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Newsprint And Nationhood: A Glimpse Into Indian Journalism

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Abstract

The history of Indian journalism reflects the nation's journey from colonial subjugation to independence and beyond. Emerging in the late 18th century with early publications such as Hickey's Bengal Gazette, journalism in India became a vehicle for political awakening, social reform, and cultural expression. Newspapers and periodicals not only disseminated news but also shaped public opinion, inspired nationalist movements, and provided a platform for reformers and freedom fighters to voice dissent. Post-independence, Indian journalism expanded into diverse languages, formats, and mediums, balancing its democratic responsibility with the challenges of commercialization, censorship, and technological transformation. This study offers a concise overview of key phases in Indian journalism, highlighting its enduring role in safeguarding democracy, promoting literacy, and reflecting the aspirations of society.

Key words: Indian journalism, Press history in India, Colonial newspapers, Vernacular press, Hickey's Bengal Gazette, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and press, Freedom struggle and media

Introduction

Journalism in India has a rich and layered history, stretching back to the late 18th century. What began as a modest effort to share news with colonial administrators soon grew into a powerful medium that shaped public opinion, fueled reform movements, and played a decisive role in the struggle for independence. The story of Indian journalism can be traced to James Augustus Hickey's Bengal Gazette (1780), often regarded as the first newspaper in India. From there, the press evolved rapidly through early English-language dailies, the rise of Indian-owned publications, and the birth of a strong vernacular press. Each stage reflected not only changes in technology and communication but also the shifting aspirations of a nation.

Indian journalism has been more than a record of events; it has been a voice of resistance, a tool of education, and a mirror of society. From the fiery writings of reformers and freedom fighters to the emergence of mass-circulation dailies in regional languages, the press has consistently played a transformative role. This glimpse into its history allows us to understand how newspapers and journals shaped India's political, cultural, and social journey—and how they continue to influence the democratic fabric of the country today.

Global Evolution of the Press

Communication is a fundamental human instinct. It is a natural propensity that has existed from the beginning of human history. The ancient poetry of Valmiki Ramayana, Vyasa Maharishi's Mahabharata, and other Puranas all demonstrate this communicative aspect. Homer's 'Iliad' is regarded as the first poem in Western literature. It is formatted as a news report on a war. A 'tripod voyager' named Narada was the primary reporter in ancient India. Narada's account serves as proof that news reports have been seen to have the power to incite violence since ancient times. The stems of the papyrus plant, which originated in Egypt, were traditionally used as paper, giving rise to the term "paper." Documents written on papyrus some four thousand years ago were discovered to contain news, apparently presented in a manner comparable to modern newspaper reporting. The Mauryan Empire, particularly under Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, used imperial edicts and decrees as news bulletins to spread vital information throughout the realm. The Mughal monarchs developed this tradition, as observed by Venetian visitor Niccolò Manucci in Aurangzeb's palace.

In the beginning, the East India Company likewise copied the Newsletter method. Therefore, it can be claimed that the British Empire adopted the Newsletter system, which originated in the Mauryan Empire, for royal purposes. The newsletter system was used in the Roman Empire, Germany, France, and England, among other Western nations. The process of alerting Roman subjects about state matters entailed putting tablets, known as albums, in Rome that held news called acts. Julius Caesar considerably improved this system. Individuals living in remote areas relied on others to reproduce and distribute these actions. Each replicated newsletter was referred to as an edition, and its producers are regarded early European journalists.

Precursors to modern newspapers include Roman editions, documented legislative processes, new laws, court decisions, battles, and conquered lands. European trade expanded during the Middle Ages, as did foreign relations. The invention of printing and paper, which originated in China, transformed newsletters worldwide and accelerated scientific progress. Papermaking technology migrated from China to Baghdad (793 AD) and Cairo (900 AD), ultimately reaching Europe. Newspapers were first formed in Germany and France before making their way to Britain during Charles I's reign, with the first newspaper in Europe appearing in 1100 AD. A newspaper was founded in Britain only after newspapers had been established in Germany and France. During Charles I's reign, it was difficult to imagine running a newspaper there.

Puthuppally Raghavan describes the period's history, emphasising the success of the Industrial Revolution, accelerated industrialisation, transportation advancements, expanded commerce and trade to distant lands, colonial exploitation that improved English economic conditions, and the subsequent expansion of education and literacy. The number of readers has increased. As a result, the number of newspapers expanded. Newspapers with circulations ranging from two to three million copies appeared. By the twentieth century, the press had almost equal power. This was true not only for England, but for all of Europe.

The first newspaper in Russia was launched in 1703, but it failed due to rigorous control by a despotic tsar. In 618 AD, the Chinese published the world's first newspaper, the 'Peking Gazette'. According to K. Ramakrishna Pillai, it originated with conspirators in Peking who wrote and sold official secrets on parchment.

Newspaper development differs greatly between countries due to differences in environment and cultural qualities. English publications had a significant influence on Indian newspapers, moulding their character and introducing them to the world's information. This progression occurred as European nations adopted the ideas of freedom of expression, liberty, equality, and brotherhood, influenced by thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau.

James Augustus Hickey: The Founder

Calcutta served as the administrative seat for the East India Company in India, attracting a large number of Westerners, both affiliated and unattached. This resulted in the development of two distinct groups official and unofficial with a hostile relationship. The English saw their rule in India as a commercial opportunity, whereas the East India Company saw it as company property rather than an English triumph. Journalism in India began in Calcutta, the East India Company's headquarters. William Bolt, an East India Company executive, wanted to start a newspaper there to expose official corruption. The first Indian newspaper, 'Hicky's Bengal Gazette or Calcutta General Advertiser,' a weekly English journal, was founded on January 29, 1780, by editor, printer, and publisher James Augustus Hickey. Early British kings held a negative attitude towards the press.

The Calcutta Gazette, founded twenty years after the start of journalism in India, had a profound impact on early Indian newspapers. Lord Wellesley's Press Censorship Act of 1799 was enforced during this period to defend British imperial interests. The Bengal Gazette is recognised as Southeast Asia's first major newspaper. According to historian Thankappan Nair, its editor, James Augustus Hickey, faced significant hardship in the pursuit of press freedom, with his journal incorporating parts of news, humour, and investigative reporting on government corruption. Hicky was released from prison in February 1785, which coincided with Warren Hastings' return to England.

Englishmen who moved to India in search of prosperity founded Indian journalism, with Hickey playing a pivotal role. Within twenty years after his arrival, over two dozen publications appeared in Calcutta, including the India Gazette (1780) and Calcutta Gazette (1784). Gladwin launched the Calcutta Gazette, which is now a government publication but is considered Southeast Asia's oldest newspaper. The "Madras Courier," created in 1785 by government printer Richard Johnston, was Madras' first newspaper. Initially edited by Hugh Boyd, it went through various editors. In 1795, R. Williams founded the 'Madras Gazette,' while Humphreys founded the 'India Herald,' which was suppressed and resulted to Humphreys' deportation due to its publishing without official permission. By 1816, Indian journalism included both Europeans and native Indians. European authorities disputed Governor General Lord Hastings' charter, resulting in the elimination of newspaper subsidies and the imposition of a levy. The 'Bombay Herald' was Bombay's first newspaper in 1789, with subsequent mergers and censorship, including security posting requirements about 1800. Publications such as the Asiatic Journal and Morning Post questioned Company authority, prompting action against editor Hetley. Buckingham launched the Calcutta Journal in 1818, which revealed the East India Company's exploitation and prompted government involvement. Buckingham also collaborated with Ram Mohan Roy on "Samvad kaumudi."

Press as a Tool for Social Awakening

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) understood the critical significance of newspapers in societal development. During his time as a collector, he became acquainted with English newspapers, which gave him insight into journalism. B.N. Dasgupta cited Roy's belief that daily and weekly publications were useful methods for influencing public opinion. Roy avidly supported his friend Gangadhar Bhattacharya's Bengali weekly, the 'Bengal Gazette,' which first appeared in 1816. This journal, the first vernacular newspaper in Bengali, ran Roy's landmark anti-sati essay for almost a year before other vernacular newspapers and advances in printing technology.

Newspapers in Indian languages began in Calcutta and developed similarly to English in the early years. Later, in April 1818, Dr. J.C. Marshman introduced the short-lived Bengali periodical 'Digddarshan', which followed the Bengal Gazette. The Bengali monthly 'Samachar Darpan', edited by Dr. Marshman and founded by the Serampore Baptist Mission, mainly advocated Christian beliefs and criticised the immorality of Hinduism.

Many editors were reprimanded, punished, and exiled between 1791 and 1798 because the East India Company's leadership saw an unchecked Indian press as a threat to governance. Although most English

publications favoured European interests, some also drew attention to the Company's poor management. The Board of Control and individuals such as Lord Munroe and Lord Elphinstone believed that journalistic freedom in India was dangerous and that discussions on government matters should take place in England, which is the country's seat of government.

By starting the Bengali monthly 'Samvad Kaumudi' on December 14, 1821, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was instrumental in establishing Indian journalism from an Indian viewpoint. With ambitions to translate articles from multiple languages, Roy was assigned to the paper with the goal of addressing native issues and expanding public knowledge. The topics covered included religion, customs, politics, and intellectual conversation. His co-founder Bhavanicharan Banerjee left for the conservative 'Sadachara Chandrika', which subsequently attacked Roy, as a result of his daring essays on social topics including sati, child marriage, and polygamy. Governor-General John Adam chastised Roy for allegedly encouraging discontent by criticising the company's management through 'Samvad Kaumudi' and the 'Mirror of News'. Later, Roy's well-known essays were turned into books. Roy viewed journalism as a tool for civil rights and national freedom, wielding the press with skill. He co-founded the 'Bengal Herald' in English with Dwarkanath Tagore and launched a Bengali newspaper in 1829. His writings and speeches stimulated internal political dissent against British rule, despite the British administration's efforts to restrict journalistic freedom in India. Newspapers existed in major British-ruled Indian cities before the late 18th century, with local papers also appearing. However, from 1840 to 1857, many Bengal newspapers failed to establish a lasting presence, often hesitating to report critically on government actions due to fears of treason.

Conclusion

The history of Indian journalism is not merely a record of newspapers and periodicals but a chronicle of India's social, cultural, and political awakening. From its origins in the late 18th century, journalism in India has evolved into a powerful medium of expression, resistance, and nation-building. Early publications laid the groundwork for public debate, nurtured political consciousness, and inspired movements that shaped India's struggle for freedom. Over time, the press adapted to changing political contexts, technological advancements, and the demands of an informed citizenry, while continuing to uphold its role as the fourth pillar of democracy. Today, as Indian journalism navigates the challenges of digital transformation, commercialization, and questions of ethics, its history serves as a reminder of the press's enduring responsibility to inform, to question, and to safeguard democratic values.

End Notes

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