CHAPTER - II

PERCEPTION OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PRACTICES
Premchand regarded himself as a writer with a message, a writer with a moral obligation to rid his society of various social and religious practices which were a hindrance to progress of the society. Liberation from these practices was as important to him as liberation from British Imperialism, rather the former was a pre-condition to political liberation. In fact social evils were more ruinous than foreign rule. He stated that if the land revenue were to be reduced on attainment of political freedom, the peasants who were subjected to blind faith would not be much happy, as they are likely to be still duped. Therefore, an important need was to rid the society of superstitions. So

long as the mentality of the masses remained backward, political concessions alone would not benefit the society.

This chapter seeks to study Premchand's depiction of social and religious practices and the changes he advocated in them.

I

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

An important cause for the cultural backwardness, according to Premchand, was the innumerable practices which had religious sanction. "The crucial elements" which constituted popular religious practices were, "ritual, worship, fasts, and scriptural lessons, and the

4. Ibid.

5. The category 'cultural backwardness' has been used here in the sense Prof. K.N. Panikkar has used in his articles "Roots of cultural backwardness", Mainstream, November, 7, 1981, pp. 15-19; "Culture and Ideology: Contradictions in Intellectual Transformation of Colonial Society in India", E.P.W., December, 5, 1987, pp. 2115-2120.
Observance of taboos about cooking and eating. 


Premchand further commented:
"Piety is judged by the observance of rules about eating. If these rules are followed meticulously, a person's piety cannot be questioned. Food habits become a shield protecting us against any accusation of unrighteousness." Ibid, p.222.
Also see Ibid, p.301. Boasting of his diligence in performance of rituals, Matadin, a brahmin, brags:

"Name one person who follows all the sacred rules the way we do. So many of the people I know never say their daily prayers, care nothing about either faith or practice, and ignore both the sacred recitations and the holy texts. Yet they call themselves brahmans. How dare they jeer at us, who've never missed even a single monthly fast and who never taken even a drop of water until we've done our morning prayers and ablutions. Following all the rituals is difficult."

Explaining the meaning of religion to his son Amarkant, Lala Samarkant in Karambhumi, says:

"Do you know what religion is? Do you bathe in the Ganges at least once in a year, or offer water to the gods? Have you ever recited the name of Rama in your life? Have you ever fasted on Ekadshi or observed any other penance? Do you ever read or listen to the scriptures? How should you know what an object religion is?" Karambhumi, Allahabad, 1981, p.41. According to Lala Samarkant, demands of conscience can be met by being 'religious' in other words, by visiting the temple and giving alms to brahmans. He himself spent a thousand rupees on a katha.
Premchand campaigned against these practices not as an end in itself but as a means towards achieving the liberation of individual. "Sages and politicians", Premchand held, "had put us on the wrong path and it was for the literateurs to create a suitable climate and awaken the truly religious tendencies in us".

But the greatest hindrance in awakening the "truly religious tendencies" among masses was the role played by the brahmins. Premchand, vehemently attacked this class. "The most odious eyesore, the most shameful blemish on the Hindu community, is this very gang of two-penny priests which is sucking the life blood of the


"Religion" said Premchand "is that light which shows path to a drop of water to mingle in the ocean, it makes us feel our individual self (soul) united in the all pervading Universal soul". Ibid, pp.144-145.

Amarkant in Karambhumi considers "truth, service and philosophy as the main aspects of religion", op.cit, p.41.
community like a giant leech and is thus the greatest obstacle in our path towards nationalism.\textsuperscript{8} Mahants, too, became Premchand's target of attack. They led luxurious lives, thrived on debauchery and were responsible for the worst of social evils.\textsuperscript{9} According to Premchand, "a society which has to maintain such a huge army of parasites is bound to get pauperised."\textsuperscript{10} Such a parasitical community was fatal to nationalism.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{"Kaya Ham Vastav Mein Rashtra-vaadi Hain"}, \textit{vividh-prasang}, Allahabad, 1978, vol.II, p.471; also see \textit{"Hindu Samaj Ke Vibhatasav Darishay"}, \textit{op.cit}, p.158.
\item \textit{"Hindu Samaj Ke Vibhatasav Darishay"}, \textit{op.cit}, p.158; also see \textit{Asrare-i-Maubid}, Premchand's first novel in which he ruthlessly exposed the brahmin priestly class and the religious institutions. He depicted the degraded, corrupt and licentious lives of the Mahants who hoodwinked the innocent girls and forced them to adopt prostitution. Also see \textit{Gaban}, pp.7-8.
\item \textit{"Hindu Samaj Ke Vibhatasav Darishay"}, \textit{op.cit}, p.159.
\item \textit{"Kaya Ham Vastav Mein Rashtra-vaadi Hain"}, \textit{op.cit}, p.473.
\end{enumerate}
The priests, according to Premchand, were thriving at others' expense, appropriating the fruits of others' labour. "And this group", said Premchand, "does not consist of five or ten lakhs of people but their number is countless." Its only purpose was to keep Hindu society


Thus Munshiji and Jhinku talked:

Munshiji - Without a paunch a pandit does not look handsome. People think that he does not get rich food and that is why he is like a string. A pot-bellied person has a grandeur about him.

Jhinku - But there are many pandits who do not have bulging bellies.

Munshiji - Can you name any distinguished pandit who is without a paunch?

Jhinku - No Sir, there is no one. How can there be a distinguished pandit without a pot-belly?

in the chains of ignorance. A Hindu child from the moment he took birth till his death remained hypnotised in the vicious circle of superstition and ignorance. And this group of parasites "perpetuates the hypnosis by cramming into his brain all sorts of parables, concocted stories, religiosity, delusions of hell and heaven".

The priests perpetuated the superstitious practices "to serve their own interests by duping the innocent devotees".

15. Ibid.
   Also see Sangram, Allahabad, 1982, pp67-71,111. Thus Mangru in this play inquires from Fatu "What use the Sadhus make of the men they entice? And Fatu replies:

   They compel them to beg alms for them, rend them menial services, to prepare hemp drugs for them and all other petty services. The innocent people are deluded that Babaji is endowed with supernatural powers and if pleased he would bestow boon on them. There are some malingerers and idlers (drones) who keep the company of Sadhus just in greed of getting sweet food. In a few days time these same drudges become saints and cheat others for their own services."

   Also see the story "Shikari Rajkumar", Mansarovar, vol.VIII, pp.54-62. Through the mouth of a Sanyasi in this story, Premchand called the Mahants as beasts and the sanyasi advises the prince "It is your supreme duty to liberate the world from the clutches of such hoaxes. It would benefit your subjects and thus you would earn a name and fame.", ibid, p.60.
In the Hindu society all that is needed to worship is to tie on a loincloth and smear some ashes over the body. If you become expert at ganja and charas (hemp drugs), so much the better. After mastering these frauds the Babaji (ascetic) becomes a god. He may be stupid, deceitful, low, but all this means nothing. He is a baba. Baba has renounced the world, he has kicked over the snares of illusion, what more is necessary? Now he is a treasure of learning, he has reached selflessness. We search for masterful subtleties in his insane speech, and consider him a treasure-house of supernatural powers. The next thing that happens is a crowd of seekers of boon gatherers about him. Merchants and moneylenders, subordinate court officers, the ladies of prominent families come to be benefited by a view of him. Nobody wonders how a dull-witted, evil-looking, licentious man can become a saint just by putting on a loincloth.\footnote{Premchand exposed the deceit of sadhus in play Sangram, story, "Neyur," and a host of other stories. An illustration from "Neyur" may be cited here.}

\footnote{Quoted by Robert O. Swan, \textit{Premchand of Lamhi Village}, DURHAM, 1969, p. 97, Foot no. 44}

\footnote{One of the subsidiary themes of the play, Sangram is the hypocrisy of Baba Chetandas, who pretended to be a holy man but was always on the look-out for beautiful girls who could be enticed with temptations of miraculous cures, progeny and so on. How Baba Chetandas dupes Gayatri & Gulabi, see Sangram, op.cit., pp. 68-71, 108-111, 122-126, 125, 127, 151-154, 184, 187, 190, 193-194. Also see Godan, op.cit., p. 92. Mirza Khursheed met an ascetic on the train "who tricked him out of his watch, his rings and the rest of his cash."}
A sadhu came to a village and encamped himself under a peepal tree right in front of Neyur's (a poor peasant) hut. The villagers started serving him with reverence. Simple hearted Neyur became the holy man's greatest devotee, believing that if by chance Babaji took pity on him he would find enlightenment and all his troubles would disappear.

One day this sadhu persuaded Neyur to bring all the silver he and his wife had and also some money. He promised him to turn this silver into gold. And sadhu tricked Neyur and disappeared with everything. The poor peasant, fearing rebukes from his wife and his creditors, disappeared and himself became a sadhu. He encamped himself at a river bank near a small village. Many villagers became his devotees.

19. "In just two or three days the sadhu's fame had spread around. What an enlightened soul he was, he could tell the past and future and everything. And he was entirely without attachment to the world - he would not touch money with his hands, he scarcely ate anything. Throughout a whole day he would eat only a couple of pieces of bread. But his face shone like a lamp and how sweetly he spoke!"
   The world of Premchand, op.cit., p.63.

20. Ibid.
One of these devotees was a beautiful woman. Neyur attempted to repeat the same fraud on this woman but suddenly withdrew when the girl brought all her jewellery which he had ordered to bring to appease the gods. Out of disgust he returned home to find that his dear wife had already died.

Premchand condemned the superstitious practices like bathing in the Ganges and other

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21. "Among Neyur's unquestioning devotees there was a beautiful young woman whose husband had abandoned her. Her father, who lived from an army pension, had married her to an educated man, but the fellow was under his mother's thumb and the girl could not get along with her mother-in-law. The girl wanted to live with her husband apart from his mother, but he would not agree to this. In a huff she'd walked out of the house. In the three years since this had happened the father-in-law's house had not once sent for her, nor had the husband even come to see her. The girl wanted to win control over her husband by any means - surely it could not be difficult for holy men to work a change in someone's heart if only they were compassionate!" Ibid, p.66.

22. "Superstition" states Edward Shills "is a vague term; it usually means belief in the existence and efficacy of empirically undemonstrable or non-existent entities; it is a form of error. Superstitions have indeed often been transmitted traditionally although in principle new superstitions can and in fact do arise". Edward Shills, Tradition, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, p.5.
rivers on the occasion of eclipses. He wondered why people associate religious sentiments with purely natural and scientific phenomena. It is the poor section of the society who suffered most due to these superstitions because they had to borrow money in order to perform these rituals.


"On the occasion of solar eclipse there was such a huge crowd of pilgrims on the banks of Triveni that it is beyond description. The religious minded Hindus from different parts of India had assembled there to dispose of their sins in Triveni's sacred current. It looked as if the faith and devotion had adorned its innumerable army to raid at unrighteousness...It was a frightening battle of religion...The pilgrims started leaving after having deposited the burden of their sins in Triveni."


25. Ibid. In the story "Siraf Aik Avaaz", Gupt-Dhan, vol.i, Allahabad,1978, pp.141-148, Premchand commented that the poor persons who did not have even shoes to wear were walking barefooted in severe winter to reach Triveni in order to take ritual bath on the occasion of lunar eclipse." Ibid., p.142.
Earlier when people walked to the place of pilgrimage they gained some experience on the way but now all this was gone and what was left was just rituals and waste of money. Moreover places of pilgrimages are full of corruption:

What are our places of pilgrimages but dens of thugs, impostors and hypocrites. Wherever you see you will find the bazaar of hypocrisy of religion is being carried on. Every other street is abounded by temples, pujaries and beggars, who have no other purpose in life except to dupe in the garb of religion the innocent devotees. When the people themselves want to be beguiled then there will not be a shortage of gullers.

The anger against religious hypocrisy, superstitions, wickedness informs all his fictional writings. Through his character Moteyram Shastri who reappeared in various garbs in many


Also see p.157;
Also see "Rasheed-ul-Khairi Ki Samajik Kahaniyan", Vividhprasang, vol.III, pp.62-63. Here Premchand attacked the ossified and outworn conventions which have become part and parcel of religious faith.
of his stories, Premchand caricatured brahmin priests.  


"Good people, you know that when Brahma created this unprofitable world he made the Brahmans from his mouth. Is there anyone who doubts this?"

"No, Maharaj, what you say is true - who can deny it?"

Moteram continued: "So the Brahman emerged from the mouth of the god Brahma, this is certain. Therefore, the mouth is the most sublime part of the human body. Thus the highest duty of any living creature is to afford delight to the mouth. Is this true or is n't? Does anyone deny it? Let him come forward." We can prove our theory by the scriptures.

To this the audience reply "Maharaj, you are a learned man - who would dare refute you?"

And Moteram explained to the audience that there are several ways to give happiness to the mouth. "To sing the glories of the gods, to offer prayers to the Lord, to converse with holy men and avoid wicked speech. From all these things the mouth will derive pleasure. But the highest, the most sublime and effective ways is...to feast the mouth with the finest food, to feed it very best dishes...of all the foods, sweet foods are the best.

Then he recited a list of specific sweets which he said would be fit for the enjoyment of God, through God's highest representatives on earth, the brahmans, such as the one who was standing before them."

Premchand earned the wrath of the Hindu communalists for writing such stories. Saraswati's joint-editor, Shrinath Singh, attacked Premchand in his article "Gharina ka Pracharak Premchand" published in the Saraswati of December, 1933. The charge was that "Premchand had been

29. Shivran Devi Premchand in her memoirs states:

"Once when an article by him published in Aaj offended the Hindu residents of the city, they called him a 'convert from Hinduism' and threatened violence against his person. Premchand, however, refused to be cowed down. The threat, he said, came from the Hindu extremists who were masquerading as Congressmen.

"Why should you write what offends one section or the other?" asked Shivrani. "Sometimes it is the government that is annoyed, and at others it is the public."

"Both the public as well as the government wish to consider the writer to be their stooge. If the writer wrote as others wished him to be, he could not be a writer and retain his individuality. His is a difficult task. If he offends the government, they put him in jail; if he offends the public, they threaten him with violence. Should the writer then give up writing? No, he should not. Whatever he writes is out of the deep anguish from within. Pity is that these people's minds are closed and they have entrenched themselves everywhere. But I am not at all worried about their threats. If I were, I won't be writing. If a writer were to worry about such threats, how can he give a lead to the people."

Premchand Ghar Mein, Delhi, 1956, pp.148-149.
Translation is from Madan Gopal, op.cit., pp.344-345.
spreading through many of his works hatred against the brahmins besides indulging generally in an utterly unrealistic and false depiction of life in the villages, which was comparable only to the images of Indians presented by Kipling and Katherine Mayo. The immediate provocation for Singh had "probably been a recent story of Premchand's, 'Sadgati'. Shrinath Singh stated that if in fifty years from then, Premchand's books were to be taken as representative of this age, readers of his books would then think that Hindus of this age, and in particular the brahmins, "led a life full of hatred...that the brahmins of India were the most tyrannical, selfish, hypocritical and deserved to be hated. In his turn Premchand in an article entitled "Jivan Me Gharina Ka Sthan" defended hatred "as a natural emotion and an effective and valid literary tool. But this only "brought forth a fresh attack on him

31. Ibid.
32. Quoted by Madan Gopal, op.cit., p.352.
On much the same ground as Singh's from one Jyoti Prasad Mishra 'Nirmal'. Replying to him, Premchand frankly acknowledged that "he had indeed been constantly attacking priests and religious touts"; and even added that "had he the strength to do so he would gladly have devoted his entire life to the cause of ridding the society of these parasitical vermin". He went on to declare "that in his opinion, the damage done to the Hindu community by these religious hypocrites had been a hundred times greater than done by the Muslims". Premchand complained to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi against Nirmal's attack on him:

He has accused me of impugning *brahmins* as a class, simply because I have ridiculed some of the hypocrisies of these priests and mahants and religious loafers. He calls them *brahmins*, little thinking how much they are discrediting decent *brahmins*. My ideal of *brahmin* is sacrifice, service, whoever he may be. Hypocrisy and dogmatism and playing upon the credulity of simple Hindu folk, these *Pujaris* and *Pandas* I regard as a curse on Hindu society and responsible for our degradation. They are only good for ridicule and this is what I have done. These Nirmals and others of his ilk, although parading as nationalists, are at heart imbued with all the failings of the priestly classes and cursing us who are trying to bring in a better state of things?"
Premchand declared that he was not prepared to insult the noble and high title of brahmin by applying it to each and every money-grubbing priest. According to him only those who are "selfless, truthful" and practice "renunciation", deserve to be called brahmins.

The true brahmins in his scheme of things were: Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Malviyaji, Sardar Patel and Swami Sharadhanand. A writer said Premchand "who wants to see good conduct, congeniality and national unity in the nation cannot afford to be apathetic to the fraud played upon the society in the garb of religion. Therefore, "the more hatred is preached against such an unsocial, anti-national, inhuman organisation, the less it is. The hatred should not be against individuals, but against trends or organisations.

UNTOUCHABILITY

Another social practice which kept the Hindu community in a state of cultural backwardness was the practice of untouchability. Premchand raised his voice against this inhuman practice. Removal of untouchability in Premchand's view was important not only for liberation of individual but also for national liberation. Rather the later cannot even be imagined without abolition of the evil of untouchability. Therefore he gave it the utmost priority to eliminate this practice.

But while suggesting the various ways to abolish this evil Premchand led himself to ambivalent arguments.

44. "Kaya Ham Vastav Mein Rashtravaadi Hain", op.cit., p.471.
He tried to remove the misconception of the priests who believed that untouchability was sanctioned by the scriptures. Premchand stated "Since, according to Vedanta, the entire universe is permeated by a single soul, then where does the question of inequality arise. He was not prepared to believe that Dharamshastras can create such a system that is full of injustice and against the principle of all permeating soul. According to him "such customs are the later interpolations by the enemies of Hindu religion or they are not being interpreted correctly." At another place Premchand accepted that "it is possible when Samritis were written such ideas may be necessary". But in the same vein he stated "If the Dharamshastras advocate

47. "Harijano Ke Mandir-Parvesh Ka Parashan", op.cit, p.446.
49. Ibid.
conceit, vanity and the feelings of high and low among the people, then such Dharamshastras do not deserve any respect. And that "gone are the days when Shastra's words were regarded as absolute truth." He firmly believed that the Shastras should be subjected to rationality.

Premchand realized that one of the main hindrances in removing untouchability was that the untouchables had internalised a sense of inferiority (low status) to such an extent that they considered their duty to keep themselves away

52. "Dharam Bhed Nahi Sikhata", op.cit, p.454.
53. Ibid, Premchand stated "the facts which can be tested by intellect, which are against humanity, justice, non-violence and truth, should not be brought into practice just by mere dictum of Shastras." Ibid.

Attacking the counter-reformists of Kashi, Premchand stated that the essence of religion is soul. One who does not understand this "though he may be steeped in Vedas and Shastras yet he is a fool and ignorant...One who does not have compassion for human suffering, and is not moved (provoked) to see injustice, one who creates the differences of low and high in society, in spite of his being a scholar, is stupid and a dullard." - "Achuton K Mandiron Mein Jane Dena Paap Hai", Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.447.
from the upper caste people.\textsuperscript{54} Linked with the sense of inferiority was the feelings of being unclean. This was inbuilt in their consciousness. Thus in the story "Sadgati" when Panditayin had an argument with her husband over tanner's entry into her house, 'the fragments of this conversation reached Dukhi's ears'.

He repented:

It was a mistake to come. She was speaking the truth—how could a tanner ever come into a brahmin's house? These people were clean and holy, that was why the whole world worshipped them and respected them. A mere tanner was absolutely nothing. He had lived all his life in the village without understanding this before.\textsuperscript{55}

Dukhi, thus asked Panditayin's forgiveness:

It was very wrong of me to come inside your house. Tanners don't have much sense - if we weren't such fools why would we get kicked so much.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} "Achutpan\textsuperscript{[Mitata Ja Raha Hai]}, Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.93.

\textsuperscript{55} The World of Premchand, op.cit, p.198.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p.199. And when Panditayin flung the coals towards Dukhi, big sparks fell on his head and he said to himself "This is what comes of dirtying a clean brahmin's house. How quickly God pays you back for it." Ibid, p.199.
Related to uncleanliness was the perception about eating habits of the untouchables. Thus when Dukhi's corpse in "Sadgati" remained unattended and the weeping and lamentation of Dukhi's wife and her female relatives went on, the priest and his wife remarked:

"The wailing of tanners is bad luck", "Yes, very bad luck."
"And it's beginning to stink already."
"Was n't the bastard a tanner? These people eat anything, clean or not, without worrying about."
"No sort of food disgusts them."
"They're polluted!"57

This was the perception of the members of the upper-caste. But even the untouchables had similar self-perception. Thus a youth in Karambhum remarked: "The entire upper-caste community considers us untouchable just because we take alcohol, eat carrion beef and do tanner's

57. Ibid, p.203.
Premchand commented on Dukhi's corpse. "Out there in the field the jackals and kites, dogs and crows were picking at Dukhi's body. This was the reward of a whole life of devotion, service and faith." Ibid, p.203.
job. What other bad habits do we have?58

Premchand as a realist writer was merely portraying the attitude of the members of the upper-caste as well as lower-caste Hindus. But his own attitude was an ambivalent one. A different perception of the untouchables also was portrayed. It was regarding the uncleanliness of the brahmins and other twice born members. Thus, the old man belonging to the untouchable family in the story "Mantar" questioned the morality as practised by the brahmins themselves. He asked Pandit Leeladhar


And when Payag was informed that Amarkant was angry because they were going to take carrion beef, Payag reacted: "Let him prattle. We would not become lower than this if he refuses to accept water from our hands...We are not going to wed our daughters to brahmins and Thakurs. We don't beg from anyone like the brahmins do! We are abiding by our own customs." *Ibid*, pp.143-144.

And Munni admonished him: "Does it look nice (behove) members of the upper-caste may regard us low just because we take carrion beef?" She told him that it was because of men like him that the entire biradari got defamed."
Chaube, the reformer:

But don't we know that there are many among the high-born brahmins who remain drunk day and night, who do not eat if there are no meat dishes?...There are many among them who are not familiar with a single letter of the alphabet. And still, I know, you dine with them, and would refuse to enter into a matrimonial alliance with them. If you yourself grope in darkness, how can you show us the way? As a matter of fact, you are proud of your caste. Get away from here-go and purify yourself for some more time. Our betterment shall not come about through you. So long as we are within the Hindu social order, our mark of low-born shall not be washed away. And howsoever enlightened we might be, and howsoever good our character, you will continue to treat us as low-born. In fact, the soul of every Hindu is dead, and its place has been taken up by falsehood. ...While you accuse us of drinking liquor, you lick the boots of those who drink, while you look down upon us, because we eat meat, you prostrate yourself before the beef-eaters. Is it not because they are stronger than you? If we become the rulers tomorrow, you would stand before us with your hands folded. For those who believe in your religion, one who is strong is high and one who is weak is low. Is n't that what your religion teaches?


Also see "Thakur Ka Kua", Gangi, the wife of Jokhu, tears the mask of the upper-caste Hindus and says, "Why was she low and those others so high? Because they wore a thread around their neck? There was not one of them in the village who was not rotten. They stole, they cheated, they lied in court...They gambled in the Priest's house all twelve months of the year." p.71 of World of Premchand, op.cit, p.71.

Also see "Mandir", Here Premchand commented on Priest's uncleanness: "He's generous by nature, and so religiously rigid that, no matter how bitterly cold it is, he does not so much as sip water unless he's performed his ablutions first. In spite of such holy washings, there is a thick coat of filth on his hands and feet! - Nandini Nopany & P. Lal, translators, A Premchand Dozen, Calcutta, 1983, p.38.
In his non-fictional writings too, Premchand's attitude was ambivalent. He declared that Harijans "keep themselves dirty, take alcohol, eat carrion beef and in spite of our desire to mingle with them we cannot do so because of our Sanskaras".  

But on the other hand Premchand attacked the brahmins. "The brahmins allege", that "the untouchables do not take bath daily" but "they themselves hardly follow this practice". Moreover, in spite of "their claim to take bath daily, they remain unclean. "The priestly class cannot, therefore," argued Premchand, "claim to be purer than the other folks."

The emphasis on cleanliness became the priority in the programme of upliftment of untouchables launched by Amarkant, a reformer in Karambhumi. When he reached a village, a group of children greeted him and the very first question he put "how many of you take bath daily" and he was

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60. "Pavan Tithi", *op.cit*, p.454; also see "Harijano Ke Mandir Parvesh Ka Prashan", *op.cit*, p.446.


stunned to find that no one was used to washing their hands and taking bath everyday. Again, Amarkant was shocked to see the Harijans carrying the dead cow on their shoulders and ready to eat carrion beef:

Amarkant’s ancestral vaishnav mentality felt like nauseating to see this detestable and demonish act. He really started vomiting. He had eliminated the feelings of untouchability from his mind but the hatred for uneatable things (carrion beef) still remained. And he had been taking food in the house of corpse eaters for the last ten or eleven months.

And he decided not to take food on that day. Not only that, he escaped from that horrid (disgusting) scene and fled to Ganga’s bank.

Therefore, Sanskritization, according to Premchand, was very important for the untouchables to regain their self-respect and human dignity.

64. Karambhumi, op.cit, p.127.
66. The concept “Sanskritization” is used in the sense M.N. Srinivasan used: “Sanskritization is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste.” - Social Change in Modern India, New Delhi, 1966, p.6.
Thus when Leeladhar, a reformer in the story 'Mantar', addressing the gathering of the untouchables pointed out that now Hindu community is awakening and trying to give equal status to them, an old man said:

"Now, however, you say you are wide awake," said the old man, "Will you dine with us?"
"I don't mind," replied Leeladhar.
"Will you give your daughter's hand to my son?" asked the old man.
"So long as the actions of your previous births are not changed," said Leeladhar, "so long as your present mode of living is not changed, we cannot enter into any matrimonial alliance with you. If, however, you give up eating meat, drinking liquor and educate yourself, you can be united with us high-caste Hindu."67

In fact, Premchand believed that Sanskritization had really transformed the lives of many low-caste communities:

We have witnessed many downtrodden and depressed classes (castes) have renounced their previous Sanskaras and have started wearing up sacred threads. They have been improving their conduct and are giving up eating carrion beef...They have realized that their existing (present) degradation is the result of their ignorance and lack of good conduct. And this process of realization on their part is progressing. Now, they perform Sandhyas (evening prayers), Shradhs and read

They are realizing the importance of their service. They have, now, similar gods as those of 'twice-born'. Their ideals, points of view and faith is similar to the twice-born. The feelings of Hinduhood (being Hindus) are entwined in their very being and no one can eliminate those feelings from their minds. 68

But on the other hand Premchand believed that in order to awaken the untouchables it was important for the reformer to live among them, participate in their sorrows and joys and thus become a part of their lives. Thus there had to be a complete identification with the untouchables. Premchand believed "that the day the untouchables are given human treatment, given due respect and a proper place in the Hindu community, all the evils like drinking alcohol, uncleanness and eating of carrion beef would automatically be eliminated from them. Since an untouchable is kept outside the fold of upper-caste he indulges in those habits but the day he gets a respectable treatment and a proper place among the twice-born he would guard the Hindu community by temperament. 69

In fact the men belonging to the upper-caste should caste away the feelings that they are in any way superior to the untouchables.\footnote{70}{"Pavan Tithi", op.cit, p.453.} It is only by casting away the feelings of superiority that Leeladhar Choubey in the story "Mantar" was able to make a rapport with the untouchables.\footnote{71}{Op.cit.} Through this character Premchand has demonstrated that unless the untouchables were not treated on equal terms, the constructive work among them was not possible.\footnote{72}{Ibid.} Premchand believed that "the greatness (or loftiness) lies in philanthropy, service, sacrifice, and integrity."\footnote{73}{"Pavan Tithi", op.cit, p.453.} The real magnanimity lies in selfless service.\footnote{74}{Ibid.} The reason why the institution of untouchability was being perpetuated was our selfishness.\footnote{75}{"Hamara Kartavya", Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.441.} In fact, this selfishness would ruin us utterly. We must discard this feeling since renunciation (abnegation) of selfishness is termed as $Yagya$ in the Hindu religion.\footnote{76}{Ibid., p.441.} By devoting himself to the selfless service that
Pandit Chaube gained "new status and popularity" among the untouchables. He, in turn, himself got transformed by contact with them:

This Panditji was not the same who was once proud of his status as a brahmin. He had learnt to have regards for the untouchables and the *bahils*. He no longer shrank from embracing them... The people's character had been reformed certainly not because of Panditji. He was, in fact, ashamed of using the term "conversion" or reform. "What reform can I bring about?" He said "I must indeed, purify myself first. To say that I can reform such pure and noble souls would be blasphemy."

Thus Amarkant in Karambhumi set before himself a programme of social reform and devoted himself to it selflessly. The main aspect of this programme were: (a) spread of education (b) cleanliness, (c) removal of evil of drinking i.e. prohibition, and (d) the removal of the custom of eating the carrion beef. Amarkant wanted to implement this programme in order to bring about radical change among the untouchables. He felt that in order to emancipate the untouchables, autonomous education was very important because the later frees the minds. He was successful in inculcating social consciousness among the untouchables. The impact on school going children is expressed in these words:

They keep themselves now neat and tidy, seldom take recourse to lies, lame excuses and abuses. They do not steal from their houses and are less obstinate now and perform household duties readily.

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78. See *Karambhumi, op.cit.*, p.147.
This statement itself implies that these practices were prevalent among the untouchables. Inbuilt in it was the prejudice of the social group to which Premchand himself belonged. That is why in Premchand's works the untouchables do not emerge as individuals but as objects of reform.80

80. **Gorapan** is the exception where the untouchables are depicted as individuals in a scene when Siliya is scolded by Matadin for giving some grains to her creditor and Siliya's parents along with their biradari members stuff a big piece of bone in Matadin's mouth. Before committing this act of sacrilege, Siliya's father Harkhu said to the villagers:

Today we'll either make a chamar out of Matadin or shed his blood along with our own. Siliya is a woman, and she has to go to live with some man or other, we have no objection to that, but whoever takes her must become one of us. You can't make brahmins out of us, but we can make chamars out of you. If you're willing to make us brahmins, our whole community is agreeable. As long as that's not possible, then become chamars. Eat with us, drink with us and live with us. If you're going to take our honour, then give us your caste.

Datadin raised his stick, 'Control your tongue, Harkhu. Your girl is over there. Take her anywhere you please. We have not tied her down. She worked and she got paid. There is no shortage of labourers around here.'

Siliya's mother took her finger at him. 'Bully for you, Pandit. You are being terribly fair.' I'd like to see you talk that way if your daughter had run off with a chamar. We're chamars, though, so of course, we don't have any honour. We're not taking Siliya away alone. We are taking Matadin with her - the one who ruined her. You are so pious - you'll sleep with her, but you won't drink water from her hands. No one but this bitch would tolerate all that. I'd have poisoned such a man.' - **Op.cit**, p.305.

Another instance of depiction of untouchable as an individual figure is in the story 'Ghaswali'. Muliya a woman belonging to a Harijan family, when she is wooed by Chain Singh, a Thakur, she admonishes him:

"You think Mahaveer (Mulia's husband) does not have blood in his veins, is devoid of prestige and has no sense of Maryada? ...You are invoking my pity because I am a chamarin, belong to the low caste and woman belonging to a low caste would be in your clutches just by little intimidation or greed. What a cheap bargain." How would you give up such a cheap transaction being a Thakur?" - **Mansarovar**, Vol.I, p.308.
The same attitude emerges in the conclusion of the story "Mantar". Although Pandit Leeladhar, a reformer, sheds his reformist attitude and identifies completely with the untouchables, but the story concludes by indicating the triumph of Hinduism:

These untouchables had once turned their faces to the light of Islam, because they had experienced darkness in their own houses. Now, however, the sun had risen in their own house. Why should they turn their faces to others?

Sanatan Dharma, the old religion, thus triumphed. Temples were now being built in every village. The conches sounded and the bells rang every morning and evening.81

This attitude emanated from Premchand's dual role: as a nationalist with the spirit of reforming the society and as a creative writer. He made efforts to combine the two and in the process the contradictions arose.

The same ambivalence is discernible in his attitude towards the question of temple entry of the untouchables.

Premchand suggested that one of the course to achieve equality was to allow the untouchables to enter the temples. He wrote:

Though religion may have been reduced to a superstition among the educated and the question of entry into temples may seem to them a needless fuss, yet the majority of the population still clutches to its heart both its religion and its gods. There are in fact some gods in North India whose priests are our Harijan brethren. Go into any village and in the quarters of the untouchable castes of chamars or the bhars, and you will see under a neem tree a group of a dozen or so earthen miniature elephants painted red with a trident beside them and a red banner fluttering from the tree. This place is sacred to a goddess. The priest of this shrine will be found to be some chamar or pasi or bhar. The caste Hindus will visit this shrine with great reverence and offer puffed sugar balls and lamps and joss-sticks and flowers there. Now if these caste Hindus are not ashamed of worshipping these Harijan gods and acknowledging these Harijan priests...we fail to see what great sacrilege will be committed if Harijans too are allowed into Hindu temples. 82

Premchand depicted the heartlessness of the upper-caste especially the brahmins and the upper caste Hindus in not allowing the Harijans to enter

the temples. Their cruelty is depicted mercilessly.83

83. See Karambhumi, op.cit, pp.170-180; 'Mandir', op.cit, pp.6-13.

Thus temple's priest and other members of the upper-caste in the story 'Mandir' prevented Sukhia, a tanner's wife from entering the temple and touching the deity's feet. When she said, "Why, are not the tanners made by God? Is there another God for tanners?" She asked, "It's prayer for my son, Sir."

At this one of the chanting faithful flares up and retorts, "The hag! Throw her things away too. As if the world is not trouble enough already! And now, if untouchables start offering Puja in the temple, the earth's going to slide into hell, if you ask me!" And when everyone left she repeatedly requested the priest to allow her but he remained unmoved and instead he sold her an amulet for a rupee. He advised her to tie this amulet round her son's neck and assured her that her son would recover from illness the next day. Reaching home, Sukhia, placed the amulet round her son's neck. But his temperature continued to rise during the night. By three in the morning, his hands and feet were cold. She panicked and summoned enough courage to go to the temple again in severe cold. She picked up a brick from under the ledge and hammered at the lock with it and broke open the lock. She was about to enter when the priest got up and seeing Sukhia shouted "A calamity! It's defiled!" A medley of males angrily started beating Sukhia and suddenly her son fell on the ground and died. She shrieked: "You scoundrels why are you standing there after killing my son? Kill me too! Because I touched Thakurji, he's become defiled. When iron rubs touchstone, it turns into gold, touchstone never into iron. So my touching Thakurji makes him impure, does it? When he created me, did not He become impure then? So be it! ... You are all guardians of cheap Dharma! You are murderous, heartless murderers, all of you!" Sukhia gazed once again at her son's face, "Hai, my beloved son!" She whispered, and fell in a faint, and died - Premchand Dozen, by Nandani Nopany & P.Lal, Calcutta, 1983, pp.38-43.

Premchand exposed the double-standard as practised by the priestly class. The money offered by an untouchable is accepted by a priest, but he himself will not be allowed to enter a temple. - "Acchuton Ko Mandiro Mein Jane Dena Pap Hai, Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.447; also see ibid, p.26. And if a brahmin keeps a woman belonging to an untouchable caste, remains a brahmin, "but a Harijan in spite of taking bath daily, does not deserve to enter a temple!" Ibid, p.446.
Premchand suggested Satyagraha as a weapon against the guardians of religion, who are not allowing Harijans to enter the temples. Boycott is another weapon which says Premchand "is a dreadful, terrifying and a hard weapon." Thus, in Karambhumi, a powerful movement is launched by the Harijans under the leadership of educated men to make an entry into the temple. It has met with severe repression but finally the Harijans get success in face of heavy odds, at the cost of lives of many men. The day they enter the temple, Premchand comments:

Half naked, devoid of visibility, barely able to walk for lack of strength, they were running intoxicated with devotion, as if they would have got the kingdom of the entire world, as if suffering and poverty has been eliminated from the world for ever.

85. Ibid, p.468.
87. Ibid, pp.176-179
But Premchand has depicted this success with an ironical tone:

There is no need to discuss the magnitude of celebration in the temple, commotion (stir) created in the city and the number of functions celebrated in the city next day. There was an endless stream of visitors in the temple throughout the day. The Brahmanchari (the priest) once again was (had been) occupying the seat of honour and the amount of offerings he received today would not have managed to get throughout his life. This pacified to some extent the inner revolt simmering within him but the men belonging to the upper castes still visiting the temple by avoiding the sight of the untouchables and walked away by showing contempt.

Premchand, therefore, was of the view that mere temple entry in itself would not remove untouchability. Firstly, because the temples are "the arena of purohits and pandits, libertines, licentious, and covetous men who guile the innocent devotees in the name of god". Keeping this in view, therefore, the temple entry does not seem to be an ideal issue. Secondly, the economic problems of the Harijans is

92. Ibid, p.466.
much "harder than the religious restriction". The real problem is economic. Premchand stated "it is my experience that the Harijans are not so much eager for temple entry as they are for improvement of their economic conditions. They want to be independent through cottage-industries so that their economic state may be improved. In order to uplift "our Harijan brother", says Premchand, "we should award scholarship to them in educational institutions and create more job facilities for them."

94. Ibid.
According to Premchand the communal basis of surnames and greetings is another cause of disunity in the society and he pleaded to break this custom of writing and addressing by surnames. By eliminating this, it is possible, that men may become more polite because it is this practice which breeds arrogance in men of upper caste Hindus.

Lastly, Premchand advocated religious universalism to eliminate untouchability. The aim of religion, according to him is to foster the feelings of Universal brotherhood. He quoted examples from other religious orders i.e. Budhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism, pointing out that Universal brotherhood is the basis of them all.

97. "This difference of high and low, big and small, has seeped into the veins of Hindu-community. We don't forget that we are Sharma and Varma, Sinha or Chaudhury, Dube or Tiwari, Chaubey or Pandey, Dikshit or Upadhyay." - "Mahan Tap", Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.464. Also see "Jaati Bhed Mitane Ki Aik Yojana", Vividh-prasang, Vol.II, p.153, Premchand Jibes at the contemporary Hindu community "We are first Kayasth or Brahmin and then human beings. The moment we are introduced to some stranger the very first question we ask is his Surname. We are very proud of putting our titles, Sharma, Varma, Tiwari or Chaturvedi.

He was of the view that communal basis of greetings should be stopped.
Premchand was very optimistic regarding the elimination of untouchability. He believed that it would be thrown into the dustbin of history. 98 The awakened Hindu community was atoning for its ill-treatment meted out to the untouchables in the past. 99 Hindus are not so much ignorant that they may dream of maintaining their existence in the world by crippling (maiming) a limb of their own body: 100

The ideal of the Indian nation is a human body and its four parts are: mouth, hands, stomach and feet. If any one of these parts gets separated (or breaks) the body would get crippled or become lifeless. Our Shudra brothers are feet of this body and if these feet are broken or cut what would happen to the body i.e. the nation? 101

Thousands of years of slavery has taught that they have put their own lives in trouble by downtrodding their own brothers and they can be redeemed only by giving equal rights to their brothers and treat them as their own brothers. 102

In this respect, Premchand praised the role of the Congress in trying to break the inhuman bondages.\textsuperscript{103} The Congressmen did not observe any distinction on the basis of caste. They did not hesitate to mingle, to eat and perform worship in temples with anyone. They were also prepared to fight those who observed caste distinctions and considered untouchables as their equals.\textsuperscript{104} Nationalism, in fact, removes or eliminates the feelings of untouchability and inequality.\textsuperscript{105} And

The type of nationalism we are envisioning there would not even be an odour of caste by birth. It would be a state run by workers and peasants where there would be no brahmin, no Kayasth, no Kashatriya. Everyone would be an Indian. Either all would be brahmins or everyone a Harijan.\textsuperscript{106}

Finally, Premchand points out that the caste restrictions cannot last long in the age of industrialization\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} "Daman", \textit{Vividh-prasang}, Vol.II, p.55.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid, p.56; also see the story "Sobhagaya Ke Kore", Mansarover, Vol.III, pp.221-234. The message of the story is that the institution of untouchability would be completely eliminated within a few years. Though the older generation may cling to it, the youth would not tolerate it any longer as is clear from Ratna's example who seems to be of more progressive bent of mind than her father.
\item \textsuperscript{105} "Achutpan Mitata Ja Raha Hai", \textit{Vividh-prasang}, Vol.II, p. 93.
\item \textsuperscript{106} "Kaya Ham Vastav Mein Rashtra-vaadi Hain", \textit{Op.cit}, p.473.
\item \textsuperscript{107} "Achutpan Mitata Ja Raha Hai", \textit{Op.cit}, p.93.
\end{itemize}
Thus Premchand sought to eradicate irrational practices and orthodox beliefs which kept the society in a state of cultural backwardness. The liberation from the shackles of superstitions and dogmas was as important as the liberation from British imperialism. Premchand launched a crusade against such groups of society who had vested interest in keeping the society in a state of ignorance and cultural backwardness. He remained undaunted in his crusade in spite of the attack on him by Hindu communalists.

The inhuman practice of untouchability was abhorrent and it was to be removed from the society not only because it was atrocious but also because it was hindrance in achieving nationalism. Premchand suggested Sanskritization, allowing the untouchables to enter temples, imparting education to them and giving them human treatment, as some of the means to eliminate untouchability. Besides, it was very important to remove their economic backwardness. But Premchand simplistically wished that with the overthrow of British Imperialism untouchability would be eliminated.