

**Review Article**

**The Symbiotic World of Hindi-Urdu Print**

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**Ulrike Stark – *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Work in Colonial India***

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The digitisation of the archives of old printed books is an exciting development in the field of digital humanities. Not only does digitisation preserve archival prints, it also facilitates sharing them with a wider audience. However, even as digitisation enables direct access to an unprecedented number of primary and secondary materials, there is danger of losing important contexts attached to the digitised artefacts. As scholars of print history have noted, the physical and historical context of the prints, such as the original framing, mounting or exhibition history are equally, if not more, important for understanding the specific historical moment or cultural context in which the print was produced. When viewed in isolation, digital images may not convey the full meaning or historical significance of the prints, which can make it difficult for researchers to interpret and analyse them. A revisit to one of the path-breaking scholarly works on print history foregrounds the manner in which a historian of print can capture the historical moment and cultural background of an age now lost in the crevice of time.

Print culture in the early modern world has been identified as a communications revolution, with print and printed books at the centre of an intellectual ferment, leading to significant social cultural and political transformations. In Europe, the increased standardisation and dissemination of texts in the 15th and 16th centuries and the concomitant growth of the public sphere led to modern print capitalism, which, as has been argued by Benedict Anderson, in effect formed the cradle for modern nationalisms to emerge in the 18th century (Anderson 1991). While an earlier generation of scholars led

by Elizabeth Eisenstein noted the preservative powers of print and the intrinsic fixity of text, subsequent scholarship, most notably that of Adrian Johns, has noted the idea of fluidity and uncertainty of early print world, with its fascinating and intertwining cultures of print and piracy, and the interactions between the larger world of the print with that of the locality (Eisenstein 1980; Johns 2009). This story of Europe's tryst with print has been recounted by an interdisciplinary field that looks at social history, book history, reading practices, print capitalism, religious reform, the emergence of a vibrant public sphere, and the growth of modern nationalism.

The coming of the book is a relatively new field in India, roughly gaining traction in the past two decades. Histories of print in India traditionally dealt with the efforts of missionaries and reformers along with government educational initiatives. The expansion of a literate public was usually seen as a slow and sluggish process; especially in north India, the public sphere was marked more by its absence outside the colonial and capital towns. Nudged into being by the efforts of company officials such as John Gilchrist and expanded by reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the story in the latter half of the 19th century invariably turns to the rivalry between Hindi and Urdu, with its national and communal ramifications. Over the past 25 years, this story has been complicated by works of scholars — such as Francesca Orsini, Stuart Blackburn, Priya Joshi, Abhijit Gupta, Anindita Ghosh, Kathryn Hansen, Veena Naregal, Meghan Eaton, and Jennifer Dubrow to name just a few — who have looked at the creation of a public sphere, reading practices and the interface between various forms of emergent media in late 19th century to uncover a social history of the north Indian public sphere (Orsini 2016) *An Empire of Books* authored by Ulrike Stark, is an important intervention within this tradition. Moreover, while attuned to the cultural histories of books and texts printed in the late 19th century, the book shifts attention to the processes and institutions of their publication and circulation. Stark bolsters the idea that the production of knowledge was a dialogic process, informed by both cooperation and contestation and developed through spaces of interaction within the frameworks of colonial modernity. This was evident in the ways in which Indians such as Munshi Nawal Kishore participated in these spaces.

Ulrike Stark's *An Empire of Books* focuses on the 'commercialization' of print in the second half of the 19th century in order to narrate the changes in the field of cultural production,

literary practice and reading habits in northern India. She tells this story by using the figure of Naval Kishore and the press he established as the axis and ‘a principal agent’ in bringing the printed book within the reach of the broadest possible audience. *An Empire of Books* attempts to restore agency to the Indian commercial publishers in shaping the literary culture and dissemination of knowledge in the colonial setting. Historically very dense, the book interweaves the worlds of material and intellectual production and aims to ‘investigate the impact of the commercial book trade on the diffusion of knowledge, and on the processes of intellectual formation, modernization, and cultural renaissance in North India’.

The book can broadly be divided along the twin axes of material production and intellectual outcomes. The Introduction underpins the theoretical grounding of the work within the European historiography of print and popular culture and goes on to locate Indian proximates or divergences with the European experience keeping in view the colonial ideological domination on one hand, and the indigenous concerns relating to the profusion of printed works on the other. Chapter I, titled ‘The Coming of the Book in Hindi and Urdu’ contextualises the historical growth of print technologies in Hindi and Urdu languages and their relationship to literacy, readership and consumption in late 19th century northern India. It posits a two-way process through which print culture, especially in the urban centres of north India, shaped public sphere as it was being shaped by it. New ways of ‘acquiring, managing and diffusing knowledge’ were opened, which paved the way for the emergence of modern political, social and cultural discourse.

In the next two chapters Stark charts the private life of Munshi Naval Kishore and the public life of the Naval Kishore Press. Chapter two, aptly titled ‘A Life in Print’, is a biographical account of the printer publisher life, weaving in the commercial and political dynamics of late 19th century north India. Through the person of Naval Kishore, Stark is able to showcase the composite cultural milieu of Hindu–Muslim elites of 19th-century urban northern India. The city of Lucknow especially engendered a cultural and intellectual climate that cut across divisions of caste and community. Naval Kishore lived in a world where his Dhusar Bania caste was successfully Sanskritised into the Bhargava Brahmin

one; where he was educated by pundits at home, maulvis at the local *maktab* and professors of the Agra College in his youth; where he had a Hindu wife and a Muslim begum; a world captured by Khawaja Ahmad Abbas, when he identified Naval Kishore as a ‘Muslim pundit and Hindu maulvi’. The chapter also notes Naval Kishore’s controversial anti-Congress stance in the 1890s, which would cast its shadow over a lifetime’s achievement in furthering the literary cultural renaissance in Hindi and Urdu. Indeed, as Stark put it, his life embodied the synthesis of Indo-Muslim and Hindu learned traditions in an exemplary fashion: his was ‘the story of an Indian Hindu who participated in the revival of Hindu traditions while acting as one of the foremost promoters of Islamic learning and preservers of Arabic and Indo Persian literary heritage in the subcontinent’.

Naval Kishore was a cultural intermediary in more ways than one, and this becomes evident from his professional profile. He served as a crucial and formal collaborator in the establishment of the British authority after the Revolt of 1857, through his printing press. The third chapter, ‘An Indian Success Story’ details the trajectory of the Naval Kishore Press (NKP). Naval Kishore found a patron in Capt. Abbot, the Commissioner of Lucknow Division from 1858–63 and was favoured with lucrative government contracts for textbook printing, official conversion tables of weights and measures and, most importantly, the contract to print the Urdu translation of the Indian Penal Code in 1861. With this beginning there was no looking back; by the end of the century, the NKP was the single largest employer in North Western Provinces, employing around 900 employees, owning 350 hand-presses and a considerable number of modern steam presses. In its publishing life spanning almost a hundred years, NKP published an estimated 12,000 titles, 5,000 of which were printed during its founder’s lifetime. Naval Kishore also invested in landed property and set up ancillary businesses such as paper mills. By the time of his death in 1895, his fortune was estimated at 20 lakhs, all of it built from scratch.

Profits made from government contracts were utilised for Naval Kishore’s engagements with the advancement of academic, literary, scientific, and popular knowledge in Indian languages. Naval Kishore followed a policy of offering the literary canon of classic authors in inexpensive and linguistically accessible formats, and in this manner reconciled the traditional concept of cultivation of the mind with the capitalist principle of profit-making. Further, Stark contends that

the commercial publishing house itself cut across the distinction between high culture and popular tastes. Along with a wide variety of Hindi and Urdu literary and religious classics NKP also undertook mass production of various kinds of cheap chapbook literature, religious and mythological tracts, medical and astrological manuals, songbooks, legal forms, and almanacks. In trying to bring the printed book within the reach of the broadest possible audience, Indian commercial publishers such as the NKP catered to both the upper and the lower end of the market. Thus, much like its owner, the press was able to successfully straddle the disparate worlds of literature and commerce.

Stark's attention to the 'material, organizational and structural aspects of contemporary literary production' is noteworthy. There are detailed sections devoted to the process of book production, not just to the products of the publishing house. Chapter Four deals with the important factor of British patronage, the opportunities it presented and the restrictions this benefaction demanded between 1858 and 1900. Chapter V brings to life the hybrid world of the publishing house, where calligraphers, scholars and translators converged to create an intellectual space within a commercial enterprise. Particularly fascinating is the recounting of the technology transfer during the 19th century and the relationship forged between the older cultures of manuscript production and the world of calligraphy with that of lithography and typography. Stark recounts how modern lithography and the organisational structure of the Mughal *karkhana* came together in early commercial publishing with erstwhile calligraphers utilising the litho press to fashion books and illustrations within a popular and familiar idiom. Technological innovations such as the steam and iron presses and the concomitant growth of the Indian paper industry with the resultant decrease in cost of production, made low-priced books a cornerstone of indigenous publishing and made for the success of the NKP. This material hybridity was complemented by the translations department of the press where bilingual Persian scholars and Hindu pundits converged to create an outstanding catalogue of translations from Persian and Sanskrit classics. The bilingual editions — where text in classical languages was accompanied by modern language translations and commentaries — illustrate the bridging of the linguistic and ideological divides.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the intellectual products, namely, the *Awadh Akhbar*, the most lucrative of Naval Kishore's journalistic ventures, and the successful Hindi publication division of the press. Initiated as a weekly, the *Awadh Akhbar* was the first Urdu newspaper to become a daily in northern India and it remained in circulation for almost a century (1859–1950). This has a lot to do with the professional management of the paper, and it is instructive that *Awadh Akhbar* followed the modern technique of being financed through advertisements and government patronage. Moreover, it served as an advertising medium for the other products of the press: Mirza Ghalib's Persian *Kulliyat*, for example, was announced prominently on the front page of the newspaper dated 1st January 1862. While the paper utilised the modern innovation of the telegraph for access to speedy news, it retained the format of the Persian *Akhbaraat* with a Persianised vocabulary and contents resembling that of a literary magazine. Through the authorial and editorial efforts of eminent intellectuals and literary figures – such as Pandit Ratan Lala Sarshar and Abdul Halim Sharar who served as editors of *Awadh Akhbar* – the paper became a platform for the emergence of new narrative genres and prose forms in Urdu.

Concomitantly, the NKP was instrumental in the extension of the Hindi public sphere, as recounted in Chapter 7 on 'Hindi Publishing in a Stronghold of Urdu'. NKP's involvement in Hindi publishing started through school textbooks, was sustained through inexpensive editions of religious and literary classics and subsequently through popular genres such as drama and novel. In publishing anthologies, the press paved the way for the construction of a literary history and genealogy for Hindi. Inexpensive editions of indigenous medical and astrological manuals, prints of popular tales and songs were a staple of the press and went a long way towards the popularisation of Hindi in the late 19th century. It is instrumental to note that even when the worlds of Hindi and Urdu became politically competitive, the NKP refused to take sides. The press defined the dichotomisation of Hindi and Urdu through a multifaceted translation activity — from Sanskrit and Hindi into Urdu and vice versa; in this manner, it continued to propagate the values of a shared and composite culture.

What enriches the book is Stark's successful placing of Nawal Kishore as a public figure traversing the worlds of commerce, literature and municipal and national politics. This is no plain

technologically deterministic history of a publishing house but a very human story of the printer-publisher, and indeed of the public sphere of 19th century Hindi/ Urdu heartland that informs us about the hybrid world of oral and print, of calligraphy and lithography and typography, print runs and circulating hawkers, libraries and reading habits of women, the making of classical literary canons, and the emergence of new authorship and genres. It also deals with acquisition and power in the public sphere, and touches upon the networks of philanthropy and patronage in the colonial and the indigenous public sphere.

Munshi Naval Kishore was indeed ‘a print capitalist with a cultural vision and social mission’. He established an extraordinary institution — the press published almost 5,000 titles in various languages in less than four decades. The NKP was renowned for its services to modern Urdu literature and the preservation of Islamic and Indo–Persian literature on the subcontinent. It proved a pioneer in the production and diffusion of Hindi religious, scientific and literary works, and also paved the way for the standardisation of modern Hindi through an extraordinary output of translated texts. Through the story of this one publishing house, Ulrike Stark has been able to portray a world in which the delineations of Hindi–Urdu and Hindu–Muslim were much less pronounced and rigid.

The extensive appendices listing early printing presses in North Western Provinces, Indian-owned presses in Lucknow and Banaras and chronological lists of NKP publications in Hindi and Urdu and Sanskrit running into 78 pages will prove a valuable resource for further research. The book also contains 15 tables on popular publishing, price patterns, organisational structure of NKP, sales network, copyrights, textbook production in Awadh in 1870s, and language learning in schools in the 19th century. An equal number of illustrations, mostly of title pages of various literary and commercial products of the press enliven the text. *An Empire of Books* should be an essential reading for anybody interested in Indian book history in particular and a broad social and intellectual history of late 19th century urban northern India.

In an age where the fluidity of the liquid text is all-pervasive, the story of the NKP brings to the fore the challenges and the thrill of moving from one technology to another.

Born in the era of manuscript, the NKP successfully adapted it to the lithographic press, and then moved on the era of type. It fundamentally transformed the relationship of authors, publishers and readers, along with the whole process of knowledge production. It also dabbled in creating political opinion, if not very successfully. It is noteworthy that NKP's commercial enterprise was able to preserve in print much of the old world, even as the cadence of orality and the materiality of manuscript was being lost. Much the same processes can be witnessed in today's publishing environment. Just as manuscript production was replaced by print, the latter is being edged out by the digital. Just as our knowledge of our past was the result of the preservation of the oral into print, similarly our knowledge of the print world is going to be crucially dependent upon its being conserved through the digital. *An Empire of Books* ably tells the tale of the nineteenth century success-story, and also cautions against assumptions of eternal growth.

#### **Citations and references**

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