

October 29, 2025

Hindi Worlds, Hindu Worlds

By: Somak Biswas

"Hindi Hindu Histories brings to life a dynamic social world and its deep ambiguities. They signal plural modes of Hindu being and belonging, even as their eclecticism hark at a distinctly conservative cosmopolitan."

This is a timely book. Over two decades, the historian Charu Gupta has produced defining works on caste, gender and sexuality in colonial India. In *Hindi Hindu Histories*, Gupta brings alive the worlds of four remarkable characters in twentieth-century North India. Over eight chapters, Gupta examines the lives and works of the anticaste thinker Santram BA (1887–1988), the ayurvedic health entrepreneur Yashoda Devi (1890–1942), the travel writer Swami Satyadev Parivrajak (1879–1961), and the communist thinker Satyabhakt (1896–1985).

All of them published prolifically—and almost entirely—in Hindi, though at least three of them were fluent in English. Their choice of Hindi in the Nagari script – and away from Urdu – reflects long-term shifts in North Indian print culture, religious nationalism and mass politics. Santram and Satyadev hailed from Punjab; Satyabhakt from Rajasthan and Yashoda from the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh). Together their careers bookend a substantial period—from the late 19th to the late 20th—comprising both world wars, decolonisation, and the Cold War.

Encounters with western ideas, institutions and knowledges meshed very well with Hindu utopias and worldmaking projects.

This overlap notwithstanding, the characters themselves had little to no direct traffic with each other. Gupta circumvents this problem by pointing at the common historical process that defined their doings: the consolidation of an internally plural public sphere that used *Khari Boli* Hindi—both chaste and everyday—to articulate a range of Hindu dialectics. A flourishing Hindi print culture aided this process.

Satyadev, Yashoda and Satyabhakt came from traditional north Indian Hindu upper caste backgrounds (Khatri, Brahmin and Baniya respectively). Santram was a Shudra (potter caste). A liberal anticaste thinker, Santram cofounded the reformist Hindu organisation Jat Pat Todak Mandal and was influential in inviting the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar to give its 1936 annual speech. In an event that is now infamous in the annals of Dalit history, this invitation was revoked due to pressure from the Mandal's upper-caste members. Ambedkar's undelivered speech was later published as the now-classic *Annihilation of Caste*.

Santram saw caste purity as an impediment to the survival of Hindus. Intercaste marriages, Santram claimed, made Hindu children more masculine and intelligent. He thus simultaneously refuted and reinforced caste-based eugenics. On sexual matters, however, Santram was a firm liberal. He believed in sex as pleasure and translated the British birth control activist Marie Stopes's works into Hindi. By decoupling sex from reproduction, Santram believed birth control permitted women to have a right on their bodies. Husbands, he argued, must share in housework. Despite such progressive observations, his writings on caste do not seem to have inflected his writings on sexology.

Similar ambiguities underline the trajectories of Yashoda, Satyadev and Satyabhakt. Yashoda established herself as a successful ayurvedic expert and entrepreneur in a thoroughly male-dominated world. Her tracts, written in simple Hindi but with the occasional Sanskrit citation that attested authenticity, proved hugely popular with women. Like many ayurvedic practitioners, Yashoda engaged with and drew selectively from western biomedicine and sexual knowledge. Invoking a language of sisterhood, she advertised her remedies as cheap and effective for all women. Yet her attempts to improve the reproductive health and wellbeing of Hindu women was firmly located within a desire to fortify the upper caste-middle-class Hindu household. Professionally, Yashoda accepted the skills and labour of lower caste women—especially in the preparation of remedies—but their work was never credited.

'Hindi Hindu Histories' offers an important intervention that foregrounds the significance of vernacular worlds in global and South Asian cultural history.

Satyadev, a celebrated Hindi travel writer with links to the Arya Samaj, was deeply enamoured of Hitler, Nazi Germany, and German physical culture and masculinity, all of which he duly enjoined as necessary for Hindus and Hindi to flourish. On the one hand, Satyadev projected himself as a "citizen of the world", a perpetual *ghumakkad* or traveller par excellence. Yet, on the other, this experience of being in the world produced its very reverse: the close minded nationalist championing Hindu civilisational unity. His encounters in Germany became a key resource to imagine and invest in a conservative Hindu-Hindi moral and social universe. Satyadev's books, including his autobiographies, sold extremely well, bringing him affluence and popularity in north India. Gandhi was a natural antithesis to Satyadev's strongman vision of Hindu nationalism.

Satyabhakt probably remains the most intriguing of Gupta's quartet. He alone faced downward social mobility, partly a result of his fetish for simple Gandhian living and a lifelong dedication to the labour movement, but also the effect of his decision to marry a Dalit woman that led to his social ostracism. Satyabhakt's communist utopia had a touch of magic realism, melding Hindu apocalyptic myths with Marxist notions of class struggle. He sparred with M.N. Roy and Muzaffar Ahmad, key figureheads of the Indian left movement, for his insistence on adapting the abstract ideology of Communism to distinctly Hindu registers.

Satyabhakt drank deeply from the fount of Hindu ethics and morality and fashioned a discourse of utopian socialism that set up Ram Rajya as an exercise in ideal society. Less convinced by the ideology of state communism advanced by Bolshevik Russia and the Communist International, Satyabhakt was drawn to Peter Kropotkin's anarcho-communism and Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism. Through Hindu cyclical notions of crisis and rebirth, Satyabhakt made sense of world historical moments such as the Great War. Despite these affinities, his theorising of what constituted the Indian working class, as Gupta notes, was weak. His insistence on a national axis for Indian communism, and his privileging of India's "national freedom" over and above proletarian revolutionary violence led him to be sidelined in the Communist movement.

|| 'Hindi Hindu Histories' brings to life a dynamic social world and its deep ambiguities.

Hindi Hindu Histories offers an important intervention that foregrounds the significance of vernacular worlds in global and South Asian cultural history. This is particularly apt as the 'global turn' has tended to obscure the value and vitality of the vernacular public sphere unless they are suitably clued to Anglophone registers. Gupta's ingenuity lies in telling not simply an outward story of Indians' encountering the wider world or to frame such encounters only in positive terms, but also to show how this world re-entered and re-ordered the vernacular prism. Encounters with western ideas, institutions and knowledges meshed very well with Hindu utopias and worldmaking projects. Satyadev's story offers an uncanny antecedent to India's present contemporary.

Though Gupta's deft analysis welds together four distinct figures within a single study, the effort shows. *Hindi Hindu* offers a loose historical template to hang together somewhat disparate figures. Yashoda's presence is nominal in chapter four. It is instead a wider study of Hindi home remedies and recipe books; an interesting subject in itself but somewhat disjointed without the biographical focus that Gupta adopts for her other figures. The absence of a book conclusion leaves several arguments open-ended.

Hindi Hindu Histories brings to life a dynamic social world and its deep ambiguities. They signal plural modes of Hindu being and belonging, even as their eclecticism hark at a distinctly conservative cosmopolitan. Gupta shows why we need to understand this world.

Somak Biswas is a Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Fellow at the Faculty of History, University of Cambridge.