

LETTER

TO

BABU ISHWAR CHANDRA BIDYASAGAR

ON

BENGALI TYPOGRAPHY.—

1865.

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*Murdoch, Rev. James John*

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BABU ISHWAR CHANDRA BIDYASAGOR,  
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BENGALI TYPOGRAPHY.

SIR,

Though I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, your name and character have long been familiar to me. Your reputation as a Sanskrit scholar is deservedly high. You have the great merit of originating an elegant Bengali prose style, free from bombastic phraseology on the one hand, and vulgarisms on the other. Your school-books, which have attained so large a circulation, have done much to facilitate the progress of the pupils, and to store their minds with useful knowledge. Your efforts in the cause of female education, widow remarriage, and other points connected with social reform, well entitle you to the gratitude of your countrymen. Your past career encourages me to address you on a matter of some importance. I have every reason to hope that any arguments advanced will receive your candid consideration. If convinced of the desirableness of the change, no one will have more influence in bringing it about.

The topic of this letter is Bengali printing. In some respects it is arrant presumption for me to take up such a question, for I barely know the Bengali alphabet. On the other hand, I have one or two advantages. The difficulties to be overcome in acquiring Bengali are vividly before my mind. A child poring over the spelling book knows his sorrows much better than a learned professor. Again, the advancement of elementary education and the publishing of school books in various languages, have been my principal work during the last twenty years.

Of all the oriental tongues which I have examined, I have found the reading of Urdu, in the Persian character, the hardest. As usually printed, it is impossible, in many cases, to give the correct pronunciation without a good knowledge of the language. Bengali, Hindi, and Marathi, are very much easier. Still, there are difficulties connected with them, which I shall



notice below. Singhalese has one or two advantages over Bengali; but easiest of all, is the Tamil of Southern India.\*

### DEFECTS OF BENGALI PRINTING.

Each character in a language should represent only one sound, and the form should be simple. I readily admit that, in some respects, the Bengali alphabet is greatly superior to the English; but this is no reason why improvements practicable in Bengali should be neglected.

Let me now briefly describe the difficulties I felt in studying Bengali. The first two points are of comparatively little consequence. Still, they are worth mentioning.

1. *The suppression of the inherent vowel is not always indicated.* I was told at the commencement that, as a general rule, the vowel অ was inherent in every consonant. Hence I called বর, *bara*. This, I was informed, was wrong; it was to be pronounced *bar*, the inherent vowel being generally suppressed at the end of a word.† I went on reading till I came to তত. This I called *tat*. Again I was corrected, and told to pronounce it *tata*. So with other words. A person not fully understanding the language, cannot be certain whether the final অ is inherent or suppressed. There is no such doubt in Singhalese or Tamil. A mark, equivalent to *biram*,‡ invariably decides the point.

2. *Several of the vowel combinations have double forms.* কুহ, গুহ, তুহ, ভূহ, &c., are used indiscriminately, necessitating the acquisition of an additional number of characters. It does not mend matters to be told that some of the irregular forms are derived from the Nagri. Only one form should be used, anomalies being rejected as far as possible.

I now proceed to the main difficulty,

3. *The great variety of compound letters.* In addition to about 50 simple letters of the alphabet and a dozen vowel symbols, I had to master upwards of 120 joined consonants. I found them united in all sorts of ways. Some were written

\* It is admitted that one great cause of the comparative simplicity of Tamil printing arises from the language itself—consonants not being grouped together nearly so much as in the languages of Northern India.

† It may be objected that *bara* is not in itself wrong, and that the word is so pronounced in poetry. I do not consider this reasoning valid. I was reading prose, not verse. Right or wrong in a grammatical sense must be understood as agreeable or contrary to usage. The real question is, how is the word pronounced in prose? I should use the *biram* in prose and omit it in poetry.

‡ In both languages a dot above the letter is adopted instead of the form in Bengali.



after or below each other, like কক or কু; some, as ঙ and ঞ, were perched on other letters; one unfortunate, ষ, was occasionally turned topsy-turvy, and impaled as in ষ্ঠ; sometimes two heads were stuck on one body as in ঙ্ঠ; in other cases, as ঙ্গ, ঙ্গ, the letters were so compressed, altered, or mutilated, that it was impossible from inspection to recognise them. Nor was this all. When I had gone over the whole of the Second Part of your Borniporichoy, I cherished the vain hope that the dreary task was ended. On taking up, however, the Gospel of St. Mark, printed last year, I found there a variety of new forms. Again, on examining another edition of the same Gospel, printed at the same press, in the same year, I came across as many fresh combinations. Lastly, on turning to the "Introduction to the Bengali Language," by Dr. Yates, I met with the very consolatory remark, "The forms of them (the compound consonants) differ more or less in every fount of type." Page 6.

Now I am quite sensible that, with few exceptions, good Bengali scholars will simply laugh at the perplexities of a tyro like myself. "Complain of joined consonants! What a whim! Why should there not be joined consonants?" )

Probably the difficulties connected with the Bengali system will be best shown by applying it to English. I shall give only two or three examples as specimens.

<i>Bengali Forms.</i>	<i>Similar English combinations.</i>	<i>Words expressed.</i>
গ্ন ন	gawin n g	gnawing.
হ্প	he <sup>l</sup> <sub>p</sub>	help.
ঙ	dint	dint.
ঙ	glow low	glow.

Such transmogrifications as ঙ্গ, I can scarcely venture to represent. Conceive with what delight English printers, and all school-boys studying English, would hail the introduction of a system requiring 120 compounds similar to the above in lieu of the present plan! How compact and simple would English printing become!

#### EASY REMEDY.

In homely phrase, "What can't be cured, must be endured." If it were impossible to print Bengali without such compounds, they must be continued. But they may all be swept away by



pursuing the course followed in many other languages, and for which Bengali itself makes provision. It is simply to use, as is sometimes done in Singhalese and always in Tamil, the mark *biram*, denoting the suppression of the inherent vowel. Let me give a few specimens:—

<i>Present.</i>	<i>Proposed.</i>	<i>Present.</i>	<i>Proposed.</i>
চিকণ	চিক্‌কণ্	অকুর	অঙ্কুর
শৃংখলা	শৃঙ্খলা	অঙ্গার	অঙ্গার
যাজ্ঞা	যাচ্‌ঞা	মন্ত্ৰন	মন্‌থন্
কণ্টক	কণ্‌টক্	কুণ্ঠিত	কুণ্‌ঠিত
চিন্তা	চিন্‌তা	উল্কা	উন্‌কা
দুষ্কর	দুষ্‌কর্	বন্ধু	বন্‌ধু

The slight projection of the *biram* would so separate letters that probably there would be no necessity for joining them as in *ff*. The symbols ङ, and ঙ্, should be retained, as they are simple in form and can be printed alike in every case. It may perhaps be desirable also to preserve, for special reasons, a compound like জ্ঞ. Such points must be determined by scholars like yourself.

The great alteration proposed is the doing away with the joined consonants by the use of *biram*. The two other very minor points are uniformity in vowel combinations, and the use of the *biram* to mark invariably the suppression of the inherent vowel. The last would give no trouble to the printers, for a letter with *biram* might as easily be set up as one without.

#### ADVANTAGES OF THE CHANGE.

1. *The difficulty of learning to read would be diminished nearly one-half.* Though the compound letters may seem easy enough to pundits, the case is very different with children, and with the poor whose period of education has been brief. Again and again have I observed with regard to both, that while they manage to get over the simple letters, they are stopped by the compounds. The latter are so numerous,\* so complicated, and in some instances so much alike, that it is very difficult to recollect them. Their acquisition, in the case of the poor, is a “never-ending, still-beginning” task. Reading is thus a drudgery, and the little knowledge acquired

\* A page of *Nitibodh*, 27 lines 12mo., contains, on an average, 40 joined

is frequently forgotten. Considering the millions of India yet untaught, and the short period many can remain at school, it is most desirable to remove every obstruction to progress in learning to read. (By giving up the joined consonants, the First Part of your Borniporichay, with a few additions, would contain all that was necessary to teach the reading of Bengali. Every intelligent teacher can bear witness to the difficulties connected with the study of the joined letters. On the other hand, a great advantage would be gained, in many cases, by the use of *biram*. When a boy finds a long word difficult to pronounce, he is told to take it syllable by syllable, and often he makes it out. It would be the same, by the proposed system, in Bengali. Can it be denied that a *beginner* would find *বুকুনিণী* easier than *বুকুনিণী*? The word would be, as it were, divided into syllables. It may be said that such a division would be contrary to the rule of Sanskrit grammar which, if I understand aright, requires every syllable to end with a vowel. I have a very high respect for men like Panini. They were giants. Still, I think in some instances they were disposed, like others in olden times, to be guided by theories rather than by facts.

2. *Increased legibility would be given to the type.* An Englishman will glance over pages in his own language, and rapidly gain an idea of the contents. How very few pundits, even among those who have spent their whole lives in study, can do the same with a page in the vernacular! While other causes operate, one of the chief reasons of the difference is the superior clearness of the Roman character. Bengali even with the doing away of the joined consonants, would not be equal to the Roman; but it would be much more readable than at present. In writing a letter, often for the use of only one person, rapidity in forming the characters is of importance. The case is different with printing, where clearness is the prime consideration.

3. *It would enable much smaller founts of type to be cut at much less expense.* The bourgeois\* type of the Baptist Mission Press is neat and distinct; but it seems doubtful whether sizes like pearl are attainable at present. The disuse of the joined consonants would remove the main obstacle. All the punches, where it was necessary, could be cut in the first instance with the *biram*, which might be filed away afterwards.

The disuse of the joined consonants would reduce by about one half the variety of types necessary in a composing case.

It may be objected that doing away with the joined conso-

\* So called. The real size is much larger.

nants takes up more space. So is a winding road with an easy gradient up a pass longer than a straight cut up the face of the hill. But in reality the change would greatly economise space by enabling smaller sizes of type to be used. Would any sane man propose to abbreviate English printing by introducing the Bengali plan of joined letters?

#### FEASIBILITY OF THE PLAN.

There are strong arguments in favor of the Romanising system; but the transition involved is so violent\* that I must confess I see little prospect of its being carried out extensively at present. With the spread of English education, facilities for its introduction will increase. The plan proposed has some of its advantages, while it does not necessitate the acquisition of a new character. Every Bengali press may at once print books in the style suggested. Education is yet in its infancy in Bengal. Let the plan be adopted in the publications of the Sanskrit and other leading presses, and it will soon extend over the country.

#### CERTAIN ULTIMATE SUCCESS.

Though the proposal may now be treated with ridicule, its adoption is a mere question of time. Past history gives assurance of this. Both Greek and Bengali were originally written without spaces between the words, without punctuation, and with many contractions. Bengali at present resembles Greek typography about two centuries ago. Words have been divided and punctuation introduced; but the contractions remain. The joined letters will yet vanish as they have done in Greek printing.†

The disinclination of the people to changes will probably be urged by some as the great argument against the scheme. I attach little importance to this. Experience has repeatedly shown that the Hindus have sufficient good sense to adopt, in course of time, whatever changes are really beneficial. Still, the

\* The same objection applies to the introduction of the phonetic system in English, in addition to that based on etymological grounds.

† On examining, in the Calcutta Public Library, 16 lines of an edition of the works of Pindar, printed in 1697, I found 35 joined letters. In the edition of Foulis, printed in 1770, more than half the contractions have disappeared. Greek is now printed like English without joined letters. It may be said that the cases are not exactly parallel. The chief difference is, that in Greek biam is understood, as the vowel is in Bengali. Still, the argument from analogy holds good. Dr. Caldwell will be consulted with regard to the writing of Tamil. It may have passed through similar changes.



rapidity with which reforms are carried out depends, to a large extent, upon the leaders of public opinion. (Whether this age may be styled the era of the "Revival of Learning" in Bengal, or the "Dawn of Civilization," your name, with that of distinguished scholars, like Babu Rajendra Lal Mittra, will long survive in the annals of your country. May it also be connected with the second great improvement in Bengali typography.)

I appeal likewise to educationists like Babu Bhoodeb Mookerjee, to the intelligent Principals of the Government Vernacular Normal Schools, to the Bengali Press, and to the entire educated community. Whatever my own countrymen may think of the proposal, they are not likely to interfere in a matter in which Bengalis are chiefly interested.

It is evident that the same principle applies to Sanscrit, Hindi, Marathi, &c.

In whatever way the proposal may be received, I shall not regret having brought it to your notice. I love the children of India, many of them so singularly engaging in their manners. To them it would be as acceptable as a cooly load of sweetmeats to know that all the puzzling joined consonants were to be thrown into the Bay of Bengal. To me it would be a source of great pleasure if I could, in the slightest degree, render it easier for the toilworn ryot to trim his lamp in the evening, or for the mother to snatch a few minutes while her babe is asleep, to acquire knowledge through books, especially that which is "able to make wise unto salvation."

I am aware that the change has been advocated before. Uniformity in printing has evidently engaged your attention, for in the books issued from the Sanskrit Press I think I have not met with the many varieties of form which have perplexed me in other cases. Still, very much yet remains to be done. Every reform can be brought about only by following the advice, "agitate! agitate! agitate!" or, to use the phrase of Father Abe, by "pegging away." I trust that the matter will not be dropped till the object has been gained.

JOHN MURDOCH,

(Agent of the Christian Vernacular Education Society.)  
CALCUTTA, February 22nd, 1865.

The following lists will show the comparative numbers of characters to be learned under the proposed and present system.

### *Proposed System.*

ক খ গ ঘ ঙ চ ছ জ ঝ ঞ ট ঠ ড  
ঢ ণ ত থ দ ধ ন প ফ ব ভ ম য  
র ল ব শ ষ স হ ড ঢ য়  
অ আ ই ঈ উ ঊ ঋ ঌ এ ঐ ও ঔ  
ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ  
ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ ঐ

*Additional characters under the present System.*

অ ঙ শ ক হ স র ক হ হ ভ ব ঞ ঞ ঞ ক  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ক জ ট ব ব ব ব ব ব ব  
 ঞ ঞ হ ঞ ঞ ত ন প য ঞ স র ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ক ক ক ক ক ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ট ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 দ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ন নু ক ঞ জ ক ক ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ক ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ

*Variations in form.\**

ଛ ର ଥ ~~ଢ~~ ଟ ଡ ଧ ଙ ବ ଘ ଞ ଣ  
 ଳ ଴ ଶ ଷ ସ ହ

\* This list might be greatly extended by specimens from different presses.