



The Public Sphere in South Asia: A Review Essay

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Reviewed Works

Francesca Orsini, 2000. *The Hindi public sphere, 1920-1940: language and literature in the age of nationalism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 486 pp., ISBN: 9780195650846, Price £17.99.

Shobna Nijhawan, 2012. *Women and girls in the Hindi public sphere: periodical literature in colonial North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 376 pp., ISBN: 9780198074076, Price £27.50.

Manishita Dass, 2015. *Outside the lettered City: cinema, modernity, and the public sphere in late colonial India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 248 pp., ISBN: 9780199394395, Price: £19.99.

J. Barton Scott, Brannon Ingram and SherAli Tareen, eds. 2016. *Imagining the public in modern South Asia*. London: Routledge, 176 pp., ISBN: 9781138648821, Price: £90.

In the past two decades, the public sphere as a theoretical concept has moved from the periphery into the centre of inquiry in scholarship on South Asia.¹ References to public culture, public space, public opinion and other related terms have become ubiquitous. A glance at the 2016 programme of the Annual Conference on South Asia at Madison, Wisconsin, one of the largest scholarly meetings in the field, reveals that the term public alone occurs more than twenty times, and public space more than ten times in panels and paper descriptions. Other terms such as public discourse, public contestation, public interest and public life are mentioned frequently.² This article traces developments within the historiography on the public sphere in South Asia to find out



how these debates have evolved over the years.³ It focuses particularly on scholarship that deals with the historical emergence of a modern public sphere in the colonial period, and within this subfield on three recent publications: Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and girls in the Hindi public sphere: periodical literature in colonial North India* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Manishita Dass, *Outside the lettered city: cinema, modernity, and the public sphere in late colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and a special issue of the journal *South Asia* titled "Imagining the public in Modern South Asia" (2015), edited by J. Barton Scott, Brannon Ingram and SherAli Tareen. In conclusion, this article offers a reflection on the state of the field and points to potential avenues for future research.

Performance, Protest, and Print: Scholarship in Retrospect

Before reviewing the three books mentioned above, major developments within the historiography in the past 25 years will be summarised. The publication of a Special Issue of the journal *South Asia* on *Aspects of 'the Public' in colonial South Asia* in 1991 provides the starting point for our discussion. It marks a watershed moment in the debate because it was the first systematic attempt at applying the concept of the public sphere to South Asia. When the articles were written, debates around Jürgen Habermas's study had just begun to take off in the Anglophone world.⁴ The authors of the volume were critical of it and pointed out its Eurocentric bias. They argued that the categories of 'public' and 'private' were not applicable to the South Asian context because they could not adequately reflect its cultural and historical traditions. Instead, they suggested to use 'inside' and 'outside', or 'particular' and 'public' ('amm and khass) as terms to describe similar phenomena in South Asia (Chakrabarty 1991: 15-31; Devji 1991: 141-53). A number of articles emphasised that not only rationalised debate, but also processions, the staging of rituals, and other devotional activities could express public interest, lead to the formation of a public opinion, and create indigenous platforms of protest (Freitag 1991b: 65-90; Price 1991: 91-121).

In order to better reflect the local and enacted nature of public space, Freitag suggested replacing the term "public sphere" with "public arenas."⁵ Her intervention not only tried to make room for the accommodation of specific South Asian histories, but also attacked the singularity of the public sphere as a concept. Until today, the question of whether realities in South Asia can best be conceptualised by



speaking of a single public sphere, or instead a multitude of competing publics and counterpublics, has remained at the core of the debate.

Other contributions to the 1991 volume explored how colonial administrative measures, particularly the restructuring of cities into "native" and "British" towns, the construction of civil and military settlements⁶, the regulation of procession routes, and the allocation of space to certain groups all shaped the imagination and use of public space in South Asian cities even beyond Partition (Chakrabarty 1991: 15-31; Masselos 1991: 33-63). In sum, the 1991 Special Issue suggested an alternative terminology, emphasised different avenues for the crystallisation of public opinion, underlined the transformation of public space in the modern period, and pointed to the importance of the imperial and colonial framework for the development of a public sphere in South Asia.

Another significant impetus was provided by Francesca Orsini's study *The Hindi public sphere: language and literature in the age of nationalism* (2000). Orsini's research focuses on print culture and literature production as important facilitators of public debate. The spread of the lithographic press in South Asia during the mid-nineteenth century has been seen by many as *the* facilitator of the emergence of a modern, interconnected public sphere (cf. Anderson 1991). It led to the emergence of a whole new industry of commercial publishing and prompted a cultural and intellectual renaissance (see Stark 2007). While print built on the existence of earlier networks of knowledge production and dissemination, it introduced a qualitative shift because ideas could circulate faster and on a much larger scale (cf. Bayly 1996). Interestingly, many contributions to the field of South Asian Studies have emphasised the impact of print on religion, particularly its importance for the construction and formation of religious identities (cf. Oberoi 1994), the fragmentation of religious authority (see Metcalf 1982; Zaman 2002; Jones 2012), the intensification of religious controversy and conflict (cf. Jones 1992), but also the renewal of intellectual exchange between India, the Middle East as well as Central, East and Southeast Asia (see Alam 2004; Green 2009; Alavi 2015).

In contrast, Orsini's study focuses on print production, the reception of printed material and the formation of a modern public sphere in South Asia 'as such.' It argues that print production played a major role for the rise of a Hindi-speaking public sphere in the early twentieth century by establishing Hindi written in the Devanagari script as a public language.⁷ According to Orsini, the new Hindi public sphere formed through this process was largely bourgeois, male-oriented, and



decidedly nationalist. In a separate article, she elaborates on this claim by tracing the history of the term "public" in Hindi writings and demonstrating that it gradually came to be equated with "national" (Orsini 1999: 409-16). Drawing on Habermas, Orsini concludes that a new social and intellectual sphere for exchanging ideas and conducting public debate indeed emerged in India between the 1920s and 1940s. It was created by propertied men of high social standing, marked by the use of a specific language, and indebted to a certain political ideology. Due to its exclusionary character, it remained mostly inaccessible to broad parts of the population. However, her study points out that elite conceptions of this nationalist public sphere were challenged by the growth of the Hindi popular press and the involvement of women in education, writing and publishing. Shobna Nijhawan builds on Orsini's research and elaborates on these arguments. The following section offers a review of her book.

Serve Your Country, or Stay in the Kitchen: Public Discourses By and About Women

Shobna Nijhawan, in her 2012 study *Women and girls in the Hindi public sphere: periodical literature in colonial North India*, probes Orsini's claim about the rise of women's publics that challenged the hegemony of the nationalist, male-dominated public sphere. In it, she analyses periodicals written by and for women of the elite and upper middle classes from the United Provinces published between the 1910s and 1940s. Her research traces their role as facilitators of public debate that allowed readers to become part of broader discourses and form a collective identity.

Women's periodicals featured a diversity of texts and genres including, but not limited to, national and international news, op-eds on socio-political issues, works of fiction, poetry, information about healthcare, reports about science, and many others. They acquainted women with larger debates about politics, citizenship, social reform, national identity, and literature, and offered them a platform to express their thoughts. Female readers wrote letters to the editors, sent in short stories and poems, offered comments on political issues, and shared their experience and advice on personal matters, such as marriage and divorce. Through their roles as editors and publishers, but also as informed readers, contributors, and authors, women thus acquired new public personalities to an extent unknown before. The



medium of print offered women a space to express their subjectivity in public and discuss issues from female perspectives.

One of the most compelling aspects of Nijhawan's study is a close reading of four periodicals in light of the public roles of women they advanced. These include *Stri Darpan* (1909-28), *Grihalakshmi* (1909-29), *Arya Mahila* (1917-c.48) and *Chand* (1922-1940s).⁸ All four journals shared an agenda of promoting women's education and liberation, but they differed markedly in their attitudes towards women's roles in the public sphere. *Stri Darpan*, for example, had a decidedly feminist and activist agenda. It campaigned for women's rights, including those of the lower classes, and strove to involve women in politics.

Together with *Grihalakshmi*, it was the earliest Hindi periodical with women on the editorial board, and one of the most popular women's publications of its time. Quite in contrast to *Stri Darpan*, however, *Grihalakshmi* saw women not as public figures involved in political struggle or social reform, but mostly as enlightened and educated housekeepers whose realm of impact lay within the sphere of the home. Identifying itself as a "domestic ladies' paper", it carried articles about the management of household affairs, child-rearing, nutrition, health-care, but also poetry, mythology, social reform, and modern education. *Grihalakshmi* attempted to blend traditional with modern values by promoting novel ideas for the uplift of Indian women while at the same time encouraging them to preserve inherited customs and traditions. Its goal was to form women as domestic role models who were distinctly modern, and yet still fulfilled traditional gender roles.

A more spiritual or religious approach to women's public roles was presented by the journal *Arya Mahila*. It started out as the official organ of the Sri Arya Mahila Hitkarini Mahaparisad (Society for the Welfare of Aryan Women, est. 1919) and promoted revivalist ideas related to the teachings of the Arya Samaj. According to *Arya Mahila*, women should become active in the public sphere as philanthropists and social reformers while upholding religious values. They were encouraged to work in educational and social organisations such as colleges and widow homes and, by doing so, to visibly display their religiosity in public activities. Here, women were seen as public figures, but their activism was restricted to a certain sphere, namely the realm of charitable and philanthropic work.

The fourth journal, *Chand*, started out promoting Hindi literature, but also focused on women's political involvement. Published since 1922 from Allahabad, *Chand* was an overtly nationalist periodical



which mostly portrayed women as active citizens participating in the anti-colonial struggle. It featured reports about politically involved women, including those who were imprisoned for their views. At the same time, it provided a space for women to express their individual subjectivity and foster relationships by sharing personal concerns and experiences through reader's letters (Nijhawan 2012: 82).

Nijhawan's analysis of these journals demonstrates how diverse the understanding of women's roles in public was even among women themselves. On the one hand, their involvement in public discourses was extensive and significant. Periodicals provided "a forum for women to emancipate themselves by means of reading and writing, to recognize oppressive social and patriarchal structures, and develop a sense of self-respect" (ibid.: 30). Women carved out new spaces in social, political, cultural, and religious debates. They established new roles as citizens with a stake in the nation's imagined future. By using the medium of print, they developed a new female consciousness and formed an idea of sisterhood that transcended class, caste, kinship and cultural boundaries.

On the other hand, patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles were re-inscribed and reconfirmed by female writers and readers alike. As the nationalist movement gained momentum, the place of women within society was increasingly framed in terms of political ideologies. Women's periodicals played an active part in absorbing and reproducing these ideologies. Discourses inspired by nationalism called for a political awakening of women and urged them to participate in political campaigns and street protests, but at the same time admonished them to fulfil their domestic duties. Women were idealised as agents of change in the anti-colonial struggle, but also hailed as guardians of the family and custodians of India's traditions.

In order to claim a place in the public sphere, Nijhawan's research demonstrates, women often had little space to navigate complex discourses. They could choose between being either freedom fighters or housewives, either realise their political potential or manage domestic affairs, either serve their country or stay in the kitchen. The ambiguity and limitations implied in these choices, which do not seem to have been real choices in the first place, demonstrate the challenges women faced when they strove to express themselves in a social and political framework that often just served to replace older forms of patriarchy with new ones.⁹ Most importantly though, Nijhawan's analysis shows that women held diverse attitudes regarding their public roles, too.



They did not speak with one unanimous voice. Female writers and readers had hugely divergent understandings about what it meant to be a modern woman and how this shaped their roles in publics.

If we recall Orsini's argument about the existence of a hegemonic male, bourgeois, nationalist Hindi public sphere, Nijhawan's study paints a more complex picture. While she seems to proceed from the existence of a number of publics and counterpublics, her study also demonstrates that debates in women's publics at times reinforced traditional gender roles and contributed to the creation of new patriarchal norms. Women's journals were part of the same structures of domination and exclusion that also existed in male publics. They were produced and circulated by women from elite backgrounds, many of whom also came from politically influential families. This restricted their readership and, to a large extent, excluded those who did not belong to the new middle classes¹⁰, such as members of rural communities or illiterate women.

Did women's publics created by print then really call into question the dominance of the bourgeois, nationalist Hindi public sphere? The problem appears to be more complex than that. On the one hand, women's publics reflected and reproduced tendencies within male-dominated publics. However, they also created a space for female voices and perspectives and were able to influence and change mainstream discourses. Women's publics were at once part of and fed into the larger public sphere; they shared important themes, ideas and discourses, but also provided a distinctly different perspective.

If we look beyond the medium of print, there were also other avenues for ordinary Indians to express themselves publicly and join broader debates. One such avenue was provided by cinema. Film had already come to supersede print as 'the' medium of mass communication in the early twentieth century. It was able to address illiterate and less educated audiences and by that include other parts of society into public discourses. The following section will focus on film and its role for the public sphere by reviewing Manishita Dass's study on Indian cinema.

A Nation Imagined Through Film: Cinema, Nationalism, and the Indian Public Sphere

Manishita Dass in *Outside the lettered city: cinema, modernity, and the public sphere in late colonial India* (2015) looks at publics brought into existence by and shaped through cinema. Her study maps the



reception of cinema in India since its emergence as a mass medium in the early twentieth century by analysing periodicals, newspapers, autobiographies, and official records published between the 1910s and 1940s. She argues that a new cinematic public sphere arose as a result of the spread of the new medium and developed into an anti-thesis or counterpublic to what she calls "the lettered city." The term is borrowed from Uruguayan literary critic Angel Rama and describes a domain of power and privilege that is accessible only to a minority of the population, namely intellectuals who are part of the literary sphere. It corresponds to Orsini's nationalist Hindi public sphere.

At the centre of Dass' book lies an analysis of the connections between cinema and the rise of nationalism. Because of its broad appeal, the medium of film quickly acquired importance for political mobilisation and the propagation of ideologies. Due to its capacity to convey stories through moving images, it had the ability to reach a larger and much more heterogeneous audience than print. To intellectuals within the "lettered city", the new medium appealed as a platform for nationalist mobilisation. They recognised the political and educational potential of film to produce "fantasies of a truly national and more inclusive public sphere" (*ibid.*: 5). At the same time, nationalist-minded intellectuals dismissed certain films and genres for allegedly supporting bad tendencies, such as "irrationality, affinity with the pre-modern, aesthetic of excess, disdain for realism, and commercialism" (*ibid.*: 40).

Dass demonstrates the ambivalence of these discourses by looking at debates about so-called mythologicals produced in the 1910s and 1920s. Mythologicals were films whose narratives took their inspiration from Hindu mythology and forms of popular entertainment such as storytelling, painting, and Parsi theatre. Contemporary critics massively opposed mythologicals for allegedly harbouring anti-modern tendencies and spreading a romanticised vision of traditional rural India which they saw as inherently opposed to progress.

These views corresponded to discourses about movie-goers within the "lettered city." While the technology of film was seen as inherently progressive and modern, its audience, by contrast, was often constructed as a "sovereign, swaggering, volatile rabble with little access to economic or cultural capital, yet wielding enormous influence at the box office" (*ibid.*: 184). In order to fully realise its potential and civic responsibilities, it had to be educated and enlightened through "nationalist-minded" films.



Dass analysis shows how from the very beginning, writers and intellectuals attempted to stratify film audiences into "the masses" on one side and elite viewers with refined tastes on the other. This stratification was constantly challenged and resisted by movie-goers themselves. Tensions between "the people" in the cinematic public sphere, and "the lettered city" representing the bourgeois, nationalist public sphere form the common thread of her discussion about film. Her study interprets different conceptions of film audiences as reflections of political conceptions of "the people" as voters and citizens. In her narrative, these two alternative visions of cinema correspond to alternative visions of democracy. The idealised figure of the educated, deliberating viewer represents the idealised citizens, while the movie-goer as an unthinking consumer of culture who easily falls for reactionary ideologies corresponds to all that haunts Indian elites' aspirations for a nationalist public sphere.

By mapping these discourses, Dass' study demonstrates the capability of cinema to provide alternative avenues for public discourse. Through the emergence of film, a new cinematic public sphere was created that included parts of the population who had no access to the high-cultured, high-brow literary discourses conducted in the "lettered city." It allowed people to challenge the cultural authority of Indian elites and their dominance of the public sphere. Thanks to its wide appeal and more inclusive nature, Dass argues, the cinematic public sphere was able to "breach the walls of the lettered city" (Dass 2015: 8) and thereby transform Indian public culture profoundly. Her study thus makes an important contribution to the historiography in pointing to the existence of different publics and counterpublics made visible by the emergence of new media.

The 'Self' in the mirror of the State: Post-colonial legacies of colonial public culture

We come full circle with our discussion of scholarship on the public sphere by looking at another special issue of the journal *South Asia* on "Imagining the public in modern South Asia", edited by Brannon D. Ingram, J. Barton Scott, and SherAli Tareen. Published almost 25 years after the first Special Issue, it presents new research, records continuities and changes in the debate, and points to future directions of scholarship on that topic. The articles address a wide spectrum of topics and, in contrast to the 1991 Special Issue, cover both the colonial and postcolonial period. As with the first Special Issue, not every



article will be reviewed, but rather core themes traced that come up across different contributions.

One connecting theme within the 2015 special issue is the role of law courts and litigation for the formation of a modern public sphere in India. J. Barton Scott's article "How to defame a God" deals with legal definitions of personhood and religious authority in colonial Bombay and how they are debated and interpreted in public. Scott's analysis focuses on the Maharaj Libel Case of 1862 in which Jadunathji Brizratnji, the religious leader of the Pushtimarg, a Hindu sect prevalent among the Gujaratis of Bombay, pursued a law suit against Karsandas Mulji, a reform-minded journalist. Mulji had accused Brizratnji, who was known to his followers as the Maharaj, in a newspaper article of having entered into illegitimate relationships with female devotees. In order to defend his reputation and restore his good name, the Maharaj filed a libel suit in the Bombay Supreme Court.

Stepping out of the protected realm of his religious community and into the open space of the courtroom was an unprecedented move for someone who was not only a religious leader, but also claimed to be a reincarnation of Krishna. A god, a supernatural being, exposed to the gaze and scrutiny of the public? That was unheard of. The unusual nature of the case and its extensive press coverage led to a huge interest in it. Soon, public debate around it began to focus on the person of the Maharaj itself. An investigation was conducted in order to define the exact nature of Pushtimarg religious beliefs and the position of its leader within the sect. The court tried to determine whether the article had insulted him as a 'private' person or a 'religious' leader. This had implications for the legal rulings applied to his case. To determine whether the accusations were true, a medical examination was conducted which tried to establish whether the Maharaj suffered from sexually transmittable diseases.

Not only this examination, but the whole case, altered the public perception of the Maharaj's personhood: "His flesh was thus legally transformed: no longer sacred, it was now a form of private property safeguarded by the British state and regulated through state-sanctioned truth procedures like those of scientific medicine" (Scott 2015: 394). The Maharaj was made to appear in front of the court and his body subjected to examination, thereby reduced by colonial law to the position of an ordinary individual. He and his believers were forced to formulate their beliefs in the dry legal language of the court that did not correspond to their devotional practices.



Scott's article skilfully traces how different notions of the 'self' move to the centre of a public debate around this case. By trying to define human personhood, and its interpretation with regard to religious belief, the colonial state attempted to open it up for reform. But the colonial state was not alone in focusing on redefining the 'self', religious and social reformers equally saw it as a primary object of reform (see Ingram 2015: 403-18). Scott's article shows how debates about personhood and the 'self' became key sites for the articulation and formation of the colonial public, a theme that also continued later in nationalist writings (2015: 387-402). "Indeed, it was only by reshaping selfhood that the colonial 'public' could emerge as such", Scott argues (ibid.: 389).

Gilmartin's contribution to the volume connects debates on the reform of 'the self' with questions of political sovereignty (2015: 371-86). Legal debates like the Maharaj Libel Case redefined public and private spheres by making private matters the subject of public debate, he argues. Not only religious leadership, but also inheritance, family issues and other topics that had previously been dealt with in separate spheres were opened up for public debate.¹¹ His article demonstrates how the public sphere became a platform for people to perform, project and redefine their identities and connect them to new ideas about sovereignty coming from Europe. In Gilmartin's eyes, this permanent tension between the performance of the self on the one hand and public debate conducted via discursive reason on the other is one of the defining features of India's modern public sphere (ibid.: 386).

The tension between the state imagining the public and competing visions of it by actors outside the state is also addressed by William Mazzarella's article on "A different kind of flesh: public obscenity, globalisation and the Mumbai dance bar ban." His analysis of the Mumbai dance bar ban of 2005 demonstrates the mixture of colonial and post-colonial concerns that are involved when a state tries to define public culture. He traces these issues back to the colonial period, when state authorities insisted on the legal distinction between public places and places of "Indian tradition." The public was mostly seen as an economic realm regulated by the market, while custom and tradition were regarded as being separate from it.

Indian nationalists, in contrast, tried to create a shared cultural, political and economic space where different understandings of the public could coincide. However, new divisions appeared when Indian nationalism politicised Indian custom to use it for street protest and



political mobilisation. Reformers, on the other hand, produced a sanitised version of tradition by reinterpreting Indian history. Since Independence, Mazzarella argues, politics in India constantly revolved around the question of what is permissible in public and what not, because the post-colonial state takes legitimacy from "the prospect of a unified national public culture whose standards of propriety necessarily produced a popular remainder that was perpetually under suspicion for obscenity and indecency" (Mazzarella 2015: 490).

Laws on obscenity reflected this tension, because on the one hand, they allowed things to happen in public as long as they were justified as "tradition" or "custom", on the other, they tried to establish certain standards that corresponded to the ideology of a modernising state. Public debates about morality thus turned into a discussion of citizenship: what were citizens allowed to do in public, how much agency did they have, and when did national public culture need to be protected by the state? The public in this and other instances became an abstract site of governance regulated and patrolled by the state, Mazzarella shows, a realm used by the state to express and define its sovereignty vis-a-vis "the masses" (see also Birla 2015: 466-80).

The second central theme of this special issue is print. Francesca Orsini's article on "Booklets and *sants*: religious publics and literary history" fills an important gap within her own work on the Hindi public sphere. In the chapter, she analyses booklets containing sant orature, words of "charismatic persons of spiritual accomplishments who deliver their message and teachings through songs and religious discourse" (Orsini 2015: 436). Many of these texts, which had already circulated orally and in manuscript form for centuries, were "rediscovered" by local publishers and voluntary associations in the nineteenth century, who then edited and published them as cheap editions.

Most importantly however, and this is where her article adds a new dimension to earlier research, sant booklets addressed a general public, which included a much broader audience than the bourgeois, high-cultured Hindi public sphere identified in her book. Publishers of *sants* deliberately wanted to make these texts available to a wide readership that went beyond individual devotional circles. By that, diverse religious publics were created that were neither polemical nor reformist. This is an important point. Looking at the historiography of religion in the public sphere, one could easily get the impression that it either ignited controversy and contestation, for example through polemical or apologetic literature, or mediated rationalising impulses, as exem-



plified by reformist writings. But for large audiences, it was rather piety and its public display that was important, as has been demonstrated by Farina Mir's research on vernacular print culture and Margrit Pernau's work on the ashraf.¹²

Last but not least, SherAli Tareen's article on reformist writings about friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims confirms this point. In the context of the Khilafat Movement, the question became important how Muslims and non-Muslims should relate to each other in terms of politics, but also on a day-to-day basis. Tareen traces competing understandings of this concept presented by two Muslim reformers, Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958) and Ahmad Raza Khan (d. 1921). His article shows how their different approaches to this question translated into opposing interpretations of Muslim identity in colonial India. For both of them, the performance of piety in the public sphere played a crucial role, but they emphasised different points. Khan argued that symbols of religious identity had to be upheld in public and therefore Muslims should avoid associating with non-Muslims. His position on friendship rested on clearly distinguishable social markers between both groups and ultimately tried to protect a perceived normative purity of Islam.

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For Azad, in contrast, political unity was at the centre of public behaviour. He regarded Muslims first of all as members of a broader, pan-Islamic community secured by the sovereignty of the caliphate. Only within this framework could Muslims practice their faith and achieve unity. Allying with non-Muslims was important to achieve this political goal. Friendships were permissible in this context, because non-Muslims helped Muslims to achieve a better condition for practicing their faith. To Azad, political sovereignty was a precondition for publically performing one's religion. For Khan, it worked the other way around: performing one's religion in public meant to realise the community's political potential. Both points of view represent "competing rationalities of tradition, each with its own logic of how the memory of the prophetic past should inform the fashioning of a moral public in the present" (Tareen 2015: 432).

Conclusion

The two special issues of 1991 and 2015 provide a useful frame for assessing debates about the public sphere in South Asia. They emphasise the need to historicise and indigenise the concept, a call that is reflected within the available historiography. Scholars now largely



agree that a modern public sphere did develop in India during the colonial period, if not already before (although the colonial period is much better researched), and that this development was sometimes similar to, sometimes different from Europe. Global developments such as the spread of new technologies and means of communication facilitated its rise, but at the same time, it was deeply local. The creation of a modern public sphere in South Asia was made possible by print, shaped by the framework of colonial rule, and deeply fractured due to community competition and conflict.

While the scholarship on print and other media is well-developed, as has been exemplified by Nijhawan's and Dass's studies, important gaps remain to be filled. For example, Muslims as actors within the public sphere are often underrepresented or merely reduced to their religious identity while their other public identities are neglected. In the same vein, Urdu reading publics are less well-researched than Hindi publics, cementing the divide of South Asian Studies into the study of either Hindu or Muslim cultures. In addition, more research needs to be done on the use of public space. For example, only a few contributions focus on how public space was constructed and imagined in both urban and rural settings (see Glover 2007: 211-24). Similarly, very little scholarship exists with regard to the developments of civil society in a South Asian context. In order to understand the functioning of the public sphere in South Asia, it is crucial to research the historical origins of a modern civil society, look at case studies and trace how ideas about it developed and were applied in this context.

Endnotes

¹ The first publication in the field of South Asian Studies that focused explicitly on this topic was a special issue of the journal *South Asia* edited by Sandria Freitag: "Aspects of 'the public' in colonial South Asia", 14 (1) (1991b), which will be discussed below. For a definition of the public sphere, I rely on David Gilmartin who describes it as a "particular arena (or space) of debate and action that stands conceptually between the state and society, a space (both physical and metaphorical) characterised by its openness ... a 'zone' of interaction, within which the power of the state can be held up to scrutiny (or legitimised) in intersection with a community of autonomous persons" (Gilmartin 2015: 371). I would qualify this definition further by drawing on Dietrich Reetz, who sees the public sphere comprised of individual publics and counterpublics (Reetz 2006). There exists, of course, a huge body of literature around the concept of the public sphere itself, starting with Jürgen Habermas's study *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), and further Fraser 1990; Calhoun 1992; Hauser 1999; Mah 2000; Warner 2002; and Nash 2014, to name only a few.



² When speaking of the "public", we have to take into account the different meanings of the word. It can either be used to describe the realm of the state (versus the market economy), or a realm of community and citizenship, in which case it is often used interchangeably with the term "public sphere" (see Weintraub & Kumar 1997). In the context of this article, I will use the term "public" only in its second meaning. For a discussion about the usage of the terms "public" and "private" for South Asia, see p. 4.

³ While the review points out important shifts and developments, it neither claims to be exhaustive, nor conclusive. Literature that could also be included in such a discussion would be Breckenridge 1995; Kaviraj & Khilnani 2001; Naregal 2002; Rajagopal 2009, among many others.

⁴ His study was first translated into English in 1989.

⁵ This concept is more elaborated in Freitag 1989.

⁶ Even though, as Glover has demonstrated, this was often a hybrid and joint process. Cf. Glover 2008.

⁷ Her argument builds on Dalmia 1997.

⁸ In addition to that, she also analyses a column written for women published in *Mahila Manoranjan*, a literary periodical published from 1922 to 1950 by Naval Kishore. One of the best parts of her book is the discussion of children's periodicals.

⁹ The connections between Hindu nationalism, discourses on women's social spaces, and the (re)construction of patriarchy were explored in detail in Gupta 2002.

¹⁰ On the rise of the new middle classes in colonial India, see Pernau 2013.

¹¹ On this topic, see also Chandra 1998.

¹² Mir, Farina. 2010. *The social space of language: vernacular culture in British colonial Punjab*. Oakland: University of California Press and Pernau 2013.

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