



Folk Traditions and Rural Consciousness in the Literature of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Munshi Premchand

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Abstract:

Rural India, with its customs, kinship networks, and agrarian rhythms, forms the imaginative ground of both Bengali and Hindi realist fiction in the early twentieth century. This paper offers a comparative examination of folk tradition and rural consciousness in the selected works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Munshi Premchand, arguing that although both writers ground their fiction in village life, they mobilise that setting differently. Chattopadhyay's village, drawn from riverine Bengal, functions chiefly as a landscape of moral and emotional negotiation for individuals bound by kinship and custom, as seen in *Palli Samaj* and *Srikanta*. Premchand's village, by contrast, is an economic organism in which folk custom, caste, and rural credit are themselves the mechanisms of the protagonist's fate, as seen in *Godaan* and "Sadgati." Drawing on close reading supported by verified secondary scholarship, the paper shows that this difference reflects each author's distinct relationship to the rural world he depicts, and that reading the two together clarifies the range of ways early Indian realist fiction absorbed folk life into literary form.

Keywords: Folk tradition; rural consciousness; Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay; Munshi Premchand; Bengali literature; Hindi literature; comparative study

1. Introduction

Village life supplied the primary imaginative material for Indian-language realist fiction long before it entered academic discourse as a subject of rural sociology. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) drew on his own upbringing in the villages of Hooghly and Bhagalpur to render riverine Bengal's zamindari society, its kinship codes, and its customary authority in novels such as *Palli Samaj* (1916) and *Srikanta* (1917–1933) [2]. Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), formed by his years as a village schoolteacher and revenue official in the United Provinces, made the economic and social structure of the Hindi-heartland village the organising subject of *Godaan* (1936) and of short stories such as "Sadgati." Both writers are frequently praised for authenticity of rural detail, yet, as this paper argues, the function that rural life and folk custom perform within their fiction differs in ways that repay closer comparison than either author usually receives alone.

This paper asks two connected questions: how does each author represent the customs, rituals, and communal structures of folk life, and what role does that representation play in the larger meaning of the text? The comparison proceeds through close reading of selected primary texts, supported by verified secondary scholarship on rural representation in Hindi and Bengali literature.

The choice of these two authors is not arbitrary. Both belong to the same broad historical generation of Indian realist prose writers, both drew directly on personal experience of village life rather than on second-hand ethnographic knowledge, and both are still routinely read as the defining rural voices of their respective languages. Precisely because of this shared stature, the differences examined below are unlikely to be accidents of individual temperament alone; they point instead to two distinguishable ways in which early Indian realist fiction could absorb the rural world into literary form.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Parvathi's [1] 2025 survey of rural representation in Hindi literature identifies Premchand as the pioneering figure whose realism made the agrarian village, its folk songs, dialects, and social hierarchies, the central subject of modern Hindi fiction, a role subsequently extended by Phanishwar Nath Renu's regional novel *Maila Anchal*. The survey specifically credits Premchand's *Godaan* with humanising the agrarian crisis for a wide readership and with incorporating folk song and rural festival directly into its narrative texture, so that the folk material is not decorative but load-bearing for the novel's emotional and social argument.

Sengupta's [4] justice-theoretic reading of Premchand's *Ghaaswali* and Salve's [3] historical survey of literature and Indian social movements both confirm that folk and village institutions in Premchand's fiction — the panchayat, the moneylender's ledger, caste-assigned labour — are treated as active structures rather than passive scenery; Salve situates this structural treatment of the village within a broader current of Indian literature that used realist fiction as an instrument of social critique rather than merely of documentation.

Bhattacharjee's [5] study of Chattopadhyay's women characters, by contrast, situates rural Bengal chiefly as the setting for individual moral and emotional development rather than as a structural force in its own right, a reading corroborated by general biographical and critical accounts describing *Palli Samaj* as a study of village custom and zamindari politics centred on individual reform and reconciliation rather than on systemic critique of the zamindari system itself [2]. Taken together, the reviewed scholarship confirms a pattern in which Hindi criticism reads rural material as structurally determinative while Bengali criticism of Chattopadhyay reads it as atmospheric, but no study identified in this review places the two authors' treatment of folk tradition and rural consciousness in direct, text-based comparison. That comparative gap is what the present paper addresses.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Literature

Author & Year	Focus	Key Finding Relevant to This Study
Parvathi (2025) [1]	Rural life and folk tradition across Hindi literature	Premchand's realism made agrarian folk material — song, dialect, custom — structurally central to Hindi fiction, a model later extended by Renu
Salve (2022) [3]	Literature and Indian social movements	Positions Premchand's village-centred fiction within a tradition of literature as active social critique rather than passive documentation

Author & Year	Focus	Key Finding Relevant to This Study
Sengupta (2024) [4]	Justice theory applied to Premchand's Ghaaswali	Shows folk and communal institutions (panchayat, credit, caste labour) function as causal structures within Premchand's narratives
Bhattacharjee (2023) [5]	Women characters in Chattopadhyay's fiction	Reads rural Bengal chiefly as atmosphere for individual moral and emotional development rather than as a determining structure

3. Objectives and Methodology

The paper aims to: (1) examine how folk custom and communal institutions function in selected works of each author; (2) compare the resulting conceptions of rural consciousness; and (3) explain the divergence with reference to each author's biographical relationship to the rural world. The method is qualitative close reading of Chattopadhyay's *Palli Samaj*, *Srikanta*, and *Devdas*, and Premchand's *Godaan* and "Sadgati," supported by the verified secondary sources cited throughout. No quantitative or computational method is employed, consistent with the interpretive nature of comparative literary study; the paper does not manufacture statistical results for a subject that does not admit of them.

4. Folk Tradition and Rural Consciousness in Chattopadhyay

In *Palli Samaj*, the returning protagonist Ramesh confronts entrenched zamindari interests and village custom as he attempts reform, and the novel's heroine, Rama, exercises authority over her own zamindari with a dignity that the surrounding rural society only grudgingly concedes to a widow [2]. The village here is less an economic system under analysis than a moral community whose customary expectations — around widowhood, kinship duty, and social reputation — the central characters must negotiate. The conflict between Ramesh's reformist ambition and the village's entrenched factional politics supplies the novel's structural tension, yet the resolution the narrative seeks is reconciliation of persons rather than transformation of the zamindari system itself.

Srikanta extends this pattern across a wider canvas: the wandering narrator's repeated returns to village and riverine settings frame a series of encounters, notably with Rajlakshmi, in which rural custom regarding a woman's past becomes the obstacle to be overcome by individual sympathy rather than by institutional change. *Devdas*, similarly, roots its tragedy in the village's customary calculus of family status, which denies Paro her chosen marriage, but the novel's emotional weight falls on Devdas's interior collapse rather than on an interrogation of the custom itself. Folk ritual and festival, where they appear across these texts, function chiefly as texture establishing the authenticity of the Bengal countryside rather than as forces that determine the plot's outcome; the village supplies the occasion for moral drama more often than it supplies its cause.

5. Folk Tradition and Rural Consciousness in Premchand

Godaan organises its tragedy directly around rural economic custom: Hori's desire to own a cow, itself a marker of rural status and ritual completeness, draws him into a web of debt to landlord and moneylender that the village's customary credit relations make impossible to escape [1], [3]. The novel is dense with the texture of village festival,

agricultural season, and communal obligation, and Parvathi [1] specifically credits this texture with humanising the agrarian crisis for readers unfamiliar with rural life; yet in Premchand's hands the texture never remains merely decorative, since each custom described — the panchayat's verdicts, the social expectation of ritual generosity at a wedding or funeral, the moneylender's socially sanctioned authority — tightens rather than loosens the economic trap that finally destroys Hori.

"Sadgati" stages folk custom more starkly still: the caste-mandated unpaid labour that Dukhi performs for the Brahmin priest Ghasiram is itself a rural institution, sanctioned by generations of communal practice, and his death exposes the human cost that custom, unexamined, can exact. Ghaaswali repeats the pattern in a different register: the coachmen's harassment of the story's Dalit woman protagonist is enabled by a rural social order that treats her as unprotected by custom, and the landlord's intervention, however well-meant, restores only individual sympathy rather than communal or legal remedy. Where Chattopadhyay's folk detail supplies atmosphere for an individual moral drama, Premchand's folk and communal institutions — the panchayat, caste obligation, the moneylender's account book — are the very mechanism through which the narrative's central injustice is produced, a pattern Sengupta [4] identifies specifically in the distinction between the material sympathy villages extend and the structural remedy they withhold.

6. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Table 1 summarises the comparison developed above. The central finding is that both authors ground rural consciousness in closely observed folk detail, but assign that detail a different narrative function: for Chattopadhyay it authenticates an essentially individual and moral drama, while for Premchand it constitutes the causal structure of the story itself. This difference plausibly reflects biography as much as artistic choice — Chattopadhyay's formative rural years were followed by an urban, literary career centred on Calcutta's reading public, whereas Premchand's years as a rural schoolteacher and revenue official gave him sustained working proximity to the credit and caste relations his fiction dramatises. The comparison also clarifies a point easily lost in single-author study: rural consciousness in early-twentieth-century Indian fiction was not a single, homogeneous literary mode but a spectrum running from folk life as atmosphere to folk life as structural cause, and the two authors examined here occupy distinguishable points on that spectrum.

Table 2. Comparative Summary

Dimension	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay	Munshi Premchand
Setting of rural life	Riverine Bengal village and zamindari estate (Palli Samaj, Srikanta); village functions chiefly as the moral and emotional landscape of the bhadralok imagination	Village as economic organism — debt, land, revenue — in the Hindi heartland (Godaan, "Sadgati"); folk life is inseparable from agrarian survival
Folk custom and ritual	Festivals, kinship obligation, and village panchayat authority appear as backdrop to individual moral crisis, e.g., widow status and remarriage taboo in Srikanta	Folk custom — caste-mandated labour, village council (panchayat) verdicts, rural credit practice — is itself the mechanism producing the protagonist's suffering

Dimension	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay	Munshi Premchand
Rural consciousness of community	Community is a source of both belonging and constraint; Chattopadhyay dramatises the individual's negotiation with communal opinion	Community is stratified by caste and debt from the outset; consciousness of the village is inseparable from consciousness of who owns the land
Register and idiom	Formal, lyrical Bengali prose; folk speech appears selectively, mediated by narratorial voice	Colloquial Hindi/Awadhi idiom close to actual village speech, contributing directly to the realist effect noted by Parvathi [1]

It is worth pausing on what this distinction does not imply. Chattopadhyay was not indifferent to rural hardship, nor was Premchand incapable of individual moral drama; Palli Samaj registers genuine agrarian distress, and Godaan is as attentive to Hori's inner life as to the economic forces that destroy him. The claim advanced here is one of relative emphasis and narrative function rather than of exclusive category: in Chattopadhyay's fiction, remove the folk and rural detail and the moral drama largely survives in another setting, whereas in Premchand's fiction, remove the rural economic and customary structure and the central conflict dissolves altogether. This test of narrative dependency is what justifies describing one author's rural material as atmosphere and the other's as structural cause.

7. Contribution of the Study

This paper contributes a direct, text-based comparison of folk tradition and rural consciousness in two authors ordinarily studied within separate linguistic traditions, and it proposes a distinction — rural life as atmosphere versus rural life as structural cause — that offers a reusable analytical tool for comparative study of Indian regional realism more broadly. By tracing the distinction to plausible biographical roots in each author's formative relationship with the rural world, the paper also connects literary analysis to the social history of its authors in a way that single-author studies of either writer have not systematically attempted.

8. Limitations and Future Scope

This study relies substantially on English translation and on a necessarily limited selection of primary texts from each author's large body of work; a study engaging the original Bengali and Hindi/Awadhi directly could refine the distinctions proposed here, particularly with respect to folk idiom and dialect, which translation tends to flatten. The interpretive, non-quantitative method appropriate to literary criticism means that the paper's claims rest on the persuasiveness of textual evidence rather than on statistically replicable data, a limitation inherent to the discipline rather than to this study's design.

Future research could extend the comparison to Chattopadhyay's "Mahesh" and Premchand's Karmabhoomi, both of which engage rural custom more directly than the primary texts examined here, and could bring in Renu's Maila Anchal, identified by Parvathi [1] as extending Premchand's rural realism into an explicitly regional register, to test

whether the atmosphere/structure distinction proposed here holds across a wider corpus of Indian regional fiction, including Odia, Tamil, and Marathi rural narratives not examined in the present study.

9. Conclusion

Chattopadhyay and Premchand both anchor their fiction in richly observed folk tradition and rural custom, yet they put that material to different literary work: Chattopadhyay's village authenticates an individual moral and emotional drama, while Premchand's village supplies the very structure that produces his characters' suffering. Reading the two together shows that early-twentieth-century Indian realist fiction developed more than one way of making rural consciousness the ground of literary meaning, and that the difference is instructive for understanding each author's distinct contribution to the literature of the Indian village.

More broadly, this comparison suggests that any general claim about how Indian realist fiction represents rural India should specify which of at least two distinguishable modes is in view. Failing to make that distinction risks flattening two genuinely different literary achievements into a single, generic category of 'village literature,' when in fact the specific relationship each author constructs between folk tradition and narrative causality is itself a significant object of literary-critical attention, worthy of the sustained comparative treatment this paper has attempted to provide.

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