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PRESS VS BRITISH CENSORSHIP: STRUGGLES DURING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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Abstract
This article examines the contest between the Indian press and British colonial censorship during the freedom movement, with particular attention to the period from the late nineteenth century to Partition. It maintains that the colonial state used the press not just as an expression of opinion but as an infrastructure of political mobilization; in that regard, it created a stratum of control by licensing, securities, sedition law, forfeiture, postal interception, emergency powers, and wartime pre-censorship. But newspapers, pamphlets, journals, and underground print networks, again and again, readjusted to cope with these burdens and came to the center of the anti-colonial politics. The article examines how the English, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, and other vernacular newspapers propagated nationalist discourse, linked local demands to national all-India movements, invented political language, and turned popular protest into long-lasting mass consciousness. Meanwhile, it provides a critical analysis of the press, observing domestic constraints: uneven literacy, urban concentration, financial vulnerability, elite editorial authority, and the tendency at times to slip the anti-colonial politics into communal polemic. With the juxtaposition of legal history, political communication, and regional paths, the article argues that the press battle was among the pivotal arenas in which colonial sovereignty was tested and the modern South Asian popular politics created.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the press in the political struggle cannot be understated as far as the history of the freedom movement in South Asia is concerned. Newspapers did not just record the events. They gave complaints their names, turned abstract rights into popular demands, emaciated discussion, taught constitutional terms and conditions to the reading, published suppressions, and transformed diffuse rage into concerted politics. To the colonial state, however, the newspapers were not just business organizations. They were possible centers of action, and at the time of crisis they seemed to the *"Raj"* as threatening as street demonstrations, volunteer corps, and party conferences. This is why the British rule in India gave rise to one of the most elaborate regimes of press control in the modern world of imperialism, with a combination of ordinary law, executive discretion, and exceptional emergency powers (Natarajan, 1955; Barrier, 1974; Sethi, 2019).

This paper will submit that the war between the press and the British censorship was not a fringe of the freedom movement, but it was one of its battlegrounds. On its part, the colonial state wanted to control information so as to control

politics. Nationalist editors and printers, in their turn, considered print a tool of political education and mass mobilization. Their fight was waged in the courts, avoidance, satire, coded writing, and changes in the ownership of works, republication, underground distribution, and open agitation of civil rights. The case of the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 through censorship during the war under the Defense of India regime shows that there was a constant worry, particularly after the freedom of political language was no longer controlled by the authorities and was now in the vernacular public, imperial power was more difficult to normalize (Britannica, 2026; Rook-Koepsel, 2018; Sethi, 2019).

The article is divided into seven sections. It initially contextualizes censorship in the greater rationality of colonial rule. It then follows the legal framework on which the state attempted to discipline the press. The third part reveals the way in which nationalist and reformist newspapers transformed the printed word into a political organization medium. Fourth is the specific importance of the Urdu and Punjabi public sphere, such as the centrality of Lahore in anti-colonial politics. The fifth examines how editors were fighting against censorship. The sixth provides a critical evaluation of the confines and contradictions of nationalist journalism. The last part is the reflection of how this conflict influenced the past decade of the colonial rule as well as the postcolonial inheritances of India and Pakistan. In doing so, the discussion is not just based on the canonical literature on print and nationalism but also on what is related to the political history of Punjab, the Pakistan movement, and the media studies in Pakistan (Hayat, 2014, 2021; Shabbir and Anwar, 2007; Ashraf and Shabbir, 2019; Chawla, 2011, 2018).

Colonial Rule and the Fear of Print

The communicative disorder is particularly sensitive to the colonial states since they are governed by a state of endemic shortage of legitimacy. To the British Indian state, it relied on law, bureaucracy, police intelligence, and capacity to coerce, yet it also relied on the ability to shape the understanding of events. Famines, military defeat, racial discrimination, agrarian riots, or repressive police had been rendered politically hazardous when told in a language that could relate local experience to overall imperative structures of imperial injustice. The very reason why print was important is that it turned incoherent resentments into conscious formations. It would form publics that are bigger than locality, would maintain memory in the aftermath of the immediate event, and would give continuity between the current campaign and the next campaign (Anderson, 2006; Seal, 1968; Bayly, 1996).

This fear was heightened by the increase in the vernacular press. The English-language journalism was already being monitored, but the newspapers in Indian languages presented more of a basic challenge since they reached the social groups that were not reachable with the help of the elite metropolitan languages. Since the diffusion of literacy was uneven and since the reading of newspapers was carried out in *"bazaars"*, coffee shops, mosques, *"gurdwaras"*, political gatherings, and local associations, the printed word surpassed the reader. The vernacular paper was transformed into a collective property and interwoven in a cyclical process and social performance. Those who controlled colonies always lamented that all that appeared small in the paper could in reality have a very large political scope (Natarajan, 1955; Jeffrey, 2000; Orsini, 2009).

The press was also of importance, as it assisted in developing a new political language. Rights, representation, *"swaraj"*, *"qaum"*, nation, civil liberty, constitutional reform, and self-government were terms that were not only being employed by speakers all over but were also terms that were reinforced by being used over and over in newspapers, pamphlets, editorials, letters to the editor, poems, cartoons, and serial commentary. In that respect, the press was not just a reporter of the freedom movement; it aided in the creation of the idioms according to which people could imagine being participants in the movement. This is why the state swung between paternalistic demands to order and blatant censorship that was repressive. The curfew was tightened whenever the agitation founded on the constitution threatened

to bring the mass disaffection back to the people (Chandra et al., 1989; Sarkar, 1983; Metcalf and Metcalf, 2012).

The Legal Architecture of British Censorship

The censorship by the British in India was not a single law. It developed as a multiple-layered and flexible structure of control. Regulations like the Censorship of Press Act of 1799 conducted by Wellesley and the subsequent licensing provisions defined the concept that the colonial government was in a position to control publication in favor of security. The reforms of 1835 by Metcalfe are mostly recollected as being relatively liberal, but even this period did not eliminate the belief that the freedom of press in India was a conditional one and not a natural one. The Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867 put the field under regularity by regulation and traceability and so made editors, printers, and publishers readable to the state (Natarajan, 1955; Minattur, 1961).

The worst known policy of the late nineteenth century was the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. Passed during the rule of Lord Lytton, the law made it very easy to target non-English publications and enabled magistrates to require bonds, confiscate printing presses, and punish papers thought to be seditious without the formal safeguards provided by the normal courts. Its discriminatory logic was quite clear; the monthly publications read by the elite population of the colonies were treated on a higher plane, and the papers of the Indian language dealing with the issues of the indigenous population were evaluated by a political standard of suspicion. The act has gained a reputation for imperial hypocrisy since it revealed the contradiction between the image of liberal Britain and the coercive realities of the colonial rule (Britannica, 2026; Natarajan, 1955).

Despite the heavy criticism, especially following the enactment of the Vernacular Press Act in the year 1881, the repeal did not imply a long-lasting devotion to freedom. Instead, the state became more open to a repertoire of changes. The editors and publishers were subjected to penal provisions, particularly those provisions involving the issue of sedition and incitement. Executive power was further extended to the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908 and the Indian Press Act of 1910. The law of 1910 especially enabled local governments to require heavy securities against the presses accused of printing scandalous contents; such securities might be forfeited to cripple small publications on the score of scandalous contents, though not even a criminal conviction occurred. The Raj could use securities, forfeiture, and administrative discretion to suppress opposing journalism without appearing to break the law of law and order (Barrier, 1974; Minattur, 1961; Kumar, 2017).

The cycle was repeated in mass nationalism. The Press (Emergency Powers) Act of 1931, which had been evaluated following the civil disobedience, refined the repression apparatus granting the government authority to seize and cancel the publications that were perceived to promote anti-government action. The act was combined with the sedition law, custom control, police spy and surveillance, interception of the post, and the criminal law of conspiracy. Practically, this implied that the state was able to combine targeting content, finances, circulation, and material infrastructure. Instead of an outright ban that would gather public outcry, a magistrate could issue warnings, refuse a newspaper postal privileges, make it by way of security, prosecute it on grounds of sedition, and seize specific publications (Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931; Barrier, 1974).

Censorship during wartimes pushed this regime even higher. Censorship became a part of emergency governance under the Defense of India Act, 1939, which was supported by the Defense of India Rules. Pre-censorship of news and tight control over the war coverage and any information considered harmful to the security of the population, recruiting, the morale, and the war effort could be eliminated. Now, as the study of wartime India has demonstrated, censorship was applied to not only the propaganda directly opposite to revolution but also rumor, reporting perceived as alarmist, and criticism that could diminish the imperial credibility during the time of worldwide vulnerability (Rook-Koepsel, 2018; Sethi, 2019; Sethi, 2017).

What made this legal architecture effective was its combination of breadth and ambiguity. Terms such as sedition, disaffection, alarmism, incitement, or prejudicial reporting could be interpreted elastically. The uncertainty itself was a technique of rule. Editors could not always know in advance which article might trigger prosecution or forfeiture, and that uncertainty induced self-censorship. Yet ambiguity also generated political backlash, for it encouraged editors to portray themselves as victims of arbitrary power rather than lawfully disciplined offenders. In this sense the censorship regime often delegitimized itself. Every prosecution became a public lesson in the limits of imperial liberalism (Minattur, 1961; Rook-Koepsel, 2018; Geva, 2024).

Press as Political Mobilizer in the Freedom Movement

Despite these restrictions, newspapers became indispensable to anti-colonial mobilization. They linked campaigns across regions, informed readers about arrests and protest schedules, published speeches and resolutions, and helped construct the moral legitimacy of resistance. Papers associated with or sympathetic to major political figures—Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Kesari* and *Mahratta*, Gandhi's *Young India*, *Navajivan*, and *Harijan*, the *Bombay Chronicle*, *The Hindu*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Tribune*, *Al-Hilal*, *Comrade*, and many others—functioned as more than information outlets. They were institutions of political education. They simplified legislative questions, interpreted state violence, and invited readers to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective destiny (Natarajan, 1955; Brown, 1972; Chandra et al., 1989).

The anti-colonial power of journalism consisted in part in its capacity towards relating across scales of politics. The opening of the salvo of a local police squad, a peasant grievance, a speech in the legislative council, or a constitutional reform controversy might be fitted into an ordinary tale of imperial iniquity. Newspapers made single cases available as witnesses. In this respect, they played a leading role in what Benedict Anderson would later term the "cultural labor of envisioning political community." Even in India, the process lay many-tongued, imbalanced, and highly contested instead of harmonious (Anderson, 2006; Bayly, 1996; Orsini, 2009).

This was a realization of political leaders. Tilak employed journalism to relate religious symbols to anti-colonial criticism, and this broadened the emotive capability of nationalist politics. According to Gandhi, newspapers became a form of discipline in an overwhelming sense: not only a means of transmission of the strategy but also a way of controlling the moral pace of movements, proclaiming suspensions, denouncing violence, supporting *"satyagraha"*, and practicing self-criticism in the ranks of followers. Muslim reformists and nationalists also used print media to argue on education, representation, constitutional guarantees, and the future of Muslim politics in India. It was in the press that nationalist, federalist, minority, and political community interests began to be contested publicly (Hardiman, 2003; Jalal, 1985; Hasan, 2008).

It is especially the connection between the press and the popular mobilization that became apparent at the time of heightened agitation: the Swadeshi movement, the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement, civil disobedience, the constitutional crises of the 1930s, the Pakistan movement, and the Quit India moment. In every phase newspapers contributed towards creating the pace at which politics was made. They could increase a cry, justify a maneuver, or transform repression into martyrdom. They too turned out to be memory repositories. Arrests, speeches, resolutions of protests, and official extravagance were printed as long as they had been discussed. The newspaper provided a continuity in a political arena that was constantly disrupted by censorship, imprisonment, and the prohibition to assemble (Chandra et al., 1989; Sarkar, 1983; Wolpert, 1984).

That is why the printed word could often be considered the precondition of direct action in the British state. It was terrified not only by blatant appeals to rebellion but also by the loss of power over time caused by constant criticism. Where oral political cultures were low, newspapers provided nourishment to the illiterate. Speeches

paraphrased editorial articles, and poems and slogans went into procession culture; rumor and reputation were fashioned by vernacular reporting. The newspaper thus acted as a kind of repository, enhancer, and/or catalog. Its importance was much greater than that of circulation (Jeffrey, 2000; Natarajan, 1955; Barrier, 1974).

Urdu, Punjab, and the Politics of Public Opinion

An account of press struggles in the freedom movement should pay proper consideration to Punjab and also to the Urdu public sphere. Punjab had been the focal point of imperial military enlistment, land policy, and communal politics; it was where the political communication involved was unusually high, since the colonial state considered the province a strategically indispensable source of stability. Lahore became a great intellectual and journalistic hub where discussions about reform, religion, constitutionalism, provincial politics, and Muslim representation played out at an unusually high pitch. Urdu and English newspapers linked the urban elite, students and lawyers, traders, landlords, and the activists to greater political trends (Talbot, 1988; Chawla, 2011, 2018).

A particularly ambiguous position was taken by the Urdu press. The main focus of Muslim political discussion was Urdu newspapers and journals, which had never been brought down to one ideological track. They hosted a debate over the reform of education, representation of the community, pan-Islamism, provincial autonomy, constitutional protection, and, subsequently, Pakistan. The connection between provincial politics, the mobilization of the Muslim League, the pressure of Unionists, and the new polarization of communal attitudes in Punjab in particular simply turned the press into a place of extraordinary importance. Not only opinion but also collective orientation might be influenced by editorial decisions (Jalal, 1985; Talbot, 1988; Chawla, 2018; Shabbir, 2021a; Shabbir et al., 2021).

The significance of Lahore in the 1930s and 1940s also contributes to the fact that surveillance and censorship were so closely intertwined with normal journalism. Political instability in the province, recollection of the revolutionary circles, agrarian dissatisfaction, activism of students, and the strategic significance of war security's role all rendered Punjab a region of central concern to the intelligence apparatus. The editors worked at the brink of persecution, warning signs, and police investigations. But it was also this pressure that improved the symbolic capital of the oppositional journalism. Being threatened or censured by the colonial authority may add status to a paper by politically minded readers (Barrier, 1974; Talbot, 1988; Hayat, 2021).

Studies on the politics of the Punjab and Pakistan movements have highlighted that elite bargaining was not sufficient to the achievement of public persuasion in the province. It relied on the written argument, revision of events, and the spreading of political stories, which turned constitutional interests into an ethical emergency. The combination of speeches, pamphlets, student activity, associational networks, and journalism made it possible to grow Muslim political consciousness in the 1940s especially, following the Lahore Resolution. Print provided political aspiration with consistency even in cases where the party system had an uneven distribution (Hayat, 2014, 2021; Chawla, 2011, 2018; Hafeez and Shabbir, 2024; Shabbir and Chawla, 2020).

Concurrently, the Punjabi and Urdu press brings out a significant tension during the struggle of freedom. Anticolonial journalism will lead to democratic awakening; however, it may also create communal boundaries. The newspaper culture followed by the same public that conditioned the reader to think politically at one time or another did so with the use of adversarial communal frames. It was not merely a moral lapse of editors, but it also marked a symptom of a progressively competitive form of late colonial politics where representation, movements, provincial majorities, and constitutional possibilities were oftentimes argued into existence using an idiom of communally gathered language. Critical history of the press must thus always bear in mind two truths; the press was a tool against empire, and this could also be an instrument of exclusionary

mobilization (Pandey, 1990; Hasan, 2008; Talbot, 2009).

How Editors Resisted: Evasion, Improvisation, and Publicity

The success of the nationalist press depended not only on the courage but also on the tactical flexibility. Editors were taught to operate on the fringes and the hazy areas of the law. Others displaced presses or transferred formal ownership so as to escape actual responsibility. Some employed allegory, historical analogy, satire, or selective quotation to get the criticism and make it difficult to accuse them. The development of legal expertise was achieved by numerous papers reading the limits of straddling the issues of sedition and executive warnings with keen interest. Networks of sympathizers raised money when there were demands in securities. Where one paper had been suppressed, another at one time appeared under a different title. The colonial state was more powerful, but the press tended to run ahead of the administrative mechanism that was to make sure that the press was checked (Barrier, 1974; Natarajan, 1955).

The politics of publicity were also very significant. The editors knew that censorship can be reversed over their heads. News in itself consisted of a warning, seizure, or prosecution. Publication of repression information might change an administrative act to evidence of imperial intolerance. The civil liberties campaign included these episodes in an effort to bring out the hypocrisy of British constitutionalism claims and Indian practice. This way censorship created the very public it was meant to suppress. Repressive force boosted the solidarities of editors, lawyers, and political bodies, particularly during times of mass agitation (Minattur, 1961; Rook-Koepsel, 2018; Geva, 2024).

Publics of reading also became adjusted. Newspapers were passed about, read aloud, quoted, and talked over where official perusal was severe. Formal newspapers were supplemented with small pamphlets, leaflets, and cyclostyled sheets. Where bigger papers did not pass, resolutions of the movement or summaries of trials and speeches, in the form of booklets, might pass. During wartime and moments of crackdown, rumor and underworld communication mixed in with print, and the distinction between journalism and underground political communication became unclear. This form of improvisation is important in knowing why censorship could hardly attain complete control. It would make the dissent more expensive, but it would not wipe out the social need in oppositional narratives (Sethi, 2019; Rook-Koepsel, 2018).

Institutional defense of the press also took place. The conferences, associations, and legal advocates of editors protested against emergency regulations and demanded more procedural protection. Historiography of the All India Newspaper Editors' Conference shows that the situation during wartime prosecution was challenging to an organized debate on the boundaries of the executive power and the definition of responsible journalism in the circumstances of the colonial rule. These arguments were significant since they also connected the freedom of press to the future of India regarding its constitution. As early as the 1940s, the freedom of the press turned from the professional requirement into the element of the bigger language of citizenship (Rook-Koepsel, 2018; Sethi, 2019).

A Critical Appraisal: Strengths, Limits, and Contradictions

It would be impossible to have a festive history of the nationalist press. The press was an essential part of the freedom movement, yet it was not socially neutral and emancipatory at the same time. It had an uneven distribution due to restricted access by direct means due to illiteracy, high subscription fees, language barriers, and urban conglomeration. The countryside practiced political print indirectly based on the oral transmission and not continuous reading. Effete editors and lawyers and even city elites were then frequently the censors of popular speech. This in no way correspondent spoiled the political role of newspapers, but it certainly did influence the voices of those who were elevated and whose grievances were given human expression in a respectable print (Bayly, 1996; Jeffrey, 2000; Orsini, 2009).

The economic instability was also a factor. Small newspapers were relying on donations, patronage, party favors, or shaky advertising. It was a weakness that exposed them to state coercion as well as division. The imposition of security deposits or the threat of forfeiture of property was crushing exactly due to the fact that oppositional journalism worked on a slim margin. Colonial censorship was not only economic warfare against weak institutions in addition to ideological repression (Barrier, 1974; Minattur, 1961).

It also had more profound political contradictions. The opposition newspapers that rebelled against the colonial rule were not necessarily crusaders of a wide democratic inclusion. Women were now being featured in the political press; women's journals were playing an active role in the debate on reform and nationalism, but the very structure and tone of mainstream political journalism were still overwhelmingly male. Similarly, the laboring and peasant masses were frequently expressed in the paternalist idioms as opposed to editorial inclusion. There were radical and socialist presses, which were equally suppressed and did not have many resources (Sarkar, 1983; Hasan, 2008).

More seriously, the postcolonial press would undergo the process of becoming a place where anti-colonial desire would be merged with communal antagonism. Newspapers in particular tended to draw partisan lines and assist in reproducing fear, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. This was not peculiar to a community or language. Competitive press cultures that were emerging rivaled press cultures that were more likely to define politics as being existential competition. This rhetoric needs to be contextualized with reference to the stalemate in the constitution, the anxiety of representation, and the traumatizing impact of recurrent political crises, yet contextualization should not degenerate into excuse-making. Even journalism that was challenging the empire might harm the moral potentials of a common public space (Pandey, 1990; Talbot, 2009; Khan, 2017).

This skeptical view is significant in that the freedom of the press is not turned into an abstract virtue that is not connected to power. Freedom of the press in the colonial rule was essential, though the social uses of freedom were much more diversified. Democratic aspiration, paternal elitism, reformist zeal, radical opposition, or communal polemic could be found on the same newspaper form. The success of anti-censorship movements, then, did not consist in ensuring an entirely clean environment but in increasing the range of spaces in which the South Asians could challenge the state and each other on more even-handed conditions (Anderson, 2006; Geva, 2024).

From Censorship to Decolonization and Partition

The last ten years of British rule showed the power and the weakness of the anti-censorship fight. To have been irreversibly subordinated indefinitely, the press, on the one hand, was too politically central. Censorship during war, suppression of Quit India, and the alarming crisis of imperial power rendered ever more impossible the continuation by the "*Raj*" of the illusion that measures were improvisational administrative requirements. Conversely, the political population, which had been broadened using print, was now divided by incompatible constitutional images, social polarization, and growing violence. The media gained power like never before when the common structure that it could work in the context of was disintegrating (Sethi, 2019; Talbot, 2009; Khan, 2017).

In Muslim politics, printed argument became the key element in the swift growth of the support of the Pakistan demand in the 1940s. But this was not mere propaganda, in the vulgar meaning of the word. It was through newspapers that the interpretive work was performed by which national interests in provincialism, even the threat of majoritarian tyranny, were combined with the discourse of constitutional guarantees and the ambition to be Muslim nationhood to create the sort of political argument that could be understood. Jinnah, Punjab, and the Pakistan movement scholarship have demonstrated leadership, organization, and persuasion of the people; they could not have been separated. Political identity could be rhetorically densified through journalism, and the elite negotiation

could be transformed into the mass effect with the help of journalism (Jalal, 1985; Hayat, 2014, 2021; Chawla, 2018; Hafeez and Shabbir, 2024; Shabbir and Chawla, 2020).

Meanwhile, the same bureaucratic and legal tools that were being made in colonial India were not destroyed with independence. Colonial emergence laws, sedition logic, registration systems, and administrative paranoia against possible dissident press were passed on to postcolonial states. This irony is one of the ironies of the freedom struggle that carries on. Anti-colonial politicians and journalists struggled against censorship under the banner of freedom, but the state apparatuses that they inherited were already being seen as colonial discourses of order and exception. This institutional continuity cannot be ignored to explain later battles on press freedom in South Asia (Minattur, 1961; Geva, 2024; Ashraf and Shabbir, 2019).

Conclusion

The struggle between the press and British censorship during the freedom movement was a foundational contest over who had the authority to define political reality. The colonial state sought to monopolize interpretation through legal regulation, executive discretion, and emergency powers. Nationalist, reformist, and oppositional newspapers challenged that monopoly by transforming print into a medium of political pedagogy, mobilization, and memory. The resulting conflict shaped not only how anti-colonial politics was conducted but how modern publics in South Asia were imagined and organized.

The historical lesson is not that the press was uniformly liberatory. It was structurally unequal, often elite-led, and at times complicit in communal hardening. Yet these limitations do not diminish its centrality. Rather, they remind us that press freedom is always a struggle over the social uses of communication, not simply the absence of restraint. In British India, censorship revealed the insecurity of imperial rule, while the persistence of oppositional journalism revealed the capacity of print to outgrow the state's intended boundaries.

In that sense, the story of the freedom movement is also the story of a battle over language, circulation, and legitimacy. Each warning notice, seized issue, forfeited security, and prosecuted editorial was part of a larger drama in which colonized subjects refused to let the empire speak for them. The press did not win by escaping censorship altogether. It won by making censorship politically costly, morally visible, and historically untenable. That achievement remains one of the enduring democratic inheritances of the anti-colonial struggle.

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