



PREMIKUMAR MANI

**The Common Man
Speaks Out**

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PremKumar Mani

To Suresh Pandit and Motiravan Kangali

About the Author

Premkumar Mani (born 25 July 1953), leading Hindi fiction writer and thinker, has authored four collections of short stories, *Andhere Mein Akele* (1990), *Ghaas Ke Gehne* (1993), *Khoj Tatha Anya Kahaniyan* (2000) and *Upsanhar* (2008), and a novel *Dhalan* (2000). He has written extensively on literary, cultural and sociopolitical issues. Four collections of his articles, *Khooni Khel Ke Ird-Gird* (2000), *Sach Yah Nahin Hai* (2003), *Chintan Ke Jansarokar* (2016) – whose English translation is this book, *The Common Man Speaks Out* – and *Charkhey Aur Charchey* (2017), have also been published. A recipient of the Srikant Verma Award for literary writings, Mani is also a leading sociopolitical activist of north India. He has served as a member of the Bihar Legislative Council.

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The Common Man Speaks Out (Essays on Society and Culture)

By Premkumar Mani

Contents

[Preface](#)

Society and politics

[India: More Ambedkar's than Gandhi's](#)

[Economic liberalization and Dalits](#)

[Corruption rooted in our culture](#)

[Interrogating Bihar's Savarna Commission](#)

[To the OBC political activists](#)

[Preparing for a parallel parliament?](#)

[Cartoons in parliament](#)

[Reservations: Another battle coming up?](#)

[The rise of Hindutva in Bihar](#)

[Everyone's is no one's](#)

[Demise of the Hindu Hitler](#)

[Making sense of 'Hindistan' polls](#)

[What should we do in these elections?](#)

[How we should view Modi's win](#)

[Policies matter more than caste census](#)

[Mandal wins in Bihar](#)

[Understand India, Modi ji](#)

Literature and culture

[Development of Bahujan literature is historic](#)

[Caste discourse in literature](#)

[The decline of Hindi criticism](#)

[Dialogue with Bertrand Russell](#)

[Kamal of Shesh Prashna](#)

[This winter](#)

[A novel on a political epidemic](#)

[A rebel in the quest of knowledge](#)

[Jagdish Kashyap: Great proponent of Buddhism](#)

[Remembering Rabindra](#)

[Remembering Renu](#)

[Gone – Just when we need you most](#)

[Srilal Shukla did not play to the crowd](#)

[Who are the Bahujans really worshipping?](#)

As I see it

It is with some degree of hesitation that I am presenting this compilation of my comments and articles on sociopolitical and literary issues. While writing them, I had never thought that someday they would be published in the form of a book. So, there might be some repetitions in this anthology. I am also not sure if they will be of any use to you. Many friends insisted that they should be published in the form of a book and I acquiesced. This is how this book came into being. But there is also another story behind these comments and articles. In 2007-08, I had launched a magazine titled *Jan Vikalp* from Patna. The monthly could last barely a year but the reception it received enthused me to no end. I can say with pride that the magazine did not wind up for want of readers, who extended ample financial support too. We received money orders and cheques from the back-of-the-beyond places and the amount is still lying unused in the bank account of *Jan Vikalp*. But probably you must be aware of the economics of running magazines. If the circulation goes up and advertisement revenue does not, losses keep on spiralling and continuing the publication becomes more and more difficult. *Jan Vikalp* was caught in this trap.

But bringing out the magazine helped me discover a revealing truth about our society. We did a class-wise analysis of the persons who helped us financially and of the readers who sent their feedback. The result was both surprising and interesting. We discovered that the biggest chunk of our readers and supporters came from farmer, labourer and artisan families which had entered the world of reading and writing only a generation or two ago. This class is conscious about the importance of science and is brimming with curiosity. Literature, history, mythology, religion, nation and politics – all have persistently cheated them. The dominant, elite section of society wants to use knowledge to boost its strength and perpetuate its dominance. The struggling, exploited sections want to attain knowledge to break their shackles, to breathe free. They not only want their own liberation but also

the liberation of that section that has built the citadels of power, to protect which it weaves an elaborate web of humbug – even to the extent of turning inhuman.

The psychology, attitude and aesthetics of the exploited sections were of little consequence in the world of knowledge. Their mindset and feedback were ignored and made fun of. They were described as rustic, crude and anti-modern. The elite tried to forcibly make them part of their cultural empire and thrust their imperialistic culture on them. Brahmanism first lived off nationalism and Indianism but once the Bahujan community saw through the ruse, it morphed into movements like Ramjanmabhumi. Our so-called “cultured intellectuals” maintained a safe distance from the ground reality. When, around 1990, issues of social justice began reverberating in the arena of Indian politics, the dominant elite paired them with “kamandal”. The “mandal-kamandal” phrase was bandied about to dilute the significance of these issues. There were attempts to put even the universal value of equality to negative use, as seen in the launch of the “Youth for Equality”. Meanwhile, tribals continued to be killed in the name of “Operation Green Hunt”, farmers continued to end their lives, women continued to face atrocities and our India continued to turn global. Those who asked questions were branded as traitors and terrorists. They were harassed and thrown behind bars. If I dwell on the details of these issues, this book might be banned. Hence, I will leave it at that.

Even after *Jan Vikalp* ceased publication, we continued to be in touch with our readers. Once in a while, they wrote an emotional letter or called up. They wanted me to relaunch the publication, but, for many reasons, this was not possible. Meanwhile, Pramod Ranjan, our associate at *Jan Vikalp* shifted base to Delhi and joined Ivan Kostka’s bilingual (Hindi-English) magazine *FORWARD* Press. I have an affectionate, personal association with Pramod and we share a common concern – emancipation of the deprived sections. Ivan Kostka and Pramod proposed that I write a regular column titled *Jan Vikalp* for *FORWARD* Press. I accepted the proposal. It is another matter that I was never very regular and the credit for whatever regularity could be maintained goes to Pramod Ranjan. This

book is a collection of those *Jan Vikalp* columns I wrote for *FORWARD* Press. At the end of each article, you will find the issue in which the article was published. Some of my interviews published in the magazine have also been included here.

I am happy that the magazine's readers welcomed the column and at least one of the articles that was republished in the column kicked up a cultural tempest of sorts. The article was titled "Who are the Bahujans really worshipping?" Some students of the JNU laid out the article in the form of a poster in 2011 and organized Mahishasur Martyrdom Day on the university premises. Over the next four years, this event began to be held in at least 300 places in nine states. In February this year (2016), the issue led to pandemonium in both Houses of Parliament, which lasted three days.

These controversies and ruckuses worry me and I am alive to their negative aspects, too. But all said and done, what do they indicate? Why do we want to skirt these issues? How long can we avoid them? A section of the people has risen. It is asking questions about your history, your literature, your religion, your mythology and yes, your sacred culture. Can these questions be brushed aside? I think not. These questions are getting wider, bigger, and you, like an ostrich, have buried your head in the sand and are waiting for the storm to pass. No sir, this is not a storm. It is a change, a transformation. Please get up and reflect on these questions. We love this country, this nation, you, everyone. You may consider us "others"; but for us, you are our inalienable part. We just want to ask you how we should perceive your mythological Ram who slayed Shambuk and banished Sita from his home. Dear sir, we seek your reaction to the severing of the thumb of Eklavya. We want to know the mythological tale of the churning of the whole ocean. How come the Asurs, who played the most challenging role – that of holding the mouth of the hissing Vasuki Nag – in the operation, got poison while the Devs, who performed the perfunctory task of holding the tail of the vicious snake, were rewarded with the elixir of life. We want to draw your attention to the garland of skulls adorning the