



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
 P-ISSN: 2706-9109
www.historyjournal.net
 IJH 2022; 4(2): 38-41
 Received: 12-05-2022
 Accepted: 22-06-2022

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Book history studies: Some interventions from colonial Punjab

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2022.v4.i2a.158>

Abstract

This essay seeks to study print cultures, history of book publishing, and language formations in colonial Punjab in the context of debates in the new historical fields of Book History Studies and Print Culture Studies. Historical studies of late-19th and early-20th centuries in Punjab have focused on the formation of communal public and print spheres and the rigidification of religious identities that culminated in Partition in 1947. Rather than assume the formation of fixed and homogenized religious and linguistic identities, this essay seeks to understand the complexity of language formations, traffic between languages, hierarchies of language systems implicated in State support and pedagogy, and other factors that inflected the world of publication in colonial Punjab.

Keywords: Book history, print cultures, colonial Punjab, language formation, Punjab print history

Introduction

Book History Studies and Print Culture Studies, relatively new fields of historical enquiry, face conceptual challenges, especially in India, where multiple cultural and language traditions intersect and challenge textual and linguistic fixities. Both disciplines work in conjunction with each other and argue that the assumed ‘fixity’ of the printed book and print as a self-evident technological invention are questionable. It has also been argued that thinking about Book History in India is, in some senses, “anachronistic” (67) ^[1]. This is because book history plotted in neat terms of the nation, or region, or language is inadequate in the Indian cultural conditions. India was historically criss-crossed by many traditions of textual, scriptural, and oral communication, and linguistic regions in the colonial period were different from the current national and State boundaries, thus making the conceptualization difficult.

As a field of investigation, Book History looks at the whole range of communicative, material, commercial, and transactional aspects of the book. Rather than treat the book as a fixed and authoritative entity, it investigates the claim of authority of a book, “its truth claims of being not corrupted, practices of distribution, claims of unauthorised translations” ^[2]. Similarly, critical interventions in Print Culture Studies, such as McElligott and Patten’s *The Perils of Print Culture* (2014) ^[3], have examined the perils of the nationalization of print historiography and debated the viability of transnationalism as a driving force and an avenue for future research in Print Culture Studies.

The *Book History Reader* edited by Finkelstein and McCleery charts the theory and practice of Book History through Darnton’s “communication circuit”, McKenzie’s “sociology of texts”, Chartier’s “order of books”, Bourdieu’s “literary field” and Jerome McGann’s “socialization of texts” ^[4]. In their introduction, they trace the trajectory of Book History Studies from the early bibliographic studies to the more sociological turn, with Robert Darnton suggesting the “location of cultural and social investigations of texts within an overarching cycle of print production, dissemination and reception”. As a practitioner of Book History has remarked, there is no handbook on its practice, one perhaps entitled “How Book Historians Think” but two basic assumptions about its methodology maybe helpful: one, “the inherent instability of texts, books and readings”, and second, is its “recognition of human agency, including the agency of powerful institutions, in the processes of composition, reception, production and dissemination” (30-31) ^[5].

It is within these debates outlined above that this essay seeks to study print cultures, history of book publication, and language formations in colonial Punjab. Historical studies of late-19th and early-20th centuries in Punjab have focused on the formation of communal public

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and print spheres and the rigidification of religious identities that culminated in Partition in 1947. Rather than assume the formation of fixed and homogenized religious and linguistic identities, this essay seeks to understand the complexity of language formations, traffic between languages, and hierarchies of language systems implicated in State support and pedagogy that inflected the print and publication processes in vernacular languages in colonial Punjab.

Materials and Method

The essay investigates the questions outlined above through qualitative analysis of records and archival material generated by the colonial machinery – Annual Reports on Publications Issued and Registered in the Provinces of British India, Quarterly Catalogues of Books Registered in Punjab under Act XXV of 1867 and Act X of 1890, Reports on Vernacular Native Newspapers compiled by the Thagi and Dacait Department of the Government of India, Notes on Native Presses, Punjab Administration Reports, Reports on Punjab Jails, communications of the Home department regarding Punjab print, and other such archival material.

History of Punjab Print

The history of Punjab print can be traced through important developments in its timeline, the legal and surveillance framework that it was controlled by, and the negotiation of these by local actors. Print came to Punjab in the 1830s even before its annexation to the British Empire. The Ludhiana Mission Press, the first press in Punjab, was established in 1835 by American Presbyterians who saw the absence of Christian missionaries as a fertile ground for their own missionary activity. The two missionaries from the Calcutta Mission Press, John Newton and James Wilson brought in Indian compositors from Calcutta since they had no knowledge of the print process themselves (161) ^[6], thus beginning the relationship between Punjab print and the province of Bengal. Beginning with two fonts, Roman and Indo-Persian, they realized soon after that they would require a variety of fonts to accommodate the languages spoken in Punjab – Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Kashmiri, Persian, Sindhi, Pashto, Bilochi among others. Reports on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India by the Department of Public Instruction from 1867 onwards indicate this complex of multilinguality, with books and periodicals being published in at least fifteen different languages. The facility of readers with multiplicity of languages and scripts is also indicated by the publication of bilingual, trilingual and polyglot books.

An important landmark in the history of print in Punjab was Charles Wood's Education Despatch of 1854 that recommended vernacularization of education and introduced far-reaching changes in the spheres of print and education. Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control, in his despatch through Court of Directors recognized religion-neutral public instruction as a State obligation and recommended the establishment of a Department of Public Instruction in every Province. The State attempted to improve taste in literature by encouraging classical languages, Persian and Sanskrit and producing cheap books in the vernacular to promote education. Production of books and reading material was thus institutionalized through Departments of Public Instruction and Text Book Committees. Vernacular printing seems to have attracted private initiatives in urban centers and the 1860s and 70s

saw a rapid increase in the publication of newspapers, books, pamphlets and tracts.

As the print became a viable commercial venture, literary activity went beyond the utilitarian programme of the State to explore genres of reform and entertainment as well. Reports on Publications from 1867 indicate that the market was inundated with cheap forms of publication such as pamphlets and tracts that ran into thousands of print runs and had an extensive reach. Newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, tracts and qissas account for the publishing boom in the 1860s and 1870s. Reports on Publications for 1878, 1879 and 1880, for example, record the number of pamphlets published in Punjab as higher than books published. These huge numbers of pamphlets were of course fueled by the fact that they were used by the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh reform organizations to carry out bitter campaigns against each other. The vast number of tracts and pamphlets that have survived are important historical sources that provide a glimpse into social relationships and shifts in the understanding of religion, caste, class and gender in nineteenth century Punjab.

The Controversy between Languages

The designation of Urdu as the vernacular of the province had a major impact on print and identity politics around languages. One of the very visible effects, as one gleans through the Reports on Publications, was that Urdu became the primary language of print although it had "no significant spoken or literary history in the Punjab prior to the establishment of the colonial state" ^[7]. Punjab was the only province in British India, where the popular and colloquial language, Punjabi, spoken by people across class, caste, and gender divide was not the designated vernacular of the province.

In the Reports on Publications available since 1867, Urdu continued to dominate the number of publications each year till the 1930s, closely followed by Punjabi. Only in 1919 and 1920 did the number of Punjabi publications exceed Urdu (482 in Punjabi and 468 in Urdu out of a total of 1403 in 1919; 715 in Punjabi and 649 in Urdu out of a total of 1848 in 1920), inviting the following comment from the reporter, Bishan Das Puri: "Punjabi can again boast of the largest number of publications showing that the mother tongue of the people in this land is gradually gaining ground" (Report 1919). Similarly, he reports in 1920 that Punjabi, "the mother tongue seems to be developing steadily along with Urdu, 'the Court language'". Hindi, over this period, accounted for 0.05% - 0.2% of publications amidst efforts to claim it as the mother tongue of Hindus, as shown by the comment of the reporter in the Punjab Education Department, Khalifa Imad-ud-din:

Urdu continues to take lead and is followed by Punjabi, written in both the Persian and Gurmukhi characters...but Hindi and Sanskrit publications have a tendency to decline in Punjab, in spite of the efforts of the Arya Samaj and of the local branches of the Pratinidhi Sabha of Benaras. (Report 1911)

The contestation between languages in the identity politics of the time is evident in the list of memorials received by the Education Commission (1882) also known as the Hunter Commission, from residents, Bhasha Sabhas (language associations), Anjumans and Singh Sabhas in favour of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. The Commission recognized that the language adopted in the courts of law and as medium of

instruction in schools was not the principal vernacular of the people. According to the Commission, the reason for the unpopularity of Punjab Schools was the inclusion of Persian as part of primary school course and the preference given to Urdu instead of Hindi and Punjabi vernaculars.

After the designation of Urdu as the vernacular in 1854, it received State patronage through translation bureaus, education departments, missionary and government presses and became the dominant language of publication. In contrast, as Mir notes, Punjabi print did not get any State patronage and was market-reliant. The flourishing of Punjabi print despite lack of State patronage is evidence of its popular, market demand.

Censorship and Surveillance

The vital and flourishing print public spheres in colonial India were nevertheless structured by relations of power, surveillance and control, quite unlike Habermas's celebration of the political agency of the public sphere and freedom from State intervention. A whole range of statistical surveys, reports on vernacular press and censorship laws were brought into operation and committees constituted to define the protocols of public space.

"The Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867", known as the Press Control Act or Act XXV was enacted for the regulation of printing presses and newspapers, for the preservation of copies of books printed in British India, and for the registration of such books. The keeper of a printing press had to make a declaration of all published material to the Magistrate and three copies of books had to be deposited gratis by the printer to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of the District to be dispatched to the Government of India (Home Public (A), No. 148-53, August 1867). Catalogues of Books printed in British India in all languages were published in each quarter to keep an eye on the native press. Reports on Publications discussed in detail issues that the vernacular press was engaged in, who was against Government policy, whose language was temperate, which paper was to be held to account and made to apologize. All these reports, which are now housed in various libraries in India and England, give us a detailed idea of the print world in the provinces of British India. Apart from these Reports, other important resources that have survived are the books, newspapers, pamphlets and tracts themselves that were preserved and sent to London as part of the requirement of Act XXV.

Clearly, the whole host of legal provisions and proscriptions were not entirely successful – it was frequently reported that proscribed copies that were owned by private individuals were passed from hand to hand for private reading ^[8]. Pamphlets and leaflets were distributed during melas and gatherings, libraries, and meeting rooms were used to disseminate literature. Despite low rates of literacy, the possession of a book or newspaper was an important cultural marker of modernity.

Language Politics and Women

Readership patterns and vernacular publishing in Punjab were complicated by the competitive politics between languages and the designation of Urdu as the official vernacular and the identification of Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu as languages of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims respectively by reform organizations. The reform organizations tried to fix the one-language, one-community formula, especially in so

far as prescribed languages for women were concerned. Periodicals for women such as Panchal Pandita, Bharat Bhagini, and Jyoti in Hindi, and Punjabi Bhain, Istri Samachar, Istri Sudhar Patra, Bhujangan Patra, etc. in Punjabi attempted to create communities of women homogenized through language and religion. This commitment to language was reaffirmed in many periodicals by women as well, as they were encouraged to produce literary work in the language of the community.

Yet, these deliberate attempts were undermined by the multiplicity of languages and registers, especially among women. For instance, Rameshwari Nehru, editor of women's periodical *Stri Darpan* (1909-28, Allahabad), encouraged Hindu women from Punjab to read her Hindi periodical because they lacked their own language. She welcomed women from Punjab to write in Hindi though their language use was 'compromised' and even announced publication of a series of poems in Punjabi to encourage the readership of her periodical in Punjab ^[9]. This clearly indicates that despite institutional efforts, Hindi did not find much readership amongst women in Punjab even till the late 1920s. Sivaramakrishnan indicates that in Punjab, "print-based popular deployment was not always an accurate indicator of the ideological commitment and support that existed for the vernacular in question" ^[10]. In other words, while Urdu was the officially designated vernacular for Punjab and dominated the print sphere, it was not spoken and understood widely.

Interestingly, the earliest Reports on Publications from 1867 used genre rather than languages as a mode of classification of the material published. As the Reports begin to use language as a classificatory mode, the 'confusion' between languages and scripts becomes imminent. When we use terms such as the 'Punjabi print sphere', for example, to refer to a language, we assume a stable, isolated entity of Punjabi language, which is far from truth. Such classifications are not immanent and elide over the cultural processes that produced such distinctions in the first place. The instability of the language-script association is evident in the Report of 1882 as it struggles to list the various characters employed for vernacular languages – Urdu in Gurmukhi, Persian, Nagri and Roman character, Punjabi in Gurmukhi, Persian or Arabic, and Nagari character and Hindi in Gurmukhi, Persian and Nagari characters.

For the same reason, compiling an "Index of Titles in Oriental Languages" presented itself as a problem at the India Office Library in London, where Punjabi, written in "two different Oriental scripts are concurrently used for the same language" ^[11]. On the one hand, then, the classification of print languages in records sought to create definitive linguistic understandings and associations with religion and script, on the other hand, the translation activity and bilingual, trilingual, and polyglot publishing registered in these records suggests an inter-textuality that contradicts the linkage of language with religion and script.

Commenting on the distinctive features of North-Indian print cultures, Orsini describes them as "hypertextual" (texts referred to other texts) and "multilingual" (books written in more than one language and also texts in same language printed in more than one script) ^[12]. The *Reports* and "Catalogues of Books" published in Punjab give an account of a rich traffic between languages and bilingual and multilingual publishing, in both their meanings mentioned above. These multilingual books include Urdu-Punjabi,

Hindi-Punjabi, Arabic-Punjabi, Pashto-English, Sanskrit-Urdu, Punjabi-English, English-Urdu-Punjabi, to the more unlikely Arabic-Persian-Sindhi, Arabic-Urdu-Punjabi-Persian, Sanskrit-Hindi-Bengali-Marhati and Arabic-Urdu-Persian-Hindi-English. Such variety points to multiple linguistic habits of people who had a whole language repertoire rather than a uniform language.

Dictionaries and language books such as Panj Zaban-i-Salih (1909), a manual of translation for learning Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and English, and Diwan Kahan Chand's *Lughat-i-Kahan Chandī Darsi* (1920), a dictionary of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Hindi and Sanskrit, including English words naturalized in the vernaculars, perhaps the first book of its kind, reflect the need for transaction between languages. Some 'translations' were only change of script, assuming that the language register would appeal to audiences competent in different scripts. Sandra Freitag has drawn attention to the printed versions of the very popular play *Indra Sabha* in Urdu, Devanagari, Gujarati and Gurmukhi, which were all transcriptions of the hybrid Urdu original rather than translations (98) ^[13].

The need for intertextuality between languages comes through various other publications as one gleans through Reports on Publications and "Catalogues of Books Registered". These catalogues abound in exchange between languages and scripts, providing a rich array of combinations – Sindhi in Gurmukhi and Persian script, Punjabi in Arabic character, Urdu in Gurmukhi and Hindi character and Hindi in Gurmukhi character.

Sometimes, manuscripts could be claimed by different languages, for example, the Nagari Pracharini Sabha's appropriation of Chand (1126-1192, born in Lahore) by interpolating and editing his *Prithi Raj Raisa* manuscript ^[14]. Talking about Sanskrit and Hindi publications of the Naval Kishore Press in Lucknow, Stark points out that in some of these publications Hindi was for the first time denoted as "arya bhasha", echoing the new cultural consciousness propagated by the Arya Samaj and Hindu revivalism ^[15].

Results and Discussion

While the colonial and reform discourses on languages and religion insisted on clear demarcations, languages were used by local actors for their own needs, and there are many examples of multiple and shifting religious and linguistic identities as well in Punjab in the late-19th and early-20th century. The Reports on Publications are witness to the confusions and crossing-over between languages on the one hand and the gradual standardization of modern languages on the other. The above discussion proves that the formulae and prescriptions of the reformers regarding language use were complicated by records of translated works, multilingual printing and the need to reach intended audiences. For a society and region that have been largely studied through religious conflict, the above account turns attention to language formations, literary and publishing activity, and realms of experience that were not necessarily communal and thus offer a "corrective to history" ^[16].

Conclusion

Print cultures and book history of late-19th and early-20th centuries in Punjab offer a site of social and cultural relations and a history of Punjab print beyond religious antagonisms and language divide. The above analysis suggests that despite State surveillance and language

prescriptions by reformers, perhaps the locus of agency of the colonial subjects can be traced in the patterns of language use that defy the official designation of a language as the official vernacular. Records of translation activities and publication of multilingual books point to reading habits beyond directives from the State and the reformers, and thus complicate the cultural history of Punjab.

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