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Premchand (1880–1936)

The World's
Most Precious ObjectTranslated from the Urdu and introduced
by Allison Busch

It is particularly appropriate for a dual anthology of Hindi and Urdu texts from the nationalist period to feature the work of Premchand, whose career straddled Hindi and Urdu in a manner that, while not uncommon in the author's own day, became less and less possible after the partition of India, when increasingly authors made the choice to write in either Urdu or Hindi, but rarely both. Born as Dhanpat Rai into a family of munshis that had historically embraced India's Persephone culture, this writer was more at home in Urdu than in Hindi, particularly at the beginning of his career. During his earliest days as a novelist and short story writer, Dhanpat Rai worked exclusively in Urdu, publishing under the name Nawab Rai. "The World's Most Precious Object" has the distinction of being Nawab Rai's first short story, which he published in the collection *Soz-e Vatan* (Mourning a Nation) in 1908. By late in 1909 the book had sold about 300 copies; one of which landed on the desk of the District Magistrate of Hamirpur (in Bundelkhand), where Dhanpat Rai was then stationed.

Although the stories may not seem seditious by today's standards, the British were not in a mood to take risks during this budding period of Indian nationalism. Nawab Rai was summoned before the

magistrate and ordered to surrender all remaining copies of the book, which were subsequently burned. He was also prohibited from publishing anything else without the explicit consent of the colonial authorities. Undaunted by these potentially career-crushing orders, he assumed the new pen-name of Premchand, the sobriquet by which he is widely known today.¹

The shape of Premchand's literary career would owe much to his engagement with the nationalist movement, but his debt to the Urdu literary tradition is also strongly evident, particularly in this early period. "The World's Most Precious Object" has literary roots in Urdu romance genres (*qissal dastan*), and at least on the surface bears much resemblance to popular story literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Nawab Rai's tale is set in the fantastical realm of Minusavad ("Outskirts of Heaven"), and the two primary characters, Dilfigar ("Heart-wounded") and Dildareb ("Heart-deceiving") are the paradigmatic beleaguered lover and demanding beloved of Persian and Indo-Muslim lore. The story contains many Sufi resonances, such as the motif of the lover whose search for the beloved doubles as a spiritual journey. In keeping with other heroes of the genre, Dilfigar is forced to perform an arduous task in order to win the hand of his beloved. Here the task, highlighted in the story's title, is to find the world's most valuable object. Dilfigar, stricken with desperate love in the manner of classic lovers like Majnun, sets out on a taxing journey, and is severely tested along the way.

Despite its distinctly non-realist and non-utilitarian narrative modes the story may already contain the seed of the more didactic concerns that would occupy Premchand later in his career. Note how Nawab Rai recalibrates even this highly traditional Urdu genre to convey an unmistakably modern message: there is no more urgent and compelling cause than that of the nation (*vatan*). For what is the world's most-prized possession? The drop of blood of a hero who dies fighting for his country. Thus, the otherworldly codes of Sufi passion have been redirected to valorize a new nationalist ethos.

"The World's Most Precious Object", like so much of Premchand's work, would eventually be published in both Urdu and Hindi. This

¹ Shivrani Devi, Premchand's wife, narrates this encounter in much detail (see pt 3, ch. 19 in the present anthology).

translation, however, is based on the Urdu version, which differs substantially from the Hindi in its register. In the Hindi translation the vocabulary is much less Persianized. Moreover, while the Hindi version captures the literal sense of the Urdu story, it often flattens out some of the more extravagant, romantic spirit. Many adjectives are omitted, and the Hindi vocabulary elides some of the Sufi resonances of the original. In this translation as much as possible of the character of the Urdu story has been preserved.

The World's Most Precious Object²

Dilfigar³ was sitting beneath a thorny tree, his clothes torn, shedding tears of blood. He was a true and self-sacrificing lover of the goddess of beauty, otherwise known as Queen Dildareb.⁴ He was not one of those lovers for whom it was enough merely to profess his love, put on scent and fine clothes, and look the part. Rather, he was one of those pure and innocent lovers who roam the mountainside and wilderness in great hardship, crying out in distress. Dildareb had told him, "If you truly love me you must go in search of the world's most precious object and bring it back to me here in my palace. Only then will I accept you as my devoted servant. But beware! If you fail to find that object, never show your face here again or else I will have you put to death." Dilfigar was not given the slightest opportunity to show his feelings or to complain about her treatment of him, nor was he afforded even a glimpse of his beloved's beauty. As soon as Dildareb had pronounced her decision, her attendants roughly grabbed hold of Dilfigar and threw him out.

And now for three days this poor soul has been sitting under the same thorny tree in the same desolate place wondering what he should do. "The world's most precious object! And I am to find it? Impossible! And what would such a thing be? The Treasure of Qarun? The Water of Life? The Crown of Khusrav? The Goblet of Jamshed? The Peacock

² Munshi Premchand, *Afsanay* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2002), pp. 9–13. I wish to thank Usamah Ansari, Frances Pritchett, Hossein Kamaly, and Arthur Dudney for their feedback on elements of this translation.

³ The name Dilfigar means "Heart-wounded". He is the archetypal beleaguered lover of Urdu poetry.

⁴ The name Dildareb means "Heart-deceiving". She is the paradigmatically cruel beloved.

Throne? The Riches of Parvez? No, it could never be any of these things. There must be more valuable, more precious things than these in the world. But what could they be? Where are they? And how can I find them? Oh God, how will I solve this problem?"

Dilfigar's head was spinning with these thoughts and he could not think rationally. "Munir Shami found Hatim as a helper.⁵ If only someone would help me. If only somebody would tell me the name of the world's most precious object. It doesn't matter if I don't actually find it but I might at least discover what kind of thing it is. I can go in search of a giant pearl, the song of the ocean, the heart of a stone, the sound of death—I would give my all to find things even more unfathomable than these. But the world's most valuable object? This is beyond my imagination."

Night had fallen, and the stars had come out. Dilfigar all of a sudden jumped up, called God's name and hurried off. Hungry, thirsty, naked, wounded, and suffering, he wandered for years, sifting the dust of wastelands and cities in his search. His feet were worn to the bone by thorns. His body began to resemble a brittle skeleton. But he failed to find the world's most valuable object, nor even a trace of it.

One day, as he was wandering he entered a clearing where thousands of men were gathered. At the centre of the crowd were several bearded religious leaders wearing turbans and cloaks. They sat there gravely, debating amongst themselves. Nearby a gibbet had been set up. Partly because he was overcome with exhaustion, and partly because he wanted to know what was going on, Dilfigar came to a halt there. And what should he see but several guards arriving with a prisoner who was bound hand and foot. The guards approached the gibbet and stopped. They removed the prisoner's chains. That unfortunate man had the blood of hundreds of innocent people on his hands. His heart knew nothing of morality, nor did it hear the voice of compassion. He was known as the Black Thief. The guards led him up onto the platform. They placed the noose around his neck and the executioners were about to pull away the platform when the doomed criminal cried out, "Please let me down for one minute. I have one last wish."

⁵ In Islamic lore Munir Shami was an ancient prince of Syria, and Hatim Tai his legendary helper.

Upon hearing this everyone fell silent. The crowd looked on in shock. The religious authorities thought it wrong to deny a dying man his last wish, so the evil, ill-fated Black Thief was taken down from the gallows for a short while.

In the crowd was a beautiful, innocent boy. He had made his stick into a pretend horse and was galloping along, so completely lost in his world of innocence that it seemed as though he really was riding an Arabian steed. His face lit up with the type of pure joy that can only be experienced during the brief days of childhood, a joy one does not forget until one's dying day. His heart was undefiled by the filth of waywardness, and innocence still nursed him in her lap.

The unfortunate Black Thief stepped down from the gallows, and thousands of eyes were fixed upon him. He came near the little boy and embraced him tenderly. He thought back to the time when he too had been this innocent, happy and carefree, untouched by the contamination of the world. His mother used to take him in her lap and feed him. His father used to bless him. His entire family used to dote on him. Alas! The memory of past days washed over the Black Thief's heart, and his eyes, which had gazed upon the writhing bodies of his dying victims without so much as blinking, shed a tear. Dilfigar rushed forward and grabbed hold of that single pearl of a tear, and his heart said, "Without a doubt this is the world's most precious object—the Peacock Throne, the Goblet of Jamshed, the Water of Life, the Riches of Parvez pale in comparison."

Happy at this idea, his spirit intoxicated with the hope of success, Dilfigar headed for Minusavad, the city of his heart-captivating beloved. But as he got closer and closer his heart began to sink. He was worried that the object he considered the world's most precious might not appear that way in the eyes of Dildareb. He would be sentenced to death and depart this world, his most cherished wish unfulfilled. Still, he would try his fate—come what may.

So he made his way over mountains and streams and at last arrived in the city of Minusavad: He approached the majestic threshold of his beloved and humbly petitioned:

"By the grace of God, Dilfigar, wearied with suffering, has arrived. Having executed your command, he wishes to kiss your exalted feet." Dildareb immediately summoned him into her presence and from

behind a golden veil commanded him to reveal his offering of the most precious object. Dilfigar was in a strange state of hope mixed with fear as he showed her the teardrop and in a deeply moving manner told her of how he had come to acquire it. Dildareb listened to the whole account attentively, and took the gift in her hand. She considered it for a moment and said:

"Dilfigar, without a doubt you have brought me a very precious thing. I compliment you on your courage and insight. But this is not the world's most precious object, so you must go now and try again. Perhaps this time you will find the pearl you seek and it will be your fate for me to become your slave. In accordance with our agreement I could have you put to death, but I will pardon you because you have the noble qualities I want to see in a lover, and I am confident that you will succeed some day."

Although he was disappointed, Dilfigar felt emboldened by the kindness of his beloved and said, "My love, you dwell ever in my heart. It is after an eternity that I have been blessed with the chance to do obeisance at your door. God only knows when I will have another opportunity. Will you not show some compassion for your self-sacrificing lover's miserable state by giving him a glimpse of your world-adorning beauty? Will you not prepare this Dilfigar, scorched by your love, for enduring the difficulties that lie ahead? Drunk with a single intoxicating glance from you, I will lose myself and be able to do what no other man has ever done."

Hearing these passionate words, Dildareb became incensed and commanded that this delirious man be removed immediately from her palace. The macebearer at once dragged poor Dilfigar from the house of his beloved.

For a while Dilfigar cried over his tyrannical beloved's harsh words. And then he began to wonder where he should go. "It was only after years of wandering and much hardship that I could obtain this teardrop. What object could be more valuable than this sparkling pearl? Oh Hazrat Khizr!⁶ You led Alexander through the well of darkness and showed him the way. Will you not show me mine? Alexander was

⁶ Hazrat Khizr (also known as Khwaja Khizr) is a Muslim prophet credited with the discovery of the water of life (*ab-e hayat*).

master of the seven worlds, but I am just a poor wanderer. I have lost everything. You have steered many a sinking boat safely to shore! Take this poor man's raft across, too. Venerated Gabriel, you alone can take pity on this half-dead lover, a slave to sorrow and toil. You sit close to the throne of God. Won't you lighten my suffering?" In short, the wretched Dilfigar lamented his condition repeatedly but nobody came forward to help him. In the end, Majnun-like, the sorrowful Dilfigar set out once again.

Dilfigar roamed the world from east to west, from north to south. Sometimes he slept on snow-covered peaks, at other times he wandered through perilous valleys. But he did not find what he was desperately looking for. His condition deteriorated and all that was left of him was skin and bone.

One evening he was lying, a broken man, on the bank of a river. He was startled out of his reverie to see that a funeral pyre of sandalwood had been built, and upon it sat a beautiful woman in bridal finery, adorned with the sixteen traditional ornaments. She held in her lap the body of her beloved husband. Thousands of people had gathered around her in a circle, and they were showering her with flowers. All of a sudden a flame leapt up from the pyre. The sati's face was glowing with a divine light. The blessed flames engulfed her and in an instant her flower-like body was consigned to ash. The beloved offered herself to her lover, and the last radiant appearance of the true, imperishable and pure love of this devoted couple became invisible to the earthly eye.⁷

When everybody had gone home Dilfigar arose and surreptitiously gathered up the ashes into the hem of his torn robe. Considering this handful of ash to be the world's most precious object, and intoxicated by success, he set out for his beloved's house. This time, as he came closer and closer to his desired destination, his confidence increased. It was as though an inner voice was telling him that he would be victorious. It is needless to mention the dreams conjured up by such a thought. Finally he entered the city of Minusavad, went to the exalted threshold of Dildareb's house, and announced:

⁷ Here Nawab Rai's almost reverential portrayal of a burning widow seems completely unaffected by colonial discourse on sati.

"Dilfigar the brave has returned. He asks to be granted an audience." Dildareb called her self-sacrificing lover into her court immediately and stretched out her hand to receive the world's most precious object. Dilfigar courageously took hold of her fair hand and kissed it. Then he put that handful of ashes into her hand and in exceedingly heart-melting words told her how he had acquired it. He then waited to hear from his beloved's delicate lips an auspicious and life-affirming decision, his fate hanging in the balance.

Dildareb stared at the handful of ashes and remained immersed in a river of thought. Then she said, "My self-sacrificing lover Dilfigar! Without a doubt this ash you have brought has special powers,⁸ and it is a very valuable thing indeed. I am sincerely grateful that you have offered such a tribute to me, but there is something more valuable in the world than this. Go and find it, and then come back to me. I pray from the depths of my heart that God will grant you success."

With this, his beloved came out from behind the golden curtain and in her alluring manner granted him a vision of heart-melting beauty. Then she vanished from sight. Lightning flashed and then disappeared behind a curtain of clouds. Dilfigar had not even had a chance to collect himself when an attendant appeared, gently took his hand, and led him away from the place of his beloved. And for a third time that devotee of love, that ascetic in the forest of failure, began to thrash around, gasping for air, in the endless ocean of despair.

Dilfigar lost heart. He began to believe that he had been born into this world only in order to die forlorn, his wishes unfulfilled. Now his only recourse was to hurl himself from a cliff so that not even a fragment of one of his bones would be left to complain about his beloved's tyrannies. Like a madman he got up and stumbled, falling repeatedly but each time somehow getting back up again, until he arrived at the top of a mountain peak high as the heavens. At any other time he would not have found the strength to climb such a high mountain but at this moment, out of the urgent desire to end his life, that mountain seemed to him hardly higher than a small hill. Just as he was about to throw himself off the cliff, an old saintly looking man came forward. He was dressed in green, and wearing a green

⁸ The expression *kimiya-sifat* refers specifically to alchemical powers.

turban.⁹ In one hand he held a rosary, in the other a stick. He spoke in a reassuring tone of voice:

"Dilfigar, foolish Dilfigar! Why this cowardly act of yours? Steadfastness is the first step on the path of love. With all your pretensions to being a lover don't you even know this? Be a man, and don't lose your courage like this. In the east there is a country called Hindustan. Go there, and your wish will be fulfilled."

With these words Hazrat Khizr disappeared. Dilfigar offered a prayer of thankfulness. Having received divine assistance his courage and vigour were renewed. He descended, happy, from the mountain and set off in the direction of Hindustan.

After a long time spent traversing thorny jungles, fiery deserts, impassable mountains and valleys, Dilfigar entered the pure land of Hindustan. He washed away the sufferings of his journey in a pleasant stream and, overcome by weariness, lay down by the water's edge. By the time evening came he had made his way to a desolate field where countless dead and dying bodies were strewn, without shroud or grave. It was a flurry of activity for crows, kites, and wild beasts, and the entire field was turning bright red with blood. As soon as he saw this frightful scene, Dilfigar's heart trembled in terror: "Oh God! In what hell have I been trapped?" He heard the moaning, gasping, and terrible agony of the dying. Savage beasts were clawing away at the bones and making off with strips of flesh, Dilfigar had never seen such a dreadful sight before.

Then suddenly Dilfigar realized he was on a battlefield, and the corpses were those of valiant warriors. Just then he heard a moaning sound from nearby. Dilfigar turned in that direction and saw a mighty soldier lying face down on the ground, his virile features grown pale from the ordeal of impending death. A fountain of blood flowed from his chest, but the hilt of his well-tempered sword had not slipped from his grasp. Dilfigar bound the open wound with a piece of cloth to halt the bleeding and said, "Young man, who are you?"

⁹ The colour green has religious associations in Islamic contexts. The whole scene has a Sufi bent to it with Dilfigar the paradigmatic crazed lover being helped by a spiritual intermediary or pir.

The young man heard this, opened his eyes, and spoke fearlessly, "Don't you know who I am? Did you not see the carnage wrought by this sword today? I am my mother's son, the darling child of Mother India." As he spoke, his brow furrowed. His pale face became flushed with wrath and his sword gleamed, ready to display its might. Dilfigar realized that this man thought he was an enemy. He spoke gently: "Oh soldier! I am not your enemy. I am a grief-stricken wanderer, exiled from my country. I have lost my way. Please tell me about this place." As soon as the soldier heard this he adopted an infinitely tender tone of voice and said:

"Since you are a traveller, come, sit at my side on the blood-soaked ground, for this is the tiny bit of land remaining to me, and nothing but death can take it away. It is a pity you have come at such a time when we are not fit to extend our hospitality to you. Today we have lost the land of our forefathers and are now without a nation." He turned over onto his other side and said, "But I showed a powerful enemy how a Rajput fights, selflessly sacrificing his own life. All the bodies you see scattered around me are those of men who have been laid low by the blade of my sword." He laughed before continuing: "And although I have lost my country at least I am dying surrounded by my dead enemies." He took off the bandage from his chest and said: "Are you the one who dressed my wound? Let the blood flow. What is the point of trying to stop it? Should I stay alive in order to become a slave in my own country? No, death is better than such a life. What could be a better death than this?"

The young man's voice grew faint. His limbs slackened. He had lost so much blood that there was not much more left to lose. His bleeding slowed to a trickle. At the end, his entire body fell lifeless, his heart ceased beating, his eyes closed. Just when Dilfigar thought it was all over, the dying man spoke faintly, "Long live Mother India!" From his chest flowed the final drop of blood. A true lover and devotee of his country had done his patriotic duty. Dilfigar was deeply impressed by this scene, and his heart told him that without a doubt there could be nothing more precious in the world than this drop of blood. Immediately he gathered into his hand that enviable ruby, red as a pomegranate. Applauding this brave Rajput's sacrifice, he set out

for his own homeland. After a long time, and enduring the same hardships as before, he reached the magnificent gate of the queen of the realm of beauty, the mother of pearl of loveliness. He sent a message saying that he had found the desired object and had come back triumphant. Dilfigar now sought an audience in the jewelled court.

Dilfareb ordered him to appear before her at once. As was her custom, she took a seat behind a golden curtain and said to him, "Dilfigar, this time you have taken a long time to return. Tell me, where is the world's most precious object?" Dilfigar kissed her hennaed hand and placed the drop of blood in it. His voice was quivering with excitement as he told her how he had come to acquire it. But before he could even finish his account the golden curtains suddenly parted to reveal an exquisite assembly of beautiful women who could make even the famed Zulaikha envious. Dilfareb sat refulgent on a golden throne, her majestic grace beyond description. Dilfigar was stunned by her enchanting beauty. Dazed, he stood stock-still, lifeless like a figure in a painting. Then his beloved descended from her throne.

She came forward a few steps and took him in her arms. The fairest dancers began to perform wedding songs. Members of the court presented Dilfigar with gifts. Paying their respects, they seated the couple together on the throne, where they shone like the sun and the moon. When the delightful songs had come to an end Dilfareb stood up and, with hands folded, said to Dilfigar, "My self-sacrificing lover Dilfigar! My prayers to God for your success have been answered, and God has made you triumphant. From now on, you are my lord, and I your insignificant slave." After uttering these words, she ordered her attendants to bring in a small jewel-studded box. The box contained a tablet inscribed in golden ink with the words: "A man's final drop of blood shed in the service of his country is the world's most precious object."

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Maithilisharan Gupta (1886–1964)

The Slaying of Jayadrath

Translated from the Hindi and introduced
by Pamela Lothspeich*

Maithilisharan Gupta was born into a scholarly and religious family in the village of Chirgaon in the district of Jhansi. Over the course of his life, he endured a change in fortunes which nearly bankrupted his family, and the deaths of eleven of his children and two of his wives. Yet Gupta persevered to become, by many accounts, the most renowned poet of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Best known for his poem *Bharat-bharati* (The Voice of India, 1912), he authored over three dozen extended poems and four plays, which are, in the main, on mythological and quasi-historical themes. He also wrote biographies, essays, and translations. Moreover, he attained several firsts in the field of Hindi letters. He was the first *rashtra kavi* (national poet) of India; he was the first to write a major *prabandh kavya* (narrative poem) in Khari Boli Hindi; and he was the first major poet of the Hindi heartland to write on mythological themes in the vernacular, rather than in Braj Bhasha.

The excerpt which follows is the first canto of Gupta's second major work, *Jayadrath-vadh* (The Slaying of Jayadrath, 1910). Like many of

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