

# Premchand's Gandhi

*Vasudha Dalmia*

## **Abstract**

*Modern Hindi-Urdu's most famous writer Premchand (1880–1936) was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, whose most pervasive influence is to be seen in his third novel of note, Rangbhumi (Theatre-stage, 1925). The novel is set in Banaras, as the city was known then, and its peripheral village Pandeypur, wherein lives the blind, Dalit beggar Surdas, whose personality radiates many aspects of the Mahatma's political and social thought, transferred to the local satyagrahas, which Surdas leads. The main struggle is over the land he has inherited, which is now to be used for industrial purposes, backed by the might of the colonial state. And later there is a tussle, for the very ground on which his hut stands, which is to be used for housing factory workers. The state adopts violent methods to set this through and Surdas is killed by a colonial officer's gun. My essay focuses on Surdas's life and words, as depicted in this novel.*

Modern Hindi and Urdu's most famous short-story writer and novelist, Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, known by his pen name Premchand (1880–1936), began his prolific writing career at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was deeply influenced by Tolstoy, whose thought and writing paved the way for his intense engagement and regard for Mahatma Gandhi. The Mahatma entered Premchand's work after his return to India in 1915 and his first successful *satyagrahas* in the teens of the century. In the aftermath of his Non-Cooperation Movement, he also went to Gorakhpur. His speech there in the open fields of *Ghazi miyan ka maidan* on February 8, 1921 to an audience of two lakhs, had an electrifying effect on Premchand, who was attending the event with his family. He now came to the conclusion that he could no longer serve in the government school-system. Not wanting to burden his family with the economic hardship that would ensue, he consulted his wife, who after some days of heartburn, decided to support her husband in his decision. He resigned from office on February 15. He was relieved of his duties the day after (Rai 1992 [1962]: 246–248).

Amrit Rai in the biography of his father, records the first traces of the Mahatma's influence in the short stories written in the first period of his career, as

also in *Premashram* (1921) his second novel of note (Rai 1992: 207, 220). It was, however, in his third important novel, the epic *Rangbhumi* (1925), which is nearly five hundred pages long, that we meet with the most extensive Gandhian imprint on his work, and it is on a close-reading of this that I focus in this paper. We have to recall, as Amrit Rai reminds us, that this was a period of lull in the Mahatma's own activities. He had called off his Non-Cooperation movement after the incident in Chauri Chaura, where a mob burnt a police station, killing the policemen trapped within (Rai 1992: 265, 266, 371). The country was not yet ready for non-violence, as the Mahatma saw it. However, once the movement was called off, once a major unifying factor receded, communal tension and communal riots erupted all over North India. Premchand's work was an act of faith in the Mahatma, to unite behind him in every sense of the word – bringing together Hindu and Muslim, touchable and untouchable, in protest against an unjust political order.

The title *Rangbhumi* has been translated variously as *The Arena of Life* and *Playground*.<sup>1</sup> Literally, it means 'theatre space' or 'stage'. It is in this sense that it is used in a verse sung by the blind beggar, Surdas. We shall come to the verse presently. But first let us turn to the beggar himself, a powerful, charismatic figure, who represents and sustains Gandhi's principles though thick and thin, winning a moral victory in the end, even as he seems ostensibly to have lost the cause he fought for. In the author's note which prefaced the Urdu version of the novel, *Chaugan-e-hasti* or *Arena of Life*, written before the Hindi, but revised and published in 1928, three years after the Hindi version, Premchand himself notes the fact that Surdas embodies the Gandhian spirit:

*"Rangbhoomi's hero Soordas is a remarkable character in the history of the Indian novel. He has an extraordinary capacity to sacrifice himself for the public welfare. In brief, he is also an ideal Gandhian character."*<sup>2</sup>

He is a beggar, belonging to one of the lowest castes, the chamars, associated with leatherwork, tanning and shoe-making, but he is respected in the larger community he is part of in Pandeypur, a still rural *basti*, or settlement, on the periphery of Banaras, as the city was known then.

---

<sup>1</sup> There are two excellent, recent English translations of the novel: King (2010) and Jain (2011). Unless otherwise noted, I have translated most passages from the original myself, based on the text in volume 3 of *Premchand Rachnavali*, *Collected Works*, henceforth PR with page number.

<sup>2</sup> Jain in the introduction to her translation Premchand (2011: xlv). Jain uniformly transcribes Surdas as 'Soordas', which I have retained in the passages cited from her translation.

Premchand's use of the epithet 'chamar' is no longer politically correct. However revered a figure Surdas may be in the narrative, he is placed low in the caste and by extension, class hierarchy. This depiction, along with the depiction of other Dalit characters in his most famous short stories, has been a cause of consternation in Dalit circles, leading to the dramatic act of burning of copies of the novel by members of the Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi (Indian Dalit Literary Association) on July 31, 2004. This act evoked critique by another, more inclusive Dalit organization, the Dalit Lekhak Sangh (Dalit Writers' Forum), triggering major debate in Dalit literary discourse about the significance, positive and negative, of Premchand's depiction of Dalit characters and themes in his fiction.<sup>3</sup> As Alok Rai has pointed out, while it may be possible to question the ghettoization implicit in the present Dalit demand of Dalit self-depiction as the sole authentic source of Dalit experience, the point being made now remains worth making. It is time to depart from the "available aesthetic models", given that they

*"worked through a complex dynamic of inducing shame and guilt in the primarily savarna [upper caste] interlocutors, and Gandhi and Premchand were, in their very different ways, masters at working this dynamic – patiently, steadily, effectively. Effective, that is, within the possible limits of the historical conjuncture."*<sup>4</sup>

Today, Dalit discourse is seeking the alternatives to the older narratives in its myriad explorations of the subjective experience of brutal exploitation by the upper castes and its formulation of an alternative aesthetics. But meanwhile, there remains to be acknowledged the historic role exceptional people, such as Premchand, played in opening up new social and psychological vistas in their time:

*"The manner in which these great ordinary figures work is by picking up disparate aspects of the life in their time and bringing them together in a provisionally viable narrative equilibrium. In that precise moment, a new cultural subject is born. New continents of experience open up, and become available for cultural appropriation and social action. The range and reach of the social imagination is significantly enlarged by the progressive inclusion of hitherto marginalized lives and experiences."*<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See Brueck (2017 [2014]: 1, 43–60), for an extensive discussion of the debate around Premchand in Dalit discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Alok Rai in the introduction to King's translation, Premchand (2010: xi).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xiii.

And it is in this spirit that we turn to Premchand's novel. This is how Surdas is described in the introductory passage:

*"Blind men need neither names nor work in India. Soordas is their ready-made name, begging for alms their ready-made vocation. Their qualities and temperament are also universally celebrated; special interest in music, exceptional love in the heart, distinctive passion for spirituality and religious devotion are their natural traits. The outer vision shut and the inner open. Soordas was extremely frail, weak and simple."* (Premchand 2011: 1)<sup>6</sup>

In his physique and in his attire, which is confined to the bare minimum, Surdas resembles the Mahatma. And just as the Mahatma, he withstands with the moral power at his command, the unjust actions of a colonial state, hand in glove with the wealthy and the privileged. He reveres the songs of Kabir and other Nirguna poet-saints, which he sings in his melodious voice on his rounds and along with others in the foreyard of the village temple. In the course of his narrative which spans the entire length of the novel, he emerges as a central figure, warm in his relations, capable of immense generosity of spirit, but also as all too human in his occasional frailties, such as for instance his intense attachment to his orphaned nephew Mithua, whom he spoils and indulges.

Two strands of narrative intersect in Surdas's person; the one has to do with the struggle over the ten *bighas* of land he owns in the centre of the village,<sup>7</sup> and the other with his giving shelter to Subhagi, a woman physically abused by her husband, who can find no refuge elsewhere in the community.

The question of land crops up in the very first scene. We meet the Sevak family, affluent Christians, seated in their phaeton, headed for Pandeypur, where they have a leather depot. Grandfather Ishvar Sevak is a devout Christian, father John Sevak the astute business man, his wife a shrew, observing only the niceties of religious ritual, the daughter Sophia, another central figure, a delicate, attractive, exceptionally intelligent young woman, with an enquiring mind, and poet son Prabhu, intent on versifying life. Surdas runs alongside the phaeton, begging for alms. Sophia and Prabhu are kind to him, but Mr. and Mrs. Sevak treat him roughly till Mr. Sevak realizes that Surdas is the owner of the land he fixes his gaze upon to set up his new cigarette factory. His tone changes then, he offers an enormous sum for the land, but Surdas declares that he cannot make any commitment to sell without first consulting his fellow

---

<sup>6</sup> The last word in this citation from Jain's translation renders the original *saral* as 'simple.' Platts has several equivalents for this word: right, upright, honest, sincere, candid, ingenuous, artless, plain, simple; easy. All of them would apply to Surdas.

<sup>7</sup> *Bigha* is a measure of land, equal to approximately 5/8 of an acre.

villagers, who use it as the common grazing ground for their cattle. In all, ten villages use it for this purpose, there being no other land in sight suitable for it. The villagers take this right for granted, no one feels particularly indebted to Surdas for it. When he consults them, they are united in their opposition to John Sevak's plan. Surdas knows no doubt then. As he tells Tahir Ali, Mr. Sevak's agent, he inherited the land from his ancestors, he is merely the keeper of it, he has committed himself to *dharmakaj*, righteous action – cows are holy and he could do no better than serve them (PR: 60–61). He is also serving his fellow villagers. No amount of persuasion can budge him from this act of public good. He owns a valuable piece of property, yet he chooses to be a beggar, to live a life of poverty, with his material wants reduced to an ascetic minimum. Tahir Ali warns him that the Sahib will acquire this land by force if it is not readily made available to him. He has connections. His daughter Sophia is likely to marry the English District Magistrate, Mr. Clark. It can come to violence but Surdas is willing to risk his life, if need be.

When the head of the municipal board, Raja Mahendra Kumar Singh, whom Mr Sevak has roped into his cause, himself comes to look at the land and talk to him, Surdas voices his concerns about the changes in village life that this act of industrialization will bring with it:

*“Sahib is a Christian, he'll turn the dharmashala into a tobacco shop; the temple will be used by his labourers to sleep in, the well will become an adda for them, daughters and daughters-in-law will no longer frequent it. If Sahib doesn't do this, his son will. My ancestors' reputation will be destroyed. Sarkar, don't pull me into this quicksand”* (PR: 77).

Surdas is echoing the general public distrust of Christians at large; there is prejudice at work here. But he is also concerned about the effects that bringing industry to the area will have on village life.

The second challenge to his relatively peaceful existence is Subhagi, a pretty young woman, whose husband Bhairo Pasi, the toddy-seller, beats her mercilessly at the slightest provocation. Subhagi is spirited, she protects herself the best that she can and runs to Surdas when it gets too much for her; he is the only person in the community kind enough to take her in. Though the villagers know his upright character, they talk. Bhairo does more than that, he comes to beat him, but discovers that though Surdas's frame looks feeble, he is made of steel. He can't be intimidated physically or for that matter morally. As Surdas ruminates:

*“God sees what goes on inside one. It’s one’s dharma to console a person in trouble. And if observing dharma stigmatizes one, then may it do so, what do I care? How long can I cry because of that? Sooner or later, people will realize how I think”* (PR: 111–112).

But Bhairo is not to be held back. Surdas is sleeping in the temple foreyard one night, as Bhairo sneaks to his hut and sets it on fire and then runs for it. He has taken Surdas’s bag of money, which he had hidden in the thatch.

Surrounded by villagers and a distraught Surdas, the hut is burnt to the ground in a matter of hours. Bhairo’s deed does not go unremarked. Subhagi hears of it, she has been hiding in an orchard, and assures Surdas she won’t rest until she gets the money back to him. But here is the dilemma for someone in Surdas’s position. He denies that he has such substantial savings. He is no saint and this is his other frailty besides his beloved nephew Mithua – the money he will not publicly lay claim to. Yet he is in despair. Till he hears a boy tell Mithua that one does not cry in a game. Then he repeats to himself what he will say often in the course of the narrative:

*“Surdas had been wallowing in the shoreless waters of disappointment, fatigue, anxiety and anguish; as soon as he heard this warning, he felt as if someone had caught his hand and stood him upon the shore. “Wah! I am crying in a game. How shameful is that...True players never cry, they lose in one game after another, suffer bruise after bruise, withstand jolt upon jolt, but they remain steadfast in the field, there is no furrow on their brow. Courage does not desert them, nor a drop of malice stain their hearts, they envy no one, allow no one to provoke them. Why cry in a game? Games are for laughter, to amuse the heart, not for tears”* (PR: 118).

And this, playing the game fairly, regardless of loss or gain, becomes, after his moment of weakness, Surdas’s constant refrain in the face of adversity.

For, things don’t get better for him. John Sevak has all the forces of the state on his side. With the help of Raja Mahendra Kumar, the head of the Municipal Board, the tacit support of Mr. Clark, the District Magistrate, and the application of the infamous Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the land is requisitioned for public purposes, that is, for setting up the cigarette factory.<sup>8</sup> Surdas wanders through the streets and by-lanes of the city, singing in powerful and lyrical appeal, mesmerizing all who hear him, including the novel’s heroine, Sophia, who chances to hear him one day; she has not yet joined her family in church. The song transfixes her; it speaks directly to her heart – One has to remain

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jain’s introduction to Premchand (2011: xxvii–xxviii).

steadfast in battle, whether in victory or defeat, to stay constant in the cause of dharma and *niti*, morality. One has to offer one's best in this cause:

*"You've come to the rangbhumī to show your maya, wondrous power"* (PR: 184).

*Rangbhumī* here has several connotations – field of battle, playground, but also staging ground, where one has to play one's part fully. As the churchgoers collect outside the church, Surdas calls out to them, asking for fair play. He quotes a verse of Kabir:

*"Don't torment the one who is weak, his deep lament.  
In one breath will turn the cursed one's skin to ashes"*  
(Premchand 2011: 236).

There is a buzz amongst the churchgoers. People talk. The indignation in the city mounts. Roughnecks in the city threaten violence at the factory site, though, characteristically, Surdas stems their violence. But the air is rife with righteous rage. Sophia puts Mr. Clark under pressure to see that this decision is reversed. She is acting against her father but she is deeply impressed by this philosophical and spiritually wise beggar, who is charitable even towards his enemies (PR: 195, 204). She is also acting against herself, for she is in love with Vinay Singh, son of another head of a *riyasat* and brother of Indu, the Raja's wife. This is another important narrative strand in the novel, which I don't follow here. The trio Sophia, Vinay, Clark, will play a major role in the last episode in Surdas's life. However, what concerns us at the moment is that Mr. Clark is a basically decent man, who is also moved by Surdas's plight. He is loath to take on the municipality in order to help him, but at Sophia's insistence, he sees to it that Surdas gets his land back, though she will cool off towards him once he has performed this task. But in the meantime, the village cattle graze again on Surdas's land.

Raja Mahendra Kumar loses public face. He has been defeated in battle by a beggar. When Sophia meets Surdas, she tells him that he should now so ruin the Raja, that he would leave the district. Surdas's response is measured:

*"No, Miss Sahib, this is not the principle (niti) of players. When the player wins, he does not mock the player who has lost, he embraces him, folds his hands and says – 'Brother, forgive me, if I have said anything improper to you or behaved improperly towards you.' So, the two players part ways, they become friends once the game is over, there is no rancour between them. I went to meet Raja Sahib today and folded my hands before him. He had me fed. As I was about to leave, he said, my heart is clear regarding you; harbour no doubt about me"* (PR: 204).

As Surdas clarifies to Sophia, his battle is for *dharma* rather than for things, even if Raja Sahib was to betray him, he would not reply in kind. Sophia comes home and tears up the venomous satirical piece she had penned against the Raja.

Surdas seems to be on a winning spree, though the ever-fickle public opinion is less friendly now that he has his land back. And the game regarding his piece of land is also far from over. Raja Mahendra Kumar, instigated by Indu, his strong-willed wife, appeals this judgement to yet higher authorities – elite ‘natives’ carry some weight now vis-à-vis white superiors – and once again, the judgement is reversed. It is Mr. Clark who loses face this time. He is demoted and transferred away from Banaras. We will meet him again. Surdas is forced to accept money for his land. Characteristically, he does not keep it for his own use, he is a beggar, he says, it would just be stolen from his hut. He donates it to a social help institution, which was once run by Vinay Singh and now managed by Indradatt, who had worked with him.

Things get worse, when Subhagi steals the bag of money from her husband Bhairo and returns it to Surdas. This is no easy matter for someone who thinks as Surdas does: whose money is it now? He not only returns the bag to Bhairo, when asked, he tells him that his wife had taken it from him. There is violence once again, but Surdas swears before the village, that Subhagi has always been his *choti bahan*, younger sister. Surdas’s determined celibacy, his *brahmacharya*, his choice to remain unattached, is a conscious decision. Bhairo takes the matter to court and attempts to persuade the villagers to bear witness against Surdas. But in the end it is only the factory workers who agree to do so. When the case comes up in court, the whole village has left work and turned up to watch the show. Questioned by the lawyer assigned to Bhairo whether he has kept Subhagi, Surdas repeats what he has been saying all along:

*“Yes, I have kept her, just as a brother keeps his sister and a father keeps his daughter. If government makes her leave my house, it takes over the responsibility of protecting her honour”* (PR: 309).

Subhagi affirms that she goes to Surdas when there is unbearable violence at home. As far as the court is concerned, this is admission of guilt from both sides. Raja Mahendra Kumar, who is adjudicating the case, imposes a fine of a hundred rupees on Surdas, and if not paid, six months of rigorous imprisonment for him. Surdas, with his deep sincerity and eloquence, appeals to the *panch*, the village council, in this case, the public whom he considers his real judges, and asks them if they consider him guilty. If they don’t trust him, he will be ready to bear the most rigorous imprisonment happily. People are stunned into silence; there is no immediate response. Outside the court, Surdas seats himself on the ground and says he will only move once he hears what the

*panch* think. The answer comes in a chorus: "You are guiltless, we consider you guiltless" (PR: 311). This seems to be the narrator's view point as well. But matters are far from resolved. Subhagi still refuses to go home and stays staunchly by Surdas's side. And he still offers her shelter. However such is his moral standing in village and city now, that no one points a finger at him.

Meanwhile, the plot twists and turns. Bhairo's drunken friends set Surdas's hut on fire. This is the second time his hut goes up in flames. In return, Surdas's nephew, Mithu, sets Bhairo's liquor-shop on fire, which also burns to the ground. No one knows who has done it, but the villagers see it as just retribution.

Surdas is set free, for the good hearted in the city's elite, led by Indradatt, who goes first to Indu, the Raja's wife, who had also come to witness the case, collect money for him, a sum that is in excess of what is needed to set him free. A good three hundred remain, which they offer to Surdas, who in his turn offers it to Bhairo to rebuild his shop. Bhairo cannot believe his eyes. What sort of a man is this? At first he refuses to take money from an enemy. Surdas's response mirrors his deeply held belief:

*"What kind of enmity can there be between the two of us, Bhairo? I don't regard anyone as an enemy. Life is too short to harbour enmity towards anyone. You've done me no wrong. If I had been in your place and thought that you were seducing my wife, I would have done the same as you. Who does not love his honour? ... I tell you the truth; I took the money because of you. For me, the shade of a tree would have sufficed..."* (PR: 323).

The ability to understand his opponent, to be generous, this is how Surdas fights his battles, till he wins over his opponents. Bhairo cannot withstand this kindness; he accepts the money and even declares himself ready to take his wife back, though she will not go with him yet. And Surdas persuades him to give up his liquor shop and start business in wood. As Bhairo tells his mother, "He is not an [ordinary] man, he is a sadhu" (PR: 327). One day, Subhagi will begin to trust Bhairo again. He and Subhagi will remain devoted to Surdas through thick and thin, for there will be further ups and downs vis-à-vis the village.

In the concluding pages of the novel, there will be one more public agitation – a climax to the struggle waged thus far, a *satyagraha*, of which Surdas will become the centre. Not content with requisitioning the village commons for his factory project, John Major, in looking for adequate housing for his factory workers, hits upon the idea of relocating the villagers of Pandeypur and setting up housing on the land thus freed. He has government backing. The villagers are resisting this move, which they are to carry out in three months. Sophia has in the meantime become great friends with Surdas, henceforth their tales are

closely entwined. She visits him often. Where the others feel lost, Surdas has a simple response, on which he will remain firm:

*“I’ll die where I was born. I won’t be able to leave my hut while I am still alive. Once I die, they can take what they want. They took away my ancestors’ land, this hut is their only sign left to me, I won’t leave it. I’ll die along with it”* (PR: 414).

This is not a plan the others can accept. They simply ignore the order for the time being. The compensation is nowhere in sight. The new District Magistrate orders that the villagers be evicted from their homes, the police are rough shod in their methods; they throw out household goods, breaking them. A huge crowd has gathered, they seem menacing; violence seems immanent. Raja Mahendra Kumar decides to do a good public deed and retrieve his reputation by paying the compensation from his own pocket. He begins to dole out money according to the list drawn up by the evaluating committee. Surdas refuses to accept any money for his hut. This action is not for the public good; the only person who stands to benefit from it is the Sahib:

*“It only means ruin for the people. I won’t leave my hut for something like this. If it had been work in the cause of dharma, I would have been the first to give away my hut. You have the right to use force, give the command to the police, how long does it take for straw to catch fire. But this is not justice...”* (PR: 422).

This last is the key sentence. Laws don’t become just because they stem from the state. As Surdas tells Indradatt:

*“There may be a law, but I only know the law of dharma, make what law you like to enforce compliance. There is no one to halt the hand of government. Their advisors after all are seth-mahajan, bankers and money lenders”* (PR: 423).

The *satyagraha* that now evolves is a spontaneous protest against the injustice of the state and Surdas is the inspiration behind it. In fact, because of the moral power he radiates, he becomes its involuntary leader. Thrice, the Superintendent orders the crowd to vacate the spot; thrice they refuse to move. Thrice the police fire; despite the Raja’s pleas, and men fall. In the last round, Indradatt also falls. When the Superintendent orders a fourth round, the Havaldar drops his gun and refuses to follow the order. This is unprecedented in the annals of police. His fate will be dire; he will be court martialled. The crowd surges again and again to protect Surdas’s hut from being felled, Surdas sits in front of it with his head bowed, “as if he were the living icon (*murti*) of steadfastness,

strength of mind, and peaceful glow.”(PR: 426).<sup>9</sup> The agitation is citywide. That evening, a procession forms to cremate the dead. The Raja's wife, Indu, Sophia, and many others join it.

As the days pass, the agitation gathers ever more strength. Vinay Singh, Sophia's betrothed, and his army of volunteers support it, it is non-violent resistance; it is non-cooperation. Each day finds Surdas positioned peacefully outside his hut. No labourer can be found to fell the houses. Even those called from outside drop their spades when confronted by Vinay's peaceful men arrayed in front of the hut. Two months pass. Sophia fears for Vinay; she falls ill, and he stays with her, she keeps him away from the scene of action. Meanwhile Mr. Clark has been reinstated as District Magistrate to control this *satyagraha*, which seems untamable and which seems to gather ever more strength. One day, Sophia cannot bring herself to remain passive. She goes to the field of battle; Vinay follows. Instead of the village houses that have been pulled down, an encampment for factory workers has come up. Gurkha soldiers guard them.

*“Thousands of people stand around in a circle like onlookers, as if to watch a vast play being enacted. In their midst stands Surdas's hut, as if set on a stage. Surdas stands with a stick before it, like a puppeteer about to commence the play...”* (PR: 438).

Surdas holds the threads of further action in his lean hands. Three canons face the hut; the government seems to have decided to stage a massive show of force and end the *satyagraha*. When he encounters Sophia, Mr. Clark tells her that it is not that he has changed his mind about Surdas, but that he himself is the arm of the state:

*“We come here to rule, not to carry out our wishes and personal opinions. We erase our personalities the moment we alight from the ship. Everything has just one aim: our justice, our good-heartedness, our good wishes. Our first and last goal is to rule”* (PR: 440).

His whip lashes out mercilessly at the people gathered there, though they refuse to disperse. They begin to collect stones to pelt the army; many lives are going to be lost. Surdas asks Bhairo to carry him on his shoulders so that he can disband the crowd. He addresses the people one last time. You haven't come here to help me, he says, you have come here as my foes:

*“The compassion, the dharma, that could have entered the hearts of the officials, the army, and the police, you have turned into anger by assembling here.*

---

<sup>9</sup> Amrit Rai cites this sentence to stress once more, that he is the embodiment of Gandhi (Rai 1992: 334).

*I could have shown the officials how a poor, blind man could have made the army retreat, shut the mouth of the canon, twisted the edge of the sword. I wanted to fight on the strength of dharma...*" (PR: 441).

Surdas shuns violence; his is a moral battle, which he has planned to win by moral means. This is the voice of the Mahatma (Cf. Rai 1992: 335).

Seeing him seated above the crowd, believing that he is inciting the mob, Mr. Clark sees his chance to stem the agitation. As long the *atma*, the soul, lives, the limbs of the body will not cease moving. The agitation would be extinguished if the soul of it were gone. He aims his pistol at this *atma* and shoots. Surdas is not killed but he is mortally wounded, he falls from Bhairo's shoulders. Sophia sees that "there was complete peace, content and steadfastness in the light that emanated from his eyes, there was forgiveness, there was no sign of anger or fear" (PR: 442) This killing seems an uncanny anticipation of the Mahatma's own violent end, a good two decades before it actually happened.

The rest of the action can be summed up in a few sentences. Sophia has Surdas carried to the hospital. The crowd is enraged and seems on the verge of finally erupting into violence, when Vinay stops them. They taunt him for staying away so long, he puts his pistol to his own head and to prove how unafraid he is; he shoots himself. This action swings the mood of the crowd. A Muslim youth follows him in death. Hindu and Muslim perform the same act; they unite in their opposition to state-injustice.

A grieving Sophia stays by the side of Surdas at the hospital in his last hours. Bhairo and Subhagi are with him, looking after him. People come to visit him, many still engrossed in their own concerns. The Raja comes to apologize but also to protest his good intentions, Mithua comes to demand that he be compensated for his property, the land and the hut were also his, he vows to blow up the factory; this breaks Surdas's heart. Mr. Sevak comes to apologize for the grief his actions have unleashed, but also to lament his losses to Sophia. The city's elite comes and pays its respects; no one stays away. Surdas's opponents from the village come. This is the final act, he speaks no more, he can only fold his hands, a couple of tear drops flow on to his cheeks, and he slips away, "the player leaves the field" (PR: 462). The narrative pauses to pay him homage:

*"... in reality he was a player who never lost his honour, never lost courage, never stepped back. He was cheerful when he won and cheerful when he lost; if he lost, he didn't harbour a grudge against the victor, if he won, he didn't ridicule the defeated. He was always ethical when he played, never cheated, never hid behind any scheming in order to attack"* (Premchand 2011: 604).

The narrator lists his vices and virtues. But the vices become virtues, when they come into contact with his one great virtue.

*“And what was that virtue? Love of justice, devotion to truth, philanthropy, compassion, or any other name that you want to give it. He couldn't tolerate injustice; immorality was unbearable to him”* (Premchand 2011: 605).

All the characters we have met so far and more – who are in the narrative but whom I have not brought up here – are present at Surdas's cremation. Even Mithua is there, weeping. In his death, Surdas and his errant nephew have come together. Mr. Clark says to the Raja that he is sorry to have killed such a good man:

*“We are not afraid of people like you. We are afraid of people who rule the hearts of the people. This is the atonement we pay to rule that we have to kill people whom we would have honoured in England as comparable to the gods”* (PR: 463).

But there is also a human motive to this act of violence. When Sophia overhears Mr. Clark and reproaches him, he says, though she has passed and does not hear his words: “This is the consequence of your unjust behaviour to me” (PR: 463). Sophia is not blameless. Premchand is too good a psychologist to have simplified his characters.

The hut is pulled down, and in its place the people collect funds to put up a statue of Surdas made by a sculptor from Poona. Mr. Sevak gladly gives permission to install it where his hut once stood. There is a ceremony at which villagers and city-folk alike are present and touchable and untouchable eat together, sitting in one row. “This is Surdas's greatest victory” (PR: 474).

The Raja, who in his heart has still not forgiven Surdas for having – however inadvertently – pulled his name into mud, comes one night to fell the statue. It falls, but on him, crushing him. This is the final act. The statue is put up again, but the expression of the face becomes distorted and the sign of violence remain on its feet. No victory is absolute.

It is time also for us to take leave of Premchand's village Gandhi, one of modern Hindi literature's most memorable characters. We leave him as we have met him in the narrative, with his deep regard for *dharma* and for truth and his abhorrence of violence. His attire, belongings, lodging, reduced to the essential, he radiates gentleness, love, compassion, and above all, moral power. He walks alone, singing the songs of the *nirguna* poet-saints in his melodious voice.

## References

- Brueck, L. R. 2017 [2014]. *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*. Delhi: Primus Books.
- Platts, J. T. 1884. *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*. London: W. H. Allen & Co. Accessed from <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/>.
- Premchand. 2006. *Premchand Rachnavali* [Collected Works of Premchand]. In 20 Volumes. Volume 3: *Rangbhumi*. Second Edition. Delhi: Janvani Prakashan.
- Premchand. 2010. *Rangbhumi: The Arena of Life*. Translated by Christopher King, with an introduction by Alok Rai. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Premchand. 2011. *Playground: Rangbhoomi*. Translated with an introduction by Manju Jain. Gurgaon: Penguin Random.
- Rai, A. 1992 [1962]. *Premchand: Qalam ka sipahi*. Allahabad: Hans Prakashan.