GOLD, DUST, OR GOLD DUST? 
RELIGION IN THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF PREMCHAND

Was Premchand really an atheist?

Premchand is regarded as one of the makers of modern Hindi literature and is known to his admirers as the 'king of novelists.' The purpose of this paper is to examine the place of religion in his life and work. In order to carry out such an examination, however, some preliminary observations are necessary.

First of all, the word 'religion' itself will need to be broadly interpreted in order to include those modern manifestations of religiosity which are more usually referred to as surrogates for religion, such as Marxism, humanism, nationalism, psychoanalysis, etc., apart from what are traditionally regarded as the religious traditions of mankind, such as Hinduism, etc. To confine religion to its narrower sense in this case would be to narrow the lens to the point where it loses focus. For it must be remembered that the active phase of Premchand's life coincided with the rise of nationalism in India and with the appearance of other 'isms' as religious options on the Indian scene.

Second, one must bear in mind that the pattern of ultimate concern that Premchand may have held was not like a fixed picture in a set frame, but rather more like luminous and continuous, but changing, images on a screen. Thus the dynamic element in the situation needs to be recognized.

Finally, it must be realized that though religious elements are to be found in his life and works, Premchand was not a man of religion as such. This last point needs to be clearly recognized, because many literary figures of India, the medieval poets, for instance, were also saints, and the life of even such a modern literary figure as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) possessed a pronounced mystical, if not religious, dimension. The biographers of Premchand have not overlooked this point in comparing the two. P. C. Gupta, for example, has suggested that Premchand "lacked the spiritual insight of Tagore into the past cultural heritage of India, but he seems to be much more in tune with modern concepts derived from a scientific and progressive world-outlook," and that "his novels have more political colouring than either the novels of Sarat Chandra [Chatterji] or Tagore." On the question of Premchand's closeness to the medieval poet-saints, which is a distinguishing feature of Tagore in some ways, it has been suggested that Premchand's work stands in marked contrast to that of Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chatterji. [for] he touches a region of life hitherto ignored by the Indian masters with the exception of the medieval saint-poets. He speaks of the Indian peasant with deep understanding and sympathy, of his poverty and sufferings, his superstitions and weaknesses and his dreams of a better life.

While it may be true that, when compared to his Bengali counterparts, Premchand focuses as much on the rural as on the emerging urban milieu in India, his approach to the issues which his characters face is not religious. If anything, his approach is rather the contrary. Moreover, Premchand does not admit of any personal experiences of a mystical nature. He begins an
autobiographical sketch with the mystically disarming metaphor wherein he admits to feeling the depths of despair but not to any kind of peak experiences: "My life is a level plain. There are pits here and there but no cliffs, mountains, jungles, deep ravines or desert wastes. Those good people who have a taste for mountaineering will be disappointed here." That religion forms a part of his life and work, and that his life and work are not a part of religion is further confirmed by the consideration of the following list of his favorite themes drawn up by one of his biographers, Prakash Chandra Gupta:

1. Love of ornaments and finery; the trouble and distress this brings.
2. The peasant's tale of woe and suffering.
3. Communal tensions, orthodoxy, superstition and blind prejudices.
4. Dowry and the marriage system.
5. The plight of the Hindu widow.
6. The stepmother.
7. Social movements and national upsurge.
8. Historical interest: mediaeval history and recent Indian history.
9. Supernatural interests and intrusions.
10. Themes of patriotic fervour.
11. Games like Kabaddi and gilli-danda [sic].
12. Satire and exposure of pretence and hypocrisy.
13. Themes of social injustice.

But to say that Premchand was not a 'religious' man or writer does not mean that religion played no role in his life or writings.

Premchand was a Hindu, a kãyasth by birth.9 Hence, Hinduism often figures into his works. But Premchand was a progressive and a rationalist insofar as Hinduism was concerned. He attacked obscurantism. He was also temperamentally secular rather than communal and once remarked: "My way of living and my culture are, in fact, a blend of the Hindu and the Muslim. The impact of Muslim culture on me is deeper than that of the Hindu; I learnt Persian and Urdu from a maulvi long before I started reading and writing Hindi." He did not believe in the cardinal Hindu doctrine of rebirth and attacked exploitation in the name of religion.11 In his first novel, Ašrãr-e-m 'abid (Mysteries of the Places of Worship), the pandãs, serving priests at a temple or pilgrimage site, are shown in a bad light, and widow remarriage is espoused in the next novel, Prem (Love).12 Premchand himself married a child-widow (though it was a second marriage for him as well),9 and the pernicious influence of the dowry system is portrayed in Nirmalã.13 Thus Premchand was a reformist in his attitude to Hindu social customs. He also became a rationalist in the sense that he subsequently discarded the supernaturalism of his early stories such as "Mûth" (The Sorcerer's Spell) and "Nãg püjā" (Snake Worship), etc., and the early novel Kãyãkalp (Metamorphosis).14 However, Premchand was first and foremost a writer rather than a reformist, and this became clearer as his work matured. As his translator David Rubin has pointed out:

Caste snobbery—though it is more than snobbery, being a function of religion; the yearning for sons (a desire that overwhelms all others) to carry on the family and perform the rituals; the terror at the possibility of disgrace or loss of face; the shame of widowhood; the proverbial conservatism—and cunning—of the peasant: these are some of the recurring strands in the fabric of his portrayal of the
village. In the early stories there is a tendency to editorialize, even sermonize, and to be redundant, which decreases gradually; the best stories of the late twenties and thirties are free of it entirely.15

The cow in the life and work of Premchand is an interesting index of his relation to traditional Hinduism. When he was in Gorakhpur, Premchand clashed with the British collector. His cow was found grazing in the collector's compound, and the collector threatened to shoot it. The point to note here is that it was not the sacredness of the cow which caused the row; rather, "Prem Chand was really standing up for national self-respect against the insolence and arrogance of foreign rulers."16 His most famous and last complete novel, Godân (The Gift of a Cow), again serves to illustrate the same point. Hori, the hero of the novel, has one "supreme ambition": "to have a cow at his doo- step."17 He gets one, but it is poisoned. Finally, when Hori is himself dying, he is urged to give a cow away in order to secure salvation by the moneylender, who "comes again in the shape of the heartless Brahmin, with all the sanction and authority of religion and custom behind him."18 The poignant end is best described by the author's own words:

The news [of Hori's dying] had swept through the village like a great wind and everyone had assembled. Lying there on the cot, Hori perhaps saw everything and understood everything, but his lips were sealed. Only the tears flowing from his eyes spoke of the anguish of breaking the ties of worldly attachment. The sorrow of things left undone—-that is the source of attachment, not the tasks completed and the duties discharged. The pain comes in making orphans of those to whom obligations could not be met, in the half-realized ambitions which could not be fulfilled.

Although she understood full well, Dhaniya [Hori's wife] clung to the dwindling shadow of hope. Tears were flowing from her eyes but she dashed around like a machine, making a mango drink one moment and massaging his body with wheat chaff the next. If only there were money, she'd have sent someone for a doctor.

'Make your heart strong, bhaabi,' Hira [Hori's younger brother] said, weeping. 'Make the gift of a cow. Dada is leaving us now.'

Dhaniya's eyes glowed resentfully. How much stronger could she make her heart? And did she have to be reminded of her duty to her husband? She'd been his partner in life --obviously her duty was not just to mourn over him.

'Yes, make the godaan,' other voices called out. 'Now is the time.'

Dhaniya rose mechanically and brought out the twenty annas earned that morning from the twine they made. Placing the money in the cold palm of her husband's hand, she stepped forward and said to Datadin [the brahman], 'Maharaj, there is no cow nor calf nor money in his house. There are only these few coins. This is his godaan, his gift of a cow.'

And she collapsed on the ground, unconscious.19
Here again the tragedy is not just the fact that the godân ceremony could not be performed; rather:

Hori in Godan is the embodiment of Prem Chand's idealism. He has got a noble soul. He represents the Indian peasantry as a whole. He is devoted to his family; he loves his land and oxen; he respects law and religion. In short, he is faithful to the old feudal society. But in this society he is exploited and oppressed even more. His family is broken; he loses his strip of land and his oxen; he is reduced to a mere wage-worker and through hard work comes to a miserable death.

This tragedy of Hori is the tragedy of millions and millions of poor peasants.20

The experience of injustice in the world shook Premchand's faith in theism. Though at one time he talked of "keeping terms with both—God and the world,"21 by the time he was writing Kayâkalp, published in 1926, he had become preoccupied with the question of reconciling God with the existence of an unjust world, for

Interspersed throughout the novel are such musings as these: "Why did God create a world, where there is so much selfishness, envy and injustice? Was it not possible to create a world where all men, all communities could live with peace and happiness? What sort of justice is this that one revels in luxury and another is pushed around; one nation sucks the blood of another and lords over it, while the other starves and is crushed under foot?" Such an unjust world cannot have been created by God.22

His correspondence with his friends on this point is revealing. To one he wrote:

'I had formerly believed in a force above all. Not as a conclusion based on thinking, but only as a traditional belief. That faith is now shattered. Undoubtedly there is some great power behind the universe. But I cannot believe that it has anything to do with human affairs, just as it cannot have anything to do with the affairs of ants, flies or mosquitoes.'23

To Jainendra Kumar he wrote: "My life has been spent in studying and listening to intellectual things. I have no faith in God, no reverence. You are moving towards theism, rather growing into a confirmed bhakt [devotee]. I have been moving from scepticism towards atheism."24 Jainendra raised the question of God when Premchand was close to death. Premchand replied to the query:

Your God . . . is a God of wrath and punishment, and runs the world by the rod. I shall never worship a God who behaves in this ridiculously inhuman fashion. God may be kind to the rich, for they seem to have all the comforts; but He isn't very kind to us common folk.

I cannot believe in God . . . as long as I see cruelty and injustice in the world. I don't have faith in absolute values. If I find that by telling a lie, I can save the lives of thousands of people or bring them positive benefit in any other way, I'll lie gladly. I measure an action by
its value to human beings. If it helps my fellow beings, anything I do is good; if it harms them, it is evil.25

In other words, Premchand ultimately came to believe in some form of humanism. This view finds repeated expression in his writings. The content of his stories is often ethical; the basic goodness of human nature is emphasized, and evil characters are transformed into good human beings.26 In other words, if religion believes in a 'loving God,' then, for Premchand, religion was loving with no God; and if religion is 'ethical monotheism,' then his religion was ethical without being monotheistic—or theistic, for that matter.

With such an attitude towards theism, it is natural that Premchand should have turned to other expressions of the religious instinct. Three of these seem to have especially appealed to him: nationalism, Gandhism, and communism.

Premchand's life coincides with the intensification of the nationalist movement in India. In his autobiographical sketch he recalls that until 1907

... I had not written one short story. The title of my first story was 'The Most Precious Jewel in the World' [Dunyã kã sab se anmol ratna], published in Zamana [The Age; Kanpur] in 1907. After this I wrote another four or five stories. In 1909 a collection of five stories was published with the title 'Sufferings of the Motherland' [Sos-e-vatan]. At this time the partition of Bengal had taken place; in the Congress the radical faction had developed. In these five stories I praised devotion to the country.27

This collection got him into trouble with the authorities.28 Small wonder, for in his first story

... he posed the question, what is the most precious thing on earth. Not the tears of a father whose son has been executed, nor the ashes of a faithful wife who burns herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, but 'that last drop of blood which is shed for the country's freedom.'29

Premchand was radicalized by the independence movement. He began as a disciple of Gokhale but soon adopted Tilak's views.30 When Mahatma Gandhi appeared on the scene, Premchand was deeply influenced by him. The 'naked fakir' of Churchill's description is seen by some to appear as the character Surdas in Rahgabhâmi (The Stage); Karmabhâmi (The Arena) also reveals Gandhian influence.31 Premchand actually met Gandhi at Wardha in 1935 and was so impressed by the mahatma's personality that Mrs. Premchand asked her husband:

"Does that mean that you intend to become his disciple?"

"Becoming a disciple doesn't mean worshipping a man," Premchand replied. "It means emulating his good points. I emulate them; I even made them the basis of Premashram in 1922."

"You wrote that before Gandhiji was on the scene," she said.

"That's just what I mean," he said. ["From the literary point of view, I discovered Gandhiji's doctrine long before he expounded it."
"That doesn't prove anything," his wife said.

He smiled, "I know it doesn't. All I meant was: Gandhi ji is pulling up with the peasants in his own way. I'm doing it in mine--with my pen and a bottle of ink."32

But at least towards the end of his life, if not sooner, he ceased to be a Gandhian in the true sense of the word.33 In his essay "Mahājānī sabhyatā" (Capitalist, or Money, Culture) he condemns capitalism as more inhuman than such systems as feudalism and imperialism.34 When asked, "Are you not a Gandhian?" he replied: "Even though I believe in Mahatma's philosophy of change of heart, I am not really Gandhian. His philosophy can bring the zamindari system to an end. Anyhow, land shall one day belong to the peasant who tills it."35

It has been suggested that his last and incomplete novel, Mahgalsutra (The Auspicious Bond), which is almost autobiographical, reflects this move away from Gandhism.36 It may have come earlier, for there are hints that, while Premchand was under the influence of Gandhian ideas to begin with, "as the years passed and brought defeat and disillusionment in its train, he moved to the left along with the rest of the national movement."37

Premchand may have looked upon communism with favor even earlier. In a letter dated 21 December 1919, he wrote to a friend: "I have now almost accepted the principles of Bolshevism."38 And already in 1928 he was debating the Marxist point of view with his wife, the details of which she provides in her remembrances of her husband:

"Exploitation isn't going to stop as soon as we become free," she said.

"No," replied Prem Chand. "Some exploitation isn't a bad thing. It's the degree that counts. We seem to take it for granted that the poor live to supply pleasures and money for the rich. Things have happened in the meantime, Rani. Look at Russia. They have knocked down the rich and the poor live in pleasure there. May be we might do the same here. I hope so."

"You think there's any chance?" she asked.

Premchand reflected. "Not in the near future."

"For argument's sake: let's suppose it has happened," Shivrani Devi continued. "Which side would you take?"

"The workers', of course," he replied. "Is there any other? They work with spade and hammer. I work with my pen. There isn't much difference."

She laughed. "That's very nice, but they aren't going to take you at your word."

"Why not? I presuppose, of course, some literacy. Aren't there writers in Russia? Aren't they infinitely better off than our writers? I only hope the day comes sooner than I expect."

"You mean the Russians come sooner than you expect." Shivrani Devi said.

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"Of course not," replied Prem Chand. "We're good enough to manage our own affairs. Our own workers will rule us, as they should. When that day comes, Rani, we'll all be living two lives instead of one."

"How strange!"

"No, not very strange. Right now a man's life is one continual mess of getting two square meals a day, of worry, of tragedy."

"Worry won't disappear in a workers' country. We bring worry on ourselves, whether workers or zamindars," said Shivrani Devi.

"Why not?" Prem Chand replied. "It should surely end when the workers have a say in their own government. Why should we sweat our lives out building for the security of our families if we are assured that after our deaths the State gives us a guarantee of providing the needs of our dependents. Put it this way. Is there any man who would not think a load's been lifted off his mind if the State promises that he needn't save up for the comfort of his wife and children?"

Thus the fabric of Premchand's religion—in the sense of the pattern of values which constituted his ultimate concern—was woven out of the three major strands of nationalism, Gandhism and Marxism. Perhaps in the end only pessimism (or was it realism?) won out as his life finally ran its course. Jainendra Kumar was by his side during those last moments:

"Press here," said Premchand, stretching out his arm, at the dead of night, everyone else in the house having gone to sleep.

Jainendra pressed his arm.

"Jainendra ..." said Premchand. He did not complete the sentence.

A long pause . . . and then: "Ideals won't do."

"But ideals . . ." said Jainendra. The sentence wasn't completed. Jainendra felt remorseful and guilty for entering into an argument with a man about to die.

"Don't argue," said Premchand, turning on his side and closing his eyes once again.

"It's warm," he said a little later, "Please fan me."

Premchand was fanned, but he couldn't sleep. He was in great agony. He did not cry; he only lay with his eyes closed.

Three o'clock in the morning of October 8. He told Jainendra to go to sleep. Soon thereafter, he went into a coma.

In a state of half-consciousness later in the morning,
he asked for some tooth powder and water to cleanse his mouth. Before these could be brought to him, he could neither move nor speak.

"Won't you cleanse your mouth?" asked Mrs. Premchand . . . Her brother caught her hand and told her he was no more.40

Notes


2. This is not as startling a procedure as might appear at first glance. Serious students of religion have long been concerned with enlarging the area of 'religion' beyond its traditional confines; see R. C. Zaehner, ed., The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 402 ff; also see William C. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah, eds., Religions in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).


4. Ibid, p. 4, 47.

Saratchandra Chatterji (1876-1937): Bengali novelist whose works address the lives and problems of the middle class, notably those of women and the treatment they receive in Indian society. Rubin (p. 207) suggests that perhaps Premchand is closer to Bankimchandra Chatterji (1838-1894), the so-called father of the Indian novel, whose works are imbued with a spirit of nationalism and a certain resistance towards a number of modern trends in social reform, especially with regard to women. Premchand avidly read Bankimchandra in Urdu translation.


Kabaddi: a team tag game.


kayāsth: a caste whose traditional occupation is that of scribes.

10. Quoted in Gopal, Munshi Premchand, p. 412. Thus Premchand consistently tried to be evenhanded in dealing with Hindus and Muslims, and eventually opposed the śvādhi (purity) movement of the Arya Samaj (for a note on which, see p. 91), which aimed at reconverting Muslims to Hinduism (see Swan, p. 89 ff; also p. 21). Swan, however, does suggest a pre-1916 phase in his writings when "the composite atmosphere encountered in these backward eastern districts [Hamirpur, Gorakhpur, etc.] did induce him temporarily toward a viewpoint marked by exclusive Hindu traits" (Swan, pp. 19-20). There is also the suggestion that he may have despised of the two evolving a common sense of nationhood (Swan, p. 20).


13. Gupta, Prem Chand, p. 14. 31. Also see Swan, pp. 6-7, 10-12, 34. The marital situation constitutes the subject of many of his stories (see Swan, pp. 113-19.). Nirmala (name of the heroine; serialized in Cāḥd [Moon; Allahabad], 1925-26; rpt. Allahabad: Saraswati Press, n.d.).


18. Ibid.


20. Rahbar, pp. 155-56. It may be added that Premchand treats Islamic themes in his writing as well (see Gopal, p. 219 ff.), and while at times he portrays Christians in a bad light (Gupta, Prem Chand p. 30), it is not always so (ibid., p. 52). Premchand's commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity leaves no room for doubt (Gopal, Munshi Premchand, p. 216; Gupta, Prem Chand, pp. 3-4, 27, etc.). It may finally be pointed out that Premchand had a more positive approach to neo-Hinduism and admired Swami Vivekananda (ibid., p. 16, 18, 31).
The appeal that men like Vivekananda and even Dayananda Saraswati had for Premchand, however, may lie in the fact that they "emerged from their long spiritual struggles to make the choice for the uplift of society their main tenet, rather than to choose the solitary traditional path of individual self-realization" (Swan, p. 17; also see p. 18).

For notes on Vivekananda and Dayananda Saraswati, see p. 53.

22. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
23. Quoted in ibid., p. 51.
24. Quoted in ibid.
25. Quoted in Rahbar, p. 146. It is said that on the day he died he told his friend Jainendra Kumar, "In this condition, Jainendra, people think of God. ... I also have been advised to do likewise, but I haven't yet been able to persuade myself to bother Him" (Gopal, _Munshi Prem Chand_, p. 453).

For a note on Jainendra Kumar, see p. 37.

30. Ibid., p. 15.

B. G. Tilak (1856-1920): radical journalist and nationalist who did not discourage the use of unrest against the British in the independence struggle.

G. K. Gokhale (1866-1915): moderate nationalist who found the Servants of India Society and was acknowledged by Gandhi as his guru.

32. Shivrani Devi, _Premoahd ghar meh_ (Premchand at Home) (Delhi: Atma Ram 1956), quoted in Rahbar, p. 152.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p 450.
38. Gupta, _Prem Chand_, p. 28.
39. Quoted in Rahbar, pp. 117-18. But see Swan, p. 128 (and also p. 120), who suggests that Premchand's non-use of Marxist solutions in his stories
after having stopped the utilization of Gandhian ones may indicate "the awareness that art must differ from teaching."

40. Gopal, Munshi Premchand, pp. 453-54; emphasis added. Another alternative to religion—Freudism—was accepted by Premchand to the extent that he regarded religion as a projection of one’s self (ibid., p. 412), rejected it as a solution because of its self-defeating emphasis on sex (Rahbar, p. 158).