



Left and above
An issue of The Azad noting the death of its founding editor, Maulana Akram Khan.

Below
The Daily Ajadi is considered to be one of the first newspapers to be published immediately after Bangladesh's independence.



Printing blocks from MN Press.

MN Press' printing machine. (right)



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 commodity 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.

While it's true that the English newspapers inspired the birth of Bangla language newspapers in the region, the difference lied in the intrinsic goals of the Bangla newspapers. English newspapers in Calcutta were a means of entertainment and profit whereas Bangla newspapers aimed for cultural enhancement and to inform and educate the privileged class.

The Bangla alphabet did not exist for print in any publication house until 1778. The Serampore Missionary Press first invented a method through which they created a frame for the Bangla alphabet and formed the different letters by using molten iron. This initiative saw the birth of Bangla publications in the region.

"With the introduction of Bangla alphabets in print, more and more locals of the region began to publish their own newspapers. This was a way of expressing their love for their native land while also providing a voice that was uniquely indigenous to the native populace of the region," says Professor Sakhawat Ali Khan of the

Mass Communication and Journalism department of Dhaka University.

The first Bangla language newspapers, *Bengal Gazette* and *Shomachar Dorpon*, published in 1818, were weeklies that were basically published for the entertainment of the elite class of Calcutta. Within the span of five years, a tide of Bangla language newspapers swept the nation.

The news publications of the 19th century were printed in hand-driven press machines. The alphabets would be arranged in a frame and then printed on paper. It would take hours for the ink to dry and probably a day to print a small publication. Four workers were required to print a single page; one person would arrange the alphabets in the correct form in a dais, another would place single pages on the dais and apply pressure on the press machine to print the letters, another person would dry the pages after they were ready while someone else would bind them to form a whole publication. It's difficult to even imagine such an arduous process