

Unraveling the Development of Indian Press during British Rule in India

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Abstract

With the establishment of the British East India Company and the subsequent administration of India, a new politico-socio-economic culture emerged. The primary objective of European companies was to establish trading links with India. However, they began to meddle in Indian politics, and in the latter part of the eighteenth century, they defeated the local kings and took control of Bengal. Christian missionaries were anxious to introduce western ideas and education to the Indian people. After the introduction of the modern press on Indian soil, there was a notable change. Hickey was a foreigner who established the English weekly and brought printing media to India. Since then, other newspapers have been established and distributed throughout India.

Newspapers, journals, and magazines published things relating to individual concerns, education, training, and ads in the early days of the press. During the nineteenth century, the Indian people were made aware of the British Company's propaganda through the vernacular press. The vernacular press exposed British brutality after the Revolt of 1857. The primary motive of vernacular newspapers was the Indian National Awakening. The press was penalised and restricted several times for publishing anti-British material. The vernacular press had several challenges and roadblocks along the way, but did not abandon its political consciousness and liberation movement until India gained independence from British Imperialism in 1947.

Keywords: *Press, Vernacular press, British Government, Nationalist Movement*

Introduction

Press is considered as the fourth pillar of democracy. Since the nineteenth century press has played an important role all over the world. Press has evolved a lot over these years through mass media communication and other technologies. The importance of press is due to its reach and influence among the common people.

The emergence of modern press in India is credited to Britishers. The first modern newspaper in India is considered to be Hickey's Gazette, also known as Bengal Gazette, which was launched in 1780. This idea of press influenced many Indians to use it against British rule in India. And thus several other newspapers started in quick succession. The British government now started to take the development of press in India seriously as it started to have an impact on many people all across the country.

Vernacular press in India played a very important role during nationalist movements. Many freedom fighters at that time wrote for different newspapers. They used press as a tool to communicate their ideologies amongst different sections of the people. And due to these techniques many people got involved in nationalist movements and protests all across the country.

The development of press and particularly vernacular language newspapers proved to be detrimental to British rule in India. Thus, British government started to impose certain restrictions on the press and particularly Indian language newspapers to curb their growth. But many Indian journalists found their way out of the restrictions and criticised British government heavily for their government actions.

These restrictions created a stir among people and mass protests were held all over the country to force the British government to lift these restrictions and provide freedom to press. Even though British government imposed several rules and regulations to curb the growth of press, there was exponential growth of press in the country. Especially local language newspapers became very popular and were important in the nationalist movement.

Review of Literature

"History of Modern India" Book by Bipan Chandra

Bipin Chandra's book History of Modern India is one of his most well-known works. Orient Blackswan published this book in 2009. This book takes you on a journey through colonial India from

the eighteenth to the twentieth century. It follows the timeline of British rule, which roughly parallels modern Indian history. This is not, however, a political account of British rule, the struggle for independence, or the declaration of independence. Rather, this book is a social analysis of the factors that allowed British rulers to rule India for such a long time. It attempts to comprehend the British rule's social implications.

“India’s Struggle for Independence 1857-1947” Book by Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K. N. Panikkar and Sucheta Mahajan

Bipan Chandra’s India’s Struggle for Independence is the book to read if you want an in-depth and informative history of the Indian independence movement. One of the most critical aspects of Indian culture is the freedom movement. Bipan Chandra’s book is a well-researched account of India’s struggle for independence from British rule. This book includes oral and written histories from all over the country, making it historically rich and diverse.

Statement of Problem

Indian press during the nationalist movement had a very important role. British government introduced strict measures to curb the growth of Indian press and particularly vernacular language newspapers. It is said that this restrictions hindered the growth of press and therefore nationalist movement in British India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the origin and development of press during colonial rule in India.
2. To analyze the impact of all the laws and regulations imposed upon the press during British rule.
3. To point out the importance of vernacular press and how it strengthened the nationalist movement in India.
4. To provide some suggestions and draw conclusions regarding the importance and development of press in modern India.

Hypothesis

Even though there were several restrictions on Indian press imposed by the British government, Indian newspapers found different ways to criticize the government. Therefore, there was exponential growth of press and nationalist movement in the country.

Research Questions

1. How did press originated in modern India?
2. What are the different laws and regulations imposed on press by the British government?
3. Whether press had an impact on the nationalist movement during British rule in India?

Research Methodology

For covering all the sources of the topic, Doctrinal research is used. Doctrinal research which is also known as Library based research which focuses on reading and analysis of the primary and secondary data. When reviewing a number of text books to the relevance of the topic, the bulk of their contents is concerned with identifying and analyzing the sources which help in making this assignment. It is concerned with the concept and synthesis of research of whole documents in respect of this project work.

Origin of Press in India

In certain ways, the “press” is as old as the human race itself. The natural desire to know what is going on in the world has always existed in humans. The first signs of the press in India were writing on the walls and on stones dating back many centuries before Christ. After the Kalinga war, Emperor

Ashoka issued edicts banning violence, which are still preserved on stone. Later, paper and writing tools were invented, and state documents were kept in rudimentary form in the form of messages from spies.

During the Mughal era, the newsletters were published on a regular basis. Throughout history, these “manuscript newspapers” were the only source of knowledge about events taking place in different parts of kings’ empires. This activity seems to have continued until the East India Company took control of India. The distribution of these newsletters may have influenced James Augustus Hicky’s decision to launch the Bengal Gazette in 1780.

Bombay had the first printing press in 1674, Madras had the second in 1772, and Calcutta had the third in 1779. Despite the fact that the British were responsible for the introduction of the printing press to India, they were vehemently opposed to the establishment of a newspaper in the country.

Hicky’s Bengal Gazette or Calcutta General Advertiser was established on January 29, 1780, and advertised itself as “A weekly Political and Commercial Paper Open to All Parties but Influenced by None” The newspaper was mainly dedicated to speculation, gossip, and juicy and sob stories about

the East Indian Company's workers, where he served as a clerk. His publication of the private lives of people in high positions resulted in his imprisonment and the temporary ban of his newspaper. His paper, on the other hand, languished as he sustained severe losses. When an order for the seizure of the printing press was given in March of 1782, the paper was forced to shut down.

Following that, many newspapers appeared in fast succession in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, but they were all short-lived. The East India Company had begun to take the contents of newspapers seriously and placed draconian controls on printing presses and editors. Censorship was first imposed in Madras in 1795, when a newspaper called *The Madras Gazette* was required to send all content planned for publication for inspection. Similarly, several Bengal newspapers, including the *Bengal Journal*, *Indian World*, and *Bengal Harkaru*, had angered the East Indian Company's authorities in some way. Soon after, the press was subjected to a slew of legal prohibitions.

Lords Wellesley and Warren Hastings imposed strict press regulation in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The May 1799 regulations mandated newspapers to publish the names of the printer, publisher, and proprietor in each issue, as well as to send all material for publication for inspection. The censorship laws, on the other hand, were not strictly observed or applied. Between 1813 and 1818, a number of important events occurred, and as a result, a number of missionaries began publishing weekly and monthly newspapers in Bengal, including *Dig Darshan*, *Samachar Darpan*, and the *Friend of India* (Chandra, 2009).

The Adams regulations of 1818 were a set of rules enacted by the government. The editors were given ample freedom, but the contents of their papers were closely monitored. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and James Silk Buckingham raised a voice for press freedom during this time. Despite the abolition of pre-censorship, a number of laws regulating the press remained in place. Ram Mohan Roy's Bengali and Persian weeklies, *Sambad Kaumdi* and *Mirat-ul-Akhbar*, as well as Bombay's well-known paper, *Mumbai Samachar*, began publication.

At this point, the press started to condemn the administration. As a result, in 1823, the first press ordinance was enacted. It developed strict guidelines for editors, as well as serious penalties and fines for violations. The employees of the East India Company were forbidden from making any contact with the newspapers. While political writings were prohibited, social and religious news was encouraged, especially that of missionaries (Chandra, 2009).

When William Bentick was named Governor-General of India, however, things changed. He and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were instrumental in improving the social environment in the country, and the authorities took a more liberal approach to the press. A certain amount of press freedom was granted.

When Charles Metcalfe became Governor-General in 1835, he eased some limitations on the press that had previously been in place.

The Bengal Gazette, established by Gangadhar Battacharya, was the first Indian-owned newspaper. The press in a number of Indian languages had begun to make rapid progress. In north-west India, Urdu and Persian newspapers have a wide readership. In addition, the Marathi and Gujarati press had begun to assert themselves. In addition, about 1850 or later, newspapers in Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, Oriya, Assamese, and Punjabi appeared.

Nationalism and Indian Press

Politically aware Indians have been drawn to modern civil rights, especially press freedom, almost since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Raja Rammohan Roy had protested against a law restricting press freedom as early as 1824.

The national movement had not yet resorted to mass agitation by thousands of small and large maidan meetings, nor had political work consisted of vigorous mobilisation of citizens in mass struggles during the period 1870 to 1918. Politicization, political propaganda and education, as well as the establishment and dissemination of nationalist ideology, remained the key political tasks. The press was the primary tool for accomplishing this aim, which was to arouse, prepare, mobilise, and consolidate nationalist public opinion.

The main aim of Indian nationalists was to preserve their freedom of speech, popular interests, and national feelings against despotic British rule. The key instrument for educating the people of the country was the vernacular press. Following the rebellion of 1857, a national awakening emerged among the masses, as the Indians were denied political representation and were stripped of their human rights. The freedom of the press was the only way to spread the national awakening (Chandra, 1988).

The obnoxious Acts and Regulations that periodically tightened the noose around the vernacular press were obstacles for Indian journalists in publishing and propagating nationalist ideology and agitations, as well as training, mobilisation, and strengthening public opinion. Local language newspapers had a significant influence on the population because their papers were widely distributed in rural areas, while English newspapers were restricted to cities and their readers were mostly from the upper and middle classes. The Vernacular newspaper made no money, while the British newspapers made money by publishing advertisements (Chandra, 1988).

During these years, the National Congress' work was mostly achieved through the newspapers. The Congress lacked its own organisation to carry out political work. Newspapers were used to

disseminate its resolutions and trials. Surprisingly, journalists made up about a third of the Congress's founding fathers in 1885.

During this time, powerful newspapers were founded by illustrious and fearless journalists. These were the *Hindu* and *Swadesamitran* under the editorship of G. Subramaniya Iyer, *Kesari* and *Mahratta* under B.G. Tilak, *Bengalee* under Surendranath Banerjea, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* under Sisir Kumar Ghosh and Motilal Ghosh, *Sudharak* under G.K. Gokhale, *Indian Mirror* under N.N. Sen, *Voice of India* under Dadabhai Naoroji, *Hindustani* and *Advocate* under G.P. Varma and *Tribune* and *Akhbar-i-Am* in Punjab, *Indu Prakash*, *Dnyan Prakash*, *Kal* and *Gujarati* in Bombay, and *Som Prakash*, *Banganivasi*, and *Sadharani* in Bengal. In reality, in India, it was rare to find a major political leader who did not own a newspaper or was not writing for one in some capacity.

The Press's reach reached well beyond its literate readers. It wasn't only limited to cities and big towns, either. A newspaper would penetrate far-flung towns, where it would be read by dozens of people. Library campaigns sprung up all over the country over time. A single newspaper will serve as the centerpiece of a local "library." The capital equipment will be a table, a bench or two, or a charpoy. Single piece of news or editorial opinion will be read, heard, and discussed thoroughly. Reading or discussing the newspaper became a form of political participation as well as a political educator.

Newspapers were not commercial entities back then, and neither were editors and journalists. Newspapers were distributed as a public service or as a national publication. They were frequently funded by philanthropy. Being a journalist needed a great deal of self-sacrifice as a political activist and agitator. Of course, starting a newspaper was not prohibitively costly, but the editor had to work on a shoestring budget or rely on a secondary source of income. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was established in 1868 with the purchase of printing equipment for Rs. 32. Surendranath Banerjea, meanwhile, paid Rs. 10 for the *Bengalee*'s goodwill and Rs. 1600 for the press in 1879.

Almost all of the day's main political discussions were conducted by the press. It also acted as an institution for opposing the government. Almost every act and policy of the government was strongly criticised, always with great care and thorough expertise to back it up. The Indian Press' motto was "oppose, oppose, oppose." The Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, wrote in March 1886 about the position of the nationalist press: '*Day after day, hundreds of Sharp-witted babus pour forth their indignation against their English Oppressors in very pungent and effective diatribe.*' And again in May: '*In this way there can be no doubt there is generated in the minds of those who read these papers. . . a sincere conviction that we are all enemies of mankind in general and of India in particular.*'

To arouse political consciousness, to inculcate nationalism, to expose colonial rule, to ‘preach disloyalty’ was no easy task, for there had existed since 1870 Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code according to Which ‘*whoever attempts to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India*’¹ was to be punished with transportation for life or for any term or with imprisonment upto three years. This clause was, moreover, later supplemented with even more strident measures.

To stay out of the scope of the law, Indian journalists invented a variety of clever tactics and established a distinct writing style. Since writings of people whose loyalty to the government was undoubted were exempt under Section 124A, they invariably prefaced their vitriolic writings with effusive expressions of loyalty to the government and the Queen. Another tactic was to print anti-imperialist excerpts from London-based socialist and Irish newspapers, as well as letters from progressive British citizens, knowing that the Indian government would be unable to discriminate against Indians by intervening against them without also acting against the offending Britishers. The extract from the British newspaper was often taken without quotation marks or acknowledgment of the source, luring the British-Indian bureaucracy into thinking about or taking action that would have to be abandoned until the true source of the statement was discovered.

The radical expose would often take the form of well-wisher advice and threats to the government, as if the writer’s main aim was to save the authorities from their own follies. This was a style of writing that B.G. Tilak and Motilal Ghosh excelled at. Irony, sarcasm, banter, mock-seriousness, and burlesque were used by some of the more daring writers.

Nationalist journalists, especially those working for Indian language newspapers, faced a difficult task in both of these cases, since they had to balance simplicity with subtlety: simplicity was required to educate a semi-literate public, while subtlety was required to express the true meaning without breaking the law. They excelled at the mission, frequently inventing new ways to express themselves in the languages in which they were able to participate, including, surprisingly, English (Hussain, 2017).

Following the Rebellion of 1857, influential Indian leaders initiated the Indian National Movement, which educated the public through their writings in newspapers. From time to time, the vernacular Press was subjected to limitations on its freedom of expression. The British Indian government passed a variety of laws to discourage the Indian press from spreading political propaganda against them.

In the 1870s, Indian newspapers started to gain momentum. They became harsh critics of Lord Lytton’s government, especially for its inhumane treatment of the victims of the 1876-77 famine. As a

¹ Indian Penal Code, 1860, §124A.

result, the government chose to make a strike against Indian language newspapers, which had a wider readership than the middle class. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878, which targeted only Indian language newspapers, was drafted in secret and passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in a single sitting. The Act authorised the government to seize a newspaper's printing press, paper, and other resources if it was suspected of publishing seditious materials and had disobeyed an official notice.

The Act was vehemently opposed by Indian nationalists. The first major demonstration on a public issue was conducted in Calcutta on this issue, when a large meeting was held in the Town Hall. The Act was also opposed by a number of government agencies and the media. As a result, it was repealed by Lord Ripon in 1881.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the exemplary leader of radical nationalism, is the man most often identified with the fight for press freedom during the nationalist movement. Tilak, who was born in 1856, dedicated his entire life to serving his country. He co-founded the newspapers Kesari (in Marathi) and Mahratta (in English) in 1881 with G.G. Agarkar. He took over the two papers in 1888 and used their columns to spread anti-British sentiment and advocate national resistance. Tilak was a fiery and brave journalist with a straightforward, easy-to-read style.

When the government attacked or attempted to curb press freedom, the national movement zealously defended it from the start. In reality, the fight for press freedom became inextricably linked to the fight for freedom.

Press Laws and Regulations

Censor Act 1799

Lord Wellesley introduced legislation requiring newspapers to publish the names of printers, editors, and proprietors. Before publishing something in a newspaper, magazine, or journal, the Secretary of Censorship should be consulted. Warren Hastings repealed the Act in 1818.

Licensing Regulation Act 1823

John Adam imposed yet another ban on Indian newspapers. To start the press, the printers and publishers needed to obtain a licence. Editors are allowed by law to receive a licence from the government. The government would fine defaulters Rs 400, and the press would be seized. The government also had the power to revoke the licence. The Governor General had exclusive authority over the issuance and revocation of the licence. The legislation restricted the use of vernacular languages. The most affected newspaper was Rajaram Mohan Roy's Mirat-ul-Akhbar, which eventually ceased publication. Charles Metcalf was the one who repealed the Act.

Press Act of 1835

The Metcalfe Act is another name for the Act. He called for press freedom in India. In 1835, he repealed the 1823 Act, gaining the title “Liberator of the Indian Press.”

The Licensing Act, 1857

During the Rebellion of 1857, the government imposed new regulations on the press, banning newspapers, journals, and magazines from being printed. The licence had to be given to the printers and publishers, and the governor had the right to revoke or grant a new licence.

The Registration Act, 1867

The object of the Act was to control the printing of newspapers and books, rather than to place limits on the press. The publisher was mandated by this Act to include the names of the printer and publisher, as well as the name of the place where the book was written, on the book. After one month, the local authority was required to receive a free copy of the book.

Vernacular Press Act of 1878

The British rule in India was criticised in local newspapers. As a result, the British government was enraged by the Vernacular Press, and Lord Lytton passed the Vernacular Press Act in 1878. The Magistrates had the authority to demand that any publisher of an Indian language newspaper promise that they would not publish anything that was contrary to British law. They were given a protection guarantee. The defaulter will be fined as well as disciplined. This legislation did not apply to English-language publications. In 1882, Lord Ripon repealed the Act.

Newspaper Act of 1908

The magistrate was granted the right to seize the property of the press if they published objectionable content in their newspapers, journals, or magazines under this Act.

Indian Press Act, 1910

This Act gave local governments the authority to demand security from printers and publishers at the time of registration, and to deregister if the offender was discovered. The printer or publisher was expected to provide the local government with two free copies of each issue. On charges of sedition, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the leader of militant nationalism, was tried and deported to Mandalay for six years. Protests erupted across the country as a result of his trial. Textile and railway employees went on strike for days, fighting the Army in the streets and on the tracks.

Indian Press Act, 1931

This Act granted provincial government's complete authority to suppress civil disobedience movement propaganda.

Conclusion

The origin of press in India is contributed to foreign rule. But it gained popularity quickly amongst the common people. Especially the freedom fighters found an opportunity to use it as an important tool to educate the masses about the nationalist movement and the unjust British rule in India.

In India, press censorship has been a major factor in the conflict between the British government and the media. With India under foreign rule, its press faced the same challenges as the press in other foreign-ruled countries. The public, as well as the press, could not be certain that all was done in the country's best interests. The press, as the watchdog of the public interest, had to take on the position of being a constant critic of the government.

The nation's identity was mirrored in the press's writings. As a result, any national awakening was viewed as a danger to British rule, and the authorities focused their efforts on press regulation. As the struggle for independence grew in intensity, more restrictive laws were placed on the press. But, as the restrictions were increased on the press, its impact on the masses increased more. The British government tried many measures to curb this popularity of press in the country, but the growth of press and nationalist movement increased over the time.

Despite censorships, fines, and press confiscations, Vernacular newspapers, journals, and magazines continued to circulate and propagate Social Reforms, National Awakening, and National Movement. They contributed to the fight for India's independence from foreign rule. The masses were educated by vernacular newspapers, which advocated for social, religious, educational, and economic reforms. The Indian Press was not a business enterprise in the same way that it is now. National Sentiments were served by the press. The printed vernacular media served as a public servant, propagator, freedom fighter, and tool in the liberation of the country from British exploitation, resulting in India's independence.

The growth of nationalism in the country was related to the press. With the growth of national consciousness among the people, the press came to play a significant role in the nation's politics.

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