CHAPTER – 3

Class, Class Conflict and the Colonial State

Premchand sympathies for the poor and downtrodden were clearly rendered in his writings so that many of his writings of India’s nationalist struggle to a large extent portrayed the socio-economic conditions of the labouring population. With the Russian Revolution, the influence of the communist-socialist thought had grown in the country. Works of Russian writers like Gorki and Chekhov became popular with the influx of socialist literature in India. Premchand got deeply influenced by the socialist thought simultaneously with his involvement in the nationalist movement and writing for its cause, a matter which had taken much of the attention of the literati and intelligentsia.

However, in the literary practice of the nation which required the conception of ‘we’ as distinct from ‘others’, it built in differences within the ‘we’ by which some people /group were included, privileged or rewarded while others were excluded, alienated or marginalized. The literature of time discussed the idea of nation in the term of inclusion and exclusion. The nationalist literature till the early twentieth century had dealt mainly with the issues of elite household in literature and reform to the total exclusion of the themes relevant to the labouring class. The credit
goes to Premchand to forefront the issue of class in literature. He shifted the focus of literature to contemporary social reality leaving much behind the trend of romantic writing.\(^1\) He turned characters from the lower/labouring classes as protagonist in his writings, his heroes and heroines not being only from the elite household. With clearly believing in the writer’s social responsibilities and committed to the ideals of socio-economic justice and freedom, he tried to bring forth the real depiction of conditions of people on the ground.

Many of his stories thereby bring forth the problems faced by the poor and the marginalized. In mostly all his major novels, from ‘Sevasadan’ (1919) to ‘Godan’ (1936), he does not take the nationalist cause without highlighting the issues of the poor. His emphasis remained on the depiction of the rural India, clearly regarding himself as the chronicler of peasant society. He felt that the peasants needed special attention as they have been worst sufferers of feudal oppression. He is careful of the class character of the Congress and the support the zamindars and propertied classes received from a section of leadership.\(^2\)

According to him, workers had their organisations and government employees had their associations, so had the zamindars and money-

---


lenders. So, peasants’ grievances could be redressed only with proper organization and struggle. A call to peasants for proper organization is given throughout in his writings. In a letter to his friend, we find him optimistic and basing his hopes on bolshevism for change in peasants’ conditions. This, however, does not show in his writings, nor do we find an advocacy for violent change. At times he also keeps shifting positions perhaps on account of other influences on him as well.

Premchand speaks of various dimensions of exploitation of labouring poor. He however comes out with sympathies for them in quite forthright and direct fashion. In ‘Pashu Se Manushya’ the plight of a poor gardener is shown in the groves of prosperous city based professionals. His wretched life conditions on account of exploitation by the employer are lucidly brought out. Out of poverty he is even forced to steal. The employer is clearly shown as a monster who hardly knows the human ways. In another story ‘Mantra’, a doctor again is portrayed as self-centered and mean in comparison to the rural poor man. Premchand makes the poor man stand tall in front of the rich professional. The cruelty of the feudal practices is

3 This is recurring theme in Premchand’s novels, see, for example, Premasharam, Allahabad, 1979, pp. 265-66.
5 Pachas Kahaniyan, p. 1.
6 Ibid, p. 271.
portrayed in all starkness. In ‘Sadgati’ a simple-minded agricultural labourer is so harassed by a Brahman pundit (a priest) for initiating religious rites at betrothal ceremony of his daughter, that he ultimately loses his life working for the priest under very harsh conditions. The story ‘Thakur Ka Kuan’ similarly depicts the exploitation through control of resources by the upper caste-class. He particularly highlights the caste-class angle of oppression in depicting the multiple evils of the feudal system. In the story the husband was not well and asked for water but the only well in the village for lower classes was staining because of an animal died in it. The wife struggles to get water from the thakur’s well but fails and ultimately her husband drank the polluted water.

Premchand’s language-use greatly invokes sympathies for the simple labouring lot. He gives a stark portrayal of their wretched lives and of total indifference of the propertied people controlling their lives. In this, he exhibits remarkable sensitivity and understanding. For instance in Sadgati, the simplicity of the labourer is brought out in contrast to the cunning, cruelty and complete inhumanity of the Brahmin in the conversation between the brahmin’s wife and him. He writes:

---

7 Ibid, p. 300.
8 Rachnawali, Vol.15, p. 54.

Panditain ne jhujhla kar kaha- in daino ne to khopdi chat dali. Sabhon ka gala thakta.


Panditain- chamar ka rona manhus hota hai.

Pandit- han, bahut manhus.

Panditain- abhi se durgandh uthne lagi.

Pandit- chamar tha sasura ki nai. Khad-akhad kisi ka vichar hai in sabon ko.

Panditain- insabon ko ghin bhi nai lagti.

Pandit- bhrasht hain sab.

Rat to kisi tarah kati, magar savere bhi koi chamar na aya. Chamarine bhi ro pit kar chali gai. durgandh kuch kuch failne lagi.
Pandit ji ne ek rassi nikali. Uska fanda bana kar musde ke pair main dala, or funde ko khich kar kas diya. Abhi kuch-kuch dhundhla tha. Pandit ji ne rassi pakad kar lash ko ghasitna shuru kiya or gaon ke bahar ghasit le gaye. Vahan se aa kar turant snan kiya, durgapath padha or ghar main gangajal chidka.

Udhar dukhi ki lash ko khet main gidadh or gidh, kutte or kaue noch rahe the. Yahi jivan paryant ki bhakti or nishtha ka puraskar tha.”

(The howls and cries lasted till the mid night. The rich people were not been able to sleep; but no one came to claim dead body, and how can a Brahman touch the dead body of lower class man! Is it sanctioned in the Puranas? Any one can show me.

The wife of Brahman gets irritated and said- these witches are making my head blow off. They don’t even get tired.

Brahman said- let the scavenger weeping. When he was alive no one even cared and when he died they came to make scene.

Wife- weeping of lower class denotes bad luck.

Brahman- Yes, Bad luck.

Wife- The body is stinking.

9 Pachas kahaniyan, pp. 305-06.
Brahman- he was a lower class man or not, they don’t even have the sense of good or bad.

Wife- They don’t even feel nauseating.

They somehow spent their night. But no one came to claim the body in the morning also. Lower class women were also gone, and the dead body had started stinking badly.

Brahman took the rope and tied it through the body of lower class and took him towards outside the village. After returning he recited the *Durga path*, he threw some *Gangajal* all over his house.

And there his body was eaten by the animals. This is his gift for life long devotion and work.)

Premchand is particularly keen to bring out the conditions of the peasantry in India. It is painful for him to visualize influx of rural population towards cities for work in mills. The wretched conditions in agriculture and the exploitation of peasants in the countryside, however, were forcing a situation like that. He considered the mill-workers to be in a worse state than the peasants or even agricultural landless. In a story ‘*Poos Ki*"

---

10 See *Pachas Kahaniyan*, p. 369.
11 Ibid.
"Raat"\textsuperscript{12}, a poor peasant finding hard to protect his land and unable to bear the hardship of hard work in his fields in adverse conditions even considers the surrender of his little plot to the zamindar, preferring a life of a landless/mill worker in desperation. Premchand makes him say ‘It is better to die working as a mill worker rather than die trying to protect your field.’ The loss of land by poor peasants and prospects of tenancy were real fears for the peasants. Premchand brings out the plight of the smaller peasantry, tenants and labourers who were victims of the zamindari system. In another story ‘Sawa Ser Gehun’ similarly oppression by rich merchant cum moneylender is depicted towards an agricultural labourer. The viciousness of debt bondage by a system that privileged the rich and was harsh against the poor is described in all its complexities. The man dies in bondage unable to clear off the debt of ‘Sawa Ser Gehun’\textsuperscript{13} (600-650 grams) that kept increasing as the time passed by so that after his death his came under bondage to the merchant.

In \textit{Karambhumi}, Premchand brings out sharp differences in the conditions of life of poor peasants and the rich zamindar, by clearly speaking of the enormous rent and the different illegal feudal levies accounting for the feudal lord’s profligate lifestyle. He writes ‘Iss ilake ke zamindar mahant ji the.karkoon or mukhtar unhi ke chele chpat the. Isliya lagan baraber

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Pachas Kahaniyan}, p. 369.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Rachnawali}, Vol. 15, p. 217
wasul hota jata th. Thakur dware main koi na koi utsav hota rehta th. Kabhi thakur ji ka janam hai, kabhi byah, kabhi yagnopavit, kabhi jhula, kabhi jalvihar. Assamiyon ko aise moke per beggar deni padti thi; bhet nyochawer, pooja chadhawa, adi chadhawa adi namon se dasturi chukani padti thi lekin dharma ke mamle main kon muh kholta? Dharma sankat sabse bada sankat hai. Fir ilake ke sare kashtkar sabhi niche jati ke the, gaon piche do char Brahman-kshatriyon ke the bhi, to unki sahanubhuti assamiyon ki our na hokar mahant ji ki our thi. Kisi na kisi rupe main ve sabhi mahant ji ke sevak the. Assamiyon ko prasann rakhna padta th. Bechare ek to garib, rin ke bojh se dabe hue, dusre murkh, na kaida jane na kamun; mahantji jitna izafa Karen, jab chahen bedakhal Karen, kisi main bolne ka sahas nai th. Aksar kheton ko lagan itna badh gaya th ki sari upaj lagan ke baraber na pahunchti thi; kintu log bhagya ko rokar, bhukhe nange rehkar, kutton ki mout merkar, khet jotte jate the. Kya Karen? Kitnon hi ne jakar sheher main nokri karli thi. Kitne hi mazduri karne lage the.14

(The zamindar of the area was a mahant. Karkoons and the mukhtars were his workers. So the lagan was extracted timely. Many festivals were organised in the thakur daware. At these festivals the lower class people have to give beggar; donation etc at this occasions. Who will say anything

in the matter of religion? The problem of religion is the biggest. Every one in the area were from lower cast and some upper class people who were there were at the side of Mahant. Pitiable lower class people they were poor, under the huge credits, they don’t even know their rights. They were totally at the will of Mahant. This time the Lagan was assessed so high that the whole production was not meeting the half. They accepted their fate, and started working in the factories.)

The comparison between the haves and the have-nots strikingly pronounces the injustices in the system perhaps to provoke the readers to strongly side against the system. In Karambhumi, Premchand made his protagonist lead a revolt against feudal oppression. The system appears as totally oppressive and in complete rotten state. Premchand here desires total change brought about by the peasants’ struggle and resistance. Exploitation of peasants in varied forms is depicted. A number of feudal exactions in the form of begar and dusturi, bhent, newchaver and shagun on the religious functions were typical in the everyday life of peasants. A number of other stories also portray the blatant oppressiveness of the system.

Interestingly Premchand does not see the class of zamindars as always exploitative. The representation of zamindars in Premchand’s writing was twofold- there are obvious oppressive zamindars whose sole concern was
of rack-renting the peasantry but he also tried to show the other category of zamindars calling them ‘traditional zamindars’, who saw their peasants as their ‘capital’ in the same way as money-lenders took care of his treasures.

Zamindar’s compassion with the peasantry is distinctly shown in some of his writings. Gyanshanker in ‘Premashram’ became ideal for the care and enthusiasm he showed in the development of his area. He never forced lagan on his peasants, provided irrigation facility and gave credit on very low interest. To augment his income instead of pushing his peasantry he tried other alternatives. He established 2-3 bazars in big villages. ‘Mandir aur Masjid’ a story with the message on communal harmony also brings out the considerate nature of relationship between Muslim zamindars and Hindu peasants. In the story the jagirdar is shown as highly considerate. He respected his workers and the workers in turn respected him greatly. The temple was attacked during communal riots in the area. The jagirdar came out to protect it along with his loyal servants. In the fighting jagirdar’s son-in-law who was fighting from the other side got killed. Still the jagirdar offered protection to his men from police. In Karambhumi also, Lala Samerkant a money-lender is shown helping the widow of his worker by continuing to pay her even after his death.

Similarly, ‘Peesanhari Ka Kuan’¹⁶ is the story about the relationship between a low class old widow and the Choudhary of area. The woman trusts the choudhary greatly and the Chaudhary too respects her for integrity. A deep relationship is shown in the way the women in her death bed, asks the Chaudhary to make a well out of her savings. In Premashram too, the peasants/tenants/agricultural labourers are depicted as happily offering begar to the zamindar, Lala Prabhashanker, their benevolent master. In Godan the peasants were ready to do anything for their zamindar. Hori, the peasant protagonist in the story was unable to give shagun to his zamindar on Ramlila but feels sorry for that.

However, a strong cause for peasant’s distress is shown in the British revenue system and a repressive law and order system which was only to facilitate a smooth extraction from the peasantry. The administrative officers were depicted always corrupt. In his writings, law order and courts similarly was corrupt. In Godan when Hori’s cow was murdered by his brother, police officer comes to inspect but instead of writing complaint he further exploits him. The corruption of officials is shown as another cause of misery of the lower classes. Similarly in Karambhumi, police is reluctant to file a case against the zamindar and demands bribe for it. Premchand writes directly that the British courts are totally unsuited for

¹⁶ Pachas Kohaniyan, p. 187.
the poor Indians as they do not have enough to bribe the lawyers and the judges.\textsuperscript{17} The irksome process and delays in the system of justice further denied any justice to the poor labouring class.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{Rangbhumi}\textsuperscript{19} the character Vinay believes in the rule of justice when he got arrested for false charges of robbing the government treasure. In prison, however, he found numerous men arrested on false charges. In one case a man got arrested simply as he tried to protect a young woman from the \textit{Illakedar}’s (officer) men who were trying to carry her off to his house. A character in \textit{Rangbhumi} speaks:

‘\textit{Yahan ke nyayalayon se nyay ki aasha karna chidiya se dudh nikalna hai.}’ \textsuperscript{20}

(It is impossible to believe in the rule of justice.)

‘\textit{Sajjanta Ka Dand}’\textsuperscript{21} is another story based on the administrative corruption. In the story, an engineer was being repeatedly transferred to difficult places for being an honest officer while the entire department was shown as corrupt.

\textsuperscript{17} Karambhum Op.cit.,pp. 52-53.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. p163.
\textsuperscript{21} Pachas Kahaniyan, p. 45.
Besides, the administration is shown as blatantly pro-zamindar in almost every writings. In *Karambhumi* the administration sides with the zamindar against the peasants for obvious reasons. When unable to meet the demand/lagan owing to fall in prices, the officers come in support of the zamindar to help him extract the rent forcefully. They seized their crop and animals, opened firing on protesting workers, threw them in prison and flogged them mercilessly. Women, children and men were brutally beaten up by the police officers.

Premchand's view of change from the oppression is multidimensional. His early writings showed a stronger socialist response to the issue of British Raj-zamindari nexus and showed the viability of revolution by peasants. He makes a call for abolition of zamindari in his first novel ‘Premashram’. However, his stance towards revolutionary change gets moderated in his later writings. In *Karambhumi*, the hero successfully leads the peasants in revolt of the oppressive zamindar and emerges victorious but later regrets the bloodshed and violence. He then considers the violence of any revolutionary change as inhumane and totally not required. We do not want war between two classes. Later with pieces like ‘Pashu Se Manushya’ and ‘Premashram’, he suggests lasting change possible

---

22 Balraj murder Gouse Khan, the zamindar’s agent.

through change in the mentality of the propertied class. This was perhaps under the influence of Gandhi’s trusteeship idea. The problem, according to Premchand, was on account of the new class of zamindars giving their traditional rural lifestyle and considering themselves as distinct (alag) from kisan. They were therefore unable to grasp their problems.

His idea of resistance by peasants as it developed over time was also quite multifarious. As in Godan he makes the poor peasants make fun of the zamindar and moneylenders during Holi- celebrations. Under the effect of the intoxicants (bhang), they make good use of the public space to voice their resentment and grievances. The resistance therefore need not always be in the form of physical combat or militant confrontation.

In fact, by the time he wrote Godan he is even ready to consider zamindars as victim at times of British rule rather than beneficiaries in all situations. He makes a zamindar explain his condition in Godan as:

Ham jow-jow or angul angul or porpor bhasm ho rahen hain. Uss hahakar se bachne ke liye hum police ki, hukkam ki, adalat ki, vakilon ki sharan

---

24 Premashram, op.cit, pp. 254-55.
25 Orsini Francesca, op.cit, p325.
26 Godan, op.cit, p.188.
27 Godan, op.cit, p13.
leten hain. Or rupwati stree ki bhanti sabhi ke hath ka khilona hain. Duniya samajhti hai ham bade sukhi hain. 28

(We are at the verge of destruction. To save our self we take the help of administrative authorities. And like a beautiful woman become the object to be played with. People believe that we are happy.)

He does not see conflict situation between the peasants and zamindars in all situations as we have seen. He could see that the class conflict between the zamindars and peasants do not appear in the Indian situation owing also to the lack of class consciousness. He desires development of class consciousness in some of his writings like Karambhumi and sees a constructive role of middle class educated men in providing leadership. Interestingly, we also find the seeping in of the middle-class normative to the lower class practices. The middle class leader tutors the working people on the virtues of education, cleanliness etc; the moralizing discourse of the narrative in turn reflects the pretentions of middle class superiority.

However, the issue of class struggle of the communist type was something Premchand had left behind during the course of his writing. Still, his sympathies for the labouring class and his powerful writing against oppression of the poor made him stand as an ardent champion of the

28 ibid
labouring class. However, his critics opposing his socialist ideas considered even his moderate writings such as ‘Pashu Se Manushya’ as amounting to hate mongering between classes. Premchand’s comparison of the inconsiderate propertied men as ‘pashu’ in the story perhaps made Jyoti Prasad Nirmal to call him ‘Ghrina Ke Pracharak’. Notably, Premchand calls the same men as ‘Manushya’ if they got converted to the idea of sharing wealth with labour. There is no call for abolition of private property anywhere in the story deserving such strong remark.

Besides, in his concern to highlight the socio-economic conditions of the peasantry, which according to him is the main producing class in India; he ignores the happenings on the industrial front. His stories hardly take up the issue of industrial working class. In fact in ‘Rangbhumi’, Premchand comes out clearly against industrialization as destructive to the agricultural fabric of rural India. The issue in question in the novel is the opening up of a cigarette factory on village land. Besides, the health factors in cigarette production that are sited, the industry itself is presented as hazardous to the people in multiple ways. The workers in the factory are thought as necessarily cut off from traditions and culture, and prone to a decadent unethical lifestyle. The peasant families will be exposed to the tougher life of factories which was according to him totally not required. He forcefully

---

negates the idea against the socialist thought that industrialization is next stage in the development of human history. The issue of generating income and employment through industry is also downplayed in view of the multiple problems that villages will face. He for that matter appears to be wishing only reform in the rural setup in egalitarian way rather than change in industrial direction which is depicted as ultimate evil. In 'Mukti Marg', he shows the wretched poverty conditions of industrial workers. According to him, people will work in factories in utter desperation and when all means of livelihood are exhausted. They will therefore be, according to him, the poorest of poor.

Premchand opposition to industrialization is also on account of the close connection he sees between capitalism and imperialism in India. In Rangbhumi, the colonial state comes out in total support of the capitalist. The capitalist in Rangbhumi boasts of his close links with the government and threatens the zamindar and the peasant of harsh consequences if his demand for land to open up factory was not met. The colonial state came directly in support of zamindars against the peasantry when the issue of revenue collection was threatened. At last the land was confiscated by the municipal board, on account of the use of the waste land in social welfare. The state up till then had naturally favoured the propertied, but Premchand

---

30 Pachas kahaniyan, p. 240.
heightens the exploitation and problem for Indian working population on account of the extractive policies of the colonial state. In the story, Surdas, the poor person was only given one thousand rupees in the compensation of land that was confiscated for factory.

The condition of working class was shown as pitiable as they were bound to do long hours of work. Godan brings out the case of an industrial worker Gobar, who leaves the work at his village to work in the city. The work in the factory was hectic and the working condition was bad, the wages being low and the superintendent of work being harsh. Their condition could not improve as the capitalist wanted to further reduce the wages low. The availability of cheap labour for work in factories worsened the prospects of raise in the workers’ wages. The climax is shown in violent clash between striking workers and the fresh factory recruits workers. The workers fight amongst themselves and put the mill on fire. Premchand in the story presents no solution to the problem of factory workers and ultimately they join back to work at very low wages.

---

31 Godan, op.cit, p. 239