

PREMCHAND: A GUILLESS PORTRAYER OF LIFE

Dr Dinesh Sharma

Principal, R.S.D. College, Ferozpur City

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A dozen novels, hundreds of short stories, several translations from English classics and innumerable essays to his credit, Premchand was born as Dhanpat Rai Srivastav on 31 July 1880 in Lamhi, a village near Varanasi, in British India.

A revolutionary by heart, Premchand was the man who dared to write about things that have always existed but had hitherto been considered beyond the realms of literature – poverty, exploitation and submission of the trodden ones, greed and corruption of the rich capitalist class, and an unyielding caste system.

A man of acute social consciousness and an unerring eye for detail, Premchand's short stories talk about the pain and suffering of the toiling masses that had been suppressed for centuries. Feeling the pulse of the real India he expressed, using stereotypes where necessary to make general observations, painting on a large canvas with broad, sweeping brushstrokes, writing stories that occasionally seem preachy or moralistic when not outright sentimental to modern readers. His simple but intense style, his appeal to that inherent goodness in every human being living on this Earth is something that touches heart irrespective of age and times. His short stories with their moralistic overtones appeal to all that is good and decent in us, all that is moved by injustice, exploitation and intolerance around. Here lies his relevance to the young readers even in the present 21st century.

Premchand, a simple individual was a revolutionary by heart. With his reformatory zeal, he believed in the 'art not for art's sake but for life's sake'. "I write for only one sake : To present a human truth, or to show a new angle of looking at common things," he wrote. His affinity towards socially-engaging and purposive literature became evident when he supported a new kind of writing that was beginning to take shape in the 1930s. He had the courage to publish in his influential Hindi journal *Hans* in October 1935 the Manifesto written by a group of Young Turks in London that later initiated the Progressive Writers' Movement. When the progressives decided to hold an ambitious first-of-its-kind meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) on April 9, 1936, Premchand rose to the occasion with everything at his command as a writer. Not only did he give his whole-hearted support to this fledgling association, but his presidential address would, in later years, become a manifesto of sorts for a literary movement unlike any other in the history of this country, a movement that would shape the responses of a whole generation of Indian intelligentsia.

In his presidential address called *Sahitya ka Uddeshya (The Aim of Literature)*, this greatest storyteller of his time told his audience how good literature can only be founded on truth, beauty, freedom and humanity. He had his own notion of beauty. The time had come, he declared with the quiet assurance of a messiah, to redefine the parameters of beauty: "*Hamein khubsoorti ka mayaar badalna hoga.*" It was something Real. In simple but powerful words, he stated that to him, literature was simply 'the criticism of life'. And since literature is nothing but a mirror of its age, its definition, scope and contents just as much as its aims and objectives must evolve with time. We all live in a real world. Witnessing the turmoil and pain in the world around, a '*sahardya*' reader could no longer be content with the wondrous tales of love and escape. He is mature enough to understand and face the bitter realities of life. Premchand believed that "Currently, good literature is judged by the sharpness of its perception, which stirs our feelings and thoughts into motion." The main aim of literature, then, was to 'refine' the mind of the readers. And while undoubtedly the aim of art was to strengthen one's sense of beauty, art too must be weighed on the same scale of usefulness as everything else in life.

Language, whether Urdu or Hindi was a means and not an end to him. According to him, a writer is born, not made. Premchand stressed that a writer's natural gifts could be enhanced with education and curiosity about the world around him. He said, "Literature is no longer limited to individualism or egotism, but tends to turn more and more towards the psychological and social. Now literature does not view the individual as separate from society; on the contrary it sees the individual as an

indissoluble part of society!" "A quick mind and a fast pen" is simply not enough. A writer must also be abreast of the latest scientific, social, historical or psychological. A writer's mind should work on a broader canvas.

He was of the view that the Indian society stays away from from such subtle matters and thus the need for far more socially-engaged literature had become more urgent than ever. A writer has an immense responsibility:

"We will have to raise the standard of our literature, so that it can serve the society more usefully... our literature will discuss and assess every aspect of life and we will no longer be satisfied with eating the leftovers of other languages and literatures. We will ourselves increase the capital of our literature".

In his initial days as a writer, Dhanpat Rai adopted the pseudonym 'Nawab Rai'. His restless and courageous spirit got expression in his first short novel, 'Asrar e Ma'abid' which explored corruption among temple priests and their sexual exploitation of poor women. The issue was definitely a sensitive one. Interestingly enough, even the women writers of that period, such as Mahadevi Varma and Suhadra Kumari Chauhan did not raise voice for their counterparts. On the contrary, Premchand made no attempt to portray the woman as a silently suffering victim. He was a 'born rebellion'. His first collection of short stories, *Soz-e Watan (The Dirge of the Nation)*, published in 1908 was found to be so provocative and rebellious that not only was it banned by the imperial government, but all copies of the book were burnt.

His women characters do not stay quite. They voice the strongest arguments, complaints and feelings. His Gangi in '*Thakur ka Kuan*' is willing to face the wraths of the thakurs while trying to fetch clean drinking water for her ailing husband. That she doesn't succeed is another matter; in showing a woman who is, at the very least, trying to go where she is forbidden, Premchand was showing the way – a way that would be seized by the progressive writers who came immediately after him, a group of writers who would turn the brave but ineffectual Gangi into the torch bearer of lasting social change.

Not just as a literary figure, even in his personal life he had the guts to stand against society's norms. He married a child widow, Shivarani Devi, in 1906. This step was considered revolutionary at time, and Premchand had to face a lot of opposition.

Premchand's works show the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his principles in his choice of subjects: the need for widow remarriage, the widespread system of dowry, untouchability, the problems of landless labourers, the urgent need for land reform, the lot of underpaid and over-worked salaried people who resort to bribery and corruption, and social and class inequalities that cause good people to do bad things.

Premchand's short stories like *Namak ka Daroga*, '*Bade Ghar ki Beti*', '*Rani Sarandha*', '*Mamta*', '*Saut*', '*Amavasya ki Raat*' and *Panch Parmeshwar* are the most apt examples of his ability to have a peep into human mind and heart. Most of these stories share a common purpose and exhibit a similar flow of ideas. They are narrative / descriptive in nature and are based on an idealistic view of things. As an omniscient narrator, he reveals all and knows all.

'*Panch Parmeshwar*' or 'The Holy Panchayat' by Premchand happens to be a simple story built around the seemingly unimportant, day- to- day events in the lives of the people of an Indian village. In fact, in its ordinariness lies the charm and uniqueness of the story. It can be picked up as the best example to have the taste of the greatness of Premchand's art as a storyteller.

Panch Parmeshwar was Premchand's first story to be published in Hindi. Originally it had been written in Urdu and was titled '*Panchayat*' but Premchand's desire to reach a wider readership led him to switch over to writing in Hindi and he translated this story himself. It was published in 1916.

The story is set against this backdrop of a village scene and against this background of friendship and harmony. Jumman Sheikh and Algu Chaudhary share an intimate bond of friendship which goes back to their childhood days. The two belonging to diverse faiths shared nothing, not even food or religion. There was nothing to bind them except their mental and emotional affinity. In an entirely simple and credible manner Premchand begins by talking about mundane, day to day affairs. His grip over the subtleties of daily life finds a complete expression here.

He sketches a vivid picture of the method of imparting and receiving education in an Indian village. Algu is ever willing to run odd errands for his teacher and to get his hubble-bubble ready for him. Premchand's

portrayal of typical Indian fatalist nature is obvious when Algu could never succeed in studies and consoled himself by blaming his fate saying that education was not in his *kismet*.

We witness a typical Indian family issue- problem of taking care of the old relatives. There is an old relative of Jumman who had handed over her whole property to Jumman on the assurance that in return she would be looked after and provided for till she lives. As it usually happens, for some time things go off well. Here Premchand deals with the nuances of human relationships very delicately. Once children have the money in their grip, the aged seem a burden to them. Jumman's cruelly insensitive comment 'I had no idea, that you were determined to live forever' not just portrays him as materialistic and insensitive but makes him more real. His saying, keeping in mind the distinctive Indian households, seems very natural and credible.

Premchand is a problem-solver. As is often the case with Premchand's stories, he takes up some problem or the other in almost all of them and works towards a resolution. This is what is going to happen in 'The Holy Panchayat' as well. A problem has been presented and now the rest of the story will work towards a resolution of the same.

Premchand is a thorough Indian by heart. His realistic and detailed description of the scene of the Panchayat: the barber filling the chillums, the smoke from the *chillums* and from the fire the village boys running around here and there, the smoke arising from the smouldering dung cakes, the birds chirping noisily in the trees and also the village dogs who too had started gathering around, anticipating a village feast and who were contributing to the general din. Premchand being a master of such descriptions has in a few sentences created the whole scene for us and we can almost visualize the same. The story presents Premchand's firm faith in Indian Panchayat system. While following the events of the story and also the proceedings of the Panchayat step by step, at the same time he gives us an insight into the workings of the Panchayat as a social organization which makes an alternative system of governance available to the people. In the rural Indian set-up the village Panchayat had an important role to play in reaching justice to the poor and downtrodden people who could not afford the expenses of the city law courts.

The old, infirm, poor aunt strongly believes that she will find justice in the village council. From her point of view the Panchayat seems to be a fair minded authority which would look at the matter objectively and see the injustice of Jumman's behaviour. Premchand thus seems to be presenting the Panchayat as a viable alternative system of governance for people in the remote corners of the country. But Premchand is not merely an idealist. He is well aware of the bitter realities of life and the cracks and fissures that are already threatening a smooth, objective and fair working of this system. He knows that forces of power, capitalism and flattery are laying siege to a fair and objective working of the Panchayat.

It becomes evident when Jumman is shown quite confident that he would be able to sway the Panchayat's judgement in his favour. Premchand was therefore a forward-looking writer who was aware of the gradual breakdown of traditional values taking place in our society. At the same time at this stage of his writing career the reformist's zeal prompts him to present solutions to these problems too and in 'Panch Parmeshwar' that solution is presented in an idealized view of man which is romantic and visionary. Ultimately establishing his faith in the inherent goodness of man, he portrays how the Panchayat system works despite all the negative forces trying to corrupt it. While indicating faith in humanity on the one hand there is an element of wishful thinking on Premchand's part.

By the end of the story, specific questions may have been resolved- the old aunt gets her land and Algu gets his money. But Premchand's short stories work on a broader canvas. There are the larger questions: the position of the old and infirm in our society, the power of money which can corrupt easily, the fate of shy and simple people like Algu who more often than not would end up being exploited. The question whether the aged and the infirm should give up all their desire for peace and happiness just because they are old is really heart stirring. Premchand's stories make its readers having a sense of responsibility and a desire to find answers to the larger questions of present day humans living with an existential predicament.