

Let Me Tell You My Story¹:
Women's Narratives in Hindi Magazines of Early Twentieth Century India

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This paper will focus on the various narratives of anonymous women in a number of Hindi magazines in early twentieth-century India. Hindi magazines, especially some women's journals from those days, gave women a voice and, as Francesca Orsini says, the "right to feel."² Many nameless women wrote letters or small notes to the editor requesting not to specify their name and address, and they expressed things about themselves, particularly their miserable situation. For most women, women's journals such as *Gṛhalakshmī* and *Cāñd*, and their reader's columns, were invaluable spaces that allowed them to express their own feelings.

This paper has three aims: first, it attempts to illustrate the emergence and changing nature of women's magazines by studying various magazines from the gender perspective; second, it seeks to show how narratives by anonymous women expressed society and themselves; finally, it discusses the role played by women's magazines in improving the status of women. In this paper, the focus is on modern Indian women's narratives, where we can not only see women's ideals and duties but also hear their other voice discussing matters such as their new sense of individual worth and their emotions. The above-mentioned three points will be shown using these women's narratives as case studies.

OVERVIEW OF EARLY WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

During the social reform movement of the late nineteenth century, both missionaries and domestic reformers emphasized the idea of improving women's social status, and, therefore, the necessity of female education became a topic. This led to the initial

¹ Draft. Please do not cite or quote.

² Orsini, Francesca, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940; Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.275.

publication of magazines aimed at women. In 1856, *Strī Bodh*, the first magazine for women, was launched in Gujarati.

Along with *Strī Bodh* (1856-1950?), several women's magazines in various vernacular languages began to be published in the late 19th century, such as *Bāmābādhinī Patrika* (1863-1923) in Bengali, *Bālābodhinī* (1874-1878) in Hindi, *Grihinī* (1877-?) in Malati, and *Akḥbār un-Nissā* (1884-?) in Urdu. These magazines mostly had contributions from male reformers, and the contents were controlled and censored to underline the importance of women's traditional gender roles. Therefore, in those magazines, there was hardly any attention paid to the examination of women's issues or voices of women. Now we will examine *Bālābodhinī*, the first women's magazine written in Hindi, to see the distinctions of early women's magazines, as mentioned above.

Bālābodhinī made its first appearance in 1874. It was dependent on government funding and lasted four years. The editor, Bharatendu Harishchandra, was a highly respected reformist and educationalist, and he was also one of the most distinguished Hindi writers of his time. Together with him, male reformers wrote for the magazine as the main contributors. The aims of the magazine, Bharatendu claimed in the first issue of the magazine, were to spread female education, to show a role model of the "respectable woman," and to improve women's social status.

The magazine was only eight pages long. It contained advice for housewives and mothers in areas such as the management of children and the home, hygiene, pregnancy, etc. It also repeatedly mentioned the duties of housewives. The magazine did not include any prose, poems, popular songs, anecdotes, non-didactic tales, or jokes; such fiction was considered unsuitable for "respectable women." Since the goal of the magazine and its writers was to enlighten women to be "respectable women," it did not include any discussion about social reform related to women. Thus we see that the magazine could provide limited information and knowledge to women, and, contrary to what Bharatendu claimed as the aim of the magazine, there was no attempt to improve women's social status.

As we moved into the 20th century, the Hindi area experienced a new wave of women's movement. At that time, many organizations were led by women, and women's issues were discussed from the standpoint of women. This was when female education was being popularized, and the female literacy rate had risen significantly. Along with these

changes, the development of printing technology and transportation had a significant impact on the circulation of women's magazines. Literate women were now able to seek the space, and obtain the tools, to bring their voices into the public sphere.

Under such conditions, three important magazines for women were released from Allahabad. These three magazines, *Gṛhalakshmī*, *Strī Darpaṇ*, and *Cāñd*, gained popularity and lasted around twenty years each. In the next chapter, we will examine each magazine closely.

POPULAR WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

Gṛhalakshmī (1909-1929)

Gṛhalakshmī (hereafter referred to as GL) was considered the first Hindi magazine with a woman editor, and there were several female writers who contributed articles to the magazine³. GL was 40 pages long and included a variety of content, both fiction and non-fiction, which were informative for women. It included a wide range of articles, on history, religion, women's issues, political issues and moral teachings, domestic and international news, editorial, a reader's column, and prose and poems. Additionally, GL used to publish photographs of active Indian women—writers, social activists, and Maharanis around the country.

Although the aim of the magazine was, as the first issued said, to spread female education and to free women's minds from various superstitions and traditions, most of the articles emphasized the traditional role of mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Many articles contributed by women for women encouraged them to hold onto the traditional gender role, in order to be a respectable woman. We can see this mold in its reader's columns as well. Some letters gained pity, but when the writer of the letter was considered deviant, she gained no pity or sympathy, instead receiving admonishment from other readers. “Self-devotion,” “sacrifice,” “virtuousness,” and “obedience to husband”—these are words we frequently see in GL.

Strī Darpaṇ (1909-1928)

³ Though it is true that the magazine had several female writers, most of the contributions were from men. Even “the first female editor,” Mrs. Gopaldevi, was, according to Orsini, an editor in name only, and the magazine was mostly written and edited by Thakur Srinath Singh. Orsini, 2002, p.262.

Strī Darpaṇ (hereafter referred to as SD) was first published in the same year as GL. The editors and main contributors to this magazine were women from the Nehru family: the editor was Rameshwari Nehru, wife of Jawaharlal's cousin, the manager was Kamla, Jawaharlal's wife, and one of the main contributors was Uma, wife of another of Jawaharlal's cousins. Aside from the Nehru family, several female reformers, educationalists, and novelists contributed articles to the magazine. In each issue, four to five articles were written by women.

SD was 60 to 70 pages long, and a quarter of the whole magazine was devoted to editorial commentaries. The magazine had various articles on history, religion, social issues, women's issues, political issues, moral teachings, etc. It had both domestic and international news, as well as book reviews. SD published both nonfiction and fiction, such as short stories, plays, poems, and prose. In contrast with GL, SD ran very few photographs, illustrations, or advertisements in each issue; there was no reader's column section either.

According to the editor, Rameshwari, the aim of SD was to spread female education and elevate the status of women as individuals. These words were well reflected in SD. Many articles were written by women for the upliftment of women, and they encouraged women to be individuals and members of society. Rameshwari herself used to write that a woman should not subordinate herself to a man; she should be respected as a human being. Several articles even questioned the traditional gender role—self-devotion, sacrifice, virtue, etc. In many articles we find words that are hardly seen in GL, such as “companionship,” “independence,” “awareness,” and so on.

***Cāñd* (1922-1949?)**

In 1922, Ramrakh Singh Sahgal began *Cāñd* (hereafter referred to as CD). Sahgal was a male social reformer and one of the most famous Hindi editors of that time. The articles in CD were also mainly written by men, but it had several female reformers, educationalists, and novelists as writers. The aim of CD was, as Sahgal claimed, to spread female education and to uplift women as individuals and as members of society. As per his statement, we find various articles dealing with women's education and their role as citizens.

CD was 80 to 100 pages long, and it devoted many spaces to both domestic and international news. Along with news, it contained various articles on history, religion, social issues, women's issues, political issues, moral teaching, home science, book reviews, and editorial commentaries. The magazine also published several pieces of fiction, such as prose, poems, short stories, and plays. Some of them were written by popular writers of the day. In sharp contrast to SD, CD had lots of photographs, illustrations, cartoons, and advertisements, and some of them were vibrantly colored.

In each issue, CD published various articles on women's and political issues. Sahgal, the editor of CD, always championed the elevation of women. He used to write in favor of women's rights, most notably the right of women to divorce and remarry. This was an extremely bold opinion in the 1920s. We can see Sahgal's sympathy for the weak in the reader's column section as well. Thanks to his attitude, each issue had plenty of letters, and therefore the reader's column section expanded. In terms of size and content, CD surpassed all previous women's magazines.

VOICES OF NAMELESS WOMEN

Now we will look at the reader's column sections of the above magazines. Since SD did not have this section, only GL and CD are covered here. Compared to CD, GL did not devote much space to the reader's column section. From 1923 to 1928 (not clear, though), GL published only one or two letters, but not in every issue. In response to the letter written by a reader, other readers wrote comments that were sometimes pitying, but sometimes harshly admonishing. Some letters did not receive a comment.

On the contrary, CD had plenty of letters in each issue under the editorship of Sahgal. Every issue had three to ten letters, and all letters from readers gained vocal support from Sahgal. In the late 1920s to early 1930s, CD had the most number of letters from its readers, but after 1935, as Sahgal left the magazine, this section gradually decreased in size and finally stopped around 1944.

Although the letters to the editor were written by both the male and female readers of each magazine, here I focus on letters by female readers. Most of them referred to themselves as young and not highly educated. They usually requested that their names

and addresses be withheld⁴. Various stories were written by women. Some women, especially child widows, were seeking marriage partners. Other women lamented about their own miserable situation, such as domestic cruelty and insecurity, repressed sexuality, poor health, or poverty. Several women lamented the lack of respect shown toward them. However, the main theme for women's stories was the expression of their emotional needs. Those letters contained bold and vivid emotions and voiced prohibited feelings; therefore, they were betraying high morals and social norms. In the pages that follow we will see some examples.

Letters for CD

In March 1930, a young married Kayasta of 16 from Bagarpur wrote about her extramarital affair with her cousin:

I was delivered to one person with poor health. But I love my cousin. He loves me too. I do not want anything but my cousin. Is it crime to go away with him? Can I get remarried with him? I do not want to go with my husband. Tell me what to do?
(CD1930 March pp860-862)

In his written response to this letter, Sahgal raised a concern about Hindu law:

It's not love, just desire. We cannot solve this kind of problem until Hindu law admits the right to divorce. We should consider revisions to the Hindu Law.
(CD1930 March pp861-862)

A daughter of an officer revealed the premarital affair she had been having with her neighbor since a couple of years:

I love him and I gave my virginity to him. But now I am getting married to another man. Due to that my dharma will be corrupted. I am degrading myself further-more.....
(CD 1930 Dec pp251-252)

Another young wife of 19 from Muzaffarnagar sought advice about her conjugal relationship:

⁴ We should note that there is a possibility that writers used fake identity, especially male may write a letter in a female voice.

When I got married, I was thirteen years old. After that I met someone and fell in love with him. Now my husband discovered our relationship and hates me. What can I do? (CD1930 Dec pp253-259)

In response to the above two young girls in love, Sahgal showed some sympathy and understanding:

Nowadays countless young boys and girls are suffering for not getting married with their loved one. Why? Because there are strong restrictions to choose the partner. We should talk about this matter with calm mind. (CD1930 Dec pp259&261)

Letters for GL

Compared to those letters and responses published in CD, there are clear differences in GL, especially in each response to the letters.

A daughter-in-law of a zamindar revealed her illicit affair with her father-in-law and made a confession:

During my husband's absence, day by day my father-in-law and I were getting close. We were like husband and wife. One day my husband found out about our illicit relationship but he did not say anything and left us. When I gave birth to baby boy, my husband rejected him saying; "I am not his father, but his elder brother." Shortly after, he died. Now whenever I see my baby son, I cannot stop thinking about my husband. I am bothered by terrible guilt. Dear editor, please tell me. How can I expiate my guilt? Will God forgive me someday? (GL c.1925 Asharh pp230-232)

In a response to the daughter-in-law of the zamindar, one reader wrote without any pity:

It is impossible for you to be forgiven in this life. Since your husband has already passed away, you cannot expiate your guilt. (GL c.1927 Savan pp283-284)

Another widow from Jarpur also revealed her illicit affair with her father-in-law. She was approached by him after the death of her husband:

My father in-law made advances to me and our illicit affair began. Eventually I started to love him, but I needed to do good to enjoy the immoral act with him in a more safe and sound manner. I mean, the dirtier my soul got, the more religious acts I needed to conduct. (GL c.1927 Asharh pp188-190)

There were no responses to this letter, at least not in the next few issues. In contrast to Sahgal, the editor at GL usually did not reply to the letters by himself/herself, but asked other readers to send in their opinions.

ROLE OF HINDI WOMEN'S MAGAZINES OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

As we have seen above, in the early twentieth century, the culture of women's magazines was developing. Compared to the women's magazines of the late nineteenth century, in which the content was mostly controlled and censored to emphasize the importance of women's traditional gender roles, the magazines of the early twentieth century were no longer standardized. We find that they had their own distinctive characteristics, and therefore there are many types of stories by various women.

Take the visual appearance, for example. Each magazine had a different appearance in terms of size and volume. There were differences in the number of pictures, illustrations, and advertisements for each magazine—CD had lots and SD had very few. The percentage of pages dedicated to entertainment and useful articles was by no means uniform either. We also found wide differences in the responses of the editors of each magazine to their readers.

In addition to the differences in appearance and content, we found variations in the women's voices in each magazine. There were many kinds of narratives and stories told by nameless and faceless women (and also men), which challenged the norms forced by the male-dominated society. For most women, especially those who were non-celebrities, women's magazines and its reader's columns were the first and only space where they could express their own feelings freely, and gain some sympathy and support from the editor and readers.

The women's magazines meant a lot to many women of that time. First, magazines gave them a sense of unity. Many letters to the magazine from readers used words such

as “we” or “our sister” when mentioning other readers. On several pages in CD, we even find the word “Cāṅḍ parivār,” or “Cāṅḍ family,” and the editor, Sahgal, also used these words, especially in the reader’s column section. When he responded to women who were in trouble, he did not only blame them; instead, he suggested that “we” should deal with the problem to change “our” society. We can imagine that it aroused a sense of unity in readers with people outside their home and community.

Second, the magazines offered many kinds of information and knowledge to women, as a result of which many women may have increased their consciousness. The magazines gave women a new role and space beyond the household, and thus they were windows to the wider world for non-celebrity women.

What we need to realize is that even though the strict social backdrop of those times called for absolute obedience and virtue, there were, in fact, voices that challenged the system at that time. Such narratives, told by faceless and nameless women, illustrate the other dimension of women's lives at that time, which contributes significantly to the cultural history of India.

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