UNIT 1 AMRIT RAI: PREMCHAND: HIS LIFE AND TIMES
TRANSLATION: HARISH TRIVEDI

Structure

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1.0 Objectives

This unit is meant to introduce you to one of the important forms of non-fictional prose namely, biography. The text chosen for your study is Kalam Ka Sipahi. Premchand’s biography, written by his son Amrit Rai in Hindi. After reading the unit you will get to know Premchand’s major concerns.

1.1 Introduction

This Unit contains an intimate account of Premchand’s life as seen by his son over a period of time. We have chosen four chapters for your detailed study and have provided an analysis of the content and style. There is a separate note on the biographical writing in India. We are also reprinting a few photographs of Premchand taken from Amrit Rai’s biography of Premchand in Hindi.

1.2 Amrit Rai: An Introduction

Amrit Rai is a prolific Hindi writer, whose well-earned reputation tends to be overshadowed by that of his illustrious father, Munshi Premchand. A professed Marxist, he has carved out a niche for himself in the Hindi literary world as a novelist and short story writer, dramatist, biographer and translator. He has many published works to his credit. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1963 for his father’s biography, Kalam Ka Sipahi, the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1971 and the Nehru Fellowship during 1977-79, to enquire into the earliest origins of Hindi and its subsequent bifurcation into Hindi and Urdu, which stood him in good stead in his translations. Some of these are Novels: ‘Beej; Naagphani Ka Deshi; Hathi Ke Daant [The Elephant’s Teeth] (1956); Bhatiali (1969); Jungle (1969); and Sukh-Dhukh [Joys and Sorrow]. Short Story collections: Ithihas [History]; Kashe Ka Ek Din [A day in a Town] (1953); Bhore Se Pahle; Katghare [Cages] (1954); Geeli Mitti [The
The translator of *Kalam Ka Sipahi* is Prof. Harish Trivedi of the Department of English at the University of Delhi. Prof. Trivedi is a renowned critic and translator.

1.3 INTRODUCTION TO PREMCHAND: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) is easily the greatest novelist and short story writer in Hindi and Amrit Rai’s biography of his father is said to be the first authentic, dispassionate biography of the writer. It has been acclaimed as a classic of Hindi biography and was indeed the first full-fledged modern biography in Hindi of any writer.

It was written in Hindi in 1962 and later an abridged version of it [The original is 640 pages] was translated into English by Harish Trivedi and published in 1982. The excerpts that you are to read are from this English translation. In addition to the Introduction, the chapters are 2, 12, 19, 25 and 33. These chapters bring up important concerns in the writer’s life and
writings — his early addiction to reading and writing and his discovery of the power of the pen, his convictions as a writer, influence of Gandhiji, the writer as a *kalam ka sipahi*, and his views on language, particularly about Hindi-Urdu hostility and his efforts to bridge the widening gulf. According to the translator, Amrit Rai writes ‘a lively, supple, and highly idiomatic style’. The translation, I need hardly say, is highly competent, but I would still suggest that those of you who can access the book in Hindi, should savour the full flavour of ‘the zest and the relish’ of the original as well. But those who read the original need to remember that the numbering of chapters in the original Hindi version is different from that in the English translation.

Here are the details so far as the chapters in your course are concerned.

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Amrit Rai was a novelist and he considered his biography to be not so much a documentary as a “creative” work. Dismissing the suggestion that in his preface to the biography he called it a novel whose hero was a man named Premchand, with the difference that he was not a figment of his imagination but a figure of flesh and blood..., that I was not at liberty to kill him off or let him live, or to turn and twist him any which way I pleased, or invent events and episodes, but was well (or ill!) and truly tethered to a solid peg. But that was no cause for complaint, for I knew I wasn’t entirely free even when writing a novel, for even there the narrator was in any case tied to the peg of life, to the peg of probability. With each act of creation goes its own discipline and its own code of restraint. But that doesn’t impair the joy of creation....And such joy I have known in this work too, and in full measure (Quoted in Eng trans, xix).

This statement, according to Harish Trivedi, ‘may account for many features of the biography which make for its distinct and unusual savour: a none too linear chronology, the occasional digression or speculation, and the author’s readiness to reflect and soliloquize on his own behalf as well as, his subject’s. In short, here is an uninhibited play of the privileges of an omniscient narrator’ (xix). Evidence for these features is widespread in the biography.

The original Hindi title of the biography was *Premchand: Kalam ka Sipahi*. The subtitle, literally translated, would be ‘A Soldier with a Pen’. Harish Trivedi had come up with ‘The Pen as the Sword’ but both he and Amrit Rai rejected it as it ‘sounded a little corny’.

Whatever be the reasons for the choice of the present title in the translation, the original Hindi subtitle ‘Kalam ka Sipahi’ is highly appropriate. It suggests several things at once. If there is any leading metaphor in the book it is the use of the pen as a weapon to fight with. One can see many of its echoes and variations in the text. Premchand did cast himself in the role of a fighter — a fighter against the evils that bedevilled the Indian society and also a fighter for freedom. Premchand was ‘invertebately a man of the family and for the family’.
But he did not wish to 'confine himself in a narrow and individualistic world' (111). He considered himself a member of the larger family of the nation as well. The use of the word 'sipahi' also suggests a humble foot soldier, in the service of the nation. At one place Amrit Rai says that Premchand's well-regulated life was 'more like the life of a peasant than that of an artist, with the difference that instead of a spade he wielded a pen' (119). The idea of everyone joining in with his/her little contribution comes through in the manifesto that Premchand wrote a fortnight before the start of the Dandi march on 25 March 1930 to the new journal *Hans* that he was launching.

As the legend has it, when Lord Rama was building a bridge across the sea numerous beasts and fowl had contributed their might by bringing in their *little portions* of the earth. The battle that rages in the country now is far fiercer. India has blown the bugle for a peaceful war. *Hans* too abandons the serenity of its legendary abode, the Mansarover, and with its *little brakful of earth* goes forward to bridge the sea and to contribute to the battle for independence* (Italics added) (255)

Clearly, public events moved him profoundly, but he also knew that writing was his forte. He had discovered the power of his pen when he was thirteen (chapter 2) and it was through his writings that he chose to give the best of himself in the cause of the country's freedom and its future.

An important feature of Amrit Rai's biography is its objectivity that comes through clearly in the book. For instance, he is unsparing in his criticism of Premchand for his obsession with the idea of having a press of his own. Premchand's finances were poor but yet he chose to stake his all on a venture that was not likely to succeed. Notice that the biographer doesn't try to diminish the foolhardiness of the enterprise.

'He could easily have gone on writing his novels, his stories and articles would have brought him forty or fifty rupees a month...But, no, there is after all such a thing as an obsession! And this is an old obsession, one that has been bugging him for years altogether' (175). The biographer's impatience and exasperation are clear. Later: 'He could never be accused of taking a plunge with his eyes closed: on the contrary his distinction lay in the fact that he always took his plunge with his eyes open!' (175) Notice the ironical tone here. Then: 'What a cruel mirage this was which he kept chasing all his life!' (176) The word 'cruel' conveys so much that remains unsaid. Finally: 'Only a simpleton could have thought of starting a press in Premchand's circumstances' (178). However, Amrit Rai also concedes that 'we all run after some illusion or the other' and what Premchand ran after was 'neither money nor authority nor any kind of false social prestige' ... (176). The figure that emerges from this episode is that of a person who is intensely involved in what he is doing and also intensely human.

### 1.4 A NOTE ON BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN INDIA

India does not have a tradition of biographical writing as it is known in the West. In his introduction, which is sadly omitted from the English translation, Amrit Rai laments the absence of good biographies in Hindi. He begins by saying that this work should have been done much earlier and preferably by someone else. He goes on to say that we shy away from writing biographies.
‘In all the developed countries the genre of biography writing has made considerable advance. But our language [Hindi] is famished in this respect. Either we do not know what good biographical writing is, or we have an idée fixe in our minds that it is not a creative genre. Or else fear, just fear of the impediments in the way.’ There was no important writer, scientist, artist, or public leader who did not have several biographies written about him, he said. He then goes on to say that Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) was alive as much because of his short stories as for his biography of Balzac. Shelley’s biography by Andre Maurois, Ariel was well-known to all readers. No less well-known was Irving Stone’s biography of the Dutch painter Van Gogh, Lust for Life (1934). He also refers to Emil Ludwig (1881-1948) who, he said, had made a special place for himself in European literature because of his biographies including those of Napoleon and Goethe. Hundreds of biographies written by talented persons came out every year and they were read even more avidly than novels. But as for India, he described the state of the Indian biography by comparing it to ‘an untouchable who stood in a corner outside the entrance, forbidden to enter’ (‘Bhoomika’ [Introduction] Premchand: Kalam ka Sahpah, 10). Later he goes on to affirm that writing a biography was no less creative than writing a novel.

Writing in a similar vein, Ramchandra Guha, historian and biographer says that in contrast to the novel, the art of biography remains undeveloped in South Asia. This is perhaps due to the Indian tendency either to eulogize a person or condemn him or her completely. In his essay, ‘Why South Asians don’t write good biographies; he says: ‘We know how to burn our dead with reverence or bury them through neglect but not to evaluate, judge or honour them.’ Himal South Asian, October 2002 (italics added). He aptly called it a world governed by deference, not discrimination.” The second half of the twentieth century has been called the era of great biographies but as the Calcutta historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee says, this has ‘left Indian writers and scholars unaffected’. We tend to think of people in either black or white. There are no shades of grey for us. And when someone ventures to point out the hero’s weaknesses, we resent it and become intolerant and go overboard in expressing our prejudices. A recent example of it is the fate of Hamish McDonald’s biography of Dhirubhai Ambani, The Polyester Prince published by Allen and Unwin in 1998. According to Sucheta Dalal, the book was an “accurate portrait” of ‘one of the most colourful, controversial and brilliant of Indian businessmen’ but because it was not a hagiography, the book is still not available in Indian bookstores. The Ambanis, she says, have threatened to take legal action against anyone they perceived as defamatory in the book. As a result we have taken a long time in coming to the writing of critical biographies in India. Ramachandra Guha lists only two outstanding examples — S. Gopal’s biography of Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1989) and Amrit Rai’s biography of Premchand (1962).

The genre of biography writing combines the authenticity of history with the aesthetics of literature. It is therefore a most difficult genre.

A good biographer must be sympathetic to the personage he/she is writing about and he must try to know all about him. But he must also put him in the context of the life around him and give a picture of the person, which is at once complete and critical. He must not slur over inconvenient facts and must refrain from whitewashing reputations. It is from this point of view that Amrit Rai’s biography of Premchand is considered to be a masterpiece.
1.5 ANALYSIS

i. Introduction

The introduction begins with three anecdotes underlining the utter simplicity of Munshi Premchand even when he had become a great writer. He never assumed airs. This utter simplicity remained with him till the very end. A characteristic photograph of his shows him seated alongside his wife. He has a cap made of some thick material and is wearing a kurta and dhoti and canvas shoes on his feet with laces tied irregularly. There is a big hole in the left shoe through which his toes can be seen protruding. Premchand, half-smiling, seems totally unaware of the state of his shoes. This photograph available between pages 408 and 409 in Chapter 26 of the unabridged Hindi version, speaks for the writer’s utter simplicity and much else. The well-known Hindi satirist Hari Shankar Parsai has written a piece entitled ‘Premchand ke Phate Joote’ on this photograph, which is worth reading.

![Image of Premchand and his wife](image)

Premchand Ke Phate Joote

ii. Chapter 2: Premchand discovers the power of his pen...

Outline Summary: Nawab’s childhood pranks at his village Lamahi, bringing down mangoes, ripe and unripe from the trees — playing with Kazaki, a mail runner who would tell him and other children tales of all kinds — at 8, starts learning Urdu and Persian — is fond of sugar cane and jaggery — loses mother, father remarries — mother’s loss reflected in his writings later — at 13, develops a new interest in reading tales of magic and suspense and romance — starts writing stories of social relevance — his first piece of writing is about a philandering uncle, who gets beaten by the villagers for trying to molest a charwoman of the house — Nawab writes a burlesque in the form of a play on the incident, that proves effective in sending the uncle away...
bag and baggage — discovers the power of the pen — his pen to be his shield as well as his sword.

Comments

This is an important chapter because it tells us how from being footloose in Lamahi, Premchand became an avid rambler in the story land of fairies and magic and romance and later a writer of social relevance. Amrit Rai has presented the entire transition graphically.

Unfortunately, he lost his mother when he was not yet eight and his father remarried. The vacuum thus created was difficult to fill in, for the memory of it remained buried in Premchand only to surface years later in his novel Karambhoomi (1932). Childhood is most certainly a seedtime.

When he was 13, Premchand took to reading and he read enormously, or rather voraciously. Fed by his grandmother’s tales and the tales told by the mail-runner, Kazaki, he read Talisma Hoshmuba by Maulana Faizi, humorous tales of Maulana Sajjad Husain and works by Mirza Ruswa and Ratan Nath Sarshar. Thereafter he turned his attention to the puranas in Urdu translation.

Inevitably such reading led to writing but surprisingly when he started writing at 13 he chose to write not tales of magic but of social relevance. Here one can see genius at work, though Amrit Rai explains the discrepancy between his reading and writing by saying that ‘some impulse larger than himself guided him to choose the path that he did’. As a proof of the writer’s choice of the credo of social relevance, the biographer quotes the writer’s own account of how he came to write the burlesque on his philandering uncle. Premchand made an astounding discovery — that his writing could move people. Notice Amrit Rai’s crisp depiction of the discovery:

It proved enough to drive the uncle away, bag and baggage. Nawab was still weak in body but this was probably the first time that he had known himself to possess a strength which was mightier far than brute force. A pen could succeed where a stick or a staff might have failed...What a fine discovery he had made!... From now on, his pen would be his shield as well as his sword (22). (Italics added)

Questions

1. Several times the biographer uses the metaphor of the pen as a weapon in the hands of the writer. Make a note of the occasions when he does so as you read the biography. (Hint: Chapter 12, page 119)

2. How do you like the original Hindi title of the biography — Kalam ka Sipahi?

3. How does the biographer explain Premchand’s choice of the path of social relevance for his writings?

4. When does Premchand realize the necessity of writing about the life of a peasant with which he had been surrounded right from the beginning?
iii. Chapter 12 — Happy days are back again at Gorakhpur, 1916, both personally and as a nation.

Outline Summary: Second Master at Normal School — birth of a son — domestic feud between wife and stepmother — meets Mahavir Prasad Podar, realizes the greater potential of writing in Hindi — upward swing in health due in part to national resurgence — Premchand’s family was his world but his was not a narrow individualistic world — nation was a larger family — profoundly moved by public events but chooses to influence the people through his pen — Congress session in Lucknow in 1916 — reconciliation between Congress and Muslim League and between the Moderates and the Radicals within the Congress — emergence of Gandhi on Premchand’s mental horizon as a new kind of leader who really serves the people — influence of Tolstoy — Gandhi’s ideals of truth, non-violence and renunciation his ideals too — highly successful as a teacher — nationalistic content — punctuality — free mixing between his children and the children of Muslim employees.

Comments

This chapter tells us of important changes and developments in Premchand’s thinking. Three of these are:

i. We see an important shift in Premchand moving from Urdu to Hindi as having greater potential, through a friend Mahavir Prasad Podar, who becomes his publisher in Hindi. This opening up of another language is going to have a far-reaching effect on his career later.

ii. Premchand is described as a man of the family but at the same time he considers the nation to be a larger family and so is profoundly moved by public events. He knows he will serve his country through his pen.

iii. Premchand thinks of Gandhi as a new kind of leader who really wants to serve the people. Gandhi’s ideals of truth, non-violence and renunciation were his ideas also. He presents such a mahatma in Jalwa-e-Issar and through several other characters in his fiction.

All these new realizations come to us in Amrit Rai’s clear, unhurried, unaffected style. But he never loses an opportunity for humour. Notice how he reports the birth of a son. This event took place in the verandah of their new house where they were put up for the night: ‘...his fears proved true. Right on the verandah where they had been accommodated for the night, his older son Dhuunu (formally to be called Sripat) announced his intention to be born!’ (107)

Amrit Rai also livens up his description of Premchand’s childhood days with small but interesting details that make the narrative so graphic and so realistic. This is what he says about Gorakhpur, where he had spent several years of his childhood: ‘...it was here that he had smoked his first cigarette, at the age of thirteen, and here, too, that he was probably initiated into the delights of filthy talk in the company of the usual street urchins’ (108-09).

We have also an early glimpse of Premchand’s attitude in letting his children mix with those of his low-paid Muslim employees.
We also have a glimpse of Premchand as a teacher. Most importantly, the writer likens the regularity in Premchand's life to that in the life of a peasant. The chapter closes with the biographer reiterating the metaphor of the pen as a weapon in the simplest of words: 'A highly well-regulated life, which was more the life of a peasant than that of an 'artist', with the difference that instead of a spade he wielded a pen' (119).

Comments

1. How is the metaphor of the pen as a weapon elaborated in this chapter?
2. What drew him to Gandhi?
3. Premchand is described as a man of the family and for the family. How then does he relate himself to the nation?

iv. Chapter 19 — All about Rangbhoomi

Outline Summary: Chaugan-e-hasti [Rangbhoomi] written during Oct. 1922-Apr. 1924; his nationalistic concerns reflected in the novel — Surdas, a blind, old beggar, a projection of the writer himself and of Gandhi; other likenesses with the Nehrus, other people — charges of plagiarism levelled against him — Premchand defends himself; becomes literary adviser to Ganga Pustakmala, a publishing house in Lucknow at Rs.100/- per month.

Comments

1. In the introduction we had drawn your attention to a distinguishing feature of the biography — namely ‘the author’s readiness to reflect and soliloquize on his own behalf as well as, at times, his subject’s’ (xix). The first page of the chapter offers a clear example of the biographer’s reflections. With Premchand’s novel Rangbhoomi in the foreground, Amrit Rai is reflecting on the chief characteristic of Premchand’s writings — *his topical relevance*. He could also be speaking for Premchand himself. Notice how he begins by stating the chief characteristic of his writing and goes on to reflect on the future and the flow of time.

   Whether one considers it a fault or virtue, topical relevance was the chief characteristic of Premchand as a writer. He wrote in the present and for the present and for the good reason that he cared for the future. There is no short cut to the future, except through the present. Time is continuous and eternal, as is man with his joys and sorrows. It is an ever-flowing stream from the beginning to infinity — and we who are conditioned by time and space can merely gather up in our palms a little measure from the stream and dedicate it to the sun, the source of life, and then restore it to the eternal stream. With a peaceful and tranquil heart we can float a little earthen lamp on the eternal waves, and that is our tribute to the future.

   Later he comes back to his starting point:

   No one has ever conquered time by turning away from the present. We must accept life as it has been given to us, answer
the questions that the age poses before us — questions of what is just and unjust, what is beautiful and what is not — and forget the rest (193).

Later he uses the metaphor of life as a battle to reinforce the same point:

Life is a battlefield and we are all mere soldiers. A soldier must only look to the battle before him....

2. The biographer then tries to illustrate this by relating Premchand’s new novel *Rangabhoomi* (completed, August 1924) to the mood of the nationalistic movement of the time and to his own life. The central character of Surdas, he says, may have been suggested by a blind beggar whom Premchand had seen doing the rounds of the streets but he argues that through this creation, Premchand speaks of ‘his own life-long suffering and his own understanding of his life.’ Surdas, he says, he has created out of his own blood and represents Premchand himself. Later he goes on to suggest that in his sublimer aspects Surdas can also be identified with Gandhi. The entire argument is presented in a convincing manner and the biographer quotes chapter and verse to substantiate his point of view.

3. Finally the biographer talks about the charges of plagiarism levelled against Premchand. Here again there is no attempt to dismiss the charges out of hand and he represents the whole controversy fairly.

Questions

1. What exactly does the writer try to say in the long reflection on pages 193-94?

2. Can you spot other examples of this reflection/soliloquy from this or the other chapters of the book?

3. How does the biographer handle the charges of plagiarism made against Premchand?

V. Chapter 25 — Premchand’s call to his countrymen through *Hans* and other writings, to prepare to fight for Swaraj, 1930.

Outline Summary: After the Viceroy gives a curt reply to Gandhi’s ultimatum in 1930, the nation prepares for a fight in the form of defiance of Salt Tax law — Dandi March led by Gandhi begins 25 March 1930 — Premchand, a rebel, uses his pen to call upon his countrymen to be ready to fight for *Poorna Swaraj* through *Hans*, his new literary-political monthly and other writings — stories and articles flow from his pen — living next door to the Congress office in Aminuddaula Park, Lucknow, Premchand puts a Gandhi cap on the satyagrahis, his wife applies tilak on their foreheads — his press publishing *Hans* asked to deposit security of Rs.1000/- for seditious writing — his wife, Sivarani Devi, becomes a Congress activist, is arrested while picketing at Lucknow, 20 Nov 1930 — Premchand appeals to the younger zamindars as *kshtriyas* to stand up for the people.
1. A characteristic feature of Amrit Rai’s style is to produce evidence and then draw conclusions. Notice his description of Premchand as ‘an inveterate rebel’, ‘a passionate fighter for freedom’ (255). But before he brings himself to say this he quotes the writer from his manifesto in the inaugural issue of the journal Hans. There are other quotations too to substantiate this. Later we are also informed that his wife Sivrani Devi also courts arrest (261). All this is really an extension of Premchand’s decision to resign his 21-year long government job during the non-co-operation movement. (For an earlier evidence of this strategy see how Amrit Rai reports Premchand’s discovery of the power of his pen in Chapter 2, pages 20-22.)

2. While announcing his decision to launch a new Hindi journal Hans Premchand admits: ‘I know it is sheer folly, with a lot of headache and no gain, but I am tempted to be foolish. All my life I have gone from one folly to the other, so why not one more’ (255). He is obviously referring to his dream project of acquiring a press of his own. But having talked about it in earlier chapters (chapter 17, for instance) Amrit Rai wisely decides to keep mum and let Premchand speak for himself. Moreover Premchand’s persistence over his project is a mark of genius. A lesser mortal would not have ventured at all.

Questions

1. Pick out the sentence that uses the metaphor of the pen as a weapon. In what context has it been used here?

2. What metaphor does the biographer use to indicate the fight with the British rulers?

3. Examine the text closely and find further evidence for the biographer’s strategy discussed in point 1 under Comments above.

vi. Chapter 33 — Premchand is deeply disturbed over the widening gulf between Hindi and Urdu.

Outline Summary: Premchand in Delhi with Jainendra Kumar Jain on Holi — inaugurates the Hindustani Sabha at Jamia Millia — is concerned about the widening gulf between Urdu and Hindi — is persuaded to agree to preside over the Progressive Writers’ Association, Lucknow, April 1936 — his address an exposition of the elements of the true, the good and the beautiful in literature — presides over the Aryabhasha Sammelan at Lahore, same month — again speaks of the dire need to bridge the gulf between Urdu and Hindi — also speaks at the Hindustani Sabha — takes part in the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad at Nagpur, April 1936 with Gandhi in the chair — Godan is published — health deteriorates.

Comments

1. This chapter gives a glimpse of two passionately held convictions of Premchand — about a new vision of truth and beauty in literature and
about the need to bridge the widening gulf between Hindi and Urdu. Keeping his own comments to the minimum, Amrit Rai lets Premchand's words speak and what an effective speaker he must have been! Rejecting the narrow idea that 'beauty lies in a lovely woman' out of hand, he suggests an alternative vision of it: 'Art has been and still is taken to mean a narrow aestheticism....Its view is not yet wide enough to comprehend the sublime beauty of the battle of life....For it, beauty lies in a lovely woman, but not in that plain poor mother of many children who has put her baby to sleep at the edge of the field and is now sweating in toil....If this view of beauty undergoes an enlargement, it will be found that if painted lips and cheeks hide vanity and heartlessness, these parched lips and the tears on these withered cheeks reflect self-sacrifice, reverence and forbearance' (349).

Premchand is equally passionate about the paramount need to bridge the gulf between Hindi and Urdu.

This was a radical vision of truth and beauty that was highly relevant to the hard times that the country was passing through and that is relevant in some ways even today. 'The Temple of Literature', he went on to say, had 'no place for devotees of wealth and splendour' nor for those who hanker after fame and prestige. The writers were 'all footsoldiers, marching on with the banner of society in our hands...' (350).

Amrit Rai's comment on this radical vision is restrained: 'This is a new, balanced and vital vision of truth and beauty which was being so clearly expounded here for the first time in this country' (349).

The issue of the widening divide between Hindi and Urdu preoccupied Premchand in the last years of his life. He lamented the fact that Hindi had come to be identified as the language of Hindus and Urdu of Muslims and that each community had turned its back on the language of the other. So strongly did he feel about the issue that it made the travel-shy writer go to various places and plead for bridging the gulf between the two languages. At Lahore he said:

'It is necessary for both the sections among ourselves to learn both the scripts and both the languages. When we can sacrifice fifteen years of our-life in acquiring English, can't we spend even a month or two on learning a script and a literature on which may depend not only the progress of our nation but its very existence? (353)

Wise words these but unlikely to have much effect then as now. The proceedings of Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad presided over by Gandhi at Nagpur in April 1936 highlighted another facet of Premchand's personality — the courage of his convictions. Gandhiji had proposed that 'Hindi or Hindustani' be the medium of its proceedings. But the use of the word Hindi was an anathema to Urdu writers, though no one was prepared to come out openly against Gandhiji. Premchand then stood up and made 'a strong and passionate speech in favour of using Hindustani' (355) as the medium of the work of the Parishad. His stand may have made him unpopular with Hindiwalas but he held on
to that position till the end. This chapter presents Premchand as a peacemaker between Hindi and Urdu, a task which was very dear to him but at which he failed.

3. The chapter ends with Premchand writing to his young writer-friend Jainendra Kumar about his newly published novel Godam. He asks him to write an article on it if he likes it. ‘But if you don’t like it, just write to me and don’t write the article’ (358). Amrit Rai’s comment is brief and apt: ‘What an extraordinary man!’

4. The chapter closes on a sombre note with a sentence that has a double meaning.

Questions

1. What exactly is Premchand’s vision of truth and beauty?

2. Describe Premchand’s efforts to bridge the Hindi-Urdu divide.

3. What impression of Premchand’s character do you form after reading this chapter?

1.6 LET US SUM UP

These chapters give only a glimpse of one of the most remarkable writers of modern India. Do try to read as much of the biography as you can. Though a son, the biographer has not slurred over any inconvenient detail nor has he tried to whitewash his father’s reputation. Simple and unassuming in his habits, Premchand emerges as a person who had the courage of his convictions and who could oppose even Gandhi when the occasion arose. He was a commoner extraordinary, if ever there was one.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Amrit Rai has presented Premchand as ‘a commoner extraordinary’. Discuss.

2. In what way do you consider Amrit Rai’s biography as being objective and dispassionate? Do you think that his being Premchand’s son interfered with his work as a biographer?

3. Bring out the distinctive features of Amrit Rai’s biography of Premchand.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


Non-Fictional Prose


‘Dalal, Sucheta, ‘Dhirubhai Ambani and the stories that need telling’, at <suchetadalal.com>