Abstract

Modern science writing in various vernacular languages in India, under colonial rule, began in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed some of the earliest instances of modern science writing in Hindi, in the context of an as yet unsettled “Orientalist versus Anglicist” debate. Christian missionaries played a pioneering role in the emergence of Hindi science writing. Various school book societies, like the Calcutta School Book Society and the Agra School Book Society, in catering to the demand for text books for primary education, were also instrumental in initiating the process.

Subsequent to its initiation, science writing in the vernacular followed a trajectory of development that was much more complex and peculiar to the case of Hindi. This paper attempts to trace aspects of this process of development. It attempts to understand the underlying motivations that sustained this process in the late nineteenth century and further promoted it in the early twentieth century, and highlights the influences on those sections of the Hindi speaking elite who were at its forefront. We argue that any specific development in Hindi has to be studied as part of the conflicting history of evolution of a “modern” Khari-Boli Hindi, which uses the Nagari script. This paper thus attempts to situate the process of the evolution of science writing within the larger scope of the evolution of Hindi itself.

The paper bases itself on a survey of the contents of some of the popular Hindi literary periodicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which also published scientific articles as well as articles on issues and subjects related to science.

The paper concludes that this process of the development of science writing in Hindi was on the one hand a part of the activity of the popularization of science. On the other it was also a striking instance of the effort to strengthen Hindi, as part of a cultural/linguistic nationalist project, within which, among other aspects, it was also a revivalist effort to establish the scientificity of traditional or “ancient” (sic!) knowledge.
PERSONAL INFORMATION

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