



When Ink became Revolution: The Role of Indian Journalism in Freedom Movement

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Abstract

This research paper examines the critical role of Indian journalism in shaping the freedom movement. It traces the transition of the press from a provincial tool to a powerful medium of resistance and national awakening. This paper advocates that Indian Journalism between 1780 and 1947 functioned not merely as a narrator of nationalist sentiment but as a primary engine for mass mobilisation. This mobilisation constructed political identities by forging cross-regional consensus.

The research addresses questions such as; What role did early newspapers and the printing press play in shaping public life in colonial India?, How did journalism inject nationalism into the populace post-1857?, This research paper critically analyses how journalism in India evolved over the years. The early beginnings, growth of nationalist ideology amongst people post 1857, and how Indian journalism brought people together for mass movements. It also discusses the Gandhian Era, in which Mahatma Gandhi's model of ethical and activist journalism and regional newspapers played a crucial role in uniting people.

It also discusses strict laws like the Censorship of Press Act of 1799, Licensing Regulations 1823, Vernacular Press Act 1878, etc. imposed by the British because of which journalists had to face several challenges. Applying a qualitative historical analysis approach, this study critically engages to understand the relationship between journalism and nationalism.

This study contributes to media historiography by underscoring journalism's evolution in India's Freedom Movement. It offers an understanding of the power of media in uniting diverse populations against colonial oppression. The study finds that journalism in India played a vital role in spreading awareness. This encouraged people to participate in the freedom struggle. Newspapers not just worked as a source of information but as a tool resistance. The Indian



Language Newspapers contributed to uniting people despite helping India's rich cultural diversity.

Introduction

Journalism in India has a fair share of trials and tribulations in its evolution. Print media has a long and important history. It was primarily centered around organising masses against the British and played a key role in mobilising support for the national independence movement. This research paper examines the critical role of Indian journalism in shaping the freedom movement. It traces the transition of the press from a colonial information tool to a powerful medium of resistance and national awakening. The freedom fighters used journalism as a tool to connect with masses and ignite the feeling of nationalism amongst people.

The Indian press has played a notable role in mobilising public opinion, organising political movements and promoting nationalism. Despite government restrictions news papers like the Indian mirror, Amrit Bazar Patrika, the Pioneer, The Hindu, the Maratha, Keshari, Bombay Samachar, Samachar Darpan, etc. became a powerful instrument of political education.

B.B. Majumdar has mightily remarked, "Western education and the Indian press were the two of the most important agencies destined to infuse into the people of India the spirit of national unity and to inspire them to achieve independence without bloodshed."

Nationalist literature in the form of novels, essays and patriotic poetry played an important role in creating national consciousness. Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore, Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, Subramanyam Bharati and Altaf Hussain Hali were some of the writers who infused the spirit of patriotism in the minds of the common people. The Indian national press was undisputedly the backbone of the freedom struggle for independence from colonial rule. Its historical importance and prestige it enjoyed in the society are linked to the awareness and creation of public opinion.

The later years of the 19th century unfolded a glorious chapter of Indian newspapers which revealed the newspapers consistently reporting on challenges ahead of the nation. Instead of reporting societal events of the Britishers and feudal Indian society, the newspapers focused on news and write-ups on diverse social and political concerns. The strong belief of our freedom fighters that 'pen is mightier than sword' and the power of their pen can challenge the political



establishment directed the Indian journalism with a sense of purpose that never weakened and holds ground till date.

Literature Review

Scholarly works argue that Indian journalism was not a mere observer but actually worked as the driving force behind the revolution. This movement began way back in 1780 with James Augustus Hicky's Bengal Gazette, which established a precedent for using press for dissent through its critical stance against the Raj. This "alien product" would subsequently be adopted by Raja Rammohun Roy, father of Indian journalism, who made journalism a powerful tool of social regeneration and nation-wide awakening through his journals, thus proving that press can work as a constitution agitation through which late-Mughal tradition of intelligence could be combined with modern liberalism to fight against sati, among other social evil practices.

With the progression of movement, press would move from being an elite instrument to become a crucial vehicle of mass mobilization. According to the scholarly literature on this subject, there emerged what has come to be known as the transformative library movement during this period when journals like Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Kesari were used to overcome literacy barriers to create political awareness through village assemblies. This period is marked by continuous struggles with oppressive laws such as the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, also known as the Gagging Act.

The literary troops showed their adeptness in overcoming authorities like these with publications like Amrita Bazar Patrika becoming a classic case by switching overnight from Bengali to English language to avoid legal constraints of the Act.

Finally, at this mature stage, journalism becomes an extension of Satyagraha itself under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Journals like Young India and Harijan not only advocated the doctrine of truth and non-violence but did so without making any commercial profit as well. In addition to Jawaharlal Nehru's National Herald, which became the soul of the latter movement, these publications not only recorded history but also undermined British authority in this regard. Thus, in essence, Indian journalism proved the axiom that pen is indeed mightier than sword in the process.



Research Methodology

As a qualitative historical research, the current analysis seeks to explore the development of journalism in India starting from its colonial origins till its emergence as one of the leading driving forces behind the independence movement. In other words, the core of this research is built around a descriptive and analytical framework that will allow re-establishing the socio-political environment within which the 'soldiers of the pen' worked.

The methodology will be focused mostly on collecting and analyzing secondary data, including the review of historical archives, scientific journals, relevant policy papers, the Annual Reports of the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), which are essential resources for understanding the priorities of both content and circulation. Moreover, it will include some insights from the history books provided by NCERT as well as relevant studies by renowned historians to contextualize the hardships endured by nationalist journalists.

The primary focus of the methodology is placed on conducting a content analysis of pioneering publications that were instrumental for shaping a revolutionary discourse. It will consist in tracing recurring topics like 'constitutional agitation,' mass protests, and rebellion against colonizers in headlines and editorials of famous newspapers like The Tribune, Kesari, and Amrita Bazar Patrika. Another key aspect of this approach will involve conducting thematic evaluation of the philosophies of prominent politicians who led the freedom movement, especially the noncommercial nature of journalism as a public service promoted by such individuals as Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

In order to ensure validity of results, this research methodology implies triangulation of sources by cross-checking archival information with more modern studies that are focused on draconian policies of the British Empire, like the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. The main purpose of it would be to explore creative ways by which journalists managed to avoid the strict regulatory regime set forth by colonizers.

I. Origins of Indian Journalism (1780-1857)

The origins of journalism in India can be traced back to James Augustus Hickey, often referred to as the "father of the Indian press" who established the Bengal Gazette in 1780. While initially a mere "alien product" catering to foreigners, Hickey set the tone for future dissidents by way of his fearless critique of the Raj which earned him quick incarceration of his press in 1782



heralding the start of a long battle for survival against dictatorial powers. Later in the century, Raja Rammohun Roy took on the mantle of journalism in a bid to indigenise it as a means of social rejuvenation. Using publications such as Sambad Kaumudi (1821) and Mirat-ul-Akhbar (1822), Roy laid the foundation of "constitutional agitation" which enabled him to use journalism as a means of ridding society of its evil practices such as sati and widow immolation while fostering national unity.

II. The Vernacular Press: Voices of the Soil (18th-19th Century)

While the elitist English press was primarily concerned with the urban population, it was the vernacular press that reached deep into the interior villages for the first time. Vernacular newspapers like the Bombay Samachar (1822), the oldest newspaper in Asia that is still being published continuously, spoke directly to the common people in their language. The role of these papers was that of "Opposition in the House of Commons" and thus, they evaluated the government policies from an Indian perspective. The Hindu Patriot (1853), among other papers, had already raised voices against the oppression of indigo planters.

III. Emergence of the Nationalist Press (Post-1857)

The 1857 revolt marked a pivotal turning point that transformed journalism among Indians, making the latter highly nationalistic. For example, Indian revolutionaries such as Azimullah Khan employed their publication Payam-e-Azadi to urge for a voice of independence, which prompted the British government to punish anyone found with a copy publicly. During this time frame (1870-1918), journalism emerged as the major tool in executing various political missions, acting as the "backbone" of the nascent freedom movement.

One famous case was in 1878, when the British Parliament enacted the Vernacular Press Act (the "Gagging Act") as a measure to censor vernacular publications. The Amrita Bazar Patrika responded by switching its language from Bengali to English instantly in an act of defiance against the Act.

IV. Journalism as a Means of Mass Mobilization (1905-1920)

When India entered the Swadeshi Movement and launched a struggle against the Partition of Bengal, newspapers were no longer confined within the realm of intellectual debate but played an important role in mass mobilization. Bal Gangadhar Tilak used his Marathi newspaper Kesari to transform rural village gatherings into centres of political literacy under the "library



movement". The "participant journalist," whereby leaders served as editors themselves, came into existence during this period. For instance, the New India newspaper published by Annie Besant and the Home Rule League demonstrated that journalism was the only means of forging a sense of Indian unity.

V. The Gandhian Era: The Press as Satyagraha (1920–1942)

The Gandhian period (1920-1942) saw Indian journalism undergo a revolutionary change by transforming print media into a natural offshoot of Satyagraha. To Mahatma Gandhi, who is considered one of the most competent journalists of all time, journalism was not a profession pursued for earning livelihood but a non-commercial "public service" to educate the masses about their flaws. For him, a vital component of his journalistic philosophy was the total absence of advertisements to ensure that the "message" of non-violence did not become a tool of market economy or advertorialism. His weekly periodicals such as Young India, Harijan, and Navjivan were written with simple language but with great passion and "indignation", which made them "training schools for self-restraint" as well as an essential part of the "matchless weapon of the struggle".

During this period, journalism emerged as more than just constitutional agitation as its role expanded to that of becoming "the backbone of mass movements". The press became the chief medium of political enlightenment and participation during the movements of Salt Satyagraha (1930) and the Quit India Movement (1942) where, in order to link the urban leaders to the people living in villages, communal reading of newspapers in libraries was encouraged. In response, the colonial government reacted harshly by issuing the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act of 1931 in an attempt to curb Civil Disobedience activities and by shutting down almost 90 newspapers in August 1942. Meanwhile, the National Herald (1938), published by Jawaharlal Nehru, served as the soul of the struggle by ensuring perfect equilibrium between political advocacy and secularism. Overall, journalism based on service rather than profit helped strip the British Raj of its moral right while forging India as a united entity for Swaraj.

VI. Repressive Colonial Press Legislation and Other Press Challenges

The chronology of Indian press history is one plagued by attempts at censorship:

- 1799 (Censorship of Press Act): Pre-censorship imposed during times of war



- 1823 (Licensing Regulations): Fines for printing without licenses, particularly affecting indigenous language newspapers
- 1878 (Vernacular Press Act): The "Gagging Act" targeting "seditious writing" in oriental languages
- 1910 & 1931 (Press Acts): Authority to collect security charges and seize press properties for "offensive content"

Apart from legal restrictions, journalists had to overcome severe financial limitations, lack of printing presses, and surveillance from the colonial regime. Nevertheless, they found ways around oppressive laws like Section 124A (Sedition) by employing tricks like using expressions of loyalty as the introduction of their criticisms.

VII. The Consequences: How Ink Turned to Revolution

The press succeeded in overcoming the problem of illiteracy by fostering communal reading habits, making it possible for even the illiterate to engage in the nationalist cause. Through detailing the "cruelties of the British empire," newspapers educated the masses on the oppression of colonial rule, fuelling a nationwide spirit of independence. In the end, the press demonstrated that the pen was indeed mightier than the sword; it was the main strategist that caused the fall of the British Empire in India, thus earning itself the position as the fourth pillar of democracy.

Limitations of the study

1. This research is carried out using a qualitative historical methodology that makes use of secondary sources including archival documents and RNI publications, which may include all the deficiencies related to documentation from the period of colonialism.
2. As a result of harsh censorship and suppression of 89 newspapers in 1942, many valuable primary sources describing the process of nationalist discourse were destroyed.
3. Pioneers who created the first newspapers did so with very limited financial means and without a fixed press, leading to the publication of brief newspapers which are hard to find in modern archives.
4. Analysis of the concepts of "revolutionary discourse" and "nationalist ideology" as a theme involves some interpretation as to the ideological goals of editors from past times.



Conclusion

It becomes evident from the history of the Indian struggle for freedom that journalism was not an onlooker but was indeed a part of the revolution. From the first sparks ignited by James Augustus Hickey to the social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, journalism underwent transformation from an exotic indulgence of expatriates to being described as a guiding light in the dark days of colonization.

This period marked the unique development of journalism in India when the "soldiers of the pen" were inspired by a concept of journalism as a non-profit "public service," an ideology which was perfected by Mahatma Gandhi whose view on journalism was as a medium that extends Satyagraha without compromising for money and advertisement.

The strength of the national press lies in its capacity to bridge the literacy divide and unify a heterogeneous population into a nation through a phenomenon referred to as the "Library Movement," where a copy of newspaper in a village cot could be instrumental in creating a sense of national identity among the masses. Though the press had to endure a continuous saga of fights with the strict British censorship laws, such as the Vernacular Press Act, the bravery of editors risking imprisonment showed that the "Gagging Acts" could not stop the voice of the masses asking for self-rule.

Ultimately, Indian journalism was not only able to chronicle events but to dismantle the supremacy of the empire by proving that **"the pen is mightier than the sword."** As one of the four pillars of the largest democracy in the world, journalism should honor this tradition of fearlessly exposing the malaise.

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