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A Study of the Urdu Print Culture of South Asia since the Late Eighteenth Century

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1. Introduction

As South Asia entered the modern era, the printing press came to the Mughal capital, and newspapers and printed books began to appear. These publications played a large part in fostering the growth of social movements. The most famous nineteenth-century leader of these movements was Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khān (1817–1898), the founder of Islamic modernism. He contributed greatly to the establishment of modern education for Muslims in South Asia. In the 20th century, Maulānā Saiyid Abū al-A‘lā Maudūdī (1903–1979) founded the Islamic Party in South Asia and had a most powerful influence on its developments. The printed book was the great vehicle for his ideas [Robinson 1993: 249]. His party’s organization was largely sustained by print.

More generally, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the popularization of formal religious knowledge through South Asian print media was closely intertwined with the Muslim religious revival [Robinson 1993: 242]. Moreover, print has played a large part in the erosion of the authority of the traditional ulama as interpreters of Islam; in other words, their monopoly of the transmission of knowledge was broken [Robinson 1993: 244–245]. Evidently, the adoption of print had a revolutionary impact on Muslim societies. The public reading of texts by copyists to authors, usually in a mosque, allowed for their dissemination [Robinson 1993: 235, 239].

However, while some scholars have studied the relationship between Islam and the print media in South Asia, they have concentrated on the content of the media and not the institution itself. In this article, we will analyse the development of the print media in South Asia, especially in the Urdu language, and its impact on readers.

2. The Formation of the Printing Culture of South Asia

(1) The East India Company’s Press from the Late Eighteenth Century

The importance of the East India Company in the early phase of printing cannot be overemphasised. Established in 1600, this huge mercantile enterprise printed numerous paper documents for its management in London. The East India Company set up its first press, superintended by missionaries, in Madras in about 1761 [Pickett 2011: ix]. The company’s press in Calcutta, under the superintendence of Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), produced both British government regulations and commercial publications. From 1784, this press, which

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became the most important in South Asia, issued the *Calcutta Gazette* [Pickett 2011: ix]. In 1822, the East India Company's employee Ram Mohan Roy (1774–1833) founded the earliest Persian newspaper, *Mirāt al-Akhhbār* [Green 2009: 217]. Thus, from the late eighteenth century, the East Indian Company was an overarching presence in South Asian printing.

(2) Development of Printing Techniques

The English printing industry developed techniques to arrange Arabic script in typeset. Early Arabic printing types were cast in London [Green 2009: 217]. In 1818, the Bible Society in London used Persian fonts to print Henry Martyn (1781–1812)'s Hindustani/Urdu prayer book [Green 2009: 209]. By 1825, more than 20,000 Persian, Arabic, and Urdu scripture books had been issued by presses in the British capital [Green 2009: 210].

In the Indian Subcontinent, The first litho press in Urdu was set up in Kanpur in 1830, and soon after, many more were established in Delhi and Lucknow [Ali 1967: 10]. In all, 11,458 copies of 42 books, most poetry and literature, were published in 1848 [Ali 1967: 10].

According to Konishi, small paper craft centres were in operation in South Asia before the British era [Konishi 1985: 62]. The British opened large paper mills in India, and they trained prisoners to make paper by hand [Konishi 1985: 60]. Moreover, the railway and post systems, which permitted the dissemination of printed material, developed under their rule. Their arrival led to the explosive expansion of the publishing industry after the nineteenth century.

(3) The Appearance of the Private Publishing Company

With printing techniques from London and the bureaucracy of the East India Company, the printing industry arrived in the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century. By the next century, many local printing presses had started. In 1820, the Nawab of Awadh established the first Muslim printing press in Lucknow [Green 2009: 217]. Other presses then opened in Calcutta, Southern India, and Lucknow. Of these, the Nawal Kishore Press became the most important. Munshī Naval Kishor (1836–1895) is one of several eminent Hindu publicists who figure prominently in the history of nineteenth-century Urdu journalism. He went to Lahore to receive his training as a printer and journalist at the famous Koh-i-Noor Press [Stark 2003: 67]. He returned to Lucknow in 1858 to set up his own press, the Nawal Kishore Press, which published Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian books and promoted literature [Suzuki and Tanaka 1974: 115].

3. The Rise of Lahore as a Printing Hub

(1) From Delhi to Lahore

Lahore was a thriving administrative centre under the Mughal and Sikh dynasties. In 1849, it

became the capital of the colonial Punjab Government; in the same year, the Koh-i-Noor press began to function in the city. These two developments permitted the printing industry to shift from Delhi to Lahore during the 1850s. By 1859, another press was functioning there. Each published a newspaper, *Koh-i Nūr* and *Darya-i Nūr*, and eighteen books in 1850 [Ali 1967: 10]. The average circulation of a newspaper in that era was not more than 50 or 60 copies, but *Avadh Akhbār* printed 600–820 in 1876–77. The fact that Koh-i-Noor printed 349 in 1854 indicates that this had a great impact on society [Suzuki and Tanaka 1974: 116]. Along with Nawal Kishore, whom I have already mentioned, many people from the Koh-i-Noor Company started Urdu newspapers or became editors of journals [Yamane 1994: 74–75]. Finally, the British Government established its official printing presses in Lahore [Şiddīqī 1979: 56]. Thus, Lahore became a hub of the printing industry.

(2) The Development of Printing Culture in Lahore

According to the colonial Punjab Government's official journal, Lahore had 32 'licensed vernacular printing presses' in 1881/2, four of which belonged to the government. Two factories were operated by European, probably British, owners, and the railway company, Anjuman-i Qaşūr (Kasur Association) and Anjuman-i Panjāb (Punjab Association) owned their own presses. Twelve presses belonged to Muslims, seven to Hindus, and four to Sikhs [Punjab Government 1989: 189]. The distribution of ownership among these three communities largely reflects their ratios in the general population, since the census of 1881 reveals that 65% of Lahore's population were Muslims, 20% Hindus, 13% Sikhs, 0.5% Christians, and 0.1% Jains [Punjab Government 1989: 56]. The various presses of Lahore, all hand-driven [Punjab Government 1989: 100], published reprints of books on the Islamic and Hindu faiths and Islamic medicine, along with elementary school textbooks, folk tales and popular ballads. 'History, science, and travel [found] little or no sale' [Punjab Government 1989: 53]. There are six weekly newspapers published in Lahore, of which one is in Arabic, the rest in Urdu [Punjab Government 1989: 53]. The *Koh-i Nūr* is believed to have the largest circulation. These presses were all 'hand-driven' [Punjab Government 1989: 100]. In 1901, 4.4 per cent of Lahore's population could read and write (7.4 per cent of males and 0.7 per cent of females) [IGI 1991b: 26]. According to the gazetteer of 1908, Lahore city had two printing presses with 229 employees [IGI 1991b: 23]. The census of 1921 shows 1946 printing employees in the Punjab District and that of 1931 shows 3537, a marked increase [Khan 1992: 241]. Thus, the data indicate that printing rapidly developed in South Asia in the half century after 1883.

(3) Linguistic Change in Lahore

Turning to the languages of Lahore, Persian had been the administrative language of the Mughals and Sikhs in the centuries before them. When the British annexed the Punjab in

1849, Urdu was introduced and has since been an important language of the region [Sullivan 2007: 114]. The 1881 census reveals that 96% of Lahore's residents spoke Punjabi, 2.5% Hindustani, which probably means Urdu, and less than 1% Kashmiri, Pashto, Pahari, or non-Indian languages [Punjab Government 1989: 52]. According to the 1901 census, Punjabi, including a dialect known as Western Punjabi, was spoken by 18 million people [IGI 1991b: 20], who comprised 90% of the residents of the Punjab District. Western Hindi accounted for 20% and Western Pahari 5% [IGI 1991a: 47] of the population. Punjabi is the language of Lahore city, although Urdu is known and on occasion used by most city folk [IGI 1991b: 20]. Specifically, Urdu was not much used before the eighteenth century in Lahore. Punjabi, however, is the dominant language in private life, even today. There is no conclusive proof that the printing industry fostered the popularity of the Urdu language.

4. Publication Activity in the Nineteenth Century

As in Lahore, translations, newspapers, magazines, and libraries spread in South Asia during the nineteenth century. Print media changed academic styles. It struck right at the heart of the personal transmission of knowledge; what is more, it struck right at the heart of Islamic authority, embodied in the oral chain of transmission of the Quran [Robinson 1993; Minault 1999: 121].

(1) The Start of Newspapers

There is no doubt about the causal relation between the growth of newspapers and printing technology. In the nineteenth century, newspapers spread more widely in Lahore, helped by the increase in readers of Urdu prose. In 1877, *Avadh Akhbār* became the first Urdu daily in northern India; appearing as a weekly in the 1850s, it was read from Delhi to Hyderabad and from Lahore to Calcutta [Stark 2003: 66]. In 1877, the paper, which had a prominent journalist, poet, and writer for its editor, became a daily [Suzuki and Tanaka 1974: 115; Stark 2003: 70–75]. In the year before, it had an average press run of 600–820 copies [Suzuki and Tanaka 1974: 116]. From 1877, *Avadh Panci* appeared as a rival [Suzuki and Tanaka 1974: 117]. Finally, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, several journals appeared in quick succession. This was the era when the Urdu journal offered many genres of prose and diverse articles [Şiddīqī 1979: 304].

(2) The Appearance of Readers

In South Asia, the eighteenth century marked the emergence of a wider reading public [Minault 1999: 119]. Its appearance can be traced to the spread of private printing companies from 1840–1860s and the expansion of the market permitted by the British rail system. In addition, the distribution network for paper expanded, making this material more generally available.

Techniques such as bookbinding had been learnt by railway company employees, prisoners, and government and mission presses [Punjab Government 1989: 101]. Small public libraries and reading rooms began to appear in North India [Naim 2011: 54].

5. The Expansion of Publishing in Pakistan

(1) The Creation of a Publishing System in Pakistan

At the time of the 1947 partition, most of the publishing houses run by non-Muslims moved to India. The numbers of Muslim-owned publishing houses of textbooks and religious books were too small to fill the gap; consequently, many new publishers and booksellers entered the field to meet the growing needs of the new nation [Shah 1963: 21]. Lahore and Karachi became the hubs of the publishing industry. In the 1950s, dictionaries of local languages and school textbooks were produced en masse as a symbol of “self-reliance” [PBWG 1972]. In West Pakistan, booksellers, educational, governmental, and general publishers produced reading materials for the public; dealers in rare and old books, bookstalls for tourists and travellers, newsstands and hawkers, pavement retailers, rental libraries, co-operative bookshops, second hand booksellers, and foreign publishers all appeared [Shah 1963: 21–23]. East Pakistan had 111 public libraries in 1970 and West Pakistan 123. In that year, Karachi had the biggest number of publishers and booksellers of any city, 181 in all, followed by Lahore with 149, Dacca with 122, Rawalpindi with 15, Hyderabad with 14, Peshawar with 11, and Chittagong with 9 [Shamsuddoula 1970: 120–144]. Ten years later, UNESCO’s 1980 report indicates that the total number of booksellers equalled 3,000, including seasonal ones [UNESCO 1980: 68]. Public libraries are found in more than 60 cities all over the country [Shamsuddoula 1970: 45–75]. In all, there are about eight million books in the libraries of Pakistan, about 75 per cent of which are located in Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi [UNESCO 1980: 67]. Finally, the country has more than two thousand printing presses, although a great majority of these are hand-operated, as in the British era [UNESCO 1980: 68].

(2) The Development of the Urdu Bazaar

Although a network of publishing houses and distribution outlets for Urdu books exists all over Pakistan, most publishing occurs in Lahore and Karachi. The total number of publishers is not small but big publishing houses are few. The majority of publishers do not publish more than ten titles per year. Besides, quite a number of books are printed by authors [UNESCO 1980: 66]. According to the best estimates, about 3,000 titles, excluding textbooks and children’s books, are published each year. Printed editions range from 1,000 to 2,000 copies [UNESCO 1980: 66–67].

Although Lahore had been a great centre of the book industry on the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent [Shah 1963: 21] since the British era, Karachi also became a publishing and

printing centre after independence [Haider 1996: 307]. Both Lahore and Karachi have an 'Urdu Bazaar' or market in the Urdu language. Each houses publishers, printers, booksellers, textbooks traders, paper cutters, and wholesale cardboard, stationery, and wedding card shops. Delhi, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and other South Asian cities have similar blocks or streets, usually located in old areas of these cities. Lahore and Karachi are the two leading publishing centres in the country.

(3) An Investigation of the Reading Public

In this section, I would like to explore the tastes and demands of the reading public in Pakistan [Ahmad 1964a; 1964b; Bengali Academy 1964; Faruqi 1974; UNESCO 1980]. In 1964 and 1974, the National Book Centre of Pakistan, which is an autonomous governmental organization, issued a report on reading preferences in Pakistan. A 1964 survey was conducted for UNESCO by the Bengali Academy in East Pakistan and by the Punjab Academy in West Pakistan. The questionnaires were mailed to 4,000 people, located all over the country, and 1890 valid responses were collected in West Pakistan and 813 in East Pakistan [Ahmad 1964a: 12; Bengali Academy 1964: 14].

In East Pakistan, more newspaper readers tend to be male and those of magazines and journals female. Of all the books read, novels and short-stories-dramas accounted for almost half, or 46%, followed by religious, crime, and adventure books. Forty per cent of all books were published in Pakistan, 52% in India, and 8% in foreign countries [Bengali Academy 1964: 25, 26, 34, 38]. In West Pakistan, teenagers read nine books in a month. The average number of books read in a month decreases with age. City folk bought 30% and borrowed 70% of their books. In comparison, village folk purchased 20% and borrowed 80%. The favourite subjects of readers were historical novels, Islamic history, and religious books [Ahmad 1964a: 31–34]. The most favoured authors were the poets Bābā Farīd and Hīr Vārīs Shāh, Iqbāl, and Nazīr Aḥmad, the short story writers Manṭo and Shaukat Ṣiddīqī, and the famous Islamic historian Nasīm Ḥijāzī [Ahmad 1964a: 32–33].

The 1974 study of 3,000 people was conducted by the Pakistan Library Association as a project of the International Book Year 1972/73 [Faruqi 1974: 9]. It excluded data on East Pakistan. This study shows that the preferred authors of the reading public were Iqbāl, Nasīm Ḥijāzī, Raḥīyah Baṭ, Maulānā Maudūdī, Ibn-i Ṣafī, Afshān [Faruqi 1974: 81–84]. Raḥīyah Baṭ was the most popular author among students and housewives, while workers preferred Nasīm Ḥijāzī [Faruqi 1974: 16]. Among the popular books are *Bāng-i darā* and *Bāl-i Jibrīl* (by Iqbāl), *Tauba al-Nuṣūḥ* (by Nazīr Aḥmad), *Sīrat al-Nabī* (by Shiblī Nu'mānī), *Aur talvār tūt gāī* (by Nasīm Ḥijāzī), *Dīvān-i Ghālib* (by Mirza Ghālib) [Faruqi 1974: 81–84]. Religious books, novels, and poems were most popular among all social groups. Urdu newspaper and magazines were by far preferred to English ones. The most popular magazines were *Akhbār-i*

Jahān and *Urdu Digest*; housewives favoured *Akhbār-i Khavātīn* [Faruqui 1974: 14, 87–90].

Ten years after the National Book Centre's survey, UNESCO in 1980 reported¹ the lack of reading among the literate population [UNESCO 1980: 69]. The number of literate persons in the country in 1967–77 was around 15 million. However, about 75 per cent of the population had no access to books [UNESCO 1980: 68–69]. On the other hand, 'digests', paperback magazines, and popular fictions were widespread, some issued in editions of 150,000 to 200,000 copies [UNESCO 1980: 70].

6. Conclusion

This article has discussed the formation and development of the printing industry in South Asia, from the eighteenth century to the 1980s in Pakistan and India. Its aim was to refine our understanding of printing in South Asia and to reveal the systems that support the print media. Among its major findings is the increase of publishing companies in Lahore in late nineteenth century, which impacted the second and third languages of that area. Another finding is that Karachi became a printing centre after independence. Its Urdu Bazaar grew rapidly. Previously, publishing activities have been taken for granted; however, I have demonstrated that a complicated relationship exists between publishers and writers and readers. This industry was formed by the development of printing techniques, a publishing culture, a legal system, a distribution chain, literature prizes, management, and bookshops.

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¹ This is the final report of the 'Regional Seminar on Book Publishing in National Languages, Karachi, Pakistan', held 20–24 January 1980. The representative from Pakistan was Mr. Ibrahim Saad, Deputy Director of National Book Council of Pakistan. Some observers also attended, one from National Book Foundation Karachi and two from Karachi's private publishers [UNESCO 1980: 95–96].

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