The Indian Novel: The Indigenization of the English Novel in India

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Over three centuries after the arrival of the first printing press on the Indian subcontinent, in 1865 Indian authors such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee began shaping the concept of the Indian novel. For these first three centuries the printing press and book culture had been under the control of European colonizers. In the late nineteenth century as the Indian nationalist movement began, the press and its products, for this paper specifically novels, gained new importance. In a tribute to Chatterjee, India’s first novelist, Aurobindo Ghosh wrote, “No nation can grow without finding a fit and satisfying medium of expression for the new self into which it is developing.” Ghosh’s comment, made in 1940 at the heart of India’s anti-colonial movement, gives Chatterjee credit for providing the Indian people a way of expressing their unique colonial identity.\(^1\) The history and nature of the novel in India lent itself to indigenization. In the second half of the nineteenth century, readership of the British novel exploded. However, the identity of the Indian people challenged British intentions for the novel. Through their choice of authors and books, purchased and borrowed, and the continuation of traditional public, oral reading practices, the British novel was indigenized. As Alexis Tadie argues, “The novel exists through effectuation— the confrontation between what is read, the literality of the text, and the process of appropriation of the text through reading.”\(^2\) While the British novel became very popular among Indian book buyers and library borrowers, its subjects and themes did not necessarily agree with Indian history and traditions. Indian authors began indigenizing this popular literary form through a series of experiments and debates about the form the Indian novel would take, and its similarities and differences from the British form. In a relatively short time period the Indian novel developed and became a founding component of what would become the Indian nationalist

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movement because it was a symbol of the possibility of the indigenization of the colonizers’ forms.

While academic work on the development of Indian libraries and Bengali printing was published by journals such as *The Library Quarterly* in the early 1960s, very little academic work has been done on the history of the book in India.³ It seems India is a prime example of Robert Darnton’s argument that, “The history of the book as a field of study has spread across many disciplines, from bibliography to comparative literature, history, graphic arts, and sociology; but it has not expanded far beyond the Western world.” He argues, and my research concurs, that academics have not been able to develop an overview of Indian book history because “we have not yet acquired basic information about book production.”⁴ This is because of the extensive period when book production and distribution were not regulated by any governing body in India. It is only since the end of the twentieth century and the development of the journal *Book History* in 1998 that scholars, most prominently Abhijit Gupta, Swapan Chakravorty, Rimi Chatterjee, Priya Joshi and Robert Darnton, have begun researching, writing, publishing and debating the history of the book in India.

According to Priya Joshi, if one reads popular and pervasive accounts of India and Indians in British novels, it would seem Indians never read at all. However, the accounts of Indians themselves and British officials paint a very different picture, recording a “virtually ceaseless circulation and consumption of print and textuality.”⁵ Joshi’s book *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* is the first to look specifically at the English novel in India focusing on, as her subtitle suggests, its influence in colonialism and

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⁵ Joshi, *In Another Country*, 35.
culture. This extensively detailed and researched study divides the history of the English novel in India into two parts, consuming and producing. Part one, consuming, concerns the culture of consumption in India both purchasing and borrowing. Part two, producing, explores the production of fiction in the country with concentration on the indigenization of the novel. As Joshi is a literary scholar, her focus is largely on the history of the literary form of the novel. For this paper I will use Joshi’s book mainly for her primary evidence. However, while this evidence is extensive in breadth it is not in depth. For example, Joshi, in her discussion of library statistics briefly mentions the lack of available sources, but largely fails to mention this lack of depth in other areas of her argument. This has drawn criticism and sparked a debate between her and Darnton in the pages of *Book History*. Despite this lack of depth, Joshi presents the field with its first extensive evaluation of a single literary form on the subcontinent.

While very few large studies comparable to Joshi’s exist, small blurbs about the history of the book in India have been included in major British book history publications. These include *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume VI 1830-1914* and *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (the book’s abbreviated version *The Book: A Global History* was used for this paper). There have however, been several smaller studies which have been published in journals such as *Book History* and edited collections like *Print Areas: Book History in India*, *Books Without Borders volume 2: Perspectives from South Asia*, and *Movable Type: Book History in India* to name a few. It seems that Indian book historians are exploring all they can with the information that is currently available, while constantly searching for the absent information in a growing desire to expand this field of study.

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In understanding the history of the novel as a literary form in India, it is important to understand the culture printing arrived to and grew from. The introduction of the printing press in India stood in contrast to traditional Indian culture, specifically religion. Hinduism is traditionally an oral religion. Messages, lessons and stories were transmitted orally from generation to generation for centuries. A central belief of the religion is that the sounds words signify are just as important as the words themselves, and in some cases recitative or incantatory verbal formulations, like the mantras, sounds matter more than words. For example, in Hinduism the sound ‘Om’ is said to have accompanied or caused the creation of the universe. This traditional belief, Harish Trivedi argues, is from the Hindu idea that, “while what is written can always be read, what is meant to be heard must be spoken with a live, situationally adaptable and at least implicitly dialogic charge, and not just read out from cold print/script precomposed at another time and place.”

Hinduism, unlike the three religions originating in western Asia (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), is not a religion of the ‘Book’, in which one text, of divine authorship, is followed indiscriminately by adherents. Rather the religions textuality consists of a number of ‘books’, none of which claim divine authorship. Adherents may choose one or more of the numerous Hindu texts to offer their personal allegiance. While Indians may not have had a book tradition, in the Western sense, this does not mean they did not have one of writing. Some of the oldest examples date back to the third century BCE. Harish Trivedi argues that while printing and books may be new to India, writing on the subcontinent is as old or older than anywhere else on

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the planet.\textsuperscript{10} When the first printing press arrived in India a well-developed manuscript and oral culture confronted it. Anindita Ghosh argues that when print culture emerged in modern India it, “rode the crest of pre-print literary traditions.” Essentially Indian authors and readers translated their indigenous traditions to their writing and reading of print.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1556, Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries introduced the first printing press on the subcontinent in Goa. The primary goal of this early initiative seems to have been to use print as an evangelizing tool. However, there was considerable resistance on the part of the Indian people as the printed book was regarded as paraphernalia of the Christian church.\textsuperscript{12} Trivedi argues, the next significant initiative began with ‘the first Protestant missionary’ Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg in 1706 in Tranquebar (now Tharangambadi), which marked a shift in missionary campaigns in India from evangelizing to civilizing. Ziegenbalg arrived with a Danish Lutheran mission on the eastern coast of India and began changing the purpose of books for the civilizing mission. In 1712, he began a prolifically productive press with the hopes of disseminating Western values and asserting power/knowledge superiority.\textsuperscript{13} Trivedi argues Ziegenbalg believed, “the book’s form and content were indivisible, and the ‘superior’ technology of printing must be employed to confer an equivalent superiority upon Christian teachings.” Essentially, the form of printing technology and the print itself together were representative of European superiority.\textsuperscript{14} Both of these examples make clear that early print culture on the subcontinent was entirely controlled by Europeans and that there was, beyond language translations, very little to no ‘Indian-ness’ in this early print culture.

\textsuperscript{10} Trivedi, “The ‘Book’ in India,” 16.
\textsuperscript{13} Trivedi, “The ‘Book’ in India,” 15.
By 1765, the subcontinent had known printing with movable type for more than two centuries, but not until this year did an industry begin to develop.¹⁵ Until this time press use had largely been limited to administration and missionaries, the technology remaining largely unknown to the Indian people. This changed rapidly as print industries began to arise first in Bengal (Calcutta), then Bombay, Madras and Sri Lanka, printing books for the civilizing mission, largely of religious and civilizing content.¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, Calcutta was home to more than forty working printers, which was unprecedented in India as well as South Asia. This number was primarily because of the large number of private entrepreneurs. The two events most responsible for the development of a printing industry in this region was first, the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta to train British civilians for work with the East India Company, and second, the establishment of the Serampore Baptist mission by William Carey, approximately 25 kilometers from Calcutta, in 1793. Carey and his mission were responsible for translating the Bible into thirty-four languages and printing it in fifty. Most significantly for this paper, they were the first to print Hindu religious epics including the Ramayana and Mahabharata. This was the first time these epics were printed in any language.¹⁷

The implementation of the East India Company Charter of 1813, allowed missionary work to spread throughout British India, including expanded efforts to educate indigenous populations. While this charter marks a significant turning point in the history of British India, it also created a new, prominent role for the printing press as educator. This role in education expanded further with the Education Acts of 1835 as book imports and printing rose to meet the

¹⁵ Trivedi, “The ‘Book’ in India,” 12.
growing demand.\textsuperscript{18} Knowledge of English developed through the missionary education system became responsible for a quickly growing group of English-educated Indians. While this continued the civilizing mission, it also created a consumer market for English language texts. While in 1761 the British were among the last European colonizing power in India to introduce the printing press on the subcontinent, within a century they would come to dominate it.\textsuperscript{19}

Printed texts continued to spread throughout India without adequate copyright legislation or governmental oversight until the muzzling of the press in 1857 with the Vernacular Press Act, which was a result of the 1857 Indian Mutiny.\textsuperscript{20} Despite this lack of legislation, in the early 1850s, Rev. James Long became India’s first bibliographer, compiling three bibliographies of printed works. His publication \textit{Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works} in 1855 contained entries of 1,400 books and periodicals in Bengali.\textsuperscript{21} While this publication was critical to the development of Indian print culture, it is also an example of a common problem of records in British India. In most cases, whether literary, religious, political or other, records are largely or in some cases entirely from areas of British dominance, this becomes apparent in the statistics and information presented by Indian book historians. As India was never a settler colony for Britain, whether during East India Company rule or the under the British Raj, their power was centralized in a few places. As the nineteenth century wore on, print spread to most of the Indian subcontinent through an elaborate process of production and distribution, of which there are very few records. As a result, the analysis made by Joshi and others is largely concentrated in a few major cities with presumptions made about similarities in the rest of the country. It is however,

\textsuperscript{19} Trivedi, “The ‘Book’ in India,” 14.
\textsuperscript{20} The Vernacular Press Act was not repealed until 1881.
clear that as print spread so too did literacy, giving rise to new spaces for the consumption of print, particularly in these big cities, including public libraries.22

The first public library, the Calcutta Public Library, established in 1836 led the way by involving subscribers, Indian and British, in their decision-making regarding content and acquisitions. Dwarika N. Banerjee argues, “libraries came to be viewed as integral to the process of education, and education was the principal forerunner of modernization.”23 While I agree with this statement, the western library tradition introduced in the mid-nineteenth century could also be seen to complement Indian traditions of sharing, providing affordable access to the entire population, while also giving the various colonial governments a way to track readership. As has previously been stated, for centuries Indians, specifically Hindus, shared their religion orally through recitation. This concept of sharing translates easily to the public library. While these stories were now shared in printed form, they were being shared nonetheless.

After the introduction of missionaries in 1813 and the application of educational reform in 1835, knowledge of English became increasingly important for social mobility; libraries provided educational opportunities to those who could not afford to purchase expensive English books, leading to what seems to have been growing literacy rates. The western colonial form of the library did not need indigenization in the Indian case because it complemented the country’s traditions. At the same time, the colonial government, if they so wished, could better track readership. However, Joshi reveals she has found minimal evidence of colonial libraries keeping detailed circulation records.

As libraries emerged on the subcontinent their data, where available, could be used to track reader preferences. This emergence followed closely on the heels of English education.\textsuperscript{24} Statistics from the Bagbazar Reading Library in Calcutta show that in 1902 fiction represented thirty-two percent of the library holdings, but seventy-four percent of the books issued. More detailed statistics show that of the 7,118 total books issued in Bengali in this same year, 5,306 or 75\% were fiction. For English of 748 titles issued, 524 or 70\% were fiction. This specific library had holdings of 802 novels in English and 903 in Bengali. Interestingly this library held more titles of poetry in Bengali than fiction, but fiction circulated more than five times more.

Joshi does recognize that the Calcutta Public Library and the Bagbazar Library are the only two institutions for which she has found borrowing statistics for the nineteenth century. Because of this we must recognize that ideas can not necessarily be confirmed about the entire country’s reading habits.\textsuperscript{25} However, one can assume based on the significant percentage differences, that novels, whether in English or an indigenous language, were hugely popular on the subcontinent.

Four of the top five authors most commonly found in Indian libraries were also British bestsellers. These authors included Edward Lytton-Bulwer, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli. However, of the twenty-two most common books only thirteen were also British bestsellers. These non-bestsellers included the French author Alexander Dumas and Brits Philip Meadows Taylor and Arthur Conan Doyle to name a few.\textsuperscript{26} Joshi argues, “My implicit premise is that if the British novel was a success in India in certain select forms, its colonial readers made it so.” Like Joshi, I argue the novel’s select forms most voraciously read by Indians were those with which they were able to make some sort of cultural connection, as

\textsuperscript{24} Joshi, \textit{In Another Country}, 38-45.
\textsuperscript{25} Joshi, \textit{In Another Country}, 63.
\textsuperscript{26} Joshi, \textit{In Another Country}, 64.
Indian readers had very different dispositions than the author’s intended British readers. Indian readers could not always connect with British authors because of the disconnection between eastern and western life, colony and metropole as well as religious differences. This presented Indian authors the opportunity to create an Indian version of the subcontinent’s most popular literary form, the novel.

The reading public in India was much more religiously diverse than its counterpart in the metropole. Joshi states that readers included Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, and Christians, none of whom could be correlated by social and/or economic standing. English’s status as the language of social and economic mobility during the colonial period meant that the desire to learn it spread across Indian society. Despite social, economic and religious differences, the one connecting thread was their shared preference for the novel. Until 1865, most novels on the subcontinent were British novels or translations of British novels, while most other reading material was religiously based.

While literacy did increase, in the Indian context, “knowledge of the written word did not necessarily translate into readership.” Here we see the persistence of traditional Hindu culture in the subcontinent’s book history and a facet of indigenizing the English novel. Illiterate and semi-illiterate people were exposed to the written word in communal reading sessions in the same way the message of Hinduism had been spread for centuries. In this way, Ghosh argues, “pre-print readership dictated the shape of the popular print market in nineteenth century Bengal… the printed text acquired real significance only when rendered orally and publicly in front of large groups.” Essentially, if a story did not translate well to oral recitations, it would

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not be popular with the Indian people. The phenomenal rise of the Indian novel, beginning with Chatterjee in 1865, is the most visible representation of the tastes and reading habits of the Indian public.

Darnton argues that beginning with authors such as Chatterjee, Bengali literature began to flourish while the colonizers had no idea of its existence. He states that Chitpoor Road, in Calcutta, was teeming with bookshops. That there were two hundred peasant peddlers, making their living selling books in the city and the countryside, for whom no records were kept.\textsuperscript{31} While the early intention of British publishers in India for introducing the novel had been to present Indians to more European style vernacular literature, the colonial government of the Raj were appalled to discovered that depictions of sex ran all through their catalogues and reports on native publication in the genre. Though the colonial governments of both the East India Company and the Raj attempted to direct this Indian literature towards their own standards there remained a cultural difference.\textsuperscript{32} Nearly 150,000 new books were published in the last quarter of the century, making the total for 1850 to 1900 more than 200,000.\textsuperscript{33} These numbers show a drastic increase in book production on the subcontinent in the last quarter century. In the second half of the nineteenth century as the Raj implemented a more invasive style of governing, a distinctly indigenous Indian book culture began to develop.

In India, print was not gradually adopted by the culture as it had been in Europe. Print was thrust upon the people. In comparison to the timeframe of development of the European novel, the Indian novel, as we have seen, developed rapidly. While, as I have argued previously,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Darnton, “Book Production,” 244.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Darnton, “Book Production,” 246-8.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Darnton, “Book Production,” 257. Both Darnton and Priya Joshi recognize the problem of these statistics, in that they are entirely British. The British desire to categorize and label everything caused considerable problems in book production records, as many indigenous texts did not fall into traditional British categories. Some categories may have in fact been more prominent but were mislabeled or categorized as miscellaneous. For example, Darnton states that Indian authors produced nothing the British recognized as politics.
\end{itemize}
India did not have a ‘Book’ religion and culture, they did have a strong sense of self and connection to their traditions. Because of this strong Indian identity, the indigenization of the novel in the development of the Indian novel did not simply coincide with rising nationalist ideas in the later nineteenth century. It provided a key point in the foundation for the development towards a freedom movement. If the Indian people could successfully adapt a cultural form as uniquely European (but specifically British) as the novel, the potential for advancement seemed unlimited.

The Indian novel, in regional languages, became established by the middle of the nineteenth century, but the literary and cultural form it would take was still being debated. As with the development of any new cultural form, prominent authors and Indian leaders had opinions and ideas about the literary form of the Indian novel. These debates and experiments were taking place to determine how best to vernacularize and create a separate Indian form that would prove popular among readers. The most significant challenge lay in adopting an appropriate fictional form that would suit the needs of the Indian reader. Chatterjee’s novel Chandrasekhar (1875) portrayed the author’s frustration with this process. Joshi argues, “Indian epic and oral traditions were already full of fantastic and superhuman stories. The need and interest in the novel lay in discovering through it a new and different way of organizing everyday life and its experiences.” However, while I agree with Joshi, an additional challenge facing Indian authors was making a literary form that connected to both the history and tradition of the ancient religious epics while also being relevant in the present day. By making connections between the India of old and new, these authors could give a voice to modern India. This was particularly important for the nationalist movement.

34 Joshi, In Another Country, 142-6.
In her book Joshi describes a particularly striking scene in Chatterjee’s Indian novel *Chandrasekhar*, which presents a vivid example of what happens when “Englishness and the world of the novel collide with India and its indigenous narrative traditions.” This novel also shows Chatterjee’s frustration with the development of the literary form of the Indian novel. In this particular scene, an Indian man arrives home to discover a British man has kidnapped his wife because he has fallen in love with her beauty. While the husband insists on finding his wife and bringing her home, he wonders if his own ways have created this situation. That night, instead of looking for his wife, he burns all the books he deems had consumed his life. Joshi argues, “the willful ruin of this massive catalogue of knowledge underscores the urgency for change confronting Indian society in the face of a British onslaught led by different language, learning and cultural priorities.”

I believe Chatterjee is arguing that it was hard to discern what was truly Indian when the country, particularly the most prominent printing city Calcutta, was so immersed in British colonization.

Chatterjee’s career is also representative of the struggles of Indian authors to find the right balance of new and old India. In 1864 Chatterjee published a book titled *Rajmohan’s Wife* written in English. Joshi argues this novel was too self-conscious and limited itself by trying to stay too close to the British form, and has been forgotten amongst his many successes. Perhaps Indian readers could not accept one of their own writing in the language of the colonizer. When he began writing in Bengali after this novel, he authored fourteen novels and received accolades such as “the man of most literary influence in the country” and “the best Bengali novelist that Bengal has yet produced.” His novels were later translated into many languages including other indigenous Indian languages and English. Joshi claims, “Not only did his work “inspire the growth of the novel in many Indian languages”… it also influenced writers, politicians,

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nationalists, social reformers, and traditionalists throughout the country.” Chatterjee became one of the most, if not the most, prominent figure associated with the development of the Indian novel and Indian book culture in the late nineteenth century.

Chatterjee appears many times in the catalogues produced by the colonial government under the 1867 Press and Registration of Books Act, but Joshi notices that the anti-colonial rhetoric, particularly of his most famous novel *Anandamath* (1882) was misunderstood in the recordings made by colonial officials of the Raj. It was described as “a story of a highly epic cast… [The insurgents] perceive the necessity and wholesomeness of the English regime in India, and in the spirit of true patriots, break up their armed league.” This emphasizes Darnton’s argument that the colonial governments, specifically the Raj, while implying increased control, did not necessarily apply it. As the first truly Indian novelist, Chatterjee set the standards for writers to come pushing boundaries and taking advantage of British ignorance. Hemjyoti Medhi argues that Chatterjee “champions forms of cultural production that separate the inner from the outer, the private from the public domain.” I believe what Medhi means is Chatterjee gave a voice to Indian life under colonial rule by making connections between traditional Indian culture and modernity.

By the turn of the century, the Indian people had developed a distinctly Indian print culture, a balance had developed between Indian tradition and the novel’s literary form. This early period of building nationalist sentiment is often overlooked in the history of India’s freedom fight because it is before the time of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi is often recognized for his use of print, particularly his use of the printed word in newspapers, in spreading his message.

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36 Joshi, *In Another Country*, 147.
of nationalism and non-violence, first in South Africa and then in India. While many of his words would presumably have been read aloud in the traditional Hindu way, his message may not have been as broadly spread if not for the increase in literacy in the late nineteenth century. If it were not for these early indigenous printers and authors, such as Chatterjee, pushing British boundaries and challenging colonial rule, the Indian freedom movement may have been very different, or may not have occurred at all. The Indian novel and through their authors became the voice of a nation. The great Indian epics, while cherished, represented a religious but historic time in India. The Indian novel represented progress and modernity. While it developed through contact with the colonizer, the Indian novel developed out and was representative of the Indian colonial experience. By indigenizing a colonial form, Indian authors provided hope of potential for early Indian nationalists struggling to find an indigenous identity in a colonized country.
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