

# DR. ALOYS SPRENGER (1813-1893)

## His Life and Contribution to Urdu Language and Literature

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Dr. Aloys Sprenger (in 1868)

Foto: With the courtesy of

“Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum”

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Dr. Alois (or Aloys) Sprenger is one of the most prominent orientalist of the 19th century. If we keep in view all his academic works we will notice that the ordinary- term ‘Orientalist’ does not apply to him. Instead, he emerges as an authority on Arabic and Islamic history and an expert on some of the Islamic services.\* He is not only respected by Western scholars but his scholarly services are also recognised by Muslim men of learning. He rediscovered some Islamic source books, which seemed to have disappeared, and reintroduced them to the world. These discoveries include *Seerat Ibn Hashbham*, Wagidi’s<sup>93</sup> *Futub-ush-Sham*, Gurgani’s, *Vis-o-Rameen*<sup>94</sup> and the mystical treatises of Muhasibi, a famous sufi of the ninth century A.D.<sup>95</sup> These discoveries have given Sprenger an everlasting place in the annals of oriental studies. Western scholars, especially those occupied with the study of Islam, will always be grateful to him. Muslim scholars, however, strongly differ with some of his views. Another thing that as downgraded his scholarship among Muslims is that he challenges the authenticity of the Traditions (*Hadith*)<sup>96</sup> By highlighting the inner contradictions of some

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<sup>93</sup> Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muhammed b. Ishaq, beat benet von F. Wuestenfeld, 2 vols., Goettingen 1858-60.

<sup>94</sup> Ed. by W.N. Lees, Calcutta 1854.

<sup>95</sup> Josef van Ess: Die Gedankenwelt des H. al-Muhasibi, Bonn 1961.

<sup>96</sup> On the Origin of Writing down Historical Records among the Musulmans. (JASB, vol. XV (1856), pp. 303-29,375-81).

Traditions he has tried to prove that all the Traditions cannot be relied upon blindly. The criticism of the Traditions initiated by Sprenger was further advanced by Ignaz Goldziher<sup>97</sup> (d. 1921) and its echo was heard again in the writings of some of the Muslim Modernists, thanks to Goldziher's influence.

Because of his criticism of the primary sources of Islamic religion and history, Sprenger is not remembered in good words by the scholars of the Islamic world although his overall contribution to the oriental literature is not denied. The authors who have written short or detailed accounts of the life and academic achievements of Sprenger include orientalists, biographers, Arab and Iranian compilers of biographical works, Western writers on oriental and Arabic studies and some research scholars of the Subcontinent.<sup>98</sup> They have made every possible effort to highlight Sprenger's life and his selected works. But what most of the early and recent writings on Sprenger glaringly lack is a detailed account of his life 'because their information is restricted to the secondary sources or the obituary notices published at the death of

Sprenger in 1813.<sup>99</sup> This published material is also confined to the discussion of his Arabic and, to some extent, Persian works. The services that he rendered to the Urdu language and literature during his thirteen years'

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<sup>97</sup> Muhammedanische Studien. vol. II, Halle 1890.

<sup>98</sup> See for example: Biographisches Lexikon des Kaiserthums( )esterreich. von Dr. Constant von Wurzbach, vol. 36 (Vienna 1878), pp. 258-63; G. Vapereau: Dictionnaire universal des contemporains, sixieme ed., Paris 1893, pp. 1459-60; Dr. August Haffner: Aloys Sprenger. Ein Tiroler Orientalist. Zur Enthuellung des Sprenger--- Benkmals in Nassereith am 19. Oktober 1913, Innsbruck 1913; Johann Fuech: Die arabischen Studien in Europa, Leipzig 1955, pp. 176-81; A. Schimmel: German Contributions to the Study of Pakistani Linguistics, Hamburg 1981, pp.48-74; M.H. Zaidi: Aloys Sprengers Beitrag zum Urdu - Studien (In: ZDMG. Supplement- II. Vortraege. Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974, pp. 259-65); Najib al-Aqiqi: al-Mustashriqun (in Arabic), Cairo 1965, vol. II. pp. 631-2; Dilli College Magazine (Qadim Dilli College Number), Dehli 1953 (in Urdu); Aloys Sprenger. Der Orientalist and Islamhistoriker aus Nassereith in Tirol. Zum 100. Todestag am 19. Dezember 1993. Im Selbstverleg der Gemeinde Nassereith von Norbert Mantl, pp. 87.

<sup>99</sup> In: Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (London), 1894, pp. 394-5; The Athenaeum, No. 3454 (6th Jan. 1894), pp. 19-20; SKPAW (Berlin) 1893, p. 1050; Deutsche Rundschau fuer Geographic and Statistik, Leipzig 1894, p. 235

stay in India (1843-1856) do not figure anywhere in these writings. If at all there is any reference to them it is *very* brief. In the following pages an attempt has been made to bring out his life with the help of reliable and original sources and discussed, in detail, the services he rendered for the promotion of Urdu.

Sprenger was born on 3 September 1813 in Nassereith, a small village near Innsbruck in the province of Tirol. Even now the population of this village<sup>100</sup> is less than two thousand souls. Situated in a beautiful valley, it is surrounded by the high peaks of Alps. The *Taufbuch*, the book that registers the birth of new babies, is still available in the Abbey of the village<sup>s</sup> and contains the name of Sprenger in the year 1813. According to this entry, Sprenger was born on 3rd September 1813 at 4.00 A.M. and was named Ignatius Sprenger, although he gained renown as Aloys Sprenger. This change occurred, possibly, when he was sent to a gymnasium in Innsbruck. The name of his father given here is Christoph Sprenger, an ex-Collector of Customs, which shows that he had left this service before 1813. The property register, *Verfachtbuecher*, in the archives of Tirol and the old record of Vienna University also mention the same service of his father. The birth certificate of Sprenger, mentioned above, gives the name of his mother as Theresia Dietrich. It is also mentioned that she was the daughter of a butcher of a nearby village Lermoos. There is no evidence to show how long Sprenger's parents actually lived but some documents in the archives of Tirol indicate that his parents were already dead when he was living in Lucknow in 1848, because some debtors from his ancestral village used to remit instalments of their' loan to him. It appears that he was more attached to his mother because, as a student at Vienna University, he used to write his articles under the name of Dietrich.

When Sprenger was born, majority of the population of the region was Roman Catholic and even now most of the inhabitants of his ancestral village belong to the same denomination. His ancestors also belonged to a staunch Roman Catholic family. The *Taufbuch*, referred above, also confirms that he was a Roman Catholic. He stuck to his creed all his life. In a long letter (dated May 8th, 1884), addressed to Mawlavi Chiragh Ali, a reformer and

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<sup>100</sup> Tiroler Landesarchiv (Innsbruck).

companion of Sir Syed Ahrnad Khan, he mentions his religious affiliation with this branch of Christianity. In addition to this, his death certificate (*Sterbebuch*), still available in the Town Hall Library of Heidelberg,<sup>101</sup> clearly shows him a Roman Catholic. All these proofs lead to the conclusion that all his life he strictly adhered to his hereditary faith.

Sprenger's father was not only a Collector of Customs of his own area but also a man of property and owned a number of houses and gardens in the small village of Nassereith.<sup>102</sup> He also possessed some agricultural land near his village which was a source of additional income for him. The details of his family property is available in the archives of Tirol, which show that he was a member of a prosperous family. This record also reveals that his parents died when he was living in India and in spite of being far away from his home he was able to control his family property.<sup>103</sup>

Sprenger completed his early education in his own village. As there was no regular school in the village he received his education either at home or at the church. He joined Innsbruck college at the age of fourteen. In the educational record of the period, lying in the archives of Innsbruck, the name of Sprenger as student first occurs in the year 1827, where he was admitted in the beginning of the year.<sup>104</sup> He continued his education at Innsbruck College for six years, that is until 1832. The duration of gymnasium course, at the time, was six years and every student had to pass through two of its phases. The first phase comprised the grammar class, which had four stages, each lasting for a year. Every student had to spend all four years in this phase. After that came the stage of Humanity class, which had two stages, each of one year duration. This is how the gymnasium course was completed in six years. This period of six years of Sprenger's life is very important because it shows that he was an intelligent and industrious student from the start. He was awarded a scholarship in the third grade for securing good marks in the first two stages, which continued until 1832. In those days various subjects

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<sup>101</sup> Standesamt (Stadt Heidelberg).

<sup>102</sup> "Gemeindeamt Nassereith" has very scanty information about this period of Sprenger's life.

<sup>103</sup> Innsbrucker Stadtarchiv (Innsbruck) and also Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum (Innsbruck).

<sup>104</sup> Juventus C.R. Gymnasii Academici Oenipontani .... 1827-1832.

and languages were taught at the college level. Religion, Latin, Geography, Arithmetic etc. were taught in the first year of the Grammar Class of the gymnasium. Except for the addition of history to geography, the same subjects were taught in the second grade. In grade three and four Latin was added to these subjects. In the second phase of gymnasium, in both the classes of Humanities, Latin was replaced with Auctor. Interpr. et Stilo and Arithmetic with mathematics, while other subjects, taught in all the four stages of Grammar classes, remained the same. In his six years, course, Sprenger studied all these subjects as an intelligent student and secured a distinguished position in every class.

As soon as Sprenger completed his gymnasium course he got admission in Vienna University. The record of the University for the year 1832-33 bears his name and states that it was his first year in the University.<sup>105</sup> His course at the University included Philosophy, Physical Sciences, Medicine and Oriental Languages. Of these, he was most interested in oriental languages. In fact he had, from his childhood, a zeal for learning various languages and their comparative study. It was this zeal that enabled him to acquire command not only over various Western languages, such as Latin, Greek, English, French, Italian, Spanish but on Hebrew as well. So much so that he had prepared a comparative dictionary of these languages for his own use. His aptitude for learning these new languages was further sharpened by the intellectual environment of Vienna University. Especially, his association with Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856), the leading Austrian orientalist and pioneer of oriental studies in German-speaking regions, gave a fillip to his intellectual and linguistic capabilities. It was he whose masterly translation from Arabic and Persian literature nourished the oriental tradition in German literature and led a great poet like Goethe to produce *West-östlicher Divan*. Scholarly works on Arabic, Persian and Turkish languages and literature impressed all the orientalists of his age. Sprenger being very close to Hammer was impressed more than any one else by his scholarship. This influence can be easily seen in the form and method of some of his books, especially in the catalogue of manuscripts in the Imperial Libraries of the Kings of Awadh, in which he has closely followed the style of Hammer. Sprenger benefitted from Hammer's scholarship as long as he lived in Vienna, but after leaving Austria

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<sup>105</sup> Matrikel der K.K. Universitaet Wien, (M II), 1832/33, p. 934.

he never had a chance to meet him again. But in spite of being far away they exchanged letters and remained in touch with each others' intellectual activities. In the ancestral home of Hammer at Hainfeld one can still see five letters, in German, that Sprenger wrote to Hammer from India.<sup>106</sup> In one of these letters, written on July 20, 1845, Sprenger briefly introduces the Delhi College and himself as the newly appointed principal of this institution. The other letters, written from Calcutta, describe the publication programme of the Calcutta Madrasah and The Asiatic Society of Bengal. Occasionally Hammer would get such information published in some journal.<sup>107</sup>

Before coming to Vienna, Sprenger did not know any Islamic language. It was under the influence of Hammer that he embarked on a deep study of the Arabic and Persian languages and literature and began to write articles on various topics pertaining to them. This was the period when Sprenger decided to make history of these languages and their speakers the project of his life. He resolved to dedicate his whole life to the cause of introducing Eastern knowledge to the West<sup>108</sup> It was Hammer again who made him aware of the rich contribution that Indian Muslims had made to the realm of knowledge. One source of this knowledge was the literary work of Hammer in which he mentioned the poetical achievements of some of the leading Persian poets of India. Later on when, on his request, Friedrich Rueckert translated into German the seventh volume of the Persian dictionary "Haft Kulzum", published from Lucknow, and serialised, from 1828 onward, in a periodical of Vienna, that many of the scholars, including Sprenger, for the first time came to know of the intellectual activities of the Indian Muslims. It was also the first chance for Sprenger to know the cultural heritage of India.

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<sup>106</sup> All these letters are still preserved in Hainfeld Schloss near Graz (Austria), the birth - town of Hammer.

<sup>107</sup> SKAW, phil.- hist Classe, vol. 5 (Vienna 1850), pp. 799-802.

<sup>108</sup> ".....under hat sich daher schon in frueher Jugend entsch-lossen, sich ganz asiatischen Studien zu widmen. Er machte es sich zum Lebensplan, das Morgenland zu besuchen, don, so viel als es in semen Kraeften stuende, zur Einfuehrung europaeischer Kultur beizutragen and hinwieder eine richtigere Kenntniss des Orients und seiner Literatur nach Europa zurueckzubringen".

(Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad ... von A. Sprenger, vol. I, Berlin 1861, Preface, p. V).

Another teacher who greatly impressed Sprenger during this period of his student life in Vienna University was Vincenz von Rosenzweig-Schowannau (1791-1865).<sup>109</sup> Basically he was a scholar of Persian and had translated into German some of the poetical works of Maulana Jami and Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi. He had produced into German a versified translation of *Divan-e-Hafiz* in three volumes and also elaborated some of its abstruse passages. Sprenger was deeply influenced by them and kept them before him while preparing the critical texts of books like *Khirdnama Sikandari* and *Gulistan*.

After completing his education at Vienna University Sprenger wanted to get an employment either in the faculty of Oriental studies of the University or in the old Oriental Academy of Vienna. His teachers also wanted the same but owing to the peculiar political and social outlook of the time, which was heavily inclined towards nobility, he could not get a job in any of these institutions. He was so disgusted with these setbacks that after sojourning in Zuerich and Paris he migrated to England. Once he arrived in England his problem of unemployment was over. He was engaged by the Earl of Munster (1794-1842). It so happened that the Earl who was at that time the elected president of the Royal Asiatic Society and had been, for many years, its Vice-President as well,<sup>110</sup> was looking for a man of his calibre. The Earl was a professional soldier and had taken part in the war against the Mahrattas in India in 1817. On his return home he thought of compiling a history of the invasions of Mongols on India but very soon he changed his mind and made a plan for writing a comprehensive history of the Muslim art of warfare. Majority of the sources of this new project were in Persian and Arabic and he was not fully conversant with them. He needed someone who knew these languages and had a strong bibliographical grasp and could collect relevant material for the project. He selected Sprenger for this task on the basis of his high capabilities and vast knowledge. Sprenger worked as his assistant and also collected extracts from Arabic and Persian books for the project. To make use of libraries of other European countries, both of them, the Earl of Munster and Sprenger, paid a visit to Germany, Italy, France Austria and

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<sup>109</sup> Wurzbach, op. cit., vol. XXXII (1874), pp. 34-6.

<sup>110</sup> Stuart Simmonds and Simon Digby (eds.): The Royal Asiatic Society. History and Treasures, London/Leiden 1979, p. 7.

Netherlands. On his return to England Sprenger prepared, in the light of the collected material, a comprehensive plan for the project. He drew a list of important sources and reproduced illustrations of battlefields, arms etc, from some of the manuscripts. He wrote all the details in Arabic. This unpublished Arabic catalogue is still available in the library of the British Museum. It does not carry his name but a copy of this manuscript, which he sent to one of his friends in Innsbruck, bears in his own hand his name as its compiler. The project was still in its formative phase when the Earl of Munster died. For want of resources Sprenger could not continue the project and was soon obliged to abandon it.

In 1838 Sprenger got the citizenship of Britain which solved many of his problems. His courses at the Vienna University also included medicine and he continued its study at various universities of Europe, like Paris and Oxford and researched on the services of the Muslims in the field of medicine. At last he submitted a brief thesis, in Latin, on the “Origin of Medicine under the Caliphate” to Leiden University on which he was awarded the post of an assistant surgeon in the army of the East India Company. Henry Horace Wilson, a famous scholar of Sanskrit, helped him a great deal in getting this job. In the meantime he had married a lady by the name of Catherine Mueler. Both of them sailed for India in 1842.

Sprenger arrived in Calcutta in early 1843. Calcutta was then the centre of the British power and was surrounded by many cantonments. Sprenger worked here for about a year and a half in various military hospitals. During this period he met some men of authority who were quick to recognise the great scholar in him. They were astonished to see a physician who knew so many languages and had such a deep insight into the Islamic sciences. They recommended the educational authorities to make proper use of his scholarship. Just then Felix Boutros (d. 1864), the French principal of Delhi College, proceeded to England on medical leave and Sprenger was appointed in his place.

The Delhi College is an important milestone in the history of Indian education. Established in 1792 A.D., it was originally designated as “Madrasah Ghazi ud-din Khan”. In the beginning it imparted education in Islamic sciences only. In 1825 the institution was reorganised and given the



name of “Delhi College”. In the new set up, English and certain Western subjects were also prescribed in its course. The basic purpose of these changes was that the Indians should also learn Western sciences, especially scientific subjects, alongwith their own. These changes were welcomed and there was a rush for admission to the College. The Delhi College not only made a valuable contribution in the sphere of education but also played a vital role in the intellectual and national renaissance of the Muslims. In fact most of the leaders who subsequently created a new wave of activity in the fields of education, literature and religion were all either teachers of this college or its graduates.<sup>111</sup> During the principalship of Sprenger all these gentlemen were his students at the college. Sprenger wanted to inculcate in every teacher and student a true spirit for knowledge and it was this spirit that motivated him to bring about reforms in the organization, teaching and the syllabi of the College. The religious institutions of some of the big cities of Northern India, like Agra, Benaras and Bareilly, were also under the supervision of Sprenger and he did his best to run them on modern lines. Sprenger was principal of this college for about three years and during this period most of the Madrasahs of Northern India were also under his control. On 6th December, 1847, he was transferred to Lucknow, as Extra-Assistant Resident, and, F. Taylor (d. 1857) was made officiating principal in his place.

Lucknow was then the capital of Awadh Kingdom and its last ruler, Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847-56, d. 1887) had occupied the throne a few months back. By temperament a lover of art and luxury he did not have much interest in the affairs of the state. Some of the high British officers, like Henry Elliot, who were aware of the three Imperial Libraries of Awadh (e.g. Moti Mahal, Topkhana and Farah Bakhsh) perhaps had an inkling that the kingdom would not last long. They, therefore, wanted to secure the valuable manuscripts of these libraries before the end of its kingdom. With this end in view they sent Sprenger to prepare a catalogue of these manuscripts to know their contents and worth. The work was personally supervised by Henry Elliot and Sprenger used to send a quarterly report of the progress of his work to him.<sup>112</sup> Sprenger was well-experienced in the art of cataloguing and

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<sup>111</sup> Mawlawi Abdul Haq: Marhum Dehli College (in Urdu), 2nd ed., Dehli 1945.

<sup>112</sup> M. Ikram Chaghatai (ed. & trans.): Shahana-e-Awadh ke Kutubhkane (in Urdu), Karachi 1973.

by virtue of this was able to prepare, within a short period of one and a half year, a comprehensive catalogue of ten thousand manuscripts of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindi and Pushtu. He wanted to publish this catalogue in five volumes but could bring out only its first volume (Calcutta, 1854). The fate of the other volumes is not known to any one.

In January 1850 Sprenger was sent back to Delhi to resume his previous post but he did not stay there for long and was appointed, in the month of May, Principal of *Madrasah Aliya* (Calcutta). This Madrasah, one of the oldest institutions of India, was founded in 1780 and rendered unforgettable services in the intellectual and educational development of the Muslims of West Bengal. Besides this College, Sprenger also supervised the Hugli College. At this time he was also selected Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In this capacity he got the texts of several Arabic books published, for the first time, from this Society. He worked on this post for four years. In 1854 he proceeded on leave. He sent his family to Germany and himself went on a tour of the Middle East. For about a year and a half he travelled in various Middle Eastern countries. In fact it was a kind of intellectual journey. During this long and arduous tour he had in view some specific purposes, i.e. to meet scholars, to know the true conditions of those countries, to benefit from the great public and private libraries and search for important manuscripts. He visited Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Muscat, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia and succeeded in the task he had set forth for himself. This tour of Sprenger is an important period of his life but so far his biographers have not paid much attention to it. The private papers of Sprenger, lying in the State Library of Berlin, contain full account of this tour. The account is written in his own hand and discloses many secret aspects of his life.

Sprenger returned to Calcutta from this tour in early 1856 and after spending a few months there proceeded to Germany. If he wished he could go to Austria, the land of his ancestors, but perhaps the old bitter, .periences, especially the recollection of his days of unemployment, prevented him from going there. As long as Sprenger lived in India he occupied different high posts. All kind of facilities were available to him. He also had abundant opportunities for academic and research work but in spite of all this he left India for Germany. The main reason of his return was *his* constant ill health. Ever since his arrival in India he had been *busy* day and night performing his-

duties. In particular the pains he took to prepare the catalogue of the libraries of Lucknow badly affected his health. His tour of the Middle East made the matter worse and he finally decided to return. He had already sent his family and personal collection of books to Germany, and he himself left for Germany in September 1856. His family members were then living in Weinheim, a place near Heidelberg, and he joined them there. As soon as the cases containing his collection of books arrived he started cataloguing them. The catalogue, which had 1972 entries, was published in 1857.<sup>113</sup> Sprenger had originally prepared it for the sale of his - collection. He wanted to sell this unique collection to Vienna University or the Austrian Academy of Sciences, but he did not get a satisfactory response from them. Then he turned for the purpose to the library of Berlin. After a few years' negotiations the terms were settled and the collection, comprising 1972 books and manuscripts, was purchased by the Library of Berlin. The correspondence regarding this deal, which took place between Sprenger and the librarian, is preserved in the State Library of Berlin and brings to light several new aspects of Sprenger's life, especially his acumen for reading the manuscripts. The sale of this collection gave Sprenger a great relief, psychological as well as financial, and enabled him to concentrate on the completion of his academic projects. At this time he was offered a professorship in Bern University, which he accepted. After teaching Islamic sciences and languages at this University for some time he left the job in 1881 and returned to Heidelberg where he spent the rest of his life. In the last years of his life he lived in seclusion and spent much of his time in writing. He did not have any teaching contact with Heidelberg University because the record of the University does not have any evidence to this effect. Sprenger died on 19 December, 1893 in Heidelberg.

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Dr. Sprenger was basically an expert on Islamic studies and a scholar of the Arabic language. He was recognised as such in the academic circles. All his biographers have taken note of the contribution he made to Islamic and Arabic studies only. In this way his academic and research work in other languages of the Muslims, that is Persian and Urdu, has received very little

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<sup>113</sup> A Catalogue of the Bibliotheca Orientalis Sprengeriana. Giessen 1857.

attention. It is true that compared to Arabic his books and compilations in other languages are not numerous but their number is not so small as to be dismissed outright as unworthy of attention. In the following paragraphs I would mention some of the outstanding services he rendered for the development of Urdu language and literature and to overcome its shortcomings during his thirteen years stay in India.

The question as to what should be the medium of instruction in the educational institutions which were being run under the supervision of the British Government in India was already being debated before Sprenger arrived in India. The debate dragged on and on and the people for and against were divided into two distinct groups. Those who insisted on making English the medium of instruction were labelled “Anglicists” while the others, in favour of native languages, were called “Orientalists”. Ultimately the Educational Report (1835) of Lord Macaulay gave the verdict in favour of the Anglicists. Favoured by the majority and backed by the Government, English was included as an independent subject in schools, while the medium of instruction for other subjects remained the same, that is the native languages. However, it was decided that these languages should be moulded to suit the requirements of modern times and gradually Western Science translated into them to enable the people of India to have an access to the real source of the manifold Western advancement. The inclusion of these clauses in the educational policy was in fact the result of the Orientalists’ endeavours.

Sprenger belonged to the group that favoured the local languages for medium of instruction. Soon after his arrival in India he began to support the Orientalists openly. A year after his arrival in India he contributed a detailed article entitled “Three Opinions on the Education of Indians” to an English weekly *The Friend of India*<sup>114</sup>. The first opinion was that the people of India should be imparted education in their mother tongue because it would develop their capabilities and they will progress as a nation. Secondly, all possible means should be adopted to enlarge the scope of local languages and to remove their shortcomings so that they can become a true vehicle of their culture and civilization. Thirdly, a deep linguistic study of those

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<sup>114</sup> No. 483, vol. X (4th April, 1844), pp. 216-7; No. 484 vol. X. (11th April, 1844), pp. 232-3.

languages, living or dead, should be undertaken from which the local languages in vogue have borrowed their vocabulary. To elucidate his views Sprenger quoted several examples from the history of Europe and the Middle East and proved that the secret of their educational progress rested on these three principles. In his article Sprenger also severely criticised some of the Arabic textbooks of Fort William College and recommended their removal from the syllabus, on the ground that they did not represent the Arabic speaking people, and suggested some alternatives for them. In regard to Urdu he also expressed the following views:

- i) In order to work for Urdu on correct lines one must have a complete mastery over Arabic.
- ii) The teaching of Arabic in the Indian Madrasahs should be in keeping with the environment and temperament of Indian people.
- iii) Urdu was short of academic and scientific terms. This deficiency could be made up by the use of Arabic in coining new terms.
- iv) The contribution of native languages, such as Sanskrit, to the linguistic structure of Urdu should be kept in view and, where possible, their help may also be sought for the development and progress of Urdu.
- v) The government must do something to encourage the efforts being made, individually or collectively, to popularise Urdu.
- vi) Along with Arabic, English may also be used to make up the deficiency of terms in Urdu because this is a language that can prove helpful in rendering modern Western sciences into Urdu.
- vii) The old Muslim literature on science should be translated into Urdu to make the Muslims aware of the achievements of their forefathers in this field and to motivate them to learn modern sciences.

This article of Sprenger reflects his special views on education and the suggestion he offered for the advancement of Urdu language and literature are in line with his viewpoint. Here he has outlined the measures he thought necessary for changes in the educational sphere and which he actually enforced when he headed various educational institutions. The British officers in India certainly wanted to introduce Western sciences, especially the amazing scientific inventions and achievements that had resulted from them, to the people of India but the lack of suitable literature in Urdu was a

major hindrance in this enterprise. There was hardly any material in Urdu which would make the vanquished Indian nation accept the superiority of the rulers in the intellectual domain along with their superior position in the political sphere. With this end in view the government formed an Educational Committee in 1835, but it proved inactive. After few years, in 1843, a new society, by the name of Delhi Vernacular Translation Society, was formed for this purpose. Its objective was similar to the Educational Committee but in its programme priority was given to the translation of important books of English, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian into Urdu, Hindi and Bengali. It is a different story that most of the translations, from English, Arabic and Persian, were done into Urdu only. Probably the world of translation into other languages was abandoned for want of resources. This Society was established as an autonomous body but subsequently it became an adjunct of the Delhi College and its Principal was made secretary of the Society. The main reason of this affiliation was that the objectives which led to the formation of this Society were already being fulfilled by the College. English was taught here but the medium of instruction was Urdu. The Principal of the Delhi College who became the first secretary of this Society was Felix Boutros. In spite of his poor health he did publish some textbooks and literature of general interest from the Society. In 1845 he went on leave to England and Sprenger was appointed in his place. As Principal of the College he also held the charge of the secretary of the Society. Soon after resuming the charge of the Principal he not only took numerous steps to improve the administration and teaching of the College but also accelerated the translation work of the Society with great enthusiasm. For him it was a golden opportunity to implement the ideas he had suggested in his above-mentioned article of 1844. He made full use of it and with the help of local scholars and staff of the College rendered several books into Urdu within a short period of two or three years. The speed, efficiency and devotion with which Sprenger did this work can be judged from the list of publications which appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1845. This list includes all the books of the Society that had been published until then, or were in press or had been approved for translation. The list was published by Sprenger. Besides this he also introduced, in 1848 and 1849, the publications of the Society in the *Journal of the German Oriental Society* (ZDMG, published from Leipzig). Sprenger, in his capacity of Secretary, also used to compile an annual report of the Society. The introduction of the Society's publications

and the reports that he compiled can give a fair idea of Sprenger's endeavours to make Urdu a scholarly language, capable of expressing all kinds of ideas and meaning. He was Secretary of the Society for about three years and during all this period he struggled hard for the advancement of Urdu language and literature. In fact his ceaseless efforts turned the College and Society into model institutions for future generations. So much so that the Scientific Society, established at a later stage by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, was a new form of these institutions.

Sprenger was appointed the Principal of the Delhi College in 1845 and the same year he speeded up his efforts, through the Delhi College and Delhi Vernacular Translation Society, for the development of Urdu language and literature. The publication of an illustrated weekly was a part of these efforts. The name of the weekly was *Qiran-us-Sa'clain* and Sprenger started it in 1845. In his introduction to the first volume of his massive work on the life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) he mentions this weekly in the following words:

“In 1845 I founded an illustrated journal, in the style of Penny Magazine. Its name was *Qiran'us-Sa'dain*. I thought as if East and West were Jupiter and Venus, the conjunction of which had occurred in this journal. This effort was the first of its kind. Eleven years later, when I left India, I was pleased to see that more than a dozen periodicals were being published in this style----- In my opinion it is the best reward of my endeavours that those for whose benefit I had struggled were so inspired by *my* efforts that the things they produced excelled even the original model, which will be useful for them and their country.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> German text runs thus:

“Im Jahre 1845 zum Beispiel gruendete ich zu Delhi eine illustrierte Zeitschrift im Geiste des Penny Maganine. Sie hatte den Titel Kiran als'a'dayn, d. h. die Conjunction der beiden Gluecksplaneten Jupiter und Venus, worunter der Occident und Orient zu verstehen war. Es

When Sprenger brought out this weekly, Urdu journalism was still in its infancy. At this early stage, Urdu newspapers and journals were confined to the local and foreign political news, religious polemics, life histories of poets and their<sup>116</sup> poetical works, and personal controversies of editors. *Qiran-us-Sa'dain* is certainly the first weekly in the history of Urdu journalism which gave an intellectual tinge to it and tried to fulfil the educational needs of the people. It also published, like other newspapers, news and verses but its real purpose was the introduction of Western ideas, especially the scientific progress of the West, to the people. Sprenger wished that the distance between East and West, at the intellectual plane, should be reduced and *they* should benefit from each other's cultural and intellectual heritage. He had resolved in his youth that he would introduce the knowledge and wisdom of the West to the East and acquaint the West with the intellectual treasures of the East. He also expressed his determination in the article mentioned above, which he wrote soon after his arrival in India. Its glimpses are also found in the *Qiran-us-Sa'dain*. His desire is reflected in the very name of the journal, which signifies the conjunction of two auspicious planets. The top of the title page of the journal carries the emblem of two hands shaking each other which also symbolises Sprenger's aspirations. As long as he lived in India this journal continued and kept on enlightening the public mind. Because of its contents the journal became so popular that many more periodicals, of the same style, were brought out within a short period. Among them two magazines *Fawaid-un-Nazireen* and *Mobibb-i-Hind*, published by the Delhi College, are notable. Both these journals were edited by Master Ram Chandra, a teacher and famous arithmetician of the Delhi College. He toed Sprenger's line in these journals.

With the start of *Qiran-us-Sa'dain* Sprenger also set up a printing press by the name of "*Matba-ul-'Uloom*" in Delhi. Initially it was a part of the Delhi College. After Sprenger's transfer to Lucknow its connection with the Delhi College was severed and it acquired the position of an independent press. As long as it was attached to the Delhi College all the newspapers and magazines

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war dies der erste Versuch dieser Art. Elf Jahre spaeter, als ich Indien verliess, hatte ich das Vergnuegen, ueber ein Dutzend Nachahmungen zu sehen." (Das Leben und die Lebre des Mohammad .... Von A.Sprenger, I, Berlin 1861, Preface, pp. vi-vii)

<sup>116</sup> Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Calcutta) vol. XXI, No. VI (1852), pp. 513-9.



of Delhi College and the books of the Delhi Vernacular Translation Society were published by it. In fact, Sprenger established this press as a limited company and most of the teachers of the Delhi College were its shareholders. The profit earned from the annual sale of its publications was evenly distributed among them. This printing press was installed at a time when there were every few presses in Delhi and for this reason it flourished so well in the beginning. Later on, when many more printing machines were installed in the city, its business declined. Gradually the investment was withdrawn by the shareholders and eventually it stopped working. During the course of its operation the press published books on various sciences, history, ethics and other social and literary topics. Its speed of publications can be judged from the fact that it published 81 books during 1849-1853.

Sa' di of Shiraz is considered one of the important pillars of Persian poetry. For centuries his books have been a source of literary and moral inspiration to the people. In the first half of the 19th century an interesting controversy began about him, the central theme of which was that he had also written some verses in Urdu. The reason which prompted the discussion was that in several biographical accounts of Urdu poets some Urdu verses had been ascribed to him. There were scholars who saw no merit in the case and attributed the controversial verses to Sa'di Deccani rather than Sa'di Shirazi. Those in favour of the claim suggested that when Sa'di came to India and heard its language he wrote the verses in question purely on impulse. Those who rejected the claim held that Sa' di who is credited with the Urdu verses was altogether a different person and belonged not to Shiraz but Deccan. Once the story of Sa'di's visit to India turned out to be false the Urdu verses attributed to him also lost their validity with the researchers of Urdu literature and these are now credited to Sa' di of Deccan.. According to recent scholars the author of these verses was a poet by the name of Mulla Sheri and not Sa'di of Deccan. Some scholars attribute these verses to yet another poet, Sa'di Kakorvi.

The man who initiated this controversy in the last century was Garcin de Tassy. In the course of his study of biographical accounts of Urdu poets he learnt that a Persian poet by the name of Sa'di had also written verses in Old Urdu. In the first volume of his *Histoire* (1st. ed. vol. I, Paris 1839) the French translation of these verses was given under Sa'di of Deccan. Later on, he

learnt through some accounts, the story which ascribed the authorship of these verses to Sa'di of Shiraz. So he wrote, in 1843, a comprehensive article in *Journal Asiatique* in which he tried to prove, on the strength of the extracts from the relevant accounts, that Sa'di of Shiraz is the oldest poet of Urdu. This article of Garcin de Tassy was also seen by Sprenger. He differed with de Tassy's views because he was fully aware of the traditions of the biographers in which these verses had been associated with a poet of the name Sa'di of Deccan, and not with Sa'di of Shiraz, Consequently, he wrote, in 1852,, an article entitled "Has Sa' dy written Rekhta verses?". In the article he refuted the arguments advanced by Garcin de Tassy and proved that the author of these verses was an Indian of the same name. Next year, that is in 1853, he wrote another article, bearing the title "Early Hindustani Poetry",<sup>117</sup> in which he disclosed that Mas'ud Sa'd Salman and not Sa'di or any one else, was the first poet of Urdu. He learnt this from *Lubab al-Albab*, a biographical account of poets written in Persian by 'Aufi Yazdi, which states that Mas'ud had compiled three Diwans (collection of poetical works), one in Arabic, the second in Persian and the third in "Hindvi", here the word "Hindvi" stands for old Urdu. The collection of Mas'ud's Urdu poetry has been lost and it is difficult to say with any degree of assurance whether the word "Hindvi" in the context signifies the early form of Urdu or denotes the language which is now called "Hindi" or "Punjabi". But in his brief article Sprenger contended that here the word "Hindi" meant Urdu.

The essays which Sprenger wrote on the oldest poetry of Urdu were greatly admired by research scholars and they wrote articles supporting his views. In this connection the detailed letter that N. Bland wrote in 1852 to Garcin de Tassy is very important.<sup>118</sup> It endorses the new information presented by Sprenger. The objections that Garcin de Tassy had raised were also published with this letter. He maintained his previous contention throughout. So much so that in the second edition of his *Histoire* (Paris, vol, III, 1871) he repeated his old arguments. Historians and researchers of Urdu accepted the new discoveries and arguments advanced by Sprenger. No wonder even now these researches of Sprenger are considered an important part of the history of Urdu literature.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., vol. XXII (1853), pp. 442-4.

<sup>118</sup> Journal AAsiatique (Paris), cinquieme série, vol. II, Sept. - Oct. 1853, pp. 357-69

Sprenger was not only a scholar but a great expert of manuscripts also. He would always keep an eye on the internal and external qualities of a manuscript. His penchant for rare manuscripts of the Muslims owed much to the training he had from his teachers like Hammer. Later on when he had an opportunity to examine and catalogue the manuscripts of the great libraries of Europe this penchant turned into a passion. Initially Sprenger had only an academic interest in the manuscripts, but soon enough he became fond of collecting them as well. He could not fulfil this desire in Europe but soon after his arrival in India he did it to his heart's content: in the course of his thirteen years' stay in India he collected thousands of Arabic, Persian and Urdu manuscripts. Some people allege that he used to appropriate for himself the most important manuscripts in the libraries he was deputed to catalogue. But the manuscripts sold by him to Berlin Library do not have a single item which ever belonged to such libraries. All his manuscripts did come from India but he collected them in different ways. One of the methods he employed for the purpose was that he had the personal libraries of various rulers and nobles of Northern India catalogued and when any of them died he manoeuvred to purchase the important manuscripts from his collection. He had personal contacts with all the professional booksellers of Northern India and even of the Middle Eastern countries who kept him informed of the arrival of new manuscripts which enabled him to purchase what he needed. As Sprenger had been the head of various institutions and academies, he had friendly relations with scholars all over India and they would often present him, for personal motives, such manuscripts. Moreover he had issued standing instructions to all the teachers and students of the educational institutions he ever headed to inform him of manuscripts which came to their notice. Some of the teachers, who always had from Sprenger an advance amount for the purpose, were constantly on the lookout for manuscripts on his behalf. For about one and a half year he travelled in various countries of the Middle East and in this period purchased hundreds of manuscripts which he directly despatched to Germany. These were some of the means by which Sprenger succeeded in collecting such a large treasure of manuscripts.

Sprenger returned to Germany early in 1856. He prepared a catalogue of the manuscripts and got it published in 1857. This list includes 1972 books and manuscripts in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, a brief mention of which has

been made before. Out of them 135 titles relate to Urdu language and literature. Of these 135 titles one hundred are books which were published by presses of various cities of Northern India. The other 35 items are manuscripts. After some years this entire collection of Sprenger was purchased by the Berlin Library. Luckily, all the 35 manuscripts pertaining to Urdu are still safely preserved in Berlin.

The total number of Urdu manuscripts in the various libraries of Germany is eighty-five.<sup>119</sup> Out of them 35 are those manuscripts which Sprenger brought from India. It means that about half of the manuscripts now available in Germany are the result of his efforts. Some of them are without a parallel in the world. In this connection *Karbal Katha* or *Deb Majlis* (by Fazli) deserves special mention. It was first written in 1732, during the reign of Muhammad Shah and Ahmad Shah, and was revised in 1748. This manuscript, written in beautiful *Nasta'liq*, narrates the events of martyrdom of the family members of Imam Husain at Karbala. It is one of the earliest examples of Urdu prose and has great importance from the linguistic point of view. This manuscript of *Karbal Katha* was first published in 1965 and since then scholars of Urdu have been writing on its linguistic and orthographical aspects, which reveal the early structure of Urdu prose in Northern India. Among other important manuscripts of Urdu in Sprenger collection *Majalis-un Nisa*, *Gulistan-e-Hind*; *Majmua-e-Naghz*, *Tabagat-e-Sukhan*, *Divan-e-Wali* and *Kanhavat* are worth mentioning.

In view of his vast experience of handling of manuscripts and cataloguing Sprenger was entrusted with an important responsibility in 1847. The kingdom of Awadh was then nearing its end and its annexation was expected at any moment. Most of its rulers were lovers of knowledge. They were fond of reading and had established some royal libraries in the capital of their kingdom, Lucknow. These libraries had thousands of rare manuscripts but with the decline of the kingdom they also fell a victim to the general disorder. The situation made Elliot, a lover of knowledge and a powerful administrator, to take steps to save these libraries from destruction. A catalogue of the manuscripts available in them was indispensable to assess

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<sup>119</sup> Urdu - Handschriften. Beschrieben von S. Mujahid Husain Zaidi, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1973.

their importance. The man he selected to catalogue them was no other than Sprenger, who was at that time the Principal of Delhi College. He was temporarily transferred from there and on 6 December 1847 appointed Extra-Assistant Resident at Lucknow. He arrived there on March 3, 1847 and lived there until the first January 1850. In this period he prepared a comprehensive subject-wise catalogue of about ten thousand manuscripts. He had intended to compile it in five large volumes but he could publish its first volume only. It pertains mostly to Persian but the description of some Urdu manuscripts is also given at its encl.<sup>120</sup> The Urdu manuscripts, included in it, were preserved in the three royal libraries of Lucknow. In the upheaval of 1857 these libraries, alongwith their rare items were destroyed. Now this catalogue is the only source that gives some details of these manuscripts.

The catalogue prepared by Sprenger is virtually a mine of information but its most important part, from the stand point of Urdu language, is the one that deals with the biographical accounts of Urdu poets. It contains brief life sketches of 1519 Urdu poets, and covers both old as well as modern poets (upto 1854). *In* the case of certain poets, Sprenger has relied on his personal information, which we do not find anywhere else. It is in alphabetical order and its material has been drawn from fifteen different biographical accounts. These sources generally tend to repeat their information on poets but Sprenger has avoided such repetition. He has incorporated only those passages which furnish new information. This arrangement of Sprenger is unconventional as well as modern. If we want to avoid the repetitions of this biographical material, that abounds in the accounts written in Urdu, and wish to compile an account which includes only new information furnished by these sources, Sprenger's work will be an excellent model for it.

As long as Sprenger lived in India he was engrossed in completing his academic projects or kept on collecting material for them. During his stay here he edited the texts of various Arabic and Persian books, an enterprise in which he was generously assisted by the local scholars. Throughout the

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<sup>120</sup> A Catalogue of the Arabic, Persian and Hindustany MSS. of the Libraries of the Kings of Oudh, compiled by A. Sprenger, Vol. I. Calcutta 1854, p. 605. (Reprinted: Osnabruck 1979).

period he was Principal of the Delhi College, its teachers, especially Maulana Mamluk al-Ali Nanawtavi, worked as his companions. Subsequently when he became Principal of the Calcutta Madrasah, its staff also assisted him. This co-operation was restricted to the editing of texts of Arabic and Persian books. Most of the work on Urdu language and literature was done by Sprenger himself and on certain subjects books were written on his suggestion or request. In his preface to the first volume of the biography of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him), written in German,<sup>121</sup> Sprenger has listed some books which were written on his request. *Asar-us Sanadeed* is also included among them. One of the earliest works of Sir Syed Ahmad, it is a history of the ancient buildings of Delhi and is considered even today a standard book on the subject. The language of its first edition (1847) was very difficult and beyond the understanding of an average reader. In the second edition (1853) its rhythmical prose was made plain, most probably, on the advice of Sprenger, because he wanted to popularise simple and easily understandable Urdu. He advised everyone to write a prose that was easily understood by an ordinary educated person. Beside *Asar-us Sanadeed*, the first edition of the poetical works of Urdu Sufi poet Mir Dard (1847), was also published on Sprenger's request. It was arranged and edited by Imam Bakhsh Sahbai, a Persian teacher in the Delhi College. In the same period a book on Urdu grammar, bearing the title *Faiẓ ka Sarchashma* was written by Mawlavi Ahmad Ali, another teacher of the College. In its preface the author states that he compiled the book at the behest of Sprenger<sup>122</sup> Mawlavi Karim-ud-Din, of Panipat, a brilliant student of the Delhi College who was subsequently appointed a teacher in Agra College, was also one of the close associates of Sprenger. All the work that he authored during his stay at Delhi and Agra was done on Sprenger's advice and encouragement and he has acknowledged this debt to Sprenger at the beginning or the end of each of his book.

In addition to these books there are several other publications which were motivated by Sprenger. The names quoted above are but a few instances to illustrate how great a well-wisher of Urdu he was. He not only

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<sup>121</sup> See note 16.

<sup>122</sup> Catalogue of the Urdu MSS. in the India Office Library; compiled by Salim al-Din Quraishi and Ursula Sims-Williams, London 1978, pp. 48-9, no. 51.

himself worked for its advancement but also encouraged other competent persons to do the same by seeking their help in his endeavours. Sprenger succeeded in his struggle and his encouragement saw the appearance of several eminent authors in Urdu language.

This account of Sprenger's services to Urdu would not be complete without a reference to his private papers and documents now preserved in a collection designated as "Nachlass Sprenger". A memorial of Sprenger's stay in India it contains scattered material that he brought with him on his return. It is a huge collection and consists of eight large boxes, of which seven are in the library of Berlin (the last is in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek situated in the previous East Berlin). Most of the stuff relates to Sprenger's life and contains a good deal of new information about him.

For many years after Sprenger's death (1893) these boxes remained with his family and his son delivered them to the Library of Berlin at the beginning of this century. This collection is full of motley information but only those parts of it shall be discussed here which are closely connected with Urdu language and literature:

1) So long as Sprenger was the head of various educational institutions of India, people constantly wrote to him for employment or transfer or on similar matters. A large number of these letters is still found in the collection. They are ninety-two in all. Out of them twenty-seven are in Persian and the rest, sixty-five in number, are in Urdu. This collection of letters, written between 1846 and 1856, includes letters of famous scholars, literary figures and teachers of that period, like Mawlawi Mamluk ul-Ali Nanawtavi, Mawlawi Zulfikar Ali Deobandi, Mawlawi Karim-ud-din Panipati, Mawlawi Sadeed-ud-din Khan Dehlavi, Nawab Hamid Ali Khan etc. These letters make it evident that Sprenger had a fair knowledge of Urdu. Had it not been so the authors of these letters would not have chosen to write to him in Urdu. Moreover, these letters are written in *very* simple and easy language, so much so that even some of the excellent scholars of Arabic have also written in the same vein. They are also indicative of changing pattern of Urdu letter-writing during the first half of the 19th century. Sprenger -himself believed in simple prose and for that reason all his correspondents tried to use the simplest possible language to express their ideas. Another important

feature of these letter is that they shed considerable light on the educational, intellectual and literary conditions in India before the uprising of 1857 and bring into sharp focus the state of affairs in some of its educational institutions.<sup>123</sup>

2) This collection of Sprenger's papers and documents also contains her a large number of newspapers and periodicals. All these newspapers, published from different cities of Northern India and Calcutta, relate to pre-1857 period. The files are incomplete and not in chronological order. Most of them, like *Fawa'id-un Nazireen*, *Mobibb-e-Hind* are those which were published by the Delhi College. Those who have compiled the history of Urdu journalism have found only a small number of early specimens of Urdu journalism and this is the reason why their information on this period smacks of scantiness. Infact most of the newspapers and periodicals of pre-1857 were lost in the upheaval and those which remained safe are scattered in various libraries of India, Pakistan and Europe and are not easily accessible. In view of this situation the newspapers and periodicals, relating to the early period of Urdu journalism, lying in the collection of Sprenger, are very valuable indeed. It is really doubtful if any other library in the world has such a large collection of pre-1857 Urdu news papers.<sup>124</sup>

3) Sprenger could read and write Urdu very well but no specimen of his Urdu writing has turned up yet. This collection also contains some papers which bear notes in his own hand. These notes, though brief, furnish clear proof that Sprenger could not only read Urdu but write it as well.

## NOTES

Die Bedeutung der Werke Aloys Sprenger fuer die Arabistik und Islamkunde. Von Stephan Prochazka (in: *Tiroler Heimatblätter*, Innsbruck, 69. Jahrgang, 2/1994, pp. 38-42).

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<sup>123</sup> An annotated edition of all these letters is being published in a quarterly journal "Urdu" (1984-, Karachi). So far ten instalments have been published.

<sup>124</sup> A complete book based on these newspapers is in preparation.