Review of: The Indian Periodical Press And The Production Of Nationalist Rhetoric by Sukeshi Kamra

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The Indian Periodical Press and the Production of Nationalist Rhetoric by Sukeshi Kamra (review)

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Harder, Mittler, and their colleagues have opened the door for future explorations of *Punch* as a global phenomenon, and Mittler does well in her conclusion to point to some likely avenues for future research. In focusing only on Asia, the contributors implicitly invite scholars to observe the workings of *Punch* and *Punch*-like magazines wherever they took root in the Victorian age. With this excellent scholarly model in place, it cannot be too long before concerted explorations of American, Australasian, and African *Punches* expand our knowledge even further.

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Upon receiving Sukeshi Kamra’s *The Indian Periodical Press and the Production of Nationalist Rhetoric*, I turned straightaway to its sources. Much to my surprise, instead of a lengthy list of newspapers and periodicals, the works cited named fewer than a dozen journals. The mystery is clarified in the introduction: in this volume, Kamra draws upon the Native Newspaper Report (NNR), a weekly report of Indian-language newspapers compiled by officials of the (British) Government of India and widely circulated among civil servants. As Kamra writes, “A number of the newspapers on which this study draws have left no trace other than the record of the NNRS,” while the archives of those that remain are “fragmentary” (14). That newspapers were treated as ephemera is something readers of VPR know only too well; in a colonial context where many periodicals had small readerships or very short runs, the ephemerality of such print media is redoubled. Additionally, any comprehensive, single-author study of the “Indian periodical press” would require an individual capable of reading some half-dozen languages, at the very least Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, and Punjabi. (In 1875, Kamra reports, there were 478 Indian-run newspapers, most in vernacular languages [67].) This is the context in which Kamra draws on the NNR’s coverage of Indian-language newspapers in the period roughly between 1870 and 1910, providing us with a rich, if mediated, access to dozens of newspapers. Readers looking for more direct access to Indian periodicals will need to revise expectations raised by the book’s expansive title.

Kamra’s primary focus is on the government’s surveillance of the Indian press and its attempts at censorship. The NNRS are exhibit A in the history of this surveillance; however, Kamra argues that they were “not solely an
imperial tool” (10). Aware that it was being watched, the Indian press used the opportunity, within the constraints imposed on it, to communicate with the government. Much of this communication occurred in a language that was by turns genuflecting or self-abasing and critical of colonial policies. Here lies the crux of Kamra’s argument: in the post-1857 period, the Government of India required its Indian subjects to demonstrate loyalty; any and all signs of critique were read as hostility, rebellion, or sedition. The growing Indian press deployed the requirement of loyalty “tactically” (a phrase Kamra relies on extensively) for protection as it commented on or critiqued government policies. Each time the government introduced more stringent measures or brought a paper to trial—as in the introduction of Section 124A of the Penal Code that criminalized “feelings of disaffection,” which Kamra discusses in chapter 2; in the 1891 trial of the Bangavasi discussed in chapter 3; in the 1898 trial of Bal Gangadhar Tilak; in the spate of injunctions against radical presses between 1906 and 1910 discussed in chapter 4—it merely propelled the press to further criticism, thus paving the way for the rise of anti-colonial nationalism. Kamra argues that what the “law effected [was a transformation] of complaint into counter-discourse” (124).

Given her reliance on a highly mediated archive that excerpted and translated for its own bureaucratic and imperial purposes, Kamra relies on a method of “reading against the grain” (another oft-repeated phrase). In almost every case, she reads resistance or critique in the passages she cites from the NNRs. In some cases, such readings are warranted, for instance when the Amrita Bazar Patrika, excerpted in the Bengal NNR, writes, “The English know full well that they have not gained possession of this country by mere force of arms . . . [but by] their decided superiority to us in various respects and our veneration for them. . . . But with the increasing period of their administration of this country, our regard for them is becoming gradually lessened. . . . That sentiment of veneration is gradually dying away, because of the mean, unwise, unjust, and oppressive acts of men of the lowest class in England, who come to India with no other purpose than of draining its resources and returning home enriched” (84–85). That the praise of the English and appeal to upper-class prejudices might be pro forma and “tactical” is credible; the force of the passage clearly lies in the injunction against “mean, unwise, unjust, and oppressive acts of men.” But this is, of course, the very reason the passage is referenced in the NNR: because the compiler deemed it inflammatory or worth watching.

In other instances, however, Kamra’s dismissal of all pro-English sentiments or critique of fellow Indians as “tactical” or forced seems ideological. The thinnest readings appear in chapter 1, which focuses on the 1857 rebellion. Kamra’s argument is that 1857 “created a verbal space . . . in which the Indian public was given little choice but to instrumental-
ize fear and loyalty” (63). While many civilians, elites, writers, and editors certainly felt obliged to assert or prove their loyalty to the company or government (see the ad reproduced on page 50), many civilians and sepoys kept their distance from the rebels, in some cases because they disagreed with the aims of the insurgents and in other cases because they were repelled by their actions or strategy. As Tapti Roy (among others) has demonstrated, even elites such as the Rani of Jhansi, venerated as a “leader” of 1857, were drawn into joining the uprising only reluctantly (“Vision of the Rebels,” Modern Asian Studies 27, no. 1 [1993]: 205–28). No doubt the Rani was being “tactical,” but to dismiss all differences among Indians as merely signs of fear or loyalty engendered by an “illiberal” government is to flatten a complex history of debate as Indians forged a nascent national identity.

Kamra’s prose poses a frequent challenge, by turns unclear and jargon-ridden (for example, “Confession would serve functions here that Peter Brooks, drawing on Foucault, describes as functions it [confession] has accrued to it in Western psychological, social, and legal histories” [48]). Nevertheless, the volume offers rich passages from an archive that is both imperial and “native.” If some of the book’s claims about resistance overreach, its overarching thesis—that the relations between press and government were the arena in which a battle to force the government to countenance its illiberal face was enacted—is persuasive and well established.

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