

STORY OF THE BANGLA PRESS

The Star looks at the Bangla newspapers that shaped national movements and structured the written language of the country from the times of the British Raj to post-liberation.

ANANTA YUSUF and UPASHANA SALAM

A teacher of a small village was so overwhelmed by the atrocities of the landowners or zamindars of colonial India that he decided to write something in protest. A former employee of a British-owned indigo production factory, he was a first-hand witness of the cruelties against the workers who gave their sweat and blood to only be further exploited by the zamindars and the British Raj. With the help of a loan and his savings, he founded his own publication house in Komarkhali, Kushtia in 1863, as an act of revolution against this oppression. Kungal Harinath Majumdar could thus be called the first

investigative reporter of the subcontinent with *Gram Barta Prokashita*, a Bangla weekly that aimed to generate public awareness regarding the veiled tyranny of those in power.

While *Gram Barta Prokashita* can be heralded as the first Bangla language newspaper that directly attacked the imperialists and the zamindars, it was far from being the first newspaper or even the first Bangla newspaper in the subcontinent. How exactly then did the ordinary people get the information that the people of today consider their right by law?

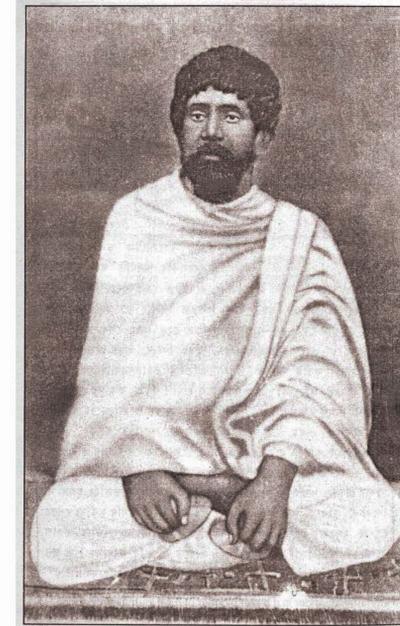
Long, long time ago, the dissemination of information was a privilege solely reserved by the ruling class. Only the news deemed most important would be streamed down to the masses through the help of a messenger and a drum. Ordinary people mostly depended on hearsay and rumours to, ironically, get a truer picture of the political decisions being taken on their behalf by the sovereign powers of the state.

In undivided India, the press began in Calcutta in 1780 to satisfy the needs of the colonials and their cohorts. By the turn of the century, there were a dozen or so periodicals with several hundred subscribers among the European residents of India. The first journal, Hickey's *Bengal Gazette*, began publication in 1780 and was owned by the Irishman Jame Augustus Hickey who came to India as a surgeon's mate. According to Partha Chatterjee's book 'The Black Hole of the Empire', the weekly English language Gazette initially started as a journal where readers could "get information on various com-

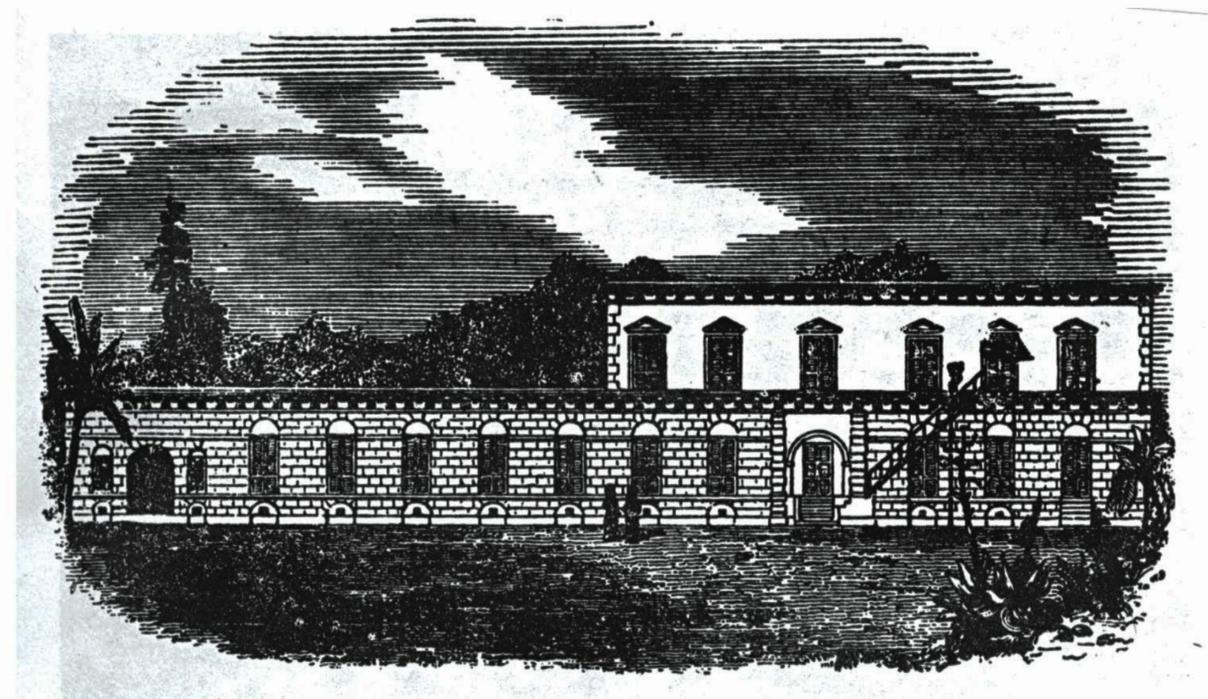
modity prices in the Calcutta markets, sales and auctions, the arrival and departure of ships as well as fires, thefts and accidents in the city." It was only when he tried to "liven" his weekly by printing news about the goings-on of the senior officials of the East India Company that he got into trouble with the

government. He then went on to incur the wrath of the British Empire by printing stories of bestiality and other vile crimes by the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Elijah Impey, and the Governor-general Hastings.

It's little surprise that the imperial government eventually seized Hickey's printing types in 1781 after he was imprisoned against a libel charge by Hastings. After his release from prison, Hickey lived the rest of his life in extreme poverty and died on board a ship to China and was buried at sea. We can't help but note with irony that the editor and publisher of the first printed newspaper of British India was forced to suffer such a fate.



Kungal Harinath Majumdar.



Serampore Missionary Press.