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## Contemporary Indian Middle-Class And The Novels Of Premchand: A Brief Survey

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### Abstract

The contemporary political and the administrative needs of the British Empire in India seem to have been the reason for the emergence and the rise of the middle class in India during the second half of the nineteenth century. The British governors and administrators in India drafted an education policy with a purpose to produce educated and well informed people to help them run their offices and making their administration working smoothly. On the other hand education and knowledge began to awaken the minds of the emerging class. Now the conflict between the old and the new was inevitable. Premchand, belonging to the same emerging class, was very well aware of the sense and the sensibilities of the contemporary Indian class. In almost all his novels he seems to represent the issues, rites, rituals and above all the conflicts of the then Indian middle class very vividly and flawlessly.

**Keywords:** - Conflicts, Social issues, Emerging middle class, The British Empire, Reformist institutions, Injustice, Untouchables.

### Introduction

The rise of the middle class in India was a result of the British Empire. The Indian middle class society emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The well-known poet and thinker Humayun Kabir, in his book 'The Indian Heritage', while analyzing the social situation of the then India, writes, "All old values and beliefs were being challenged. Social economic and political institutions were breaking up at a terrifying pace. India was literally in the melting pot. The old social stratification was disturbed. New types emerged which have no parallel in any previous period." (Humayun Kabir, 116-117) He further observes: The old traditional pattern of social, economic and political life was disturbed and at times destroyed. Nor was there any attempt to build up a new and integrated outlook which could combine the heritage of the past with new ingredients brought from the west.

Nature cannot permit a vacuum. Haphazard and fragmentary belief and habits took the place of the old way of life. The old was destroyed beyond recall but the new remains still unborn. (Humayun Kabir, 119) In the contemporary transitional, political, educational and social conditions the western influence on Indian society was increasing. It was the result of all these western influences that the middle class emerged in India. This class made up of educated persons was needed in various offices to run the English state, in India, smoothly. To fulfill this need, the British established schools and colleges across the country and made English the medium of instruction. These schools and colleges helped the mind of this newly born Indian middle class to be developed progressively and as the result the middle class emerged as the main intellectual class of the country. Explaining the educational policy of the British rulers, Humayun Kabir further writes: Administration was long conducted with a view to

commercial advantage. For full exploitation of the country's resources, Britain needed a group of middle men who could act as interpreters between her and the Indian people. The needs of administration also posed the same problem. Higher policy could be determined by the British themselves, but its application to the daily routine of administration required the services of indigenous men. The result was the creation of a large ministerial class who helped the British in administration and commerce. The primary qualification for such subordinates was proficiency in the English language. Education was therefore remodeled to suit the needs of the rulers. Instead of development of human personality, the chief aim of education became the attainment of linguistic proficiency in English. (Humayun Kabir, 123-124)

The middle class was being influenced by the policies of the west and its ways on the one hand and on the other hand the Indian middle class society was under the influence of the Indian reformist institutions too. In fact, we do not see any definite form of the position of the middle class during the contemporary Indian scenario; and there was diversity in this class. In the words of Humayun Kabir,

The new literate classes largely derive their ideas from the West. They also have in one way or another derived their living from the British connection.... Literacy in English has continually expanded in the course of the last century and led to an inordinate expansion of the middle classes. (Humayun Kabir, 125-126) Apart from this, some reformist institutions also had an impact on this emerging Indian middle class. The institutions like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Congress etc. kept on following reformist approach. The intellectual middle class could not keep itself free from these reformist movements and thus its psyche also got a reformist color. It is the distinctive aspect of the mental structure of the Indian middle class that sets it apart from other middle class people of the world. The economic categories of the contemporary middle class society are also worth noting. Humayun Kabir observes, "For one thing, the middle classes can never be a homogeneous group. No social class is fully homogeneous. But stratification is even more marked in the case of the middle classes. At one extreme are those who just escape being proletariats. At the other are those who are hardly distinguishable from capitalists." (Humayun Kabir, 141)

The capitalist system also has a hand in the rise and development of the middle class.

The position of the middle class in capitalist countries is quite good. Since India remained subjugated, the capitalist economy could not develop freely here. Due to the poor condition of the Indian middle class, there can be seen maximum dissatisfaction among the contemporary middle class people. As Humayun Kabir further observes: The middle classes have everywhere started to realize that they have no future. In India their plight is still more pitiable. The growth of capitalism has in other countries secured them a place in the social economy. In India, the expansion of indigenous capitalism was resisted by the British through political and economic pressure. And yet, the relative comforts enjoyed by the middle classes continually attract recruits from other strata of society. A middle class has developed which is too numerous for support by the existing economy. Its members refuse to go back to a lower level of economic competence. And yet their march forward to capitalism is hampered in a thousand ways. Un-employment has increased and so has discontent. (Humayun Kabir, 137-138) This middle class seems to be the most worried class of India. Most of its problems are due to its own weaknesses. On analyzing the nature of the middle class people, it comes to the fact that the main concern of this

class is to acquire the status of the elite people i.e., the upper strata of society; but this feeling gets frustrated due to economic deprivation. For this reason, the form of 'show off' is often found in middle class families. From outside they keep an aristocratic veil over themselves. But, in the midst of the struggle of life, the true form of the middle class is easily revealed. Comparing the psychological aspect of middle class society and its comparison with other categories, Humayun Kabir writes:

The unbalanced growth of the middle classes is perhaps the most significant fact of modern India. Middle classes all over the world are restless, critical and individualistic. From the nature of the case, they are economically unstable. Impelled by the urge to move upward into the ranks of the capitalist, many of them are yet fated to relapse into the ranks of the proletariat. They feel they have to maintain a standard of respectability which is often beyond their means. The constant economic struggle colours their whole outlook of life. The aristocrat is so sure of his own standing that he feels no need to assert it. The proletariat also is apt to accept his lot. The middle class refuse to be content and often aggressive, self-assertive and loud. They seek to justify themselves by criticising others. (Humayun Kabir, 141) The problem of middle class women is also a complex problem. Economic dependence is one thing, but she is badly bound by social and moral rules also. In the middle class, the woman is considered as the Lakshmi of the house. The prestige and the dignity of that house rests on her shoulders. Middle class women have to suppress their desires. Premchand has presented this fact in the character of Ratan in *Ghaban* and in that of *Nirmala* in *Nirmala*. The middle class is deeply affected by ancient rites and conventional rituals. Traditional stereotypes are being carried by the middle class even today, willingly and unwillingly. As a result of these rites, the condition of the middle-class women is most deplorable. A kind of backwardness in the social field is often found in the middle class female world.

It will not be an exaggeration if we call Premchand as a story teller of middle class and lower class. Undoubtedly, he presented the contemporary upper strata of the society in his fictional writings with his acute observation, but while presenting the middle class and the lower class he seems to be more successful and more sensitive. Being himself from the middle class, Premchand's proximity to the middle class was natural. In fact, he was more familiar with the middle class. If most of the depiction of the lower class was done by looking at the then environment, then the depiction of the middle class was based on his personal experiences.

The precise description and scientific analysis of the condition of the Indian middle class during Premchand's time has been done in great detail by Dr. Indranath Madan in his book *Premchand Ek Vivechana*. He writes: The middle class was passing through a struggle between the dominant and new ideals of life. The blow of capitalism or Western civilization had dug a deep chasm between the medieval and modern outlook of life. Premchand's early works were related especially to this struggle of the middle class society. He (the middle class man) was determined to reform....In social matters the middle class began to make more use of personal freedom....Hence the middle class had been pursuing morality more enthusiastically.(Indranath Madan, 41-42)

Premchand has depicted this group of middle class in his novels very minutely. His sympathy remained with this suppressed part of society. Since Premchand had deep faith in moral values, he did not tell the victory of injustice anywhere. His philosophy of life was to always tell the victory of truth over lies. In this way Premchand through his novels has established the moral values of this progressive

middle class emerging in Indian society. It is another matter that somewhere he seems to take the path of compromise because of his own middle-class upbringing. The feeling of compromise is especially visible in the psyche of the middle class society and Premchand seems not to be able to escape from it.

Premchand's novel *Varadan* depicts the life of the middle class society. Major characters like Brajrani, Pratap, Kamalacharan belong to the middle class and their problems are also related to the problems of middle class families. The mutual antagonism of marriage and love seen in the middle class society has been depicted in a very successful narrative in *Varadan*. Despite being an early and simple novel, *Varadan* makes it clear how Premchand's mind was getting attracted towards the problems of middle class society. In *Pratijna*, Premchand writes about the problem of remarriage of widows on the background of middle class society. The realistic depiction of this social evil found in the middle class is the main feature of *Pratijna*. He emphasizes on the practice of widow-marriage by telling the pathetic condition of the life of widows. Since the era of *Pratijna* was the dawn of middle class awakening and struggle, Premchand's approach has also been reformist in this novel. He wants to eradicate this social evil by reforming. The main middle-class character of *Pratijna* is Amrit Rai, who devotes his life to improving the condition of widows. Premchand has well described the specific moral values of the middle class in the character of Amrit Rai.

After *Pratijna* and *Vardan*, Premchand in *Seva Sadan* depicts life of the middle class comprehensively. In fact, *Seva Sadan* is a novel of the life of the middle class. In it, a burning issue of middle class families has been highlighted; this problem is the problem of women's life, and that is the problem of remarriage of the widows and the issue of the prostitution. Dr. Indranath Madan writes at one place while reviewing *Seva Sadan*, "All the main characters of the novel are of middle class and their characterization has been done from the reformist point of view of life. All the merits and demerits of this class are present in the girl's father, Krishnachandra." (Indranath Madan,47) Padma Singh is a special type of representative of the middle class. He is a man of orthodox ideas and insists in his dealings. Thus the story of *Seva Sadan* is also a story of middle class families. In it, almost all the characters follow the middle class rites.

As his *Varadan*, *Pratijna* and *Seva Sadan*, Premchand's next novel *Nirmala* seems to represent the contemporary middle class society. There are two major contemporary issues that have been raised in *Nirmala*, the one is the dowry system and the other one being the marriage of a young girl to an old widower. The story of the novel is intertwined with the lives of three middle-class families, one of Babu Udaybhanu, the other of Babu Totaram and the third of Sinha Saheb. In the illustration the family life of these three families, there has been a very successful depiction of the values and beliefs of the contemporary middle class society of India. As far as Premchand's *Rangbhoomi* is concerned, it seems to deal with the industrial issues primarily and predominantly. Therefore, there is more mention of magnates or capitalists in this novel. The depiction of farmers and rural people has also been parallel. Therefore, *Rangbhoomi* seems to be related to the life of the lower and upper classes.

In *Kayakalpa*, there can be sighted the depiction of the upper, middle and lower classes definitely. Two parts of the fictional story can be seen in this novel. One part is related to social problem and the other is related to the depiction of spiritual and mystical world. There are six episodes in the present novel: (1) the story of Chakradhar-Manorama, (2) the story of Ahalya-Chakradhar, (3) the story

of Manorama-Vishal Singh, (4) the story of Rohini-Vishal Singh, (5) the story of Mahendra Singh-Devpriya, and (6) the story of Harisevaka-Lungi. In the above-mentioned episodes, only Chakradhar's early life, his thoughts and conduct are symbols of progressive middle class society, while his father Brajdhhar is representative of the middle class society of the older generation.

After *Kayakalpa*, the most famous and distinctive novel of Premchand representing the middle class is *Ghaban*. In fact, *Ghaban* is Premchand's best novel to open up to the problems of the contemporary middle-class society. Adequate place has been given to characterization in this novel. Ramkant is the main character of *Ghaban*. In the characterization of Ramakant and other main characters, the novelist seems to be very careful and cautious. And in this novel also the problems of the middle class society have been represented prominently. Ramkant himself is a person of middle class society and many characteristic features of middle class are present in him. It is because of this pseudo status consciousness of the middle class society that makes Ramakant commit embezzlement that consequently puts his life in jeopardy.

After *Ghaban*, Premchand published *Karmabhoomi*, *Godan* and *Mangalsutra*. Because of Premchand's sudden demise his last novel *Mangalsutra* remained incomplete; though it was published by his son Amrit Rai later. It depicts the struggling middle class along with the glimpses of the aristocracy. Perhaps this novel too would have been related to the middle class sensibilities. Apart from the problem of untouchables, *Karmabhoomi* is related to the problem of national freedom. In this the middle class seems not to be able to get the special attention. Financially Amarkant's wife and widowed mother-in-law do not come in the range of middle class characteristics, so their problem has become of general class rather than that of the middle class. *Godan*, the last complete novel of Premchand, is a novel of the peasantry; it is the epic of the rural people. The inclusion of the bourgeoisie and the mill-owners serves to express the decaying nature of the elite class. It is another matter that one or two characters in it belong to the middle class.

To conclude it can be said that Munshi Premchand, the great novelist, creates a pen portrait of the then political, domestic, religious and above all the social scenario, as prevalent during the contemporary period, in his novels. The domestic and the social issues of the emerging middle class have been vividly depicted by Premchand in his novels and other literary creations also. Thus we see that the middle class has a significant representation in novels of Premchand.

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