



The First Decade of the 21st Century and the Hindi Novel

Dr. Anuradha Pandey

M. Phil. & Ph. D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Post Doctoral Fellow of ICSSR
Assistant Professor of Hindi, (Mahila College, Pakur, Jharkhand)

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ABSTRACT

The novels of the first decade of the 21st century in Hindi literature mark a significant shift in narrative focus and thematic exploration. Moving away from purely aesthetic concerns, these works engage deeply with contemporary socio-political realities, including the impacts of globalization, caste and communal tensions, gender struggles, and the changing dynamics of the urban middle class. This period witnesses a renewed emphasis on realism and a rejection of extreme postmodern detachment, offering a grounded, critical portrayal of India's evolving landscape. Novels by writers such as Kashinath Singh, Doodhnath Singh, Nasira Sharma, Mridula Garg, Prabha Khaitan, and others capture the fragmented yet vibrant spirit of the time, often blending genres and perspectives. Dalit discourse, feminist consciousness, and the deconstruction of historical and cultural myths emerge as dominant literary currents. Through these diverse voices, Hindi fiction from this era not only reflects but actively participates in shaping public discourse, presenting literature as a site of resistance, negotiation, and social introspection. The decade thus stands as a transformative phase in the evolution of Hindi narrative fiction, marked by intellectual rigor, inclusivity, and a commitment to representing lived experiences with authenticity.



Introduction

The tradition of Hindi novel writing, extending over more than a century and a quarter, has examined India from almost every conceivable perspective. After a long and eventful journey, the Hindi novel has now arrived at a point where merely looking backward or forward is no longer sufficient. In order to assess the totality of the novelistic tradition, it is essential to revisit those ancient civilizations whose narrative imagination and psychological expansiveness liberate us from contemporary enclosures. Our religious inclinations have evolved to the extent that we no longer view the heroes and plots of ancient epics merely as sacred objects of worship. Their characters, circumstances, and underlying philosophies, freed from religious sentimentality, now appear before us in socio-political contexts. These ancient works may now be read as extended or short novels or long-short stories, just as we read contemporary literature. Our contemporaries are 'contemporary' only in their temporal presence. Although a truly global culture has yet to fully materialize, it is evident that its far-reaching implications liberate us not only from geographical boundaries but also from the constraints of our temporal contemporaneity. This liberation from the narrowness of contemporary time is one of the major achievements of our intellectual sensibility. According to its significance and form, the genre of the novel has engaged with a wide range of themes, evolving its creative process in ways compatible with societal transformations.

A novel is not merely a literary composition; it is itself a society, a life-form, a human consciousness, and a civilization. Therefore, it inherently resists any singularity; it is pluralistic, incorporating a vast and diverse canvas. One of the most notable features of this genre is its democratic impulse, which allows it to encompass and articulate an expansive reality. Despite the presence of multiple layers and contradictions in Indian society, Hindi novels have rarely exhibited any signs of fragmentation.

Another major strength of this literary form is its pivotal role in establishing a secular society. Even in moments of resistance and ideological conflict, the Indian novel has remained committed to a secular outlook. It has played a vital role in ensuring that Indian society and culture do not succumb to extremist or militant ideologies.

Like all things that emerge with historical continuity, the Hindi novel of the first decade of the 21st century has carried its past while responding to the present and anticipating the future. These novels absorbed the structural and thematic legacies of their predecessors while simultaneously acknowledging



the shifts occurring in contemporary life. They engaged with themes from the past—myth, history, and classical narratives—not in their original forms but by reshaping them with contemporary relevance.

Rather than perceiving history through a singular or glorified lens, these novels sought to highlight its inadequacies and fill in the silences left by traditional historiography. The present was undergoing rapid transformation, and novels of this era were quick to grasp and represent these changing dynamics. The new model of development, employment concerns, political transitions, youth unrest, the emergence of new discourses, the transformed nature of communalism, the media's role, and the impact of technology—these were some of the critical subjects around which these novels were centered.

It is not that these themes were entirely new to Hindi literature; however, the novels of this era offered a logical and critical portrayal of the deceptive propaganda being projected under the banner of the “21st century.” One of the primary responsibilities of these contemporary novels was to critique the earlier socio-political realities and offer new paradigms in response—something they successfully accomplished to a large extent.

Another significant responsibility was to lay the foundation for a progressive future. While it may be premature to expect that the entire vision for the 21st century could be articulated within its first decade, it is undoubtedly true that the novels of this period initiated a robust and thoughtful beginning. Despite minor limitations, these novels succeeded in marking a firm and meaningful entry into the literary landscape of the 21st century.

The novels of the first decade of the new century actively absorbed the emerging realities of the time. A renewed perspective on history—particularly one shaped by subaltern discourse—became a dominant concern. The transformations occurring in rural India, which must be understood as a form of socio-cultural disintegration, as well as the shifts within the middle-class framework, were among the many pressing issues reflected poignantly in contemporary fiction. These novels addressed such concerns with remarkable emotional depth and narrative engagement.

One notable characteristic of the novels from this period is the general absence of aesthetic detachment. Unlike earlier trends where artistic expression often alienated itself from the emotional and experiential terrain of reality, the novels of this era remained deeply rooted in realism. Realism emerged not only as



the defining strength of the novel but also as a necessary condition for sustaining democratic ethos within literature.

That said, the realism depicted in these works is not absolute. The influence of the semi-feudal and still-developing societal consciousness continues to cast its shadow, as such structures have not been entirely dismantled. Nevertheless, the commitment to realism in this period is far more pronounced than in earlier literary phases, and this deeper engagement with truth is likely to influence the course of future novelistic developments. Importantly, these novels did not wear the excessive garb of aestheticism or postmodernist nihilism.

The entry into the 21st century witnessed a dramatically altered economic, political, and socio-cultural landscape. India, having nearly relinquished its economic sovereignty in the web of international loans, appeared increasingly beholden to foreign creditors. The general populace was fed illusions of future prosperity, even as it was misled and betrayed. The nation faced escalating challenges of casteism, separatist tendencies, rampant corruption with manifold tentacles, and the emergence of a parallel sociopolitical system characterized by criminality and opportunism.

In such an environment, society found itself dazzled and consumed by pseudo-spiritual gurus, the glitter of subculture, and the illusionary trappings of materialism. The middle and upper classes were increasingly immersed in consumerist stupor, while a directionless youth, devoid of any clear goals, wandered aimlessly. Within the media, the commodification of the female body continued unabated, often masked as freedom, with voluntary participation that blurred the lines between self-deception and the illusion of liberation. The loud echoes of communal frenzy, fascist religious zeal, and a dark, tunnel-like journey with no visible end—all reflected a disturbing socio-political reality driven by extreme hedonism and a perverse desire for indulgence.

Furthermore, the fading memories of the national movement, the rigidity of outdated traditions, the erosion of revolutionary legacies, the stagnation and contradictions within ideological frameworks, the disintegration of feudal society, the inherent injustices of the caste system, and the anti-people nature of democratic institutions became central preoccupations in the fiction of this era. The novels of this period rigorously interrogated Hindu-Muslim relations, the violent clashes bred by religious extremism, and the betrayal of public interest by political power structures.



Most literary critics and reviewers evaluating the fiction of this decade have foregrounded these practical concerns, advocating for an empathetic and scientific understanding of present-day social dilemmas. Their intent has been to interpret contemporary issues through rational inquiry and convey them effectively to readers. As such, both authors and readers find themselves in a position to engage with these texts meaningfully, both in their creation and in their interpretation.

These novels impress at the level of emotional resonance and formal construction, and in doing so, they have also helped chart a path for future literary production. Their value does not lie in achieving some mythical classical status; rather, their significance stems from their deep rootedness in the present and their potential to transcend temporal boundaries. There is scarcely any domain of contemporary discourse left untouched by these narratives. Not in isolation, but as a collective body, these novels participate in a larger discursive field that examines the core questions of contemporary Indian life, including systemic hypocrisies and the broader effects of globalization.

Among the most-discussed novels of this decade, Kashinath Singh's *Kashi Ka Assi* holds a prominent place. It is a novel that offers a new perspective on both content and form. It presents a fresh narrative about the political and cultural transformations of the past two decades. The novel deeply investigates the politics of the Mandal and Kamandal movements of the 1990s, the communal division among people based on caste and religion, and the symbolic shift from the invocation "Har Har Mahadev" to "Jai Shri Ram." This is a realist narrative that portrays the new dimensions of globalization's impact on society. One of the most distinctive features of this work is its narrative technique—an effective blend of genres such as short story, novel, satire, memoir, and reportage.

A novel of similar social concern is Doodhnath Singh's *Aakhri Kalam*, which partially deconstructs traditional myths while simultaneously mythicizing the contemporary. It provides an expansive critical reading of our society and offers vivid portrayals of the socio-religious realities of the time. Major contemporary events are discussed in detail.

Another significant novel by Kashinath Singh, *Rehan Par Raghu*, provides an authentic and profound depiction of the emotional and communal fragmentation caused by globalization. It illustrates a scenario where, although the world of man and society has expanded to reach as far as America, the individual remains profoundly isolated.



One of the key figures in the fiction of this decade is Nasira Sharma. Her three novels—*Akshayvat* (2003), *Kuyanjan* (2005), and *Zero Road* (2008)—intensely focus on urban middle-class families and their lives. These novels capture the existential struggle of the younger generation, caught between local realities and a globalized world, as they face complex and direct conflicts.

In Mridula Garg's novel *Kathgulab*, the protagonist Smita is consumed by a desire for revenge—against her brother-in-law who raped her, and Jim Jarvis who humiliated her. Her pursuit of education and prosperity in America is motivated by this sense of retribution. Women in this era no longer shatter under pressure; instead, they gather the strength to fight back. Asima, the protagonist of *Kathgulab*, realizes at an early age that women need martial skills like karate rather than mere tolerance. For her, learning karate is equivalent to attaining salvation.

In Prabha Khaitan's *Chhinmastā*, the protagonist Priya rebels against the polygamous traditions of Marwari families, the ongoing trauma of sexual assaults, and her husband's oppressive control. Assuming the metaphor of the goddess Chhinmastā, she confronts her environment and circumstances with defiance, choosing her own path amid adversity.

Maitrayee Pushpa's novel *Chaak* features a heroine, Sarang, who chooses struggle over tears and passive suffering. She is fearless and determined, stretching vengeance like rubber. Aware of the risks of confronting a male-dominated society, she still does not retreat. Despite being labeled a prostitute, she rises through her struggle and intellect to become a village head. Characters like Manda (*Idannamam*) and Kadambai (*Alma Kabutri*) also exemplify this journey.

Kshama Sharma's *Parchhaai Annapurna* explores the life of a working woman. The protagonist Vibha maintains a balance between professional achievement and family responsibilities. In *Aavaan*, Chitra Mudgal presents a unique perspective on women's emancipation, addressing the evolving status of women within patriarchal family structures.

Dalit issues are also examined with greater depth in the novels of this decade. Themes that were less vocal in earlier times gain more prominence now. The influence of changing socio-political contexts on Dalit discourse is clearly visible in this period. Notable novels include Gopal Upadhyay's *Ek Tukda Itihaas*, Amritlal Nagar's *Nachyo Bahut Gopal*, Jagdish Chandra's *Narkkund Mein Bas*, Madan Dikshit's *Mori Ki Eint*, and Giriraj Kishore's *Parishisht*.



Among authors engaging with new developments, Sanjeev stands out. His novels like *Jungle Jahan Shuru Hota Hai*, *Sutradhar*, *Paanv Tale Ki Doob*, and *Reh Gayi Dishaen Isi Paar* explore distorted socio-political realities, re-narrate history, critique capitalist deformations, and raise concerns about the paradoxes of development.

Ranendra's *Global Gaon Ka Devta* is another notable work that addresses globalization's impact. It narrates the brutal suppression of tribal communities and critically examines the role of outsiders in identity-based struggles.

Communalism, a major concern since the last decade of the 20th century, continues to influence the fiction of the early 21st century. The strong foundations laid by Shani and Rahi Masoom Raza find mature expressions in this decade's novels. The Ayodhya episode features prominently in several works. Doodhnath Singh's *Aakhri Kalam* is a prime example. Asghar Wajahat's *Kaise Aagi Lagai* critically explores politics, market forces, and communalism. Similarly, Swayam Prakash's *Indhan* and Priyamvad's *Ve Wahan Qaid Hain* engage deeply with communal realities. Kamleshwar's *Kitne Pakistan*, Geetanjali Shree's *Hamāra Shahar Us Baras*, and Nasira Sharma's *Zinda Muhavare* also address this theme. Abdul Bismillah's *Apavitra Akhyaan* offers a grassroots exploration of communalism and reflects on how language itself becomes a site of sectarian influence.

From the perspective of creative production and authorial voice, this decade has been a fruitful one. A key strength has been the clarity and conviction with which subjects are addressed. While many well-known writers reinvented their narrative modes, several new authors also emerged, bringing innovation to both form and content. On one end, we have established names such as Shrilal Shukla, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Krishna Sobti, Usha Priyamvada, Giriraj Kishore, and Hridayesh. On the other, we see the emergence of writers like Neelakshi Singh, Mahua Maji, Pankaj Subir, Kunal Singh, and Ranendra.

A connecting thread runs through both groups—an evolution shaped by the post-"New Story" and contemporary storytelling trends, with authors like Mridula Garg, Nasira Sharma, Mamta Kalia, Chitra Mudgal, Kamta Nath, Asghar Wajahat, Sanjeev, Kashinath Singh, Abdul Bismillah, Manzoor Ehtesham, Doodhnath Singh, Maitrayee Pushpa, Priyamvad, and Anamika continuing to build strong and insightful narratives.



These novelists have presented the socio-cultural landscape of the first decade of the century with remarkable acuity. They do not merely assess the present but also initiate crucial discussions about the future. The novels of this decade stand out for their focus on identity, anti-people social realities, and articulate, creative resistance. They demand attention not for their classical timelessness but for their rootedness in the present and their potential to transcend it.

Conclusion:

The first decade of the 21st century in Hindi fiction represents a dynamic confluence of tradition and transformation. The novels of this period not only reflect the socio-political upheavals of the time—such as globalization, communalism, caste dynamics, and gender struggles—but also interrogate them with a critical and creative lens. Through diverse narrative strategies, including myth deconstruction, realism, satire, and feminist assertion, the authors have addressed the complexities of contemporary Indian life. What distinguishes this decade is the emergence of a more inclusive literary discourse, where marginalized voices—Dalits, women, tribal communities, and minorities—find space for expression and resistance. Both established and emerging novelists have contributed to shaping a rich, polyphonic narrative that engages with present realities while envisioning transformative futures. These novels are not merely literary documents but serve as socio-cultural testimonies of a society in flux, deeply engaged in the pursuit of identity, justice, and human dignity.

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