Chapter VII

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The plight of the masses had caught the consciousness of the nationalist intelligentsia even during the 19th century when the nationalist critique of British rule was beginning to take shape. The induction of the masses in the national movement following the assumption of leadership by Gandhi furthered this concern. The Congress sent out workers in the countryside, extended the network of local committees, and made efforts to mobilize the masses as participants in the struggle for freedom.

Premchand amply reflected this concern. In fact, he was the first writer of Urdu and Hindi to make the cause of the common man his primary concern. Indeed, his self-image was that of a mazdoor, a spokesman of the poor, a writer devoted to the reflection and amelioration of the lot of the wretched of his society. A very large proportion of his writings, fictional and non-fictional alike, reflects this focal concern. The strengths and weaknesses of his thought and craft, as also the ambivalence we have time and again perceived, are best exhibited in his treatment of the masses.

The masses for Premchand meant primarily the large body of peasantry. Once in a while he wrote also about the urban

workers in the industrial establishments and about domestic servants. Usually, however, even the latter had their roots in the countryside and continuing links with the peasantry. Moreover, in his treatment of the industrial proletariat, as is demonstrated so well in Godan, he tended to turn nostalgically to the village which, despite being an arena of oppression and injustice, remained to him the only haven of humanity.

A major and continuing concern of his, the village, in fact, drew Premchand irresistibly. And it did so in a way that was characterized by an unresolved duality. At times the village appeared to him as the sole bastion of humanity in the face of industrialization and consequent erosion of social norms, and at times as the scene of unrelieved exploitation and consequent dehumanization. While this tension in the perception of the village continued till the very end, his work showed a general shift from romanticization to confrontation with reality.

Along with this occurred an analogous development. With the passage of time grew a tendency to look for less wishful and more realistic solutions to the ills of rural society. In the pattern of this shift and its underlying tension may be seen a touching reflection of the dilemma of one who, born in a colonial society, aspired for a juster social order in accordance with his intellectual aims and in

spite of his instinctive class affiliations. But, it needs to be emphasized, Premchand was not alone in daring this transcendence and in failing to carry it through even at the level of ideation.

Sevasadan (1917) is the earliest novel to indicate Premchand's attitude towards the village. 'Rural life', we are told, 'has an endearing affectionateness that is lacking in urban life. It has a bond of attachment that ties all the inhabitants together irrespective of their status.'[1] Though appearing in increasingly less unadulterated forms, this idealization of the essential dignity and humaneness of the villager never deserted Premchand completely.[2] These idealized vignettes of rural life - the 'free' peasant of this enslaved country standing almost angelic in his unreality - were, however, incidental to the main story of Sevasadan. In Premashrama (1920) Premchand describes the scenic beauty of the village and concludes: '... it was a pure scene of simple, peaceful life. In front of the noise and traffic and hurry of the city, this peace appeared extremely elating.'[3] In Karmabhumi (1932) he wrote of Amar, the hero, being fascinated by the simplicity, generosity, love, and contentment of the village

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1 Sevasadan, p. 50.

2 Ibid, p. 178; Premashram, pp. 86-7; Gupta Dhan, vol. I, p. 135; Karmabhumi, p. 121, etc.

3 Premashram, p. 139.

folks, and lamenting sentimentally that atrocities were perpetrated on such guileless people.[4]

Full of concern, sympathy and sentimentalism for the peasant, Premchand devotes most of his best works to his plight. The villages of Oudh and eastern U.P. form the setting for his depictions. The general picture that he paints of the village scene is thus provided by the zamindari system with its parasitical landlords and their numerous aides preying upon the peasant. Absentee landlordism also is mentioned. The traditional forces of the village are the zamindars, the biradari, the panchayat, and the village headmen, etc. They are feared and respected by the poor villagers. The colonial authorities, be they the law courts or the district officials or petty policemen, also impinge in a big way on the rural society. They are feared but not respected. The two forces, however, are linked together in an exploitative system that sustains and is sustained by the colonial dispensation.

The peasantry Premchand depicts as existing largely at simple subsistence level. He does recognize differentiation among the peasantry. This differentiation runs along both caste and economic lines. Very often there is a convergence of caste and economic differentiation. The richer peasants thus belong usually to the Rajput and Thakur castes whereas the poorer ones, constituting the bulk of the peasantry, are

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4 Karmabhumi, p. 121.

Mahtos, Kurmis, Bhars, Gadariyas, Ahirs, Bhangis, and Chamars.

The wretched plight of the rural poor, in Premchand's view, is mainly ascribable to three factors. First, the hold of tradition and superstition makes the poor villagers fatalist. They squander away savings as well as borrowings in fulfilling ritual and customary obligations centring around birth, marriage and death. Intimately associated with these obligations is the notion of honour. Secondly, the elements and world market trends operate on the poor peasant as imponderables over which he has no control. In the absence of awareness and news of the outside world on the one hand, and of better techniques of farming on the other hand, he remains exposed to both these forces. Thirdly, the entire extractive colonial system, in which the traditional social superiors are hand in glove with the exploitative colonial masters, so operates as to perpetuate the poverty of the peasantry.

Working against such heavy odds, some of the peasants, not surprisingly, are constrained to seek employment as wage agricultural labourers or as urban workers. The pain and humiliation ensuing from this forced weaning away from their beloved land is most movingly captured by Premchand.

This, then, is the general backdrop of Premchand's portrayal of rural society. Community life is the norm and the hold of tradition is strong. But the penetration of the

colonial system, by making inroads into the relatively isolated village community, has begun eroding its internal structure and, consequently, damaging the beauty and viability of its social relationships.

Turning again and again to the sombre village reality, Premchand documents at considerable length the multi-level victimization of the peasantry. He is particularly conscious of the difficulties posed by the vicissitudes of the market as a result of larger national and international developments. For example, when he writes Premashrama following the end of the first world war, land is expensive and labour plentiful. After the war grain prices have shot up and the authorities are planning enhancement of rent. Apparently this is an unexceptionable move. But its unfairness stems from the fact that the peasants' gains from the increased prices of grains are neutralized by the rise in the cost of bullocks, labour, agricultural implements, etc. With the government determined to enhance rents, the peasant was bound to lose on two fronts.[5] Agriculture, at least for the small cultivator, tends to become unprofitable. If the kisans still stick on to land, they do so mainly for the sake of maryada, their hereditary dignity which is associated with the possession of land. However, such is the pressure of circumstances that in spite of the general

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5 Premashram, pp. 50-51.

hold of this maryada, many peasants are rushing off to cities like Calcutta and Rangoon where labour is in demand.[6]

Not losing sight of the general state of the market, in Karambhumi Premchand notes that there are few buyers for land and, as a result, the exploiters do not see in eviction the most effective way of squeezing the peasantry. Alternative measures are, therefore, resorted to.[7] This was clearly a function of the Great Depression when Karmabhumi was written. While writing Godan (1934-36) Premchand dwelt at great length in his narrative on the effect on rural economy, particularly on the destiny of the peasant, of the emergence of sugar factories and the consequent clamour for producing sugar cane as against traditional crops like maize and barley.[8] He also notices the fact that the price of agricultural estates had fallen by as much as 50%.[9]

As for the exploiters, Premchand shows the British Indian sarkar implicitly at the apex of the elaborate exploitative system. Only occasionally are direct references made to it, as in Premashrama where its role as the opponent of Indian nationalism is spoken of. The government's policy of squeezing the peasants dry through the instrumentality of heavy taxation

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6 Ibid, p. 51, 185.

7 Karmabhumi, p. 285.

8 Godan, p. 144.

9 Ibid, p. 136.

is also mentioned.[10] As we have already seen in the first and second chapters, Rangbhumi and innumerable articles also highlight this exploitative role of the Raj.

The Raj effects this exploitation through a network of agents including those who man the district administration and those who constitute the fabric of traditional rural authority. For the sake of convenience, and without losing sight of the fact that both of them constitute the whole of the exploitative colonial framework, we may call these two constituents the colonial and the internal exploiters. Also, these categories are not always neatly divided; they often overlap.

Even the rural-town authority divide is not a neat one. For example, district officials like Jwala Singh in Premashrama are also landlords. A different kind of overlap is exemplified by Khanna in Godan. Besides being an entrepreneur, he is also a moneylender who, by controlling a chain of small sahukars, completes his stranglehold over the peasants. Within the village itself, neat functional divisions do not always obtain. The zamindar may smell profit in lending money and so decide to supplement his income thereby. The same could be true of the village purohit or mukhia. In fact, even a petty peasant who could set aside ten or twenty rupees for the purpose was only

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10 Premashram, pp. 343-44.

too keen to try his luck at moneylending. Hori, the tragic protagonist of Godan, himself had lent money in his better days. If, in such a situation, the moneylender developed the ambition of, and saw profit in, becoming a landowner and landlord, that was by no means surprising.

Premchand looks upon the zamindars as the relics of a bygone age who nonetheless continue to perform an exploitative function in the modern set-up. He talks, for the most part, of the old and new types of zamindars, reserving a degree of empathy and admiration for the old type. Zamindars of the old type, according to Premchand, still cherish the older values of maintaining their honour and treating their praja as their children. They are as jealous of their privileges as they are zealous about their obligations. Prabhashankar in Premashrama, for instance, is a representative of this type. It is indicative of Premchand's attitude towards the zamindari system that he shows the older type of zamindars as losing out to the new type in the struggle for survival. In Premashrama itself, Prabhashankar's decline is complete and irrevocable while his newphew, Gyanshankar, representing the new type of ruthless and acquisitive zamindars, moves from strength to strength. The old type zamindars are averse to involving the police and law courts in their dealings with their ryots for that would stain their honour. They are, moreover, indifferent to the principle that money produces more money.[11]

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11 Ibid, p. 365.

Premchand discerns benevolence in the dealings of the older kind of zamindars with the peasants. They give money, wood and fodder to their needy ryots, and as a matter of course at the time of marriage in a peasant's family. They are never keen on evicting the farmers for non-payment of dues.[12] In Rangbhumi Premchand goes to the extent of saying that these benevolent zamindars could even lay down their lives for the sake of their 'subjects'.[13] Even in Godan, which is free from the utopianism of Premchand's preceding fiction, it is because of his concern for the traditional sense of honour that the zamindar lets the grazing ground be used by the villagers free of charge.[14]

As against this, maybe idealized, picture of the fatherly zamindar of old, Premchand sketches the new one as being crassly exploitative. The latter does not believe in wasting any time sympathizing and softening towards the peasantry. In Premashrama Gyanshankar is the new landlord and the peasants bemoan with regard to him: '... since the chhotey sarkar has become the master, see what chaos there has been. Day and night we have had enhancement, eviction and cesses....'[15]

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12 Ibid, p. 18.

13 Ranghbumi, p. 244.

14 Godan, p. 9.

15 Premashram, p. 10.

It is, however, Godan that makes the most perceptive comment about the zamindars, old and new. Prof. Mehta, who is easily the most positive of Premchand's characters in his masterpiece, tells Rai Saheb, the rather kind zamindar, that essentially all the zamindars are alike, be they kind or cruel. One kills with kindness and the other with cruelty. But both, without any distinction and in equal measure, want to rob the peasant.[16] That even Rai Saheb would be, in the ultimate analysis, in agreement with Mehta can be inferred from his admission that the real solution of the problem does not lie in improving the character of the zamindars and making them kinder and more benevolent. They are themselves victims of a system. They cannot but be obliged to exploit the peasant so long as this system continues.[17] The real solution, logically, lies in doing away with the system.

The abolition of the system, however, is left implicit in Godan. Unlike Premashrama, which overtly argued for the abolition of the zamindari system and, in keeping with Premchand's early technique of change of heart, showed young Mayashankar giving up his unjust and immoral rights of ownership as a zamindar, Godan represented a more sophisticated stage of Premchand's craftsmanship in that it relied, at least in that part of it that dealt with rural society, on pregnant suggestions

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16 Godan, p. 52.

17 Ibid, p. 53.

rather than unequivocal statements.

In his depiction of landlords Premchand also mentions the growth of absenteeism among them. Rai Kamalananda, in Premashrama, lives in Lucknow. So does Rai Saheb of Godan. This completes the span of virtually two decades within which he wrote his major novels. In between, in Rangbhumi and Karmabhumi and a number of short stories, absentee zamindars appeared regularly in his fiction. This was, in a sense, natural. The kind of affluence that the bigger zamindars enjoyed and the kind of luxurious living for which they used their affluence could not but take them away from the village. Living in the city, moreover, held out the additional advantage of proximity to the law courts and the district, or even higher, officials. Political ambitions, too, were likely to be better promoted from the cities. As in the case of Godan's Rai Bahadur, the support of the ryots could be taken for granted at election time without having to live among them; but the requisite preliminary manoeuvres, without which nobody could hope to enter the council, could hardly be organized from the village. Whatever the zamindars' motivation or advantages in living away from their ryots, Premchand was severely critical of absenteeism which he saw as productive of many of the ills to which the peasants were exposed.[18]

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18 See Upadesh in Mansarovar, vol. VIII, pp. 276-96.

Not only the riches of the zamindars but also the luxuriousness to which they are prone rest demonstrably on the exploitation of the peasantry. Besides rack-renting the ryots, the zamindars also realised a variety of dues from them. Some of these dues had, with the passage of time, been sanctioned by custom. But some of these were utterly arbitrary and rested on nothing more solid than some capricious need of a particular zamindar. Whether customary or capricious, these dues were illegal. Though that did not affect the impunity with which they were realized.

These additional extractions could be in cash as well as in kind. For example, Manohar in Premashrama always gave a fourth of the mangoes from his grove to the zamindar.[19] In Godan, on the other hand, all the peasants give a shagun - auspicious offering - of about a rupee each to Rai Saheb on festivals such as Dussehara. In the very early stages of the narrative, as a matter of fact, Rai Saheb is shown telling Hori that this year he expects at least Rs 500 from the entire village.[20]

Apart from the dues demanded by the zamindar, at times peasants give gifts voluntarily in order to get into their master's good books. For instance, now that he has realized his ambition of possessing a cow, Hori decides that every now

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19 Premashram, p. 49.

20 Godan, p. 17, 24.

and again he would offer two to four seers of milk to Rai Saheb.[21]

A modified version of these illegal dues was the practice of making the ryots supply provisions at rates that were considerably lower than those obtaining in the market. Thus on the occasion of the feast to be given on the first death anniversary of Jatashankar in Premashrama, the villagers have to supply ghee at the rate of a seer for a rupee while the prevailing market rate is only ten chhataks for a rupee. It may not be very oppressive for those who have milk enough to make ghee on their own. But many villagers have to buy it from the market in order to make their contribution to the zamindar's feast.[22]

In addition to these forced or voluntary payments, the villagers are further obliged to perform begar. The zamindar has little difficulty in getting what he wants from his ryots. Premchand employs a telling phrase to describe the extent of this hold. The zamindar, he says, has fifty-two arms.[23]

With these fifty-two arms the zamindar seeks in particular to usurp the land of the hereditary cultivator who is slightly better off than the other peasants with regard to the legal

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21 Ibid, p. 27. See also 'Banka Zamindar' (1913) and 'Neki' (1910) in Gupta Dhan, vol. I, pp. 156-66, and pp. 149-57.

22 Premashram, pp. 11-12.

23 Ibid, p. 163.

protection of rights over land.[24] His other major concern is to increase, under one pretext or another, the rent on all kinds of landholdings. He may, for example, have a kuchcha well needlessly constructed to justify enhancement in the eyes of the law.[25] The death of a peasant is especially used as an opportunity to claim enhanced rent from his successor. Should the latter fail to meet the additional demand, as does Giridhar in 'Balidan' (1918), he has to forego the succession.[26] Besides the constant threat of being dragged to the law court or the police station, the peasant has to live under the dread of having such essential amenities as the right to use the grazing ground denied to him by the zamindar. There is also the Damocles' sword of distraint.[27] Fines, moreover, can be imposed for a whole host of reasons. Rai Saheb of Godan, for example, confesses that he makes between five to ten thousand rupees a year by means of fines.[28] Physical violence is freely resorted to as a means of exploiting the peasantry. Clearly extra legal, though causing no legal problems for the zamindars,

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24 Ibid, p. 178.

25 Ibid, p. 66. Besides the distinct advantage of money, the zamindars also had an upper hand in matters of litigation because of their ability to produce false witnesses. 'Pachtawa' in Mansarovar, vol. VI, pp. 227-40.

26 Mansarovar, vol. VIII, pp. 63-71.

27 Premashram, p. 47; Karmabhumi, p. 27. See also stories, 'Neki' in Gupta Dhan, vol. I, pp. 149-57; 'Pacchtawa' and 'Beti ka Dhan' in Mansarovar, vol. VI, pp. 227-40 and vol. VIII, pp. 29-37.

28 ~~Premashram~~ Godan, p. 166.

the use of violence includes such drastic means as burning the erring peasants' huts.[29]

As an organized interest, too, the zamindars operate systematically and effectively. Apart from keeping the officials in good humour, they manage to have their representatives in the local boards and the legislative councils. With the Indian National Congress emerging as a force to be reckoned with, some of them take care to be associated with the major movements launched by it. Rai Saheb, for example, gives up his membership of the council in response to the Congress call for civil disobedience, and re-enters the council after the movement is withdrawn.[30] The zamindars have also organized an association to protect their profits and promote their interests.[31]

The fifty-two arms with which the zamindar preys upon the ryot include a whole train of employees ranging from his factotum, the karinda, to mukhtar-e-am and peons. These servants carry out his orders ruthlessly and, in the process, reap some benefits for themselves too. They are the ones who deal directly with the ryots and so may even do what has not been ordered by the zamindar. This is especially so if the

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29 Premashram, p. 174.

30 Ibid, pp. 16, 134, 165, 253, 265. In Rangbhumi both Kunwar Bharat Singh and Raja Chatari are keen to maintain their loyalism to the Raj and also maintain a nationalistic facade. Also Godan, p. 14.

31 Premashram, p. 121.

latter is not a careful administrator or is an absentee zamindar placing total reliance in his factotum.[32] These servants of the zamindar receive meagre salaries. But, particularly the karindas, they live well and lord it over the helpless villagers. The following passage in Ghaban describes their position with obvious irony:[33]

> They were not kisans but did agriculture. They were not landlords but did landlordism. They were not thanedars but did thanedari. They were the zamindar's mukhtars.

Many of these men are elaborately sketched in Premchand's fictive construction of rural society. In Premashrama, his first major attempt in this direction, we encounter Ghaus Khan, the zamindar's factotum, who believes, as a typical karinda, in keeping the villagers completely clawed. He gives no receipts to peasants for the payments made by them, thus keeping the path clear for further extraction. For ever so slight an arrear of payment he does not mind taking recourse to distraint.[34] No wonder the villagers see the wisdom of showing deference to Ghaus Khan, and in spite of a measly salary the karinda does well for himself.[35] Though he is murdered, his violent end has

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32 For example in 'Upadesh', Mansarovar, vol. VIII, pp.276-96, begar is taken contrary to the zamindar's orders.

33 Ghaban, p. 2.

34 Premashram, p. 185.

35 Ibid.

no deterrent effect on his successor, Faizullah, who persists in the characteristic cruelty of a typical karinda.[36] He does not shrink from physically torturing the peasants; he hits them and makes them stand for hours under the scorching sun; he even has the audacity to break women's bangles and pull their hair. He further intimidates peasants with threats of litigation. He knows that in such an eventuality he would himself be exposed. But the risk is not real. The threat alone suffices to frighten the peasants into submission. Acting upon it is not necessary.[37]

In Godan, the last and the most realistic of Premchand's portrayals of rural society, Nokheram is a petty karkun with a salary of not more than ten rupees a month. But he makes more than a thousand and maintains his own men to carry out his nefarious operations. His favourite means of keeping the peasants in check is dand, a fine that is imposed by the village panchayet. Using his wits and influence, he so manages the panches as to make them do his bidding. This mode of dealing with the peasants offers him the added advantage of avoiding, so far as possible, a confrontation directly with the person who is to be brought to heels; for it is the panchayet that is inflicting the punishment. Like Ghaus Khan in Premashrama, Nokheram, too, tries to avoid giving receipts for payments

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36 Ibid, p. 239.

37 Ibid, pp. 240-42.

actually made, to keep constantly available the option, or at least the threat, of eviction for non-payment.[38]

The mukhia, village headman, also occupies a place in this system of exploitation. In Premashrama, for example, Sukkhu, the richest peasant of the village, is the mukhia. His is the only house in the entire village where food is cooked twice a day. As the recognised leader of the village community, he is supposed to be a mediator between the villagers and those above them, the latter including government officials and the zamindar along with his men. But in reality Sukkhu is no less adept in preying upon those whose interests he is expected to protect. With Ghaus Khan on his right and patwari Maujilal on his left, he forms the trimurti that decides, in a fair measure, the destiny of the poor villagers. In the bargain he does not mind plotting against the innocent members of his own village community.[39] Godan has no less than four mukhias. With her characteristic sharpness, Dhania, Hori's wife, describes them as loot mars. This expression shows the effectiveness of colloquial ingenuity in that a particular activity of the 'dirty four' is used as a collective noun for them. These mukhias virtually constitute the 'community' and set the norms that its members are expected to observe. The novel shows how ruthlessly they deal with poor peasants like Hori for what they

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38 Godan, p. 122.

39 Premashram, p. 176, 94.

construe as violation of norms.[40]

In keeping with Premchand's general picture, in which there are no pure exploiters except the Raj, these men, the scourge of poor peasants, are in turn terrorised and exploited by those above them, i.e., petty police officials like daroghas. Thus it happens that Sukkhu, the scheming mukhia in Premashrama, is himself falsely implicated in a case.[41]

Like the village headman, the patwari, too, forms part of the exploitation nexus. With his intimate knowledge of land rights in the village, virtual monopoly of access to the relevant records, and consequent ability to manipulate things, the patwari is possessed, by virtue of his office, with a potential for mischief and a power that is almost esoteric, given the technical nature of the village records and the illiteracy of the villagers. The patwari in Godan is also a panch and an elder of the biradari, a fact that invests him with multiple authority. Unabashedly he refers to his business of cheating the ryots as his kheti, cultivation.[42]

Yet another category of rural exploiters is that of pandits. Pandit Umanath, in Sevasadan, is a powerful man. He owns no cattle. But milk and ghee flow freely in his house.

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40 Godan, p. 121.

41 Premashram, p. 176.

42 Godan, pp. 256-57.

Possessing not a patch of land, he never experiences the slightest shortage of grains. A part of the feast is set aside for him; women have jewellery made through him; all kinds of documents are executed under his advice; and court cases are instituted through him. All this he does in addition to his normal functions as a pandit, which include making forecasts, suggesting auspicious days, offering mantras, and officiating at worships and ceremonies. Pandit Lekhraj, in Premashrama, dresses in silk and is respected even by the zamindar. He is a 'cultivator without cultivation, zamindar without zamindari and mahajan without mahajani'.[43] He fleeces his jajmans without scruples or mercy.

The most rounded picture, however, is that of Pandit Datadin in Godan. Here is a pen-portrait of the village 'Narada' who is also a part-time mahajan:[44]

> He always reached where stolen goods were to be divided.... He never gave a pie of rent to the zamindar and if distraint was threatened he would set out to jump into the well.... but he gave peasants money on interest. Any woman wants to have jewellery made, Datadin lands up in her service. He particularly enjoys marital match-making, for that brings him fame as well as offerings. To the ill he prescribes medicines, and also acts the exorcist.... He is a friend to the thief and the rich alike.

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43 Premashram, p. 133.

44 Godan, p. 120.

Pandit Datadin treats the lower orders with utter contempt and believes that they behave 'best if kicked'. He uses his influence with the panchayet and the biradari to exploit the ryot.[45] Part of his immunity he obtains from his Brahmanhood. Even the karinda considers it best to keep him happy, and so does not attempt to recover the five hundred rupees that the Pandit owes the zamindar.[46] By the later half of the novel, it is Datadin who exploits the ruined Hori as wage labourer.[47] But even the pandits have to submit to daroghas and such like and acknowledge the superiority of the headmen.[48]

Among the various layers of rural exploiters who come between the ryot and the zamindar, the mahajan is about the most vicious. In Premashrama Bisesar Sah, the village bania who ostensibly runs an innocuous little provision shop, 'squeezes the necks of the entire village'.[49] Godan discusses in greater detail the role and position of the moneylender in rural society. The novel has three regular mahajans: Dulari, Jhinguri and Mangaru Sah; although anyone in the village who can manage a little surplus cash tends to lend on interest. Jhinguri is the most substantial of the three. He is the agent of Khanna, the town-based capitalist who is both a big mahajan

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45 Ibid, pp. 121-22.

46 Ibid, p. 234.

47 Ibid, p. 170, 175, 194.

48 Godan, pp. 107, 111.

49 Premashram, p. 55.

and an entrepreneur. Jhinguri gets the villagers to enter into an agreement on stamped paper before advancing a loan. In the bargain he deducts from the principal advanced not only stamp money and a year's interest but also nazrana and dasturi. Thus, on an average, the poor debtor gets in hand a sum of rupees seventeen on a loan of rupees twenty-five.[50] Mortgage is a common practice in these transactions. Jhinguri is confident in himself. He knows that until the government provides an alternative source of agricultural loans, no legislation can weaken the hold of those like him. Government offices and law courts, after all, are for the moneyed.[51]

The plight of the typical peasant vis-a-vis the mahajans, as also others, is movingly told by Premchand in the tragic tale of Hori's life in Godan. For buying bullocks he has borrowed from Mangaru, for sowing potatoes from Datadin, and for giving his brothers their share of the family property from Dulari. Far from clearing the principal amounts, he is not even able to keep paying the interest on the three loans. The inevitable result, though protracted in its painful unfolding over the whole of Hori's working life, is the loss of everything, movable or irremovable, that he could call his own. So crushing and efficient is the system of exploitation.

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50 Godan, p. 17.

51 Ibid, p. 234.

There is little that is individual or specific about Hori's tale. The death of the protagonist may bring a Godan to an end. But the system goes on grinding with its usual efficiency. After Hori his son. It is a different matter that this particular Hori's son, Gobar, had decided quite early to opt out of this system and migrate to the city. In any case, the system is not yet exposed to the risk of dearth of human victims. In spite of Gobar's example, and he does inspire the young in the village with visions of an exodus, migration to cities is still no more than a trickle.

The point about the long temporal scale of the effect of the exploitative system is made by Premchand in 'Sava Ser Gehun' (1924). For borrowing a seer and a quarter of wheat, poor Shankar eventually loses not only his own freedom but also that of his oppspring to his mahajan, a wily old Brahman in this case. The transaction is frightening in its simplicity. Having borrowed the wheat - ironically enough he does so to feed a mendicant sadhu - Shankar gives the mahajan, who as the village Brahman is entitled to a portion of the rabi and kharif harvests, more than his usual share and thinks that the loan of wheat has been paid off. But the mahajan thinks differently. Over the years, according to the mahajan's computation, the original one and a quarter seers has piled up to five and a half maunds or sixty rupees. Shankar is obliged to work like a dog. But the interest keeps mounting. Eventually he despairs of

ever ridding himself of this load. He begins to slave for the mahajan. But the principal keeps increasing. In twenty years it amounts to one hundred and twenty rupees. Shankar's son replaces the father as the mahajan's serf. Premchand ends the story with the statement that it is a true reflection of the state of affairs in our society which is full of Shankars and such mahajans.[52]

This, then, is the exploitative system constituted by the internal exploiters of rural society. But there exists the official counterpart of it also. And the two parts of the overall exploitation nexus operate in a relationship of mutual collaboration and tension. As it impinges upon the peasantry, the official exploitative apparatus consists of the hakim at the top followed by his subordinate officials from tehsildars, thanedars, and kanungoes down the line to the peons. While the internal exploiters use their social status and authority over a largely illiterate and poor peasantry, the local representatives of the Raj possess the distinct advantage of the awe that sarkar inspires generally in the people. Police lock-up, jail and the law courts are the instruments of oppression available to them in the discharge of their functions.

The hakim comes on periodic visits ostensibly with a view to supervising conditions in the pargana. He forces begar on

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52 Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 188-95.

the poor villagers and also acquires provisions at concessional rates, if not gratis. His lashkar, camp, may include as many as a hundred, or even more, men, besides horses. Premchand describes the manifold harassment that the hakim's tour held in store for the villagers. His descriptions are not devoid of attempted resistance from the rural people to such harassment.[53]

Tehsildars and kanungoes also do their bit to get begar. During the distribution of taqavi loans, moreover, the former make money by accepting bribes. The kanungoes are no less corrupt. They even resort to such petty practices as siphoning off part of the salaries of the patwaris serving under them.[54] During times of natural calamities they understate the damage to the peasants' crops in order that the government may not lose much revenue and they may earn the approbation of their superiors.[55]

While the revenue officials having direct dealings with the peasants are corrupt enough and enjoy a life-style that far exceeds their meagre emoluments, the local police officials are simply rapacious. It is impossible for them to visit a village and come back without making some illicit money. From the

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53 Premashram, p. 182; Kayakalpa, p. 111; Karmabhumi, pp. 243-44.

54 Premashram, p. 10.

55 Ibid, p. 132.

poorest peasant to the village mukhia nobody can be safe from their oppression and extraction. In Godan, for example, the death of Hori's cow as a result of poisoning brings the thanedar to the village. When he fails to get money from Hori, he realises it from the village headman instead.[56] Though normally these petty police officials act in collusion with the mukhias, karindas and the like.[57]

How do the ryots fare in this corrupt and exploitative system? Premchand does not categorize his peasants as poor, middle and rich in any systematic manner. Consequently one could talk of the ryots as an undifferentiated whole. But incidental references do indicate differentiation among the peasants. The majority of the peasants he chooses for his novels and short stories are, however, poor; the very poor, indeed. His works also show the extra interest of the exploiters in somehow getting rid of the hereditary ryots with, relatively speaking, the most secure rights in land. About Ghaus Khan's desire to enslave the entire village, Premchand writes in Premashrama: 'Many men still remained among the hereditary peasants.... They were the thorns of this garden. Unless they were removed, where was any joy in idle roaming?'[58]

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56 Godan, p. 261.

57 Premashram; 'Shankhnad' in Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp.165-72; 'Andher' in Gupta Dhan, vol. I, pp. 135-40; 'Upadesh' in Mansarovar, vol. VIII, pp. 276-96.

58 Premashram, pp. 177-78.

If only these hereditary tenants with secure occupancy rights could be replaced by tenants-at-will paying higher rents, wandering in this garden would become such a pleasure. For it was so much easier to deal with and, if necessary, evict tenants-at-will and share-croppers.[59]

The point Premchand seems to be making is that even though there is a clear differentiation within the peasantry, in terms of the rigour with which the exploitative system oppresses them, relative material security or a state of penury makes little difference to the peasants' vulnerability. So fluid and unstable is this differentiation - and the message is writ large in Godan - that within the same generation a peasant is likely to move up and down the different levels within the peasantry.

Practically all peasants, consequently, are constantly exploited and live poorly. Manohar, in Premashrama, has twenty bighas of hereditary land. But he is poor.[60] Most peasants in his village live in want of metal utensils, beds and adequate living space. One coarse meal a day is the norm; the house of Sukkhu, the headman, alone having the cooking fire lit twice in a day. The possession of twenty bighas offers him no relief from the usual run of troubles. His sikmi land is

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59 Ibid, p. 47, 94.

60 Ibid, pp. 53-54.

usurped; he is in debt; the rent is in arrears.[61] The picture is no different in Karmabhumi.

It is, however, to Godan that we have to turn for the most realistic account by Premchand of what he saw as the typical destiny of a peasant. In tracing the life of his protagonist from a well-to-do maurusi peasant to a landless labourer, the novelist lays bare the entire exploitative system. Hori begins as a peasant of reasonable standing in the village. He has five bighas of hereditary land and a pair of bullocks; the latter being no mean possession for it means that he is self-dependent for ploughing his fields. His personal belongings like a blanket and mirjai (jacket), although only a few, reflect his respectable status.[62] Yet, he is already a victim of indebtedness and can have no savings either in money or in grain. For the bullocks he has borrowed sixty rupees from Mangaru Sah. Of this he has paid back rupees sixty by way of interest and the principal still remains to be cleared. From Pandit Datadin he had borrowed thirty rupees for sowing potatoes. The principal has risen to one hundred rupees. As for the potatoes, some miscreant had dug these out. A third loan of forty rupees he was obliged to take from Dulari for settling the distribution of property with his brothers. The amount of this loan has swelled to a hundred rupees. The

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61 Ibid, p. 396, 51, pp. 94-95.

62 Godan, p. 9, 101, 112, 113.

load of these debts apart, Hori has also to worry about the periodic payment of rent and customary dues to the zamindar. He has, moreover, to arrange for at least three hundred rupees to get his daughters married.[63]

Premchand weaves into his portrayal the normative framework of the peasant which drags him further into the throes of destitution. The longing for some punya - virtuous act - induces him, in the face of his many material liabilities, to buy a cow for eighty rupees. Maybe the auspicious presence of the cow would help him tide over his difficulties. From here a tragic tale unfolds. Exploiters of many varieties fling out their nets simultaneously. Hori wriggles out of one only to get entangled in another. His property, his honour - marjad - and, ultimately, his life are ruthlessly wrested from him.

Premchand shows disastrous events following upon one another just as seasons do. It is the month of Ashadh, the time just before the rains. Hori must prepare the fields for sowing. But, like a vulture, the karinda swoops upon him to demand rent before he would permit Hori to work in his field. Perforce Hori - and the other peasants - turn to the mahajans. He decides to mortgage his cow, the source and symbol of punya. But before he can raise the required loan, his jealous brother poisons the cow. This brings a new scourge. The darogha

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63 Ibid, p. 36.

decides to descend on the village to conduct an enquiry, knowing full well that the villagers would grease his palm to hush up the case.[64]

An already difficult situation is worsened by Gobar, Hori's son, whose liaison with a young widow, Jhunia, gives the internal exploiters yet another weapon to beat Hori with. For violating the moral code of society in having sheltered pregnant Jhunia, the panchayet imposes upon him a fine of one hundred rupees and thirty maunds of grain. Hori's doom becomes inevitable. His entire crop is snatched by the panches and his house mortgaged for eighty rupees.[65]

But Hori refuses to give up. He takes money from Punia, the wife of his younger brother, to sow sugarcane. But at the crucial moment Bhola turns up to walk away with Hori's bullock in lieu of the ill-fated cow that he had sold to Hori on promise of payment later.[66] Thus paralyzed, Hori is obliged to look for work on others' fields. Wily old Datadin takes advantage of the situation. Playing upon the peasant's attachment to his land, he offers Hori money and implements on condition of getting half the produce.[67] The cane crop, when it is ready, does nothing to mend matters. The mahajans and the millowner's

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64 Ibid, p. 112.

65 Ibid, p. 122.

66 Ibid, p. 148.

67 Ibid, p. 170.

agent rush in. The former would not let the cane be cut until their payments are made. The latter, quick to take advantage of the peasants' discomfiture, buys the standing crops at a ridiculously low rate. Hori gets in the bargain one hundred and twenty rupees, and comes home penniless after meeting the mahajans' demands.[68]

This was a familiar scene at every harvest and sowing. The exploiters knew that the peasants, having no cash balances to fall back upon, were in no position to bargain for a reasonable price for their crops.[69]

The odds are simply insuperable for Hori. His struggle seems more pathetic than heroic. In any case it is utterly tragic. Perhaps worse. It is futile. Finally, the patwari Mangaru Sah gets a degree against Hori. He loses his crop and house in distraint.[70] But the sad tale of Hori has sadder details to disclose. Forced by Nokheram's false allegation that for three years Hori has not paid the rent - something he could easily do because he was not in the habit of giving receipts - poor Hori practically sells his young daughter, Rupa, in marriage to old, but rich, Ram Sewak who will now clear his dues.[71]

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68 Ibid, p. 176.

69 Ibid, p. 194, pp. 232-33.

70 Ibid, p. 242, pp. 256-57.

71 Ibid, pp. 332-38.

At each step it seems that things could not be worse. But the impression is constantly belied. Worse and still worse follows, battering an already battered soul. Gobar comes back from the city, and a cow must be got for his child. Ram Sevak, too, must be repaid. Stripped of his land, status, honour, and contentment, Hori is now a wage worker picking stones for road making.[72] Only death releases the broken man from the web of traps which have robbed him even of his sense of dignity.

Similar ruin attends peasant protagonists in 'Sava Ser Gehun', 'Khun Safed', 'Balidan', 'Pus ki Raat', and 'Kafan', showing the irreversible lapse from a perilous point of hope into resignation, despair and even cynicism.[73]

The peasant thus fell a prey to a variety of perceptible and imperceptible hardships. In their oppressive combination, the blood-sucking system, the resultant indebtedness, an obsolescent normative framework, internal dissensions, and natural calamities seemed to create a vicious circle from which the peasant could hope for no scope of relief, let alone liberation. The poor could only be crushed. Despair dominated their cheerless world.

But Premchand saw signs of hope also. As in the case of zamindars, he made a distinction between the old and the new

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72 Ibid, p. 340.

73 Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 188-95; vol. VIII, pp. 5-15; Ibid, pp. 63-71; vol. I, pp. 157-73; and Kafan, pp. 5-14.

types of peasants. Peasants of the old variety show greater resignation to their lot. They are fatalists who unquestioningly accept the relationship of master and slave. They respect and fear authority. They are also more susceptible to the traditional value system. If at all they protest, and they do, their protests are mild and invariably invoke the traditional network of relationships. Thus Manohar, in Premashrama, is calmer than his son and has faith in the goodwill of the sarkar and the zamindar. The belief in sarkar appears in Karmabhumi also. Hori epitomizes the old type kisan in contradistinction to his son, Gobar.

The new peasant is younger, less deeply rooted in the conventional normative framework, and aware of new national and international forces. Thus Balraj, Manohar's son, has heard of the revolutionary upheavals in Russia and Bulgaria; he is also, already in 1920, talking of Gandhi as a national hero.[74] He is able to talk of the authorities, governmental as well as zamindari, in a tone suggestive of defiance. Similarly, Payag, the son of Chaudhary, the headman of the Chamar village in Karmabhumi, considers agriculture a nuisance and is not scared of officials.[75] Of course, Gobar in Godan is the most convincing specimen of the new generation. He realizes the importance of unity among villagers for fighting the system.

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74 Premashram, pp. 51-52, 16.

75 Karmabhumi, p. 129, p. 287.

It is a different matter that having left the village he is able to achieve nothing in practical terms; although during one of his visits to the village, he does organise a farce that is intended to awaken the exploited people in the village.[76] He looks upon all landlords as robbers and opposes his father's flattery of Rai Saheb.[77] Once he leaves the village to seek livelihood in the city, his general awareness increases. He even begins to understand something of the nation and class.[78] He opposes the panchayet and threatens it with a criminal case for cheating his father. Nor would he be fooled into making any payment without a proper receipt.[79]

Premchand seems generally happy with the beginnings of a new mood and temper among at least some of the new generation. It is a different matter, though, that he finds the trend of migration from the village to the city productive of social evil. His treatment of Gobar's career in the city amply demonstrates this. We have already seen this aspect of Premchand's views in an earlier chapter while discussing his attitude towards industrialism.

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76 Godan, pp. 206-07.

77 Ibid, p. 20.

78 Ibid, p. 191.

79 Ibid, p. 199, p. 212.

II

The foregoing account outlines the forces and the process of exploitation within rural society as seen by Premchand in his various literary constructions of the village reality. But the creator of this vast corpus of fiction, we have seen, was no passive or neutral spectator. He had his sympathies and affiliations clearly defined. He was, therefore, quite often intruding in his fiction either plainly by bringing in the authorial voice or through thinly veiled devices like having his positive characters, such as Premshankar in Prem-ashrama and Prof. Mehta in Godan, making statements and delivering speeches that could well have been lifted from his own journalistic writings. It is in the analysis of Premchand's own attitudes, as reflected in his work, that we discover, here too, his familiar ambivalence: seeing hope in the exploiters he has despaired of, and mistrusting the wisdom and ability for self-reliance of the very masses he feels for and hopes from. This formulation, of course, states rather sharply the two extreme points of the contradiction between which his ambivalence moved. In its actual operation it got reflected in subtler shades and nuances.

The two positions with regard to the masses suggested two different solutions. The hope that, even though in response to enlightened self-interest, the exploiters could, maybe had, to be relied upon for necessary action, called for reform. But the logic of hope from the masses themselves, and upto a point

he does entertain this hope, seems to imply nothing short of a total restructuring of society. The first expects initiative from above, the other a movement from below. This fluctuation between tinkering with the existing exploitative system and its transformation forms an interesting pattern in which tinkering and transformation seem to contradictorily complement each other. It is with a view to understanding Premchand's attitude towards the masses that this section attempts a second look at his writings.

Premashrama, the first novel in which Premchand deals with the rural set-up, identifies several layers of rural and urban society in their direct/indirect relation to the peasantry. The story unfolds along two levels - of peasants and zamindars - tracing their respective lives with all their independent as well as intertwined problems. But the protagonist, the ideal hero, is a member of the zamindar class. In his self-abnegating altruism is placed the ultimate solution.

The novel exposes a multi-level pyramid of corruption with the government constituting its apex and the ryot the base. A chain runs through these levels in which the one below is exploited and the one above exploits. Consequently, barring the two extreme points of this relationship, there are no pure exploiters and no pure exploited; the exploiters of a lower level, as we have seen in the preceding section, are themselves exploited higher up. Condemned to this web of exploitation and corruption, it is not the fault of individuals that they

are exploitative and corrupt. It is the system, says Premchand, that is to blame.

The base of this pyramid, the peasant, naturally bears the greater part of the weight of the system. As Premshankar, the hero, muses on the wretched plight of peasants, he realizes the impossibility of agreeing with other economists who saw in the sloth, ignorance, thriftlessness and technical obsolescence of the peasant the explanation for his ills. Continuing the national critique of British rule that had begun in the later 19th century, Premchand gave the following summary of his protagonist's diagnosis:[80]

> It is the circumstances of their existence that account for the poverty of peasants. What are these circumstances? Mutual discord, selfishness and the volution of an institution that has fettered them. But a little more deliberation will show that all the three stories spring from the same source; and the source of these circumstances is the very institution that rests on the peasants' blood. Why is there discord among them? Because of the evil conditions produced by the present administration. Why is there the absence of mutual love and trust? Because this administration views these qualities as fatal to itself and does not let them

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80 Premashram, pp. 199-200.

> flourish. What is the saddest result of this discord? Progressive division of land into very small holdings and unlimited enhancement of revenue.

In the clarity of the attribution to the colonial rule of the basic ills of rural society, this passage was never to be surpassed in the vast corpus that followed Premashrama.

If the system was intrinsically at fault, as Premchand was so lucidly able to perceive, the solution logically lay in overhauling it. But he failed to follow the logic of his perception with a degree of consistency. He kept moving back and forth between the vision of a social transformation and the advocacy of minimum necessary reforms. He vacillated all along between the need for political change as an essential prior condition and the possibility of suitably modifying the existing social arrangements.

The radical thrust of Premashrama is not confined to the diagnosis of Premshankar who is a trained economist with a utopian orientation of mind. It is shown as beginning to shape the aspirations of stray peasants belonging to the younger generation; the assumption being that the trend would be strengthened with the passage of time. Balraj embodies this nascent radicalism among the peasants. He is aware of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia and of the replacement of the king in Bulgaria by a panchayet of peasants and workers.

It is in consonance with this radical thrust that Premchand talks, in Premashrama, of the need for the eradication

of zamindars. He describes their dilapidated homes as symbols of their anachronism, and finds no justification for the existence of these brokers. For, the land belongs either to those who cultivate it or to one upon whom lies the responsibility of its defence. Reminiscent of the rather abstract concern for the poor that Premchand's literary precursors had shown since the days of Harishchandra (1850-85) and Pratapnarayan Misra (1856-94),[81] this position is slightly altered when Mayashankar, another ideal character, says that the land belongs either to God or to the kisan who tills it in accordance with divine will; the king, as defender of the country, can realize tax either directly or through some less objectionable mechanism. If an intermediary class is permitted the freedom to devour the kisan under any pretext, the practice should be considered a blot on the existing social organisation. The ills of the system are recognized even by Rai Kamalananda, a rich and worldly-wise zamindar.[82]

Exercising the artist's prerogative of wishing away the inevitable, and painful, stages of conflict for the realization

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81 See Pratapnarain Misra's poems and essays for expression of strong feelings for the poor peasants and labourers and against the zamindars and the government. Pratap Lahari, Kanpur, 1949, pp. 42, 133, 248-50; and Pratapnarain Granthavali, Kashi Samvat 2014, vol. I, pp. 265, 396-400. Radhacharan Goswami (1859-1923), too, expressed similar sentiments in his journal, Bharatendu; see vol. I, Nos. 5 and 8 (1883), pp. 74-75, 115.

82 Premashram, pp. 265-66.

of a desired end, Premchand brings about, in keeping with the underlying logic of Premashrama, the abolition of zamindari through a magnanimous act of voluntary renunciation by Mayashankar. Though the story is over, he carries forward the narrative to show the Ramraj that comes in the wake of zamindari abolition. The erstwhile poor, indebted and rack-rented ryots become, within no time, prosperous and enjoy the fruits of peace and industry. A new society, based on relationships of equality, comes into being.[83]

Despite its utopian capriciousness, this end has the merit of being in harmony with the logic of the novel. But a snag remains. The proper sequel to this logic should have been zamindari abolition plus change of government. Without the latter, the former was inconceivable. And even if by some literary stratagem it was effected, it could not have ushered in Ramraj so long as a rule lasted that drew its raison d'etre from, among other things, exploitation of the peasantry. There could at best have been minor changes for the better in the case of the 'kisan zamindars' created by Mayashankar. It is significant that Premchand circumvents this part of the logic of the novel almost altogether, mentioning it only in passing.

Along with the level of the peasant - a level that introduces a radical perspective - the narrative in Premashrama also proceeds at the level of zamindars. At this level it

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83 Ibid, pp. 408-11.

seems to accept, on condition of some reforms, the existing arrangement by positing faith in and appealing to the kindness of zamindars. No longer is the misery of peasantry due to an essentially corrupt and exploitative system, a system in which individuals possess little initiative. What needs to be done, now, is for the zamindar to forsake his cruelty and shortsighted acquisitiveness. Plausibility is lent to this position by suggesting an inter-generational contrast between zamindars. As against the traditional zamindar who, as a kind patron, looked after the welfare of his ryots, the new zamindar is more concerned with assertion of rights unmellowed by regard for obligations. The paternalism of a hierarchical traditional community is giving way to aggressive individualism.[84] Manohar, Balraj's father, reminisces about olden times:

> There could then be arrears for a year or two. But the maalik would never take recourse to eviction or distraint. Whenever there was a ceremony we were invited. At the time of a girl's wedding we were given wood, fodder and twenty-five rupees.... When they looked after us like their own children, the ryot also did begar for them willingly.

There are, in Premashrama, numerous instances of the kind maalik winning with enviable ease the goodwill and cooperation of his ryot. Even at Premshankar's ashrama the peasants

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84 Ibid, p. 18.

happily perform all kinds of chores for him. Gyanshankar, the cruel zamindar representing the new generation, gets converted towards the end. When that happens, he discovers to his pleasant surprise that kindness is more effective than his old imperious ways. Not that he does not realize dues in addition to rent. But now the peasants are willing to pay even these without much ado.

Thus the two levels show Premchand suggesting simultaneously that the problems facing the peasantry are integral to the existing politico-administrative structure; and also that, since all human beings are endowed with an essential core of goodness, individually villainous zamindars can be transformed into benevolent patrons of the ryot. This double-thrust of Premashrama characterizes, in fact, most of Premchand's work.

As manifestations of this major contradiction, in the course of the narrative, occur other irreconcilable strands. Premshankar, for example, is elected to the legislative council. He has a chance now to propose the abolition of zamindari. Indeed, he does toy with the idea of doing so. But solicitude for his zamindar relatives holds him back. Even a resolution prohibiting the eviction of tenants by zamindars is more than he can move.

Premchand's uncertainty, significantly enough, relates only to the goals to be achieved. He keeps oscillating between

social restructuring and social correction. Irrespective of what he is advocating at a particular point in time, he is nonetheless clear about the required instrumentality. It is a two-fold clarity. It demands that violence be shunned; and it presumes that the deliverers of peasants would come from outside their own ranks. First exhibited in Premashrama, this clarity was to run through almost the entire corpus of Premchand during the following decade and a half. Such consistency was quite extraordinary for a mind that, in spite of the growing lucidity of its perception of the social reality, could never get over its ambiguity regarding ends. This was, perhaps, Premchand's most tragic failure as a creative writer. The failure could be seen as a tribute to the effectiveness of the ideologically determined processes of socialization.

Regarding observance of non-violence, Premashrama contains a number of situations in which poor villagers, no longer able to contain their anger at some palpable humiliation or injustice, are at the point of embarking on a violent course of action. Invariably they are restrained by the moral authority of the man they revere. There is, for instance, a confrontation during an official camp in the village. Passions run high when some villagers are ordered to do, as begar, some chores in violation of their caste status. Reaching the scene and realizing the explosiveness of the moment, Premshankar yells out the order that they should do as bid, and adds the assurance that adequate payment would be made for the work done by them.

He intervenes, again successfully, when the villagers are about to assault the man who had betrayed them in an important legal case. In words that were soon to acquire a familiar ring, he threatens: 'Beware, let not even a hand be raised lest you should see my corpse here.'[85]

As for the peasants' capacity for initiative and independent action, Premchand invests them with submissive patience occasionally disturbed by ineffectual impetuosity. Social and political issues are discussed regularly at Premshankar's ashrama with a view to awakening the villagers. But not one of them emerges as a leader. Some of them do demonstrate strength of character and awareness of their wretched lot. Yet, like Manohar and Qadir, they remain resigned to their fate. Allah, as Qadir says, will provide a solution when He wills.[86] Or else someone like Balraj, conscious of revolutionary changes in Russia and Bulgaria, is driven to do something foolhardy that lands the entire village into trouble.[87]

What such incidents imply is corroborated by direct observations which could with some reason be seen as meeting with the writer's approval; more so as they occur as parenthetical commentaries not integrally woven into the text

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85 Ibid, p. 281. See also p. 182.

86 ~~Balraj's aggressivity~~ Ibid, p. 52.

87 Balraj's aggressivity leads to Manohar murdering Gaus Khan with Balraj as an accomplice and this lands the whole village into trouble.

of the narrative. When young Mayashankar asks his mentor and uncle, Premshankar, about the causes of peasant poverty, the latter attributes it to the peasants' 'foolishness, lethargy and other bad traits'.[88] This is towards the end of the novel. One wonders at this. For, Premchand was crediting Premshankar with faith in the very colonial stereotype of peasant poverty which, earlier in the novel, he had so convincingly exposed in his version of the nationalist critique of British rule.

Perhaps Premchand was not aware of this obvious implication. His intention was not to lend credence to a colonial stereotype. The reference to the backward pull of peasant temperament seems to have been related to his sentimental approach towards villagers. As yet he has not seen the starkness of the rural reality. His concern is more emotional than an outcome of grim understanding. This leads him to attribute to the villager of his imagination - who is partly real and partly mythical - such traits, both positive and negative, as would facilitate and justify identification with his lot. Naturally, this attribution is not a deliberate exercise which stops the moment the model villager is created. It is a continuing process that is influenced by the specific situations in which Premchand is responding to the villagers.

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88 Ibid, p. 397.

An illustration may be offered. After the humiliation during the official camp in the village, Dukharan Bhagat is so shattered that he gives vent to his impotent rage by breaking the idol of god Shaligram. Premshankar, who has morally coerced the belligerent villagers into obeying the official's unjust orders, is surprised by this reaction. His interpretation is: 'God! Such self-respect in an illiterate, uncivilized and poor man! So hurt is he by this insult! Who says self-respect is a dead feeling among the rustics?'[89] This is all that the novelist has to offer by way of comment on this poignant incident. His distance from the villagers can only see in the incident their humanity and dignity. Even their helplessness is romanticized. The starkness of their life remains unfelt.

It is in keeping with this sentimental idealization that Premashrama shows zamindars as the deliverers of the peasants. These deliverers, Premshankar and Mayashankar, brandish the shibboleth of equality. But the picture of the peasantry never corresponds to this ideal. It slips all too easily into the zamindar-ryot model of master and servant, even after Ramraj has been ushered in by Mayashankar's renunciation of zamindari. This applies to Premshankar's ashrama also. The ashrama is described in stirring terms as a place where there are no masters and no servants. Everybody

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89 Ibid, p. 185.

is everybody else's servant and well-wisher. Wealth is not worshipped here. The poor are not trampled upon. No one waits in obsequious attendance. But when actual human interaction in the ashrama is shown, Premshankar remains the master whose writ reigns unquestioned and whose frown sends a chill of fear down the spines of his rustic followers.[90]

It is, then, at the sweet discretion of the zamindar that the solution is offered. The peasants cry in pain. But they do not demand a cure. They continue to view the zamindar as their lord. A desire for or notion of a different future is not for them to articulate.

Premchand's short stories upto the period ending with the publication of Premashrama - which coincided with the launching of the Non-co-operation movement - reveal the same nearly discrete couple of approaches to the rural society. They reflect also the same faith in non-peasant leaders and non-violent methods. An interesting, even though partial, contrast is provided by a short story of 1913. It may, however, be stressed that the contrast is never repeated during the following two decades and more of Premchand's creativity. Entitled 'Banka Zamindar', this story anticipates in a way the solution offered in Premashrama. An eccentrically altruistic zamindar voluntarily transfers his ownership rights to individual cultivators. But unlike Mayashankar in Prem-

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90 Ibid, pp. 212-13, 217, 293.

ashrama, this man does so only after the cultivators have stood up in resistance against his feigned oppression and demonstrated their will to safeguard their rights. The message is unequivocal. The ryot must rise in defence of their interests and dignity. Without that even their well-wishers from outside their class cannot be of help. Unless suitably moderated, this message was never again addressed to the ryot so forcefully.[91]

A year later Premchand wrote 'Pachhatava' which dealt with rural society from the zamindar's level. This short story provides intimations of the solution to the ills of rural society which was to recur constantly in Premchand's work, a solution that was closest to his heart. It lay in the enlightened charity of the zamindar. The story, through the painless device of change of heart that Premchand in later years would resort to with monotonous regularity, shows the conversion of a cruel zamindar. The point to be noted about the conversion is that it is to the zamindar's benefit; there is no appreciable change for the better in terms of the surplus and the services taken from the ryot by the zamindar. Status quo is maintained so far as the zamindar-peasant relationship is concerned. The peasant remains the chakar (servant) he was, and he must fulfil the zamindar's demands.

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91 Gupta Dhan, vol. I, pp. 158-66.

The zamindar may reduce his demands upon the peasant.
But the latter must do as the former wills.[92]

The most favoured of Premchand's solutions, this was hardly a solution inasmuch as it sought to grapple with the problem simply by curbing its vilest manifestations. The kind zamindar, too, in effect did what his cruel counterpart did. The problem was to free the peasant of his shackles. 'Pachhatava', to put it harshly, further strengthened the grip of these shackles by legitimizing, and endearing, his role as chakar through the zamindar's kindness of manner. The harshness of this formulation does violence to Premchand's motivation by seeming to suggest that he was wedded to the status quo sans its excesses. What, in fact, it is intended to suggest is that even creative writers possessing, and inspired by, visions of a new social order were held back by forces that they barely recognized and in a way that they were barely aware of.

'Upadesh' (1917) is written in the same vein. It is the kind zamindar who can bring about humane relations with the ryot and make the latter happy. He has, however, to be in close contact with the ryot. Absentee landlords, even if benevolently disposed, cannot but be a source of oppression. The story also stresses the absence in villages of committed and sensible people who might work for the regeneration of

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92 Mansarovar, vol. VI, pp. 227-40.

rural society.[93]

In 1918 appeared 'Balidan', the first short story having a peasant as its central character. It is the first portrayal by Premchand of the pervasive misery of the countryside. It describes also the disastrous effect of foreign sugar on the destiny of poor peasants; an effect compounded by the fact that land is not only a means of sustenance - howsoever meagre - but also the symbol of his izzat (honour). Death, to the deracinated peasant, is preferable to wage earning. Premchand was to return to this theme again and again until it found, in the last year of his life, a shatteringly austere expression in Godan.

It is in keeping with a pattern that 'Balidan' does not offer a solution. There is no change of heart here. Presaging the tragic saga of Hori in Godan, Premchand brings out in 'Balidan' the pain and poignance of Girdhari's tragedy. Deprived of his land and reduced to utter despair, Girdhari dies a broken man. Hovering over his erstwhile plot of land, his ghost sobs disconsolately. There the story ends.[94] In sharp contrast to stories written from the level of zamindars - though not without concern for the wretched kisan - stories like 'Balidan', written from the level of peasants, were invariably without a solution. They either depicted despair -

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93 Ibid, vol. VIII, pp. 276-96.

94 Ibid, pp. 63-71.

as in 'Balidan', 'Sava Ser Gehun', 'Poos ki Raat', 'Thakur ka Kuan' and 'Kafan' - or provided justice through divine retribution, as in 'Gharib ki Haay' (1911) and 'Vidhwansa' (1921).[95] In the post-1920 phase, however, the short stories of peasant life concentrated more on conveying despair without offering the sop of posthumous divine retribution.

These attitudes are further reflected in Rangbhumi and Kayakalpa. In Rangbhumi is imagined, nostalgically, a bygone age when rajas, jagirdars and zamindars could lay down their lives for the sake of their praja.[96] Since the novel does not deal at length with peasantry, it is not clear whether any hope was reposed in the possibility of the existing zamindars becoming like their praja-loving forebears. Kayakalpa deals more directly with the submerged humanity in the countryside. It re-echoes Balraj's invocation of the rule of workers and peasants. Describing the pent-up frustration and anger of the exploited chamars of a village, it makes their chaudhary say: 'When we bore kicks we did; now we would not.'[97] But it is outside leadership that has instilled this awareness among the chamars and galvanized them into a group prepared to fight for its rights. These rights, though, are seen within the context of existing social arrangements, and the fight for their

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95 See Mansarovar, vol. VIII, pp. 16-28 and 179-83.

96 Rangbhumi, p. 244.

97 Kayakalpa, p. 113.

realization is kept scrupulously non-violent. That this should be so in Kayakalpa is remarkable because the narrative here brings out clearly the tendency of the oppressed to break out into violence in the hope of prompt redressal of their grievances.[98]

In 1929 and 1930 appeared two short stories that merit mention in this context. The first, entitled 'Ghaswali', had a zamindar as its hero. It ended with Premchand's familiar solution. The other was 'Poos ki Raat'. One of Premchand's most moving short stories, it describes the desperate struggle and eventual defeat of a peasant. This story tails off into despair offering no solution.[99]

After Premashrama, Premchand returns to a full length portrayal of the peasantry more than a decade later in Karmabhumi. The novel is replete with uncompromisingly revolutionary assertions. Religion and charity, we are told, have failed and the time is past when people could depend on the good sense of the officials and others to get reforms. The twentieth century has ushered in a historical phase when the rich and the poor, the propertied and the hungry would coalesce into opposing ranks. The conflict of classes would ultimately pave the way for a world without distinctions of the ruler and the ruled. This conflict in some places would be more bloody

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98 Ibid, pp. 119-21.

99 Mansarovar, vol. I, pp. 157-63.

and bigoted than in others. Directing his radical rhetoric to this classless utopia, Premchand further states that justice lies in equality and it has to be achieved ruthlessly: 'When the organization of society comes in the hands of selfishly oriented intelligence, the intelligence governed by justice is dethroned. This is a sure sign of an imminent explosion in society.... Humanity cannot be crushed forever. Equality is the essence of life. This alone is the condition that can keep society stable.'[100]

This general radical temper informs some of the comments on the relationship between the ryot and zamindars. Atmananda, a radical sadhu-turned-peasant leader, who seems cast in the mould of Baba Ramchandra and other peasant leaders, employs a colloquial metaphor to bring home to the kisans the absurdity of depending for their welfare on the goodness of zamindars. Addressing the villagers, he says: 'If the roti on your plate asks you not to eat it, would you agree? ... How can, then, they agree the rotis of whose plates you are?'.[101]

Revolution seems the only way out in an explosive situation like this. Even a character like Shanti Kumar, who inspires his students to become activists but also impresses upon them the need for circumspection, is constrained to remark: 'The officials would continue to behave like this unless

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100 Karmabhumi, pp. 318-19.

101 Ibid, p. 243.

authority is exercised by the people.' And that, he adds, calls for revolution, 'complete revolution'. There is fire all around. Reliance on a few pitcherfuls of water to control it would only inflame it further. So let it burn as much as it can. When nothing is left to be burnt, the fire would subside on its own.[102]

But the expectations raised by radical rhetoric are betrayed by the unfolding of events and attitudes in the novel. This happens not in terms of the ultimate goal but in terms of compromises with the existing system; hopefully, the compromises would be temporary. The final triumph - after the din of revolution and the prospect of an all-consuming fire - belongs, however, to a pragmatism that is willing to make its peace with charity. The peasants' struggle is called off in the hope that in consultation with its educated urban leaders the government would mete out justice to the poor oppressed.

In contrast to the earlier calls to the poor to take the initiative in their own hands,[103] when it comes to deciding things they are asked to follow their leaders. The justification for this would seem to be that the illiterate masses are not as self-sacrificing as the leaders. They do not even possess the prudence that induces people to accept temporary difficulties

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102 Ibid, p. 190.

103 Amarkant, the educated leader, engaged in organizing the villagers says: "The riaya now know their rights. My duty is done. Now they have to act on their own." Ibid, p. 267.

for the sake of permanent gains later on. For them, in fact, there can be nothing but humiliation and sorrow in this world because of their unwillingness to make necessary sacrifices in the present.[104]

At one level, thus, the ryots are painted as passive, scared and unaware of their true interests. At another level - the level of radical rhetoric - they are shown as an increasingly awakening lot that would no longer submit to injustice. Judging by the manner in which Premchand attempts to resolve the contradiction inherent in the two ways of looking at the ryot, it would seem that he was unprepared psychologically to accept the consequences of this growing awakening even in the world of his fiction. He visited upon the rural poor the inadequacies of the educated leadership. For, in spite of his criticism of individual leaders like Amarkant for their egoism,[105] nowhere did he so much as indicate the possibility of the poor masses having been put back on the leash by a leadership that was afraid of the consequences, beyond a point, of mass awakening and direct people's action.

It is significant, in this context, that Karmabhumi shows the rivalry of two leaders of peasants, Amarkant and Atmananda. The former takes a moderate and the latter an extremist stance with regard to the peasants' struggle. In view of Premchand's

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104 Ibid, p. 220.

105 Ibid, pp. 308-09.

practice of drawing his characters from real life, it could be a reasonable speculation that these two protagonists represented the Congress and the Kisan Sabha positions respectively. That Atmananda, the fictional representation of peasant leaders, had eventually to accept the dominance of Amarkant would suggest a literary replication of the actual dominance of the Congress over the Kisan Sabhas. In the portrayal of the rivalry between the two leaders, Premchand did tend to make Amarkant cunning and selfish. But when the final outcome of the peasants' movement - the withdrawal of it in accordance with Amarkant's way of thinking - came to be described, Premchand treated it in terms that indicated nothing but approval.[106]

Viewed from the more radical perspective of the Kisan Sabhas, Karmabhumi would seem to have been written by a man who, perhaps unconsciously, had his sympathies for the peasants moderated by the dominant ideology of the national movement as represented by the Indian National Congress. Viewed thus, it would forestall the argument that the demands of realism prevented Premchand from presenting a picture of the peasants' struggle that would have been less inconsistent with the

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106 Having earlier said that the riaya having realised their rights, had to act on their own, Amarkant now tells them: 'Our leaders are trying to solve the question. We have to follow them.' Ibid, p. 244.

rhetoric of the novel. He could not have, indeed, arbitrarily changed its end and shown a triumphant peasantry. But, in consonance with realism, he could have adopted a different tone in the treatment of the end; a tone that would have agreed well with his own realistic understanding of the nature of educated leadership, if not also with his appraisal of the peasants' potential for initiative and action.

The fact that realism continues to be invoked to explain away this glaring contradiction in Premchand's work offers evidence of the continuing hold of the nationalistically oriented modern Indian historiography. The recent attempt to develop a 'subaltern' alternative to this historiography might suggest a different understanding of realism with reference to the 1920s and 1930s.[107] The important point, however, is that the insights of a later historiographic development are not required to acquire an alternative understanding of realism. Premchand's own fiction reflects it amply.

A close reading of Karmabhumi reveals the working of a mind that was, in the final analysis, averse to social upheaval. There is talk of 'complete revolution'. But when it comes to the actual movement, the peasants are not only asked to be non-violent but also directed to respect the law. They are asked

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107 See Ranajit Guha (ed.), "Subaltern Studies I", New Delhi, 1981; Kapil Kumar, Anti-Feudal and Anti-Colonial Struggles of the Indian Peasantry, Oudh, 1918-22.

by Amarkant to pay the land revenue irrespective of the nature of the harvest because that is what the law lays down.[108] Premchand does not even care to explain away the inconsistency between the call for complete revolution and the reverence for laws imposed by the very system that needs to be overthrown.

Having begun with a bang, Karmabhumi ends with a whisper. Through its many contradictions and inconsistencies Premchand struggles to find a solution. All that he manages to do is to have a chastened Amarkant - chastened by severe introspection in jail - hold forth on the need and possibility of a moral revolution at the level of individual human beings. 'The price of freedom', he realizes, 'is the strength to adhere to right and truth.' In the depths of every human heart lies a chord that sooner or later resonates to the sacrifice of others.[109]

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108 Karmabhumi, p. 130. A close reading of the struggle-eve appeals to the authorities would suggest, on the part of the educated leaders, a desperate desire for a last-minute compromise and avoidance of a conflagration the shape and consequences of which seem ominously uncertain. The authorities are simultaneously cajoled by considerations of a pragmatism that would bring them glory, and scared with the 'least of rebellion' who, once awakened, would not be held back. The least may or may not have frightened the authorities. But the leaders who appealed in its name, did appear afraid of it. Ibid, p. 321.

109 Ibid, p. 311. Its radical pronouncements notwithstanding, the impression Karmabhumi conveys is one of glorifying compromise, of almost elevating it to the level of idealism. Condemned by Amarkant for accepting compromises that were inconsistent with his principles, Shanti Kumar, his

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In the resonance of these chords - in the myth of human goodness - lies the hope.

Written during 1934-36, Godan marked a clear departure in Premchand's thinking. It showed that the earlier idealistic faith in charity and basic human goodness as a solution was a mere sop; and that men would not change unless the system changed. This is revolutionary logic. Through the inexorable unfolding, as it were, of Hori's tragedy, Godan provides an unmitigated indictment of a system that holds the poor peasant in moral and material bondage. Wedded to his land with body, heart and mind, Hori dies a landless labourer, and his son seeks livelihood away from the tentacles of those equipped only too well to squeeze the peasant. The need for a solution - indeed for an end to this inhuman system - is writ large on the pages of Godan, without having once been explicated. No more the Karmabhumi kind of reiteration of radical rhetoric and climatic reversion into sentimental reformism. The phase of idealism is clearly over. Faith is not wasted here in the eventual moral regeneration of individual human beings and in the awakening of the submerged conscience of the villainous

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> mentor, says: "The real is not a bit less important in life than the ideal." And: "My idealism leaves room for the practical." The position is idealized by Sukhada, Amarkant's wife, who says about Shanti Kumar: "He can even sacrifice his conscience. Such a man, I think, is more worthy of respect." Ibid, pp. 91-3.

oppressor. The critics of the system, as also its beneficiaries, can now see with consistent clarity that the exploitation of peasantry is independent of the wickedness or kindness of the individuals meaning it. As Mehta, the leading positive character in the novel, says to Rai Saheb, an affluent zamindar:[110]

> I accept that you behave well with your tenants. But the question is whether there is selfishness in it. Could it not be that food cooked on slow fire is delicious? Compared to him who kills with poison, one who kills with gur (jaggery) can be more successful.

Though feeling insulted by such outspokenness, Rai Saheb admits that concessions given to the ryot on the basis of goodwill and not as a matter of right would prove ineffectual. 'With all my goodwill', he adds, 'I cannot forsake selfishness. I want that through the power of the government and morality, my class should be forced to give up selfishness.'[111]

Godan refuses to repose faith in the good intentions of and consequent remedial measures adopted by the appropriating classes, be they zamindars or the educated middle classes.

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110 Godan, p. 52. In another context, Mehta dismisses the idea of reform and argues for "altering the social system from the top to the bottom." Ibid, p. 311.

111 Ibid, p. 53.

'Wolves', says Mehta with a touch of rhetoric, have always answered the innocence of lambs with claws and teeth.' The simple innocence of the kisans has reached the point of passivity. They seem to have lost the very awareness of their being.[112] The same point is more directly made by Gobar when he tells his father, Hori: 'I could never tolerate that my earnings should fill others' houses while my own family starved.'[113]

The problem is that although deep down he may be weighed down by it, the kisan normally does not let the realization of exploitation come to the surface and disturb the docility of his acquiescence. And if there is a stray kisan like Gobar, who refuses to accept the givens of the system, his sense of outrage at what is happening is accompanied by the realization of his own ineffectuality. All his rebelliousness, then, is directed towards ensuring that he as a person is not exploited. Having secured for himself a tiny niche within the larger framework of injustice, he is not unduly worried about what happens to those without their niches. A more real representative, perhaps, than Balraj of the rebellious kisans who were beginning to emerge, Gobar inspires little confidence in terms of the efficacy of the new awareness. His desertion of the scene of exploitation apart, as a city-dweller with some consciousness

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112 Godan, p. 294.

113 Ibid, p. 339.

of the social and political problems of his society, he unquestioningly accepts the social relationships of inequality simply because his employer is a kind person.[114]

The pessimism of Godan is extended further in 'Kafan' which provides a finale to the trend that had begun with 'Balidan' and continued through such short stories as 'Poos ki Raat'. Both Godan and 'Kafan', written as they are from the level of poor villagers, suggest little ground for hope in the midst of despair. In 'Kafan', especially, the implicit assumption seems to be that the victims of the existing system have been so utterly diverted of their humanity as to be rendered incapable of working out their own salvation. Nothing short of a total social restructuring could offer them a decent deal. But these dregs of humanity are hardly the stuff from which revolution is forged. Even more than Gobar, for different reasons though, Ghisu and Madho would not be the ones to overthrow the system. Unlike Gobar, however, these wretched protagonists of 'Kafan' might unwittingly erode the system by their refusal to be exploited by it. They dodge it with their wicked servility which makes them morally callous and enables them to beg, borrow or steal in order to survive somehow.

In a sense, Premchand has travelled a long way between the romantic utopia of Premashrama to the unrelieved cynicism of Godan and 'Kafan'. The word 'cynicism' is used here

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114 Ibid, p. 320.

deliberately as a substitute for the commonly employed term 'realism' to designate this phase of Premchand. The crucial question to be asked in this context is: Why does Premchand, having seen through the unreliability of basic human goodness as the spring of social justice, find it impossible to even hint at the ever so slender possibility of the oppressed - some sections of them at least - organizing some form of resistance? As a sensitive observer of his society, we know, he was not unaware of the active stirrings within the rural society. But he could not trust the non-urban leaders of rural society - peasant leaders as against leaders of peasants - to struggle towards a better future.

In another sense, therefore, in spite of the ground traversed between Premashrama and Godan, Premchand still stood at the same point. His reluctance to credit even some sections of the rural mass with sufficient awareness and ability to struggle on their own seems to have been an outcome of the imperceptible influence of his class affiliations. This supposition is strengthened by the position he took in his non-fictional writings. The thrust of Godan and 'Kafan', after all, could not have been acquired abruptly; Godan was written over a long period during 1934 and 1936. The shift in his thinking should have found expression in the many journalistic pronouncements he made during this phase on questions relating to the peasantry. That does not seem to have been the case.

The only time Premchand, in his non-fiction, wrote in a vein that did justice to the thrust of Godan was in 'Mahajani Sabhyata' (1936) which appeared posthumously.[115] It is problematic of just one article - even if it is considered his testament - can be seen as representing the position of a writer whose work in imaginative literature as well as journalism continued for thirty years. In the rest of his non-fiction he keeps vacillating between appeals and threats to the zamindars in the name of their own long-term interests without seriously demanding the abolition of the zamindari system as such. Besides, he keeps hoping that not only the Congress but the government, too, would see the wisdom of ameliorating the lot of the peasantry. Premchand, in his articles, shows awareness of the interplay of material factors which often combined, even within the Congress, in such a manner as to minimize the efficacy of the intellectually or morally felt concern for the poor. The farthest he goes is to advocate and welcome the organization of peasants' cooperatives. For the rest, with all his solicitude for the poor and realization of the selfishness of the better off sections, he can only turn to the political leaders, the government and the zamindars.[116] He could never conceive of the masses as shaping their own destiny. Even when

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115 Mangalsutra evam Anya Rachnayen, Ilahabad, not dated, pp. 365-68.

116 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, pp. 23-4, 41-5, 216-21, 247-49, 263-64, 481-510.

he said that they would, he invariably turned to one or the other sections of the middle and upper class society and the government. Even as he despaired of the latter, he continued to plead with them. The despair never made him turn to the masses in any sustained, conclusive way.

Premchand's inability, despite his radical rhetoric, to accept the dynamic potential of sections within the rural society was related to the circumstances and nature of his relationship with the village. He came from the countryside and all his life maintained regular ties with it. He had a house built in his ancestral village, Lamahi, to which, as we have noted before, he retired from time to time. It was for him a kind of refuge from the competitive and increasingly impersonal life of the city. The village held for him a fascination that impaired his vision of it; a fact that, as we have seen, influenced his attitude towards industrialism also. Moreover, the need to have a place to counter the cultural offensive of the alien ruler pointed to the village as the surviving preserve of indigenous superiority. Of this the most elaborate illustration is provided in Rangbhumi.

What emerged was a genuine attachment for the village with a tendency to romanticize it. This produced a distance from the rural reality. The bridging of this distance was made difficult by the very need to remain attached to the village. Premchand's class and caste position also must have contributed to this distance.

Premchand's love for the rural poor had something unreal about it. He was always concerned about them. But he could rarely enter their skins to get a live feel of them as humans. Often, to satisfy his own psychological needs, they appeared as angelic. Even in an austere work like Godan, Mehta could talk of the need for the kisan to shed off some of his divinity and become more of a human if he was ever to become a free person.[117] With his sentimentality Premchand could treat the village folk only as vulnerable miserable souls who needed sympathy and active help from those who, like him, cared for them.

While category definitions of class outlook tend to be simplistic, Premchand's middle class background seems to account in a large measure for the kind of perception he had of rural society and of its problems. To this was related the hold on him of the Congress. If his journalistic writings - as also his fiction till Godan - offer an index of his political alignment, he seems to have faithfully articulated the Congress position. His general attitude with regard to the national movement has already been discussed, and we have seen how he continued to look upto the Congress. With regard to his attitude towards the rural poor, in particular, the same hold of the Congress can be clearly seen. In fact, many of his

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117 Godan, p. 294.

inconsistencies in the pre-Godan fiction reflected the shifting position of the Congress vis-a-vis peasants and zamindars. This was a position that could not leave the rural poor alone and yet was willing to make concessions for the sake of zamindars. What sustained these inconsistencies without necessitating a resolution thereof was the fact that Premchand was speaking instinctively for one class and with deliberation for another. It would, however, be wrong to see in the frequent retreats from a radical position proof of his cowardice or of the phoney character of his radicalism. He could compromise because his inadequate understanding of the social reality, especially of its rural segment, sustained his romantic idealism and induced a belief in the therapeutic value of pragmatism.