

Introduction

This short study is concerned with a somewhat under-reported aspect of book history in India. For understandable reasons, much of the scholarship on book history in the region has had to concentrate on urban centres of print. The first two centuries of the coming of print to India were very much a coastal affair, confined to missionary enclaves such as Goa and Tranquebar (Tharangambadi).¹ Then, with the rise of the East India Company as a political power, the three Presidency cities of Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), and Calcutta (Kolkata) became rapidly developing centres of print, as did Serampore, that accidental site of Baptist printing forty kilometres upriver from Calcutta. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the growth of printing in South Asia became phenomenal: ‘What had taken Europe three centuries to achieve, the emergence of a full-fledged book culture, was compressed into a single century,’² writes Graham Shaw. While the three Presidency cities continued to dominate, a host of other centres of printing began to create their own ecosystems of production and consumption. These included traditional centres of learning, princely states, cantonment towns, local zamindaries, missionary stations, centres of commerce, remote villages and the like.

This study is interested in looking at how print proliferated outside the major, and metropolitan, centres of print in colonial India. This is not a process that can be measured over a limited time-frame, or understood in terms of a set of common parameters. In a country as vast and diverse as India, there is no singular narrative that can be made to accommodate the various networks and flows of print. Neither can a study of a limited length such as this begin to do justice to this narrative. Nevertheless, I have tried to sketch a tentative proposal about how we might enter the space of printing in the hinterland, and understand its dynamics.

¹ For historical reasons and ease of quoting, colonial spellings of places have been used in this study, with the modern spelling provided in parentheses when first used. However, when such names are parts of periodicals or presses, the spelling which is closer to the Bengali pronunciation has been used. Example: the city of Dacca, but the periodical *Dhaka prakash*.

² Shaw, ‘South Asia’, 276.

To begin with, I propose a very basic model in understanding the various stages in the proliferation of print, that of networks, flows, and nodes. Thus, centres of print such as Calcutta or Serampore in the early nineteenth century were the starting point of a *network* that would eventually enable print to disperse into the hinterland. This network may be defined as the sum of the processes and personnel connected with the production of print, as well as those agents who were responsible for the distribution of the printed product. Further, the printing emanating from such centres would necessarily be heterogeneous and multi-lingual in scope. The second element in this model would be designated *flows*, consisting of not just the circulation of the printed products, but also of personnel – printers, type-makers, binders, booksellers, authors, journalists, correspondents – whose mobilities were key to the formation of the third component of this model: *nodes*. It is in the formation of such nodes of printing that we might locate the meaningful dispersion of the print into the hinterland. As we will see, many of these nodes would develop into networks in their own right, while others would restrict themselves to a limited sphere of operations before ultimately petering out.

Using this model, this study tries to identify key moments and episodes in the creation of local economies of print. In the first instance, we consider the flow of the printed book from centres of print into the hinterland. This stage was largely a missionary enterprise, with tracts or books of the Bible being circulated free of cost over much of India, through the elaborate missionary network of first preachers, and later, colporteurs. Then, towards the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, the missionaries were joined by the local intelligentsia and a section of the colonial administration in creating textbooks and pedagogical literature for primary and secondary classrooms. These too circulated by way of the missionary networks as well as new networks created by the colonial apparatus. Though information about such flows is scarce and erratic – and almost entirely dependent on the missionary and imperial archives – they nevertheless enable us to put together a very preliminary map of reading and readers' responses, and trace the early history of the socialisation of print in the Indian subcontinent.

In the second stage of this study, we will look at specific nodes of printing that came into being in the hinterland from roughly the 1840s onwards. This was very much a stop-start process, with the usual quota of false dawns and aborted beginnings. Key to this process was the availability of both printing machinery and the expertise necessary to run it, away from the usual centres of printing. This is a crucial moment in the hitherto unidirectional flow of workers, skills and material into the city. With the rise of Calcutta as a hub of commerce and imperial power, a steady stream of primarily upper-caste Hindus flowed from the countryside into the city, looking for white-collar jobs under the Company. They formed the lower cadre of the law courts, merchant offices, chambers of commerce and educational institutions, and also found employment in the nascent publishing industry. But is it possible to identify a moment when the flow ceased to be unidirectional, and the skills acquired in the city began to find their way back into the hinterland? In his work on peripatetic printers during the Victorian age, David Finkelstein poses a number of questions that may fruitfully be posed in the context of colonial India as well: ‘What infrastructures and mechanisms underpinned such print culture developments? What cultural values and trade skills were transmitted and embedded in indigenous settings by workers who flowed through established and developing territories? . . . How did locals and incomers alike deal with each other in such work spaces?’³ These questions become crucial when we try to understand how local economies of print came into being and were sustained.

The Case of Colonial Bengal

In order to study the above phenomena, I have chosen undivided Bengal of the nineteenth century as an exemplar. Among other things, Bengal lends itself particularly well to the model proposed above owing to the presence of not one, but two, major networks of print during this period. The first is Serampore, formerly a Danish enclave, and for that reason the site of a Baptist mission (the East India Company was famously allergic to missionaries operating in their bailiwick), which from 1800 expanded into one

³ Finkelstein, *Movable Types*, 5.

of the most prolific centres of print production in all of South and Southeast Asia. The elaborate missionary network that ramified from Serampore, towards the west, as well as the south-east, carried with it a stream of tracts and Bibles, which were handed out to all comers wherever their proselytisers went. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of information in the otherwise copious missionary archives about those who might have actually read the tracts and Bibles, other than a handful of overly dramatic accounts of Indians taking to Christianity. But distribution of print on such a large scale (by one estimate, six million tracts were distributed during 1823–68) is bound to leave traces, and the first part of the study tries to compile a tally of such traces and evidence. We are in somewhat better documented territory when we look at the dispersion of textbooks by societies such as the Calcutta School-Book Society (CSBS), which started operations in 1817. As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ the CSBS's activities presaged Macaulay's Englishing of the imperial curriculum by nearly two decades. More importantly for this study, it established a robust network of distribution facilitated by inspector of schools, their agents, and sub-agents. In the first chapter, therefore, I look at the twin networks of print put into place by the Serampore Baptists and the CSBS respectively.

In the second chapter, we look at the dispersal of print production from the city to its hinterland, taking Calcutta as the point of departure. Along with Bengali, the lingua franca of the lower delta of Bengal, the Calcutta press printed extensively in languages such as Persian, Hindustani (Urdu), Hindi, Nepali, Odia, Assamese, Tibetan, Burmese and English, to name a few. These have been well documented by scholars. But this chapter will focus on what we might call small town or 'mofussil' presses as they originated outside Calcutta, from roughly the mid-century onwards. Such a survey will enable us to identify a wide range of printing models and practices that called for a degree of innovation and reinvention. While the famed Battala quarter of Calcutta was the locus of the commercial book market, the districts provided a congenial environment for alternative modes of print production and consumption. In particular, the periodical press flourished in the districts, providing a bracing counterpart to the

⁴ Gupta, 'The Calcutta School-Book Society'.

public discourse emanating from the city. In contrast, book publishing with the attendant cachet of authorship was more of a metropolitan phenomenon, and continues to be so till this day. Of course, the mortality and morbidity rate of districts presses and publications were high, but that should not detract from their efforts to forge micro-communities of textual production, and to address local issues and concerns.

I should mention here that I use the word ‘mofussil’ as both a descriptive and conceptual category. In the first sense of the mofussil, one can do no better than to turn to that old chestnut *Hobson-Jobson*: “‘The provinces,’ – the country stations and districts, as contra-distinguished from ‘the Presidency’; or, relatively, the rural localities of a district as contra-distinguished from the sudder or chief station, which is the residence of the district authorities. Thus if, in Calcutta, one talks of the Mofussil, he means anywhere in Bengal out of Calcutta.”⁵ But, in the Bengali language, the word also carries an affective charge that obtains to this day. Along with a sense of location, the word mofussil variously functions as a site of memory, a mood and a positional politics, especially with reference to the cultural counterweight that is Calcutta.

What were the chief centres of such printing in undivided Bengal, or the Bengal Presidency?⁶ Closest to Calcutta were riverside towns such as Hooghly, Chinsurah (Chuchura), Serampore, and Naihati in the Hooghly district, followed by Burdwan (Bardhaman), in the district of the same name. Two hundred kilometres north of Calcutta lay the twin towns of Murshidabad and Berhampore. As we move into the eastern part of Bengal, the most pre-eminent centre of printing was Dacca (Dhaka), with Mymensing, Rungpore (Rangpur), Sylhet (Srihatta) and Jessore following suit. Additionally, we see the rise of printing in those parts of undivided Bengal where Bengali was not the dominant language: Odia printing in Cuttack and Balasore, Assamese printing in Sibsagar and Goalpara, and Hindi and Urdu printing in Patna and Arrah. Finally, there were centres of

⁵ Burnell and Yule, *Hobson-Jobson*, 435.

⁶ The Bengal Presidency, an administrative unit of colonial India, consisted of parts or whole of the following modern-day states/nations: Assam, Bangladesh, Bihar, Meghalaya, Odisha, Tripura and West Bengal.

Bengali diaspora such as Benaras (Varanasi) and Allahabad outside Bengal, and Bhagalpur and Hazaribagh situated towards the western perimeter of the undivided Bengal.

What were the languages in which printing took place? While the towns in the vicinity of Calcutta printed mostly in Bengali, the linguistic map became more diverse as the distance increased from Calcutta. Also, typography was not the only technology for printing. Ulrike Stark points out how lithography, after originating in Calcutta in the 1820s, spread ‘right across Upper India’ as the technology of choice, particularly for printing in Urdu and Persian.⁷ According to Francesca Orsini, lithography enabled presses to print in a number of languages, ‘for the book needed only to be copied in a fair hand in the other script’.⁸ Thus, presses in Patna and Arrah (now in the state of Bihar) were able to print in four languages – Arabic, Hindi, Persian and Urdu – employing both lithography and typography. As far as district presses in middle and lower Bengal were concerned, they were overwhelmingly typographic, and usually printed in one, or at most two, languages. This was owing to the limited resources a small press would possess, as well as the limited readership they would cater to.

Printing in other regional languages was the preserve of missionaries before indigenous entrepreneurs entered the fray. Before the setting up of the Orissa Mission Press in 1838 in Cuttack, printing in Odia was carried out by the two Baptist presses in Serampore and Calcutta. The coming of missionaries such as Bampton, Pegg, Sutton and Lacey to Odisha resulted in widespread distribution of tracts, following the Serampore model. Till 1866, the Cuttack Mission Press was the only centre of printing in Odisha, printing hundreds of tracts and other titles in a variety of subjects. Like the Serampore press, it trained up a whole generation of print-house personnel – by 1858, it employed as many as eighteen people in the press.⁹ But within two years of each other, two indigenous establishments were set up – the Cuttack Printing Co. of Gourishankar Ray in 1866, and the Utkal Press of Fakir Mohan Senapati in Balasore (Baleshwar) in 1868 – which carried the

⁷ Stark, *An Empire of Books*, 46. ⁸ Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 17

⁹ Shaw, ‘The Cuttack Mission Press’, 41.

bulk of Odia printing in the nineteenth century. Assamese too had a trajectory similar to Odia, with missionaries setting up a press in Sadiya in 1836. This later shifted to Sibsagar, from where the missionaries printed the influential periodical *Orunodoi* from 1846. Owing to Assamese using the same typeface as Bengali, much of early printing in the language was carried out from Calcutta presses, before take-up by presses in Assam from the 1870s. Presses such as the Chidananda Press at Guwahati, the Hitasadhani Press at Goalpara and the Dharmaprakash Press at Jorhat became active both in book and periodicals printing,

Reading the Archives

The material in the first chapter is almost entirely drawn from institutional histories and archives – in particular, those of the Mission Press of Serampore, and the CSBS. The second chapter is able to bring a wider variety of sources into play, such as the publications of the Bengali press, memoirs and biographies, government reports, bibliographies, catalogues and the like. However, the single largest body of information about book printing of the period are the multi-volume Bengal Library Catalogues, issued four times a year following the passage of the Press Registration Act, or Act XXV of 1867, which made it compulsory for printers to register all their publications with the government, book, periodical or newspaper.

Given that much of the book – particularly the first chapter – is dependent on missionary and imperial archives of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, certain caveats are necessary, especially in relation to missionary archives. Given the near-total absence of any indigenous records and testimonies for this period, we have to be cautious about how we interpret missionary publications and records. For example, despite copious records left by the missionaries about almost all aspects of their work, there is a complete lack of mention of large chunks of their print output. Understandably, Bibles and tracts publications are reported upon in detail, as these were largely paid for by donations, and there was a need to account for how such monies were spent. But the missionaries also carried out other kinds of printing, such as those for Fort William College, or the

CSBS. These find nearly no mention in their despatches. Early in the 1800s, the Mission Press produced the first-ever printed versions of the Sanskrit epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, in the Bengali translations of Krittibas Ojha and Kasiram Das respectively. The archives are completely silent about this significant initiative. The same is true of the incomplete 1806 prose translation in English of the *Ramayana* carried out by Carey and Marshman, a project financed by the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.

Then there is the question of erasures. Despite working with a large supporting staff of local scholars, translators and print-house personnel, the missionaries rarely thought it fit to mention them by name. Wages for unnamed ‘pundits in different languages’ were a regular feature of the balance-sheet printed by the missionaries. The only occasion on which staff members were named was when they had converted to Christianity – thus, in 1811, we have the name of eight print-house staff, all converts. Gangakishore Bhattacharya, the first Bengali to set up as publisher learnt his trade at the Mission Press but is never named in the despatches. Likewise, one looks in vain for meaningful references to the two great typemakers who worked at Serampore, Panchanan and Manohar Karmakar. These erasures are frustrating as the names of these workers trained at Serampore could have given us a much clearer idea about the beginnings of the indigenous book trade.

In comparison, the bureaucratic and impersonal imperial archive is more comprehensive. However, Samarpita Mitra alerts us that a database such as the *Bengal Library Catalogue* is also marked by its own share of omissions as publishers often submitted incomplete returns, though such omissions are likely to have been very few. She also draws our attention to the ‘Western classificatory’ schemes that were used to classify Indian literary output, thereby reflecting a colonial epistemological imperative.¹⁰ A. R. Venkatachalapathy is more forthright in referring to the ‘bureaucratic stupidity’ of the classification and the overall diminishing returns of the quarterly reports from the 1920s.¹¹

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¹⁰ Mitra, *Modern Literary Culture*, 32.

¹¹ Venkatachalapathy, *Province of the Book*, 175–6.

Prologue: The Three Journeys of Gangakishore Bhattacharya

On a morning sometime in the early years of the nineteenth century, a man named Gangakishore Bhattacharya might have been found journeying to the Danish enclave of Serampore, from his native village Bahara. It would have been a considerable journey by either foot or bullock-cart, more so by the river – today, it would take nearly three hours to drive the 100 km distance via National Highway 19.

Why was Gangakishore travelling to Serampore? He might have heard that three *sahibs* (lit. white men) had set up a Baptist mission on the banks of the Hooghly river. Or he might have heard one of the brethren preach as they went up the river. In any case, there was work for such a one as Gangakishore. Under the leadership of the ‘Serampore Trio’ – William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward – the mission had set up its own printing press in 1800 and was intent on publishing the Bible in as many languages as possible. The press needed workers, and many came from near and far to work in the print shop, the bindery and the type-foundry.

We do not know how long Gangakishore apprenticed at Serampore. William Ward, who was himself a printer, remarked: ‘(F)or about a month at first we had a brahman compositor, but we were quite weary of him.’¹² This is unlikely to refer to Gangakishore, and later accounts convey a different impression. George Smith, biographer of William Carey, wrote: ‘The first Bengali, who on his own account, printed works in the vernacular on trade principles, was Gunga Kishore, whom Carey and Ward had trained at Serampore.’¹³

At an unknown date, Gangakishore made his second and much shorter journey, this time to Calcutta. At that time, there were no Indian-owned printing presses in the city, other than the Sanksrit Press of Baburam Sharma, a faculty member at Fort William College,¹⁴ and a handful of the so-called ‘maulvi presses’, which also printed for the Fort William College list. In Calcutta, Gangakishore found employment with Ferris & Co.,

¹² Smith, *William Carey*, 253. ¹³ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁴ The Fort William College was set up in 1800 to train the future cadre of the Company.

a printing press set up by Paul Ferris. In 1802, Ferris & Co. were also acting as Calcutta agents for the Mission Press at Serampore,¹⁵ and Gangakishore may have made contact with them while training at Serampore.

We find Gangakishore branching out on his own in 1816, publishing three titles in one year from the Ferris Press under his own name. These were *Ingreji byakaran* (English grammar), *Daybhaag* (Hindu inheritance law), and the famed *Annadamangal* and *Bidyasundar*, a courtly romance by Bharatchandra Ray and the first Bengali book to be accompanied by wood-cut illustrations.¹⁶ In the next few years, he added more titles to his list,¹⁷ and famously co-founded the first-ever Bengali periodical with Harachandra Roy, the *Bangal gejeti*, in 1818.¹⁸ These facts are well known and do not require reiteration.

However, what is less known is the fact that the Ferris Press had issued a bilingual title in 1815, in which Gangakishore had played a somewhat different role from usual. This was new edition of John Miller's 1797 *The Tutor: in English and Bengalee*,¹⁹ a work aimed at teaching English to Bengali learners. Ferris reissued the work in 1815, but with the addendum: *Carefully revised and corrected by a professional pundit. Re-printed from a work formerly published by the late Mr. John Miller.* Now who might be he professional pundit? There is no mention of any name on the title-page, but if one looks at two-page Bengali preface to the work, the name of Gangakishore emerges as the pundit in question.

The preface, written by Gangakishore himself, is remarkable in several aspects. It is written in the traditional songlike Bengali *payar* cadence of loosely rhyming couplets. After the ritual invocation of Brahma, Gangakishore announces his intention to amend the previous work,

¹⁵ Shaw, *Printing in Calcutta*, 48.

¹⁶ For a detailed study of the many lives of Bharatchandra's opus, see Roy, *Journey of Bidyasundar*.

¹⁷ For a description of his printing career in Calcutta, see Brajendranath, 'Gangakishore Bhattacharya', *SSK* 1, 158–170.

¹⁸ Unfortunately, there are no extant copies of this periodical.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Richard Kossow for allowing me to quote from this rare – and to my knowledge – unique title.