Chapter IV

VISION OF SWARAJ

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Premchand's nationalism did not end with a recognition and propagation of the cause of national liberation under the Congress umbrella. He was no more spokesman of the Congress - even though he stood by it as a matter of principle. Nor did he, unlike nationalists formally associated with a political party, feel invariably constrained by the need to paper over inner contradictions in order to present a surface of unity for the sake of the freedom struggle. In many of his journalistic writings and short stories, written specifically to inspire nationalist fervour, he may have overlooked these contradictions. But his novels dealt more critically with the contemporary Indian reality, exposing its ills quite faithfully. The sensitivity and perspicacity of his later realism reaches its highest point not only in Godan but also in short stories like 'Poos ki Raat' and Kafan'. These works are nationalist in the larger sense of the term. They illustrate how the colonial system is itself diseased; it would permit no relief without its elimination, followed by a radical reconstruction of society.

The explosive logic of his ideological pronouncements coexisted, we have seen in the last chapter, with his Congress type pragmatism. He continued to stress, it is true, the unity of the nation, making internal differences appear as minor, irrespective of whether they existed between Hindus and Muslims,

peasants and zamindars, workers and capitalists, or untouchables and caste Hindus. At the same time, implicit in his work was a recognition of the falsity of this formulation, even though he may never, perhaps, have said so explicitly.

The inherent tension of this dual realisation is nowhere better reflected than in the expression of those ideas and attitudes in Premchand's writings that bear upon his conception of swaraj. For this conception moved along separate courses and comprised elements that were often irreconcilable. Roughly three broad strands can be discerned in the complex of views that he expressed, directly or indirectly, with regard to the image he had of free India. The first strand moved along bourgeois democratic lines and followed the Congress pattern of promising a new deal to all the sections of society and emphasizing that the poor oppressed needed to be especially attended to. The second rested on the assumption that swaraj meant the people's tomorrow and this entailed nothing short of a total transformation of the existing social relationships. The third strand, revivalistic in its orientation, subscribed to an indigenous romanticism that was intended to counter the racial and cultural arrogance of the western masters.

The complex of different, even diametrical, strands indicates basically the aspirations of the liberal nationalist intelligentsia. It reflects what the intelligentsia generally deemed necessary, thought was possible, and dreamt of as the ideal society.

Premchand was, naturally enough for a writer whose social commitment was the organising principle of his writing, constantly grappling with the future of his society. Swaraj per se was not, for him, the raison d'etre of the freedom struggle. Swaraj was not an end in itself. He would rather not have it if all that it amounted to was a shift from white to brown masters. An essential prerequisite for removing the ills of his society, swaraj was a means for bringing about suraj. Writing in April 1933, Premchand scorned away those who considered suraj as secondary and insisted that, irrespective of its actual content, swaraj must come. He was glad that such people constituted only a small minority. For the majority it was important that swaraj should mean better living conditions, not just that their voice was theoretically heard in the new political arrangement. They wanted to control their own natural resources, to consume their own things, settle the prices of their own things, besides having some relaxation to enjoy a little poetry, energy and joy in life. Without this, for the overwhelming majority of the people, swaraj could have little meaning and less appeal.[1]

Suraj was so important in his scheme of things that he could even dramatise its significance by saying that if suraj could somehow be obtained without swaraj, people would not mind settling for suraj minus swaraj. 'The point is to eat mangoes, not to count the trees.'[2] People's welfare as a necessary

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1 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, pp. 152-55.

2 Ibid.

justification for swaraj had become, in the very early stages of his career, an essential ingredient of Premchand's thinking. In one of his earliest short stories, dealing with the life of Mazzini, he wrote of the Italian people's struggle against the internal oppressors after they had thrown out their external masters. 'Earlier they were groaning under the repression of an alien people, now of their own.'[3] This story appeared in the first collection of Premchand's short stories that came out in 1908. Turning to 'Ahuti', written in 1930, one could see how consistently this element affected his thinking.[4] This is what Roopmani, a character in 'Ahuti' says:

> If after the coming of swarajya, too, property has the same power and the educated remain selfish as before, then I would say it is better that such a swarajya never comes. It is the greed of British mahajans and the self-interest of the educated which is crushing us. Will the same maladies, for the removal of which we are endangering our lives, be welcomed simply because they have turned swadeshi and are no longer videshi? At least to me swaraj does not mean that Govind sits in John's place.

In Karmabhumi Amar declares: 'I do not call it liberation that power will shift from one section to another and they, too, will rule by force.'[5] A year earlier, in 1931, Devidin had exposed,

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3 Premchand, Soz-e-Watan, p. 79. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj refers to Italy and Mazinni similarly.

4 Premchand, Kafan, Ilahabad, 1973. Aahuti, pp. 96-106.

5 Karmabhumi, p. 312.

in Ghaban, the glaring gap in the life-style and public stance of the nationalist leaders, to ask them the crucial question whether they cared for the poor they wailed so much about, and to say: 'When it is not your rule, you run after luxuries like this. When your rule comes, you will just devour the people.'[6]

This concern for more than formal swaraj shows in Godan also. The landlord-money-lender-capitalist combine, operating under the colonial aegis, squeezes the peasantry dry, and Dhania bursts out indignantly: 'Rob the poor. And then demand suraj. Suraj will not be had by going to jail. Suraj can only be got by dharam and by justice.'[7] Dhania's suraj, it may be clarified, is different from Premchand's suraj. Her suraj is the East U.P. colloquial for swaraj. Without quite using the term for pun, Premchand employs Dhania's anguished outburst to emphasise the necessity of suraj as a necessary justification for swaraj. Swaraj can be real only if it corresponds to Dhania's suraj. The system, not just the personnel manning it, must change.

The three strands constituting Premchand's conception of swaraj are not seen by him as pulling in different directions. They jostle together in the vast corpus he reproduced during three decades of varied writing, often getting intertwined in a way that makes it no easy task to isolate them for purposes of intellectual clarity. Retrospectively isolated, they betray

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6 Premchand, Ghaban, Ilahabad, 1975, pp. 171-72.

7 Godan, p. 110.

obvious irreconcilabilities. For example, acceptance of a bourgeois democratic swaraj, even if only because it seemed the most likely in the near future, did mean a strengthening of bourgeois forces. Alternately it also meant a weakening of the common man's swaraj which would recede further into the future; its possibility had been indefinitely postponed.

One could almost talk of the three strands representing three separate visions that, mixed in varying proportion, constituted the totality of Premchand's conception of swaraj. In expressing his views, from time to time and through a variety of forms, he did not, naturally, work out to their logical and the mutual relationships and implications of these views. They represented his responses to a whole series of problems relating to the present and future of his society. What mattered most, in the expression of these views, was the fact that they were inspired by a set of common objectives: they sought to build a self-reliant, self-respecting and progressive India; they were inspired by idealism; their central concern was with the poor and the oppressed sections of society; they tended to rest on the Congress for their realisation in practice.

However well they may have coexisted in a given mind and society, it is the irreconcilabilities of the three strands that reflect the confusions, ambiguities, contradictions and uncertainties of a sensitive creative mind. In fact, given the nature of Premchand's commitment to writing as also the nature of his writings, the irreconcilabilities reflect more than the state of a particular mind; they reflect the plight of a certain

segment of society that embraced almost the whole of the educated middle classes including the leadership of the Indian National Congress. The actual proportion of different elements may have varied in different 'mixes' - indeed it did in Premchand's own case from time to time - but as a class they betrayed the dilemma that Premchand's vision of swaraj so obviously embodies. Nor was it always, and altogether, a dilemma of which the contemporary actors were unaware. Very often, and substantially, the irreconcilabilities stemmed from attempts to short-circuit the logic of a particular political or ideological position at a point where it seemed to acquire inconvenient proportions, but without giving up the advantages held out by the position. At times apparently inconsistent ideals could be woven together with the thread of romanticism. But whether it was conscious or unconscious, there invariably was a recoil from the implications of a progressive stance. In some cases it came earlier than in others. And almost always the recoil occurred without much contrition. Rationalisation invariably followed.

Coming back to Premchand's vision of swaraj, an attempt could now be made to illustrate his mental make-up by seeing how he dealt with these diametrical pulls. We shall, for the purpose, examine by turn the three strands that went into the making of his conception of swaraj, and see how they related to one another.

First there was the bourgeois democratic swaraj of the type that Premchand often wrote of as a follower of the Congress.

In general the attempt was to appease all sections of society in order to evolve a national consensus so that the struggle for freedom was not adversely affected by internal divisions. While upholding this vision of swaraj, Premchand naturally reflects the Congress, or perhaps middle class, ambivalence towards the peasants vis-a-vis zamindars and the workers vis-a-vis capitalists. Soothing assurances are made to the oppressed while the oppressors are warned of dire consequences if they did not mend their ways. The nation, in this scheme, has to be built up on the basis of industrialisation. It is interesting that this basis of a free democratic India is propagated only in non-fiction. Premchand's fiction opposes industrialism as the basis of civilised society; not only for India but for the entire mankind because most of its ills in modern times can be traced to the single factor of industrialisation. In his fiction he envisages an indigenous model of swaraj which is patterned after Gandhi's Hind Swaraj.

Industrialism is accepted in Premchand's non-fictional writings from the beginning, though distinction is made, over the years, between capitalist industrialisation and socialist industrialisation. The advisability or otherwise of factors within industrialism is discussed at length. But its validity as a cherished goal is not disrupted. It was in 1905, obviously under the impact of the swadeshi movement, that Premchand began writing about industry and talked of progress and social reconstruction within its context. But his pre-1919 articles

were not explicit about the kind of industry desired; they were concerned with ways and means of promoting the manufacture and sale of indigenous goods like cloth and sugar.[8]

In 1919, in his article 'Purana Zamana: Naya Zamana' which, as we have noticed earlier, may be seen as a landmark in the development of Premchand as a mature writer, his attachment to socialism seems to influence, for the first time, his attitude towards industrialism. This article decries the ugly manifestation of capitalism and industry which has set nations against one another and led to the exploitation of the many by a few. This manifestation, however, is not seen as inevitable. The example of post-Revolution Russia is cited as an alternative. It has ushered in the age of the workers and peasants. Tomorrow belongs to them. Factories, ships and railways must be owned by them, and they should share the prosperity accruing therefrom. The article favours large scale industrialisation, opposing only its concentration in a few hands.[9] This becomes, in the articles that follow, a recurring theme, and the Soviet experiment is repeatedly mentioned admiringly.[10]

Premchand is in no doubt, in these articles, about the enormous potential industrialism holds for the benefit of mankind. Industrialism could serve the interests of the peasants, make India self-reliant, and, besides facilitating her independence, equip her in course of time to compete successfully with the

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8 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, pp. 17-22.

9 Ibid, pp. 258-69.

10 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 161-62, pp. 293-94, pp. 496-97, pp. 511-12.

rest of the world.[11] Being aware, however, of the evils that industrialism might bring in its wake, Premchand wants the country to learn from Europe the ill-effects of unbridled industrialisation and steer clear of them.[12]

It is in a posthumous article that we come across Premchand's most impassioned denunciation of capitalism. This was written during the illness that was to end his life; perhaps during intervals of lucidity and intensity that illness so often provides. It assails individualism as an essential concomitant of capitalism. But the answer lies not in going back and turning away from industrialism; humanity should, instead, move towards the new civilisation of the Soviet kind.[13]

This offers a perfect contrast to the position Premchand had earlier taken in Rangbhumi. There, too, individualism was seen as a curse in as much as it was corrosive of community life. But it was seen as integral to industrialism. But in the posthumous article he established an equation not between industrialism and individualism but between capitalism and individualism. The Soviet experiment, he would have us believe, had made it possible for men to harness industry to enrich community life without letting the monster of individualism neutralise its advantages.

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11 Ibid, p. 251, pp. 486-89.

12 Ibid, p. 328, pp. 331-33, p. 497.

13 Premchand, Mangalsutra va Anya Rachanayen, Ilahabad, undated, Mahajani Sabhyata, pp. 365-68, especially p. 367.

In any case, it is the western model of progress that Premchand here desires future India to be built on. His final preference seems to be for the Soviet form of industrialism. But the fascination for the Soviet experiment during the 1930s was within the context of the debate that Nehru had initiated in a big way within the Congress. Even earlier he had felt drawn to the Russian Revolution. But his manner of referring to the Soviet experiment in 'Purana Zamana: Naya Zamana' or Premashrama leaves no doubt about the fact that the attraction was based on fleeting bits of information. Nehru's influence appears to have been decisive in helping him formulate his socialist ideas and attitude towards the Soviet experiment with greater clarity and confidence. It is, in fact, only after listening to Nehru in Banaras that Premchand begins to talk of 'scientific socialism'.[14] It is a different matter, though, that his own advocacy of socialism remained largely romantic; as it was, at least during this phase, in Nehru's own case. Hence the significant fact that even though his vision of an industrialised society is now cast in a socialist mould, Premchand does not put forward the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The bourgeois democratic set-up would usher in socialism too.

The assumption that bourgeois democratic swaraj could also be the instrument for bringing about socialism highlights the difficulty of isolating different strands that composed Premchand's conception of swaraj. For in his writings that

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14 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 222.

touched upon a socialist future for free India has stress was on people's swaraj without the mediation of a 'guardian' class above them. People's power was an ideal with him from the first decade of the 20th century. In 1908 he wrote of the Turkish struggle for a constitutional government and laid stress on 'the importance of the janata's opinions'.[15] In 1919, a critical year in his development as also in the history of modern India, he wrote several articles that welcomed the 20th century as the age of freedom and equality the world over. They declared that the janata would come to power tomorrow. Yesterday belonged to the rich and the sultans. Today belonged to the traders and merchants. Already 'the strength of the dumb millions is becoming evident',[16] and there could be no preventing the tomorrow belonging to the people. Democracy, he asserted, 'is our ideal', and added: 'The coming age is one of workers and peasants.'[17]

Clearly enough this kind of a normative tone was inspired by certain developments in the contemporary world, and also by the aspirations of the colonised that induced them to view these developments as harbingers of hope in their struggle for freedom. There could even be discerned an element of wish-fulfilment in such exercises. But this tone also owed something to Vivekananda whose influence on Premchand had been marked and more or less

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15 Ibid, vol. I, p. 23.

16 Ibid, p. 264.

17 Ibid, pp. 268-69.

abiding. Employing a traditional idiom to offer a general principle of historical dynamics over the centuries, the Swami had said that the past of human history had belonged to the Brahmans and Kshatriyas, and the present belonged to the Vaishyas. The latter, as specified by him, were the traders and merchants to whom Premchand had conceded the domination of the present. The future, according to Vivekananda, would belong to the Shudras. These obviously were the downtrodden peasants and workers whose tomorrow Premchand was seeing as inevitable in the logic of the 20th century.[18]

Swaraj, in this blueprint of it, was not to be wrested from the foreign masters: 'Please remember, we have to claim swaraj not from the English people but from our own brethren, our own compatriots'.[19] The idea is beautifully conveyed in two of Premchand's short stories. In 'Pashu se Manushya', written in early 1920, Durga, a gardener, is servile, besides being a liar and a thief, in his dealings with a master who treats him as inferior. But a change of relationship transforms his character. With an employer who believes in equality Durga becomes dignified and honest. Premchand depicts here a utopian conception of socialism where all are working hard, sharing equality in profits, and leading simple lives.[20] The second story, belonging to 1925, mentions in passing, but significantly, that

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18 Ibid, vol. II, pp. 19-22.

19 Ibid, pp. 35-36.

20 Mansarovar, vol. VIII, Pashu se Manushya, pp. 102-13.

swaraj would be won through the exertions of common men. Mentioning how everybody, including the Swarajists, cheats him for a ride, the central character of the story, a tonga-driver, says that in course of time 'we ekka-tonga-wallas will usher in swaraj; it will certainly not come in a car.'[21] Similarly, in Premashrama, Balraj, representing the young generation of peasants, speaks proudly and with hope of the rule of cultivators in Russia, adding that recently the king of Bulgaria has been dethroned and the country is ruled by a panchayat of cultivators and workers.[22]

There were occasions when, impelled by his concern for the poor and despairing of the good sense of the propertied classes, Premchand could even rise above his usual aversion to violence and revolution. However rare such occasions may have been, as we have seen in the last chapter, Premchand could then even assert that class war would not be eschewed if it became necessary. Or he could say: 'The world will not have peace unless a society without property is organised, and the individualism bred by property eliminated.'[23]

It is, however, easy to see the romanticism that was ingrained in the vision of swaraj that envisaged a propertyless

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21 Gupta Dhan, vol. II, Tangewale ki Bar, pp. 184-89.

22 Premashram, pp. 51-52.

23 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, p. 335.
The above was written in 1933. The same year Premchand also wrote that equality must be achieved, whether through revolution or evolution. See ibid, vol. III, p. 470.

tomorrow that belonged to the poor and the oppressed of today. He may have talked of class war in the event of its becoming inevitable. But nowhere in his large corpus does he offer an alternative to the bourgeois democratic set-up. The rule of the people remains a nebulous notion that can exist alike in democratic systems patterned after the British pattern and in societies that have established the dictatorship of the proletariat on their way to a really egalitarian socio-political system.[24] He could thus joyfully hail the dawn of the age of democracy and proceed to enumerate the examples, without any discrimination, of the end of czardom in Russia and of the dethronement of the Kaiser in Germany.[25] Both were grist to his romantic mill.

Given these sure signs of the times, Premchand could confidently assert:[26]

> Today in the 20th century it is no longer the time to harp on special rights. It is no longer a matter of debate today that the distinction between the worker and the owner, the zamindar and the kisan is based on injustice and coercion. The state is no longer an organisation of the few who enjoy themselves with the taxes extorted from the poor and put down those who obstruct this enjoyment, an organisation that could at

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24 This is how Premchand perceived the Soviet experiment. It was a new civilization on the way to its ultimate goal. See ibid, vol. II, pp. 342-43.

25 Ibid, pp. 62-63.

26 Ibid, p. 328.

> the most protect the lives and property of the public. The state of today does not countenance such inequalities. The state of today is an organisation that rests on the pillar of equality. Its duty is to ensure for the whole public equal opportunities, equal amenities and equal rights. The state that refuses to see this truth cannot last long.

But for realising this ideal of swaraj, too, Premchand took care to emphasise that what the others had achieved through coercion could be achieved through patience and conversion and without bloodshed. In fact, the gains of coercion could hardly be trusted, for it could never rule out the possibility of the recrudescence of the evils that had forcibly been suppressed.[27]

The non-recognition of the need to distinguish between socialism as it was being effected through the Soviet experiment and socialism within a democratic arrangement based on the British model could be seen as another manifestation of the gap between Premchand's radical rhetoric and tactical conservatism. To the same class belongs his refusal to make a distinction between people's raj within a bourgeois democratic and within a socialist democratic system. That this should have been so becomes all the more striking if we recall that with regard to industrialism Premchand had been at pains to show how the same phenomenon acquired a different face, depending upon the socio-political system it was operating in.

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27 Ibid.

Coming to the last strand, Premchand's conception of swaraj drew also upon an indigenous model that rested on the romanticisation of pre-colonial Indian social structure and organisation. In practice, though, it amounted to the revival of a glorified Hindu past. Almost an unavoidable product of the colonial ambience, this indigenous romanticism represented a response to the arrogant cultural claims of the West that were integral to the rulers' hegemonic designs. Revivalism apart, a concrete Gandhian form of swaraj also found place in this vision of swaraj.

Premchand's attitude towards what he considered western culture and the indigenous alternative that he put forward as a counterpoise to the cultural onslaught of the rulers reflect the cultural aspect of his nationalism. In this, too, he represented more than a personal position.

The West and all it stood for was a baggage to which Indians had a very complex response. The humiliating awareness of subjection to alien rule, coupled with racial arrogance of the rulers, sometime sharpened the sense of hostility into an intense hatred for the Whites. But perhaps more humiliating was the gnawing sense of the superiority of the foreigners' culture which seemed to be evidenced in their triumphs in various parts of the world, as also in their achievements at home in the sphere of industry and science. The model of progress invariably appeared to be the western one. The emotional need of many Indians to soothe their injured self-

image, however, led them to turn inwards to their own indigenous achievements, thereby seeking to prove Indian superiority over the West. All too often they conjured up an image of the wonder that was India. But even then they failed, in the final analysis, to get rid of the nagging thought that in order to succeed India must emulate the West.[28] The result was that even as they clung tenaciously to the old Indian culture as it was or as they imagined it to be, they could not help wishing for an India that would be at par with the world even when judged by the western scale of progress. This mixed relationship with the West further heightened the Indians' sense of resentment.

Whether in his fiction or non-fiction, whether he spoke of the West and its ways, Premchand mounted serious attacks on it. These ranged from expressions of despair at the way the world was going, to allegations against western culture that were hardly sustained by sober facts. Moreover, he tended to contrast the worst manifestations of western society with the abstract ideals of Hindu society - always presuming that the normative was the real in the case of the latter - to prove the superiority of Indian over western culture. The need for

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28 In formulating a genuine, comprehensive and sustained critique of western civilization Gandhi was able to work out a cultural alternative. There was nothing aggressive about his rejection of the West; sadness and sympathy informed his critique. He did not, therefore, feel drawn towards it even in the act of rejecting it. But he was obviously an exception.

national self-respect provided the context for his outbursts against the West; and that explains the otherwise irrational railings. Intrinsic to the West, in this scheme of perception, were the variables of greed, selfishness and inhumanity. All these led to conflict as the very basis of western life. The components of Indian culture, on the contrary, were sacrifice, service, morality and religion. These made cooperation the foundation of Indian society.

Taking his cue from Vivekananda, Premchand equated western civilisation with crass materialism. Worldliness being the soul of this civilisation, a westerner's primary concern was for his own profit. In the pursuance of profit he was not the least inhibited by the thought of a fellow human being's life or property.[29] Again following Vivekanand's example, he turned the very fact of political subjugation into a cultural virtue. History had proved again and again, he wrote, that inferior cultures, by their barbaric qualities, conquered superior ones. That is why Italy could conquer Greece, and now England had occupied India. Civilisation and violent acquisitiveness had always been at loggerheads.[30]

Such reactions were not confined to what is supposed to have been the revivalistic phase of Premchand. In 1931 he

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29 Vividh Prasang, vol. I, pp. 174-82. To illustrate this he gives the example of little boys and pregnant women being compelled by the West to work for a living and speaks of the workers' and employers' constant readiness to pounce on each others' money and rights. This culture has nothing to teach to Hindus and Buddhists.

30 Ibid.

described similarly the decadent character of Europe, and contrasted it with India's 'elevated soul'. Europeans were criticised not only for drinking liquor like water, but also for making tea the basis of their life. Man, having virtually been strangled as a human being, survived merely as a machine of loot and selfishness, multiplying money and material comforts. Western democracy and political revolutions were offered as proofs of the westerner's proclivity to conflict.[31]

It is against this background that Premchand's blueprint of an indigenous swaraj has to be seen. Passionately and strongly he expressed views and sentiments that emphasised the need to revive the ancient greatness of India. But it is doubtful if he would have argued for the exclusion of western ways and institutions - democracy and industrialism being two outstanding examples - which elsewhere in his writings he praised and saw as constituting the very basis of a restructured free India.

The salvation of India, for Premchand in his revivalistic frame of mind, lies in reviving that culture which was perfected by our ancestors thousands of years ago. Based as it is on ahimsa and human brotherhood, the organising principle of this culture obviates the very need for conflict. The sphere of activity of each man is clearly defined, and duty rather than right is the guiding principle. The four-fold varna system is the basis of this non-exploitative society. The Brahman is the

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31 Vividh Prasang, vol. III, pp. 204-09.

recognised leader of society by virtue of his wisdom and not his physical prowess. The Vaishya makes money through means permitted by the society, and does so for public welfare. Kings, zamindars and such rulers worry and care for their subjects, the instincts of people being so schooled as to concentrate on obligations rather than privileges.[32] 'We are forgetting our souls', Premchand warns in an article written in the early 1920s, 'in following the western ways of materialism'. Once swarajya is achieved, we shall recover our souls; varna and ashrama dharma shall prevail; and religion shall be ascendant. 'We shall again be respected in the world and not be considered uncivilised.'[33]

Premchand's fiction develops even more this theme of corrupt western culture and its ideal Indian counterpart. This is particularly significant because fiction, more than journalistic writings, represents the emotional world of the writer, besides being a more reliable representation of the world he is writing about. In two ways Premchand expresses his anti-West sentiment here. First, he contrasts the ideal Hindu woman - a recurrent figure in his fiction - with the flirtatious western woman, thereby setting off the morality of the East with the immorality of the West.[34] Secondly, his heroes often break out

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32 Ibid.

33 Ibid, vol. II, p. 277.

34 In Karmabhumi, Amar tells Munni of the brave Rajput women who performed 'johar' in order to save their honour. This is our culture, he proudly acclaims, adding disdainfully -

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violently against White characters.[35] It is an index of the contradictory psychological needs that had to be satisfied in

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"not like the West where if Germans attack France and kill all its men, the French girls begin flirting with them." pp. 147-48.

Shanti (1920), a short story brings out his ideal best. The educated husband begins by wanting his highly traditional wife to turn Westernized so that she may read English novels and accompany him to the club. He succeeds in transforming her. But the transformation, Premchand shows, generates an inevitable pollution of character. The Westernized wife becomes selfish, indolent, luxury-loving and frivolous. The story ends with both the husband and the wife returning to their traditional ways, and living happily ever after. Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp. 80-96. Even the Englishman, Mr. Clark is shown in Rangbhumi (1925) as disliking the frivolous Western women. p. 421.

The contrast between the Indian woman and her Western or Westernized counterpart is detailed in Premsutra (1926), Gupta Dhan, vol. II, pp. 170-83; Do Sakhiyan (1928), Mansarovar, vol. IV, pp. 210-77; and Unmad (1931), Mansarovar, vol. II, pp. 116-36.

35 Kayakalpa, p. 167. Vishalsingh hits the D.M., Mr. Jim, who is refusing his request to release Chakradhar. The scene ends with Jim covering fearfully on the ground and agreeing to the demand.

Karmabhumi, pp. 27-8. Amar, Salim, and Santikumar attack with fists and hockey sticks the White soldiers who rape a village woman.

Patni se Pati (1930), in Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp. 17-29. The husband of a nationalist lady joins the national movement after hitting the White Saheb for his arrogance.

Vichitra Holi (1921), pp. 234-40, in Mansarovar, vol. III. The cook revenges himself on his White official master by tricking other Indians to celebrate Holi in his house. They throw coloured water on the White when he returns. He is absolutely livid, and with his painted face tries to catch the miscreants but fails to restore his dignity.

a subject society that whereas the ruffianly European character is often treated, to good effect, physically in Premchand's fiction, the message that is invariably imparted, with obvious relish on the part of the writer, is that of non-violence.[36]

In an article written in the early 1920s Premchand described the rediscovery of India's own soul as the chief advantage, almost the raison d'etre, of swaraj. His explication of what this rediscovery would mean gives an idea of the revivalist orientation of his thinking:[37]

> The greatest advantage that the country would derive from swaraj is the resurgence of Indian life. In the life of every people there is a characteristic virtue. Valour is the chief trait of the English, and love of freedom the chief trait of the French. Similarly, devotion to religion is the chief characteristic of India. The main basis of our life was religion. Our life was woven by the thread of religion. But the influence of western ideas is ruining our religion; we are forgetting our own knowledge and learning, turning away from our ways of life and customs, and like westerners

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36 A recurring scene in Premchand's fiction is provided by disaffection of the masses threatening to break out in violence but being contained by the hero at the crucial moment. This the hero achieves by intervening with a Gandhian speech of "Stop or let me die." See Premashram, p. 182; p. 281. Kayakalpa, p. 32; p. 121; p. 152. Karmabhumi, p. 244, p. 269.

37 Vividh Prasang, vol. II, pp. 276-77.

> treating the pursuit of wealth as the sole goal of life. Our unique social organisation is getting disintegrated. Knowledge, contentment, duty, and sacrifice are losing their importance for us.... We are devoid of mutual love and sympathy.... In short, we are forgetting our soul. With swaraj we would get back our soul, our religion would be revived, and the darkness of irreligion would give way to the dawn of the sun of knowledge. The reign of the varna and ashrama system would be re-established.... Subjection has dimmed our intelligence. We have lost our intellectual vigour. For the last few centuries we have contributed nothing to the fund of human knowledge, caused no ripples in the sea of ideas, and made no leap in the sphere of imagination.... Swaraj will liberate our intelligence and capacity for thought.... We shall offer to the world a new civilisation and a new life ... instead of envy and competition we shall establish the supremacy of love and cooperation....

Even socialism, as we have seen in the previous chapter, would be, in this vision of swaraj, an essential part of the 'new civilisation and life' that the benighted world would get from India.

It was largely in response to his revivalistic orientation that Premchand advocated the acceptance of the Gandhian conception of swaraj. This, it may be noted, was not the same thing as accepting Gandhi's leadership of the national movement.

Early in the present century, while he was still leading the satyagraha of Indian settlers in South Africa, Gandhi had set forth his views about free India in his Hind Swaraj (1908). These views were never disowned or even substantially revised by him. While he remained at the helm during all the major confrontations with the Raj from 1920 onwards, Gandhi does not seem to have made any serious attempt to have his blueprint of swaraj adopted by the Congress, the organisation through which he led the freedom struggle. Nehru's was the decisive role in this respect. During the 1930s, until his death in 1936, Premchand veered definitively towards Nehru's proposed socio-economic programme for the Congress. But this, like in the case of Nehru himself and the Congress at large, did not mean rejection of Gandhi's leadership. Moreover, the definitive turning towards Nehru, in the matter of his programme and not tactics, did not mean the rejection of other influences. Hence the continuing attraction of Gandhian ideas of social reconstruction.

Judging by Premchand's work before he came under Gandhi's spell, there would seem to be substance in his assertion, as recorded by his wife,[38] that even earlier he had been moving along lines that led towards Gandhian values and ideas. Faith in the traditional panchayat system, ideas that could be seen as trusteeship in incipience, and the efficacy of conversion -

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38 Sivrani Devi, Premchand Ghar Mein, pp. 94-95.

change of heart as a means of social change - can be cited as some of the characteristics that substantiate Premchand's assertion. 'Panch Parameshwar', a short story that appeared in June 1916, shows how the village panchayat is an institution that affects the very psychology of those called upon to dispense justice; with all their frailties they are transformed into honest and impartial persons by the responsibility and faith entrusted in them.[39] 'Pachhatava' (1914) depicts a fatherly zamindar who earns the goodwill and cooperation of his peasants through kindness.[40] 'Upadesh' (1917) shows an exploitative zamindar realising, through the example of a kind zamindar, the wisdom and morality of being good to his peasants: 'The people I live off, their responsibilities have to be shouldered by me.'[41]

But after the catalytic experience of February 1921, when he heard Gandhi for the first time, these tendencies got a new fillip. For example, 'Laag Daat', a story written in this very year, portrays a Gandhian swaraj when panchayats, not law courts, would dispense justice, English education would be replaced by education imparted along religious principles, alcohol is unknown, and swadeshi has driven out foreign cloth. The story lays stress on the need to build moral strength.[42] 'Ahuti' (1930) also

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39 Mansarovar, vol. VII, pp. 152-64.

40 Ibid, vol. VI, pp. 227-40.

41 Ibid, vol. VIII, pp. 276-96.

42 Ibid, vol. VI, pp. 202-08.

preaches a similar message. 'Frail, wasted naked body, dhoti coming down to the knees, smooth head and hollow mouth' - so clearly cast in Gandhi's mould - the central character of the story, Vishambhar, embodies the qualities of meditation, renunciation and truth.[43]

But the classic literary representation of Gandhian politics and culture - with a pronounced stress on ancient culture and the need for its revival - is offered in Rangbhumi. The novel, indeed, is a glorification of Gandhi. It shows how, for Premchand, Gandhian ideas of social reconstruction were impregnated with revivalism.

In one major respect Gandhian influence highlights the ambivalence of Premchand with regard to the kind of swaraj he envisaged. We have seen how he accepted Nehru's proposed socio-economic programme with its stress on socialism; and also that his attitude towards industrialism is characterised by an unresolved, perhaps, unfaced, tension. The tension is reflected along formal lines, as we have mentioned earlier. The part of his attitude towards industrialism that rejects it for India can be attributed mainly to Gandhi's influence on him. Along with this rejection of industrialism as the basis of society in free India goes a continuing attraction towards a simple village-centred life. As against his non-fiction, Premchand's fiction envisages a culturally traditional India, with the village being its epicentre, developing a self-sufficient economy and society on the basis of its own developmental norms.

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43 Kafan, pp. 96-106.

As early as 1917, in his first major novel, Sevasadan, Premchand put forward the view that industry per se was productive of evil. The issue, however, is not discussed, in this novel, at length; the criticism having been made in the context of the writer's attachment to an idealised Indian past and his antipathy to new values which he had seen as a parcel from the West.[44] In Premashrama, too, the outburst against industrialism seems to have been guided more by emotion and less by reason. With his morality and humanity preserved by such traditional institutions as kul and biradari (family and community, the former in the sense of extended family), the kisan is idealised as against the mazdoor who is spoken of as degenerate.[45] Cottage industry alone is welcomed.

It is in Rangbhumi that Premchand spells out at length his antipathy to industrialism per se. This is, perhaps, the only work in which he has provided in its epic dimension, the confrontation between western civilisation and imperialism on the one hand and traditional Indian culture and nationalism on the other hand. John Sevak embodies the former, and Surdas represents

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44 Sevasadan, pp. 114-15.

This attack on industrialization comes from a character who is not exactly positive. Considering, however, that what he says was to become a regular refrain in Premchand's novels, the attack ought to be seen as representing the novelist's views.

45 Premashram, pp. 86-7; p. 266.

Mills are described here as instruments of exploitation, further enriching the rich, without having much potential to benefit the poor. The latter cannot but be morally and socially corrupted thereby.

the 'ideal' camp within the latter. Though no clear distinction is maintained between an industrialist and a merchant, the course of events in the novel indicates that industry is really the target of attack. The novelist's understanding of the phenomenon, moreover, seems at this stage to have been derived from his readings on the subject - a broad critique drawn from Gandhi and Tolstoy - than from any first hand knowledge of industry in his region.[46]

The opposition to industrialism, in Rangbhumi, is nonetheless impassioned and unequivocal. The industrial is shown possessed with but a single passion in life - the promotion of his business interests. He may, in order to achieve his ends, shift loyalties without any qualms, take recourse to treacheries quite shamelessly, and forsake all moral and religious norms whenever necessary.[47] This remorselessness of the industrialist is what leads Premchand to assert through Prabhu Sevak who, as the industrialist's son, ought to know from close quarters:[48]

> Business is nothing if it is not cannibalism. To look upon men as beasts and to treat them accordingly is its basic principle. One who cannot do this cannot be a successful businessman.

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46 Premchand seems to have read Gandhi and Tolstoy rather extensively. His acquaintance with the Western critique of industrialism seems to have been through Gandhi. It is interesting to note that the word "industrialism" first coined and used by Carlyle is used by Premchand quite frequently in his journalistic writings. Apparently he found it more expressive of a whole phenomenon than any possible Hindi equivalent.

47 Rangbhumi, pp. 76-80; p. 121; pp. 155.56; p. 271.

48 Ibid, pp. 407-08.

Surdas, the protagonist of Rangbhumi, echoes Premchand's views even further. Central to the main plot of the novel is the determination of John Sevak to set up a cigarette factory on a plot of land which has been left by its owner, Surdas, to be used as common land by the inhabitants of the locality. He employs persuasion, temptation and coercion, besides his influence with the local officials, to obtain the land. But Surdas, a God-fearing man, would not part with the land and have the fair name of his forefathers sullied for the sake of a little money. He would rather have a dharmashala made on a part of it and leave the rest to be used for a variety of purposes by the community. Besides, he is aware of the inevitable consequences of industry. When Raja Mahendra Singh, the chief of the local municipality, acting obviously at the behest of John Sevak, impresses upon him the benefits that would accrue to the people of the locality as a result of the cigarette factory, Surdas says:[49]

> You are quite right, sir. The locality will, indeed, become livelier, and men of business will prosper. But this gaiety will be accompanied by the spread of drinking and prostitution. Outsiders will ogle at our women. How immorality will reign! Tempted by prospects of employment, peasants will flee the countryside, learn wicked ways, and go back to contaminate their villages thereby. Village women will come for employment and,

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49 Ibid, p. 88.

for greed of money, sell their virtue. The glamour that characterises the city will come here, too.

The fears expressed by Surdas are corroborated by Nayak Ram's first hand testimony: 'These are precisely the conditions I have seen wherever there are mills and factories, be it Calcutta, Bombay, Ahmedabad or Kanpur.'[50]

The evils spelt out by Surdas make their appearance soon after the establishment of the factory. Young lads of the locality, Ghisu, Mithua and Vidyadhar, succumb to precocious sexuality, drinking and other vices.[51]

Intense and elaborately articulated as it is in Rangbhumi, the critique of industrialism retains some of the basic premises on which, in its embryonic form, it had rested in Premashrama. Premchand now dwells on the erosion of the sense of community and the rise of an immoral individualism as an essential concomitant of industrialisation. Just touched upon in Premashrama, this aspect of the antipathy to modern industrial culture is, in its tragic dimensions, detailed in Rangbhumi. The following word-picture offers a view of the degeneration that the cigarette factory has brought to Pandeypur, the main locale of Rangbhumi:[52]

> The mill workers who had come from other regions were constrained neither by the fear of biradari nor by any consideration for relatives. They would work the whole

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50 Ibid.

51 Ibid, pp. 472-75.

52 Ibid, pp. 472-73.

> day in the mill and consume toddy at night. Gambling was an everyday routine.... There would be great merry-making till ten or eleven at night. Someone would stand in front of the pan shop, and someone exchange a bawdy joke with a prostitute; lewd stares and lecherous gestures would be in full swing. Where were these thrills at Pandeypur? The boys could not even dare loiter near a toddy shop lest some member of the family happened to spot them. Young men had not the guts to tease a woman for fear of being reported at home. Everyone was related to everyone else. Where are these constraints here?

The nostalgia for an idealised traditional culture, which had appeared so fleetingly in Sevasadan and Premashrama, finds fuller expression in Rangbhumi. The counter-ideal of an idyllic community culture, with religion and social service at its very centre, is elaborated through the portrayal of Surdas.[53] There are shortcomings within this culture. But it has the great merit of preserving the essential humanity of its people. Unsullied by industrialism, the village is the scene of this idyllic life.[54]

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53 Surdas the blind beggar would have a temple, a dharmashala and a tank built on the land besides letting it be used as a common grazing ground. He would have the people of Pandeypur gather together in the evening for devotional community singing so that their hearts may be cleansed of all evil. Ibid, p. 57, p. 130.

54 It might be mentioned that though locationally Pandeypur is more of a suburb of Benaras, the novelist has consistently described it as a village and its inhabitants as villagers.

With its unalloyed criticism of industrialism and the offerings of an idealised Indian culture as the alternative civilisational model, Rangbhumi delineates Premchand's basic cultural orientation. Subsequent attitudinal shifts were no more than changes in which the conscious intellect gradually gained the upper hand without effecting the underlying attachment to the idealised indigenous culture.

As a realist Premchand could not ignore even in Rangbhumi the growing influence of industry, and seemed to think that as yet it was a losing battle for his ideal. Industrialism is referred to as the foundation of the new age, and men are shown as resigning themselves increasingly to its advance.[55] Changes in the behaviour pattern of the inhabitants of Pandeypur seem to suggest that there is something inexorable about this evidence.[56] Once evicted from their homes, many of them are obliged to serve in the factory.[57]

Surdas alone is isolated as a tragic hero who dies fighting for the cause. His isolation and the clarity of his realisation that he has been defeated may make pessimism the key-note of Rangbhumi. But, as we have noticed earlier, the poignancy of his delirious speech, as he lay dying, transforms the novel into a saga of hope.

Without being dramatised, as in Rangbhumi, the fate of the village community life in the face of advancing industrialism

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55 Rangbhumi, p. 407.

56 Ibid, pp. 155-60, p.223.

57 Ibid, p. 553.

is treated in Godan through concentration on the insidious ways by which the nexus of relations is so manipulated by the entrepreneur as to bring the village community under his control. Yet, Premchand's normative orientation remains unaltered. Notwithstanding the depiction of the seamy aspects of village community life, Godan vindicates faith in its essential beauty. It does so particularly because of the erosion caused by the advance of industrialism through the instrumentality of sugar factories in the region. There is a desperate attachment to a way of life that is withering away.

Premchand may not be as emotional in his attack on industrialism as he was in Rangbhumi. He may even be more pessimistic about the fate of his idealised traditional culture. But he is nonetheless unequivocal in his opposition to industrialism. In Godan, however, this opposition comes out not so much by way of explicit pronouncements as in the description of the ways in which industrialism is beginning to make dents in the life of the village. The following excerpt would illustrate this:[58]

> A sugar mill was set up here last year. Its agents and contractors went from village to village buying the standing sugarcane crops. While bargaining with them the peasants realised that it was no longer economical to make gur.... The whole village was ready to sell sugarcane;

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58 Godan, p. 173

> no matter if it meant getting a little less in cash. At least the payment would be immediate. Someone had to buy bullocks, someone had to pay back arrears, and someone longed to be freed from the mahajan's stranglehold....

What the entrepreneur really did was to offer a semblance of relief, in the immediate context, to the peasant without rescuing him from his subsistence existence. Indeed, by means of alliance with the agents of rural credit or by himself providing such credit, the entrepreneur was, through the promise of ready cash on terms that were actually unfavourable to the peasant, so strengthening the ruinous economic dependence of the latter as to be able to exploit it to promote manufacturing interests. Godan offers a close view of the operations of this rural money-lender and urban manufacturer combine.[59]

Godan also documents at length the contrast between peasants and industrial workers which had been briefly suggested in Premashrama. In fact, it even sharpens the contrast by suggesting that certain evils are specific to industrial labour. This is done in the delineation of the changes that occur in the personality of Gobar, a young man who has left his village and is struggling to earn a decent living in Lucknow. It is significant that he retains his humanity while he tries his luck as a vendor and gardener. But his debasement starts when he becomes a mill-hand. This is a debasement, Premchand

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59 Ibid, p. 174.

emphasises, that Gobar shares in common with his fellow mill workers; it is caused not by the quantum but by the conditions of work. Gobar would not work any less hard in his village. But he had not known fatigue then. He could, in fact, even laugh and talk in the midst of that tough grind. And then the vast fields and the open skies would offer their own compensations. Work in the factory was different. Soon it induced him, as it did the others, to drown his bodily exhaustion and mental depression in liquor, a mode of relief that had a familiar pattern of working itself out.[60]

It may seem possible to argue, more so because of the growing influence of socialist ideas on Premchand, that what Godan offers is not a critique of industrialism per se but of industrialism within capitalism. But there is a very significant passage in the novel that suggests that whatever might have been his general attitude towards socialism, he was far from considering, in Godan, that socialism was capable of cleansing industrialism of its integral ills. What, after all, has happened in Russia? The question is answered in a pithy observation by Prof. Mehta, a philosopher in Godan, who is repeatedly used by Premchand to put forward views with which he is in sympathy: 'What has happened there except that the industrialist has been replaced by the bureaucrat.'[61]

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60 Ibid, pp. 262-3.

61 Ibid, pp. 54-5.

Thus, from Sevasadan to Godan, Premchand's fiction exhibits consistently an antipathy towards industrialism per se. This antipathy can, as a matter of fact, be traced back to a story in his maiden collection of short stories. Entitled 'Yeh Mera Watan Hai', the story offers clear intimations of what Rangbhumi and Godan were to say about traditional community life and about its confrontation with industrialism.[62] As Premchand moves towards greater realism in the course of his development as a writer, there may be marked tonal changes in his depiction of the reality as he saw it. But his basic orientation and thrust remained the same. Industrialism was an evil in itself because of the unavoidability of its corrosive effect on the humanity of man.

Since none of the three strands discussed above was exclusive of the others, not in terms of their logical implications but within the framework of Premchand's consistent search for a vision of free India, they need to be seen as reflective of the attempts made by a sensitive and politically committed writer to forge an ideal that would be in consonance with the needs and unique personality of his society. That in the process of forging the ideal he also betrayed the unresolved tension caused by the contradictory material and cultural pulls to which he, along with others of his class and/or society,

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62 Soz-e-Watan, pp. 43-51.

was exposed, is what makes his writing worth analysing the socio-intellectual history of his times. To the explanation of the ambivalence that characterised his vision of swaraj, we shall turn in the last chapter of this study.