

PREMCHAND

(1880 – 1936)

Biography

Premchand (born as Danpat Rai) was the most influential Hindi novelist of the first half of the twentieth century. His grandfather was a record-keeper and his father was a post office worker in a village near the famous city of Benares in north India. While still quite young, Premchand was educated in Persian and Urdu, as well as Hindi. He lost his mother at age eight, and was raised by a succession of female relatives (a recurring theme in his novels). He took on a part-time job of selling books, went to a missionary school, where he learned some English, and then enrolled at Queen's College in Benares. His arranged marriage, when he was 15, to a rich man's daughter was not a happy one. After his father died, he took on several odd jobs before becoming a teacher, a profession that allowed him to begin his literary career by publishing short stories and serialised novels under the pen-name of Nawab Rai. As his career progressed, he drew further and further away from his wife and son, who stayed in the village. In 1906, he remarried, this time choosing a child widow as a statement of his progressive views. He also became inspired by the movement for Independence and wrote essays advocating violent opposition to the government. His house was raided by British officials and copies of some of his books were burnt. This was when he adopted the new name of Premchand and began writing exclusively in Hindi (instead of Urdu). He gained a BA in 1919 and in 1921 was promoted to Deputy Inspector of Schools in his district. A month later he heard Gandhi speak at a rally, where Gandhi asked people to resign from government jobs. Although he had two children and a pregnant wife, Premchand left his job and devoted himself to writing. Having moved back to Benares, he started a publishing house that published his major novels in the years before his death. In 1931, hounded by financial troubles, he moved to Kanpur and took up a teaching position in a college, but soon left and went back to Benares. Hoping to solve his money problems of his loss-making publishing business, he went to Bombay to write film scripts. He left after one unsuccessful year and returned to Benares, hoping to see more of his two sons. Worn down by his debts, and having suffered from poor health for many years, he died in Benares in 1936, only weeks after having been elected the first President of the Progressive Writers' Association.

Achievements

In 1936, only a few weeks before his death, he was elected as President of the Progressive Writers' Association, a new organisation established that year in Lucknow. Several of Premchand's novels and short stories were adapted as films, two by Satyajit Ray. In 2005, the Sahitya Akademi (India's Academy of Letters) established the Premchand Fellowships.

Works

Novels

Gaban (Speed)
Sevasadan (The Workplace)
Godaan (The Gift of a Cow)
Karmabhoomi (The Land of Work)
Kaayakalp
Manorma (Beautiful)
Mangalsutra (The Necklace that marks our Wedding)
Nirmala [Female Character's name]
Pratigya (Oath)
Premashram (The Temple of Love)
Rangbhoomi (The Land of Colours)
Vardaan (Blessing)

Mera Khoon (My Blood)

Short stories

Premchand published approximately 300 short stories, of which these are among the most famous.

Do Bailon Ki Katha (The story of two Oxen)
Kafta (The Shroud)
Poos ki Raat (A January Night)
Baade Bai Sahab [name of a male character]
Nasha (Inebriation)
Panch Parmeshwar (Holy Panchayat [village council])
Thakur ka Kuan (The Landlord's Well)

