Chapter III

THE NATIONALIST STRUGGLE

Chapter III

THE NATIONALIST STRUGGLE

Premchand's portrayal of British Raj with its supportive network of relationships points to the battle lines drawn between imperialism and nationalism. These lines are different from those usually described in the historiography of Indian nationalism. They offer a point of departure - in terms of an alternative hypothesis for examining the phenomenon of Indian nationalism from a radical perspective - that could yield rich intellectual dividends. In the battle lines as they emerge from Premchand's work, on one side were the British and their supporters who included the feudal rich, the capitalists and the many middle class men in the professions and the bureaucracy; on the other side stood the nameless janata, the vast faceless masses groaning under the system.

The historiographic significance of Premchand's depiction is, however, not exhausted by the clarity with which he reached to the core of the confrontation. The significance lies also in the ambiguities and uncertainties that made it impossible for him to face and sustain the logic that was implicit in this kind of perception. For one would imagine that having identified the enemy, he would have suggested a corresponding strategy that would rule out reliance on sections of the supportive segments. This, as we shall see, he could not do. The answer for this failure lies in the complex relationship Premchand himself had with the

It would be misleading to see this belief as necessarily a true reflection of the objective contemporary reality. A decisive verdict seems difficult; more so as a consequence of the basic assumptions put forward by the 'subaltern' school of historiography. More important and germane to the present discussion is the fact that lack of faith in the independent initiative of the masses was related to the fear of violence and disorder in case the masses were left to their own. It was certain, Premchand believed, that in the event of exercising their own initiative the masses would give way to their natural proclivity to violence.

Premchand does not seem unaware of the violence practised upon the poor by the internal oppressors. Indeed, his fiction offers moving, almost epic, accounts of precisely such violence and the suffering caused thereby. But even to him a new kind of violence, the violence practised by the oppressed for their liberation and the liquidation of injustice, threatened to turn the world topsy-turvey.

A possible way out of the dilemma appeared to lie in attempting to end oppression rather than the oppressor. Gandhi's notion of trusteeship and the attendant method of change of heart had already lent plausibility and respectability to the possibility. That Premchand entertained the possibility seriously would be suggested by the frequency of villainous characters in his fiction feeling contrition and entering into brotherly cooperation with their erstwhile oppressed. But, on his own showing, roles and relationships had to change before individual

natures could. In their social role a kind master and a cruel master performed substantially the same exploitation. Their status as masters, not their kindness or cruelty, needed to be changed.

Whatever his dilemma or uncertainties and ambiguities, Premchand was consistent in eschewing the use of violence. He was nearing thirty when Khudiram Bose shot into fame and captured the hearts of so many Indians. So powerful was the impact of his bravery and idealism on Premchand that, disregarding the risk to him as a government servant, he hung up in his drawing-room a picture of the young revolutionary hero. But admiration for Khudiram did not imply subscribing to his method and ideology. Later in life, however, antipathy to violence would not permit even an emotional appreciation of revolutionary violence. This is illustrated by his reaction to the execution of Bhagat Singh and his associates. Writing to Dayanarain Nigam in 1931 Premchand confessed that the execution had crushed his spirits. But what had crushed his spirits was not the killing of revolutionary heroes. He felt forlorn because Gandhi would now be laughed at and the Congress would pass into the hands of irresponsible extremists. 'The future', he added in despair, 'looks utterly dark.'[1]

Gandhi's example and influence may have made Premchand's opposition to violence more of a positive and principled advocacy

---

1 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, p. 184.

of non-violence. But his aversion to violence antedated Gandhi's influence. As early as August 1908, referring to constitutional changes in Persia and Turkey, Premchand made the point with great pride that the kind of freedom and rights people in the West had obtained after wading through rivers of blood and toppling the heads of their kings, the people of Asia were capable of acquiring peacefully.[2]

With Gandhi being the dominant influence, Premchand could talk of non-violence not for just India or Asia but for the entire humanity. Human civilisation as such now began to be seen as passing through a critical, suicidal phase, with capitalism, imperialism, aggressive nationalism and irreligion driving men madly among the path of selfishness and acquisitiveness. The only hope lay in a peaceful revolution. And this was something that more and more sane people were beginning to realise all over the world.[3] Nearer home, admitting that the Indian situation could be explosive if the poor continued to be preyed upon, he insisted that what was needed was laws that would usher in changes without bringing in revolution. 'We do not want a war between classes.'[4] 'We are Congressmen. Our principle is that our nation's redemption lies through peaceful means. We are opposed to bloody constitutions ... a pious

---

2 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, p. 23.

3 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 98-101.

4 Ibid, p. 487.

objective like freedom cannot be achieved through bloody ways.... We have full faith in the inner divinity of man.'[5] 'We have never supported terrorism and our principle is that terorism is causing great harm to the country.'[6] Lest it may be argued that these are Premchand's pronouncements as a journalist, some of these occasioned by the government's suspicion and demand for security, the following excerpt from a letter he wrote to Indarnath Madan in 1934, less than two years before his death, may be given as evidence of the seriousness of his opposition to violent methods:[7]

> I believe in social evolution, our object being to educate public opinion. Revolution is the failure of saner methods. My ideal society is one giving equal opportunities to all. How is that stage to be reached except by evolution. It is the people's character that is the deciding factor. No social system can flourish unless we are individually lifted. What fate a revolution may lead us to is doubtful. It may lead us to worse forms of dictatorship denying all personal liberty. I do want to overhaul, but not destroy. If I had some prescience and knew that destruction would lead us to heaven I would not mind destroying even.

---

5 Ibid, p. 540.

6 Ibid, p. 542.

7 Chitthi Patri, vol. II, p. 2.

There is a difference in this position and the principled opposition to violence - for the sake of 'our' country and human civilisation at large - that found articulation in his journalistic writings. The two positions are, however, only different, not mutually exclusive. They could have been held simultaneously without the need arising for working out the implications of the difference between them. But supposing that the letter to Madan represented the position that Premchand would have liked to stand by, it would follow that in reality his advocacy of non-violence was more pragmatic than his journalistic writings would suggest. In which case he would be more Congressite than Gandhian in this regard. But, judging by the letter, his was a fairly determined pragmatic opposition to violence. Theoretically he was leaving the possibility of employing violence open. But it was dependent on a condition that was impossible to fulfil. After all, he was not alone in not possessing prescience. There is a familiar ring about the letter. It is the usual rationalisation of a deep-seated unwillingness to disturb the status quo in spite of consciously held radical views.

To a man so seriously opposed to the use of violence and yet committed to a fairly radical restructuring of society as a necessary condition for ameliorating the lot of the poor peasants and workers, the Indian National Congress seemed an answer. To it Premchand turned. Most Premchand scholars have sought more or less clearly demarcated phases in the development of his

personality and writing. From a raw patriotism and revivalist nationalism, through a bourgeois Congress affiliation and Gandhian idealism, to a final leap into socialism would seem to be the generally accepted course of Premchand's personal and creative Odysseys. The two need not take the same course. We have such famous cases as those of Balzac and Dostoyevsky whose work was subversively radical in spite of their reactionary politics; or that of Zola whose fiction could betray a bias against industrial workers on strike in spite of his own advanced political views. In Premchand's case, there is little by way of such divergence and can talk of a single Odyssey in his case.

While there is agreement among scholars about clear phases in the development of Premchand, they have been divided about the terminal point of this development. The final leap into socialism - by which is meant, in concrete terms, some kind of acceptance of Marxism and of its actualisation in the Soviet experiment - has been questioned with as much passion as it has been asserted with. Those who question the leap insist that Premchand remained a Gandhian till the end. The controversy apart, the most convincing and sober statements of the two competing positions have come from Amrit Rai and V.S. Narvane; the former arguing for the socialist leap and the latter showing the Gandhian phase as being the last and the longest.[8]

---

8 Amrit Rai, Kalam Ka Sipahi, Ilahabad, 1962; V.S. Naravane, Premchand: His Life and Work, New Delhi, 1980.

It is, of course, true that Premchand grew impressively from Soze Watan (1908) to Godan (1936). Yet, it seems misleading to see this growth in terms of clearly marked stages. The growth was more in the nature of an organic process in which earlier imbibed ideas were not necessarily discarded; rather, different ideas tended to fuse into a 'whole' which was by no means static. Moreover, the Congress at that time was an organisation - more a platform for nationalists with different political and ideological hues than a political party - that permitted under its umbrella whole cross section of nationalist opinion. This meant that persons holding divergent views could be its members. It also meant that a person could substantially modify his political and ideological position without feeling obliged to quit the party. This facilitated Premchand's continued membership of the Congress. Whatever development he might have undergone, his passion for the nationalist cause never flagged; and the cause he consistently served under the aegis of the Congress. In fact, his own shifting stances were often a reflection of developments within the Congress.

Two examples may be given to illustrate the fallacy of phases and the organic unity of his development. First, with regard to the early revivalist phase when Dayananda and Vivekananda were his moving spirits and feudal valour was offering a rich theme for his fiction, it is argued that this was over once he came under Gandhi's spell. But that is not

simply what happened. Revivalism lost, in the later years, much of its stridence. It also ceased to be dominant. But revivalist ideas were never banished from his mental make-up. Thus he could object, even in 1932, to widow remarriage because he saw it as a fall from the ideal that a Hindu woman ought to follow.[9] As for the final leap into socialism, to offer the second example, within two years of the Russian Revolution Premchand had begun to say that he had become a convert to 'Bolshevist principles'.[10] Thus several strands of thought - revivalist, Gandhian, socialist and the like - coexist in his mind. One of these may dominat at a given point in time; but the others are not obliterated. Premchand cannot be said to have ever in his life definitvely rejected any of these important constituents of his thought structure.

In another way also the Congress held sway over the minds of people like Premchand. It symbolised, at an institutional plane, the thought processes of the liberal intelligentsia with its contrarily directed stirrings: the radical thrust of its ideals and the conservative constraints of its methods. In its programmatic pronouncements and in the vision of free India that it held out, the Congress could reconcile the conflicting expectations of different sections of society. Its assurances to all attracted all. After all, the demands of the freedom

---

9 Kamal Kishor Goenka, Premchand Vishvakosh, vol. I, Dilli, 1981, p. 145.

10 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, p. 93.

struggle had to be accorded top priority. And this required a united front against the imperial master. It was in the interest of all to defer till independence the solution of problems caused by internal contradictions and conflicts. In any case, many of these problems were seen - or could be shown - as endemically related to foreign rule. One can see encapsulated in Premchand's mind the conflicting aspirations and interests that the Congress was able to accommodate in its ideology and programmes. It is possible that his conception of the ideal at times transcended the ideals of the Congress which were invariably in advance of its actual practice. But in his conception of what was possible in the immediate future he seems to have been influenced by the constraints within which the Congress operated. For him the constraints of the Congress were the constraints of the national movement. Indeed, Congress was the national movement.

There is no evidence of Premchand's formal association with the Congress. It is doubtful if he attended more than two sessions of the premier national organisation. The first one of these was in 1906 when, along with Dayanarain Nigam, he went to the Calcutta session to preside over which Dadabhai Naoroji had come specially from England; the Grand Old Man had consented to undertake the journey in spite of his age in order to avert the possibility of a confrontation between the Moderates and the Extremists.[11] The second occasion was when he took his wife,

---

11 Most biographers of Premchand write wrongly that he attended the Congress session at Ahmedabad in 1907. There was no such session that year.

daughter and son-in-law to see the 1934 Bombay session.[12] This time no journey was required for he was then having his brief stint with the Bombay film world. On neither occasion did he attend as an official delegate. Then for a short while in 1930, when the tidal waves of the Civil Disobedience Movement were sweeping over the country, Premchand did some work for the Lucknow Congress office; but again in an unspecified and informal capacity.[13] In fact, it was his wife, Shivarani Devi, who once went to jail during the Non-co-operation Movement.[14] Premchand seems to have realised quite early that given his temperament and talents, the best service he could render to the cause of freedom was by abstaining from physical participation in agitational politics.

But his affiliation with the Congress was no less strong because of its informal character. To use the word in its respectable sense, for its propaganda the Congress could not have asked for a more devoted, effective and creative person than Premchand. Through thick and thin, during its tides as also the ebbs, he stood by the nationalist body. As early as April 1905, months before the partition of Bengal gave a new turn to Indian politics and extremism came into vogue, Premchand took on no less redoubtable a scholar than Zakaullah of Delhi

---

12 Premchand, Vishva Kosh, vol. I, p. 185.

13 Ibid, p. 123.

14 Ibid, p. 125.

for his aspersions on the Congress.[15] Thus began an association that was to last till his death three decades later.

Between 1905 and 1920, however, Premchand's interest in the Congress appears to have been predominantly intellectual. This is a phase in his life when he was struggling to find his bearings and to be able to lead a kind of life that would be in keeping with his sense of mission. Even as a writer, during this phase, he was feeling painfully uncertain about himself, unhappy that he tended to be swayed by all kinds of influence without any distinct personality of his own.[16] He was fretting increasingly because of the compulsion to make a living as a government servant. Already he had been roundly reprimanded for his Soze Watan stories and obliged to assume a nom de plume.[17] But nothing seemed to work out.

1919 was a crucial year in Indian politics. It found nationalists gripped by a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, in spite of dismissing them as inadequate and disappointing, the rejection of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms was a decision that for the majority of nationalists was very difficult to take. To criticise the reforms till the last entailed little political price. On the contrary. But to actually implement the threat of boycotting them was a big gamble that could well be tantamount to going into the wilderness. On the other hand, there was the

---

15 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, p. 40.

16 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, p. 29.

17 Premchand Vishva Kosh, vol. I, p. 39.

Jallianwala Bagh massacre as the climax of a wave of anger that swept over the country as a result of the Rowlatt Bills and the Khilafat wrong. With the whole country smarting under government repression, it seemed inconceivable to accept the reforms. What, then, was to be done?

The acuteness of the dilemma is reflected in the rapidity with which decisions with regard to the reforms changed within the Congress. Having all along condemned the reforms scheme, it decided, at its Amritsar session held towards the end of the year, to give the reforms a trial. Gandhi, it may be emphasised, was in favour of this decision. But within seven months of this resolution, the Non-co-operation Movement had been launched and the reforms thrown aside. Gandhi had promised swaraj within a year. Two years later, after he had felt obliged to withdraw the movement in the wake of Chauri Chaura, Gandhi was to attribute his decision to boycott the reforms and start the movement to three factors: the Rowlatt Bills, the Khilafat wrong and the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. Gandhi's ex post facto explanation is accepted by historians even today. It is acepted in spite of a chronological fallacy involved in its acceptance. All the three factors had been in operation when, in December 1919, the resolution to give the reforms a trial was passed by the Congress. Surely the reversal of this resolution can be explained only with the help of some supplementary factors. Historical scholarship is yet to provide this additional explanation. Which means that even hindsight has not done much

to clarify the dilemma that nationalists in 1919 were faced with.

Premchand's own general uncertainty could hardly have lessened in the midst of such pervasive uncertainty. But his personal diffidence and the low spirits that accompanied it tended to give way to a feeling of urgency even though, in keeping with the complexity of the political situation at the time, no definite direction could be discerned for directing this feeling. As in the annals of the country, in Premchand's life also 1919 was a critical year. For in this year he wrote an article that may be seen as of seminal importance. Entitled 'Purana Zamana: Naya Zamana', it shows Premchand struggling towards a radical conception of politics and society in which nothing short of a major social restructuring would do. This is the conception that he was never to go back upon, though in course of time it was to be informed and enriched by a greater sense of realism and better understanding of societal dynamics. But towards the end the article remains no more than a damp squib. After breathing radical fire, it warns the oppressing classes to beware of their own interests and finally peters into an appeal to them to be better.[18] Such anti-climactic retreats from brave radical postures were also to characterise Premchand's writings in later years.

---

18 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, pp. 258-269.

This feeling of undirected and ineffectual urgency is better expressed in a letter to Dayanarain Nigam. Writing days before the Congress resolved to give the reforms a trial, Premchand thoroughly condemned the Montagu-Chelmsford scheme. It gave nothing by way of additional powers to Indians, for whatever was apparently given to them was in reality neutralised by all kinds of attendant provisos. If at all something was given, its beneficiaries were to be the educated sections that could only exploit the people. Disdainful of the Moderates, and not so much as mentioning the Extremists, Premchand could repose hope only in Bolshevist principles.[19] Here is a clear indication of his frustration with nationalist politics and of the radical drift of this frustration. But it is frustration nonetheless, for nothing on the Indian scene offers him hope.

That, however, was really not the case. Despite the general frustration and hopelessness - as also the brutal indictment of the Moderates - conveyed in his letter of 21 December to Nigam, Premchand continued to turn to the Congress. True, he had said in this letter that he had given up the idea of attending the Amritsar Congress. But that seems to have been a decision made in a fit of desperation. Soon after he had changed his mind. Plagued with chronic financial difficulties, he hoped to get from a Gujarati publisher some money that would have taken care of the trip to Amritsar. But another chronic malady, dysentery,

---

19 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, pp. 93-94.

finally intervened.[20]

A new relationship with the Congress was forged in early 1921. This also provided him with the anchor he had desperately looked for during the difficult and prolonged formative years between 1905 and 1920. It was an almost miraculous happening; though the kind of happening that seems to have become integral to Gandhian charisma. Premchand was posted at Gorakhpur when, on 8 February 1921, Gandhi visited the city at the height of the Non-co-operation Movement and addressed a mammoth public meeting. Premchand attended it in spite of indifferent health, and took his wife and two young children along. Listening to Gandhi had an instantaneous and lasting catalytic effect on him. For years he had wanted to resign his job as a government school teacher. Non-availability of an alternative source of living had invariably held him back. Within a week of hearing Gandhi, however, he left government service, and did so without bothering to make alternative financial arrangements. Another evidence of Gandhi's impact is provided by the fact that it marked the beginning of a whole crop of nationalist short stories that were to idealise the national movement and broadcast his message of freedom; the theme would figure in a big way in his novels also. A significant point in this context is that though the Non-co-operation

---

20 Ibid, pp. 94-95. The date given seems wrong since the Amritsar session was in 1920.

Movement had been going on for six months, it is only after listening to Gandhi in person that his fiction, and life, took this new turn.

Premchand's support to the Congress was no longer merely intellectual and produced by pragmatic considerations. It now became synonymous with the national struggle for freedom. And his support to the freedom struggle was not simply intellectual. It was intensely emotional, an important part of his very being. His new mood and the changed attitude towards the Congress are reflected in the following excerpt from an article entitled 'Benefits of Swaraj' which, judging by internal evidence, must have been written within the year that elapsed between the Gorakhpur speech of Gandhi and the withdrawal of the Non-co-operation Movement:[21]

> ... The Congress is the only organisation in our country that propagates swarajist ideas. Mahatma Gandhi is the head of that organisation. He has told us clearly that if we wish to enjoy the fruit of swaraj, we have to take to the spinning wheel and swadeshi, boycott the law courts and have our disputes settled by our panchayats. Give up intoxicants, leave the accursed legal profession and make proper arrangements for national education. Mahatma Gandhi is a patriot. He has renounced his all for the sake of the country. For our welfare he is running about the country

---

21 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 282.

> day in and day out. We shall keep regretting for long if we could not achieve independence under such wise and farsighted leaders, for only rarely are such great men born in the world. We should realise that God has sent them for the redemption of India. It would be our great misfortune if we failed to obey them.

The use of plural number for leaders in part of the above excerpt may be misleading. It may convey the impression that Premchand has in mind also leaders other than Gandhi when he is employing these superlative terms. Judging by the tenor of the whole article, this interpretation would amount to placing undue reliance on what is little more than a peculiar linguistic usage of the plural. Premchand is talking of Gandhi alone.

What Premchand particularly celebrated about Gandhi's emergence as the undisputed leader of the Congress was the change he had brought about in its policies and attitudes. He believed that, without having undergone any change in its class composition, the Congress under Gandhi had been committed inexorably to the principle of people's primacy. The conflict of interests between zamindars and capitalists on the one hand and peasants and workers on the other was a reality of Indian society that depressed the nationalists and obstructed their efforts. Earlier, largely because the masses had been inert and passive, the Congress had tended to be favourably disposed towards the privileged classes. But the movement launched by Gandhi 'rested on the pillars of justice, truth and democracy'.

The masses had begun to awaken. 'The sympathy of everybody, consequently, was necessarily with workers and peasants.' The Congress was still a movement predominantly of lawyers, teachers and journalists who were neither zamindars nor capitalists. It was not difficult for them to respond to the changing spirit of the times and take a favourable view of the needs and demands of the oppressed. Non-co-operation, therefore, had acquired the character of a democratic movement. Workers' and peasants' societies had cropped up everywhere, and these were run under the guidance of Congress volunteers. It was only natural, in view of this tilt, that zamindars and capitalists should tend to drift away from the Congress. But, realising the signs of the times, they had not altogether left it. Many of them still sympathised with the Congress and helped it with money. It would not be surprising, though, if with the passage of time they should decide not to trust their interests and rights with the Congress and decide to withhold their financial assistance. While insisting that there could be no going back, Premchand did not forget to make his usual appeal to the zamindars and capitalists to reform themselves in time for the sake of their own interests.[22]

When the Non-co-operation Movement waswwithdrawn and Gandhi jailed, the Congress was divided between the no-changers and pro-changers. The latter, as Swarajists, stood for a policy of wrecking the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms from within. The

---

22 Ibid, pp. 28-9.

idea was to accept the electoral process, which implied cooperation with the government, as a necessary step towards eventual non-co-operation. Read between the lines, Premchand's post-non-co-operation articles would suggest that the Swarajists' position appeared to him as no better than an exercise in rationalisation. This was not surprising, considering his reverence for Gandhi and the fact that it was the no-changers who stood nearer the leader's principles. But Premchand also believed that, as a democratic organisation, the Congress must permit free discussion and decision by majority verdict. The depth of his feelings on the subject can, however, be gauged from an article he wrote in 1923. Aimed ostensibly against the Liberals, the angry sarcasm of the article conveys also something of his displeasure with the pro-changers:[23]

> The cooperators demand swarajya. So do the non-co-operators.... Where, then, is the dividing line? In the systems and methods of attaining swarajya, the non-co-operator cannot make use of a system that may hurt his self-respect. Even for swarajya he will not barter away his self-respect. He will suffer all kinds of agonies and bear the hardships of jail; but his dignity he will not forego.... The cooperator is a practical politician. He will disregard his own dignity to attain his goal. If he could serve his self-interest by sacrificing his

---

23 Ibid, pp. 36-7. The words "practical politician" occur in Premchand's original Hindi text.

> principles and setting aside his self-respect, he would not let the opportunity slip. He will avoid the jail and keep off all kinds of pain even if that meant killing his own conscience. However much his area of operation may be constricted thereby, he will adhere to the path of constitutionalism. Presently he speaks of Gandhi with respect. But if the government were to issue a decree today forbidding the mention of that great man's name, the cooperator would not utter it even in dream.... This is the difference between cooperation and non-co-operation. This is the dividing line.

The quality of passion discernible in Premchand's sarcasm offers a measure of his commitment to the freedom struggle of which, to him, the Congress was the chosen instrument. The single-mindedness of his commitment is further reflected in the close correspondence between his journalism and fiction. By way of illustration may be attempted a textual comparison between the article quoted above and Rangbhumi, the most pronouncedly Gandhian of Premchand's novels, and also one of the most evocative and poignant. Begun on 1 October 1922 - in the midst of the depression that overtook the country in the wake of the withdrawal of non-co-operation - and completed on 1 April 1924,[24] the novel was evidently conceived with a view to projecting an image of the movement that would stir and

---

24 Premchand Vishva Kosh, vol. II, p. 330.

inspire the people, thus lifting them from the slough of post-1922 pessimism. Judging by contemporary sales, if not also by the continuing life the novel has enjoyed since its appearance sixty years ago, Premchand seems to have been eminently successful in the realisation of his objective.[25]

Coming back to the textual comparison, the article was obviously written at a time when Premchand was working on Rangbhumi. Indeed, he must have by then made considerable progress with the novel. In both the article and the novel he was responding to a part of the contemporary reality that had agitated him to the core. But the form that his response would take had to vary in accordance with the mode of his expression. The journalistic response had to be more in the nature of a comment even though it contained an outline of the reality on which it was commenting. The fictional response had to be significantly different. It had to transcreate in all possible details the reality to which it - the response - owed its existence.

The essential formal variation notwithstanding, the article and the novel converge so strikingly as to leave no doubt about their origins in the same reality. The theme of cooperation is developed at considerable length in Rangbhumi through the characterisation of Dr Ganguli, a well-meaning patriotic member of the legislative council. Beginning as a convinced cooperator,

---

25 Ibid, vol. I, pp. 284-85.

he tends to doubt, somewhere in the middle of the novel, the efficacy and relevance of cooperation in the Indian situation. Eventually he resigns his membership of the council and ends, in his old age, a confirmed non-co-operator. In the intermediate phase, when congratulated for an impressive performance in the council, he says:[26]

> Well, you could praise us if you considered it work to make speeches, ask questions and to keep debating; but I do not see it that way.... We had great hopes from the new constitution, but three or four years experience of it has shown that it would not do. We are where we were before. The military expenditure keeps increasing.... When the budget is prepared, a few lakhs is deliberately added to every item. When we raise hell in the council, that inflated figure is slashed to please us. The members puff up with delight - we have won, we have won. Ask them: What have you won? What will you win? You don't have the means to win, how can you win? If ever we succeed in forcing some economy, it is our own brethren who suffer as as a consequence.... The result is that now I shudder to talk of economy.... The council can do nothing. Can't even pluck a leaf.... The council is made by the government and is controlled by it. The country would benefit only when the nation makes the council.

---

26 Rangbhumi, p. 385.

Ganguli knows all this. Yet he does not leave the council. His reason for staying on is simple: '... but it is better to keep doing something than to do nothing.' In a lighter vein he adds: 'My life has passed by in the council. Now I can see no other way.'[27] Despite the seriousness of his exposure, behind the mook confession of his inability to see an alternative way is a lurking belief that still something could be done from within the council. Hence his preference for keeping doing something to being passive. But even this battered belief deserts him in the end: 'Today I have lost my forty year old confidence that this government wants to rule over us by the power of justice.' He can see that optimism in the prevailing conditions is nothing but delusion. He resigns his membership of the council. He can, at last, see another way in spite of having spent his life in the council. Unmindful of his old age, he devotes himself to active social service. As for the council, it can have a place 'either for those who love self-interest or for those who are adept in deluding themselves.'[28]

The close correspondence between his fiction and journalistic writing is characteristic of Premchand's work. It shows the solid presence of the objective world in his fiction. This is more or less true of all creative work of the realistic type. But realism is not copying of the objective reality. Artistic creation also demands a transcendence of the external

---

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid, pp. 581-83.

reality. It is the appearance of resemblance, not actual resemblance, to the other given reality that artistic realism thrives on. Premchand also metamorphosed the actual in fictionalising it. But given the primacy of social commitment in his conception of the role of writers in a colonial society, he was prepared to pay, in terms of artistic quality, the price of deliberately minimising the distance between the external reality and his transcreation of it. It is a different matter, though, that in spite of the constraints that he consciously chose to work under in his capacity as a colonial writer, he managed to make much of his fiction so artistic and enduring. Rangbhumi easily belongs to this class.

Thus 'The Dividing Line' - the 1923 article quoted above - and Rangbhumi show how concentrated Premchand's passion could be in situations that agitated him. But there is a striking difference also in the two manifestations of his response to the question of cooperation. The article follows the correct chronological sequence of cooperation getting a fillip from the withdrawal of non-co-operation in 1922. In the novel, on the contrary, it is only after the popular agitation has apparently been crushed, and the story is nearing its end, that Dr Ganguli's conversion takes place. The reversal of sequence is an ingenious device to serve the original purpose that had inspired the conception of the novel: to create an exhilarating and buoyant effect that would neutralise the depression caused by the withdrawal of the Non-co-operation Movement. Premchand does not attempt to achieve this effect by showing the agitation in the

novel as any more effective and successful than the Gandhian satyagraha had been in real life. He does so by changing the perspective for viewing the agitation, including its apparent defeat. Surdas, the blind protagonist of Rangbhumi so transparently cast in a Gandhian mould, is squarely crushed. He knows this. But he knows something else too. Nearing his and after having been fired at, Surdas is revived for a while by a medicine administered by Dr Ganguli. With the clarity of perception that proximity to death provides, Surdas says:[29]

> You have won. I have been defeated. This round belongs to you. I just could not last out. You are all seasoned players, your breath does not run out, you have team spirit and zeal. We lose our breath and start grasping; we lack coordination and keep fighting among ourselves; no one listens to no one else.... But we shall play again, let us gather breath, we shall learn from you even as you defeat us repeatedly, and one day we shall triumph, certainly we will.

With rapt attention Dr Ganguli listens to the dying protagonist. Here is for him a pithy enunciation of 'our interpersonal, social and political life'.[30] Hence his renunciation of cooperation.

It may be argued that the novel portrays the cooperators with greater sympathy than is done in the article. To an extent

---

29 Ibid, p. 558.

30 Ibid.

that is true. Moreover, that is in consonance with the effect intended in the two cases. A short piece like an article would not permit the details that constitute the very warp and woof of a novel's structure. To ensure the desired effect, he had to be crisp and pointed in the article, without being partisan to an extent and in a way that would be counter-productive. The novel permitted a more sympathetic delineation of the 'enemy' without the risk of the readers ending by taking an indulgent view of the political position represented by him. In fact, considering the final conversion of the 'enemy', to the extent that it contributed to making him life-like rather than a caricature, his sympathetic treatment eventually helped produce the right effect. At the same time, however, this difference is not quite so sharp. In the article, too, Madan Mohan Malaviya, a leading cooperator, is spoken of with utmost respect and shown capable of frontally opposing the government when he felt his self-respect to be at stake.[31]

Though feeling obliged to bolster up its fighting image, Premchand at this time was not particularly happy with the Congress either. With Gandhi removed from the scene, it had slumped into the doldrums. In stark contrast to the bold front he was providing in his articles of the period, he wrote to Dayanarain Nigam from the Kashi Vidyapith on 17 February 1923: 'You have asked me which party I belong to. None. Because neither of the two parties is doing anything effective. I belong

---

31 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 37.

to that party of the future that will have as its course of action the political education of the petty and the poor.'[32] This letter conveys some idea of the state of mind in which Rangbhumi was written. In the face of a bleak prospect, hope had somehow to be kept alive.

It was not for long, however, that Premchand could sustain his aggressive opposition to cooperation as a method for the country's political advance. Writing to Keshoram Sabberwal, soon after the Congress had adopted its historic Purna Swaraj resolution at the 1929 Lahore session, he conveyed to this Japan-based Indian journalist the momentous message that the national organisation had taken an important step forward:[33]

> Very deep division exists in this matter. The Moderates are not prepared to go so far, and the younger politicians are not willing to even listen to anything less. I think independence is the proper answer to the vain imperialism of England. Dominion status is a mere facade.

After this support to the idea of complete independence, Premchand added the following sentence: 'But one thing that I fail to understand is the Congress decision to boycott the councils.' Mustifying his position, he wrote: 'We should take whatever little or much we get, wherever it may come from. Why should the councils

---

32 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, pp. 129-30.

33 Ibid, vol. II, p. 208.

be permitted an opportunity to make reactionary laws? Independence is not such a simple matter that we may afford to let the councils do mischief for a session or two.'[34]

At one level this letter matches ill with the determined and clearly articulated position of 1923; a position that seems to have been adopted without any kind of reservation, as would be indicated by the fact of its expression through a whole variety of forms, viz., personal letter, journalistic article and novel. No less intriguing is the timing of Premchand's failure to comprehend the raison d'etre of the council boycott. He failed to see this when the Congress, if not the country, was rearing for a major confrontation with the Raj; and failed after having unhesitatingly supported the Congress' step forward. What, then, was the message of Dr Ganguli's resignation from the council? Could a modus vivendi have been evolved that would combine a fight of the kind that the logic of the Lahore resolution demanded, with continued work within the councils?

It may seem incredible, in retrospect, that when the scene was set for the Salt Satyagraha, someone who favoured confrontation with the Raj should have failed to appreciate the necessity of council boycott. That, of all persons, this should have been Premchand, who had so vividly described the mockery and futility of the councils, only adds to this retrospective sense of disbelief. However, whatever the difficulties of a retrospective look, there is a level at which the amazing shifts

---

34 Ibid.

in Premchand's stance constitute a microcosm of what was happening within the Congress at large. For these shifts were of a piece with the broad spectrum of attitudes that obtained within the Congress at any point in time, as also with the changes that characterised its policies over the years. Given the complexity of the situation, with its uncertainties, the diversity of sectional pulls and the multiplicity of tactical possibilities, it was, indeed, very difficult to be certain of the soundness of a particular decision. To keep believing in its soundness was even more difficult.

Whatever his reservations about the wisdom of boycotting the councils, Premchand was steadfast in his loyalty to the Congress. In March 1930, on the eve of Gandhi's Dandi March, he started the publication of Hansa, a monthly journal. Writing in the inaugural number, he particularly rejoinced in the fact that the birth of his journal was coinciding with that auspicious occasion when the country had decided to struggle out of the shackles of subjection. Alluding to the name of the journal, which evoked an association with the Manasarovar lake in the Himalayas, he stressed that Hansa had left the quiet of its sylvan habitat to contribute to the struggle for freedom.[35] Premchand was as good as his word. During the six and a half years that elapsed between the birth of Hansa and his own death, the journal remained a fervent champion of the country's freedom.

---

35 Premchand Vishva Kosh, vol. II, p. 448.

After Gandhi, accompanied by his seventy-six followers, had embarked on the Dandi March, Premchand was once again as enthusiastic as he had been during 1921-22. Realising that his friend, Dayanarain Nigam, had reservations about the timing of the Salt Satyagraha, and feeling that these reservations typified a middle class response that had at its base the fear of material loss, Premchand wrote on 23 April 1930:[36]

> You think that 'salt'sis premature. Just as death is always premature, and the creditor's claim is premature, similarly all such acts from which we apprehend loss of money or time seem to us premature. The popularity of this movement bears testimony to the fact that it is not premature.

This is the letter in which, as we saw in the last chapter, Premchand had written off 90 per cent of the English educated Indians as lost to the cause of national liberation.

With his passionate concern for the poor, Premchand was quick to see and stress the significance of the issue chosen by Gandhi to be the centre piece of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Salt was a mantra that encapsulated, for the poorest rustic to see, the exploitative relationship into which India had been bound by imperialist Britain. Here was a symbol, moreover, that made possible the transcendence of all internal divisions in the common fight against the alien Raj. Premchand wrote in unabashedly adulatory terms in the second issue of Hansa: 'We

---

36 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, p. 178.

are great admirers of Mahatmaji's practical wisdom. By God, whatever he does is unsurpassable. No one knows from where, he fished out the salt tax which has set the whole country ablaze. There is no other tax that is realised from the poorest of the poor, and that has been so stoutly opposed in the Assembly.'[37] Salt thus enabled Premchand not only to write in glowing terms about Gandhi, but also to project an image of the Congress that made it the lone organisation of the people that was wedded to the cause of freedom.

Throughout the year that it lasted, Premchand remained an inspired and inspiring supporter of the Civil Disobedience Movement. He assailed in no measured terms the repression let loose by the government on peaceful volunteers:[38]

> We have witnessed the dance of Englishmen's demoniacism. It is difficult to improve upon this race in cowardice, meanness and cruelty. Still, much more is happening than we had anticipated. There is no law, no rule, no morality, no religion. All around there is nothing but fluster, the agitation of someone perturbed.

Turning to advantage the official resort to terror, he added: 'In these injustices lies our victory. Delirium is the sign of death.' There were two ways of restoring peace: one human and the other demoniac. The latter meant machine gun and the former meant acting in accordance with the real state of the country.

---

37 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 46.

38 Ibid.

True to its nature, wrote Premchand, the government had opted for the machine gun.[39]

Aggravation of repression was necessary for the success of the movement for another reason also. Taking a strictly Gandhian view of satyagraha, Premchand explained:[40]

> What is the basic element of non-violent struggle? That we should oblige the enemy to commit so much repression that he may fall in his own eyes, that his conscience should begin to hate him, and his army and police should refuse to obey his repressive commands. At the same time, we should continue to abide by all the canons of civility.

It may be recalled in this context that, in what must have been a creative writer's intimations of things to come, Premchand had shown in Rangbhumi precisely this kind of a situation in which soldiers had put down their rifles when ordered to fire upon a crowd of peaceful agitators.[41]

He also emphasised the demonstration effect that the satyagrahis' suffering had on people in general; in increasing numbers they felt drawn towards the movement. Thus it happened that in cities and towns where it was difficult to gather together ten or twenty volunteers, a similar number was now courting

---

39 Ibid, p. 46, pp. 52-3, pp. 61-2.

40 Ibid, p. 64.

41 Rangbhumi, p. 513.

arrest everyday. Also, that prominent Liberals like Madan Mohan Malaviya and Syed Hasan were now 'performing tapasya in jail'. In a more pragmatic strain, marking a minor departure from the strict Gandhian position, he pointed to the administrative disarray that was caused by satyagraha, a disarray that threatened the government with economic and political insolvency. He saw signs of such a happening in the large number of ordinances the government had been forced to issue in order to deal with the daily swelling ranks of non-violent volunteers. These 'illegal or lawless laws' - Gandhi had popularised the notion - clearly indicated that the government had reached its tether's end. Premchand ended this article in a vein that epitomises the mood and spirit of the 1930 struggle: 'May you be complimented on wielding the danda, and we on having it wielded on us! If there is a regulator of this world, he will do justice. We possess the power of our truth.'[42]

Fortified with 'salt', Premchand dilated on his favourite theme of the interests of the poor. 'The swaraj agitation', he wrote in Hansa, 'is the agitation of the poor.' Among the poor he was particularly concerned about the peasants. Unlike the workers - the other sizable segment of the poor - the peasants had no organisations of their own.[43] Even the middle class Congress leaders could not feel the pain and anguish of the

---

42 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 67.

43 This need is expressed in Premchand's fiction. See Kayakalpa, p. 41, p. 113; see also Karmabhumi, p. 252.

peasantry, although for reasons of justice and policy they did take up the advocacy of peasants' interests. With the advent of Salt Satyagraha this would change.[44] A year later, soon after the Congress had ratified the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Premchand emphasised the fact that the Congress' conception of swaraj was one in which the interests of peasants, workers and other poor sections would be paramount.[45]

Characteristically, however, the passionate advocacy of the poor was accompanied by familiar appeals to the propertied classes. More than during the Non-co-operation Movement, Premchand this time emphasised the long-term substantial losses these classes were suffering as a result of the subordinate, and essentially exploitative, relationship with the British which they had no option but to accept. Once this incubus was removed, they would not only have the dignity of free human being but also the possibility of fostering their material interests without being curbed by colonial constraints. True, the post-swaraj dispensation in the country would not permit zamindars and capitalists the kind of grim and cruel internal exploitation that the colonial rulers had deliberately encouraged them to practise. But in real terms the loss caused by this check would be more than offset by the possibilities of expansion and investment - let alone moral gains - that swaraj would have in store for them.[46]

---

44 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, pp. 41-8.

45 Ibid, p. 74.

46 Ibid, pp. 41-5.

It is significant that having whole-heartedly supported the Civil Disobedience Movement from its very inception, Premchand was avid in his acceptance of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Hailing it as a success, the success of moral over brute force, he complimented Gandhi for achieving, like a shrewd commander, maximum gains with minimum losses. Besides all the prominent Congress leaders, about eighty thousand volunteers had gone to jail during the year of the struggle. This was nothing in comparison to the sacrifice of fifty lakh soldiers made by Britain and of fifteen lakh made by India during the great war of 1914-18. And what were the gains of these sacrifices? As against this, the unarmed satyagrahis had forced the mighty British Empire, braving its machine guns and aeroplanes, to admit their strength. This became possible because Gandhi had given the country the 'invincible weapon of ahimsa and satyagraha'. He did concede that the desired objective of complete freedom had not been achieved. But he justified the compromise by quoting Gandhi, the supreme commander of the movement: 'Sacrifices are necessary up to a point; but to ask for them beyond that point is the climax of foolishness.' If the commander felt that more would be gained, at this juncture, through compromise than through struggle, he could not be said to have committed an error.[47] As his own commentary on the justification, Premchand added:

---

47 Ibid, pp. 72-4.

> ... Is it a small gain that the same government which dismissed our effort as contemptible and made fun of it is now forced to treat with us? Once the opponent has accepted our strength, he dare not challenge us again.... The British government will never again have the courage to face the combined strength of India. If it still has any hope, that lies in the mutual enmity of various Indian sections and communities.

This, Premchand warned, was something that the Congress would have to guard against. It had to ensure that at the negotiations to be conducted at the Round Table Conference, the country's united voice was heard.

There was, clearly, an element of special pleading in this justification of the compromise that had brought about the suspension of the movement. In fact, the avidity of Premchand's acceptance of the compromise almost reflected his anxiety lest it should be rejected by the Congress. He was afraid that the opponents of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact would persist in their opposition and persuade the general body of the Congress to turn it down. Not that they refrained from doing so. They even staged a black flag demonstration against Gandhi. But to no avail. In the face of the Mahatma's great influence, noted Premchand with evident relief, they could do nothing.[48]

This anxiety to see the compromise effected was in keeping with the justification he had offered to Keshoram Sabberwal, on

---

48 Ibid, p. 74.

the eve of the movement, for feeling unhappy with the proposed boycott of the councils: 'We should take whatever little or much we get....' Even when Gandhi was in London for the Round Table Conference, and, following Irwin's departure, Willingdon's government came down upon the Congress with a heavy hand, thereby violating at least the spirit if not also the letter of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Premchand was worried that the compromise could be threatened by militant elements within the Congress. Particularly dangerous in this respect was Jawaharlal Nehru. He was going about telling people that there could be no straying from the path of war after the vow of complete independence had been taken at Lahore. Moreover, since it was certain that the Mahatma was not going to bring independence from London, they in India had no business to slump back into slumber.[49] Premchand was alarmed. He wrote to Nigam with a concern that carried with it more than a hint of disapproving sarcasm: 'How much poison Jawaharlal is spawning these days. Preparations are afoot for revolution.'[50]

Premchand's loyalty to the Congress was unquestioned. Even during the debilitating aftermath of the Civil Disobedience Movement, when the British were able to deepen divisions within the Indian society by holding out the prospect of constitutional concessions, Premchand stood by the Congress and projected an idealised image of it. Writing in April 1932, he described it

---

49 S. Gopal, ed, Collected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delhi, 1972, vol. V, pp. 3-5.

50 Chitthi Patri, vol. I, p. 186.

as the only organisation that pleaded on behalf of the people. If it demanded and fought for swaraj, the desire that impelled it was not to enjoy power but to see the country happy. He wrote:[51]

> The fact is that England does not want to part with even a small portion of political power. The Congress is the only organisation that wants the rule of the people in the real sense; that keeps off caste squabbles and endeavours for the nation's redemption; that treats as supreme the interests of poor peasants; that wants to make the nation powerful by creating unity in diversity; that subscribes to the fundamental belief that the country should be governed in its own interest, and we may not be oppressed and humiliated in our own country ... and our people may not have to live like animals.... We want a swaraj in which, instead of selfishness and exploitation, morality and religion would enjoy primacy....

Its epic role in the struggle for freedom apart, Premchand also highlighted the efforts made by the Congress towards ushering in all-round regeneration in the Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi had already waged a struggle on behalf of the untouchables. It was beginning to yield results although a great deal still remained to be achieved, especially in the country-side. In addition to that, in its own collective life the

---

51 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 91.

Congress was providing a model of community life that transcended all narrow differences of caste and creed. For its volunteers lived in camps that observed no such distinctions. 'In this way', Premchand rejoiced, 'has been laid the foundations of a united nation.'[52] In the matter of women's emancipation, too, the Congress had contributed significantly by inspiring them with the message of freedom and inducing them to break out of the seclusion of purdah.[53]

All along, and in spite of the reservations he may have felt, Premchand maintained a stance of fidelity to the Congress. True to his own conception of nationalism and swaraj, and having convinced himself that the Congress was the chosen instrument of Indian nationalism, he invested the premier nationalist organisation with a progressive and democratic image. It was this image that he kept projecting till the last through the pages of Hansa and Jagaran, a weekly that he edited from August 1932 to May 1934.[54]

What is striking about Premchand's attitude towards the Congress is his invariable retreat from a militant tactical position into which he was placed, willingly or unwillingly, during the tide of a popular movement. During the Non-co-operation Movement, we have seen, he passionately championed the multi-faceted idea of non-co-operation without any reservations.

---

52 Ibid, p. 93.

53 Ibid.

54 Premchand Vishva Kosh, vol. II, p. 159.

For sometime after Chauri Chaura also he kept an extremist tactical position. But then, like the rest in the Congress, he veered to a tactical acceptance of council entry with a degree of conviction that made it difficult for him even on the eve of the Dandi March to understand why the councils should have been boycotted as part of the fight. Hence, too, his eagerness that, whatever Willingdon's government might have been up to, the Gandhi-Irwin compromise was not allowed to be set aside by Congress militants like Nehru. In fact, from now onward, spanning the last six years of his life, his journalistic writings increasingly betray a note of desperation that the work possible from within the councils may not, at any count, be neglected. Indeed, there are occasions when his writings on the possibilities of council work match the passion of his advocacy of the two Gandhian movements. Writing about the possibility of new elections to the Assembly, pending the finalisation of the proposed constitution for India, Premchand hoped that the Swarajists and the awakened public would succeed in stamping out the lackeys of the government:[55]

> Fear of the Swaraj party has already thrown into disarray the sycophantish and time-serving members, and in the coming elections they may try to appear before the public with changed colours and wide ranging promises. But the public is no longer so innocent as to trust such unpatriotic

---

55 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 260.

> members who, in order to retain the confidence of the government and to remain its beneficiaries, had enacted laws that were shameful. No longer do we need to send such selfish, weak and inactive members to the councils and the assembly. We will have to return members who have given evidence of their services, fearlessness and unselfishness; those who did not flinch while renouncing everything for the sake of the public. Only such people can lead us in the fight for freedom.... The Swaraj party is saddled with a responsibility at this juncture, and one hopes that they realise this. The nation relies on their sacrifices and courage.

Having convinced himself that 'a constitutional movement is our only option', Premchand argued that the reason why little had so far been achieved through work in the councils could not be seen in the weakness of the constitutional movement per se; it lay 'in the indifference of our political movement towards the public'. Before the Non-co-operation Movement transformed the situation, politics in the country was a source of pastime and self-advertisement for a handful of able and ambitious persons in the cities. They were content to have a few positions, a few places in the councils, and a few rights. In the process they were inducted into the exploitative system. The change that Gandhi had brought about needed to be accelerated in order that its gains could be maximised and consolidated:[56]

---

56 Ibid, p. 191.

> We cannot have lasting political progress without creating proper awakening and strong organisation within the nation. We need patriots who would get involved in the task of nation-making with the same single-mindedness, zeal and sense of sacrifice with which they had got immersed in satyagraha. Thanks to the Congress, the nation does not lack leaders who can prepare it to gain the maximum advantage from the forthcoming system. The Congress has organisation, influence, the urge for public service, and spirit of sacrifice.

Premchand, therefore, wanted the Congress, endowed with the requisite qualifications as it was, to lift the satyagraha movement and devote itself to the new programme of constitutional movement. 'It would then be able', he felt certain, 'to do a very great service to the nation.'[57]

It is important to note, in this context, that even though the shifts in Premchand's tactical positions coincided roughly with similar shifts within the Congress, he did not always take a position that agreed with the most advanced and militant position within the Congress at that point in time. This fact acquires particular significance when seen in relation to another fact, which is that with regard to its socio-economic programme, Premchand invariably supported the most progressive stance within the Congress. There was thus, very often, a striking lag between the ideological and tactical positions taken by him. The socio-

---

57 Ibid.

economic content that he gave to his conception of nationalism was considerably more radical than the means and methods he was generally willing to support. In fact, something of the fascination Gandhi exercised on him stemmed from the belief made possible by the Mahatma that major socio-political changes could be effected without recourse to revolution in the generally accepted sense of the term. Writing in June 1931, when he had begun desperately pleading for a 'constitutional movement' as against satyagraha, he commented: 'Mahatma Gandhi does not want a revolution; nor has revolution ever brought about the redemption of a people. Mahatmaji has shown us a way that would bring the benefits of revolution while avoiding the atrocities that it entails.'[58] Premchand wanted a revolution without a revolution.

Hence, also, his insistence on combining 'constitutional movement' with serious and systematic implementation of Gandhi's constructive programme. Arguing that satyagraha be given up by the Congress, he now described constructive work as an essential preparation for achieving real swaraj. Otherwise, as he put it, swaraj would mean no more than 'Mr Nayadu succeeding James'; and how would this benefit the public? Unhappy that Nehru should have dismissed constructive work as fit only for old women, Premchand dilated on how it was more important than, indeed the very raison d'etre of, the political struggle for freedom:[59]

---

58 Ibid, p. 78.

59 Ibid, p. 262.

> ... much more than political reforms, constructive work can serve the interests of the public, and make people's lives happier and richer.... To have his share of the land revenue reduced by half does not contribute in the same measure to the welfare of the peasant than does removal of superstitions or freedom from false rituals and ceremonies. Why at all do we want swaraj? Simply so that we may make the nation prosperous and happy, and have the capability to spend more on constructive programmes. Isn't it?

Another illustration of Premchand's inability to support tactics that would have been in consonance with his advanced ideological position is provided by his attitude towards Nehru. We have seen how he scorned, not without getting alarmed, Nehru's preparations for revolution, and, contrary to Nehru's dismissal of it, described constructive work as the sole justification for swaraj. In both these cases Premchand was in disagreement with Nehru's tactical preferences because these implied a more militant political confrontation with the Raj than Premchand was willing to settle for. But so far as Nehru's ideological position within the Congress was concerned, Premchand fully supported his efforts to have the Congress programmes and policies impregnated with a radical socio-economic content. At least on one occasion, he got so carried away by his advocacy of Nehru's programme of 'scientific socialism' as to say that if inevitable there would be no flinching away from class war. It

is a different matter, though, that he softened the possible effect of this uncharacteristic acceptance of class war by adding that the Congress was not 'desirous of needlessly fighting against the propertied people'.[60] Judging by his writings on the subject, it would appear, however, that Premchand's support to 'scientific socialism' was more in the nature of a vague and sentimental idealism. Thus it happened that among the reasons Premchand found for 'scientific socialism' to be the basis of Congress' policies were its inevitability in the 20th century and suitability for Indian culture in that it was in perfect agreement with Vedantic monism:[61]

> The 20th century is the century of socialism, and this may possibly take the form of communism in course of time. In a country like India where a large proportion of the population consists of the poor ... what ideal other than socialism can be adopted. If a referendum were held within the Congress today, the majority, we believe, would subscribe to socialism, and just a step or two behind would be seen communism....

Without meaning to be critical, Premchand added: 'Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is a socialist, like almost all Congressmen are; may not be so in practice, but certainly in ideas'.[62]

---

60 Ibid, p. 217.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

As for the other reason why India should embrace socialism, Premchand wrote, giving expression to a view shared by a number of Congress Socialists:[63]

> ... Here the ground has already been cleared for socialism by Vedantic monism. All that we have to do is to implement that monism in practice. When the same common soul inhabits all men, why then distinctions between big and small, rich and poor? We think that one who does not support socialism is not a Hindu.

And this impels him to draw an imaginary and idealised picture of socialism and to predict its inevitability, incidentally not for India alone, to the Vedantic monism of which it is particularly suited, but for the whole world:[64]

> Socialism will have no place for such conflicts. Why should there be thefts where all are equally rich or poor? Why would there be law courts where there is no question of private property?.... Why would there be a countless army of beggars where all are equally educated and have the same means of progressing and making their lives meaningful?.... It is an insult to humanity that one man should consider the other inferior and try to fatten on the earnings of his sweat. This can continue only so long as the public is not enlightened.... Today the roots of capitalism are hollowing out in the world, and for

---

63 Ibid, p. 224.

64 Ibid.

> preserving its existence it is obliged to compromise with socialism. Fascism and Nazism are the manifestations of this compromise. But there are signs that in the near future the capitalism of today will be lying on the ground, and on its dead body would be flowing the stream of socialism.

Implicit in the romantic nature of his radicalism was, to a considerable extent, the divergence between his ideological and tactical positions. That this divergence was typical of the middle class radicals in general, and not simply a personal trait, is nowhere better reflected than in Premchand's own fiction, especially the novels. Premashrama, Rangbhumi, Kayakalpa (1926), Karambhumi, and Godan show the poor, particularly peasants, pitted against the foreign oppressors - who may or may not physically appear in the narrative - and the internal oppressors in the form of rajas and zamindars, capitalists and the English educated middle classes. The lethal quality of the latter is worsened by their two-facedness. The zamindar, capitalist and the middle class man have one foot planted in the nationalist movement, from where they supposedly represent the people and their interests, while the other foot remains firmly rooted within the colonial set-up. The plight of the peasant in particular and the poor in general is pathetic.

But Premchand's dilemma is particularly acute with regard to the middle class men. They are the people he turns to for the salvation of the poor. Their idealism is genuine. His perception

sharpened by an insider's view, he is also able to see through them. Hence his disillusionment with them. The result is that in the nationalist section of the educated middle classes - the section to which he himself belongs - he reposes hope even as he is disenchanted with them. Unable to resolve the tension of this love-hate relationship with his own class, he creates heroes who falter, fail, struggle, learn, and emerge again. It is these dedicated souls from the middle classes who are to guide the nation and its poor to a swaraj that would not be tantamount to the substitution of the external by the internal oppressor.

As part of the perceptual constraints created by his social origins may be mentioned his distance from the other classes, those above and below his own class. The distance makes it difficult for him to see possible national leaders and 'shepherds' coming from any but his own class. The zamindars and capitalists he can see only as exploiters. The latter, particularly, appears as a stereotype embodying little else than the worst kind of acquisitiveness. Relatively greater empathy is shown in the portrayal of zamindars, especially the 'old' type among them. But on the whole they, too, are seen from a distance. The peasants - constituting the main segment of the poor to figure prominently in Premchand's fiction - are similarly viewed as a single unit from outside. Except in moments of metamorphosis represented by artistic creation - moments that bring into being a 'Poos ki Raat', 'Kafan' or a Godan - Premchand cannot quite

enter their skin. Ordinarily he seems to share with others of his own background the belief that the poor and the oppressed, because of their utter helplessness and simplicity, are incapable of taking charge of their own affairs. Again and again his fiction brings home the message that it is for the victims to rise and shape their own destiny. But his own considered view seems to remain that the freedom struggle has to be for the masses, has to have masses in it, but under the aegis of the middle class. To this we shall return in a later chapter.

What, then, is the picture of the middle class nationalist leadership that emerges from Premchand's novels? Since the picture does not vary qualitatively over the years, a few examples could be taken to provide an outline of it. While nationalist characters, even nationalist politics, make their appearance in almost all the novels from Sevasadan to Godan, it is primarily in Rangbhumi and Karambhumi that the nationalist movement constitutes the main theme; Godan also treats of them at some length, but within the context of their impinging upon the rural society, the sombre totality of which Premchand portrays in his magnum opus.

Vinay, in Rangbhumi, may be seen as the first full-length delineation of the idealist radical leader. Belonging to an affluent zamindar family, he is inspired by the injustice and oppression he sees around him to devote his life to the cause of the poor. But idealism and dedication cannot be a substitute for understanding of and identification with the oppressed. His radical concerns, consequently, retain a dreamy quality about them. From a distance the oppressed evoke sympathy. Seen from

close quarters, they inspire a feeling of uneasy, almost aggressive, revulsion. More so if they betray a determination to take care of their dignity vis-a-vis the superior classes. From a distance, and if directed against the foreign masters, even this assertion of self-respect could have appeared as a sign of awakening and hope. But if the leader himself happens to be the cause for the oppressed to feel called upon to safeguard their dignity, he cannot but react in a way that accords with conventionally expected response patterns. Thus it happens that Vinay is beside himself with blind rage when he finds himself in such a situation. Despite his radicalism he turns against these poor miserable people. Yet he refuses to face the fact that he has fallen from his own ideals. He, therefore, tries to persuade himself that whatever he is doing is in the interest of the oppressed. It is this capacity for self-delusion that enables him to act in a manner that permits the coexistence of ideological radicalism and selfishness and vanity.

Premchand's effectiveness as a writer lies in the sympathy with which he unfolds the complexities of this coexistence. Unlike his treatment of the other internal oppressors, his depiction of the middle class leaders successfully shows the amalgam of contradictory qualities and characteristics in the same person. It is this amalgam that rules out any simplistic generalisation. There are no neat categories of good and bad. In the same person selfishness coexists with sense of service, commitment to the larger cause with petty concern for personal

promotion, and breadth of vision with immediate factional concerns. Vinay is Premchand's representation of this complex type. It is significant, however, that the novel's denouement consists of Vinay's final transcendence of his many limitations. Unable to bear the contempt and ridicule to which he is publicly exposed as a result of what is seen as his betrayal of the people - his self-image remains virtually unsullied - he kills himself. Instantaneously he is worshipped as a martyr by the very people whose scorn had led him to put an end to his life.

The denouement shows that despair with the simultaneously mean and self-sacrificing nationalist leader will not drive out the hope reposed in him. This hope, moreover, as also the despair, is felt not only by Premchand but also by the people as they are represented in his fiction. In the final act of Vinay's sacrifice, too, may be seen a basis for hope. True, for all his larger concerns, the middle class leader cannot rise above petty personal concerns. But at least in one of these petty concerns is a reason for hope. In the final analysis, Premchand seems to suggest, the middle class leader will not be permitted by his own vanity - his obsession with his public image - to subordinate the larger cause to narrower considerations.

Within days of completing Rangbhumi, Premchand began work on Kayakalpa. Vinay was now reborn, as it were, in the person of Chakradhar. Having as its main theme the corruptibility of power, Kayakalpa showed, among other things, how leadership of popular

oppositional movements tended to corrupt the leaders. Highly educated and subscribing to progressive values, Chakradhar is a votary of non-violence. He supports a group of Chamars who refuse to perform begar in an Indian state, and is sent to jail. But when, later, some poor villagers refuse to do begar for him, he forgets all his progressive values and non-violence and assaults one of these men.[65] He, too, is repentant later on.

Amarkant, the protagonist of Karmabhumi, carries on the tradition, though he is a refined version of Vinay and Chakradhar. His love for the poor is equally genuine. But in his ability to relate to the poor villagers he is an improvement upon the earlier types of nationalist leaders. He dedicates himself to the service of the poor and makes the countryside his sphere of operation. However, he cannot always rise above such considerations as maintaining his undisputed leadership and public image. In the process, he does not mind making subtle manoeuvres that would crush his trusted lieutenant from whom he is beginning to fear a threat to his leadership; it does not matter if the unhappy operation involves taking advantage of government officials.[66]

In Karmabhumi occurs a small incident that constitutes one of the most effective and damaging indictments of the educated middle classes' concern for the oppressed that Premchand was so prone to offer in his novels. The incident involves a band of

---

65 Premchand, Kayakalpa, Ilahabad, 1980, pp. 256-57.

66 Premchand, Karmabhumi, Ilahabad, 1973, pp. 247-58.

European soldiers who have raped on Indian woman. Obviously intended as a typical specimen of the kind of common incidents that, almost throughout British rule, made Indians increasingly conscious of Europeans' racialism, Premchand's depiction has the additional feature, not so common, of the guilty soldiers being beaten for their audacity. It is Amarkant and his friends who teach the necessary 'lesson' to the soldiers. They have avenged a wrong. Their job is done, and conscience satisfied. Not for once do their thoughts turn to what happened to the poor victim of the rape. It is left to a woman, Amarkant's wife, to chide them: 'Why don't you all go one day to find out about her, or have you freed yourself from your obligation by delivering a speech?'[67] This incident, described with a degree of economy and consequently with great effect, occurs fairly early in the narrative and sets the tone for the portrayal of Amarkant, and through him of the educated nationalists. All through he cares more for his leadership and image than for the poor oppressed whose suffering has drawn him so far away from his family and induced him to court real hardships.

But in this case also hope provides the final, if not consistently dominant, note. Amarkant goes to jail. He has time for introspection. He looks back at his work among the villages. He cannot but face the fact that service was secondary to self. He comes out a chastened man, purified and spiritually enriched.

The hope provided by Amarkant's spiritual and moral transformation cannot, however, be seen as Premchand's final and

---

67 Ibid, pp. 27-8, p. 34.

unmixed response to the middle class nationalist leadership. In Godan he is back with his despair. If anything, hope tends to get weaker and despair more pronounced in his masterpiece. There is no counterpart of Vinay, Chakradhar or Amarkant in Godan. They are pivotal characters who can be seen as Premchand's representation of nationalist leadership at the top level. Prof. Mehta, Miss Malati, Mr Khanna, Rai Saheb, Pandit Omkarnath, and Mirza Saheb, all of whom are involved in nationalist politics in different ways, are not leaders but participants; even though some of them participate at the level of council politics. Premchand, in this novel, seems more interested in understanding the institutional and societal levers of nationalist politics than its personalities. The none too cheering thrust that he offers is that the dominant role is played by big money. As for the individuals, even the better ones among them like Prof. Mehta and Mirza Saheb, have only marginal roles to perform. Maybe, aesthetically, this is Premchand's reason for keeping out the 'leaders' as against the participants. However, only the proportion is changed. Both hope and despair continue to constitute the totality of Premchand's attitude towards the nationalist leadership.[68]

---

68 Some of Premchand's short stories express also his despair at the mercenary and calculating nature of the nationalist leadership. See Mansarovar, vol. II, Kanuni Kumar, pp. 289-300; Kutsa, pp. 148-52; Gupta Dhan, vol. II, Rashtra ka Sevak, p. 80.

The standard portrayal of the educated middle class nationalist in Premchand's novels strikingly resembles the picture that emerges of Premchand, the journalist, as he responded to the national movement through its ebbs and tides. He does not seem to have faced the fact that the tactics he was generally prepared to favour were too tame for, and often even inconsonant with, the results he wanted to achieve. Consequently, a compromise of sorts was struck with _status quo_. The future that he ideally wanted to belong to the _janata_ threatened to become more distant and uncertain. In the immediate present dominant interests got suitably accommodated. Ironically, these methods could only have brought about a freedom that would be tantamount to replacing alien with 'native' oppressors.