

## NEGOTIATION BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN WOMEN'S PERIODICAL PRESS IN EARLY-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PUNJAB

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**Received: 21 Aug 2022**

**Accepted: 22 Aug 2022**

**Published: 23 Aug 2022**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The essay undertakes a study of the nascent print and public spheres in late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab and examines women's claims to subjectivity and their negotiation with colonial and reform discourses through the periodical press of the times. In Punjab, discursive battles for affirmation of religious identities at this time were also fought over women's bodies, their practices, and their relationship to the public sphere. Women are assumed to have been contained within these reform discourses that defined appropriate modernity for them. As a counter to this assumption, this essay examines the participation of women in the burgeoning print and public spheres of late-colonial Punjab and the ways in which the periodical press mediated their understanding of the self as part of the public. The essay questions the rather stable idea of the public/private divide through an examination of women's responses in the periodical press of the times, specifically through the study of two periodicals – Punjabi Bhain in Punjabi and Bharat Bhagini in Hindi*

**KEYWORDS:** *Print Sphere, Women's Periodicals, Colonial Punjab, Private/Public, Reform Movements in Colonial Punjab*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The essay discusses the ways in which women in early-20th century Punjab experienced, participated in, and reinvented the configurations of the public, both in its material and discursive understanding, through the Periodical Press. Early-20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab history has conventionally been studied through the tropes of hardening of religious identities or formation of nationalist consciousness. In these readings however, the role and presence of women have been elided over. The present essay examines the participation of women in the burgeoning print and public spheres of late-colonial Punjab and the ways in which the periodical press mediated their understanding of the self as part of the public.

The print and public spheres in Punjab are seen to have been appropriated by the middle-class reform movements such as the Arya Samaj movement (founded in 1875 by Dayanand Saraswati), the Singh Sabha movement (founded in 1873), and the Ahmaddiya movement (started in 1889), that sought to legitimize and consolidate religious identities and produce images of idealized womanhood. Identities of women are understood to have been framed and constituted either through the discourse of these reform patriarchies or through the colonial discourses about women. Thus, the 'women's question' has been discussed in historical literature without taking into account women's own participation in the public sphere and their claims to agency. This essay seeks to fill in this gap in the study of print spheres by examining women's own negotiations and claims to subjectivity in the periodical press of the times.

The print and public spheres in late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab were successfully mobilized by the reform

patriarchies to fix religious canon and practices, rewrite history, negotiate issues of modernity, tradition, languages, caste, class and religion through 'idealized womanhood'. The preoccupation, in the print terrain, with prescriptive femininity is indicative of the anxieties of colonial and reform patriarchies about the management of women's sexuality and marking out class, caste and religious differences through women's bodies and their cultural practices. In that sense, the print space was already 'gendered'.

In a famous formulation of the "women's question" within the reform discourse in colonial Bengal, Partha Chatterjee (1989) suggested that the new reform patriarchy resolved the women's question by relegating them to the inner, private, domestic sphere where tradition and Indianness could be preserved and over which they could maintain control, while the outer, the public and the masculine sphere was a sphere where western modernity was to be negotiated and emulated. In an early critique of this position, Uma Chakravarty (1996) questioned the passivity of women within religious reform movements through the example of Pandita Ramabai and demonstrated that women's identities were not merely fixed by reform and colonial discourses. Subsequently, a large body of feminist scholarship has also examined the private/public distinction, its articulation in the public sphere, and the ways in which the private sphere itself has been cast in gendered terms. In the colonial Indian context, the work of Tanika Sarkar, Janaki Nair, Meera Kosambi, Himani Bannerji, and Padma Anagol, to name a few of these interventions, suggests that from the point of view of women, the women's question was never resolved, the inner/outer was a site of contestation and the private and public were permeable spaces rather than being fixed ones. The women's periodical press in late colonial Punjab presents evidence of this contestation.

## WOMEN AND THE PRINT-PUBLIC SPHERES IN COLONIAL PUNJAB

The public sphere in late-19th century Punjab was marked by restructuring of caste, class, and religious identities and an intense contestation for domination among the elite in religious communities. These discursive battles for affirmation of religious identities were also fought over women's bodies, their practices, and their relationship to the public sphere, which became new indicators of class and caste.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the public sphere was experienced by women through communitarian and caste identities and ideas of 'appropriate' modernity. Caste and gender identities were also negotiated through print dissemination of pamphlets, tracts and popular genres such as *qissa* literature. Anxieties about women's relationship to public spaces are evident in reform prescriptions about women's mobility in the periodicals produced for women.

Middle class women also experienced the public space through a maze of restrictions suggested by reform organizations on their traditional cultural practices and spaces of association with each other as also through new forms of public appearance sanctified by these organizations. One of the new forms of public gathering for middle class women was a conflation of religious gathering with public-spirited voluntary associations in the form of *satsangs* and *mahilasamajes*. Yet, even these sanctified forms of access to public space sometimes invited ridicule and resentment. Some of this can be gleaned from the way in which women's mobility was commented upon in the print media.

Mai Bhagwati, a *pracharak* of the Arya Samaj addressed a public gathering in what is now Haryana that was reported in the *Tribune* as follows: "Of late, a correspondent says, it has been difficult to get well-cooked dishes at any

<sup>1</sup> See Malhotra 2002 for a detailed discussion on how marriage and spatial practices by various castes were restructured to move into a new high caste, middle class identity.

house in Haryana, and few people stop at Haryana for fear of indigestion...."<sup>2</sup> Mai Bhagwati was also an active writer, publishing morally 'appropriate' songs and readers for women (for example, *Stri Bhajan* published in 1910), in which she addressed the question of women's education. Periodicals for women, such as *Arya Mahila*,<sup>3</sup> published by the Arya Hitkarini Sabha from Benaras and *Panchal Pandita*, published by Lala Dev Raj and Badri Dass from Jullundur, often expressed suspicion of women who roamed around of their own volition, participated in fairs and gatherings and entertainment in public spaces or wore clothes that exposed the female form to a public gaze (*Panchal Pandita*, 15 January 1901).

The 'private' spaces of home, domesticity and women had already been brought into the public domain by reform organizations, by State intervention that sought to fix customary laws, marriage practices and female foeticide in Punjab, and by ethnographers who wanted to record traditional society. Foremost among these ethnographers whose work has been described as example of "empirical taxonomising scholarship" (Bayly, 1996: 355) is Sir Richard Temple, founder and editor of *Panjab Notes and Queries* (est. 1883), editor and proprietor of the *Indian Antiquary* for forty-six years and compiler of *Dissertation on the Proper Names of Panjabis, with special reference to the Proper Names of Villages in the Eastern Panjab* (Bombay, 1883). Flora Annie Steel, J.C. Oman, H. A. Rose, C. F. Usborne and Charles Swynnerton were other scholars who attempted to document folklore, oral cultures, and linguistic practices of local communities, thereby entering the 'private' world.

This essay questions the rather stable idea of the public/private divide through an examination of women's responses in the periodical press of the times, specifically through the study of two periodicals – *Punjabi Bhain* in Punjabi and *Bharat Bhagini* in Hindi. Women's reform in Punjab was indeed tied to questions of communitarian identities but could never be completely co-opted into a cultural, religious, nationalism so as not to have its own dynamic trajectory. The new, burgeoning print cultures made available for women new modes of subjectivity as writers, readers, owners, and consumers of print in colonial Punjab. The women's periodical press of the late-19th and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries is an important medium to study women's own interventions in the questions that shaped their everyday lives. Many of these periodicals were either instituted or supported by reform institutions and, in many cases, edited by male reformers. There were a few periodicals, however, that were edited by women, and this brought them into the day-to-day processes of writing, editing, gathering financial resources, dodging censorship and promoting subscription. For the anonymous women who contributed letters, essays and poetical works, the periodicals became a medium to share pain, anger, aspirations, discontent, embodied experiences, and affective desires.

Women writing in these periodicals argue for space in the public arena and professions, wrest the initiative to speak on their own behalf, discuss women's movements and universities across the globe, imagine a sisterhood, hold tradition and family responsible for their misfortunes and counterpose their everyday experiences to the romanticized notions of Vedic womanhood through which they were being constructed. Joining their individual fate to that of the collective, they try to negotiate their way into the questions that affected them and configure the language of 'rights' in which to address the State and the reformers.

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<sup>2</sup> The information is in Kenneth Jones (1976: 108, footnote). This is also quoted in Kumar (1993: 32).

<sup>3</sup> "Swachand Bhraman Se Stri Bigad Jati Hai," *Arya Mahila*, February-April 1919.

## WOMEN'S RESPONSES IN PUNJABI BHAIN AND BHARAT BHAGINI

I focus here primarily on two periodicals, *Punjabi Bhain* (1907-18), a monthly in Punjabi, edited by Vir Singh and Harnam Kaur at the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur, and published at Wazir-i-Hind Press, Amritsar (later at a new press at Ferozepur), and *Bharat Bhagini*, a monthly in Hindi started in 1889, edited by Hardevi and published at Lahore (the periodical ceased to exist in July 1911). Most editorials in *Punjabi Bhain*, however, were written by a female persona. The title *Bharat Bhagini* (Sisters of India) already indicates the claim of Hindi to represent a sisterhood across 'Bharat' while *Punjabi Bhain* (Punjabi sisters) is content with a regional affiliation, although both had readership outside Punjab as well. Both the periodicals were embedded in local and personalized network of relationships, as suggested by their contents where biographical references are made to important citizens and donors.

The presses where these periodicals were printed often advertised their services in printing pamphlets, newspapers, cards, programmes, thus 'compositing' local social life and relationships. At the same time, the periodicals reached out to the larger world to establish networks along transnational axes. Both the periodicals usually consisted of 20-35 pages and included editorials, world and national news, biographical information on men and women engaged in reform, scientific achievements in the world, opinion pieces on social questions, domestic issues, health, household, cookery, children, stories, literary writings, letters, riddles, prayers, songs, homemade remedies, recommended books, and advertisements.

To make women aware about world events and inspire through example, the periodicals would carry news about women passing university exams, scientific inventions in Europe and America, professions for women in European, American and Chinese societies, activities of women's organizations abroad, women's societies such as the Society for Prevention of Foot Binding in Japan, Ramabai's travels, news of medical advancement, surgeries, travel, discoveries such as the washing machine that changed the face of domesticity in America, telecommunication, electricity generation from alternate sources and scientific explanations of phenomena.

It was through various forms and genres that these periodicals brought together and created their audiences and addressed various sensibilities. The amalgamation of old and new genres was used to formulate unprecedented experiences, problems, and dilemmas in various languages of emotion, reason, and anger. Articles and editorial notes in both the periodicals would frequently exhort women to subscribe in the name of sisterhood. One such note in *Punjabi Bhain* compares the numbers of women's magazines sold in Europe and wonders why Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women, who are all 'sisters', cannot achieve such numbers (*Punjabi Bhain*, September 1910). We also get a glimpse into the networks of readership, congregations, conferences, and institutions that sustained these worlds of print.

The genre of the periodical gained currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the time of reform and was influenced by Victorian British periodicals such as *The Light of Reason*, that was referred to frequently in both the periodicals under discussion (*Punjabi Bhain*, February 1911). The contributors cited the example of women contributing to the British public sphere, as a model where women charted their own destiny. A reader in *Bharat Bhagini*, in fact, suggests that Indian women should take cues from the Suffragette movement and women's organizations in Britain (*Bharat Bhagini*, June-July 1902). The debates about womanhood in these periodicals were informed by feminist debates in Europe but women also articulated the need to chart out and write their own modernity, distinct from the western model. The periodical as genre, rather than having a fixed meaning, should be regarded as a form that arose from a specific need to

define modernity at a crucial historical time. Both the periodicals, *Bharat Bhagini* and *Punjabi Bhain* were addressed to women and declared their intent as the reform and education of women. Both consisted of articles written by men and women. Women's responses in these journals are carefully woven through poetry, irony, wit and sometimes anger.

Editors and readers laid out the parameters of journalistic ethics that were to be followed. Objecting to the lack of journalistic ethics in the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim press in an article titled "Hai Anarth", a reader of *Punjabi Bhain* comments on how Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim press was involved in mudslinging and gaining cheap popularity by abusing and destroying each other's reputation. She says that educated men bad-mouth prominent names from each other's religious communities, thus provoking communal conflagration rather than following ethics. Such communal politics was keeping people of the nation apart. If the trend continued, the nation would destroy itself and the blame would fall on the educated classes, especially editors of the press (*Punjabi Bhain*, June-August 1914). In a spirited rebuttal to the Hindu and Sikh press, she suggests that people of all religions should unite in respecting their women rather than engage in divisive politics through them.

This was generally the tenor of both these periodicals in a context that was communally charged. Voices in these periodicals try to configure languages and ethics which can overcome the divided publics. Young students of the Sikh Kanya Maha Vidyalaya (SKM) would frequently distribute pamphlets on amity amongst religions. For example, 3000 copies of a pamphlet titled "Pyare Panth Guru Val Ik Bhain Da Sneha" (Message to the Panth from a Sister), conveying that communal tensions can be overcome through education, were distributed at the Second Sikh Educational Conference by students of the SKM. Amidst bitter controversy between the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha, *Punjabi Bhain* reports the visit of an Arya Samaj delegation at the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya. In turn, *Prakash*, a newspaper associated with the Arya Samaj expresses adulation for the single-handed efforts of Bhai Takht Singh in establishing a school for women and asks the Arya Samaj to emulate the same spirit (*Punjabi Bhain*, June-July, 1910). *Punjabi Bhain* also reported with pride Muslim delegations and educationists visiting the school who had words of praise for the school in the letters they wrote subsequently. Some of the people named were Wali Mohammed, Professor, MAO College, Aligarh, Abdul Aziz, Post master, Baluchistan, Kamal-uddin, Pleader, Ferozepur, Mohammad Shafi, Normal School, Lahore and Chirag Din, Pleader, Pakpattan (*Punjabi Bhain*, September 1912). Thus, they valiantly tried to build a consensus on women's education across religious boundaries. While the colonial and reform narratives employ the 'women's question' to support their own evaluations and interventions in 'Indian Culture', women's voices in these periodicals acquire an immediacy by being concerned about the everyday, the experiential rather than larger constructs of culture.

## WOMEN'S CLAIMS TO SUBJECTIVITY IN LITERARY WRITING

The periodicals became vehicles for women to publish their literary writing and experiment with genres. As reformers reinforced the idea of one language, one community, there was also a need to demonstrate the existence and indeed the superiority of literary cultures associated with each language. It was this need that impelled the reformers to include women in the production of substantial literature in these languages. In these journals, they conform, of course to the one language, one community formula, but this may not have been true of their reading practices outside the sanitized reform discourse.

Encouraged by reformers to produce literature in their 'own' language, women contributed in terms of editorials, serialized stories, poems, traditional forms such as chhand, baint, kabitt, jhok and dohra, which were shortened forms of what was traditionally considered a qissa. Farina Mir points out that print-versions of the traditional qissas were usually

“episodic” versions that narrated only a few scenes or episodes and took for granted the audience’s knowledge of the entire plot. These genres were “siharfi (thirty letters), baranmah (twelve months), sawal-jawab (question and answer), faryad (plea), jhok (abode), and chitthi (letter)” (Mir, 2010: 15). The genealogy of these oral traditions and their transmission and change into print has been further detailed by Frances Pritchett in *Marvelous Encounters*.

In these periodicals, traditional oral genres such as chhand, kavitt, dohra and baramasahs were modulated to express intimate experiences and individual emotions. They merged the embodied, affective charge of orality with the realism of commentary on education, religion and morality. As an example, I quote three verses from an anonymous composition, “*Fariyaad*” (*Punjabi Bhain*, September 1916):

*He panthdayaluhokripalu dal bhujangantarasde*

*De dan sanu vidya da, charantereparasde (1)*

*Kuchkhavane di chahnahipahinne di lor na*

*Hai aasdadi vidya di, eh sadi tor na (2)...*

*De dan vidya datya, phirpanth seva kaarlai*

*Nimaniya, nitaniya, niyaniya di saarlai (6)*

“O kind *panth* be merciful to us poor women

Give us the grant of education, we long at your feet

We do not want delicious food, nor do we want fancy clothes

We crave for education, do not disappoint us

By granting us the boon of education you will serve your *panth*

You would have served the meek, the weak and the marginalized”

Both the periodicals encouraged women to pursue their creativity because there was a new medium of publication available. The series “*Vichar Vridhak Ladi*” in *Punjabi Bhain* invited compositions from women and gave tips on the craft to new authors. Another series, “*Samasya Purti*” gave a rhyme that readers had to complete in the form of a chhand and send to be printed (*Punjabi Bhain*, June 1912). The periodical also recommended readings and book reviews on the art of writing poetry (*Punjabi Bhain*, April 1918). Similarly, serialized stories and novels by women authors were also published in *Bharat Bhagini*.

## **SOCIAL LIFE, DOMESTICITY, AND CULTURAL PRACTICES**

Recipes for healthy cooking, traditional remedies, domestic and child care columns were added to appeal to women’s interest. The informal, everyday tone of advice was also modulated by the scientific vocabulary of dietary requirements, calorific count, nutritional values of foods and their use. Similarly, women in these periodicals use the discourse of science to give primacy to motherhood as an experience central to their health. Thus, the reform anxiety about harnessing women’s reproductive capacities to produce a healthy race, is used to draw attention to the health and care that women need and duties of husbands towards the health and education of their wives.

The letters sent to the periodicals by women from places as far as Burma, Canada, and America demonstrate the transnational linkages that they were able to bring about. At the same time, they opened up the inner domains of women's lives to public gaze. A lot of these letters were published anonymously. Anonymity ensured that private struggle and discontent could be voiced even in bitter, angry tones. A whole range of letters divulge struggle between individual aspirations and social pressures, little acts of resistance against social expectations and a desire to constitute individual subjectivity through languages of modernity.

A letter in *Punjabi Bhain* regrets communal infighting between men and appeals to women not to provoke hatred further and continue to write for peace (*Punjabi Bhain*, June-July 1910). A vociferous critique of Hindu reform is presented in *Bharat Bhagini* (April 1902) in a note titled "Aryadharmā ki Nyunta" ("The Deficiency of Aryadharmā"). The writer contests the claim of Aryadharmā to have brought about women's upliftment through reform. Another letter in the same periodical complains that despite tall claims, women's lives are imprisoned within domesticity and illiteracy and that the only liberation possible is at end of life (*Bharat Bhagini*, May-June 1902).

Anonymous letters narrate the everyday experiential dilemmas that resulted from fractured experiences – split between ambition and domesticity in marital homes, modern education and traditional practices such as adorning oneself with jewellery, the rebellious acts of reading and gathering together and the chiding received. Very often, women write about the ignominy that parents of an educated girl had to face despite the tall claims of reform movements on women's education (*Punjabi Bhain*, May 1912).

Advertisements of books and musical instruments in both the periodicals under study point to the ways in which middle-class domestic womanhood and the concept of leisure time was being constructed by women. Much of the writing mentioned above, thus, shows that the concerns of reform patriarchies about women were in fact recast by women to construct a modern self in different ways. Issues such as gender discrimination and the economic rights of women were also addressed by both periodicals. Women also critique the efficacy of reform in the absence of property rights and economic security, a condition which pushed them into invisibility in economic processes (*Punjabi Bhain*, June-July 1910). A later issue of *Punjabi Bhain* also suggests that the Married Women's Property Act be amended so that property is not taken away from women after the death of their husbands (*Punjabi Bhain*, August 1916). This evidence shows that women's responses went beyond interventions into questions of domesticity and education to the reconfiguration of social and economic structures and gender relations within them as well.

Another essay in *Punjabi Bhain* undercuts the symbolic obeisance paid to mythological women while nothing is done to improve the everyday lives of real women. She uses Hindu mythology to cite intellectual attainments of women, for example, the Goddess Saraswati who gave *rag vidya* and contributed to the writing of Vedas but her race is still regarded as unintelligent- "*saraswati ki jati ko moorkhnahehsakte*" (*Punjabi Bhain*, November 1910). She regrets that Saraswati had been reduced to a mere sculpture to adorn homes. Women like Lopamudra and Vidyotama never acknowledged their authorship because of their humility and have therefore vanished from history. Therefore, she says, a new history is needed in which women are acknowledged. It is through these interventions that women engage with their idealized representations in colonial and reform discourses and negotiate with their everyday social experiences, prescribed cultural behaviours, and norms of domesticity.

## CONCLUSION

Women's writing in the two periodicals examined above suggests that one cannot simply assign conformist roles to an undifferentiated middle-class community of women who were sought to be reformed and modernized by reform patriarchies and the colonial state. They were not simply co-opted bystanders perpetuating hegemonic norms about community, religion, domesticity, and 'progressive' cultural practices. This paper has argued that to assume that women were by and large co-opted within a male discourse is to deny to them a history of contestation. The assumption that women formed part of the consensus created by dominant groups occludes forms of struggle that existed in social relations within these groups.

Women writing in the two periodicals, *Punjabi Bhain* and *Bharat Bhagini*, speak from within a dominant discourse, in fact, they acquire legitimacy to speak from this discourse that authorizes them. One can see them actively participating, mediating, and negotiating on questions of women's education, professions, politics and reading practices. They are sometimes co-opted, at other times they deploy their agency in various interesting ways, thus offering glimpses of what Partha Chatterjee calls "fragmented opposition" that can be traced through a "historically situated dynamics of dominance and subordination" (Nijhawan, 2006 refers to Chatterjee, 1993). Hence, women were not only "cultural and ideological objects of others' invention" but claimed ideological and political agency and subjectivity (Bannerji, 2001: 3).

As against the a historical, essentialized notions of womanhood, women in these periodicals offer the everyday, quotidian experience of struggle and discrimination that are frequently beyond the divisive concerns seen in the literature of the time. This is in contrast with the reform images of women as superstitious, bickering and unintelligent and requiring the superior authority of men as arbitrators.

Therefore, the periodical as a genre not only addressed a public but actually convened one. It was specific styles, genres, and idioms that became markers of this public. Although initiated with the purpose of moral advice and women's reform, these periodicals became vehicles for women's self-conscious emancipation, their connections with the outer world and their literary subjectivity. The public thus constituted was conscious of the need for a different voice, sometimes discordant with the dominant discourse. Thus, these newly emergent 'print publics', which were understood as gendered spaces offered new subject positions and modes of articulation to middle-class women.

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