

Persianate Print Culture in Late Colonial Modernity: *Habl-ol Matin*, and the Making of a Persianate Information Sphere

Introduction

Historians of modernity have increasingly examined how modern forms of communication, information, and knowledge production emerged across the Global South during the colonial period. This paper examines the emergence of a Persianate information sphere connecting colonial South Asia and Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This presentation argues that the circulation of Persian printed materials—particularly newspapers and books—created a transnational public sphere connecting cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad with southern Iranian port cities such as Shiraz and Bushehr. Central to this transregional public sphere was information which involved printed books, newspapers, pamphlets etc.

Rather than viewing modern information and its networks through the lens of imperial administration and colonial management, this paper focuses on print culture and its circulation to look at the “empire in low spaces,” which involves cultural and intellectual figures and writers, human mobilities as well as technological advancement and investment in print production and dissemination. Persian newspapers and books circulated through networks of merchants, readers, writers, postal infrastructures, and telegraph systems. These aspects created a transregional sphere of information that connected readers across colonial India, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. Central to this presentation is the famous Persian-language newspaper *Habl-ol Matin*, published from Kolkata beginning in 1893. The newspaper was widely circulated across Asia and beyond, and it was as an important medium for the circulation of political news, commentaries, intellectual debates, reports on global affairs, economic and statistical analysis among Persian-speaking audiences. This paper therefore situates Persian print media within the broader history of information circulation under the late colonial modernity, arguing that newspapers helped create an interconnected Persian-language public sphere that extended far beyond the borders of regions.

From the Persianate World to Information History in Persian

In recent years, historians of modernity have increasingly tended to extend the framework of “connected histories” of the Persianate world to the modern histories of the Middle East and South

Asia.¹ The framework of print capitalism has informed a wide array of work in the field. This paper benefits from this historical framework and extends the recent intervention to the study of the formation of a connected empire of information in low spaces between the Middle East and South Asia.

Print technology was a significant medium of information creation and dissemination in the connected history of the Middle East and South Asia in the modern period. Book production, in fact, connected Iran to other parts of the Middle East and South Asia. For example, the port city of Mumbai was a significant place to produce Persian books in India. Specifically, Persian literary textbooks and classics constitute a major part of Persian print productions in the late 19th century and early 20th century.² The merchants from the city of Shiraz in Southern Iran and the Parsi community in colonial India were active in producing printed books. The Parsi community in India, as Monica Ringer has shown, was one of the first communities under the influence of British educational reforms, and by the mid-nineteenth century, they began establishing schools and institutions at their own expense.³ For instance, as she shows, Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Parsee Benevolent Institution was founded in 1849, and six years later it had around 1,294 boys attending the school.⁴ The community also was actively involved in creation of books and printed materials and were actively contributing to a global readership community across Iran and South Asia.

In recent years, several historians of South Asia have increasingly engaged with print cultures under colonial modernity. Ulrike Stark, in her study of the Nawal Kishore Press demonstrates how the press became an empire of book publishing and created a market for books in North India.⁵ Megan Eaton Robb has focused on the case study of Muslim newspapers in North India and the questions of community, and religiosity. She explores how the rural area used the “influence of the newspaper to advocate for a nationalist vision that prized the local political context above overarching national narratives.”⁶ In this regard, she shows how the rural newspaper culture

¹ For a full treatment of the Persianate World in the modern period see Marashi, Afshin, and Mana Kia. 2016. “Introduction: After the Persianate.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36, no. 3: 379–383.

² For a study of Illustrated Books see Marzolph, Ulrich. *Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

³ Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, 38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stark, Ulrike. *An Empire of Book*.

⁶ Megan Eaton Robb. *Print and the Urdu Public*, 3.

created a voice distinct in terms of “temporal, spatial, and social characteristics” to that of the “European and nationalist imagined futures.”⁷ As such, her study is primarily focused on a distinct imagination -largely framed in terms of religion – that rural print culture created, in comparison with that of the urban print culture. Previous studies of culture and print have focused on notions of cosmopolitanism. Notable among these is Nile Green’s *Bombay Islam* in which he considered the religious economy of the city as “cosmopolitan” rooted in its location as a port city.⁸ In a recent work, Amanda Lanzillo examines print culture in 19th century South Asia at the intersection with Muslim religiosity, labor and history of technology to examine how “the versions of Islam embedded in a wide range of Muslim documents.” Hence, print culture in this regard is considered within a religious framework, and not necessarily based on the idea of information. From an administrative and imperial perspective, historians of empire and South Asia have engaged with the idea of information from 1780s until 1860s. Notable among them is C.A Bayly work which shows how the formation of the British Empire was accompanied by a regime of gathering information, consisting of “the networks of Indian running-spies, news writers and knowledgeable secretaries whom officials of the East India Company recruited and deployed in their efforts to secure military, political and social information.”⁹ However, studies of print culture in transnational perspective between colonial South Asia and Iran have remained at the margins of scholarly attention. Persian print materials were widely produced in Indian cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata, often by Iranian merchants and members of the Parsi community. These printed texts circulated widely across the Persian Gulf and into Iran, contributing to the growth of new reading publics. Yet books represented only one dimension of information circulation. Newspapers became an especially important medium because they provided regular updates on political events, global affairs, and local developments. Unlike books, which are often circulated among specific readers and communities, newspapers addressed a broader readership and were frequently shared, borrowed, or publicly read.

***Habl-ol Matin* and the Persianate Information Sphere**

Among Persian newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Habl-ol Matin* was one of the most influential. Published in Kolkata under the editorship of Mo’ayyed al-Islam

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ Nile Green. *Bombay Islam*.

⁹ C.A Bayly. *Empire and information Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*

Kashani, the newspaper circulated widely across colonial India, Iran, Afghanistan, the Ottoman Empire, and even parts of Europe. The newspaper appeared twice a week and combined editorial commentary with extensive news reporting. It published reports on events across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, presenting global political developments to Persian-speaking readers. The significance of the newspaper was also in its wide circulation at a specifically significant juncture of history in Asia concomitant with the rise of constitutionalist movements, specifically given its role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906 in Iran.

The newspaper's circulation depended on the expanding infrastructures of communication in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in a sphere that was under the British empire from South Asia to Southern regions of Iran. Yet, the newspaper should also be situated in the wider infrastructure and modes of information creation and dissemination. For instance, the Telegraph networks were particularly an important medium in the history of information creation and dissemination. Telegraph cables connected cities across the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean and enabled the rapid transmission of news. Reports transmitted via telegraph were frequently published in newspapers, including chiefly in *Habl-ol-Matin*, under sections such as "Foreign Telegraphs" or "Foreign News." Through this entanglement of the newspaper with the Telegraph, reporting on global affairs constituted a major part of the newspaper. For example, issues of the newspaper reported on major international events such as the rising tensions leading to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905. Other reports in *Habl-ol-Matin* covered conflicts in Africa, including the war between the British and the Boers. These reports were often compiled from telegraph dispatches and other international news sources. By translating and circulating such reports in Persian, the newspaper connected Persian-speaking audiences to global political events. Readers in Iran, India, and elsewhere could follow events occurring across the world through a shared language of print and analysis.

Southern Iranian port cities played a particularly important role in these networks of circulation. Cities such as Bushehr functioned as key spaces linking Iran to the wider Indian Ocean world. These port cities hosted telegraph stations, postal infrastructures, and commercial networks that facilitated the movement of printed materials. Newspapers such as *Habl-ol-Matin* entered the Iranian territory chiefly through the Southern port cities including Bushehr. The dissemination of the newspaper at times created sensitivities among the censorship authorities in Southern Iran

leading to banning the newspaper from circulation. *Habl-ol Matin* frequently reported on the developments in the Southern regions in Iran, and copies circulated from coastal cities into the Iranian interiors. Intellectual circles specifically in Southern Iranian cities – with the considerable amount of print public sphere – actively engaged with *Habl-ol-Matin*. Through such networks, port cities became important sites of information exchange and contributed to the formation of new reading publics.