

William Bolts and his contributory role in the history of printing and publication of newspapers in Bengal, as well as in India.

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Abstract

Though we all come through the name of James Augustus Hicky whenever we discuss the history of printing press of Calcutta, particularly his efforts in publishing the first regular newspaper in Calcutta, India in 1780 called 'Bengal Gazette', yet we should not forget to discuss that it was twelve years before Hicky that William Bolts was the first to take a huge leap towards establishing one. In fact, he was the first to propose to set up a printing press at Calcutta, and introduced a handwritten newspaper in Bengali in 1768. Once being himself an employee of the British East India Company, he showed the courage to write about the truth, of the oppressive misrules of the company. This newspaper obviously could not exist for long; Bolts' affixation of a notice on the door of the Council House announcing his intention to bring out a newspaper created much uproar at the time. But his intention was not approved by the East India Company and he was ordered to quit India for "having endeavoured to utter an odium upon the administration and promote faction and discontentment". [1] Bolts' contribution in this part of history cannot be undermined, as he was truly a strong, influential character of his age and time.

Keywords: History of publication of newspaper in India, History of printing press in Calcutta, History of Mass Media.

Introduction

The last fifty years of the 18th century is absolutely important a period, in the history of printing and publication of newspapers in India. This was the time when there did already come up printing press and newspapers in other parts of India, yet in Calcutta (the Second London for the Company administrators), the British officials were particularly disinclined of establishing printing press here, unmistakably to conceal the misrule and misdeeds of the administration and the administrators – not to be coming up in written their accounts and draw the attention of the throne in England. Yet interestingly, when it happened, it happened through a British – whether it is the *Bengal Gazette* of Hickey, better known after the name of its founder as Hicky's Gazette, or the non-published one of Bolts. The point to be noted here is that both these newspapers came out challenging the disapproval of the British Raj. Indeed, Bolts' primary initiative of bringing out a handwritten newspaper and wanting to print it was the bold step already made a few years before Hicky's Gazette, and that made

a clear mark of progress in the history of printing press and publication of newspapers in Calcutta, as well as India.

Research Objective

Of course, whenever and wherever the history of newspaper publication in India is discussed, we begin with Hicky's contribution to the field. Well, it is true that the history of the same begins from Hicky himself; yet the contribution of William Bolts before Hickey is never to be denied or demeaned. Today's people often tend to forget Bolts' early contribution to the field, which must be regarded with much sincere intension. So, the need of the research is to highlight Bolts' path-breaking move first, threatening British rule-the power. So, the objective of writing this article is to lead people go back to the past and re-discover Bolts' contributions to the history of Indian Press.

Research Methodology

Data collected from various books, articles; a detailed analysis of data collected from Mr. Andrew Otis' work is the major highlight of the paper.

Discussion

The time was 60s of the 18th century in Bengal. Already the British East India Company regained power defeating the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and the victory helped the Company seize control of Bengal's economy totally. It was the time when the Company was in full authority of trade and commerce without paying the Nawab any tax, rather a huge share of the land-tax was also procured by the British – the news of which did not reach England many a times, just because there was no printed newspaper till date. To enjoy monopoly in trade and the land-tax, the British officers who were mostly corrupt and tyrant, went to any extent of exploitation over the natives, and this is precisely why the Company did not wish to establish printing press. They feared of truth coming out to the open, and kept suppressing the chances of newspapers being published, just as the birth of female foetus is still being restricted in backward Indian societies. This has been mentioned in Dr. Nandalal Bhattacharya's book when he wrote, '□□ সময়□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□ বড়□□□□I' [2] (the time was of extreme fright and anxiety for the British that they were averse to the idea of allowing printed newspapers to get published)

Earlier, when kings ruled small states in India, news letters from ministers, news writers and secret service men were appointed, which kept the ruler regularly informed of developments in various parts of the country and among different classes of people. In the Moghul period, news-writers were appointed to various administrative units in their territory, and were allotted the duty of sending reports to the headquarters of the administration. The East India Company also requisitioned the services of news-writers for the same purpose as Moghul emperors did. [3]

By the 18th century, apart from Asia, in many parts of the world newspaper publication had already been into practice. In India, it was in 1780 that James Augustus Hicky started the *Bengal Gazette* or the *Calcutta General Advertiser*, in the first issue of which he introduced himself as 'the late printer to the Honourable Company '. In fact, Hicky's *Gazette* specialised in the exposure of the private lives of Company servants, which soon landed Hicky into trouble. [4] Yet the first attempt to start a newspaper in Calcutta was made in 1776 by Mr William Bolts. P. R. Sethi has also written in his article, 'William Bolts was the first man to conceive a plan for initiating a newspaper press in India. [5] Bolts' newspaper was still hand-written of course. When Bolts affixed a notice clearing his intention of bringing up a newspaper press in India, that he had "in manuscript many things to communicate which most intimately concerned every individual ", [6] this naturally gave rise of alarm in official quarters. He was commanded to quit Bengal permanently and proceed to Madras and therefrom to take his passage to Europe. But surely, Bolts' move was in itself, a 'movement'.

About William Bolts

William Bolts was a Dutch by birth, born to William and Sarah Bolts, on 7 February, 1738. Nothing much is known of their origin though, apart from the fact that by his fifteen years of age, he left for England. Initially, being a private merchant, he was in diamond trade while in Portugal in 1755, but later he began his career as an employee of the East India Company, and came to Calcutta in search of fortune in 1759. He was employed in Calcutta as a factor in the service of the Company; later, he was appointed to the Company's Benares (Varanasi) factory, where he opened a woollens mart, developed saltpetre manufacturing, established opium plantations, imported cotton, and promoted the trade in diamonds from the Panna and Chudderpore (Chhatarpur) mines in Bundelkhand. [7] So, it is evident that Bolts was already a rich merchant before he was in India, until his trade was heavily hampered due to a huge earthquake followed by extensive devastation that occurred in Portugal. Thus, Bolts was never in poverty or less in power, not like Hicky who had to live by borrowing, but did not take him back of his maiden effort, that literally took the British officers out of their beds.

Bolts in Bengal became a very influential character, he was among the last ten Factors of the British Raj, close to the Nawab of Bengal, as well as well-known in the Vatican. As a senior merchant, Bolts became a council member at Benares in 1764, but he was a private trader himself. He quarrelled with the company's authorities on the issue of private trade and remittance; for this, he was dismissed from the Company's service and deported as an interloper in 1768.

Printing Press in India

William Bolts already was a polyglot, and learned Bengali after coming to Bengal. So he aspired to publish a Bengali newspaper from Bengal itself. Also important is that in India, though there was a printing press already launched in Goa in 1556, yet there was no press in Calcutta till date. Observing this, he tried to launch the city's first printing press in 1766, but failed to be successful under pressure of the British regime. Thus after he was forced to leave India, he planned to publish his first newspaper in Bengali from England, a revolutionary step indeed of the time. Later in 1773, with the help of the very renowned printing artist called Joseph Jackson, the first letters of Bengali language as blocks were created for printing, at London's Dorset Street, in Salisbury Square. On 23rd September, 1773, the new Bengali printing blocks were sent to the company's another Director Mr. William James, a close friend to William Bolts. But in order not to annoy and agitate the Company, Mr. James and Mr. Joseph kept these printing blocks hidden, thus repressing the historic efforts of Mr. Bolts. And Bengal's printing press remained waiting for Bengal's 'Vishwakarma' - Mr Panchanan Karmakar.

Early Newspaper

As it is being already mentioned, the British were dissatisfied with Mr. Bolts and his deeds, yet his power could not be limited. It is said that Bolts had strong connections with the Dutch government; also, he was mentioned as 'Count Bolts' in some Austria government's official documents. Once, it is said that the British government made a ship to deport Bolts from India, but when Bolts threatened the Captain of the ship of dire consequences, the plan was rested down. In 1768 hence, out of his wrath against the imperial government and its unjust governance, Bolt decided writing upon a hand-written newspaper, only not to be published anywhere for the opposition of the Raj[12].

The Notice

'To the Public

Mr. Bolts takes this method of informing the public that the want of a printing press in this city being of a great disadvantage in business and making extremely difficult to communicate such intelligence to the Community, as is of importance to every British subject, he is ready to give the best encouragement to any person or persons, who are versed in the business of printing, to manage a press, the types and utensils of which he can produce. In the meantime, he begs leave to inform the public that having in manuscript things to Communicate, which most intimately concern every individual, any person who may be induced by Curiosity or other more laudable motives will be permitted at Mr. Bolts' house to read or take copies of the same. A person will give due attendance at the hours from ten to twelve any morning.' [8]

According to this Notice, due to the non-availability of the right tools and machineries required to start a printing press, the business of the same is being cramped. So, if somebody is interested to start a business in printing press, they would be welcome and receive all assistance from Mr. William Bolts. He felt, people are being left out of enjoying their right to information, so he asked the public to visit his residence between 10 am to 12 noon daily to read his handwritten newspaper, until it gets published somehow.

But the fact remains as such, that Bolts' newspaper did not last long, neither did it get circulated. It was rather confined to a particular area and the public there, and came out only in few editions, not enough to sustain itself in length of time[11].

After Bolts was thrown out of Bengal, he did not halt his efforts particularly to expose the dominant and unjust British rule in India. He started writing books among which the best known even today is his 1772 book, *Considerations on India Affairs*. This book detailed the administration of the East India Company in Bengal which began shortly after their victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The observations and experiences he recorded, as himself being a participant in the post-Palashi pillages, are all lively and genuine. He had seen very closely how Bengal, once a prosperous region, was despoiled and bled white by the East India Company. [9] He vehemently complained of the arbitrary power exercised by the authorities and of his own deportation. *Considerations* was translated into French and enjoyed wide circulation, which contributed to his fame on the Continent. [10]

Conclusion

Thus, in a study of the history of printing of newspapers here in India, the invaluable contribution of William Bolts is always to be mentioned. When there existed no printing press in Calcutta, Mr Bolts was thinking of printing a newspaper in Bengali, sitting in England, while being himself a European; and even then, took the boldest move of doing the same, in spite of all odds. The printing press in Calcutta was first established by Hicky around 1777, when printing was mainly done in English. Later in 1799, Panchanan Karmakar was the first to create printing blocks for Bengali language in Hooghly district, with which the first Bible in Bengali language could be printed and published in 1790. This was in fact, the first published Bengali book as such. So, when in 1773, Bengali printing blocks were already made in England by the efforts of William Bolts, it is truly farcical in the story of coming up of printing press that publishing of books in Bengali had to wait for years, before Panchanan Karmakar made the same blocks here. But this is the real story behind that today's people should know and acclaim. The truth lies here, where it gets clear that the struggle to establish printing in Bengali began by a Company servant, a European by birth and a merchant by profession, William Bolts. Later when printing of newspapers and books started in Serampur, (Hooghly) Danish India, in between 1880 and 1837, it was also under William Carey, William Ward, and other British Baptist missionaries at the Serampur Mission. But Carey had craftsmen like Panchanan, when Bolts did it at London. The saddest point is that, due to the betrayal of William James, the British press-owner and Bolts' one-time friend, that he could never rise to fame and become a proud part of the history of Indian press.

Bolts' hand-written newspaper can never be undermined; in Indian history we had mentions of traditional hand-written newspapers already. Again, Bolts' newspaper was not to document the best side of the British Raj and work for their contentment at all, rather it was bold enough to showcase the truth, the uglier deeds of the despotic English administration. Even after being repressed by the British and his deportation, Bolts never lost his courage and morale to rage the fight against the ruling Raj. He brutally exposed the real characteristics of British dictatorial rule every time he wrote in newspaper articles, books or other documents.

The truth of Bolts' banishment from India was also largely due to the fear of the Raj of getting exposed to the world of their tyranny towards the natives here. So, Bolts' contribution to the history of newspapers and establishment of printing press cannot be ignored. To initiate a mass media that would later on become a platform for the natives to protest for their rights and make loose the super-control of the so-called, ever-powerful British governance, should definitely be a part of history, and so Bolts'

