



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2023; 5(1): 205-213
Received: 05-05-2023
Accepted: 09-06-2023

Dr. Saumya Gupta
Associate Professor, Janki
Devi Memorial College,
University of Delhi, New
Delhi, India

Social equality and political subjecthood: *Stri Darpan*'s advocacy for women's rights in the early twentieth century

Dr. Saumya Gupta

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i1c.250>

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the United Provinces during the 20th century by placing the women's periodical *Stri Darpan* at the centre of analysis. It contextualises the articulation of an early feminist consciousness through the articles that appeared in the journal, most of which were contributed by women. By exploring the narratives, debates, and discourses within its pages around the social and political rights of women, this study endeavours to capture the essence of women's agency, advocacy and aspirations within a pivotal period of socio-cultural transformation.

Keywords: Gender, Hindi periodical, social reforms, public sphere, women's writings

1. Introduction

India experienced significant socio-cultural transformations during the 20th century. Amidst the challenges of colonial rule and the fight for independence, the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh or UP) witnessed an intricate interplay of historical, cultural, and political transformations. In this multifaceted setting, a thorough exploration of gender dynamics becomes essential to grasp the comprehensive evolution of society during that era. The colonial period, marked by the imposition of Western ideologies and norms, played a pivotal role in restructuring existing gender dynamics. The twentieth century witnessed the reformulation of traditional roles within the private and public sphere, the negotiation of identities within the complex interplay of tradition and modernity and the emergence of voices advocating for women's rights. This paper will explore the challenges and opportunities posed by these transformations, shedding light on how individuals navigated and contested gender expectations in the face of societal changes through a study of *Stri Darpan*, a Hindi monthly published from Allahabad between 1909-1928.

The early years of the 20th century were the time when there was a wave of periodicals devoted to social reform in this region. A significant archive enabling access to this discourse is that of vernacular periodicals and journals. The interplay of emergent nationalism with colonial modernity gave rise to a class of educated individuals, who keenly felt the injustices of their own society, as much as they fought the alien rule of the British masters. For the educated middle classes, issues of reform were understood as a social and moral responsibility. Vernacular periodicals, magazines and journals became the means for disseminating new ideas of social modernity – especially those that concentrated on issues of gender, education, caste and community. Though these early periodicals were marked by an attempt to preserve traditional values, they also attempted to inform their readers about the changes and challenges of modernity.

However, most of these periodicals were male-owned and managed. This is understandable in a society like the United Provinces, which had low literacy rates even by the 1920s^[1].

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Saumya Gupta
Associate Professor, Janki
Devi Memorial College,
University of Delhi, New
Delhi, India

¹ Latika Chaudhary has calculated that "Literacy was extremely low in early twentieth century India, averaging less than 10 per cent across the large Indian provinces." Latika Chaudhary, 'Land revenues, schools and literacy: A historical examination of public and private funding of education,' *Indian Economic Social History Review* 2010, 47: 179 DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700202

Moreover journals devoted to social reform were always in a precarious situation vis a vis indigenous notions of patriarchy, and their prescriptions were directed more at reforming women rather than just reforming society. It was only in the 1930s that reformist male editors identified traditional norms and values as oppressive to women as well as modern society.

Within this context, a women's periodical like *Stri Darpan* stands out as a valuable lens through which to explore the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges faced by women during this transformative era. *Stri Darpan* was a rare publication that was owned and edited by women. It thus is an invaluable repository of voices reflecting the evolving role of women in society. The periodical, serving as a platform for women to express their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations, provides a unique entry point to understanding the nuanced ways in which women engaged with and responded to the changing socio-cultural landscape.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The colonial legacy as well as the growing nationalist fervor for independence provided the backdrop against which *Stri Darpan* articulated and contested prevailing gender norms. Through an interdisciplinary approach drawing on historical contextualisation and content analysis of the periodical, this paper seeks to illuminate how women negotiated their roles within the context of societal expectations, political upheavals, and cultural transformations. The study aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of gender dynamics in the United Provinces by closely examining the content, discourse, and contributions within the pages of *Stri Darpan*.

The study will focus on this one periodical that was owned, edited and managed by women and place it in historical context. It will use the methodology of textual analysis to explore how the periodical advocated for women's rights and served as a medium for articulating feminist perspectives even as it negotiated questions of identity and ideology within the broader fabric of Indian society. It will delve into the themes of education, employment, marriage, and political participation as discussed in the pages of the periodical, to shed light on both the aspirations and challenges faced by women in the United Provinces.

Furthermore, this research will consider the conceptualization of the category of gender through the perspective of social reform as well as through that of political rights, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of the rich ideological debates that unfolded within the pages of *Stri Darpan*. The study thus will consider how the periodical contributed to shaping public discourse on gender-related issues and illumine our understanding of the societal changes of the early twentieth century.

3. Historiographical Contextualization

Scholars like Meredith Borthwick, Judith Walsh and Tanika Sarkar have done pioneering work on recovering the archive relating to the everyday life of women in the late 19th century and early 20th century ^[2]. They have pieced

together the women's world through fragmentary archives, memoirs and vernacular texts. An exhaustive study of the periodical press and women's journals has enabled scholars to recreate the ideological positions of the time. In the context of the United Provinces, this scholarship was pioneered by Francesca Orsini, Ulrike Stark, Shobana Nijhawan and Charu Gupta ^[3]. These scholars pointed to the importance of the platform for public debate that was made available through print in the early 20th century. They traced the growth of the Hindi public sphere and its prescriptions for women in political as well as personal issues.

Further, Orsini, Nijhawan and Gupta utilized the extensive Hindi vernacular archive comprising popular pamphlets, advice manuals, novellas and newspapers to understand the intersectionality of gendered norms with the shaping of the Hindu community identity. Delving into the intersections of gender, sexuality, and public discourse these works have powerfully situated the centrality of the Hindi publishing and periodical literature for the dissemination of the ideas of social reform, linguistic identity and freedom struggle in the early years of the twentieth century. This paper seeks to extend these insights to explore the evolving roles and aspirations of women during a period marked by social and political transformations.

From the early 20th century, three phases of public articulation of the 'women's question' can be discerned in the pages of the Hindi periodical press of the United Provinces. In the first phase, women were taught to learn to be 'good housewives' and companions to their husbands while managing their households with prudence and thrift. This kind of advice was dispensed through periodicals published in the late 19th century and could be seen in the columns of periodicals like the *Grihalaxmi*. From the first decade of the twentieth century, and especially from the 1910s onwards, a more visibly political agenda appeared. Issues like women's education, widow remarriage, and their contribution to the national movement came to the forefront. *Stri Darpan* exemplified this trend and remains unique in its early articulation of a feminist viewpoint voiced by women of the United Provinces. Indeed, the combination of social and political interests of women with an agenda directed towards broadening women's intellectual worldview was first outlined by *Stri Darpan*. This positioning was crucial for the subsequent radical articulation of women's position in society and their rights. This third phase was represented by periodicals like *Chand* and *Madhuri*, published from the 1920s, but coming into their own in the 1930s. These phases conversed with, overlapped and intersected with each other, and also with the more traditional viewpoints of their detractors, making women and their issues a burning question of the early 20th century.

3.1 Origin and Context

Stri Darpan was published initially from Allahabad from

Orient Blackswan, 2003; J. Walsh, *Domesticity in colonial India. What women learned when men gave them advice*, Lanham, 2004.

³ F. Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-40: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, OUP, 2001; F.

Orsini, 'Domesticity and beyond. Hindi women's journals in the early twentieth century,' *South Asia Research*, 19, 1999, p. 137-160; C. Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, Permanent Black, 2001

² M. Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, Princeton University Press, 1984; T. Sarkar 2001, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*,

June 1909. It later shifted to Kanpur in 1923, from whence it continued to be published till 1929. Initially, it was published in both Devanagari and Persian script, to garner a wider reading public. However, this practice was dispensed with after the first two issues; henceforth the magazine chose to be available solely in Devanagari. For these twenty years, it was a trailblazer in evolving a feminist viewpoint in the United Provinces. Of these twenty years, the journal was edited for 16 years by Rameshwari Nehru. After its shift to Kanpur, it was edited by Sumati Devi and Phulkumari Mehrotra^[4].

The women of the Nehru family were at the forefront of this exercise. Rameshwari Raina was born in Lahore in 1886, to the Dewan Narendra Nath, a prominent and influential family of Lahore. She married when 15 years old to Brijlal Nehru who was Jawaharlal Nehru's cousin (son of Moti Lal Nehru's elder brother Nand Lal Nehru), and who had accompanied Jawaharlal to England to study. The Raina family followed the practice of *parda*, and Rameshwari was schooled at home, where Pandits and maulvis taught her Sanskrit and Persian, while she picked up a smattering of English through her governesses. Uma Hukku was married to Shyamlal Nehru, another of Jawaharlal's cousins (younger son of Motilal's brother Nandlal). She had received formal education at St. Mary's School, Hubli, and belonged to a much more progressive family. The third woman involved with the *Stri Dapan* was Kamala Dar, who was married to Mohan Lal Nehru, older brother of Brijlal. Mohanlal Nehru had established the Law Journal Press from where *Stri Darpan* was published. Mention must also be made of the sister publication *Kumari Darpan*, which was edited by Roop Kumari Nehru, the daughter of Mohanlal and Kamla Nehru and the niece of Uma, Kamla, and Rameshwari Nehru. Together these women of the Nehru clan pioneered the educated and the reformist female voice in the Hindi public sphere^[5].

After setting up the Prayag Mahila Samiti in 1909 Rameshwari Nehru founded the Delhi Women's League. She was a nominated a Member of the Government of India's Age of Consent Committee in 1928. In 1930 she represented Indian women at the Round Table Conference in London, and at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1931. She visited Russia in 1932 and Australia in 1937. Thus between 1931 and 1938, she visited different parts of the world studying the conditions of women abroad and seeking to enlarge the horizon of the women's movement in India^[6]. Besides women's empowerment, she was also involved in the movement against untouchability. In 1934 following Mahatma Gandhi, Rameshwari Nehru turned to harijan uplift and was elected vice-president of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1935. In 1938 she worked for the uplift of Harijans uplift in Central India. In 1942 she was arrested, and jailed. Her lifelong preoccupation with the cause of women empowerment and caste uplift had an early start, and is noticed in the subject matter of her journal *Stri Darpan* from the first decade of the twentieth century itself.

⁴ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 265

⁵ Elena Borghi, 'Forgotten Feminisms: Gender and the Nehru Household in Early-Twentieth-Century India' *Gender & History*, Vol.29 No.2 August 2017, pp. 254–272.

⁶ Rameshwari Nehru, *Gandhi is My Star*, Pustal Bhandar, Patna, n.d.

The origins of the journal *Stri Darpan* lay in the desire for forming a ladies' club om Allahabad. Around fifty women from elite service families were invited to the Nehru household, on the 22 of January 1910, for a meeting to discuss issues of concern. This salon meeting would become the foundation meeting of a women's organization known as the *Prayag Mahila Samiti*. Nandrani Nehru was chosen as the president of the association. Rameshwari Nehru, who had already known as the editor of *Stri Darpan*, informed the assembled women that women's association had already been established in all big cities like Lahore, Delhi, Bombay, Pune and Calcutta, and the women of UP should not be left behind in this endeavour^[7]. Twenty office bearers were chosen, prominent among whom were wives of Pandit Madam Mohan Malviya, Pandit Sundarlal, Pandit Motilal Nehru and Dr Satish Chandra Banerjee.

The association was to meet on the first of every month. Proceedings included one member reading a note or giving a lecture, followed by two commentaries upon it. The first such lecture was to be delivered by Mrs. Kailash Rani on *Matra Bhasha* or Mother Tongue. The Samiti's was to work towards the empowerment and social education of women. Within five years, the Samiti became the foremost organization for talking about women's uplift and emancipation in the province. Indeed, even before the emergence and acceptance of Gandhian sanction for women in politics, the annual conference of Prayag Mahila Samiti held in 1914 attracted participation from 200 women^[8]. Thus while the social reform movement giving centrality to women's issues was initiated a century earlier in Bengal than in the Hindi region, in twentieth century UP, it was led by women and raised questions relevant to them.

Wider dissemination of the proceedings of the discussions undertaken in the meetings of the Prayag Mahila Samiti were to be publicized through the new Hindi magazine called *Stri Darpan*, published on the 1st of every month. Started some time before the establishment of the Prayag Mahila Samiti, *Stri Darpan* was edited by Rameshwari Nehru, managed by her sister-in-law Kamala Nehru, and published by Kamala's husband Mohanlal Nehru's Law Journal Press. Though initially the journal had around five or six hundred subscribers, within a year the number of subscribers increased to a thousand, no small feat for a journal dedicated steadfastly to women's issues only^[9].

Stri Darpan was a substantial repertoire of features. Each issue comprised around seventy pages, with content divided into approximately four sections. The editors commented upon the dominant issues of the day through an editorial. It updated readers on current events, emphasizing women's issues at local, national, and global levels. The second section featured informative texts and brief essays covering social, cultural, historical, and political subjects. The third section focused on literature and included serialized novels, short stories, biographies and poetry. A fourth section comprised miscellaneous items that ranged from letters to the editor with responses, and book reviews. Interestingly,

⁷ 'Prayag Majila Samiti,' *Stri Darpan*, February 1910

⁸ Uma Rao, 'Women in the Frontline: The Case of UP,' in Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar ed, *Women and Indian Nationalism*, Indian Association for Women's Studies, 1994

⁹ Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*, Oxford University Press, 2011

like modern journals, *Stri Darpan* reviewed newly published books on national and literary topics. Though the language of the periodical was an easy mix of Hindustani and Khari Boli, the text was liberally interspersed with many poems, *dohas*, *chaupais* shlokas indicating its location in a polyphonous world of Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu, Awadhi and Braj. It also conversed with its readers by regularly printing letters from them and interestingly these letters were written by both men and women. Contributions to *Stri Darpan* came from professional writers, notable public figures, and also from a significant number of ordinary writers. Many of the writers and contributors to the periodical were involved in nationalist political organisations like the Indian National Congress and the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, and the periodical was vocal and supportive about national issues taken up by these bodies and their possible connection to the emancipation of women. Thus the journal has justifiably been labelled as the “most important instrument in the women’s movement in the Hindi provinces [where], there was no other magazine which brought such gravity and depth to the examination of women’s issues.”^[10]

3.2 Stri Darpan: Women as Social Subjects

From the late 19th century, educated Indian men, serving the modern bureaucratic state, living in newly urbanized cities were keenly aware of the embarrassing contradictions of their personal lives, especially the duplicitous ethical and social norms of gender and caste discrimination that formed the bedrock of traditional Indian society. The desire for a companionate, educated and cultured wife and mother was the main propeller of the social reform. *Stri Darpan* played an important part in the advocacy of social reform in the United Provinces. However, *Stri Darpan* provided space for the emergence of an agenda for social reform that was articulated by women and was not limited to women’s emancipation as understood by men. It concentrated on two main issues, the need for women’s education and the pitiable condition of widows in Hindu society. Right from the beginning, these two issues formed the subjects of many poems, stories and features of the journal.

3.3 Education: What Should Women be Taught

The need and advocacy of women’s education was a continuing theme not only in the articles and features, but also in the majority of fiction, stories and poetry published in *Stri Darpan*. In the early twentieth century, census figures pointed out that only six girls were literate out of every thousand^[11]. Lack of education was the root cause of women’s oppression and subservient position in the family and society. The modernist view of education held by Rameshwari Nehru was outlined in an early issue of *Stri Darpan*, which carried an editorial comment on the efforts of Mrs. Annie Besant to establish a university in India that would cater to all irrespective of religion or creed, would stress on Indian history, philosophy and languages, would

teach industrial arts and would be free from government control^[12]. The opening of Dayal Singh College in Lahore was welcomed, as was Gandhi’s educational efforts in the Phoenix Farm in South Africa. The need for education was the focus of a poem titled *Vidya ki Badhai*. Indeed even at this early date, an article by Savitri Devi, titled *Stri Jati par Purusho ka Bura Vyavahar*, noted that the first oppression that men subjected women were the denial of education (“*Pahila atyachar purusho ka striyon par jo hota hai voh unko siksha na dena hota hai*”). Modern educated men, who espoused social reform outside the home unfortunately remained indifferent towards educating the women of their households. Savitri Devi addressed the prevalent notion that educated women would not care for traditional household duties and would strive for an independent existence, by rhetorically asking men to give up education if it led to such adverse results.^[13]

Examples of women being educated in ancient India were regularly cited to encourage women to take up the cause of education, as by Braj Rani through her poem ‘*Vidya Parho*,’ published in May, 1911. Similarly, an article lamented the lack of attention given to women’s education in the twentieth century, despite notable advancements in education worldwide. Not educating women was doing a disservice to the cause of the nation by depriving it of the services of educated, competent, and efficient mothers^[14]. In the January issue, Kamleshwari Devi’s article, ‘*Stri Shiksha Se Deshonnati*,’ cited the accomplishments of educated Japanese women who actively contributed to all facets of national life, aiming to counter arguments opposing the education of Indian women. In an editorial in August 1918, Rameshwari Nehru expanded on the advantages of education by stating that it would empower women to cultivate a sense of pride in being Indian^[15]. While there was a broad acceptance among the elite social reformers that women’s education must be promoted, there was much debate about the content and nature of that education.

Besides basic literacy, that would enable women to comprehend religious texts, especially tales of ancient women who were exemplary followers of wifely duties or *pativrata dharma*. This form of education was propagated in the Hindi public sphere with enthusiasm. Short historical sketches of famous women of the past were regularly published in *Stri Darpan*. These were presented as ideal women, whose bravery and sacrifice were to be emulated, for the cultural uplift of India and Indian women. Women from ancient Indian legends like Sita and Savitri and history like Rani Durgawati, and Rani Chanda were presented as ideal Indian women. Profiles of modern high-achieving women like the poet and writer Mahadevi Varma were also published^[16]. Traditionalist supporters of women’s education also advocated providing proficiency in skills such as tailoring, embroidery, cookery, childcare, letter-writing, etc. so that women become efficient homemakers. Articles on crafts like sewing and tailoring were

¹⁰ Vir Bharat Talwar, ‘Feminist Consciousness in Women’s Journals in Hindi, 1910-1920,’ in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Kali for Women, 1989

¹¹ Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar (ed), *Women and Indian Nationalism*, Indian Association for Women’s Studies, Vikas Publishing. House 1994, p. 32

¹² ‘Mrs Besant ki University,’ *Stri Darpan*, June 1910

¹³ Savitri Devi, ‘Stri Jati par Purusho ka Bura Vyavahar,’ *Stri Darpan*, June 1910

¹⁴ Yadunandan Prasad, ‘Stree Shiksha aur Bhavishya Ka Sanskar,’ in *Stri Darpan*, May-June 1911

¹⁵ Rameshwari Nehru, ‘Desi aur Vilayati Nari Shiksha,’ *Stri Darpan*, August 1918

¹⁶ Srimati Mahadevi, February 1918

incorporated in the journal from the beginning and were presented as providing essential skills for “those unfortunate women, especially widows, who had to earn their livelihood.” For example, *Stri Darpan* introduced a series on *Shilpa Shiksha* by Savitri Devi, which taught tailoring, embroidery and knitting to women^[17].

Upholding the patriarchal family was still a major issue of concern, and thus the fear of educated women turning their back to their familial duties remained a consistent concern even in the reformist writing published in *Stri Darpan*. Thus for instance, an article titled *Arya Nari* by Neeraj Nath Sharma advocated that women should only be taught “their mother-tongue and some maths, so that their husbands were not burdened with household accounts relating to the milkman and the washerman, and the women were able to enjoy and teach religious principles of Hindu religion to their children^[18]. Another feature on *Stri Siksha* published in July 1916 stressed that women’s education should not “blunt their talent to become an ideal housewife.”^[19]. Similarly in the February 1918 edition, Smt. Krishna Kumari from Lahore stated that it was education that bestowed grace upon women and provided them with the skills needed to fulfil their wifely duties efficiently.^[20]

These debates in the pages of *Stri Darpan* points to the complexities of women’s emancipation vis a vis the patriarchal family structure in which reformers were located. Should women receive an education focused on domestic affairs or were they to be acknowledged as true equals and given an education that encompassed social and political ideologies and issues? Should women’s education follow an indigenous or Western pattern? Given the slow pace of attitudinal change among both men and women and the reluctance of men to acknowledge the intellectual potential of women, as indeed their social and political rights, *Stri Darpan* followed a middle path. Rameshwari Nehru believed that men and women have to together work for an egalitarian social order, and nothing would be gained by advocating a reversal of power relations in society. It judiciously provided space to traditionalist and radical views on the issue, publishing for example the spirited rejoinder to Akbar Allahabadi’s satire on educated women by Hirdaya Mohini Devi.^[21] Further, *Stri Darpan* and Rameshwari Nehru enthusiastically reported about women’s schools like the opened in cities like Allahabad, Lucknow or Jalandhar, and regularly publicised any such enterprise.^[22]

3.4 Mismatched Marriages and Enforced Widowhood

The lack of education among women was linked to the deplorable state of the Hindu widow. The statistics for the number of child widows in UP in 1918 revealed the high incidence of child marriage and widowhood. The number of widows was estimated to be more than a lakh (1,03,541). Of this more than 15000 were below the age of 10, 38,849 were between the ages of 10-15 years and an astounding 49,555 of widows were aged between 15-20 years. The marital

figures gathered by the Census of 1921 show that 102 girls out of every 1000 in UP were married before ten years of age. Altogether there were 18,663 girls under five years of age and 3,06, 618 girls under the age of ten who were married. Once the figures of child marriage and widowhood are put together, it is clear that many brides never saw their husbands.^[23] Mismatched marriages and enforced widowhood denied women any control over their bodies and sexuality. *Stri Darpan* emerged as the platform for a constructive dialogue between advocates and critics of widow remarriage.^[24]

The pitiable condition of the widow became a recurrent theme addressed through features and barely fictional accounts and stories. Many writers commented on the entitlement of the male widower as against the injustices heaped upon the female widow. The fact that most of the widows from high castes were married off as child brides to much older men was seen as a root for this evil practice. The anonymous autographical account titled *Ek Vidhwa Ki Jiwani*^[25] and poems like *Nari Vilap* by Srimati Suryadevi poignantly put forward the ills suffered by widows^[26]. Radical views about the injustice meted to women was expressed through another poem by one Mrs Mannan Dwivedi, BA, who condemned the men for marrying multiple times, and then preaching chastity to women.

One of the most strident contributors on the issue was Hukma Devi who was scathing in the indictment of the traditional patriarchal society and its treatment of widows. Hukma Devi was the principal of the Girls School in Dehradun. She was a regular contributor to the journal and was one of the few promoters of widow remarriage. In an article titled *Ardhangini ya Paon Ki Jooti*, Hukma Devi compared the position of women as footwear used and discarded by men^[27]. In another article titled *Stri Jaati ki Unnati Kaise Ho*, published in April 1917, she berated the men for the speediness shown in remarrying in case their wives died. On the other hand women were denied the option to remarry and were constrained by tradition to follow stringent rules of widowhood, killing every natural desire of their heart. Hukma Devi even suggested that the government be petitioned to make laws against the remarriage of widowers. Fictional stories also put forward the need for women to not accept such discrimination passively, as in the story *Adarsh Sakhi*, carried in the 1918 issue of the journal^[28].

The issue of widow remarriage had to battle conservative social attitudes despite this spirited support. However, these debates did helped in publicising the pitiable condition of the Hindu widows. Even the critics of widow remarriage were forced to argue for a reform of the social sanctions on the widow and to offer them opportunities for education and employment. Some even suggested that they could become exemplary national soldiers. The discussion on widow

¹⁷ Savitri Devi, ‘Shilpa Siksha,’ *Stri Darpan*, January 1910

¹⁸ Neeraj Nath Sharma, *Arya Nari*, *Stri Darpan*, March 1910

¹⁹ Kamlesh Mohan, *Towards Gender History*, p. 113

²⁰ Krishan Kumari, ‘Bharat Ki Yeh Dasha Kyon Hui,’ *Stri Darpan*, February 1918

²¹ *Stri Siksha par Akbar ke Vichar*, *Stri Darpan*, July 1917

²² ‘Kanya Mahavidyalaya,’ *Stri Darpan*, September 1910; ‘Mrs. Portar ki Kanya Pathshala,’ *Stri Darpan*, August 1911; *Arya Kanya Pathshala Prayag*, *Stri Darpan*, November 1911.

²³ Uma Rao, *Women in the Frontline: The Case of UP*, in L. Kasturi and V. Mazumdar ed. *Women and Indian Nationalism*, pp. 28-52

²⁴ K. Mohan, *Towards Gender History: Images, Identities, and Roles of North Indian Women with special reference to Punjab*, Aakar Books, 2006

²⁵ *Stri Darpan*, December 1915

²⁶ *Stri Darpan*, December 1918

²⁷ *Stri Darpan*, March 1918

²⁸ Gulabdevi Chaturvedi, ‘Aadarsh Sakhi,’ *Stri Darpan* July 1918.

remarriage as seen in the pages of *Stri Darpan* indicated that despite the lament on the pitiable condition of widows, remarriage was more a social stance than an actual practice. Further, a majority of women contributors looked beyond re-marriage and upheld the alternative of education and employment.

4. Stri Darpan: Women as Political Subjects

The women of the Nehru clan leading the Prayag Mahila Samiti represented the first generation of English-educated educated empowered women who laid the foundations of the women's movement in the pre-independence period. The progressive struggles against child marriage, widow remarriage and education for women that had begun in Bengal and Maharashtra in the nineteenth century reached UP in the early twentieth century. In contrast to the nineteenth-century social reform movements led by men with the aim of "women's uplift," these twentieth-century women's groups did not look towards men to lead their struggle for emancipation. Women's groups and associations like Prayag Mahila Samiti promoted institutions dedicated to the education of widows and destitute women, actively participated in social reform initiatives, and promoted education. Women's periodicals like *Stri Darpan* were the protagonists of this phase of first-wave feminism in the United Provinces. Further, as this was a time when questions of political representation were emerging as a central concern, women demanded not only social reforms but also political rights.

Partha Chatterjee has forcefully argued that the 'women's question' of the nineteenth century was set aside in the twentieth by more immediate concerns of nationalism and anti-colonial struggle. This argument overlooks the emergence of new forms of writing like *Stri Darpan* that emerged as crucial platforms for discussions about the role and position of women in society^[29]. In the context of *Stri Darpan*, Vir Bharat Talwar has contended that the nationalist movement played a pivotal role in linking women's rights and education with the requirements of the nationalist movement^[30]. Thus, to truly understand the novelty of this politics, there is a need to expand the categorisation of the 'political' to include women's writings about private and personal matters that have conventionally been seen as 'social.' Visualised in such a manner, the "women's question" of the nineteenth century does not seem to have disappeared; rather it was "enthusiastically carried forward, expanded, and transformed by women...who were editing and publishing in journals...whose readership was predominantly female."^[31]

The political agenda of *Stri Darpan* and Prayag Mahila Samiti was to build up social conscience against atrocities against women and mobilise public opinion in favour of women's participation in the national movement. The pages of the periodical carried news and commentaries on national issues and leaders from the beginning. The February 1910 issue of *Stri Darpan* had a long feature on Madan Mohan

Malviya and the various activities undertaken by him^[32]. The periodical was the among earliest followers of Mahatma Gandhi and published on Gandhi's movement in South Africa from the beginning. For instance, the April 1910 issue had a long serialised biographical feature on the life of Mohandas Karmchand Gandhi, who was addressed both as the 'brave heart from South Africa' (*Dakshin Afrika ke Veer*) and a 'true son of Mother India' (*Bharatmata ka sachhe putra*)^[33]. The journal planned to later publish a series of life stories of such selfless and patriotic men and women devoted to Mother India. The first of the series of this *Adarsh Jeewan Mala* was the book on Gandhi, and it was planned that a fourth of the income received from the sale of this booklet would be sent as a contribution to the welfare of Indians in Transvaal in South Africa^[34]. Again in 1917, the periodical dedicated an issue to the cause of the Indian indentured labourers, showing political consciousness and the desire to be counted as a political voice. Learning from British feminists, the elite women of the Prayag Mahila Samiti used their privilege to "confront the highest ranks of the colonial government utilising constitutional methods, seeking recognition from their (male) compatriots for supporting nationalist claims and ultimately starting to carve an autonomous space from which they would later on be able to voice other, more sensitive concerns"^[35].

As noted earlier, *Stri Darpan* did not believe in a limited sense of women's education – one that was only geared towards companionate domesticity, looking after the household, husband and children. Instead, right from the beginning, it put forward an expansive political worldview, indicating that it was important for women to know the wider world, and not just of their own country or culture. Thus it educated its readers on varied issues concerning the world, including the annual conference of the Indian National Congress, the suffragette movement in England, (*Vote mangane vali striyan*), the price inflation in India, the draconian Press Act and even the experiment in aviation undertaken in Europe. All of these issues were essential for a well-rounded education of modern women.

Stri Darpan was one of the earliest of women's periodicals in the Hindi region to actively engage with prominent nationalist concerns. Unlike other women's publications, the editorials in *Stri Darpan* routinely addressed government bills and Indian National Congress decrees. The journal boldly delved into the analysis and critique of political affairs and decisions, distinctly marking its editorial comments and allowing room for diverse perspectives. Few journals exhibit such openness to opposing viewpoints. The concern with national and international affairs can be seen right from the inception of the Journal in 1909-10 and it remained consistent in 1919-1920. A typical issue of *Stri Darpan* in 1919 included "war news; influenza; air-travel; forced widowhood; water of the Ganga as dangerous to health, tight to vote for women, the peasant the congress"^[36]... These were accompanied by a serialised story, a

²⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, OUP Delhi, 1989, p. 246

³⁰ Vir Bharat Talwar, 1989: 221)

³¹ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, (ed), *Women Writing in India, vol. I: 600 BC to the Early 20th Century*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 160–86.

³² Mannaniya Pt. Madanmohan Malviya, Sabhapati Indian National Congress, *Stri Darpan*, February 1910

³³ Mohandas Karmchand Gandhi: *Dakshin Afrika ka Bharteeya Veer*, April 1918

³⁴ Tippiani (Comment), *Stri Darpan*, April 1910

³⁵ Borghi, *Forgotten Feminisms*, p. 265

³⁶ Vir Bharat Talwar, *ibid*.

serialised play and a historical romance, all with women as the protagonists or dealing with male attitudes. A patriotic poem and an essay on women's duty to serve the nation were also part of the issue.

The periodical was also an early proponent of women's rights, not only in the social space, but also in the political space. It was one of the first to ask for the right to vote for women. Rameshwari Nehru made a clear statement of equality between men and women when she pointed out that women should also get the right to rule, and to give orders, if they were expected to serve the nation^[37]. Further, she also contended that if men wanted freedom from the British, they should first be required to grant freedom to enslaved women."^[38] In an editorial published in 1921, the editors Nehru and Vachu traced the history of the journal and its service to the women's cause over the past twelve years. They noted "This magazine commenced publication when no other magazine dealt with women's opinions. The only talk during this period was on *stree dharma* (women's duty) and nobody even spoke about women's rights...an issue that has come to the forefront through powerful advocacy by the Journal^[39]. Despite being limited by their privileged class and caste position, these middle and upper-class, upper-caste Indian women put up a sophisticated analysis of the inadequacies of the colonial state. In fashioning and participating in this discourse they were able to reconceptualize the position of women in the future nation.

The demand for treating women as political subjects, with equal rights of participation in the public space was predicated on three discursive registers: by citing examples of women in history, by claiming inspiration from women fighting for political rights in European countries, and finally by public solidarity with the Gandhian national movement. Rights of women outside the home were foregrounded through the examples of Puranic women like Sita, Savitri and Damyanti who did not live within the confines of the purdah, or the brave Rajput women warriors like Durgawati and Rani Chanda, who fought on the battle field. *Stri Darpan* published a series over four issues titled *Pracheen Bharat me Striyon ke Adhikar*, penned by revolutionary writer Satyabhakta.^[40] Along with these examples from ancient history, the struggle of modern women for political rights was also commented upon favourably. The success of the Suffragette movement for women's right to vote in the United Kingdom in 1918 was welcomed in *Stri Darpan*. Articles tracing the history of the movement were published, and Uma Nehru commented on the favourable change in the status of women after the First World War^[41]. Lastly, it was the politicisation of the Indian middle class through the freedom struggle that encouraged Indian women to ask for their rights^[42]. Indeed in 1917 Sarojini Naidu took a delegation of women to the Viceroy demanding representation in the impending Councils Act. Miss Pal, a contributor to *Stree Darpan*, demanded that men

should also consider granting Home Rule to women^[43].

4.1 Emergent Feminist Consciousness

Uma Nehru was the most vocal advocate for the rights of women. As noted earlier, Uma Nehru's upbringing was relatively more progressive. She was brought up in the Bombay Presidency, and had received an English education at St. Mary's Convent, Hubli. She was an active member of the various civil and political organizations of United Provinces, including the Home Rule League and the Congress. She carried this activism in the 1920s and 1930s and was even mentioned as the 'dictator' of the national movement in Allahabad during the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930, and led about 5000 Indian ladies in a demonstration against the colonial government. She was one of the founders of the All India Women's Conference and served as the President of its Lucknow branch. Uma Nehru was part of the women's delegation that met Lord Chelmsford on 24 March 1917, under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu. A few months later she also participated in another deputation to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State Lord Montagu to demand women's franchise on the same terms as men. Besides *Stri Darpan*, she also contributed articles to a literary magazine called *Maryada*, and was the editor for its special issue on women in June 1916. Another article on the 'role of women in marriage,' was published in the *Vidushi Ank* of the *Chand* magazine. Her writing points to a deep engagement with issues of female emancipation. She was moreover extremely critical of the rhetoric of tradition and culture employed by the political class of the time to valorise femininity and motherhood and use that to justify the denial of political rights to women.

In a series of articles published between March and August 1918, she dissected the ills and disadvantages suffered by Indian women. Titled *Hamare Samaj Suhharak* (March 1918), *Hamare Samajik Dhanche* (April 1918), *Hamare Hriday* (May 1918) and *Hamari Soortein* (July-August 1918), these articles berated Indian males for camouflaging women's oppression under the weighty ideals of tradition, social structure, service and beauty that women were supposed to uphold. Uma Nehru described how women were put in these straitjackets by Indian society in the name of traditions throughout history, from the Vedic times to contemporary age, and identified patriarchy itself as the enemy of the *stri jaati*. She thus conceived a sisterhood of women and hoped that Indian would be inspired by the recent struggle for women's rights in the West. Uma Nehru called out the hypocrisy of male reformers who desired the Indian women to follow the ideals propagated by Indian culture, while themselves being enamoured of the modern west. As she stated memorably, "to create a Sita or Savitri [society] needs a Ram, or Krishna, Bharat or Yudhishtir."^[44]

Uma Nehru's acerbic prose and no-compromise feminism were contentious enough for Rameshwari Nehru to publicly disassociate the journal from this radical stance. The veneration of ideals like Sita and Savitri was hard-wired into

³⁷ "Seva ke saath hamen rajya karne ka adhikar bhi hona chahiye, aagyapalan karne ke saath hamen aagya dene ka svatva bhi milna chahiye." R. Nehru, 'Stri ka Kartavya' *Stree Darpan* July 1917.

³⁸ R. Nehru, 'Sampdakeeya: Striyon aur Vote' *Stree Darpan*, November, 1918

³⁹ Nehru and Vachu, editorial 1921: 329

⁴⁰ *Stree Darpan* January – April 1918.

⁴¹ *Stri Darpan*, October 1918

⁴² Striyon aur Swarajya, *Stree Darpan*, October 1917

⁴³ Miss Pal, 'Striyon ko pahile "home rule" Dijiye,' *Stree Darpan*, February 1917

⁴⁴ *Sita aur Savitri banane ke liye Ramchandra, Krishna, Bharat aur Yudhishtir ki aavshakta hoti hai*. Uma Nehru, *Hamare Samaj Sudharak*, *Stri Darpan*, March 1918

the Indian psyche ^[45]. Instead the periodical followed the call of Mahatma Gandhi, who opened up the public space for women, and political equality for women, without denigrating the Indian traditional ideas. It maintained that 'women' were not a homogenised category, and it would be difficult to argue for a radical feminist vision in the traditional society. Moreover, as scholars have noted, many more women were able to participate in public life under the traditional protection offered by the Gandhian national movement. ^[46]. Indeed most of the women who championed women's cause in the pages of *Stri Darpan* in 1910-20 evolved as full-time political activists during the Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. This was especially true of the women of the Nehru family, as the later careers of Rameshwari, Kamala and Uma Nehru indicate. Not only did the women associated with *Stri Darpan* emerge as full-time political figures during the freedom struggle, they also occupied high constitutional offices in independent India.

The political landscape has been historically shaped by deeply ingrained gendered structures, relying on the control and reconstitution of women through the language of the community culture, service, and labour. While building on the insights of earlier historiography, this paper argues that for paying attention to the diverse ways in which women have politicized themselves in India. Women from politically active families like the Nehrus, who took upon leadership roles, set a precedent for the mass of middle-class women to follow. Though *Stri Darpan* remained within the paradigm of the Gandhian national movement with its idealization of *sewa*, it did exhibit a deep understanding of women's subjugation and oppression within the family and through the community. In this endeavour, it exhibits the stirrings of a genuine feminist consciousness. Seen alongside women's active and independent participation in politics, their presence in the public sphere, however marginal, was an important moment for Indian womanhood as well for as the Indian nation.

5. Conclusion

Stri Darpan is an important site to evaluate the ideological allegiances of early women's magazines. The periodical continuously strove to awaken women's consciousness by questioning traditional norms that put myriad restrictions on women. Editors of this periodical were among those pioneering women who ventured into the entered the field of editing and publishing when education itself was a privilege. It is important to remember that in a world dominated by men, even elite women had to struggle for a public presence. For example, other reformist periodicals of the time like *Grihalaxmi* and *Chand* were managed by husband and wife teams, with the final editorial authority resting always with the husband. ^[47]. In such a scenario, *Stri Darpan* was a rare journal published and edited by women, in which the majority of the contributions were also written by women. Even if it catered to a minority of educated

women, the periodical makes these women, their struggles and their voices visible to history. Moreover, in the first decade of the 20th century, *Stri Darpan* was possibly the only women's periodical that talked about the rights of women, as much as about their duties.

The periodical served as a platform to expose patriarchal, social, and political ideologies negatively impacting women's lives. One very interesting feature of *Stri Darpan* was the ready acceptance of opposing viewpoints. Rameshwari Nehru was of the view that giving space to opposing viewpoints would lead to debates and open discussion would generate dialogue and acceptance. Indeed she argued that engagement with a plurality of views on an issue would lead to the intellectual growth of her readers and they would be able to take an informed standpoint ^[48]. This is a rare example of openness and catholicity, especially in the early twentieth century. The ensuing debates gave rise to diverse, yet always negotiable, models of womanhood and citizenship. While the domestic sphere remained a central field of action for women, engaging in the public sphere was no longer considered taboo. Thus the Hindi women's periodicals aimed to cultivate responsible female citizens moored both in tradition and modernity. Speaking for and on behalf of women, *Stri Darpan* identified various causes for women's subjugation and exploitation. Its advocacy for the education and mobilization of women and girls evolved from a social reformist discourse to an assertion of and demand for political rights.

6. References

1. Borghi E. Forgotten Feminisms: Gender and the Nehru Household in Early-Twentieth-Century India. *Gender & History*. 2017;29(2):254-272.
2. Borthwick M. *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*. Princeton University Press; c1984.
3. Chatterjee P. *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*. OUP Delhi; c1989.
4. Chaudhary L. *Land Revenues, Schools and Literacy: A Historical Examination of Public and Private Funding of Education*. *Indian Economic Social History Review*. 2010;47:179. DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700202.
5. Forbes G. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge University Press; c2000.
6. Gupta C. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. Permanent Black; c2001.
7. Kasturi L, Mazumdar V, editors. *Women and Indian Nationalism*. Indian Association for Women's Studies, Vikas Publishing House; c1994.
8. Menon V. *Indian Women and Nationalism*, the U.P. Story. Shakti Books; c2003.
9. Mohan K. *Towards Gender History: Images, Identities, and Roles of North Indian Women with special reference to Punjab*. Aakar Books; c2006.
10. Nehru R. *Gandhi is My Star*. Pustak Bhandar, Patna; n.d.
11. Nehru R, editor. *Stri Darpan*.
12. Nijhawan S. *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*. Oxford University Press; c2011.
13. Orsini F. *Domesticity and beyond*. Hindi women's

⁴⁵ *Stri Darpan*, March 1919

⁴⁶ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁴⁷ *Grihalaxmi* was supposedly edited by Mrs. Gopaldevi, but most of the editorial work was the domain of her husband Pandit Sudarshanacharya. *Chand*, was managed by Vidhyavati Sahgal and edited by Ramrakh Sahgal

⁴⁸ *Stree Darpan*, Editorial Comment, July 1916

- journals in the early twentieth century. *South Asia Research*. 1999;19:137-160.
14. Orsini F. *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-40: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*. OUP; c2001.
 15. Rao U. *Women in the Frontline: The Case of UP*, in Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar ed, *Women and Indian Nationalism*. Indian Association for Women's Studies; c1994.
 16. Sarkar T. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Orient Blackswan; c2003.
 17. Talwar VB. *Feminist Consciousness in Women's Journals in Hindi, 1910-1920*, in K. Sangari and S.Vaid (ed). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Kali for Women; c1989.
 18. Tharu S, Lalita K, editors. *Women Writing in India, vol. I: 600 BC to the Early 20th Century*. Oxford University Press; c1993.
 19. Walsh J. *Domesticity in Colonial India. What women learned when men gave them advice*. Lanham; c2004.