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PRINT CULTURE: LINGUISTIC HOMOGENEITY, NATIONALISM AND COMMUNITARIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

While the advent of print technology in South Asia represented a paradigm shift in the region's cultural and intellectual history, the nature and magnitude of this transformation continued to figure in scholarly debate. The transition from oral and manuscript cultures to print culture has been interpreted in diverse ways: as revolutionary, evolutionary, and as a hybrid negotiation between tradition and modernity. This paper analyses the validity of Western and South Asian historiographical arguments regarding the impact of modern print, evaluating competing claims over the transformative consequences of print on languages, literature and social consciousness in colonial India. The spread of print in South Asia was neither a mere technological transfer nor an uncomplicated vehicle of colonial modernity. Throughout the history of print, different agents—missionaries, colonial administrators, Indian entrepreneurs, and religious reformers—existed with their diverse objectives and strategies. The resulting print cultures were not only heterogeneous and contested but were also deeply entrenched in the social hierarchies. This paper argues that while print culture facilitated the emergence of new forms of linguistic standardization, nationalist consciousness, and the formation of communitarian identities, it consolidated and altered the existing hierarchies of caste, class, and gender rather than simply demolishing them.

Keywords: Print Culture, Serampore, Naval Kishore, Battala, Linguistic.

The Transition from Oral and Manuscript to Print Cultures

The Print Revolution Thesis

Elizabeth Eisenstein's seminal study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, argued that print led to a new cultural era in Western history, marked by wider dissemination, fixity and standardization of texts. However, as Anthony Grafton's (1980) critical review of Eisenstein's work shows, this mechanical interpretation has been substantially questioned by subsequent scholarship based on the social and cultural uses of the book. Grafton noted that Eisenstein's exaggerations in her account of the shift from script to print inevitably have repercussions on her account of the ramifications of the change for intellectuals, with a tendency to overemphasise the radical break between manuscript and print cultures.

In the South Asian context, Scholars have questioned Eisenstein's thesis. Francis Robinson (1993) argues for a fundamental difference in knowledge transmission systems as an explanation for the Islamic world's delayed embrace of print—by about four centuries. For Muslims, person-to-person transmission was at the core of the transmission of knowledge of Islam, with oral transmission considered more reliable than a written text. The oral character of the Quran, where the Quran itself means recitation, shaped the general attitude towards knowledge transmission. Robinson's argument posits that the transition to print was not inevitable or uniform but dependent on particular cultural conditions.

Similarly, Stuart Blackburn (2001) challenges deterministic accounts of the impact of print, arguing that the change generated by print seems more innovative than revolutionary. Using the research showing the commingling of orality, writing, and print, Blackburn argues that far from widening a gap between the literary culture and oral traditions, print, in Tamil in the nineteenth century, brought them together and bridged them through printed folklore. Such an observation completely complicates narratives of print's displacement of oral traditions.

The Persistence of Oral and Pre-print Traditions

Anindita Ghosh's (2003) research on early print cultures in colonial Bengal challenged teleological accounts of the triumph of print. Ghosh shows how the printed book was the direct heir of the manuscript and retained on many occasions its formats,



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genres and uses. The transition from manuscript to print was gradual and partial, with manuscript publication continuing alongside printing. In 1821, the Serampore College Library housed forty-nine Bengali manuscripts against only twenty-eight printed Bengali books. Ghosh emphasizes the persistent importance of oral reading practices even after the widespread availability of printed texts. Reading aloud in front of a group during informal and secular occasions was also widespread among the lower and middle orders, she reports, with silent reading an unusual and limited practice in the mid-nineteenth century. The persistence of kathakata (collective narrative sessions) and other performance traditions meant that the print did not replace oral culture, but intersected with it in complex ways.

Ulrike Stark's (2007) study of the Naval Kishore Press similarly emphasizes the co-existence of oral and print cultures. Stark reports that the printed book entered, and came to flourish in, a world imbued with oral traditions: there it was coexisting and interacting with traditional and strong oral cultures. This coexistence had a crucial impact on the nature of print cultures in South Asia, where reading practices were steeped in preprint practices of sharing the word written.

THE SPREAD OF PRINT IN SOUTH ASIA

The Early Agents and Technologies

The study of A.K. Priolkar (1958) on the printing press in India has located the introduction of print technology to 1556, when the Portuguese Jesuits established the first press in Goa. The press was meant for missionary work in Abyssinia, but was detained in Goa, inaugurating what would be a complex history of print in the subcontinent. Priolkar observes that the first types of an Indian script—Tamil—were prepared by João Gonsalves, though it was not until 1577 that the first book in an Indian script was printed. The initial history of printing in India was marked by the missionary enterprise, with Protestant missions at Tranquebar and Serampore establishing presses that produced vernacular texts. The Danish missionary Bartholomew Ziegenbalg set up a press at Tranquebar in 1712, stimulated by a need for books in indigenous languages. Ziegenbalg was keenly aware of his inability to achieve his object without the aid of the printing press, as Priolkar notes. William Carey's mission at Serampore (est. 1800) marked a crucial turning point, as Carey produced translations of the Bible and vernacular textbooks in various languages. Priolkar documents the astonishing diversity in Carey's linguistic work, with translations appearing in Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Telugu and Kannada as well as a myriad of other languages. The Serampore press undertook an early leadership in the development of type foundries for various Indian scripts, where native workmen played a preeminent role in this technical feat.

Indian Agency and Commercial Publishing

Indian entrepreneurs started their own presses by the 1830s and 1840s and competed with the establishments of missionaries and colonials. Stark (2007) documents the rise of the Naval Kishore Press, set up in Lucknow in 1858, which became the largest Indian owned printing press and house of publication in the subcontinent. Naval Kishore (Indian Print Capitalist) combined commercial savvy with intellectual and cultural concern. According to Stark, he was a singularly influential and prolific publisher in all of the production, transmission and canonization of printed texts in the North Indian languages of Hindi and Urdu.

Ghosh's (2003) study of Bengal unveils a similar vibrant Indian's publishing industry, centred in the Battala district of Calcutta. By 1857, there were 46 Bengali presses in Calcutta, constituting over 571,000 books printed for sale that year. The presses were run primarily by artisanal castes derived from a substantial population of printer-publishers, authors and readers of relatively plebeian origin (Ghosh, 2002). The spatial distribution of presses was critical: While the Battala presses were concentrated in the northern part of the city, more respectable ones were placed southwards (Ghosh, 2003).

Colonial Legislation and Surveillance

The colonial state's interactions with print were distinguished by both encouragement and repression. Darnton (2001) describes the legislation of the Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867, setting up a system of registration of all the



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printed books in British India. This piece of legislation had multiple functions: copyright protection, surveillance of native opinion, and creation of massive bureaucratic machinery to monitor literary output. The catalogues, despite with innocent sounding names, were not made accessible to the general public. They circulated secretly within the channels of ICS. The catalogues show colonial anxiety about native literature, with librarians frequently branding works obscene, seditious, or trash. William Lawler, librarian in Calcutta, reported on one Bengali epic recording the subjection of the Aryan Bengali race to foreigners, who have placed their feet on the heads of the Brahmins. However, the reaction of the colonial state was paradoxical: While the surveillance was systematic, it failed at times of censorship, and the British continued to profess commitment to freedom of the press. Darnton describes this as the paradox of liberal imperialism, in which the difference between the preaching of liberalism and the practice of imperialism stood out every week.

LINGUISTIC HOMOGENEITY AND STANDARDIZATION

The Construction of Modern Languages

One of the most profound impacts of print was the construction of the modern vernacular languages in the South Asian subcontinent. Its role in standardization and codification of the languages through printed textbooks and dictionaries had far-reaching consequences for linguistic hierarchies and community identities. To Stark (2007), the nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation and linguistic codification of Urdu and Hindi as modern literary idioms, a process in which the printed textbooks produced under missionary and colonial aegis played an important role. Such a process was closely connected with the religious and communal identities. Missionary printing, in following an ideologically determined policy to address Hindus and Muslims separately through publications in Nagari and Urdu script, was a first step in cementing the separation of the two languages. The subsequent controversy of Hindi-Urdu with its increasingly polarised linguistic community was enabled and amplified by print.

Ghosh's (2003) analysis of Bengali illustrates how the civilizing urge of reformers reorganised the concepts of obscene and genteel in nascent print culture through the application of new standards. The invention of new literary prose Bengali entailed the conscious disconnect of the standard language from its others, creating a demarcation between written and spoken forms and seeking to eliminate the Perso-Arabic element in the language (Ghosh, 2002). The ramifications of such a project for communities were profound, as Muslims increasingly identified with a distinct linguistic register: Musalman-Bengali.

The study of Blackburn (2001) on Tamil illustrates a similar process of linguistic purifications and standardization. The interaction between Tamil and European languages was characterised by translation instead of assimilation, developing new concepts of language and language use. The work of missionaries like C.G. Beschi, who simplified the almost thousand grammatical rules (in most of the traditional grammar) to only 370 and introduced new orthographic conventions, exemplifies the transformative potential of print-enabled standardisation.

Homogeneity and its limits

Despite the drive towards linguistic homogeneity, there have been many diversities and contestations which shaped the print culture in South Asia. Ghosh's (2003) study on the low-life print in colonial Calcutta illustrates how the project of creating standardized high Bengali suffer from the antagonism of the commercial press fulfilling popular tastes. The Battala presses did a brisk trade in cheap ephemeral pamphlet literature composed in earthy and idiomatic colloquial, far removed from standard desirable works.

Similar to Ghosh, Blackburn (2001) documents the continuity of vernacular diversity in the print culture of Tamil. He noted that the very appearance of the language, its look upon the printed page, was dramatically different by the mid-century, but that doesn't signify the vanishing of other forms. Co-existence of high and low print cultures, of Sanskritized and colloquial registers, of elite and popular genres shaped the print landscape.



NATIONALISM AND PRINT CULTURE

Print and the Construction of National Identity

The connection between print and nationalism has been a prominent theme of scholarship on South Asian print culture. Benedict Anderson's assertion about print capitalism producing imagined communities of the nation has been influential and controversial. Stark (2007) acknowledges Anderson's importance but points out that his argument has been modified in some important ways by several scholars who warned of the dangers of overgeneralising the power of the printed word in societies that had other means of mobilisation of the public. However, Stark posits that print capitalism in its basic sense, and more precisely in terms of the confluence of capitalism and print technology, is well exemplified by the House of Naval Kishore. The role Naval Kishore played in shaping the North Indian printing economy demonstrates how commercial publishing could simultaneously engage in nationalist and communal agendas.

Darton's (2001) analysis of colonial surveillance shows emerging nationalist themes in Indian literature by the late nineteenth century. The catalogues registered the sentiments of discontent without immediate censorship and reflected the paradoxes of liberal imperialism. Darnton documents how the Bengali is called a coward and taunted for being so familiar with the chains of slavery, with poets reminding their countrymen of their noble ancestors and their valorous deeds.

Blackburn's (2001) discussion of folklore and nationalism in colonial South India offers a nuanced description of how print helped enable nationalist discourse. Blackburn posits two distinct formulations concerning folk and the nation. First, he understands the creation of a folk identity for non-Brahmins, revolving around the "image of a buried Dravidian culture", and second, a more personal and intellectual approach focusing upon "the image of the vanishing village". Natesa Sastri, the first true Indian folklorist, ascribed folklore as a national literature and argued that all nations, old and new, had peculiar forms of wit and humour.

Communitarian Consciousness and Print

The role of print in facilitating communitarian consciousness, based on religion, caste, or language community, perhaps eclipsed that of constructing national identity. Robinson's analysis of Islam and print in South Asia illuminates how print made possible an age of flourishing religious experiment, where groups emerged as Deobandis, Bareilvis, Ahmadis, Necharis, Ahl-i Hadith, Ahl-i Quran, Jamaatis, etc. The loss of the authority of the ulama as interpreters of Islam was paradoxically enabled by the same technology that was originally adopted by them in order to disseminate religious knowledge (Robinson, 1993).

Robinson (1993) highlights the contribution of print in the enhancement of pan-Islamic consciousness. There is a symbiotic relationship between the growth of pan-Islamic consciousness and the growth of the press, whereby the more Indian Muslims learned of the fate of their brethren elsewhere, the more they wished to learn. This expansion of Muslim identity beyond regional limits was made possible by print.

Stark's (2007) analysis of the Naval Kishore Press describes a publisher who served both Hindu and Muslim communities, exemplifying the syncretism of the Indo-Muslim and Hindu learned traditions. Naval Kishore was a part of the revival of Hindu traditions and was one of the foremost protagonists of Islamic learning and custodians of Arabic and Indo-Persian literary heritage.

PATRONAGE, HEIRARCHY, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Caste, Class, and Gender

Print's ramifications for questions on caste, class, and gender were complex and contradictory. Ghosh (2002) shows that low-caste groups of smiths and artisans were significant actors in the Battala printing industry, both as producers and consumers. These groups succeeded in "impressing their stamp" on print culture, challenging the prevalent notions of



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literary aesthetics. However, the culturally chauvinistic bhadralok sought to exclude them from respectability by creating new canons of respectability.

Regarding gender, Ghosh (2002) shows that a significant number of women literates emerged in the 1860s and 1870s, and they were voracious consumers of the readily readable genres of ephemeral literature written in colloquial Bengali. However, women's reading was heavily scrutinised and regulated, where reformers shamed their reading of trashy and romantic novels and erotic and immoral novellas. The creation of respectable bhadramahila identity was predicated on the erasure of these popular genres.

Stark (2007) observes that attitudes towards female literacy and education changed drastically throughout the century, whereby the ability to read and write came to be perceived by many as a valuable acquisition, indeed, a necessity, in a girl's religious and domestic training. However, patriarchal anxieties made sure that books appropriate for women were restricted to a prescriptive and scrupulously monitored canon of textbooks and didactic works.

CONCLUSION

The account of the history of print culture in South Asia illustrates the complex and contradictory circumstances of the cultural transformation brought about under colonization. Print operated both as a tool of colonial rule and as a medium of resistance; it was both a tool for standardization and a support for diversity; it worked both as a technology of elite dominance and a means of popular contestation. The shift from oral and manuscript cultures to print culture was a gradual and far from complete one, with print forms simultaneously existing and interacting with older forms of communication. Print helped linguistic standardization and codification, allowing the making of modern vernacular languages and the solidification of community identities. Print provided a venue for nationalist discourse and Pan-Islamic consciousness but also allowed the contestation of the hegemony of elite cultures by the lower class and lower caste groups. However, print also worked to reinforce hierarchies that were already in place in new ways, where elite groups leveraged its usage to discipline and control popular cultures.

Ultimately, recognizing such complexities necessitates moving past simplistic stories of the print revolution in order to focus on specific contexts, agents, and practices that influenced the multiplicity of cultures of print in colonial India.

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