The Lesser Known Life of a Hindi Journal in Colonial Lucknow

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On page 29 of Shobna Nijhawan’s *Hindi Publishing in Colonial Lucknow: Gender, Genre, and Visuality in the Creation of a Literary ‘Canon’* we are made to pause at a black and white photograph of a building in ruins. The closed shutters, the dark gaping archway and the signs of dereliction make the story Nijhawan tells all the more poignant. The photograph contrasts with the bright mustard yellow backdrop of the story Nijhawan tells all the more remarkable. The photograph of the Karyalaya building is a reminder of the depleted archives and challenging circumstances faced by researchers choosing this domain of inquiry. The cover montage from *Sudha*, a Hindi literary journal, Nijhawan’s book chronicles the life of this journal, published by the Ganga Pustak Mala Karyalaya, Lucknow, between the years 1927 and 1942. The photograph of the Karyalaya building is a reminder of the depleted archives and challenging circumstances faced by researchers choosing this domain of inquiry. The cover montage from *Sudha* suggests a dogged persistence at work in pursuing the fast disappearing traces of a robust literary culture.

Despite incomplete archives and scant information on the publishing house, Nijhawan builds her case study through richly detailed accounts of the content, layout, artwork, advertisements and design of *Sudha*, invoking newer ways of reading journals along a “horizontal” and “vertical” axis simultaneously. She reminds us that histories of print culture in colonial India are necessarily conjectural at some level, requiring us to consider alternative analytical tools and methodology. Nijhawan is not new to this inquiry. However, while her earlier book focused entirely on journal culture for women and girls in Hindi, this book is ambitious in a different way (Nijhawan 2012). Her masterful “biography” of the journal *Sudha* juxtaposes the concerns of gender, genre and visuality in a manner not seen before. It makes good the scholarly promise of book history in South Asia while also shifting disciplinary boundaries.

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Hindi Publishing in Colonial Lucknow: Gender, Genre, and Visuality in the Creation of a Literary ‘Canon’** by Shobna Nijhawan, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018; pp xviii + 241, ₹1,050.

**Hindi Print Culture**

Decades before the launch of *Sudha*, Lucknow was well established as an important centre of early print and distribution through the offices of the Naval Kishore Press. *Sudha*’s editor-publisher, Dularelal Bhargava, was in fact related to Naval Kishore, the man who put Lucknow at the centre of print networks in colonial north India (Stark 2007). The Naval Kishore Press shared office space and design artists with the Ganga Pustak Mala Karyalaya. The vast distribution network, innovative sales strategies and strategic partnerships enabling the Naval Kishore Press were therefore known to Bhargava when he founded the Ganga Pustak Mala Karyalaya in the same city in 1919. And yet, the differences between the two establishments could not be more emphatic. Naval Kishore invested in a spectrum of classical and modern print languages (Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi), thus challenging any easy assumptions aligning print culture with language the politics. On the other hand, the Ganga Pustak Mala’s principal focus on Hindi books and journals marks the generational shift from a plural, overlapping, interdependent linguistic print terrain to a more cautiously differentiated one.

Given the Hindi-only focus of *Sudha*, Nijhawan’s book contributes to a long tradition of scholarship assessing the implications of the movement for Hindi in late colonial north India (King 1994; Dalmia 1997; Rai 2000; Orsini 2002). Centred in colonial Lucknow, the book goes to the heart of the deep divisions the project of modern Hindi entailed. Nijhawan claims that in the years *Sudha* began to be published, the Hindi–Urdu “demarcation” in terms of both script and language was “unavoidable.” The poetry and prose sections of *Sudha*, its critical commentaries on literature, the interest in visual arts and sciences all lean towards reinforcing the pre-eminence and modernity of Khari Boli Hindi over other dialects. In line with this assessment, she draws attention to Bhargava’s Arya Samaj affiliation, his active engagement with a literary fraternity invested in the project of modern Hindi, his editorial interest in institutions like the Nagari Pracharini Sabha and his consistent attempt to align *Sudha* with an emerging national consciousness.

Did *Sudha* exacerbate the growing divisions in colonial India by defining a readership of primarily upper-caste, middle-class Hindu readers invested in the project of modern Hindi? Nijhawan chooses to ask instead an important follow-up to that question: How did *Sudha*, while reinforcing the language divide, reimagine the horizon of its responsibility with an actively engaged readership? Nijhawan’s analysis suggests that Bhargava’s editorial decisions enabled *Sudha* to remain connected to a vast and diverse audience spread over regions, languages and different political affiliations. It made better business sense for *Sudha*’s proprietors to accommodate plural readerships and enthusiasms. The concerns of running a successful and viable business enterprise override attempts at a narrowly exclusive reading audience. *Sudha* began to be published within a context that flouted literary and regional divides.

Nijhawan’s assessment and meticulous detailing of the Ganga Pustak Mala’s commercial reach reinforces the fact that *Sudha*’s reading audience remained connected to regions and realities emphatically different from colonial Lucknow. And yet, one feels compelled to ask if *Sudha* does not also remain distinctive...
through its very location. We are informed that numerous contributors to the journal taught at Lucknow University, some of its artists were affiliated with regional art collectors and aficionados, it brought visibility to the prized art collections of Lucknow’s elite class, the journal ran a column featuring Urdu poetry, Sudha’s political cartoons seemed to be inspired by Awadh Punch and its readers were drawn to advertisements of watches and umbrellas. How do we consolidate these disparate but fascinating details to suggest ways in which Sudha grew out of and reinforced a very particular Lucknow upper class and its way of being? Can we discern a subtext about Lucknow urbanity and self-fashioning in this Hindi journal that we have so far looked for only within Urdu literary traditions? Given the recent scholarly interest in urbanity and cosmopolitanism, this seems to be a question Nijhawan implicitly raises in her first chapter (Dalmia 2017; Dubrow 2018).

Sudha’s ‘Openness’

Bharagava’s ambitions for Sudha were realised only through a carefully crafted business model that saw the interdependence of multiple discrete organisations. Nijhawan documents the Ganga Pustak Mala Karyalaya’s reach and success in relation to the Ganga Fine Arts Press and a book depot. All three establishments reinforced each other through adeptly synchronised advertising and broad networks. Sudha’s pages provide detailed evidence of the large commercial undertaking. By the 1930s, through numerous book agencies, the publishing house extended its reach to Mysore, Calcutta, Karachi and Lahore as the furthest points in its distribution map. Bharagava’s shrewd and intuitive marketing allowed him to breach the conventional divides in high and low print forms. Sudha published literary figures and special editions, the collected works of established literary figures and special editions. He also promoted low brow, popular bazaar literature. Although the world of Hindi print may appear to have fractured from the times of the Naval world of Hindi print may appear to have fractured from the times of the Naval

Creative editorial policy complemented the business model developed by Bharagava. Therefore, although the journal’s columns are defined by a consolidation of interest in Khari Boli Hindi, the politics of canon formation, and the compelling claims of crafting a modern identity for Hindi poetry and prose, the journal creates room for diverse reading publics. We see in the chapters of the book an attentiveness to assess how the normative proclivities of the Hindi public sphere are consistently provoked and challenged. Braj Bhasha poetry, modern portraiture, short stories that challenge notions of middle-class respectability and satirical essays push against the boundaries being drawn in the Hindi public sphere. A redefinition of thresholds appears to be instituted at two levels simultaneously. At the level of genre (poetry, prose, short stories, satire) Sudha’s editors follow the principle that Nijhawan describes as “simultaneity” and “contemporaneity.” Contradictory aesthetic categories and warring literary traditions are juxtaposed seamlessly in Sudha’s pages. At another level, the 120-page literary journal challenges its readers on what constitutes “literature.” Through an assessment of essays on science, music, economics, social reform, travel, politics and anthropology, we are alerted to the numerous ways in which Bharagava hoped to present Sudha as a “repository” of all knowledge.

However, we are not always sure whether the decisions taken by Bharagava are shaped by commercial opportunity or political will. This ambiguity becomes more insistent when Nijhawan begins to sift the contents of the journal in the later chapters of her book. What does it mean to include poetry in Braj Bhasha? How does the aesthetic of popular art or portraiture challenge conventions in design? How do short stories on adultery and columns on women in science unsettle the assumptions of Sudha’s middle-class reading audience? It is not always clear whether the editorial decisions are an indication of strategic business manoeuvres or the consequence of intellectual and political conviction. Perhaps there is an element of shrewd business sense that sees merit in accommodating difference and dissent. Nijhawan’s book leaves it to its readers to assess Bharagava’s ambivalence.

Lesser Known Lives

The three analytical frames of gender, genre and visuality that undergird Nijhawan’s analysis juxtapose and intersect in compelling ways. At the still point of these moving frames Nijhawan repeatedly returns to the role played by two people in shaping Sudha’s destiny. The book carries two photographs of Bharagava’s wife, Savitridevi Bharagava. In one, she appears alongside her husband, while in the other she stands on a rug, her right elbow leaning against a tall three-legged stand, holding in her hands a copy of Sudha. There are numerous references in Nijhawan’s book to Savitridevi’s consistent, mostly unacknowledged, contributions to editorial decisions. Nijhawan suspects that she was assisting her husband much before she begins to be acknowledged as part of the editorial team. The photograph’s staged studio quality discourages any attempt to determine who dominates the meaning of the visual—Savitridevi or Sudha. Does

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Savitridevi determine *Sudha’s* identity, or does the journal enable Savitridevi? Savitridevi’s portrait must be read against two alternating visual sign systems in *Sudha*. Its women-only columns reinforce a gendered division of knowledge. These columns are complemented by sketches of women in traditional roles of housekeeper, mother, seamstress and cook. At the same time, intriguingly, women overwhelmingly occupy the visual vocabulary of *Sudha*. The cover design and the images that frame the science, book reviews, editorial, social reform, fine arts and music sections foreground women. We see them reading books, playing the veena, conducting laboratory experiments, writing at a desk and painting. Why did *Sudha’s* designers, artists and editors take this decision? Was Savitridevi part of this decision-making process? Does it mark a substantial shift in the visual vocabulary of journals in Hindi? Is it a reminder of a concerted effort to include women readers in a mainstream audience? As a gesture at inclusiveness, is it enough? Does it indicate a greater proportion of women readers and women contributors? Or are the women-centred images merely an attempt to craft an aesthetically pleasing reading experience? These questions appear dispersed in implicit and explicit manners through the book. Nijhawan highlights a middle-of-the-road, middle-class respectability in editorial and design decisions that enables certain kinds of notional, aestheticised visibility for women in *Sudha’s* pages. Her analysis of *Sudha* centres around noticing incremental, small shifts in the journal on matters relating to its women readers. The visuals are interpreted as a sign of accommodation within the Hindi public sphere. How do we take her insights forward through a discussion on correspondingly shifting notions of masculinity in Hindi periodical culture? What is the visual vocabulary through which men are represented?

As a neat parallel to Savitridevi’s partially visible life story we leave Nijhawan’s book intrigued by *Sudha’s* artist-designer Hakim Muhammad Khan. His name (“Hakim”) appears scrawled in a downward slant in English in some images included in Nijhawan’s book. Originally from Lucknow, Khan was trained at Shantiniketan by Abanindranath Tagore and returned to Lucknow to work closely with Dularelal Bhargava. Over several years he was responsible for most of the art work appearing in *Sudha*—its front cover, first page, cartoons, column-related images and possibly other design elements in the journal. How did Khan interpret the editorial instructions he received? What was his role in making visible gender, religion, urbanity and middle-class respectability in *Sudha*? Do his images dismantle or reinforce the content of *Sudha’s* columns and sections? How did he make known his ownership of *Sudha*?

Shobna Nijhawan’s book marks a particularly important moment in scholarship on vernacular periodical culture and literary modernities in the region (Mody 2018; Dubrow 2018). She provides an exhaustive overview of the journal and asks unusual questions of her chosen domain. Her book will serve as an important reference point for those interested in the literary cultures of colonial north India. That she leaves us with many more questions to pursue must surely be taken as a sign of the value of her book. She notices an unusual premise in the editorials of *Sudha*: Bhargava’s project to transform a literary journal to a desirable collector’s item. Nijhawan’s analysis records the editorial and commercial decisions that shape the journal and give it the possibility of a life beyond what we usually understand of periodicals. She contributes in no small measure to the afterlife Bhargava desired for *Sudha*.

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REFERENCES


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