

The Printed Word, Polemics and Debate in Northern India up to 1860s

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Abstract

Christian missionaries used printing facilities in a major way for the purpose of Evangelization. They were trying to reach the 'elite' audience, especially the Muslims, by translating New Testament, Biographies of the Christian Saints and other literature in Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages. Apart from the Translations, the original tracts were also composed in these languages, some of them with highly objectionable content. The intent was to make them Muslim friendly by imitating the Muslim way of writing. Nevertheless, the colonial administrators kept a check on the use of printing facilities by the 'natives' through various legislative laws and regulations.

In spite of these safeguards, the Indians especially the Muslims made full use of the new technology, owned numerous printing units and published a number of newspapers, polemical tracts and works of theologian literature.

Certain hitherto little-known aspects can be studied on the basis of the material obtained from archival records and missionary registers to take up questions: how far the printing venture of the missionaries had the tactic support of the Government of East India Company? Did the Government of East India Company really stand against the religious zeal of the missionary societies so that it could claim pursuing the policy of non-interference in matters of religion? Some data is also available to see how the 'Natives' especially the Muslims were aware of these complexities'. How far they were making use of these facilities and of modern printing technology, to run counter propaganda and produce polemical literature of their own?

Keywords: *Print, Polemics, Literature, Missionaries, Ulema, Company*

Introduction

The Printing Press and the dissemination of knowledge, though, brought a true revolution in the World; the countries of South Asia especially the regions of northern India remained deprived of its benefits till the 19th Century. The history of printing in India starts with the rehearsal of the evangelical efforts of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries in South India. Fifty-nine years after the landing of Vasco-da Gama at the Malabar Coast of Southern India, the printing press made its first appearance at Goa (in 1556). Here the art of printing was brought as an aid to Proselytization. However, during the early years, the missionaries relied almost entirely on political coercion. But, when it did not yield the desired results and the converts showed a tendency to revert to the practice of their old faith, the emphasis was shifted to the religious education of the converts. (Priolkar, 1958, p.13) In this program, indigenous languages were assigned an important role as Christian Literature was provided to the natives in Indian languages and printing press played a significant part in this endeavour.

Although, reputed scholars like B. S. Kesavan and A. K. Priolkar have done an extensive and useful study on printing and publication in India, their focus is primarily on the South-Western Coast. The thrust of this paper would be to look at how the Christian missionaries used printing facilities in a crucial manner for the purpose of evangelization in Northern India and how this can be related with the conversion in Northern India? Many of the regions in Northern India, especially Agra and Lucknow were richly populated with the Muslim inhabitants. By translating Old and New Testament, biographies of the Christian saints and other literature in Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages, it seems obvious that the missionaries were targeting mainly the Muslim population. They had already used these tracts in other countries dominated by the Muslim population like Persia and Middle East. It was not that the Muslims were unaware of printing. Thirty-five years after printing of the first book in Europe (in 1457), we have evidences of material printing at Turkey in 1493 by the Jewish and Muslim settlers who had migrated from Spain and set up their presses there. In the Muslim lands like Egypt, Syria, Arabia or Turkey, the shrill call of the newspaper boy is as much a part of daily life as that sonorous cry from

the minaret above. They held a realm of journalistic literature and cheap translations. (Aqueel, 2009, pp.10-21) However, the acclaim to make the Indian Muslim aware of this technique goes to the Christian missionaries, even if they did it for their own sake.

I

The credit to introduce printing in India goes to the Portuguese Jesuits. However, if the locations of earlier printing presses in India are plotted on a map, Tranquebar, Madras, Calcutta along the Eastern Coast would represent the shaping of Indian Printing. Bombay contributes its share much later. But when one looks at the volume and variety of achievements in the field of printing, it could be said that printing in India actually had its origin at Serampore (Calcutta) by the Baptist Missionaries¹. The main aim of the Serampore Mission (established in 1801), run under the supervision of the Trio – William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward – was to produce religious material and propagate Christianity. One more institution i.e., the College of Fort William was established in Calcutta (in 1800) with the similar intention. Its aim was also to popularize and spread the Holy Scriptures, and edify Christian literature in the regional languages of India. This schema can be traced back to the sixteenth century. The first book in an Indian language and script was based on the teachings of Christ and printed as 'Doctrina Christa' (1557). Tranquebar Mission's First English translation in 1712 was also the "Christian doctrine in question and answers" (Kesavan, 1985, p.12). Seemingly the task of the missionaries was two fold. In this process, they were not only propagating the doctrines of new faith², but also making attempts at weaning people from following their old religious beliefs and practices³ by printing books on Hindu and Mohammadan religious laws. Several literary societies were especially instituted to print and publish the religious tracts in refutation of the Quran. *Ijaz-i Quran* and *Tahrif-i Quran* of the Punjab Religious Book Society could be named as few examples. Similarly, the famous periodical of Serampore Mission, '*Digdarshan*' also dealt with the topics like 'Mohammed and the Koran's History'⁴.

However, very soon the missionaries realized that they could not carry this plan ahead without employing some 'native' hands⁵. Graham Shaw in his study on printing in Calcutta till 1800 emphasizes how the early phase of printing

marked a distinction between print culture and a culture that entirely depended on the race of the scribes. It was only with the help of these Indian assistants that a number of books and tracts were first translated and then printed in Indian languages. They were given the most difficult task of either translating the Christian literature into Persian language or scribing it in Bengali alphabets⁶.

However, when the non-evangelists, for instance, J. A. Hicky through his *Bengal Gazette*, voiced a fearless critique of the administration, the first Censorship of Press (by Lord Wellesley in 1799) was brought into being. Thus, the first quarter of the 19th century was marked by the controversies over censorship and freedom of press that arose between the colonial administrators and the pioneers of the English and Vernacular language press in India⁷. For Company, freedom of press could have led to the subjugation of their Imperialism. Therefore, in January 1823, John Adam by issuing the most abhorrent laws against the proprietors and editors of newspapers and periodicals directly targeted the increasingly vocal vernacular press. (Stark, 2008, p.84)

What really opened the floodgates of printing in India for native printers was the removal of the obnoxious Press Ordinance of 1832 by Charles Metcalf in the year 1835. In his brief period of governor generalship, he liberated the Indian Press. The government had also conducted a survey and reduced the subscription of some of its own presses, thereby, though indirectly, ultimately benefitting the natives. Nevertheless, the British government had quite an ambiguous attitude towards censorship of the printing press, for instance, in response to the complaint from the minister of *Awadh* against the editor of the Persian newspaper, *Jam-i Jahan Numain* 1831, Secretary to the government replied that the British Government had stopped interfering in the matters pertaining to newspapers published at Calcutta in native and English languages⁸. However, in June 1835, when the inhabitants of Calcutta made a petition to repeal the Press Laws at their City and the Presidencies of Bengal and Agra⁹, the appeal was accommodated through the above-mentioned resolution of Charles Metcalf. Hence, one can observe an ambiguous stance of the British government with respect to censorship of press, wherein, it did accept an appeal from the inhabitants from adjacent regions on one hand, while on the other

hand, denied to help the King of *Awadh*. One may say that the government either did not want to help the native king or buy selectively adopting the policy of non-interference in the affairs of one or two vernacular newspapers, the system paved way for its own newspapers! The said statement can be validated with yet another example. The Second Report of the Press Commission of India stated that liberal concessions were granted to the papers published by the Serampore missionaries and ones under the patronage of the government. However, only nominal concessions were given to the Indians owned vernacular language newspapers¹⁰. To further corroborate this discrimination, J. Natarajan in the Press Commission Report of 1955 quotes Thomas Munro, “we could think to grant liberty to the printing presses, if they were owned by our Countrymen. But as they were not Our People we cannot provide them Freedom” (cited. in M.A. Siddiqui, 1957, p. 111).

Despite all checks and official restrictions on the use of printing technology by the colonial administrators, the 'natives' were making an optimum use of these facilities. Eventually, printing by the locals became so popular that there were approximately twelve thousand publications by 1832. (Wadley, 1995, p.22) In spite of the safeguards used by the government, the Indians especially the Muslims made full use of the new technology, owning numerous printing units and publishing a number of newspapers, polemical tracts and works of theologian literature. There used to be a time, when people would shut their eyes to the printed books because they thought that the printed books conveyed only Christian religion, and would offend their religious susceptibilities. However, in the new times, print gave way to their own thoughts. The educated middle class of the society played a significant role in bringing forth this change. Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1822, for instance, started '*Mirat-ul Akhbar*', the first Indian newspaper in a vernacular language (Persian) to address the populace of North India. He was the first Indian who through his writings¹¹ initiated a stand against the Christian missionaries.

II

Once the natives had started using the printing technology, there was an overwhelming response to the printed reading material. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why the North Indian Muslim readers or the class of Muslim intelligentsia initially showed no apparent interest in printing press?

Undoubtedly, the great guilds of *Khatibs* (Scribes) would have been opposed to printing, as this mode was sure to take away their means of earning from them, says Francis Robinson. He further suggests that the reasons for negative response to printing were much deeper than this. Modern technology of printing was incongruous with the very heart of Islamic systems for transmission of knowledge that was done through the *Quran*. The *Quran* was always transmitted orally even if it was written as well. Writing was considered as only an aid to memory and oral transmission of knowledge from one person to another was the backbone to the Muslim education system. Robinson suggests one more probable reason for the Muslim aversion from printing. Since, printing press was an invention of the non-Islamic Civilization, the orthodox "Ulema considered this technology as a brainchild of the infidels and hence were reluctant to embrace it" (*Proceedings, Home, Public* (Oct. 17, 1822), pp. 221-259). Therefore, in the beginning, the technology of printing did not attract the Muslims, who for their educational and academic needs, used only Persian and had a good taste of the art of Calligraphy. However, contrary to F. Robinson's assertions, it may also be argued that the uniqueness and the artistic value of their art of Calligraphy and penmanship that the Muslims took pride in, made them initially somewhat reluctant from embracing the technology of printing press¹². The ornate designs used for beautification of the hand written copies, and distinction between certain Arabic letters such as 'dal' and 'dhal' could not be carried out by using the printing technology in its initial phase of availability. However, introduction of the Lithographic press in India which facilitated printing in the Persio-Arabic character made this technology readily acceptable to the Muslims. Moreover, the improved printing technology now also provided re-employment to those professionals who had earlier been engaged in the production of manuscripts, and certainly constituted the bulk of Muslim population in India¹³.

M. Ogborn in his *Indian ink: Script and print in the Making of English East India Company* says that the Company had introduced printing in India not simply to facilitate trade but more importantly to consolidate the empire (2008, p. xviii). However, the missionary aspirations were essentially in conflict with the implementation of Company's policy. The British had this carking fear in mind that the missionaries by spreading their religion would

agitate the 'natives' against the British Imperialism¹⁴. Does it imply that the government was in opposition to missionary attempts? In reality though, both the parties reciprocated the evangelical sympathies. William Carey, a missionary could not have functioned in Bengal before the Charter Act of 1813 without the Company license, had he not been supported by the Company officials. Further, William Lee, an agent of London Missionary Society, wrote to its Director, Charles Grant that 'because of the courteous treatment he had received from the acting secretary of the Government at the Fort William, he was saved from the considerable inconvenience and delay in travelling to Vizagapatam'¹⁵. The printing technology that had been initially introduced by the Company to facilitate their trade in India, was now being used by the missionaries to appropriate their task of evangelization.

How the British Government killed two birds with a stone can be understood by reviewing Macaulay's Minutes on Education (1835). From here on, there was a clear shift in the education policy of the Company, wherein not only education in English language was introduced, but all funds for education were also appropriated for printing English literature alone.¹⁶ The objective was to gradually and indirectly do away with the study/ learning of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit languages, and to introduce the Bible, not as a holy book but as a secular text. This would obviously result in a gradual disconnect of the people from the knowledge of the principles of their own faith, accompanied by their attention being directed towards books containing the principles of Christian Creed and Western learning. This approach helped not only the government to procure the '*Angrezi Baboos*'¹⁷ for the functioning of Company office, but also paved the way for the Christian missionaries in attaining the '*Kala Padris*'¹⁸.

Therefore, the new education policy which emphasized on learning of English language and teaching of Bible and other texts from the West, gained support, both manual and financial, from all evangelists, that is from a Church militant¹⁹ to the English and American State, and from the British government to the Christian in habitants²⁰ within India. Consequently, one witnesses a stupendous rise in the financial resources of the missionaries operating in India in the nineteenth century, for example, income of the Church Missionary Society had increased from thirteen hundred dollars in the year 1815 to one lakh dollars by 1850²¹. The missionaries had now started making a profound impact

on the popular imagination of the masses. The missionaries were also willing to incorporate changes in their already written and translated books/ tracts, which till now, had aroused feelings of suspicion and mistrust from the natives. These novel approaches, for instance, comprised of inclusion of eye-catching illustrations and comments in the books to attract the attention of the natives. The Indian Report prepared by the joint committee of Foreign Mission opined; for those we cannot use the power of verse e.g., the people of rural communities, the illiterate and semi-literate class our narrative should be simpler in form than the current translation of the Gospel. We should tell them the Bible histories, books about missions and Christian ethics in colloquial and easy rhyme with colored pictures.

There was also an attempt to imitate the Muslim way of writing in these printed books; every tract in Urdu invariably began with a *Quranic* verse and concluded with some suitable poetry. For the female readers, they introduced women's page, such as *Nur Afshan* (at Ludhiana).²² In this context it is interesting to quote Sir William Muir, "On the running of the Bible, brief notes, lithographed in the margin, and would prove invaluable; such a work should be executed so as to accommodate the native taste. Take the Lukhnow Coran with its running marginal Urdu notes as the model." (Muir, 1897, p.51) The intent was obviously to make the reading material Muslim friendly.

III

Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824) of Delhi, one of the greatest religious scholars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, used printing technology to publish his reformist literature and promote Islamic Education amongst the Muslims. But he and his descendants, like Sayyid Ahmad Rai Bareli of *Tariqah-I Muhammadiya*, through their thoughts and by the medium of their early reformist literature, *al- Iman* and *Sirati-Mustaqim*, not only developed their own religious literature, but also used the printing facility to advance their objectives of education, reform and polemics against the Christian missionaries. The Muslims had now begun to use the same printing technology to their own advantage, with which they had been earlier manipulated by the Christian missionaries. With the recognition of Urdu as an official language in 1837, the Protestant missionaries vigorously began to use Urdu language to translate, write, and preach. Their stated intention was to undermine the

authority of religious elites, the *Ulema* and the Brahmans but their main agenda was to reach the lingua franca of the masses, while the government by this policy tried to wean away the remaining particles of the Mughal power.

However, the Muslim reformers used the same convenient tool of Urdu language to implement their basic goal of creating consciousness among the Muslim individuals and to make them competent to stand against the challenges posed by Christianity. In the Pre-Mutiny era, print had become the main forum for religious debate; it was an era of religiously partisan newspapers and pamphlet wars. By 1820s, the emergence of Urdu newspapers, particularly in north India, made it quite evident that printing and publishing was widely accepted among Muslims and also used for the advancement of knowledge and proliferating social reforms. According to the report of *Akhtar Shahanshahi*²³, *Matba-i Rahmani* of Delhi (1813) and *Matba-i Sultani* of Lucknow (1819) were among the first few Urdu presses established by the Indian Muslims. Another printing press in Urdu language, though unnamed, was established in Kanpur in the year 1830. Printing presses in Agra, whether in English or vernacular language, were instituted a bit later, i.e., in 1845²⁴. However, within a short span of 12 years, twenty-three papers were printed and published from here only. Very soon the erstwhile capital of the Mughals had become the hub of printing and publishing. The city of *Nawabs*, Lucknow till the year 1843 also had at least twelve printing presses. India's first Hindi newspaper, *Udand Martand* by Pandit Jugal Kishore Shukla was also getting published from May, 1826 onwards.²⁵ Thus, the subcontinent saw a host of indigenous papers and journals being published in vernacular languages. This helped the Indians to resist the evangelist proclamations of Protestant missionaries and their ally, the Colonial Government.

The missionaries' antagonism not so evident in their earlier publications, now was undoubtedly visible in their polemical literature. It is worth observing that while there were usually no profane references to Christianity in Muslim literature, one could often find offensive depiction of Islam and its Prophets by the evangelists.²⁶ Now it became apparent to the natives that the aim of the Christian missionaries with the aid of government support was to convert the whole nation to Christianity. Hence, the *Jihadi*²⁷ *Ulama* like Syed Abdullah of Serampore, who in order to counter the missionary activities, had established a

printing press *Matba' e Ahmadi* in Calcutta in 1824, (Qadiri, 1988, pp. 197-98) along with the other Muslim activist, issued *Fatwa* for *Jihad* against the British in the great uprising of 1857.

The Muslim press had become very active. The newspapers had begun to question and challenge the objectionable practices of missionaries. J. Natarajan's assertion that 'the Vernacular newspapers played no role in the uprising of 1857' seems rather foolish and uninformed. (1956, p. 66). Role of the press in the First War of Independence could be well understood by referring to what Lord Canning said on 13 June, 1857; "the vernacular Akhbars by publishing the latest khabars, fill the heart of every Indian with plenty of valor and fearlessness that now they are ready to revolt." (cited in Siddiqui, 1957, p.111) Though these newspapers claimed to have an apolitical tone, even the simplest of news published therein, directly or indirectly, targeted the encroachment by the imperial power.

Urdu and Persian newspapers like *Miratul-ul Akhbar*, *Sultan-ul Akhbar*, *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*, *Sadiq-ul Akhbar* or *Tilism-i Lucknow*, had to suffer after the revolt, because of their anti-British stance during the Mutiny²⁸.

Conclusion

One may conclude that despite experiencing the most rigid period of proscription, the Indians and specially the Muslims had realized that printing technology could be used as an important tool to gain freedom from the colonial rule. Therefore, the British government in order to exercise control over the publishing activities by the natives and check formulation of any strong public opinion against the colonial rule devised several tactful strategies. Apart from the prohibition and censorship laws, the government also provided patronage to the native press to garner a closer relationship with printing in vernacular languages. The aim was to win the allegiance of some loyal editors and publishers, who could disseminate 'useful literature' in vernacular languages (an indispensable means of communication) in support of the colonial administrators and also help in gaining access to the public beliefs in future. However, some of the Indian publishers used this colonial strategy reciprocally to their own benefit. For instance, the Naval Kishore Press of Lucknow is considered as a mile stone in the history of printing and publication in India. Even after the Mutiny, Munshi Nawal Kishore's press continued to be the

largest national publishing house and played a significant role in the preservation and dissemination of Islamic textual knowledge. (Stark, 2008, pp. 86 & 225)^{xxix} Contemporary scholars and *Ulema* held high regard for the publications of this press and used the same to once again assert their identity and stand against the Proselytization. Thus, it is not surprising that Francis Bacon named printing technology along with gunpowder and compass, as one of the three things that had changed the appearance and state of the entire world.

End Notes

1. Serampore Mission translated *The Bible* in more than 45 languages of which 38 were translated at Serampore; W. Carey himself translated it in 29 languages. In 1800 came the Bengali version, in 1805 Marathi, in 1811 Persian, in 1812 Hindustani and in 1813 Arabic. (B. S. Kesavan, 1958, p. 254).
2. By translating their Scriptures into the native languages.
3. By commenting on vernacular religious literature.
4. This information came from the catalogue of books, courtesy; Vidyajyoti, The theological Institute of Christian Learning, Delhi.
5. As to import types from London was 7 times expensive than paying the local labor.
6. *Home, Public*, No.2, August 29, 1799.
7. Until then on the publications of English language only some nominal restrictions were imposed. When in the year 1807, governor general lord Minto felt that the publications of the Baptists could be provocative. He did not ban or brought any censorship law but ordered them to move their press to Calcutta. *Foreign, Secret*, No.10, Oct. 5, 1807.
8. *Foreign, Political*, No.55-57, June 17, 1831.
9. *Home, public*, No. 38, Feb 6, 1835.
10. Calcutta Gazette and India Gazette were under the patronage of the government; always remain postage free (J. Natarajan, 1958, p. 13).
11. Apart from this paper, through his other writings e.g., *Sambad Kaumudi* and *Brahamanical Magazine* also, he answered the challenges posed by the missionaries. *Proceedings, Home, Public*, Oct. 17, 1822.
12. Something similar had happened in the Mughal period also. When Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627) was shown a copy of the Bible in Arabic script printed in Italy by the Jesuits, Jahangir had enquired about the possibilities of converting it into the *Nasta'liq* script; Sir Edward Maclagan, pp. 2, 11 and 208.
13. *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. II, 2009.
14. As English East India Company was trying hard to establish its sovereignty on its colonies, now the Company did not want anyone to ruin it, especially the missionaries who were not even

their co-patriots but were Dutch.

15. An Indian Bishporic was established under the same Act. (Calcutta Review, 1850, pp. 1-35). Similar information also available in *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. Vol II. (1908). Clarendon Press. pp.259-60.

16. *Home, Public*, No. 6-8, June 3, 1835.

17. *The Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction for the year 1833*, *Home, Public*, No. 24, March 25, 1835. From the year 1832-33, number of students in the Oriental Seminary of Delhi College decreased from 300 to 257 while in the Delhi Institution (a branch of Delhi College, where only English was taught) increased from 153 to 160. Though the changes in numbers may not appear very drastic, but gradually the natives had to learn English language as a means of earning livelihood. Very soon the study of Bible as a schoolbook became compulsory in every school. Translated versions of the religious books of Hindu and Muslim faith often engrafted with Christian teachings were also used to influence the Indians to convert to Christianity, for instance, Master Ram Chandra of Delhi College had abandoned his native religion and converted to Christianity.

18. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, pp. 16-19. *British Parliamentary Report of 1852* also mentions the use of Bible as a simple School book, p. 781.

19. W. Carey, who was being paid a salary of Rs. 1000 per month for teaching at Fort William, writes in his letter of Feb 11, 1807; that his salary will be of much help for the mission, esp. for the purpose of printing the Bible and New Testament. A. K. Priolkar, op.cit, p. 62.

20. When the famous polemical tract '*The Mizanulhaqq*' of the German missionary P fander, due to the shortage of finances was out of print during the mid-19th Century, the Christian Inhabitants of India undertook the task of printing this book as 'one of the noblest cause', *Calcutta Review*, 1845.

21. *Indian Church Directory 1919-20*, pp. 56-82

22. *Christian Literature in Muslem Lands; A Study of the Activities of the Moslem and Christian Press in All Mohammedan Countries*, prepared by joint committee of Foreign Mission, New York, 1958, pp. 41-120.

23. Mohammad Ateeq Siddiqui, mentions it as the basic source of information about the earliest Urdu newspaper and press. While it also gives information about the material and techniques available in other languages, p. 265.

24. After Kanpur and Meerut, Agra came at the third position in establishing printing presses.

25. *O.C.Home, Public*, No. 64-65, June 29, 1826.

26. *Home, Ecclesiastical*, No.1, Sep 1, 1807.

27. Here the word 'Jihad' is used not in the context which was used by the colonial government, but to represent a group of people who stood against the opponents to save their religion, who strived and struggled to attain the Religious, Social and Political liberty not only for themselves but for the whole Muslim community.

28. When Sultan ulAkhbar exposed the motives of the British Government behind the

murder of British resident William Fraser, it had to face censorship. Similarly on opposing the government policies others also had to face the worst fate; Maulvi Baqar Ali was shot dead and the editor of Sadiqul Akhbar was poisoned. (M. A. Siddqui, 1957, p.340).

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