



Human Dignity and Social Equality in the Fiction of Premchand and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay: A Comparative Socio-Literary Analytical Framework

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Abstract:

Premchand (Dhanpat Rai Srivastava) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay stand as the two foremost architects of social-realist prose fiction in early twentieth-century India, writing respectively in Hindi-Urdu and Bengali. Both novelists turned away from the ornamental romanticism that dominated preceding literary generations and instead placed the peasant, the untouchable, the widow, and the economically dispossessed woman at the centre of their narratives. This paper develops a structured comparative framework for examining how the two authors treat human dignity and social equality across four thematic axes: caste and untouchability, gender and domestic subjugation, economic exploitation under feudal and colonial conditions, and the moral agency of marginalized protagonists. The framework is applied to a purposively selected corpus of eight major works — four by each author — and the resulting qualitative comparison is presented through descriptive tables rather than fabricated quantitative metrics, in keeping with the interpretive nature of literary analysis. The study finds substantial convergence in the two writers' humanist critique of institutionalized inequality, alongside a marked divergence in narrative register: Premchand anchors dignity in economic self-sufficiency and the social recognition of labour, whereas Sarat Chandra anchors it in emotional autonomy and liberation from patriarchal domestic control. The paper argues that this replicable comparative method offers a useful model for cross-linguistic literary scholarship, subaltern studies, and the design of comparative Indian-literature curricula.

Keywords: Human Dignity; Social Equality; Premchand; Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay; Comparative Literature; Subaltern Studies; Indian Social Realism

1. INTRODUCTION

The first four decades of the twentieth century witnessed, in colonial India, the emergence of a new prose sensibility that broke decisively with the escapist romances of the nineteenth century. Two figures dominate this transformation: Premchand, writing in Hindi and Urdu from the Gangetic heartland, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, writing in Bengali from the villages and small towns of undivided Bengal. Despite belonging to different linguistic traditions and addressing partially different regional realities, both novelists shared an unmistakable preoccupation — restoring dignity to those whom their societies had systematically stripped of it: the landless peasant, the untouchable sweeper, the child widow, and the woman confined within an oppressive domestic order.

This shared preoccupation is not accidental. Both writers came of age during a period of intensifying nationalist consciousness, in which questions of social reform — the abolition of untouchability, the remarriage of widows, the education of women, and the redistribution of agrarian surplus — were inseparable from questions of political self-rule. Yet while Hindi and Bengali literary criticism have each produced rich, mature bodies of scholarship on their

respective author, comparative studies that place Premchand and Sarat Chandra side by side, using a single consistent analytical method, remain comparatively rare in indexed, cross-disciplinary venues.

This paper addresses that gap. It proposes a structured, replicable comparative framework — organized around four thematic axes — for reading the two authors' treatment of dignity and equality, and it applies that framework to a purposively selected corpus of primary texts. The contribution of the paper is fourfold: (1) a thematic taxonomy for comparative reading across languages; (2) a transparent analytical workflow that can be reused by other researchers; (3) a set of descriptive comparative tables summarizing convergence and divergence; and (4) a candid assessment of the method's advantages and limitations, together with directions for future computational and cross-regional extension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Premchand within Hindi literary criticism has traditionally emphasized his role as the founder of realistic fiction concerned with peasant life, agrarian debt, and the moral hypocrisy of the rural elite. Biographical and critical studies have documented his gradual shift from didactic reformism in his early Urdu writing toward a more structurally aware, quasi-Marxist depiction of exploitation in his mature Hindi novels and short stories. A parallel strand of criticism, influenced by subaltern-studies methodology, has examined how Premchand's untouchable and outcaste characters are granted narrative interiority rarely available to such figures in earlier Indian fiction.

Bengali criticism on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay has, by contrast, tended to foreground his sustained engagement with the domestic and emotional lives of women — widows, deserted wives, and women trapped by rigid codes of family honour. Feminist re-readings of his fiction have highlighted both his sympathetic portrayal of women's suffering and the limits of his reformism, which frequently resolves in pathos and renunciation rather than structural change. Historians of the Bengali novel have also situated his work within a broader trajectory of realist prose that runs from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay through Rabindranath Tagore to Sarat Chandra himself.

Comparative Indian-literature scholarship — much of it produced under the broader umbrella of South Asian literary history — has occasionally placed Premchand and Sarat Chandra within the same discussion, typically as co-representatives of an early-twentieth-century turn toward social realism. However, such discussions tend to remain descriptive rather than methodologically structured; they rarely specify a repeatable coding scheme, a defined corpus, or an explicit set of comparative categories. This paper builds on the shared intuition of that literature while supplying the structured method it generally lacks.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Two related problems motivate this study. First, Premchand and Sarat Chandra are almost always studied within their own linguistic and disciplinary silos — Hindi departments engaging primarily with Premchand, Bengali departments engaging primarily with Sarat Chandra — so that genuinely comparative insight is left to occasional review essays rather than sustained analytical work. Second, where comparison is attempted, it is frequently impressionistic: critics assert broad thematic kinship ("both wrote about the poor") without a transparent method for identifying, classifying, or comparing specific textual instances of dignity-denial and dignity-restoration across the two authors' works.

The absence of a structured, transparent, and replicable comparative method limits the field in two ways: it makes it difficult for later scholars to test, extend, or challenge existing comparative claims, and it obscures precisely where the two authors converge and where they diverge in their construction of human dignity. This paper's central problem, therefore, is methodological as much as thematic: how can a comparative literary study of two authors writing in different languages be organized so that its categories, corpus, and reasoning are made explicit and reusable by other researchers?

4. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a comparative-thematic close-reading method organized around a fixed coding taxonomy, rather than a purely impressionistic comparison. Four thematic axes were defined prior to reading, based on recurring concerns identified in the literature review:

- A. Caste and Untouchability — the treatment of characters marked as socially "low" by birth, and whether the narrative grants them moral or narrative centrality.
- B. Gender and Domestic Subjugation — the treatment of women constrained by widowhood, arranged marriage, or codes of family honour.
- C. Economic Exploitation and Feudal Bondage — the depiction of debt, land relations, and rural or urban economic coercion.
- D. Moral Agency and Redemption — whether marginalized characters are permitted an active moral choice, or are reduced to passive objects of pity.

For each axis, representative episodes and characters from the selected corpus were identified through close reading (in English translation, cross-checked against the original Hindi and Bengali where feasible), and classified according to narrative outcome — dignity restored, dignity denied, or narratively ambiguous — together with a note on the author's implicit or explicit reformist stance. No direct quotations from the primary texts are reproduced in this paper; all textual observations are presented in paraphrase and analytical summary, consistent with standard practice in comparative literary criticism.

5. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE / ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework is organized as four sequential layers, illustrated conceptually in Fig. 1. The Textual Corpus Layer holds the primary works selected for each author. The Thematic Coding Layer applies the four-axis taxonomy described in Section IV to each work independently. The Cross-Author Comparative Layer aligns coded observations across the two authors along each axis. The Interpretive Synthesis Layer produces the qualitative conclusions reported in Section VIII, informed throughout by the secondary critical literature reviewed in Section II.

Fig. 1. Four-layer analytical framework: Textual Corpus → Thematic Coding → Cross-Author Comparison → Interpretive Synthesis, with secondary literature informing the coding and synthesis layers.

This layered structure is deliberately modular: a future researcher could substitute a different pair of authors, or add a third author from another regional literature, at the Textual Corpus Layer without altering the coding taxonomy or the comparative logic of the layers above it.

6. ANALYTICAL WORKFLOW

The workflow applied to each text in the corpus proceeds as follows:

- Step 1 — Select primary text and, where applicable, its standard English translation.
- Step 2 — Identify all major characters belonging to a socially marginalized category (outcaste, widow, indebted peasant, deserted wife, and so on).
- Step 3 — For each such character, code the narrative treatment against the four thematic axes (A–D) defined in Section IV.
- Step 4 — Record the narrative resolution for that character: dignity restored, dignity denied, or ambiguous, together with the surrounding textual context.
- Step 5 — Aggregate character-level codes into a work-level thematic summary.

Step 6 — Aggregate work-level summaries into an author-level profile for each of the four axes.

Step 7 — Compare author-level profiles across the two writers to identify convergence and divergence, cross-checked against the secondary critical literature.

This workflow was applied uniformly across all eight primary texts described in Section VII, ensuring that the comparative conclusions in Section VIII rest on a consistent procedure rather than selective illustration.

7. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

The corpus was purposively selected to represent each author's most critically significant treatment of caste, gender, and economic dispossession. Four works by each author were chosen, spanning both novel-length and short-story forms, summarized in Table I.

TABLE 1

Primary corpus selected for comparative analysis.

Author	Work	Form / Period	Primary Axis Emphasized
Premchand	Godaan	Novel, 1936	Economic exploitation; peasant dignity
Premchand	Sadgati	Short story, 1931	Caste and untouchability
Premchand	Kafan	Short story, 1936	Poverty; moral agency
Premchand	Nirmala	Novel, 1925	Gender and domestic subjugation
Sarat Chandra	Devdas	Novel, 1917	Gender; romantic/social exclusion
Sarat Chandra	Palli Samaj	Novel, 1916	Rural feudal power; moral agency
Sarat Chandra	Mahesh	Short story, 1922	Poverty; caste-adjacent exclusion

Author	Work	Form / Period	Primary Axis Emphasized
Sarat Chandra	Grihadaha	Novel, 1920	Gender and domestic subjugation

Secondary sources consulted include standard biographical and critical studies of both authors (see References), used to cross-check the interpretive claims produced by the coding workflow rather than to supply the primary evidence itself, which was drawn from close reading of the texts.

8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table II summarizes the comparative findings across the four thematic axes, aggregated at the author level.

TABLE 2

Comparative treatment of the four thematic axes.

Axis	Premchand	Sarat Chandra	Relationship
Caste / Untouchability	Central and explicit; dignity denial often fatal	Present but secondary to gender focus	Divergent emphasis
Gender / Domestic Subjugation	Present, tied to economic dependency	Central and explicit; emotional register	Divergent register, shared concern
Economic Exploitation	Structural, tied to land and debt	Present but subordinated to family honour	Divergent emphasis
Moral Agency	Often denied at the point of death	Often denied through renunciation	Convergent outcome

A. Convergence

Both authors repeatedly use the social exclusion or death of a marginalized character as a narrative device to indict the surrounding society's indifference, rather than to console the reader with a redemptive resolution. In both traditions, moments that might elsewhere function as sentimental climax instead serve as unresolved social accusation: the community's failure to recognize a poor man's basic humanity in Premchand's short fiction, and a woman's forced

renunciation of personal happiness for the sake of family honour in Sarat Chandra's novels, both function as indictments of institutional indifference rather than as morally satisfying endings.

B. Divergence

The two authors differ markedly in where they locate the mechanism of dignity-denial. Premchand consistently ties human dignity to economic self-sufficiency and the social recognition of labour: his peasant characters are stripped of dignity primarily through debt, land dispossession, and the moneylender's structural power over rural life. Sarat Chandra, by contrast, ties dignity to emotional and domestic autonomy: his characters — especially his women — are stripped of dignity primarily through arranged marriage, widowhood, and the suffocating weight of family reputation, with economic hardship typically functioning as an aggravating rather than a primary cause.

C. Interpretation

This divergence can be read as a product of differing regional literary inheritances: Premchand's Hindi-Urdu fiction inherits a reformist tradition closely tied to agrarian political economy, while Sarat Chandra's Bengali fiction inherits a domestic-novel tradition concerned with the inner emotional life of the middle-class and rural household. Read together, however, the two bodies of work complement one another, jointly mapping the two principal registers — economic and domestic — through which early-twentieth-century Indian society denied dignity to its most vulnerable members.

9. ADVANTAGES

The proposed framework offers several advantages over ad hoc comparative reading. It is replicable: the four-axis taxonomy and seven-step workflow can be applied by other researchers to the same or an expanded corpus, and the resulting codes can be checked against the original texts. It is transparent: every comparative claim in Section VIII can be traced back to a specific axis and a specific work in Table I, rather than resting on unexamined critical impression. It is extensible: the modular four-layer architecture in Section VI allows additional authors, regional literatures, or thematic axes to be incorporated without redesigning the method from scratch. Finally, it is pedagogically useful, offering a ready-made structure for comparative Indian-literature courses that wish to move beyond single-author survey teaching.

10. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies substantially on English translations for cross-linguistic comparison, and translation inevitably attenuates certain stylistic and idiomatic nuances present in the Hindi and Bengali originals. Second, the method is deliberately qualitative; it does not, and does not claim to, produce statistically generalizable quantitative results, and any future attempt to quantify the coding scheme would require a much larger corpus and inter-rater reliability testing. Third, the corpus of eight works, while critically significant, represents only a sample of each author's considerably larger body of work, and conclusions drawn here should not be over-generalized to every text either author produced. Fourth, the four-axis taxonomy, while grounded in the literature reviewed in Section II, reflects one reasonable analytical choice among several possible taxonomies, and alternative frameworks might foreground different thematic categories.

11. FUTURE SCOPE

The framework developed here suggests several directions for future work. The comparative method could be extended to a third or fourth author from other Indian regional literatures of the same period — for instance, Marathi or Tamil social-realist fiction — to test whether the convergences identified here between Hindi and Bengali fiction generalize further. A complementary computational layer, using topic modeling or sentiment analysis on translated corpora, could supplement the qualitative coding scheme with an independent quantitative cross-check, provided such methods are used cautiously given the interpretive risks of applying computational text analysis to literary translation. The framework could also be adapted for intersectional analysis that considers caste and gender jointly rather than as

separate axes, and could inform collaborative work between translation studies scholars and literary critics to reduce the translation-dependency limitation noted in Section X.

12. CONCLUSION

Premchand and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, writing in different languages and addressing partly different regional realities, converge in a shared humanist project: the restoration of dignity to those whom early-twentieth-century Indian society treated as socially disposable. This paper has proposed and applied a structured, four-axis comparative framework for examining that project across a purposively selected corpus of eight major works. The framework reveals both a deep convergence in the two authors' use of narrative exclusion as social indictment, and a clear divergence in the economic versus domestic registers through which each author locates the mechanism of dignity-denial. Beyond its specific findings, the paper offers a replicable and extensible method that other researchers can apply, test, and refine — a contribution intended to move comparative study of Premchand and Sarat Chandra from occasional impressionistic remark toward a more structured and cumulative scholarly practice.

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