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The Press of Allahabad and the Politics of Womanhood: Chand and Nationalist Print Culture, 1922–1938

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Abstract

This article examines the development of the Hindi public sphere through *Chand*, a Hindi journal published from Allahabad between 1922 and 1940 that became an important site of women's engagement with nationalist politics. Situating *Chand* within the evolution of Hindi print culture—from Bharatendu Harishchandra's literary milieu in Benaras to women-oriented periodicals such as *Balabodhini*, *Saraswati*, *Madhuri*, and *Stree Darpan*—the article highlights its distinctive emphasis on female authorship and the “women's question.” Edited by Ramrakh Singh Sehgal and Vidhyawati Sehgal, and later by Mahadevi Varma, the journal featured prominent writers including Premchand and provided women writers a significant literary and political platform.

The article argues that nationalism, rather than an autonomous feminist consciousness, was the principal condition enabling women's entry into the Hindi public sphere. Concepts such as *stri-jati*, *strisamaj*, and *narishakti*, alongside Gandhian symbols of the charkha and khadi, helped construct women as collective political subjects. Reports on women's imprisonment, satyagraha, and political activism further expanded their public visibility. Drawing on Francesca Orsini, Partha Chatterjee, and Nira Yuval-Davis, the article contends that while *Chand* advanced women's participation in nationalist life, it also reproduced gendered limits by tying political agency to domestic duty and patriarchal sanction. A brief comparison with Bengali and Urdu women's periodicals places *Chand* within the wider multilingual landscape of vernacular women's print culture in colonial India.

Keywords: Hindi Public Sphere; Chand; Nationalism; Gender; Women's Print Culture; Colonial North India

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I. Introduction

Historians of the public sphere have long asked how different social groups gained entry into it. Sandria Freitag's work on oratory and performance shows how forms such as *katha* and street theatre carried "semi-literate" and "rural" audiences into public life in the towns of the United Provinces.¹ Bayly, similarly, has located a north Indian public sphere sustained as much by cultural performance as by print, through which political messages travelled between elites and ordinary people.² Print, nonetheless, reshaped this arena in its own right: Natalie Zemon Davis linked the advent of print to the intellectual ferment of the Renaissance, while Benedict Anderson made the more far-reaching claim that print capitalism itself produced the imagined communities on which modern nationalism depends.³ The Indian press, though it arrived comparatively late, expanded quickly after 1820 and was never confined to a narrow elite readership.⁴ This article turns to a still under-examined strand of that expanding print culture — the entry of literate women into the Hindi periodical press — through a close reading of one Allahabad journal, *Chand*.

This article's central claim is that *Chand* brought women into the nationalist public sphere largely on instrumental grounds. Education, political visibility, and public activity were sanctioned for women again and again as *sevā* — service to the nation — rather than as entitlements women could claim in their own right. Yet the journal was not wholly contained by this logic: its pages also preserve moments in which women contributors pressed against the authority of husbands, guardians, or the prevailing education system on terms that cannot be reduced to national usefulness. The first, dominant tendency is termed here *nationalist accommodation*; the second, rarer one is reserved for the label *feminist consciousness*, understood specifically as criticism directed at patriarchal authority itself rather than at one nameable social evil. Holding the two apart matters because they are so easily mistaken for one another. To argue that women should be educated so that they might serve the nation better is not the same claim as arguing that women should be educated because the existing order treats them unjustly — even though a single column, or a single sentence, of the journal can contain both. Keeping these two registers distinct, rather than reading *Chand*'s treatment of women as one

1 Katha was patronised by elites of Benaras, while street theatre and recitation represented lower-class entertainment. Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, (California: University of California Press, 1989), 32.

2 Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information, Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 238.

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso Books, 1983).

4 Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information, Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 238.

undifferentiated body of “women’s writing,” is the analytical work of what follows, and it is where this article seeks to add something to existing scholarship on the Hindi women’s press, which has tended to read journals such as *Chand* as more or less straightforward evidence of an emergent “feminist consciousness” without stating precisely what would separate that consciousness from nationalist reform rhetoric more generally.

The phrase “Hindi public sphere” is used throughout in a sense drawn from Francesca Orsini rather than transplanted wholesale from Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere took shape in the coffee houses, salons, and literary and table societies of eighteenth-century Britain, France, and Germany, and was constructed in deliberate contrast to a “plebeian” counterpart; gender received little attention in his account, a gap critics such as Joan B. Landes identified early.⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty’s broader warning is also relevant here — that categories drawn from European political thought cannot simply be lifted into third-world historiography.⁶ Orsini’s own account of the Hindi case distinguishes two aspects that mark its difference from Habermas’s model: a normative sense, in which “public” was understood through the idiom of *jati*, or caste, and a critical sense, in which existing norms and consensus were opened to challenge, whether in the name of reason or in defence of some particular interest.⁷ It is the second, critical sense that structures the argument below: a print-mediated space, built out of subscriptions, editorials, readers’ letters, and the wider circulation of nationalist and reformist argument in the Nagari script, within which existing norms — including those governing women — were increasingly placed under question, even as the sphere itself remained, in the normative sense Orsini identifies, bounded by caste. Women were never merely an audience within this space; the sections that follow show them becoming, increasingly, its authors as well, even as male editors went on setting many of its terms.

The evidence considered here is drawn from issues of *Chand* published between 1922 and 1938 — a span covering the editorship of Ramrakh Singh Sehgal and Vidhyawati Sehgal (1922–32) and, afterward, of Mahadevi Varma (1932–38) — together with its two special numbers, the *Achhut Ank* (1927) and *Vidhwa Ank* (1926).⁸ Editorials, feature articles, the *Samachar Sangrah* news column, and

5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). On the omission of gender, see Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal,” in *Subaltern Studies VIII*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

7 Francesca Orsini, “What Did They Mean by ‘Public’? Language, Literature and the Politics of Nationalism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 7 (1999): 409–16.

8 [Author to confirm: name the repository or collection in which these issues of *Chand* were consulted, and state whether the study draws on a complete run of the journal for 1922–38 or a representative sample selected on

the *Chitthi-Patri* letters section receive the closest attention, since it is here that the friction between editorial framing and readers' own voices — the concern at the heart of this article — is easiest to observe directly. Given persistently low literacy among Hindi-speaking women across this period, both *Chand's* readership and its pool of contributors were necessarily narrow and largely urban middle-class, drawn from Aggarwal, Kayastha, Brahmin, Thakur, and Khatri families. The argument that follows is offered as a claim about this specific stratum, not as a generalisation about Hindi-speaking women as a whole.

The discussion proceeds as follows. Section II traces the broader emergence of Hindi as a national language in Allahabad; Section III turns to the specific circumstances of *Chand's* founding and its succession of editors; Section IV situates the journal within the wider political currents — Dalit assertion, pan-Islamism, Congress mobilisation — against which it wrote, and compares it with its immediate Hindi-language peers. Section V examines *Chand's* own vocabulary for addressing women; Sections VI through VIII turn, respectively, to its treatment of national service, political knowledge, and Gandhian symbolism; Section IX sets this material against the contemporary Bengali and Urdu women's press; and the conclusion returns to the distinction between nationalist accommodation and feminist consciousness introduced above.

II. Development of Hindi as a Language in Allahabad

Language has, in many national contexts, done crucial ideological work for nationalism, and Anderson's account of the "imagined community" gives one influential reason why.⁹ In the Hindi case, British administrators and Hindu nationalist reformers pursued distinct but converging projects, and Hindi consequently developed along three fronts at once: it was prised apart from Urdu, standardised through grammars and schooling, and furnished with a genealogy reaching back into an invented historical past.¹⁰ Bodies such as the Nagari Pracharini Sabha of Benaras (founded 1893) and the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan of Allahabad (founded 1910) drove this project of promoting Hindi and the Nagari script. Women's journals participated in this promotional work: *Saraswati* reported on the Sabha's activities and reviewed its publications, including its first title, *Hindi Navratna*.¹¹ The Sabha's own stated criteria.]

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso Books, 1983).

10 Vasudha Dalmia has shown how the British codified Hindi and the role played by Fort William College, founded in Calcutta in 1800, where Hindavi was treated as distinctively Hindu and separated from the language of Muslims, leading to separate departments of Hindi and Urdu at the college. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhartendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 147. See also Jurgen Lutt, *Hindu Nationalism in Uttar Pradesh, 1867–1900*, (Stuttgart, 1970).

11 *Saraswati*, November 1911, p. 30.

quarterly, *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, went further still, actively yoking the idea of “Hindustan” to Hindi — Dharendra Verma’s pieces “Hindustan ki Vartaman Boliyon ke Vibhag” and “Unka Prachin Janpadon se Sambandh” both argued for Hindi’s superiority over rival languages.¹² Orsini reads this period as one in which nationalist propaganda and literary activity converged, with the United Provinces functioning as something like the epicentre of a Hindi movement shot through with anti-Muslim sentiment.¹³

This claim to Hindi’s superiority, advanced by its editors and authors, drew reinforcement from both the print sphere and the educational system. Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, writing in “Hindi hi Rashtrabhasha Hone ke Yogya,” insisted that Hindi alone could serve as India’s *rashtrabhasha*, or national language.¹⁴ Orsini’s own research complicates this picture somewhat: Hindi and Urdu functioned, in practice, as parts of a single “osmotic literary system,” even as print technology increasingly gave the two languages separate institutional lives.¹⁵ It was this process of standardisation, in any case, that opened space for the journals and literature examined in the rest of this article — printed matter read here not chiefly as evidence of linguistic politics but as a record of women’s own thought.

III. Harishchandra, the Founding of *Chand*, and Its Editors

Christopher King has shown that Hindi publishing between 1868 and 1925 leaned increasingly on an idiom of “Hindi heritage” set against “Islamic heritage,” so that the balance of publication shifted steadily from Urdu toward Hindi; Premchand himself, a Kayastha who had begun writing in Urdu, made this switch after 1920 and went on to contribute to *Chand*.¹⁶ The language itself grew more Sanskritised across this period, as writers worked deliberately to widen the distance separating it from Urdu.¹⁷ Harishchandra’s contribution to this development was centred in Benaras, while Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi pursued the parallel project of standardisation from Allahabad; the journals Harishchandra edited carried an unmistakably nationalist tone. His first venture, *Kavivachansudha* (1868), addressed the cultural, social, political, and religious habits of Hindus and printed readers’ letters, already establishing a dialogue with its audience. *Balabodhini*, launched in 1874, was the first Hindi journal aimed exclusively at women, notwithstanding an entirely male roster of contributors. Vasudha

12 *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, (Kashi Pracharini Sabha, 1920).

13 Christopher Rolland King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 12.

14 *Chand*, March 1922, p. 324.

15 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 68.

16 Christopher Rolland King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37.

17 Alok Rai, “Thinking Through Hindi,” in *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 193.

Dalmia's account of the journal is worth quoting at some length:

“*Balabodhini* contributed its share to the creation of the new domestic model. To this end were offered the many *charitras* i.e. portraits of ideal women both Indian (Savitri) and foreign (Joan of Arc), who in the guise of traditional models, in fact depicted new gender roles. The women were virtuous, chaste and pure. In these sketches as in many columns filled with good advice regarding the duties of the housewives there was no discussion of social reforms, mostly revolving around the status of women in Hindu society, which so preoccupied the vernacular papers addressed to the general public, where some consensus around these issues formed a vital constituent of the self-perception of the emergent middle class.”¹⁸

It was *Balabodhini*, in this sense, that cleared the ground for the later run of Hindi journals addressed to women, among them *Saraswati*, *Madhuri*, *Stree Darpan*, and *Chand*.

A cluster of comparable journals, edited variously by men and women, appeared across the 1900s to the 1940s: *Stree Darpan* (1909–28) under Rameshwari Nehru; *Grihalakshmi* (1909–29), edited in practice by Thakur Srinath Singh though published under the name of Smt Gopaldevi; *Arya Mahila* (1917–48), edited by Smt Surathkumari Devi; *Madhuri* (1922–50), whose *mahila manoranjan* (“women’s entertainment”) section drew contributions from a range of women writers; and *Chand* itself. Ramrakh Singh Sehgal founded *Chand* in Allahabad in 1922 together with R. M. Laghate, with financial backing from Seth Ram Gopal Mehta. Sehgal’s own political credentials lay with the Allahabad Congress and the Non-Cooperation Movement; he had been part of the first Congress delegation sent to tour the Avadh countryside during the peasant agitation there.¹⁹ His wife, Vidhyawati Sehgal, co-edited the journal from 1922 to 1932, at which point declining health forced Sehgal’s resignation and Mahadevi Varma assumed the editorship.²⁰ Varma’s tenure proved brief: her decision to publish Hindi translations of Yone Noguchi’s poetry strained relations with the journal’s management, and her final issue appeared in July 1938. Chatursen Shastri took over from 1938 to 1941, by which time *Chand* had already shed much of the readership it commanded under Varma.

This sequence of editors matters directly for how the journal’s contents ought to be read. Through

18 Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhartendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 247, 249.

19 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 267.

20 Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 225.

most of the 1920s, the editorial voice of *Chand* — its unsigned editorials, its framing notices, its replies in the *Chitthi-Patri* column — was Sehgal's, a man whose political attachments lay firmly with Congress; when the journal presses women toward *sevā*, or admonishes a correspondent for wanting more independence than her husband will grant, it is his voice doing the arguing, not a female contributor's. After 1932, that editorial voice belonged instead to Mahadevi Varma, one of the era's most celebrated Hindi poets. This is not a merely cosmetic distinction. A claim that women's public activity serves the nation carries a different weight, and arguably represents a different politics altogether, depending on whether the founding male editor is making it to a female readership or a woman editor is making it to her own constituency. In what follows, editorial material is attributed by name — to Sehgal or to Varma — and kept distinct from the contributions of named or pseudonymous writers, since to collapse the two would mean treating material addressed *at* women, in a great many instances, as though it had been argued *by* them.

IV. Nation, Print, and the Woman Reader in *Chand*

Chand did not emerge in isolation from its political moment. Nandini Gooptu has argued that several distinct developments — Dalit assertion, pan-Islamism, nationalist mobilisation, and Congress's turn to mass politics — converged in the early twentieth century to produce the highly charged political climate against which the journal was written.²¹ Orsini traces the growth of Hindi's popularity alongside a network of literary societies centred on Benaras and Allahabad, among them a Nagari Pracharini Sabha founded by students of Queen's Collegiate School in Benaras, whose members translated books into Nagari and publicised Hindi's progress through the newspapers, and the Bareilly Tattvabodhini Sabha, which performed a comparable role with the backing of M. Kempson, the North-Western Provinces' Director of Public Instruction; women's journals such as *Chand*, Orsini notes, kept up a steady stream of reporting on these societies' activities.²²

Against this backdrop, *Chand* addressed itself principally to a female readership, notwithstanding the presence of male contributors in its pages. A number of its women writers subsequently achieved wider prominence in Hindi letters — Mahadevi Varma's own literary career, for instance, owed something to the platform *Chand*'s columns had given her.²³ Where *stri upyogi* literature had confined

²¹ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²² Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²³ Vir Bharat Talwar, "Feminist Consciousness in Women's Journals in Hindi, 1910–20," in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989).

women strictly to domestic concerns and steered clear of political or reformist comment,²⁴ *Chand* broke that pattern, placing the “woman question” squarely within its nationalist coverage and casting women consistently as protagonists across its poems, stories, news items, letters, and serialised fiction. Its readers also received political news reaching well beyond national borders, a marked contrast with journals such as *Grihalakshmi*, which stayed within a strictly domestic compass.

Chand, in other words, formed one node within a larger Hindi-language field that made women its subject — a field that also included *Stree Darpan*, *Madhuri*, *Grihalakshmi*, and *Mahila Sarvasva* — and the phenomenon was by no means confined to Hindi: comparable journals appeared in Bengali (*Antahpur*, *Bamabodhini Patrika*), Marathi, and Urdu (*Tahzib un-Niswan*, *Khatun*, *Ismat*), a comparison this article returns to more fully in Section IX.

Yet the journals within this Hindi-language field were far from ideologically uniform, and the contrasts between them help clarify what set *Chand* apart. Shobhna Nijhwan’s comparative reading of the period’s Hindi women’s press finds *Grihalakshmi* largely tethered to domesticity, however much it gestured toward wider social concerns, and *Stree Darpan* committed to inclusiveness while carefully preserving political neutrality. *Chand*, by comparison, spoke to women across social groups, condemned tyranny more openly, and drew a direct line between patriarchy and broader social ills without ever adopting an anti-male stance, treating the cultivation of political and civic awareness as more central to its purpose than the transmission of domestic skill.²⁵ This contrast bears directly on the argument advanced here. Precisely because *Chand* positioned itself, relative to its Hindi peers, as the more overtly political journal and the one most willing to name patriarchy as a social problem, its continuing reliance on a *sevā*-centred, nationalist justification for women’s public role — the subject of Section VI below — deserves closer scrutiny than it has usually received. The tension between the journal’s comparatively bold social criticism and its comparatively conventional grounds for making that criticism runs through everything that follows.

Anderson’s framework suggests one way of reading this material: print capitalism and rising literacy as forces that built an “imagined community” within the Hindi public sphere, with *Chand*’s content offering a route into that community as seen by literate women themselves.²⁶ The community *Chand*

24 This form of literature generally focused on issues of domesticity; women were not treated as active political agents by journals like *Saraswati* and *Madhuri*, which focused solely on private-sphere matters such as cooking and healthcare and avoided commenting on women’s reform or public issues.

25 Shobhna Nijhwan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

26 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso Books, 1983).

imagined, however, was never simply a community of women. For most of the period examined here, both the space itself and its editorial framing were set by Hindu men engaged in defining the boundaries of a “Hindu” nation, even as those same pages increasingly recorded women’s own efforts to negotiate greater autonomy within, and at moments against, that framing. Gail Minault has described a similar dynamic in the Urdu press, where women writers took up the concerns of Muslim women even while working within boundaries largely set by male editors and reformers;²⁷ much the same can be said of *Chand*. The titles of these Hindi journals register this framing on their own terms: *Grihalakshmi*, “goddess of the house,” addresses its reader through an idiom of domestic femininity that *Chand*, as the sections below show, only partly managed to shed.

V. Categories of Address: *Strijati*, *Strisamaj*, *Narishakti*

Chand drew on a pre-existing vocabulary of address that placed women squarely as protagonists in the nationalist debates of the day: *strijati* and *narimandal*, denoting Indian womankind collectively; *strisamaj*, used for women’s societies; *strijan*, for smaller groupings of women; *hindi bhashini*, marking out women who spoke Hindi; and *narishakti*, the power of women. None of these terms functioned as a neutral label. Each was itself an act of organisation, an attempt to construct women as a collective political constituency whose energies could be marshalled for the national struggle. Shrimati Mandala Devi’s invocation of *nari shakti*, for instance, was made in the service of a historical argument about women’s power (*kranti*) across the world: “the power of women in this world is endless, and that power is elaborated not only in the Puranas but in world history also.”²⁸

Mandala Devi’s argument is a clear instance of nationalist accommodation rather than feminist consciousness in the sense defined above: the claim being made is not that women deserve power in their own right, but that women’s power is historically demonstrable and therefore usable — by the nation, in the nation’s cause. The distinction is worth holding onto because it recurs, with variations, through nearly every category of address examined in the sections that follow.

Alongside this vocabulary of collective address, Orsini has identified five recurring character-types through which *Chand* and its peers represented women in fiction and biography: historical *virangana* (women warriors), literary heroines refashioned from figures such as Sita and Savitri, widows and

27 Gail Minault, “Urdu Women’s Magazines in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Gender, Language, and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009).

28 *Chand*, 1922: “संसार में नारी की शक्ति अनंत है और उस शक्ति का वर्णन केवल पुराणों में ही कथारूप से वर्णित नहीं है परन्तु संसार के इतिहास में भी अनेक उदाहरण हैं।”

reformed prostitutes, *svayamsevikas* (volunteers), and housewives — each shown interacting with the world beyond the household in ways framed, consistently, as a form of *sevā*.²⁹ This typology is useful here because it shows how thoroughly the logic of nationalist accommodation extended even into fiction and biography: whether *Chand* was depicting a legendary queen, a reformed widow, or an ordinary volunteer, the terms on which she was permitted to act in public remained substantially the same.

VI. Nation, Service, and the Woman Question

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman the whole world is my country.”³⁰

At particular junctures in their own struggles, Western feminists have rejected the category of the nation altogether; women’s participation in anti-imperial nationalist movements, however, generally set feminism in the Third World on a different course from its Western counterpart.³¹ The experiences of women outside the West, on this reading, diverged sharply from those within it.³² Ganga Devi’s “Deshvyapi Kranti mein Striyon ka Bhag” captured something of this divergence, describing women who went to jail, joined strikes alongside men, and stepped outside purdah in order to take part in the movement.³³ Nationalism, on this account, opened space for a socio-politically engaged female readership whose concerns ranged from the domestic to the political,³⁴ and it was nationalism, rather than any autonomous claim to rights, that supplied the principal impetus for women’s entry into the Hindi public sphere. Sehgal made this connection explicit in one editorial note, reaching for the revolutions of England and France to underline the importance of equality and independence: he wrote that “the revolutions that occurred in England and France a century or two ago were spurred by the idea of equality and independence.”³⁵

29 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291.

30 Virginia Woolf, *The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 861.

31 Mrinalini Sinha, “Gender and Nation,” in *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 232.

32 Kumari Jayawardena has shown the emergence of a local discourse of feminism embedded with nationalism, unlike the feminist movements of the western world. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Verso Books, 2016).

33 *Chand*, August 1924, p. 492.

34 Shobhna Nijhwan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

35 Ramrakh Singh Sehgal, editorial note, *Chand*, July 1923, p. 217: “एक या दो शताब्दी पहले जो फ्रांस और इंग्लैंड में क्रांति हुई उस का भी ध्येय समानता और स्वतंत्रता था।”

Writing elsewhere in the journal, Sarla Bai Nayak described the present moment not as *kalyug* but as *kranti yug*, an age of revolution;³⁶ for her, equality and freedom for women specifically formed the very basis of this *kranti*, a formulation that moves some distance beyond Sehgal's purely instrumental framing, even if it stops short of naming patriarchal authority as the obstacle in its own right.³⁷ A number of male contributors, for their part, deployed the language of gender to show how women could reproduce cultural and national boundaries — precisely the use of gender that Nira Yuval-Davis identifies as marking territory and reproducing the nation's own narrative rather than advancing women's claims.³⁸ Sehgal's editorial "Rashtriya Jeevan mein Stri ka Mahatva" makes the point with particular clarity: it argues for women's centrality to *rashtriya jivan*, the life of the nation, on the grounds that only women can pass cultural education and love of country to children, accepting Western material and scientific superiority while insisting that an unchanged "essence" of national culture be preserved within the domestic sphere — the same distinction between an accepted "outer," material domain and a protected "inner," spiritual one that Partha Chatterjee identifies as central to nationalist thought.³⁹ Women, on this formulation, are put to instrumental use twice over: first as the vehicle carrying national culture forward, and second as the boundary marking off an "other" from which that culture must be defended.⁴⁰

This instrumental logic met at least occasional resistance. Vidhyawati Sehgal, co-editor from 1922 to 1932, argued in "Samajik Sudharako ki Avashyakta" that only education could help women rid themselves of harmful social practices, and went further than most of the journal's contributors in criticising the education system on terms set by women's own interests rather than the nation's: she wrote plainly that "the existing education system of our country is harmful for the individual life of women and for society."⁴¹ The contrast between this claim and her husband's editorial is instructive. Where Ramrakh Sehgal locates women's worth in what they can do *for* the nation, Vidhyawati Sehgal names a harm done *to* women that stands independent of whatever national benefit might follow from correcting it. Passages of this kind are rare set against the sheer volume of nationalist-instrumental material the journal carries, but they are not absent, and it is passages like this one that this article treats as evidence of feminist consciousness in the strict sense, rather than of nationalist accommodation.

36 *Kaliyug* is understood as the "age of Kali" and as the last of the four stages of the Hindu cosmic cycle.

37 Sarla Bai Nayak, *Chand*, May 1922, pp. 95–96.

38 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 13.

39 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989), 237.

40 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 46.

41 Vidhyawati Sehgal, "Samajik Sudharako ki Avashyakta," *Chand*, November 1923, p. 14: "जो शिक्षा प्रणाली हमारे देश में है, वह औरतों के व्यक्तिगत जीवन और समाज के लिए हानिकारक है।"

Political rights were treated in a similarly mixed register. Pieces on the right to vote (*nirvachan adhikar*) recurred throughout the journal's run, and *Chand*'s own coverage suggested that Indian women met with comparatively little organised opposition to the franchise, unlike the suffrage campaigns fought by women in the West.⁴² This confident comparison, offered by the journal's own writers, deserves some scepticism: it glosses over substantial regional and communal variation in how enfranchisement was actually debated within India, and stands as an example of *Chand* generalising about "Indian women" from evidence that was, in practice, drawn from its own predominantly Hindu, middle-class readership. Some women writers turned instead to historical exemplars: Shanti Devi, for instance, invoked Mirabai to argue that women had long served as active historical agents.⁴³ Others reached instead for the vocabulary of *sevā*: Kumari V. A., in "Seva Sadan," described Indian women serving both nation and household in the manner of Sita.⁴⁴ Orsini's term for what is doing the work here is *sevā-dharma*, service understood as a religiously and socially sanctioned duty, and she argues that this concept operated throughout the Hindi women's press to extend women's activity beyond the household even as it simultaneously reshaped their domestic obligations — turning housewives into *svayamsevikas*, volunteers, and teachers, all without disturbing the underlying claim that Indian society itself rested on the principle of *sevā-dharma*.⁴⁵ *Chand* gave this logic particularly forceful expression. The concept was genuinely enabling for women even as it constrained them: it opened a legitimate route into public life, while making sure that route ran, quite explicitly, through service rather than through any claim to autonomy. Sharda Kumari Devi, editor of *Mahila Darpan* and a contributor to *Chand*, put this logic of equivalence in explicit terms in "Bhartiya Striyon ka Mahatva," writing that "daughters and sons have an equal share in the service of India."⁴⁶ The claim on offer is one of equal *duty*, not equal *right* — a formulation entirely characteristic of nationalist accommodation as this article has defined it.

The journal's photography followed the same pattern. It featured prominent women credited with stirring nationalist sentiment, such as Vijaylakshmi Pandit among the women of Allahabad (fig. 2.1), and Krishna Nehru pictured picketing shops that sold foreign cloth (fig. 2.2), alongside ordinary women who practised satyagraha or went to jail. Taken together, this visual reportage worked, much like the textual material discussed above, to render women's political visibility legible specifically

42 "Mahilaon ka Nirvachan Adhikar," reporting a statement by education minister Dr Gaudgeez on the importance of women's voting rights in Burma. [Author to verify this attribution against the original issue.]

43 Shanti Devi, "Mirabai," *Chand*, October 1928, p. 68.

44 Kumari V. A., "Seva Sadan," *Chand*, 1930, p. 344.

45 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291.

46 Sharda Kumari Devi, "Bhartiya Striyon ka Mahatva," *Chand*, November 1922, pp. 22–23: "भारत की सेवा में जतिना भाग सुपुत्र का है उतना ही भाग सुपुत्री का भी है।"

as a form of national service — heroism measured against sacrifice for the nation rather than against any autonomous political claim.

VII. Political Knowledge for Women

André Beteille has argued that societies which treat both public and private life as fundamental values expect individuals to move competently between the two domains;⁴⁷ *Chand* asked precisely this of its women readers. Its *Samachar Sangrah* (news digest) column kept up a steady supply of “political news” for its female audience, setting *Chand* apart from journals such as *Grihalakshmi* that stayed confined to domestic matters. Sushila Devi Nigam argued, in “Samachar Patron ke Labh,” that Indian women ought to become committed newspaper readers, pointing out that women elsewhere in the world were routinely seen with the press in hand.⁴⁸ Local reporting carried the same logic into everyday life: Bimla Devi’s “Striyon ka Swadeshi Prem” noted that “women who bathe in the Yamuna have started wearing khadi,”⁴⁹ turning an ordinary choice of dress into evidence of political awareness. “Madrasi Mahilao mein Jagriti” reported Dr Muthulakshmi’s resignation from the deputy presidency of the Madras Council so that she could commit herself more fully to the national movement,⁵⁰ and *Samachar Sangrah* regularly carried accounts of women picketing alongside men during satyagraha, including Parvati Devi’s remark that “until this country is free, no one should sleep peacefully.”⁵¹

The journal also printed lists of women sent to prison — Rukmani Lakshmi pathi of Madras University (one year), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay of the All India Women’s Association (six months), Sarojini Naidu (one year) — alongside images that equated the goddess Lakshmi with Bharat Mata at Diwali.⁵² Individually these are unremarkable items of reportage; together, their cumulative effect was to build a specifically *political* readership for the journal, one for whom imprisonment, picketing, and public sacrifice became recognisable and, by implication, aspirational. This reporting extended into questions of law. Bholadas, in “Hindu Law mein Striyon ke Adhikar,” criticised Section 314 of the Indian Penal Code for allowing a man multiple marriages while denying a divorced woman the right to remarry during her husband’s lifetime, concluding bluntly that “Hindu law has shortcom -

47 André Beteille, “The Public as a Social Category,” in *The Public and the Private: Issues of Domesticity and Citizenship*, ed. Gurpreet Mahajan, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 38.

48 Sushila Devi Nigam, “Samachar Patron ke Labh,” *Chand*, 1923, pp. 42–45.

49 Bimla Devi, “Striyon ka Swadeshi Prem,” *Chand*, 1932, p. 332.

50 “Madrasi Mahilao mein Jagriti,” *Chand*, 1930, p. 333.

51 Parvati Devi, quoted in “Sanyukt Prant,” *Chand*, n.d.

52 Shobhna Nijhwan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–7.

- ings.”⁵³ When the Sarda Act was passed, *Chand* argued that its minimum ages had been set too low, and should instead have stood at sixteen and twenty-four.⁵⁴ Struggles from elsewhere in the country received the same treatment — women of the Bombay Presidency, Leelavati Munshi, Indumati Goenka, students of Ahmedabad High School, and Lakshmi Vayamma of Madras were all praised for acts of civil disobedience — and the journal itself did not escape censorship.

Up to 1930, *Chand* had expressed its nationalist commitments cautiously, largely through the small news items and social-reform coverage described above. That changed in January 1929, when Sehgal announced the journal’s intention to serialise Pandit Sundarlal’s nationalist history *Bharat mein Aingrezi Rajya*. The book was banned almost at once, and by June 1929 *Chand* itself had been abruptly struck from official recommendation in schools and public libraries after years of being listed there — the beginning of the repeated prohibitions and financial strain, compounded later by similar restrictions on Sehgal’s other weekly, *Bhavishya*, that dogged the journal for the rest of its run.⁵⁵ The timing bears noting: *Chand*’s own circulation had in fact grown considerably across these same years, from roughly 1,000 in 1927 to some 15,000 by 1930, helped along by aggressive advertising and, until the ban, by the very government recommendation subsequently withdrawn.⁵⁶ The journal criticised the Press Ordinance Act directly in its own *Sampadakiya Vichar* column, writing in one editorial note that “our national presses have been hit badly” by the Act, “and as a result several journals and magazines have been shut down.”⁵⁷ Section 124-A was invoked separately when Maithilisharan Gupt’s *Eesh Prarthana* was seized.⁵⁸ Taken as a whole, this material — jail lists, legal criticism, and the journal’s own brush with censorship — did more than record events; it modelled for readers what a politically literate woman’s relationship to the colonial state might actually look like, spanning voting rights, imprisonment, and the simple act of reading a newspaper. *Chand*’s standing on this front was acknowledged even by colonial officials: Justice B. J. Dalal of the Allahabad High Court wrote to Sehgal that “your office is a production of great taste and beauty,” praising the journal directly.⁵⁹

53 Bholadas, “Hindu Law mein Striyon ke Adhikar,” *Chand*, September 1930, p. 389.

54 *Chand*, on the Sarda Act’s minimum age provisions.

55 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

56 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 276.

57 “Sampadakiya Vichar,” *Chand*, n.d.

58 *Chand*, March 1933, p. 123.

59 Justice B. J. Dalal to Ramrakh Singh Sehgal, quoted in *Chand*, 1930.

VIII. Gandhi's Influence on Women's Writing in *Chand*

Lisa Trivedi has described how the charkha worked as a symbol that helped crystallise an “idea of national community,”⁶⁰ while Manu Goswami argues that khadi gave nationalist discourse a “vital materiality” to which ordinary people could readily attach themselves.⁶¹ Madhu Kishwar traces how Gandhi used the charkha in particular to elevate ordinary women to the status of fellow workers within the movement.⁶² *Chand* registered this Gandhian influence directly. Smt Ganga Devi Gandola urged women to commit themselves to the charkha as a way of strengthening the boycott of foreign cloth,⁶³ and the journal ran a photograph of the Queen of Kalakankar in connection with her donation of five thousand rupees toward khadi production — gendered imagery once again pressed into service for women's self-representation within a nationalist frame rather than an autonomous one. Male contributors joined in this pattern of praise as well: Shakuntala Sharma, in “Assam ki Pragatishil Mahilaye,” pointed out that Assamese women had already been spinning yarn on charkhas before Gandhi popularised the practice, crediting regional women's labour over Gandhi's own innovation, if only by implication.⁶⁴ Sehgal's editorials congratulated the “satyagrahi mahilaen” of Allahabad directly for their part in the movement,⁶⁵ and feature writing turned individual women into movement “heroines”: Shivrani Devi's “Balidan” recorded that Prabhadevi of Lucknow, who gathered fifty thousand women to protest outside the Legislative Assembly, “took a bullet in the chest in Hazratganj,” and was personally commended by Gandhi for her sacrifice.⁶⁶

What links these examples is not simply their shared Gandhian iconography, but the particular *kind* of agency they authorise: women are granted heroism, even physical risk, provided it can be read as sacrifice for the nation's cause. The charkha, the cloth boycott, and the satyagraha march gave women access to public, at times genuinely dangerous, action that existing gender norms would otherwise have made difficult to sanction — yet in every instance examined here, that access ran through service and sacrifice rather than through any independent claim to public standing. This is nationalist accommodation at its most visually and emotionally compelling, and it goes some way toward explaining why so much of *Chand*'s coverage of women's political action, radical as its effects genuinely were,

60 Lisa Trivedi, “Visually Mapping the ‘Nation’: Swadeshi Politics in Nationalist India, 1920–1930,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 11–41.

61 Manu Goswami, “From *Swadeshi* to *Swaraj*: Nation, Economy, and Territory in Colonial South Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 4 (1998): 609–36.

62 Madhu Kishwar, “Gandhi on Women,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1985, pp. 53–58.

63 Ganga Devi Gandola, *Chand*, 1928, pp. 120–21.

64 Shakuntala Sharma, “Assam ki Pragatishil Mahilaye,” *Chand*, 1928, pp. 120–21.

65 Ramrakh Singh Sehgal, “Satyagrahi Mahilao ko Badhai,” *Chand*, n.d.

66 Shivrani Devi, “Balidan,” *Chand*, 1933, pp. 111–14.

stops short of the second register — feminist consciousness — set out in the introduction.

IX. Women's Journals in Bengali and Urdu: A Comparative Note

Women's engagement with print in this period reached well beyond the Hindi public sphere. Essays by women in Bengali journals between 1865 and 1947 record comparable debates over education, widow remarriage, child marriage, and women's place in national life.⁶⁷ Meredith Borthwick has shown how *Bamabodhini Patrika* gave the *bhadramahila* a platform for discussing everything from household recipes to the future of the educated woman,⁶⁸ while Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi trace how Bengali women writers challenged interpretations of the *shastras* that sanctioned women's subordination.⁶⁹ Some wrote under pseudonyms such as *banganari* ("woman of Bengal"), questioning men's efforts to confine women to the household while keeping their own identities hidden;⁷⁰ Chandrima Bhattacharya reads this pseudonymity as a deliberate, selective strategy, one that criticised patriarchy on specific points while stopping short of a direct challenge to it as a system.⁷¹ Three Urdu journals followed a broadly comparable pattern: *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Lahore, 1898), edited by Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begum; *Khatun* (Aligarh, 1904), edited by Sheikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan; and *Ismat* (Delhi, 1908), edited by Rashidul Khairi, who wrote much of its content himself under female pseudonyms.⁷² These journals covered health, childcare, education, and news of women's associations abroad; even where they debated the validity of purdah, their aim was less to glorify a separate sphere for women than to loosen women's isolation within it.⁷³ When the All India Muslim Ladies' Conference passed a resolution against polygamy in 1918, Khairi opposed it by citing the Quran directly — a reminder that male control over a women's journal's editorial line was hardly peculiar to the Hindi press.⁷⁴

Set against this wider field, what marks *Chand* out is not so much its basic structure — a print venue for debating women's issues, largely under male editorial control, with women contributing as both authors and readers, a structure it shared with its Bengali and Urdu counterparts — as the particular

67 Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*, (New York: Ashgate Publications, 1998).

68 Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

69 Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi, eds., *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865–1947*, (Kolkata: STREE, 2014).

70 Chanda and Bagchi, *Shaping the Discourse*, 15.

71 Chandrima Bhattacharya, review of *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865–1947*, by Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 1 (April 2016).

72 Gail Minault, *Gender, Language, and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2003), 86, 92.

73 Minault, *Gender, Language, and Learning*, 86.

74 Burjor Avari, *Islamic Civilisation in South Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 222.

political idiom it built to justify that structure: an explicitly Congress-nationalist, *sevā*-centred framework with no real equivalent in *Tahzib un-Niswan*'s more straightforwardly social-reformist orientation, or in *Ismat*'s deliberate avoidance of politics altogether. The Bengali case sits closer to *Chand* in spirit, sharing its entanglement of print, gender, and anti-colonial politics, though it took shape within a different linguistic public sphere and under a different set of communal pressures — a comparison too large to pursue fully here. What the Hindi case contributes, distinctively, is the tightness of the link it forges between women's public voice and the specific vocabulary of Hindu nationalist service examined in Sections V through VIII above, a vocabulary that, as the conclusion argues, did as much to limit the possibilities of feminist consciousness within *Chand* as it did to enable women's entry into print in the first place.

X. Conclusion

This article set out to separate two registers in which *Chand* addressed the “woman question” between 1922 and 1938: a dominant register of nationalist accommodation, in which women's education, political visibility, and public action were consistently justified as service to the nation, and a much rarer register of feminist consciousness, in which patriarchal authority itself was named as the problem. Most of the material examined here — the vocabulary of *strijati* and *narishakti*, the *sevā* framing of women's political action, the Gandhian iconography of charkha and satyagraha march, even the journal's own reporting on women's imprisonment — belongs squarely to the first register. Passages such as Vidhyawati Sehgal's criticism of the education system, or Sarla Bai Nayak's insistence that *kranti* meant equality and freedom for women specifically, belong, more tentatively, to the second. That this second register appears in *Chand* at all, however sparingly, carries some historical weight: it suggests that nationalist print culture, even under male editorial control for most of this period, opened gaps that at least some women contributors put to uses their editors had not intended.

This distinction also marks the limits of *Chand*'s significance. The journal's governing conviction — that women's moral purity underwrote the nation's own moral and spiritual power — reasserted itself even at a moment of apparent crisis. When Sunehari Devi of Bulandshahr wrote asking whether she might sacrifice herself for the nation against her husband's wishes, Sehgal's published reply told her simply to follow her husband and serve the nation from home.⁷⁵ The episode captures, almost exactly, the boundary this article has tried to trace: *Chand* widened the space in which women could speak and act in public, but did so, in the great majority of cases, without disturbing the prior authority that

⁷⁵ *Chand*, 1928, pp. 565–66.

husbands, editors, and the nation itself held over what women's speech and action were ultimately *for*. Given how narrow, urban, and middle-class *Chand*'s own readership remained within a Hindi-speaking population that was still overwhelmingly illiterate, the claims made here should not be extended into a general statement about Hindi-speaking women's political consciousness; they are offered, more modestly, as a bounded account of what nationalist print culture did, and did not, make possible for the particular readership *Chand* addressed.