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Commercial print media and history in colonial India

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Abstract
This article tries to put forth the view that a more complicated and nuanced ways should be applied to understand 'archives.' This emanates from the fact that archives are not always passive and neutral, having historical truths.

Keywords: commercial publishing, Bhakha, archives, etc.

Introduction

There has been a paradigm shift in the way archives have started to be seen, from simply being 'neutral' and 'passive' repositories of historical documents, ready to he mined in by scholars for reconstruction of history, to 'archives as subjects' on their own, as sites where power is articulated, negotiated and even contested. Along with that, there has also been an extension of the category of 'archives', to include hitherto unused materials like oral and vernacular sources, memories, emotions, dreams, etc, precisely because these pose the same problems of interpretation, as posed by conventional archives. Or, in other words the fact that 'no archive is full' and is subjected to the same rigours of historical analysis makes the use of these new archives possible. This essay shall take up one such new archival site, the so-called 'marginal' and popular pulp literature, that largely came up as a result of the development of the print media and new literary sensibilities in the nineteenth century, to find out how a proper understanding of it radically alters the existing notion of prevalent modes of sexuality, more-so when the reforming agenda was vociferously aiming to create a model code of conduct, bereft of any sexual overtones.

Yet, one must also remember that it is not to ignore the fictional, imaginative part of literature in general. Neither is it denied that many a time, many a text talk in a normative tone, in terms of what should be, rather than what is. Notwithstanding such pitfalls, one can still use them, by reading between the lines. But before moving on to proceed with such all interpretative exercise, one must look at the process of the emergence and furtherance of the print media.

The nineteenth century in the Indian sub-continent bore witness to two remarkable cultural phenomena, of the emergence of a world of commercial publishing and entertainment, and tile creation of a reading public. Scholars see a puzzle here in this context, when low and sluggish increases in literacy and formal schooling, and the growth of a vibrant and diffuse print culture remained together. But newer studies have brought to light the filet that however low he the level of readership, tile emergent literate class was largely being catered to by commercial publishers who churned out songbooks, tales and theatre chapbooks, with which that were already acquainted.

Earlier works on print in nineteenth century India largely focuses on the printing efforts of missionaries, of the various colonial educational departments, and of Indian intellectuals. This particular history of print starts with the publication in Fort William College in 1800. This was done in order to separate texts in Hindi and Urdu, in different scripts and with different vocabularies by respectively, Bhakha and Hindustani munshis (scribes), under the guidance of a Scottish professor, J.B. Gilchrist. The publication of textbooks and translations of scriptures by missionaries and school book societies, and those by Indian intellectuals in the colonial administration as well by persons connected with the 'Hindi movement' in the second half of the nineteenth century followed later.

Commercial publishing, by contrast, was influenced to a great extent by the cheap technique of lithography, with which they could bring into the printing domain, re-print oral or written tradition with potential audience. It was also shaped by the momentum of publishing itself. Printed books themselves created tastes and attracted new audiences by easily crossing the Hindu-Urdu script divide. This included canonical texts, booklets of prayers, religious songs, polemical tracts, religious periodicals, entertaining and leisure texts etc.

The relationship between two dominant languages in north India, Hindi ad Urdu, largely remained antagonistic and competitive in the reformist field. But as Francesca Orsini says, was quite symbiotic in commercial publishing and theatre. The former, was more engaged with reformist patriotism, but the latter exclusively dealt in local genres. The commercial publishing in Hindi and Urdu, was thus a unified field created by three inter-related forces, viz., the insertion of neo— or non— literate audiences and their oral traditions into the print market, the creation of new literary forms, by harnessing older aesthetic and narrative models, and finally, the world of commercial theatre and professionals, which acted as catalysers for various poetic and musical forms. Thus, an interaction between these three forces created a varied and vibrant print culture that crossed script boundaries and caused a mixing of narrative and poetic traditions.

Any kind of literary development is concomitant with the growth of a particular readership, towards which it is directed. Since, the new literary texts lacked prefaces, only through stray and indirect references left by readers themselves and the ones left by neo-literate writers that one can speculate upon the readership catered to by this new development. Evidence points towards the process through which literacy and book reading habits were often acquired by upwardly mobile individuals and groups who sought to avail themselves of the occupational possibilities opened up by the colonial administration and the new markets for jobs, especially in the post 'mutiny' period.

Along with low literacy, commercial publishers also faced the fact that the society was habituated in different oral and visual entertainment, embodied in storytellers, singers, mimes, dancers, actors and so on. Now, the challenge for them was to come up with a form that would be as attractive and pleasure giving as these pre-existing forms were. According to Orsini, they succeeded by infiltrating existing sites and patterns of leisure, and thus providing a range of texts of pleasure, these sought to reproduce and multiply the pleasures offered by oral performers. Like for instance, many of these were in genres which could he called as "oral literate", like popular songs and poems (barahmasas), which could be recited and read aloud in large gatherings. This in turn resulted in their immense popularity.

The evidence that is there on book-buying and reading patterns shows that these developed on already established spatial and gendered patterns of leisure, both inside and outside home. Hindu and Muslim intellectuals tried to purge the women's spaces of those forms of leisure where both male and female presence was noted, which made agents of patriarchy anxious. But hooks were a breakaway from such reformist mould and easy access could necessarily made the formers to have a second thought about it. The usual binary of secluded private sphere of women, and the public sphere of men, has been found to be too simplistic a separation and books could very well enter a number of such 'segregated open spaces' where women assembled, conversed with each other and read out and sung from books meant for them. Not only that, there arc evidence to show that the inner spheres also witnessed the reading of the so-called 'suitable books ' for women, like the reference by Alloys Springer in 1850. Also, the lamentation by Yashoda Devi, the 'remarkable' woman Ayurvedic doctor in the 1920s, that " in the trunks of educated women are kept at least one or two of such novels " shows exactly the same concern.

The most important public site for the circulation of books and the creation of a popular reading public was no doubt the 'melas' or fairs, which were a festive space where women seem to have considered it part of their right to go to and display themselves and where the distinctions of caste and sexes seemed to melt away. Women bought novels and other genres which interested them to take them home and read them. Another important space of leisure that encouraged book reading was the theatre (perhaps the greatest of all), and later, the cinema hall catering to a heterogeneous public. Theatre companies made a brisk business of selling chapmans of their productions.

Thus stray evidence on leisure and reading matches the larger picture of socio-economic changes taking place in nineteenth century north India. Firstly, literacy and a smattering of adab (civility), still the dominant ethos were now sought after by other upwardly mobile groups, who also turned to books for entertainment. Secondly, the dispersal of court musicians, singers, dancers etc and their regrouping around garrison towns which allowed for a wider circulation of musical genres, and the crystallization of new theatrical forms such as Parsi theatre and nautanki. Thirdly, the greater circulation of goods and people even in rural areas meant allowed a faster exchange of performance and musical genres between rural and urban performers and audience, which was capitalized on by book-sellers. Finally, migrant workers and women were among the beneficiaries of these enhanced pleasures which even a little literacy could bring. The result was not a unified book-reading practices, not even of buying, but religious books, theatre chapbooks, etc. were sold at very low prices, and novels, a bit more costlier were mostly borrowed from others or public libraries.

Thus, this is the story of the dissemination as well as furtherance of the commercial print in north Indian scenario, Now, one would look at the impact that these not so 'readable' and un-suitable publications had on the society, that is the way it was received by different strata in society, especially, the middle-classes. Though there were attempts to 'salubrity' the literary terrain of these erotic, 'obscene' and semi-pornographic works, these persisted, and their very persistence "reveal literary pluralities, and the contested terrain of Hindi literature". Such attempts at salubrifying the various spheres of national life like art and culture can still be seen in the attempts by the right wing. But the question is: who decides what 'obscene' is, or does the aesthetic canon represent a homogenised/fragmented voice'?

In India, the first obscenity laws appeared in the late nineteenth century, explicitly designed for the prevention of any form of obscenity. They were defined to include any visual or written material that was 'lascivious or appealed to the prurient interest'. However, in spite of various rules the term 'obscenity' remained vague, and in colonial India too, there was no clear definition of the term, and could encompass a wide variety of meanings in common usage and debates.

As Charu Gupta says, any discussion on obscenity is closely linked with the debate on elite and popular literature. Some scholars argue that in India, new literary sensibilities marginalized popular traditions, and that print displaced performance. Standardized and sanitized literary norms became marker of modern national identity and culture for the educated middle classes. As print stimulated new expressions of vernacular literature like nautanki, sangeet, qissa etc., the Hindu literati attempted to discipline writing. But, they did not succeed fully, and themselves borrowed some popular elements in their writing, itself a result of reading practices and market. Similarly, popular literature also appropriated a few features of elite literature.

There is a tendency to view all of popular literature as healthy, sensual and subversive, Another view tends to see it as 'pornographic continuum' aiding right wing men to assert their masculinity. But, it is particularly against such simplistic readings that newer scholarships have brought to light far more a complex picture, like the one by Charu Gupta on UP,

which shows that even when they were not self-consciously either reactionary or liberating, they tend to provide a variety of interpretations, sometimes even questioning the dominance of patriarchy and male hegemony, though writing with in their very auspices. Contemporary indigenous assessments regarding obscenity drew a lot from existing notions of it in the colonial domain and vice-versa, i.e., it was a two way process.

A vocal and influential section of the Hindu middle class literati was trying to fashion a new collective identity for itself, especially from late nineteenth century. Several processes like coming up of new educational institutions, rapid growth of libraries, print culture, publishing houses, giving rise to newspapers, magazines, books, etc. provided platform to the emergent Hindu middle class by paving a way for Hindu public sphere'. Also, attempts by organizations like the Arya Samaj to Hindi for the self-perception of the Hindu community made a significant contribution to the association of' Hindi with Hindu. These several processes acting simultaneously played a leading role in determining the content of the Hindi literary and linguistic canon in the syllabi, schoolbooks and university departments of the period. It was this particular strand of Hindi literature which was strategically tied to the nation and to the assertion of civilization and pride.

Concomitant with it were endeavours at linguistic standardizations and attacks on any hints of eroticism and obscenity in literature, very hallmarks of a decadent, feminine and uncivilized culture detested by the moralizing reformers. As Gupta shows, there was a deliberate distancing from the so-called uncomfortable' traditions of the past and an attempt to establish a monolithic high-cultural norm. Came with this quest for a 'proper' Hindi literature, new aesthetic values which idealized a classic, calm and perfect image of women, simultaneously denigrating the erotic and sexually active nayika (heroine) and Radha, the most important aesthetic categories of medieval Riti Kal poetry. The ideal women, in contrast, were to he extremely chaste and virtuous mothers and wives, thus leading to a radical altering of the gender imagery. This attack became even more sharper and systematic by the twentieth century.

But all this restrain in terms of canonisation of the 'standard' and 'proper' literature, did not remain uncontested, and as Gupta brings to our notice, a plethora of different genres, including sex manuals, popular romances, entertaining songs, grew along with a few devotional genres like the Ramanandi Rasik tradition. Even when demanded that such woks be declared objectionable and illegal, 2,777 such books were published in UP alone in 1925-26. This shows the enormity with which such works came to contest the blows of the reformist agenda.

It is this persistence which led to the growth of wide-ranging pulp and popular literature flooded the market in UP. However, it was not just the 'low' writers and small presses which came out with such 'obscene' stuffs, many prestigious presses like The Newal Kishore Press also came out with many such publications, playing upon well established literary genres. Despite the moralizing tone of the reforming agenda, a few of the reformers and established publishing houses actually came to feel the need to depict intricacies of sex and erotic life of conjugal couple, for, it was understood that sexual pleasure was an important aspect of modern married life,

A few established writers also, like Pandit Bechan Sharma 'Ugra', took to writing popular sensational romantic fiction. Torn between nationalist moral concerns with social reform on one hand, and commercial interests and entertainment on the other, this particular genre came to exhibit a certain tension, Ugra's 'Chaklet' which came out in 1927, and dealt with homo-sexuality, was charged as being 'obscene', even though the stories contained in it were against same sex relations. While condemning homosexuality by claiming to draw from real life incidents, it nevertheless throws a welcome light on the wide prevalence of such alternate and 'deviant' sexual practices (especially in UP).

The work won extreme popularity among the masses, and thus drew widespread militant criticism, from amongst the reformist circle. A Ghasleti Andolan was launched to do away with ghasleti sahitya (or, inferior literature). Even Gandhi initially wrote against the book, hut later' as lie read it, did not find it obscene, This attack on Chaklet was also part of a nationalist critique, as the 'de-gendered' effeminate male was one stereotype of colonial domination (so much contested through the making of the imagery of a strong masculine Hindu male), and questioned the stability of the hetero-sexual regime, procreative imperatives and modern monogamous ideals of marriage. As a consequence of this conflict, a rift was created between popular literature and canonised 'proper' literary works.

Thus, finally it can be concluded that though the nation building task testing with the reformist circle, which aimed at sanitizing the emerging official Hindi literary canon (so much a part of creating a 'strong' and 'civilized ' nation), did not succeed fully in its effort to replace aesthetics with ethics, Integral to these civilizing aims, in the words of' Gupta, was 'the denial of eroticism', 'with a renewed insistence upon order and control and upon the danger of license and licentiousness'. But, as is clear from the analysis above, the so-called 'dirty literature' flourished unabated even when ousted from the official 'high' literary domain, and was not at all at the margins, but at the very 'centre of an emerging subculture'.

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