



Turning the Page: New Directions in South Asian Book History

University of Chicago Center, New Delhi

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This two-day workshop was organized by the University of Chicago in collaboration with Jadavpur University, Kolkata and held in New Delhi from 9 to 10 March 2017 at the University of Chicago's Delhi Center. The papers were mostly delivered by young doctoral or post-doctoral researchers from India and Nepal, together with some from more established scholars in India and the United States – a mutually beneficial exchange between two generations. Together the papers comprised an informal case-study of South Asia with researchers still sifting for the most appropriate methodologies to pursue towards a fuller understanding of the region in book history terms. There was mention, for instance, of Daniel Moretti's 'distant reading' approach, but no example of its application to any corpus of South Asian literature has yet emerged.

The impetus for a global approach to book history as the final phase in the discipline's development, superseding the phase of national book histories which have dominated the approach in Europe and North America in recent decades, has been gaining ground for two reasons. First, there is the no small matter of a large proportion of the globe with long-established textual traditions being largely ignored, *except in so far as* they have 'impinged' upon European and North American publishing history primarily as lucrative export markets – essentially viewing these areas therefore solely through 'neo-colonial' eyes. More importantly, the emerging study of the book in non-Western societies has already raised serious doubts whether the Elizabeth Eisenstein orthodoxy of print as a revolutionary agent of change is globally applicable. That view has been challenged for instance by, among others, Robert Fraser in his *Book history through postcolonial eyes* (London: Routledge, 2008) which contrasted developments in South Asia and Africa. Taking such a comparative regional approach to book history may be a difficult challenge but it has definite appeal as a productive way forward. What might we learn, for instance, by contrasting South Asia with Latin America? Both had extensive pre-print cultures, and both went through a long period of colonial rule. As Robert Darnton put it in his preface to the papers of the 2004 London symposium (Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash & Ian Willison ed., *Literary cultures and the material book* (London, 2007)), by comparing the history of text in non-Western cultures: "Shading shifts, new nuances appear, and the general configuration looks less familiar. In place of the

printing revolution, we see continuity, especially in manuscript production and in oral modes of transmission. Cultural factors displace technology as determinants.” The study of textual transmission in non-Western societies thus also confirms undeniably the central place of book history in cultural history.

The growth in recent decades of post-colonial studies and the reappraisal of empire, epitomized by the new five-volume *Oxford history of the British Empire* (Oxford: OUP, 1998-99), have been very influential. This has seen literary as well as non-literary texts increasingly used by historians of non-Western societies as ‘historical witnesses’, and the same texts critically re-examined by literary historians in their various historical dimensions (political, economic, religious, social and cultural). As stated in the prospectus for *The Cambridge history of postcolonial literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011-12), the “first major collaborative overview of the field”: “Postcolonial studies is attentive to cultural differences, marginalization and exclusion. Such studies pay equal attention to the lives and conditions of various racial minorities in the West, as well as to regional, indigenous forms of representation around the world as being distinct from a dominant Western tradition. With the consolidation of the field in the past forty years, the need to establish the terms by which we might understand the sources of postcolonial literary history is more urgent now than ever before.” But, while *post-colonial* studies have been growing rapidly, *pre-colonial* South Asia has yet to receive its fair share of academic attention. As Sheldon Pollock wrote in the introduction to *Forms of knowledge in early modern Asia: explorations in the intellectual history of India and Tibet, 1500-1800* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): “As many of its practitioners would be ready to admit, colonial studies has long been skating on the thinnest ice, given how far it presupposes knowledge of the precolonial realities that colonialism encountered and how little such knowledge we actually possess We cannot know how colonialism changed South Asia if we do not know what was there to be changed.” As Pollock further observed, the source material – in the shape of South Asia’s manuscript heritage – is there in superabundance: “South Asia boasts a literary record far denser, in terms of sheer number of texts and centuries of unbroken multilingual literacy, than all of Greek, Latin, and medieval European culture combined.”

Perhaps surprisingly absent from the Delhi workshop was the Benedict Anderson concept of ‘imagined communities’ originating from a study of Indonesia (in *Imagined communities*:

reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism (London: Verso, 1991)) as the basis of non-Western nationalism in which print capitalism played a crucial role (revised edition), once very influential but more recently attracting doubts as to its universal applicability. As Ashokan Nambiar (University of Delhi)'s paper on 'Historicising Newness: the Culture of Versification and the Coming of Print in 19th-century Kerala' demonstrated, the usual crude literary binary of 'modernity' (equals prose) versus 'tradition' (equals verse) does not apply in South Asia – a hybrid form of intertwined verse and prose very much continued in print. Verse was included not only for didactic purposes but also for performative reasons as it 'packed more of a cultural punch' in South Asia. The Bengali historian Partha Chatterjee in *The nation and its fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) has proposed a different approach for understanding the emergence of nationalism in non-Western societies that has gained acceptance. In Chatterjee's view, nationalists first inhabited an inner ('spiritual') domain before proceeding to the outer ('material') struggle against colonialism – with obvious implications for book history.

It was clear from the workshop that Sheldon Pollock's exploration of the relationship between language and power resulting in the idea of dominant cosmopolitan languages eventually giving way to vernacularization is also gaining in acceptance ('Literary culture and manuscript culture in precolonial India' in *Literary cultures and the material book*). Originating with the example of Sanskrit as a cosmopolitan language in South, Central and Southeast Asia (the oriental equivalent of Latin in Europe), the idea is being extended to Persian and English in South Asia, and may conceivably be taken up in future to examine the roles of Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America, and French in Africa, the Middle East, etc. Pollock's more recent revisiting of the essential purpose of philology as "how to make sense of texts" in *World philology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015) with its examination of traditions not only in Europe but also in Asia and the Middle East is a timely reminder of another global dimension vital to book history.

Alongside *philology*, the New Delhi workshop showed that we can now add *bibliology* in its non-Biblical sense of the study of books as physical objects (a term recently resurrected by Ian R. Willison in his forthcoming essay, 'The history of the book as a field of study within the humanities: a summary and envoi'). In the case of South Asia, it is increasingly becoming recognized that book history allows a different narrative to emerge from that which a strictly linguistic or literary historical approach would produce. For instance, Tyler Williams

(University of Chicago)'s paper on the emergence of Hindi as a textual medium demonstrated the changes that occurred when vernacular languages replaced the Sanskrit and Persian cosmopolises as vehicles of intellectual discourse in South Asia. There was not a wholesale imitation of cosmopolitan writing cultures. Rather an examination of formats, patterns of page-sizes, impagination, etc. in early regional-language manuscripts is making visible a process of adaptation and experimentation leading to a gradual process of standardization. For instance, it is bringing to light the relationship between different kinds of manuscript formats and specific kinds of circulation – from notebooks (*gutka, bayaz*) copied for individual use, through collections of loose folios (*pothi, pustak*) for circulation only among members of a particular monastic community (*sampraday*), to bound 'holy books' (*granth, kitab*) taken around among lay devotees.

In the South Asian context it was surprising that the significant role of Christian missionaries in taking print out of the metropolitan centres and into the hinterland (*mofussil*) had hitherto been neglected. Borrowing the concept of the reciprocity of gifts from cultural anthropology, Ulrike Stark (University of Chicago) considered the fate of the millions of tracts distributed in India during the nineteenth century, their distributors (colporteurs and catechists), and the sensitivity of recipients to the 'poison' in the gift. Starting from John Loudon's famous description of the churchyard as "the country labourer's only library", a paper by Sujaan Mukherjee (Jadavpur University) even looked at the complex relationships between the corpus of texts 'published' on stone in Bengal cemeteries and their documentary sources, forming an "affective geography of death".

Deborah Schlein (Princeton University) examined the many manuscripts of a popular Yunani medical text in Arabic, *The book of causes and symptoms*, by the thirteenth-century al-Samarqandi. Deconstructing paratextual information (marginalia, ownership stamps and seals, etc.) in manuscripts can yield valuable insights into the reception, consumption and discussion of texts, helping us to understand their outreach and impact – the historical context(s) in which they were used; the reader or owner's education, knowledge and awareness of other scholarship in a particular field or fields. Large margins left by scribes when copying an original text indicate that the manuscript itself was intended as a 'place of discourse', of intellectual exchange. This case-study of al-Samarqandi manuscripts also demonstrated that South Asia in the nineteenth century was still a very active part of the Islamic intellectual sphere. As in Europe, in non-Western societies print did not immediately

or universally replace manuscript culture. Their parallel existence and interplay make it imperative that researchers in pre-print or non-print cultures come together with researchers in print and that they regularly interact (an important lesson taken away from the Delhi workshop). Charu Singh (Shiv Nadar University)'s paper traced the importance of institutions such as the Vernacular Scientific Society (Vijnan Parishad) in the publishing of popular scientific literature in Hindi in early twentieth-century North India.

Other problems facing a detailed reconstruction of South Asian book history also emerged during the workshop. Ranking alongside the dearth of publishers' archives extant for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the scarcity of surviving runs of newspapers and journals, especially in the regional languages. The colonial legal deposit privilege enjoyed by both the India Office Library and the British Museum Library in London failed miserably in the case of serial publications. This is a major lacuna, given the importance of periodicals for gauging the state of public discourse in both the colonial period and later. For instance, J. Balasubramaniam (Madurai Kamaraj University)'s paper on Tamil journals published by and for *dalits* (untouchables) in colonial Madras from 1869 to 1943 revealed that out of forty-two titles copies of only five have so far been traced. Similarly, a new survey of early Bengali periodicals published between 1818 and 1867 by Purbasha Auddy (Jadavpur University) had so far located just sixty out of 230 titles. These lamentable survival rates point up the importance of small society libraries and private collections in preserving South Asia's printed heritage. The enormous difference a single energetic collector can make is the Madan Puraskar Library at Lalitpur in Nepal founded by Kamal Mani Dixit which, with 38,000 volumes, has a larger collection of early Nepali books, journals and newspapers than any institutional library or archive. Deepak Aryal's study of early twentieth-century Nepali primers (*varnamalas*) in the Madan Puraskar Library revealed how symbolic representations of different cultural and religious groups were gradually erased from these school-books as the movement to construct one national identity progressed. Aryal also reiterated the irrelevance of modern geopolitical boundaries for South Asian book history. Half of the 2,000 Nepali books published up to 1900 were printed not in Nepal itself but in India, principally at Varanasi and Calcutta.

In the case of South Asian newspapers and journals it was important not to be misled by often very small circulation figures. The number of copies subscribed for did not equate to the overall number of readers for any particular title and therefore did not give a true

indication of its relative importance. For instance, the Serampore missionaries' Bengali newspaper, *Digdarshan*, was distributed gratis to schools, and the survey of Bengali periodicals was revealing an early 'pre-trade', 'free-give-away' phase for many other titles. Funding for early titles ranged from the patronage of Indian rulers or landowners (*zamindars*) to the profits of venture capitalists' shipping opium to China!

Given the non-availability of publishers' archives in regions such as South Asia, more input was urgently needed from non-academics – from practitioners such as journalists, editors, publishers, printers, book-designers, literary agents, etc. – if we are going to be able to reconstruct in any degree of detail the evolution of publishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Might a 'life-histories' interview project for the South Asian book trade usefully be launched? In the case of South Asia, another feature of book history at present is that it is overwhelmingly based on research published in English and other European languages. The wealth of research published in other languages (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Japanese, Urdu, etc.) remains 'outside the pale', confined to specialized circles. This increasing body of good-quality work is being ignored by the mainstream. The solution has to be translation into English, which makes SHARP's recent initiative in this respect very welcome. But this will be a slow process of raising awareness and 'absorption' into the mainstream.

Book history is now taught at three higher-education institutions in India: Jadavpur University, the University of Pune, and the Madras Institute of Development Studies. But there continues to be a difficulty in accommodating book history within a traditional university departmental structure because of its essential inter-disciplinarity. Its impact and innovation would be lessened were it to become a 'closed' discipline strapped within the curriculum 'strait-jacket' of a traditional History or English department, for instance. This remains a great barrier to the expansion of teaching book history in the global academy.

This feeling of marginalization within the discipline of book history is not only coming from South Asia. It is also being articulated for Africa, for example in Caroline Davis's and David Johnson's introduction to *The book in Africa: critical debates* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) with its case-studies from Morocco to South Africa, Ethiopia to Cameroon. Equally welcome is the recent series of readers under the umbrella title *The History of the Book in the East* with volumes on [East Asia](#), [South Asia](#) and the [Middle East](#) (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). In his series preface the historian of the Japanese book Peter Kornicki makes



the point admirably succinctly: “The importance of these three regions of the world lies not only in the sheer antiquity of printing in East Asia, where both movable type and wood blocks were used centuries before Gutenberg’s invention changed the face of book production in Europe, but also in the manuscript traditions and very different responses to printing technology in the Middle East and South Asia. This series forms an important counterbalance to the Eurocentrism of the history of the book as practiced in the West.” As the number of such published overviews increases, the feeling of marginalization must surely begin to wane. Inexorably – and not before time – we are witnessing the emergence of global book history. The process that we might dub, at least in part, “The Empire Strikes Back” is underway. As again Robert Darnton in his preface to the 2004 symposium papers provocatively suggested: “Perhaps pre-Gutenberg Europe resembled pre-colonial India more than could be imagined from the standard wisdom among book historians”. Now wouldn’t that be a tremendous turn-up for the book?

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