Coming across, in a second-hand book shop, Arnold Bennett's *How to Become an Author* and reading him for the first time, I was struck by his practical hints. Later on, reading *How to Live on 24 hours a Day* by Bennett, I suddenly found myself in a pragmatic, disciplined world of concrete facts. The critical formulation and justification in view of my experience, whatever its intrinsic worth, deepened my interest in Bennett all the more, urging me to develop interest in existence, discipline my life and channelize my energies. I could not conceive the circumstances under which I would ever read Bennett; but I did not regret having read him while I was a science student, and I would read him again, for when I read him for the first time some of his virtues passed into me; I was the better for him. This was a fancy that became a fact when I was doing my master's in English literature in 1972-74. *The Old Wives' Tale* enkindled my enthusiasm to undertake a serious and systematic perusal of his other famous novels. An increased interest sprang from his journals and letters, stressing a fusion between theory and praxis, literature and life. Then, several hints from his "pocket-philosophies" enkindled my outlook on life. His letters and autobiographical writings acquainted me with the struggle he had to undergo —with a sole aim: how to lead a "reasonable life", how to make life yield maximum — to become something in life. A sense of identification gave a fillip to my understanding.

Enormously popular in his own time, Bennett fell from favour after his death. He suffered the ignominy and critical neglect because of his passion for "concrete coins", his industry
of ephemeral works, sensational novels, fantasias and "potboilers". And, it is true that because of Bennett's meticulous chronicles, his prolixity, and his announced mercantile interests, it became commonplace to assume that he was writing for money and popularity. Further, his critics seem particularly correct in their assumptions, because so many works poured forth, year after year, to suit the public taste and also kept his "pot" boiling. Part of this criticism or neglect can be attributed to Bennett's own fault; for critics, by and large, tended to take him at his word.

Of the best known (transitional) novelists who formed a link between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) has received surprisingly little critical notice and scholarly treatment. Bennett achieved a considerable success in a variety of fields in his lifetime; subsequently he suffered a comparative neglect and became an object of condescension. To explain this most unlikely phenomenon in the English novel, is a task worthy of a serious attention. For an author who has written so voluminously, it is perhaps more surprising that only a handful of articles have been written between 1931 and 1970. The belated reassessment of Bennett's work and his art began during the early sixties, and, perhaps the most significant revival and revaluation that compensated his disrepute and critical neglect appeared in the seventies. The Penguin reprint of his novels and some studies of his work further established his significant position as a novelist.

Admired by David Lodge, found tasteful by James Halls, enjoyed by James G Hepburn, John Wain, and John Lucas, Bennett
hasnot yet received the serious consideration that scholars have accorded his contemporaries. No doubt, romanticism, realism and naturalism are not entirely new concepts in relation to the literary criticism of a prolific writer; yet, in most cases, criticism lacked a universal touch of human experience which is very essential to make realism viable. It is particularly true of Bennett who is pitted against the historical and cultural currents of a significant transitional period in English history, who fully understood and sincerely endeavoured to interpret the literary movements of his time. Unfortunately Bennett's novels have not so far been analysed on the basis of modern realist standards and his own views, scattered in his journals, letters, pocket philosophies, biographies, prefaces and reviews. This focus on his achievement demands an assimilation of his scattered viewpoints, to make his realist stance more concrete and tangible. Such an exploration can offer possibilities of new innovations and exhibit qualities of excellence. The most favourable contemporary scholars and critics have gone only thus far that Bennett is a genius and an artist with prodigious output.

Precisely, Bennett's best works are packed with a profound interest in life, experience, romance, beauty, grandeur and learning. A Five Towns man, enmeshed in a world full of tremendous push and pull, of changing historical conditions, society, religion, and environment, family alliances and personal ambitions and inclinations, fights to extricate himself from constricting Victorian philistinism — an affirmation of a purposeful existence. This investigation, in short, tries to
affirm that, at heart, Bennett is a romantic pragmatist, committed to progress and adjustment in life, in the face of all fundamental problems of love, marriage, making decisions and judgements in the choice of careers and fulfilment of personal aims and ambitions. To the extent Bennett is directly relative to the tradition running from romanticism that recognizes the infinite possibilities of human experience he stands at the fulcrum of the "turn of the novel" and is different enough in his epistemological grasp of modern experience. It is to be hoped, therefore, that such a realistic examination of Bennett's novels, based on his deeper concerns with life and experience, will clear away some of the difficulties and place Bennett in a proper perspective.

I have divided my dissertation into seven chapters. Utilizing the theoretical distinction and relationship between "literary realism" and "realism in life" propounded by J.P. Stern (On Realism, 1973), the first chapter—Realism and its Theories—incidentally suggests broadened applicability of the relationship of two realisms but primarily leads to new insights into Bennett's epistemological realism. First, though not surprising, it becomes clear that Bennett's realistic purpose shifts as his attitude becomes more experiential and pragmatic. Second, this distinction reveals related trends in the type of realistic novel Bennett wrote. Beginning with a tendency to write on regionalist material, built upon historical and environmental study of life, serving his romantic and aesthetic purposes, he increasingly used naturalism as the basis of his evolving epistemological realism. The subsequent chapters—Bennett and
his Realist stance, Bennett as Historian, Bennett and Victorian Philistinism, Bennett and the Naturalist Movement, and Summing Up — are devised exclusively for convenience. When viewed together, they serve two purposes: first, various chapters reveal the various stages of the development of realism; second, they correspond to various phases of a provincial man's growth, maturity and evolution from ignorance to knowledge, complacency to experience, illusion to reality, imperfection to perfection, and finally a realization of 'What Life Is'.

Realism, as such, is an elusive and slippery word; therefore, the enquiry in the first chapter naturally necessitates a critical review of various concepts and theories, to acquire the tangibility of its conventions and traditions with perennial human experience. There is no clear critical consensus as to the nature of "realism in life", but one may abstract a working concept from various critical sources, starting with Stern's pronouncement and supplementing it by some perceptions and insights provided by Erich Auerbach, Raymond Williams, Harry Levin, and Malcolm Bradbury. This is not, nor in the nature of realism could it ever satisfactorily be, a comprehensive survey, but my intent is to explain different modes of approach to realism and different central issues involved in its discussion. It is not the primary object of my enquiry to undertake an exhaustive study of the differences and inconsistencies, whether apparent or real, in all their multifarious manifestations, but to seek a coherent relationship between the two. In dealing with, "literary realism" and "realism in life", I have relied on their accepted definitions and concepts; the chapter on these two
categories and their relationship, as such, is compilative and derivative.

The second chapter is devoted to study the social and intellectual milieu of Bennett. Bennett apprenticed mainly in three environments - Staffordshire, London, and Paris - and lived intimately with his times, especially the period which is known as transitional period. Such a focus determines the roots and growth of Bennett's realism. Bennett has a profound sense of life and sees it as full of possibilities. He himself triumphs over all his problems gradually and, in a word, he conveys this spirit in his serious novels. An effort is made in the third chapter to probe the historical changes and their effect on the life of a people of the Five Towns. It places them in the recognizable surrounding which is described in realistic details; it makes Bennett's realism historically valid. In the next chapter an attempt is made to explore the deterministic milieu of the prevailing Victorian philistinism. Bennett's central aim is to free his individuals from internal as well as external pressures, whatsoever. Therefore two chapters - "Bennett: Novelist as Historian", "Bennett and Victorian Philistinism" - see Bennett's men and women in the stranglehold of environment and their consistent effort to realize their wills. A particular emphasis is placed upon the recurring conflict between societal claims and individual aspirations.

Bennett was, no doubt, affected by the literary movements of his time; but his work is more profoundly conditioned by the new climate of social, moral and naturalist experience which he shared with other English naturalists. Chapter five sees Bennett
in the light of the naturalistic movement of the period. An effort is made to see how Bennett’s protagonists strive to free themselves from the devastating effects of Victorian philistinism and complacency. The next chapter is the central one and has been devoted to Bennett’s epistemological realism.

In view of the voluminous output of Bennett’s varied genius, it has not been possible to take his work in its entirety. I have confined my enquiry and conclusions to Bennett’s six serious novels — *Anna of the Five Towns*, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, *Clayhanger*, *Hilda Lessways*, *These Twain* and *Riceyman Steps* — with passing references to related works and writers. Since neither time nor place would have favoured a fully comprehensive treatment when the territory to be surveyed is so extensive and Bennett’s work for illustration so selective, the risk of repetition could not be avoided in many cases. In this study, the concept of realism maps out history, environment and naturalistic forces to an epistemological process of individual’s learning through experience. A concluding chapter — Summing up — offers some observations on each of the various approaches of realism — historical, romantic, environmental, naturalistic and epistemological.

By taking up this inquiry at some length, I have partly tried to clarify the frequent complaints about Bennett’s traditional cast of mind and solve the inconsistencies. I believe that Bennett’s outlook on life and experience is amenable to reinterpretation, and I hope my interpretation of it does not defend itself but leads to a purposeful argument.
The close and painstaking study of Bennett's work done on this line has been a rewarding experience, since it has helped me handle some of the most complex problems in life. The paucity of material available may limit the scope of the present thesis, for I have based my discussion on the works and criticism available in India.

Finally, it seems pertinent to add that in order to avoid unnecessary confusion, I have followed the British spellings, unless or otherwise I have quoted American criticism. Bibliography at the end may not make an exhaustive reading, since I have included only those sources which have either been cited in the text or have vitally influenced the formation of various concepts.