

Littératures d'Asie du Sud

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Narratives of Social Reform in Late 19th Century Gujarat: Ramanbhai Neelkanth's *Bhadrambhadrā*

Ramanbhai Neelkanth's novel *Bhadrambhadrā* (1900) is a product of the reform movement of 19th century Gujarat and of the various debates that took place among Gujarati intellectuals about what reform truly meant. As a novel it is a classic in Gujarati for various reasons. It is hailed to be the first humorous novel at a time when prose traditions and modern genres were emergent at the turn into the twentieth century. It also pioneers the first-person narrative device and builds on the Western genre of the picaresque. Moreover, the orthodox Hindu character of 'Bhadrambhadrā' has become an enduring comic cultural trope to refer to someone who is overly concerned with linguistic purism and religious orthodoxy. Yet, what makes the novel still highly relevant is that it is centered on the large differences between the reformist and the revivalist strands of thought that debated everything from the relevance of past traditions, religion and its place in society, gender and gender roles, communal pride, some of which find echoes even in today's times. While *Bhadrambhadrā* is often dismissed as a light-hearted novel-in-the-making with a lack of character development and often a repetitive plot, it is argued here that this iconic novel is nevertheless an important and understudied site that presents an insightful glimpse into the contentious world of late 19th century Gujarat.

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