

GAIL MINAULT

Master Ramchandra of Delhi College: Teacher, Journalist, and Cultural Intermediary

IN THE GENERATION BEFORE the Indian revolt of 1857, the city of Delhi had revived from the devastation caused by repeated invasions in the eighteenth century and its cultural and literary life was particularly vibrant. Indeed, the characterization of this age as a “twilight”¹ is unwarranted. It was an age that witnessed the flowering of Urdu poetry with the careers of Ghālib, Żauq, and Żafar, the emergence of the Urdu political press, and the ferment of religious controversy. It was also a time of intellectual interaction between the new British rulers and the Mughal service élites of North India (whether Hindu or Muslim), who still retained their administrative and cultural importance.

The institution of learning that both contained that intellectual interaction and abetted the flowering of literature and the press was Delhi College. I have discussed elsewhere the college and its contributions to knowledge.² This institution had two sections, a *madrasa* with an Oriental curriculum and a college with a Western curriculum, but its chief innovation was that all subjects, whether Oriental or Western, were taught in the vernacular, Urdu. This required collaboration between the European administrators and the Indian teachers and students at the college to translate and publish texts on scientific, social, and literary

¹By Percival Spear, in *Twilight of the Mughuls* (Cambridge: University Press, 1949).

²In “Delhi College and Urdu,” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 14 (1999), pp. 119–34; and “*Qiran us-Sa’adain*: The Dialogue Between Eastern and Western Learning at Delhi College,” in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History, 1760–1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 260–77.

subjects. The college established its own press that published not only textbooks, but also periodicals containing articles about contemporary developments in science and technology, international events, and serialized translations of popular works of literature and biography.

The chief figure in the development of the periodicals that issued from the Delhi College press in the 1840s and 1850s was Master Ramchandra, the mathematics professor at the *madrassa*. A North Indian Kayastha, Ramchandra rose from a relatively humble background to achieve renown both as a mathematician and as an Urdu stylist, known for his clear, unpretentious prose. He edited two of the journals published by the college: *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzirīn*, a fortnightly, and *Muḥibb-e Hind (MH)*, a monthly scientific and literary journal. In the pages of these periodicals, Ramchandra made Western innovations in science and technology available to the literate public of North India, but also articulated an ideology of reform that involved openness to knowledge from wherever it issued. Ramchandra had a curiosity and love of learning that reflected the ideas that were being discussed at the college and among intellectuals in Delhi at the time. This paper will develop an intellectual portrait of Ramchandra, and discuss the contents of the Delhi College periodicals and Ramchandra's contribution to Urdu journalism and the transmission of knowledge.

Ramchandra was the son of Rai Sunderlal Mathur who, like many Kayasthas, served the government. Literate in Persian and adept at record keeping, Kayasthas served the Mughals and their successor states, including the East India Company as its territory expanded.³ Sunderlal was from Delhi, but at the time Ramchandra was born, in 1821, he was posted to Panipat as a *nā'ib tehsildār*. When Ramchandra was six he started school at a *maktab*, where he would have received basic training in Arabic and Persian grammar, reading, and the copying of texts. The family eventually moved back to Delhi, where Ramchandra entered the Delhi English school that became Delhi College. Sunderlal died in 1831, leaving his widow with six children. Ramchandra was married a year later to the daughter of a wealthy Kayastha family. Her dowry helped alleviate the family's straitened economic circumstances, but it turned out that his wife

³For Kayastha subcastes and their careers in Mughal and post-Mughal bureaucracy, see Karen I. Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste: The Kayasthas of Hyderabad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), especially pp. 57–123.

was a deaf-mute. To cope with this adversity and to help his siblings get an education, Ramchandra quit school and worked as a clerk for three years before re-enrolling in Delhi College on scholarship. He was a devoted and successful student and completed his studies in 1844, at which point he was employed by Delhi College as a teacher of science and mathematics in the Oriental (or *madrassa*) section of the school. In this capacity, he taught algebra, trigonometry, and other branches of math through the medium of Urdu.⁴

As part of his teaching duties, Ramchandra also became involved in the work of the Delhi Vernacular Translation Society. The society had been founded in the early 1840s by the Principal of Delhi College, Felix Boutros, in order to translate textbooks into Urdu, to facilitate the teaching mission of both the Western and Oriental sections of the college. Ramchandra and other teachers and students at the college participated in this effort, creating textbooks for their courses in the process. The society not only translated textbooks in medicine, math, science, law, economics, and history from English into Urdu, but also translated works of literature—significantly, not all of them from Western languages. For example, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian classics such as *Alf Laila va Laila* (Thousand and One Nights), Sa’dī’s *Gulistān*, and the *Dharma Shastras*, were rendered into Urdu by and for the students in the Oriental section of the college.⁵ It is worthwhile to remark in passing that the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy in curricular matters, then raging among educators in India in the aftermath of Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Education” of 1835, seemed to be much less important in the Mughal capital city than it did in the chambers of government in Calcutta.

Ramchandra translated several mathematics textbooks into Urdu and produced two original works in English. One of these, *A Treatise on*

⁴This biographical sketch of Ramchandra is based on ‘Abdu ’l-Ḥaḡ, *Marḥūm Dehli Kālij* (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1962), pp. 167–72, hereafter cited as MDK; Edwin Jacob, *A Memoir of Professor Yesudas Ramchandra of Delhi* (Kanpur: Christian Church Mission Press, 1902); Ṣādīqu ’r-Raḥmān Qīdvā’ī, *Māṣṭar Rāmčandra* (Delhi: Department of Urdu, Delhi University, 1961); and K. Sajun Lal., “Professor Ramchandra as an Urdu Journalist,” *Islamic Culture [IC]* 23, 1–2 (Jan.–Apr. 1949): 22–36.

⁵MDK, pp. 148–53; *Report of the General Committee on Public Instruction [GCPI], Bengal for 1840/41–1841/42*, Appendix XV by Boutros, dated Delhi, 1 July 1842, India Office Library & Records [IOLR], V/24/948.

Problems of Maxima and Minima Solved by Algebra, first published in 1850, was reprinted in London in 1859, commended by a leading mathematician there, and given a prize by the Indian government. Two Indian scholars, Dhruv Raina and S. Irfan Habib, have recently commented that this treatise reveals Ramchandra's intellect to be more than simply a conduit of Western mathematical knowledge to his students. In this treatise, Ramchandra pursued a means of solving problems algebraically that might more easily have been solved using differential calculus. For this reason, some simply dismissed it. Augustus De Morgan, a professor of mathematics at London's University College, however, did not. De Morgan championed the work, wrote an introduction to the British edition, and pointed out that Ramchandra's solution showed the strength of the Indian mathematical tradition in algebra. In developing this solution, Ramchandra performed an important pedagogical purpose: to reveal to his students the importance of their own tradition as a supplement to the newer methodologies coming from the West. The Indian mathematical tradition going back to Bhaskara was thus, in some sense, revitalized. Raina and Habib—if I understand them correctly—see Ramchandra's work as developing an alternative mathematical discourse that resisted cultural colonialism. Whether one agrees with that or not, what is certain is that Ramchandra validated Indian intellectual contributions, and his own, in the course of his mathematical work.⁶

At Delhi College, the moving spirit behind the translation society, Boutros, fell prey to ill health in the mid-1840s and was succeeded as Principal by Dr. Aloys Sprenger. Sprenger (1813–93) was a native of the Tyrol who, after completing his medical education, joined the medical service of the British East India Company in order to pursue his real intellectual passion, Oriental literatures.⁷ A scholar of Arabic and Persian,

⁶Ramchandra, *A Treatise on Problems of Maxima and Minima Solved by Algebra* with a foreword by Augustus De Morgan (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1859); Dhruv Raina and S. Irfan Habib, "Cultural Foundations of a Nineteenth Century Mathematical Project," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 24/37 (Sept. 16, 1989): 2082–6; "Regarding the Recompense to be Granted to Ramchandra of the Delhi College for His Work on Algebra," *Home* (Educ) 11–13, 8 May 1857, National Archives of India [NAI].

⁷For Sprenger's distinguished career as a literary scholar, see Annemarie Schimmel, *German Contributions to the Study of Pakistani Linguistics* (Hamburg, 1981), pp. 48–74.

Dr. Sprenger presided over the founding of the college press, the Maḡba‘u ‘l-‘Ulūm, and founded the first college periodical, the weekly *Qirānu ‘s-Sa’dain*, in 1845.⁸ *Qirānu ‘s-Sa’dain* is an Arabic astronomical term denoting the conjunction of the two fortunate planets, Jupiter and Venus; it also referred metaphorically to the interaction of two cultures, Eastern and Western, in the intellectual life of the college. Pandit Dharm Narayan, Pandit Moti Lal, and Maulvī Karīm Bakhsh, all associated with Delhi College and its press, served at various times as editor of *Qirānu ‘s-Sa’dain*, which, as a weekly, contained current news as well as literary items. In 1849, for example, events of the Sikh war were reported and there was an obituary of Lord Auckland, the former Governor-General. The activities and durbars of the Mughal emperor, Bahādur Shāh Ṣafar, were chronicled and Ṣafar’s poems also appeared occasionally. Notices of books published by the college press and reviews were printed, as were translations of articles of literary and scientific interest.⁹

Ramchandra occasionally contributed to *Qirānu ‘s-Sa’dain*, but he also started the fortnightly *Favā’idu ‘n-Nāzirīn* (roughly translated: “For the Benefit of the Reader”) with the idea of spreading new learning beyond the walls of Delhi College. The fortnightly contained some news items, but more literary and scientific articles, serialized translations, and even illustrations: line drawings, maps, and diagrams (many of them copied from the *London Weekly Times*). He noted an earthquake in Constantinople in 1851 and the beginnings of the construction of the railroad leading westward from Calcutta.¹⁰ In an example of a somewhat longer article in *Favā’idu ‘n-Nāzirīn*, Ramchandra discussed the condition of Muslim learning in India (“Ḥāl ‘Ulūm Ahl-e Islām kā Hindustān Mēn”) and criticized not so much the nature of Islamic scholarship as the means of its transmission. He said that Islam and Muslim learning came to India via Iran and the Persian language. The official language of the court

⁸Unfortunately very few copies of this journal have survived, and those in very fragile condition. I have seen a few issues from 1849 and 1853 in the Sajun Lal collection of newspapers at Osmania University, Hyderabad.

⁹K. Sajun Lal, “A Few Newspapers of the Pre-Mutiny Period,” *Indian Historical Records Commission* [IHRC] 19 (1942): 130–1. Sajun Lal summarizes the contents of issues from the collection of Dr. Muḡiyu ‘d-Dīn Qādrī Zōr at the Idāra-e Adabiyāt-e Urdū in Hyderabad. Cf. Nadir Ali Khan, *A History of Urdu Journalism* (Delhi: Idāra-e Adabiyāt-e Dillī, 1991), pp. 136–45.

¹⁰Sajun Lal in IHRC 19 (1942): 129–30

remained Persian, even when the rulers were Turkish speakers. The original Arabic sources of religious and scientific learning, and the Greek sources of the Arabic knowledge, were lost sight of in translation, and in digests of translations, in digests of digests, and in stylistic embroidery. As a result, Islamic learning stagnated. Ramchandra consequently commended the revival of the study of Arabic grammar as well as *Ḥadīṣ* and *fiqh* in the India of his day as a necessary return to the original sources and greater research.¹¹

Ramchandra's purposes here are linguistic and pedagogical. Though aware of the revival of religious scholarship taking place in Delhi thanks to the line of Shāh Valīu 'l-Lāh and Shāh 'Abdu 'l-'Azīz, Ramchandra is also inspired by the type of scholarly activity occurring at Delhi College, with its emphasis on the need for accurate translation. In fact this article reveals much about Ramchandra's intellectual approach to cultural encounter. Linguistic scholarship is necessary and the translators need to know both the source language and the target language well. But in addition, there is the question of transmission of knowledge. For that, there are two further considerations in his view: first, the target language needs to be that commonly spoken by the intended audience (Persian, in this article, being neither the language of the rulers nor of their Indian subjects), and secondly, the knowledge needs to be conveyed in as direct and clear a fashion as possible—no flowery embroidery. Ramchandra here, while not talking about British policies, nevertheless indirectly endorses the disestablishment of Persian, and he slams the ornate style of the courtly Persian of his day. He also, by extension, champions the transmission of knowledge in an Indian language, Urdu in this case. So this article contains a summation of Ramchandra's pedagogical approach.

His prose style further exemplified that approach. In contrast to much nineteenth-century Urdu prose, Ramchandra's writing was deliberately conversational, colloquial, and straightforward. His style remains easily accessible to this day. Various scholars have praised his style and traced his influence in the prose of Ghālib's letters and in the greater simplicity of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's later reformist writings in *Tehzību 'l-Akhlāq*. Certainly, Ramchandra contributed to the development of a simplified, journalistic Urdu, but when placed beside Ghālib's epistolary

¹¹ *Favā'idu 'n-Nāziriin* 5, 9 (29 April 1850), in Sajun Lal collection, Osmania University.

prose, Ramchandra's style appears more artless than seminal.¹² His championship of clear expository prose in Urdu was certainly influential among his many students at Delhi College and was transmitted via his tireless periodical publication. It seems fair to say of Ramchandra's prose that he wrote as he spoke and he did both in order to teach and to reach as wide an audience as possible, though the circulation of his journals was never large.¹³

Ramchandra followed *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzirīn* with another periodical published from Delhi College, a monthly founded in September 1847. At first called *Khairkhvāh-e Hind* (or "Well-Wisher of India"), the title of the journal was changed after two months to *Muhibb-e Hind* ("One Who Loves India" or "Indian Patriot") to avoid confusion with another *Khairkhvāh-e Hind* published from Mirzapur.¹⁴ The content of this journal was very similar to that of *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzirīn*: articles by Ramchandra and others on scientific, historical, and literary topics; serialized works of general interest; and coverage of local cultural events, especially *mushā'iras*. *Muhibb-e Hind* also had occasional illustrations: sketches, portraits of biographical subjects, and maps.

In one of the earliest issues of his monthly, Ramchandra wrote an important article, "Tarbiyat-e Ahl-e Hind kā Bayān," that further developed his pedagogical ideas. In the Orientalist-Anglicist debate that had by then stirred up intellectual circles in Delhi, Ramchandra acknowledged the importance of English for scientific knowledge, but nevertheless firmly backed the vernacular as the most effective medium of education. He did so not only in the interests of bringing about a synthesis of Eastern and Western knowledge, but especially because it would render that knowledge accessible to more people. He noted that in India, only a tiny minority knew English, and even those did not know it all that well. He noted that English was, if anything, even harder than Persian. Thus the

¹²Khvāja Aḥmad Fārūqī, *Žauq-o-Justajū* (Lucknow: Idāra-e Farōgh-e Urdū, 1967), pp. 273–5; cf. Saiyyida Ja'far, *Māštar Rāmčandra aur Urdū Naṣr kē Irtaqā' mēn unkā Hiṣṣa* (Hyderabad: Abul Kalam Azad Oriental Research Institute, 1960), pp. 90–9.

¹³According to M. 'Atīq Ṣiddiqī, *Šūba-e Shimāl-o-Maghribī kē Akhbārāt-o-Maṭbū'āt* (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū (Hind), 1962), p. 112, the circulation of *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzirīn* at its peak was 150, that of *Muhibb-e Hind* was 52.

¹⁴Sajun Lal, "Ramchandra as an Urdu Journalist," *IC* 23, 1–2 (Jan.–Apr.1949): 33.

spread of knowledge via English would only benefit the few, and would lead to the kinds of problems that he had earlier noted concerning the transmission of knowledge in Persian: misunderstandings, mistranslations, and so on. He answered the Anglicists' argument that there was no one Indian vernacular by arguing that Urdu was understood from Attock to Patna and from Hyderabad, Deccan, to the borders of Nepal. No other language in India was used and comprehended to that extent. Urdu was thus the closest thing to a national language (*qaumī zubān*) in India and it should become the medium of higher education, not English. All peoples of India would benefit from the propagation of knowledge in a generally acceptable vernacular, and in his view, the obvious candidate was Urdu.¹⁵

Titles of other articles that appeared in *Muḥibb-e Hind* give evidence of Ramchandra's eclectic interests as well as the range of topics that interested his potential readers: from "Ẓikr-e Ḍā'viṅg Bel, jis sē Ḍūbā-huā Asbāb Samandar sē Nikāl Sakēn,"¹⁶ ("A Description of the Diving Bell, by Which Sunken Materials May Be Retrieved from the Sea" to "Ḥāl un Ghalaṭiyōñ kā jō ke Fāzilīn-e Hunūd nē 'Ulūm-e Mukhtalifa Shāstar mēñ kī Haiñ"¹⁷ ("A Discussion of the Mistakes that Hindu Learned Men Have Made in Various Sciences in the Shastras"). He published scientific articles on astronomy, on the work of Sir Isaac Newton,¹⁸ and a discussion of the relationship of the human mind and body ("Ḥāl-e Jism aur 'Aql-e Insān kā").¹⁹ Cultural articles included items about ancient Greece: "On Demosthenes,"²⁰ China: "On Confucius,"²¹ and Iran: a biography of the Safavid Shah Abbas.²² Another very popular genre was the travel-cum-ethnographic narrative, such as Edward W. Lane's *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*,²³ Elphinstone's *Kingdom of Caubul*,²⁴ and—putting the shoe on the other foot—the serialization of an original publication from the college press, *Tārikh-e Yūsufi*, or the travels of Yusuf

¹⁵ *Khairkhvāh-e Hind*, 2 (October 1847), cited in Fārūqī, *Ẓauq-o-Justajū*, pp. 277–81; reprint of Fārūqī's introduction to Qidvā'i, *Māstar Rāmčandra*, pp. 38–42.

¹⁶ *Muḥibb-e Hind*, 6 (Feb. 1848).

¹⁷ *MH*, 22 (May 1849).

¹⁸ *MH*, 9 (May 1848).

¹⁹ *MH*, 22 (May 1849).

²⁰ *MH*, 8 (April 1848).

²¹ *MH*, 9 (May 1848).

²² *Khairkhvāh-e Hind*, 1 (Sept. 1847).

²³ *MH*, 34 (June 1850).

²⁴ *MH*, 18 (Feb. 1849).

Khan Kamalposh to England.²⁵ Ramchandra also discussed new scientific knowledge in agriculture and horticulture,²⁶ and summarized works of history and popular science. One of the regular features in *Muḥibb-e Hind*, otherwise devoted to the dissemination of new knowledge, was a monthly selection of Urdu poetry by the likes of Zafar, Mīr Dard, and Shāh Naṣīr. Though Ramchandra was critical of flowery, poetic prose style, he was not disinclined toward verse, perhaps with the thought of increasing the circulation of the journal. Whatever the reason, poetic offerings were an important element in both *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzīrīn* and *Muḥibb-e Hind*, indicative of the importance of poetry and poetic assemblies in the literary life of Delhi at the time.²⁷

Ramchandra continued publishing both *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzīrīn* and *Muḥibb-e Hind* concurrently, frequently with a duplication of contents, until 1851. At the end of that year, he closed *Muḥibb-e Hind*, as its circulation had shrunk from a high of 56 to 32. Then, in July of 1852, he converted to Christianity. This caused an uproar at the college and led to the withdrawal of a number of students.²⁸ The circulation of *Favā'idu 'n-Nāzīrīn* plummeted and by the end of that year it too had ceased publication. It was an unfortunate end to the story of these two journals, especially given their eclectic contents and the lively intellect that animated them both. Ramchandra's purposes throughout had been essentially pedagogical: to inform the public about a wide variety of topics, both Oriental and Western, and to facilitate cultural dialogue. It is a pity that, by his conversion, Ramchandra went too far in the direction of the culture of his colonial masters.

C. A. Bayly, in his massive study on imperial information makes a comment concerning cultural encounter: "Our understanding of colonial discourse must reflect the pervasiveness of Indian agency, of the Indian intellectual challenge, and of Indian cultural vitality."²⁹ This observation

²⁵ *MH*, 28 (Dec. 1849); 30–32 (Feb.–Apr. 1850).

²⁶ *MH*, 23–27 (July–Nov. 1849).

²⁷ Qidvā'i, *Māṣṭar Rāmčandra*, appendix., pp. 178–94; *MH* nos. 14–37, with some missing nos., (Sept. 1848–Aug./Sept. 1850), IOLR.

²⁸ According to MDK, 25 students withdrew or were withdrawn when the news broke of Ramchandra's conversion, p. 56.

²⁹ *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 314.

seems particularly applicable to Ramchandra, at least before his conversion. He acted to propagate learning as widely as possible, he wrote incessantly using the new medium of the periodical press, and he challenged both sides in the cultural dialogue to remain open to the vast amount of new knowledge in the world, whether it arose in the West or the East. Ramchandra was a mediator, a pedagogue, and a popularizer. As with many such figures, his contributions have been overlooked or underestimated. Partly that was because Delhi College, his institutional platform, collapsed during the revolt of 1857, and, though it was revived thereafter, it never recaptured its former prominence. Then, too, English won out in the matter of a national medium of higher education. Ramchandra's most important legacy was in the evolution of Urdu journalistic style. His clear, straightforward, conversational prose exemplifies that "Indian intellectual challenge and Indian cultural vitality" that Bayly commended. □