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Munshi Premchand: The Upanyas Samrat

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Munshi Premchand: The Upanyas Samrat

Munshi Premchand was an Indian writer of Hindi and Urdu fiction. He was born Dhanpat Rai in 1880 and died in 1936. The British banned his story collection Soz-e-Watan, and he changed his pen name. His last novel, Godaan, is considered his best.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Life**1880 to 1936.

02 **Names**Dhanpat Rai, Nawab Rai, Premchand.

03 **Last novel**Godaan, 1936.

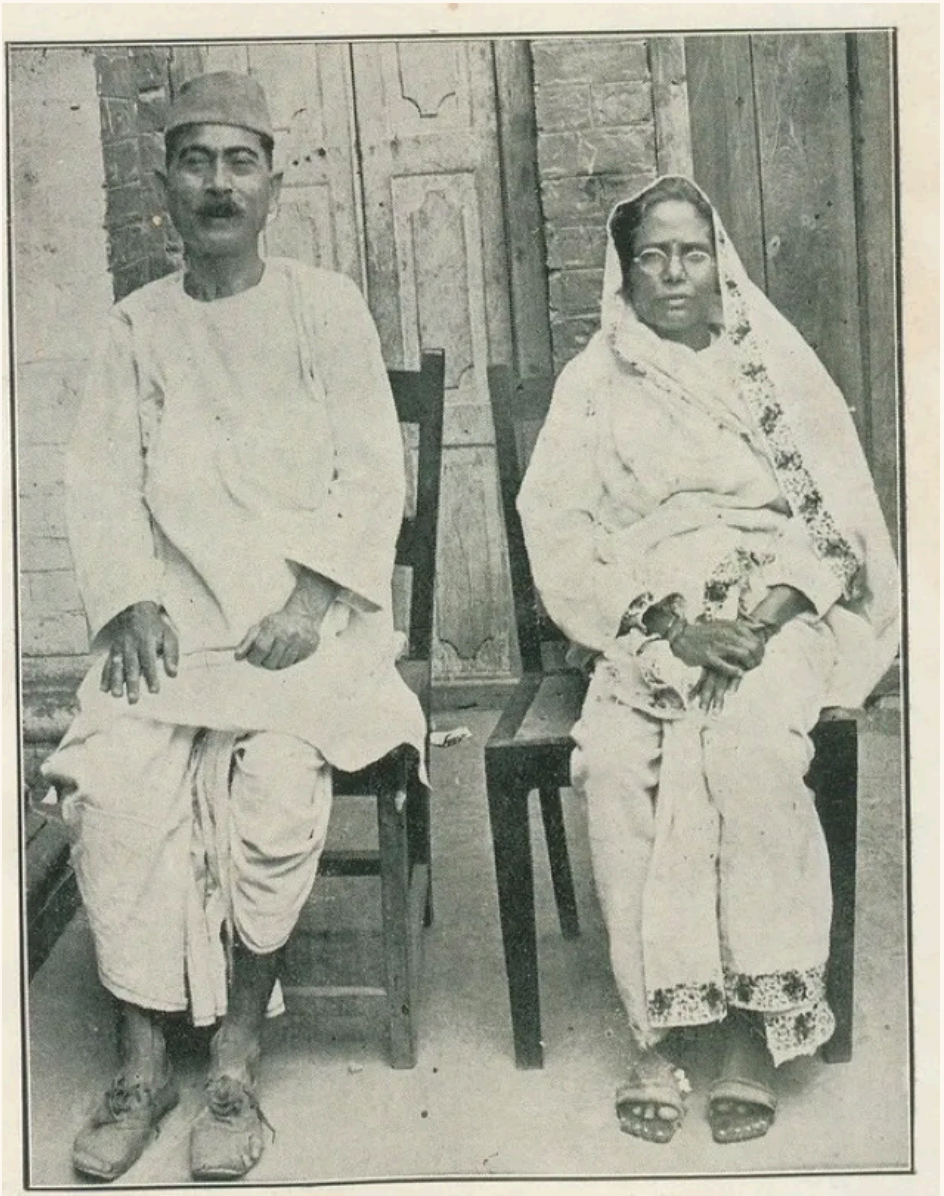
04 **Magazine**Hans, started 1930.

Who was Premchand, and why two names?

1 Who was Premchand?

1.1 When and where was he born?

He was born on 31 July 1880 near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. His birth name was Dhanpat Rai Srivastava. He died on 8 October 1936, at the age of 56.



منشی پریم چند

مسز پریم چند (شیورانی دیوی)

Premchand with his wife Shivrani Devi, October 1936. Photo: Zamana, Kanpur. Public domain. Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 Why is he called Upanyas Samrat?

Upanyas Samrat means Emperor of Novels. He is also known by this title. He wrote over 250 short stories and 13 novels, plus many essays and letters.

1.3 What did he write about?

He wrote about villages, poverty, women and farmers. These were subjects close to his heart. Critics praise his simple but powerful prose and his humane, idealistic outlook.

17. **Think it through:** Why did a writer choose farmers and the poor as his heroes? See answer ↓

Quick check 1. True or false: Premchand was born in 1880. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: Premchand's birth name was Nawab Rai. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newindiasamachar.pib.gov.in; hindustantimes.com

2 Why two names?

2.1 What was Nawab Rai?

Nawab Rai was his first pen name. A pen name is a name a writer uses instead of the real one. He began writing novels and stories as Nawab Rai.

2.2 What was Soz-e-Watan, and why was it banned?

Soz-e-Watan was his story collection. He wrote it during the freedom movement. The British banned it. Its copies were burnt. The collector also ordered him not to write anything further.

2.3 How did he become Premchand?

In 1909 he changed his pen name from Nawab Rai to Premchand. The British had censured him for the book. After this he wrote as Premchand. He also began in Urdu and later shifted to Hindi.

> 18. **Think it through:** Why would a new pen name help a banned writer? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Soz-e-Watan was banned by the British. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: He wrote Soz-e-Watan as Premchand. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Which stories and novels did he write?

3 Which stories are famous?

3.1 What is Eidgah about?

Premchand wrote Eidgah in 1933. Its hero is a small boy named Hamid. At the Eid fair, Hamid does not buy sweets. He buys a pair of tongs for his grandmother. That way her hands will not get burnt while cooking.

3.2 Why did a Prime Minister retell it?

On 28 May 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told this story to Ujjwala scheme beneficiaries. Ujjwala is the government's cooking-gas scheme.

3.3 Which other stories should you know?

Four more are popular. They are Shatranj Ke Khiladi, Poos Ki Raat, Bade Ghar Ki Beti and Namak Ka Daroga.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Hamid buys tongs for his grandmother in Eidgah. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Namak Ka Daroga is a novel. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Which novels matter?

4.1 Which novels should I remember?

Read the table, oldest first.

Premchand's main novels

Novel	Year	What it is about
Sevasadan	1918	First written in Urdu in 1917 as Bazar-e-Husn, then published in Hindi
Rangabhoomi	1924	A blind Dalit beggar, Soordas, fights the takeover of his land
Nirmala	1928	Serialised in the women's magazine Chand
Gaban	1931	Psychological realism; corruption among the urban middle class
Godaan	1936	His last novel; a farmer's debt and a cow

Years as given by the sources listed under the cards.

4.2 Why is Sevasadan special?

Sevasadan began in Urdu in 1917 as Bazar-e-Husn. It then appeared in Hindi under the name Sevasadan. This shows how he moved between the two languages.

4.3 What are Rangabhoomi and Nirmala about?

Rangabhoomi follows Soordas, a blind Dalit beggar. He fights to keep his ancestral land. Nirmala first appeared in parts, in the magazine Chand, in 1928.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Sevasadan was first written in Urdu. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: Rangabhoomi is about a rich landlord. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What are Godaan, Hans and AIPWA?

5 What is Godaan?

5.1 What is the story?

Godaan is about a farmer named Hori. All his life he dreams of owning a cow. He finally buys one. But he falls into a huge debt to pay for it.

5.2 Why is it so important?

It was his last novel, from 1936. Critics consider it his best work. Its story centres on a farmer's debt.

5.3 Where did it appear later?

Godaan was made into a Hindi film in 1963. The film Peepli Live used the name Hori Mehto for a farmer character. The filmmaker used it as a symbol that farmers' situation had not changed over the years.

19. **Think it through:** What does Hori's cow stand for? See answer ↓

Quick check 9. True or false: Godaan was Premchand's last novel. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: Godaan was filmed in 1936. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianexpress.com

6 What were Hans and AIPWA?

6.1 What was the magazine Hans?

Premchand started the magazine Hans in 1930. It closed in 1952. The Hindi writer Rajendra Yadav revived it in 1986.

6.2 What was the Progressive Writers' Association?

The All-India Progressive Writers' Association is called AIPWA. It was launched on 9 April 1936 at a conference in Lucknow. Premchand presided over that conference.

6.3 Why did he leave his government job?

In 1921 he joined the freedom struggle. He left his government job and entered the movement.

> **Quick check 11.** True or false: Premchand presided over the founding conference of AIPWA. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 12.** True or false: Hans was started in 1952. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianexpress.com

7 Why a realist?

7.1 What does realism mean here?

Realism means showing life as it is, not as fiction wishes it to be. Critics call his work socially and psychologically real. It also carries progressive ideas, humanism and idealism.

7.2 What is psychological realism?

It means showing what characters think and feel, not only what they do. Gaban is the usual example. It looks at corruption among the urban middle class from the inside.

7.3 What should I remember for exams?

Link him with villages, farmers and social evils. Link him with a plain, strong prose style. Link him with two languages: Urdu first, then Hindi.

> **Quick check 13.** True or false: Premchand's work is admired for social-psychological realism. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 14.** True or false: Gaban is a story about kings and battles. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Practice

8 Exam traps

8.1 Which dates do students mix up?

Keep the key dates in one place.

Dates to keep straight

Fact	Date
Born	31 July 1880
Pen name changed to Premchand	1909
Left government job	1921
Hans started	1930
Eidgah written	1933
AIPWA launched at Lucknow	9 April 1936
Died	8 October 1936, aged 56
Hans closed, then revived	1952, then 1986

Dates from the sources listed under the cards.

8.2 Which mistakes are common?

- Soz-e-Watan was by Nawab Rai, not Premchand.
- Godaan was published in 1936. The film came in 1963.
- Hans began in 1930. It closed in 1952.
- AIPWA was launched in 1936 at Lucknow.
- Counts differ between books. This page uses over 250 stories and 13 novels.

Quick check 15. True or false: The AIPWA conference was held at Lucknow. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 16. True or false: Premchand died in 1930. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: timesofindia.indiatimes.com

Remember this

- **Born/died:** 31 July 1880; 8 October 1936.
- **Names:** Dhanpat Rai, then Nawab Rai, then Premchand from 1909.
- **Soz-e-Watan:** banned by the British; copies burnt.
- **Godaan:** last novel, 1936; farmer Hori and a cow.
- **Hans and AIPWA:** Hans 1930; AIPWA launched at Lucknow on 9 April 1936.

Explain it back: Say why Soz-e-Watan changed his name.

Practice MCQs

1. What was Munshi Premchand's birth name, before he adopted the pen name "Premchand"?

A. Nawab Rai

B. Dhanpat Rai

C. Munshi Rai

D. Ajaib Lal

See answer ↓

2. Premchand first wrote under the pen name "Nawab Rai." He adopted the name "Premchand" after British officials banned which of his works as seditious?

A. Gaban

B. Soz-e-Watan

C. Rangbhoomi

D. Godaan

See answer ↓

3. Godaan, widely considered Premchand's finest novel, centres on the life of an indebted peasant. In which year was it published, the same year he died?

A. 1919

B. 1936

C. 1928

D. 1932

See answer ↓

4. In 1936, Premchand became the first president of which literary organisation, at its founding conference in Lucknow?

A. Sahitya Akademi

B. Hindi Sahitya Sammelan

C. All India Progressive Writers' Association

D. Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samiti

See answer ↓

5. Munshi Premchand pioneered realistic social fiction in Hindi and Urdu, most famously portraying peasant life in which novel?

A. Ramcharitmanas

B. Anandamath

C. Godaan

D. Gitanjali

See answer ↓

6. The Hindi book 'Soz-e-Watan' was written by which author?

A. Mahadevi Verma

B. Sumitranandan Pant

C. Munshi Premchand

D. Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The correct answer is **Dhanpat Rai**. He was born Dhanpat Rai Srivastava in Varanasi in 1880. Nawab Rai was his first pen name, not his birth name. Memory hook: Dhanpat is the birth name, Nawab the first pen name. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The correct answer is **Soz-e-Watan**. He wrote this story collection as Nawab Rai. The British banned it and burnt its copies. In 1909 he took the name Premchand. Memory hook: banned book, new name. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The correct answer is **1936**. Godaan was his last novel and came out in 1936, the year he died. Critics consider it his best work. Memory hook: last novel, last year. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The correct answer is **All India Progressive Writers' Association**. It was launched on 9 April 1936 at a conference in Lucknow. Premchand presided over that conference. Memory hook: Lucknow 1936, Premchand in the chair. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The correct answer is **Godaan**. It follows the farmer Hori, who buys a cow and falls into huge debt. Critics consider it his best work. Memory hook: Hori, cow, debt. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The correct answer is **Munshi Premchand**. He wrote Soz-e-Watan under the name Nawab Rai. The British banned it and burnt its copies. Memory hook: Soz-e-Watan, Premchand, banned. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** He was born on 31 July 1880 and died on 8 October 1936. ↑ 1
2. **False.** His birth name was Dhanpat Rai. Nawab Rai was his early pen name. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Its copies were burnt, and the collector ordered him to stop writing. ↑ 3
4. **False.** He wrote it as Nawab Rai. He took the name Premchand afterwards. ↑ 4
5. **True.** He chooses tongs over sweets so her hands will not be burnt. ↑ 5
6. **False.** It is a popular short story. ↑ 6
7. **True.** It began as Bazar-e-Husn in 1917. ↑ 7
8. **False.** Its hero is Soordas, a blind Dalit beggar. ↑ 8
9. **True.** It came out in 1936, the year he died. ↑ 9
10. **False.** The Hindi film came in 1963. The novel was published in 1936. ↑ 10

11. **True.** It was held at Lucknow on 9 April 1936. ↑ 11
12. **False.** Hans began in 1930. It closed in 1952. ↑ 12
13. **True.** His simple prose and humane ideas are also praised. ↑ 13
14. **False.** It is a novel of psychological realism about middle-class corruption. ↑ 14
15. **True.** Premchand presided over it on 9 April 1936. ↑ 15
16. **False.** He died on 8 October 1936. ↑ 16
17. **Think it through.** He showed how ordinary people lived and suffered. That made his stories feel true to readers. ↑ 17
18. **Think it through.** A new name let him keep writing without drawing the same attention. ↑ 18
19. **Think it through.** A cow was wealth and honour in a village. Hori's wish for one shows a farmer's simple dream. His debt shows how far that dream cost him. ↑ 19

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