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THE HISTORY OF THE PRESS IN INDIA (UPTO 1947)

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ABSTRACT

Press and Politics information media in print popularly known as press is generally credited with having unseen power to mould public opinion. There is no historical evidence that the press as such existed before the east india company rule in the subcontinent, except for the mention of 'waqiah-navis' who primarily acted as an official news recorder and secret informer of the Mughal rulers. Actually, The history of the Indian press begins with the coming of the Europeans. Indian press during the Raj was, on the whole, an aggregation of vernacular reads which did little to unite castes and national interests. It was during the mid-19th century (First War of Independence) and the 20th century freedom movement that the Indian newspapers played a powerful and prominent role in questioning the forces of authority, social prejudices and the suppression of personal liberty. During the late 19th and early 20th century, attempts to propagate the ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity, and freedom were made by political and social leaders.

KEYWORDS: *Press, journalism, freedom movement, nationalism*

INTRODUCTION

The history of the press in India can be traced to the ancient period even before printing started. There is evidence that the use of the concept of mass duplication in India dates back to the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. Grants of land were originally recorded by engraving the information on copper plates and etchings on different surfaces like wood, bone, ivory and shells. Printing, as it is understood in the present day, was not there in India during the ancient period when it was ruled mostly by kings and emperors. It was a period when education was not widespread and the means of communication and transportation were quite inadequate. Asoka (304 B.C. to 233 B.C.), one of the greatest Indian emperors and

the grandson of Chandragupta Mauraya, devised his own means of communication. During his regime all the imperial edicts were inscribed on copper plates, rocks and stone pillars which exist even today from Afghanistan in North East to Karnataka state in the South. His edicts are considered examples of imperial political communication to the informed and literate section of the population. With the establishment of the Moghul Empire started a new era in the field of the press in India. Communication was effectively organized. Written newspapers of a kind were circulated. It must be pointed out that the news-writers were given maximum freedom to cover, present and disseminate the news which had been unfortunately very often inaccurate, fabricated and distorted

According to historians of journalism, the news was collected in a well-organized manner under Akbar the Great. In 1574, Akbar established a recording office that helped later medieval historians to gather materials for chronicles.

The Christians, who came to India with an avowed purpose of propagating Christianity among the Hindus and convert them into Christians, set up for the first time printing presses in India to achieve their desired goal. 6 September, 1556 is quite significant for the Indians as it was on this day, arrived the first printing press in India. It is interesting as well as significant to state that initially the establishment of printing presses in different parts of India was looked down with contempt and suspicion by the Indians as their sole aim was the propagation of the Christian faith. The individual responsible for the initiation of printing in India was one Joao De Bustamante (rechristened Joao Rodrigues in 1563), a Spaniard who joined the Society of Jesus in 1556. Bustamante, who was an expert printer, along with his Indian assistant set up the new press and began to operate it. Among others, four books are known to have been printed by Bustamante:

- Conclusões e outras coisas (Theses and other things) in 1556.
- Confecionarios in 1557.
- Doutrina Christa by St. Francis Xavier in 1557.
- Tratado contra os erros scismaticos dos Abexins (A Tract against the Schismatic Errors of the Abyssinians) by Gonçalo Rodrigues in 1560.

Another Spaniard to play a major role in the history of printing in India was Joao Gonsalves, who is credited with preparing the first printing types of an Indian script- Tamil.

Judging from the historical facts, we have to give credit to the British rule for the advent of Journalism in India. The newspaper, therefore, came to India as an alien product, which was in fact forced upon us. This is because even our great nationalist leaders in the 18th and 19th centuries did not entertain the idea of learning English (called Mlechhas' language). The English were contemptuously referred to as Mlechhas—the depraved/degraded people whose moral standards were considered abysmally low and despised. The East India Company, which was ruling the country, was not favourably disposed to the press; the officials of the Company were suspicious of journalists and newspapers from the very beginning. The officials were intolerant of any kind of criticism. The notional support that the press in India got emanated from the control of press by the Englishmen who drew strength from the power of press in England.

William Bolts, an ex-employee of the British East India Company attempted to start the first newspaper in India in 1776. Bolts had to beat retreat under the disapproving gaze of the Court of Directors of the Company.

It was James Augustus Hicky who earned the distinction of launching in India the first English newspaper. The first publication of Hicky came to the stalls/readers on January 29, 1780 in Kolkata. It was named Bengal Gazette alias Calcutta General Advertiser. The paper had two sheets with three columns on each page and it was published weekly. The paper declared it as a "weekly political and commercial paper open to all parties but influenced by none." Using allegory, the paper made transparent insinuations about certain individuals. There was suspicion that Sir Philip Francis, a Member of the Governor General's Council and the enemy of Warren Hastings, supplied Hicky with slanderous information which Hicky skilfully used in his paper to annoy the Hastings Administration—suspicious fortified by the fact that Hicky's paper never attacked Sir Francis himself. Finally, on November 14, 1780, (following Sir Francis' departure from India) after reading scurrilous attacks upon Mrs. Hastings in Hicky's Gazette, Sir Warren Hastings denied Hicky the use of postal facilities on the ground that the newspaper contained improper paragraphs tending to vilify private character and to disturb the peace of the English Settlement in Calcutta and "for failure to promote British economic interests"; and after this no copy was to pass through the channels of the post office. This might be considered as the first censorship of the press in India. Hicky was infuriated and was bitterly opposed to those who were in power and attacked Governor General Hastings and other officials in an indecent way. In June 1781, he was imprisoned for being unable to pay fines of RS.80, 000/- but his imprisonment did not extinguish his paper. He is truly a pioneer of the Indian Press. So in its early days the press offended the Government by libeling private persons or writing libellous articles against the Company's servants. Later on, these papers began to receive the resolutions and minutes of the council and military secrets and the like were published as news. The Government objected to this kind of publication in 1785.

A rival paper, Indian Gazette, appeared in the world of journalism in Kolkata, in the same year, 1780, in which Hicky introduced his Gazette; the rival paper gave setback to Hicky. The rival paper was much better in quality; it had four pages of 16 inches long, the types were better; it had three columns and it was well printed. On the other hand, Hicky's paper was having two pages of shorter size, crudely printed, having only two columns. Hicky found that his customers were deserting him. In a fit of anger, he attacked Swedish missionary, John Zachariah

Kiermander; Hicky suspected him of having supplied types to his rival. He also attacked the proprietors of Indian Gazette, Peter Read and B. Messinck, salt merchant and theatrical producer, respectively. As if it were not enough, the authorities granted Indian Gazette postal facilities; the same facilities were denied to Hicky's paper. Within a few years after the Hicky's Gazette we saw the appearance of new publications like The Calcutta Gazette (1784), The Bengal Journal (1785), The Oriental Magazine of Calcutta or Calcutta Amusement (1785), The Calcutta Chronicle (1786), The Madras Courier (1788), The Bombay Herald (1789), etc. the promoters of these new publications profited from Hickey's bitter experience and avoided clash with the authorities.

In 1799, Lord Wellesley introduced the press censorship in Bengal in the aftermath of developments leading to the deportation of Dr Charles Maclean for his anti-establishment reporting in Bengal Harkara of which Dr Maclean was the printer. The year 1818 marks the beginning of Bengali journalism, with Samachar Darpan as the first newspaper in Bengali language published by Serampore Mission Press on May 23, 1818. Started by missionaries Carey and Marshman, it began as a monthly, but soon converted into a weekly. After surviving a number of crises, it closed down in 1852. Meanwhile, another remarkable Bengali journal Sambad Kaumadi was published under the patronage of Rammohan Roy in 1821, however, it did not survive for long. Sambad Prabhakar was the first Bengali daily newspaper published in 1839, patronized by Ishwar ChandraGupta. It was followed by Tattobodhini, published by Akshya Kumar Dutta in 1843. The other Bengali journals during this time were Samachar Chandrika, Bangadoot, Vividhartha Sangrah (1851), Masik Patra (1854) and Som Prakash (1851). The early Bengali papers took up the cause of the oppressed workers in the indigo plantation and of the peasants. Notable among them were Som Prakash, Grambartha Prakashika and Amrita Bazar Patrika (before it became an English weekly). Amrita Bazar Patrika became a threat for the government with its exposure of the exploitation of labour in plantations and on the fields, violent denunciation of the European planters and the government. In the course of this campaign, it became the most significant newspaper of its time in Bengal and led to the births of many smaller newspapers in villages and districts in the state. However, any attempt at socio-cultural empowerment faces opposition and resistance, and Bengal's journalistic revolution was no exception. It was countered perpetually by blows from the government. The British government legislated and executed various repressive laws to jeopardize the functioning and freedom of press. However, it could never compromise the commitment Bengali press had towards its readers for fighting against injustice, racial

prejudice and mal-administration; also Bengali press was among the pioneers to assail the Moderate leaders of the nationalist movement with timidity and lack of courage in front of the British onslaught. However, the Bengali press suffered much in the reprisals launched by the government after the mutiny in 1857, especially by the Vernacular Press Act of 1878.

The circulation of papers during this early period never exceeded a hundred or two hundreds. These journals usually aimed to cater to the intellectual entertainment of the Europeans and the Anglo Indians. There was hardly any danger of public opinion being subverted in India. What really worried these Company's officers was the apprehension that these newspapers might reach London and expose their misdoings to the Home authorities. In the absence of press laws, the newspapers were at the mercy of the Company's officials. The Government sometimes enforced pre-censorship, sometimes deported the offending editor for anti-government policies.

THE CENSORSHIP OF THE PRESS ACT, 1799

Lord Wellesley imposed severe censorship on all newspapers. Apprehending a French invasion of India had engaged in the struggle for supremacy in India, might have the effect of weakening his influence vis-à-vis his Indian adversaries or the French. The Censorship of the Press Act, 1799, imposed almost wartime restrictions on the press. These regulations required:

- i. The newspaper to clearly print in every issue the name of the printer, the editor and the proprietor; and
- ii. The publisher to submit all material for pre-censorship to the Secretary to the Government.

Breach of these rules was punishable with immediate deportation. In 1807 the Censorship Act was extended to cover journals, pamphlets and even books. Relaxation of press restrictions came under Lord Hastings. The Governor-General tried to put his liberal ideas in practice and succeeded in establishing in India some of the progressive views which were gaining ground in England.

THE LICENSING REGULATIONS ACT, 1823.

The appointment of John Adams as acting Governor-General in 1823 gave him the opportunity to give a practical shape to his reactionary views. Press regulations of 1823 proved more stringent than any other that had been in force earlier. The new regulations required:

- i. Every printer and publisher to obtain a license for starting a press or using it.
- ii. The penalty for printing and/or publishing any literature without the requisite license was Rs. 400 for each such publication or imprisonment thereof. Magistrates were authorized to attach unlicensed presses.
- iii. The Governor-General had the right to revoke a license or call for a fresh application.

THE LIBERATION OF THE INDIAN PRESS, 1835

Lord William Bentinck adopted a liberal attitude towards the press. Although Adams' press regulations were not revoked considerable latitude of discussion was given to the press, Indian as well as Anglo Indian. However, it was left to Charles Metcalfe, officiating Governor General to repeal the obnoxious ordinance of 1823 and earn the epithet of 'Liberator of the Indian Press'. The result of this liberal press policy which continued till 1856 was the rapid growth of newspapers all over the country.

THE LICENSING ACT, 1857.

The emergency caused by the Rebellion of 1857 led the Government to again impose licensing restrictions on the press in addition to the existing registration procedure laid down by the Metcalfe Act. The Act prohibited the keeping or using of printing presses without a license from the government and the government reserved the discretionary right to grant licenses or revoke them at any time.

THE REGISTRATION ACT, 1867.

The Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867 replaced Metcalfe's Act of 1835 pertaining to registration of printing presses and newspapers. The Act was of a regulating nature and not a restriction on printing presses or newspapers. By this Act every book or newspaper was required to have printed legibly on it the name of printer and publisher and the place of printing. Further, within one month of the publication of a book a copy of the book had to be supplied free of charge to the local government. In 1870, an Act to amend the Indian Penal Code was passed which contained a sedition section. Later on this section was incorporated in the Indian Penal Code as Section 124-A.

VERNACULAR PRESS ACT, 1878

Vernacular Press Act, 1878 a highly controversial measure repressing the freedom of vernacular press. The regime of Viceroy Lord Lytton is particularly noted for his most controversial press policy which led to the enactment of the Vernacular Press Act on 14 March 1878. Earlier dramatic

performances act (1876) was enacted to repress the writing and staging of the allegedly seditious dramas. Vernacular Press Act (1878) was aimed at repressing seditious propaganda through vernacular newspapers. Introducing the Bill the Law Member of the Council narrated how the vernacular newspapers and periodicals were spreading seditious propaganda against the government. The viceroy Lord Lytton strongly denounced newspapers published in the vernacular languages as "mischievous scribblers preaching open sedition". He remarked that the avowed purpose of most of the vernacular newspapers was an end to the British raj. The papers that made the government worried were Somprakash, Sulabh Samachar, Halisahar Patrika, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Bharat Mihir, Dacca Prakash, Sadharani and Bharat Sanskarak. All these papers were said to have been leading the seditious movement against the government. The Act provided for submitting to police all the proof sheets of contents of papers before publication. What was seditious news was to be determined by the police, and not by the judiciary. Under this Act many of the papers were fined, their editors jailed. Obviously this repressive measure came under severe criticism. All the native associations irrespective of religion, caste and creed denounced the measure and kept their denunciations and protestations alive. All the prominent leaders of Bengal and of India condemned the Act as unwarranted and unjustified, and demanded for its immediate withdrawal. The newspapers themselves kept on criticising the measure without an end. The succeeding administration of Lord Ripon reviewed the developments consequent upon the Act and finally withdrew it.

THE NEWSPAPERS ACT, 1908

The newspapers of the time often commented adversely on the Government policies. The government followed a repressive policy and enacted the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act, 1908. According to this Act:

- i. The magistrates were empowered to confiscate printing presses, property connected thereto of newspapers which published objectionable material which served as incitement to murder or acts of violence;
- ii. The local government was empowered to annul any declaration made by the printer and publisher of an offending newspaper made under the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867; and
- iii. The newspaper editors and printers were given the option to appeal to the High Court within fifteen days of forfeiture of the press. Under the Newspapers Act of 1908, the Government launched prosecutions against

nine newspapers and confiscated seven presses.

DEFENCE OF INDIA ACT, 1914

In 1914 the enactment of the Defence of India Act added to the restrictions imposed on the Press. The Press Association of India in a memorandum on the operation of the Press Act of 1910 stated that nearly 1,000 papers had been prosecuted under the Act. The total amount of securities and forfeitures which went into the hands of Government during the first five years of the Act was nearly Rs 5 lakhs according to another official return made in 1918. Over 500 publications were proscribed under the Act. The Defence Act Rules in India were not merely used for war purposes, but also for all political purposes so as to carry out the policy of the Indian Government in regard to repression of political agitation or free public criticism of its normal acts and methods of administration in India.

PRESS EMERGENCY ACT, 1931

When Gandhiji started his Salt Satyagraha in March 1930, the peace between the Press and Government, which had been maintained for nine years, snapped. A Press Ordinance was issued, reproducing the stringent provisions of the repealed Press Act of 1910, on January 4, 1932. Simultaneously with Gandhiji's arrest, the earlier Press Act of 1930 was amplified in the form of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1932. The struggle for freedom passed through many vicissitudes between 1932 and 1946. There were intervals, though brief, of understanding between Government and the Congress. Throughout this period, however, the Press Emergency Act of 1931 remained in force and was applied with greater or less severity according to political circumstances. The record of prosecution in the 15-year period exceeded the one under the 1910 Act. Well over 1,000 newspapers were victimised in Bombay, Bengal, Delhi, Madras, Punjab and UP.

ROLE OF PRESS ON NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The dawn of a new century resulted in increased number of newspapers, particularly vernacular newspapers which supported the growing national consciousness. Indian press played an equally important role in building and developing Indian nationalism. It is through press that the Indian nationalists spread the message of patriotism and modern economic, social and political ideas among the 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, Andhra Prakasika etc. became a powerful

instrument of political education for the middle class and stimulated the growth of national feeling by making public the grievances of the people and also by exposing the failings and deficiencies of the foreign rule. 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 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. As a result, Press had always enjoyed popular support with respect and despite various lamentable aberrations in the functioning of media, even now media in India has strong popular support and the liberty which it enjoys today is founded on such popular support of the civil society. National political struggle and advocacy of social reforms and emancipation in the years before independence contributed to the creation of the core strength of the press in free India. This included independent functioning, resistance to state oppression and censorship, firm commitment to free speech and expression and its role as the leader and path finder of the society and protector of fundamental rights. Indian democracy has grown from strength to strength and made wide range of reforms for surging India in the 60 years of independence encountering struggles, war and insurgencies. The press has not only mirrored the march of this journey of democracy but gave valuable insights and suggestions at every step.

It was in 1857 itself that Payam-e-Azadi started publication in Hindi and Urdu, calling upon the people to fight against the British. The paper was soon confiscated and anyone found with a copy of the paper was prosecuted for sedition. Again, the first hindi daily, Samachar Sudhavarashan, and two newspapers in Urdu and Persian respectively, Doorbeen and Sultan-ul-Akbar, faced trial in 1857 for having published a 'Firman' by Bahadur Shah Zafar, urging the people to drive the British out of India. This was followed by the notorious Gagging Act of Lord Canning, under which restrictions were imposed on the newspapers and

periodicals. In the struggle against the British, some newspapers played a very notable role. This included the Hindi Patriot! Established in 1853, by the author and playwright, Grish Chandra Ghosh, it became popular under the editorship of Harish Chandra Mukherjee. In 1861, the paper published a play, "Neel Darpan" and launched a movement against the British, urging the people to stop cultivating the crop for the white traders. This resulted in the formation of a Neel Commission. Later, the paper was taken over by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The paper strongly opposed the Government's excesses and demanded that Indians be appointed to top government posts. The Indian Mirror was the other contemporary of this paper which was very popular among the reading public. Yet another weekly, Amrita Bazar Patrika which was being published from Jessore, was critical of the government, with the result that its proprietors faced trial and conviction. In 1871, the Patrika moved to Calcutta and another Act was passed to suppress it and other native journals. Mahadev Govind Ranade, a leading leader of Maharashtra, used to write in Gyan Prakash as well as in Indu Prakash. Both these journals helped awaken the conscience of the downtrodden masses. Another Marathi weekly, Kesari was started by Tilak from January 1, 1881. He alongwith Agarkar and Chiplunkar started another weekly journal, Mratha in English. The Editor of the 'Daccan Star' Nam Joshi also joined them and his paper was incorporated with Maratha. Tilak and Agarkar were convicted for writings against the British and the Diwan of Kolhapur. Tilak's Kesari became one of the leading media to propagate the message of freedom movement. It also made the anti-partition movement of Bengal a national issue. In 1908, Tilak opposed the Sedition ordinance. He was later exiled from the country for six years. Hindi edition of Kesari was started from Nagpur and Banaras.

The Editors commanded a very high reputation at the time of the birth of the Indian National Congress. One could measure the extent of this respect from the fact that those who occupied the frontline seats in the first ever Congress session held in Bombay in December 1885 included some of the editors of Indian newspapers. The first ever resolution at this Session was proposed by the editor of The Hindu, G. Subramanya Iyer. In this resolution, it was demanded that the government should appoint a committee to enquire into the functioning of Indian administration. The second resolution was also moved by a journalist from Poona, Chiplunkar in which the Congress was urged to demand for the abolition of India Council which ruled the country from Britain. The third resolution was supported by Dadabhai Naoroji who was a noted journalist of his time. The fourth resolution was proposed by Dadabhai Naoroji. There were many Congress Presidents who

had either been the editors or had started the publication of one or the other newspapers. In this context, particular mention may be made of Ferozeshah Mehta who had started the Bombay Chronicle and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya who edited daily, Hindustan. He also helped the publication of Leader from Allahabad. Moti Lal Nehru was the first Chairman of the Board of Directors of the leader. Lala Lajpat Rai inspired the publication of three journals, the Punjabi, Bandematram and the People from Lahore. During his stay in South Africa, Gandhiji had brought out Indian Opinion and after settling in India, he started the publication of Young India, Navjeevan, Harijan, Harijan Sevak and Harijan Bandhu. Subash Chandra Bose and C.R. Das were not journalists but they acquired the papers like Forward and Advance which later attained national status. Jawaharlal Nehru founded the National Herald.

Unarguably the Press was a very important pillar in the struggle against the British with regard to critiquing their policies and demanding complete independence. It is unlikely that without the Press, the important leaders of the Indian national movement would have been able to disseminate their ideas to the masses on such a massive scale. The Government on its part had enacted many strident laws, such as Section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code which provided that anyone trying to cause disaffection against the British Government in India was to be transported for life or for any term or imprisoned up to three years. But the nationalist-minded journalists had evolved many clever ways to subvert these legal hurdles. For instance, writings hostile to the Government used to be prefaced with sentiments of loyalty to the Government or critical writings of socialists or Irish nationalists from newspapers in England used to be quoted. This was a difficult task which required an intelligent mix of simplicity with subtlety.

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