

Premchand's Use of Folklore in His Short Stories

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Source: *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1977), pp. 31-56

Published by: Nanzan University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1177657>

Accessed: 25-03-2020 10:33 UTC

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Premchand's Use of Folklore in His Short Stories

By

INGE C. ORR

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Introduction

In discussing the use of folklore by an Indian writer, we must be clear as to the meaning and scope of folklore in a country such as India where the mass of population is today still illiterate. If folklore is defined as the unwritten or oral tradition of a people, then virtually the whole of Indian culture is transmitted from one generation to the next by means of its folklore. In the process of transmission the Sanskrit language played an important part. Sanskrit has a position in India similar to that of Latin in modern Europe. Originally Sanskrit was the language of the Aryans, ancient invaders from the North Asian steplands. Later it became the secret language of their priestly caste, the Brahmans, who perpetuated the sacred knowledge contained in the Vedas among their initiates by an intricate process of memorization in Sanskrit. Already before the time of Christ, and under the impact of Buddhism and Jainism, Brahmanism had lost its exclusiveness and had turned into

Hinduism, the religion of the Indian masses. Sanskrit works, principally the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, incorporated and carried the folk beliefs and traditions of Indian society, i.e., its legends, mythology and its moral and religious teachings.

Indian folklorists maintain that these writings are the very basis of Indian folklore.¹ Insofar as the ancient texts have filtered down from literate priests to the illiterate masses and insofar as tales of ancient Gods, heroes and heroines have become a part of Indian oral tradition, they have indeed become folklore. Sanskrit literary tales, more or less embellished or emasculated, constitute an important part of Indian folk culture.

Actually, the process of incorporation worked both ways. A case in point is that of the literary animal fables (*Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*) whose authors and editors, respectively, used animal lore and beliefs of the Indian folk in order to illustrate moralistic teachings for court audiences. Today these fables, with their folk components, have once more filtered down to the level of the folk and are being told to Indian children everywhere by their grandmothers.

Premchand's background and intellectual formation

Our present concern, however, is the incorporation of folklore into literature, rather than vice versa.² Premchand has done this effectively. However, Premchand's works—which have remained popular in India for two generations—are not mere recordings of folktales, nor are they simple descriptions of Indian folk customs and beliefs.

Dhanpat Rai Shrivastav, better known by his pseudonym—Premchand—lived from 1880–1936. Having been raised in a bi-lingual area of Northern India, he used both Hindi and Urdu as his writing media. He is considered the father of realism in Indian prose literature. He did not write, however, for the sole purpose of the aesthetic enjoyment of his readers. His stories and novels were the media for expressing his social criticism and, more than that, for arousing the social conscience of the Indian people with the ultimate goal of removing those obsolete customs and beliefs which he considered to be social evils, while at the

1. P. Goswami, lecturing at the Folklore Institute, Bloomington, Indiana, in the summer of 1966. Durga Bhagvat expresses the same view in *An Outline of Indian Folklore* (Bombay: Book-depot, 1958).

2. That both of these processes occur universally has been brought out by Daniel Hoffman, the moderator of a symposium: "Folklore in Literature," published in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1957), 70, p. 18.

same time preserving and re-enforcing those which he considered to be healthy and holy. In this endeavor he was most consistent and prolific. There is hardly an area of human misery and ignorance which he has left untouched.

Having spent his youth in extreme poverty in an Indian village, he had first hand knowledge of the exploitation of the peasants by landlords and money-lenders. He also knew and accurately portrayed the mind of the middle class in face of the rising tide of capitalism and westernism. Furthermore, he lived at a time of radical change in India, a time of political and economic uprisings, the time of the Gandhian nationalist movement. His first public encounter with Gandhi in 1920 became a turning point in his life. Within three days he decided to give up his petty government post, as a consequence of Gandhi's appeal to boycott the foreign rulers.

He was attracted to Gandhi's dynamic personality for several reasons. First of all, he shared the Mahatma's passion for independence and reflected the nationalist struggle faithfully in his writings. Like the great national leader, he too sought out the poor and the ignorant masses and especially the Indian women, still living a secluded life. He urged them to take an active part in the Nationalist struggle and even to lead the men—the theme of several of his short stories.

Like Gandhi, so also Premchand felt pride in India's heritage and both were opposed to Western civilization on several grounds. Both sympathized with the Indian peasant and believed in the necessity of village autonomy and were opposed to the large-scale industrialization of India. In addition, Premchand indirectly blamed "morbid individualism", imported from the West, for the break-up of the Indian joint family system by spoiling the Indian woman whom he would very much prefer to remain the traditional "Goddess of Sacrifice and Service".

Premchand, like Gandhi, believed in self-sacrifice and ceaseless work on behalf of the suffering masses. He believed in *satyagraha* or soul-force as a means to convert the rich and the mighty, i.e., the zamindars, the capitalists and the government officials. (This belief, however, was shaken later on when Premchand became disillusioned with its effectiveness and was looking for more radical methods.)

Both Gandhi and Premchand had an abiding faith in the goodness of man and in the nobility of the poor and downtrodden, the victims of an unjust and unequal economic system, e.g., of the untouchables, victims of cruel tradition.

Finally, he shared the great leader's devotion to *ahimsa*, or non-

violence, and preferred evolution and compromise to revolution, though not so much as an orthodox conviction, but rather as an expedient, it seems.

Besides Gandhi, it was Russian literature which had a lasting impact upon Premchand. According to his son,³ he had already read Tolstoy's moralistic stories and Tolstoy's influence was already noticeable upon his writing long before he was attracted by Gandhi's magnetic personality. Both technically and intellectually Premchand was a faithful pupil of the great Russian writer. The technique of his stories he improved after the model of his teacher.

Like Tolstoy he abhorred the enslavement of men by industry. "Premchand—ever a disciple of Tolstoy's theories—opposed the large-scale industrialization of a predominantly agricultural country like India, with her huge surplus labour."⁴

Finally, both Premchand and Tolstoy were reformers and social historians. Tolstoy registered in his works the plight of the Russian peasant as contrasted with the excesses of the rich. Premchand did the same for the Indian scene.

Another Russian writer whose works Premchand loved and admired was Maxim Gorki. Premchand shared his passion for independence and social change. Both championed the suffering and the exploited. Between them, however, there are two important distinctions to be made: "... Whereas Gorki emphasized the strategy of revolution, Premchand preferred evolution—a peaceful evolution. Gorki's stage was the marketplace and the factory; Premchand's was the village."⁵

Premchand's technique

Although Premchand is considered the pioneer among modern Indian writers, "the father of realism," few of his works have been translated into other languages, the reason being that in translation they appear naive, over-idealized, in short, unconvincing. His critics point out that Premchand's heroes and heroines are too deeply inspired by, and subordinated to, his reformist ideology to be genuinely human.⁶ Because he considered plot and character development secondary to his

3. Amrit Rai, *Kalam ka Sipahi* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1962), p. 162.

4. M. Gopal, *Premchand* (Lahore: The Bookabode, 1944), p. 77.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

6. Indar Nath Madan, *Premchand, An Interpretation* (Lahore: Minerva Bookship, 1946) and Mohammed Sadig, *Twentieth Century Urdu Literature* (Baroda: Padmaja Publications, 1957).

social reform purpose, they accuse him of a wrong conception of the function of art. In all his works, his critics argue, he has not created a single immortal character. Furthermore, he is caught up in ideological contradictions. He preaches an equalitarian society, equality between the sexes, and uplift of women, and at the same time he remains a faithful devotee of sacrifice and service on the part of women—the *Sita* ideal of Indian mythology. Throughout the stories analyzed, his heroines are pure and virtuous victims of cruel customs. They can do no wrong. Instruments of Premchand's reforming zeal, his characters, with few exceptions,⁷ do not ring true to life.

Yet he remains popular. His great popularity is due, first of all, to the fact that he abandoned the romantic subject matter of court life, flowers, nightingales and fantasies of the preceding period, for the real problems of the common man of his day and age. If his popularity was built around his selection of subject matter, it also rested upon his technique which roused moral tension in his readers: namely, the confrontation of Indian ideals with the harsh realities and cruelties which fill the everyday life of an impoverished and over-crowded people. Against a background of commonly accepted ideals, Premchand paraded stories of scum, filth and human indecency which every Indian recognized as being more or less commonplace in actual Indian life. His semi-educated middle and especially lower middle class readers, predominantly male, saw for the first time their society critically reviewed with both the good and evil clearly outlined. With relief they found that the foundation was still good and that basic institutions such as the joint family are essential also for the new social order and should therefore be retained. The secret of Premchand's success, apart from his choice of a realistic subject matter, then, was his ability to dramatize the dichotomy of folk custom versus a background of noble concepts and aspirations—ideals which he drew in part from India's past and in part from Western humanism and socialism. With this device he builds up tensions as the story develops. Unfortunately his realistic portrayals lead almost invariably to a happy ending, i.e., the noblest of Indian aspirations win as characters rise above themselves and their environment.

To illustrate Premchand's hypothesis of the inconsistency of Indian folk customs and beliefs with ancient and humanitarian ideals, I have selected and analyzed a number of his short stories, especially those wherein women characters are prominent. Indian women—to 92 percent

7. "Kafan" in *Kafan* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1960).

still illiterate according to the 1951 census—live at the very heart of the folk, and practice folk rites and customs more faithfully than do the men. Not only are women the carriers of Indian folk tradition, but they are also the principal victims of abusive customs.

The status of Indian women

Except for a period of equalitarian status enjoyed by the Aryan women of the ancient Vedic Age (about 2,000 to 1,400 B.C.), women in India have traditionally been both honored and despised. Opposed to the saintliness of motherhood stands the abjectness of widowhood. Ambivalent attitudes towards women do occur in other cultures, though not everywhere are they so extreme as in India. Traditionally Indian women are allowed little or no choice in their social role. An Indian woman's role in society is largely governed by such accidents of life as (a) the caste into which she is born, (b) whether she has living offspring, (c) whether her first born is a boy, (d) whether her husband dies prematurely, (e) whether she is abandoned by her husband or family. Her position in the world depends largely upon these uncontrollable elements rather than upon any acquired skills, such as, for example, formal education. Nonetheless she may desperately try to influence and control her destiny through the practice of folk rites and remedies and by propitiating the Gods.

Apart from these uncontrollable events, every Indian woman is expected during her lifetime to pass through the roles of bride, wife, daughter-in-law in the husband's joint household, mother of a son, and mother-in-law. According to the Laws of Manu—a scripture dating back approximately to the time of Christ—an Indian woman is never to be left alone. In childhood she is cared for by her father, in her youth by her husband, and in her old age by her son—a woman must never be independent. Thus the traditional Indian woman has little opportunity for self-expression. During much of her life she is expected to be servile, passive and dependent. However, with normal luck there comes a time in the life of almost any Indian woman when, after suffering the indignity of serving as a daughter-in-law in the husband's family, or of bearing only girl babies, she will eventually give birth to a son, and thus win respect, self-confidence and the opportunity, still later, to order about or even to maltreat her own daughter-in-law.

Analysis of selected stories

The female characters appearing in Premchand's short stories can

be grouped according to stages of life. From one to four short stories have been selected to illustrate each group. The stories are taken from the Hindi edition of *Mansarovar*, Premchand's collected short stories in eight volumes; *Kafan*, a brief volume of selected short stories in Hindi, as well as from a paperback edition of several stories translated into English, under the title of *A Handful of Wheat and other Stories by Premchand*. The translations from the Hindi versions are my own.

Female children and their mothers

Under this sub-title I have selected two stories as representative: (1) "The Bad Omen" (*Mansarovar* III) and (2) "Despair" (*Mansarovar* III). Both stories picture traditional Indian joint family life and more particularly the superstitions surrounding the birth of a girl, which in village India is considered a bad omen and justification for the ill-treatment of both mother and child. The fathers in both stories, though introduced as educated men, are nonetheless subject to the same superstition.

One of them ("The Bad Omen") tries to rise above his superstition and also to convince his wife as well as his own mother that their fears are unfounded. The other father contents himself with blaming his wife and daughters and bemoaning his fate. It is the paternal grandmothers, however, who are the real pillars of superstition and who insist upon the ill-treatment of the mothers and their girl babies. The mothers themselves are under the sway of the same superstition and in fear of their mothers-in-law. One of them ("The Bad Omen") rejects her newborn girl and fails to care for it. The other mother ("Despair") tries pathetically, again and again, to produce male off-spring in order to gain the respect of her husband and his family.

From the earliest signs of pregnancy Indian women fret over the possibility of bearing a girl child and they will do their utmost to ward off this calamity by observing the proper religious rites and festivals.⁸ If a girl is born despite all of this effort the mother may go so far as to withdraw love and affection, or even nourishment, and thus expose the child to early death by starvation ("The Bad Omen"). In this story a female child is born after three boys. The birth of a female as a fourth child is regarded as especially unlucky: "The mother, still confined, was bemoaning her fate. . . ."⁹ She used to breast feed her sons, but for her

8. *Mansarovar*, III, pp. 118-119.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

daughter "She gave up every effort."¹⁰ Rather, by feeding it opium she keeps the child from crying and in an unconscious state. She won't even look at her unlucky child.¹¹ She scolds her oldest boy when he wants to play with it.

The mother of three girls ("Despair") considers herself "truly unfortunate, otherwise why would the Good Lord only create girls in her womb?"¹² Her husband's lack of sympathy and understanding and the fear of people's talk "intimidated her from showing love to her own daughters" and "when her husband was due home from work she kept her daughters away from him under whatever pretext."¹³ She is a dutiful wife and does not omit a single religious observance in the hope of producing a son. Yet "all the while her ear was longing for a single sweet word, her eyes for a loving look and her heart for a loving embrace."¹⁴ When no attention is forthcoming, neither from husband nor family, it is small wonder that she becomes listless and "disinterested in life." In despair she begs her husband to let her visit her brother and her sister-in-law who know of "a true mahatma whose blessings are never unsuccessful. . . . Several childless women even have given birth to sons due to his blessings."¹⁵

According to orthodox Hindu belief it is the woman's religious duty to produce a male child in order to perpetuate the husband's name and eventually to perform the essential funeral rites for the parents. Girls born to her can never help their parents in this world nor in the next, for they will belong to their future husbands' families. Furthermore, upon marriage they will have to be provided with dowries by their own parents. All of this makes their arrival very undesirable. In folk belief, as the stories show, the birth of a girl is a curse, a bad omen.

A girl born after three sons, as we saw in Premchand's story "The Bad Omen", is a particularly cursed event. It is the women who are especially susceptible to this superstition. The old woman, as head of the joint household, is most alarmed: "This girl is a demoness? Why did she have to come to this house? If she had to come why did she not come earlier? The Lord would not let her be born even to His worst enemy."¹⁶ Her son, the father of the baby girl, tries to make light of

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

it: "Mother, there is really nothing to this superstition. Anyway, whatever God wills will be." She retorts: "What do you know, son, about these matters? . . . Your father's death was caused by just such an inauspicious birth."¹⁷ The old woman is so deeply set in this belief that, when her son does not take her seriously, she consciously or unconsciously simulates sickness in order to make the evil omen come true.¹⁸ Unfortunately the father's emancipation is not long lived. When he finds that his mother has fallen sick, due to the bad omen, he contemplates forsaking the child.¹⁹

The husband in the other story ("Despair"), blames his wife outright for only producing three daughters. "Worst of all he threatened, should there be another girl, to leave the house and not to stay in this Hell for a minute longer."²⁰ When the prospect of the birth of a son appears the family's attitude changes. The husband buys his wife new jewels and clothing. The mother-in-law busies herself with preparing *pan* and food for her. But the wife correctly assesses the situation: "They are not doing it for me, but only for a son. . . . I am the cow who is fed fodder and water in return for milk."²¹

The only person who is truly concerned about the wife's welfare, although her advice is questionable, is an elder brother's wife. This woman shrewdly invents ways and means by which to keep the family hoping for a son, and thus gives the wife a respite from unending abuse and ill-treatment. She argues her point thus: "You'll be able to spend at least a few days in peace and happiness. . . . If it is to be a son next time, then everything will be all right. If it is to be another daughter, then I'll have to invent a new tactic. . . . To trick those selfish people is a virtuous deed," she assures her timid sister-in-law.²²

Historical evaluation

In the two stories cited Premchand opposes the superstitions and ill-practices of his own time regarding the birth of a girl. Going back to earliest recorded time, i.e., Rg Vedic India (about 2000 B.C.), was the birth of a girl already inauspicious? Although we find prayers for the birth of sons only we have no depreciating passage in the hymns of

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 115

19. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 120–121.

the *Rg Veda* concerning the birth of a girl. To the contrary, in two cases reference can be found to the birth of an only daughter, who was to be awarded the legal position of a son, inasmuch as she could perform funeral rites for her father and could inherit property.²³ This serves to prove that the position of a girl in Rg Vedic times was not at all low nor deprecatory as it was to become later on.

The hymns of the Atharva Veda (younger than the Rg Vedic hymns), however, already contain prayers and rituals for the purpose of preventing the birth of a girl in favor of male progeny.²⁴ Reference to the exposure of female children first occurs in the Brahmanas²⁵ (dating back to about 1000 B.C.). It is clear from these references that the depreciation of the female child started early in Indian history, though not so early as Rg Vedic times.

In the course of time the birth of a son came to be the twofold religious duty of a Hindu: to insure the continuation of the family line and to attain salvation after death by means of funeral rites to be offered by a son, or son's son, etc. To the degree that the birth of a son was welcomed, to that extent the birth of a girl was dreaded and cursed, as is evidenced by Premchand's stories.

However, A. L. Basham, in his authoritative reference book on Indian culture, believes that "In the best Indian families, daughters, though their birth may have been regretted, were cared for and petted just as sons."²⁶

It is possible that Premchand in order to make his point had to stress the abuses rather than make allowances for the exceptions, but from the evidence gathered it is justifiable to assume with Premchand that the superstition and maltreatment of female children are widespread and constitute an old tradition.

Co-wives in the polygamous household

Illustrating this social institution is Premchand's story "The Co-wife" (*Mansarovar* VIII). Just as there is no place in orthodox Hindu society for unmarried women, so too there is no room for a childless one. To produce a son in order to perpetuate her husband's lineage is the traditional life goal of every Indian woman. Godaveri, the principal

23. S. R. Shastri, *Women in the Vedic Age* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960), pp. 4-5.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

25. *Ibid.*

26. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), p. 160.

character of this story, is no exception. Being childless she faces the difficult decision of getting her husband a co-wife. The ability to take such a step, as Premchand wants his readers to understand, is part of her traditional duty as an Indian wife. Moreover, her decision to do this is proof of the tenacity of Indian tradition and is all the more remarkable inasmuch as her husband, educated and of modern views, does not require it.

Godaveri herself goes to the village, gives up her jewels (as is customary for Indian widows) and arranges the marriage formalities with ease and skill, so "that there would be no exertion whatsoever on her husband's part."²⁷ Once the marriage is completed, she rules over her co-wife in the way of a benevolent mother-in-law.²⁸

However, her attitudes soon changes. She begins to act petty and catty toward the younger co-wife: "Perhaps she was afraid of Gomati, of her beauty, her youth. . . . Having opened the dike, she now wanted to stop the flood with a wheel barrow of earth."²⁹ She feels left out, jealous and she becomes hard, even to her husband whom she accuses of brutality and selfishness. Finally she refuses to run his household: "Let the other one run your affairs. . . ."³⁰ Feeling betrayed and abused by both her husband and the co-wife and unable to remain in the same household any longer, she finds the tragic solution of drowning herself in the Ganga.

The co-wife, quite in contrast to the first wife, lacks initiative and for a time she appears to be passive and docile in her new environment, which is, of course, the behavior expected of an Indian bride. Her opportunity to rise comes when the first wife gives up her rule over the household. In order to fan the first wife's jealousy, she proudly shows off the new sari bought for her by the joint husband.³¹

As for the husband, he felt "everlasting love for his wife, Godaveri, although she was childless. He did not want to destroy his present marital bliss for the sole reason of having off-spring,"³² even though his deceased parents had insisted upon a second marriage for this very reason. Unfortunately for his first wife he not only appreciates her and her sacrifice, but he also has sympathy for the second wife. He does nothing to help his first wife to alleviate her disturbed condition, nor

27. *Mansarovar*, VIII, p. 274.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, p. 278

31. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

does he understand the seriousness of her talk of suicide, but rather joins his co-wife in making fun of it. Nonetheless, he falls unconscious upon the news of her self-inflicted death.³³

Historical evaluation

Premchand is aware of the difficulties of a polygamous household and in his story "The Co-wife", he questions the Indian practice of taking a co-wife in order to assure male progeny.

What is the history of this Indian custom? The Rg Veda in the tenth book contains hymns embodying spells used by co-wives against their rivals. According to one source "it is not certain whether these hymns really belonged to the Rig-Vedic times. If, on the other hand, they did not belong to it, they present an element to which no reference is to be found in any other Mandala of the Rig-Veda."³⁴ From this and the fact that the language of this reference is more akin to the later Sanskrit of the Atharva Veda than to the Rg Vedic, the same author concludes that, although kings as well as ordinary people might have practiced polygamy, it was not general and widespread in early Vedic times, but rather monogamy was the established order of society.³⁵ A. L. Basham seconds that: "The ordinary people of India... were generally monogamous, though even in the Rg Veda polygamy was not unknown. Kings and chiefs were invariably polygamous as were many brahmans and wealthier members of the lower orders."³⁶

The magical incantations of the Atharva Veda leaves no doubt of the feelings of jealousy and hatred which a wife must have felt for her rival. Curses are uttered such as "May she be unable to bear children, may she sit forever and ever in her father's home."³⁷

Upanishadic times (900-500 B.C.) give us the classical example of the sage Yajnavalkya who wisely and justly treats both of his wives Maitreyi and Katyayani, according to their needs (Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad II and IV).

At least since the time of the law books (i.e., Christian times), polygamy was sanctified and made a religious duty for a Hindu in order to produce a son in case his wife proved to be barren. This codified practice lasted well into modern times and bears out the motif

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-285.

34. Shastri, p. 2.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23, 39.

36. Basham, p. 173.

37. *Atharva Veda* I, 14, as cited by I. Karve, *Kinship Organization in India* (Poona, Deccan College, 1953), p. 76.

of barrenness as cause for polygamy as portrayed in Premchand's story.

I. Karve in her recent study of Indian family relationships in accord with Premchand observes:

Not only does a man marry again if the first wife proves barren but the author has known cases in which the first wife insisted on a second marriage of her husband in order that children should be born in the house. When asked as to why she would not adopt a child she replied—"An adopted child is a complete stranger. A co-wife's child is at least the child of my husband and I could love it as such. I would hate to bring up strangers as my children."³⁸

This author qualifies her observation thus: "Far more usual is the attitude where, in a polygamous household, a woman hates her rival's children who are a constant living reminder of her defect and a symbol of her humiliation."³⁹ According to the same author: "In the husband's home there is the ever present fear of the husband bringing another wife. Only when the girl becomes the mother of a boy does she feel completely at home in her husband's house."⁴⁰

A. L. Basham maintains, in contrast to Premchand whose story ends in tragedy, that polygamous households in India "were not necessarily unhappy, and the first wife might console herself, if she had male children, with the knowledge that she was the chief wife, the mistress of the household, entitled to the first place besides her husband at the family rites."⁴¹

Indian religious as well as secular literature has variously laid down that a husband should treat his wives equally and that "a girl should behave towards the other wives of her husband as if they were her dear friends."⁴² However, the ancient incantations of the Atharva Veda, where a woman curses her rival and wishes her bad luck, doubtlessly give us a more realistic picture of the life situation of polygamy, as does also Premchand's story.

Child widows

According to religious law (the Laws of Manu) Indian women were supposed to be innocent of and protected from the ways of the world. Yet religion also conditioned the public and especially the Indian male to think of widows as the black sheep of society, a target for ridicule

38. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

41. Basham, p. 174.

42. Karve, p. 78.

and exploitation. Whether high-caste or low born, whether young or old, alone or living with her family, the fate of the widow in the past was always the same—exploitation.

Premchand has treated the problems of widowhood extensively, ranging from the fate of child widows to widows forced into prostitution. I have chosen four stories to illustrate the lives of girls who were married and widowed in their early teens, one of them at the age of sixteen, another at eleven, a third one about ten, and finally one who was “already a widow for three years at the age of seventeen.”⁴³

1. “The Curse” (*Mansarovar*, I)
2. “Fortunate” (*Mansarovar*, I)
3. “Support” (*Mansarovar*, III)
4. “Festival of Love” (*Kafan*)

Three of the child widows live in villages, the fourth in a town (“The Curse”). Two of them reside with their own families (“Fortunate” and “Festival of Love”), while of the other two, one lives with her deceased husband’s family by her own choice (“Support”) and the other with her uncle’s family of necessity (“The Curse”). All four have “ideal” personalities and Premchand more than once points out how undeserved a hardship widowhood is in each case. In fact, their purity and their innocence seem only to magnify their hardship. All four of them, according to Premchand, are models of virtue and very much deserving of happiness in remarriage. Yet only one of them succeeds in achieving this (“Fortunate”), although three of them had marriage prospects.

These girls have to work hard in their respective households. They do not seem to object to being at everyone’s service. Rather they are models of obedience. They accept this role as a widow’s fate and try to make the best of it: “She knew, that being a widow, the pleasures of the world were closed to her.” (This is said of Gangi in “The Festival of Love”).⁴⁴ Even simple little pleasures are denied her. She must not be seen on feast days. For a widow to be present at a wedding brings bad luck to bride and family. However, hard labor and obedience have not killed the natural longing of these young girls for some form of appreciation. One of them, when chided by her aunt for daring to gaze at the wedding preparations of her more fortunate cousin (“this then is the reward of your meanness, to come and disgrace us women whose

43. *Kafan*, p. 142.

44. *Ibid.*

husbands are still alive")⁴⁵ becomes profoundly dejected and attempts to commit suicide.

Gangi ("Festival of Love") no doubt would have loved to wear a colorful sari like the other young girls for the Holi festival—her own mother encourages her—but for fear of her older brother's wife, she does not dare to wear it.

By Premchand's time *Sati* (the self-immolation of widows) had been prohibited by law, and remarriage of child widows had become permissible, at least in principle. His stories reveal that two of the child widows had received proposals for remarriage, but both of them, characteristically, reject these offers.⁴⁶ Conditioned to their traditional role, they cannot conceive of remarriage.

Although young and innocent (frequently only promised to and never really having lived with her husband) the child widow still shares the traditional disdain awarded to the Indian widow in general. Sometimes her situation may be ameliorated by the fact that (a) she may return to her own family instead of staying as a servant in her husband's family, and (b) she does receive proposals for remarriage.

Historical evaluation

Premchand—who himself married a woman widowed in childhood—points out that remarriage is not easily accepted as a solution to widowhood, neither by the widow nor by society. How do his views on this question compare with ancient Indian tradition?

The hymns of the Rg Veda give us only scanty information about the life and treatment of widows. Hymns X, 18, 8 and X, 40, 2 make it clear that widows were remarried to the brother of the deceased husband.⁴⁷ Nowhere in the Rg Veda is there any mention of the practice of *sati*, the burning of widows upon their husband's funeral pyres.⁴⁸

By the time of Christ the practice of remarriage of widows had largely disappeared, as reflected in the Laws of Manu which state categorically "nowhere is a second marriage permitted to a respectable woman."⁴⁹ "A promise is given once and a daughter also is given but once among good people."⁵⁰ According to orthodox practice (maintained

45. *Mansarovar*, I, p. 216.

46. *Mansarovar*, I, p. 226, 228 and *Mansarovar*, III, p. 88.

47. Shastri, pp. 23–5, and Karve, p. 73. The latter makes the qualification that no marriage ceremony was performed for this kind of relationship.

48. Shastri, pp. 26–27.

49. *Manu*, V, 162, cited by Basham, p. 186.

50. *Manu*, IX, 47, quoted by Karve, p. 73.

up to British times) a widow could not remarry, nor was she even to mention the name of another man. She had to live as a hermit on only one meal a day, had her hair cut short, no jewels were allowed to her and she was treated as a servant. She was not permitted to take part in family feasts, as her presence was considered to be a bad omen.⁵¹ Basham believes that such severe treatment of widows was limited to the higher castes "which adhered to the letter of the law."⁵² He also relates the practice of *sati* to the higher castes: "The living cremation of the *sati* was always in theory voluntary, but . . . social and family pressure may have made it virtually obligatory on some high-caste widows. . . . The widow herself, if she had no young children, might well prefer even a painful death in the hope of reunion with her husband, to a dreary life of hunger, scorn and domestic servitude. It is thus not surprising that *satis* were so common in medieval Hindu society."⁵³

In Premchand's stories the voluntary death of a widow is rare ("Rani Sarandha," *Mansarovar* III). By his time *sati* had already been legally abolished (in 1832) and also a widow remarriage bill had been passed (in 1856). More often he pictures the condemned-to-live *sati*, who suffer end from the maltreatment and abuse of her family and who sometimes commits suicide as a last resort ("The Curse" and "The Widow and Her Sons", *Mansarovar* I).

Although the Indian social reform movement, inspired by the British example, has brought about legal protection of widows, changes of the social customs still lagged behind. But Premchand, with his reformer's zeal, perhaps over-emphasizes the disabilities of Indian widows. Real life situations are not always so very harsh and they allow for many gradations, as is shown in a study of contemporary village life in the U. P.: "in our village she is not expected to perform the austerities demanded of widows in some communities. Her share in the farm work is too great to permit leisure for time consuming ceremonies. Very few of our widows shave their heads . . . and (they) bear no outward mark of widowhood. In an ordinary household it is difficult to distinguish widows from their more fortunate sisters-in-law."⁵⁴ The same source claims, at variance with Premchand ("The Widow and her Sons",

51. Frieda Das, *Purdah, the Status of Indian Women* (London: K. Paul, Trubner and Co., 1932), pp. 35 and 77. Also Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (New York: F. H. Revell Co., 1901).

52. Basham, p. 186.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

54. C. V. Wiser and W. H. Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls* (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), p. 107.

Mansarovar I), that the widow with grown sons retains her position "as dictator of the family courtyard. Her sons' wives yield to her authority, though not always without protest."⁵⁵

Concerning widows' remarriage, I. Karve observes that among poorer and tribal people it is not uncommon for a widow to "enter into the house of an unmarried man or widower and force him to marry her."⁵⁶ This author also finds that in early Marathi literature the special name "Ghar-ghusi" had been used for these widow gate-crashers, which leads her to assume that this custom is practiced "by many other castes in India." The same author also mentions that the ancient Vedic custom of junior levirate, i.e., the widow joins her husband's younger brother thus becoming a co-wife to her sister-in-law, is still quite prevalent in the villages of Northern India and is found among all castes.⁵⁷ However, A. C. Mayer seems to support Premchand's view that "remarriage is looked down on."⁵⁸

Another report of contemporary village life describes the fate of a Brahman child widow which is more in keeping with Premchand's observations: "When the child who leaves the paternal home is a widow and no wife, the grief is deeper and more acute. There are no new clothes, no jewelry, no feeling of importance to sustain her and give courage and hope. The only importance she possesses is economic, as one who can be made to lighten the burden of work for other people in home and fields."⁵⁹ In this example the child widow had to join her husband's family, but in one of Premchand's stories ("Support", *Mansarovar III*) the child widow is given the choice of either staying on at her husband's household or of returning to her paternal home.

Although I have singled out child widows from Premchand's short stories, he also has treated the lot of adult widows, both with and without family, and of widows turned prostitute. The latter had been widowed young and were without any family of their own. People start talking ("The Road to Hell", *Mansarovar III*) if they do not behave or dress like a widow should, namely like a hermit or a nun. For them life was a living death. Completely frustrated, they turned to prostitution. Premchand implies that such young women might be prevented

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

56. Karve, pp. 133-134.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

58. Adrian C. Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 208-209.

59. Miriam Young, *Seen and Heard in a Punjab Village* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1931), p. 16.

from turning to prostitution by making remarriage possible and acceptable for them through reshaping folk custom and belief.

Premchand further points out that old age is an added burden, especially for widows without family. Luckily this is rare under the joint family system. According to Wiser and Wiser: "If there are no survivors of her husband's family to shelter her, and she has no sons, she considers herself doubly cursed."⁶⁰ The same source mentions the case of an old widow who "wrung our hearts when she told us of her homeless state . . . until to our amazement we found her comfortably housed—under the roof of her daughter's husband. This to her was no home but a make-shift which fate had forced upon her."⁶¹—for it is traditionally the husband or the son who must provide her with a home, or in any event, the husband's family.

Finally Premchand focuses upon the problems of widows left with families. To be the mother of four sons is normally a blessing to any Indian mother, as Premchand points out at the beginning of his story "The Widow and Her Sons" (*Mansarovar* I). However, soon after the death of her husband, her grown sons turn into vultures, robbing and abusing her. In still another story ("Feast of the Wake," *Mansarovar* IV) a widow and her small children are exploited to the point of bankruptcy by the village elders (the *Panchayat*), who force her to give up her house in payment for the customary feast of the wake.

If an Indian widow so often falls prey to exploitation, as in all of Premchand's stories about widows, it is partly due to her traditionally secluded life as a woman and therefore to her lack of experience with the world beyond her family, but still more it is due to the traditional treatment awarded widows by Indian society.

Untouchable women

Outside of the traditional caste structure of Indian society are the untouchables or outcastes. They are too low to be considered part of Indian society, yet not too low to be exploited as bond slaves, as Premchand observes in the following stories:

1. "The Thakur's Well" (*Mansarovar* I and *A Handful of Wheat*)
2. "The Temple" (*Mansarovar* V)
3. "The Shroud" (*Kafan* and *A Handful of Wheat*)
4. "The Price of Milk" (*Mansarovar* II)

60. Wiser and Wiser, p. 107.

61. *Ibid.*

It is our purpose to show Premchand's portrayal of the lot of women within this unfortunate group.

All four stories are placed in a rural setting. The first two have a similar theme; namely, outcaste women trying to help their sick family members to regain health by soliciting favors from high caste people. In the third story ("The Shroud") we learn the plight of a tanner's wife. The fourth story ("The Price of Milk") gives us a somewhat brighter view of the life of untouchable women. In this story Premchand tells of the important role which a sweeper woman can assume at times of child birth in Indian villages, where she replaces midwife, nurse and lady doctor. All of the four women are tradition bound, law abiding, very hard-working and wouldn't dare to break any of the customary restrictions imposed upon their caste by society and religion, except in dire circumstances.

For the sake of her sick husband, an outcaste woman becomes brave enough to fetch water from the forbidden well of the village head man, despite warnings by her husband ("The Thakur's Well"). Inside her heart she rebels against the unjust restrictions: "Why are we considered low and these people high? Is it because these people wear a thread around their necks? . . . How are they better than we? They are high born in name only."⁶² She dares not defy society openly. Only in the dark of night and guarding her every step like a thief, does she proceed to the Thakur's well. Finally "invoking the Gods, she took courage and dropped the bucket into the well."⁶³ When suddenly the Thakur appears she lets the bucket and rope fall and runs as fast as she can: "The lion's open mouth could not have looked more dreadful to her."⁶⁴

In similar fashion, the cobbler woman ("The Temple"), is determined to help her dying child. Her last resort is to take it to the temple to invoke the Thakurji, a deity of high caste devotees, knowing full well that she is breaking the taboos of society in so doing. She appeases her conscience: "Why should Thakurji only be theirs? Do outcaste people like us not also have a claim on him? Who are these people to stop me?"⁶⁵ Yet afraid of being manhandled, she dares not openly enter the temple. In great humility she tries to persuade the priest to give her permission. When this supplication is of no avail and the child's health

62. *Mansarovar* I, p. 143.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

65. *Mansarovar* V, pp. 4-5.

worsens, she decides in desperation that she must go back to the temple at night. A high born devotee shouts at her thus: "Get away you witch before you contaminate the place. What is this world coming to? Even the cobblers now want to offer prayers in the temple."⁶⁶ Her crying, however, made the priest feel "compassionate, but how could he possibly let a cobbler woman come close to the Thakurji."⁶⁷ To get rid of her he offers her some tulsi leaves and holy water. When Sukhiya tries again to enter the temple at night the priest this time with his shouts instigates a mob to fall upon her: "Thief! Thief!" and "What a calamity! Sukhiya has polluted the Thakurji."⁶⁸ When attacked by the mob which kills her child, she speaks up bravely: "... why don't you kill me too so that your Thakurji may be avenged?"⁶⁹

Of these four women, only one ("The Price of Milk"), succeeds in making her voice heard. She earns respect as well as payment for her services in nursing the zamindar's son. Premchand describes her thus: "After the landlady herself, it was Bhungi who ruled over the household."⁷⁰ In fact she becomes so arrogant she dares to talk back to her employers: "Landlord, if it were not for us sweepers where would you big people be?"⁷¹ Premchand remarks: "Such arrogance under any other circumstances would have cost her head."⁷² When the landlady offers Bhungi five *bhigas* of rent-free land, besides her board, Bhungi wants bangles of gold as well, not just of silver.⁷³

Budhia ("The Shroud"), has the misfortune not only of being an untouchable, but also of having married into the house of two shameless creatures, reduced to beastly insensitivity. Following her death, they know how to exploit the sympathy of the village by their cunning: "Within an hour they collect the nice sum of five Rupees."⁷⁴ Then they regret having to spend it upon a shroud for her dead body: "What a rotten custom to wrap her with a new cloth, she who never even had a rag given to her when she was alive."⁷⁵ Knowing how to exploit the villagers' mentality upon this occasion they reason: "The same people

66. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 8

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Mansarovar* II, p. 202.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, p. 201-202.

74. *Kafan*, p. 10.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

who have the money once will surely provide for her shroud again."⁷⁶

Fear of their high caste superiors, whether based upon superstition or upon personal experience, subjugates the outcastes and outweighs any logical evaluation of their situation. The outcaste women in "The Thakur's Well" and "The Temple" clearly see the social injustice of caste discrimination, yet are quite unable to mobilize any effective resistance to it.

The cunning behavior of the outcaste people, as a means of survival, is pointed out in the other two stories. It is characteristic of Premchand that he permits his outcaste male characters to become completely debased and selfish, but his women characters remain ideal. They do not openly rebel. They remain law-abiding and devoted to husband and family, as much so as any Indian woman of any higher caste. In Premchand's view the fear of their high-caste superiors, based in part on deep rooted superstition but still more on their day to day personal experiences, so intimidates the outcastes that they are unable to resist effectively the discrimination and maltreatment, which are awarded them for no other reason than their lowly birth.

Historical evaluation

For the roots of this arbitrary social injustice we have to look to Vedic India. By Rg Vedic times Indian society consisted of the following four *varnas*, or social orders: 1. the Brahmins, i.e., the priestly or learned class, 2. the Kshatriyas, the military or governing class, 3. the Vaisyas or traders and agriculturalists and 4. the Sudras who were the servants and menials of the three higher castes and who, unlike the three former, were not "twice born" and therefore excluded from Vedic sacrifice. A. L. Basham suggests that the name Sudra "was perhaps originally the name of a non-Aryan tribe which became subordinate to the conquerors."⁷⁷ Another source quotes a Brahman text as saying: "A woman of the black race, meaning the Sudra people, was meant only for enjoyment and not for furtherance of any higher motives."⁷⁸

If this was the fate of the Sudra, by implication a worse fate must have been that of the vast mass of *dasas*, or conquered people still lower than the Sudras—who later came to be known as untouchables, outcastes, depressed or scheduled castes—for they were not incorporated

76. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

77. Basham, p. 143.

78. G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay: The Popular Book Depot, 1950), p. 52.

into Aryan society. According to G. S. Ghurye: "It seems that the Vedic Dasa, by constant association and slow assimilation, had been partially differentiated into the Sudra and partially into the Nishada (supposedly a cross between a Brahman and a Sudra woman), while the refractory and incorrigible elements were especially despised and styled Paulkasa and Chandala (a cross believed to be between a Sudra and a Brahman woman)."⁷⁹

In support of this view A. L. Basham states: "Buddhist literature and the early Dharma Sutras show that several centuries before Christ there already existed groups of people who, though serving the Aryans in very menial and dirty tasks, were looked on as quite outside the pale."⁸⁰

The exclusiveness and purity of the higher castes were to be protected by taboos on interdining, touch and intermarriage: "No man of higher class might have any but the most distant relations with a candala on pain of losing his religious purity and falling to the candala's level. By Gupta times (400 A.D.) candalas had become so strictly un-touchable that, like lepers in medieval Europe, they were forced to strike a wooden clapper on entering a town, to warn the Aryans of their polluting approach."⁸¹ G. S. Ghurya, quoting the Dharma Sutras to the same effect, says: "The outcastes are to live by themselves as a community, teaching each other and marrying among themselves. Association with them by pure men is prohibited on pain of excommunication. By association is meant either a matrimonial alliance, officiating at their sacrifice, or even touching them."⁸²

If devotional Vaishnavism brought some relief in the religious sphere to the outcaste people of India by securing for them for the first time religious salvation through devotion and even annual entrance to the temple, by the good auspices of the great spiritual leader of devotionalism, Ramanuja (400 A.D.),⁸³ this did not affect their inferior social position, as neither did Islam. To the contrary: at the end of Akbar's reign (1600 A.D.), "among Hindus the caste system existed substantially as it exists today."⁸⁴

In confronting the casteless British culture the conscience of the

79. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

80. Basham, p. 144.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

82. Ghurye, p. 83.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

84. Ghurye citing Morland, Ghurye, p. 113.

enlightened and educated Indians was aroused. The agitation of the Indian reformers, as well as that of the Indian Nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi, gradually achieved more humane and just legislation for the outcaste people of India. However, legislation alone cannot change a people's social outlook and traditions. Deep-rooted caste prejudices and practices die hard, as was shown by Gandhi's repeated fasts on behalf of temple entry for the outcaste people during the 1930's, which brought only temporary success.

L. S. S. O'Malley concedes with Premchand that offerings may be made by the outcaste people to the priests, "but (they) may not be present when the latter present them but must remain outside the temple."⁸⁵ However, this author maintains that the outcaste people themselves do not regard temple entry as vital to the solution of their problems, inasmuch as their daily worship does not center around the great temples of orthodox Hinduism anyway, but rather around village godlings and demons. In support of this view the author quotes Dr. Ambedkar, the Indian outcaste leader: "As regards temple entry, the depressed classes have made it clear to Mr. Gandhi that they will have nothing to do with it regarded as final solution of the problem of untouchability. They would accept it only if Mr. Gandhi would make it clear that it was the first step in a general reform of Hindu society involving the break-up of the caste system."⁸⁶

O'Malley confirming Premchand's story "The Thakur's Well" (Mansarovar I), describes the difficulties which outcaste people have to face in getting the use of wells for their elementary supply of water: "Their difficulty is acute if their wells dry up or if they are dependent on common village wells. In that case they may have to go miles for water . . . even during the famine of 1919-1920 the Deccan Marathas refused to allow the untouchable Mahars to use the village wells when their own had dried up, and they had to wait and collect what muddy liquid trickled past after the cattle had been watered."⁸⁷

As regards the cunning of the outcastes, as described in two stories by Premchand, this only stands to reason, as under the pitiful circumstances described they are forced to eke out a living however they can.

If Premchand pictures the untouchable woman as being devoted to family and husband, as much so as her higher caste sisters, this is due in

85. L. S. S. O'Malley, *India's Social Heritage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 57.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

87. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

part to his characteristically idealistic view of Indian women in general, but even more perhaps to his understanding of the universality of motherhood.

Premchand's use of folklore

An interest in folklore may be derived from various motivations: at the one extreme lies the personal interest of the collector, writer or scholar; at the other extreme is a desire to use folklore as an instrument of education and indoctrination. Somewhere between these extremes—but closer to the latter—stands Premchand.

The folklorist's approach to his subject is likely to have implications for the direction of social change whether or not he is aware of this issue. Generally speaking, attitudes toward social change fall into four categories: reactionary, conservative, radical and revolutionary. Many a non-political folklorist would unconsciously fall among the conservatives—those who admire and wish to maintain the social order as it now stands. Others are consciously or unconsciously reactionary in that they would like to revert to the ways of old. Pride in the past of one's own people is a strong foundation for conservatives and a weapon for reactionaries.

Whereas conservatives could be classified as preservers, the reactionaries, radicals and especially the impatient revolutionaries tend to be manipulators of folklore for the purposes of propaganda and indoctrination. Aware of the people's natural conservatism (i.e., their reluctance to change), they may seek out elements of folk tradition in which to dress their proposals for social change. It is a well known fact, for instance, that many old church hymns were based upon older folk melodies with new words set to them. Medieval monks and priests, eager to proseletyze, appropriated classical proverbs and tales, and fixed Christian holidays to the calendar of Pagan festivals. Modern labor and political groups have, in their turn, appropriated Christian hymns, changing only their words. In this same spirit, both the Soviet and Chinese Communists have promoted the study of folklore and have used, misused and revised popular tales to suit their own social and political aims.⁸⁸

How does Premchand fit into this spectrum? While he is highly critical of the present order, it is not easy to classify him. Certainly he is a reformer for whom the present state of backwardness among his people is intolerable. He is not simply a reactionary and not simply a

⁸⁸. Richard M. Dorson, Foreword to Wolfram Eberhard, Ed., *Folk Tales of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1965.

radical. His views are those of an evolutionary socialist, mixed with conservatism. He says of his purpose as a writer: "I believe in social evolution, our object being to educate public opinion. Revolution is the failure of saner methods. My ideal is one giving equal opportunities to all. How that stage is to be reached except by evolution. . . . No social system can flourish, unless we are individually uplifted. . . . I do want to overhaul, but not destroy."⁸⁹

To this end—"to educate public opinion"—Premchand singled out those folk customs and beliefs which he considered social evils, and exposed them in his writings. He revived the noble ideals of ancient times, yet he knew that India could not return to that glorious past. In this regard, Premchand was in accord with his contemporary and mentor, Gandhi, who also defied any simple political label. Premchand was, more than any other Indian writer, the literary expression of the Gandhian philosophy. His political sympathies burst out in his stories, as passive and oppressed women characters become heroines and even martyrs, for ancient ideals as well as for the modern nationalist cause.

Premchand, like Gandhi, was not just carried along on a wave of anti-colonial nationalism. He knew that India's weakness lay within India herself and he wanted to do something about it. His method was to try to put the Indian people into motion by appealing to their conscience. To this end and with reformist zeal, he exposed cruel customs, incongruent with ancient ideals as well as with modern humanism. He did this through the characters of his stories. The hold of folk traditions upon Indian life is clearly revealed in the attitudes of Premchand's women characters. His male characters are ambivalent reflecting the tension between old and new values.

89. Madan, p. 165.

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