

## 10<sup>th</sup> – Print Culture and Modern World I



The evidence of printed material can be found everywhere around us—in journals, magazines, newspapers, books, theatre programmes, calendars, diaries, advertisements, cinema posters etc. The coming of print had a great impact on social lives and change in culture. The earliest kind of print technology was developed in China, Japan and Korea. From AD 594 onwards, books in China were printed by rubbing paper against the inked surface of woodblocks.

**The first printed books:** The traditional Chinese ‘Accordion Book’ was folded and stitched at the side because both sides of the thin, porous sheet could not be printed. Skilled craftsmen could duplicate, the beauty of calligraphy with remarkable accuracy. For very long time, the imperial state in China was the major producer of printed material. China possessed a huge bureaucratic system, which recruited its personnel through civil service examinations. So the vast number of text books were printed in China under the sponsorship of the imperial state.

**Print in China:** By the 17th century, the use of print diversified in China because of a blooming urban culture. Print was no longer limited to scholar-officials. Merchants used print in day-to-day life because they collected trade-related information. Reading increasingly became a leisure activity. The new readership preferred fictional narratives, poetry, autobiographies, romantic plays etc. Western printing techniques and mechanical presses were imported to China in the late 19th century as Western powers established their outposts in China. Shanghai became the hub of the new print culture, catering to the Western-style schools. From hand printing, there was now a gradual shift to mechanical printing.

**Print in Japan:** Buddhist missionaries from China introduced hand-printing technology into Japan around AD 768-770. The oldest Japanese book is the Buddhist ‘Diamond Sutra’. It was printed in AD 868. It contains six sheets of text and woodcut illustrations. Pictures were printed on textiles, playing cards and paper money. In medieval Japan, ‘poets and prose writers’ works were regularly published and books were cheap and abundant. Printing of visual material led to interesting publishing practices. In the late 18th century at Edo (later to be known as Tokyo), illustrated collections of paintings depicted an elegant urban culture. It involved artists, courtesans and teahouse gatherings. Libraries and bookstores were packed with various types of books on diverse topics like women, musical instruments, flower arrangements, etiquette, cookery and, famous places.

**Print comes to Europe:** For centuries, silk and spices from China flowed into Europe through the silk route. In the 11th century, Chinese paper reached Europe via the same route. In 1295, Marco Polo (a great explorer) returned to Italy after many years of exploration in China. He brought the technology of woodblock printing back with him. Italians began producing books with woodblocks. Luxury editions were still handwritten on very expensive vellum, meant for aristocratic circles. Merchant and students bought the cheaper printed copies.

**Increase in Demand for Book:** As the demand for books increased, the book-sellers of Europe began exporting books to many different countries.

- Book fairs were held at different places.
- Production of handwritten manuscripts was also organised in new ways to meet the expanded demand.
- Scribes (skilled handwriters) were no longer solely employed by wealthy or





influential patrons, but increasingly by book-sellers as well. More than 50 scribes or skilled handwriters often worked for one book-seller.

However, increasing demand for books could not be satisfied by the production of handwritten manuscripts. Woodblock printing gradually became more and more popular.

**Woodblock Printing:** In the early 15th century, the woodblock printing was being widely used in Europe to print textiles, religious pictures, brief texts and playing cards. There was a great need for quicker and cheaper reproduction of texts. Johann Gutenberg developed the first known printing press in 1439 at Strasbourg, Germany.

**Gutenberg and the Printing Press:** Johann Gutenberg was a German goldsmith and inventor. He is credited with inventing movable type printing in Europe. As a son of rich merchant, he had seen wine and olive press and acquired the expertise to create lead moulds. He used his knowledge to design his innovation. The olive press provided the model for printing press and moulds were used for casting the metal types for the letters of the alphabet. By 1448, Gutenberg perfected the system. The first book he printed was the Bible. About 180 copies were printed and it took 3 years to produce them. In fact, printed books at first closely resembled the written manuscripts in appearance and layout. In the hundred years between 1450 and 1550, printing presses were set up in most countries of Europe. In the second half of the 15th century, 20 million copies of printed books were flooding in the markets of Europe. The number went up in the 16th century to about 200 million copies.

**The print revolution and its impact:** The print revolution was not just a new way of producing books; it transformed the lives of people, changing their relationship to information and knowledge and with institutions and authorities.

**A New Reading Public:** With the printing press, a new reading public emerged, as printing reduced the cost of books. Access to books created a new culture of reading. Earlier reading was restricted to the elites. Common people lived in a world of oral culture. They heard sacred texts read ballads recited and folk tales narrated. Now, books could reach out to wider sections of people. But the transition was not so. Books could be read only by the literate and the rates of literacy in most European countries were very low till twentieth century.

**People Who Enjoy Listening to Books:** There was a large number of people who could not read, but could listening to books being read out. To satisfy their needs, printers began publishing popular ballads and folk tales with lots of pictures. These were then sung and recited at gatherings in villages and in taverns in towns. Thus, oral culture entered print and printed material was orally transmitted. The hearing public and the reading public became mixed together.

**Religious Debates and the Fear of Print:** Innovation of printing culture created the possibility of wide circulation of ideas and introduced a new world of debate and discussion. Even those who disagreed with established authorities could now print and circulate their ideas. From the printed message, they could explain people to think differently and move them to action. But printed books were not welcomed by everyone. It was feared that if there was no control over what was printed and read, then rebellious ideas might spread. If that happened, the authority of 'valuable' literature would be destroyed. This anxiety was expressed by the religious authorities, monarchs, writers and artists.



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**Religious Reforms:** In 1517, Martin Luther wrote Ninety Five Theses criticizing many of the practices and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. His writings were immediately reproduced in vast numbers and read widely. It led to the beginning of the **Protestant Reformation**.

Luther's translation of the **New Testament** sold 5000 copies within a few weeks and the second edition appeared within 3 months. Luther said, "Printing is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one". Printing culture brought about a new intellectual atmosphere and helped spread the new ideas that led to the Reformation.

**Print and Dissent:** Print and popular religious literature stimulated many distinctive individual interpretations of faith even among little-educated working people. In the 16th century, Menocchio (a miller in Italy), began to read books that were available in his locality. He reinterpreted the message of the Bible. He formulated a view of God and Creation that made the Roman Catholic Church angry. When the Roman Church began its **inquisition** to repress **heretical** ideas, Menocchio was executed. Then, the Roman Church imposed severe controls over publishers and book-sellers. They began to maintain an Index of Prohibited Books from 1558, Erasmus, a Latin scholar and a Catholic reformer, who criticised the excesses of Catholicism but kept his distance from Luther expressed a deep anxiety about printing.

**The reading mania:** In the 17th and 18th centuries, the literacy rates went up in most parts of Europe. Churches of different **denominations** set up schools in villages, carrying literacy to peasants and artisans. By the end of the 18th century, in some parts of Europe, literacy rates became as high as 60 to 80 per cent. As literacy and schools spread in European countries, there was a vital reading mania. People wanted to read books and printers produced books in large numbers.

**Introduction of New Forms of Literature:** New forms of popular literature appeared in print, targeting new audiences. Pedlars roamed around villages, carrying little books of different interests for sale. There were **almanacs** or ritual calendars, along with ballads and folktales. In England, penny **chapbooks** were carried by petty pedlars known as chapmen. They sold these for a penny, so that even the poor could buy them. In France, the 'Biliotheque Bleue' were low priced books printed on poor quality paper, and bound in cheap blue covers. The periodical press developed from early 18th century, combining information about current affairs with entertainment. Newspapers and journals carried information about wars and trade. The ideas of scientists and philosophers became more accessible to the common people. The discoveries of Isaac Newton and the writings of thinkers like Thomas Paine, Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau were widely printed and read.

**Power of Books:** In the mid- 18th century, a lot of people believed that books could change the world, liberate society from **despotism** and make a society which would be ruled by reason and intellect. Louise -Sebastien Mercier, a novelist in 18th century France, declared "The printing press is the most powerful engine progress and public opinion is the force that will sweep despotism away." He believed that the power of print would bring enlightenment and destroy the basis of despotism.

