

INDIA'S OLDEST NEWSPAPER: THE CALCUTTA GAZETTE

Jawhar Sircar

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Which is the oldest surviving newspaper in India? Which Indian newspaper started publication at least three years before 'The Times', London, and is still continuing? The answer to both queries would surprise many. 'The Calcutta Gazette', which completes 200 year of publication today.

The 1780s witnessed the birth and the unprecedented advancement of journalism in India. And Calcutta, as the capital of British India, naturally took the lead. Though the Portuguese Missionaries had brought the first printing press to Goa as early as 1557, there was no newspaper or journal in India until January 29, 1780 □□when James Augustus Hicky ventured to bring out his controversial 'Bengal Gazette' from Calcutta.

Hicky's two sheets of paper, about twelve inches by eight, contained enough advertisements for Hicky to prosper, but his vitriolic columns caused so much indignation among the East India Company's 'New Nabobs' that the survival of India's first paper (and its proprietor) became a matter of considerable speculation. The administration of an exasperated Hastings finally clinched the issue in March, 1782, by seizing and closing down Hicky's press. Hicky himself found his lodgings shifted to the Calcutta Jail.

The Company's authorities were in favour of a Press that would be less 'scurrilous' and a trifle more understanding. Before Hicky's Bengal Gazette completed 10 months, a rival paper called the 'Indian Gazette' was started by B. Messink, who was connected with the theatre, along with a salt merchant of Calcutta called Peter Reed. India's second newspaper was promptly rewarded by Warren Hastings for its sobriety and loyalty with the privilege of circulation through the Post Office free of postage. The India Gazette did not, however, survive for long.

The newspaper that did survive and still does, was the third newspaper □□though in its present form, it can hardly be called a newspaper. The 'Calcutta Gazette' was the brainchild of a brilliant

individual; Francis Gladwin. A pioneering Orientalist and lexicographer, Gladwin was a civil servant who thought far ahead of his time. He was the first Professor of Persian at the Fort William College in Calcutta, which Lord Wellesley had founded for the proper training of the Company's 'griffins' as soon as they reached India.

Francis Gladwin's translation of the Ain-i-Akbari reserved for him a secure place among the assembly of Orientalists, while his other translation from Persian, like the 'Memories of Khojeh Abdual Kurrern', the Tuti-Namah, Sheik Saadi's Gulistan, to name a few, continue to enthuse scholars. Gladwin's dictionary, the 'Compendious Vocabulary of English and Persian', his 'Ceremonies of the Eastern Nations' and his 'Vocabulary, Persian, Arabic and English' displayed his complete mastery over Persian Arabic, Hindustani and Bengali.

Gladwin had, of course, to apply his genius to more mundane matters pertaining to revenue administration, and in this sphere too, he has left ample evidence of his grasp, insight and labours. His contribution to, and his association with, the Asiatic Society — founded, incidentally — in the same year as the Calcutta Gazette, is part of the Society's folklore.

Gladwin had applied formally to "The Hon'ble Governor General & Council" on 2nd February, 1784, seeking sanction for the publication of "A Authorized Gazette, under the Immediate Superintendence of a Covenanted Servant". The administration moved amazingly fast and within four days, the Secretary of the Revenue Department issued a notification declaring "Letter from Mr. Gladwin. February 2 — agreed to in terms of his application". The order further enjoined upon the "the Heads of Offices to Issue all such Advertisement or Publication as may be ordered on the part of the Company, thro' the Channel of his Paper."

Thus was born the Calcutta Gazette, on the 4th of March, exactly 200 years ago, in Calcutta. Like its two forerunner, the Calcutta Gazette was also a weekly, but whereas the other two Gazettes were published on Saturday, this Gazette was published on Thursdays and till today, the major publications of the Calcutta Gazette are brought out on Thursdays. One reason for this could be that Muslim Assistants were difficult to come by on Fridays, whereas most Christians refuse to work on Sundays. This made the publication of a paper that used Persian and English letters somewhat difficult between Fridays and Mondays. But this is merely a

supposition.

‘The Calcutta Gazette’ or ‘Oriental Advertiser’ as it was called, started publication from 37 Larkins Lane, an off-shoot of Old Court House Street in the Dalhousie Square area. Though Gladwin was a civil servant, "the official department of the paper was kept quite distinct from the editorial, and the Company's authorities were in no way connected or identified with the management or politics of the paper, but only used it as a medium for making known general orders, requisitions, and official notices of all sorts". The Government never regarded (until 1832) the Calcutta Gazette as its official organ and often took umbrage at some of its comments. In fact, such displeasure was often made public even through the medium of the same paper. On the 10th of February, 1785, an announcement was made in the Gazette that the Governor-General and Council had expressed their entire disapprobation of some portion of the Gazette dated September, 30, 1784.

Gladwin could not resist a swipe or two against some of his own government's actions. Mere government advertising support can hardly sustain a newspaper and the "Gazette's gentlemanly sense of fair play" and reporting must have contributed considerably towards its longevity, though certain students of the history of journalism tend to dismiss the ‘Calcutta Gazette’ (even in its prime period between 1784 and 1832) as a mere organ of the government, which is rather unkind.

From 1832, however, the Calcutta Gazette did become the official publication of the Government □□ of both the Government of Bengal and the Government of India till 1864, and only of the Government of Bengal after 1864. But for the first thirty one years of publication, the Gazette guarded its independence with pride and dignity. Even for the next seventeen years, till 1832, the Gazette continued to publish news and views as any other independent newspaper, though its name was temporarily changed to the Government Gazette. In fact, the first forty eight years of independent publication and free selection and reporting of news gave the Gazette its prestige and historical importance.

Historians, research-scholars and journalists continue to pore over the musty volumes of the Calcutta Gazette of this period to cross-check the authenticity of events as well as for testing the veracity of their findings. So important is the historical value of the publication of the Gazette (as source material, up to 1832) that in the 1860s, the Records Commission

took upon itself the task of sifting all available material published in the Calcutta Gazette and bringing out volumes of 'Selections from the Calcutta Gazette'. Five volumes were published by W.S Seton Carr and Hugh Sandemenn, covering the period up to 1823. Another volume of the 'Selections' was published in 1959 by A.C. Dasgupta of the Bengal Government Press.

In March, 1832, the Calcutta Gazette resumed its original name, but became purely an official publication of the Government, in which form it continues till today. Its historical importance and legal value, however, remain all though the Gazette's later one hundred and fifty two years of uninterrupted publication.

The Calcutta Gazette has naturally seen many changes in size, dates of publication, ownership, content and publication addresses, but these are only natural for any publication or any organisation that outlives two centuries.

When it started, British power in India was in its relative infancy. The Gazette witnessed the growth and consolidation of the Raj; the spread of an Empire over which the sun never set; the exciting transformation of India; the growth of nationalism; the political and legal crises of an alien administration desperately trying to cling on and the pangs of the birth of a free nation. Not only did the Gazette witness it all, it mirrored all it saw □□very faithfully so, till 1832 and within the limitation of a Government publication after that year.

As a mirror of Indian affairs, the Calcutta Gazette was at its best up to 1832, when independent reporters and diverse correspondents filled the newspaper with letters, dispatches, songs, poems, news, trade bulletins and essays, which may interest the casual reader even today, while the Company and the citizens of the Settlement of Calcutta published notices, notifications and advertisements in it.

"Run Away" - A slave boy, called J - belonging to Lt Col C. - ... This notice was published on 20th July, 1786, in the Gazette, along with many similar contemporary notices and items about "Coffree boys for sale" clearly reveals what most history books fall to mention □□that slavery was an open practice in Calcutta, even among the British, till the middle of the 19th century.

Another notice that appeared, on the 11th of December, 1788, announced that Mr. Tiretta was organizing a lottery and was offering as first prize a plot of land valued as Rs.1,96,000 for the construction of a bazaar. It was this plot that was to become famous later as the Tiretti Bazzar of Calcutta. The Gazette's reports about Vauxhall and fireworks, nautches and banquets, festivities and poojas give us valuable glimpses of 18th and 19th century society in Calcutta. Items regarding Suttees and infanticide, and the reports of Ram Mohan Roy's crusade, can make us visualize vividly the events of the age of transition and the struggle between obscurantism and reform.

The present condition of the Calcutta Gazette □□its delayed publication and lack of organization □□calls for immediate and drastic action. The Administrative Reform Committee of the West Bengal Government reported last year on the sorry state of this historic journal and suggested positive steps for its improvement. The public at large has almost lost interest in this Government publication, but a researcher may yet discover items of interest (and sometimes) of amusement.

A government notification (not of West Bengal) that appeared in the Gazette of 7th December, 1978, contained this passage: "The present Central government consisting of a bunch of lunatics, comedians, ludicrous comic actors and actress, nincompoops of the first waters greedy power mongers & clinging on the seats of political privileges for their own personal gain, are not only utterly unfit to guide the destiny of this disintegrating country, but are positively traitors to the country and deserve to be thrown behind prison bars if not publicly executed for high treason against the State of India."

It was only after a second and third look that one discovered that this extract was meant to be proscribed under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, and not for wide publicity in the official organ that it inadvertently received!

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