

Module name/ title: Vernacular Press Regulation in Colonial India

Paper: News and Society

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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Media and Communication Studies
Paper Name	News and Society
Module Name/Title	Vernacular Press Regulations During Colonial India
Module ID	P1-M 7
Pre-requisites	
Objectives	
Keywords	

Module: Vernacular Press Regulations during Colonial India

1. Introduction

The paper looks into the various tactics that were used by the colonial regime in controlling the freedom of vernacular press in India. The paper highlights the policy changes that were introduced by the British regime in curbing the Indian press and how Indian press played an instrumental role in disseminating the anti-colonial attitude amongst the Indian citizens all over India.

2. Learning Outcome

The students will have clarity over the policy debates which targeted the freedom of vernacular press and how these policies operated in India. In addition to that, the students will have clarity as how the vernacular press played an important role in developing the anti-colonial feeling in India.

3. Vernacular Press Regulations and State of Vernacular Press in India

The advent of vernacular press in India brought about a major transformation in terms of dissemination of information. Vernacular press as agents of dispersing information brought about mass awareness about the atrocities of the British regime amongst the Indian citizens. The Indian vernacular press caused concern and uneasiness to the government and acquired a reputation of disseminating seditious content, the same way it did before the great rebellion of 1857. The increasing political consciousness amongst the people increased the apprehensions once again in the minds of British towards vernacular press.

Indian press was a multilingual press unlike British and French. At the time of beginning of press in India, most of the newspapers were in English but later large number of Indian language press grew. In the initial phase of press policy, there was an underlying unity in the policies and common conditions for both English language and vernacular language newspaper that subsequently lead to economic unity along with commonness in development of newspaper. Content in the newspaper was a major concern of the British government especially in vernacular language newspaper, as Indians generally published seditious content against British government and owned most of the vernacular language newspapers. Moreover, regulations in infrastructure of the press i.e. Indian and Anglo-Indian was an indirect way of regulating the content in the newspapers in both Indian and English language.

However, before the introduction of Vernacular Press Act, Adam's regulation was imposed which was uniform to both the Indian was owned Press and the English owned press. However, in terms of practice it was discriminatory towards the Indian vernacular press. There were higher number of cases of cancelling the license and warnings to the Indian owned newspaper. The Anglo-Indian newspapers, on the

other hand were given relaxation and additional provisions because of their pro-British attitude.

Indian newspapers mostly criticized the policy of government and talked about social reforms and politics. As a result, they were largely the targets of the colonial regime. With strict ban on the newspaper run by company's employees by Court of Directors, the nature of ownership was only of two kinds i.e. Indian owned or Vernacular Newspaper and English owned newspaper. The Adam's Regulations were seen as the precursor to Vernacular Press Act.

Natrajan quoted that H.T. Prinsep and Lt. Colonel Morrison, were of the opinion that excess of liberty to the press would create a problem in the long run for the colonial empire in India. Prinsep stated that:

"I do not contemplate entirely without apprehension the encouragement of the growth of the native press, which, judging from the spirit of discontent produced by our first experiments in the work of education threatens to be hostile". He added: "I dread that in its consequences the native press may be subversive of good order and discipline: but the experiment has been commenced of leaving this press free, and we have, therefore, now only the choice of endeavoring to influence it, and to give it a proper direction, or of abiding the result, leaving it to pursue its own course, in the confidence that we shall be strong enough to cope with it when we see danger."

Morrison also expressed apprehension at allowing freedom to the "native" press. He suggested the appointment of a responsible officer to watch the operations of the Indian Language press and urged it should be made clear to all printers and publishers that government had the power of putting a stop forthwith to the operations of any press which in its publications indulged in sedition or in discussion dangerous to public tranquility (Natrajan, 1955).

During the first two decades of the 19th century, there was difference in the opinions of the Government officials related to the clear policies for the press both in London and in India. As a result, regulations in press were in imbalance. Lord Wellesley adopted a hard attitude toward press in the early decades of 19th century, while Lord Hastings was relatively kind towards them. This sort of warm and cold attitude continued towards the press but, there was a clear difference in terms of treatment of the Vernacular Press which was different from that of Anglo-Indian Press.

The reason was clear, Anglo-Indian press acquired a supportive attitude towards Imperial State's public policies, whereas Vernacular Press deeply criticized the public policies of the British regime in India. After 1857 mutiny, more intense and subversive policies were imposed on Vernacular Press. It was so as the colonial regime felt that vernacular press in India was instrumental in instigating the 1857 revolt against the empire.

The period after 1857 till 1905 was a period which was understood as a foreground for a big battle against Imperial State. The partition of Bengal was a painful historic event in the Indian struggle for freedom and for press as a powerful media. Lord Curzon's anti-Indian policies intensified the agitation. Indian Nationalist movements became more intensive in their mission to root out the British Empire from India. The oppressive legislation and other repressive measures fueled the burning of agitation. It was later followed by the introduction of gagging policies to curb the press freedom in India.

In 1876, Lord Lytton became the Viceroy. He conducted an enquiry about Indian-owned press and invited opinions on improving relations between the government and the Indian press. Robert Knight the founder of "The Statesman" was of view that, "attitude of press could directly be derived from the attitude of government towards press." Government never showed sympathy and never consulted people belonging to press before taking any decision. Lytton suggested setting up press bureau where an appointed director would perform the job of informing about the anti-colonial writings of the press (Natrajan, 1955).

In the following year, the Vernacular Press Bill was introduced in the Governor-General's Council and passed as Act IX of 1878. Briefly its objectives were to place newspapers published in the languages of India under better control and to furnish the government with more effective means than the existing laws provided to punish and repress seditious writings done to produce disaffection towards the government in the minds of the ignorant population. It was also claimed to be intended to prevent unscrupulous writers from using their papers as a means of intimidation and extortion (Rau, 1974).

The Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was one of the most prominent press regulations at that time. It was imposed because gradually over a period of time the vernacular newspapers in India started to become a nuisance for the British regime.

For instance, "Nil Durpan", a Bengali drama on the indigo cultivation was published in 1861. It was a highly controversial piece of information. The "Hindu Patriot" was founded in 1853 and was considered as a terror to bureaucracy, as well as to the white colonists in Bengal. 'The Bengalee', was founded in 1868 by Girish Chandra Ghosh who fearlessly published his views on public grievances (Rau, 1974). The most striking feature of the Indian press was the diversity of language. The knowledge of English was only restricted to educated and urban community in India. Vernacular newspaper was published in every region in different languages. Growing political consciousness was the one of the major reason behind the growth of the vernacular newspaper in every district and village of India. The newspaper had readership on the basis of the name of the person who published the article. The Government aided vernacular newspapers less and major advertisements went to Anglo-Indian newspaper (Gupta, 1977).

Serious objections were raised against the Vernacular Press Act as it discriminated between the Anglo-Indian press and the Vernacular press. This act was also called

'Gagging Act'. Under this act, once the license to run a press got revoked, it could not be reapplied and this meant shut down of the Indian press.

Sir Ashley justified this unjust act by saying that he did not allude to personal attacks, for personal abuse, falsehoods, scurrility and exaggeration could be left to the courts, but the measure was necessary to deal with license, amounting to sedition. The distinction between English language newspapers and Indian language newspapers was justified because the English language newspapers were written by a 'class of writers' for a 'class of readers' whose education and interests would make them naturally intolerant to sedition (Natrajan, 1955).

The act, however, was not able to bear the strong agitation of the people. In 1880, some improvements were made in this act but finally it got repealed on December 7, 1881.

In December 1903, the colonial government sought to amend the Indian Officials Secret Act of 1889 with the object of placing civil matters on a level with naval and military matters. The Anglo-Indian press was at one with Indian Press in its opposition to this measure but the cleavage between the two sections of the Press became more marked than ever before during the Swadeshi movement of 1905 to 1908. Under the Newspapers (Incitement of Offence) Act of 1908, the colonial government stated that if any newspaper was found inciting the offences like crimes of murder or any act of violence, this act would put an end to the existence of that newspaper. The Government was also authorized to cancel the declaration of the printer or publisher of the newspaper. A similar provision existed in the Vernacular Press Act (IX of 1878) and in the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act of 1931.

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi launched his civil disobedience movement; the country was in state of disarray. The government had promulgated several ordinances to arm the authorities with powers to deal with what they considered intimidation and unlawful instigation. The colonial government gave full authority to the officials to take stringent actions against any individual or press involved in covering and disseminating information about the movement. They feared that the vernacular press would play the role of fuel to this fire and would instigate the public against the colonial regime. The Indian press came under severe attack by the British forces.

Even in 1931, while constitutional discussions and Round Table Conference were taking place in London, the government decided to deal with the situation in Bengal by introducing a new Press Bill to check the publication of matter exciting to or encouraging murder or violence. The Indian Press (Emergency Power) Act 1931 was the result of this which tried to keep a check on the growth of vernacular press in India.

The Indian Press (Emergency Power) Act of 1931 was aimed to better control the freedom of the press. The Indian Press Act revived the provision of the Indian press Act of 1910. It gave sweeping powers to the provincial government in suppressing the propaganda for the civil disobedience movement. It sought to punish the words,

signs or visible representations, which would incite or encourage the commission of any offence or murder or any cognizable offence. These cognizable offences included violence or directly or indirectly expressing approval or admiration of any such offence. According to the Act, any person, real or fictitious, who had committed or alleged or represented to have committed the offence, would be punished. In 1932 the Press Act of 1931 was amplified in the form of Criminal Amendment Act of 1932. Section 4 was made very comprehensive and expanded to include all possible activities calculated to undermine the government's authority.

Any person who had access to printing-press was required to make a declaration under section 4 of the Press (Registration) Act. A certain amount of security amount was also required to be submitted to the Magistrate. The initial amount set was Rs 3000/- which was to be deposited in respect of any printing-press for a period of three months from the date of declaration.

As a result, what could be observed was the fact that despite the attempts of the British regime to gag the vernacular press, the voice of anti-imperialist movements grew in leaps and bounds as anti-colonial national movement gained strength.

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