

Contribution of Vernacular Newspapers to the Emergence of Revolutionism in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *In the history of India, Bengal which is one of the provinces of India, occupies a prestigious place in its civilization, culture, intellectual thought and nationalist movement. In the first half of the 20th century, the revolutionary activities carried out in Bengal were mainly contributed by the native and Bengali newspapers. People can know about various events in the country or internationally through newspapers. The contribution of newspapers to government notification, employment, business, education, social needs, political activities and development of national consciousness etc. cannot be repudiated. This study has tried to find out how the native newspapers played a major role in promoting revolutionary ideas in Bengal. What impact did these newspapers have on political and social issues in Bengal? Why did the common people of Bengal have an armed revolutionary struggle against British rule? To what extent did newspapers help in promoting revolutions in other provinces outside Bengal or how did they influence other provinces of India? In this study, the researcher not only depends on popular newspapers but also on regional or local newspapers in contemporary Bengal Province.*

Keywords: Colonial Bengal, Freedom Movement, Revolutionism, Vande Mataram, Vernacular Newspapers

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Introduction

The contribution of indigenous newspapers to the history of the Indian freedom movement is a fascinating chapter. Both foreign-owned and native newspapers had their origins in the British-occupied Bengal province. The year 1818 is described as a watershed or turning point in colonial Bengal. Since then Bengali language and Bengali-owned newspapers have been started. The first '*Bangla Gazette*' was published under the editorship of Ganga Kishore Bhattacharya (Bandyopadhyay, 1947); but no number has been found to date. At the same time, a monthly '*Digdarshan*' was published in Bengali by the Serampore Baptist Mission. However, there is no doubt that the first newspaper in Indian language was published in 1818. The emergence of vernacular newspapers in the first half of the 19th century was able to pave the way for the anti-British movement by spreading the revolutionary ideals of that newspaper in Bengal Province and the whole of India in the last two decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's '*Kesari and Mahratta*', Aurobindo Ghosh's '*Bande Mataram*', Bipin Chandra Pal's '*New India*' and Surendra Nath Banerjee's '*Bengalee*' played an outstanding role in propagating nationalist ideals in Bengal and India as well. In this study, the role of *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, *Sanjivani*, *Yugantar*, *Sandhya*, *Banganivasi*, *Burdwan Sanjivani*, *The Advocate*, *The Kayastha Samachar* and *The Indian Nation* will be discussed in the spread of revolutionism in Bengal and the evolution of the social and political sphere of Bengal.

Research Question of the Study

The researcher has chosen the study '*Contribution of Vernacular Newspapers to the Emergence of Revolutionism in Colonial Bengal*'. Previous researchers had not often discussed the special contribution of newspapers to the rise of intellectual thought and public awareness in the anti-British nationalist movement in India. However, this study analyzes how vernacular newspapers in colonial Bengal contributed to the emergence and spread of revolutionary activity in the socio-political arena.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- To know the context in which revolutionism arose in colonial Bengal.
- To know the role of native newspapers in the rise of revolutionism.

- To find out whether extremist revolutionism in Bengal arose out of the administrative brutality measures of the British government from 1878 onwards.
- To know the extent to which the revolutionary activities of various countries of the contemporary world influenced the native newspapers to develop anti-British sentiment in Bengal.
- To analyze the contribution of newspapers to building nationalism nationwide.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study has been described as follows:

- Through this study, the people of all India and Bengal will know that the contemporary vernacular newspapers promoted public awakening by promoting the brutal exploitation of the dictatorial structure of the British government down to the lower strata of society.
- Readers will know how newspapers of that time were able to create revolutionism among the educated middle class in Bengal by carrying out a one-sided propaganda campaign against the British government demanding 'Swaraj' in stark contrast to the pleading politeness or begging of the early National Congress leaders.
- Newspapers can convey the unspoken words of the human mind to every level of society. Today everyone recognizes the essential contribution of newspapers to organizational work at political, social, economic, educational, etc. levels. Through this study, we will know the contribution of newspapers in the formation of 'revolutionism' in colonial Bengal.
- Another importance of this study is that today newspapers are mostly immersed in commercial interests but in colonial Indian newspapers were published on the ideology of nationalism and tried to create public awareness.

2

Literature Review

Natarajan. J. (2022) in his book *"History of Indian Journalism"* describes in detail the origin of the press in India, the Press Control Act by the East India Company, the rise of newspapers in Indian languages, the awakening of awareness in the national public life in the rise of newspapers etc. Narain. P. (1970) in his book *"Press and Politics in India 1885-1905"* assessed the political thought of contemporary India from 1885 to 1905. Bandyopadhyay. S. (2020) *"From Plassey to Partition and After"* gives a clear explanation of the rise of the National Congress, British rule, the Bengal partition movement, analysis of various Acts, the role of native leaders etc. The book, *"Bangla Samayik Patra 1818-1868"* by Bandyopadhyay. B. (1354 B.S.) has a vivid account of the emergence, the evolution of the Bengali Samayik newspaper and the rise of the Bengali renaissance. Chattopadhyay. P. (2011) *"Bhartiya Sangbad Patrer Ruprekha"* gives a comprehensive account of the country's newspapers on political, social and economic developments in India and Bengal. Sharma. B.R. (1994) discusses the colonial Indian perspective in his book *"Freedom of the Press under the Indian Constitution"*. By reviewing, the researcher has tried to give a clear description of his research.

Methodology

The study is a descriptive, historical research study. Hence a format of historical research study is followed by the researcher while presenting the research report. The data is collected mainly from both primary and secondary sources by the researcher.

Discussion

The contribution of Aurobindo Ghosh's *'VandeMataram'* to the development of *'nationalism'* and *'nationalist extremism'* in India and the province of Bengal is undeniable. (Banerjee, 2021) His purpose in publishing this newspaper was to prepare Indians for a complete freedom struggle. He understood 'revolutionism' to mean complete independence. Inspired by his ideals editors of many contemporary newspapers pledged to propagate revolutionary ideals in Bengal. Tilak's *'Maharatta'* and *'Keshari'* played a unique role in the development of extremist revolutionary ideology in Bengal.

Again, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was heavily influenced by Shishir Ghosh and did not hide the fact that he closely followed the model of 'Amrit Bazar Patrika' in directing Kesari, he said "It was a time when one had to teach people how to criticize bureaucracy and, at the same time, keep themselves safe, at least physically, if not specifically. This concept was fully developed by Shishir Kumar during that period of journalism." (Natarajan, 2022; Mathur, 2007) Bengali educated class dared to campaign directly against the British government through newspapers. So, the Aligarh Institute Gazette, on August 1, 1882, observed "The Bengalis are the leaders of the native community. Bengalis were the first to break the barriers of superstition and cross the sea for education." Amrit Bazar Patrika, on January 7, 1886, Appreciated Umesh Chandra Banerjee as President in 1885 in honour of Bengali thought for "paying a compliment to Bengal by electing our illustrious countrymen, W.C. Bonnerjea as the chairman of the congress". (Narain, 1970)

The vernacular press not only carried out political propaganda against foreign British rule but also emphasized their internal reforms. Newspapers accused the Congress leaders of submitting their demands addicted to the needs of the rich people of the society, ignorant of the needs of the masses of the society. (Narain, 1970) Burdwan Sanjivani, on January 18, 1887, Demanded, "Bengal Congress leaders to pay more attention to common people suffering from malaria in Bengal than to meet Subrahmanya in Madras or Mehta in Bombay." Early Congress leaders wanted to uproot British rule from India by reforming the Legislative Council. But native newspapers like Bengali newspapers criticized the Congress idea that the English people would not sit as puppets in the Legislature but be seated in the Legislature at the behest of the Babu, as they cried for it.

Banganivasi, on December 28, 1894, published an article entitled 'Who are You Master'?

You are the lord of 80 million people. As Hindus, we, therefore, know you as the father of 80 million people, as the punisher of 80 million people as well as the protector of 80 million people. But we consider that you are beating your children with a hundred shoes, that that you are laughing at the tears in the sunken eyes of a hundred starving children of yours in order to make light of the matter, we cannot help thinking that you are the punisher of the 80 million people and not their nourisher or protector.....

The native press believed in movement that was manifested by physical forces such as Irises. The Amrit Bazar Patrika Believed that "It has now come to be known that political agitations will do us no good unless we are back by force". (Narain, 1970) The Amrit Bazar Patrika on August 19, 1886, also wrote:

"We must then create a force before we can succeed in securing a gift from our masters. What is to be the nature of that force? How is that force to be created? And how is that force to be created without awakening the susceptibilities of our jealous masters?..... Our countrymen will clearly see what the real questions are before then and attempt at their solution." (Narain, 1970)

The Advocate, The Kayastha Samachar and The Indian Nation wrote that there was an ideological difference between the old and the new generation over the methods of the Congress agitation. Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in the 'New India' newspaper in 1902:

We have always been begging and begging. The congress here and its committee in London are both begging institutions..... but have real political power in the hands of the British who control elections and construction of the national legislature. But we can only pray and petition, beg and cry and at the utmost fret and fume and here ends all.

International Effect on Newspapers to Create Revolutionism

The impact of international events on the revolutionary upheaval in India and Bengal is noticeable. Indeed, the indigenous press played a leading role in fanning the flame of mistrust and annoyance at the grassroots level of the movement. The nationalist revolution was created in Bengal by highlighting international news or events in local newspapers. The valour of the Boers and their armed struggle won them autonomy within the British Empire. After Russia's defeat by Japan, America granted self-rule to the Philippines in 1904. Chinese Revolution, and Persian Renaissance, these international events greatly encouraged the press to build nationalist harmony in Bengal. The mass revolutionary movement was developed at the social level through newspaper writing.

Curzon and his Reactionary Activities

Curzon took several reactionary unpopular legislative and administrative measures which hurt the sensibilities of educated Bengalis. He reduced the number of seats elected representatives by the 'Calcutta Municipal Amendment Act' of 1899. He deprived Indians of their right to education and emphasized on the training of bureaucrats of the British government. He brought Calcutta University under strict government control through the 'Indian University Act' of 1904. In 1904, freedom of the press was curtailed by the Indian Official Secrets Amendment Act. Finally, he partitioned Bengal on 16 October 1905 to weaken the Bengali nationalist activity. (Bandyopadhyay, 2020) As a result of Curzon's reactionary legislation, vernacular newspapers in Bengal incited the common people to revolution by writing against the government, leading to the 'Swadeshi and Boycott' movement.

Leading Role of Newspapers during the *Swadeshi Movement*

4

The newspaper that played an important role in the anti-partition movement was '*Sanjeevani*'. On 23rd Boishakh (first month of Bengali Calendar), 1311 B.S. Krishnakumar Mitra, editor of *Sanjeevani*, criticized Lord Curzon and wrote:

"Lord Curzon is an imperialist, his only aim in life is to establish complete English domination over the people of India. He is a strong pillar to establish dominion over fear". If the government is doing something for our welfare, then why keep it secret from us? (Chattopadhyay, 2011)

This newspaper clearly revealed to everyone the ambition to weaken Bengal politically behind the administrative goodwill of the Bengali division of the government. *Sanjeevani* wrote about the sufferings of common people, coolies, workers, and farmers. In 1883 this newspaper strongly protested against the arbitrary granting of drinking rights by the government, creating a sense of patriotic fervor among the youth. An atmosphere of freedom and self-reliance spread among the masses in the contemporary province of Bengal. (Chattopadhyay, 2011)

To expand the revolutionary movement in Bengal, the newspaper '*Yugantar*' was launched in 1906 by Barindra Kumar Ghosh, Bhupendra Nath Dutta, Upendranath Bandyopadhyay and others. This newspaper was the mouthpiece of the '*AnushilanSamiti*' and '*Yugantar*' party. Pramathanath Mitra was the president of both these branches. (Sengupta, 1989) The goal of this *Yugantar* newspaper was to achieve a complete Swaraj of India through armed revolution. The newspaper supported the anti-government struggle in Punjab. Editor Bhupendra Nath Datta called upon the masses in the rural areas of Bengal for direct struggle against the government.

The newspaper '*Sandhya*' published in 1904 played a unique role in the development of a revolutionary movement in Bengal during the independence movement. The magazine was edited by Bhavani Charan Banerjee alias BrahmabandhavUpadhyay. He also published a magazine called '*Swarajpatra*' during the Bengal Partition movement. This newspaper played an important role in propagating national thought in simple and eloquent language.

"Shopkeepers, the Zamindar government, teachers and students at the school, everyone was laughing and crying on the street. Landlord, householder, educated, uneducated, boy and girl, old and poor, sometimes excited with joy, sometimes maddened with anger. Everyone is anxious to know when 'Sandhya' will come, what has been written today." (Chattopadhyay, 2011)

Major Findings or Results

The findings from this discussion are given below:

- Bengali intellectuals in colonial Bengal were the first to realize the manpower and nationalism needed to oust the British from the country. So, they thought of the development of thought through the publication of newspapers.
- The role of the first stage leaders of the Congress failed to turn the common people of the country towards the revolution, so newspapers like *Sanjeevani*, *Yugantar*, *Sandhya* etc. of Bengal were forced to carry out revolutionary propaganda with extremist ideology.
- Again, international affairs also helped to develop revolutionary ideas in Bengal – in this case, newspapers were able to create a powerful platform in Bengal by promoting international affairs.

- The promotion and work of *Yugantar* newspaper was eye-catching. Alipore Conspiracy Case in 1908, First 'Swadeshi dacoity' in Rangpur in 1906. Bomb-making in Maniktala etc. is a unique example of armed revolution.
- The partition of Bengal was withdrawn due to the excellent publicity of these newspapers.
- *Swadeshi constructive activities* such as Bengal Chemical, and national education. *Bhagavata Chatuspathi*, *Santiniketan Ashram*, the establishment of national schools and colleges, *Swadesh Bandhav Samiti* etc. were started.
- As a result of the promotion of newspapers outside Kolkata, '*Midnapur Society*' was founded in 1902 and '*Dacca Anushilan Samiti*' was founded in 1906. (Bandyopadhyay, 2020)

Conclusion

The province of Bengal occupies a prominent place in the history of Indian journalism. The intellectual thought that emerged throughout the 19th century among Bengalis at the hands of Rammohan Roy, the progenitor of renaissance in Bengal, gradually became the focal point of the emergence of revolutionism in Bengal. Again and again, the British had to pass various acts to suppress the voice of newspaper propaganda in Bengal as well as India. Freedom of the press is essential for the progress of a democratic country, but the British government has curtailed the freedom of the press. Despite that, the nationalist ideology of Bengal and Bengalis has not decreased at all. All learned scholars admit that newspapers can play a primary role in building a united bridge between the country and the nation under any circumstances.

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