Chapter VI

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By the time Premchand came to the heights of his power as a writer, the problem of relations between the Hindus and Muslims, of sectarian strife or what has come to be known in the historiography of modern India as 'communalism', had become a matter of serious concern for every nationalist. The 'story teller of the independence movement' had inevitably to come to terms with this problem, and his writings, fictional as well as non-fictional, are full of indications of the way in which he tried to do so. Here, again, does Premchand in many ways mirror the conflicting trends within the nationalist movement. His very eclecticism contributed to this, as we have emphasised in earlier chapters, enabling him to borrow an idea from Gandhi here, a slogan from Nehru there, and such like. What is clear beyond doubt in Premchand's writings is his over-riding concern to promote Hindu-Muslim unity which was seen as essential to the advancement of the nationalist cause.

We know that this was a concern shared by all the important Congress leaders throughout the 1920s and early '30s. What is less known in the case of the nationalist leadership or that of the Indian intelligentsia as a whole is the complexity of responses to the bewildering question of Hindu-Muslim relations, and, as a sequel, the prescription of mutually contradictory

solutions. This was partly a consequence of the inability to grasp the problem in its complexity. In the nationalist treatment of it, the problem tended to be, on the one hand, dismissed as 'false consciousness' created by vested economic and political interests, and, on the other hand, attributed to a fundamental cultural division between the Hindus and the Muslims that would not permit any effective bridging. What is significant, the inherent paradox of the two diagnoses was not faced; they continued to be offered alternatively as autonomous explanatory schemes.

Premchand's writings, as we have already noted in a questioning vein, have often been analysed in terms of an evolution from an Arya Samajist to a socialist orientation via a prolonged Gandhian phase. His attitudes to the Hindu-Muslim question have, in accordance with this evolutionary view of his work, been shown as falling within this sequential pattern. There is, of course, considerable evidence, in Premchand's writings, of an evolution in such a direction. Though not to be disregarded, such an explanation remains only partially valid. It leaves unnoticed certain nuances and complexities that make Premchand's response to this delicate problem so intricate.

In his work and person Premchand did embody most of what was progressive and regenerative in his society. He assailed all that he thought was decadent in it. But the dichotomy

between the regenerative and the decadent by no means paralleled the dichotomy between the new and the old. While the general espousal of certain values for the creation of a new and free society was sustained in terms of abstract principles, the elaboration of these principles in terms of their programmatic content within the context of a plural colonial society often posed dilemmas that were either ignored or resolved in ways that did not wholly conform to these principles. Hence the fact that during his best progressive phase he wrote, only a year before his death, a short story like 'Smriti ka Pujari' with a pronounced bias against Islam.[1] Similarly, it was during this phase, to hark back to an example already given, in earlier chapters, that Prema was metamorphosed as Pratigya.

This chapter seeks to illustrate this complex pattern by focussing on Premchand's attitude to the Hindu-Muslim question. It tries to show that though his stance remained consistently principled in support of Hindu-Muslim unity for the nationalist cause, his reactions to specific situations or issues at times deviated from this stance. It argues also that a body of received assumptions, deeply rooted in Premchand's mind, militated against the nationalist values to which he was attached, and led to an apparent ambivalence in his writings on Hindu-Muslim relations

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1 Mansarovar, vol. IV, p. 299.

Conventional interpretations of the nationalist intelligentsia's attitudes to communalism fail to take account of the idiom and cultural context in which this intelligentsia perforce had to think (and, as in Premchand's case, write) - an idiom and a context that were permeated by religion (in a broad and non-fanatic sense of the term). This did not, however, involve any automatic or inevitable 'slide-back' from secular ideals. More crucial, perhaps, was the manner in which the question of relations between the two communities was perceived, the very understanding of what those 'communities' meant.

In the treatment of the Muslims, Premchand's work reveals some inconsistent trends. Where they are dealt with directly as a factor in the freedom struggle, a respectful attitude is generally adopted towards them. At times Premchand even pleads with the Hindus to make some sacrifices in order to reassure and win over the minority community. The prospect of the freedom struggle and the future of the country depend upon Hindu-Muslim unity. No effort ought to be spared to ensure its realization. It is incumbent on the Hindus, as the majority community, to allay the fears of the Muslims and to let them have preferential treatment. In certain other contexts, however, Premchand betrays a tone that does not exactly square with his commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity. While responding to the western cultural offensive, for example, it surges towards a

chauvinistic Hindu position. A glorified Hindu past then becomes 'our' ideal. The Muslims are not seen as the Hindus' co-sharers in this offensive. When the regeneration of the Hindus is the issue, the Muslims are bypassed if not denounced outright. The Hindus constitute a different religion and a cultural universe and seem to stand apart from the Muslims.

But so intense was Premchand's advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity and so severe his condemnation of the evils of Hindu society, that the constricting effect of this 'Hindu' orientation on his work all too easily escapes our attention.

It seems necessary to remind ourselves of the missionary role that Premchand believed that a creative writer in a colonial society had no option but to perform. We have seen in the 'Introduction' that inspired by his romantic realism, Premchand had consciously set out on a mission to contribute in a big way to the freedom and regeneration of his society. That such a self-consciously committed writer sometimes said what he could not have otherwise found consistent with his general mission only indicates the hold of certain deep-rooted assumptions on his mind.

Premchand brought his normative conception of the writer's role to bear upon the specific problem of Hindu-Muslim unity. Reviewing a book by Swami Shraddhananda in which the history of Hindu-Muslim conflict had been traced, he stressed that communal and sectarian strife had occurred throughout Indian history.

He referred to intra- and inter-religious fights among the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. The need of the hour was to forget this long tradition of conflict, not to rake up the past and aggravate communal antagonism.[2] Similarly, he took Chatursen Shastri to task for providing, in his Islam ka Vish Vriksha, a detailed and lopsided account of the atrocities perpetrated on their Hindu subjects by the Muslim rulers. To thus incite the communally minded among the Hindus to harbour enmity against the Muslims did not become a responsible and eminent writer like Chatursen. All religions, while they were dominant, had been guilty of oppression. In any case, nursing past memories and using them to spread hatred among people was to drive the nation towards disaster.[3] Reviewing the work of a Muslim writer, Premchand complained that he had addressed himself exclusively to the Muslim community to the elevation of which alone he was committed.[4]

So conscious and conscientious was Premchand's commitment to communal unity that he did not mind recommending, if necessary, the suppression of history and its manipulation for serving the cause of unity. Without being opposed to efforts directed to the regeneration exclusively of the Hindus or Muslims, he did not favour exclusive appeals that tended to forget the existence of the other community and, consequently, hurt its sentiments.

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2 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, p. 323.

3 Ibid, vol. II, p. 414.

4 Ibid, vol. III, p. 66.

II

Premchand's earliest writings on the communal question date back to the first decade of his literary efforts which began around 1905. Some of the biographical vignettes he wrote about this time are of special interest in this connection. With a few additions that were intended to make the the collection 'communally' more representative, these essays were later compiled in two slender volumes entitled Kalam Talwar aur Tyag. This was the period of Soze Watan (1908), the first collection of Premchand's short stories, when a patriotic ardour filled the young writer's heart. So enthusiastic is Premchand in these, and so carried away by the love for motherland, that any thought of facts, their implications and mutual contradictions is swept aside. Only the ideal of patriotism shines consistently. The biographical essays of Kalam Talwar aur Tyag are inspired by this passion. The writer moves lightly from one hero to another, praising a particular quality at one time and condemning the same at another, and remaining blissfully unaware of the resultant inconsistencies.

Thus Raja Mansingh and his family are praised for setting aside 'the religious norms of thousands of years for the sake of the contemporary interests of the country' in order to form ties with the Mughals. The fact that to make these ties durable they offered a girl of their family in marriage to Akbar is praised. The victory of 'Akbar's valour' over

Rana Pratap is hailed and the latter's attacks are described as 'excesses'.[5] The very next year, 1906, Premchand wrote an essay idealizing Rana Pratap whose saga now became worthy of a place in 'our' religious lore. These brave Rajputs could not bear the thought of 'foreigners coming and settling as our equals'. Yet most of them submitted. The Rana alone preserved his freedom. The marriage of the Rajput princess to Akbar now became a reprehensible fall. It symbolized the complete degeneration of the descendants of Ikshvaku, the legendary founder of the venerable Solar dynasty, and of the house of Prithviraj. Premchand concluded the essay with the hope that a lesson in freedom would be taken from Rana Pratap's life.[6]

In the following year Akbar was idealized for his bravery, tolerance and justice. Pratap and his like were now called 'rebellious countrymen'. Premchand got so carried away by the impulse to promote Hindu-Muslim unity that even while praising Akbar for abolishing the jaziya, he argued that it was not the kind of vile imposition that European historians had made it to have been. In keeping with the patriotic fervour that informed these essays, he even tried to turn the tables by arguing that it was really the British in India who had levied taxes that could be likened to the jaziya. As instances he

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5 Premchand, Kalam Talwar aur Tyag (Dilli, 1979), vol. I, p. 123.

6 Ibid, pp. 13, 29-30.

cited the 'home' charges and the money taken for maintaining contingents in the British Indian army for the Indian States.[7]

The others praised in this biographical series for their tolerance and advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity were Maulana Wahiduddin 'Salim', Badruddin Tyabji, Vivekananda, Ranjit Singh, and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, though the last named was also criticized for his anti-Congress views.[8]

The stress in these essays is on patriotism. A pronounced anti-British streak runs through them. They reveal a contradictory pull which, more or less, continued all along in Premchand's thought. Hindus and Muslims are seen as two different communities. Unity between them is seen as essential for the country's freedom. At the same time, the greatness of the Hindus is upheld as distinct from and opposed to the Muslims. While these trends persisted over the years, a new perspective was added later when Premchand began to highlight the material basis of communal differences. Never could he work his way towards a resolution of these attitudes into an understanding of the relative role of material and cultural-historical factors in the creation of community identities and inter-community relations. His framework gradually widened to accommodate the complexity of Hindu-Muslim

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7 Ibid, pp. 76, 78, 80.

8 Ibid, pp. 31-45; vol. II (Dilli, 1974), pp. 67-80, 94-122.

relations. Yet, he kept vacilating between two kinds of 'cultural rhetoric: one that rested on the essential separateness of the two communities, and another that took for granted a common culture shared by them. Accompanying these vacillations was the tendency to wish away the communal problem in material terms. Lack of clarity and an almost desperate recourse, in turn, to 'cultural' and 'materialistic' shibboleths characterized Premchand's life-long effort to tackle the communal tangle.

In December 1922, little realizing that the communal situation would deteriorate abruptly, Premchand felt happy with the amity between the leaders of the two communities. In keeping with the spirit of the erstwhile Non-co-operation-Khilafat combine, he noted that though the Hindus would forever remain Hindu and the Muslims forever Muslim, they had united for the common struggle.[9] In February 1924, when the communal situation was causing anxiety, he admitted that the two communities 'are not and never will be like milk and sugar'; but he reiterated that unity between them was the cornerstone of swarajya.[10]

Premchand's perception of social reality was influenced by a framework of values and assumptions derived from the traditional categories of caste, sect and religion. These

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9 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 351.

10 Ibid, p. 355.

were commonly used for analyzing existing problems. Naturally, wherever this was done, Hindus and Muslims emerged as separate and distinct. Basic to his search for solutions seems to have been the assumption that the Muslims would not be able to love the country with the same intensity as the Hindus would. During the Non-co-operation-Khilafat stir, he noted with sympathy and approval, that the Muslims would love the cause of Khilafat more than the cause of national freedom. He assuaged the disturbed feelings of his Hindu compatriots by arguing that like they loved the country more than Khilafat and did not expect the Muslims to mind this, they should themselves be appreciative of the Muslims' emotional preferences. Besides, he went on, Khilafat was no mere religious issue; it was inspired by the Muslims' desire for worldly power. Was not the Hindus' desire for <u>swarajya</u> similarly inspired?[11]

However liberal and understanding this attitude may appear, it carried with it the admission that, owing to religious considerations, Indian nationalism could not mean to the Muslims what it meant to the Hindus. Whether articulated or not, the admission granted to the Hindus a higher status in the struggle for independence.

It is significant that such a feeling could hold in its subtle grip even an ardent advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity like Premchand. For even he could take a position that was basically

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11 Ibid, pp. 31-4.

Hindu, a position which rested on assumptions that perpetuated the psychosis of distrust between the two communities. In an article written in 1924 - when communal tension tended to bring out the latent bitterness of otherwise sober nationalists - Premchand advised the Hindus to give up their narrow-mindedness and to treat the Muslims with tolerance. He suggested that the Hindus accept the Muslim demand for the cessation of music outside their mosques without insisting that the Muslims in turn show respect for the cow. At the same time, he admitted that a chasm of 'distrust and hatred' divided the two communities and that the division lay far back in history. But in elaborating this, he wrote in a vein that was hardly likely to make any easier the acceptance of his plea for tolerance.

He wrote, in the same article, that the chasm had been created as a result of the infliction upon the Hindus of 'the greatest possible atrocities' by the Muslim rulers. Moving on to the contemporary scene, he conceded that the Muslims were the greater culprits in the matter of communal riots and such irritants as sacrifices. They still hugged the memories of their past supremacy and tried to dominate the Hindus. Though not overlooking the shuddhi activities, he asserted that the tablighi Muslims had been guilty of greater excesses. He saw in these excesses a possible explanation for 'the daily decreasing number' of the Hindus.[12]

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12 Ibid, pp. 351-57.

At the time of the Non-co-operation-Khilafat stir, we have seen, Premchand employed religious-cultural terms to promote communal unity. It could be argued that this was to an extent inevitable in view of the nature of the Khilafat issue. Ten years later, when the Salt satyagraha began, the symbolic issue was one that affected the secular interests of the entire population. This time, too, Premchand appealed to the Muslims in religious-cultural terms. Claiming wishfully that the Muslims were with the Congress, he betrayed his own disbelief in the claim through the pains he took to convince the Muslims that the Congress was where they belonged. He did talk of the common poverty and exploitation of the Hindus and Muslims under the imperialist dispensation. But he also invoked the Muslims' natural love for liberty by referring to the examples of other Muslim countries. He wrote: 'Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey, these are all Muslim countries. See what they have done for their freedom and are still doing. This quam (people) can never go against freedom.'[13] He invoked the ideal of Islamic brotherhood while exhorting the Muslim youth not to 'forsake their national interests for the sake of sectarian rights'.[14] Since this ideal stood for the equality of all men, how could the Muslims claim special rights and privileges?[15]

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13 Ibid, p. 48.

14 Ibid, p. 46.

15 Ibid, p. 73.

As in his analysis of the causes of communalism, in his search for practical solutions also Premchand displayed a tendency to be carried away in sheer desperation. Disturbed by the Muslim refusal to give up separate electorate, he warned them that one day they would regret their obstinacy in this matter. Hindus, he argued, would never be able to unite in such a manner as to be able to crush the united Muslim community. Only if they agreed to the joint electorate, they would be able to have the Hindus under their thumb.[16]

This assertion offers one of the rare examples of the manifestation of Premchand's distance from the Muslims. It betrays a degree of impotent irritation with the Hindus for not being sufficiently united; and an element of pique against the Muslims for their supposed unity. But for the intrusion of this almost unconscious animosity, Premchand could not have drawn this contrast between a divided Hindu and a united Muslim community. He would have seen, otherwise, that the Muslims, too, were internally divided. And the realization would have been truer to his normally drawn picture of the Muslim community. For, irrespective of whether he was taking a cultural or material view of communalism, he was insistent about a distinction between the communally minded selfish few and the rest of the Muslim community.

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16 Ibid, pp. 383-84.

This inference is further corroborated by the concluding portion of the above article. It clearly brings out the feeling of Hindu superiority that underlay Premchand's nationalism. He writes with uncharacteristic self-righteousness on behalf of all Hindus: 'It would be unjust to them if it is believed that the Hindus want to do away with separate electorate because of their self-interest. They know that it is altogether against their interests to collaborate with the Muslims. Still they want this collaboration. Why? Simply because they want to make India a united nation, and for that unity they are prepared to efface themselves.'[17]

Premchand's comments about Muslim behaviour during the census of 1931 confirm this bias. Maintaining that the census figures did not represent the correct demographic reality, he observed that while the Hindus, engaged as they were in the Salt satyagraha, boycotted the census, the Muslims took full advantage of the situation and ensured for their community large returns in anticipation of the electoral issue.[18] Also significant in this context is Premchand's opposition to the creation of the separate province of Sindh with a Muslim majority.[19]

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, pp. 211-12.

19 Ibid, p. 389.

At the same time that Premchand wrote under the assumption that the Hindus and the Muslims were separate communities, he also argued that it was the British rulers and their 'native' henchmen who, for their vested interests, kept the two communities divided. Veering towards the material explanation of communalism, he wrote that the communal fire was stocked by selfish Hindu and Muslim interests that were out to please the government. He advised the Hindus, in this context, to emulate the Muslims and produce such 'servants of unity' as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew.[20]

This line of argument rested on the assumption that there was no cause for mutual discord in the circumstances of the two communities. It was the colonial masters that kept them divided. 'The hardest blow', he wrote in 1931, 'that a conquering people inflicted upon the vanquished was to poison their history.' This is what the British had done. They had instilled into Indians the feeling that the Hindus and Muslims had always been divided into two opposite groups. Through this distortion of history, the hearts of Hindus and Muslims had been filled with confusion and fear. The Muslims complained that they were treated by the Hindus as untouchables. The Hindus grieved that their temples had been destroyed and their pilgrim places ransacked by the Muslims, who had also kept in their palaces the daughters of Hindu kings. But all this was a

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20 Ibid, pp. 351-57.

travesty of truth. If Islam spread in India, it was not an accomplishment of the sword. Rather, the oppression of the lower by upper castes had brought about the conversion of whole villages. Because Islam had no room for inequality, lower caste people had 'welcomed this new religion with great joy'.[21]

It was easy from this point to assert that Hindu-Muslim unity could be effected only after the British had left the country. This offered an escape from the frustrating failure of all efforts to bring about communal harmony; for it permitted the reassuring faith that all energies could be harnessed to the cause of national liberation without worrying overly about communal amity.

Having argued that the British were solely responsible for communal division, Premchand contended that there was no basic difference between Muslim and Hindu cultures. This was in itself, at least, a tenable proposition. But the way Premchand explicated it suggested that it was more a special pleading than a deeply held conviction. He mixed sober facts with specious pleas. In clothes and food habits, he wrote, Hindus and Muslims of a particular region were similar. Just as Shiva, Rama, Krishna and Vishnu were the gods of the Hindus, Mohammad, Ali and Hussain were the 'gods or venerable men' of the Muslims. Moreover, the Hindus were themselves riven with

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21 Ibid, p. 375.

differences based on caste and sect. Nor did the cow constitute a bone of contention. 'Only a few, perhaps, among the Hindu princes and those Hindus who had studied abroad', he asserted in a bid to clinch the argument, 'would be found who had not eaten beef.' The untouchables ate beef as a matter of course. (Not realizing that he was weakening his own case, Premchand could not help adding, with regard to the beef-eating habit of the untouchables, that 'we' were trying to elevate them by persuading them to give up this habit.) That apart, the Hindus could themselves worship the cow; they had no right to force others to do likewise. Also it was only the poor Muslims who ate beef. And the poor Muslims were the ones who had embraced Islam to escape the oppression of caste Hindus. Even the Hindi-Urdu controversy was not the cause of division between the two communities for this was confined to the educated few. 'In a nutshell', he concluded, 'there appears to be no real reason for Hindu-Muslim enmity.'[22]

How Premchand's eagerness to show this basic cultural unity could drive him to <u>logicum ad absurdum</u> can be seen from his assertion that the two communities were not different, among other reasons, because both of them possessed good as well as bad qualities. This was in an article of 1933 in which Premchand quoted Nehru admiringly for saying that culture was a

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22 Ibid, pp. 374-78.

national and not religious factor, and that both Hindus and Muslims were soaked in Indian culture. Premchand followed this up with an enunciation of what culture consisted of: an outer world consisting of language, dress and customs; and an inner world comprising religious and spiritual principles. In matters pertaining to the outer world, Hindus and Muslims were not different; and their similarities with regard to the inner world were even greater.[23]

To the extent that there was no real reason for the Hindus and the Muslims to be antagonistic, the solution seemed very simple. 'What is required is for us to cleanse our hearts of distorted history and settle our beliefs after careful consideration of the needs of time and place. Then we would realize that those we had believed were our enemies had, in fact, rescued the oppressed. They have loosened the rigours of our caste system and helped in the evolution of our civilization.'[24] Premchand reminded his readers of the 'not insignificant fact' that the person chosen by both the Hindus and Muslims as their leader in 1857 was the effete emperor of Delhi.[25] He also highlighted the fact that religion was not the basis of wars between Hindu and Muslim rulers in pre-British India. Moreover, the armies that fought these wars were mixed; Muslims fought on the side of Hindus and vice versa.[26]

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23 Ibid, pp. 425-28.
24 Ibid, pp. 377-78.
25 Ibid, p. 377.
26 Ibid.

Having argued that there was nothing in the circumstances of the two communities to cause hostility, Premchand did not find it difficult to assert that 'the real war of tomorrow would be economic'. His enunciation of the case, however, does not suggest that he quite grasped the import of it. He seems to have found in the idea of economic conflict a possible way out of the communal tangle. The source of communal conflict lay, he would now argue, in the differences among the educated with regard to their rights and interests.[27] He described it as a fight between two beggars for a single piece of bread.[28]

But this, he thought, was merely a matter of time. 'The coming age would be the age of economic war. Nobody would then ask as to who is a Hindu and who a Muslim.'[29] Obviously inspired by Nehru's pronouncements on communalism,[30] in believing that the coming age would automatically remove communal conflict, Premchand argued that for the time being one might even tolerate 'mild' communalism in order to ward off rabid communalism.[31]

That there was in this analysis of the causes of communalism a desperate desire to see the end of it is

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27 Ibid, p. 393.

28 Ibid, p. 111.

29 Ibid, p. 394.

30 Ibid, p. 427.

31 Ibid, p. 402.

indicated by Premchand's use of analogies that had the merit not of suggesting any parallels but of permitting the illusion of relief. For, in the very article that welcomed the coming age of economic struggle, he wrote that if the Hindus and Muslims fought, so did the Socialists and Democrats.[32] Its relief-offering function apart, the analogy did not form an essential part of the economic analysis of communalism. Though it permitted the inference that since the actual area of strife was confined to but a 'fistful' of the educated, the millions that remained were neither Hindu nor Muslim. They were peasants or workers, and very poor and exploited.[33] Their material problems were the same, irrespective of which community they belonged to.[34] Culture was of no interest to them.[35] The tranquillizing effect of this analysis is confirmed by the fact that having talked of the coming economic struggle, he even wished it into the world of here and now, and wrote: 'The world today has but one culture and that is economic culture.' And culture, he added, has nothing to do with religion.[36]

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32 Ibid, p. 403.

33 Ibid, p. 404.

34 Ibid, p. 405.

35 Ibid, vol. III, pp. 232-35.

36 Ibid.

Such an argument implied that culture, and also history, were mere frauds (dhakosala).[37] He looked forward to the blessed day when 'history is banished from our educational institutions'.[38] But this was stretching the 'economic' interpretation to a point that it was not possible for him to sustain for too long. For, in the same breath that he dismissed history and culture as mere fraud, he called upon people to think in terms of the nation. But the idea of nation subsumed within it a good deal more than the material interests and welfare of the downtrodden majority. Premchand's own fiction shows that he realised only too well that nationalism could be, and indeed it was, a deceptive mask for hiding the interests of a few in society. And this was made possible by the cultural dimension of the idea of nation.

Unless it is argued that he was aiming at the substitution of one kind of fraud with another, Premchand's insistence on a history undistorted by the colonial mediation would indicate that he appreciated the role of collective memory in history. The pains he took to demonstrate that culturally Hindus and Muslims were not different would similarly suggest that he assigned to culture also a role in the development of social life. But he insisted on disengaging culture from religion,[39] without necessarily dismissing religion as inconsequential.

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37 Ibid, vol. II, p. 425.

38 Ibid, vol. III, p. 235.

39 Ibid, vol. II, p. 427; vol. III, p. 232.

Hence his appreciation of the efforts made by Maulana Azad to provide an authentic commentary on the Quran. It was clear from this commentary, Premchand observed happily, that the Quran emphasized the unity of all religions and did not direct the faithful to liquidate the unbelievers. What it did was to bid the faithful to carry the message of God to the unbelievers and leave them to the mercy of God if they did not see the light.[40] Hence also the fact that Premchand himself wrote in defense of the Prophet who, he averred, respected all religions and found in the core of each the same single truth.[41]

In Premchand's fiction, as in his non-fiction, liberal views predominate when the Hindu-Muslim question is treated directly. Muslim characters abound in his novels and short stories. They often occur in innocuous contexts and are paired with Hindu characters as symbols of unity between the two communities. A similar effect is sought by introducing fleeting glimpses of Muslim characters as participants in the freedom struggle. For example, after the police firing in Rangbhumi, there is the description of nine crematory and three funeral processions, indicating the martyrdom of three Muslims along with nine Hindus.[42] In the same novel, Rani Janhavi delivers

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40 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 418-19.

41 Ibid, pp. 411-14.

42 Rangbhumi, p. 516.

an impassioned speech saying that out there in the field of duty they are neither Hindu nor Muslim. They are all one. Sailing in the same boat, they would sink or survive together. Following on this logic, Pandeypur, the locale where these Hindu and Muslim nationalists met their valiant deaths, becomes a shahidgah for the Muslims and a tapobhumi for the Hindus.[43] There are, however, more substantial and integral characters, too, like Kadir in Premashrama who sings bhajans with the Hindus of his village and shares with them a common culture.

Premchand works out in his fiction the rhetoric he was employing in his articles. In Kayakalpa, violence threatens to break out over a sacrifice that the Muslims are determined to perform and the Hindus to prevent. Chakradhar, the hero, saves the situation by driving home the point that human life is more precious than a cow's life. He offers himself to be struck before the cow is sacrificed. In the argument that follows, the Muslims complain that the Hindus have revived, after five hundred years of disuse, the institution of shuddhi. Why, then, should they be considerate to the Hindus? Chakradhar replies that Islam has never hurt the sentiments of the followers of other religions. He says that God is one and that he recognizes Hazrat Muhammad as the Prophet. Violence is eventually prevented.[44]

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43 Ibid, pp. 539, 552.

44 Kayakalpa, pp. 28-37.

Through Chakradhar Premchand manages to introduce in Kayakalpa much of his well-meaning rhetoric about Hindu-Muslim unity. Chakradhar speaks with nostalgia of the old days of communal amity and tries to remove the mutual fears of the Hindus and the Muslims. He says: 'People unnecessarily give a bad name to the Muslims.... They are as peace-loving as the Hindus.... People think that they dream of ruling over us. Similarly, Muslims think that the Hindus are out to avenge old rivalries and destroy them wholesale.'[45] The novel also depicts the outbreak of a communal riot which is described with equal severity towards both the guilty communities; for they are interested less in religion and more in outdoing each other in inhumanity. A woman, whose daughter has been taken away by the Muslims, cries: 'Neither for the Muslims nor for the Hindus is there any other place. Both have to live and die here. Why then this scramble to devour each other?'[46]

Premchand tries similar devices to stress the futility of communalism and to inspire his readers with nationalist fervour in short stories like 'Muktidhan' (1924), 'Kshama' (1924), 'Mandir aur Masjid' (1925), and 'Himsa Paramo Dharmah' (1926) - all written, it may be noted, during the years of worsening communal relations in the country.[47] These stories

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45 Ibid, p. 49.

46 Ibid, pp. 205-08.

47 Mansarovar, vol. III, pp. 173-84, 202-10; Amrit Rai, ed, Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 159-69; Mansarovar, vol. V, pp. 86-95.

bear testimony to Premchand's desire for Hindu-Muslim unity. During these years of disturbed communal relations, he also wrote a play, Karbala (1925), with the specific purpose of inspiring people with the ideal of unity.

III

The underlying 'Hindu' orientation of Premchand's mental make-up emerges more clearly in contexts where he is not dealing directly with the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity and is concerned with the need to regenerate 'his' society. Without deliberate parochialism, it seems, the Hindu society is what he sees as his society. It is in terms of his self-definition as a Hindu that he seeks the larger identity of nation, and relates himself to other groups.

Premchand had come of age during the last quarter of the 19th century when the basic units of social identities drew their sustenance from religion. Nationalism in this traditionally structured society represented a new kind of awareness that not only transcended but also drew upon traditional social identities. Quite often Premchand thought or wished that the ideal of nation would bring about the effacement of caste, sect and religion as units of social identification. 'We want India to be one quam, a nation which means a people who have one education, one culture, one political unity, one language, and one literature.' He made this observation during the last year

of his life. But in his own conception of the Indian nation he could not always manage to prevent the intrusion of his Hindu orientation. In ways that he could not always have perceived, this orientation vitiated his own professed ideals.

Such an intrusion can be traced back to his Kalam Talwar aur Tyag essays. In the essay on Mansingh, wherever his armies defeat a Muslim rival and consolidate Akbar's empire, they are called Rajput and not Mughal armies; the obvious inference being that the brave Hindu Rajputs had defeated the Muslims.[49] The essay on Gokhale, to offer another example, ends with the peroration: 'Motherland! They do you injustice who allege that the Hindu jati has become dead and lifeless. So long as children like Dadabhai, Ranade and Gokhale play in your lap, this jati can never be called dead.'[50]

It is significant that while the motherland is addressed, the supposed death of only the Hindu jati is challenged. Equally significant is the fact that Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi, is the first to be mentioned among the illustrious children of the motherland who keep the jati alive. The significance of this lies in the tendency to equate the Hindus with Indians. This tendency comes out more clearly in an article written in 1907 on painting. Almost imperceptibly, in the course of the

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49 Kalam Talwar aur Tyag, vol. I, pp. 127-30.

50 Ibid, p. 44.

description of the effect of a painting of Shakuntala, the term Hindu widens to mean Indian and to embrace Indian nationalism.[51] In a speech, to which reference has been made towards the end of the preceding section, Chakradhar employs the term 'people' for the Hindus as distinguished from the Muslims. The unself-conscious manner in which the Hindus become the people - the Indian people - suggests the efficacy of this extended identification of the Hindus.[52]

It could be argued that the article on painting was written when Premchand was under the influence of the Arya Samaj, an influence that ceased to operate from about the period he wrote Premashrama, if not earlier. And also that the way Chakradhar, a character in his fiction, thinks need not offer a clue to the understanding of Premchand's own thought patterns. A close look at his articles - setting aside his fiction for the time being as belonging to a different class of evidence - seems to necessitate a modification of the view that there were clearly marked stages in the evolution of Premchand's mind. Instead, as we have been arguing all along, one could more profitably look for continuing influences that had to contend, in his mind, with newly acquired influences.

In some of his articles written during the 1930s Premchand uses the word jatiya to denote institutions that

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51 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, p. 89.

52 Kayakalpa, p. 49.

had been established by the Hindus or the Muslims for the upliftment of their own communities, and the word rashtriya to mean national. Some of these jatiya institutions, he says, are doing real service to the nation. Not once is a Muslim jatiya institution, however, described as rashtriya. But similar Hindu institutions are. On such occasions Hindu, jatiya, rashtriya and Bharatiya are used as synonymous terms. By way of example may be cited his account of the Gurukul Kangri of which he spoke in stirring terms as a 'national institution preserving our culture'.[53]

The persistence of this subtle tendency to take Hindu as national and Indian is reflected in some of the similes and metaphors also. Writing in 1932, when the problem of the untouchables had acquired a serious political dimension, Premchand stressed that the untouchables were as much an integral part of the nation as the others. To press his point, he likened the Indian nation to the human body which had four parts: the mouth, hands, belly and feet. The removal of any part would render the body paralyzed or lifeless. 'What would be the fate of this body', he asked, 'if our Shudra brethren - the feet of this body-like nation - are chopped off?'[54] Obviously Premchand was influenced by the Purush Sukta. Did he, in employing this metaphor, have the Hindu society in mind

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53 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 181-84, 198-203.

54 Ibid, vol. II, p. 438.

as a substitute for the Indian nation? Or did he have one of the four parts of the body-like nation reserved for the non-Hindus of this nation? In any case, this was certainly the kind of language that the Muslims were unlikely to relish; a fact that was not unknown to Premchand.

In other respects also this tendency found expression in ways that could not but have antagonized the Muslims; more so as these expressions left no doubt about the Muslims being seen as the 'other'. Many of the writings about the untouchables belong to this class. While referring to the lower castes in contexts that related to the Muslims directly, Premchand invariably harped on the oppression and injustice that had induced lower caste Hindus to seek refuge in Islam. He even found reasons for the Hindus to be grateful to Islam for having obliged them to reform their society. But he wrote in an altogether different vein while dealing with the place of the untouchables within the Hindu fold, especially when it was related to the question of the electorate. Written about in this vein, the Muslims became the 'others' who kept waiting villainously for opportunities to make more inroads into the Hindu society.[55]

In the writings of Premchand that deal directly with the question of communal unity, we can discern a constant note of

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55 Ibid, pp. 439, 443, 448.

exasperation at the hold of religion. But in writings inspired by his 'Hindu' orientation, it is considered a matter of pride that India is still a pre-eminently religious country where dharma constitutes the most important part of life.[56] There is nothing in the tone of this exultation to suggest that dharma, the hold of which he noted with pride, includes Islam also.

Faith in Hindu greatness, moreover, found expression in attempts to trace modern concepts to early Hinduism. This did not necessarily indicate the continuing hold of the Arya Samaj on Premchand's thinking. But it certainly suggests the influence on him, as on most liberal Hindu nationalists, of the time, of cultural revivalism. Thus, like many Hindu Congress Socialists of the 1930s, he maintained that socialism was contained in the Vedanta. No Hindu, he went to the extent of asserting, could be true to his dharma without being a socialist.[57]

This picture is confirmed by Premchand's fiction. But this dimension of his fiction has been neglected as a result of greater scholarly interest in aspects of his work which expose the evils and corruption obtaining within the Hindu society. Why this should have been so could well be the starting point of an important enquiry into the sociology of

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56 Ibid, p. 445.

57 Ibid, pp. 223-24.

modern Indian literature. What is relevant for our study, however, is the fact that the recurrent exposure of the sordid side of the Hindu society could well have been prompted by a desire to revitalize it. This supposition would be corroborated by the fact that most of his heroes combine religion and social service. Some of them may be non-believers in the beginning. But they all come round to see the light of dharma. Even the U.S.-educated Premshankar, an atheist, ends up sounding saintly and religious: 'I am now convinced that God answers the prayers of the poor.'[58] Again and again, one feels, Premchand creates characters who realize in their lives Vivekananda's ideal that service of man is the worship of God.[59]

The most explicit, almost aggressive, statement of Hindu superiority is offered in Rangbhumi. Though ostensibly the statement made reference to Christianity and the western cultural onslaught, its tone seems to have upset at least some of his Muslim readers who found the novel - in Urdu it appeared as Chaughane Hasti - anti-islamic and brazenly Hindu.[60] Through the character of Sophia - which is supposed to have been

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58 Premashram, p. 378.

59 Pratap in Vardan (1921), Surdas in Rangbhumi and Chakradhar in Kayakalpa combine religion and social service. So do Vinay in Rangbhumi and Gajadhar in Sevasadan. In Karmabhumi, Amar turns truly religious after a spell of introspection in jail.

60 See Chitthi Patri, vol. II, p. 231.

modelled after Mrs. Annie Besant - superiority of the Hindus is unmistakably established. Born in an Indian Christian family of second generation converts from some high caste, she finds, after an agonising search for truth, peace and light in Hinduism. It is not the abstract principles of Hindu religion and philosophy that offer her enlightenment and spiritual solace. It is in the normal pattern of Hindu society that she discovers a haven of peace. This, for example, is what she says about Hindu vis-a-vis Christian families: 'I have seen how persons of different persuasions live together so lovingly in Hindu households. The father is an orthodox Hindu, the son an adherent of the Arya Samaj, and the wife is an idol-worshipper. All of them observe their own religion.... The soul is crushed among us.' She also says: 'Our freedom is worldly and therefore false. Yours is mental and therefore real.' Soon enough she is able to say: 'I too am all for the Hindu religion.' And Vinay says of her more than once that although born, by some accident, in a Christian household, she is not a bit less than 'our ideal women'. She is, indeed, an Arya lady.[61]

Occasionally this pride in Hinduism even acquired an anti-Muslim character in Premchand's fiction. In Sevasadan, his first major novel, he dealt with the problem of

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61 Rangbhumi, pp. 36, 44, 311, 355, 415, 518.

prostitution.[62] He did not mind including in it the stereotyped Hindu explanation for the ills that had crept into their society. Vithaldas, a reformer in the novel, says: 'How, I wonder, did this evil practice come into being? I think it must have begun during the times of the pleasure-loving Muslim emperors.'[63] This was not merely the explanation of an isolated evil. Nor could it be dissociated from Premchand's own ideas about the origins of evil practices within the Hindu society, on the ground that through Vithaldas he was only portraying - realist that he was - a widespread Hindu belief. The fact that as late as 1932 Premchand wrote an article in which he traced the country's general decline to the coming of the Muslims would confirm the impression that he himself shared the belief he had described through Vithaldas in Sevasadan. In this article, Premchand ascribed India's decline to the destruction of the gurukul system of education following the coming of the Muslims. With this destruction, the 'boat of the nation was deprived of its anchor'.[64]

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62 Prostitutes figure frequently in Premchand's fiction. Usually they are Muslims. But, significantly enough, Suman, the heroine of Sevasadan, is shown a Brahman housewife who is forced by an unfortunate combination of circumstances to take to prostitution. The novel is full of lamentations that a high caste Hindu woman should have thus fallen.

63 Sevasadan, p. 92.

64 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, p. 202.

If Rangbhumi was seen by some Muslims as an attack on Islam, their assessment must have followed rather from their uneasiness about the idealization of the Hindus than from direct attacks on Islam or the Muslims, which are but a few in the novel.[65] Whatever the reasons for their reading of Rangbhumi, the assessment does not seem to have been totally unjustified. In 'Smriti ka Pujari' (1935), Premchand made short work of the supposed greatness of Islam and idealized Hinduism, going to the extent of equating the latter with manava dharma, the religion of man. The story describes the disillusionment of a Hindu who has been enamoured of Islam. In the end he realizes his error. He can no longer believe that Islam is a revealed religion. He feels that, like other religions, even Islam is but narrow groupism. He becomes a convinced Hindu, or rather a follower of this universal manava dharma.[66]

Premchand did take pains to show that the Muslims were part of Indian culture. Often in his novels and short stories, especially in his portrayal of rural life, Muslims and Hindus

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65 There is, for example, the meeting in Rangbhumi of Nayakram with Arya Samajists - a meeting wholly extraneous to the development of the story - whom he praises for their role in saving the country from turning Muslim or Christian, thereby preserving the honour of the Hindus, pp. 315-16. Or the fear expressed in the same novel, that Subhagi, having been forced to leave her home, might fall into the hands of Muslims or Christians, p. 358.

66 See note 1.

lived in harmony and shared a common culture. Besides Kadir of Premashrama who sang bhajans, Miyan Chaudhary of 'Mandir aur Masjid' worshipped Durga, bathed in the Ganga, and respected Hindu religious customs even while remaining a devout Muslim. Rahman of 'Muktidham' loved cows, while in 'Vichitra Holi' Hindus and Muslims played holi together. But this was a one-sided amalgamation. The Muslims joined in with the Hindus. The picture of common culture would have been complete if Premchand had also depicted Hindus participating in Muslim festivals and rituals. After all, many pirs and mazars were then, as now, worshipped by both Muslims and Hindus. In fact, this one-sided portrayal in Premchand's fiction is made even more glaring by the fact that his non-fiction mentions the other side of this interaction.[67]

All this lends credence to the suspicion that at least the Hindus belonging to Premchand's own social situation - the urban middle class - were rather distant from the Muslims. More consistent than many of them in his concern for communal unity, Premchand, like them, was evidently influenced by a 'Hindu' mode of apprehending the contemporary social reality, without quite realizing that in the process the Muslims had been bypassed or treated as the 'other'.

IV

Premchand's commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity was, without doubt, genuine. He was, as we have seen, unclear about what

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67 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 232-34.

it was that kept the two communities apart. He even denied occasionally that they were apart. But the denial was, perhaps, a reflection of his zeal for unity. Maybe it also stemmed from occasional realization of the intransigence of the communal problem. It was this realization that prompted him, like it prompted Nehru and Gandhi, to say that communal unity would be achieved only after the British had left; although he could see the need for unity as a prerequisite for freedom.

This commitment, however, had its limitations. It operated at the level of political pragmatism. Though in the making of a case for unity cultural dimensions were also introduced and a common cultural legacy was shown, this seemed more an exercise in rationalization. That was so is shown by Premchand's defense of Indian vis-a-vis western culture. The need for such a defense was more than just political. It involved the very question of being in a colonial society. Consequently, the mode of Premchand's reaction to the question of collective survival and being reflects a deeper level of his personality.

Using exaggerated terms, he condemned western culture as steeped in crass materialism. This culture had 'strangled humanitarianism and become an instrument of selfishness'.[68] The conquest of India by such a civilization, we have seen,

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68 Ibid, pp. 196-97.

was for Premchand, following Vivekananda, yet another proof of the inexorable law of history that superior cultures are overrun by inferior ones.[69]

Though the culture whose superiority he establishes as against western culture is almost invariably described as Indian, in its content it is, almost invariably, Hindu. The salvation of India lies in reviving that culture which her ancestors had perfected thousands of years ago. We have seen how Premchand was led by this cultural orientation to go so far as to project the concept of a Hindu swarajya for India.

He may have got carried away by the need to resist western cultural aggression when he talked of swarajya in unabashedly revivalistic Hindu cultural terms. For he did talk of swarajya, on other occasions, in more secular and contemporary terms. He even talked of class war. Obviously he found himself exposed to discrete influences and never succeeded in evolving a consistent world-view. In spite of his liberal outlook he remained at heart a Hindu to the extent of bypassing the Muslims as a whole in his idealized vision of what India was; and also, to some extent, in his vision of what she would become. In ways that he did not always perceive, this attachment to the Hindu world adversely affected his efforts to propagate the ideal of Hindu-Muslim unity.

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69 Ibid, vol. I, p. 182.