

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT: NEWSPAPERS, NATIONALISM AND PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract

The press emerged as one of the most important instruments of political awakening during the Indian national movement. From the nineteenth century onwards, newspapers and journals provided a platform for discussing colonial policies, social issues, economic exploitation and political rights. The development of both English and vernacular newspapers enabled nationalist ideas to circulate among different sections of Indian society and contributed to the formation of public opinion against colonial rule. Newspapers such as Amrita Bazar Patrika, The Hindu, Kesari, The Mahratta, Bengalee, Swadesamitran, Young India and Harijan played important roles in different phases of the freedom struggle. The colonial government recognized the growing political influence of the press and introduced various restrictive measures, most notably the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. Despite censorship, prosecution and other forms of repression, nationalist journalism continued to criticize colonial policies and encourage political participation. During the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement, newspapers became important instruments of political communication and mobilisation. This article examines the growth of the Indian press, its contribution to nationalism and public opinion, its relationship with major political movements, and the limitations imposed by colonial censorship. The study argues that the press was not merely a recorder of the national movement but an active force in creating political consciousness, nationalist identity and public opinion.

Keywords: Indian National Movement, Press, Newspapers, Nationalism, Public Opinion, Vernacular Press, Colonialism, Political Mobilisation, Press Freedom.

1. Introduction

The Indian national movement was one of the most significant anti-colonial movements of the modern world. It developed through the combined efforts of political organizations, intellectuals, social reformers, students, workers, peasants and ordinary citizens. Although political organizations such as the Indian National Congress provided an institutional framework for the movement, the spread of nationalist ideas required effective means of communication. In this context, the press became an important instrument of political awakening.

The growth of printing and journalism in India during the nineteenth century coincided with the spread of modern education and the emergence of an educated Indian middle class. Newspapers created a new public sphere where Indians could discuss political, economic and social questions. They reported government policies, criticized colonial administration and introduced readers to ideas of liberty, rights, representation and self-government.

The Indian press developed in both English and vernacular languages. English-language newspapers generally reached educated Indians and provided a platform for political discussion across regional boundaries. Vernacular newspapers, on the other hand, communicated political ideas in languages understood by particular regional populations. They reported local grievances and connected them with wider questions of colonial rule.

The colonial government soon realized the political potential of newspapers. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was one of the clearest examples of the government's attempt to control Indian-language journalism. Later restrictions, censorship and prosecutions further demonstrated the conflict between colonial authority and the nationalist press.

The press therefore played a dual role. It acted as a source of information and simultaneously as an instrument of political mobilisation. It helped transform individual grievances into collective political concerns and contributed to the development of a broader Indian national consciousness.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of the Indian press in the development of nationalism and public opinion during the Indian national movement.

The specific objectives are:

1. To trace the emergence and development of the Indian press during the colonial period.
2. To examine the growth of English and vernacular newspapers in India.
3. To analyse the role of newspapers in spreading political awareness and nationalist ideas.
4. To examine the contribution of major nationalist newspapers and journals.
5. To study the relationship between the press and major phases of the Indian national movement.
6. To analyse the role of newspapers during the Swadeshi, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements.
7. To examine the contribution of the press to the formation of nationalist public opinion.
8. To analyse colonial attempts to regulate and suppress nationalist journalism.
9. To understand the relationship between freedom of the press and the broader struggle for political freedom.
10. To identify the limitations of the nationalist press in terms of literacy, readership, regional divisions and social representation.
11. To examine newspapers as important primary sources for understanding the history of Indian nationalism.

3. Review of Literature

The role of the press in Indian nationalism has been examined by historians, political scholars and researchers of journalism. Existing scholarship provides different interpretations of newspapers as instruments of political education, nationalist mobilisation, public opinion and cultural communication.

Bipan Chandra and his co-authors, in *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857–1947*, provide a broad account of the development of Indian nationalism. Their work highlights the importance of political communication and the role of the press in spreading nationalist ideas. Newspapers helped explain political programmes, criticize colonial rule and communicate the activities of nationalist organizations.

Bipan Chandra's *History of Modern India* also provides a useful overview of the development of political consciousness during colonial rule. His work helps locate the growth of the press within the wider social, economic and political changes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India.

Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India, 1885–1947* is important for understanding the political and social background of nationalism. His studies of the Swadeshi Movement demonstrate how political communication and public mobilisation contributed to the development of nationalist consciousness.

Anil Seal's *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* examines political developments in late nineteenth-century India and provides useful information concerning the growth of the press. His approach connects journalism with emerging political groups and the development of political competition.

Uma Das Gupta's study, "The Indian Press 1870–1880: A Small World of Journalism," provides an important examination of the early Indian press. Her work is particularly significant for understanding the growth of vernacular journalism and the colonial government's increasing concern about political criticism.

Sukeshi Kamra's *The Indian Periodical Press and the Production of Nationalist Rhetoric* provides a cultural and intellectual interpretation of the nationalist press. The study examines periodicals as spaces where nationalist language and political identities were produced. This approach moves beyond viewing newspapers simply as sources of information.

Amelia Bonea's *The News of Empire* examines the relationship between journalism, communication and the colonial state. Her work shows how the circulation of news and information became an important aspect of colonial governance and political conflict.

Regional studies have further demonstrated the importance of vernacular newspapers. Newspapers in Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Hindi and other languages translated nationalist ideas into regional contexts and helped connect local political issues with the wider national movement.

The existing literature can broadly be divided into three approaches. The first views the press as an instrument of nationalist education and mobilisation. The second examines the relationship between newspapers, political organizations and public opinion. The third treats newspapers as cultural spaces in which nationalist rhetoric and political identities were constructed.

However, much of the existing research focuses on individual newspapers, regions or particular political movements. The present study attempts to bring these aspects together by examining the press simultaneously as a medium of communication, an instrument of political mobilisation and a creator of public opinion.

4. Methodology

The study follows a historical and analytical methodology. It uses both primary and secondary sources to examine the relationship between the press and Indian nationalism.

4.1 Primary Sources

The primary sources include contemporary newspapers, journals, government reports, legislative proceedings and writings of nationalist leaders. Newspapers such as *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Hindu*, *Kesari*, *The Mahratta*, *Young India* and *Harijan* are particularly useful for understanding political debates during the national movement.

4.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include books, research articles, theses and scholarly studies relating to Indian nationalism, journalism, colonial censorship and political communication.

4.3 Method of Analysis

The study follows a qualitative historical approach. Newspaper reports, editorials and political writings are examined to understand how nationalist ideas were communicated and how public opinion developed.

The study also compares English and vernacular newspapers to identify regional differences in political communication. Government restrictions on the press are examined to understand the conflict between colonial authority and freedom of expression.

5. Emergence and Growth of the Indian Press

The emergence of newspapers in India was closely connected with the development of printing technology, education and modern political thought. Early newspapers were largely intended for European readers, but Indian participation in journalism gradually increased.

By the nineteenth century, Indian intellectuals and political activists began establishing newspapers and journals in both English and Indian languages. These publications initially focused on social reform, education and cultural issues but increasingly began addressing political questions.

The growth of vernacular newspapers was particularly significant. Newspapers published in Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu and other languages could communicate with regional populations in familiar languages.

The press created a new form of public communication. Political developments could be reported quickly, government policies could be criticized and readers could participate in political discussions through letters and public debates.

This development contributed to the emergence of a politically conscious public sphere in colonial India.

6. The Press and the Growth of Indian Nationalism

The nationalist press contributed to Indian nationalism in several important ways.

6.1 Political Education

Newspapers introduced readers to political concepts such as constitutional rights, liberty, representation and self-government. They explained government policies and helped readers understand political developments.

6.2 Criticism of Colonial Rule

Nationalist newspapers criticized colonial economic and administrative policies. Issues such as taxation, land revenue, economic exploitation, famines and racial discrimination received attention.

6.3 Development of National Consciousness

The press helped Indians understand that people in different regions faced common problems under colonial rule. This contributed to the development of a broader sense of Indian identity.

6.4 Political Mobilisation

Newspapers encouraged people to participate in political activities, meetings, boycotts and nationalist campaigns.

Thus, journalism became closely connected with political action.

7. The Vernacular Press and Colonial Restrictions

The increasing influence of vernacular newspapers caused concern among British officials. The colonial government believed that Indian-language newspapers could spread criticism and encourage opposition to British rule.

The **Vernacular Press Act of 1878** was introduced during Lord Lytton's administration. It gave colonial authorities greater power to control publications in Indian languages.

The Act became a symbol of colonial restrictions on freedom of expression. Indian journalists and political leaders criticized the legislation.

The response of Amrita Bazar Patrika became particularly famous. The newspaper changed its language to English, thereby avoiding the restrictions directed specifically at vernacular publications.

The conflict surrounding the Vernacular Press Act demonstrated that the press had become an important political force. Colonial attempts to suppress newspapers also strengthened nationalist demands for freedom of expression.

8. Major Nationalist Newspapers

8.1 Amrita Bazar Patrika

Founded in 1868 by Sisir Kumar Ghosh and Motilal Ghosh, Amrita Bazar Patrika became one of the leading nationalist newspapers. It criticized colonial policies and supported various nationalist causes.

Its response to the Vernacular Press Act demonstrated the ability of nationalist journalism to adapt to colonial restrictions.

8.2 Kesari

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was closely associated with Kesari, a Marathi-language newspaper. It promoted political awareness and encouraged a more assertive form of nationalism.

The newspaper played an important role in communicating Tilak's political ideas to Marathi-speaking readers.

8.3 The Mahratta

The Mahratta was an English-language newspaper associated with Tilak. It helped communicate nationalist arguments to educated readers beyond the Marathi-speaking population.

8.4 The Hindu

Founded in Madras in 1878, The Hindu developed into an important newspaper for political discussion. It increasingly reflected Indian political opinion and criticized aspects of colonial administration.

8.5 Swadesamitran

Swadesamitran played an important role in the development of political journalism in the Tamil-speaking region. It helped communicate nationalist ideas in Tamil and contributed to political awareness.

8.6 Young India and Harijan

Mahatma Gandhi used Young India and Harijan to communicate his political and social ideas. These publications discussed non-violence, satyagraha, swadeshi, social reform and national unity.

9. The Press and the Swadeshi Movement

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 marked an important stage in the relationship between the press and nationalism.

Nationalist newspapers criticized the partition and reported the growing opposition to the government's decision. They supported the Swadeshi and boycott movements and encouraged Indians to purchase indigenous goods.

Newspapers also published political speeches, resolutions and arguments supporting the movement.

Through these activities, the press helped transform the anti-partition movement into a broader nationalist campaign.

The Swadeshi period demonstrated that newspapers could play an active role in political mobilisation rather than merely reporting political events.

10. The Press and Gandhian Nationalism

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi as a major national leader transformed the relationship between the press and mass politics.

Gandhi regarded newspapers as instruments of public education. Through Young India, Navajivan and Harijan, he explained the principles of non-violence, satyagraha and swadeshi.

His writings helped readers understand the objectives of political campaigns and the importance of disciplined, non-violent participation.

The press therefore became an important link between nationalist leadership and the wider population.

11. Newspapers and Public Opinion

One of the greatest contributions of the press was the creation and shaping of public opinion.

Newspapers provided information, but they also interpreted political events. Editorials and political articles encouraged readers to form opinions about colonial policies and nationalist movements.

The press shaped public opinion by:

- reporting political developments;
- criticizing government policies;
- exposing colonial repression;
- discussing economic problems;
- communicating nationalist programmes;
- publicizing political meetings and demonstrations;
- encouraging participation in nationalist movements.

Newspapers also connected readers in different regions by reporting political developments from across India.

The emergence of such a political public sphere was an important element in the growth of nationalism.

12. The Press During the Non-Cooperation Movement

The Non-Cooperation Movement launched under Gandhi's leadership in 1920 marked a new stage of mass politics.

Nationalist newspapers explained the objectives of the movement and encouraged people to participate in boycotts of government institutions and foreign goods.

Newspapers reported political meetings, speeches, arrests and demonstrations. They also attempted to explain the importance of non-violence and disciplined political action.

The colonial government responded with restrictions and prosecutions against nationalist publications.

Despite these challenges, the press remained an important channel of nationalist communication.

13. The Press During the Civil Disobedience Movement

The Civil Disobedience Movement, particularly the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, generated extensive newspaper coverage.

Nationalist newspapers reported Gandhi's activities, political demonstrations and government repression. They helped communicate the objectives of the movement to readers across different regions.

The colonial government imposed restrictions on newspapers that supported civil disobedience. Yet nationalist publications continued to communicate political messages through editorials, reports and political commentary.

The press thus helped transform individual acts of resistance into part of a wider national movement.

14. The Press and the Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement of 1942 took place under conditions of intense colonial repression.

The British government imposed censorship and attempted to prevent information about the movement from circulating freely. Newspapers faced restrictions and political reporting was closely controlled.

However, nationalist communication continued through underground publications and alternative networks.

The experience of 1942 demonstrated that control over information was an important element of colonial power. It also showed the determination of nationalist activists to maintain political communication despite censorship.

15. Limitations of the Nationalist Press

Although the nationalist press played an important role, its influence had limitations.

15.1 Low Literacy

A large part of India's population could not read newspapers directly. Therefore, the direct readership of newspapers remained limited.

15.2 Urban Concentration

Many newspapers were concentrated in towns and cities and primarily reached educated readers.

15.3 Social Limitations

The opinions expressed by newspapers often reflected the interests and perspectives of educated middle-class groups.

15.4 Regional Differences

India's linguistic diversity meant that newspapers often had limited geographical influence.

15.5 Political Bias

Nationalist newspapers were not politically neutral. Different publications supported different political leaders, ideologies and strategies.

Despite these limitations, newspapers could influence wider society indirectly through public reading, political meetings and oral discussion.

16. The Press as a Historical Source

Newspapers constitute an important source for historians studying the Indian national movement.

They provide contemporary information about:

- political meetings;
- nationalist campaigns;
- government policies;
- arrests and repression;
- public reactions;
- speeches of political leaders;
- Debates within nationalist organizations.

However, newspapers must be critically examined because each publication represented particular political viewpoints.

Historians should therefore compare newspaper reports with government documents, correspondence, memoirs and other primary sources.

The press is valuable not only for understanding what happened but also for understanding how historical events were interpreted by contemporaries.

17. Findings of the Study

The study arrives at the following major findings:

1. The Indian press was an important instrument of political awakening during colonial rule.
2. Newspapers helped spread ideas of nationalism, political rights and self-government.
3. Vernacular newspapers played an important role in bringing political issues into regional languages.
4. Newspapers helped connect local grievances with wider national concerns.
5. The nationalist press contributed to the creation of public opinion against colonial rule.
6. Major newspapers played an active role in political mobilisation during important nationalist movements.
7. The colonial government considered the press politically influential and therefore attempted to control it.
8. Press censorship strengthened the nationalist demand for freedom of expression.
9. Newspapers helped create a sense of common national identity among people divided by language and region.
10. The press influenced society beyond its direct readership through public readings and political discussion.
11. Despite its limitations, the press was an important component of the wider political and social processes that produced Indian independence.

18. Conclusion

The Indian press played a vital role in the development of Indian nationalism and the struggle against British colonial rule. The growth of newspapers created a new public sphere in which Indians could discuss political, economic and social issues.

Nationalist newspapers educated readers about colonial policies, criticized government actions, communicated political programmes and encouraged participation in nationalist movements. English and vernacular newspapers together created networks of political communication that connected different regions and communities.

The importance of the press became particularly visible during the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement. Newspapers transformed political events into widely discussed national issues and helped mobilize public opinion.

The colonial government's attempts to control newspapers through the Vernacular Press Act and later forms of censorship demonstrated the political importance of journalism. The struggle against press restrictions became part of the wider struggle for civil liberties and national freedom.

However, the nationalist press had limitations. Its direct readership was restricted by low literacy, and many newspapers reflected the perspectives of educated and urban sections of society. Nationalism itself was shaped by many forces beyond journalism, including political organizations, social reform, economic grievances and mass participation.

Nevertheless, the press was an essential component of the Indian national movement. It served simultaneously as a **source of information, instrument of political education, creator of public opinion and means of political mobilisation.**

The history of Indian nationalism cannot therefore be fully understood without examining the history of its newspapers and journalists. The nationalist press helped Indians not only to read about the struggle for freedom but also to imagine themselves as participants in a common national cause.

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