Bangshumi
The Arena of Life
PREMCHAND

Translated by CHRISTOPHER KING
with an Introduction by Alok Rai

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Introduction

*Rangbhumi* is a product of a moment of acute personal and political difficulty. It is important to keep this fact in mind as we read the novel today—read it, indeed, against the grain of its enthusiastic and upbeat reading in the world of Hindi generally. Premchand started work on the Urdu draft of *Rangbhumi—Chaungan-i-hasti*—on 1 October 1922, a little over one year since that singular and formative moment in which he gave up his career in the provincial education service, and threw in his lot with Gandhi and the national movement. After the first flush of excitement, however, there is ample evidence to suggest that the sheer sluggishness of the practical world began to take its toll on him. He was ever more deeply mired in the financial difficulties that were to dog him throughout his life—trapped in the never-to-be realized fantasy of earning some ‘forty or fifty rupees a month’(!) so that he could devote all his time to writing. The nationalist movement too had, after the brief camaraderie of the Khilafat movement, given way to the rampant exacerbation of communal hatreds and, inevitably, to the ineluctable consequence of such exacerbation, sectarian violence. The mass movement that Gandhi had seemed to conjure up out of the arid political landscape of pre-Gandhian nationalist politics had melted away. The ‘Chauri Chaura’ upsurge had been brought to an abrupt halt by Gandhi himself—in February 1922. And while those who stood accused of participation in the violence were hanged or transported, Gandhi himself was brought to trial in March 1922 and sentenced to six years in jail. What makes the moment memorable, however, and renders Gandhi heroic, is his speech in court, in which he outlines the unique moral position which was to inform his unlikely, unprecedented politics: ‘I am here, therefore, to invite and submit cheerfully to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is deliberate crime, and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.’

But, heroic gestures apart, the political initiative seemed once again to have passed into the hands of sectarian leaders, and into the hands of safe,
bourgeois politicians who aspired to no change greater than could be effected by collaborating with the colonial masters—even, indeed, conspired to prevent any change more radical. This moment of political regression or stasis—‘anti-climax’, in the words of Sumit Sarkar (1980: p. 226)—must have had a particularly personal sting for the man who had abandoned his safe career in the hope of immersing himself in a rising mass movement. It was a deep bitterness out of which Premchand wrote to his friend Munshi Dayanarain Nigam in February 1923: ‘You ask me which party I support. I do not support either party. Because neither is at the moment doing any effective work. The party I am a member of is that party of the future which will devote itself to the political education of the lower classes.’

There is a particular Marxist formulation that captures the frequently divided state in which the radical consciousness is forced to work, necessarily aware of the weight of the given and unacceptable present, but also necessarily committed to the overthrow of that burden which must therefore simultaneously be acknowledged and resisted: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will, in the familiar capsule formulation. However, if one maps this on to the state of mind in which Rangbhumi is written, it is unclear if the pessimism infects the intellect or also the will, and again, whether the ideological commitment to optimism is a desperately volitional act, or a coolly analytical reading of long-term historical trends. However, no matter how one works out the detail of this ambivalence, the fact of the matter is that some such ambivalence lies at the heart of the inspiration and imagination of Rangbhumi.

There is, however, little trace of this ambivalence in the contemporary reaction to Rangbhumi. The Hindi version of Chaugan-i-basti—thus rendered in 1924—was published in January 1925, to much acclaim. A letter from Amaranatha Jha, of the University of Allahabad, originally written in English, summarized the dominant tone of the contemporary critical response: ‘I have read each word of it and am now a greater admirer than before of your wonderful creative genius. It was an act of great daring to take for your hero a man like Surdas, but how well you have drawn his character... Rangbhumi will surely rank as a classic of modern Hindi.’ The blind Surdas—so named because he is blind, after the great blind poet of medieval Braj—is the person who, while he begs for a living, is also the owner of a piece of land. Contention over this piece of land provides the substance of the action of the novel. The land is in use as a kind of commons by the fractious villagers of Surdas’s village, Pandepur—but it is also sought to be acquired by a local industrialist, Sevak, in order to set up a cigarette factory. Surdas’s land is thus the symbolic stage on which the struggle over questions of the different paths of development are fought out. There is a great deal more in this ambitious, capacious novel, but there is little doubt that the lower caste, ‘untouchable’ Surdas is its epic, unprecedented, hero.

The figure of Surdas—w ith his emaciated body, his protruding ribs, and his firm yet humble expression, insistent on his truth—seemed intended as a representation of Gandhi himself, and has been almost universally received as such. This is evident not only in his articulate awareness of the traditional values of the old village life but even more pointedly in his attitude to the promise (and threat) of industrialization, represented here through the Sevak’s projected cigarette factory. Thus, though Surdas is manifestly a symbolic representation of Gandhi; Premchand’s biographer, Amrit Rai, even suggests that there is something of Premchand’s self-representation in the figure of Surdas (1991: pp. 198–9). Be that as it may, be he Gandhi or Premchand himself, Surdas’s blindness is a stark fact that cries out for interpretation, whether as a comment on Gandhi in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura, or on Premchand, longing for a politics that seems unavailable and, literally, invisible. Further, it is worth stating that using a figure such as Surdas to embody traditional values is something of a departure, and indicates that for all his affection for the ways of life that were under threat from the pattern of capitalist industrialization that the masters, white and brown, had in mind, Premchand did not let go of his unsentimental awareness of the grim realities of rural life, of life at the bottom of the economic scale. Thus, though there is plenty of sentimentality in the novel—a fact to which we shall return—the actual picture of the happy folk, singing bhajans in the village temple late into the night, is preceded by a sharp picture of the very real antagonisms and hostilities that must constitute the substance of any real collectivity including, of course, the idyllic pre-industrial village.

Apart from the identification of Surdas with Gandhi, there are analogies and resemblances to other contemporary political figures as well. Thus, to cite Amrit Rai: ‘In the characters of Kunwar Bharat Singh and Vinay, father and son in this novel, there are constant hints of Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru. Vinay goes to Rajasthan with a group of Sewa Dal volunteers. In the then situation of the princely States, any social work such as this was interpreted as sedition, and the consequence is that Vinay is promptly put into jail. A similar fate had befallen Jawaharlal Nehru at about this
time ... Similarly, one can see some resemblance between Dr Ganguli, a friend of Kunwar Bharat Singh in this novel, and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, both in the moderate political stance of Dr Ganguli as well as in his eventual disenchantment with politics altogether. And, as Premchand himself later acknowledged in a letter, the character of Sophia in this novel is modeled on Annie Besant.’ (p. 201)

The analogy with the larger political scene, and with the process of nation-formation, of course, runs deeper than the identification of particular characters with particular public figures. At one level, there is the fundamental conflict between the pre-industrial way of life and the emergent conflict with industrialization, symbolized in the struggle over Surdas’s patch of land, currently in use as a kind of commons—somewhat improbably, one might add, given that the owner of the ‘commons’ ekes out a tenuous living as a beggar! Then there is the constant wrangling over the true meaning and relevance of different religions—against the actual historical background of communal mobilizations and heightened sectarian violence. There is the frantic activity of the poor, in sharp contrast to the active conniving of the exploiting classes—and, finally, there is the heavily symbolic collapse of Surdas’s statue, triumphant even, and only, after death in crushing Raja Mahendra Kumar Singh, prominent among those who had conspired against him. There is the ceremonial feast at the end, at which touchable and untouchable eat together—marked as Surdas’s ‘greatest victory’. Similar thematic parallels may easily be multiplied, but perhaps the deepest analogy between the novel and the process of nation-formation, then (and always?) incomplete, might well lie at Rangbhumi’s formal structural level, in the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to tie together the wildly centrifugal diversities of a nation-in-ferment into one transcendent, symbolic convergence.

I will return to the question of the apparent formal fuzziness of Rangbhumi—a matter of concern to practically all commentators—later. For the moment, however, I wish to bring up one context of significance that is only available to us as readers today. This offers a way of focusing attention on the novel in ways that might, retrospectively, enable us to address that formal fuzziness as well.

On 31 July 2004, Premchand’s birth anniversary, a Dalit cultural activist publicly burned a copy of Rangbhumi, as a protest against the ‘anti-Dalit’ nature of the work. It is only fair to say that this action did not meet with unanimous approval even from Dalit intellectuals. And it was widely condemned by other, non-Dalit, intellectuals. Premchand’s status as a secular, progressive cultural icon is practically unrivaled in modern India. He was the first writer to bring a whole range of social issues—rural poverty, caste discrimination, untouchability—within the range of literary attention. Premchand focused attention on the entire range of experiences which, while they were there and had indeed been available for centuries, still lay unregarded in the hinterland of social consciousness, discrete elements of not-yet-experience, mere disconnected episodes which, while they might provide emotions of one kind and another, still did not add up to a story. Premchand’s achievement is to have invented a kind of narrative form for these proto-experiences. It was on the basis of these broadly humanist appropriations that the great social reformers of this time were able to pull the hitherto excluded elements of society within the range of social concern. It worked through a complex dynamic of inducing shame and guilt in the primarily savarna 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.

The hapless Dalit activist who chose Premchand might well have been misguided but, nevertheless, he chose his target well. The contemporary Dalit experience, in today’s conjuncture, has not found its significant form so far—it is still mired in the fully empirical chaos of individual experience, in harrowing autobiography. But in attacking Premchand, the Dalit activist signalled the desire for a departure from the Premchand-derived narrative forms of life at the bottom of the social scale—‘Sava Ser Gehun’, ‘Sadgati’, ‘Kafan’ which were found inadequate, and even offensive. It should be recognized that the Dalit dissatisfaction with the available aesthetic models is a point well made—but dissatisfaction is still only a beginning, it is not yet a story.

The matter of Dalit aesthetics has been engaging the attention of writers and thinkers in many cultural regions of the country for the past some years. Needless to say, there are extreme positions available at both ends of the critical spectrum. At the complacent, savarna end, of course, but also at the other, Dalit, end. Thus, there are Dalit activists who argue that only Dalits can actually represent Dalits. However, it is pointed out that ‘Dalit’ as a category is not merely an ‘in itself’ category—that is, not everyone born in one of the so-called untouchable castes is a Dalit.
To qualify as a Dalit requires a transformation and a realignment at the level of consciousness—a 'for-itself' manoeuvre, specifically, an ideological commitment to Ambedkar’s ideas. But it is not immediately apparent how all this maps onto the question of aesthetics. Thus, it is easy to extract ideas regarding the questions of reservations, or minority rights, from the writings of B.R. Ambedkar, but I believe that the aesthetic corollary of these ideas is still to be spelt out.

There are several problems that become immediately apparent in thinking about the question of aesthetic representation in this extreme fashion. Thus, there is the familiar danger of ghettoization—that is, if Dalits alone can write about Dalits, it follows as a necessary corollary, that Dalits alone can read such writing with profit and pleasure. In that case, art is not, pace Pound, the news that stays news—it is the news that is not news to begin with: been there, suffered that. There are also and already stirrings of that other and attendant danger, that of a practically infinite regress, of further segmentation within the ghetto itself. Thus, for example, it is argued by some Dalit intellectuals that only certain Dalit sub-castes are hogging all the attention. These must, alas, remain unnamed for fear of offending current standards of political correctness and corresponding laws that require certain caste-names to be treated, even with elaborate and ironic framing, as unutterable—so progressive we have become! The obvious implication here is that while each sub-caste can represent itself, it can represent itself and itself only. Other castes, other representations—until, of course, a further sub-caste emerges! This is, in any case, a familiar wilderness—I believe feminists have been here already.

There is another, and for us potentially more suggestive, difficulty that emerges on the other end of the critical spectrum. This is the smug assumption that the realm of the aesthetic exists above mere contingency, and represents ‘universal’ values—and, by implication, that newer kinds of experience must simply conform to the available and timeless models. This idea of the aesthetic has, it must be said, been under heavy critique for some time now—and, god knows, with good reason. It is also a matter of commonplace observation that aesthetic values do not remain static. Ideas of beauty and significant form change over time. But it is also the case that the process of change is imperfectly understood, thereby ensuring that ‘the aesthetic’ continues to be thought of in terms of universality and timelessness—despite the historical evidence of changing aesthetic norms.

This stubborn reluctance is, at one level, mere cussed conservatism. But it might well conceal something more valuable.

For all the recognition of the contingency and historical relativity of aesthetic judgments, one must in practice cling to some provisional notion of ‘autonomy’ for aesthetic judgments to be possible at all. Minus such ‘autonomy’, the category of the aesthetic simply disintegrates, and then one is left with nakedly empirical judgments—everything simply is what it is, and all assertions of value are rendered mere parti pris advocacy. Beyond this confusing landscape of crippling relativism and a possible negotiated and negotiable universalism, one recognizes that the secular and glacial but still undeniable movement of our ideas of what is beautiful and significant, is subject to the intervention of occasional figures, labelled ‘great’ by way of cultural shorthand. These are what I have described, elsewhere, as ‘masters of consciousness’.

At the end of James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the precociously aestheticist Stephen Dedalus declares his surprising ambition, ‘to forge, in the smithy of my soul, the uncreated conscience of my race’. Similar young men dominate the modern traditions of many of India’s languages—encyclopedic Renaissance men (not many women, alas, for all the well-known reasons), towering and formative individuals whose cultural influence goes far beyond their considerable achievements and competencies. The manner in which these great originary figures work is by picking up disparate aspects of the life of 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 both 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. There is a very real sense in which we inhabit the narratives invented by these masters of ‘conscience’, live in the worlds that they have imagined for us—imagined, and so rendered thinkable, capable of being experienced and acted upon.

The disjunction between the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ halves of Rangbhumi—as, indeed, of the great, final, novel, Godan—has been much remarked. The world of Surdas and his neighbours is characterized by vivacity, by salty
speech and authentic emotion. In contrast to this, the world of the 'aristocrats'—the rajas and the ironically named 'Sevak's—is staid and stilted. It is difficult to know what to make of this disjunction, and the temptation is always to read the authentic 'lower' part, and ignore the 'upper' one—read for Surdas and Hori, and not for the silly Rani, mother of Vinay in Rangbhumi, and the picnickers of Godan, for Mehta and Malti. However, despite the difficulty, I would like to insist that the mismatch seems part of the effect of the whole, whether or not it is intended as such.

Thus, it is at the 'upper' level that we have the rehearsal of so many of the stations of the nationalist trajectory. Meanwhile, underlying it all, there is the stubborn persistence of the poor, carrying on. Most noticeably, there is the Hindu nationalist, voiced most prominently through Rani Janhavi, which finds its embodiment in the princely states of Rajputana. Her son Vinay is despatched to one of these states on what is both a proxy life-mission and a penance for having been involved, ever so minimally, with the Christian Sophia! And this is how Vinay defends the princely state against the rebel Veerpal's legitimate accusations of misrule: 'Even if what you say is completely true, I still won't do anything which will give the state a bad reputation. I'm willing to drink a cup of poison along with my brothers, but I'm not willing to plunge them into a crisis by complaining. We have always looked upon this state with pride, and even today we look towards the Maharaja Sahab with the same veneration. He's the descendant of these great Sanga and Pratap, who sacrificed their own lives for the protection of the Hindu community. We consider the Maharaja our protector, our benefactor, a most eminent member of the Khatriya community ....' (Ch. 17, p. 225 in King's translation). Now, Premchand knows this to be nonsense, and Vinay soon enough discovers it to be so. Indeed, Vinay—and we, readers—are treated to a surprisingly frank analysis of the conflict between the colonial authorities and their 'traditional' feudal accomplices by the Divan Sahab himself: 'Think of princely states as the government's harem, where even the light of the sun may not pass through. We are all the black eunuchs of this harem. ... When they feel like it from time to time, our amorous rulers grace us with their presence here for their amusement. The sleeping fortunes of the harem awaken on those days. ... You've had the audacity to enter this harem ... and you are not alone; along with you is a whole gang of social service volunteers. ... Some of them are going around in Kota creating associations of farmers; some are intent upon uprooting forced labour in Bikaner; and some of them are opposing traditionally collected taxes in the princely state of Marwar. You people are going around publicly proclaiming communism. ... We won't let you ...' (ibid. pp. 228–9).

Vinay's own education is very tortuous, intercut as it is with his despairing, impossible love for Sophia, and by implication, with the complications of her own trajectory—loving Vinay, almost marrying Clark, to name but one improbable set! (And their eventual suicides are practically euthanasic—because the alternative would be unending narrative excruciation for characters and readers alike!) But the point worth noticing is not the individual inconsistencies and absurdities so much as it is the eloquent plausibility that is accorded to all the positions. Everyone is allowed their lies, their self-serving perspectives on their lives, their 'truths' even—but the reader is also afforded another, external perspective, with no attempt at explanation, or reconciliation. For obvious reasons, the only way in which these can be held together within one howsoever provisional narrative is through flagrantly melodramatic joinery and sentimental rhetoric—and there is plenty of both.

This tense, unresolved conjunction is also evident in respect of the question of capitalist industrialization versus a form of life that is pre-industrial but far from idyllic. It is common to treat this formal fuzziness, this jerky instability, as a kind of defect, as a failure to meld his disparate materials into the dominant bourgeois realist form that surely Premchand knew from his acquaintance with the nineteenth century English novel. But the detour by way of a possible, still-forming Dalit aesthetics, enables us to consider the possibility that what is at work here—what, indeed, explains the cultural hold and consequence of these writings—is in fact another and different kind of emergent aesthetic form which, for all its superficial resemblance to bourgeois realism, derives its very purchase from its instability.

Premchand's own term for this emergent form is 'ideal' realism, with its necessarily sentimental joinery, the narrative articulation of (still) irreducibly disparate elements in one necessary, necessarily national myth. This 'national' myth is not the dreaded 'nation-state' of the postmodern or Foucauldian imagination. It is merely the formal analogue of the attempt—inevitably unsuccessful—to include all that has been previously been excluded. The question of whether it is an 'adequate' narrative form is not one that can be answered on theoretical grounds alone. The only test is—does it work? If it does—as Rangbhumi evidently does, even for the enraged
Dalit activist whose rage would otherwise be inexplicable—then the question that critical enquiry must address is the nature of the text's narrative transactions with its readers—then, as now—rather than to evaluate it against some other, extraneous, standard.

_ALOK RAI_

References


_Translator's Note_

Translating a long novel is something like a voyage. Finally the journey that began more than six years ago is over; my translation of Premchand's novel _Rangbhumi_ is complete. The first draft took about twenty months, and editing and proofreading have taken the rest. This is not the place to explain why it took so long; suffice it to say that all's well that ends well.

Sooner or later every translator probably asks: Why am I translating this particular work anyway? Why am I translating anything at all? And in the case of Indian languages: Why isn't some Indian translating this? The best answer for the first question is: I'm translating this work because I've fallen in love with it. For the second question: I'm translating to give the experience of this work to those who would otherwise not have it.

But what about the third question? There is no easy answer. Unless the translator is equally adept in both languages and both cultures, the translation is bound to be less than perfect. Non-Indian translators have the advantage of knowing their mother tongue and culture better than Indian translators, while Indian translators have the corresponding advantage of knowing their mother tongue and culture better than non-Indian translators. In the first case, the accuracy of the translation is more likely to suffer, in the second case, the beauty.

I have attempted to produce a readable, not a scholarly, translation. Thus I have used only two sources: the Hindi version of _Rangbhumi_ published in New Delhi by Diamond Pocket Books in 2000 and the Urdu version, also published by the same publisher. As in my previous translation of another Premchand novel, _Gabbar_, the Hindi version was my primary source, and I used the Urdu version only when I got temporarily stuck in the Hindi.

As before, I have included a glossary meant for non-Hindi-speaking Western readers for terms that will be well-known to most Indian readers. This points to a small dilemma for translators from Indian languages into
English: one is translating for both Indian and Western English speakers. What is obvious to one group may not be so to the other, and vice versa. Hence a glossary is probably quite unnecessary for Indian readers, but very useful for Western readers. And as before, I have deliberately not attempted to give a systematic scholarly transliteration of any of the Hindi terms since Indian or Western readers familiar with Hindi do not need it, and those not familiar with Hindi probably do not want it.

Again, as before, I have consistently followed certain practices to make the translation more readable. Thus I usually change the first person to the third person when a character is internalizing his or her thoughts. If for some reason it seems unclear that this is occurring, I have added some phrase such as 'he thought to himself' or the like. My aim is to avoid awkward shifts back and forth between first and third persons, and also extra quotation marks. Similarly, I have consistently used the past tense to avoid numerous shifts between present and past tense in certain passages.

As in Gaban and other novels, Premchand has a habit of putting each speaker's name in front of every utterance in almost every conversation. I have usually omitted the speaker's name when it is obvious who is speaking, adding it only when needed for clarity. In this case I have used phrases such as 'said Surdas' or 'Kunvar Sahab asked' rather than only the name. He also now and then uses very short sentences, sometimes in strings. In such cases I sometimes combine these into longer sentences.

When Premchand repeats the same word two or three times, in exactly the same sense, in a sentence, or in two adjoining sentences, I have usually kept this repetition, believing that it gives the flavour of Premchand's writing better than attempting to find some synonym for each occurrence.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those who helped me along the way. I would like to give my special heartfelt thanks to my good friend Dr Urooj Zaidi for helping me with numerous idiomatic expressions where I got 'stuck'. I would also like to thank Leela King for a final proofreading which caught a number of errors I had missed. I would also like to thank my daughter Alexandra for learning even at the tender age of three to let me work relatively undisturbed, and my wife Cristina for enduring, and for looking forward to reading Rangbhumi with as much enjoyment as she had in reading Gaban.

CHRISTOPHER KING

1

THE CITY is a place where rich people live and conduct their business. The area outside the city is a place for their diversion and pleasure. In its middle portion are the schools for their boys and the arenas for their lawsuit addicts, where the poor are throttled in the name of the law. All around the city are settlements of the poor. In Banaras, Pandepur is just such a settlement. Neither the light of the city street lamps, nor the drops of the city sprinklers, nor the flow of the city water supply reaches there. Along the sides of the street are tiny shops of merchants and sweet-sellers, and behind them live a number of ikka drivers, bullock-cart drivers, milkmen, and labourers. There are also three or four houses of down-and-out white-collar workers, whose desperate condition has banished them from the city. Right among them lives a destitute and blind Chamar, whom people call Surdas. In India there is no need for blind people to have a name, or to have work. Surdas is a ready-made name, and begging is a ready-made occupation. The nature and virtues these blind people share with their namesake, the blind poet Surdas, are world-famous: a special relish for singing and playing, a special affection in the heart, and a special love for the way of devotion and spiritual contemplation, these are their inherent traits. The outward vision is closed and the inner vision open.

Suras was an extremely feeble-bodied, thin, and simple individual. Perhaps fate had made him just for begging. Every day, leaning on his litter, he would come and sit on the main road and pray for the welfare of the passers-by: 'Oh my benefactor! May God make you prosperous.' This was his refrain, and he repeated it over and over. Perhaps he thought it was a mantra to inspire people to take pity on him. He remained seated in his place when he addressed his prayers to those on foot. But if an ikka came along he would run after it, and when it came to a buggy, his feet acquired wings. He considered motorcars, however, to be beyond the reach of his good wishes. Experience had taught him that motorcars don't pay any heed to what anyone says. From morning to evening he spent his time in wishing
Mr John Sevak and his wife were sitting in the front seat of the phaeton. Their young son, Prabhu Sevak, and his younger sister, Sophia Sevak, were sitting in the back seats. John Sevak was a fair-complexioned and sturdy man. Even in old age his face was ruddy. The hair of his head and beard was sprinkled with gray. His English clothing suited him very well. Pride and self-confidence shone from his countenance. The passage of time had been particularly unkind to Mrs Sevak. Her face was wrinkled, and reflected the narrowness of her heart, which even her golden spectacles could not hide. Prabhu Sevak's moustache had begun to appear, he was spare-framed and lean-bodied, with a spiritless face and spectacled eyes; on his countenance showed seriousness and the deep cast of thought. From his eyes shone forth the light of compassion. He seemed to be enjoying the beauty of nature. Miss Sophia was a shy girl with large attractive eyes. An extremely delicate body, as if created from flowers rather than from the five elements. A very gentle beauty, as if shyness and modesty were personified. Animated from head to foot, without the slightest trace of stolidity.

Surdas was running along behind the phaeton. Even a seasoned sportsman could not have run so far and so fast. Wrinkling her nose, Mrs Sevak said, 'This good-for-nothing's yelling is splitting my eardrums. Is he going to keep on running?'

'Who knows when this nuisance will disappear from this country?' replied Mr John Sevak. 'To uplift a country where begging is not considered shameful, so much so that even the highest castes and classes make it their livelihood, and where it is the sole means of support even for saints, will take centuries.'

'Here this practice has been going on from ancient times,' said Prabhu Sevak. 'In Vedic times even princes begged during their education, to support themselves and their gurus. Nor was it something disgraceful for sages and saints either; rather they took support from well-wishers, so they could gather wisdom while remaining free from illusion and attachment. This practice is now being misused. I've even heard that lots of Brahmans, who are zamindars, leave their homes empty-handed to fight their lawsuits, beg all day on the pretext of a daughter's marriage or a relative's death, sell the food they've begged for small amounts, turn these small amounts into larger, and in the end all of it goes into the pockets of court officials and lawyers.'

'Driver, tell this blind man to get lost, there isn't any money,' said Mrs Sevak.
'No, Mama,' said Sophia. 'If there's money, then please give him some. The poor fellow has run for half a mile, he'll be disappointed. How much pain he'll feel in his soul!'

'So who told him to run? If his feet are hurting him, then let them.'

'No, my good Mama, please give him something. See how hard the poor fellow is breathing.'

Prabhu Sevak took a case from his pocket, but there were no copper or nickel coins, and he feared his mother's anger if he gave a silver coin. 'Sophie, I'm sorry,' he said to his sister, 'there's no money in here. Driver, tell the blind man to come to the warehouse slowly; we might have some money for him there.'

But was Surdas likely to be satisfied with this? He knew that no one would wait for him at the warehouse; if the carriage should keep going, all his efforts would be in vain. He didn't abandon his pursuit but kept on running for a mile altogether. He ran so far that the warehouse appeared and the phaeton stopped. Everyone got out. Surdas too stood to one side like a stump among trees. He was huffing and puffing, and completely out of breath.

Mr John Sevak had opened a leather brokerage here. A person named Tahir Ali was his agent. He was sitting on the verandah. Seeing his boss, he stood up and saluted him.

'Tell me, Khan Sahab,' said John Sevak, 'how's the income from the leather sales?'

'Your Honour, it's not what it should be yet, but there's hope for the future.'

'You have to do some running around; nothing will happen if you keep on sitting in one place. Keep moving around the villages near here. I intend to meet the chairman of the municipality and get a liquor and toddy shop opened here. Then the Chamar who live near about will come here every day and you'll have the chance of getting to know them. Nowadays nothing happens without these little tricks. Look at me, for example. There's probably not a single day that I don't meet three or four rich and important people in this city. To get a policy for even ten thousand means several days' running around.'

'Your Honour, I'm worried myself. Don't I know that if the owner doesn't get a little profit, he won't do this work? But with the salary that Your Honour has fixed for me, I can't make both ends meet. Twenty rupees isn't even enough for my daily bread, let alone all the other necessities. Just now I didn't have the courage to say anything to you, but if I don't tell you, who am I going to tell?'

'Work for a few days more, and you'll get an increase. Now where are your accounts? Bring them so I can see them.'

Saying this, John Sevak sat down on a broken stool on the verandah, while Mrs Sevak sat down on a chair. Tahir Ali brought the account book and placed it before him, and he began to examine it. After turning over and examining three or four pages, he frowned and said, 'You don't understand how to keep an account book yet, and you tell me to give you a raise on the strength of this. An account book ought to be just like a mirror; from this I can't tell how many goods you bought, and how many you sent out. The buyer gets a discount of one anna for each hide, but there's no record of it at all.'

'Should I record this too?'

'Why, isn't it my income?'

'I thought it was my right.'

'Never. I could have you charged with embezzlement,' said John Sevak, and then, scowling, added 'Employees' right! Wonderful! You have a right to your salary, and no right to anything else.'

'Your Honour, this kind of mistake will never happen again.'

'Enter the amount you've received up to now under income. When it comes to account books I don't make the slightest concession.'

'Your Honour, it'll be a very small amount.'

'It doesn't matter even if it is one pai. You'll have to enter all of it. Just now the amount is small, but in a few days it will reach hundreds. I want to open a Sunday school here with this sum. You understand? This is the memsahab's great desire. Well, let's move on. Where is that land that you mentioned?'

Behind the warehouse lay a large expanse of open land. The neighbourhood animals came to graze here. John Sevak wanted to open a cigarette factory on this land, and he had sent Prabhu Sevak to America to study this kind of business. John Sevak, Prabhu, and his mother had all come to see the land. Together, father and son measured the area of the plot. The two of them spent a long time discussing where the factory would be, where the office, where the manager's bungalow, where the labourers'
quarters, where the coal would be stored, and from where the water would come. Finally Mr Sevak asked Tahir Ali, ‘Whose land is this?’
‘Your Honour, I don’t rightly know, but I’ll go ask someone right now. It might be Nayakram Pandaa’s.’
‘For how much can you get this land from him?’
‘I’m even doubtful that he will sell it.’
‘Ajii, even his father will sell, who’s he? If you give seventeen annas to the rupee, you can buy the stars in the sky. Send him to me, and I’ll talk it over with him.’
‘I’m afraid that we’ll have difficulty in getting raw materials here,’ said Prabhu Sevak. ‘People don’t do much tobacco farming out this way.’
‘Getting the raw materials produced will be your job,’ said John Sevak. ‘Farmers have no love for sugar cane, or barley, or wheat. They’ll grow whatever crop they see as profitable. There’s nothing to be concerned about. Khan Sahab, be sure to send this pandaa to me tomorrow.’
‘Very good, I’ll tell him.’
‘Don’t tell him, send him. If you can’t do even this much, I’ll assume you don’t know anything at all about making a deal.’
‘You should put some experienced man in this position,’ said Mrs Sevak in English.
‘No,’ replied Mr Sevak in English. ‘I’m afraid of experienced men. Because of their experience, they think about their advantage, not yours. I stay miles away from such men.’
Talking among themselves in this way, the three of them reached the phaeton with Tahir Ali in the rear. Sophia was standing and talking with Surdas there. As soon as she saw Prabhu, she said, ‘Prabhu, this blind man seems to be a knowledgeable person, a thorough philosopher.’
‘Wherever you go, you find some knowledgeable person or other,’ said Mrs Sevak. ‘Tell me, blind man, why do you beg? Why don’t you do some work?’
‘Mama,’ said Sophia in English, ‘this blind man is not just a yokel.’
After receiving respectful attention from Sophia, these insulting words of Mrs Sevak seemed very hurtful to Surdas. In front of those who honour one, insults become several times more unbearable. Lifting his head, he said, ‘God gave me life, I serve God. I can’t serve anyone else.’

‘Why did your God make you blind?’ said Mrs Sevak. ‘So you could beg, then? Your God is very unjust.’
‘Mama, why are you insulting him?’ said Sophia in English. ‘I’m ashamed.’
‘God is not unjust,’ said Surdas. ‘This is what I earned from my previous life. I am reaping the fruits of my actions. This is all God’s sport. He is a great sportsman. He builds and destroys children’s playhouses, and he has no malice towards anyone. Why would He do anyone an injustice?’
‘If I were blind,’ said Sophia, ‘I’d never forgive God.’
‘Miss Sahab,’ replied Surdas, ‘everyone has to suffer from the results of his sins; God is not to blame for this.’
‘Mama, I don’t understand this mystery,’ said Sophia. ‘Lord Jesus atoned for our sins through his blood, so then why aren’t all Christians in equal circumstances? You can find all kinds of people, good and bad, rich and poor, lame and crippled, in our community, just as you can in other religious communities. What’s the reason for this?’
Before Mrs Sevak could reply Surdas jumped in. ‘Miss Sahab, we have to atone for our own sins ourselves. If today everyone knew that someone had taken the load of our sins on his own shoulders, the world would be filled with darkness.’
‘It’s too bad that you don’t understand such an important matter, Sophie, even though Reverend Pim himself has set your doubts at rest several times,’ said Mrs Sevak.
‘Do you want us to renounce the world and become recluses, then?’ said Prabhu to Surdas.
‘Yes. Until we renounce the world, we can’t escape suffering.’
‘To smear ashes on your body as a sign of giving up the world, and then to beg is itself the biggest suffering,’ said John Sevak. ‘How can this free us from suffering?’
‘Sahab,’ said Surdas, ‘it’s not necessary to smear ashes on yourself and give up the world. Our great saints have said that smearing ashes on yourself and letting your hair grow long is hypocrisy. Renunciation happens through the mind and heart. Live in the world, but don’t be of the world. This is what is called renunciation.’
‘The Hindus learned these things from the Greek stoics,’ said Mrs Sevak. ‘But they don’t understand how difficult it is to put them into practice. It’s
not possible that joys and sorrows won't affect a person. If this blind man doesn't get any money this time, he'll have a thousand curses in his heart.'

'Yes, don't give him anything,' said John Sevak. 'Then we'll see what he says. If he gets even the least bit angry, I'll talk to him with my whip. Then he'll forget all about renunciation. He begs, he runs for miles like a dog for a few small coins, and on the strength of this he claims to have renounced the world.' Then speaking to the driver, 'Turn the coach around, and go to the bungalow by way of the club.'

'Mama, please do give him something. The poor fellow has run so far in the hope of something,' pleaded Sophia.

'Oho,' said Prabhu. 'I completely forgot to get some small change.'

'Never, don't give him anything,' said John Sevak. 'I want to give him a lesson about renouncing the world.'

The phaeton moved off. Surdas stood staring after it with his blind eyes like a statue of disappointment, as if he still couldn't believe that anyone could be so pitiless. He took several steps after the coach almost unconsciously. Suddenly Sophia said, 'Suras! I'm sorry, I don't have any money with me now. I'll come again sometime, and then you won't have to be so disappointed.'

Blind people are very acute of mind. Surdas understood the situation perfectly well. Although anguish was in his heart, he said unconcernedly, 'Miss Sahab, what's there to be worried about? May God bless you. It's enough for me that you wanted to take pity on me.'

Sophia said to her mother, 'Mama, did you see how his mind is not the least bit soured?'

'Yes, he doesn't seem sad at all,' said Prabhu.

'Look into his heart,' said John Sevak.

'He's probably cursing us,' said Mrs Sevak.

The coach was still moving slowly. Just then Tahir Ali called out, 'Your Honour, this land is not Pandaa’s, it's Surdas's. That's what they're telling me.'

The sahab had the coach stopped, and looking abashedly at his wife, he got out of the coach, came towards Surdas, and said meekly, 'Well, Surdas, is this land yours?'

'Yes, Your Honour,' said Surdas, 'it's certainly mine. This is the only token left by my forefathers.'

'Well then, my job is done. I was worried about what sort of person its owner might be. But with a disinterested and respectable person like you, I won't be put to a lot of trouble. When you own this much land, why do you wear these clothes?'

'What can I do, Your Honour? I'm just doing what God wishes.'

'Well, now all your troubles will be over. Just give me this land. A present for a present, a profit for a profit. I'll give you whatever price you ask.'

'Sarkar, my ancestors left this to me, how could I face them if I sell it?'

'I'll have a well built right here on the street. Your ancestors' name will not be forgotten.'

'Sahab, this land is a great benefit to the local people. There's not a finger's breadth of pasture anywhere else. All the neighbourhood cattle come here to graze. If I sell it, then there won't be any place left for them.'

'How much money do you get in a year for letting them graze?'

'Nothing. God gives me enough food for nothing, so why should I take money for grazing from anyone? I can't benefit anyone in any other way, but I can do this much.'

Surprised, John Sevak said, 'You let people graze their cattle on this land for nothing? Sophia spoke the truth when she said that you're the very image of renunciation. I haven't seen this much self-sacrifice even in very great people. You are blessed. But when you show so much compassion for animals, how can you disappoint your fellow humans? You won't get rid of me until I get this land.'

'Sarkar, this land is certainly mine, but until I ask the people who live around here, I can't say anything. What are you going to do with it?'

'I'll open a factory here, which will bring progress to the country and the people, benefit the poor, and give thousands of people a living. The renown of it will be yours, too.'

'Your Honour, I can't say anything without asking the people in the neighbourhood.'

'Very well, ask them. I'll meet you again. Just understand that you won't lose anything by doing business with me. I'll make you happy in just the way you like to be happy.' Taking five rupees out of his pocket, he said, 'Take this. Pardon me for thinking that you were just an ordinary beggar.'
Surdas, leaning on his lathi, walked slowly home. As he went he thought to himself that this was the selfishness of important people. What arrogance they had showed at first, considering him even lower than a dog, but as soon as they had learned that the land was his, how they had begun to flatter him. As if he'd give his land to them. He had showed him five rupees as if he'd never seen money before. Never mind five, let him give five hundred, but he still wouldn't give his land to him. How would he show his face to his neighbours? The poor cows should wander around wretchedly because of his factory? Christians didn't give the slightest thought to compassion or justice. All they did was to go around trying to make everyone into Christians. If they didn't intend to give anything, they should have snubbed him right away. After he'd run a whole mile, they'd told him to get lost. Out of them all, only the girl seemed good-natured. She had some compassion and justice in her. The old woman was completely hard-hearted and talked so rudely. Such haughtiness! As if she were Queen Victoria herself. Dear God he was tired! He was still panting. Never before today had anyone made him run so far, only to give him a flat refusal. It must have been God's wish. Let his heart not be so sad. Begging was his work, giving was that of others. It was their own money, so if no one gave anything, why should it seem bad to him? Should he tell people that the saba was asking for his land? No, everyone would get into a panic. He had given an answer, so what was the need to tell others?

Thinking all this, he reached his home. This was a very ordinary hut. There was a neem tree by the door. Instead of a door, there was a bamboo screen. He pushed aside the screen, and took out a small packet from his waist, which held his earnings for the whole day. Then grooping around the roof of the hut, he brought forth a small bag, which contained his life savings. He put the packet in the bag very stealthily so that not the slightest sound would reach anyone's ears. Then he hid the bag in the roof again, brought some fire from a neighbour, and lit a fire in the chulha with some dry branches he kept under the tree. A faint unsteady light filled the hut. What a mockery! What hopeless poverty! No cot, no bedding; no pots, no utensils. There was a clay water jug in one corner, whose age could be guessed from the green mould clinging to its surface. Near the chulha was a handi. An old griddle, as full of holes as a sieve, a rather small plate, and a lota. That was it, the entire wealth of the home. What a condensed form of human desires! Surdas dumped all the food he'd got today into the handi, just as it was. There was some barley, some grain, some chickpeas, a little bit of millet, and a handful of rice. He added a little salt. Whose tongue has relished such a hotchpotch? It contained the sweetness of satisfaction, and there is nothing sweeter in the world. Putting the handi on the chulha, he went out of his house, pushed the bamboo screen back on the doorway, and going out into the street brought back a little flour and a paisa's worth of gur from a grocer's shop. He kneaded the flour on the small plate and then listened for half an hour to the melodic song of the khichari cooking as he sat before the chulha. In the dim light his feeble body and his tattered clothes were making a mockery of the human love of life.

The contents of the handi came to a boil several times; the fire went out several times. Surdas's eyes began to water from blowing into the chulha again and again. Even though eyes can't see, they can still cry. He kept on