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Chandrakanta and Society

Devakinandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta*, which he began publishing in 1891, was an instant hit. It is often described as modern Hindi's first bestseller, one which went on to spawn lengthy sequels and, more recently, television adaptations. In this paper, focusing on the first part of the novel, I discuss *Chandrakanta* and its social context, and the ways in which the two interact. In the first part of my essay I approach the novel from the outside in, outlining its general social, political and literary context, and discussing its author and the circumstances of its publication and reception. In the second part, I start from inside the novel and try to proceed outward: how does *Chandrakanta* relate to the world in which it came into being? If we believe the dramatic success of the novel was due to more than circumstantial factors alone—i.e. that the text succeeded as much as the books—then this is an appropriate and important question to ask. The third and final part of my essay is an analysis of the aiyyar, a figure so central to Khatri's project, and in whom many of the processes outlined here coalesce.

***Chandrakanta's* context and community**

The year 1890, writes Gopal Rai, was a milestone in Hindi literature. From Kishorilal Goswami's historical romances to Radhakrishna Das's *Suhasini*, and of course Khatri's

Chandrakanta—that year, the novel became a significant part of Hindi literature. Some seventy novels were published in Hindi in the decade from 1890-1900, five times as many as in the preceding ninety years (Rai 268). The early impetus for the development of the genre was provided by Bengali novels translated into Hindi, and the works of Victorian popular writers like Wilkie Collins and G.W.M. Reynolds (Orsini 231). These were read in translation and in the original: Mukherjee points out that the novel appears in Indian languages one generation after Macaulay's Minute, which made English instruction compulsory in schools (3). Khatri himself was fond of the works of Bankim and Reynolds (Orsini 234). The early Hindi novelists could expect a readership by and large more proficient at reading nastalikh than devanagari. This was because of Urdu's importance as a language of administration, i.e. employment. For these readers the literary scene was dominated by the dastans of Ashk, Bilgrami, Jah, and a soup of qissas—short, cheap and entertaining (Pritchett 22-26). It is said Khatri drew inspiration from Jah's *Tilism-e-Hoshruha* (Yadav 23), and it is the world of the dastan, charged with razm-o-bazm and tilism-aiyyari, which Khatri is credited with introducing to Hindi literature (Rai *ibid.*).

Since Ramachandra Shukla's *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas* it has become customary to credit *Chandrakanta* with creating a large reading public for Hindi—or more appropriately, for devanagari. Khatri was astute enough to provide just what this readership wanted: his novel appeared in serialised form, divided into short chapters, printed in large type, and made available at the low price of eight annas. Illustrations would be added from the second edition on, and the price would be reduced even further (Rai 270). Khatri was among the first Hindi writers to use a contemporary, unliterary sort of Hindi, with plenty of 'Urdu' words drawn from conversation (*ibid.* 272). All of this rang true in a way most of Harishchandra's work, for instance, could not. Even those of Khatri's contemporaries who tasted commercial success did not achieve it

nearly as rapidly, or to the same extent. It is difficult to overstate *Chandrakanta*'s popularity. Six editions of the novel appeared between 1891 and 1904. Its success, and the success of Khatri's publishing house Lahari Press, were largely responsible for making Benares the home of the Hindi novel (ibid.). In later years, throngs of impatient readers would be seen at the Lahari Press when a new part of the novel was due for publication. In their eagerness to find out what happened next they would intercept proofs of the book before they could even be sent to Khatri for correction (Rai qtd. Mukherjee 64).

Commercial success of this sort makes it worthwhile to ask just what it was about *Chandrakanta* that resonated with the reading public of the time; how it was they could 'relate to' the book. In her study of the nineteenth-century Indian novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies three main kinds of writing: didactic, realist, and a hybrid 'inclusive category, where the apparently opposed tendencies of historical and supernatural fiction merge, the common denominator being the creation of an ethos remote in time ... Elements of fantasy and intimations of history are inextricably tangled in [such] works' (16, 38). She places *Chandrakanta* in this category of works, situating it at the fantastic end of the spectrum—she writes it is 'a fabulous saga of the sensational and the marvellous'. But, as she acknowledges, 'reality always peeps through the chinks of the marvellous' (67). It is necessary to consider the social and political context of even such a work of fantasy as *Chandrakanta*. In the next section, I shall try to start with the text and work my way out, to see how Khatri has the world of *Chandrakanta* mingle with the world of his readers.

Can a novel ever really escape its time?

The Persian and Urdu dastans Khatri drew on had narrators prone to asserting the ancient,

remote and prestigious origins of their story (Pritchett 11). By contrast, Khatri relies on a process of familiarisation—Chandrakanta may be a princess, but her story seems less ancient, closer home, and in general more familiar to a reader from Benares—Chunargarh finds mention amid a host of made-up places. Orsini refers to the way in which Khatri ‘naturalised’ the dastan world, Indianising his characters, populating his locales with Indian flora and fauna, which he occasionally describes in long scene-setting passages (e.g. Khatri 39). Everyone from King Jaidev to Chandrakanta’s handmaidens converses with a bare minimum of formality, rendering even the courtly world of kings and queens homely and familiar (Orsini 203-04). And Chandrakanta herself is fashioned most familiar of all: she is barely described (ibid. 208), a blank slate on which we readers are free to project whatever image suits us best.

Alongside this process of familiarisation, we see a modernisation of sorts in *Chandrakanta*’s formal aspects. The novel is hip. It begins not with a dastan-style preamble, but in medias res. The opening scene is described in present tense, in economical phrases, and we soon find ourselves privileged viewers to a secret conversation between Tejsingh and Birendrasingh. The clipped narrative prose and immersion of the viewer in the scene are reminiscent of a play script; perhaps even a film script—the Lumière brothers’ first movies would be screened in Bombay just a few years later.

A sort of bleak modernity also hangs over the narration in the first part. The setting sun frames the opening scene, as Birendrasingh laments that love could bring things to such a pass. In the first part of the novel at least (pp. 1-77), sunsets seem to dominate. In the tenth bayaan, Queen Ratnagarbha, Chandrakanta’s mother, laments the loss of unity, of ‘mel-mohabbat’, between the kingdoms of Jaigarh and Chunargarh (30). Her tone seems to suggest this past is irrecoverable (but for the dash and wisdom of the aiyars and a few good men), and one is

tempted to hear an echo of the author's voice, that of a vanquished subject in post-1857 Benares. Mukherjee writes that the historical romancers of the time were wont to use their novels' quasi-historical setting to glorify a pre-British Indian past (46). In contrast, Khatri sets his story in a time of decline, searching for greatness.

The theme of decline finds its first mention in the novel's preface. In his fascinating preface to the first edition of *Chandrakanta*, dated 1887 (vs 1944), Khatri says two curious things. He begins by describing what sets his novel apart from the many Hindi novels (upanyasas) about politics and courtly life—his book is about aiyyers, the 'chalaak ... servants who knew the arts of disguise, medicine, song and dance, running, combat ... When kings went to war, these [aiyyars] would, by dint of their cunning, without any bloodshed or sacrificing scores of lives, bring an end to hostilities' (1). The aiyyers you see nowadays, Khatri goes on to say, are just hucksters out to make some money, in whom none of the former virtues survive. They only know how to disguise themselves, which is little good now anyway. A story of decline—and alongside, Khatri's promise to take us back to a braver past, that too for the first time ever in Hindi. He adds, somewhat cryptically, that if Hindi readers benefit at all from learning about aiyyers it will be in this way: no reader 'of such books will be deceived by anyone in a hurry' (ibid.).

Now, consider for a moment what a strange thing this is to say. Romance, heroes, magic—and a handy way to defend yourself? Against what? I shall return later to the alluring possibility of the aiyyar as an anti-colonial deva figure. For now, I shall focus on the materialism Khatri derides. Aiyyari today, he says, is just cheap trickery for a quick buck. This is precisely the sort of materialism that suffuses *Chandrakanta*: everywhere there is an 'aesthetic of wealth', and a privileging of money and material splendour (Orsini 210). Moreover, the elaborate

framework of the novel as a whole has a material motive. We discover ultimately that there were two tilisms to be broken, one by Birendrasingh and the other by Chandrakanta herself. These were created at the behest of an ancestor of Birendrasingh's, who wanted to safely pass on his wealth to him (Orsini 217). The contrast with the epics, those great purveyors of adventures under a fixed star, is evident. If Kaikeyi hadn't had Rama banished to the forest; if Sita hadn't stepped out of the circle ... evil would not have been vanquished. In a more material world, however, the wheels of fate appear to constitute a sort of hawala system. More disturbing still, this was not seen to be an anticlimax—*Chandrakanta Santati* and *Bhutnath* were yet to come.

Chandrakanta's ambivalent attitude towards materialism is an example of the various pressures under which the novel was forged in India. It was a genre, Mukherjee writes, 'nursed by if not born out of the tension between opposing systems of value in a colonial society, and modified by certain indigenous pressures' (vii). Khatri in his preface longs for the days when the right battles were fought the right way; in his novel (and in creating it) he at least acknowledges the importance of spectacle and wealth in his Benares, even if he doesn't quite celebrate it. *Chandrakanta* may escape its time but it carries its materialist baggage with it. So too with its pervasive suspicion of Muslims and Muslimness. This is a strand of thought found in many other texts of the period (Amin qtd. in Orsini 213). The times smelt of Hindutva, and (at the very least) Khatri wasn't afraid to exploit the fact. The prejudice can effectively be carried over to the novel's time because we cannot read about Chunar, Vijaygarh, and Rajput princes without thinking of the Mughals, those earlier foreign oppressors. This is complemented by a 'piously Hindu' tone and tenor, which 'seems like a last ditch attempt to reassert values that seemed threatened by a stronger culture' (Mukherjee 66).

But the Mughals aren't mentioned in the novel, so they do not serve as replacements for

the British. The British themselves are nowhere to be seen. All they do, it seems, is help us Indians with our magic tricks. And it is to magic, and the figure of the ayyar, that I now turn.

Hocus pocus

An advertisement from 1891 reads: ‘*Chandrakanta*—never has such a strange, surprising, wonderful novel come out in print—the astonishing art of ayyari must be seen to be believed’ (Rai 278). We know we can always trust the advertisers (in this case it was probably Khatri himself), and clearly, the wonders of ayyari are the bait. In his preface to *Santati*, Khatri writes, ‘Although there are many among my readers whose interest doesn’t extend to *tilismi* spectacle any more, there are still many who enjoy it, and are eager for elaborate descriptions of it, to know how it works’ (qtd. in Rai 280). From the very beginning of his novels, Khatri is as interested in describing wonderful happenings—instruments that play themselves, stone dogs that talk, secret passages that reveal hidden worlds—as he is in providing explanations for them. As Orsini remarks, it is as though a pact exists between author and reader whereby it is expected that miracles will be explained in a ‘scientific’, mechanical manner, even if the explanation is not entirely convincing (210-11). Technologies that didn’t exist till the coming of the British are now taken apart and reassembled, with varying degrees of plausibility, in a hazy pre-British past. Khatri writes elsewhere that, for every scientist who reads his stories and agrees that what they describe is a scientific possibility, there are naysayers who scoff at the whole thing (qtd. in Rai *ibid.*). The intrusion of such technology into the novel is one way we can date it from within: ‘references to applied science are the only indication in these novels that India has been exposed to the western technological world-view’ (Mukherjee 66). Mukherjee reads this as a possible attempt to appropriate western technology and use it to glorify the Indian past (*ibid.*),

but it is worth keeping in mind Orsini's claim that scientific-sounding explanations were expected from Khatri; they were an obligation he had to fulfil so as not to insult his readers' intelligence. Rai makes a similar point, adding that one way the narrator keeps things going is through his habit of leaving 'kunjis' about the place, explaining some mysteries, promising an explanation for others (280). An interesting example of this is Khatri's footnotes, where he glosses words that may be unfamiliar to the reader. In the preface, 'aiyyar' is parenthetically glossed as 'chaalaak'. Elsewhere, the Persian-derived word 'takhliye' is glossed as 'ekaant' (32). Here the narrator is referring to the king, Shivdutt Singh, and from the context it makes sense to use a word with Persian overtones. So the Indianisation/Hinduisation/familiarisation process is wilfully left unfinished. Instead, the narrator holds the key to unfamiliar places; first he takes us there, and then he carefully explicates. In fact, he is rather like a tourist guide to these ruins: confident and unerring, choosing his stories with care.

The art of aiyyari

If magic is somewhat modernised in *Chandrakanta*, so is the aiyyar. The Persian-Urdu dastan is a useful starting point in considering the figure of the aiyyar. We saw earlier the prominence in print of such dastans as the *Tilism-e hoshruha* and the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. From Pritchett's characterisation of the aiyyar in Urdu dastans, we see that aiyyars are

a normal part of a courtly retinue, and can defect to another king or feudal lord if discontented; kings have whole troops of them ... They specialize in reconnaissance, espionage, disguise ... [They] are tremendously given to playing practical jokes, especially vulgar ones, on each other and on their enemies (40-41).

Orsini notes that the aiyyar here is already being given less prominence than in Persian dastans, where aiyyars were in fact the true protagonists (202). In Khatri, the taming process continues.

While the first part of *Chandrakanta* is in fact primarily concerned with the scheming of aiyars in opposing camps, the aiyars here are diminished by virtue of being, quite simply, less fun. Pritchett writes that prince and aiyar in Persian and Urdu dastans are two halves of a whole—one's chivalry and wisdom are complemented well by the other's sense of humour and his constant jokes and tricks (41). In *Chandrakanta*, however, the equations are somewhat changed. Whether it is Tejsingh, resourceful and sagacious, reminding the lovestruck Birendrasingh to keep his eyes on the prize, or fierce-masculine Chapla keeping an eye on clueless-feminine Chandrakanta, aiyars here simply have little time for fun. Orsini plausibly speculates that Khatri began with a happier version of the aiyar, quite close to the Urdu equivalent: she cites the scene in the ninth bayaan where Tejsingh wheedles some reward money out of Birendrasingh (Orsini 202). One could also cite the strong comic element in Chapla's ever-readiness for a fight, and her enhanced interrogation of Krursingh's aiyar Ahmed in the third bayaan. However, as the novel proceeds and events begin to unfold in quick succession, there is little time for humorous diversions and tales within a tale.

But the figure of the aiyar is not seriousified for formal reasons alone. The twelfth bayaan illustrates what I mean. The chapter begins much like the first: we are made privy to a conversation between Birendrasingh and Tejsingh. The scene is sketched out quickly in a few lines, again in present tense—they are at Naugarh fort, sitting by the Chandraprabha river, listening to the cries of peacocks and langurs rising from the dense sal forest across the river (32-33). The Indianisation discussed earlier is evident here. But what's striking is the contrast between the prince and his aiyar. The narrator continues:

Prince Birendrasingh is unhappy: in Chandrakanta's absence, the peacocks' cries sting like arrows, the calls of the langurs are like thunder, even the cool evening breeze feels like the *luh*. He sits there silently, staring at the river, taking deep breaths.

This characterisation of a viraahi Birendra places him in a long and distinguished line of distraught lovers parted from their beloved. Like the quintessential romantic hero, he is overwhelmed by emotion and stilled into inaction. He is not simply withdrawn from his surroundings but actually pained by them: the sting of the peacock's cry, the fever of a cool breeze. And significantly, we are permitted to see him in this state.

Given Birendra's helplessness, it is Tejsingh who must be in charge. In the next passage, a mysterious sadhu figure appears on the other side of the river, singing a song that only Tejsingh overhears. More evidence here of the many influences in Khatri's text: the sadhu is introduced with a series of participial predicates—'saffron-robe wearing, Ramanandi-tilak bearing' (33)—followed by a chaupai-style rendition of his song. The scene is strongly reminiscent of Lallulal's evocation of Krishna in his *Premasagar*, adapted from the *Bhagavata Purana*. At any rate, it turns out the sadhu's song contains a message: that Shivdutsingh of Chunar has despatched a team of aiyars to Jaisingh's kingdom. The drumbeats of war, but Birendrasingh is deaf to them. It is Tejsingh who springs into action. He immediately takes the prince aside and tells him what he heard. True to style, a stream of advice follows: he tells Birendrasingh to remain alert, not accept food from strangers, and so on (34).

Tejsingh also resorts to some low-tech security measures. Other aiyars may disguise themselves as me and try to fool you, he tells Birendrasingh, so just remember I have a little mole on my eye—whenever I see you, I'll show it to you so you can be sure it's me (*ibid.*). Writing about Khatri's detective novels, Orsini highlights the importance of the mark as a clue to one's character, to be observed and deciphered by the astute detective. This form of evidence had to compete in those novels with the more modern, scientific kind—documentary evidence, or simply being caught red-handed (254). In Tejsingh's case the mark functions a little

differently. As a secret known only to him and his prince, it is a useful counter to the modern, high-tech tricks of the aiyvars. It is worth emphasising here that aiyvars in *Chandrakanta* are not supernatural beings: aiyvari is an art (or science) passed on from teacher to student; aiyvars have their own paraphernalia (e.g. Khatri 32; this was true of Persian-Urdu dastans as well, Pritchett 42); and it is possible for a character to ‘know some aiyvari’ (Khatri *ibid.*).

In fact the parallel with detective novels is important. Orisini remarks that while in Bengali detective fiction, crimes tend to be solved by a colonial-style police force, working hierarchically, in Hindi fiction the work is done by the community itself, by freelancing jasad/ aiyvar types (248). My point in tracing the taming of the aiyvar in *Chandrakanta* is similar: these ‘trickster figures’ (Bausani *qtd.* in Pritchett 40) are reduced to being instruments of the state. They are ‘naukars’, as Khatri describes them in his preface (1), whose work lies in preventing full-scale hostilities. When Krursingh urges Shivduttasingh to go to war against Vijayarh (‘we have the Muslims on our side’), the king replies: ‘There is no need for us to fight right now. First, we will put our aiyvars to work, and then we’ll see what happens’ (31). In the thirteenth bayaan, right after he hears the sadhu’s warning, Tejsingh (in disguise) tries to promote detente between the two kingdoms.

So while aiyvars do dominate the first part of *Chandrakanta*, they work by and large as agents of their political masters. They are Rajputs, and they follow a code of ethics that abjures bloodshed (Orsini 212-13). As such, they are predictable, loyal, reliable. They are useful in a hostile environment because they can move freely: at the beginning of the novel, Tejsingh must function as a messenger between Chandrakanta and Birendrasingh, while the prince, barred from enemy territory and unskilled in the art of disguise, weeps in his bedroom-cage. Or consider Chapla, described right after Birendra’s viraahi angst in the twelfth bayaan. She disguises

herself as a man and sets forth in the middle of the night to meet Tejsingh (34). Thus the aiyvars maintain a fine balance: they know when it is time for decisive action, and they are capable of effecting it, so things never come to a sentimental standstill. At the same time they are employed as a prelude to all-out war, with a view to preventing it.

How things have changed since Arjuna paused on the fields of Kurukshetra, only to be urged on. Perhaps the comparison is unfair, but it is tempting to read a bit of defeatism in *Chandrakanta's* dovish attitude towards statecraft—and every critic does (Mukherjee 66, Yadav 47). Looking at it another way, the encroaching demands of realism meant that Khatri could not simply have his kings do battle and settle scores the old way. They rely instead on the craft and cunning of the aiyvar. Recall Khatri's remarks in his preface, about the aiyvar of old as a figure who can teach us how not to be deceived. The aiyvar in *Chandrakanta* is special—something of an anti-colonial deva, occasionally even helped out by asuras, such as the wild-eyed dark-skinned creature that appears in Chandrakanta's garden to warn Tejsingh that the king is on his way (24).¹ But unlike a deva, aiyvars can be controlled; they are on our side. Whereas in the Persian-Urdu dastans, they could indulge in all sorts of humour because they simply had less dignity to uphold (Pritchett 41), here they are less foolish and less funny, because less free.

Aiyvars can be subordinated to political functions, as indeed they must be, because war in *Chandrakanta* proceeds in the shadows. Because they can operate in this manner, they are freer in a certain sense than royal personages. For example, aiyvari carries with it a sort of exemption from gender (as seen in the frequent instances of cross-dressing), and certainly an exemption from traditional gender roles, helped along perhaps by Romantic ideals of the angsty hero. The lovelorn Birendrasingh and the curiously blank Chandrakanta are often effectively subtracted

¹ Even the man's garbled language is reminiscent of asuras, the anti-gods who were also notorious solecists (Pollock 47).

from the plot; and Tejsingh and Chapla (how much more vital their love is!) must fill the void. Moreover, as Orsini points out, the prince(ss)-aiyyar relationship is more friendly, more equal, than a traditional master-servant relationship might be, which could be a sign of increasingly fluid hierarchies in Khatri's own society (223). At the same time, if this social mobility led in some way to the rise of the novelistic protagonist, who must decide for himself what is to be done (Mukherjee 4), the hero and heroine of *Chandrakanta* are still somewhat passive-archetypal, who must be helped along by their more active-realist retinue. But I can't quite shake the feeling that on balance, aiyvars lose more than they gain.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show here is how the time of the text mingles with the time of the book. The popularity of Khatri's novels makes this question worth investigating, and gives our answers more plausibility. *Chandrakanta* is a curious mix of flavours: its literary influences are varied, its mode shifts from heroic/epic to realistic/kitsch to various other things. But its sheer success and influence, and the staggered manner of its publication, suggest that it can effectively be treated as a cultural product, sensitive to its consumers' needs. In his essay on *Chandrakanta*, Rajendra Yadav repeatedly mentions the claustrophobia (ghutan) of that epoch of Indian history. Khatri's novel both evokes this sense of suffocation and offers a highly entertaining way out.

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