

## Hindi Detective Pulp Fiction

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### Abstract

In this paper, I begin by establishing the relationship between earlier Western detective fiction, other Asian detective fictions, and Hindi detective fiction. I then explore how the Hindi-Urdu works of Ibne Safi (1928–1980) revolutionized this genre during the period from 1950 to 1980. In particular, I look at how the plots of some of these detective novels suggest ways in which authors and readers engaged with modernity through exploring the role that the supernatural plays in the contemporary world. I then shift to examining how certain writers in the city of Meerut near Delhi, such as Om Prakash Sharma (1924–1998), came to prominence in the 1980s during the period of rapid growth in the circulation and readership of Hindi detective fiction. Through examining some of their plots, I also suggest that a prominent focus in these novels was the fictionalised accounts of current affairs. In particular, I chart the rise of the patriotic female detective superspy as an embodiment of India in its struggles with terrorism and its territorial opponents. I then question why it was that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, sales of printed pulp fiction began to decline, linking this to the arrival of the mobile phone and the Internet in India. In conclusion, I argue that not only does older Hindi detective fiction now live on in an afterlife on the Internet, but that there are signs that the growing use of the Internet with Indian languages may lead to new possibilities for Hindi detective fiction in the future.

**Keywords:** detective fiction, Hindi, Internet, mobile phone, modernity, patriotism, rationalism, supernatural literature, Urdu

### Introduction: The Detective Story in the West, Asia and India

Many authors trace the origins of detective fiction as a distinct genre in world literature back to the 19th century. Knight argued that the origins of detective fiction in English were in the late 18th century when a genre of work called the “Newgate Calendars” developed.<sup>1</sup> These works were framed in the form of confessions to the chaplain of Newgate Prison by criminals before their executions in London. However, in a sense these works cannot be called ‘detective novels’ as they have no detectives; the bringing to justice of the individuals is the result of the community rallying round to reveal the criminal. It was only after 1743 with the establishment of the “Bow Street Runners,” the earliest form of the British police, that the notion of detection by a special individual began to develop in works such as *Richmond: Scenes from the Life of a Bow Street Runner* (1827). A fusion of the Gothic and the supernatural in the form of a detective story also appeared in the U.S. in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), particularly in stories featuring the detective Dupin, such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845). Another link in this development were the works by the English author Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), such as *The Woman in White* (1860), which can be seen as a mixture of the Gothic novel and crime fiction.

However, in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), the detective fiction genre assumed its full-grown form; and from the 1880s onwards, detective fiction really took off after the publication of the first of the Sherlock Holmes stories, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).<sup>2</sup> A number of authors such as Christopher Clausen have also written on the ways in which an important theme in stories like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the contrast between a modern rational scientific view of the world and an apparent supernatural menace in the context of life far from modernity.<sup>3</sup> In her 2004 study, Francesca Orsini traces the origins of Bengali and Hindi detective fiction in the late nineteenth century in India back to the influence of works by authors such as Wilkie Collins and Conan Doyle. She also explores how in Hindi the figure of the *jāsūs*, the detective, developed out of an earlier kind of hero, a sort

of investigative magistrate, in a traditional genre derived from Middle Eastern storytelling traditions. Moreover, by comparing early Hindi and Bengali detective novels, Orsini investigates how early Hindi detective novels focused on the new British notions of policing and the anxieties over property inheritance linked to the landholding changes the British implemented.<sup>4</sup>

A parallel study of the early detective story in Urdu by Daechsel also documents the ways in which translations of the Sherlock Holmes stories began to appear in the Punjab from 1914 onwards. He characterises the early Urdu detective stories based on a few of these surviving novels published since the 1930s. In particular, he notes that they represent an intersection between a traditional story genre in which a hero finds clues that lead to the revelation of a mystery and the modern Western detective story with its strong focus on how the hero deals with his encounter with modernity.<sup>5</sup>

A number of other authors have looked at the impact of Western detective fiction elsewhere in Asia. Amongst such studies there are some similarities with those found in the Hindi and Urdu languages. For example, Yuri Takahashi argues that in the Burmese responses to Sherlock Holmes stories by authors such as Shwe U-Daung (1889-1973), the conflict between western rationalism and the traditional culture was the main focus.<sup>6</sup> In particular, she argues that through the way in which the hero, a Burmese version of Sherlock Holmes called Mr San Shar, is able to apply deductive logic to solving mysteries, readers are able to explore the relationship between Burmese culture and what it might be to become a modern Westernised Burmese person. In Japan, writers such as Hirai Tarō (1894-1965), better known by his pen name Edogowa Rampo, which is based on the name Edgar Allan Poe, also created a new genre of detective fiction that explores the relationship between Western rational deduction and its interaction with beliefs and the supernatural.<sup>7</sup> Some authors, such as David Katz, have argued that Freud's 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" (The Uncanny) marked a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of the supernatural in modern societies and in fiction. This is because it highlights the way in which the supernatural could be understood in relation to the psychological development of the

individual. Freud argues that what he called the uncanny was not just the strange, exotic or alien, but that which was familiar but repressed, including “primitive beliefs.”<sup>8</sup>

However, the ways in which Asian detective fiction employs the supernatural seem to suggest that at times there is also a social aspect to this, and that it was part of not just an individual negotiation but also a social negotiation of how “the uncanny” could fit within modern world views. Seen in this light the presence of the supernatural and the “uncanny” in detective fiction, and in Hindi detective fiction in particular, could perhaps be regarded as related to both individual and social anxiety about the presence of the unexplained within modernity. Indeed, during the twentieth century, there was a considerable degree of continued belief in the supernatural in the Hindi-speaking area of North India. From talking with people informally, I came to understand that the issue for them was not whether ghosts and spirits exist, but what

forms they take in the modern world. It might be useful to consider that the popularity of themes related to superstition and the supernatural in Hindi detective fiction is in part a reflection of the world views of people such as rickshaw drivers and manual labourers who make up a considerable portion of its readership. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which Hindi-Urdu detective fiction highlights the overlap between belief in superstitions, religious beliefs and the supernatural, and the negotiation of everyday life in the mundane world of twentieth-century India. A second theme is the relationship



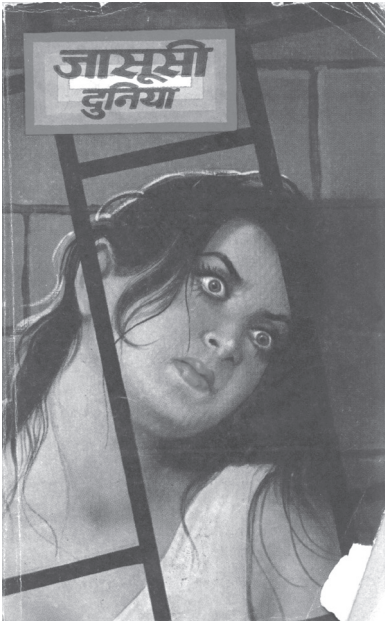
**Figure 1.** 1982 edition cover from Ibne Safi’s *Khūn kī Bauchār* (*Rain of Blood*). Ilāhābād: Nakahat Publications (Reprint of the original first novel in the series from 1952).

between the detective genre and a form of Hindi patriotic literature characterised by its focus on the figure of the patriotic female detective superspy.

### **Ibne Safi (1928–1980)**

In India and Pakistan, the most famous writer of detective stories, and the writer whose works also explore the relationship between new rational Western ideas and traditional cultures and beliefs, is arguably Ibne Safi (1928–1980). Safi was born before the division of India near Allahabad and moved to Karachi in Pakistan after independence. He was a prolific author, writing 125 novels in a series called *Detective World*. These stories were originally published in Urdu, and then in Hindi versions, as monthly magazines from 1952 to 1980. In their Urdu versions, the heroes of the *Detective World* series were Inspector Faridi and Sergeant Hameed and each month's publication was normally a separate novel in the series. From 1955, Safi began a second series which eventually ran to 116 novels in which the leading figure was a secret agent called Ali Imran.<sup>9</sup> The Urdu versions of *Detective World* commenced publication in March 1952, and from December 1952 Hindi versions of the novels were also undertaken. Aside from the obvious changes to the script and language, one other major alteration concerned the leading character: in the Urdu version the hero was a Muslim, Inspector Faridi, while in the Hindi version he was a Hindu, Inspector Vinod. However, the depiction of the hero and his sidekick is the same in both: they are modern men in whose lives fast cars and the *femme fatale* play a leading, if hands-off, role; they fight through logic and heroism to defeat criminals who often hide behind a pretence of supernatural mystery.

It is also notable that the covers of these magazines feature paintings in similar styles to that of the movie poster art of the period. Like them, they are as lurid as possible in order to attract attention. Some of the artists such as Mustajab Ahmed Siddiqui were responsible for painting hundreds of these pictures over many decades; their art is featured on the covers of many of the leading Hindi detective story novels.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.** Cover of *Jasusi Duniya*, *Pathar ki larki* (Stone Girl). Ilāhābād: Nakahat Publications, March 1982.<sup>11</sup>

### The Worlds of *Detective World*

*Jasusi Duniya* (*Detective World*) represents a typical example of a Hindi detective pulp fiction. It went on sale in March 1982 and comprised a novel called *Pathar ki larkī* (The Stone Girl).<sup>12</sup> It is a story about a group of gangsters who scare people away from their smuggling operations by pretending that there is a ghost in the immediate vicinity. In the Hindi version, however, the hero of the story, Colonel Vinod, solves the crime by revealing that there is in fact nothing supernatural going on and that the supernatural merely serves to hide criminal activity.<sup>13</sup> This

story fits perfectly into the kind of opposition between superstition and deductive logic which characterises so much Hindi detective fiction: the detective uses scientific deductive logic to reveal a “true” picture of the world, showing how belief in superstition and the supernatural can be exploited as a cloak for criminal activity.

These magazines were often sold at bookstalls outside cinemas, where a range of Hindi language publications were available.<sup>14</sup> The customers of such bookstalls ranged from office workers to rickshaw drivers; and many of them, particularly the drivers, would typically come from rural areas to work in the city when agricultural work was not available. Many of these migrant workers would appear to live in a kind of marginal space between modernity and more traditional beliefs. Further research could be done into whether this kind of fiction attracted them because it provided a space in which they could explore the meaning of their life in the city as well as the way in which their

traditional beliefs and superstitions might be contextualised in modern urban India. These publications were also very cheap, and in a sense offered readers an alternate way to experience the thrills of cinema. The stalls not only sold these books but also rented them out, for a few rupees a day or less. It is therefore very difficult to estimate how large their actual circulation may have been. Later in this article, however, I will argue that there were perhaps a hundred thousand or even a million readers each month.



Figure 3. Satyakatha (True Stories) magazine, September 1985.

### Hindi Detective Novels and True Crime Story Magazines

There was an overlap between true-life crime stories and Hindi detective fiction. True crime magazines such as *Satyakatha* (*True Stories*) were also sold at the bookstalls, alongside issues of *Detective World*. As with the early Western detective stories, this confluence of accounts of true crimes and detective fiction blurred genre boundaries. Moreover, whilst the two genres shared a common basic crime narrative structure, detective stories were often told from the viewpoint of the detectives, while crime stories were always written as third-person narratives in the manner of newspaper journalism. The example shown in figure 3 from 1985 includes a whole range of stories about theft, robbery, rape and murder. The readership for both fictional detective stories and accounts of real crimes clearly overlapped. People bought and read both types of publication, which explored similar areas of anxiety about modern life and the issue of safety in the new modern Indian public spaces. The venues where Hindi detective and true crime publications were sold included not only the bookstalls outside cinemas but also bookstalls located at railway stations.<sup>15</sup>





**Figure 4.** Om Prakaś Śarma, Śamsān meṃ Saṅgarṣ (Struggle in the Burning Ghat). Merath: Janapriyā pāket buks, ca. 1984.

The importance of the latter as marketers of popular Hindi fiction and detective pulp fiction in particular should not be underestimated. Indeed, many of the novel serials indicated that they were specially produced for A.H. Wheeler, the main railway bookseller. It is possible that this method of railway station marketing was influential in creating a modern mass market for Hindi literature.

The new public railway spaces were also a site for anxiety about crime; and, as early as 1923, the leading Hindi/Urdu literary author Premchand had written a story *Pratiśodh* (Revenge),<sup>16</sup> which

included a random attack on an Indian woman in a railway compartment at night by English ruffians. The railways went on to become the site of communal violence during partition—itsself a subject for popular fiction as in the English language novel *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one could regard the railways as both a context for anxiety about public space safety and a site for individual readership of a wide range of print media forms to while away the time on the long journeys between India's rural and urban centres. In the twentieth century, detective fiction and true crime fiction, along with romances and supernatural horror stories, were an important part of this pulp fiction readership in India.

### Detective Fiction from Meerut

The volume *Śamsān meṃ Saṅgarṣ* (Struggle in the Burning Ghat) by Om Prakash Sharma shown in figure 4 dates from the mid-1980s. It focuses on how elite teams of secret police were being sent to towns where it was anticipated crimes would happen in order to prevent them from

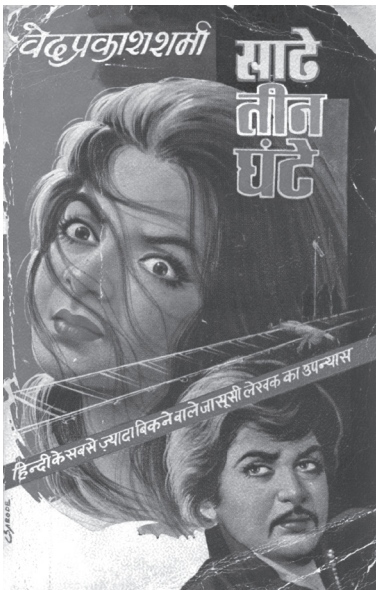


ever taking place. In this case, the story is of a small town in which belief in the supernatural and superstition is rife. Here, the practice of *sati*, the forced self-immolation by widows, is given particular attention. The detectives in this story arrive in the town and are able to show that several of the supposedly superstitious practices of the locals are baseless. This helps them prevent the crime of encouraging a woman to commit *sati*. It is interesting to consider how to understand the popularity of such stories. The debunking of the supernatural through logical deduction appears to have fitted with how readers were negotiating their partly westernized and partly traditional identities. This story, in particular, reflects an anxiety about how to understand life in smaller Indian towns seen from the perspective of the growing Indian metropolis. The novel was written by an author who lived in the city of Meerut, near Delhi, one of the new centres that became associated with Hindi detective fiction in the 1980s. He belonged to a new generation of novelists who wrote only in Hindi, unlike earlier authors such as Ibne Safi who had written in both Hindi and Urdu. Authors such as Om Prakash Sharma (1924-1998) and Ved Prakash Sharma came to prominence during this era, and this led to the city of Meerut becoming famous as a centre for publishing houses specializing in various forms of pulp fiction, including detective fiction.<sup>18</sup>

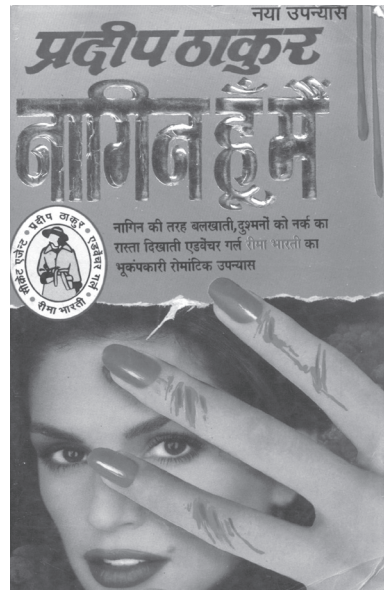
In an article about the author, Yadavendra Sharma Candra described a meeting with Om Prakash Sharma in which he was surrounded by fan mail not only from Indian but also from Chinese readers. Om Prakash Sharma first worked at the DCM cloth mill in Delhi before quitting and moving to Meerut. Here, he became fairly well off through his writing. He typically wrote two or more novels every month, in one of a number of different series. Apart from detective fiction, he wrote historical novels. One of these historical novels, *Dawn to Dusk*, which concerned the life of the last Mughal Emperor Badshah Zafar, achieved a certain fame. Towards the end of his life, Sharma estimated that he had written over 450 novels.<sup>19</sup>

Ved Prakash Sharma (b. 1955) is another of the most prolific authors of Hindi detective fiction. The cover of the 1984 novel *Sare tīn ghañṭe* (Three and a Half Hours), which is shown in figure 5, proudly proclaims that it is “a novel by the best selling of all Hindi detective novel authors.”

In a biography on his website, Sharma describes how he began to write detective stories at school and then became the ghost writer of twenty-three novels before *Burning City*, the first novel to be published under his own name, came out in 1973, when he was still only eighteen. By the age of 27, he had published one hundred novels, some independent, but mostly in the form of works in a number of series based on different leading characters. Since 1986, he has published his books through his own publishing house, Tulsi Books; and he has won a number of prizes. Some of his books have been turned into films and a TV serial has been made out of his Keshav Pandit series of novels.<sup>20</sup> He has also been an active commentator on the Hindi detective fiction genre and has been interviewed by the press and TV on many occasions. One constant theme in these interviews is the fact that in the 1970s authors such as himself were exploited by the publishing houses, being paid as little as 100 RS or two dollars per story. Even for a novel the going rate was only a figure



**Figure 5.** Ved Prakaś Śarmā, *Sare tīn ghañṭe* (Three and a Half Hours). Dilli: Manoj Poket buks, 1984.



**Figure 6.** Ṭhākūr, Pradīp, *Nāgin hūm māim* (I Am a Serpent). Meruṭh: Rajat Prakaśan, ca. 1998.

somewhere between 1000 RS or twenty dollars and 8000 RS or around a hundred and fifty dollars. Sharma notes that the sales and readership for these novels was at its highest in the early 1990s and that a few of his novels sold in excess of three hundred thousand copies.<sup>21</sup>

### **Rīmā Bhārtī and the Issue of Ambiguous Authorship**

In the 1990s, the number of novels with female super spy detective heroes as leading characters began to grow. In some cases, stories about the same hero were attributed to different authors by different publishing houses, and it became obvious that different authors were being used to ghost write these novels. One such hero was “Rīmā Bhārtī,” whose second name can be seen as a sort of pun: it is a surname that can also mean “Indian.” On the cover of *I Am a Serpent* by Pradīp Ṭhākur (figure 6), Rīmā Bhārtī is described as being an “adventure girl-secret agent.” She is also a nationalist hero who is typically allied somehow with the Indian Secret services, seeking to defeat India’s enemies. By the late 1990s, it is notable that the tradition of lurid cover paintings for detective storybooks had begun to be replaced by covers made up from photographic montages. In a newspaper article about the changing fortunes of Hindi detective fiction, Shelle, one of the most prolific of its cover artists, commented ruefully that whilst he used to paint four or more covers a month, by 2012 he was no longer painting any at all.<sup>22</sup>

A typical example of this genre was *Sannāṭā* (Silence) by Dineś Ṭhākur, which was published by Delhi’s Manoj Pocketbooks around 1999 (figure 7). The broad outline of this story is that India’s leading nuclear scientist is kidnapped by the Pakistanis, and our hero Rīmā Bharti parachutes alone into Pakistan and defeats the entire Pakistani defence force on her own, rescuing the scientist and his daughter and bringing them back to India. These books typically responded to world news: plots related to nuclear weapons appeared when the Indians tested nuclear weapons, plots about wars with Pakistan were dominant when there were tensions with Pakistan. These detective novels therefore often featured stories in which the patriotic defence of India was somehow intertwined with the foiling of international criminal plots.

### “Mona Darling,” Superhero Detective Spy and Author

The authorship of many books becomes increasingly hazy over time. It is important to remember that these books were all written as monthly series; to what extent any author could really churn out one novel a month for years on end must be open to question. It seems quite likely that even when a book claimed it had been written by a particular author, it might nonetheless have been ghost written by an authorial team. What is more, sometimes a number of different publishing houses would publish books about the same heroes but written by different authors. Rīmā Bhārtī books were written by Dineś Thakur and published by Delhi’s Manoj Pocketbooks, whilst at the same time other Rīmā Bhārtī books by Pradīp Thakur were published by Meerut’s Rajat Prakashan. “Mona Darling,” another female superhero, appeared in books written by Seema Kapur for Rajat Prakashan. However, Meerut’s Tulsi Pocketbooks went one better, attributing its series of Mona Darling books to—Mona

Darling herself! Perhaps, in this case, all these publishing houses were able to use the same name for their hero as the name “Mona Darling” was in circulation as that of an archetypal gangster’s moll figure. Over the years, this figure had become increasingly well known, particularly after her striking depiction by the actress Bindu in the very successful 1973 film *Zanjīr* (Shackles). However, in the novels, Mona Darling morphs from criminal moll into superhero detective spy.

*Kālī Mirc* (Black Pepper) is an example of a typical Mona Darling book from Tulsi Books. The story involves a highly unlikely ploy by the CIA to steal all of India’s cash so

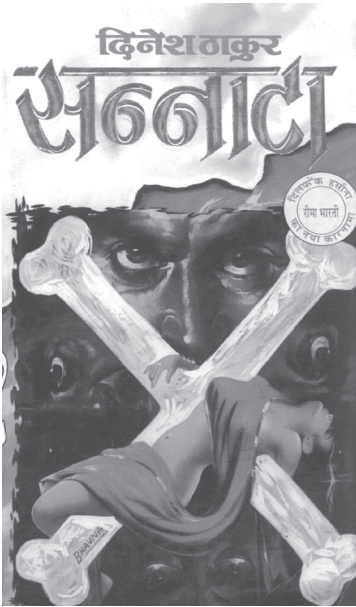
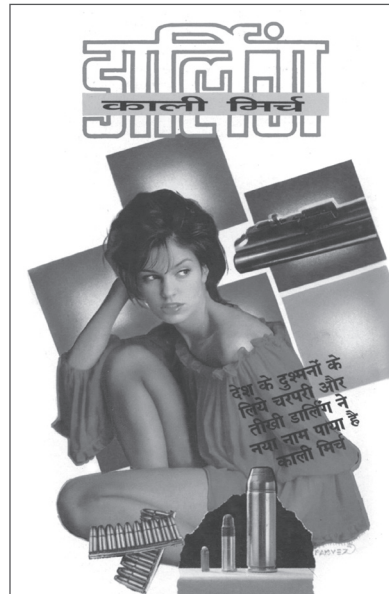


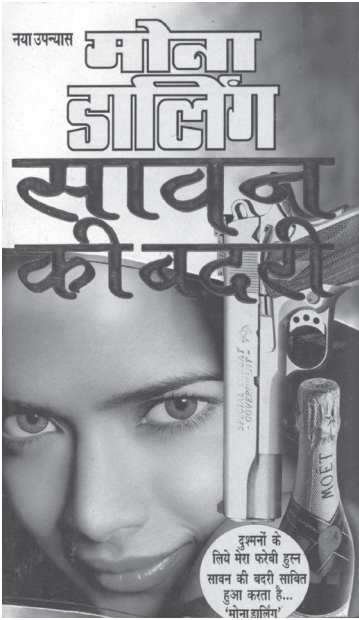
Figure 7. Dineś Thākur, *Sannātā* (Silence).  
Dillī: Manoj Poket buks, ca. 1999.

that India will be unable to go ahead with its nuclear arms development program. The book apparently was published just after Atal Behari Vajpayee had overseen an Indian nuclear bomb test at Pokharan in 1998. Later that year a second volume entitled *Monsoon Clouds*, another of Mona Darling's supposedly self-authored compositions, was published. Once again, this publication shows the odd way in which themes and current affairs are mixed up in these novels. Featuring a cast of both virtuous and villainous Chinese characters as well as the normal cast of criminals and heroes, *Monsoon Clouds* is an account of how international criminal mafia gangs are collaborating with the Chinese to destabilize the North Eastern states.

It could be argued that even in this age of increasing Indian sophistication, there is much in India that stands outside of the tide of modernization. Indeed, these detective stories are full of a variety of ethnic stereotypes, including villainous Chinese, crude Westerners, Indian Mafioso and virtuous Indians. In truth, they demonstrate very little sophistication. Quite the opposite, they illustrate a rough and ready approach to life, one that nevertheless clearly appeals to rural migrant workers who, while pulling rickshaws around the bustling cities of a newly urbanized and modernized India, are also trying to make some sense of their world.



**Figure 8.** Mona Darling (ca. 1998) *Kālī Mirch* (Black Pepper), Meerath: Tulsī Poket Buks.



**Figure 9.** Monā Dārlīng (ca. 2000). Sāvan kī badarī ('Monsoon clouds'). Merath: Rajat Prakaśan.

### The Mobile Phone and the Decline of Hindi Detective Pulp Fiction

In an interview in 2012, Ved Prakash Sharma, the leading author and publisher of Hindi pulp fiction, commented on the steep decline in genre sales. He noted how sales figures had sharply fallen off, from a high of hundreds of thousands for one book to a just a few thousand at the present time. He attributed this decline to a saturation of the market by sensationalist and titillating works.<sup>23</sup> One could, of course, cite other causes too, particularly the cumulative impact of new media formats in India. Pawanpreet Kaur suggests that the former middle

class readers of Hindi detective fiction are now more likely to be reading English books and that since 1992, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people watching TV for entertainment. However, Kaur also notes that between 2010 and 2012 some publishing houses were reporting increasing sales in the major metros.<sup>24</sup> More recently, in an article from January 2015 in the *Times of India*, it was argued that it was not just the TV but also the mobile phone that was causing the demise of the pulp fiction Hindi detective novel.<sup>25</sup> Denis Abrams contends that it is up to the larger publishing houses to begin selling Hindi detective novels if the genre is to remain viable. He also notes, however, that it is not that the genre has died, but rather that it has simply fallen from the height of its greatest popularity in the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

However, while it may well be that the TV has indeed sliced off some of the market for Hindi pulp fiction, it is questionable whether it has been the main or sole cause, as TV was already becoming widespread by the



early 1990s in the Hindi speaking area of Northern India, before the high point in sales of Hindi pulp fiction. Moreover, like other commentators, I believe the main reason for the decline in the readership of the print versions of Hindi detective fiction may be the rise of the mobile phone. In their study, *The Great Indian Phone Book* (2013), Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron chart the way in which the mobile phone has changed the lives of people at all levels of Indian society since its first inception in 1995.<sup>27</sup> From around 2000 onwards, a large number of Indians, including even rickshaw drivers, have started to access entertainment by downloading it onto their mobile phones. This was not done via the Internet, but rather at the stalls where phones could be recharged and content purchased. It was in a sense a very similar model to that of the bookstalls, but instead of renting a book for a day or two, you could now pay to have content downloaded onto your phone by the megabyte. This caused a rise in the viewing of pirated Bollywood films and new forms of sensational entertainment, such as pornography and salacious re-imaginings of folk music genres. The key issue here is that such content was not Hindi detective fiction, which is hard to read on a small phone screen, but the kind of film entertainment that previously people had to go to cinemas to see.

Two other factors that may have had some influence on the sales of Hindi detective fiction relate to the venues for its sale. In 2004, the Indian government removed the monopoly that the A.H. Wheeler business had had on all bookstalls on Indian railways. This led to a seven-year court case between the company and the state that caused a great deal of turmoil in the sales of books at Indian railway stations.<sup>28</sup> As A.H. Wheeler has historically been a major publishing contractor for Hindi detective fiction, the court case is likely to have had a considerable impact on the sales of Hindi detective fiction.

Furthermore, from around 1997 onwards, there was a great deal of restructuring in the Indian cinema industry. Many of the old single screen cinemas, with their associated bookstalls, closed down and were replaced by multiplexes in shopping malls.<sup>29</sup> The new multiplex cinemas were not locations at which Indian language publication stalls could easily be set up. This would appear to have contributed to the decline in



the number of outlets for Hindi detective fiction and thus impacted its sales as well.

It is estimated that sales often peaked at several hundred thousand copies per novel and of up to fifty to eighty publishing houses being active publishing multiple works each month. Such figures suggest that at its peak sales might have been running in the area of twenty million copies a month of Hindi detective novels. However, copies of a sold book were probably read by multiple readers as second-hand copies were often hired out by stall holders in locations such as the Pahar Ganj market outside New Delhi railway station. This would suggest that at the height of the readership of pulp fiction, Hindi detective novels attracted a staggering number of readers to this literary genre. Of course, this proposition is very hard to substantiate. While in theory it might be possible to find out how many Hindi detective novels were sold by the major houses, it would be impossible to find accurate circulation figures for pulp fiction novels hired out by stall owners. This makes it difficult to measure the demise of the Hindi pulp fiction detective novel. Equally, there are no accurate statistics on the contemporary practice of the localised distribution of illegal digital content by Indian stallholders.

These days, the sector of the public which was arguably previously the main readership for Hindi pulp fiction, the marginal working poor of urban India, appears to have abandoned imaging the perils and pleasures of their heroes and heroines through reading about them in print novels having begun to consume the same media content through their smartphones instead. One sidelight on this argument can be found in the Hindi pulp fiction detective novel *Hitler merā bāp* (Hitler is My Father), which was available for sale in January 2013.<sup>30</sup> In this novel, the mobile phone features heavily and has clearly become fully incorporated into the imagined world of the pulp fiction Hindi detective novel. Indeed, in this story, whilst Hitler actually makes no appearance, the Indian woman super spy Rīmā Bhartī is now almost constantly on her “mobile” as she defeats a terrorist plot. In this case the plot involves an imaginary central Asian country and Bangladeshi terrorists who seek to assassinate the American Defence Minister during a visit he makes to Mumbai to discuss countering cross-border terrorism from Bangladesh

into India.

However, on balance, it does seem that the rapid reported demise of the pulp fiction detective story industry has taken place at around the same time that the distribution of content on mobile phones first took off. What is more, the anecdotal reports by stallholders mentioned in the press suggest that there has been a rapid fall in sales over the last decade.

### The Internet and the Reincarnation of Hindi Detective Pulp Fiction

The reports of the complete demise of Hindi detective pulp fiction may nevertheless be somewhat premature. Samples of the medium are still available for purchase at Indian railway stations and even progressive journals like *Tahalka* still receive a certain amount of censure for being part of “a cocktail of Detective fiction and Sex Thrillers.”<sup>31</sup> In 2014, a reader could buy Ibne Safi’s books at the Urdu bookstalls outside the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi, and Hindi detective pulp fiction titles were still available at stalls in traditional market areas. What is more, Hindi detective pulp fiction has increasingly becoming available on the Internet for legitimate purchase as e-books, while websites for famous authors, such as the one established in the name of the late Om Prakash Sharma, offer online scanned versions of many of his classic novels to read at no charge.<sup>32</sup> Ved Prakash Sharma has also been one of the authors who have responded most actively to the decline in over-the-counter print sales of Hindi detective fiction by marketing his books in different ways. For example, they are now available as e-books through sites



Figure 10. Bhartī, Rīmā, (circa 2013) *Hitler merā bāp* ('Hitler is my father').  
Meraṭh: Tulsī Sāhitya Publikeśāns.

such as pothi.com (*pothī* is a Hindi word for a small book) as well as in the form of print books by mail order from sites such as amazon.co.in. In addition, a number of sites, such as newshunt.com offer e-version downloads of a number of his books, including the celebrated *Vardī Vālā Guṇḍā* (Uniformed Thugs) for as little as 19 RS or about forty Australian cents.

There is of course quite a lot more available in one way or another via illegal download sites, but behind most of the links claiming to be Hindi detective pulp fiction online is merely old pulp fiction, the classic works in Urdu by Ibne Safi and the main Hindi pulp fiction detective authors of the 1970s to 1990s, some of whom continue to produce new work. Overall, however, it appears that very little new content is being produced. This may be, in part, because the economic model that supported pulp fiction is broken: money that was being spent on print copies is now being spent on illegal digital content downloads.

There is also some presence of Hindi pulp fiction on the web on what are essentially fan sites. Some sites, such as Anupam Agrawal's blog, feature archives of the covers of old Hindi pulp fiction novels as well as digitised versions of some of the old titles.<sup>33</sup> What is more, some sites such as Vikas Nainwal's Bookworld blog contain write-ups of what the blogger enjoyed reading in these novels.<sup>34</sup> There are even some sites that include roman script versions of classic Urdu detective stories; and, in a manner akin to Japanese *dōjinshi* sites, works of fan fiction exist, in which people try to create their own detective pulp fiction.<sup>35</sup> Even so, this remains a minute market that exists without any financial basis on bulletin board sites. It has none of the momentum that characterised the mass market Hindi pulp fiction of the twentieth century.

On a note of caution, it should be mentioned that certain sectors of society that were previously the main readers of Hindi pulp fiction, such as marginal workers, are unlikely to be able to easily access Hindi detective fiction over the Internet. As yet only a few of these sites make their content easy to read on a small phone screen, which is the typical product that a poorer Indian mobile phone user would possess. However, recent reports on the increase in Internet usage in India suggest that soon usage in Indian languages in rural areas may outstrip

the growth of the use of the Internet in English in urban areas.<sup>36</sup> Under such circumstances it is possible that in the future Hindi detective pulp fiction might make a full comeback as part of a new Hindi language-based Indian Internet.

## Conclusion

What is striking about the rise and fall of Hindi pulp fiction is that it charted the ways in which post-independence India negotiated modernity. In particular, it shows how a gradual rise in literacy led to the mass consumption of the detective pulp fiction genre in the second half of the twentieth century. However, it also points to the way in which digital media, distributed largely through downloads onto mobile phones, have now brought the world of Bollywood movies into the personal viewing habits of many Indians and displaced detective pulp fiction into a kind of afterlife on the Internet.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Knight, *Crime Fiction: 1800–2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–63.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Clausen, 1984. “Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind,” *The Georgia Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 104–23.

<sup>4</sup> Francesca Orsini, “Detective Novels: A Commercial in Nineteenth Century North India,” in *India’s Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stuart H. Blackburn (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Markus Daechsel, “Zālīm Dākū and the Mystery of the Rubber Sea Monster: Urdu Detective Fiction in the 1930s Punjab and the Experience of Colonial Modernity,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3 13, no. 1 (2003): 21–43.

<sup>6</sup> Yuri Takahashi, “The Case-book of Mr. San Shar: Burmese society and nationalist thought in the 1930s as seen in the Burmese Sherlock Holmes stories,” *Proceedings of the 17th Biennial Conference of the ASAA, Melbourne*, ed. Marika Vicziany and Robert Cribb (2008), accessed June 12, 2015, <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mai/proceedings-17th-asaa-conference>.

<sup>7</sup> James B. Harris, *Japanese Tales of Mystery & Imagination* (Tokyo: C.E. Tuttle, 1956).

<sup>8</sup> David S. Katz, *The Occult Tradition* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 151.

<sup>9</sup> Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, “Introduction,” in *Poisoned Arrow* (Chennai: Blaft

Publications, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Shelle, *Heroes, Gundas, Vamps & Good Girls* (Chennai: Blaft Publications, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The illustrations in this paper of the books described are images of the covers of books in my possession collected in India.

<sup>12</sup> Ibne Safi, *Jasusi duniya: Pathar ki larki* (Ilahabad: Nakahat Pablikesans, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> The plot of hiding criminal activity by pretending a site was haunted was of course also popular in the West and featured in Sherlock Holmes stories such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

<sup>14</sup> This copy was bought from a bookstall outside of the Lalita Talkies Cinema in Varanasi in 1982.

<sup>15</sup> There is a reference in this edition of *Satyakatha* about how it, and its sister magazine, *Manohār Kahāniyām* (Diverting tales) were available for sale from over 750 railway bookstalls in 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Rāmvilās Śārmā, ed. *Premacanda racanāvalī* 12 (Dillī: Janavānī Prakāśana, 1996): 446–55.

<sup>17</sup> Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Despite the similarity in their names they were not actually related.

<sup>19</sup> Ravishankar Shrivastava, “Janapriya lekhak: Omprakaś Śārmā,” January 2, 2006, accessed June 3, 2015, [http://www.rachanakar.org/2006/01/blog-post\\_10.html#comment-form](http://www.rachanakar.org/2006/01/blog-post_10.html#comment-form).

<sup>20</sup> Ved Prakash Sharma, Bio, accessed June 10, 2015, <http://vedprakashsharma.com/bio>.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Tausif Alam, “Era of Pulp Fiction Will Be Back: Ved Prakash Sharma, Meerut Publisher.” *The Economic Times*, February 24, 2012, accessed July 1, 2015, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-02-24/news/31091718\\_1\\_hindi-pulp-publisher-publication-house](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-02-24/news/31091718_1_hindi-pulp-publisher-publication-house).

<sup>22</sup> Pawanpreet Kaur, “The Sad Demise of Hindi Pulp Fiction,” *The Sunday Guardian*, March 18, 2012, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/artbeat/the-sad-demise-of-hindi-pulp-fiction>.

<sup>23</sup> Pawanpreet Kaur, “The Sad Demise of Hindi Pulp Fiction,” 2012.

<sup>24</sup> “Digital Era Spelling Doom For Hindi Pulp-fiction,” *Times of India*, January 14, 2015, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/Digital-era-spelling-doom-for-Hindi-pulp-fiction/articleshow/45851262.cms>.

<sup>25</sup> “Digital Era Spelling Doom For Hindi Pulp-fiction,” *Times of India*, January 14, 2015, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/Digital-era-spelling-doom-for-Hindi-pulp-fiction/articleshow/45851262.cms>.

<sup>26</sup> Denis Abrams, “HarperCollins India Tries To Save Hindi Pulp Fiction” in *Publishing Perspectives*, January 29, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://publishingperspectives.com/2015/01/harpercollins-india-tries-save-hindi-pulp-fiction/>.

<sup>27</sup> Jhilmil Motihar, “The original Wheeler dealers,” *Livemint.com*, August 19, 2011, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/r8EEDa8JaP5xEdxS5kN7wO/>

The-original-Wheeler-dealers.html.

<sup>28</sup> Jhilmil Motihar, "The original Wheeler dealers," *Livemint.com*, August 19, 2011, accessed June 3, 2015, <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/r8EEDa8JaP5xEdxS5kN7wO/The-original-Wheeler-dealers.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Praśant Varmā, "Jāsūsī aur seks thrilar kā koktel" on *Tehalka.com*, June 19, 2015, accessed June 20, 2015, <http://tehelkahindi.com/the-cocktail-of-spy-and-thriller/>.

<sup>31</sup> Praśant Varmā, "Jāsūsī aur seks thrilar kā koktel" on *Tehalka.com*, June 19, 2015, accessed June 25, 2015, <http://tehelkahindi.com/the-cocktail-of-spy-and-thriller/>.

<sup>32</sup> *Omprakashsharma.com*, 2015, <http://www.omprakashsharma.com/>.

<sup>33</sup> Anupam Agarawal's World. "Manoj BPB - Train Ka Lutera," August 11, 2015, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://anupam-agrawal.blogspot.com.au/>.

<sup>34</sup> Vikas Nainwal, "Kaun jītā kaun hārā - rīmā bhārati" on *Vikas Book Journal*, March 1, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://vikasnainwal.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/kaun-jeeta-kaun-hara-by-Reema-Bharti.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Aditi Malhotra, "How Non-English Speakers Are Taking Over the Internet," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2015, accessed August 5, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2015/08/04/how-non-english-speakers-are-taking-over-the-internet-at-a-glance/>.

<sup>36</sup> Aditi Malhotra, "How Non-English Speakers Are Taking Over the Internet," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2015, accessed August 15, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2015/08/04/how-non-english-speakers-are-taking-over-the-internet-at-a-glance/>.