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Scripting the Modern: The Materiality of Fort William College Translations and the Rise of Vernacular Print Culture in the early 19th Century

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Abstract:

This research explores the pivotal role of Fort William College (est. 1800) in shaping the linguistic and cultural modernity of South Asia through the lens of materiality and print culture. By focusing on the college's translation projects in the early 19th century, this study argues that the transition from a traditional manuscript culture to a mechanized print paradigm was not merely a change in medium, but a fundamental "scripting" of the modern vernacular. The college served as a colonial laboratory where the collaborative efforts of British Orientalists and Indian scholars (munshis and pundits) led to the systematic standardization of prose in languages such as Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali. The core of this inquiry examines the materiality of the translated text—the shift toward movable type, the formalization of typography, and the mass distribution of printed books. These physical attributes of the text provided a new sense of fixity and authority to the vernacular, facilitating its ascension over the previously dominant classical languages like Persian and Sanskrit. By analysing representative translations, the paper demonstrates how the requirements of colonial pedagogy and administration necessitated a "plain" prose style, which subsequently laid the foundation for modern literary expression in India. Furthermore, the study situates these developments within the broader context of early 19th-century print culture, viewing Fort William College as a precursor to the "print capitalism" that later fuelled nationalistic and social reform movements. Ultimately, the research concludes that the college's translation legacy represents a critical juncture where colonial technology and indigenous linguistic traditions intersected to produce a durable, printed modern identity for the Indian vernaculars.

Keywords: Fort William College, Materiality of Print, Vernacular Modernity, Translation Studies, Colonial Pedagogy, South Asian Literature, Movable Type.

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INTRODUCTION:

The turn of the nineteenth century marked a profound transformation in the linguistic, literary, and political topography of South Asia. Central to this transformation was the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800 by Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General of India. Ostensibly designed as a training academy for junior British civil servants to master local languages, the college quickly evolved into a crucible for institutionalizing regional vernaculars (Rahman 46–47). Guided by Orientalist scholars like John Borthwick Gilchrist, the college orchestrated a massive translation enterprise that effectively disrupted the long-standing hegemony of Persian, the courtly language of the Mughal Empire (Auer 199–226).

This research paper explores how the pedagogical imperatives of Fort William College catalyzed the rise of modern vernacular print culture. By looking beyond textual content to analyze the *materiality* of translation—the physical technology of the printing press, the standardization of type, the compiling of lexicons, and the spatial economy of the book market—this paper demonstrates how colonial administrative needs inadvertently birthed modern prose.

Specifically, the college's policy of splitting "Hindustani" into mutually exclusive, script-dependent variants (Urdu in the Perso-Arabic script and Sanskritized Hindi in Devanagari) laid the structural and material foundation for nineteenth-century print capitalism and regional language nationalisms (Yadav; Zaidi).

The Institutional Shift: From Courtly Persian to Vernacular Administration

For centuries, Persian served as the undisputed *lingua franca* of governance, diplomacy, and elite literary production across North India, stretching from the Deccan to the Indus valley (Auer 199–226). This courtly ethos relied on a sophisticated, hereditary scribal culture—composed primarily of Muslim *munshis* and Hindu *kayasths*—who meticulously hand-copied manuscripts, maintained administrative registers, and mastered the ornate, metaphorical prose style known as *insha*. This linguistic framework operated as a closed guild of knowledge, where political power and administrative access were inextricably bound to the mastery of a classical, highly stylized foreign language.

However, as the British East India Company transitioned from a mercantile entity focused on maritime trade into an aggressive territorial sovereign following the treaties of Allahabad (1765) and the expansionist campaigns of the late eighteenth century, it encountered severe administrative friction. Relying on an elite, highly stylized classical idiom fundamentally distanced British administrators from the vast agrarian and urban populations they now sought to tax, police, and govern. The Company's district collectors and magistrates found themselves entirely dependent on local native subordinates who could easily manipulate revenue records, legal depositions, and land titles behind the dense veil of complex Persian courtly prose.

To bridge this administrative gap and dismantle the monopoly of the traditional scribal elite, British policymakers concluded that effective, self-sustaining colonial control required a systematic, unmediated understanding of regional dialects (Rahman 46–47). It was no longer sufficient to govern through a classical language of high culture; the colonial state demanded a direct window into the languages of the marketplace and the field.

Linguistic historian Kapil Raj notes that Fort William College functioned as "the first of a series of institutions in which these different knowledge traditions and their corresponding skills were brought together, standardized, and rendered teachable" (qtd. in Auer 205). By institutionalizing vernacular study under a rigid academic curriculum, the college completely reconfigured the socio-political value of local speech. It turned vernacular languages—which had previously existed as fluid, regionally diverse, and primarily spoken dialects—into uniform, grammatically codified, and highly standardized written instruments of statecraft. This shift effectively transformed the vernacular from a medium of local folklore into a rigorous apparatus of colonial surveillance and imperial administration.

The Materiality of Translation: Presses, Type, and Scribal Labor

The translation project at Fort William College was fundamentally a material and technological intervention. Before the nineteenth century, South Asian literary transmission was predominantly oral or preserved through calligraphic manuscript traditions. The introduction of moveable metal type and the expansion of printing

presses changed the physical lifecycle of text.

The Symbiosis with Serampore and Local Presses

Fort William College did not operate in a vacuum; its material output was deeply intertwined with missionary and commercial print networks. The Serampore Mission Press, established by William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward, worked in close proximity with the college to cut matrices, cast localized type, and print educational and religious texts (Das). This relationship transformed the physical accessibility of literature:

[Manuscript Tradition] —> Hand-copied,
Elite, Limited Circulation

|



[Fort William / Serampore] —> Moveable
Metal Type, Standardized Orthography,
Mass Print

The Munshi as Agent and Informant: The Political Economy of Scribal Labor

The labour structure of Fort William College relied on a unique, deeply asymmetrical

collaboration between European colonial administrators and elite native scholars. Seeking to codify the linguistic landscape of North India, figures like John Borthwick Gilchrist hired dozens of *munshis* (traditionally Muslim scholars fluent in Persian and Urdu) and *pandits* (traditionally Hindu scholars versed in Sanskrit and regional dialects) to execute, supervise, and refine the college's translation projects (Yadav). This institutional arrangement forged a complex political economy of knowledge production.

Within this hierarchy, the native informant occupied a highly ambivalent position: they were simultaneously a passive linguistic source to be mined by Orientalist scholars and active, creative authors who fundamentally shaped the contours of the new prose styles (Auer 205). While European supervisors retained institutional oversight and received primary credit, it was the intellectual labour of these native scholars that translated abstract administrative desires into physical text.

[Colonial Administrative Need]

|

▼ (Directives & Financing)

[John Gilchrist / Faculty]

|

▼ (Mediation & Translation Labor)

[Munshis & Pandits (Native Informants)]

—> Authorship under constraints

However, this intellectual collaboration was not unmediated; it was systematically constrained and reshaped by the physical, technological requirements of early moveable type print. Unlike the fluid manuscript tradition—where calligraphers could stretch letters, nest words within one another, and use variable regional spellings—the mechanical logic of the printing press demanded absolute uniformity. Grammars, dictionaries, and prose textbooks had to be heavily reformatted. European pedagogy required the introduction of Western-style punctuation, standardized word spacing, and a rigid, uniform orthography designed to facilitate easy visual scanning and quick reading for young, linguistically untrained British recruits (Rahman 46–47).

This mechanical rationalization had a profound effect on the language itself. The process systematically stripped the North Indian vernaculars of their fluid regional

variations, oral textures, and transitional dialects. By forcing spoken tongues into fixed, typo graphed layouts, the college's printing presses effectively trapped the historical fluidity of the vernacular, freezing dynamic speech into permanent, standardized, and institutionalized typographic matrices.

Fragmenting the Vernacular: The Bifurcation of Hindi and Urdu

One of the most profound and far-reaching socio-political legacies of the translation and publication program at Fort William College was the deliberate, institutionalized linguistic bifurcation of "Hindustani" into modern Urdu and modern Hindi. Historically, the spoken urban dialect of North India—variously termed *Hindavi*, *Dehlavi*, *Rekhta*, or *Hindustani*—existed as a deeply syncretic, shared, and fluid linguistic continuum (Yadav). This spoken vernacular naturally integrated a rich tapestry of localized Prakrit roots with centuries of accumulated Persian, Arabic, and Chagatai Turkish loanwords, shifting organically across different geographical regions and social strata without rigid communal demarcations.

However, the bureaucratic and pedagogical mandates of the colonial state could not operate within the ambiguities of a fluid oral continuum. To train British administrative officers efficiently, the college required fixed, uniform, and easily graded grammar systems paired with distinct, standardized textbooks. This institutional demand triggered a profound material and typographic division based strictly on script choices and vocabulary purism.

By requiring separate language departments and distinct typographic manuals, the college effectively forced a wedge into this linguistic continuum. It carved out two artificially polarized literary registers designed to serve different administrative tracks:

- The Persianized Register (Urdu): This register was systematically tethered to the Perso-Arabic *nasta'liq* script. It leaned heavily on Arabic and Persian vocabulary, drawing structural and cultural inspiration from elite Islamic courtly history and classical poetic traditions.
- The Sanskritized Register (Hindi): This register was deliberately rendered in the Devanagari script. It was consciously purged of its everyday Persianate inflections and systematically restocked

with classical Sanskrit loanwords to construct an independent literary genealogy.

This was not merely a passive philological classification; it was a physical intervention driven by the mechanics of typesetting and book publishing. The college's policy established a precedent where a speaker's cultural, religious, and political allegiance was materially mediated by the script of the textbook they consumed (Yadav). By stabilizing these divergent registers in mass-produced print, Fort William College effectively disrupted the organic bilingualism of the North Indian landscape, laying the material and structural foundations for the rigid, script-based language nationalisms that would partition the subcontinent's cultural psyche long before its physical borders were drawn.

Mir Amman's *Bagh-o-Bahar* (1801)

John Gilchrist commissioned Mir Amman Dehlvi to translate the classic Persian prose tale *Qissa-i Chahar Darvesh* (The Tale of the Four Dervishes) into colloquial Urdu, published as *Bagh-o-Bahar* (Rahman 47; Yadav). The text was celebrated by Europeans for its "pure" and accessible prose style (Yadav). Materially, it was

printed in the Perso-Arabic *nasta'liq* script. This choice permanently linked this register of prose with Islamic courtly history and Persianate vocabulary.

Lallu Ji Lal's *Prem Sagar* (1810)

Concurrently, to cater to a distinct Hindu administrative and cultural demographic, Gilchrist directed linguists like Lallu Ji Lal and Sadal Misra to craft a parallel prose register (Safadi; Yadav). Lallu Ji Lal's *Prem Sagar* (Ocean of Love) was created by systematically purging Persian and Arabic loanwords from Hindustani and substituting them with Sanskrit equivalents (Safadi).

Printed in the Devanagari script, *Prem Sagar* effectively established a new "High Hindi" (Safadi).

Linguistic historians argue that this bifurcated publishing strategy created an artificial fracture. George Grierson observed that this new literary dialect was practically invented by Lallu Ji Lal at the instigation of Gilchrist (qtd. in Yadav). By publishing these works as separate, mutually exclusive manuals, the college materialized a cultural and religious divide through the medium of print technology.

Text	Author / Translator	Primary Script	Linguistic Register	Institutional Role
<i>Bagh-o-Bahar</i> (1801)	Mir Amman Dehlvi	Perso-Arabic (<i>Nasta'liq</i>)	Urdu (Persianized)	Standard text for Hindustani proficiency
<i>Prem Sagar</i> (1810)	Lallu Ji Lal	Devanagari	High Hindi (Sanskritized)	Foundation for modern Sanskritized prose

From College Manuals to Battala: The Rise of Vernacular Print Capitalism

The typographic standards, grammatical matrices, and stylistic prose templates developed within the closed, institutional walls of Fort William College did not remain

confined to colonial administration. Instead, they rapidly spilled over into the wider public sphere, laying the structural groundwork for what Benedict Anderson terms "print capitalism" in South Asia. As civil servants, British administrators, native

pundits, and entrepreneurial local printers moved outside the college's immediate ecosystem, they carried these newly acquired printing technologies, standardized orthographies, and stabilized linguistic registers with them into the open market. The institutional capital of the colonial state inadvertently financed the foundational infrastructure of a decentralized, commercial publishing industry.

In Calcutta, this democratized and commercialized print wave found its most vibrant, chaotic, and revolutionary manifestation in the indigenous commercial print hub known as Battala (located in the northern quarters of the city) (Das). The Battala press culture fundamentally democratized the regional book market by stripping away the elite, exclusionary architecture of both the traditional manuscript culture and the expensive colonial presses. Utilizing cheap, locally manufactured paper, woodcut illustrations, and worn-out metal type discarded by institutional presses, Battala printers produced highly affordable, vernacular publications tailored specifically for the rapidly growing urban middle class, lower-middle-class literate workers, and rural

migrants who flocked to the colonial metropolis (Das).

Far from being a mere site of passive reproduction, Battala functioned as a radical translational palimpsest, aggressively blurring the boundaries between elite, canonical literature and popular, lowbrow consumption. It hybridized the rigid prose structures formulated at Fort William College with the fluid, subversive textures of street performance, folk culture, and religious erotica. As literary scholar P. Das observes:

"The practice of translation became increasingly significant with the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800. The institution played a crucial role in promoting translation by commissioning and publishing works in multiple Indian languages... This facilitated the development of dictionaries, grammars, and literary texts, contributing to the standardization and modernization of Indian linguistic traditions." (Das)

The cheap, mass-produced books of the Battala market successfully mimicked the neat prose formats, paragraph divisions, and standardized typographies pioneered by colonial institutions, yet they completely

subverted their didactic purpose by adapting them to popular tastes. Scandals, mythological retellings, almanacs (*panjikas*), and satirical social commentaries were poured into the very prose vessels designed for colonial civil servants. This systemic shift firmly established the vernacular book as a mass consumer commodity. In doing so, it irrevocably decentralized South Asian intellectual life, shifting the ultimate site of literary and linguistic authority away from royal courts and colonial academies directly into the hands of the commercial marketplace and the reading public.

Scripting the Nation: The Long-Term Sociopolitical Fallout

The material separation of languages initiated at Fort William College in the early nineteenth century set off long-term sociopolitical ripples. By linking language variants directly to specific scripts—and implicitly to specific religious communities—the college's translation infrastructure anticipated the deep communal divisions of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the material reality of these printed texts hardened into rigid cultural identities. When

the colonial government began replacing Persian with vernacular languages in local courts and administrations during the 1830s, the choice of script became a zero-sum battleground for employment and political representation (Safadi). The "Hindi-Urdu controversy" that escalated across the North-Western Provinces was fought precisely along the linguistic fault lines drawn by Fort William's early printing initiatives (Safadi; Yadav). An intervention originally designed for simple administrative convenience ultimately institutionalized the cultural and political divisions that shaped modern South Asian nationalism (Safadi; Zaidi).

Conclusion

Ultimately, Fort William College was far more than a mere pedagogical laboratory or a benign educational academy designed to teach British civil servants how to converse with colonial subjects. It operated as a formidable, state-subsidized material apparatus that aggressively restructured the linguistic consciousness, literary horizons, and epistemological frameworks of North India. Through the systematic deployment of the printing press, the mechanical standardization of moveable metal type, and the execution of highly targeted translation

commissions, the college successfully dismantled centuries of Persian scribal dominance. In doing so, it constructed the very physical and structural scaffoldings upon which modern South Asian vernacular prose was built.

By demanding uniform spacing, fixed punctuation, and standardized grammatical matrices to make local languages legible to the colonial eye, the college transformed fluid oral traditions into rigid, typographed objects of mass consumption. It converted what was once a dynamic, auditory landscape into a visually regimented and mechanically reproducible medium of print.

Yet, this institutional push toward linguistic modernization came at an extraordinarily heavy, permanent cost. The material choices negotiated by Orientalist administrators like John Gilchrist and their networks of native *munshis* and *pandits* did not just capture existing realities. Their decision to systematically divide a shared, fluid spoken idiom—Hindustani—into two mutually exclusive, script-dependent, and lexically polarized text traditions fundamentally fractured the cultural landscape. By explicitly routing Urdu through the Perso-Arabic *nasta'liq* script filled with Persianized vocabulary, and engineering a "High Hindi"

routed through the Devanagari script filled with Sanskritized vocabulary, the college materialized a deep cultural and religious binary. Spoken language, which had historically functioned as a syncretic bridge across communities, was structurally weaponized through the medium of the metal type.

The physical books, grammars, and dictionaries produced within the college walls between 1800 and 1815 did not simply record or preserve South Asian speech; they aggressively scripted the very conceptual categories of the modern. They created a deeply ambivalent legacy. On one hand, this material transformation paved the way for the democratizing force of print capitalism, enabling the rise of commercial print hubs like Battala, lowering the cost of literature, and fostering an expansive, literate public sphere. On the other hand, it hardcoded the polarizing politics of language nationalism and script-based communalism.

These early colonial publishing strategies created linguistic fault lines that hardened over the nineteenth century, directly feeding into the sectarian conflicts of the twentieth century and permanently altering the geopolitical map of South Asia. The modern vernacular book, born out of the imperial

machinery of Calcutta, emerged not as a neutral vessel of culture, but as a primary site of political struggle, administrative surveillance, and fractured national identity.

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