INTRODUCTION

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The intellectual history of 20th century India is a relatively neglected field. For the preceding century, which has been seen as the glorious age of social reform and an Indian renaissance, there are numerous works that attempt to understand the intellectual climate of the times. They seek to examine its complexities, its achievements, its ambiguities, and its vision. Comparatively little work of a similar nature exists for the present century.

Part of the reason lies in the overwhelming dominance of the national movement in the historical works relating to this century and the stress on the overtly political dimension of this movement. The first half of the century was dominated by mass nationalist agitation, by the towering figures of Gandhi, the two Nehrus, Patel, Bose and the others, by new forms of workers' and peasants' struggles, and the increasingly insistent presence of communalism. It is the hard facts of political confrontation that have engaged scholarly attention. Works on individual leaders too have generally taken the form of political biography and have rarely strayed into the field of intellectual history, barring a few honourable exceptions like Raghavan Iyer's work on Gandhi. And if for the outstanding leaders we have at least the outlines of an intellectual history, for the lesser mortals who constituted the bulk of the Indian middle classes and who provided the leadership of the national

movement at the lower rungs and also much of its manpower, we have yet to make a real beginning.

It is not as though the sources for such studies are scanty. For the 20th century, at any rate, there is an embarrassment of riches in the form of writings in all the regional languages, published in journals, pamphlets, leaflets, notices, books and what-have you, waiting to tell us a great deal about the concerns and attitudes, the culture and world-view of the growing number of educated men in town and country.

In a largely illiterate country this literature could naturally be a guide predominantly to the ideas and attitudes of the educated few. But the latter constituted an important section as far as the transition from colonialism to independence is concerned. They formed the personnel that largely led and manned the nationalist struggle with its various ideological hues.

Essentially a torch-bearer for the ideas and feelings of the literate few, such literature nevertheless often sheds light on the uneducated and poorer sections also of our society. It may have done so from the vantage point of the middle and upper classes. But to the extent that it is not altogether devoid of empathy, it offers a rich source of information even for the poorer and lower sections of the society. The importance of this literature for understanding the depressed and vulnerable segments of our society is heightened also by the relative paucity of more reliable first-hand accounts for these segments.

More conventional sources like official records and party pamphlets deal usually with directly political and administrative reality. The masses are mentioned almost only in the event of an out of the ordinary occurrence, such as a riot, a famine or a flood. The day-to-day travails and pleasures of the common people and their mental make-up are better reflected in literature, even when it is produced by writers belonging to different, and higher, classes.

What the historian, perhaps, needs to do is to shift his focus from the narrowly 'political' in order to broaden his own horizon, analyze the intellectual development of the age, and then return to the same political questions that dominate the history of the period.

In India interest in the study of society through literature is of recent origin. Social scientists are now turning to this vast source for reconstructing the socio-intellectual profile of an age. As for the theory of literature in the colonial society of India, no work has yet been produced.[1]

The terms of interaction between literature and society in colonial India were not the same as in the West. The colonial experience shaped much of the course along which literature here moved. In the West capitalism was the major influence in

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1 The very few works in this direction include Colonial Consciousness in Commonwealth Literature; Malik, ed., Political Novel in India.

determining the content and the forms of modern literature. It was during the 19th century, at somewhat different points in time with regard to different Indian languages, that the shift from traditional sensibility began to be apparent in Indian literature. More in the choice of forms and, naturally enough, less at the level of content, creative writers tended to turn increasingly to western literary modes without quite dissociating themselves from their own traditions. The novel, for example, came here as a result of contact with the capitalist West. Romantic love of the western variety and Victorian prudery entered Indian fiction.

The general context for this literature was provided by Indian nationalism. The complex relationship with the West, the crises of identity in the midst of the opposing pulls exercised by traditional moorings and the modernizing forces, and the traumatic awareness of subjection and the resultant urge for liberation constituted the general ambiance for the generation of this literature. The memory of the past, the perception of the present, and the vision of the future were synthesized in the making of this literature.

These opposing pulls operated with reference to all the significant issues that faced the society, be they political, economic, religious or moral. Consequently, the prevailing intellectual climate was characterized by a continuing attempt at reconciling these opposing forces. A good deal of ambiguity persisted beneath the choices made by people in their individual

or corporate roles. It is with this central ambiguity that my thesis is primarily concerned.

The major source for this study is the vast body of writings left behind by the famous Hindi-Urdu writer, Munshi Premchand (1880-1936). In many ways a very exceptional individual, he was a creative writer of fine ability and also a journalist who constantly reflected on the state of his times and society. Though not an anonymous member of the intelligentsia, he is particularly the kind of 'case' that a historian could look for in order to examine the interaction between ideas and society. The fact that Premchand commented on and reacted to his society in all its dimensions, at the level of fiction as well as non-fiction, makes it possible for the historian to examine the mental make-up not only of this particular individual but also of his class at more than the plane of carefully expressed ideas and reactions.

Premchand's writings span the first four decades of the 20th century, a period of painful and incomplete transition for the country. This surfaces in a variety of ways and with regard to a number of issues in Premchand's writings. He belongs to the amorphous category of the educated middle classes. More specifically he is a member of the liberal nationalist intelligentsia which had flung its net fairly widely and been imbued with a fair measure of eclecticism and pragmatism.

Premchand's eclecticism is derived from various sources. First, he consistently turned to current issues with the express

aim of reforming his society. Secondly, his views emerged through a variety of forms - novels, short stories, plays, articles, and letters - so that he could capture and express his social reality at more than one level. It also meant that his attitudes were expressed, as we shall see, at different levels and in much of their complexity. Thirdly, his personal life equipped him with a first-hand experience and knowledge of a wide range of subjects. He could not always integrate all this into a consistent world-view or vision.

Premchand was a self-conscious writer in the sense of being aware of his social role as a writer. From the very start of his writing career he had a clear conception of his reformist and missionary purpose. All writing, he believed, must be geared to the portrayal of reality and in particular to the exposure of all that was decadent in society. This realism, however, should be turned towards an ideal. This approach to literature, which he consciously adopted and conscientiously followed, was described by Premchand as adarshonmukhi yatharthvad[2]. Literally translated it would mean 'idealistic realism'. Understood in terms of its translation in his work, it could more aptly be described as 'romantic realism'.[2]

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2 The soul of literature is idealism and its body is realistic portrayal. Premchand, Kuchh Vichar, Ilahabad, 1973, p. 84. For a discussion of romantic realism, see Amrit Rai, ed., Vividh Prasang, Ilahabad, 1978, Vol. III, p. 35. This is a compilation, in three volumes, of Premchand's journalistic writings on a variety of subjects. It covers the period from 1905 to 1936.

Time and again Premchand asserted that literature must invariably have three basic qualities. First, it must concern itself with reality and expose the ills of society. Second, it must side with the oppressed and the down-trodden. Third, it must propagate ideas of beauty and equality. Literature, he insisted, must not only inform but also convert the reader.

Such a conception of what the writer and his literature must aim at necessitated the creation of works that were intended to be didactic and propagandist. The concern for extra-literary functions could not but adversely affect - howsoever marginally - the artistic excellence of the works produced. Premchand was not oblivious to this. But this was for him an inevitable price that writers in a colonial society had to pay. As he wrote to a friend about his own stories: 'It is possible that you do not care for their didactic nature. But India cannot reach the pinnacles of artistic excellence while she is groaning under the yoke of alien subjection.... Our social and political circumstances force us to educate the people whenever we get the opportunity. The more intense our feeling is the more didactic becomes our work.' Perhaps carried away by the force of his own expression, he went to add in this letter that his novelettes, Nirmala and Pratigya, did not claim any artistic finesse, but simply aimed at exposing the ills of society.[3]

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3 Premchand to Keshoram Sabherwal, September 3, 1929, in Amrit Rai, ed, Chitthi Patri, Ilahabad, 1978, Vol. II, p. 207. This and the other passages have been translated from Hindi by the author.

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Ideally, Premchand argued, literature should be concerned with nothing but itself. In his article on the novel he wrote: 'The highest ideal of literature is art for art's sake, fulfilling its own inbuilt artistic potential and showing man's basic leanings, whether in love or jealousy, greed or anger, faith or sorrow and such like.' He admitted that when 'used to propagate some social, political or religious viewpoint', a literary work 'falls from its high place'. But he insisted that given the contemporary national needs, no writer could afford the ideal of keeping 'propaganda out of his work'. All that the writer, in a colonial society, could, and needed to, do was to combine his roles as a writer and patriot and aim at an optimal fusion of the demands of social message and artistic excellence. He said:[4]

> It is my view that an able literature should produce works dominated by ideas in such a skilful manner that man's basic urges and their struggles, too, can be shown. The time for 'art for art's sake' was one when the country

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> The realization that a subject people could not produce great literature was shared by others as well. Thus, for example, Sharatchandra Chatterji, the great Bengali novelist, said in 1923: 'What is called great literature cannot be produced today in this country because politically, socially, in fact in all ways, we are not free.' Quoted in Vishnu Prabhakar, Awara Masiha, Dilli, 1974, p. 246.
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> Even earlier, Balmukund Gupta wrote in 1905 that a subject society was incapable of writing great poetry. See his preface to Sphut Kavita, Calcutta, 1905, p. 1.

4 Kuchh Vichar, pp. 51-53.

> was happy and prosperous. But when we see that we are restricted by all kinds of political and social chains, that whichever way we turn scenes of miserable sorrow and poverty meet us, and pathetic cries are heard, then how can any thinking person remain unmoved? Of course, the novelist should certainly guard against an artificial and forced projection of his views.

Nor was this an impossible order. Premchand offered examples from great world literature to show that ideals and messages could be skilfully woven into the fabric of the finest literary text. Confining himself to his own western contemporaries, he contended: 'Shaw, Wells and such big authors today write books with the aim of propaganda.'[5] In a letter to Maniklal Joshi he wrote on 20 December 1933: 'Almost all great novels have had some social purpose or were set against the backdrop of some momentous movement.'[6]

It may be noted that almost imperceptibly Premchand was tending to make a virtue of necessity. Aware of the adverse effect of extraneous constraints on the colonial writer, he moved on to argue that the greatest novels had been produced in response to some major social pressure. And this he used in such a way as to permit the belief that the colonial constraints were, after all, not an impediment but an impetus to the creation of great literature. So strong could at times be this belief

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5 Ibid, p. 52.

6 Chitthi Patri, Vol. II, p. 254.

that Premchand, perhaps revealing in the process the working of a colonial complex, could argue that the Indian ideal of literature was imbued with a social purpose which made it greater than the western ideal which contributed in no mean a measure to the general decline and degeneration of the western society.[7]

As early as 1911-12, and in spite of his close association with the magazine and friendship with its editor, Premchand objected to a whole issue of Zamana, an Urdu monthly, being devoted to romantic literature. He moralised to Nigam, the editor:[8]

> In this age when all kinds of moral, social and economic problems deserve our full attention, I was filled with remorse to see an entire issue of Zamana devoted to the poet Aatish.... The subject of literature is the elaboration of human emotions, revealing of truth, describing the travails of hearts. But that poetry which is concentrating on love and its fortunes ... is certainly not fit to concern us today.

Considering such a condemnation of romantic love, it is not surprising that Premchand described as 'masculine' the kind of literature to which he lent his support. Elaborating on this, he even tried to set off what he termed the beautiful and

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7 Kuchh Vichar, pp. 97-8.

8 Chitthi Patri, Vol. I, p. 10.

masculine qualities in human nature, qualities that were fit for his times.[9]

It was in consonance with his idealistic realism that Premchand should have emphasized the need for plots of literature to be taken from real life. That alone, however, was not enough. The treatment of these slices from real life was further to be geared to the solution of life's problems.[10]

Premchand's letters are replete with references to his conception of the writer's role in society. He was there to teach and to reform. Appropriately enough, he preferred the Urdu 'communist' poetry, full as it was of philosophy, realism and optimism, to Hindi poetry that he found obsessed with sentimentalism.[11] To Ramchandra Tandon he wrote in December 1934 that the writer, being an inspirer and a propagandist, must imbue his readers with desirable sentiments.[12] Warning against stark realism, he wrote to Harihar Nath in January 1930 that 'our realism should never forget' that the objective of literature was to 'uplift'.[13]

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9 Ibid, p. 122. This is a letter written in September 1920. See also p. 235, for similar views in a letter of September 1934.

10 Premchand to Vinod Shanker Vyas, January 1930, ibid, Vol. II, p. 284.

11 Ibid, letter to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi, March 1936, p. 94.

12 Ibid, p. 166.

13 Ibid, p. 286.

Literature for Premchand was thus an effective instrument for shaping society. This being so, he assigned to the writer a higher role in society than that of religious leaders and politicians. The latter two, for long enough, had enjoyed the leadership of society. They had by now been thoroughly discredited. It was no longer possible to make any headway under their leadership. It was, therefore, incumbent on the writer to fill in the breach and constitute the advance guard of society.[14]

As a realist Premchand was aware of the critical significance of the angle of vision in any understanding of social reality. The angle that he deliberately adopted was provided by his overriding concern for the wretched of his society. He looked upon himself as their champion and spokesman. He believed that he owed a debt to his poor village brethren and viewed writing as a mode of its repayment.[15] That is why, as he wrote to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi, he had chosen peasant society as the dominant theme for his writings.[16]

In 1936, a few months before his death, Premchand presided over the maiden session of the Progressive Writers' Association. On this occasion he expressed in sum his views on literature in a colonial society beset by internal problems and oppressed

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14 Kuchh Vichar, p. 83; see also p. 20.

15 Premchand to Shriram Sharma, February 1931, Chitthi Patri, Vol. II, p. 211.

16 Premchand to Chaturvedi, June 1932, ibid, p. 76.

by alien rule:

> Literature should criticize and analyse our life.... The literature which does not ... infuse us with true strength and determination is useless for us today.... In the earlier age the reins of society were controlled by religion ... today literature has taken charge and its means is love for beauty.... The downtrodden, the pained and the deprived - their protection and advocacy is the duty of literature.... The writer and the artist feel revolted at the present mental and social conditions. They want to end these conditions so that the world can turn into a better place ... to end slavery and poverty. 17

This conception of his role as a writer made Premchand a consciously realistic writer, picking on the burning issues of the day and seeking to be honest in their portrayal. Unlike the political leaders, whose writings concentrated primarily on the narrowly political matters, Premchand's work covered a much wider canvas and dealt with a whole range of subjects. His writings shed light on a very broad spectrum of social relations, whether between different sections of society, between town and village, men and women, the high and low, and so on.

Yet another factor adding to the range, complexity and relevance of Premchand's works is the variety of forms that he employed to express himself. The same reality got reflected, in

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17 Kuchh Vichar, pp. 6-20.

his writings, through fiction as well as non-fiction. Both were created by the same man. But the dynamics of form operated in such a way that different levels and nuances of the same reality were reflected through the prisms of different forms. This was so because fiction and non-fiction permitted different take-off points and different perspectives.

Non-fiction, particularly at the level of journalism, tends to present a rational and segmentary apprehension of reality. The problems and controversies of the day are reacted to more or less in their own terms. Wider and deeper interconnections are often overlooked. Immediate societal concerns determine the perspective. Objective, rather than intuitive comprehension, dominates the vision. The writer sets out with a relatively clear idea and seeks to develop his arguments point by point as a kind of rational academic exercise, and with a degree of precision. If not restrained by considerations of plausibility and realizability, idealism in non-fiction tends to become prone to rejection faster. Intellect, rather than instinct and emotion, has the upper hand. The very conception of an ideal has to be attempted within the framework of constraints imposed by what actually exists. The 'winged irresponsibility' of the creative writer, as Ernst Fischer so felicitously put it,[18] is smothered here by the demands of plausibility. Time and space are more neatly defined and correspond to our commonsense notions of these.

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18 See 'Endgame and Ivan Denisovich', in Ernst Fischer, Art Against Ideology, London, 1969, pp. 7-34.

Fiction, even realistic fiction, on the other hand, transmutes reality and apprehends it at many more levels. Facts are shorn of much of their specificity in the process of being fictionalized. Though in their fictionalization they tend to approximate more to the reality that is sought to be comprehended. The irrational and the unconscious, which in fact remain enmeshed in the rational and the conscious, enrich the fictional representation of social reality. Idealism and imagination, moreover, get a freer rein in fiction. The projected ideal may, in a narrow sense, appear irrational and patently unrealizable. Yet the work holds appeal by virtue of its inner consistency and by the power of its extra-rational flights into the ideal and the unknown as a counter to the real and the known. Dreaming and fantasizing do not mar the quality of fiction. Far more easily than non-fiction, fiction, consequently, becomes the vehicle for the expression of one kind of values and ideas - the sentimental and romantic, the intense and the passionate - without being divorced from the reality around us. Time and space also acquire a greater depth and variety of scales in fiction, especially in the novel. The writer can operate at various levels and flit over varying temporal spans in a single work of fiction. This quality of fiction permits the coexistence of discrete mental tendencies so that it captures with greater fidelity the complexity of human personality. This study, using literature for the historical reconstruction of a given segment of Indian social reality, makes use of this formal variation as an important tool

of analysis.

To the extent that no historian of society can be content with analyzing only the consciously held and expressed ideas, attitudes and reactions - for the complex of social consciousness includes the subterranean and the unconscious - the rich corpus left behind by Premchand permits insights into the contemporary society that the more conventional sources of historical raw material are likely to yield. More so when the focus, as in this study, is not so much on specific events or movements as on the complex of social consciousness as it operated among the educated segments of society. For, Premchand's work shows not only the mental make-up of a gifted individual, both in its mode of perception and in the reality that can be reconstructed from his massive output; his corpus also offers glimpses into the ideas, attitudes and beliefs of a large segment of the English educated Hindus, if not more.

One might add a word of caution. The division between emotion and intellect must not be overstated. It has been mentioned here only to make the point about different stresses in fiction and non-fiction. In Premchand's case, his didactic purpose intrudes, to a considerable extent, into his fictional imagination, particularly in his earlier works. His fiction and non-fiction abound in lines and even whole passages that could easily change places from fiction to non-fiction and vice versa. In general his articles and short stories set out to prove and propagate the same ideas by employing a wider canvas and

introducing a whole range of situations and complex characters. Both the positive and negative find expression in his novels.

It is possible to discern a tussle in Premchand's fiction between his creative imagination and social conscience. In the earlier novels the story would culminate in an idealistic solution. This would often be effected with the help of a sudden change of heart on the part of the villain and be uncovincing. Later works, especially Godan and 'Kafan', did not circumvent the internal logic of the narrative by any recourse to a utopian solution. However, almost invariably his works had positive and negative characters to make it possible to suggest authorial agreement or disagreement on particular issues. The protagonist, especially in the novels, was for the most part represented as an all-too-human amalgam of good and bad traits. But in the end he always realised the truth, the ideal, and there remained no doubt about Premchand's own affiliation.

The exercise, however, is not without its difficulties. Transference of 'information' from one mode of discourse to another has to steer clear of formal traps. The historian using literature for his kind of reconstruction of social reality has to be cautious about the role and mechanism of fictional imagination while trying to work out 'objective' data from the fictional construction of reality, irrespective of whether the data relate to the ideas and attitudes of the author concerned or to the larger reality portrayed by him. Fictional imagination

permits a transcendence of the writer's consciously held and expressed views even as it does the transcendence of 'facts' as seen by the historian. Turgenev, to offer a well-known example, was a convinced westophil. In his fiction he emerges, on the contrary, a Slavophil. Also, a creative writer does not always write what he initially sets out consciously to write. All kinds of variations occur in the actual course of writing. The narrative dynamics so allies with the writer's intuition as to make possible these variations on the original theme conceived rationally by the writer. Many great writers are known to have anticipated in their fiction later events; and done so not quite consciously. Turgenev, to continue with our example, whipped up a raging controversy in the contemporary Russian society by his portrayal of the 'nihilist' protagonist. The word as representative of what would soon become a major social force was till then unknown. But Turgenev had anticipated it, this force, with penetrating insight in his Fathers and Sons.[19]

Premchand's biographical background also lent depth and dimension to his writing inasmuch as it had endowed him with wide-ranging experiences of his society. Born in 1880 in a Kayastha household at Lamahi, a village near Banaras, he led a rather chequered career, experiencing in the process, among other

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19 The point is not confined to Bazarov, the nihilist hero of Fathers and Sons. Turgenev portrayed other 'new' men also like Rudin and Insorov. About Bazarov's veracity, it is significant, Turgenev had some doubts because, as he confessed, 'no one else had yet portrayed the type, and I was afraid I was chasing a phantom'. See Peter Henry, 'I.S. Turgenev: Fathers and Sons (1862)', in D.A. Williams, ed., The Monster in the Mirror: Studies in Nineteenth Century Realism, Oxford, 1978, pp. 40-74.

things, village life, town life, government service, teaching in government as well as nationalist educational institutions, professional journalism, the film world of Bombay, upper caste affiliations and lower caste contacts. His father was a petty, ill-paid post-master who got posted to small offices. From his childhood, therefore, Premchand traversed from village to town following his father's transfers in different parts of eastern U.P. At Lamahi he studied under a Maulavi, in a nearby village, and received the traditional Urdu-Persian education of the madrassa type. At the age of ten he began English education at Gorakhpur where his father and step-mother were then living.

Besides filial maladjustment and unhappiness consequent upon the intrusion of a step-mother, Premchand also experienced economic hardships quite early in life. The death of his father when he was still in school only compounded these hardships. He had to earn enough to carry on his own education and to maintain his step-mother and step-brother in Lamahi. He braved through this difficult phase by giving tuition lessons; and also by depriving himself of basic material amenities. His poverty may have been later exaggerated and romanticized by Premchand himself and his admiring commentators. But there can be no doubt about the fact that for some years he did have first-hand and intense experience of poverty.

It is, however, a significant pointer to his personality that while passing through the worst phase of poverty, when pressure on his time was so great following the conflicting

demands of mercenary tuition and his own formal schooling, Premchand struck a deal with a book-seller and avidly went through volumes of English and Urdu fiction. This voracious, almost indiscriminate, reading was to influence his early writing in a big way. This long reading list also included the contemporary Bengali literature which was beginning to make its mark, through translations in different Indian languages, all over the country, as also the massive output of Devakinandan Khatri in Hindi.

Soon after his matriculation in 1899, Premchand began his career as a school teacher in Chunar. Thereafter, with a view to improving his prospects, he did a course in teachers' training in Allahabad. Taking up government service, he rose to be a sub-deputy inspector of schools. It was about this time that he took to writing which, from the very outset, he used for propagating patriotic and reformist sentiments. Besides writing novels in the old narrative style, he also wrote short stories and articles. He was, however, not yet averse to government service. But at the same time he adopted a somewhat nonchalant attitude towards the official duties. His reaction to the corruption prevailing among government officials was one of healthy indifference. For example, he reacted negatively to the then common practice of gifts being given openly to government officials on tour. But on being requested not to jeopardize the chances of his successors, after he had been transferred, he relented on condition that the gifts be distributed among his

servants and subordinates. Similarly, in his duties as an inspecting officer, he took to telling the school teachers to themselves prepare the report which he was expected to submit to his department. This he did in order to discourage teachers from helping their students to cheat so that a favourable impression was created on the inspector.

Perhaps this stoic indifference towards his official duties facilitated his stay in government service even as he made progress with writing his socially informed and patriotically inspired fiction and articles. Hence his refusal at this stage to heed the advice of friends to give up government service and make a career of writing. He even said to Dayanarain Nigam, a personal friend and the editor of Zamana who seems to have assured him a steady income from writing, that the latter's offer did not attract him, and that in government service he was quite well and free with no immediate seniors above him, and pension assured, and such like. Besides, he added, Urdu journalism was far from flourishing and he could hardly be justified in expecting to make a living from it.

In course of time, however, this feeling began to change increasingly. This was in a large measure the outcome of the changing political climate in the country. The origins of this feeling could be linked to the difficulties of writing, as a government servant, which were dramatized by the seizure of copies of his Soze Watan on the ground that the short stories in this collection were seditious, and the undertaking he was

informally required to give that henceforth he would submit all his writings for prior official clearance. The importance of this experience cannot, though, be seen as decisive in the matter of his decision to quit government service and adopt writing as a whole-time vocation. In August 1920 Gandhi launched the Non-co-operation movement. The whole country seemed astir. Premchand was no exception. He had been patriotically inclined from the very outset. He had written with fervour on swadeshi during the agitation against the partition of Bengal (1905). He had also written a series of biographical sketches with the intention of arousing patriotic sentiments. More important than this, his maiden collection of short stories had been officially seen as seditious.

The slow evolution of these patriotic urges all these years found an almost dramatic and sudden manifestation when, having for years toyed with the idea of leaving government service, Premchand took the plunge within a week of listening to Gandhi during the latter's visit to Gorakhpur in February 1921. Premchand was at this time earning Rs 125 per month as an assistant master. Without having ensured an alternative means of livelihood, he gave up this fairly well-paid job. Fittingly enough, perhaps, he started a workshop with a few spinning wheels and handlooms although he could not make a success of it. After a while he returned to his village, Lamahi, where also he tried to popularize the idea of charkha by having spinning wheels distributed gratis among the poor villagers. As part of the

immediate spell of Gandhi and Non-co-operation, Premchand also taught at the Kashi Vidyapith which, like the Jamia Millia Islamia and Gujarat Vidyapith, had come into existence as a constructive response to the boycott of educational institutions.

The resignation from government service, in fact, was a dramatic culmination of a long and sustained interest in the socio-political movements of the day. The Arya Samaj, to which Premchand was drawn rather early in life, continued to hold appeal for him. His writings lauded its contribution to social reform, educational development and cultural awakening. While at Gorakhpur, he is known to have subscribed to the local Arya Samaj. How long he continued this subscription is difficult to say. But his attitude towards the Samaj is reflected by the fact that in the last year of his life he presided over the Arya Bhasha Sammelan held in Lahore.

But more sustained and intense was his involvement in the Indian National Congress. The involvement preceded the emergence of Gandhi as the leader of the national movement. With touching loyalty Premchand stuck to the Congress through all its travails and tribulations. Even when, on occasions, he unhappily, chidingly or cynically wrote of its negative manifestations, he held the Congress to be the body guiding the struggle for Indian independence. As early as 1906, he attended, in company with Dayanarain Nigam, the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress. What Gandhi did was to sharpen this commitment and

make of Premchand somewhat of an apostle. This, in a way, was in keeping with the direction and potential of Premchand's thinking even before he came directly under Gandhi's influence. Shivarani Devi, in her reminiscences of her husband, has recorded a very significant bit of conversation with Premchand. She asked him about the fact that even before he had seen Gandhi and been so powerfully influenced by him, Premchand had written the kind of fiction - and Premashrama could be cited as a particularly telling example - that was clearly 'Gandhian' in its orientation. Premchand's explanation was simple. In accepting Gandhi's leadership and ideas, he said, he had only realised with greater clarity his own intellectual potential and direction.[20]

This is not to suggest that he had earlier not felt drawn towards other tendencies within the broad spectrum of the Indian national movement. Thus it happened, for example, that he was so stirred by the patriotic sacrifice of Khudiram Bose that without caring for the consequences to him as a government servant, Premchand hung in his house a portrait of the young revolutionary. Though after the 1921 encounter with Gandhi, Premchand tended to move almost exclusively along the Congress lines.

But moving along the Congress lines also involved choices. It meant exposure to a variety of ideological pulls. For,

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20 Sivrani Devi Premchand, Premchand Ghar Men, Delhi, 1956, p. 95.

especially during the 1920s and the early 1930s, the Congress was more a huge political umbrella, under which groups with differing ideological hues gathered together, than a political party with a clearly formulated ideological position and corresponding socio-economic policies and political programmes. Consequently, despite the increasing influence of Gandhi, Premchand also felt attracted towards not only the kind of socialism Nehru was preaching but also towards the Soviet experiment.

Nevertheless his political involvement was not the involvement of an activist. As a matter of conscious choice dictated, perhaps, by an awareness of his own limitations, mental inclinations and effectiveness as a writer, he confined this involvement to his vocation as a journalist and creative writer, refraining all along from courting arrest. Barring a few instances, as when he met political prisoners in the Lucknow jail in 1922 and did some work at the Lucknow Congress office in 1930, he remained a spokesman of Indian nationalism, dedicating all his creative and intellectual resources to the cause of the country's freedom and regeneration. It is a different matter that, in spite of these self-limiting constraints, he could not always steer clear of the risks involved in political participation. It is true that he never went to jail, a privilege that his wife was able to exercise. But he could not escape the official demand for securities for his two periodicals, Jagaran and Hansa; and at least on one occasion this security was forfeited.

Within the context of Gandhian influence, Premchand's willingness to deposit securities acquires special significance. Gandhi, true to his philosophy of non-co-operation, insisted that Indians should rather stop publishing their papers than submit to the official demand for securities. But for Premchand the written word was such an efficacious instrument in the struggle for freedom that he was not prepared to have his publications be stopped even temporarily. In fact, he even went to the extent of pleading with the authorities that his periodicals were loyal and not seditious. Where the government is powerful enough to crush dissent, he argued, such pragmatism becomes essential.

Such pragmatism, however, never affected the quality of his writing and journalism. His resolve to promote the country's cause never wavered as a result of the compromise he agreed to make with the authorities for ensuring the continuance of his publications. Hence the fact that in 1933 the C.I.D. felt obliged to take away from the press 200 copies of Samaryatra, a collection of his nationalist short stories. It is, indeed, a measure of the unfailing seriousness with which he took to writing as a nationalist mission that during the more than three decades of his creative life he rarely wrote anything that did not bear upon the concerns of freedom of his country and the regeneration of his society. The singleness of his purpose is indicated also by the quantum of his output. He wrote twelve complete novels and an unfinished one, over 250 short stories,

four plays, several biographical sketches, and numerous articles dealing with current issues, besides translating eight works. Even the translations done by him were mostly aimed at promoting the country's cause.

During the first decade of his writing career Premchand wrote in Urdu. But around 1915 he made a deliberate shift towards Hindi in order to be able to reach a wider audience and also because Hindi journalism brought better dividends. Following the shift to Hindi, he edited magazines such as Madhuri and Maryada. In 1921 he set up his own press in Banaras. In 1930 he started a monthly, Hansa, which was to leave a strong impression on the Hindi literary and journalistic world. Two years later he took over Jagaran, a weekly, which had been, under Sampurnananda's influence, a vehicle for socialist views within the larger nationalist perspective. It is an index of Premchand's commitment to the national movement that without getting any compensation by way of goodwill, and with K.M. Munshi as his co-editor, he handed over the Hansa to the All India Literary Conference which had been set up under Gandhi's inspiration.[21]

Writing filled the major portion of Premchand's life. His wife's memoirs provide moving accounts of the man writing away desperately even when he was ill and vomitting blood. Gastric trouble and dysentery had, for long, been damaging his

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21 Kamal Kishore Goenka, Premchand Vishwa Kosh, vol. I, Dilli, 1981, p. 202.

constitution. Finally, on 8 October 1936, he succumbed to his ailments. To posterity were left the reflections of a sensitive mind which received and reacted to events, movements and ideas during more than three decades in the country's struggle for freedom. The story teller of the Indian national movement revealed even as he tried to rise above the limitations and distortions of his society.

Premchand is a representative of his times. Open to a variety of influences, he was both rooted in tradition and affected by 'modernization'. He operated, at the same time, at different levels, and revealed contradictions and ambiguities that reflect the complexity of the mental make-up of a nationalist intelligentsia. As subsequent chapters will show, his thinking was characterized by continuing ambivalence, with regard to such significant issues of the day as nationalism, communalism and industrialism. This being so, labels like progressive and secular, which have been generally used to describe him, conceal more than they reveal the complex and representative character of his personality. Similarly, attempts to put the nationalist intelligentsia's responses in neat categories of 'orthodox', 'revivalist', 'socialist', and so on, miss on their complexity and on the coexistence of discrete aspirations and contrary pulls.

Progressive in intention, Premchand's thought was full of ambivalence and complexity in content. There is, for example, the case of his attitude towards women. When only seventeen, he

had an arranged marriage with a girl he had never seen before. Full of adolescent delight at the prospect of marriage, he welcomed it enthusiastically. But on discovering that his bride was ugly, he was down in the dumps and lost all interest in his spouse thereafter. He lived mostly away from her in connection with his service. During one of the frequent quarrels between Premchand's wife and step-mother, the former tried to kill herself. She was rescued by Premchand who was in Lamahi at that time. In a huff she left for her parents' home, vowing never to return. Premchand hoped in a letter to Dayanarain Nigam that this was the end. And indeed it was. Immediately prospects of a second marriage began to be discussed. The same year Premchand read a pamphlet on widow remarriage written by a Kayastha. He began negotiations with this gentleman and, in 1906, married his child-widowed daughter, Shivrani Devi. The subsequent life of the first wife is not known. But, it seems, she was alive for long after this, though Premchand made no move to acknowledge her existence.

It is significant that in these early years Premchand wrote Prema, a novelette idealizing social reform to the extent of equating it with nationalism and making widow marriage the key item on the reformist agenda. But in 1927, without ostensibly eschewing social reform, he rewrote Prema and rechristened it Pratigya so that instead of seeking happiness in marriage the heroine, after being widowed, devoted herself to religion.

What confounds matters is that in the earlier phase there was much to justify the existence of revivalism in Premchand. In the later phase he was veering away from Gandhi and towards Nehru and socialism; a fact that hardly squares with his shift towards conservatism in matters relating to social reform.

Jainendra, the eminent Hindi writer, who nursed Premchand during the last days describes a snatch of conversation with the dying man. Weak and emaciated, even struggling for breath, Premchand said falteringly, but in no uncertain terms, that 'idealism would not do'.[22] It is not enough to seize on such snippets to indicate the direction in which Premchand was moving by way of resolving the discrete elements coexisting in his mind and society. Nor can such a hypothesis gain much strength from a swan song like 'Kafan' and 'Mahajani Sabhyata'. It is true that Premchand struggled constantly to take a consistent direction and acquire a clear perspective and vision. His was not the placid mind of a self-assured, doubt-free person who rejects ideas that go against the grain of his settled beliefs. His was an earnest mind grappling with complex issues and trying honestly to arrive at some viable conclusion. In the course of this attempt he did not hide his confusion and uncertainties. The richness of his range demands admiration. The failure to arrive at any kind of consistent world-view reflects the state

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22 Jainendra Kumar, Premchand Ek Kriti Vyaktitva, Dilli, 1980, p. 57.

of flux in which the liberal nationalist intelligentsia operated.

All the major nationalists of the period were fighting for a self-reliant, free and democratic society. Premchand, too, tried to identify the ills of his society and sought their redress, hoping for a great tomorrow. This study details what he thought about the Raj and its supporters on the one hand and, on the other hand, about the forces that were struggling to liberate and revitalize the country. The latter were not embodiments of unmixed idealism and unadulterated patriotism. They represented also the tensions and cleavages that obtained within the Indian society. The comprehensive scope of his vision and reflection makes it possible to use his vast corpus for understanding the nature of the liberal nationalist intelligentsia. The main issues with reference to which this understanding is sought are: the nature of the Raj and the socio-economic and political effects of slavery; the character of the nationalist struggle; the vision of a free India; the plight of the poor masses, especially the peasantry, and their position in, as well as vis-a-vis, the freedom struggle; Hindu-Muslim relations; and the conception of social reform with special reference to education, women and the untouchables.

This study shows how progressive intentions were often thwarted by received assumptions and aspirations which could be reactionary, revivalist or conservative, as the case may be.

Here, then, was Premchand wielding his pen to recreate the stark reality of a colonial society in its totality. In the process he not only provided realistic portrayals of his society; he also betrayed, very often, his own inability to rise above the weaknesses and limitations that provided much of the staple to his realistic portrayals. In his work as also in his person Premchand offers sharp insights into and reliable documentation on the structure of liberal thought among the north Indian intelligentsia.