

## Spectres of the West: Negotiating a Civilisational Figure in Hindi (1870-1920)

**Abstract:** From the second half of the 19th century, the concept of civilization played an important role in the social reform and nationalist movements in India. The central figure that emerges in the nationalist discourse of civilization is the figure of “the West.” Whether it was the rejection of the West, or its acceptance or its imitation or the conscious presentation of the national culture as different, such issues were articulated in terms of the concept of civilization. During the period under discussion in this paper (1870-1920), the concept of civilization - translated with the Hindi word *sabhyata* - is one of the basic concepts in the public discourse in Hindi. Along with other words such as *unnati* (progress/improvement) and *sudhar* (reform), *sabhyata* is one of the key political concepts in the semantic field that evolved in the wake of the ongoing social reform movements during this period. In terms of its applicability, the scope of the concept of *sabhyata* is large as it encompasses the work of reform and improvement in various fields: language and literature, science, knowledge and education, social and religious reform, reform in personal conduct and civility, character building and self-restraint, right cultivation of emotions, care of health and body. The reformist endeavours to recast the emotional world of the subjects by promoting new ideals of domesticity and love are also informed by the concern for civilization. During this period, a distinct emphasis is placed by the nationalist intellectuals and writers on the emotion of sympathy among the compatriots and on promoting the feeling of patriotism. This gets reflected in the literary works of this period most clearly. In addition, *sabhyata* was also a concept with the help of which Indian nationalists gradually began to question and contest the legitimacy of the colonial rule. The Western claims to civilization are contested by the nationalist intelligentsia by pointing out Western nations’ “barbaric” acts of violence in various colonial wars and their wars among themselves in the 19th and early 20th century.

### About Mohinder Singh:

Mohinder Singh teaches political thought at the Centre for Comparative Politics and Political Theory, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. His main field of research is history of political thought in modern India. For the last few years his research has been on the study of Hindi as the language of political discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century North India with the main focus on social and political concepts in the Hindi vernacular social imaginary. His recent publications include 'Tagore on Modernity, Nationalism, and the "Surplus in Man"' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May, 2017; *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in 19th Century Asia and Europe* (co-authored with Margrit Pernau, Helge Jordhem [et.al.](#) (OUP, Oxford)); 'Crisis and Critique: Diagnosis of “the present” in the Nationalist Discourse in Hindi (1870-1908)' in *Critical Studies in Politics*, Ed. by Nivedita Menon, Aditya Nigam, and Sanjay Palshikar (Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2013); 'Cosmopolitanism in Indian Political Thought' in *Indian Political Thought*, Ed. by Pradip K. Dutta and Sanjay Palshikar (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013); “Temporalization of Concepts: Reflections on the Concept of *Unnati* (progress) in Hindi (1870-1900)” in *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, Volume 7, Issue, 1, Summer, 2012. More recently, he has started working on Hindi autobiographies in the early twentieth century. He has also been part of the editorial collective that edited *What the Nation Really Needs to Know: The JNU*

*Nationalism Lectures*, with Dr. Rohit Azad, Prof. Janaki Nair, Dr. Mallarika Sinha Roy (on behalf of JNU Teachers Association), Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2016.