

Cultural Aspects of Printing Press in Bengal: A Case Study of Serampore Mission and Indigenous Responses

Amrita Mondal¹

Establishment of the printing press and printing of sacred scriptures was a part of missionary activities in India from the fifteenth-century onwards. This process started in Goa, at Malabar region and developed with the establishment of the printing press in Tranquebar by Tranquebar-Halle missionaries. Noticeably, in Europe the rise of Protestantism along with technological development had tied 'the vernacular firmly to the nation and thereby greatly enhanced its status in Europe' (Ghosh 2006: 5). The same happened to India with the establishment of printing press by Christian Missions and publication of the Bible along with different other books in vernacular languages, which not only helped them to preach Christianity but also helped in the development of vernacular typefaces.

With the establishment of the East India Company's printing presses, this legacy of development of printing press was carried on by British Colonial power along with Christian missionaries. After the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and capturing the ruling power of Bengal, the British East India Company engaged with the administrative works in Bengal. Meanwhile for the official publication they established a printing press at Fort William. Besides, they published many books other than official documents. However, the development of printing technology in Bengal as well as in India took place with the coming of William Carey and establishment of Serampore Mission (Kesavan *et.al* 1985: 189). The Serampore Mission printing press established in 1800 and affected the Bengal Society. This paper is going to trace out the establishment of printing press and its cultural and educational impact on Bengal society through the case study of Serampore Mission. The Serampore Mission, established in 1800 at Serampore in Hooghly district by the Serampore Trio, was the first Protestant Mission to come to Bengal. Soon after its foundation, the mission indulged in various philanthropic activities along with the establishment of the printing press. While doing so the mission differed both from the predecessors and successive missions. The points of departure were: mission's approaches while promoting western science education at school and college levels along with its initiative while promoting new technologies in different fields, like in agriculture, in health care and while establishing printing press. Besides, indigenous responses towards their activities were different from similar missionary instances.

Ghosh (2006: 2) in *Power in Print*, has tried to show how the colonial society, its language and literature were shaped by print culture and had ultimately empowered the indigenous society to present their perspective in front of a large section of readers. Besides, publication of a large number of printed materials helped in modification of language, further dividing indigenous society linguistically. Further Ghosh (2006: 2) argues that all these developments broke down 'the simplistic and seemingly self-evident binary cultural opposition between colonizer and colonized by reforming the narrative within a wider and complex set of conflict within colonized society itself'. The printing press had also generated two contradictory responses among the indigenous society of Bengal. Following these

¹ Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.