

Reading The 'Cheapness' of Cheap Prints: Karbala Narrative in the Early Print Culture

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Little did Heyat Mamud, the Sufi pir in late eighteenth century Rangpur, know that the manuscript that he scribbled with his own hand at the age of 80 for a sacred purpose, would finally be sold by some of his heirs to a printer-publisher. *Ambiya Bani* (1757), the handwritten manuscript on the lives of Islamic prophets by Mamud, was printed on cheap paper in 1874, 50 years within the death of the author, and sold cheaply to reach a wider mass, not everybody among them literate. What would have shocked him to the core was the fact that the manuscript he prepared as a sacred duty to enlighten the vernacular soul on the lives of Islamic prophets was registered to prevent other printers/publishers from extracting money out of that particular text — the beginning of copyright.

The print-and-copyright phenomenon indicates a shift in the conception of the sacred and the way the sacred was realised by a community through narratives. It is also a shift from the way the community constantly produced itself through its relationship to narratives and the way narratives inveigled themselves to function within the community. While talking about changes ushered in by print, we need to look at subsequent transformation as a flow, a continuum of a prevalent memory about stories in a new mode of remembrance. Print indicates the formation of a new sensibility within the community through its new technologies of production and change in the medium of expression. Print, as a new technology and social force, brought new dimensions to the culture of words/narratives, new realizations of the community and religion. As Francis Robinson rightly points out, the Islamic world responded late to the forces of print than Christendom. Ulemas who were previously sceptical about the new technology, which could contaminate with the use of sight the sacredness based on hearing, 'embraced' print only in the nineteenth century. It was basically a strategic adaptation by reformist ulemas to disseminate their ideas about pure Islamic ideals to the masses. But, this step revolutionized the way Islamic knowledge was perceived as a system, with more copies, translations and adaptations of scripture and other classics into the vernacular. Robinson has shown the double bind of print on the ulemas who lost their stranglehold on a knowledge system that they wanted to propagate, with print technology's multiplying potential and ability to reach the masses. The reformist movement could, therefore, become the most influential force to redefine tradition and chart out trajectories towards modernity. Cheap print culture became most operative after the 1830s in Upper India and in Bengal where reformist Islam shackled and stirred the imagination about Muslim self and the sense of a community. In Bengal, didactic and entertaining texts in cheap print flooded the market as an intense response to print technology that became the defined ways for pleasure and piety. It is the forms of popular piety that must be engaged with to understand the nuances of identity formation of the Bengali Muslim community in the wake of modernity.

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This essay will initiate an understanding of the connection between cheap print and popular piety while enquiring about the adequacy of ‘cheapness’, ‘popular’ and ‘print’ as parameters to define realisation and conceptualization of piety so instrumental in defining Muslim public life in late nineteenth century. To achieve that, this essay will try to understand the fractures within the concept of popular. Through a literary form, *puthi* as the popular cheap market named a printed text in Bat Tala², the formations of piety would be engaged with to understand contemporary intentions of the Muslim public.

I have referred to Heyat Mamud, because he would be among the few authors of the oral- scribal culture whose narrative on the battle of Karbala, *Jarijungnama* (1723), who would continue to be circulated in the early print culture. I have chosen the theme of Karbala, for the purpose of this essay, as this theme oscillated between religiosity and narrative, scripture and ritual, history of the community and imagined story to make history tactile and palpable.

The battle of Karbala marks the first sectarian schism within the Islamic community, which got split between the Sunnis and the Shias. As the climax of a long drawn debate between the inheritance of prophetic line and caliphate, the Prophet’s grandson Imam Husayn was killed in an unjust battle with his followers on the banks of Karbala by the river Forat in 680 AD. This battle, the saga of loss and mourning entered the domain of literature within two hundred years of the event and travelled wherever Islam went, in whatever garb. It offered the travelling community a core of their religious identity, built up forms of piety for the newly converted masses without keeping any sectarian exclusivity associated with it. Devotionalism around the Prophet, his daughter Fatema, son-in-law Ali and grandsons Imam Hasan and Husayn was articulated through narratives on the battle of Karbala in Bangla since mid seventeenth century and an illustrious literary tradition flourished creating an emotional- narrative bonding with *pak panjatan* . In medieval and early modern Bengal, authors like Muhammad Khan, Daulat Ujir Bahram Khan, Hamid, Heyat Mamud and Fakir Garibullah were instrumental in creating the tradition of telling about the Prophet’s grandsons in Bangla.

If we talk about the continuation of Karbala narratives from its oral pre-modernity to early print culture, we need to investigate new forms of textuality and new systems of production and consumption of this theme in a new era. An investigation of community demands an understanding of the culture of textuality, both popular

² Bat Tala is a demographic area in the Chitpur area of North Calcutta where early print culture flourished and took up an enormous shape. Groups of printers and publishers (block makers, book binders, engravers and distributors gathered as well) emerged to give it a shape of a popular industry with innumerable cheap prints on different subjects including didactic and entertaining narratives, astrology and almanac. *Puthis* are what cheaply printed books in this culture were called. Later on, with the proliferation of print industry, when books were being published from different corners of Bengal, Bat Tala acquired some sort of generic meaning to define cheap prints.

and elite, that formed a group of heterogeneous people as an interpretative community³, as a community of consumers⁴. But, to accomplish that investigation in the age of print technology we need to be careful about not imposing an over-simplistic dichotomy between print and orality⁵, speech and writing, ritual and script. Similarly, a clear-cut division between the popular and the elite may not be adequate to chart out a layered argumentative space to claim modernity for the Muslim technology we need to be careful about not imposing an over-simplistic dichotomy between print and orality⁶, speech and writing, ritual and script. Similarly, a clear-cut division between the popular and the elite may not be adequate to chart out a layered argumentative space to claim modernity for the Muslim community in Bengal. For this, I will engage with the popular print culture concentrated in and around Bat Tala in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My question would be, from the engagement with the basic tenets of the early print culture in Bat Tala, whether any linear evolutionary history of print is possible for a smooth departure from the oral nonmodern to arrive at Muslim modernity.

From *Kathakata* to *Kitabhana*: Piety at Threshold

The theoreticians' stance of looking at print as a radical force of change⁷ may overlook complex ways in which print and orality coexist and act simultaneously to contest and complement each other. Though cheap print culture, as the most important field of popular culture of the last few centuries, at the very onset, may seem to be exclusively connected with producers and consumers from socioeconomic margins, a study of its reception may expose only points of overlap and contest. The culture of reading of the Karbala puthis⁸ spread

³ Stanley Fish rejects authorial intention and places meaning solely on those receiving the text. Stanley Fish's reader-response theory conceptualized 'interpretive community' in the act of the readers who invest meaning in the text. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). We should remember to extend Stanley Fish's conceptualization by adding the fact that the manufacturers of the texts belong to the grid of 'interpretive community' making the act of writing an act of interpretation as well. It is difficult to maintain a producer-consumer binary in terms of readership and interpretation anymore after this extension.

⁴ Roger Chartier defined patterns of cultural consumption as a form of production which constitutes representations that are never identical to those of the producers. Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between practices and Representations*, tr.Lydia G Cochrane (Cambridge: Cambridge University press,1988) p40. Here is a call to look at the popular prints of Karbala, not as authorial texts, but as reception of textual cultures.

⁵ This begins with Roger Chartier warning against too simplistic opposition between print and orality, developed by later historians of print culture. Chartier saw print as a simultaneous process which went with orders of oral, scribal and performative traditions rather than acting as a direct replacement of the oral. Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, tr.Lydia G Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). Sheldon Pollock, to add to this discussion about beyond the binaries, points out this simultaneity of different cultures of text-formation and dissemination coexisting at the same time. Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) p15.

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⁷ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *Print as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)

⁸ Puthi is the generic name of all books printed on cheap paper and circulated at a moderate rate to different areas of the city and outside. There was a huge network of circulation which included both the publishers' office and the hawkers spread all

across different socio-economic groups with different religious and aesthetic inclinations. Here, to understand Muslim popular piety in the late 19th century Bengal vis-a-vis cheap prints, it is a compelling theoretical invite for the researcher to go beyond a set of binary opposites that explain popular print culture traditionally. That may enable the researcher to look beyond binaries to form and formulate a new problematic for consumer communities and also raise new questions of cultural history (of Muslim modernity in Bengal).

In the latter half of nineteenth century, perceptible changes can be felt in the Muslim community in its understanding of socio-economic-ideological newness that ushered in the transformation of political power. In the latter half of nineteenth century, irrespective of demographic and social cleavages, myriad responses could be discerned in various degrees within Bengal's Muslim community. Fundamentalist reform⁹ through the activities of preachers of Tariqa-e-Muhammadiya¹⁰, Titu Mir and the Faraidi leader Haji Shariatullah invoked a sense of justice to be achieved by returning to "true Islam". Primarily, the antagonism, fractured within the emerging ideas of reform itself, was in the form of anticolonial and anti-feudal struggles. The journey towards the ideal form of Islam was articulated not in an autonomously religious language; rather, these fundamentalist affirmations could hardly be differentiated from land and social rights of poor Muslim peasantry¹¹. Fundamentalist reformers did not only pose military and ideological threat to the colonial power, they also attempted to minimize the impact of the traditional pirs and mullahs who created and upheld the Islamic religious system in

Bengal so far. It was the beginning of differentiation between Islamic and non-Islamic in Bengal when the fundamentalist reformists attempted to dismiss forms of Islamic practices and understandings upheld by the traditionalist mullahs¹².

These movements, reformist-revivalist in nature, attempted to purge elements, *shirk* and *bid'at*¹³ as they termed them, from the body of Islam that accumulated through slow and long-term intimate transactions

over rural Bengal.

⁹ Fundamentalist reform is the generic name attributed by Rafiuddin Ahmad to signify all the systematic attempts made by the learned ulama to purge out the non-Islamic elements from Islam. He made these to poles, the fundamentalists and traditionalists to show moments of conflict and subsequent consensus. Rafiuddin Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981)

¹⁰ Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya, as an early reformist school, launched the jihad movement under the leadership of Shah Sayyid Ahmad (1786-1831). Later, Tariqa made a serious impact on Bengal through the missionary works of its Patna caliphs, Maulana Inayat Ali and Wilayat Ali.

¹¹ Muin ud-din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Faraidi Movement in Bengal: 1818-1906*, (Karachi, Pakistan Historical Society, 1965), Qeyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement of India* (South Asia Books, 1994)

¹² Rafiuddin Ahmed cited these two terms, fundamentalist and traditionalist to conceptualize the distinction between the old and new interpretive systems one connected to the scriptural revival of the Islamic ideals and the latter was connected to localized forms of doing and interpreting Islam.

¹³ Shirk and bid'at are connected to each other. *Shirk* signifies Islam's accommodation of ideas as a result of its connection to polytheistic local religions. *Bid'at* is a set of bad innovations emerged in Islam as a consequence of its adaptation of local ritualistic practices.

between exogenous forms of Islam and literary-aesthetic and physical ritualistic patterns of the local religious communities of Bengal (of South Asia to be more accurate). Tariqa movement was more connected to political struggle against the British by upholding the conceptions of *jihad* and *hijarat* unlike the Faraizis who became more effective in terms of direct dealing with the oppression of the peasantry¹⁴ in Bengal. These two movements, with their different orientations, energised rural masses towards “pure Islam”, toward a feeling of belonging to an imagined community.

The print culture reflected this new-found interest to save a so-called degenerated Islam; nonetheless, no unilinearity could be found in an attempt towards a more structured knowledge. The attempts was played out in the form of increasing interest in printing didactic manuals and constant mobility of preachers moving through villages to secure their interpretation of Islam. The subsequent period experienced a huge proliferation of reformist texts printed on cheap papers and their dissemination even in the remotest quarters of Bengal¹⁵. While reformist ulemas from outside of Bengal with their missionary zeal roamed inner districts, the associates of local reformers like Haji Shariatullah and Titu Mir defied landlords with all their might, landlords and rural religious authorities felt threatened. Popular print carried the dynamic churn of relationships — influence, rejection and adaptation — among different literary-religious communities, reformist or fundamentalist. Here we also see the emergence of counter-narratives by the traditionalists who tried to nullify the effects of reformers and carry on with their authority over the local religious systems¹⁶. In this process of mutual antagonism, overlaps occurred after preliminary coercion and we find moments of consensus and mutual adaptation between the fundamentalists and the traditionalists, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes strategic. With the proliferation of the reformist education system¹⁷, the traditionalists, who used to pose a half-baked understanding of the meaning of Islam, felt the urge to get trained in this new structure and books published in late nineteenth century by the traditionalists reflected this scriptural exposure. Our authors of the Karbala texts in cheap print culture, coming from the traditionalist fold of the contemporary Muslim society, Hanafi as they identified themselves, were undoubtedly the products of this new education system.

Responses and reactions from within the Muslim community in the atmosphere of changing social paradigms of colonialism followed no single parameter. Social elite among urban Muslim community with Muslim

¹⁴ Rafiuddin Ahmad, *ibid*.

¹⁵ While a reformist pathi, *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya* by Abdul Aziz claimed to have purged put *shirk* and *bid'at* from rural Bengal, the traditional mullahs tried their best to write and print pathis to counter-balance their impact. It was basically Tariqa's disregard of the system of *mazhabs*, four law-schools of Islam, that was violently attacked by the traditionalists who claimed themselves to be Hanafi. Hanafi is one of the four *mazhabs* of Islam.

¹⁶ Reformists texts were *Ketab Kasf al-Haq* by Male Muhammad (Calcutta 1911-12), and for typical reaction of the traditionalis, *Akbar al-Marifat* by Muhammad Mallick, *Irshad-i-Khaligiya* (Calcutta 1903), *Dai al-Sharur* by Abdus Sattar.

¹⁷ Here, Deoband movement and Ahl e-Sunnat became extremely effective in spreading structured Islamic knowledge through proliferating madrasa education in Upper India and also in Bengal.

landlords of rural areas, *ashrafs* in the sense of the class, were sceptical and critical about anti-British sentiment of the rebellion as they thought that the colonizers might refuse them many opportunities they were entitled to as allies. Opportunities such as English education were on the top of the priority list of the urban elite

who did not consider rural Muslims as belonging to their class because of their less-refined religiosity and a lower degree of authenticity as Muslims converted from the local mass. Local landlords who patronized rural mullahs for a basic practice of Islamic knowledge among their subjects, tried to retain their hold on the masses against the influence of the reformers from outside by reaffirming the authority of the mullahs¹⁸. They even assigned them to write *fatwas* against reformers to secure their religious-social stranglehold¹⁹. As rural communities were exposed to religion through the experience of the narratives and were so used to a fractured understanding of Islam taught by the often ill-informed mullahs, they could hardly demarcate between scriptures and *qissas* as religious sources.

The masses, as the consumer of cheap prints, emerged as more than one homogeneous entity. A study of cheap and popular prints can show us overlapping and contesting sites within the community to look at the Muslim community in the wake of modernity — not a monolith, but a site of consensus and contest of ideas and imaginations around narrative and history, around the *sharia* and the sensory. The battle of Karbala, with its voracious capacity as history and narrative, became a relatively more viable and productive site to engage with the intentions of the community in transition²⁰.

Karbala repertoire, with the sacred characters from *ahl e-bayt*, the family of the Prophet, while being placed within forms of popular piety conceived and expressed in different genres of the cheap print culture, becomes productive in understanding the changing perception of Islamic self and the Muslim community in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Reformist Islam gave the community a turn from a that-worldly Islam to a this-worldly Islam by invoking the ideal character of the Prophet in the form of Prophet-centric piety²¹. This-worldly realisation of Islam in the form of Prophet-centric piety replaced the figure of the Sufi pir who was the ideological centre of that-worldly Islam. It would be interesting to notice how any text, entertaining or didactic, reformist or fundamentalist, in cheap print

¹⁸ In the bahas/debates between the fundamentalist preachers and traditionalists was a common phenomenon in the rural districts of Bengal. William Hunter described several occasions where he witnessed strong antagonism between rural religious systems and external reformist zeal.

¹⁹ Rafiuddin Ahmad, *ibid*, p72

²⁰ Attempts can be made to revisit various consenting and contesting relationships between different groups that belonged to print culture and used it to meet several needs about religion and community vis-a-vis modernity. This revisit would raise methodological and conceptual issues concerning the formation of cultural history and the imagination of Islam and the Muslim community in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

²¹ Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001)

culture would need to praise the sacred members of ahl-e-bayt, Fatema, Ali, Hasan and Husayn immediately after praising Muhammad in the *naat* section.

At this historical crossroads, piety, Muslim community and modernity has to be understood in the interface between the unfixity of orality and the fixity of a printed text, the script and the speech, the elite and the folk, the book and the body.

Uncertain Author, Fixed Publisher

Stuart Blackburn emphasized on simultaneity while discussing the relationship between Tamil folklore and print in the context of nationalism and critiqued binary between oral and print cultures for the early print culture²². It's an interface between the performative and the print that emerged when non-modern expressions, both performative forms and scribal-oral narratives, like musical drama, ballad, *dastan*, *qissa* were being printed²³.

The entry of the Karbala repertoire into the printed format, similarly, did not loosen the link from the scripted-performative traditions. Rather, Karbala texts from the scribal culture were chosen to be printed and published in this early print culture without making much alteration in the text to fit a new format. It was a simple change of media, the medium of expression that carried the ambivalence of orality and print together and made recitation of the printed book possible before an audience with varying degrees of literacy or a lack of it²⁴. Garibullah and Heyat Mamud may have been chosen by the print culture for reproduction of their manuscripts, but there was an array of authors whose manuscripts were simultaneously scribed and orally transmitted while cheaply printed versions were simultaneously available in Bat Tala. It is not only an author's concurrent presence in the scribal and print cultures in the same historical period, cheap print culture coexisted with the newly developing elite genres and sensibilities around them. In this multi-dimensionality of the literary community, relatively successful Karbala authors like Jonab Ali and Muhammad Munshi

²² According to Blackburn, the print, without creating any rupture in the existing mode of transmission, bridged the gap between orality and print, and brought them together in the form of printed Tamil folklore. The printed form, with the beginning of reading, did not terminate performance-based dissemination but also opened up other engagements with print like reading aloud from the book in front of an audience etc. Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, eds, *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006)

²³ The printed form, with the beginning of reading, did not terminate performance-based dissemination and also opened up other engagements with print like reading aloud from the book in front of an audience. Kathryn Hansen worked on the orality-print interface in North Indian popular musical drama form and the narrative tradition, Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (California: University of California Press, 1989). Kumkum Sangari said, even if the form entered the domain of print, it moved 'back and forth between oral narration, print and performance', "Multiple Temporalities, Unsettled Boundaries, Trickster Women: Reading a Nineteenth Century Qissa", in Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, *ibid*, p215

²⁴ We notice the instruction for singing as an integral part of Heyat Mamud's printed text, If one cannot sing the four-line couplet form, he might convert it into two-line.

continued to scribe their manuscripts²⁵, titled *Shahid e Karbala* for both, that would become extremely popular in print²⁶, in a more standardized climate of print culture in the latter half of nineteenth century. The reiteration of Stuart Blackburn's observation at the start of his book on the relationship between printed folklore and nationalism in colonial south India may seem valid here too as symptomatic of the early print culture — "print did not produce new books, only more old books."²⁷

The classical reading of print culture as bringing forth 'communications revolution' as proposed by Elizabeth Eisenstein necessitates a more nuanced study of different consumer- communities inhabiting different ends of the socio-political-ideational spectrum instead of simplistically claiming a radical transformation with the advent of print. Much work had been done after Eisenstein's groundbreaking work on print culture *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*²⁸ where she proposed a mechanistic approach to explore 'the preservative power of print' and identified increased dissemination, standardization and fixity of text as the main features of print culture²⁹. Later, this reading became inadequate as being mechanistic and upholding an evolutionary approach to the ideational and material changes in a society divided between several binary poles like the elite and the folk, the literate and the nonliterate etc. This was refuted by Adrian Johns in his study of print in early modern England where he showed evidences of piracy and unauthorized printing against Eisenstein's 'intrinsic fixity' of the print culture³⁰. John's key concept was, rather, 'uncertainty'. Print, according to him, has many cultures within which one might like to explore interpretative communities. Francis Robinson, quite rightly, put up this observation in his study on print and Islam in South Asia that till mid-nineteenth century this fixity was unimaginable³¹. Frances Pritchett has already shown through the example of the *qissa* genre and its proliferation in the printed form that fixity was never absolute and some genres defied it even if they were produced in

print.³³

²⁵ Jonab Ali finished scribing his manuscript in 1882 and Muhammad Munshi finished his in 1900.

²⁶ Within one year of the scribing of his manuscript, Jonab Ali's *Shahid e Karbala* was published from Bat Tala. Siddikiya Library of Upper Chitpur Road published and reprinted editions from 1883. Within twelve years of the scribing of the manuscript, Muhammad Munshi had ten editions because of the high demand of the Karbala narratives. Mobarak Ali Khondakar of 29/12 Gopi Krishna Pal Lane published these editions from Satyanarayan Press, Kolkata. That these texts held their positions in both scribal and print cultures are evident in their presence in both types of catalogues on manuscript and print. Ahmad Sharif, in his *Puthi Parichiti*, has enlisted all these *puthis* with their dates and other specifications. In that book it can be noticed that manuscripts continued to be scribed even in a period of much proliferation of print and standardized genres simultaneous with literacy. *Puthi Parichiti*, Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Bangla Bibhag, 1958

²⁷ It can be a print of a prevalent manuscript written sometimes in late eighteenth century or it can be a manuscript coming directly from the author to the printer. The prevalent text, oscillating between the copyist's desk and the printer's workshop, already had a community of listeners who used to enjoy the text as a performance-text. Words are not only events in the oral culture (as being performed or recited), they carry the elements of performance as well. They are performative in both the sense which continued even when standardization was achieved in linguistic and generic terms.

²⁸ Eisenstein, 1980

²⁹ Eisenstein, 1980, pp51-159

³⁰ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) p40

³¹ Robinson, 2001, p68

But what Robinson follows is a two-tiered idea of a society with the *sharia* and the lived forms of Islam working along with ever-expanding structured power of the sharia. In his formulation of the impact of print on the Muslim community and Islamic ideology, Robinson disclaims the position of some historians who proposed the idea of peaceful coexistence of the scripture and the 'lived- folkness' of Islam to define the quality of Islam in this subcontinent. In those theorizations, which Robinson opposes, the lived, without being affected by the sharia, continued to be there in the ritualistic realisation of Islam from below³². My observation is that though Robinson calls to explore Muslim history in south Asia as a layered transaction between the orthodox-orthoprax and the heterodox-heteroprax, he remained within the gamut of a two-storied Islamic society without mentioning the 'middling' categories³³ that could have made transactions more layered, appropriation more nuanced. Robinson's theorization of transaction between two groups, the ortho and the hetero, proposes a one-way *hegemonic* structure where the grand tradition slowly eats up the small pockets of lived communities³⁴.

Ambivalence carried on in the early printed texts till a more fixed consumer entered the domain of print, till institutions of literature (printing press, publishing houses, and literary societies) got more structured and gave rise to standardization of genre and language. Even when a more standardized middle class driven market emerged to tell the tale of Karbala in a standardized language through standardized genres, it carried the trace of its dialogues in

cheap print culture. On the other hand, cheap print culture had its own trials regarding standardization of genre and connection to the elite culture of the scriptures. After *Bishad Sindhu*, the first attempt to write about the Karbala in prose by Mir Musharraf Husain (pub 1887), when there was a flood of such standardized attempts to express Karbala in modern generic patterns, there was simultaneous presence of cheap prints on Karbala. In a period of literary standardization and a more structured print culture, along with Mir Musharraf Husain (*Bishad Sindhu*, 1887), Abul Ma'ali Muhammad Hamid ali (*Kasembadh Kavya*, 1905, *Jaoynamodddhar Kavya*, 1907), Matiur Rahman Khan (*Yezidbadh Kavya*, 1899, *Moslembadh Kavya*, 1308/1901), Kaykobad (*Muharram Sharif ba Atmabisarjan Kavya*, 1933), Abdul Bari (*Karbala Kavya*, 1912), Sayyid Ismail Husain Siraji (*Mahashiksha*, 1322/1915), Abdul Munaem (*Pancha Shahid Kavya*, 1919), Azhar Ali (*Hazrat Emam Hasan Hosayner Jiboni*, 1932) Muhammad Abdul Rashid (*Karbala*, 1936), Mohammad Uddin Ahmad (*Moharram Kanda*, 1912) attempted a standardized contemporary Bangla and generic formulations, both in prose and lyric so close to the Hindu middle class readership. Simultaneously, we can see a constant flow of popular renditions on Karbala that continued to appear in the cheap print format

³² Imtiyaz Ahmad, *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981)

³³ Harris, Tim, 1989, "The problem of "popular political culture" in seventeenth-century London", *History of European Ideas*, 10, pp 43-58

³⁴ Robinson, 2001, p46

using Musalmani Bangla³⁵ as the linguistic medium. Musalmani Bangla did not really match with the aspirations of the Muslim intelligentsia that had started envisaging their template of modernity by exploring a more elite language and genre being explored by their Hindu counterpart. Muhammad Munshi finished *Shahid e Karbala* in 1900 which had its tenth edition within 19 years of its inception³⁶. Sa'ad Ali and Abdul Wahhab, co-authored *Shahide Karbala* in the first decade of the twentieth century³⁷, that experienced much success at the market and continued to be reprinted for the next few decades. Muhammad Eshakuddin's *Dastan Shahid e Karbala* (1929) and Qazi Aminul Hak's *Jung e Karbala* (1939-1945³⁸) were written as the steady continuation of the popular tradition. All these *puthis* written in Musalmani Bangla continued to be printed to wholesome popular reception, creating a market of cheap prints on the theme of Karbala as a living tradition till date. Garibullah's *Jungnama*, though under the name of Yakub, still gets printed by a popular press. Qazi Aminul Hak's *Jung e Karbala* was printed as late as in the 1970s³⁹. Babur Ali's *Bahatture Khun*, scarcely available in North 24 Parganas, is claimed to have been printed last in the 1980s⁴⁰.

Printed books appeared as commodities once the rules of the market were clear to native entrepreneurs. The printers and publishers, in the act of multiplying texts, became more important than the author of a previous era. The making of the text as a printed form and controlling its dissemination were more crucial for this new culture. Here arrived a sensibility geared around profit to be achieved in the market without fixity that is the general marker of a profit-oriented organization in Bat Tala. Tajaddin Muhammad, the most illustrious of the publishers, overshadowed the individual author like Garibullah or Yakub, with more than 50 books at a time under his credit readily available at his house in Masjid Parha Street. His publication list, throughout the last three decades of nineteenth century, impressive in its wide variety of genres and translations, usually came in an extra page inserted after the text.

³⁵ Musalmani Bangla was a generic name for the language emerged in late eighteenth century in the Hooghly Howrah region of Bengal and became a sort of lingua franca for the mid and lower part of Bengal in the next centuries. It was first coined by Rev. James Long when he prepared lists of printed books, *Descriptive Catalogue of Vernacular Books and Pamphlets*, in 1867, coined this 'Islamized' form of language. This register of language with its free admixture of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi and local Bangla became the all-engrossing medium for writing didactic manual and entertaining texts by the Muslim authors from different parts of Bengal. With its another name, *dobhashi* (bi-language), Musalmani Bangla became synonymous for cheap print culture in Bat Tala. Later, when Muslim intelligentsia attempted to demarcate a modernity from the lowly and vulgar and not-so-aesthetically sound systems of literary discourses, Musalmani Bangla was vilified as an inadequate medium for a Muslim modernity.

³⁶ *Shahide Karbala*, Muhammad Munshi, publisher, Mobarak Ali Khondakar, 29/12 Gopi Krishna Pal Lane, Satyanarayan Press, 10th edition, 1319/1912

³⁷ Gholam Saklayen, *Banglaye Marsiya Sahitya* : Udbhab O Bikash (Rajshahi: Bangla Bibhag, Rajshahi Biswabidyalay, 1968) p236

³⁸ The author referred to the Second World War and the famine of the 1943 when he could not continue with writing and resumed it after the calamities were over.

³⁹ Bangla Academy Library, Dhaka

⁴⁰ People from the villages of Mandra, where the only copy of this book is part of a personal collection, told me so in a discussion in 2012.

The early days of Bat Tala print could show this ambiguity as there was neither much standardization of language nor itemization of the new genre. Without standardization of language and genre, it was difficult to achieve fixity. Non-authorization of the text was a process through which the printer- publisher could commodify the text. Later, the text was fixed with undoubted stability when the name of the author became prominent, showing individuation of the text in a world where individual talent was the condition for its popularity. Before this fixity, text, textuality and the reception of the text was not individualized to form an individual approach to religion and society, to form a this-worldly religion from a that-worldly Islam. Piracy was the symptom of this unfixed authority. Most of Garibullah's *puthis* were printed and re-printed by several publishers with other authors' names. His *Jungnama* was published under the name of Yakub Ali by several publishers, which ran out of print several times⁴¹. This *puthi* was published also under the name of Shifuiddin in 1877 from Kolkata, which shows how canny publishers attempted to extract the maximum profit by using an inclination to unfixity⁴². That several editions of Yakub Ali's *Jungnama* were published by a Hindu press confirmed these strategies of the market ruled more by the enterprise of the printer- publisher than attestation of the author's authenticity⁴³. Fixity came out of this appropriation of the text by the publisher turning the name of the author as the part of the title of the text, an attestation which did not carry any authorial agency. If we follow the structure of the text, it can be noticed that it was the attestation by the publisher of the printed text that overshadowed the name and the presence of the person who wrote it. Especially after the 1848 Registration Act, the publisher was inspired to become more self-positing as to referring to his claim over the printed material to be protected by the act from being pirated. Unfixity of a text with/without the name of the author, thus, opened up the possibility of the control of authorities who tended to lose their symbolic power over the text once texts were individualized with the author's name. This transformation brought change in

⁴¹ All the *puthis* written by Garibullah followed the condition of un-fixity and lack of authenticity of a less structured print-market. That there was maximum confusion around the authorship of *Jungnama* might prove its maximum popularity among readers and maximum market viability. It is really difficult to say that the scribal sensibility of contemporary times was affected by the lack of fixity of print but that the scribed *puthis* also carried this confusion around might be an evidence of a dialogicity between an old and a new technology. That it is not only the continuation of an old system into the new as a productive residual form, but a simultaneous event of influence on the older and much fixed form by a new and emergent one. Though Ahmad Sharif has referred that "We presume that the first part of 'Jungnama' or *Shahide Karbala* was written by Garibullah and the last part was by Mohammad Yakub. Because, in some *puthis*, in the first part, Garibullah's *bhanita* (author's self-introduction) is seen whereas in the second part, Yakub's *bhanita* is seen". *Puthi Parichiti*, Collected by Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad and Edited by Ahmad Sharif, Department of Bangla, Dhaka University, 1958, p171. But all the *puthis*, not some, carried this division of authorship, be it a manuscript or a printed *Jungnama*. Sometimes Yakub's *bhanita* outnumbered Garibullah's to such an extent that Abdul Gaffar Siddiqi even claimed *Jungnama* to be originally written by Yakub, not Garibullah. 'Jungnama', *Sahitya Parishat Patrika*, Vol2, 1324, pp130-131

⁴² That the original author of 'Jungnama' was Garibullah and Yakub might be the magnificent scribe, was authenticated by Sukumar Sen (*Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol1, Eastern Publishers, Calcutta, 1962, p524, footnote), Muhammad Shahidullah (*Bangla Sahityer Katha*, Vol2, p299-300), Ahmad Sharif (Bangali O Bangla sahitya, p125 and Anisujjaman (*Muslim Manas O Bangla Sahitya*, p125).

⁴³ In the British Library collection we find *Jungnama* came out in 1878/1285, 1880/1286, 1881/1287 from Harihar Press. Also in 1876/1283 from Mortajabi Press, Kalikata, from Siddikiye Press in 1880/1286 and 1881/1287. These information confirm the unparalleled popularity of this *Jungnama* *puthi*.

the pattern and dynamics of the print culture as a system which involved a change in authorial affiliation, new understanding of piety, religion, language, genre and the society.

But it should always be remembered that Karbala can be posited in a fluidity where while gradually conforming to emerging demands of more structured institutions of print, it continued to defy the tenets of fixity of print attained diachronically. At the same time,

Karbala theme produced in Musalmani Bangla or *dobhashi*, started to connect itself to the grand scriptural tradition to create its own authentication of piety and to form valid textual forms for religious modernity. In this dialogic framework, we should not take this 'popular presence' as some sort of monolith. Popular print, while remaining popular, showed imprints of contact and conversation with different elitist strands and inclinations.

For me, it is this dialogic between these registers, a widely ranged argumentative space, the interstitial space, the middling categories, a complexity of Muslim modernity arose in terms of cultural and political nationalisms. In that argumentative space lie the fractures and fissures in the quest for identity of the Bengali Muslims.

Following what Roger Chartier said, we can interject here that these widely circulated books crossed social boundaries of the Muslim community and drew readers from very diverse social and economic levels. So there should be an amount of caution against predetermining the sociological level of nonelite prints as purely popular⁴⁴. Whereas the cheap print, by definition, is supposed to be thin and lowly priced, between the unfixity of the cheap and the fixity of the elite, emerged texts like Muhammad Eshakuddin's *Dastan Shahid e Karbala*, divided into seven chapters (*balam*), the 622-page edition priced Rs 7 in 1929; Sa'ad Ali's *Shahid e Karbala*, divided in four chapters (*daptar*), a 525-page edition priced at Rs 6.50 in 1910s. The presence of repeated references to scriptural sources⁴⁵ to authenticate any narrative situation posited the text within a different gamut of piety inclined more towards a standardized form of religiosity. This new dependence and association with scriptures, basically the Hadis repertoire, to authenticate narrative with scriptural status, produces the Muslim reading public with a markedly different piety and religiosity, eventually invoking different kinds of interpretative practices.

Gradual fixity of these texts in *dobhashi*, while following the textual format of the older puthis on Karbala, represented a middle class tenor. Karbala texts in *dobhashi*, by learned traditionalist Hanafi mullahs emerged

⁴⁴ Quoted in Elizabeth Sauer's *Paper Contestations and Textual Communities in England, 1640-1675* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005)

⁴⁵ Either the reference of different *Hadis* literatures and/or the reference of the Rabi who wrote those authentic verses were given to claim a connection with high religious knowledge.

out of a new system of madrasa education (direct effect of the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Sunnat) who started using titles like Munshis and Maulavis like an inseparable part of their identity in the first half of the twentieth century. Eshakuddin did not claim an *alem* lineage (or connection to the madrasa education system) like Muhammad Munshi and Qazi Aminul Haq (who clearly brought up their high learning at the start) but confirmed his flair in Persian at the beginning of his selfintroduction in his Karbala narrative. These authors from the traditional religious fold of the Muslim public might have craved for their own standardization/ fixity/ authenticity by introducing elite rhetoric from Islamic scriptures which they needed to authenticate as learned Hanafis, the next generation of the traditionalist religious authorities. There was also an urge to refer to an array of authentic sources while writing each and every episode in a prickly defence against reformist allegations. According to the reformists, the popular version of Islam as expounded in the narrative genres practiced by the traditionalist mullahs was far removed from the authentic. No more was it enough to vaguely refer to 'some Persian text', or more specifically, even *Muktal Husayn*⁴⁶ to place a trans-creation with respect to the original. Now it was a constant anxiety to claim some kind of authenticity of the narrative that had simultaneity with the new reading public of the Muslim community. For instance, authentication was accomplished not only at the start of the *dastan* by Eshakuddin where he gave names of over twelve books as sources and references⁴⁷, the urge to authenticate was a repetitive reminder embedded within the narrative, an authorial ploy where he concluded many episodes with citations. Sa'ad Ali and Abdul Wahhab, after writing any episode, continuously referred to the fact that they were following the well established narratives in sacred books written by some learned Rabi⁴⁸.

Oral Form, Scripted Format

Blackburn talked about the continuation of oral culture, patterns of spoken language and vernacular cognitive framework that confronted content and format of the printed book and created a liminal phase in the book industry⁴⁹. The oral, as an aesthetic-cognitive experience, as well as a form of expression, would now be rudely or discreetly shoved out in the next phase of standardization and creation of a uni-linear modernity. This attempt towards standardization, again, was multifarious and polyvalent, depending on the affiliation, understanding and cultural repertoire of authors concerned, multiple forms of piety and fractured and layered nature of consumption.

⁴⁶ Thus the authors of the Karbala narratives in early modern Bengal, like Muhammad Khan and Hamid, attempted authenticity by referring to *some* book in Persian.

⁴⁷ *Lataef Ashrafi, Anaser Shahadate, Nabutan Shuhada, Sawayek Mahrekate, Kashfol Mahzub, Tafsir Kashshaf, Sabasana Huliya, Aoana Reowaj, Rahatol Kulub, Mosbahal Kulub, Fazayele Sahuressiyam, Kitab Mahbub*, following the Bangla way of writing the names.

⁴⁸ It comes as a refrain, thus said the Rabis. Rabi was a learned person eligible to comment on the Hadis.

⁴⁹ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Nationalism and Nationalism in South India*, (Delhi: Orient Blackswan) 2006, p17

As the differences between oral and printed genres, language and thematic concerns were negotiated by the Muslim intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to propose a national and a modernistic schema, this aspiration for a more fixed and authentic version percolated into the cheap print culture. Cheap print culture, in its ambivalent dynamics with modernity, tried to envisage a connection with the sociology of reading and writing embedded in the culture of literacy.

At certain social layers, demarcation between speech and script, most probably due to constant presence of non-standard variants or remnant elements of oral cultures, and specific reading practices of the masses, was blurred or jerky at best. So, one sees reading of texts printed in Bat Tala opening up a network determined by a triad of values taken from oral, performative and script cultures present in various capacities.

Though *jungnama* was a part of a bigger ritualistic repertoire commemorating Muharram⁵⁰, they simultaneously fulfilled different narrative-performative purposes as they were recited in the month of Muharram as a marker of the painful events in Karbala⁵¹ and also at other formal reading occasions. The title of Heyat Mamud's narrative *Jarijungnama* affirmed the text's position within the performative tradition called the *jari*⁵² even as its contents retained the performative elements in the scribed text⁵³. The narrative structure of *Jarijungnama* affirmed the generic relevance of the adjective, *jari*, in the title⁵⁴, a performative

⁵⁰ As the reading of the pain of the events of Karbala and the commemoration of Muharram were not a sectarian exclusivity in early modern Bengal, the texts even if they were recited or performed, did not attest Muharram as a sectarian event. The beginning of textualization on the themes of Karbala, first in fragments and then in a full length format from the late sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries did not confirm Muharram as a contemporary sacred event. The commemoration of Muharram began later when the reading of the narratives had already taken up the shape of a tradition.

Hayat Mamud's *Jungnama* reveals the sheer physicality of the grief of women that is an inevitable part of Muharram. Chest beating and hair tearing, as lived and bodily expressions of performing grief, create the performative through Mamud's scribed and recited words, affirming the presence of the tradition of expressing grief during Muharram in early modern Bengal. All angels and Prophets, who came down on the plains of Karbala when Imam Husayn was martyred, expressed their grief in the form of *matam* reaffirming the physical expression of pain, as a contemporary ritual. The continuation of the text in the print format not only affirms the sensory aspects of Muharram as a contemporary socioreligious practice, but also shows the all-pervasiveness of the commemoration as a social event side-by-side with popularity of the printed text across sects. Islamist reform would try to eradicate these sensory aspects by reconfiguring a meditative Islam for which a reformulation of the events of Karbala became necessary in the reformist discourse of the late nineteenth century.

⁵¹ We should remember that the long narrative tradition on the theme of the Karbala battle offered narrative pleasure even without being connected to the rituals of Muharram in the eponymous month.

⁵² *Jari*, as a performative tradition, according to researchers, developed along the culture of the recitation of puthis. Sukumar Sen commented that *jungnama* narratives were recited like the *mangal kavya*. It has already been observed in the previous chapter that *Jungnama* or other long narratives like *Nabivamsa* were composed to fill up the void in the minds of newly converts, previously occupied with the narrative imagination of the divine beings of the panchalis and mangal kavyas. (Bangla Sahityer Itihas, Vol II, p478. This singing of the stories of Karbala was in practice even before they got exposed to the written format. During the eighteenth century we can see an assimilation of different purely performative-narrative traditions (*Ghajir Gaan*, *Madar Pির Gan*, *Manik Pির Gaan* etc) into a manuscript culture. *Jari*, almost during that time, entered the domain of writing and became a folk performative tradition. (*Folklore o Likhito Sahiya: Jariganer Asare Bishad-Sindhu: Atmikaran o Parobeshan Paddhati*, Simon Zacaria and Najmin Martuja, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 2012, P41)

⁵³ *Jarijungnama* retained the textual divisions those were used in its oral-performative original format.

⁵⁴ *Jari* comes from *azadari*, which means expressing sorrow over the death of Imam Husayn. This is a performative tradition where the main singer tells the story of Karbala in *apanchali* format and occasionally breaks into song. There are musical accompaniments, vocal and instrumental, which supplement the performance of the main singer called *bayati*. Throughout the

tradition in the eastern part of Bengal that commemorates the death of Imam Husayn and others in his army on the plains of Karbala. *Jari* became a folk performative tradition, once the culture of expressing grief through narratives became a religious reality for the converted masses of Bengal. Thus it became more than the reading of a narrative; instead, it became a part of the commemoration of Muharram, a performance linked to the ritualistic repertoire. Even while printed, all performative elements were retained. This somehow confirmed not only Blackburn's position on the continuity of old genres in a new technology of dissemination, but also showed the overlap between printed and performed genres⁵⁵ in early print culture⁵⁶. The narrative patterns of texts on Karbala published in Bat Tala showed them belonging to various registers of oration and performance. Garibullah's *Jungnama* was in the format of long narratives, descriptive, diegetic, with an episodic progression like the *panchalis* as did Jonab Ali's. Mohammad Munshi's and Sa'ad Ali-Azhar Ali's *Dastan Shahide Karbala* offered us enough justification that they were all read, if not as a part of a performative repertoire of Muharram, as a part of recitation-performance for a designated audience. That these recitation-performances did have sacred values for the orator-performer was quite apparent in the narratives where the audience was inspired to engage with the text for a hallowed purpose⁵⁷. The retention of sacredness of listening in the printed format transformed the value of print as well as that of the implied reader placed between the acts of reading and listening according to his capacity in an ambivalent milieu of the literary-performative. It can be said from the literary references of the *puthis* under discussion that it was a network of reading-listening-performing-writing where writing about Karbala was being accomplished. Print culture, at least in Bat Tala, did not try to create any new network that nullified the impact of the performative. Rather, it accentuated the expectation of the audience/readership while experiencing the text, whether it was by listening or reading. As already said, it was not sufficient to interrogate whether it was a mechanical distinction between two channels of communication, that was between the scribed-and-heard and the written-and-read, rather it was the *sensibility of orality* that needs to be realized as continuing in various degrees with diverse grades of writing-print impact.

Similarly, when the author was writing for the scribal and the print cultures at the same time, recitation of the narrative went beyond the generality of reading to follow a sacred calendar by expounding writing as a

month of Muharram people observe this pain by singing and listening to jari songs.

⁵⁵ The introduction by the publisher and the cues of reading/performance reveal this.

⁵⁶ This is an interesting study that other than Heyat Mamud's *Jarjungnama* that acclaimed its connection with the performative tradition of *jari*, rarely any text printed text in Bengali from late eighteenth to early twentieth century showed connections to the performative tradition. Rather, it was more like the culture of oration, predicated upon long narratives of fragmented episodes that the Bangla texts are supposed to belong to. As orated units, fragmented episodes (like those of Garibullah's *Jungnama*) were different from small unites closely resembling *marsiya*s (small lyrics of elegiac expressions in Heyat Mamud's *Jarjungnama*). The textual difference between a narrative and a lyrical exposition could be connected to the difference in the performative arena of the texts that are the condition of their generic differences so to say.

⁵⁷ The audience was addressed in the text itself, like 'listen to O the mumins'.

performative act, here a sacred performance in itself, thus making *writing* a ritualized sacred act. This is true for the authors of the scribal culture of late eighteenth century as well as those of the early print culture⁵⁸.

Here, we should again remember that these authors of popular print culture did not transcend conditions of the scribal-oral culture and their understanding of writing as an *act* showed the ambivalence of these two phases as well. The orator's invocation of the audience was juxtaposed with his self-conscious entry as a writer in Sa'ad Ali Abdul Wahhab's *Adi Brihot Shahid e Karbala* and Eshakuddin's *Dastan Shahide Karbala*, showing textual ambivalence symptomatic of Bat Tala prints even as they entered a more structured print economy and hiked prices.

Thus was the preparation for the Bengali Muslims' trials with modernity, through overlaps and dialogues between several aspirations, between the speech and the script, between the elite and the lived. Cheap print culture could never be relegated to an autonomous realm of popular subculture rather the popular, when is investigated like this, shows fissures, fractures and productive fault-lines in the process of identity formation of the Bengali Muslims.

Whether Bengali and Muslim would be adequately coupled in the formation of an imagined community, would be discussed on another occasion.

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⁵⁸ Radhacharan Gop, Heyat Mamud, Ishakuddin and others also did the same.

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- ³³ Pritchett, Frances, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*, (Delhi: Manohar, 1985) p32
- ³*Pakpanjatan* is the sacred five figures so revered by the Muslim community (Shia and Sunni alike) which includes the prophet, his daughter Fatema, son-in-law Ali and grandsons Hasan and Husayn.