was only fifty-six.⁷

To understand Premchand, it is necessary to recognise him for what he was—a nationalist with broad Gandhian sympathies. In 1921, when Premchand left government service, Gandhi had emerged as the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress. A few years after his return from South Africa, he had led the peasants of Champaran in non-violent protest against their oppressive British masters, and, in 1918, had played a similar role in the strike by textile mill workers in Ahmedabad. These incidents showed that Gandhi was unique as a leader, not only because of his novel form of non-violent resistance, but also because of his extremely personal moral viewpoint. He was the only person in India who could move easily among different classes of people and mobilise peasants and workers as well as landlords and capitalists. Premchand himself recorded Gandhi's amazing effect on the people around him in 1935. "Anyone who meets the

Mahatma belongs to him . . . One is compelled to speak the truth to him . . .”⁸

Gandhi seriously contemplated millions of Indians consciously demanding self-government through a series of non-violent actions. But his predilection for peaceful negotiations led him to consider even the Montague-Chelmsford reforms somewhat sympathetically. However, the notorious Rowlatt Bills were promulgated in February 1919, seeking, among other things, to make the mere intention to publish or circulate seditious literature punishable by imprisonment. There was also a wave of strikes, one involving 125,000 textile workers in Bombay. Gandhi could not remain unaffected by these signs of grave unrest. He decided to channel the people's discontent into 'satyagraha' or 'truthforce', a form of protest he considered morally viable. The response to his call for a general strike in April 6, 1919 was unprecedented. The British government replied with a frenzied repression that culminated in Jalianwalla Bagh where troops opened fire on unarmed people in a walled garden. The official figures were 379 dead and over 1200 wounded but unofficial estimates were much higher. Gandhi's subsequent arrest sparked off violence and made him call off the strike on April 18. He was more shocked by the people's violent spirit than by government atrocities and could not think them fit for self-rule.⁹

However, mass unrest was accentuated by the economic crisis which began to develop in the 1920s. Prices of agricultural products started to fall and some tenants had to relinquish land taken on high rents.¹⁰ In the cities, the first six months of 1920 saw at least two hundred strikes involving one and a half million workers. Also, Gandhi saw a unique opportunity to unite Hindus and Muslims behind the Khilafat movement¹¹ and in 1920, the All India Khilafat Committee and the Congress, at separate sessions, adopted Gandhi's non-cooperation programme. During the next two years, there was large-scale mass mobilisation. According to official figures, half a million workers went on strike in 1921. In the United Provinces, the arrest of three peasant leaders resulted in a peasant demonstration where the police opened fire and killed seven people. In 1922, Gandhi notified the Viceroy that if political prisoners were not released and repressive measures not abandoned, he would begin mass civil disobedience. Then came the news of Chauri-Chaura, where angry peasants had burned down a police station, killing twenty-two policemen. Gandhi immediately suspended the campaign, calling Chauri-Chaura his bitterest humiliation, and, at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee at Bardoli, substituted a programme of spinning, anti-untouchability, temperance and educational work. This was unfortunate on two counts. It not only failed to capitalise on the enthusiasm and political consciousness of the people but it also did not take advantage of the amity between Hindus and Muslims that had been created by the Khilafat Movement. The relations between the two communities deteriorated steadily from 1923 onwards.

The late 1920s saw further non-violent demonstrations against the Simon Commission.¹² At the Madras Congress of 1927, a resolution to boycott all British goods was adopted. 1928 saw thirty million working days lost in strikes and a successful peasant movement against the enhancement of land revenue in Bardoli. Gandhi began his 'satyagraha' against the salt

tax with the Dandi march of 1930; in the same year, a 'no tax' campaign was launched at a peasant conference in Allahabad. The world-wide depression had caused the price of agricultural produce to fall by at least seventy per cent in the fourteen months between November 1929 to January 1931—a 'cataclysm' according to the Census Report of 1931.¹³ Peasants in the United Province refused to pay taxes and, in April 1930, the 18th Royal Garhwali Rifles, a Hindu regiment, refused to open fire on a Muslim crowd. But once again, the movement was called off with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Round Table Conference of 1931.

The importance of mass protest during this decade was that it mobilised both peasants and landlords on a large scale. Gandhi himself had an ambiguous attitude towards peasants. On the one hand, he said that the only rightful owner of the land was the tiller. On the other hand, he considered that landlords were entitled to their land if they thought of themselves as trustees of the people.¹⁴ In the civil disobedience movement, he advised peasants not to pay taxes, but assured landlords that their rights would be upheld. Three of the seven clauses in the 1922 Bardoli resolution¹⁵ urgently emphasised that peasants had an obligation to pay rent and referred to the landlords' legal rights. Gandhi was even suspicious of the Kisan Sabha¹⁶, saying as late as 1937 that the Sabha was more interested in capturing the Congress organisation than in working for the peasants. However, when the Moplahs, who were unusually poor Muslim peasants along the Malabar coast of South India, rebelled against their Hindu landlords and moneylenders in 1921, Gandhi referred to them as 'brave and god-fearing' and the Congress Working Committee recorded that they had been given provocation beyond all endurance.¹⁷ Thus, both landlords and peasants had their appointed places in Gandhi's ideal society. After all, 'The Congress claimed to represent over eighty-five per cent of the population of India . . . even the princes, the landed gentry, the educated class, all minorities . . .'¹⁸ Change had to come through mutual help and cooperation. The violence of revolution shocked Gandhi's conscience. He said that he would lay down his life to prevent a class war.

This shunning of violent solutions is apparent in Premchand to the last. His novels are no pastoral Utopias. They are more reminiscent of the poems of George Crabbe, the eighteenth century poet whom Byron called 'Nature's sternest painter'¹⁹. Crabbe's poems were most likely a part of the English course set for the Matriculation examination in India²⁰ and one can imagine, though there is no record of it, the young Premchand reading 'The Village': "Then shall I dare these real ills to hide/In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?/ . . . I paint the Cot/As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not. . ."²¹ Also by 1900 Edwin Markham's poem 'The Man with the Hoe', based on Millais' powerful painting, had asked: "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,/How will the Future reckon with this Man?/ . . . How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—/With those who shaped him to the thing he is —/When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,/After the silence of centuries? . . ."²² Premchand asked the same questions in his work. He called his brand of realism 'idealistic realism' and felt that it was the duty of the writer to feel for 'the oppressed, the persecuted and the deprived'.²³ He had an ideal character in most of his novels.²⁴ In his early

work, this character was a catalyst for the conversion of villains but in final novels like *Godan* and stories like *Kafan*, the protagonist emerges as someone living under institutionalised exploitation.

The historical records of this period show actually how deep this exploitation had penetrated agricultural society in India. In the years between 1891 and 1947, the rate of growth of the total volume of agricultural output was only 0.37 per cent. The rate of growth in the production of food-crops was even less: 0.11 per cent. In fact, in this period, agricultural output was increasing at only about half the rate of population growth.²⁵ In the districts of Basti and Gorakhpur where Premchand spent seven important years, the outlook was even more bleak. In 1901, Basti had 4 towns and 6,903 villages. 84 per cent of the population was Hindu; literacy was 2.82 per cent and even less among Muslims and women. Gorakhpur, with a much larger population, had 18 towns and 7,544 villages. Again, literacy was 2.8 per cent and less for Muslims and women.²⁶ The Census Report of 1931 puts the population of Gorakhpur at three and a half million and that of Basti at over two million, when the average population in the districts of the United Provinces was one million. 'Gorakhpur division [comprising the districts of Basti, Gorakhpur and Azangarh] although only seventh in size has the largest population and by far the greatest density . . . there are only two other districts in India with a population greater than that of Gorakhpur. . . . Epidemics, famines and floods were rampant. There was an actual drop in population between 1901 and 1911 due to the famine of 1907-8, the malaria epidemic of 1908, plague and cholera. In 1918-19, an influenza epidemic killed between two and three million people. Monsoons failed with depressing regularity and, in 1913, famine was declared in parts of the province. There were floods in 1924-25, a severe drought in 1938-39 and locusts in 1929-30. These natural factors were compounded by the fact that out of an estimated irrigateable area of fifteen and a half million acres, only nine million were irrigated.'²⁷

For the ordinary peasant, these natural calamities were increased by man-made injustice, especially the inequality of land ownership. Although, '71.1 per cent of earners returned agriculture as their principal means of livelihood and a further 8.2 per cent returned it as their subsidiary means of livelihood',²⁸ a very small percentage of the population, usually caste Hindus, owned most of the arable land. In Basti, Brahmins and Rajputs, who together comprised about sixteen per cent of the population, held two-thirds of the land,²⁹ while in Gorakhpur, fifteen per cent of the population—again Brahmins and Rajputs—held half the cultivable land.³⁰ Moreover, in Gorakhpur, out of 2.4 million rent-payers³¹, 741 thousand were tenants without occupancy rights³² and therefore subject to the worst form of rack-renting.³³ There were also 34.4 thousand landless labourers in Gorakhpur and over 211 thousand in Basti,³⁴ all of whom were paid trifling wages—four annas and six pies per day³⁵ for men and about a quarter of that for women.³⁶

'Sava Ser Gehun' [One and a half Seers³⁷ of wheat], a story written by Premchand in 1924, depicts what happens to a peasant if his holdings are fragmented. The protagonist of the story, Shankar, has only five-sixths of an acre of land and one bullock after the division of property between him

and his brother. This is not enough to ensure a livelihood so 'Shanjar became a labourer from a farmer'. Premchand elucidates: 'In the end cultivation became a means for maintaining status, livelihood depended on wage labour'. Shankar is the stereotype of the honest, uncomplaining peasant found so often in Premchand's earlier stories. 'He was poor, minded his own business, neither borrowed nor lent anything . . . He did not worry about being cheated, nor did he know the art of trickery. If food was available, he ate it, if not, he chewed grain; if even grain was not to be found, he drank water, prayed to God and went to sleep.'³⁸ He borrows some wheat from the village priest to feed a holy man and finds, after seven years, that his debt has increased two hundredfold because of interest. He has to become a bonded labourer and work without wages on the priest's land to pay off part of the debt. His son inherits both the debt and the slavery after him.

This kind of semi-slavery and indebtedness was rife in India. The *District Gazetteer* of Basti admitted that 'the burden of debt pressed heavily' on the peasant who was 'habituated to the idea of debt.'³⁹ The 1909 *District Gazetteer* of Gorakhpur goes further: 'Indebtedness exists everywhere, as has always been the case'.⁴⁰ The 1931 Census Report states that forty per cent of the ordinary cultivators in the 'Sub-Himalaya East' region (which included Basti and Gorakhpur) were indebted and most of these debts were unproductive. Some high-caste Hindus earned a 'substantial' income from money-lending and often—as in the case of Shankar—the village priest was also the money-lender.⁴¹ As early as 1889, a British official wrote of a district in the United Provinces: 'The majority of ploughmen in Domeriaganj were still serfs . . . In consideration for an advance of cash, the peasant bound himself, his wife and children to work for their master till the money was repaid . . . A man and his wife could be bought for fifty or sixty rupees . . .'⁴² In Gorakhpur, the interest charged on small debts was an exorbitant seventy-five per cent while loans of seed at sowing time carried an interest of twenty-five per cent.⁴³ A large number of landlords engaged in money-lending and looked with disfavour on any proposal to start a cooperative credit system or a bank.⁴⁴ In fact, when a bank was established in Gorakhpur in 1906, the village money-lenders refused to have any dealings with borrowers from that institution.⁴⁵

Yet even the debt-free peasant was desperately poor. He worked on uneconomic holdings which, even in favourable years, yielded only subsistence level income. 'The possessions of the ordinary peasant are limited to essential capital—a little land, a pair of bullocks, and seed for the next crop; and bare necessities—an unsaleable house, the clothes he stands in, a store of coarse foodgrains and the utensils required to cook in.'⁴⁶ In 'Babaji Ka Bhog' [A Meal for a Holy Man], written by Premchand in the mid 1920s, the peasant, Ramdhan, is described as belonging to the 'ahir' caste, traditionally associated with cow-herding, but, ironically, he has no milch-animals, only plough-oxen. After paying his rent, debts and taxes, he has practically nothing left: 'The barn had been emptied of the crop. The money-lender had taken half and the landlord's agents had grabbed the other half, the straw had been sold to get the ox-trader off their neck. A small sack was all that fell to their share. By threshing it over and over again, they had

managed to get a maund⁴⁷ of grain out of it. Somehow or other, they had reached the end of spring. But what of the rest of the year? God only knew what the oxen would eat then or indeed the people of the house.⁴⁸

In the 1930s, Premchand wrote a number of stories based on the current Civil Disobedience movement. Many of them were set in the cities and contained sentimental and idealistic views of the Congress and Gandhi. But the tales of the villages have still the same stark background. The rent payable on arable land had increased steadily since 1860 and, in 1905, was thirty-six per cent higher than it had been.⁴⁹ In 'Samar Yatra' [The Battle Journey], written in 1930, an old woman says: 'Tell me honestly, all of you people here, have you had a full stomach anytime these past six months? . . . We now pay nine or ten rupees rent for fields where we once paid three . . .' The injustice of the salt tax is also mentioned by a satyagrahi: 'Your country has so much salt that the whole world can live on it for two years. But you pay seventy million rupees for salt alone . . .'⁵⁰ Throughout Premchand's work there are references to peasants who have been forced off the land by increasing debts and rents and to artisans and tradesmen who have had to become cultivators because of colonial rule. In 'Balidan' [Sacrifice, 1918] Harakhchand had become a tenant farmer. 'Twenty years ago he manufactured sugar and had a wide network of business. The import of sugar from abroad had broken him . . .'⁵¹

In 1930, Premchand also wrote 'Poos Ki Raat' [A January Night] which showed how an ordinary peasant, typical because he is both poor and in debt, becomes a wage labourer. Halku has to give his landlord the money he had saved for a blanket. When he stays up to guard his fields on a January night, he lights a fire to ward off the cold and is so comfortable that he refuses to move even when he hears animals destroying his crops. Halku's wife outlines the bitter choice facing all tenant farmers: 'What I say is, why don't you give up this tenant farming. You work till you drop, the harvest goes to pay the arrears, so why not end it? Were we born just to keep paying off debts? Work for your own stomach. . . ' When she finds that the crops are ruined, she is disconsolate. 'Now you will have to hire yourself out to pay the rents and taxes.'⁵² The implication is that Halku will give up tenant farming and join the great army of landless labourers. There was a substantial increase in their number in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of 'high rates of interest, rack-renting and decline in the size of land holdings on the one hand and alienation of the land through indebtedness and loss of tenancy rights on the other.'⁵³

The position of the peasant was made even more precarious by the persistently unfavourable movement of prices on his real income. In the early years of the first world war, the prices of food grains and agricultural produce remained relatively low, while the prices of important items of mass consumption, e.g. cloth, rose considerably. The disparity between the price movements of agricultural and non-agricultural products was particularly pronounced after the depression.⁵⁴ The slump in the prices of agricultural produce from February 1930 'had very unpleasant consequences for the cultivator who depend[ed] upon the proceeds of the 'rabi' to pay his dues to the landlord and his other creditors . . . By June 1930, prices had declined to the pre-war level, i.e. a drop of about one-third . . . The fall became

precipitous at the beginning of 1931'. In fact, the price of wheat, to take one food grain, was fourteen seers per rupee in 1931 compared to about five seers per rupee in 1921.⁵⁵ Before the depression, the peasant had barely managed one meal a day. Now, when the value of the produce was, in many cases, less than the rent, the cultivator still had to pay. So, 'cursing their fate, naked, starved and dying like dogs, people continued to till the fields. What choice did they have? Many had migrated to the cities and found employment there. Many others had resorted to wage labour. But there was still no dearth of tenants. In predominantly agricultural country, cultivation is not merely a means of livelihood, it is also a status symbol.'⁵⁶ So writes Premchand in the novel *Karmabhumi* [The Land of Work. 1932].

This drop in prices adversely affected the wages of agricultural workers which had shown a tendency to rise in the previous decade. After 1930, however, the cultivator had a low, often non-existent, margin of profit and could scarcely afford to employ labour at all. Wage-levels dropped and labour both skilled and unskilled, became a surplus in most parts of the United Provinces.⁵⁷ In Premchand's last novel *Godan* [The Gift of a Cow, 1936], the protagonist Hori returns penniless from the sale of his sugar-cane crop because he has had to pay off his creditors. He comforts his wife: 'One can get work as a labourer. I will work and we shall eat.' But his wife is more practical: 'Where is there work for a labourer in this village?' The tragedy of Hori is the tragedy of a class. Premchand describes Hori's village: 'There was not a man whose face was unlined by grief, as if sorrow, not life, was manipulating them like so many puppets. They would walk, work, suffer and be crushed because misery and oppression was their fate. Life held out to them no hope or excitement. It was as if the very springs of their lives had run dry.'⁵⁸

Much worse off even than the ordinary peasants were the untouchables who formed a large part of the rural population in the United Provinces. The 'chamars' or tanners formed eighteen per cent of the Hindus in Basti and thirteen per cent in Gorakhpur. They formed the great bulk of landless and agricultural labourers.⁵⁹ Over half of them were in debt and they existed in a social ghetto from which there was no escape. They were forbidden both the village well and the cremation grounds. Gandhi's pronouncements of the untouchables in the 1920s when he called them 'Harijans' or 'children of God' and exhorted national leaders to try and abolish this practice had not had much effect in rural India. In 'Sadgati' [Deliverance, 1931], Premchand gives us a detailed description of how an untouchable tanner, Dukhi, makes gifts to a Brahmin. 'We'll put the offerings on a leaf. But don't you touch it. Take Jhuri, the Gond's daughter to the village shop. Make a full offering. A seer of flour, half a seer of rice, a fourth of lentils, and eighth of ghee and four annas at the edge of the leaf . . . You don't touch anything, or everything will be ruined.' The untouchable is not allowed even on to the verandah of the Brahmin's house. The Brahmin's wife says to her husband: ' . . . you forget caste rules. A washerman, a tanner or a bird shooter can't come into the house with his head held high. Is this a Hindu's house or a hotel?' The Brahmin and his wife express the majority opinion of the village: 'These people eat anything, clean or unclean, without worrying about it . . . They're all polluted.' When Dukhi dies while splitting wood for the Brahmin,

most of the villagers are only concerned that his corpse is polluting the way to the village well. No tanner will remove his body for fear of the police so the Brahmin has to do it himself. ' . . . How could a Brahmin lift up a tanner's corpse! It was forbidden in the scriptures and no one could deny it . . . ' So the Brahmin 'got out a rope. He made a noose at the end, managed to get it over the dead man's feet and drew it tight . . . He grabbed the rope and dragged the corpse out of the village. Having returned home, he immediately bathed, read prayers to Durga and sprinkled Ganges water round the house . . . ' ⁶⁰

In 'Thakur Ka Kuan' [The Thakur's Well, 1932] the well used by the untouchables is a long distance from the village and the water is putrid because an animal has fallen in and drowned in it. But they still cannot use the village well. There are other forms of oppression too, as Gangi, the untouchable woman, points out: 'That very day, the Thakur had stolen a sheep from a poor shepherd . . . The Brahmin's house was a gambling den . . . The shopkeeper mixed oil with the ghee . . . They made you work but wouldn't pay you wages. . . Whenever she came into the village, they looked at her with eyes full of lust . . . They beat poor Maghnu so hard that he spat blood for months and all because he refused to join a forced labour gang . . . ' Premchand adds an interesting touch in that 'Gangi', the name of the untouchable woman, is a corruption of 'Ganga', the name of the holy river of India which is supposed to contain the purest water of all. ⁶²

This kind of ironic significance is repeated in 'Doodh ka Dam' [The Price of Milk, 1934] where the name of the untouchable boy is 'Mangal', which, in contrast to his situation, means 'auspicious, fortunate'. He is an orphan and his parent's deaths are typical. His father died of plague and his mother of snake-bite while cleaning out a drain. So Mangal takes to living under a tree in front of the landlord's house and eating the left-overs from their plates. Even these are dropped into his hands for fear of pollution. But this fear does not extend to wet-nursing for it was Mangal's mother who breast-fed the landlord's son. No penance was required, however, because as the village priest remarks: 'Kings and princes can eat what they want. Restrictions are for ordinary folk.' When the landlord's son and Mangal have a fight, the landlord's wife refrains from striking Mangal, not out of pity, but because even through a cane 'the lightning current of contact would be conducted . . . to course through her body.' ⁶³

Who did Premchand hold responsible for those conditions? He certainly absolved the peasants. As early as 1921, in the novel *Premashram* [The Hermitage of Love], he says: 'The responsibility for their poverty rests not with them but with the conditions under which their life is spent . . . and an institution which depends for its existence on the life-blood of the peasants'. Obviously this institution should be abolished, as the hero Premshankar puts it: 'What justice is this that while someone toils and someone else protects him, it is we who collect the money? . . . Land belongs to the tiller. The ruler can claim a share for keeping peace and order in the country. No third group can have a place in society.'

This novel shows clearly the influence of the Russian Revolution on Premchand. An admirer of Bolshevism, he was, like so many other Indians, appalled by the violence that accompanied it. On the other hand,

Premchand admired the Kisan Sabha and mentions it in this novel in a way that shows that this organisation was already bothering the administration. But, at this time, Premchand also genuinely believed that benevolent landlords could ameliorate the condition of the peasant. In *Premashram*, he makes the landlord renounce all his land and give proprietary rights to the peasants.⁶⁴ There is an equally incredible incident in a story 'Pachtawa' [Repentance, 1914] where, under the influence of a saintly agent, the peasants of a particularly oppressed village pay up their taxes, rents and debts by pawning all their possessions.⁶⁵

In another story written in 1920, 'Pasu se Manushya' [From Beast to Man], there is a five page long conversation between a progressive landlord who shares his profits equally with his tenants on a Soviet-style cooperative farm and a wicked lawyer who pays pittances to his servants.⁶⁶ Premchand, like Gandhi, did not want a war between classes⁶⁷ and appealed to the landlords to prevent this from happening:

If the landlords would not stain themselves so much with their injustices that their existence is disgusting in the eyes of others they would for ages remain the chiefs, the leaders and the protectors of the peasants. After independence, of course, land rents will be somewhat reduced—the peasants will not accept less than fifty per cent—and along with that the landlord's wealth will be reduced but will self-rule be so empty of justice and righteousness that it will snatch away the proper rights of any group? That is not possible.⁶⁸

By the 1930s, however, Premchand had realised that the end of British rule did not necessarily mean the end of exploitation. As early as 1919 he had warned the leaders of the Congress 'There is no reason for the public to prefer your governance to that of foreign rulers'⁶⁹ and in *Karmabhumi*, he had stated that the transfer of power from one group to another did not, in itself, constitute liberation.⁷⁰ One of the problems of a bourgeois nationalist struggle is that, after it is over, power is often handed from an alien exploiting class to an indigenous exploiting class. African colonies also experienced this difficulty as the stories of Ama Ata Aidoo show. In 'For Whom Things Did Not Change', the caretaker of a small guest house in Ghana looks forward to the overthrow of the white rulers so that he, too, can have a flush toilet and electricity. But things 'did not change' to that extent and the story ends with the old man asking in hurt bewilderment 'What does "independence" mean?'⁷¹ Nehru understood this very well when he wrote: 'Our educated classes have so far taken the lead in the fight for self-rule but in doing so have seldom paid heed to the needs of the masses . . . But what shall it profit the masses of India—the peasantry, the landless labourers, the artisans—if every one of the offices held by Englishmen in India today were held by an Indian.'⁷²

Premchand made no such explicit statements but his disillusionment with simplistic solutions is apparent in his later work. In *Karmabhumi* he makes the civil disobedience movement in the city a success but cannot offer this palliative to the peasants. Their movement is withdrawn in the face of a government offer to negotiate but there is no villain-turned-saint landlord to

set things right. His last novel *Godan* is even more ruthless. The peasant, like Hori, is born, suffers and dies. Love, mercy and non-violent soul-force can no longer overhaul a blighted reality and, though Hori's oppressors include agents of the British administration, the Congress is no longer shown as the saviour.

Godan was Premchand's most sustained and explicit statement on peasants. But if anything remained unsaid, it was said in 'Kafarn' [The Shroud, 1936]. In this story, the scarcely tolerable grimness of the characters' lives is developed in the mode of grotesque comedy. Ghisu and Madhav, father and son, are untouchable leather-workers but they are unique in Premchand's writing because they are not good, uncomplaining peasants like Sankar or Halku. In fact 'If Ghisu worked one day, he would take three off. Madhav was such a loafer that whenever he worked for half an hour he'd stop and smoke his pipe for an hour.' The degradation caused by hunger and poverty is uncompromising. Madhav will not even go in to see his wife who is dying in childbirth because he is afraid that his father will eat up all the potatoes that they have stolen. After collecting enough money to buy a shroud for the dead woman, they remark 'What a rotten custom it is that someone who didn't even have rags to cover herself with while she was alive has to have a new shroud when she dies.' So they spend the money on eating and getting drunk. The evening in the liquor shop is not a revolutionary solution but, at least, the exploited are now beginning to ask why they should form part of a society which gives them the same reward whether they worked or not.⁷³

When Premchand wrote in 1934: 'I believe in social evolution . . . Revolution is the failure of saner methods'⁷⁴ he was expressing the opinion of a class. He had responded to the 'vague, confused' socialism that was in the atmosphere of India at the time, but was not willing to take the hard option of Marxism. He was, however, part of an international trend because the 1930s saw a spate of novels about peasant crises. For the first time in many societies the life of the majority was revealed and often in their own language. In the West, the causes of this crisis ranged from depopulation and falling wages in Scotland to indebtedness in Italy and Germany and ploughing out soil and erosion in America. In India, the Bengali writer, Manik Bandopadhyay had already written two major peasant novels by 1936, while in America and Europe, authors like John Steinbeck and Ignazio Silone had published *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Fontemara*. All of these writers, Premchand included, did what historical documents cannot do—they recorded the experiences of a whole class and showed that human suffering need no longer elude the knowledge of those who did not experience it. Premchand's last work shows, in fact, that a knowledge of the exploitation on the scale of entire classes is, in principle, accessible to us. It is also a painfully honest record of how a liberal humanist was compelled to discard some of his strongest views in the face of social reality.

Notes

1. David Craig, 'Novels of Peasant Crisis', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2, No. 1, October 1974, p. 47.

2. Lu Hsun, Chi wai-chih, quoted in Huang Sung K'ang's *Lu Hsun and the New Culture Movement of Modern China*, Djambatan, Amsterdam, 1957, pp. 163-4.
3. N. Bajpai 'Kahaniyan' in I. N. Madan ed. *Premchand: Chintan our Kala*, Saraswati Press, Banaras, n.d., p. 113.
4. R. O. Swan, *Munshi Premchand of Lamhi Village*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1968, pp. 138, 139.
5. Village accountant or land recorder.
6. Premchand to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi, June 3, 1932 in *Chitthi-Patri*, Vol. 2, Hans Prankashan, Ilaahabad, 1962, p. 76.
7. For details of Premchand's life see Amritrai's *Kalam Ka Sipahi*, Hans Prakashan, Ilaahabad, 1976.
8. Shivrani Devi Premchand, *Premchand: Ghar Hein*, Hindustani Publishing House, Ilaahabad, 1952, p. 124.
9. Hiren Mukerjee, *Gandhiji: A Study*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1960, p. 48.
10. *Census of India*, 1931, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XVIII, Part I—Report, p. 37.
11. The Khilafat Movement was organised to give voice to Muslim resentment at the British treatment of the *Khalifa* in Turkey after the first world war. For a full-scale study of the Khilafat Movement, see *The Khilafat Movement in India 1919-24*, A. C. Niemeijer, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1972.
12. The Simon Commission was a Statutory Commission under the Chairpersonship of Sir John Simon. It was appointed by Britain's Tory government in 1927 to enquire into the working of the Indian constitution. It aroused intense opposition in India because it included no Indian.
13. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. I—Report, op.cit., p. 40.
14. N. K. Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Orient Longman, Calcutta, 1974, p. 24.
15. This was the resolution of the Congress Working Committee in Bardoli in 1912 which called off the Civil Disobedience Movement after Chauri-Chaura.
16. Literally means 'The Peasants' Association'. It was formed in 1917 by groups within the Congress to look after the interest of peasants. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, it came under the influence of socialists within the Congress and the Communist Party of India.
17. H. Mukerjee, op.cit., chapters 5 and 8, *passim*.
18. Indian Round Table Conference (Second session) 7 Sept. 1931 to 1 Dec. 1931, *Proceedings* (London 1932), 390.
19. Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scottish Reviewers*, in Frederick Page ed. *Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 124.
20. I am grateful to S. N. Mukherjee of the Department of History, University of Sydney, for drawing my attention to Crabbe's possible influence on Premchand.
21. George Crabbe, 'The Village', *Crabbe: An Anthology*, ed. F. L. Lucas, Cambridge University Press, London, 1933, p. 8.

22. Edwin Markham 'The Man with the Hoe.' *The Man with the Hoe and Other Poems*, Gay and Hancock, London, n.d., pp. 17-18.
23. Premchand's presidential address to the first convention of the Progressive Writers' Conference in 1936, *Kuch Vichar*, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1961, pp. 5-25 passim.
24. I.N. Madan, *Modern Hindi Literature*, Minerva Book Shop, Lahore, 1939, p. 209.
25. T.K. Raychaudhuri, 'The Indian Economy (1905-1947)' in *Struggle For Freedom*, Vol. 11 of *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, ed. R.C. Majumdar, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1969, p. 830.
26. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908, Vol. III, 126-32; XII, 334-40; XIII, 13-22.
27. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. I—Report, op.cit., Ch. 1, passim.
28. *Ibid.*, Ch. 1, p. 26.
29. *Basti: A Gazetteer. Being Vol. XXXII of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1907, pp. 76-78.
30. *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer. Being Vol. XXXI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1909, p. 109.
31. According to the 1921 Census, rent-payers comprised landlords, occupancy tenants and tenants-at-will all of whom cultivated their land or holdings themselves. See *Census of India*, 1921, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Part II, p. 315.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 427.
33. T.K. Raychaudhuri, op.cit., p. 837.
34. *Census of India*, 1921, op.cit., p. 428.
35. Roughly equal to a little more than a quarter of a rupee or three Australian cents.
36. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. II—Report, op.cit., p. 50.
37. An Indian measure of weight equal to about one kilogram.
38. 'Sava Ser Gehun', *Mansarovar*, Vol. IV, Saraswati Press, Dilli, 1976, pp. 188-9.
39. *Basti: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p. 108.
40. *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p. 137.
41. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. 1—Report, op.cit., pp. 41-43.
42. *Basti: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p. 109
43. *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., pp. 70-72.
44. *Basti: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p.58.
45. *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p.71.
46. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. 1—Report, op.cit., p.48 passim.
47. An Indian measure of weight, roughly equal to 82 pounds.
48. 'Babaji Ka Bhog', *Mansarovar*, Vol. III, Hans Prakashan, Ilahabad, p. 322.
49. *Basti: A Gazetteer*, op.cit., p. 103.
50. 'Samar Yatra', *Mansarovar*, Vol. VII, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1979, pp. 70-71.

51. 'Balidan', *Mansarovar*, Vol. VIII, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, p. 63.
52. 'Poos ki Raat', *Mansarovar*, Vol. I, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, pp. 157, 163.
53. T.K. Raychaudhuri, *op.cit.*, pp. 839-40.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 839.
55. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. 1—Report, p.38.
56. *Karmabhumi*, Ilahabad, 1978, p. 301
57. *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. 1—Report, pp. 39-40.
58. *Godan*, Ilahabad, 1975, pp. 177, 336.
59. *Basti: A Gazetteer*, *op.cit.*, p. 76; Gorakhpur: *A Gazetteer*, *op.cit.*, p. 94.
60. *Sadgati, Mansarovar*, Vol. I, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, pp. 18, 19, 21, 26.
61. Literally means 'god' or 'lord', a title given to kshatriyas in Uttar Pradesh, usually to Rajputs and sometimes also applied to landlords.
62. 'Thankur ka Kuan', *Mansarovar*, Vol. I, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, p. 142.
63. 'Doodh ka Daam', *Mansarovar*, Vol. II, Hans Prakashan, Ilahabad, 1978, p. 207.
64. *Premashram*, Ilahabad, 1979, pp. 199, 141, 403-4.
65. 'Pachtawa', *Mansarovar*, Vol. VI, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, p. 239.
66. 'Paus se Manusya', *Mansarovar*, Vol. VIII, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad, 1978, pp. 208-12.
67. *Vividh Prasang*, ed. Amritrai, Hans Prakashan, Ilahabad, 1962, Vol. II, p. 487.
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43. Translation by R.O. Swan, *op.cit.*, p. 111.
69. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 267.
70. *Karmabhunmi*, *op.cit.*, p. 312.
71. Ama Ata Aidoo 'For Whom Things did not Change', *No Sweetness Here*, Longman, London, 1970, p. 29.
72. J. Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, New Delhi, 1972, Vol. III, p. 371.
73. *Kafan*, Hans Prakashan, Ilahabad, 1961, pp. 5-14.
74. Premchand to I.N. Madan. Quoted in I.N. Madan's *Modern Hindi Literature*, *op.cit.*, pp. 210-211.