



## Expression of Socio-Political Zeitgeist in Tsarist Central Asia Printing

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**Abstract** *Orientalist approach to Central Asia especially Bukhara in our historical references present a romantic picture. This paper takes publications and printing as the indicator of intellectual maturity of the population and progressive zeitgeist in socio-political life. Analysis of historical events and facts reveal very little appetite of reading, almost universal ignorance and scarcity of written/printed books. The transformation of Central Asia took place after introduction of presses during the Tsarist control. With the arrival of printing, not only literacy increased but also the scope, number and range of topics expanded. As a result of printing/publication, the Jadidist ideology emerged and opposed the Qadimist status quo. Ultimately the Jadids prevailed. Therefore, the paper establishes that socio-political awakening and increase in printing/publication are linked. The paper recommends revisiting errors in the representation of Central Asia in our accounts of history.*

## Introduction

Central Asia (CA) has remained a region of profound mystery for the outside world in the West. If Edward Said had talked about the rise of the discourse of orientalism in the context of Middle East he would have found in Central Asia more befitting example of the mystery of “Orientalism” which affected the Muslim of the East and European equally. Long before the drawing of Iron Curtain by the communist regime, Central Asia remained a remote and isolated place. Among many myths that advocates of golden past of Islam put forward, the myth of culture, prosperity and learning of Central Asia remains a central one. The glory of Central Asia

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especially that of Bukhara and Samarqand is told often in the romantic haze of mystic reverence. How far is the truth mixed with fiction in this myth? Present discussion is concerned mainly with analysis of information for the verification of the truth of the myth of Central Asian glory.

Elisabeth Einstein called printing an “unacknowledged revolution”. She in her book “The Printing Press as Agent of Change” explored the relationship between progress in printing technology and dissemination, standardization and transformation in European reform movement, renaissance, and scientific revolution (Einstein, 1979). Her work provides a framework which Dr. Adeb Khalid in “Printing, Publishing and Reforms in Tsarist Central Asia” applies to Central Asia with mixed findings about Einstein’s theory (Khalid, 1994). He instead of her theory that press starts the transformation of society posits the opposite theory of “print capitalism” forwarded by Benedict Anderson as an explanation for the relation of the social transformation and printing in Central Asia. The second theory as Khalid (1994) explains the progress of press as a symptom of already materialized social transformation. Therefore, this theory opposes the conclusion of Einstein (1979) and present in its place the reverse theory which instead of presenting press as a cause of social transformation (as Einstein thinks) present press merely a result or a product of social transformation which was more accurately initiated by economic transformation of society. These two works provide starting point for us to link socio-political transformation and publication of books newspapers and magazines. Arguments of Einstein and Khalid (1994) appear partially correct in linking the chain of causality. From critical review of both in Central Asian context it appears that printing and socio-political transformation appear simultaneously as symptoms of the power struggle in society. Michel Foucault and Karl Marx have talked about shaping of social relation through delimiting discourse and class struggle respectively. If we take power as the indicator of the play of knowledge and class struggle resulting in social transformation, we would find printing and social transformation indicating the underlying power struggle.

In Central Asia some factors gave to involved power struggle distinct characteristics.

## **Research Methodology**

A descriptive/analytic approach is adopted in this paper for understanding the relation between printing, publication and maturation of socio-political zeitgeist. In order to achieve this objective, the paper attempted to find answer to the following questions:

1. What was the reading/publication related condition in the pre-Tsarist era?
2. What socio-political transformation took place in Central Asia that can be linked with printing/publications?

3. How printing/publication and sociopolitical transformation connect in the context of Central Asia?

The study used mostly reports and studies on the history and status of printing and sociopolitical conditions of Central Asia. Most of such material is secondary source, therefore, further studies for further validation of the claims are necessary. However, the sources and inferences used in this paper have sufficient authenticity to warrant reliability.

### **Social and Political Conditions of Tsarist Central Asia**

Social scenario of Central Asia (CA) saw little change over time till twentieth century. Most of CA became part of Muslim world by 850 AD. In the Muslim world this area was referred to as Turkestan. This reference produces the impression of a monolithic geographic, linguistic and socio-political area in the works of Arab Historian. When the lead of Muslim world came to Turks, some areas of CA attained renown for scholarship in the religious and secular domains. Exaggerated tales of wealth, culture, education and modernity were related to CA with a mythical candor. There was very little firsthand information available to Western scholars about this area. Exploration of this area started in nineteenth century. Western travelers were not fully trained to describe the social life of CA. They saw in CA realities opposite to earlier report of exaggerated progress and culture. The area was divided into khanates and un-ruled areas. People depended on irrigation. There was very limited commerce in 19<sup>th</sup> century with this area. Development of sea routes had minimized the utility of unsafe routes going through CA. Whatever innovation had taken place in the first three centuries had given place to stagnation in scholarship (Becker, 2004). The habit of book writing was dead in the area. Authoritarian monarchs aided by obscurantist clerics were bitterly opposed to learning. Arabic, the language of Quran and Islamic scholarship had a numbered literate people. The textbooks developed in twelfth century were still venerated dogmatically. Memorization without understanding the meaning of traditional texts of Quran and its interpretations by various scholars was considered sufficient for all branches of learning.

In nineteenth century continuous defeats at the hand of technologically advanced West awakened some of the Muslim thinkers in the area a desire to modernize the Muslim society in CA. In order to spread their message in masses they focused on literacy and then education. They published a number of newspapers as an attempt to increase awareness and literacy. Schools were opened with a view to introduce Central Asians to the better experience of better education of Tatars and the West. Such attempts were bitterly opposed by clergy. On behest of intolerant clerics the little tolerance shown to the new education by the autocrats soon gave way to suppression of the new literacy and education movement.

Events like the expansion of Russian empire produced hardliners on both sides. Clerics of Central Asia advocated tighter observation of the old policy of limited literacy and suppression of learning new languages which brought with them new learning. Reformists proposed to look at events realistically and start to learn modern sciences through new languages and increase literacy. Areas under the Tsarist rule liberated from the clutches of the traditionalists and started to learn western knowledge through Russian and other languages. Leading force of reform and enlightenment of CA society came from these people. We can summarize these characteristics as follows;

- Geographic isolation from world especially after 15<sup>th</sup> Century
- Lack of communication
- Intellectual stagnation and low literacy
- Lack of commerce
- Nomadic Lifestyle
- Tyranny of corrupt Emirs and nobility
- Limited subsistence based agriculture

The isolated people in Central Asia were divided into the classes of haves and have not. Contact with the outer world in the form of Russian conquest of Central Asia exposed Central Asians to the effect of modernity (Russian Empire and her technology of railway and agriculture etc). The social and political relation of power started to adjust to the new circumstances. New elite in shape of merchants started to replace the older religious and aristocratic bourgeois. To partake of the power the aspirant class of merchants etc at once recognized the utility of print and press, and on the other hand the incumbent elite saw in print and press a threat to their rule.

## **Literature Up to 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Due to the above stated features, literature confined like other parts of the world to ruling class only, including both secular and religious elite. Epic poetry like “*Shahname Ferdousi*” describes history of kings. Folk poets and minstrel were a contrast to elitist poetry, though there too songs of the greatness of elite in the hope of reward were sung by the poor. “*Manas*” is a Central Asian epic in Turkic language, “*Iskandarnameh*” by the Persian poet Nizami. Some rulers like Shibani Khan of Uzbeks wrote “*Hikmat*”. Such writings were intended to spell the myth of ancestral greatness of the king. Manuals like “*Kabusnameh*” and “*Siyasatnameh*” which were advices for the king and civil servants were also popular (Paksoy, 2002), pp. 478-82), here again due to the elitist appeal.

In religious writing before Islam Tengri, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism had scholars who wrote mainly on the performance of rites. With Islam poetry and tales about battles of proselytizing became known. Islamic era early centuries up to twelfth century were productive in writings on philosophy, astronomy,

mathematics etc. Turkish philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, Ulugh Beg (astronomer) was grandson of Emir Taimur, Mir Ali Sher Nwai (literary figure, poet) are the major luminaries of the whole Islamic rule in Central Asia till 19<sup>th</sup> century. Literature of this period had the following features:

- Myth based (ethnic myths of races and kings)
- Elitist
- Do's and don'ts
- manuscript copying (availability of publication in manuscripts, Katibs used to reproduce copies in libraries)
- Reading circles (no lending libraries, few literate persons, necessitated this mode of reading in private and clandestine reading circles)
- Minstrels and singers (often attached to courts of kings and nobles)

The socio-political influence of written world was very limited till Tsarist era in Central Asia. Till that time written world was an extended facility of legitimizing the authority of the powerful. It was used to pacify the passions of masses and keep them continually obedient to the incumbent regime. Masses took reading as a luxury which only the rich could afford as the cost of owning a book was too high and books were too rare to become popular. In such environment the catalyst role of reading was very weak and embryonic. Most of those who could write and create used to be attached to courts and were there employed in writing favourable histories and poetry.

### **Central Asian Literature in Tsarist Period**

First Muslim owned press was set up by Ibrahim Muteferrik in 1729 in Istanbul as a private venture. If look at the west it was in 1585 that Caxton setup the press in London. Being backward in printing, Ibrahim's example was not followed and after his death the interest in print did not awaken in other people. After death of Ibrahim the press stopped, and second time it started in second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. So, there was no way but the tradition of scribes to make copies. Before Tsarist conquest of Central Asia no printing press was present there.

Before the start of press Central Asia depended on imported printed books from other parts of world such as India, Kazan, Azerbaijan, Egypt and the Ottoman Turkey. The first press was established in 1868 in Tashkent after it becoming part of Russian Turkestan. The first publication included "*Turkestan Wilayatining Gazeti*" (Turkestan Gazette). This was used for official information and propaganda and for Tsarist orders. Till 1879 it published only five titles.

First local publisher/printer was Esanbay Hussayn Oghli. He started with a lithographic press in 1882 in Tashkent. In this press "*Sabat ul ajizin*" of Sufi Allah Yar was the first little to be printed. By 1917, 13 printing presses were in Taskent

only and the same number was expected to be in the whole of Central Asia. Most publishers /owners had a close association with the reformist movement.

In Central Asian publication, publisher or “nashir” was important. Mostly their work would be unprofessional collection, with willful (often subversive) editing and after 1910 owners shifted to another market practice of keeping bookstores. “*Sahhafs*” or scribes changed their business from copying manuscripts to printing. Some ulema and cultural elite also adopted the work of “*nashir*” (publisher) part time. They would use publication as a means of earning respect and money.

Print had close connection with the nature of education. Most of the books were those which were used in the madrassas. Even *Jadids* depended on the press. Initially primers and school text were published locally and books making advanced courses were imported. This shows that people schooled in initial phases and dropping at a little higher level was enormous. The number of printed books grew steadily in the earlier part of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1910- 1911 period 69 books were published. These books were either in Turkic or in Persian language. They covered a spectrum of secular and theological themes.

The Theological works were overwhelmingly didactic in nature. These publications aimed at simplifying and operationalizing the rites and beliefs of Islam in simple formulae or were simple selection from holy Quran such as Char Kitob (Four Books) and Haftiyak (Seven Surah of Quran), Forz-e-Ain (Fundamental Duties) and Awal-e-Ilm (Basics of Knowledge). Stories of the well-known prophets in Muslim world such as Joseph and Moses etc. in Qesus-ul-Ambiyo (Stories of Prophets). The work on Islam ranged from scholastic to popular in nature. The popular works gravitated to mysticism. Mystic literature (including Sufism) narrated in exaggerated style the lives, miracles and achievements of the Muslim Sufis in Moajot and Tozkirot

The secular works included publication of poetry and prose of popular figures. Anthologies and Selected works of classic poets of the Persian and Turkic literature such as Ali Sher Nawai, Fazuli, Sheikh Saadi, Baydil and Ferdusi. The printing of oral legends and epics in Central Asia such as Shahnama, doston, and qissus were in demand (Shahrani, 1991, pp.166-70).

Titles pertaining to these themes were stocked by the bookstores and when they were sold out, more copies were printed. The works on central Asian authorities on Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), histories (mostly exaggerated and without proof), craft related tracts were also published as an addition to the core publications. Quran and its translation was not a serious business. There were only a few occasions when it was printed locally.

During this period local publishers produced works in Uzbek language. A number of publications emerged after 1912 in Tashkent, Kazan and Orenburg in Kazakh language. Samarqand and Bukhara were also emerging centers of publications in Persian language. The catalog of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg mentions more than sixty titles (Shcheglova, 1975).

As local publishers took interest in traditional texts Russian publishers and orientalist in “Wilayatining Gaziti” and other magazines published translations from European literature. Titles included life of Columbus and short history of Egypt and methods of book keeping.

Textbooks of *Jadid* were also made of non-traditional texts. New method texts were primers like teaching of basic sounds of Arabic, teaching of counting etc. Few *Jadid* method schools necessitated publication of complete new sets of books on geography, history, arithmetics and literacy. Most of the books of higher level were however imported from Kazan, Bakchisarai, Tehran and Bombay.

Apart from textbooks *Jadid* publishers took interest in literary forms. Drama or Dastan became an important medium of socio-political criticism.

Some *Jadids* translated works. Fazilbek-Oghli published translation of Robinson Crusoe in 1912. Newspaper became a new source of the power of printed works, because they were used only for information.

The Tatars of central Russia, the Crimea and the Caucasus and Muslim of Azerbaijan were politically more advanced than Central Asian Muslims and they exerted a major influence in the development of Central Asian politics and culture. Their newspapers Tarjuman (translator), Vaqt (time) and satirical journal “Mulla Nasiriruddin” from Azerbaijan were very influential (Khan, 2003, p.93).

Other periodicals in which social issues were discussed, included Taraqqi – Orta Ayanning Umr Guzarlighi (‘Progress- Central Asian Life’); Taraqi (progress) edited by Ismail Abidi and published in 1906 in Tashkent; Khurshid (‘Sun’) edited by Munnawar Qari, published in 1906 in Tashkent; also Tojkor (‘Merchants’) published in 1907 by Sayyid Karim Bey; Shurat (‘Fame’), edited by Abdullah Avloni in 1907; and Azya (‘Asia’) edited by Muhammadjan Bektermirov in April 1908, all of these published in Tashkent (Khan, 2003, p.94).

Tarjuma (‘The Translator’), a Tatar newspaper brought out from 1903-1914 by famous reformist Ismail Gasprinskii of Bakhchi Sarai. Vaqt (‘The Time’), a Tatar literary and political daily published in Orneburg in 1905. Mulla Nasiriruddin, a progressive satirical journal published in Azerbaijan from 1906-1931 (Khalid, 1998, p.181).

Written word became common due to Russian press. As the number of presses were equal in Taskent and rest of Central Asia, importance of Tashkent surpassed other areas in the production of books and newspaper. Imported newspapers were too few and limited to few subscribers only. Demand for books and newspapers as we can see in the above discussion increased with the passage of time when *Jadid* became a political and social force. *Jadid* schools was the major markets for production of progressive and unorthodox book titles. In the struggle between *Jadid* and Qadeem we can find the underlying desire of struggle for share in the political and social power. *Jadid* saw in books of knowledge and fiction, effective means of socio-political mobilization. Here, power struggle remained a potent cause behind the increase in demand for the printed books. *Jadids’* support and

Qadimis opposition to books is therefore very easy to understand if viewed from this view point.

## **Role of Tsarist Era publication in Socio-political Transformation of Central Asia**

Printing of books and newspapers was adjusted into the existing traditional system. Therefore, their ability to become decided agent of change became very weak. Censor of Muslim elite, their link with Russian authority minimized chances for publication of a decidedly revolutionary work.

Though insignificant themselves, these books/ newspapers exposed the fear of elite, dependence of elites on status quo and it started debate on legitimacy of corrupt leadership who used status quo and tradition as life line.

Print changed mass attitude to knowledge which as Foucault posits, was the base of power of elite in the traditional set up. In traditional Muslim society written words were considered sacred. With print the myth of sacral aura of written words vanished.

Some of writers of fiction made bold statements by calling theatre “Ibrat Khona” (Place of lesson learning). The power of Ulema to offer cure of social evil through the sacred texts was challenged. Similarly meaning of “Adab” or discipline changed from censorship and control to that of culture of freedom and entertainment. The European sense of literature which blended pleasure with purpose dominated Central Asia in 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Emergence of debates was another feature that became popular in the wake of printed publication. Traditionally only ulema participated in “Mubahesa” or debates as a form of rectifying and vindicating views. Ordinary people were disqualified to participate in the learned religious debates. With printing of books on secular and less religious topics ordinary people felt free to take up the privilege of Ulema and argue their problems.

When reading became more popular, it aroused class consciousness of exploiter-exploited though there was very little industrialization of Central Asia to let people experience it directly in work place. This condition made the acceptance of communist ideals in Soviet period easier than would have been otherwise.

## **Conclusion**

Central Asia lost its isolation and latency with the arrival of modernity along Russian conquest. The unrivaled and unquestioned hegemony of the ruling class was questioned as the new merchant class emerged. Press was a useless tool for socio-political transformation in start of its introduction in Central Asia, as it was used by the traditional scribes to ease their work of duplicating the orthodox titles and texts. But with the awakening of social and political consciousness among

reformists like Donish and Fitrati we find indication of the start of a renewal in struggle between the aspiring elite and the incumbent elite. The aspiring elite rightly found in Press a tool to facilitate their business of social and political awakening, and the incumbent elite vainly tried to oppose books and newspapers. As the will of the *Jadid* to partake of power was too strong for the Qadimis to resist, we find *Jadid* prevailing at the end. In this paradigm, the role of press is simply indicative of the power struggle between those who possessed power and those who aspired for power.

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