

Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture 2025

Recovering Premchand

Alok Rai

The main objective of this talk is really to seek to rescue Premchand from the paradoxical obscurity of fame. I wish to make Premchand available as an object of intellectual attention. The truth of the matter is that, having been enshrined as a school text, the living writer, subject to the pulls and pressures of context and situation, has been embalmed in hagiography – and, of course, the condescension of latter-day sophisticates.

As I see it, there are two ways in which Premchand may be framed as an object of enquiry. The first of these is the drama of the “making” of “Munshi Premchand”. There is a biographical aspect to this – which has been lovingly depicted in the awkwardly-filial biography by my father, Amrit Rai. However, beyond the bare, if impressive, narrative, there is the drama of the emergence of “Munshi Premchand” from the chrysalis of “Nawab Rai”. This drama, in turn, works at two different levels – that of language and, perhaps relatedly, at the level of thematic substance, of the experiential universe. As a pioneering writer in Hindi – more particularly, in Nagari – Premchand is negotiating between two different sets of influences: on the one hand, there is tradition of the Persianate *latifa/dastaan*, albeit with a nationalistic inflection. But on the other hand, there is also the socially reformist tradition of Bangla romantic fiction which was a staple of the early Hindi readership. The eventual creation of a literary identity that is different from either is a phenomenon that bears reflection.

It is easy to overestimate the significance of the switch from Urdu to Hindi. I have, indeed, long maintained – it is pretty much a family tradition! – that the supposed duality between Urdu and Hindi is itself contestable. But in any case, it is unlikely that Premchand – who had been schooled in the Persianate tradition – suddenly switched to a Sanskritised “Hindi” register. What is nearer the case is that he continued to write in the way that he always had, but handed the manuscript to sundry and anonymous translators, who rendered it into what was in the process of becoming “Hindi”. The consequently slippery nature of the text adds a further, scholarly, dimension to the engagement with Premchand – the matter of the unstable text itself. Barring *Godan*, there is no “authentic”, manuscript version of virtually anything. The fact that this scholarly anomaly has not received due scholarly attention is really an effect of the split between the Urdu and Hindi scholarly worlds.

Finally, there is the mysterious phenomenon of canonicity – of “iconicity”, of “genius” – itself. After all, Premchand has not lacked for detractors – young writers have scoffed at his lack of narrative sophistication. As with Dickens – the characters are simple, the situations predictable, the transformations sentimental. He is clearly a writer who deserves to be forgotten – except that he is widely read, and widely believed to be one of our “great” writers. This “greatness” is itself something that could be mined for insights into his place and time.

**

Alok Rai attended the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and University College, London as a Commonwealth Fellow. His PhD *George Orwell, Orwell and the Politics of Despair*, was published in 1990. He has translated Munshi Premchand's *Nirmala*, but he believes that his best work is the monograph *Hindi Nationalism*, published in 2001.

He was born into a family that gave him, “well before the age of consent”, a certain engagement with matters of language and culture, with literature. He received his early education in Allahabad which, he insists, gives him a kind of privileged vernacular access.

He has taught at the University of Allahabad, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, and University of Pennsylvania. He retired from the Department of English, University of Delhi in 2011.