Chapter 5: Print Culture and the Modern World

CONTENTS 2 exercises · 14 questions

5.1	Write in brief	10 Q
5.2	Discuss	4 Q

Exercise 5.1 — Write in brief

Q1 Give reasons for the following: (a) Woodblock print only came to Europe after 1295.

SOLUTION

Woodblock printing was a Chinese technology. Europe learnt of it only when there was direct contact that carried the knowledge back.

In 1295, Marco Polo, a great explorer, returned to Italy after many years of exploration in China. As China already had the technology of woodblock printing, Marco Polo brought this knowledge back with him.

After this, Italians began producing books with woodblocks, and soon the technology spread to other parts of Europe. This is why woodblock print came to Europe only after 1295.

Answer: Marco Polo brought the Chinese knowledge of woodblock printing back to Italy in 1295, and only then did it spread across Europe.

Q2 Give reasons for the following: (b) Martin Luther was in favour of print and spoke out in praise of it.

SOLUTION

In 1517 Martin Luther wrote his Ninety Five Theses criticising many of the practices and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, and a printed copy was posted on a church door in Wittenberg.

Because of print, his writings were immediately reproduced in vast numbers and read widely, leading to the Protestant Reformation. His translation of the New Testament sold 5,000 copies within a few weeks and a second edition appeared within three months.

Deeply grateful to print for spreading his reform ideas so quickly, Luther said,

'Printing is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one.'

Answer: Print spread Luther's reform ideas rapidly and widely, so he praised it, calling printing 'the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one.'

Q3 Give reasons for the following: (c) The Roman Catholic Church began keeping an Index of Prohibited books from the mid-sixteenth century.

SOLUTION

Print and popular religious literature encouraged many individual interpretations of faith, even among little-educated working people.

For example, Menocchio, a miller in Italy, read books available in his locality, reinterpreted the message of the Bible and formulated a view of God and Creation that enraged the Roman Catholic Church. He was hauled up twice by the Inquisition and ultimately executed.

Troubled by such popular readings and questionings of faith, the Roman Church imposed severe controls over publishers and booksellers and began to maintain an Index of Prohibited Books from 1558.

Answer: To control the individual interpretations of faith that print spread among ordinary people, the Church kept an Index of Prohibited Books (from 1558) to censor dangerous ideas.

Q4 Give reasons for the following: (d) Gandhi said the fight for Swaraj is a fight for liberty of speech, liberty of the press, and freedom of association.

SOLUTION

Gandhi saw liberty of speech, liberty of the press and freedom of association as the three powerful vehicles of expressing and cultivating public opinion.

As he said in 1922, 'The Government of India is now seeking to crush the three powerful vehicles of expressing and cultivating public opinion. The fight for Swaraj, for Khilafat... means a fight for this threatened freedom before all else.'

Without these freedoms people could not voice their opinions or organise against colonial misrule, so Gandhi held that winning Swaraj required first securing this threatened freedom.

Answer: These freedoms are the powerful vehicles of public opinion; without them people cannot express or organise, so Gandhi saw the fight for Swaraj as first a fight for this threatened freedom.

Q5 Write short notes to show what you know about: (a) The Gutenberg Press.

SOLUTION

Johann Gutenberg developed the first-known printing press in Germany. Growing up he had seen wine and olive presses, learnt to polish stones, became a master goldsmith and made lead moulds; he adapted this existing technology for his innovation.

The olive press provided the model for the printing press, and moulds were used for casting the metal types for the letters of the alphabet. Gutenberg developed metal types for each of the 26 characters of the Roman alphabet and a way of moving them around to compose words. This moveable type printing machine remained the basic print technology for the next 300 years.

By 1448 he perfected the system. The first book he printed was the Bible; about 180 copies were printed and it took three years. The press could print 250 sheets on one side per hour. The Bible's borders were painted and illuminated by hand, so no two copies were the same.

Answer: The Gutenberg Press was the first printing press, developed by Johann Gutenberg with moveable metal type modelled on the olive press; his Bible (about 180 copies, by 1448) was Europe's first printed book.

Q6 Write short notes to show what you know about: (b) Erasmus's idea of the printed book.

SOLUTION

Erasmus was a Latin scholar and a Catholic reformer who criticised the excesses of Catholicism but kept his distance from Luther.

He expressed a deep anxiety about printing, which he set down in his book Adages (1508). He felt that a flood of printed books was harmful.

In his view, just as satiety in good things is most harmful, so an excess of printed books could spread worthless, foolish and even seditious matter along with useful knowledge; his was a 'fear of the book.'

Answer: Erasmus, a Latin scholar and Catholic reformer, was anxious about print, fearing (in his Adages, 1508) that a flood of books would spread worthless and harmful matter along with useful ones.

Q7 Write short notes to show what you know about: (c) The Vernacular Press Act.

SOLUTION

After the revolt of 1857 the colonial attitude to freedom of the press hardened, and as vernacular newspapers became assertively nationalist the government debated stringent controls.

In 1878 the Vernacular Press Act was passed, modelled on the Irish Press Laws. It gave the government extensive rights to censor reports and editorials in the vernacular press, and the government now kept regular track of vernacular newspapers published in different provinces.

When a report was judged seditious, the newspaper was warned; if the warning was ignored, the press was liable to be seized and the printing machinery confiscated.

Answer: The Vernacular Press Act (1878), modelled on the Irish Press Laws, gave the government wide powers to censor vernacular newspapers and to seize the press and machinery if a seditious report was warned but not withdrawn.

Q8 What did the spread of print culture in nineteenth century India mean to: (a) Women.

SOLUTION

Print greatly increased women's reading. Lives of women and their feelings were now written about in vivid detail, and there was a great interest in what women themselves had to say about their lives.

Women themselves began to write and read. Rashsundari Debi wrote her autobiography Amar Jiban, the first full-length autobiography in Bengali (1876). Kailashbashini Debi wrote about how women were imprisoned at home and kept in ignorance, while Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai wrote with anger about the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women, especially widows.

But there was opposition too: conservative Hindus believed a literate girl would be widowed, and Muslims feared educated women would be corrupted by reading

Urdu romances. Some, like the girl who secretly learnt Urdu, defied these prohibitions. Journals written for and edited by women became popular, discussing education, widow remarriage and the national movement, though some (like Istri Dharm Vichar in Punjab) taught women to be obedient wives.

Answer: Print let women read and write about their own lives (e.g. Rashsundari Debi's Amar Jiban) and opened up debate on their education and rights, even though conservatives opposed female literacy.

Q9 What did the spread of print culture in nineteenth century India mean to: (b) The poor.

SOLUTION

Very cheap small books were brought to markets in nineteenth-century Madras towns and sold at crossroads, so that even poor people travelling to markets could buy them.

Public libraries were set up from the early twentieth century, expanding access to books, mostly in cities and towns and sometimes in prosperous villages. Issues of caste discrimination began to be written about in printed tracts and essays: Jyotiba Phule wrote Gulamgiri (1871), and later B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar) wrote powerfully on caste, read all over India.

Workers too took to print: the Kanpur millworker Kashibaba published Chhote Aur Bade Ka Sawal (1938) on caste and class exploitation, and Bangalore and Bombay cotton millworkers set up libraries to educate themselves, sometimes sponsored by social reformers.

Answer: Cheap books and public libraries brought reading within the reach of the poor, and print gave low-caste protest and workers a voice (Phule's Gulamgiri, Ambedkar, Periyar, millworker writings and libraries).

Q10 What did the spread of print culture in nineteenth century India mean to: (c) Reformers.

SOLUTION

From the early nineteenth century there were intense debates around religious and social issues. Reformers criticised existing practices and campaigned for reform, while others countered them, and these debates were carried out in public

and in print.

Printed tracts and newspapers spread the new ideas and shaped the nature of the debate, letting a wider public participate. There was intense controversy over matters like widow immolation (sati), monotheism, Brahmanical priesthood and idolatry.

Rammohun Roy published the Sambad Kaumudi from 1821 and the Hindu orthodoxy commissioned the Samachar Chandrika to oppose him. Muslim ulama used cheap lithographic presses and the Deoband Seminary (1867) published thousands of fatwas, while Hindu religious texts like the Ramcharitmanas were printed cheaply for wide reading.

Answer: Print gave reformers a powerful means to spread and debate their ideas in public (Rammohun Roy's Sambad Kaumudi, the ulama's tracts and fatwas), carrying controversies over sati, idolatry and religion to a wide audience.

Exercise 5.2 — Discuss

Q1 Why did some people in eighteenth century Europe think that print culture would bring enlightenment and end despotism?

SOLUTION

By the mid-eighteenth century there was a common conviction that books were a means of spreading progress and enlightenment, and that they could liberate society from despotism and tyranny and usher in an age of reason.

Louise-Sebastien Mercier declared, 'The printing press is the most powerful engine of progress and public opinion is the force that will sweep despotism away,' and proclaimed, 'Tremble, therefore, tyrants of the world! Tremble before the virtual writer!'

Print popularised the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, who attacked superstition, the sacred authority of the Church and the despotic power of the state, arguing for the rule of reason. Print also created a new culture of dialogue and debate in which all values and institutions were questioned. People believed that as print spread reason and criticism, they would become enlightened and despotism would lose its legitimacy.

Answer: Because print spread Enlightenment ideas of reason and criticism (Voltaire, Rousseau) and built a public culture of debate, people believed it would enlighten society and destroy the basis of despotism.

Q2 Why did some people fear the effect of easily available printed books? Choose one example from Europe and one from India.

SOLUTION

Many feared that easy access to printed books would spread irreligious, rebellious or worthless ideas and undermine authority, since print could no longer be fully controlled once books circulated widely.

Example from Europe: The Roman Catholic Church feared that popular reading led ordinary people to reinterpret faith for themselves. When the miller Menocchio reinterpreted the Bible, he was tried by the Inquisition and executed, and the Church began an Index of Prohibited Books from 1558. Erasmus too, in his Adages, expressed anxiety that a flood of books would spread harmful matter.

Example from India: There was anxiety that print would corrupt women and

overturn traditional family roles. Conservative Hindus believed a literate girl would be widowed and Muslims feared educated women would be corrupted by Urdu romances; woodcuts like Ghor Kali dramatised the fear that women's reading and education would break up proper family relations.

Answer: People feared print would spread dangerous or immoral ideas and weaken authority: in Europe the Church feared readers reinterpreting faith (Menocchio, the Index of 1558); in India conservatives feared educated women would be corrupted and family roles overturned.

Q3 What were the effects of the spread of print culture for poor people in nineteenth century India?

SOLUTION

Very cheap small books were brought to markets in nineteenth-century Madras towns and sold at crossroads, so that poor people travelling to markets could afford to buy them. From the early twentieth century public libraries, mostly in towns and sometimes in prosperous villages, expanded access to books.

Print gave a voice to protest against caste oppression. Jyotiba Phule wrote Gulamgiri (1871) about the injustices of the caste system, and later B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar) wrote powerfully on caste; their writings were read all over India. Local protest movements produced journals and tracts criticising ancient scriptures.

Workers too used print: the Kanpur millworker Kashibaba published Chhote Aur Bade Ka Sawal (1938) on caste and class exploitation, and the poems of another Kanpur millworker (under the name Sudarshan Chakr) were collected as Sacchi Kavitayan. Bangalore and Bombay cotton millworkers set up libraries to educate themselves, sometimes sponsored by reformers who also spread literacy and nationalism.

Answer: Cheap books and public libraries made reading affordable for the poor, and print gave low castes and workers a voice against caste and class oppression (Phule's Gulamgiri, Ambedkar, Periyar, millworkers' writings and self-run libraries).

Q4 Explain how print culture assisted the growth of nationalism in India.

SOLUTION

By connecting people across regions, print helped create a shared political awareness. Newspapers conveyed news from one place to another, creating pan-Indian identities, and carried critical commentary on government policy, acting much like an opposition.

As vernacular newspapers became assertively nationalist, the colonial government tried to control them: after 1857 it clamped down on the 'native' press, and in 1878 passed the Vernacular Press Act. Despite such repression, nationalist newspapers grew in numbers everywhere, reporting on colonial misrule and encouraging nationalist activities.

Attempts to throttle nationalist criticism provoked militant protest. When Punjab revolutionaries were deported in 1907, Balgangadhar Tilak wrote with great sympathy about them in his Kesari, leading to his imprisonment in 1908 and widespread protests across India. Gandhi in 1922 called liberty of the press one of the powerful vehicles of public opinion and said the fight for Swaraj meant a fight for this threatened freedom.

Answer: Print connected people into pan-Indian identities, and nationalist newspapers spread news of colonial misrule and criticism; despite censorship like the Vernacular Press Act, they grew and, with figures like Tilak (Kesari) and Gandhi, fuelled the nationalist movement.