



Defining Modernity through Education: Women's Responses from Colonial Punjab

Arti Minocha

Associate Professor, Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, India.

Corresponding Author: Arti Minocha, **Email:** artiminocha@lrsr.du.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

Late-19th and early-20th centuries in Punjab were times of ferment and formation of new class, caste, gender, and religious identities. The quest for a localized modernity at this historical juncture was spear-headed by reform movements of Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha, and Ahmaddiya reform movement, that predicated their quest on the construction of 'modern womanhood'. The new technology of print was used effectively by reform patriarchies to disseminate these representations of modern womanhood. While much has been written about these patriarchal reform movements that projected their own modernity through 'liberal improvements' in the condition of their women and by opening up to ideas of education and companionate marriages, the presence of women in this history has been elided over. This essay examines the print spheres in late-19th and early-20th century Punjab, especially the periodical press, to trace women's responses to reform prescriptions about their education and deportment. It is in this interplay between dominant discursive formations and alternative modes of articulation by women that multiple cultural meanings emerge.

Keywords: colonial Punjab, women's education, women's periodical press, reform movements in Punjab, print cultures in Punjab

INTRODUCTION

The cultural histories of late-19th and early-20th century colonial Punjab in the Indian subcontinent have been continuously analyzed and re-interpreted for their pertinence to the ways in which we construe national and regional identities, even in our contemporary present. In Punjab, this was also the time for the formation of new ‘print publics’, that is, new discursive spaces offered by print technology for negotiation of religious identities, solidarities, and civic concerns, that brought about a specific set of disruptions and changes in conceptions of the self and society. Numerous histories, biographies, travelogues, newspaper editorials, and articles written in colonial Punjab document these changes – both from the imperial point of view as well as through the eyes of the colonial subjects who inhabited the new public sphere made possible by print networks, public libraries, literary associations, and the rise of publicists (Suleman et al., 2021; Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020).

Histories of print cultures in Punjab have generally assumed that the new modes of print dissemination were appropriated by the reform presses of the Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha, and the Ahmaddiya movements to construct and fix religious identities and idealized images of modern women. If the print space is indeed analyzed as a gendered space, it is in terms of the patriarchal reform presses “recasting women” (Sangari & Vaid, 1989) and using their body, and their social and cultural practices as tropes to consolidate religious identities as well as a new modernity. This essay argues that this analytical trope of the reform patriarchies “recasting women” needs to be extended to locate self-constitution by women themselves (Anagol, 2005, p. 5). It particularly examines women’s responses in the periodical press to prescriptions about their education and deportment made by the reformers to construct ideal, modern women.

Late-19th century, that was a period of new caste, class, and religious formations in Punjab, was also a time for the consolidation of the middle-class which found new opportunities in the fields of education, administration, judiciary, and trade, and it used “the associational sphere to postulate its own hegemonic claims” (Stark, 2007, p. 146). Gradually the ‘modernizing’ middle-class elite wrested the initiative of reform from the colonial state and claimed the right to decide their own cultural practices, laws, and traditions. Hindu and Sikh reform movements, that is, the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha, projected their own modernity through ‘liberal improvements’ in the condition of their women by opening up to ideas of education and companionate marriages. In doing so, the “vernacular elite” (Sarkar, 2001) not only reconstituted patriarchy but also lay down prescriptions for ‘ideal femininity’ that transposed the traditional on to the modern.

These groups successfully mobilized the new technology of print to fix religious canon and practices, rewrite history, negotiate issues of modernity, tradition, languages, and idealized womanhood through pamphlets, periodicals, novels, poetry, science manuals, and other forms. Print was thus an important medium through which women entered public discourse as well as the changing ideas of public space in the 19th century. However, Punjab histories do not record any presence of real-life women in these evolving print publics, who enact their agency as writers, readers, editors, listeners, and participants in a potent site of contestation that the print sphere was. This gap in history can be countered by examining the periodical press of late-19th and early-20th centuries, especially the periodicals edited by women, and ones in which they write.

It is in this interplay between dominant discursive formations and alternative modes of articulation that a more wholesome understanding of cultural meanings emerges. It would thus be interesting to see how women, in their first, tentative articulations in print in colonial Punjab, deploy available subject positions to enunciate their self-fashioning in a complex cultural field of print.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that has been employed to study these voices that have hitherto been sidelined by history is a qualitative analysis of the print archives of Punjab. These contain official files, *Reports on Publications* issued by British authorities, and writing in English and vernacular languages. In this essay, I focus 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).

Women's Access to Print Spheres

Middle-class women in Punjab gained access to publishing and print in the second half of the 19th century, largely through educational institutions, presses set up by reform organizations and commercial presses set up by their fathers and husbands. Vernacular print material and periodicals for women were mostly initiated by schools, colleges, and institutions set up by reform organizations in late-19th century to counter the inroads made by Christian schools and European women in the zenanas. For example, the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur published *Punjabi Bhain* and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jullundur brought out *Panchal*

Pandita, periodicals devoted to the reform of women (*Punjabi Bhain* was a Gurmukhi monthly, started in 1908, published by the Singh Sabha through Bhai Vir Singh, the circulation of which was reported as 2000 in 1910, and in 1914 it was 2500, more than that of the *Tribune*, which was reported as 1830 in the same year. These statistics are as per the Report by the Assistant to the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Criminal Investigation Department, Punjab, on newspapers published in the Punjab for the year 1911, Home Political (B), No. 2-3, October 1912. *Panchal Pandita* was a Hindi monthly started in 1903, edited by Lala Dev Raj, with assistant editor, Sarala Devi, a teacher at the school, circulation 500).

Bharat Bhagini, another prominent Hindi monthly from Lahore was edited by Srimati Hardevi, daughter of late Rai Bahadur Kanhya Lal, Executive Engineer, Lahore and wife of Roshan Lal, barrister-at-law (as indicated in the periodical). *Sharif Bibi*, an Urdu monthly published from Lahore since 1894 maintained a circulation of about 300. As per the “Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals published in the Punjab during the year 1914”, the editor of the periodical was Fatima, daughter of Mahbub Alam, the editor and proprietor of *Paisa Akhbar*.

Women’s entry into print was thus largely premised on their religious affiliations. Most women who functioned as editors also happened to be wives, daughters, and family members of reformers. Therefore, their entry into print economy was in fact, initiated, mediated, and legitimized by reform men of specific religious associations. The desire of women to enter the domain of creativity and authorship and chart their own ‘modern’ literary evolution is also seen in literary writing in the periodicals. The periodicals were meant as vehicles to disseminate a normative understanding of modern womanhood. However, as they were participatory in nature, they managed to critically engage this gendered public in debates that were heterogenous and open-ended. They also provided space for new literary experiments that adapted oral modes and mythic imagination to a new realism.

Print proves to be a rife field in which multiple discourses intermingle and different models of womanhood and citizenship are debated. Women’s writing in these periodicals show how their self-perception was framed through a web of relations – to religion, community, state and to each-other. Sometimes they conjure an identity through language and religion, at other times through the commonality of being women. Sometimes women writing in these periodicals call for a unity beyond class and caste, at other times, these barriers undermine attempts at collectively. Yet, these early writings in periodicals find a resonance together, in that they provide a glimpse into the lived world and everyday negotiations of middle-class women.

Opinions on Education

One of the most significant issues on which these periodicals influenced public discourse was women's education. The force with which this issue was debated is exemplified by a report in *Bharat Bhagini*, on a Stri Satsang congregation at Hoshiarpur at the Bhagwati Putri Pathsala, established by Mai Bhagwati. It is reported that women from nearby villages congregated and resolved to take charge of their own destiny because they were tired of the empty promises made by reform groups. They declared that men would keep holding conferences, but societies would not improve till every woman in every home was educated by her own efforts (*Bharat Bhagini*, July-August 1902).

Women in these periodicals argued for an education that was not merely literacy but promised other accomplishments and entry into professions as well. There are largely two subject positions that are employed to negotiate for an education – the employment of the reformist discourse on women's education and the more assertive discourse of rights which claimed women's right to decide on the kind of education that they wanted. An article in *Punjabi Bhain* (August 1907) titled "Istriyan Layi Vidya di Lor" ("The Need of Education for Women") argues through the example of a popular Akbar-Birbal story, that educated women are needed to be companionate wives and responsible mothers. The strategy that is employed here is a claim to speak for all women for a cause that is ostensibly dear to men, that is, women's education. Yet another article titled "Vidya te Pativrata" ("Education and the Loyal Wife") *Punjabi Bhain*, March 1912) assuages through stories, the reform apprehension that education would be conflictual to the *pativrata* (loyal wife) ideal. The writer gives examples of mythological characters such as Maitreyi and Gargi to prove that educated women have high moral standards.

A similar reassurance is offered in *Bharat Bhagini* that men should not assume that education will lead to low character in women. In another instance, subject position is negotiated by allaying men's anxieties about educated women being out of control. A contributor in *Punjabi Bhain* reassures her Sikh brethren that even after women are allowed education, they will remain 'under their thumb' and will not become Suffragists. In fact, it is the men who require women with higher education to be doctors and principals to run institutions established by them (*Punjabi Bhain*, September 1912). A promise of loyalty is thus offered to demand higher education for women. Religious discourse is used as well to justify women's education. A writer in *Bharat Bhagini* presents an ingenuous argument that for the upper caste Hindu women to be touched by Christian doctors would amount to loss of religion, therefore, they needed to

be doctors themselves (*Bharat Bhagini*, January 1902). *Punjabi Bhain* reports that three thousand copies of a pamphlet titled “Pyare Panth Guru Val Ik Bhain da Sneha” (“Message to the Sikh Brethren from a Sister”) were distributed by the students of SKM at the Second Sikh Educational Conference, Lahore to appeal for women’s education for the betterment of the future generation of Sikhs.

Along with this stance of appeal, one can see the gradual emergence of the language of collective rights and sisterhood. This discourse of collective rights is used to demand western education and medical education, which women claim should not be that of glorified *dais* (midwives) but of professional medical doctors as in Russia (*Punjabi Bhain*, March 1912). An editorial in *Punjabi Bhain* (April 1917) in defence of equal education for women represents this subject position articulated through equal rights discourse. The editor says that learned men who argue that women are different from men and that their education should be different, use western philosophy and ‘natural’ difference expediently. Practices that are beneficial to men get sedimented as custom and become part of women’s ‘natural’ behaviour. She says that if women’s education is feared because it is believed to turn them into uncontrollable and argumentative beings and blind followers of western fashion, then this apprehension should work in the same manner for men (*Punjabi Bhain*, April 1917).

Another editorial in *Bharat Bhagini* takes a strident stance and notes that society cannot be reformed without taking women’s opinions and that passing resolutions and changing society are two different things. If men claim that education leads to immorality, they should not educate themselves for if it is the nature of fire to burn, it will burn both men and women (*Bharat Bhagini*, May-June 1902). In contrast to the reform literature which sought to glorify and preserve an idealized past and tradition, many utterances in these journals blame tradition for the misfortunes of women and regard the private domain as a site of oppression. An article in August 1909 *Punjabi Bhain* agrees with the idea of a glorious past when women had more rights but strikes a defiant note when the writer squarely blames men for women’s illiteracy.

Punjabi Bhain presented extensive discussions on higher education for women through the example of the Japanese University for Women, and in the process, it contemplated on various implications of curricula, education, and pedagogy used. Japan’s victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese war aroused keen sympathy and awe in India for the might of an Asian nation. The intense patriotism of the Japanese had taught Europe that “there is a limit to high-handedness and that a time comes when even the worm will turn” (Home Public (B), No. 28, August 1906). The Japanese example became a model for an alternative modernity that did not

have its foundations in the West. Women's entry into higher education and the curricula that they would be taught became subjects for fierce debates in the columns of these periodicals. The *Punjabi Bhain* cites the example of the Japanese University and Cambridge, an entire University town that admitted women, to argue for higher education for women in Punjab.

Following the Japanese example, the periodical suggests that the minimum age of matriculation should be sixteen years and that education should mean knowledge and maturity, not simply a degree. This was in the context of debates on the minimum age limit for matriculation at the Punjab University in 1905. The Senate of the Punjab University under the governorship of Denzil Ibbetson decided upon fourteen years as the minimum age for matriculation and not sixteen as suggested. H.W. Orange, the then Director General of Education had rejected the idea saying that those who want the age limit decreased also wanted courses to be shortened so that they could quickly get a BA degree and a subordinate position. Thus, the standards would be debased (Home Education (A), No. 63-4, October 1905). The periodical argued for a minimum age of sixteen years on similar grounds of substantial education rather than a functional degree.

The process of drawing up curricula suited to women was a very contentious one and invited a range of positions. One position was based on the liberal perspective of equality of women's education and the same curricula for men and women. Some others suggested that middle path be followed so that women's equality could be achieved and men could also be helped by educated women (*Punjabi Bhain*, April 1909). In the Sikh Kanya Maha Vidyalaya at Ferozepur, the curriculum included Hindi, English, Maths, Geography, History, *raag* and *swar*, *dastkari*, and *rasoi ghar*. Training to cook and sew was imparted as life-skills training for women. In a report on the working of the school, the editor cites examples of Sita and Draupadi who could survive only because of their training in household work. In this report, she aligns women's education with the skills needed to run a 'modern' household as also face the public sphere. She also gives examples of the Japanese queen who cooks for husband and Queen Victoria who has taught her daughters domestic work (*Punjabi Bhain*, November 1910).

Another position on women's education was that women needed an education that was different from the one designed for men. In an opinion argued out in *Punjabi Bhain*, a writer cites Plato, and English educationists Arnold and Ruskin to argue for women's education that is different from men. She argues that women need domestic education, say, Mrs Beaton's *Cookery*, not excessive academics, algebra, and geometry. Interestingly, subjects such as music, drawing, and painting are advocated as inclusions in the curriculum as women were

assumed to have ‘softer’ feelings. She also suggests that English language could be taught but other subjects should be taught in Punjabi. Higher degrees of matriculation and FA could have choices for Physiology, Chemistry, and Maths (*Punjabi Bhain*, April-June 1911). Such emphasis on education in domesticity and child-rearing was quite dominant in the reform discourse.

Yet, there are many other voices in *Punjabi Bhain* that critique this view of domestic education and call for higher education that would facilitate women’s entry into professions. Writers give examples from European universities, discuss women’s roles as part of the work economy and engage with their ‘modernity’ to assess what is worth emulation. One particular response cites the example of Miss Gemini, a Bengali woman who passed the Glasgow University exam for Medicine and became a member of the Doctor’s Royal Society. The writer asks how she could have achieved this if she was only taught only Bengali, Hindi, and cookery (*Punjabi Bhain*, September 1912). Yet another writer complains about the indifference of the reformers to women’s education while they passed formal resolutions. She argues that it is the debilitating domestic circumstances rather than ‘innate’ stupidity that hamper women’s efforts at education. Women are burdened with domestic chores, even if they are sent to school. In case of illness of family members or childbirth at home, they are called back from school for domestic chores. Marriage at an early age further hinders higher education (*Punjabi Bhain*, February 1916). A view presented in the December 1910 edition also appreciates the pedagogical practices adopted by the Japanese University, which provided conceptual, practical and social knowledge to inspire students to probe rather than kill learning. The curriculum also included programmes for spiritual well-being, physical exercises and financial literacy and that amounted to real education.

Both the periodicals report scientific experiments conducted worldwide and inspire women to adopt a scientific outlook. One of the ways in which modernity registers and affects women’s daily life, significantly, is the quickened pace of time through scientific inventions such as, rail, motor and telegraph (*Punjabi Bhain*, June 1913). This is evident in a response where a writer asks women not to define their modernity in a superfluous manner through clothes, but to value ‘time’ and use it effectively to develop their personalities. In another response, modernity is also defined in terms of a robust public sphere through open public spaces and a culture of open debate in households and outside (*Punjabi Bhain*, June 1913). The idea of science is localized to understand everyday lives and practices of women. For example, a writer argues that the printing of calendars based on solar cycle will help women minimize their dependence on

Brahmans for auspicious dates and festivals. The solar calendar is considered here as more 'scientific' and fixed rather than a lunar calendar (April-June 1911). The writer opines that in the days of liberalism and democracy, religion needs to be made more transparent.

In view of debates about the language of instruction for women and reform institutions advocating vernacular education for women, it is significant that there is strong advocacy of education in English in *Punjabi Bhain*. For example, in the June 1916 edition, Gurmukhi is suggested as the language of *dharmik sudhar* (religious improvement), whereas English is suggested as the language of *vyavharik sudhar* (behavioural improvement). Most provincial governments also rejected the idea of English education for women when financial assistance and scholarships were sought from them. The Punjab government also feared that women who had been trained in England would demand better salaries (Education, Education (A), No. 1-13, February 1915).

Both periodicals continue to inspire women by reporting examples of women who had achieved distinctions or worked for women's education. *Punjabi Bhain* reports that Miss Shukl Bihari was the first Punjabi woman to be admitted for study at Somerville College at the Oxford University (*Punjabi Bhain*, January 1917). The edition of May 1916 reported that three SKM girls were studying at Queen Mary's College, two in Kinnaird College and one student had also been admitted to Lady Hardinge Medical College. Once women become a part of the new print community, one can see gender-based solidarities beginning to emerge. One can say then that print gave to middle class women "collectively traversed legible spaces" (Nair, 2011, p. 265) and domains of experience that could be shared beyond communal antagonisms that were constantly provoked by newspapers and print.

CONCLUSION

The women's periodical press of the late-19th and early-20th centuries is an important medium to study women's own interventions in the questions of education that shaped their everyday lives. As mentioned in the essay, many of these periodicals were either instituted or supported by reform institutions and, in many cases, edited by male reformers. The intent of these periodicals was to promote women's education, to interpret a new modernity for them and provide a new rational and journalistic vocabulary of prose that expressed this modernity. There were a few periodicals, however, that were edited by women, and this brought them into the day-to-day processes of writing, editing, and gathering financial resources. Women writing in these periodicals argue for space in the public arena of education and professions, intervene

actively in discussions on the curricula and pedagogy of the education they should get, wrest the initiative to speak on their own behalf, discuss women's movements and universities across the globe, and imagine a solidarity.

However, their responses in these periodicals cannot be framed through spatial and temporal linearity and as a teleological story of their 'evolution' towards a discourse of rights. It is a story of multiple and sometimes, fractured responses and multiple strategies – of appeal, contestation, rebellion, rebuke and assimilation – and this story makes the history of Punjab more complex and multi-layered.

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