

# Education and the Freedom Struggle in India: The Humanist Vision of Premchand

Dr. Ritambhara Malaviya

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India  
Email - ritambhara.academic@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This paper tries to examine the ideas of Premchand on education and posits that Premchand reflects the humanist consensus on education, which had emerged as a result of the freedom struggle and the socio-cultural movements in India. As a person who was a keen observer of human behaviour, the social relations and the politics of his time, his thoughts on education system are drawn from these experiences and hence offer rich insights. His ideas are representative of the dialogue between the traditional and the modern in India and what emerges from this dialogue is a vision for the future of the nation, filtering the best from both. Premchand's thoughts can be taken as a milestone in the development of the concept of modern education in India. The education system in India, in course of its development, acquired different forms and can be categorised into four types – religious, colonial, humanist and neoliberal. This paper points out that in order to understand the basic tenets of humanist concept of education, Premchand's writings are unrivalled both in terms of the variety of concerns addressed as well as the richness of the humanist understanding of these problems.

**Key Words:** Humanism, colonial system, commercialism, equality, inclusive education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Turning back to the classics helps us to assess the present in light of the visions that came up in course of history. Especially, when a country looks for its own model of development and education and tries to find the voice of the Global South in the world of knowledge, it becomes imperative to study some of the prominent voices emerging from the grassroots. This paper discusses the works of an eminent litterateur whose valuable ideas on education in India are less well known and acknowledged in the field of education. Premchand is the representative voice of the common people of India and therefore his views on education remain very significant for strengthening the voice of the marginalised. Premchand is undisputedly one of the tallest figures in Hindi and Urdu literature till date. He became the voice of the people with his simple, uncomplicated, yet deeply moving writings. India's freedom struggle was giving birth to a new society and Premchand's fiction as well as essays and articles are a constant dialogue and discourse with the people for giving shape to this new society. His writings stand at a unique intersection of literature, politics, sociology and education. Premchand's writings offer a dialogue between the traditional and the modern in India and represent the eventual creation of a holistic vision for the future. This paper argues that the ideas of Premchand epitomise the humanist consensus on education that had emerged as a consequence of the freedom struggle and the mammoth socio-political churning in India.

## 2. THE HUMANIST VISION:

Four prominent models can be identified in course of mapping the history of the development of education system in India: First, the religious systems of ancient and medieval India like the Gurukuls and the Madrasas, secondly, the colonial system of education, epitomized by Macaulay's Minute on Indian education<sup>1</sup>, thirdly, the humanist thought as reflected in the works of the humanist leaders and writers of the freedom struggle like Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore and finally, the neo-liberal ideas which gained prominence as India embraced the package of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. This paper discusses the ideas of Premchand as representative of the humanist vision on

education. The issues, debates and concerns raised in his letters, essays and writings are still being debated in India and therefore his writings are classics which become a source of valuable insights into these debates.

Premchand keenly followed the developments in socio-political thought in India and abroad, and his writings seem to be intensely sensitive to these ideas. Thus, while his earlier writings are imbued with a Gandhian philosophy, his later writings like 'Mahajani Sabhyata' (Premchand, 1993) reflect a deep admiration for socialist ideas and criticise the capitalist system. The liberal humanist tradition of the European Renaissance with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity also left an indelible imprint on his writings. While extolling these ideals, Premchand rigorously questioned the liberal tradition for its failure in checking the forces that were corrupting the society by promoting greed, selfishness and gross individualism. Thus, he remarks in one of his stories through the female protagonist, "If despite the coming in of independence, the educated society remains blinded by selfishness like this, then I would say, it would be better that such a *Swaraj* does not come. The greed of British businessmen and the selfishness of the educated are squashing us. ... I want to see a social system in which at least inequality is not given protection" (Premchand 1994: 18).<sup>ii</sup> He wrote vigorously in favour of the oppressed and exploited which culminated in the form of his most acclaimed novel *Godaan* (Premchand, 1969). At that time, it was no less than revolutionary to have as the main protagonist a poor farmer, and to conceive a story that revolved around the little joys, hopes and tragedies of this man and his family – exploited and fleeced by the system.

Premchand questions exclusion and discrimination in all its forms. He derides the caste system through his stories like 'Thakur ka kuan' (meaning the tank of the high caste Thakur) (Premchand, 1996) and also through the character of 'Pandit Mote Raam Shastri', the insensitive obese priest, who is ridiculed throughout his literature. Premchand is a product of the complex hybrid and syncretic culture of India – the 'Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb' as it is called, or the culture that emerged from the confluence of two rivers – the Ganga and the Yamuna – symbols of the traditional Hindu and the rich Mughal legacies, respectively. This is reflected in how he is highly acclaimed and unrivalled in both Hindi and Urdu literature. He flays communalism unequivocally in his writings like 'Sampradayikta aur Sanskriti' (Premchand, 1962f).

In his writings, Premchand advocates a democratic concept of education. He had before him a country the majority of which was illiterate, deprived of knowledge and its fruits for centuries. Premchand's ideas regarding education are scattered throughout his works. Since he never wrote a book on education to express these ideas systematically, one has to go through his numerous writings to understand his thoughts that point towards a holistic concept of education from childhood to youth and beyond. He clearly favours inclusive classrooms, aimed at the holistic development of students. Thus, his ideas begin with a criticism of the colonial model but develop in the form of commentaries on the links between education system and society and culminate in his profound vision of a society which is egalitarian and non-exploitative.

**3. CRITICISM OF THE COLONIAL MODEL OF EDUCATION:** According to Premchand, education should be such that it inspires social consciousness in students. Premchand seems to be warning against the education system which had been introduced by the British in India for producing loyal subjects that would work efficiently for the administration. Premchand unequivocally criticises the model of education in the West, for producing self-centred men who grow up with a predatory and parasitic mindset to work less and exploit others. This results in commercialism and imperialism and gives birth to conflicts between states (Premchand, 1962h, pp.221-222).

To Premchand, university is truly a place for universal learning, a concept that was vanishing even from the place of its origin. He criticises in unequivocal terms the colonial education which leads to the development of vanity and false pride in the people who acquire half-digested knowledge for examinations. This produces people with a colonial mindset suitable for official work only (Premchand, 1962g, p. 198). The writer places before the people a very high ideal of education – education for the quest of truth (Premchand, 1962i, p. 202). Premchand's call echoes with the call of the emerging nation, 'The nation now expects high ideals from university, where rote learning should remain within limits and the development of the students' character becomes their aim' (Premchand, 1962a, p. 211). In a moment of social churning when leaders like Gandhi were giving a call to youth to become fearless, Premchand, through his work, reinforces this call for new energy and strong character in the youth which was necessary for resisting every form of oppression and exploitation.

**4. DEVELOPMENT DURING CHILDHOOD AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS:** Premchand emphasised that childhood is the most crucial stage of development as habits formed at that stage stay for life, and it is at this stage that the character and personality of the child can be moulded (Premchand, 1962h, p. 222). He even advocates a play-way

education for channelising the energy of children and developing their creativity as a step towards enabling human beings to achieve what they are truly capable of. He warns against the tendency to put restrictions on the activities of children from the fear that children would waste or break things. Premchand believes that children should be allowed to learn freely through their own experiences, and should be given opportunities to explore things on their own, “The innate creativity of children must be awakened. If a boy wishes to make toys, wireless devices, if he wishes to go fishing, to grow vegetables, stitch clothes, play the flute, to act in plays, or write poems, do not stop him. If a child stays for a few weeks in a year in the midst of natural forces, goes boating in a river, drives on a ground, or works with a hoe in a field, he will experience a self-confidence, which books and lecturing cannot provide” (Premchand, 1962b, p. 188). This quote also shows that to Premchand the development of a student meant his or her developing into a well-rounded person. He definitely reflects here the true spirit of the renaissance humanism, which believed in the endless capacity of human beings for growth and creation. Coming down heavily on the education system that produced mere paid employees of the state with no vision for the development of children and society, Premchand emphasised the necessity of enlightened teachers (Premchand, 2002, p.90).

**5. EQUALITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS:** Premchand stands for the progressive ideal of “education to all” and envisions the creation of a sufficient number of schools for it (Premchand, 1962c, p. 216). He believed that education should not be expensive because it is a public good, and not a commodity to be traded. This stands in contrast to the neo-liberal model of education which converts education into a profitable investment and teachers into education providers (Kumar, 2011).

He emphasises in his writings that most of the children have equal capabilities for development, a befitting reply to those who discriminated on the basis of caste, creed, race or status. He says, ‘It is being accepted now that most of the children have the same tendencies and the use or misuse of those tendencies makes them good or bad’ (Premchand, 1962h, p. 222). This statement is a powerful rebuttal to those who have tried to justify social hierarchies as natural. This was especially significant as it was the freedom struggle in India which tried to create an egalitarian ethos in a deeply divided and hierarchical society, and for this the work of the writers and intellectuals was of seminal importance.

Premchand feels that selling education like a commodity instead of treating it as a service, has led to the development of a mindset which makes people increasingly self-centred. Education, for Premchand, is not only a means of professional success but also a means for the development of society. He unequivocally states his support for government funded free education in his novel ‘Karmabhoomi’ and regrets how we have turned education into a business of getting returns on investment. He also says, “The nation needs education much more than it needs the military” (Premchand, 2002, p.9). This comparison of defence expenditure with expenditure on welfare has been done time and again. A number of studies in contemporary scholarship on human development emphasise curtailment of expenditure on defence to eliminate problems like illiteracy, hunger and malnutrition. Premchand lays emphasis on the development of human capabilities and potentials and equal rights to development for all. Those studying the implementation of modern paradigm of human development and capabilities can look back to this writer for this vision, “So long as the nation does not recognise and accept that every person has equal rights to life and development, unemployment among the educated would continue to grow with each passing day” (Premchand, 1962k, p. 231).

**6. THE SOCIAL AND THE SELF:** Education, for Premchand, is ultimately the institution that connects the individual to the society and prepares them for fighting against all wrongs and for standing staunchly and unflinchingly for the larger social cause. In his quest of an egalitarian society, Premchand also comes across the dilemma between the individual and the collective. This dilemma can also be found in the works of the greatest philosophers of the West – Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Mill and Marx, but their prescriptions are different. While Hegel subordinates the freedom of the individual to the state, Mill sides with the individual and his ‘experiments in living’ (Mill, 1859). Premchand tries to strike a balance between the individual and the collective, relying on education to bridge the divide between the self and society. Instead of a predatory relationship between the individual and society, education would aim at developing an individual in harmony with his society. He defines freedom as self-restraint which could be encouraged in children through education which cultivates the wisdom to judge (Premchand, 1962b, p. 188).

**7. CONCLUSION: EMPHASIS ON HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS:** Premchand is concerned about the holistic development of students and lays utmost emphasis on the health of students (Premchand, 1962j, p. 241). He strongly criticising the lopsided emphasis on rote learning and exams at the cost of activities like community service, sports, debates and art and creativity which play an equal role in the mental and physical development of students (Premchand, 1962d, p. 212).



The overall vision is that of a fully developed human being, sharp in mental faculties and healthy in body. This ideal naturally entails the vision of a society where the divide between mental and physical labour disappears, where all get education and all work for building the society. Behind this lofty concept of the dignity of labour is the legacy of a gamut of social thinkers like Tolstoy, Ruskin, Marx and Gandhi. Premchand assimilates the best in these traditions to advocate full development of the human potential for all.

Premchand's thought on education is relatively underemphasised in the academia. However, this paper argues that the range of issues addressed by Premchand, with their legacy of the humanist tradition of the Indian freedom struggle make his writings a valuable resource for understanding the debate on education today. Premchand is among a galaxy of writers, intellectuals and activists who had envisioned not only an independent nation, but also a nation that would guarantee full development of every student's mind and soul. Revisiting these ideals is important for assessing the progress made after independence towards them and understanding the failures, challenges and obstacles in the process.

## REFERENCES:

1. Kumar, K. (2011). Teaching and the neo-liberal state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (21), 37-40.
2. Macaulay, T.B. (1835). Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835. <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~hcverma/Article/Macaulay-Minutes>.
3. Mill, J.S. (1859). *On Liberty*. <https://www.utilitarianism.com/ol/three.html>.
4. Premchand. (1962a). Allahabad University ke Naye Vice Chancellor. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., p. 211). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
5. Premchand. (1962b). Bachchon ko Swaadheen Banao. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 185-188). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
6. Premchand. (1962c). Fail Hone Wale Ladke. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., p. 213). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
7. Premchand. (1962d). Gorakhpur mein Shiksha Sammelan. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 212-213). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
8. Premchand. (1962e). Naveen aur Pracheen. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 196-198). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
9. Premchand. (1962f). Sampradayikta aur Sanskriti. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 232-234). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
10. Premchand. (1962g). Sanyukt Prant Mein do Convention. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 198-201). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
11. Premchand. (1962h). Shiksha ka Naya Adarsh. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 221-222). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
12. Premchand. (1962i). Swami Shraddhanand aur Bharatiya Shiksha Pranali. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 201-203). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
13. Premchand. (1962j). Swasthaya aur Shiksha. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 241-243). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
14. Premchand. (1962k). Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru ka Bhashan. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, 3, (1st ed., pp. 230-231). Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
15. Premchand. (1969). *Godan*. Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
16. Premchand. (1993). Mahajani Sabhyata. In Amritrai (Ed.), *Premchand Smriti* (pp. 257-264). Allahabad, India: Lokbharti.
17. Premchand. (1994). Aahuti. In *Kafan*. Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.
18. Premchand. (1996). Thakur ka Kuan. In *Premchand ki Sampurna Kahaniyan*, 2, (pp. 308-317). Allahabad, India: Lokbharti.
19. Premchand. (2002). *Karmabhumi*. Allahabad, India: Hans Prakashan.

<sup>i</sup> Lord Macaulay, member of the supreme council of East India Company from 1834 to 1838 wrote in 1835 in favour of the introduction of a system of education in India which would produce 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay, 1835).

<sup>ii</sup> All the translations of Premchand's quotes in this article have been done by the author.