
**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SARAT CHANDRA
CHATTOPADHYAY, MUNSHI PREMCHAND, AND AMIYABHUSAN
MAJUMDER**

***Dr. Madan Chandra Karan**

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Bengali Bangabasi Morning College, Calcutta
University, Kolkata.

*MA, UGC-NET, M.Phil, Ph.D (Bengali), Vidyavaridhi, Vidyavachaspati (Hindi),
Vidyalkara (Hony., Sanskrit)*

Article Received: 19 June 2026

Article Revised: 09 July 2026

Published on: 29 July 2026

***Corresponding Author: Dr. Madan Chandra Karan**

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Bengali Bangabasi Morning College,
Calcutta University, Kolkata.

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.7726>

ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comparative examination of rural consciousness and its relation to social transformation in the fiction of three major Indian novelists writing across Bengali and Hindi literary traditions: Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938), Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), and Amiyabhusan Majumder (1918–2001). Although separated by language, region, and historical moment, the three writers share a sustained engagement with the material and moral world of the Indian village under colonial and post-colonial conditions. The paper argues that while Sarat Chandra locates the possibility of change in individual moral awakening within a sentimental-reformist framework, and Premchand articulates a more collective, class-conscious and Gandhian vision of peasant agency, Majumder's later modernist prose complicates both models by foregrounding the ambivalence, fragmentation, and loss that accompany rural modernisation, particularly among tribal and landless communities of North Bengal. Drawing on close textual analysis of representative novels and short stories, alongside the existing body of critical scholarship on Bengali and Hindi realism, the study proposes a comparative framework — presented diagrammatically — for understanding how rural consciousness is constructed, narrated, and transformed across these three literary trajectories. The paper concludes that, taken together, the three writers constitute a continuous yet evolving archive of India's agrarian imagination, one that moves from reformist sentiment through revolutionary realism to reflective modernist scepticism.

KEYWORDS: *rural consciousness; social transformation; Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay; Munshi Premchand; Amiyabhusan Majumder; comparative literature; agrarian realism; subaltern representation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian village occupies a paradoxical place in the modern literary imagination: it is at once the repository of an authentic, pre-colonial cultural order and the site of the most acute material deprivation produced by colonial revenue systems, caste hierarchy, and gendered subordination. Across the first half of the twentieth century, novelists writing in India's regional languages turned to the village not merely as a setting but as a total social fact — an object of ethnographic attention, ethical reflection, and political argument. Among these writers, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bengali and Munshi Premchand in Hindi-Urdu stand as the two towering figures of early-twentieth-century social realism, each constructing, in his own idiom, a fictional world in which rural custom, poverty, and injustice become the ground for narratives of reform and resistance. Writing a generation later, Amiyabhusan Majumder extended and complicated this tradition, bringing to Bengali prose a more interior, fragmented, and ethnographically dense treatment of rural and tribal life in North Bengal, one that registers the ambivalences of post-colonial development rather than a settled faith in reform.

This paper compares the three writers along a common axis — rural consciousness, understood as the structure of feeling, belief, and self-understanding through which characters inhabit and interpret their agrarian world — and traces how each author correlates this consciousness with a distinct model of social transformation. The comparison is deliberately cross-linguistic and cross-generational: it reads Bengali and Hindi realism together, and reads an early-twentieth-century reformist tradition alongside its later, more sceptical modernist inheritor. In doing so, the paper contributes to comparative Indian literary studies a framework that moves beyond single-language literary history toward a shared regional and historical grammar of agrarian representation.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine how Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Munshi Premchand, and Amiyabhusan Majumder each construct rural consciousness in their major fiction.
- To identify the distinct models of social transformation — reformist, revolutionary, and reflective-modernist — that emerge from their respective bodies of work.

- To analyse the treatment of caste, gender, poverty, and tribal identity as constitutive elements of rural consciousness in the selected texts.
- To situate the three writers within the broader historical trajectory of Indian agrarian realism, from the late colonial period to the post-Independence decades.
- To propose a comparative conceptual framework, presented diagrammatically, for the study of rural consciousness across Indian regional literatures.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative-textual methodology grounded in close reading of primary literary texts, supplemented by secondary critical and historical scholarship on Bengali and Hindi realism. Primary texts have been selected on the basis of their centrality to each author's engagement with rural life: from Sarat Chandra, *Palli Samaj* (1916), the short story *Mahesh* (1922), *Grihadaha* (1920), and *Ramer Sumati* (1914); from Premchand, *Godaan* (1936), *Poos ki Raat* (1930), *Sadgati* (1931), and *Gaban* (1931); and from Majumder, *Rajnagar* (1979–80, awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986), *Garh Shrikhandal* (1957), and *Mahishkurar Upakatha* (1963). The analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically within each section, comparing the three writers' treatment of a shared concern — agrarian exploitation, gender, caste, or the encounter with modernity — before drawing the threads together in a synthesising conceptual diagram. Given the comparative and interpretive nature of the study, the method is situated within postcolonial and subaltern-studies approaches to literary history, particularly as developed in the scholarship of Sisir Kumar Das and Meenakshi Mukherjee on the Indian novel.

4. Review of Literature

Sisir Kumar Das's authoritative literary-historical survey situates Sarat Chandra and Premchand as the two central architects of social realism in early-twentieth-century Indian fiction, each responding to the currents of nationalist reform and social critique that swept the subcontinent in the decades preceding Independence (Das, 1991, pp. 213–248). Meenakshi Mukherjee's study of the Indian novel similarly emphasises the reformist and didactic impulse underlying much of this early realist fiction, while noting the tension between individual sentiment and social critique that runs through Sarat Chandra's narratives in particular (Mukherjee, 1985, pp. 45–62). Premchand's own critical writings, notably his 1936 presidential address to the Progressive Writers' Association, articulate an explicit theory of

literature as an instrument of social change grounded in the lived experience of the peasantry (Premchand, 1936/1981).

Scholarship on Amiyabhusan Majumder remains comparatively limited in circulation outside specialist Bengali criticism, a fact itself noted by his biographers and by translators of his work; Kalpana Bardhan's English translation of Rajnagar for the Sahitya Akademi has been instrumental in bringing his fiction to a wider readership, and her introduction identifies his sustained attention to landless labourers, the Rabha community of Cooch Behar and Assam, and the declining zamindar households of North Bengal as central to his rural imagination (Bardhan, 1998). Critics have frequently described Majumder as a 'writer's writer' whose formal experimentation and psychological density set him apart from the more accessible realism of his predecessors, even as his thematic concerns — agrarian dispossession, caste and tribal marginality, the erosion of rural community — remain continuous with the Sarat Chandra–Premchand tradition. This paper builds on these strands of scholarship to construct an explicitly comparative and cross-linguistic reading that has not, to the author's knowledge, been attempted at length in existing criticism.

5. The Three Novelists: Historical and Literary Context

5.1 Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938)

Born in Debanandapur in the Hooghly district of Bengal, Sarat Chandra spent long years of poverty and itinerant employment in Bihar and Burma before establishing himself as the most widely read Bengali novelist of his generation. His fiction is set overwhelmingly in the villages and small towns of undivided Bengal, among the declining rural gentry, the peasantry, and, above all, women confined by the structures of widowhood, child marriage, and social ostracism. Novels such as *Palli Samaj* and *Grihadaha*, and short fiction such as *Mahesh*, combine a deep sympathy for the socially marginalised with a narrative mode that critics have described as sentimental realism: social criticism is mediated through pathos, individual suffering, and the moral awakening of central characters rather than through explicit political argument (Das, 1991, pp. 220–225).

5.2 Munshi Premchand (1880–1936)

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, who wrote under the pen name Premchand, is widely regarded as the founding figure of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction and the pre-eminent chronicler of the North Indian peasantry. Beginning his career under the influence of Arya Samaj reformism and Gandhian nationalism, Premchand's fiction evolved from an early idealistic realism toward the starker, more class-conscious realism of his final novel, *Godaan*, widely

considered the definitive Hindi novel of peasant life. His short stories — *Poos ki Raat*, *Sadgati*, and *Kafan* among them — depict with unflinching precision the compounded burdens of poverty, caste oppression, and institutional exploitation borne by the landless and low-caste peasantry (Premchand, 1936/1981; Das, 1991, pp. 230–240).

5.3 *Amiyabhusan Majumder (1918–2001)*

Born in the princely state of Cooch Behar in North Bengal to a family with roots in Pabna (in present-day Bangladesh), Amiyabhusan Majumder pursued a modest career as a post office clerk while producing, over more than five decades, a body of fiction distinguished by formal experimentation and a sustained attention to communities largely absent from earlier Bengali realism: landless agricultural labourers, the Rabha people of Cooch Behar and Assam, and the declining zamindar households of a fading feudal order. His novel *Rajnagar*, set against the backdrop of the 1857 uprising and awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986, exemplifies his characteristic blend of historical density, psychological interiority, and ethnographic precision. Known among fellow writers as the 'writer's writer', Majumder's relatively limited popular readership has not diminished his standing as one of the most significant, if underrecognised, chroniclers of rural and tribal Bengal in the post-Independence period (Bardhan, 1998).

6. Comparative Conceptual Framework

The comparative relationship among the three writers can be represented schematically as a movement from a shared material base — the colonial and post-colonial agrarian structure of caste, zamindari exploitation, indebtedness, and gendered subordination — through three distinct literary modes of representation, toward a convergent understanding of literature as an archive of rural consciousness and a discourse of social transformation. Figure 1 sets out this framework.

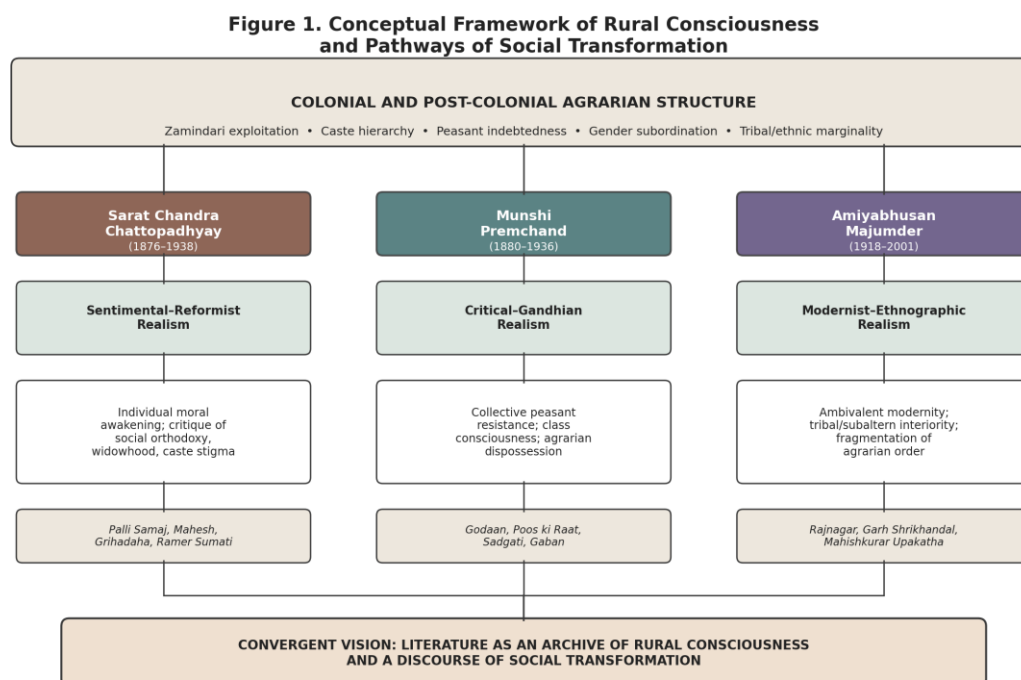


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of rural consciousness and pathways of social transformation across the three novelists (author's construction).

As the diagram indicates, all three writers begin from a broadly shared agrarian structure, yet each identifies a different locus for the possibility of change. Sarat Chandra situates transformation within the individual conscience — a socially conditioned but ultimately personal moral awakening that leaves the larger structure of caste and gender relatively unchallenged even as it grants dignity to the individual sufferer. Premchand, by contrast, increasingly locates the possibility of change in the collective agency of the peasantry itself, informed by the Gandhian ideal of self-rule and by an emergent, if not fully articulated, class consciousness. Majumder, writing from the vantage point of the post-colonial present, treats transformation more ambivalently: modernisation and development bring not unambiguous progress but a complex, often painful renegotiation of tribal and agrarian identity.

7. Thematic Comparison

7.1 Agrarian Exploitation and the Peasant Condition

In Premchand's *Godaan*, the peasant protagonist Hori's lifelong labour to acquire a cow — the emblem of minimal social dignity in his village — ends in his death still burdened by debt, dramatising with stark clarity the structural impossibility of peasant advancement under a system of compounded rent, interest, and social obligation (Premchand, 1936/2002). A comparable, though tonally distinct, treatment appears in Sarat Chandra's *Mahesh*, where the

Muslim peasant Gafur's inability to feed his beloved bullock during a devastating drought, and his consequent social and communal isolation, is rendered with an intimacy that indicts rural custom and administrative neglect alike without the explicit systemic analysis found in Premchand (Chattopadhyay, 1922/2002). Majumder's fiction extends this concern to communities largely invisible in earlier Bengali and Hindi realism — the landless labourers and Rabha tribal households of North Bengal — whose relationship to land and livelihood is shaped as much by ethnic marginality as by class position (Bardhan, 1998).

7.2 Caste, Community, and Social Hierarchy

Premchand's short story Sadgati offers one of the most unsparing depictions in Indian fiction of the violence embedded in caste practice, as the Dalit labourer Dukhi dies performing unpaid, degrading labour demanded by a Brahmin priest, his death met with ritual indifference rather than moral reckoning (Premchand, 1931/2002). Sarat Chandra's fiction, emerging from a Bengali social milieu structured more by the internal hierarchies of caste Hindu society and by the stigma attached to widowhood than by the explicit Dalit-Brahmin confrontation central to much of Premchand's work, nonetheless shares a comparable concern with social ostracism, as seen in the treatment of fallen or transgressive women across novels such as Palli Samaj and Grihadaha (Chattopadhyay, 1916/1999; 1920/1999). Majumder's Rajnagar, set against the backdrop of a small princely kingdom during the upheavals of 1857, examines the intersection of caste, tribal identity, and political power with a historical and ethnographic density that distinguishes his treatment from the more contemporary social settings of Sarat Chandra and Premchand (Bardhan, 1998).

7.3 Gender and the Rural Woman

The condition of women constitutes perhaps the most consistent thread across the three writers' rural imaginations, though each treats it differently. Sarat Chandra is widely regarded as the most sustained early-twentieth-century Bengali novelist of women's inner lives, his fiction repeatedly centring on widows, socially transgressive women, and wives negotiating the constraints of custom, as in Grihadaha and Ramer Sumati (Chattopadhyay, 1914/1999; 1920/1999). Premchand's later fiction, notably Godaan, extends this concern to the rural woman's labour and endurance under conditions of agrarian poverty, portraying Dhaniam, Hori's wife, as a figure of both suffering and moral clarity whose perspective frequently exceeds and critiques her husband's fatalism (Premchand, 1936/2002). Majumder's fiction, informed by his ethnographic attention to Rabha and other communities, situates women's experience within frameworks of kinship and custom that differ markedly from caste Hindu

norms, thereby broadening the comparative field beyond the reformist paradigm shared by Sarat Chandra and Premchand (Bardhan, 1998).

7.4 Colonial Modernity, Development, and Ambivalence

A crucial point of divergence emerges in the writers' respective attitudes toward historical change itself. Both Sarat Chandra and Premchand, writing within the moral and political horizon of the nationalist movement, retain — in differing registers — a fundamental faith that rural society can be reformed or transformed for the better, whether through individual moral regeneration or collective peasant struggle. Majumder, writing across the transition from colonial to post-colonial India, treats the same historical process with considerably greater ambivalence. His fiction registers the erosion of older forms of rural community and tribal autonomy under the pressures of post-Independence development and administrative modernisation not as unambiguous progress but as a complex process involving genuine loss alongside genuine gain — a reflective, at times melancholic modernism that distinguishes his generation's engagement with rural change from that of his predecessors (Bardhan, 1998).

8. Comparative Table

Table 1 summarises the principal points of comparison discussed above.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Rural Consciousness and Social Transformation.

Parameter	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay	Munshi Premchand	Amiyabhusan Majumder
Literary phase	Late colonial Bengal (1900s–1930s)	Late colonial North India (1900s–1930s)	Late colonial to post-Independence period (1940s–1990s)
Dominant mode	Sentimental–reformist realism	Critical, Gandhian-inflected realism	Modernist, ethnographic realism
Primary rural subject	Zamindari gentry, widows, village women, marginalised men	Landless and marginal peasantry, indebted farmers	Landless labourers, Rabha and other tribal communities, declining gentry
Locus of transformation	Individual conscience and moral awakening	Collective peasant agency and organised resistance	Interior consciousness and ambivalent encounter with modernity
Representative works	Palli Samaj, Mahesh, Grihadaha, Ramer Sumati	Godaan, Poos ki Raat, Sadgati, Gaban	Rajnagar, Garh Shrikhandal, Mahishkurar Upakatha

Parameter	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay	Munshi Premchand	Amiyabhusan Majumder
Attitude to social change	Reformist; faith in humane sentiment overcoming custom	Transformative; faith in collective struggle and ethical self-rule	Sceptical-reflective; transformation as loss as much as gain

9. DISCUSSION

The comparison undertaken in this paper suggests that rural consciousness in Indian fiction is not a static or homogeneous category but a historically evolving structure of representation, responsive to the changing political and social horizons within which each writer worked. Sarat Chandra's reformist sentimentalism and Premchand's Gandhian-inflected critical realism together constitute the founding grammar of Indian agrarian fiction in the early twentieth century, a grammar organised around the twin convictions that rural suffering is a legitimate object of literary attention and that literature can itself be an instrument of moral or political change. Majumder's later fiction both inherits and unsettles this grammar: by extending the field of rural representation to tribal and ethnically marginal communities largely absent from his predecessors' work, and by replacing their relative confidence in transformation with a more searching, formally complex ambivalence, he registers the altered historical conditions of a post-colonial society in which 'development' can no longer be assumed to be synonymous with justice.

Read together, the three writers thus offer a continuous yet internally differentiated archive of the Indian village across nearly a century of literary history — from the reformist pathos of the late colonial period, through the revolutionary realism of the independence movement, to the reflective, ethnographically attentive modernism of the post-colonial decades. This trajectory carries implications beyond literary history narrowly conceived: it offers, in the diagrammatic terms proposed in Section 6, a model for comparative work across India's regional literatures that resists the tendency to read Bengali and Hindi fiction, or early and late twentieth-century realism, in isolation from one another.

10. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Munshi Premchand, and Amiyabhusan Majumder, though writing in different languages and at different historical moments, together constitute a coherent and evolving tradition of rural consciousness in Indian fiction. Sarat Chandra's sentimental-reformist realism, Premchand's collective and Gandhian-inflected critical realism, and Majumder's reflective modernist ambivalence

represent three distinct but historically continuous responses to the material and moral condition of the Indian village under colonial and post-colonial rule. The comparative framework proposed here — situating all three within a shared agrarian structure while distinguishing their respective loci of transformation — offers a basis for further comparative study of rural representation across India's regional literary traditions, and underscores the continuing relevance of these writers to any historical understanding of India's agrarian society and its literary imagination.

REFERENCES

1. Bardhan, K. (Trans.). (1998). *Rajnagar* (English translation of Amiyabhusan Majumder's novel, with introduction). New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
2. Chattopadhyay, S. C. (1999). *Ramer Sumati*. In *Sarat Sahitya Samagra* (Vol. 1). Kolkata: Ananda Publishers. (Original work published 1914)
3. Chattopadhyay, S. C. (1999). *Palli Samaj*. In *Sarat Sahitya Samagra* (Vol. 2). Kolkata: Ananda Publishers. (Original work published 1916)
4. Chattopadhyay, S. C. (1999). *Grihadaha*. In *Sarat Sahitya Samagra* (Vol. 3). Kolkata: Ananda Publishers. (Original work published 1920)
5. Chattopadhyay, S. C. (2002). *Mahesh*. In *Sarat Chandra: Selected Short Stories* (trans. various). New Delhi: Rupa Publications. (Original work published 1922)
6. Das, S. K. (1991). *A History of Indian Literature, 1911–1956: Struggle for Freedom, Triumph and Tragedy*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
7. Majumder, A. B. (1963). *Mahishkurar Upakatha*. Kolkata: Bikash Grantha Bhavan.
8. Majumder, A. B. (1957). *Garh Shrikhandal*. Kolkata: Bikash Grantha Bhavan.
9. Majumder, A. B. (1979–80). *Rajnagar*. Kolkata: Prakash Bhavan.
10. Mukherjee, M. (1985). *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
11. Premchand, M. (1981). Presidential address to the first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference, Lucknow, 1936. In *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents* (ed. S. Pradhan). Calcutta: National Book Agency. (Original address delivered 1936)
12. Premchand, M. (2002). *Godaan* (trans. G. Roadarmel, as *The Gift of a Cow*). Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1936)
13. Premchand, M. (2002). *Sadgati*. In *The Oxford India Premchand* (trans. various). New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1931)

14. Premchand, M. (2002). Poos ki Raat. In The Oxford India Premchand (trans. various). New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1930)
15. Premchand, M. (2002). Gaban. In The Oxford India Premchand (trans. various). New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1931)