

# When satire hits the sweet spot

Shrilal Shukla's 1968 novel 'Raag Darbari' remains a touchstone to understand India's governance dystopia, a new book reveals

Aditya Mani Jha

**N**early 60 years ago, one of the most influential Hindi satirical novels was published—Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968). Shukla, a former Provincial Civil Service officer working with the Uttar Pradesh government, presented an unforgettably dire portrait of India's Hindi heartland through the fictional village of Shivpalganj, where the novel unfolds. In the decades since its publication, *Raag Darbari* has been adapted for stage and screen, and every new production has underlined the novel's enduring prescience.

Shukla's Everyman central character is an idealistic graduate called Rangnath who has just finished a master's degree in History. When Rangnath (who resembles Voltaire's Candide in his tragicomic naivete) visits his uncle "Vaidya-ji" in Shivpalganj, he finds himself with front-row tickets to the massive failures, inadequacies and hypocrisies of the still-nascent Indian state.

The villagers are utterly dominated by the Machiavellian Vaidya-ji and his cronies, especially his wastrel sons, Rupan the student leader and Badri the *pahalwan* (wrestler). The local school and college are dysfunctional, corruption-riddled social welfare schemes seldom reach the people, while caste and gender-based oppression run rampant. Through the novel's anecdotal structure, we see how the scales gradually fall from Rangnath's eyes until he is convinced that this unique corner of the world is well beyond redemption.

A recent book, *Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality*, edited by scholar Satyajit Singh, studies Shukla's classic from a political and social-science perspective. This well-researched, consistently insightful book began life as an academic conference on Shukla's novel, supported by Delhi University, where Singh teaches political science. In its final form, the book escapes the constraints of academic discourse and confronts some of the urgent governance challenges and societal obstacles faced by Uttar Pradesh and other Hindi-speaking states today.

Across 10 essays (Singh writes the opening and closing chapters himself), this volume asks whether the "governance dystopia" described by Shukla has improved at all, nearly six decades after the novel's publication. Is the delivery of social welfare, the running of local institutions any smoother? Are we finally free of regional imprimaturs like Vaidya-ji? Or have we simply replaced the old figureheads with "new darbars and pahalwans that continue to mock the might of the state, and more pertinently, the will of the people?"



In 'Raag Darbari's' fictional village, social welfare schemes seldom reached the people.

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Singh asks in his opening gambit.

Vibodh Parthasarathi, in his essay *Darbari Redux: The Dystopian Roots of Public Communication*, notes that early editions of *Raag Darbari*, published by Rajkamal Prakashan, featured a cracked rural wall on the cover, cement peeling off and a medley of handprints in red and black signalling general disrepair. Using this as a starting point, Parthasarathi draws a number of artful parallels between Shivpalganj's "village wall" and the contemporary Facebook "wall". In Parthasarathi's reading, both these walls operate at the border of the public and the private, signalling a kind of public privateness that anybody who has lived in the Indian countryside will be instantly familiar with.

For instance, an early episode in the novel follows the aftermath of the village wall being painted over with a federal government advertisement, where a muscular, hard-working farmer is being exhorted to grow more foodgrain by a cheerful young woman. In theory, the villagers are supposed to see themselves in the advertisement, and therefore be spurred on to greater agricultural productivity. In practice, however, the villagers decide that the muscular farmer looks like Badri the *pahalwan* and this creates a distance between the government's intended public service announcement and the villagers' takeaway—what Parthasarathi calls "pahalwani publicness" in the register of the novel.

Another pertinent example of this public-private liminality is the variety of nudge-wink messages painted on the vil-



**Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality:**  
Edited by Satyajit Singh,  
Orient Blackswan,  
248 pages, ₹1,560.

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lage wall, promising men that their sexual ailments will be cured in a jiffy by the Ayurvedic medicines peddled by (who else) Vaidya-ji himself. Therefore, mass media (newspapers, radios) in the context of Shivpalganj are little more than "mediated presences", as Parthasarathi phrases it—any message-stream will have to be filtered through the malicious membrane of Vaidya-ji and his men.

Parthasarathi's essay is sandwiched between two entries that underline the strikingly contemporary modes of *Raag Darbari's* language and its political expressions—Ulka Anjaria's *The Contemporaneity of Raag Darbari* and Ashutosh Kumar's *Politics and Government in the Hindi Heartland: Revisiting 'Raag Darbari'*. Almost 20 years before *Midnight's Children* made it cool to do so, here was a Hindi novel that deployed modern-day "Hinglish" (Hindi with prolific usage of untranslated English loan-words) not just as intermittent comic relief, but as the dominant register of entire conversations. Within the first 10 pages of *Raag Darbari*, you will find "station-wagon", "CID", "managing director" *et al* printed in the Devanagari script) sans explanation.

As Kumar points out in his essay, the linguistic choices made by Shukla in the novel are significant in and of themselves. While Rangnath slips into English words regularly (a darkly funny scene towards the beginning of the novel sees him explaining the concept of a master's degree to a truck driver), the villagers and Vaidya-ji himself use a mixture of Awadhi, Braj *bhasha* and the "*khadi boli*" that even-

tually came to be recognised as "standardised" Hindi. This divergence is also one of the ways in which Shukla alludes to the distance between the actual on-ground state of governance in Shivpalganj and what the anglicised, college-educated elite think governance should be in the newly-independent nation-state. This issue assumes even greater significance when you remember the aggressive promotion of Hindi as not just "*raajbhasha*" (official language) but "*rashtrabhasha*" (national language), feeding into the Hindutva politics that would come to define this part of the world in the subsequent decades.

Philip Oldenburg's essay *The Folklore of Corruption in Uttar Pradesh Villages* presents its polemic-adjacent argument elegantly, but it is also the one essay in the book with which I found myself disagreeing vociferously. Oldenburg is responding to Akhil Gupta's 2005 paper *Narratives of Corruption: Anthropological and Fictional Accounts of the Indian State*, where the latter explains how and why he came to read *Raag Darbari* as a quasi-ethnographic document on corruption, despite its status as a work of fiction. Gupta's argument is that it is near impossible to research Indian corruption using a rigorous, fact-based, social scientist's methodology. People lie, mislead and embellish facts in this context all the time and besides, acts of corruption operate on an inherently covert mutual trust rather than a written contract.

Oldenburg's big argument challenging Gupta's paper is that "while there was cer-

tainly fire producing smoke, the amount of smoke did not accurately indicate the extent of the fire." According to Oldenburg, if a landowning villager willingly pays a sum of money for, say, expediting *chakbandi* (land consolidation), the government officer in question cannot be said to be corrupt.

Using economist Gunnar Myrdal's "folklore of corruption" theory, which spoke to a pessimistic acceptance of corrupt practices in developing countries, Oldenburg suggests that the earlier sequence of events should be described as paying a "fee", not a "bribe," because it is now "part of the system". Essentially, Oldenburg's argument is akin to Franz Kafka's parable: "Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated over and over again; eventually it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony."

Oldenburg claims, somewhat understandably, that a certain amount of greasing-the-wheels is not just necessary but inevitable in developing societies. However, he largely ignores the flip side of this argument, which pertains to the widespread erosion of public trust in the federal government. If the public at large is desensitised to corruption in governance, the social contract that keeps them paying taxes, feeding into social welfare schemes, and so on, will soon be shattered, with devastating consequences.

Simply put, the average tax payer has to believe that his money is being used honestly and efficiently, otherwise they have no incentive to keep pumping capital into the welfarist state (even a well-intentioned one). An entrenched system of this kind will soon devolve into a "pay-for-play" crony state, where only the super-wealthy have any influence at all on policy decisions.

American society spent decades obsessing over low-income "welfare queens" allegedly defrauding the state—and it has led them to Trump 2.0 where immigration officials can now lock anyone up for no reason at all, but wealthy immigrants can purchase the so-called "Trump Gold Card" that buys them citizenship for the princely sum of \$1 million. Surely, Oldenburg, a longtime professor at Columbia, could have used his own country's trajectory to offer, at the very least, a necessary counterweight to his provocative argument.

The other contributors build their arguments off lesser-known aspects of *Raag Darbari*. Paroma Ray's essay, for example, starts with the near-total absence of women from the novel's "main" narrative, and branches out into what it means for Indian women in public and private realms. Gunjal Ikir Munda's *Adivasi Worldview and Modern Politics* contrasts the politics of an average Adivasi village with the local politics of a Hindi-speaking village as depicted in *Raag Darbari*.

Taken as a whole, *Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction* throws some intriguing ideas around Shukla's magnum opus and its implications for contemporary Indian society and politics. Even when I disagreed with the book, I was fully locked in. And isn't that the platonic ideal that academic discourse is supposed to achieve?

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