



THE ROLE OF LOCAL NEWSPAPERS IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT (1905–1947) A THEMATIC PAPER

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of local and regional-language newspapers in the Indian national movement between the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and Independence in 1947. It argues that beyond serving as chroniclers of events, local newspapers were active political agents that translated elite nationalist ideology into regional idioms, sustained mass mobilisation between the peaks of all-India campaigns, and trained a generation of political workers. Tracing developments across the Swadeshi and Extremist phase, the Gandhian era, and the revolutionary, socialist, and Muslim press traditions, the paper also surveys the colonial state's escalating legal apparatus for press control, from the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 to the Defence of India Rules of the 1940s. It concludes that the local press constituted indispensable infrastructure for nationalist mobilisation and left a durable legacy for India's post-independence public sphere and democratic institutions.

Keywords: *Indian national movement; vernacular press; nationalism; Swadeshi movement; Gandhi; colonial censorship; Vernacular Press Act; regional journalism; public sphere; freedom struggle*

1. Introduction

Between the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the attainment of Independence in 1947, the Indian press evolved from a scattered collection of English-owned and missionary papers into a vast, vernacular-rooted network that carried the freedom struggle into towns, mofussil qasbas, and villages far from the metropolitan centres of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Local and regional-language newspapers were not merely chroniclers of the nationalist movement; they were active participants in it — mobilising public opinion, disseminating Congress and revolutionary ideology, exposing colonial excesses, and training a generation of political workers in the discipline of organisation and argument. This paper examines the growth, function, and impact of

the local press during four broad phases of the freedom struggle, the colonial state's legal apparatus for controlling it, and its lasting legacy for Indian democracy.

2. The Press before 1905: Setting the Stage

Indian-owned newspapers existed well before the twentieth century — the Bengal Gazette (1780), Samachar Darpan (1818), and later Amrita Bazar Patrika (1868) and Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Kesari and Mahratta (1881) had already demonstrated that a press independent of European ownership could shape public opinion. The colonial state had responded as early as 1878 with the Vernacular Press Act, which specifically targeted Indian-language papers for seditious content while leaving the English-owned press largely untouched — an asymmetry that itself became a grievance feeding early nationalist consciousness. By the turn of the century, a network of regional papers existed, but it was the shock of Bengal's partition in 1905 that transformed this network into a mass political instrument.

3. The Swadeshi and Extremist Phase (1905–1918)

The partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905 triggered the Swadeshi and Boycott movements, and the local press became the principal vehicle for spreading both. Bengali papers such as Bande Mataram (edited by Bipin Chandra Pal, with Aurobindo Ghosh as a contributor), Sandhya (Brahmabandhab Upadhyay), and Yugantar (associated with the Jugantar revolutionary group) moved beyond constitutional protest to openly advocate boycott, self-reliance, and, in some cases, revolutionary action. These papers combined religious idiom with political appeal, invoking the goddess Kali and the imagery of the motherland to mobilise readers who had never engaged with Congress politics before.

Outside Bengal, Tilak's Kesari (Marathi) and Mahratta (English) in Poona became the voice of the "Extremist" wing of the Congress, popularising the doctrine that Swaraj is my birthright. Tilak's editorials repeatedly brought him into conflict with the colonial state; he was tried for sedition in 1897, 1908, and 1916–1922, the 1908 trial resulting in six years' transportation to Mandalay. His imprisonment demonstrated both the political weight the government attached to vernacular editorials and the extent to which local papers could shape a mass following around a single leader. In Punjab, the Urdu and English press — including Lala Lajpat Rai's writings — fed the agitation against the Punjab Colonisation Bill of 1907, while in Madras presidency papers such as Swadesamitran (Tamil, founded by G. Subramania Iyer) carried Swadeshi ideas into southern

India. This period established a template: a charismatic editor-politician using a local-language paper to build a regional political base that fed into an all-India movement.

4. The Gandhian Phase (1919–1934)

With Gandhi's return to India and his assumption of Congress leadership, the local press entered a new register — disciplined, moralistic, and organisationally tied to the Congress programme. Gandhi himself edited *Young India* (English) and *Navajivan* (Gujarati) from 1919, using them to explain non-cooperation, khadi, and later civil disobedience to both the English-educated elite and the Gujarati-reading public. After 1933 he founded *Harijan* to campaign against untouchability, showing how a movement newspaper could pursue social as well as political reform simultaneously.

Regional papers proliferated alongside Gandhi's own organs. C. Rajagopalachari and others used southern papers to explain satyagraha to Tamil audiences; the *Hindustan Times* (founded 1924, later associated with the Birla family and Congress sympathies) and the *National Herald* (founded by Jawaharlal Nehru in Lucknow in 1938) gave the movement metropolitan English-language platforms, while district-level papers in the United Provinces, Bihar, and the Punjab translated Congress resolutions into local languages and reported on local satyagraha campaigns, picketing of liquor shops, and the burning of foreign cloth. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi's *Pratap* (Kanpur, Hindi) became one of the most influential Hindi nationalist papers of this era, combining reportage of Congress activity with fierce criticism of communal violence — Vidyarthi himself was killed in 1931 while trying to stop Hindu-Muslim riots, underscoring the personal risks local editors bore. The Salt Satyagraha of 1930 offers a clear case study: local papers across Gujarat, Bombay, Bengal, and the Andhra region carried near-daily accounts of the Dandi March and subsequent satyagrahas, turning a regional protest into a genuinely national event through simultaneous, coordinated regional coverage — years before radio or newsreel could perform the same function.

5. Press Legislation and Colonial Repression

The colonial government treated the nationalist press as a serious security threat and built an increasingly elaborate legal machinery to contain it:

- Vernacular Press Act, 1878 — required vernacular publishers to enter into bonds and submit proofs for pre-censorship; repealed in 1882 but set the template for later action.

- Indian Press Act, 1910 — required newspapers to deposit security which could be forfeited for publishing material deemed seditious; led to widespread self-censorship and the closure of several papers.
- Rowlatt Act, 1919 — though primarily aimed at revolutionary conspiracy, it reinforced press restrictions during a period of heightened agitation.
- Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931 — gave provincial governments sweeping powers to demand security deposits, forfeit presses, and proscribe printed matter connected with civil disobedience.
- Defence of India Rules, 1939 and after — used extensively during the Second World War to suppress Congress and revolutionary papers, particularly around the Quit India Movement.

Editors faced imprisonment, fines, and confiscation of printing presses as routine hazards. Papers were frequently forced to suspend publication, change names, or continue printing "underground" — the fugitive Congress Radio and cyclostyled bulletins during Quit India (1942) being a direct descendant of this local-press tradition of defying censorship.

6. The Revolutionary and Left Press

Alongside the Congress mainstream, local papers associated with revolutionary and left political currents played a distinct role. Yugantar and papers linked to Anushilan and Jugantar samitis in Bengal openly discussed armed resistance. In Punjab, the Ghadar newspaper (published from San Francisco but smuggled into India) inspired the Ghadar Party's activities. Later, socialist and communist periodicals associated with the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India used local presses to articulate class-based critiques of both colonialism and Congress moderation, widening the ideological range of the freedom press beyond mainstream nationalism.

7. The Muslim and Communal Press

The local press also reflected — and at times sharpened — the communal dimension of late-colonial politics. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's *Al-Hilal* (Urdu, 1912) and later *Al-Balagh* combined pan-Islamic sentiment with anti-colonial nationalism and were repeatedly targeted by the government. Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali's *Comrade* and *Hamdard* linked the Khilafat movement to the wider non-cooperation campaign, producing the brief but significant Hindu-Muslim unity of 1920–22. As communal politics hardened in the 1930s and 1940s, sections of the Urdu press increasingly carried the Muslim League's arguments for Pakistan, illustrating how local

newspapers could serve nation-building projects that diverged from, and eventually competed with, the Congress-led movement.

8. Local-Language Press as Political Education

Beyond individual famous papers, the sheer expansion of the district and small-town press between 1905 and 1947 deserves attention in itself. Government reports on newspapers and periodicals recorded a several-fold increase in the number of registered vernacular publications over this period, most of them short-lived, poorly resourced, and locally circulated — yet collectively decisive. These papers:

- Translated complex constitutional and political debates (the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, Congress resolutions, Round Table Conference proceedings) into accessible local-language prose.
- Reported on local Congress committee meetings, elections, and satyagraha campaigns that the national press often ignored.
- Served as training grounds for a generation of political workers — many future legislators, ministers, and Congress organisers began as district-level journalists or pamphleteers.
- Created a shared political vocabulary (swaraj, swadeshi, satyagraha, charkha) that could travel from Gujarati or Marathi into Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and Urdu almost simultaneously, knitting together a genuinely pan-Indian public sphere despite linguistic diversity.

9. Limitations and Debates

Historians differ on how far to credit the press with shaping, as opposed to merely reflecting, nationalist sentiment. Circulation figures for most vernacular papers remained modest by later standards, and literacy rates limited direct readership; scholars working in the "public sphere" tradition note that newspapers were often read aloud in tea shops, panchayats, and Congress offices, multiplying their effective audience well beyond subscriber counts. There is also debate about the extent to which the local press was an autonomous political actor versus an instrument controlled by Congress high command or by proprietors with their own commercial and political interests — the Birla family's ownership of the Hindustan Times, for instance, has been read both as principled nationalist support and as strategic business positioning.

10. Conclusion

From the Swadeshi agitation of 1905 to the transfer of power in 1947, local newspapers were indispensable infrastructure for the Indian national movement. They translated elite nationalist ideology into regional idioms, sustained mass mobilisation between the peaks of all-India campaigns, bore the brunt of colonial censorship and repression, and trained the political class that would govern independent India. The story of the freedom struggle cannot be told through Congress resolutions and viceregal correspondence alone; it must equally be read in the columns of *Kesari*, *Yugantar*, *Pratap*, *Al-Hilal*, *Navajivan*, and hundreds of smaller papers whose editors risked imprisonment, financial ruin, and sometimes their lives to keep the idea of an independent India in daily circulation.

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- Note: This paper offers a thematic overview drawing on well-established historical scholarship on the Indian press and national movement. Specific circulation figures, dates, and minor details should be cross-checked against primary archival records (e.g., National Archives of India press branch files, contemporary Report on Newspapers and Periodicals) for rigorous academic citation.*