

Premchand: A Prolific Novelist

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India has been the cradle of Ganga-Yamuni culture. The culture in which humanity dominates the minds of the people. There is no room for violence, and humanity creates peace. All religions and cultures are respected here and thoughts are accommodated. Premchand was a precious jewel of this culture. The novelist and short-story writer Premchand is considered to be the first major novelist in Hindi and Urdu of the twentieth century.

Born on 31 July 1880 in Lamhi, a village in Varanasi, Premchand's actual name was Dhanpat Rai Shrivastava. He belonged to the Kayastha family who used to hold important positions at that time, especially during the Mughal period. His grandfather Guru Sahai himself was a Patwari (land record keeper) and uncle Mahabir a big landowner. His father Ajaib Lal was a post office clerk. But beyond the identity of the ancestors, Premchand made his unique identity - an identity of an author who preferred Hindustani language over Hindi and Urdu as medium of expression. It was his extraordinary style of writing in composite culture that made him the samraat (emperor) of Hindi novels. Though we saw some names in the world of novel even much before Premchand such as *Pariksha Guru* by Lala Shrinivas Das(1882), *Chatidrakanta Santati* by Devaki Nandan Khatri (1890), *Upanyas*, a journal launched by Kishorilal Goswami (1998) in which his sixty five novels were published. But all these were like fables, away from the social issues and reality. It was Premchand's pen which made social reality its subject matter. He not only provided literature to the society but picked up the characters from the society itself and explained them in their work.

His distinctive style of writing made him stand a part. He did not adopt Sanskrit-influenced Hindi or Persianised Urdu, but adopted the Hindi-Urdu confluence as his companion and was proud of it. Today we consider it to be the common heritage of Hindi and Urdu. He said, *Just as the language of English people is English, Japanese of Japan, Iranian of Iran, Chinese of China, it is not only appropriate to call the national language of India -Indian but necessary to do the same with the same weight.* His prolific style of writing coupled with the reflection of problems of ordinary people in society reached out to the general public. Premchand once said, *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.*

The composite culture started in his early days of childhood when he started learning Persian and Urdu in a Madrasa in Lalpur near Lamhi. He studied Persian for around eight years from a Maulvi whose teaching had a profound effect on his mind as a result his writings became a model of Hindu-Muslim solidarity. He found Hindi also a useful communication language as there was a major part of the society who used Hindi.

The characters of his writings reflected the general class of society and exposed many facets of social evils such as cast system, feudal system, gender discrimination, widowhood, child marriage, poverty, prostitution etc. Once he said, *we have to redefine the parameters of beauty.* His grip on every aspect of life was so deep that he seemed to be a part of it. Reality and in-depth knowledge of other religions made his writings apart. The way he described in his short-story fictional work *Eidgah* is not just about the festival of some people but the reflection of feelings for which his writings are still known. The legend recognized the feelings of a poor little child who did not care about his child-like hobbies of buying sweets and toys at the tender age but to alleviate the suffering of his old grandmother. The child felt proud to buy a pair of tongs for her. He reasoned for his act that the toys and sweets would not last for long and were not very good for health too but the tongs were as it would remove the pain of old grandmother she felt while pulling roties from the oven every day. Her hands often got scalded. Her fingers would not burn with the use of these tongs.

His another story *Hajj-e- Akbar* is a perfect subject of hindu-muslim unity. It touches the heights, even an ordinary Muslim may not have such a deep knowledge about the religious matter as what is to be preferred over the other in the extraordinary circumstances. In the story, a poor muslim woman wished to go and perform Hajj. She saved her hard earned money for the purpose. When the time arrived to go for it, she found that her neighbour who was as poor as she was afflicted with a deadly disease but had no money for the treatment. That woman happened to be a hindu and that time Hajj coincidentally was the Hajj-e- Akbar (more virtuous). But she preferred to spend her money on the treatment of that poor hindu lady instead of going for Hajj. This is not only the unity for which Indian culture is known but also the grasp on the deep rooted issues of the society.

Religion had never stopped his pen. For example, in his short novel, 'Asrar e Ma'abid', he exposed the bitter reality of how people have sold their consciences even in the house of God. The so-called Messiah (priest) had fallen so low that

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he did not even spare the innocent and distressed women. The novel was published in a series in the Benares-based Urdu weekly 'Awaz-e-Khalk' from October 1903 to February 1905. The novel is still considered a masterpiece in the literary world. Premchand did not want only to present the problems found in the society, their solution became his goal.

He wrote extensively for national integrity also and became known for his patriotism. His work 'Soz-e- Watan' was published in 1907 from Kanpur. The volume contained his short story *Duniya Ka sabse Anmol Ratan* (The most precious possession in the world) where the most precious possession of the heroine was not the jewel or like materials but that drop of blood which is shed for the sake of mother land. The story was full of patriotic fervour, urged the people to participate in Indian freedom struggle from the colonial rule. When it came to the notice of the British officials, they banned it. When the copies of Soz-e-watan were burnt Premchand himself was also the witness. He had been asked then to submit for the government clearance whatever he wrote. Once he stated, *whatever I write, on any subject - may be even on elephant tusk - I must submit to the district collector. It is not once or twice a year that I write. It is my daily work. If every month a manuscript is sent to him, he is sure to feel that I am slack in my official duty.* This forced him to change his pen name from *Nawab Rai* to *Premchand* to remain an avid writer. He said,

"Nawabrai" is now dead for some times. It was Dayanarayan Nigam who suggested him the pseudonym *Premchand*. Premchand was not the slave of languages but that of poverty, hunger, feudal system from which he wanted the society to get rid of. He did not dream of a Hindu or Muslim society but a society in which rich and poor of all religions could live together with dignity and respect. He was Upanyas Samrat. Love and passion for the poor and middle class, pain for the women, patriotism for the nation, and national unity for religious diversity were the benchmark of his work. To spread this message of love, dignity and respect to every member of the society he adopted the unique style of writing. He did not miss any opportunity to do so, rather created to do so. This is the reason why his drama *Karbala* was so well-received even when it was far from reality. He proved that if a man is true, not even religious walls can stop him to help. He wrote dramas like *Karbala* on one hand, on the other, his patriotism did not restrain him from criticizing those who opposed Khilafat movement.

Proficiency in Urdu language earned him the status of a perfect journalist. Premchand was an avid reader too. Undoubtedly, he himself was a prolific writer but also appreciated the work of others. Once he wrote to Nigam *I am still undecided what style to adopt. Sometimes I follow Bankim and sometimes Azad. Recently, I have read Count Tolstoy and since then I am in his influence. This is my weakness, what else...* He regarded Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, a great wizard of pen. In his review of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* in 1933 he stated, *His compositional skills and imagination were beyond human. There is no fraction or part of life on which his sharp eyes did not rest. And when something came into his mind, it ended by exceeding the limits of the human. He was able to depict with the same greatness and the same truth a picture of the upper layers of society as well as one of the lower ones, without falling into stereotypes or any sign of ignorant inexperience...* He also did translations of some of his short stories such as *How much Land Does a Man Need. The God-Child* etc. and published under the name *Prem Prabhakar*. His writings are still read with great zeal and enthusiasm. It is said that Premchand took the literature to the common man by describing their problems through his writings. According to a web site he is counted among the 60 famous personalities of India.

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