



The Press as a Catalyst: How Journalism Mobilized Public Opinion during India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

The influence of journalism in India's fight for freedom was crucial in shaping nationalist feelings and rallying public opinion against British colonial rule. Newspapers and journals became strong resistance tools, spreading political awareness, fostering unity, and challenging imperial narratives. The growth of journalism in India traces back to the early 19th century, with publications like Bengal Gazette paving the way for a politically aware press. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, newspapers such as Kesari, Young India, Bande Mataram, and The Hindu played a key role in shaping public sentiment and challenging British dominance. Several prominent journalists and editors emerged as leaders of the nationalist press, using their platforms to inspire and mobilize the masses. Despite strict colonial laws like the Vernacular Press Act (1878) and the Press Act (1910), the press found innovative ways to bypass restrictions, ensuring the ongoing spread of nationalist ideals. This research paper will explore the evolution of the nationalist press, its strategies, and its enduring impact on modern Indian journalism and democracy.

Keywords: nationalist press, colonial censorship, print media and resistance, swadeshi journalism, underground press, british propaganda, counter-narratives.

Introduction

Journalism in India finds its genesis in the late 18th century, marked by James Augustus Hicky's Bengal Gazette in 1780 a modest yet pioneering venture primarily serving the colonial elite. While its focus was tethered to European concerns, this endeavor symbolized the inception of print media as a transformative force in the subcontinent (Basu, 1988). The 19th century witnessed the ascendancy of vernacular journalism, which emerged as a vehicle for indigenous expression and resistance. Raja Rammohan Roy stands out as a formidable figure, using platforms like Sambad Kaumudi (1821) and Mirat-ul-Akhbar (1822) not merely to critique colonial policies but to sow the seeds of socio-political reform and galvanize public dialogue (Natarajan, 1973). Yet, this burgeoning force met resistance from imperial authorities (Lal & Sharma, 2021). Alarmed by the press's potential to unsettle colonial hegemony, the British introduced restrictive measures such as the Licensing Regulations of 1823 and the Press Act of 1835, seeking to suppress dissent and retain control. These interventions underscored the contentious relationship between the press and the colonial establishment, framing journalism not just as a profession but as an enduring instrument of resistance and revolution (Gupta, 2012). As the 19th century progressed, the Indian press ascended as a vital force, weaving together the myriad threads of nationalist aspirations into a unified tapestry of resistance (Lal, 2023). Newspapers like The Hindu, Amrita Bazar Patrika, and Kesari emerged not merely as chroniclers of socio-political events but as catalysts that shaped and amplified the nationalist discourse. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, through his fiery editorials in Kesari, infused the burgeoning movement with a rallying cry "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it" igniting an era of spirited defiance and political awakening (Sarkar, 1983). This rising momentum, however, drew the ire of the colonial authorities, who viewed the press as a potent instrument of dissent. In a bid to curtail its growing influence, the British enacted the Vernacular Press Act of 1878-a calculated assault aimed at silencing Indian-language publications that dared to challenge imperial authority (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025c). This confrontation between the state and the press underscored the centrality of journalism in India's struggle for self-determination (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

By the 20th century, the press became a powerful tool in India's fight for independence, uniting people and supporting movements like Swadeshi, Non-Cooperation, and Civil Disobedience (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). Mahatma Gandhi used newspapers like Young India, Harijan, and Navjivan to spread his ideas of nonviolence and inspire action (Brown, 1991). In

response, the British government tried to suppress these efforts with strict laws, such as the Press Act of 1910 and the Press Emergency Powers Act of 1931. Despite these restrictions, underground newspapers continued to fuel the freedom struggle and kept the nationalist spirit alive (Raghavan, 2016).

This study delves into the transformative role of journalism as a cornerstone of India's freedom struggle, examining how the press became a crucible for nationalist thought, a unifying force for mass mobilization, and a relentless challenger to British colonial rule (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a). By foregrounding the contributions of influential newspapers, pioneering editors, and visionary journalists, the research underscores the press's essential role in carving India's path to independence (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). It further reflects on how the enduring legacy of the nationalist press continues to shape the ethos of contemporary journalism and media activism, embodying the spirit of resistance and reform that defined its historic journey (Singh et al., 2021).

I. Contribution to Media Research

The role of the press in India's independence movement, extensively examined across multiple scholarly works, remains an ever-evolving field of inquiry, and yet, this study carves out its own distinct intellectual space by engaging in a detailed examination of the press—not merely as a chronicler of nationalist aspirations but as an active, evolving force that shaped, and was shaped by, the tumultuous interplay of colonial policies, resistance strategies, and the broader global discourse on imperialism and freedom (Saika et al., 2021). In foregrounding both mainstream and underground media, this research pushes beyond the familiar contours of nationalist historiography to illuminate the complex and dynamic mechanisms through which journalism did not merely reflect public sentiment but actively produced and mobilized it (Kumar & Lal, 2023).

Where many studies have tended to privilege specific newspapers or discrete historical moments, this research instead situates itself within a broad temporal and thematic arc, spanning from the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911) to the Quit India Movement (1942), thereby offering a comparative insight into the changing nature of nationalist journalism (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c). The interplay between the nationalist press and colonial propaganda emerges here not as a simple binary of resistance and repression but as a contested terrain where British-controlled newspapers-

The Statesman, for instance-sought to construct a counter-narrative aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the nationalist movement, even as indigenous (Aarzo & Lal, 2026a) publications systematically dismantled such efforts by crafting a powerful discourse of resistance and self-determination that, in turn, shaped public consciousness (Rahman et al., 2022).

Moreover, while historical accounts have largely centered on well-established nationalist newspapers such as Kesari, Harijan, and The Hindu, this study ventures into the shadowy yet indispensable world of underground publications and Congress Radio, particularly during the Quit India Movement, where state censorship had reached its peak (Lal & Aarzo, 2026c). It is in this subterranean sphere of nationalist media activity that alternative communication channels-conceived out of necessity, driven by urgency- emerged not simply as parallel structures but as strategic interventions in the colonial information (Aarzo & Lal, 2026b) order, creating avenues for resistance that resonate even in contemporary struggles for press freedom under authoritarian regimes (Lal & Aarzo, 2026a).

Equally significant is the study's engagement with the global dimensions of India's nationalist press, an area often overshadowed by a preoccupation with the domestic press landscape (Singh et al., 2022). By examining how Western newspapers-The Manchester Guardian and The New York Times, for instance- not only reported on but actively shaped international discourse on India's struggle, this research underscores the ways in which events such as the Dandi March (1930) were not just local acts of defiance but performative spectacles of resistance, whose significance extended far beyond Indian shores, exerting diplomatic and ideological pressure on the colonial administration (Rahman et al., 2024). The study, in essence, does not merely revisit history but reorients the discussion on journalism's role in anti-colonial resistance by drawing transnational linkages between media, power, and the politics of representation (Lal & Aarzo, 2026b).

II. Research Method

This research employs a historical-qualitative methodology, drawing extensively from archival records, contemporary accounts, and scholarly evaluations to examine the pivotal role of the press in India's struggle for independence. Through the integration of multifaceted sources and the

application of thematic analysis, the study provides an intricate understanding of how journalism not only molded political consciousness but also fortified nationalist movements in the face of relentless colonial repression (Aarzo & Lal, 2025). The paper organizes its findings into distinct thematic categories, encompassing censorship, mass mobilization, counter-propaganda, and underground press movements. These classifications provide a structured framework for analyzing the multiple role of the press in shaping India's nationalist struggle, highlighting the intricate interplay between media and resistance.

The data sources for this research can be classified into two distinct categories. The first comprises Primary Sources, including archival newspapers such as *The Bengalee*, *Kesari*, *Harijan*, and *Al-Hilal*, alongside official colonial records like Press Acts and censorship laws. It also incorporates speeches, letters, and writings from nationalist leaders for instance, Gandhi's seminal articles in *Young India*. Additionally, reports from the international press, including *The Manchester Guardian* and *The New York Times*, on India's independence struggle form a critical component of this category. The second category includes Secondary Sources, which encompass scholarly works on India's independence movement and press history, journal articles analyzing the influence of press regulations and nationalist media, as well as biographies and autobiographies of prominent journalists and political leaders. Together, these sources form the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the press's role in India's freedom struggle.

The objective of the research therefore could be enlisted as:

- Understanding the nationalist press and its evolution during India's freedom struggle, and its key contributions to the anti-colonial movement.
- Analyzing strategies employed by journalists and newspapers to circumvent British censorship and spread nationalist ideals.
- Studying the mobilization of public opinion and foster unity across regional and linguistic barriers by the press.
- Conceptualizing the role of newspapers in shaping major movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement.

III. Pioneering Print Media and the Dawn of Indian Nationalism

The advent of print media in colonial India signified the rise of a formidable instrument of resistance against British dominion. Although initially dominated by European publishers, the early Indian press rapidly evolved into a crucial medium for nurturing nationalist consciousness and galvanizing public opinion. From the late 18th century onwards, newspapers and journals emerged as arenas for vibrant political discourse, platforms for exposing colonial exploitation, and forums for engaging in critical debates on social reform. While British authorities moved swiftly to regulate and suppress the press, Indian intellectuals and reformers adeptly harnessed its potential to contest imperial policies. They lay the ideological foundation for a burgeoning nationalist movement.

The origins of India's press can be traced back to Hicky's Bengal Gazette, launched in 1780 by James Augustus Hicky. While initially centered on colonial politics and European society in Calcutta, the paper quickly garnered attention for its bold criticisms of the British administration, particularly Governor-General Warren Hastings. This uncompromising stance led to its suppression by the colonial authorities within two years (Natarajan, 1973). Subsequent developments saw the emergence of publications like the Calcutta Gazette (1784) and Bombay Courier (1790), which catered predominantly to European officials and merchants. Their focus remained narrowly aligned with colonial interests, limiting their engagement with the broader Indian populace (Basu, 1988). The early 19th century, however, marked a turning point as Indian-owned and vernacular newspapers began to rise, redefining the press as a platform for indigenous political discourse and the articulation of resistance against imperial policies.

The early 19th century heralded a transformative era for Indian-owned newspapers, marking a decisive phase in the evolution of nationalist journalism and its role in awakening political consciousness among the people. Among the first Indian-run publications was the Bengal Gazette, founded in 1816 by Gangadhar Bhattacharya, a pioneering effort that laid the groundwork for the press as a force for social and political change in India (Gupta, 2012). In this period of intellectual fervor, Raja Rammohan Roy emerged as a towering figure, championing the causes of social reform and press freedom through his landmark publications, Sambad Kaumudi in Bengali (1821) and Mirat-ul-Akhbar in Persian (1822). These platforms became arenas for advancing debates on the abolition of Sati, confronting economic exploitation under British rule, and fostering

a nascent nationalist consciousness that challenged both colonial authority and entrenched societal norms (Sarkar, 1983). The influence of nationalist journalism extended beyond Bengal, shaping narratives across other regions. In Bombay, the Bombay Samachar, first published in 1822, emerged as a significant voice, while the Madras Courier played a vital role in Madras, disseminating political ideas and rallying public opinion (Natarajan, 1973). These newspapers not only exposed the injustices of British rule but also served as networks for intellectuals and activists committed to the pursuit of self-governance, amplifying the ideals that would eventually coalesce into the freedom movement.

As the Indian press grew increasingly vocal in its criticism of colonial policies, the British administration responded with a series of legal measures designed to curtail press freedom. The Licensing Regulations of 1823, introduced under Governor-General John Adam, marked an early attempt to suppress dissent by requiring newspapers to obtain licenses before publication a move that targeted nationalist voices and led to the closure of influential outlets like Rammohan Roy's Mirat-ul-Akhbar (Gupta, 2012). The trajectory shifted briefly in 1835 when Governor-General Lord Metcalfe enacted a more liberal Press Act, abolishing prior licensing requirements and granting Indian newspapers greater freedom to operate (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). However, the late 19th century saw the colonial administration intensify its efforts to control the press amid rising nationalist sentiments. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878, introduced by Lord Lytton, sought to suppress Indian-language newspapers critical of British rule. This draconian law empowered authorities to confiscate printing presses and imprison editors without due process. Demonstrating remarkable adaptability, newspapers like Amrita Bazar Patrika circumvented the Act by transitioning overnight from Bengali to English, ensuring their continued role in challenging imperial authority (Sarkar, 1983).

In the face of colonial repression, the early Indian press emerged as a formidable force in shaping the nationalist movement, forging connections across diverse social groups and fostering a platform for vibrant political discourse. By exposing the realities of colonial exploitation, newspapers became engines of resistance, propelling the quest for independence. Reformers and intellectual luminaries such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Jyotiba Phule, and later Bal Gangadhar Tilak adeptly wielded the press to challenge imperial policies and advocate for self-rule, infusing the

burgeoning nationalist narrative with clarity and purpose (Brown, 1991). The foundational role of the press in these early struggles set the stage for subsequent waves of political mobilization, most notably during the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911) and the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922). Through the tireless efforts of journalists and activists, the print media transcended its role as a disseminator of information, evolving into a cornerstone of resistance. In doing so, it became an enduring symbol of the indomitable spirit that defined India's march toward independence.

The early Indian press transcended its role as a mere purveyor of information, emerging as a potent catalyst for resistance against British colonial rule. It functioned as a dynamic forum for political discourse, a powerful platform for unveiling the injustices of British oppression, and a unifying medium that brought together diverse voices in opposition to imperial dominance (Mane & Lal, 2021). Despite relentless efforts by the colonial regime to silence nationalist journalism, the unwavering determination of Indian editors, publishers, and writers ensured that the press became a cornerstone of India's quest for independence, an indispensable instrument in the forging of a collective struggle for freedom.

IV. The Press in the late 19th Century

The latter half of the 19th century signified a pivotal shift in the trajectory of Indian journalism, as the press transitioned from its earlier role as an instrument of social reform to becoming a formidable force of nationalist resistance. This era saw the emergence of influential Indian-run newspapers, the flourishing of vernacular journalism, and an intensification of British colonial efforts to suppress the press. Despite these growing restrictions, newspapers assumed a central role in awakening political consciousness, offering incisive critiques of colonial policies, and mobilizing public opinion against imperial rule, solidifying their position as indispensable agents in the nationalist struggle.

By the mid-19th century, vernacular newspapers had risen to prominence, embodying the aspirations of an emergent nationalist movement and providing a dynamic platform for self-governance advocacy. Publications like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (founded in 1868), *The Hindu* (1878), and *Kesari* (1881) became instrumental in challenging British colonial policies and educating the populace about the systemic injustices of imperial rule (Rao, 1966). The

establishment of Kesari and Maratha by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1881 marked a watershed moment in nationalist journalism. Published in Marathi and English respectively, these newspapers evolved into potent tools of political agitation. Through his impassioned editorials, Tilak mobilized public sentiment, critiquing British policies and championing the cause of self-rule, particularly in the wake of events like the Bengal famine of 1876–78 and the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883 (O'Malley, 1941). Such unrelenting advocacy made Tilak a focal point of colonial repression, resulting in his imprisonment under sedition charges in 1897 and 1908.

In parallel, The Hindu, founded in 1878 by G. Subramania Iyer, emerged as a key voice of nationalism in South India. It not only exposed the economic exploitation entrenched in British policies but also extended unwavering support to the ideals of the Indian National Congress (Puri, 1982). Meanwhile, in Bengal, Amrita Bazar Patrika underwent a strategic transformation, transitioning from a bilingual publication (English and Bengali) to an exclusively English newspaper in response to the draconian Vernacular Press Act of 1878. This adaptive shift enabled it to persist in its nationalist mission while circumventing colonial censorship (Guha, 1990).

As the nationalist press gained traction and influence, the British government intensified its efforts to curtail anti-colonial expression, introducing stringent measures to suppress dissent. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878, enacted under Lord Lytton's administration, represented a deliberate attempt to undermine the power of Indian-language newspapers that boldly criticized British rule. This draconian legislation granted the colonial authorities sweeping powers to confiscate printing presses and prosecute editors without trial. Among its primary targets were prominent newspapers such as Som Prakash, Hindoo Patriot, and Amrita Bazar Patrika, which had been unrelenting in their critiques of British policies (Pal, 1976). In a reflection of colonial anxieties, a Times of India editorial in 1878 justified the necessity of such controls, arguing that “sedition spread through vernacular print media threatens the stability of British governance in India” (Times of India, 1878). However, Indian nationalists fiercely opposed the Act, rallying against its repressive implications. Notable leaders such as Surendranath Banerjee took to the pages of publications like The Bengalee to mobilize public opinion against the law. Ultimately, sustained opposition forced the repeal of the Act in 1882 under Lord Ripon's administration, underscoring the growing potency of Indian public opinion in countering colonial oppression (Dutt, 1902).

The emergence of political journalism found its resonance with the establishment of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885, marking a significant juncture in the evolution of nationalist discourse. Newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *The Bengalee*, and *Indian Mirror* became pivotal in championing the INC's call for greater Indian representation in governance, shaping the contours of early nationalist thought. Reports from *The Tribune* vividly chronicled the initial Congress sessions, amplifying demands for administrative reforms and galvanizing public opinion (*The Tribune*, 1886). In this transformative period, the press emerged as an indispensable pillar of the nationalist movement, offering a platform for visionaries like Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Surendranath Banerjee to articulate their aspirations for self-rule. Through its unwavering commitment to the cause, the press not only informed but also inspired, embedding itself as a cornerstone of India's struggle for independence (Mehta, 1980).

In this era, the press emerged as a vital platform for economic critique of British colonial rule, amplifying voices that exposed the systemic exploitation of India's wealth and resources (Jain et al., 2023). Central to this discourse was Dadabhai Naoroji's "Drain Theory," which laid bare the mechanisms of economic extraction under British governance. Widely disseminated through influential newspapers like *The Hindu* and *The Bengalee*, Naoroji's ideas ignited a robust debate on economic nationalism, resonating deeply with the Indian populace (Naoroji, 1901). These publications played an instrumental role in fostering awareness of colonial exploitation, transforming abstract economic grievances into a rallying cry that galvanized nationalist sentiments. By bridging intellectual critique with mass mobilization, the press became an indispensable force in India's struggle for self-determination.

This period witnessed the Indian press rising as a robust adversary to British colonial rule, positioning itself as a central instrument of political awakening and resistance. Even in the face of harsh repressive measures such as the Vernacular Press Act, newspapers endured as a critical platform for challenging imperial authority. By unmasking the exploitative mechanisms of colonial governance, advocating for reforms, and rallying nationalist sentiment, the press laid a vital foundation for the mass movements that would define the political landscape of the early 20th century. As the press became more intricately aligned with the nationalist movement, it played a pivotal role in bridging the divide between intellectual leaders and the broader public. In doing so,

it emerged as one of the most potent forces in India's march toward independence, weaving together diverse voices into a unified call for liberation.

V. The Press as a Catalyst for Mass Mobilization

The Indian press emerged as a vital force in rallying public sentiment and inspiring collective resistance against British colonial authority. Newspapers served as the primary platforms for nationalist leaders to voice their critiques of imperial policies, expose the pervasive injustices of colonial rule, and galvanize public participation in landmark movements like the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911). Spanning the spectrum from vernacular journalism to revolutionary publications and Gandhian journalism, the press became an indispensable instrument in molding public consciousness and nurturing a spirit of mass defiance.

The partition of Bengal in 1905, orchestrated by Lord Curzon, ignited a wave of resistance, with the press emerging as a critical force in rallying public sentiment. Newspapers like *The Bengalee*, led by Surendranath Banerjee, and *Sandhya*, under Bhupendranath Dutta, played a defining role in shaping public opinion against the divisive colonial policy (Sarkar, 1983). These publications went beyond critiquing the political and economic motives of the partition, advancing the Swadeshi cause by encouraging Indians to boycott British goods and embrace indigenous alternatives. *The Bengalee* provided extensive coverage of protests, processions, and student-led demonstrations, serving as a unifying force for the movement. Meanwhile, *Sandhya* adopted a more radical approach, publishing fervent editorials that called for active resistance against British imperialism (Gupta, 2012). Responding to this growing challenge, the colonial authorities unleashed a wave of repression—imposing hefty fines, confiscating printing presses, and arresting editors in an attempt to quell dissent. Despite such measures, underground networks ensured the uninterrupted circulation of Swadeshi literature, keeping the spirit of the movement alive.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's contributions to nationalist journalism stand as a testament to the transformative power of the press in rallying the masses. Through his Marathi newspaper *Kesari* and its English counterpart *Mahratta*, Tilak relentlessly challenged British dominance while advocating for self-governance. His writings struck a chord with the people, particularly in Maharashtra, where he creatively utilized the Ganapati and Shivaji festivals as platforms for cultivating political awareness and collective resistance (Natarajan, 1973). Marked by fiery

nationalist rhetoric, Tilak's editorials laid bare the economic exploitation and political subjugation inflicted by the British. His outspoken support for revolutionary actions led to his conviction for sedition under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code in 1908, resulting in a six-year imprisonment (Puri, 1982). This trial became a rallying point in the independence movement, as newspapers across the nation framed his imprisonment as a direct assault on free speech and the broader nationalist cause. The British attempt to silence Tilak, one of the most influential voices of resistance, only served to strengthen public resolve and deepen the nationalist spirit within the press.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad utilized his newspapers, *Al-Hilal* and *Comrade*, as powerful platforms to shape the ideological framework of anti-colonial resistance. Launched in 1912, *Al-Hilal* was a passionate Urdu weekly that sought to invigorate Muslim political consciousness while advocating unity between Hindus and Muslims in their collective struggle against British rule (Ansari, 2004). Through its pages, Azad vehemently criticized British attempts to divide Indian communities, calling for unwavering political solidarity among Indians. At the same time, *Comrade*, edited by Mohammad Ali, catered to the educated Muslim elite as an English-language publication. It provided insightful critiques of British imperialism and situated the Indian nationalist struggle within the wider context of global anti-colonial movements (Raghavan, 2016). Recognizing the transformative potential of these newspapers, the British authorities banned *Al-Hilal* in 1914, compelling Azad to adopt covert methods to continue his mission. Despite stringent censorship, these publications left a profound legacy, fostering anti-imperialist sentiment that deeply influenced the trajectory of the nationalist movement.

Mahatma Gandhi recognized the transformative potential of the press and used it as a cornerstone of his strategy for nonviolent resistance. Through his newspapers *Young India*, *Harijan*, and *Navjivan* he disseminated the philosophy of *Satyagraha*, inspiring social and political change across the nation (Chandra, 1997). *Young India* (1919–1932) became a medium for Gandhi's reflections on colonial rule, nonviolent action, and social reforms. Within its pages, he advocated principles of truth, nonviolence, and self-reliance, urging Indians to adopt *Swadeshi* practices and boycott foreign goods (Nayar, 2002). The reach of *Young India* extended beyond political elites, resonating deeply with ordinary citizens in villages and towns who engaged with its powerful ideas.

In a complementary vein, Harijan addressed social challenges, focusing on the upliftment of Dalits and the eradication of untouchability. Gandhi used this platform to intertwine the ethical dimensions of the freedom struggle with social justice, emphasizing the indivisibility of political independence and moral reform (Guha, 1990). Meanwhile, Navjivan, published in Gujarati, served as a vital bridge to rural communities, allowing Gandhi's ideas to penetrate the heart of India. Unlike earlier nationalist publications that employed fiery rhetoric, Gandhi's journalism was marked by its ethical approach and emphasis on nonviolence. Despite repeated censorship and bans by the British government, his newspapers left a profound imprint. Through simple yet powerful language, Gandhi made his vision of nonviolent resistance accessible to a vast and diverse audience, embedding his ideals deeply within the national movement.

The press turned into a dominant force during the Indian freedom struggle, galvanizing public sentiment through incisive journalism that exposed the realities of colonial exploitation and kindled the flames of resistance. From the Swadeshi Movement's advocacy for economic self-reliance to the bold radicalism of Al-Hilal and the ethical nonviolent philosophy of Young India, newspapers assumed a central role in molding public opinion and fostering unity among diverse communities in opposition to British rule. Even under the harsh weight of repression, censorship, and the imprisonment of editors, the nationalist press continued to persevere, sustaining the spirit of defiance and resistance. The enduring legacy of these publications stands as a profound testament to the transformative power of journalism in shaping political and social change and in propelling India's quest for independence.

VI. Oppressive Colonial Policies and Media Censorship

The British administration in India employed a calculated blend of legal restrictions, financial sanctions, and outright repression to tighten its grip on the press and stifle nationalist sentiments. From the late 19th century onwards, the colonial state enacted a series of draconian laws designed to suppress the press, particularly during moments of heightened political unrest. Despite the critical role played by the Indian press in mobilizing public opinion, its progress was persistently hindered by colonial censorship, which intensified during World War I and the subsequent waves of nationalist movements.

World War I (1914–1918) marked a defining period of intensified press censorship in India, as the British colonial administration sought to counter the potential of nationalist newspapers to stir anti-colonial sentiments and undermine wartime governance. To address this perceived threat, the Defence of India Act (1915) was introduced, granting extensive powers to the government to silence dissenting voices in the press (Nayar, 2002). Under the Act's provisions, newspapers that criticized British wartime policies, recruitment efforts, or the exploitation of Indian soldiers faced severe censorship. Prominent nationalist publications like *The Bombay Chronicle* and *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* were repeatedly penalized for exposing wartime hardships and the economic exploitation of Indian resources (Chandra, 1997). The colonial authorities defended these restrictions by asserting that nationalist journalism could incite unrest and hinder India's contributions to the war effort. Alongside suppression, the British actively propagated official narratives through state-controlled newspapers and publications to portray the war as a "shared imperial responsibility." Government-sponsored dailies such as *The Pioneer* framed the war as an opportunity for Indians to demonstrate their loyalty to the British Empire. Meanwhile, nationalist newspapers, operating under relentless surveillance and censorship, struggled to counter these narratives (Gupta, 2012).

In the aftermath of World War I, the British government, instead of easing wartime restrictions, reinforced its control over the press through the enactment of the Rowlatt Act in 1919. This oppressive legislation extended the draconian measures of the Defence of India Act, empowering the colonial administration to arrest individuals and suppress publications without trial. Dubbed the "Black Act," it faced widespread condemnation from nationalist leaders and the press alike (Sarkar, 1983). Under the Rowlatt Act, nationalist newspapers bore the brunt of colonial repression for their critical reportage of government policies. *The Hindustan Times* and *The Bombay Chronicle* were repeatedly censored and fined for documenting police atrocities and the growing unrest among the Indian populace. Similarly, *The Tribune*, a prominent nationalist daily from Lahore, endured frequent warnings and restrictions for exposing the extent of British oppression (Raghavan, 2016).

The Rowlatt Act's most infamous consequence was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on April 13, 1919. The British authorities sought to suppress reports of the atrocity, yet newspapers like *The Servant of India* and *The Independent* managed to publish searing eyewitness accounts,

igniting widespread public outrage (Chandra, 1997). In response, the colonial government escalated its efforts, shutting down numerous publications and imprisoning journalists who defied censorship laws. Despite such measures, the nationalist press remained resolute, ensuring that the fight against oppression endured.

In the face of relentless repression by the colonial authorities, the Indian nationalist movement, led by Mahatma Gandhi, adapted its strategies during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922). Newspapers became indispensable tools for rallying public support, amplifying Gandhi's call to boycott British institutions, including government-controlled newspapers, and uniting the masses in collective resistance. This era saw the rise of Gandhian publications such as *Young India* and *Navjivan*. Through these platforms, Gandhi passionately advocated for self-rule while exposing the harsh realities of police brutality, labor exploitation, and the injustices ingrained in the colonial legal system (Guha, 1990). His writings in *Young India* directly challenged the legitimacy of British rule, often leading to censorship and repeated bans on his publications. The colonial government retaliated with stringent legal actions against the nationalist press. Editors and journalists associated with *The Independent*, edited by Motilal Nehru, and *Swarajya*, under T. Prakasam, were arrested for publishing content deemed "seditious" by the authorities (Nayar, 2002). Heavy fines and the revocation of printing licenses forced many nationalist newspapers to shut down. Despite these setbacks, underground presses emerged as critical lifelines, ensuring the distribution of banned materials and sustaining the momentum of the movement.

The contest between colonial censorship and nationalist journalism grew increasingly intense as rival narratives about British rule vied for public attention. The British government leaned heavily on propaganda, employing official newspapers like *The Statesman* and *The Pioneer* to cast British governance as a benevolent force essential for India's progress. These publications frequently characterized nationalist leaders as extremists, portraying political unrest as the actions of a handful of "misguided" individuals rather than a collective movement (Puri, 1982). In defiance, nationalist leaders and journalists crafted counter-narratives to dismantle British propaganda. Influential publications such as *The Bombay Chronicle*, edited by B.G. Horniman, and *The Hindu* responded by exposing the stark realities of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and police brutality under colonial rule (Raghavan, 2016). During the 1920s,

Indian nationalists extended their efforts to the global stage, leveraging international media to highlight British repression. Reports of atrocities like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the brutal suppression of the Non-Cooperation Movement appeared in Western outlets such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *The New York Times*, reshaping global perceptions of British rule in India and mounting pressure on the colonial regime (*The New York Times*, 1921).

The British colonial government's relentless efforts to suppress the nationalist press through stringent censorship laws, arrests, and a calculated propaganda machinery were met with unwavering resistance from Indian journalists and editors. From the enactment of the Defence of India Act in 1915 to the imposition of the Rowlatt Act in 1919, and the restrictive measures during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–1922, the press became a fiercely contested arena for controlling public opinion. Amidst this ceaseless repression, nationalist newspapers proved indispensable in dismantling colonial narratives, galvanizing the populace, and sustaining the momentum of the freedom movement. Far from being mere disseminators of information, the press evolved into a formidable tool for mass mobilization and emerged as an enduring force that profoundly shaped India's journey to independence.

VII. The Press and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934)

The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934) represented a pivotal chapter in India's fight for independence, with the press playing an instrumental role in garnering widespread support both domestically and internationally. Fully attuned to the influence of the media, Mahatma Gandhi employed newspapers as a strategic vehicle to disseminate his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. The movement's defining moment, the Dandi March, received extensive coverage across Indian and global media outlets, drawing unprecedented international attention to the Indian struggle for independence. Alarmed by the growing influence of nationalist journalism, the British government escalated its measures of suppression through the enactment of the Press Act of 1931, underscoring the mounting significance of the press in the nationalist cause.

Mahatma Gandhi on March 12, 1930 undertook the historic Dandi March, a 240-mile journey from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal town of Dandi, where, on April 6, he defied the British salt laws in a symbolic act of resistance. This meticulously planned event was designed to inspire mass participation and garner widespread media attention. Gandhi ensured that nationalist

newspapers, including *Young India* and *Navjivan*, provided detailed accounts of the march, its objectives, and its significance in the broader movement for self-rule (Gupta, 2012). The nationalist press played a pivotal role in rallying public support, with publications offering vivid descriptions of the march and Gandhi's speeches delivered along the route. The *Bombay Chronicle*, under B.G. Horniman's editorship, offered extensive coverage, framing the march as a bold stand against colonial domination (Chandra, 1997). The image of Gandhi walking barefoot alongside his followers, often captured and published by nationalist newspapers, became an enduring emblem of the resistance.

Meanwhile, British-controlled newspapers, such as *The Times of India* and *The Pioneer*, attempted to diminish the event's significance, dismissing it as a mere "futile gesture." However, nationalist journalists countered these narratives by emphasizing the march's profound moral and political implications (Nayar, 2002). In this way, the press became a vital arena for shaping public opinion, with nationalist editors ensuring that the movement's message resonated even in the farthest corners of the country.

A defining feature of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934) was the pivotal role played by the international press in reshaping global perceptions of India's struggle for independence. Unlike earlier phases of the nationalist movement, the 1930s witnessed an unprecedented surge in foreign media interest, as correspondents from leading publications such as *The Manchester Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune* extensively covered events like the Dandi March and its subsequent protests. Prominent Western journalists, including Webb Miller of United Press International, provided harrowing eyewitness accounts of British violence against unarmed protesters. Miller's vivid reports on the Dharasana Salt Satyagraha, where British police mercilessly assaulted peaceful satyagrahis, were widely disseminated in international newspapers, sparking global outrage (Fischer, 1950). His dispatch in *The New York Times* captured the unflinching courage of volunteers who marched forward to endure blows without retaliation a powerful reflection of the philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

Alarmed by mounting international criticism, the British government sought to counter these narratives by portraying Gandhi and the Indian National Congress as extremists. However, publications like *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Nation* largely amplified the Indian

perspective, emphasizing the repressive nature of British rule (Raghavan, 2016). This wave of global media coverage profoundly undermined Britain's moral authority, intensifying scrutiny of its colonial policies and making the justification of its rule in India increasingly untenable on the world stage.

The widespread success of the Civil Disobedience Movement, coupled with its extensive coverage in the press, prompted the British government to tighten its grip on nationalist journalism through harsher censorship measures. Enacted during Lord Irwin's tenure, the Press Act of 1931 imposed stringent controls on newspapers that were deemed to publish seditious content. This legislation granted the colonial administration sweeping powers to confiscate printing presses, levy substantial fines, and imprison editors without trial (Sarkar, 1983). The Press Act of 1931 brought heavy penalties upon several nationalist newspapers, including *The Hindustan Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Tribune*, which were subjected to crippling fines or forced to suspend operations temporarily. Prominent journalists like Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi endured relentless persecution, facing repeated harassment and arrests for their outspoken support of the movement through their writings (Nayar, 2002).

Though the act drastically curtailed press freedom, underground networks rose in defiance, ensuring the uninterrupted dissemination of nationalist literature, thereby sustaining the spirit of resistance even under the shadow of colonial repression.

The Gandhi-Irwin Pact, concluded in March 1931, brought a temporary respite from the stringent press restrictions imposed by the British colonial administration. This historic agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Viceroy Lord Irwin resulted in the release of political prisoners and permitted satyagrahis to engage in peaceful protests. In exchange, Gandhi agreed to halt the Civil Disobedience Movement and participate in the Second Round Table Conference in London. This accord ushered in a brief period during which censorship measures were relaxed, granting newspapers greater latitude in reporting on nationalist activities and highlighting the evolving dynamics of India's freedom struggle (Chandra, 1997).

The brief respite in press freedom was abruptly overturned in 1932 as the Civil Disobedience Movement regained momentum following the breakdown of the Round Table Conference. Publications such as *Harijan* and *Young India* faced renewed censorship, while

numerous nationalist leaders were subjected to imprisonment. The British government's oscillation between harsh repression and measured negotiation underscored the press's pivotal role in fortifying the independence movement and influencing public sentiment.

VIII. Quit India Movement and the Impact of the Underground Press

Initiated by Mahatma Gandhi on August 8, 1942, The Quit India Movement, unleashed an immediate and uncompromising response from the British colonial administration. In the wake of Gandhi's momentous address at Gowalia Tank, top Congress leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, and Maulana Azad, were swiftly taken into custody within hours of the speech. The British authorities extended their repressive measures to nationalist newspapers, enforcing stringent censorship laws aimed at curbing pro-independence reporting and silencing voices that sought to inspire resistance. Newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *Harijan* bore the full weight of colonial repression during this period. *The Hindu*, which had long established itself as a steadfast advocate of moderate nationalism, faced repeated warnings before being subjected to suspensions and significant financial penalties for its reporting on British atrocities (Gupta, 2012). Meanwhile, *Harijan*, founded by Mahatma Gandhi, was completely banned in 1942 due to its uncompromising anti-colonial stance and its fervent calls for mass resistance (Nayar, 2002). Other influential publications, including *The Bombay Chronicle*, *The Hindustan Times*, and *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, were similarly targeted, enduring relentless censorship, intrusive raids, and, in some instances, outright closure (Chandra, 1997). These measures underscored the colonial administration's determination to silence dissenting voices, but they also highlighted the resilience of the nationalist press in the face of relentless suppression.

The British administration rationalized these actions under the Defence of India Rules (1939), which conferred sweeping powers upon colonial authorities to arrest editors, confiscate printing presses, and prohibit publications without the necessity of a trial. Reports from *The Times of India* revealed that the colonial government perceived nationalist newspapers as a direct threat, accusing them of inciting rebellion and jeopardizing wartime governance (Raghavan, 2016). Yet, the suppression of legal newspapers only strengthened the resolve of nationalist forces, fostering the rise of an underground press that boldly carried forward the message of resistance, ensuring that the struggle for freedom persevered despite relentless colonial repression.

As mainstream newspapers were suppressed, underground publications emerged as lifelines of resistance, operating covertly to escape the vigilant eyes of British surveillance. These clandestine presses, often run by students, activists, and local leaders, produced hand-printed pamphlets and bulletins that fervently called for continued defiance. Among these, The Azad Hind stood out as a prominent underground newspaper, disseminating news of British repression, Gandhi's messages, and updates on nationalist activities (Sarkar, 1983). The underground press assumed a central role in mobilizing protests, providing information about planned strikes, and dismantling British propaganda. In Bengal, the Jugantar group spearheaded efforts to circulate secret newspapers detailing revolutionary strategies and acts of resistance against colonial forces (Puri, 1982). Similarly, in Maharashtra, underground bulletins conveyed encrypted messages from imprisoned leaders, ensuring that the movement's resolve remained unbroken despite stringent restrictions. Perhaps one of the underground press's most vital contributions was its unyielding opposition to British disinformation. While government-controlled newspapers like The Statesman sought to depict the Quit India Movement as a "leaderless revolt" dominated by anarchists, underground publications steadfastly countered this narrative, presenting the movement as a cohesive and organized mass uprising against British rule (Raghavan, 2016).

Operating from covert locations in Mumbai, Congress Radio, an underground broadcasting station led by Usha Mehta and a group of young activists, became an indispensable weapon in rallying public support during the Quit India Movement. It broadcast fiery speeches from nationalist leaders, updates on the movement's activities, and harrowing accounts of British repression, offering an unfiltered stream of revolutionary energy to listeners across the country (Mehta, 1997). Unlike newspapers, which could be silenced through confiscation and censorship, radio broadcasts transcended geographic and logistical limitations, reaching audiences instantaneously and eluding colonial efforts to stem the flow of information. Congress Radio became a beacon of resistance, amplifying the voices of leaders like Gandhi and Nehru as they urged the nation to persevere despite the imprisonment of key figures. Through its transmissions, the underground station played a pivotal role in orchestrating strikes, protests, and acts of sabotage against British authority (Gupta, 2012). Despite relentless efforts by the colonial government to shut down the station, Congress Radio operated for several months before Usha Mehta and her team were arrested in 1943 (Mehta, 1997). Even in its eventual silencing, the station left a lasting

legacy, demonstrating the transformative power of alternative media in fueling the nationalist struggle and challenging imperial repression.

Beyond underground newspapers and Congress Radio, an array of alternative communication methods—handbills, graffiti, and word-of-mouth networks—emerged as crucial lifelines that kept the Quit India Movement alive under the shadow of colonial repression. Volunteers and activists operated in secrecy, leveraging clandestine meetings and coded messages to spread critical updates on British actions and strategies for resistance. In rural regions, traditional storytelling and folk performances became invaluable tools for conveying nationalist messages in ways that evaded British surveillance (Sarkar, 1983). Through songs, poems, and street plays, these cultural expressions not only inspired individuals to join the movement but also kept the collective spirit of resistance burning amidst mass arrests and crackdowns.

The British government's inability to completely suppress nationalist communication highlighted the remarkable resilience of the independence movement. As newspapers were banned, journalists imprisoned, and radio stations dismantled, alternative channels of communication rose defiantly to spread the Quit India message far and wide. These underground efforts not only sustained the movement through adversity but strengthened its resolve, ultimately culminating in India's long-awaited independence in 1947.

This Movement witnessed an unprecedented assault on press freedom, with influential nationalist newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *Harijan* subjected to bans and draconian censorship. In the wake of these suppressions, underground presses and alternative media channels arose as critical engines of resistance, ensuring that the movement endured despite relentless British repression. Congress Radio, a clandestine broadcasting station, assumed a central role in galvanizing public support, delivering messages that resonated across the nation. Concurrently, underground publications tirelessly disseminated reports on protests and exposed the harsh realities of British oppression. These channels of resistance symbolized the tenacity of India's nationalist struggle, highlighting the essential role of the press in preserving the movement's momentum. Ultimately, the colonial regime's inability to extinguish these alternative media efforts underscored the transformative power of the press as an agent of political change. These enduring efforts paved the way for India's eventual triumph, culminating in independence in 1947.

IX. Conclusion:

This study asserts that the press was instrumental in shaping India's freedom struggle, serving as an engine of mass mobilization and a robust counterforce to colonial propaganda. Through an exhaustive historical analysis of nationalist newspapers, underground publications, and the policies of colonial censorship, the research reveals that the press was far more than a passage for information. Instead, it operated as an indispensable, active participant in India's anti-colonial resistance, crucially influencing the course of the nationalist movement.

The press in India's freedom struggle became a potent weapon of political mobilization, a voice against colonial propaganda, and a shared platform for articulating nationalist aspirations. From the early resistance of the 19th century to the climactic upheavals of the 20th century, journalism played a decisive role in shaping the collective political awareness of the Indian populace. Newspapers such as *The Bengalee*, *Kesari*, *Al-Hilal*, and *Harijan* spearheaded the creation of a compelling anti-colonial narrative, fostering mass participation in transformative movements like *Swadeshi*, *Civil Disobedience*, and *Quit India*. Journalists and editors, often braving immense personal danger, turned these newspapers into tools of defiance, ensuring that the ideals of self-rule and liberation permeated every segment of society. Equally impactful was the contribution of the international press, whose coverage of landmark events like Gandhi's Salt March and the brutal British crackdowns reshaped global perceptions of India's struggle. These accounts amplified the voices of the nationalist movement, cementing the press's central role as both a force for mobilization and an agent of political change.

In the face of relentless colonial censorship, the firm resilience of the nationalist press stood as irrefutable proof that oppressive laws could never extinguish the power of ideas. The emergence of underground publications and Congress Radio during the Quit India Movement exemplified the remarkable adaptability of nationalist media, which persisted even under the harshest repression. This unyielding struggle between British censorship and nationalist journalism underscored the press's pivotal role in maintaining the momentum of the freedom movement.

This study reaffirms that the press was not merely an observer but a transformative force, one as integral to India's independence as political activism and mass protests. By forging a unified

nationalist identity, exposing the systemic injustices of colonial rule, and mobilizing the public toward decisive action, journalism ensured that the fight for freedom never wavered. The enduring legacy of the nationalist press is woven into the fabric of India's democracy, a testament to the profound power of the press in championing truth, justice, and the right to self-determination.

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