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978-0-521-42037-2 - Communications and Power: Propaganda and the Press in the Indian Nationalist Struggle, 1920–1947

Milton Israel

Excerpt

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Introduction: politics and the press in a colonial setting

On 7 February 1919, Motilal Nehru gave a dinner at Anand Bhavan, his Allahabad home, to celebrate the founding of the *Independent*; and in his toast to the paper, he spoke for a large and often competing fraternity of nationalist politicians, Government officials and professional newspapermen. The *Independent* would ‘think aloud for India’, Nehru declared, gathering together in a simple and potent phrase the emphasis on ideas, the presumption of an extraordinary representative role and awareness of the proselytising opportunities in the control of a newspaper. For politicians like Nehru, a paper provided an expanded platform, a public demonstration of influence, assured publicity for a particular perspective, as well as the opportunity to attack the views of others. The daily appearance of the paper provided the image of institutional stability for both the man and the viewpoint, a symbolic demonstration of the power to speak out – especially significant in the context of freedom struggle. Getting ‘a good press’ was considered to be essential support for a political career, and control of one’s own newspaper clearly enhanced the odds in one’s own favour.

Nehru’s views regarding the role of the press in the nationalist movement were a legacy of the extraordinary syncretic nature of the British–Indian encounter and the colonial political culture that would provide the foundations of the modern Indian state. The conquest of a vast empire and its maintenance and administration for almost two hundred years were dependent on the acquiescence and participation of a range of indigenous groups. In the countryside, the primary British concerns for order and revenue were accommodated to the interests of the old princely and landed elites. In the European enclaves of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, a clutch of alien political appointees and senior bureaucrats determined policy and sought to control their Mughal inheritance. The basic institutions of the Raj were constructed largely in the space between: Government departments, councils, courts, universities, newspapers, business houses – operated jointly by Britons and a new Indian elite of English educated civil servants, academics, merchants, newspapermen,

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lawyers, and judges. Directly or indirectly they served the Government of India by participating in the collaborative system on which it depended. And they would provide as well, generations of leaders of the Indian nationalist movement that threatened to displace it.

This 'space between' was both a barrier and a passage way. In no other place was the isolation of these 'two solitudes' more apparent. But it was as well an entrepôt for the exchange of ideas and perspective, angry attack, and defensive posturing among Indians and Englishmen who sought to construct ordinary lives in an extraordinary situation. And the ambiguity and paradox which informed their efforts was reflected in a multi-generational 'debate' about India's future and the role, place, and purpose of the British colonial enterprise.

**Legacy: the press and the colonial system in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries**

The participation of the press in this critical enterprise began early, and prophetically in the context of an attack on Government, a repressive response, and an ambivalent debate about official relations with newspapermen. In 1780, James Hicky established the *Bengal Gazette*, the first weekly newspaper published in India. But his attacks on Warren Hastings' East India Company regime led to the seizure of his types and the closure of the paper in 1782. A series of deportations followed: William Deane in 1794, Dr Mclean in 1798, James Silk Buckingham in 1820 – each reflecting the Company's conviction that Government was not the public's business (a viewpoint that was not limited to colonial situations), and its determination to suppress critical comment in print. It was apparent, however, by the end of the eighteenth century that individual papers could be shut down but the press as an institution could only be controlled. The changing nature of these controls reflected differences of opinion among officials regarding the special circumstances of their situation and the appropriateness of a free press in a colonial setting.

Warren Hastings' Council had suppressed the *Bengal Gazette*, but it patronized its competitor, the *India Gazette*, recognizing the usefulness of a popular voice directed against its enemies.¹ But its successors rejected both the need for a 'voice' and for the publication of any news regarding the activities of the Government. The 1799 Wellesley Regulations initi-

¹ S. Natarajan, *A History of the Press in India*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962, p. 19. The term 'popular' referred only to the British or other 'Europeans' in late-eighteenth-century Calcutta. The maximum circulation of a paper among this group was approximately 200. Natarajan's book remains one of the best overviews of the history of the Indian press.

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ated the institutionalization of constraints and banned virtually any discussion of Government in the press. In 1814, The Hastings Regulations introduced the cycle of conservative and liberal response to the press issue by establishing a more tolerant environment for newspaper activity. Although the ban on Government news was retained, a group of officials who opposed any loosening of control responded to the decision by establishing its own paper, *John Bull in the East*. By seeking to meet the enemy in its own camp, however, this group grudgingly recognized its significance and enhanced its vitality by its own participation.

In 1823, the Adam Regulations set a new standard for constraints on press freedom not to be surpassed by any subsequent Government. They reflected both the viewpoint of a very conservative regime and the new defensive concern that the debate was no longer confined to British protagonists, but included Indians as well. The first Indian-owned weekly appeared in 1816. Its survival was brief but Indian participation as newspapermen, readers of the press, and advocates of press freedom continued. The debate among Company officials preceding the introduction of the new regulations emphasized the alien nature of their regime and the danger of dealing with the press as if they were in England. Mountstuart Elphinstone noted the incongruence of a situation which attempted to bring together the 'more refined theories of Europe' and the 'prejudices and fanaticism of Asia'; while Thomas Munro insisted that 'a free press and the domination of strangers are things which are quite incompatible and which cannot long exist together'.² Another view, which clearly did not impress the Adam regime, but which would eventually inform all future debate on the question was provided by the Bengali social and religious reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. In his attack on the new regulations, Roy insisted that 'a free press and the domination of strangers' was in fact sustainable. And he associated this right with other examples of the positive and creative impact of British colonial rule in India.

The discussion concerning the Adam Regulations was the prelude to a decade of debate concerning British responsibility and mission in India, pitting 'orientalists', who argued for the development of Indian languages and institutions, against the 'anglicists', who insisted that only British institutions and the English language could set India on a progressive path. In the early thirties, the triumph of the latter was reflected in a liberal reformist programme including a new press law. T. B. Macaulay, the Law Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council, drafted the legislation and it was implemented in 1835 by Charles Metcalfe.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

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Precensorship was abolished and the press was freed to print comment on Government action subject only to the laws of sedition. One reflection of the confidence of the Government was its willingness to depend on 'ordinary law' rather than arbitrary executive authority in dealing with its critics. Its successors sought to maintain both the confidence and the sense of ordinariness in their possession of power and position in India, but continuing reminders of the alien and arbitrary nature of their authority forced them back to defensive positions. From 1835 to 1947 and beyond, the Adam Regulations and the Metcalfe Press Law provided the parameters for official action, legislation, and perspective on the issue of freedom of the press. It was a wide space and there was regular reference to both precedents as required by the immediate political situation.

The 1857 Revolt shifted the control centre back toward the Adam restrictions with the introduction of the Canning Press Act. Throughout British India an enhanced environment of race consciousness and separation informed virtually all relationships. Although the educated Indian elites generally did not participate in the struggle, their press comments concerning the violent retribution of the victorious British forces were particularly noted in reference to the need for renewed constraints on freedom of the press. The provocative and racist Anglo-Indian publication and that in the British press at home, was generally passed over without comment. The Canning Act was short-lived, but the fear which produced renewed emphasis on the special and dangerous nature of the colonial context was not easily dissipated. In regard to the press, it entrenched the idea and perception of two distinct entities – an Indian and an Anglo-Indian press – sharing a common history, purpose, and ethos, but separated by some as yet ill-defined politicized communal loyalty.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of Anglo-Indian and Indian-owned newspapers established in the major urban centres of British India became recognized as 'national' voices. Although their circulations were relatively small, they were read by an elite constituency; and those Anglo-Indians who held power and Indian politicians who sought it began to recognize the enhanced capacity of these papers to create environment and affect viewpoint. The *Times of India* in Bombay, the *Statesman* and the *Englishman* in Calcutta, the *Pioneer* in Allahabad, and the *Mail* and *Times* in Madras were influential Anglo-Indian voices supported by a range of merchants and planters, and indirectly by Government through purchase and advertisement. The Indian elite press was better off than its vernacular country cousins, but it too was denied the substantial support available to British-owned enterprises. Continuing financial problems both enhanced its separation from its more affluent Anglo-Indian 'contemporaries' and denied it the easy pro-

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essional independence that economic security provides. But a combination of philanthropy, family enterprise, extraordinary individual sacrifice, and eventually the support of nationalist war chests produced over time another choir of ‘national’ voices which competed with increasing success. In Calcutta, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Bengalee*, the *Tribune* in Lahore, and the *Hindu* in Madras represented the initial core of such papers. They were quoted and read beyond their provincial localities, and they were edited by men who perceived and wrote about events in an ‘All-India’ context. English was considered essential for any national role and the establishment or control of an English-language paper often signalled a politician’s desire to move on to the All-India stage. B. G. Tilak’s Mahrathi language paper, *Kesari*, had a large circulation and its profits were required to cover the losses regularly incurred by the *Mahratta*, its sister English-language publication. But Tilak wanted to reach out beyond his Marathi reading constituency, to the English reading elite in other provinces and in Government. He apparently never doubted the *Mahratta*’s value, and made it a condition of the trust established to support the papers that the *Mahratta* be continued.³

There was little scope for any significant expansion of the Anglo-Indian press by the end of the century, but the potential for Indian-owned enterprise was boundless. The stagnation of the former and the growth of the latter was reflected as well in the range of viewpoint which created divisions within the two groups. While there was considerable difference between the fervent and defensive Anglo-Indian loyalty of the *Englishman* and the more judicious and balanced *Times of India*, there was consensus about the legitimacy of the Raj and its continuing creative role and mission. The Anglo-Indian press could be critical, but its opposition was always loyal. Among Indian newspapers, their shared nationalism was no constraint on a spacious range of views regarding means and ends. In its daily editorial comment and reporting of events, competing images of India present and India future reflected loyalties to a particular leader and the significance of ethnicity, language, local historical experience, and religion in any response to calls for unity of action and identity.

Increasing political institutionalization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – both by British Government and Indian initiative, broadened this ‘national’ context. The Indian Councils Act of 1861 had initiated the development of legislative assemblies and enhanced Indian participation in Government.⁴ Associational developments in major

³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴ Constitutional progress in India was marked by a series of such acts. The Indian Councils Act of 1861 was succeeded by two others in 1892 and 1909, and two Government of India Acts in 1919 and 1935.

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urban centres provided a base for the subsequent establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885.⁵ The expanding political life of the country also stimulated increased and more combative press activity, especially in vernacular languages, and produced another round of press legislation in 1878. Rather than a response to direct attacks on their administration, British officials were now increasingly required to deal with 'local' situations that were only indirectly concerned with decisions and actions at the 'centre'. This form of independence threatened to undermine a system of control dependent as much upon a range of explicit and implied power-sharing agreements as on the Government of India's ability to enforce its rule. A Press Commissioner was appointed in 1877, to attempt an improvement in the 'tone of the press', but the passage of the Oriental Languages (Vernacular) Press Act in the following year reflected the perception of failure. An important element of the Act was the elimination of any judicial constraint on executive action concerning the press. This had been introduced in Metcalfe's 1835 Act, eliminated in Canning's 1857 legislation, and revived when that Act was repealed in the following year. The return to executive control in 1878, was also brief. Judicial review was reintroduced in 1881, when Lord Ripon's Council repealed the Vernacular Press Act and returned the situation to the 1835 status quo.

Stephen Koss has described the emergence of the modern press in Britain in the mid nineteenth century and the development of its intimate relationship with politicians and the political process. The abolition of various taxes released the British press from constraining state control; and technical advances gave it the tools to produce a better-looking product, distribute it efficiently, and through telegraph, cable, and international news agencies, quickly receive and pass on information from all parts of the world. This unprecedented independence and power, Koss argues, gave the press 'new respectability', a 'heightened self-consciousness', and led to the creation of 'a myth' regarding the institution of the 'Fourth Estate'.⁶ Newspapers became 'The Press' and asserted more aggressively a unique position of freedom even within a free society. At the same time relations with individual parties and politicians were not perceived as a conflict of interest or restraint. Freedom of the press meant

⁵ Such associations generally involved the participation of newspapermen. In Calcutta, Kristo Das Pal, the editor of the *Hindu Patriot* was active in the British India Association; the Ghose brothers, who owned and edited *Amrita Bazar Patrika* were involved in the India League; and Surendranath Banerjee, the editor of the *Bengalee*, participated in the Indian Association.

⁶ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, Vol. I, *The Nineteenth Century*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981, p. 2.

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freedom to choose which idea, ideology, party, or Government to support. In Victorian England, Koss noted, ‘partnership was the dominant characteristic of newspapers’, and it remained so during most of the first half of the twentieth century.⁷

In India during the same period, the essential characteristics if not the whole context of this situation were replicated. Like Britain, politicians sought the control of newspapers and newspapermen went into politics. And in both societies there appeared to be an insatiable interest in political news. In 1865, the establishment of the cable link between Britain and India eliminated time and isolation as defensive weapons for a colonial regime that had always been aware of ‘enemies’ on both sides of the water. But the nature of the Anglo-Indian colonial society and the development of organized nationalist politics made the comparison difficult for the Government of India to accept. There were no proper political parties in India, only a Government that could not be turned out, its Anglo-Indian press supporters, and an Indian-owned press that had taken on the role of opposition – and increasingly only as loyal as the legal situation and their need for government cooperation and government news required. Many Indian papers and their editors were attacked for their allegiance to the Indian National Congress. They were accused of being unprofessional propagandists writing for political rags with no legitimate claim on freedom-of-the-press protection. But by the turn of the century, the elite press in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras had much in common with those in London, and official attack on their legitimacy required at least implicit recognition of the questionable nature of their own.

In the context of constitutional advances initiated in India in the 1861 Indian Councils Act, it was assumed that the development of representative institutions would lead to the establishment of parties and to a parallel development of an Indian party press. In both cases, it was argued, the inevitable divisions and competition would dilute the direct attack on the British regime and divert the attention of politicians and papers as they competed for place and power in the new India in the making. This optimistic scenario would allow ‘legitimate’ attack on the Government of the day without the need for ‘illegitimate’ assault on the bona fides of the British imperial state. But with or without parties, there were always divisions and competition among Indian politicians. While considerable attention was concentrated on the actions and policies of the Government of India in the Indian-owned press, there was as well a distinctive Indian agenda and frame of reference regarding relationships among Indian groups as well as with the British.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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Much of the attention of the Indian press in the early days was concentrated on social and educational issues, and these remained significant in the increasingly politicized environment of the late nineteenth century. The use of the press for a political campaign was preceded by and often inseparable from its use on behalf of social reform and the defence of traditional values and institutions. In 1890–1, B. M. Malabari, the Bombay editor and social activist, used his *Indian Spectator* to launch a successful campaign on behalf of a higher minimum age of marriage law. He was aided in Calcutta by K. C. Sen, an heir to Ram Mohan Roy's reformist legacy, who used tracts and the press to mobilize support. The combined assault from the east and west coasts gave the campaign an 'All-India' and 'national' quality which was not lost on their opponents. In Calcutta, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* advocated the orthodox view on such issues as well as the nationalist cause, and 'the example of the *Patrika* first awakened in Tilak awareness of the possibilities of harnessing religious sentiment to political causes'.⁸ In 1896, Tilak utilized the name and revitalized tradition of Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha leader, to reach a mass audience through their religion and history. Much of Shivaji's fame rested on his courageous attacks on the Mughal Empire, and Tilak's two papers, *Kesari* and *Mahratta* advocated a reading of the past that attracted a large constituency among the Hindus of Maharashtra, although many Muslims were offended. The Shivaji symbol also attracted a 'national' audience. Within six years of the great king's reappearance in Poona and Bombay, Bengalis on the other side of the sub-continent were celebrating Shivaji festivals in honour of an 'Indian nation builder', despite his regional base and his bad reputation in Bengali history.

Hindu–Muslim relations were a subject that produced emotional and combative viewpoint and publication before Tilak's time, but his stature as a nationalist leader and the influence of his papers extended and politicized the debate. In 1911, Mohammed Ali's advocacy of Pan Islamic identity in *Comrade* would exacerbate the situation and add to the confusion. While urban-based English-language papers tended to be more restrained than the vernacular press in this regard, they set examples and suggested themes that often became violent and dangerous in translation. The British did not create these divisions, but where possible, they took advantage of them – often enhancing and entrenching in the process.

The possible uses of the past for the contemporary campaign were myriad since so much of it was still part of everyone's daily life; and the publicist delved selectively to find a symbolic life or event that could, with

⁸ Natarajan, *The Press in India*, p. 135.

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some writer's licence, be inducted into the movement. The editor of the influential Calcutta monthlies, *Prabasi* and *Modern Review*, Ramananda Chatterjee, chose his personal hero, Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj and the symbol of the positive and reformist approach to the presence of the British. David Kopf has described Chatterjee's adeptness in endowing Roy with those qualities he most appreciated in a national leader: a social reformer who emphasized the need for internal regeneration, a political and economic reformer, i.e., a nation builder and therefore a champion of Indian freedom.⁹ Chatterjee's choice and views did not please the extremists in the first decade of the twentieth century when Calcutta in particular was noted for its terrorist activity and violent press, but it remained a potent message sent out in book form and reiterated continually for a generation in the pages of his journals.

In the decade preceding World War One, the Government of India perceived both danger and opportunity in a series of disturbances largely initiated in response to Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal, but reflecting as well divisions and malaise in the nationalist movement. Terrorist action in Bengal, peasant unrest in the Punjab, concern about disaffection in the army and an increasingly extreme voice in sections of the press produced the now-standard array of ordinance and legislation deemed necessary to defend the Raj. And the split within the Congress in 1907, which left the moderate leaders in temporary control attracted new adherents within the Government to a policy of reform that would rally support for their constitutional position and keep the extremists on the defensive. For both purposes a constrained press was considered essential and the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act 1908, and in 1910, a Press Act shifted once again the context back to the Adam Regulations.

By 1914, virtually all of the major themes that reflected the intermingling of press and political history in India were evident. While the Indian-owned press was still weak, its potential significance was recognized. During the war, an elaborate information and publicity organization was established for the first time, and in addition to the activities of officials, it attracted the cooperation and collaboration of influential Anglo-Indian and Indian newspapermen. The honeymoon did not last very long after the shooting stopped, but the usefulness of such an organization and the continuing need for it after the war was apparent. Imperialism and nationalism in India confronted each other on a range of battle fields. The daily newspaper had become both one of the protagon-

⁹ David Kopf, 'Rammohun Roy and the Bengal Renaissance: An Historiographical Essay', in V. C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, PVT Ltd, 1975.

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ists and for most people, the primary source of information about the battle itself.

The endgame struggle for unity: 1918–1947

The context of advocacy and defence was remarkably different at the end of the war. The familiar world that had been dominated by European-centred empires and European-centred perspective about order and international relations remained largely in place, but increasingly defensive and susceptible to internal and external challenge. The leaders of the Russian Revolution committed themselves to the immediate export of their victory and adopted particular policies to deal with nationalist struggles in the colonial world. Lenin's chief adviser in this regard was M. N. Roy, a Bengali revolutionary who had left India like many others and who rejected anti-revolutionary accommodation made by the Congress leadership. Roy symbolized for the British the red menace that was the latest incarnation of Russian threat to their empire. An anti-communist theme became a permanent element in official propaganda campaigns against radicals and the Congress left. In addition, the final collapse and disposition of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire engaged the British in a confrontation with Pan Islamic viewpoint. In its Indian setting, the Khilafat Movement mobilized substantial Muslim support for the restoration of the Turkish Khilafa as the titular head of world Islam, and for Congress-sponsored confrontation with the British. Although there had been a rapprochement between the Muslim League and the Congress during the war, this new evidence of unified action was considered particularly dangerous by the Government. It also made an impact on some supporters of the Congress who were concerned about the introduction of a sectarian issue, particularly a Muslim issue, onto the agenda of the movement. In the far west, the new presence of the United States as a power able to influence world events turned the attention of nationalist leaders to the task of attracting American opinion to their cause. Officials in Britain and India recognized the need to respond to the new challenge and engage in the competitive dialogue on a new stage.

The call to defend the empire in 1914, had attracted a loyal response from politicians and the Indian army, but the defeat of the enemy released the leaders from their vows and the return of a large number of soldiers to a homeland destabilized by post-war political and economic malaise added to the potential for renewed trouble. In the Punjab, the dangerous tension was resolved in violent confrontation. On 19 April 1919, the slaughter of hundreds of unarmed civilians who had gathered for a public meeting at Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar was the result of an individual