

PREMCHAND: A CHAMPION OF PEASANTS

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Abstract

Premchand succeeded in painting a true picture of the joys and sorrows, the aspirations and deprivation of the Indian people, which broadened his vision. By depicting the deplorable conditions of the Indian peasantry and working class, he realised a sad lot of millions of workers all over the world, especially in the colonial countries. He is one of the greatest Indian writers who have intimately studied the life of a poor peasant and labourer and portrayed it with such a powerful imagination and wonderful act that it stands supreme in the history of Hindi fiction - nay in the annals of the entire Indian fiction.

Key Words: Peasantry, Deprivation, Humiliation, Poverty, Misery, Injustice, Exploitation,

Premchand was a revolutionary thinker who hit out against wrong and injustice in all its vicious myriad forms. He hit out boldly and courageously against the humiliation of foreign rule, he stood by the peasant and the worker, by the untouchable, by oppressed women. He hated tyranny in all its various forms. He left behind a plethora of books spanned three important decades of Indian history: a period of Indian struggle for Independence. He wrote more than three hundred short stories, seventeen novels, biographies, plays, articles and translations from writers like Tolstoy and Gorki. His writing is not only an important document of peasant conditions but also at this time of the nationalist movement. His fiction is true to the historical record and complements the social history of this period.

Who was Premchand and what circumstances caused him to become the first and one of the finest story-tellers of peasantry class of India? He was born on 31st July 1880, as Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, in one of the poorest districts of what was then the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (during Colonial Era) in a village called Lamhi near Banaras. His family belonged to a subsection of the *Kayastha* caste which had traditionally held occupation that required literacy as they were often 'patwaris', as Premchand's own grandfather had been. Thus, Premchand was both literate and familiar with an illiterate and underprivileged world which not previously depicted in Indian literature.

To understand Premchand, it is necessary to recognize him for what he was- a nationalist with board Gandhian sympathies. Gandhi had emerged as the undisputed leader of Indian masses. He led the peasants of Champaran in a non-violent protest against their oppressive British masters and in 1918 Gandhi played a similar role in the strike by textile mill workers in Ahmedabad. These incidents made Gandhi a unique leader in the eyes of people like Premchand. In 1921, Premchand saw Gandhi speaking at a meeting in Gorakhpur and he was so impressed that renounced his twenty years old government service. He took to writing as the only serious vocation and struck to it till his end in 1936. It was the influence of Gandhi on Premchand that he presented non-violent resistance in almost all his novels and short stories as his own personal moral viewpoint.

The historical record of Premchand's age shows that actually how deep the exploitation had penetrated the agrarian society of India. According to T. K. Raychoudhry (*The Indian Economy 1905-1947*) the rate of growth of the total volume of agricultural output was only 0.37 per cent. The rate of production of food crops was even less i.e. only 0.11 per cent. Moreover, the epidemics, famines and floods were rampant. These natural factors were compounded by the fact that out of an estimated irrigate-able area of fifteen and a half million acres of Gorakhpur and Basti Districts (where Premchand lived) only nine million acres were irrigated. For the ordinary peasant, these natural calamities were increased by man-made injustice, especially the inequality of land ownership. As per the Census 1921 in Gorakhpur out of 2.4 million rent payers, 741 thousand were peasants without any occupancy rights and therefore subject to the worst form of rack-renting. There were 34.4 thousand landless labourers in Gorakhpur and all of whom were paid four *annas* (one-quarter of a rupee) per day for men and one anna for women. This poverty and exploitation find a voice in the works of Premchand.

In a short story, 'Sava Ser Gehun' Premchand depicts what happens to a peasant if he does not have grain. Shankar, the protagonist has a small piece of land and a bullock after the division of property between him and his brother. The land is not enough to meet both ends, so, Shankar has to work as a labourer. Like stereotype peasant, Shankar is honest, does not worry about being cheated, does not know any trickery. After the hard work of day if food is available he eats it, if not he chews some grams if nothing is available he drinks water, prays to God and goes to sleep. He borrows some wheat from the village priest to arrange a feast for a holy man and finds that after seven years the debt has increased so much that he has to work as a bonded labourer in the field of the priest to pay off the debt. He dies in debt and inherits his son both the debt and slavery.

In another story 'Babaji Ka Bhog' Premchand describes the conditions of the peasantry class of the 1920s. Ramdhan, the protagonist, belongs to 'Aahir' caste, traditionally associated with cow herding, but ironically, he has no milk animal only plough oxen. After paying the rent, debt and taxes, he has practically nothing left. "The barn had been emptied lender of the crop. The moneylender had taken half and the landlord's agent had grabbed the other half, the straw had been sold to get the oxen trader off their neck. A small sack was all fell to his share. By threshing over and over he could manage to get a mound of grain out of it. Somehow or the other they had reached the end of spring. But what is of the rest of the year? Only God knew what the oxen would eat or indeed the people of the house" Throughout Premchand's works there are references of peasants who have been forced off the land by increasing debts and rents.

'Poos ki Raat' is a heart-rending cry of an ordinary peasant Halku who is both poor and in debts becomes a wage labourer. He has to give the landlord the money he had saved for his blanket. He keeps vigil to gourd his fields on a January night he lights a fire to ward off the chilling weather. He 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 not you give up this tenant farming. You work till your droop; the harvest goes to pay off the arrears so why not end it? Were we born just to keep paying off debts? Work for your own stomach..." And he finds that the crops are ruined she cries out, "Now you will have to hire yourself to pay the rent and taxes." But the irony is that when the value of the produce was, in many cases, less than the rents the cultivator still had to pay. So, 'cursing their fate, naked, starved and dying like dogs the peasants continue to till the fields. Otherwise what choice did they have?' Premchand writes in Karambhumi that in a predominately agricultural country cultivation is not merely a means of livelihood, but also a status symbol.

In *Godan* Hori returns penniless from the sale of his sugarcane crop because he has had to pay off his creditors. He comforts his wife Dhania: "One can get work as a labourer. I will work and we shall eat." But Dhania is practical, "Where is there work for a labourer in this village?" The tragedy of Hori is the tragedy of the peasantry class of India. Describing Hori's village Premchand writes: "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." This novel is Premchand's most sustained and explicit statement on peasants. The village economy is damaged beyond repair by the process of industrialization. Gobar, who is a peasant, is reduced to the status of a worker. He has lost all the virtues of traditional life. He imbibes the spirit of competition and selfishness. Premchand believes that industrialization does not go to solve the problems of unemployed youth. One or the other hand, it brings about their complete ruin. About the life of workers, Premchand remarks: "Workers live in hovels, dirty, stinking hovels, where you could not stand a minute without retching. Their clothes are so dirty that you would not like to clean your shoes. I have studied their conditions." It is an outline of modern civilization and social order.

Premchand through Hori has focused attention on the wretched plight of the millions of poor people of India who are toiling, suffering, starving and dying of dangerous deaths, bearing the burden of life, being exploited at all hands. Poverty, misery, injustice, exploitation, and cruelty remain faithful friends from birth to death of almost all heroes of Premchand. He tries to arouse the conscience of humanity against the ruthless exploitation of the underdogs of society.

To whom did Premchand hold responsible for the wretched conditions of peasants? He certainly absolves the peasants. In *Premashram* he writes, "the responsibility for their (peasants) rests not with them but with the conditions under which their life is spent...and an institution which depends for its existence on the lifeblood of peasants." Obviously, the institution should be abolished. Premshankar (the hero of *Premashram*) says: "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." The words written about a century ago have not lost relevance.

But if anything remained unsaid was said in the short story 'Kafan'. Ghisu and Madhav, father and son, untouchables, are unique in Premchand's writing because they are not good, uncomplaining like Hori. In fact 'if Ghisu worked for one day, he would take three off. Madhav was such a loafer that whenever he worked for half an hour he would stop and smoke *bidi* for an hour.' In other words, they worked when they needed and for none but themselves. They were free of all sorts of worldly cases and wants. So, Ghisu and Madhav were perceptively different.. They were born in a world which denied them any advantage, let alone the minimum space to be for them.

Namvar Singh writes that 'The Shroud' is a piece of crowning irony that 'one who cannot get even a rag to cover one's body in life, should require a new shroud in death,' Ghisu and Madhav both reject this custom and utilize the money collected from the villagers for the shroud in drinking. When they dance after getting a drink, a strange atmosphere of eeriness is created. The woman lies dead in the hut with a child in her womb while her husband and father-in-law are dancing away their bizarre dance at the wine shop. On one side is death, on the other the dance. Does it not remind one of the paradoxes of Shiva's dance of destruction -- the *Tandava*? This is not reality but might more which destroys all illusion and kindles revolt even in cold, dead souls.

Premchand's writing is a painful honest record of how a liberal humanist was compelled to give voice to the suffering peasantry and discard some of his strongest views in the face of social reality. Today, when the forces of reaction, exploitation, fascism and obscurantism are re-emerging, the importance of his writings and the ideas he expounded have increased manifolds.

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