Chapter V

SOCIAL REFORM: UNTOUCHABLES, WOMEN AND EDUCATION

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As a writer whose chief ambition was to see India free, Premchand was keen on an all-round development of his society. A socially evil-ridden society, he knew, could not be politically progressive and awakened. Much of his work, therefore, dealt with the socio-religious ills that retarded the overall progress of the country. His earliest writings - from Asarar-e-Ma'abid (1903-05) and Hamakhurma va Hamasavab (1906) to Soze Watan (1908) - show the pull that the variegated problems of his society exercised on his mind from the very beginning. He may not have worked out at this stage an integrated approach, and may have reacted piecemeal to different problems. But implicit in his awareness of the range of problems was the possibility of his eventually working towards their interconnections. This is, indeed, what happened.

In the development of his approach towards the integrated development of his society even as it struggled to put aside the yoke of subjection, the influence of Gandhi is clear. The bulk of Premchand's writing, both fictional and journalistic, during the post-1920 years bears testimony to this. But, as is clear from his earlier probing in this direction, he was also responding to a continuing and lively, often fierce, debate that had begun during the last decades of the 19th century

about the most rewarding relationship, within the context of a politically awakening colonial society, between social reform and political agitation. Besides the influence on him of Vivekananda and the Arya Samaj - both of which stressed the need for an all-round regeneration - Premchand seems to have been an heir to Ranade who had offered the best articulated justification for the simultaneous development in the social, economic, moral and political spheres.

Premchand adopted a pronounced progressive stance with regard to social reform. With his natural sympathy for the underdog, he exposed with passion the iniquitousness of all those customs and institutions that kept in bondage such vulnerable sections of society as the untouchables and women. Some of his finest creative writing brings out the anguish, pathos and unrelieved suffering of these sections. Though, given his ideal of a realism that also inspired hope and suggested a way out, he often tended to colour his portrayal of the depressing reality with a touch of reformist idealism. In any case, about the centre of his own sympathies there never is any doubt.

However, as in the case of his attitude towards the nationalist movement and in his vision of swaraj, an underlying ambivalence is discernible in his advocacy of social reform too. This ambivalence, in fact, is one that can be noticed in the long history of social reform in modern India from the early 19th century onward. It was caused basically by the

diametrical pull exercised by western ideas and traditionalism. Thus it happened that from Rammohan Roy to the Indian National Social Conference - and this brings us to Premchand's early writings - almost as a rule, all proposed social reforms, irrespective of their motivation, were justified and rationalised in terms of an unspoiled tradition. Even while assailing brutally the state of Indian society as it was for these vulnerable sections, Premchand felt drawn towards the pristine form of which the present was a cruel distortion. We propose to examine this aspect of Premchand's work with reference to three issues: untouchables, women and education.

I

Early in his career Premchand recognised untouchability as one of the worst ills besetting his society. His first short story on the subject bemoaned the insensitivity of the educated people towards the untouchables. Entitled 'Sirfa Ek Aawaz', the story (1913) shows a sanyasi - one cannot but be reminded of Vivekananda - delivering a discourse, indicting the system of untouchability in the strongest moral terms, and exhorting his audience to remove the revulsion felt for the poor untouchables who are treated as worse than animals. He invites his audience to resolve to live lovingly with them and asks at the end of his moving appeal: 'Who will vow so?' Only one hand goes up. That of Thakur Darshan Singh, a conservative old man. Commenting on those who did not respond, Premchand

puts in the following authorial comment: 'These are the very heads that pop up in excitement at the mention of national issues, these the very eyes that turn bloodshot with passionate patriotism. But between saying and doing there is the difference of beginning and end.'[1] In an article written in 1919, he deplored the consciousness of high and low that pervaded his society: 'Chamars are untouchable, and the touch of Doms is absolutely degrading for us.'[2]

The plight of the untouchables forms the theme of several of Premchand's short stories during the 1920s, especially during the aftermath of Chauri Chaura when nationalist politics was at a low ebb and there was reason to turn to Gandhi's constructive programme. 'Shudra' (1925), for example, tells of an untouchable woman who is transported as part of a racket involving trafficking in women. The poorest among the poor, the untouchables are naturally most prone to the deception and cunning of the traffickers.[3] In 'Mandir' (1927), an untouchable mother is desperate to take her ill child inside a temple and pray for his recovery. But the priest is not to be deterred.[4] All her pleadings fall on deaf ears. The child dies.

'Ghaswali' (1929) is about a zamindar who casts covetous eyes on Muliya, a low caste woman grass-cutter. Her poverty

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1 Gupta Dhan, vol. I, pp. 141-48.

2 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 21.

3 Mansarovar, vol. II, pp. 338-60.

4 Ibid, vol. V, pp. 5-13.

and low status as an untouchable combine to place her at the mercy of the upper caste rich. 'What other use does beauty in the low castes have apart from being a toy for the upper caste folk?' Hapless Muliya bursts out at the harassing zamindar and refers, in the process, to her husband Mahavir: 'Do you think that because Mahavir is a Chamar he has no blood in his body, that he feels no shame, that he has no thought of his honour....' She also taunts him that he dare not similarly approach other, even more beautiful, women: '... but you will not go there, because going there you feel terrified. You ask me to be kind to you, is it not because I am a Chamarin ... a little scolding or some small bribe is enough to trap a low caste woman.... You are Thakur, why would you let slip so cheap a bargain.'[5]

In the 1930s a profusion of short stories and articles relating to the problem of untouchability followed. This coincided with, and was in no small measure due to, the fact that the problem emerged on the national scene in a big way following the protracted bargaining as a consequence of the Round Table Conferences climaxing in the Macdonald Award, Gandhi's fast and the Poona Pact. In these writings can be seen not only Premchand's concern for the problem but also an implicit acceptance of the received attitudes towards untouchability. For example, his treatment of the problem often betrays

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5 Ibid, vol. I, pp. 305-17.

a 'Sanskritist' bias which may be traced to the influence of the Arya Samaj. Again and again he states that the untouchables have fallen due to their unclean habits and characterlessness. Having thus put the cart before the horse, he writes in reassuring terms, in December 1932, of the realisation by the untouchables themselves that their degradation is due to their unclean and immoral life-style; and the realisation is happily inducing them to mend their ways. The mending, naturally enough, is viewed in Sanskritist terms:[6]

> So many castes which were low and degraded have changed their sanskars and are wearing the sacred thread, improving their conduct, and giving up the foodstuffs that are considered ritually uneatable. They have realised that their fall has been due to their ignorance and immorality.... They now perform sandhya, shraddha and study religious texts.

Afraid, like most nationalists, that the untouchables might opt out of the Hindu fold, Premchand pleads for their stay within the Hindu society because they have the same view of life, same gods and same ideals.[7]

It is possible that this kind of writing was motivated by the hope that caste Hindus would shed off some of their revulsion and prejudice for the untouchables if they could believe that the latter were not recusantly immersed in their

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6 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 439.

7 Ibid, p. 446.

filthy ways. The following assurance would lend credence to such a possibility: '... it is true that the Harijans still have many dirty habits. They drink, do unclean work and eat carcasses. But once the Hindu society offers them room, these bad habits will automatically disappear.'[8] It may be further stated in this connection that this article was intended to counter the arguments of those who were memorialising the Viceroy to demand that the untouchables be kept off the Hindus' temples. Naturally, he had to employ an idiom and a logic that would make sense to those he was trying to convert to his way of thinking. And yet, after due allowance is made to this possibility, the evidence of his writings on the subject of untouchability makes it difficult to believe that he was uninfluenced by the current Hindu assumptions. More so because he seems to have genuinely believed that the dirty habits and low morality of the untouchables were responsible for their downfall.

Convinced though he perfectly was of the injustice meted out to the untouchables, Premchand often relied on what appear to have been puerile sentimentality and logic for bringing about a change in public opinion on this question. For, after attributing their downfall to their unclean ways, he could also make a feeble attempt to suggest that, after all, these were really not such unclean ways. Or he could hope to change

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8 Ibid, p. 453.

people's attitudes by asserting, almost apocryphally, that the untouchables were finer human beings than the rest. They were, for example, more truthful and God-fearing; a fact, Premchand would argue, attested to by the behaviour pattern of Brahman mahajans in that they would readily lend money to an untouchable but be very suspicious of another Brahman. On such occasions, finding in this fact a handy argument to plead for a better deal for the untouchables, he even overlooked the simple truth of the untouchables' vulnerability that made the caste Hindu money-lenders so keen to entangle them in the web of indebtedness. This truth, we know, could not have been better exemplified than in his own fiction. Proceeding in the same vein, Premchand even hoped to cut some ice by trying to turn the tables upon the caste Hindus: '... are all the touchables clean? Do they bathe daily? Do the Brahmans of Kashmir and Almora bathe daily?'[9]

Premchand tended to be carried away by this kind of sentimentalism. Clearly at a loss for tactics that might prove effective, he could clutch at any straw that came his way. Trying to appeal to the gratitude of the upper castes, he emphasised that the untouchables were looking after their health by keeping their houses clean. Sensing, perhaps, that this alone would not help, he tried to suggest a functional equality between the two segments of the Hindu society. Was not the complaint, that the untouchables were unclean because they

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9 Ibid, vol. II, p. 449.

removed human excreta, nullified by the fact that each morning men and women of any varna perform the same chore for for their children?[10]

He also brought in, naturally enough in the political atmosphere of the early 1930s, political arguments for treating the poor untouchables with dignity and as equal members of the Indian polity. For if the Hindus failed in this, there would be no way to prevent the nation disintegrating. It is significant, however, that even his political argument was coloured by the traditional upper caste Hindu view of hierarchical social organisation. Employing an argument that obviously rested on the venerable Purush sukta, he described the untouchable as the feet of the nation, and asked: 'How can we have a healthy nation if we chop off its feet?' He also turned to the untouchables and assured tham that their interests would be served best if they remained within the Hindu fold and did not press for separate electorates.[11]

Premchand wrote approvingly about the Hindu candidates who had withdrawn in favour of their untouchable rivals at the Delhi municipal election. He was sorry that their example was not followed by their Kanpur brethren. If the caste Hindus persisted in behaving with such unconcern for the advancement of the untouchables, the latter would have no option but to insist on separate electorates.[12] For the same reason he also

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10 Ibid, p. 441.

11 Ibid, pp. 437-40.

12 Ibid, pp. 450-61.

opposed separate schools for the Harijans. They would promote divisive tendencies among them with regard to the Hindu society.[13]

While generally Premchand talked of the unity of the nation in relation to separate electorates for the untouchables - whatever the ultimate basis of this unity in this particular context - the Hindu in him also worried about the consequences of such a measure for the Hindus vis-a-vis the Muslims. For, among other things, he accused the upper castes of causing the loss of a section of the Hindu society to the Muslims. The ill-treatment the Brahmans and the orthodox Hindus meted out to the untouchables made the latter turn away from the Hindu fold. In utter desperation he asked: 'Will you rest only after you have wiped out the Hindu religion from the face of the earth?'[14] Along with the Indian National Congress he praised the Hindu Mahasabha and the Arya Samaj 'for safeguarding the interests of the Hindus in the political struggle'.[15]

Though he realised the urgency of the political dimension of the problem, Premchand had sufficient realism to see that the efforts made as a result of the call issued by the Congress were symbolic in nature and unlikely to have more than a demonstration effect. But this, too, was important. At least

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13 Ibid, p. 450.

14 Ibid, p. 448.

15 Ibid, p. 443.

the foundation had been laid. The question had drawn the attention of the people. The cleansing of hearts, so essential for the solution of the problem, was still a far cry. He could see, like Gandhi, that there was no reason to be satisfied with the progress made in the direction of the untouchables' welfare. It is a measure of the helplessness felt by him that he could see no greater hope than that Gandhi's efforts at self-purification through fast would help the nation purify itself and treat the outcasts as equals.[16]

Temple entry, naturally enough, seemed an important item of the immediate programme intended to awaken the social conscience and convince the untouchables that the Hindu society was earnest about their equality and welfare. Taunting the orthodox who opposed the 'defiling' of their temples by the untouchables, Premchand asked if their gods were so weak as to get polluted by the sight of an untouchable instead of purifying the latter by their divine grace.[17] He disagreed with Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi on the ground that what the untouchables needed more was not the right to enter the temples but equality with caste Hindus and gentle treatment from them. He wrote:

> ... but what proof would there be that the Hindu is treating the untouchable gently. Inter-dining does not as yet exist among the Hindus themselves; how can this be done with the untouchables? The problem would not be

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16 Ibid, p. 437.

17 Ibid, pp. 448-9.

> solved if three or four hundred educated urbanites dine with the untouchables. Inter-marriage is a still more difficult problem. When different branches of the same caste do not inter-marry, how can they have marital relations with untouchables? It will be a long time before both these questions are solved, that is, until the Hindus have not done away with discrimination. Such restrictions exist even among Christians and Muslims.

However, Christians and Muslims at least had the decency to observe no distinctions inside their places of worship. This was the minimum that the Hindus needed to do. More so as Mahatma Gandhi had decided to stake his life on this issue.[18]

But so complex was the situation that Premchand could not quite understand what tactics would be most effective under the circumstances. Consequently, having said in November 1932 that 'the question of temple entry is at present the most important question',[19] he could contend in May 1933: 'But, at the same time, by no logic can we understand why temple entry is being treated as an essential part of the programme to eliminate untouchability.'[20] Temple entry, he asserted, would hardly change matters. Not many Hindus frequented temples. The Harijans were unlikely to behave differently. The latter, moreover, would not abandon their own local deities for Hindu gods.[21]

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18 Ibid, pp. 445-46.
19 Ibid, p. 446.
20 Ibid, p. 446.
21 Ibid, p. 455.

If temple entry had no more than symbolic significance, touching as it did only a part of the cultural manifestation of a deeper rooted social problem, the solution had to be sought elsewhere. Premchand saw that more than religious obstacles it was the material hindrances that blocked the untouchables' march towards equality and well-being. He wrote: 'The real problem is economic.' By permitting the untouchables to enter the temples, the Hindus would at best remove their own blot like they satisfy their own conscience by performing shraddha to their dead ones. We have no means of knowing whether the departed souls, too, benefit thereby. Similarly, the removal of the Hindus' own blot would bring no tangible relief to the untouchables.[22] He continued:

> If we want to elevate our Harijan brothers, we have to create such resources as would help them rise. They should have stipends in schools, concessions in matters of employment should be extended them. Our zamindars have at their disposal means that would improve the lot of the untouchables. They can remove many of the difficulties faced by the latter by offering them land for houses, freeing them from begar and by treating them gently.

It was in keeping with his faith in the efficacy of material factors that even with regard to the temple entry question he placed his hope in the boycott of recalcitrant priests. He argued that all those who favoured the temple entry agitation

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22 Ibid, p. 455, pp. 457-58.

should boycott the temples that kept the untouchables off their precincts. The resultant loss of money from offerings would sooner than later oblige the priests of these temples to succumb to public pressure.[23] To corroborate this argument, Premchand published excerpts from a letter sent him by a social worker who wrote:

> For years I have devoted my life to the service of Harijans. My experience is that they are not so anxious about temple entry as about improving their economic condition. They want to liberate themselves with the help of cottage industries. In order that their material situation may be better, they want the production of machinery to be taxed.

He also referred to a resolution passed by the Harijans, at a meeting of their caste association held in Jaunpur, to the effect that they would rather forget about temple entry because it bred dissension within the society, and concentrate on the promotion of cottage industries. Welcoming this resolution - and adding that temple entry had to be worked for in any case - Premchand commented with a touch of sarcasm that cottage industries would not only get the untouchables food but also deference from the begging Brahmans.[24]

Premchand may not have quite seen what needed to be done. In this he was by no means alone. But about his sympathies there can be no doubt. For in no uncertain terms he wrote:

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23 Ibid, pp. 467-68.

24 Ibid, pp. 457-58.

'... the welfare of the society and the nation lies in removing discrimination and also the blood-sucking domination of some sections, because, as we have said earlier, the first condition of nationality is that the varna organisation, the distinction between high and low, and false religiosity should be rooted out.'[25] This is clearly an unequivocal statement. The equivocity of Premchand lies in a larger context, in the context of the totality of his work. For, we have already seen in the preceding chapter that an important strand of his vision of swaraj saw in the revival of the varna system an essential justification for the freedom struggle.

It is to be noted that whatever ambiguities or uncertainties mark Premchand's attitudes towards the untouchables are reflected in his journalistic writings. In his short stories of the 1930s he shows nothing but total concern of a kind not vitiated by his own upper caste bias. The untouchables here are not blamed for their dirty habits and low morality. It is clearly the prevailing socio-economic system that is responsible for their sad degradation. Towards the end of 1930 appeared 'Sadagati', portraying most movingly the plight of Dukhi, a poor Chamar. To have an auspicious day fixed for his daughter's wedding, he needs to turn to Pandit Ghasiram. The latter keeps him waiting the whole day, and in the meantime makes him perform begar. Dukhi cannot refuse what he thinks is the high caste's

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25 Ibid, pp. 475-76.

right. Exhausted with hunger he gets for his labour no more than an ember to light his bidi. The ember only hits him in the head. All his strength peters out as the day draws to a close. Dukhi lies dead in the Pandit's compound. The Chamars of the village, the traditional scavengers, will not clear the corpse until the police have looked in. The women of the Brahman household cry, and the Pandit is horrified. Besides, the growing stench of the rotting corpse they find revolting. Early in the morning, while it is still dark, the Pandit throws a rope round the dead Chamar's leg and drags the dead body outside the village. As the Pandit, polluted by the exercise, purifies himself; vultures, dogs and crows feast on dead Dukhi.[26]

In August 1932 came out 'Thakur ka Kuan'. Jokhu is ill and thirsty. The untouchables' well has a dead animal in it. Gangi, Jokhu's wife, is desperate to get some drinkable water. In the dark of the night she decides to steal some water from the Thakur's well. Her fear - for the consequences of being caught would be disastrous - is sensitively captured in the story. The climax comes when just as the ordeal of drawing water from the well promises to be over, the door of the Thakur's house opens with a bang. In sheer fright Gangi drops the vessel in the well and runs for dear life. Reaching home, she finds Jokhu drinking the rotten water that had been drawn from the infected untouchables' well.[27]

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26 Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 18-26.

27 Ibid, vol. I, pp. 141-44.

Two years later, in 'Doodh ka Daam', a woman belonging to the caste of sweepers - Bhangis - neglects her own child because the zamindar's son requires her as foster mother. During this while she is treated like a V.I.P. Later she and her husband die, and her son is taken care of at the zamindar's. But he is treated like dirt by the boy whom his mother had breast-fed. The poor untouchable orphan bitterly thinks of the price he is getting for his mother's milk.[28]

Finally, in December 1935, appeared the immortal 'Kafan'. Ghisu, a Chamar, and his son, Madhav, are the dregs of humanity. They are busy roasting a handful of potatoes they have managed to steal from somewhere. They can hear the cries of Budhiya, the young man's wife, who is dying of child birth inside their hut. But neither of them would go inside to nurse her. Each is afraid that the other may eat away more than his due share of potatoes. But when Budhiya dies, they become a picture of sorrow and take advantage of her death to collect from the richer villagers money for her kafan - shroud - without which she cannot be cremated. This money they spend in feasting themselves. Drinking and feasting, they bless dead Budhiya for the grand time she has, by her death, made possible for them. As for the shroud and the cremation, they know that the religion-scared rich of the village would give money yet again to facilitate the cremation.[29]

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28 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 204-14.

29 Kafan, pp. 5-14.

'Kafan' has Premchand at his realistic and tragic best. He brings out with sure and subtle touches the alienation and dehumanisation that institutionalised injustice and poverty can produce. Why should Ghisu and Madhav work? By slaving away for others they can never hope to have a better existence than they manage through begging and stealing. Nothing better than animal existence is their lot. But 'Kafan' is only the high point of a realisation that can be discerned in his earlier short stories on the life and condition of untouchables. And this realisation differs from the kind of portrayal we find in his articles. The cart, in this realisation, is not put before the horse. It is not to their bad habits and low morality that the untouchables' miserable condition is attributed. Their condition and the despair it induces are shown as integral to the existing socio-economic system.

II

The position of Indian women had, since the early 19th century, captured the imagination of social reformers. Indeed, the very beginning of a new awakening - what is often described as Indian renaissance - from Rammohan Roy onward was marked by a keen realisation of the evil effects of women's subjection. It is, in fact, noteworthy that even conservatives like Raja Radhakant Deb, the arch rival of Raja Rammohan Roy, were not averse to the education, and consequent improvement, of women.

It is a measure of the way concern for women loomed increasingly within the growing social reform movement during the 19th century that almost all the leading issues put forward by reformist leaders and organisations related directly to the position of women in society. The 20th century saw a continuing of this interest. Leaders such as Gandhi had much to say on the subject. Journals such as Chand devoted themselves almost exclusively to the furthering of women's interests. And writers, Premchand being a leading one among them, showed an abiding and sensitive interest in the lot of women.

Premchand takes up certain dominant ills that affect the position of women, e.g., dowry, prostitution, plight of widows, May-and-December marriages between young girls and old men, and the inferior status assigned to women qua women. He holds the society responsible for ruining the lives of women. However, as in his attitude towards the untouchables, an ambivalence can be noticed in his attitude towards women also. His articles support even as radical a measure as divorce, not to mention his support to the Sarda Marriage Act and the raising of the minimum marriageable age. But his fiction reveals an attachment and respect for the traditional Hindu ideal of woman: self-effacing, all-suffering, subservient, and fiercely loyal to her husband. Not only that. He even opposes what seem to him 'modern' women; seeing in them only negative qualities and no character. In accordance with such a prejudice, his heroines, if led astray initially, reform themselves by the end of the

story or the novel; and the reformation is invariably in keeping with the traditional Hindu ideal. Even lower caste women, whose social norms and mores are recognised to be different from those of the upper castes, are depicted as ideal characters by having them resemble the gentle, traditional, self-effacing middle class woman. It would appear to be the case that even while supporting drastic measures in the face of extraordinary social practices, it is a conservative ideal of woman that reigns supreme in his heart.

An examination of the way his fictional and non-fictional writings take in the treatment of women would illustrate this ambivalence. Many of his short stories bring out the unhappiness that fills the lives of Indian women crushed in a society dominated by obsolete customs. 'Nairashya' (July 1924) shows the humiliation and contempt suffered by a woman having no sons. Nirupama, the heroine, is an object of contempt because she has been giving birth only to girls whereas the family, like any average Indian family, expects her to give a male heir to her husband. When for the fifth time a daughter is born to her, she is unable to bear the thought of having to face more contemptuous taunts, and her heart fails.[30]

In 'Nirvasan' (June 1924) Premchand exposes the hollowness of the middle class concern for honour when a respectable woman, caught in a mishap that may make society suspect her

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30 Mansarovar, vol. III, pp. 118-129.

'purity', is rejected by her family for ever. During a visit to the Ganges, Maryada gets lost in the crowd. A Seva Samiti volunteer takes her to their office. As many women have thus been rescued and there are not sufficient volunteers to leave them home, the women have to wait for the fair to be over before they can reach home. Later Maryada is deceived by a man trafficking in women. But she manages to escape unscathed. But when she reaches home after these harrowing tribulations, her husband would not accept her for fear of her chastity having been compromised.[31] The story leaves us in no doubt about the writer's moral anger against such a precariously balanced faith.

Nirmala and 'Narak ka Marg', both of which appeared in 1925, deal with the problem of May-and-December marriages, a problem caused by the compulsions of dowry and the power of wealth, and causing in its turn a whole set of emotional and psychological problems. Nirmala becomes an object of suspicion for her old husband who sees sordidness in her attachment to his own son from an earlier wife. Nirmala eventually dies, ending a wasted life. In the short story, the woman is unable to win the love of her old, rich and suspicious husband. After his death she attempts suicide and is saved by a wicked woman who turns her into a prostitute.[32]

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31 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 47-53.

32 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 23-30.

In 'Do Kabren' (January 1930) Premchand shows how hard society makes life for a 'dishonourable' woman, however elevated her character may be. Sulochana, the daughter of Kunwar Ranvir Singh by a prostitute, is an ideal woman. She marries Ramendra. But society would not let them live in peace. She can only be looked upon with lecherous eyes. Driven to continuing tension, Ramendra quarrels with her over the visit of her prostitute cousins. She commits suicide.[33]

In 'Ek Anch ki Kasar' (August 1924) Yashodanandan, a social reformer, builds up a public image by opposing evil social customs. But secretly he bargains for a dowry.[34] The lure of dowry is shown in 'Vidrohi' (November 1928) also where the parents turn away from the girl their son loves because they can get a fat dowry elsewhere.[35]

The plight of widows, too, forms the theme of Premchand's short stories. 'Nairashya Lila' (April 1923) is about Kailash who becomes a widow at thirteen. Still a child, the girl cannot grasp the grievous implications of the event. She continues to be full of verve and zest. The parents, worried about what the society would say about a widow who remains so cheerful, try to keep her sequestered from the outside world. But she goes to the theatre, then turns to a sadhu for religious discourse, and later on takes up a tuition at somebody's house.

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33 Ibid, vol. IV, pp. 36-52.

34 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 89-94.

35 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 102-115.

Then comes a day when Kailash grasps the full meaning of her kind of life. In the ultimate despair she becomes desensitised to all criticism. Her father feels that there is a way out for his daughter: death. But he cannot bring the idea to his lips.[36]

In 'Dhikkar' (February 1925) widowed Mani has to live with her cruel aunt and uncle. They make her work like a slave. Embodiment of ill-omen that a widow is, she is kept far off during auspicious occasions such as weddings. Shorn of all hope, she contemplates suicide. But Indranath, a friend of her cousin Gokul, dissuades her and proposes to her. The marital knot is tied secretly. But humiliated by being shouted at by her uncle and aunt, Mani does end her life finally.[37] This story is significant because it constitutes a departure from the usual turn of events in Premchand's fiction which rarely shows the marriage of a widow. To this point we shall turn later.

'Beton Wali Vidhava' (November 1932) describes the scant regard shown to widows. Phoolmati's word was law in her house when her husband was alive. But once widowed, she begins to be progressively ignored by her sons and their wives. They even usurp her property and give nothing to their sister. At the latter's wedding, Phoolmati had planned to part with her jewellery. But one of her sons spins a tale about needing to

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36 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 54-66.

37 Ibid, vol. I, pp. 213-30.

pay bail to avoid being jailed, and takes away the jewellery. The sister, in the absence of proper dowry, is married off somewhere else. This is more than Phoolmati can bear. She ends her life in a river.[38]

Premchand's stories deal with some other aspects also of the general plight of women. In 'Durasha' (October 1922) he opposes purdah. Dayashankar keeps his wife behind the veil. He pays for this when he returns home one day with a famished friend. There is no food in the house because his wife could not go to the market to buy provisions. This incident changes him.[39] In 'Doosari Shadi' (September 1931) Premchand preaches against second marriage by showing how family harmony is wrecked by the second wife.[40] In 'Paipuji' (October 1935) he criticises the lower status accorded to the girl's people in marriages.[41]

While these stories usually concentrate on depicting the wretched plight of women, often culminating in the unhappy death of the victim, Premchand's articles prescribe fairly strong measures for reform of women's condition. Written mainly in response to the issues that happened to be under discussion at the time, the articles favoured such steps as higher marriageable age, women's right to property and, though only in extraordinary situations, even divorce and abortion. However, the articles,

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38 Ibid, vol. I, pp. 68-88.

39 Ibid, vol. VI, pp. 275-286.

40 Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 225-28.

41 Ibid, pp. 252-56.

too, tended to assume that traditionally women in India had been assigned a respectable place in society; the suggestion being that even the most radical reforms could be conceived in a revivalistic mould.

Thus, in an article of February 1931, Premchand lamented that once upon a time the Indian woman was the goddess of the family and as such she enjoyed a status in society that was higher than man's. He hoped that 'our mothers' would once again regain their old prestige and position as a result of the new wave of nationalism and rationalism. 'Worship of the Mother is an essential part of India's religion.' The nostalgia for a lost tradition apart, he recommended practical steps for improving the position of women. What was required to be done was that men and women must have equal rights in marriage and inheritance. The equality in marriage included equal rights with regard to the annulment of the marital bond; in concrete terms, he supported the wife's claim to half of the husband's property in case of divorce. He supported the Sarda Bill which aimed to raise the minimum age for marriage and to give the widow the right to her deceased husband's property.[42]

Though he wrote rather eloquently in favour of divorce, he wanted the annulment to be confined to unbearable circumstances so that the strength of the marital tie was not needlessly weakened. Resenting the fact that men could leave their wives

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42 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 249-50.

with impunity, he wanted women to have the right to get away from husbands who were prone to exploiting them. He realised that the Hindu ideal of marriage did not admit of dissolution of the bond; divorce was antithetical to Hindu marriage. But he could not but face the ugly reality of the existing situation which made the traditional ideal of Hindu marriage a burden for women. For, in actual practice, while women were tied inexorably to the marital bond, men enjoyed virtual freedom. He realised that divorce could be misused, as it was in the West. But given the wretched state to which women had been reduced, it seemed a necessary alleviative measure.[43]

Considering his own mental make-up with its revivalistic Hindu orientation, as also the times in which he was writing, Premchand was undoubtedly taking a very progressive stance in favouring divorce as a necessary step towards the liberation of women. It is, therefore, not surprising that he could not bring himself to extend unqualified support to abortion. He felt that legalising abortion would countenance licentiousness and erode the foundations of marriage.[44] Nor could he whole-heartedly favour birth control through means other than abstinence. Recognising the need to have fewer children, he wanted men and women to take recourse to brahmacharya for the purpose. The latter, he argued, increased strength while artificial birth

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43 Ibid, p. 258.

44 Ibid, p. 250.

control induced licentiousness.[45] It was only his recognition of the need to control population by lowering the birth rate that obliged him to acquiesce in the acceptance of artificial means by those who were incapable of practising brahmacharya. But he would not do this without warning that it would encourage easy living among men and women.[46]

In view of his concern for women it was but natural that Premchand should think in terms larger than the alleviation of their lot within the household. What he wanted was a liberated woman - liberated in consonance with an ideal that he held forth - who would make her contribution to the nation's onward march. Therefore, apart from favouring right to property, increasing education and fair terms within the marital relationship, he also supported women's right to franchise.[47] That he should have consistently opposed dowry and lamented the difficulties involved in doing away with this evil practice - stressing particularly the double face of the social reformers who would protest against dowry and accept it on the sly - was only to be expected.[48]

It was in keeping with his ideal of a good woman that Premchand opposed the idea of an indiscriminate equality between

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45 Ibid, p. 251.

46 Ibid, p. 269.

47 Ibid, pp. 253-54.

48 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 260-61; p. 268; p. 256.

men and women. The two had to perform different functions in society. So their equality had to be so designed as to meet the society's functional needs. His conception of a good education for women, therefore, was one that trained them to be ideal housewives and mothers. Writing months before his death, feeling not quite happy that women should be aspiring for jobs that men had traditionally performed, he wanted educated women to be patterned as good mistresses of the household and not as social butterflies'.[49] In another article, written a couple of years earlier, he made an observation that reveals his understanding of the complementary roles that men and women had to perform instead of being locked in a fight for blind equality. Suggesting that Bihari, the erotic medieval Hindi poet, should not be included in text-books, he added to stress his point: 'why for girls only, even for boys'.[50] Clearly, girls needed greater protection from exposure to a certain kind of knowledge than boys. A differential scale of exposure needed to be devised for the two. It is a different matter that Bihari, the great riti poet, was, in his opinion, bad for both boys and girls.

So strong was his conviction, that women should be trained specifically for the kind of functions they were fit to discharge, that even when he seemed to believe that women were capable of perfect equality with men, he refused to face the logical

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49 Ibid, pp. 244-46.

50 Ibid, pp. 262-63. See also pp. 266-67.

implications of this recognition. He tended, on such occasions, to lapse into sarcasm about the claims of women for equality of this kind. For example, writing in 1934 he accepted that women had proven their equality with men and therefore must be paid equally for the same job. But as he neared the end of the article, he became suspiciously tongue-in-cheek and advised such women to maintain their husbands like men had looked after their wives over the centuries.[51] The conclusion that one can draw from such writings is that even in his most radical moments, as was the case with him in other respects, Premchand remained basically attached to his tradition in his advocacy of the cause of women.

The hold of the traditional ideal is also reflected in the limits of Premchand's concern for prostitutes. Apart from his fiction, he dealt with the problem of prostitution in his articles also. He believed that economic hardships and unemployment, coupled with the ill-treatment of women by the family and relatives, were factors that contributed to the growth of the evil practice. In 1934 he wrote admiringly of

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51 Ibid, p. 270. Premchand writes - "... women have proved that in many works they are not only equal but ahead of men. What is left is the question of family. Now it is no longer necessary that she be family-less. In these days of unemployment so many men can live off their wives. And now unmarried women can have a child through artificial injections, so why should she be given less salary? Yes, we do request women to give up their insistence on solitude and take charge of useless, unemployed men like - men so far have been doing to their unemployed women."

Soviet Russia which had rooted out prostitution, and seemed to suggest that capitalism was at one level responsible for such exploitation of women.[52] But the significant point that may be noted in this context is that in his articles Premchand does not talk of the reacceptance of the prostitutes in society. A woman having once fallen could, unlike fallen men, not be fully taken back into society. That she had truly repented and completely changed her ways did not matter.

Premchand's articles thus cannot be said to reflect an attitude of happy and whole-hearted welcoming of the 'modern' woman. Yet, there is an acceptance of modern forces in her. She is equal with man in public life, taking up jobs and participating in the freedom struggle. She rightfully speaks up for her economic, political and social rights and privileges. She is a confident, independent and self-respecting human being. Even the responsibility of maintaining harmony within the household she shares, as a matter of right, with her husband. Subservience is not appreciated at any point in his articles, even though 'forwardness' is rather acquiesced in than welcomed.

But this over-all position of his non-fiction seems inconsonant with and in advance of his attitudes as reflected in his short stories and novels. For instance, nothing in his vast fictional corpus would support divorce. The women idealised

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52 Ibid, p. 267.

in his fiction are those who remain fiercely chaste even to the memory of a man with whom they had barely had a formal marital relationship and who had been a source of nothing but suffering while he was alive. His heroines are chaste, religious, self-effacing and, often, docile. They are invariably the anti-thesis of the western women as he sees them. His vamps or anti-heroines, paradoxically enough, are the ones who translate into their life-style many of the recommendations he himself makes in his articles: they are independent, working women who can divorce the man who is exploiting them, and fight for their economic and other rights.

In this context it needs to be emphasised that this portrayal does not represent a depiction of reality as seen by Premchand. There is an element of idealisation in the portrayal. Not all of his fiction ends at mere depiction of a problem and a character. In keeping with his romantic realism he gives the realistic portrayal a turn towards his 'ideal'. For in the denouement to most of his works he turns not to the real but to the ideal. It is this tendency that expresses his preferences with regard to women.

The treatment of the theme of widows in his fiction may be cited as an example. There are only two instances, in his novels and short stories, of a widow getting married. In one of these cases the widow dies soon after getting remarried for fear of what her unkind guardians would say. The other instance, dating back to Premchand's youth, around the time he himself

married a widow - this being his second marriage without the first wife having been dead or divorced - seems to have weighed later on Premchand's conscience. He virtually disowned this when he rewrote this novel and changed the end to dispense with the solemnisation of widow remarriage. This he did, we have seen in an earlier chapter, because he could not bear to see a Hindu widow deviate from her ideal. In the suitably revised end, the widow, Prema, was shown deciding against remarriage and, instead, leading a pure spiritual life at an ashrama. Premchand had made amends by restoring the ideal of the Hindu woman.

There are numerous instances to show his unforgiving stance towards women who had once erred. In 1918 appeared Sevasadan. Suman, its leading lady, falls into bad ways as a result of being lured by outer glitter and being married to an aged and poor man, Gajadhar. She is rescued by reformers, absolved of blame, and repentant that she got lost. But she can no longer return to a normal wife's existence. Her life is dedicated to prayers and social service. As a glaring contrast to this, Sadan, the young paramour of Suman, once reformed, returns to his hitherto abandoned wife and lives happily ever after. A similar attitude is reflected four years later in Premashrama. Gayatri, hitherto an ideal woman, gets carried away by the wiles of Gyanshankar and is never redeemed. As an act of penance she goes on a pilgrimage and dies in the sacred mountains.

Ten years later Karmabhumi shows again an easier attitude towards men. Amar, the hero, is married. But he has an illicit liaison with Sakina. He is also drawn later towards Munni. Finally he returns to the straight path of marital fidelity. On the other hand, Munni, having been raped, voluntarily leaves her husband and child, indicating thereby that there can be no relief even for a wronged woman.

All these instances are admittedly a realistic portrayal of the contemporary reality. It was no doubt easier for an erring man to get a chance from a forgiving, though ill-treated, wife. That, however, is not the issue. In the treatment of many major social problems, Premchand resorted, in his fiction, to solutions that were obviously unrealistic. He could move away from the contemporary reality to prove his point. With regard to the kisan-zamindar relations, for example, he took flight from an ugly reality in order to suggest a better state of affairs and a way out, no matter how improbable it seemed. This means that Premchand's apparent fidelity to the reality of prevailing attitudes towards women was not uninspired by his own ultimately conservative attitude towards them.

The ideal women characters in his novels and short stories show the qualities closest to his own heart. Shanta, in Seva-sadan, has been rejected by her husband and in-laws because she is prostitute Suman's sister. Sadan, who is a bit of a vagabond, visits Suman regularly. But Shanta, having once placed Sadan in her heart, is wedded to him for life, irrespective of whether

or not he accepts her. Virjan, in Vardan (1920), loves Pratap but is married off elsewhere. Thereafter she only has her husband as her 'god', totally undeserving and deceitful though he is. In Premashrama, wily and corrupt though he is, Gyanshankar is worshipped by his wife. Similarly, her sister, Gayatri, cherishes the memory of her deceased debauch husband. And, as we have already noted, when she falters once as a result of Gyanshankar's wiles, there is no hope left for her. The tragic heroine of Nirmala, too, is true to her suspicious, cantankerous old husband. Rangbhumi introduces an almost proselytising element in Premchand's portrayal of idealised Hindu women. This is done through the characterisation of Sophia. She is repeatedly described as an ideal Hindu woman who got born in the wrong religion. It is noteworthy that she is said to have been a Hindu in her previous birth.[53]

However, Rangbhumi also has a woman who leaves her husband. But here Premchand has found a cause more ideal than devotion of Hindu wives to their husbands. This is the sacred cause of Indian nationalism. For its sake Indu leaves her loyalist

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53 Rangbhumi has several instances where Sophia's 'Hindu-ness' is lauded.

"Sophia has all the qualities of our 'devis'. She should have been born in a 'raja' family. No one knows how she got birth in a Christian family." p. 355.

"She may be Christian by birth but in nature and in deed she is an Arya woman". p. 415.

"Sophia's character was fully conducive for Hindu religion and society". p. 518.

husband Mahendra Singh. This, in fact, is a familiar device in Premchand's fiction. Some of his nationalist short stories contain similar incidents. Though, unlike Rangbhumi, they all end with the husband realising his error and teaming up with the wife in the struggle for freedom. In 'Juloos' (January 1930) Daroga Birbal Singh is a typical Indian government servant, imbued with a slavish mentality and conscious of his official powers. He comes down heavily on a peaceful procession organised as part of the Purna Swaraj movement. With his baton he administers a fell blow to old Ibrahim who succumbs to the injury. Another procession is now organised for Ibrahim's burial. Birbal Singh is again deputed to deal with the procession. This time he finds his wife in the very front row. Converted to the cause of nationalism, he turns to Ibrahim's old widow. That is where his wife finds him. The two are united once again.[54]

Mahendra Singh, in Rangbhumi, is an exception in that he persists in his old ways in spite of the shining example of his wife. Otherwise the benighted husbands are finally awakened by their nationalist wives. Even though they defy their husbands and seem to deviate from the ideal behaviour pattern of a Hindu woman, the eventual conversion of their husbands leaves an impact that does not convey an abiding impression of defiance. Thus the general feeling generated by Premchand's fiction is that of

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54 Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp. 49-60.

the idealisation of the meek, chaste wife and self-effacing member of the family. The ideal was set forth as early as 1910 in 'Bade Ghar ki Beti' which remains one of his celebrated short stories. It shows a daughter-in-law, belonging to a rich and respectable family, saving from disintegrating the family of her husband. This she does by swallowing her pride and magnanimously forgiving her brother-in-law who had flung slippers at her in anger.[55]

Surely these are qualities that need to be praised. It is not easy to reform the wrong-doer with patience and forgiveness. But it is the constant stress on these qualities as necessarily feminine rather than human attributes that reveals the double standards of traditionalists. Women possessing these qualities uphold social order and prevent its break-up. Men as lesser beings are wanting in these qualities. This is a convoluted way of glorifying the subjection of women. Almost invariably the man is the pivot. The woman has to tune herself according to his strengths and weaknesses. Leela, in 'Swarga ki Devi' (September 1925), is married into a rotten family. She has an uneducated husband, a cheat for a father-in-law and a swearing mother-in-law. But she accepts her lot, like all of Premchand's ideal women characters, without ever grudging or complaining. Her unquestioning love finally cures her drunkard husband and wins his heart.[56] In a short story published months

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55 Ibid, vol. VII, pp. 142-51.

56 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 72-81.

For the ideal woman's faithful service to her man see also Khudi (1928) in Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 63-68 and Shuddhi (1928) in Vishvakosh, vol. II, p. 394.

before his death, Purnima is married to a middle-aged man whom she serves faithfully. He dies, and her childhood lover, Amrit, still a bachelor, proposes to her. But she would be faithful to the memory of her departed lord. Amrit bows reverently before her.[57]

Premchand's lower caste and lower class heroines are permitted to acquire ideal status in his perception by their upholding middle class moral values. These are not the norms at their level of society where both men and women are freer in their love and sex life. But Premchand feels happy with the Sanskritising tendencies of lower class/caste women. His 'Sati' (May 1932) shows low-born beautiful Mulia married to ugly Kallu. Because of her beauty Kallu cannot trust Mulia even though she is faithful to him. For her part, however, Mulia serves her mistrustful husband dutifully and nurses him when he falls ill. But he dies. His cousin, Raja, tries to win over Mulia. Given the mores of his class and community, Raja is perfectly justified in his overtures. But Mulia remains unmoved. Second marriage is not for her. She has decided to live like a sati.[58] Similarly, 'Devi' (April 1935) has untouchable Tulia whose husband never returns from a trip on which he had embarked in order to make money. Tulia remains his and his alone forever.[59]

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57 Vishvakosh, vol. II, p. 179.

58 Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 145-53.

59 Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 61-62.

The message in Premchand's fiction is clear. With patience, tolerance and devotion the woman can melt the cruellest man. Also, the fidelity, self-sacrifice and spirituality of women win them the respect of society at large. The assertion of her separate identity is denied to woman in this moral system. She is to follow the husband fated for her and shape herself according to his needs and temperament. The happiness she will one day get is the reward traditionalists hold out to the suffering woman.

What happens when the women assert themselves or question and refuse the suffering inherent in their social situation? Premchand's answer to this emerges in numerous fictional portrayals of the counter-ideal woman. She is usually contrasted with the ideal woman in the same story to make the point more sharply. 'Shanti' (August 1920) is perhaps the most striking example of this kind. Shyama, the heroine, alienates her husband and family as a westernised modern woman. She even loses her good qualities. But following her transformation into a traditional woman she gets back her character. The family accepts her as their own. Premchand makes his point by showing two transformations in Shyama's personality. Initially she was a traditional housewife who read religious scriptures, wore the veil, and rushed to do the slightest bidding of her in-laws. Her husband, a lawyer, however, admired western culture and wanted her to change herself accordingly. For his sake - it is interesting to speculate if as a traditional obedient wife she

had any alternative but to realise the wishes of her husband - she forced herself to learn the English language and become fashionable. The metamorphosis gradually brought into her a sense of pride and intolerance. Finding her mother-in-law's scoldings increasingly hard to bear, she persuaded her husband to move away from the joint family household and live elsewhere. Her stylish existence in the nucleated household included servants, club, theatre, parties, and superficial glitter and glamour. The metamorphosis seemed complete when it irked her to cut down her socialising when her husband fell ill and needed her care. The husband had meanwhile lost all peace and finally he confessed that he would be cured only if they returned to their old existence. This they did. Shyama burnt her Oscar Wildes. The ideal woman once again showered happiness all around. The story concludes with the message that western culture may have taught her many things, but in its hollowness and pretentiousness she had lost her strength of character.[60]

'Premasutra' (April 1926) has Prabha, a traditional Hindu woman, totally devoted to her westernised husband, Pashupati. The latter is attracted towards Krishna, a modern woman. Enraged and humiliated, Prabha is about to flirt with another man in sheer revenge. But she is reminded of her duty by the presence of her child. Pashupati, however, remains undeterred and Prabha leaves for her mother's home. She is obliged to do this because

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60 Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp. 80-96.

Pashupati plans to marry Krishna. But the latter rejects Pashupati who goes away to Europe. There he marries an English girl who later elopes with an Englishman. Pashupati, completely broken, returns home where his daughter, now to be married, encourages a reunion between her parents. Prabha, ever loyal to her husband, cannot refuse. They are tied together by the 'thread of love'.[61]

In 'Do Sakhiyan' (February 1928) Padma and Vinod constitute a modernised couple. But their marriage turns sour. Vinod squanders away money for sheer ostentation. Padma flirts with another man. Forlorn and unhappy, Vinod thinks of poisoning himself to death, but is saved by Kusum who advises Padma that man can be won only by spiritual love, sacrifice and dedication; beauty cannot hold them for long. Padma's friend Chand, on the other hand, belongs to a traditional household. At the time of her marriage a difficult situation arises on the issue of dowry and the marriage party goes back without the bride. But Chanda considers her husband, who has gone away without taking her with him, her god and writes to him with Padma's help. The husband accepts her. But her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law continue to dislike her although she serves them dutifully. All this Chand suffers silently. For her marriage is a vow of service and self-abnegation. Hurt by this ill-treatment of Chanda, her husband wants to move away from the joint family. But Chanda would rather bear all. He leaves alone. On learning that she is

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61 Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 170-83.

not eating or drinking, he comes back. The oppression in the house ends. All live happily thereafter.[62]

In 'Unmad' (January 1931) Manhar's wife, Vageshwari, keeps him free from all worries so that he may devote his time to writing. He is chosen, as a successful writer, to go to England on a government scholarship to study the subject of his work, detective writing. In the midst of the glamour of western society he forgets the service and renunciation of his wife. Instead he marries Jenny, an English lady, to use her for further success. Jenny flirts with other men in order to get positions and promotions for Manhar. Eventually they return to India. Manhar is now a celebrity. But for Jenny he is no more than an object to have fun with. She naturally refuses to be a maid to her husband. Because of her wilfulness relations between them get progressively strained. Finally Manhar runs away from Jenny and goes to Vageshwari who accepts him back. Jenny meanwhile chases him and manages to find him. Knowing about Vageshwari's relationship with him, Jenny tries to kill her. But Manhar snatches the pistol and kills himself.[63]

Miss Padma, in a story entitled after her name (March 1936), is a modern woman. Highly educated and a lawyer by profession, she hates the slavery that marriage entails. She loves Mr. Prasad and they decide to live together. Prasad is extravagant.

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62 Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 210-77.

63 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 116-36.

He charms Miss Padma into total submission. He soon begins to ignore her and one day leaves her. Padma, having a baby from Prasad, finds herself ruined as Prasad has not only deserted her but also taken away all her money.[64] Such, Premchand tells us, is the end of western liberation.

In the same year as 'Miss Padma' appeared Godan. In Malti and Govindi Premchand has provided his contrasting pair - his favourite device - that stresses the superiority of the traditional as against the westernised woman. Malti is a modern educated woman, a 'social butterfly'. Frivolous and fashionable, she cannot earn the respect of Prof. Mehta, Premchand's mouthpiece in the novel, for whom she has a soft corner. Her life is devoid of any earnestness or purpose. Such is her appetite for sensuous pleasure that she even thrills to the idea of being kidnapped by the Pathan at Rai Saheb's party and experiencing his barbaric love. Govindi, Khanna's wife, is an ideal traditional woman. Though constantly spurned by her husband - who is ever waiting on Malti - she remains true to him. Once in despair she leaves her house. But Mehta tells her of her real greatness and persuades her to return to her child and husband. She now behaves with greater patience and determination.[65]

The point is driven further in Mehta's speech before a women's group formed with Malti's inspiration. Women, he says, are superior to men. They are devis, full of kindness, reverence

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64 Ibid, pp. 94-101.

65 Godan, pp. 183-90.

and sacrifice. It is painful to see them try now to behave like men and take to conflict. Man is no god. The ultimate human qualities of love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and ahimsa reside in women, goddesses that they are, and not in men. They do need strength and education. But not of the kind that has taught and enabled men to turn our earth into hell. True, men have exploited women. Fight this exploitation. But without destroying womanhood. It would be ruinous to emulate the western woman. She is no longer the mistress but a mere toy for pleasure. Our mothers cannot have pleasure as their ideal. Their ideal is service. On this rests their greatness. Modesty and magnanimity are their biggest qualities. They do not have to become butterflies. Lest it may be argued that the rhetoric of a discourse, like this one, does admit of a degree of sharpness of expression which involves an element of exaggeration, a greater demonstration of Premchand's attitude towards women is provided, in Godan, by the fact that Miss Malti undergoes a change and devotes herself to service and such like.[66] More than his discourse before the assemblage of women got together by Malti, it is the result of his personal influence on her character that constitutes the measure of Mehta's success.

It is, clearly, a conservative ideal that, in the final analysis, Premchand upholds for women. He may at times recommend obviously radical measures. But the characters he creates in

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66 Ibid, pp. 320-25.

his fiction - and it may be reiterated that his craftsmanship rested on creating characters that reflected the existing reality and at the same time also embodied the possibilities and directions of desired changes - rarely, if ever, agitate for the realisation of these measures. Except for the occasions when the call of the greater cause of nationalism necessitates a different mode of behaviour, his ideal women characters merge their identities with those of their men. In this merger alone - or through it - do they seek hope and salvation. They remain the hidden forces behind their men. Their success lies not in anything they do but in what they make it possible for their men to achieve. They are the perpetual givers. The takers among them remain the counter-ideal. Ironically it is they who are equipped with the will and the determination to fight exploitation actively. But they are condemned for their supposed self-indulgence and shallowness.

To win respect and be idealised, women in Premchand's fiction have to pay a heavy price. They are deprived of their individual faces. There are many paths a human being treads. His travails, his riches of experience, constitute his personal capital in life. Women, for the most part, is given limited opportunities and depicted as an invisible force propelling others. As if her own individual strivings, failures and realisations had no variety and no independent relevance. And this facelessness is apotheosised.

III

The hold of indigenous culture on Premchand's mind is further evidenced by his views on education. In January 1931 he declared that the answers to India's multifarious problems must be sought within her own culture and not in western civilisation. Europe had gone astray and lost all sense of purpose. Its culture was heading inexorably towards annihilation. 'Were we also to copy the same evils and push our culture down the abyss of destruction?' He warned that the prevailing political situation would not last forever. But if under the pressure of this political condition Indians lost their own specific existence, their own culture and the authority of their religion, they would have spelt their own end.[67]

Given the radically different character of Indian life and culture, the existing system of English education was a particularly effective instrument for destroying the very fabric of Indian social and cultural organisation. It produced slaves and made its recipients unfit for the country's service. It instilled, moreover, values and attitudes that were antithetical to the values and attitudes on which rested Indian culture. He lamented the fact that not only government officials, lawyers and college teachers were infected by the 'disease of English language'. Even the patriotic nationalist workers were not immune to it. They might be dressed in khaddar, but their

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67 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, p. 193.

mentality had acquired 'not even an iota of culture'.[68] Culture in this context obviously meant Indian culture as Premchand saw it.[69] He bemoaned in december the same year:

> India has no universities. But, yes, she has many factories where graduates are produced.... Here the youth are taught bad ways, extravagance, luxury and false pride. Such students are good for nothing save some useless pen-pushing in an office.

He particularly singled out teachers for setting, by their own life-style, the bad example of fashionableness and luxurious living. He hoped, however, that the students would realise the value of austerity not only for the sake of their country but also for their own sake.[70]

Premchand, however, realised that this hope could hardly be realised if it was to be based on moralising alone. The students, after all, would be influenced not so much by platitudes as by the life patterns of the educated and the upper classes. This led him to call for a radical restructuring of society which would do away with the prevailing principle of attaching higher value to mental as against manual activity. In this context he also reiterated his suspicion of a social organisation - patterned after the West - that fostered

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68 Ibid, pp. 194-95.

69 Ibid, pp. 198-99.

70 Ibid, p. 210.

individualism at the expense of the community. In an article that betrayed a degree of confusion about what needed to be done about refashioning education as a necessary means of national progress on the desired lines, Premchand got caught in the mire of uncertainty about whether education could bring about the required social change or whether a social transformation was a pre-condition for ensuring the effectiveness of an ideal educational system. In the process he equated Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler as outstanding leaders who had the ability to defy the norms of their society and make it to the top 'through the path of revolution'. But he could not bring himself to holding these great European leaders up as examples worthy of emulation by the Indian youth. For, he wrote:[71]

> We do not want the idea to strike roots in the minds of our youth that the doors of advancement are closed to them and that they can carve out a way for themselves only by rebelling against their society and nation. It would be a bad day for the country if the idea gets implanted in young minds. To prevent such an eventuality it is essential for the nation to accept the principle that diplomas are not the key to wealth and privileges. Only then will the real importance of education emerge. At the moment, education, too, is a kind of business. He who can spend the maximum can have the highest degrees,

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71 Ibid, pp. 230-31. Also see p. 211.

provided he is not altogether a moron. It is imperative for the future welfare of the nation to change the system which permits a few to monopolise all the amenities of the world. This fans the fire of discontent and conflict. Not luxuriousness and ostentation but service and life of sacrifice should be the touchstone of our greatness.

It may be noted that while generally Premchand was opposed to revolution - he could at best support the idea of revolution without revolution - he went to the extent of saying that even an ideal system of education would not succeed unless it was accompanied by a radical social restructuring. However, it seems difficult to see this advocacy of social transformation as evidence of his radicalism. For the suggestion appears to have been inspired not by a serious examination of the dynamics of social change, with education being an important variable, but by a feeling of desperation about the existing state of his society; more so because in his writings on education he does not work out the need and mode of such a restructuring. Here, too, Premchand was resorting to the kind of radical rhetoric to which, as we have seen before, he was only too prone.

The ultimate panacea of a radical reordering of social values apart, he did recognise the importance of educational institutions as the nurseries for fostering national regeneration. 'Our schools', he wrote in February 1932, 'are the biggest protector of our nation's culture.' Whether it was

alien rule or self-rule, educational institutions must enjoy total autonomy. Any need to turn to the government would throttle education. Once education is chained, its recipients cannot but acquire a slavish mentality.[72]

Premchand even went to the extent of holding the western educational system responsible for imperialism, commercialism and conflict among nations:[73]

> Now even western thinkers are beginning to see that the educational system they have been hugging for centuries weakens character and, by strengthening man's anti-social instincts, sows in society the seeds of divisiveness and doom. The existing imperialism, commercialism and conflict among nations are the fruits of this evil education, for by ascribing primacy to the individual it has made man an aggressive beast vis-a-vis society.

What was required was a revolution in education:[74]

> Universal brotherhood is the highest ideal of human civilisation and religion.... Even today we are as far off this ideal as we were thousands of years ago. But society has not been able to conceive of a higher ideal than this, and the spirit of the universe is still

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72 Ibid, pp. 201-202.

73 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 221-22.

74 Ibid.

> keeping its gaze fixed at the far off future. Thinkers are gradually veering round to the view that to realise this ideal we will have to have a new creation - that is, we will have to revolutionise the upbringing and education of children in such a way that strife in society should give way to the instinct of cooperation, instead of mutual suspicion there should be trust among people, and power is acquired not for terrorising but for helping others.

Though he had, in this very article, condemned Indian civilisation for holding up, through monism, the ideal of universal brotherhood without having taken a step towards its realisation, Premchand felt confident to counter the rapacious western system of education with the ancient Indian model of gurukulas: 'In this respect our gurukuls were better than the Eton, Harrow or princes' colleges of today. All the students in these gurukuls were equal, and this bred among them the spirit of public welfare.'[75]

As a necessary sequel to the conception of education as an instrument for character formation, Premchand assailed the obsessive concentration on examination. 'The main aim of the student is to pass the examination and the prime duty of the teacher is to help the student pass the examination.' A lamentable consequence of this was that scouting, wrestling,

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75 Ibid.

games and sports, debating, clay modelling and similar extracurricular activities were sacrificed on the altar of examinations. 'This examination mentality is ruining education, and there is not an element of exaggeration in the statement that it is the main cause of the physical weaknesses of the educated community.' The terror of examination and the compulsion of English language as the medium of instruction combined effectively to crush the students. He regretted that teachers in the country were no better than frogs in a well. It was impossible for them to see and struggle against the evil effects of the existing system of education.[76] Appreciating the fact that the education department was not averse to extra-curricular activities, Premchand insisted that a day in the week should be formally set aside for such activities. For teachers were unlikely to take interest in the extracurricular development of their students if the exercise was left optional for them.[77]

Premchand's ideal of good education was that besides developing minds it should also concern itself with the soul, health and general welfare of the students. One of the things he considered essential for translating this comprehensive view of education into practice was the imparting of basic knowledge about sex. He wanted high schools and universities to organise

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76 Ibid, pp. 212-13.

77 Ibid, p. 220.

lectures on the subject by experts in the field. Through these lectures he hoped to 'reduce the moral aberrations that are stealthily practised in our educational institutions'. 'It is imperative that an expert in human anatomy should write a book providing healthy instruction in the subject with a view to highlighting the importance of purity.' He felt unhappy that some western scholars had started writing on such a serious subject in a way that was bound to lead the young readers astray. A matter like this could only be entrusted to doctors and brahmacharis. Far from this happening, commercially inclined publishers had brought out books on sex that would only titilate the readers.[78]

In some articles Premchand also opposed the adoption of western foods and other habits relating to daily routine like brushing teeth. He pleaded for natural foods as opposed to synthetic ones like ovaltine, gur instead of sugar and unpolished for polished rice. Similarly, he decried the tendency of taking to tooth-paste instead of the traditional datun for cleaning teeth.[79]

With regard to education, then, his whole stress was on a system that aimed at reviving the traditional Indian system in order that emulation of the West was discouraged and the transmission of indigenous values promoted. In effect this meant

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78 Ibid, pp. 242-43.

79 Ibid.

looking back to a more or less romanticised Hindu past. At one point, in fact, this even led him to talk of the Muslims as another force, apart from the British, that had disrupted this ideal cultural life of the country. He was afraid that the ruin of these ideals and traditions would soon deprive the nation of its distinct personality and identity.[80] He wrote:

> Till the Buddha's time the gurukul tradition was flourishing. In the Muslim age it was destroyed. Consequently, the nation lost its cultural anchor. No discipline was left in any area of life. Varna and ashrama, the two pillars of Aryan civilisation, lost their real face and took the shape of caste divisions....

Such a ruin could not be prevented by the British Indian educational system. On the contrary, in fact. It was, after all, no more than a government department that aimed at acquiring petty clerks for offices. But even while utilising the system for its narrow purpose of recruitment, the government ran it on lines that were likely to yield financial gains: 'It is some shopkeeping where at every step the concern is to extract money from the students.' As a result, there were fines of all kinds: fine for absence, fine for late-coming, fine for misbehaviour, fine for not learning the lesson, etc.[81] This, then, was not the system that could be trusted to discharge the basic function of national regeneration.

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80 Ibid, p. 202.

81 Ibid.

The only hope, Premchand felt, lay in the revival of the gurukul system of education. Writing in glowing terms about the Gurukul Kangari at Hardwar, which he had visited, Premchand described it as the ashrama of a saint. He praised the enthusiasm that the students exuded and the freedom of thought that they enjoyed. He was particularly impressed by the preservation of national customs and etiquette at the Gurukul; these included the eating of food in thalis and sitting on the ground. In a mere few years, he wrote in 1928, the Gurukul had an alumni that it could rightfully boast of. They were true citizens serving the country and not mere degree holders. Of them 29 were working in various gurukuls, nine were writers, 23 had dedicated themselves to the cause of Arya Samaj, five were vaidyas, 18 were in business, and seven were acquiring higher education abroad; of these seven, two had meanwhile come back, one as a doctor and the other as a barrister. All of them were proficient in English also.[82]

Three years later Premchand described the gurukul system as encapsulating the traditional Indian ideal of education. In 1932 he praised Shraddhananda for realising that the revival of the gurukul tradition was the way for India's rise. The following year, as we have seen, he offered the gurukul system as a counter to the western educational system that bred imperialism, commercialism and discord among nations.[83] These

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82 Ibid, pp. 181-84.

83 Ibid, pp. 200-03; pp. 221-22.

years are important because they suggest the need to move away from the sequential view of Premchand's development which would have us believe that the revivalist phase saw him under the spell, inter alia, of the Arya Samaj, and that this influence was discarded during his later Gandhian and progressive phases. Incidentally, it was only natural that Premchand should have hailed Tagore's great educational experiment in Shantiniketan.[84] Similarly he also praised the Kashi Vidyapith - with which he was himself associated for a while - Jamia Millia Islamia and Prem Mahavidyalaya.[85]

Premchand thus showed a positive and marked preference for indigenous values and in the process tended to glorify ancient Indian culture. It would, however, be wrong to imagine that he was opposed to the imbibing of what was good in other cultures. Mentioning with approval a school proposed by Swami Satyadev for Kashi, Premchand wrote that it would have the best of East and West; there would be lessons in different religions, European history, European education, and western and eastern civilisations.[86]

About the medium of instruction, we have seen that Premchand was opposed to the retention of English. Besides imposing a heavy and needless burden on the students, a burden that exhausted precious energies that could otherwise have been directed towards

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84 Ibid, p. 232.

85 Ibid, p. 209; p. 215.

86 Ibid, pp. 236-37.

more creative functions, instruction in an alien language seriously curbed the intellectual and creative potentialities of the students. He favoured Hindi as a common medium of instruction. He admitted that the mather tongue would have been the ideal medium of instruction. But in view of the fact that practically every province in the country had its own language, he pleaded for the adoption of Hindi for considerations of nationalism. He was, however, not blind to the need of keeping abreast with the rest of the world. Consequently, he suggested that one western language - not necessarily English - must be learnt by the students: 'One cannot do without it. It is necessary in order to keep pace with the world's progress.'[87]

Premchand's ideal of a good educational system for India did not envisage cultural autarchy. It did conceive of India as part of a larger world to which she would give even as she would take from it. But his stress was on a scheme of education that would inculcate indigenous cultural values and revive old traditions. Familiarity with western culture and science was secondary. Primary was the need to educate Indians to be the true servants of their nation. Interspersed though his writings on education are with statements about the need for contact with the outside world, they dilate mainly on the traditional education system and emphasise the urgency of its revival if the nation is to be saved from total ruin.

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87 Ibid, p. 229.