

comprehension and exercises, the book encourages interaction and the reference section usefully suggests further research areas.

References

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Ansari, A.K. & Nagpal, R. (Eds.) (2021), *Premchand on Literature and Life: Selections* (Translated from the Hindi) Aakar Books, 2021, ISBN: 9789350027394; Routledge, 2023, ISBN: 9781032524573.

Reviewed by T.C. Ghai

Premchand on Literature and Life (2021) includes selections from Premchand's letters, articles, and editorials in different magazines like *Hans* and *Jagran* that he edited or was associated with. It is the third book that I have come across recently on Premchand's non-fictional works, the other two being *Premchand on Culture and Education* (2020) and *Premchand on National Language* (2019). Together, these three books give us a fairly comprehensive view of Premchand's understanding of literature, life, and the burning issues of his world, including literary, social, cultural, economic, and political concerns.

The fifty excerpts included in the book are selections from four magazines—*Bharat*, *Kalayan*, *Jagran*, and *Hans*, and cover the period between 1922 and 1936. Most of the articles from *Hans* are editorial pieces that Premchand wrote, expressing his views on a wide range of issues related to life and literature, this was a period in which he arguably produced some of his best work in both short and long fiction. The length of the pieces varies from half a page to ten pages, depending on the issue he is reflecting upon. Occasionally, for instance, in the Editorial titled "Proposal for an

Edition on Stories: 1926", Premchand seems to let himself go and his humour and informal tone override a formal approach.

The subjects in these writings cover the length and breadth of literature and life. Premchand devotes considerable attention to the genres of the novel and the short story. He recognizes that the novel as a form has been imported from the West. He regrets the paucity of good and serious fiction in Hindi literature which is loaded with translations mainly from Gujarati and Bangla, the languages richer than Hindi in this genre. His analysis of the form of the novel is primarily based on his own praxis rather than on any theoretical formulation like that of E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927/2010). He doesn't subscribe to the idea of "Art for Art's Sake" (at least in the immediate contemporary Indian socio-economic context) and states that mere entertainment can't be the object of literature and subscribes to the idea of mixing realism and idealism, something which he practised in his works. However, the writer for him, is not a preacher but rather an instrument of creative change in the society. For him literature is primarily a depiction of the conflict between truth and untruth. He emphasizes the role of the writer to bring about a change in society by intervening to set right the lapses of politicians. He also believes that films are impacting novels' popularity and suggests how the short story is becoming more relevant than the novel in a world where people have little time to read a long work of fiction.

Apart from these issues of perennial debates in literature, Premchand actively engages with contemporary issues: emergence of a new reading public, the need for libraries, the sorry state of publishing especially in Hindi, the need to train people for editing, the issues of translation, the idea of a national language, and the necessity for an academy of letters. He even engages himself with controversial topics such as the relevance of autobiographies, and the charge of plagiarism by one of his critics that he vehemently refutes.

This selection also includes Premchand's reflections on major contemporary socio-cultural, political, and economic issues. He sees Western civilization as pleasure-loving, violent, obsessed with greed, engrossed in love for power, and preoccupied with dominance. He resents the dominance of English over Indian languages, decries the rise of consumerism, and refers to Krishna's message of Karamyoga in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Premchand is neither a blind critic of the West nor

a besotted lover of everything Indian. He recognizes what is good in West, especially its literature, and he is a trenchant critic of the obsession with an imagined glorious past of India. He is extremely conscious that Indian society is undergoing a great change and has clarity about what Indian society should reject and accept from its past and the West. He has his own vision of India's future but at the same time, he is aware that in a world undergoing such a fast and momentous change one can't be sure of what the future has in store.

What kind of a person, both as a writer, man of letters and thinker does Premchand emerge from these writings? One can say that his views on literature and life are deeply embedded in the world he grew up and lived in, it was a period when the Indian freedom movement was at its peak. The period he reflects upon was perhaps the most exciting and dynamic period of Indian history. India was stepping into the modern world with new ideas, along with their incumbent complexities and uncertainties. As a literary writer, he reflects on various dimensions related to writing, reading, criticism, and dissemination of literature. As a thinker he hovers, at least in these pages, between Gandhi and Marx. Gandhi teaches him, among other things, that one should hate the evil not the evil doer; from Marx he derives the idea that literature must reject the unjust and blood-sucking capitalism, the 'mahajani sabhyata' as he called it, and support the cause of the down-trodden and victims of injustice. Premchand feels that new literature must break with the past and engage itself with issues of real life, and sees literature as "at once a text of sociology, theology, economics and everything else on which rests a nation's existence".

This book displays Premchand's relevance even today. He was sensitive and open-minded about the issues he touched upon, and many of these issues still defy resolution. In these pages and elsewhere too in his writings, we can detect a vision of India that is politically united and for all its wonderful religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity, a harmonious whole free from slavery of a colonial rule, an equitable society free from poverty and injustices of the past and present. Today, we are in dire need of preserving such a vision of India. The editors and translators have done a commendable job in selecting, translating, and editing this collection of Premchand's writings on myriad themes.

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