

# THE ROLE OF BENGALI NEWSPAPER IN COLONIAL TIME

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19th century Bengal was the most important period in Indian history. The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural, social, Intellectual, and artistic movement that took place in the Bengal region of colonial India. According to Sumit Sarkar, 'the pioneers and works of this period were revered and regarded with nostalgia throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, due to new focus on colonialist origins.'<sup>1</sup> The Bengal Renaissance was a movement characterized by socio political awakening in the arts, literature, music, philosophy, religion, science, and other fields of intellectual inquiry. This led to the advent of the newspaper which had far reaching effects.

History of Indian press account for the prestigious growth of Indian newspaper and significance in Indian history. Bengal, specially Calcutta was the cradle of journalism in India. The Indian newspaper started by an Irishman James Augustus Hickey. Hickey launched the '*Bengal Gadget*' in 1780, India's first newspaper, in English. James August Hickey is considered as the father of Indian Press. Hickey, himself stated 'the purpose of his newspaper that have no particular passion for printing of newspapers. I have no propensity: I was not bred to a slavish life of hard work. Yet I take a pleasure in enslaving my body in order to purchase freedom for my mind and soul.'<sup>2</sup> Before that, the British East India Companies rule did not encourage the establishment of newspaper in India, just to make sure that his paper was perceived as "independent", Hickey added a line to his must head-'a weekly political and commercial paper open to all parties but influenced by none.'<sup>3</sup> Hickey's paper was a bit tabloid and a bit satire paper. It's lacked the tone of overly serious news evident in other British paper of that time. He initially used the paper to take on personal adversaries by usually mocking them. Copying the British newspaper style it initially targeted only the British residents as readers. A campaign against the first Governor General of India however caused what can be pointed out as the first Censorship in India when the '*Bengal Gadget*' was banned from circulation through official channels. It was the incident that reportedly sharpened Hickey's perception of how free the press should be to be able to serve its purpose. He devoted lots of space to social issues and anti-war content, including the voice of the general public. After a period of fighting back, delivery his newspapers in neighbourhoods, even keeping the publishing going during him being arrested, the first newspaper of India was finally crashed by the previously targeted Governor General and the Supreme Court in 1782. Although rich in its time of existence were limited one can say it inspired others to launch newspapers, too.

<sup>1</sup> Sumit Sarkar, Writing Social History (OUP. P. 104)

<sup>2</sup> The Indian Press, Barns, p. 46

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 47

The year 1818 marked the beginning of Bengali (regional language) journalism. *Samachar Darpan* was the first newspaper in Bengali language. It was published by Serampore Mission press on May 23, 1818. Started by missionaries like Carey and Marshman, It began as a monthly, but soon converted into a weekly journal. It carried both Indian and foreign news. It became bilingual in 1829, carrying Bengali and English news in parallel columns. After surviving a number of crises, it closed down in 1852. *Digdarshan* was also published in 1818. In 1821 a remarkable Bengali Newspaper '*Sambad Koumudi*' was published under the patronage of Rammohan Roy. Raja Rammohan Roy (social reformer) was the founder of the national press in India. Though a few paper has been started by others before him, his *Sambad Koumudi* and *Meert-ul Akbar* (Persian 1822), were the first vernacular publication in India. As a reformist he used its publications to spread awareness of social evils like '*Sati*' and with a distinct nationalist and democratic progressive orientation. But it did not however survive for long. However Raja Rammohan Roy had a profound influence on the social reform agenda pursued by the progressive intellectuals and journalists across the country. He encouraged the publication of several journals and papers.

*Sambad Pravakar* was the first Bengali daily newspaper published in 1839, patronized by Iswar Chandra Gupta. It was followed by *Tattobodhini* published by Akshya Kumar Dutta in 1843. The other Bengali Journals during this time were *Samachar Chandrika*, *Vividhartha Sangrah*, *Bangadoot* (1851) and *Somprakash* (1851), *Masik Patrika* (1854). The first weekly within the territory of today's Bangladesh, Rangpur *Bartabaha*, was published in 1847 from Rangpur and the first weekly from Dhaka, *Dacca News*, was published in 1856. The long lasting *Dhaka Prakash* was first published in 1861 and *Dhaka Darpan* in 1863.

The early Bengali papers took up the cause of the oppressed workers in the indigo plantation, and of the peasants. Notable among them were the *Somprakash*, the *Grambartha Prakashika* and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (before it became an English weekly). They created problems for the government with their exposure of the exploitation of labour in plantations and on the fields, and violent denunciation of the European planters and the government. In the course of this campaign, a number of newspapers were started in villages and districts. Bengali journalism triggered and carried the message of renaissance. The Brahmo Samaj, a socio-religious sect erected reforms and used newspapers as its vehicle. Prarthana Samaj in Maharastra and Arya Samaj in Northern and Western India did the same later. In the end 19 century saw some remarkable newspapers coming out from Bengal. The *Sulava Samachar* of the Indian Reform Association was started in 1870 by Keshab Chandra Sen. It was a weekly, priced one piece per copy. It had a circulation of 3,500 copies and was the most popular weekly of the period. Another journal which was also popular was the *Halisahaar Patrika* edited by Babu Kisari Mohan Ganguli. The first newspaper to espouse the cause of the working class, *Bharat Sharmajibi*, was started as a weekly at about this time The first Bengali daily to adopt modern methods of production was the *Basumati* (1880) which was edited by Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya, Surendranath Banerjee published *Bengalee*. The editor of *Bengalee* faced contempt of court proceedings and imprisonment when it voiced public indignation in 1883 against a High Court Judge who ordered Hindu Idols to be produced in court as evidence. The paper which became a daily in 1900 was the first language paper to subscribe to

Reuter's foreign news service. An associate of the *Bengalee* was the *nayak* (1908), published by Panchcowri Bannerjee. Through the *Bande Mataram*, another important newspaper of this period Aurobindo Ghosh proclaimed his philosophy and the 'new path' which meant passive resistance as an instrument of political action. In fact Bengal papers were the earliest to demand Self-Government and attack the Moderate leaders of the nationalist movement with timidity and lack of courage to demand what was the birthright of Indians. The division of Bengal in 1905 had a profound impact on the Bengali press, which not only opposed it along with most of the nationalist press in other languages all over the country, but became severely critical of the British government at times going over the board. Three papers which came on the scene after the partition as champions of revolution were *Sandhya*, *Nagasakhti* and *Yugantar*. The *Yugantar* founded in 1906 by Barindra Kumar Ghosh, brother of Aurobindo Ghosh achieved great popularity. On March 13, 1922 came the *Anandabazar Patrika*, started by MrinalKanti Ghosh, Prafulla Kumar Sarkar and Suresh Chandra Majumdar. Together with its English counterpart, *Hindustan Standard* (launched on 1937), it played a glorious role in the freedom movement.

After Gandhi took over the leadership of the national movement *Bengalee* and *Nayak* which were the organs of the Moderates, lost ground rapidly in spite of official support because of the tremendous pressure exerted by C. R. Das who was the undisputed Congress leader in Bengal. In 1926 a weekly *Atmashakti* and in 1927 a daily *Banglar Katha* was published as associate publications of the English daily Forward. However, all three ceased publication in 1929. The three newspapers reappeared in different names : *Liberty*, *Bangabani*, and *Nabashakti* but could not survive for long. Another daily *Jugantar* was started in 1937 by the management of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. Two more dailies were published in 1939. The *Bharat*, founded by Makhan Lal Sen, and the *Krishak*, the organ of the Krishak Praja party. In 1941 A.K Fazlul Haque started the publication of the daily *Navajug*. In 1946 the official organ of the Communist party of India the *Swadhinata* was published. In the same year, *Swaraj* was published with Satyendra Nath Mazumdar as the editor.

To prevent the growth of development of the press in India the British government decided to pass certain acts and regulations. The intention behind this act was to stop this spread of specifically nationalist views and sentiments through this newspapers. The British government wanted to prohibit the Indians from coming together and launching a revolt against the government. So government passed some important acts and regulations like – Censorship of Press Act (1799), Licensing Regulations (1823), Press Act of (1835), Licensing Act (1857), Registration Act (1867), Vernacular Press Act (1878), Newspaper Act (1908), Indian Press Act (1910).

In spite of the legal obstacle the contribution of Bengali Newspaper under the British rule played important role. The main aim of these Newspaper was not make profit but to serve the public. The Press was a powerful factor in building and developing Indian nationalism and nationalist movement, social, cultural, political and economic. The national movement, on its political side, was possible because of the facility of political education and propaganda provided by the Press. It was a weapon, in the hands of the nationalist groups, to popularize among the people their respective political programmes, policies, and methods of struggle, and to form organizations with a broad popular basis. Without the Press, all India conferences of

nationalist organizations could not have been prepared and held and big political movements organized and directed. Since the Press was a powerful weapon of the nationalist struggles, the Indian nationalists staunchly fought for its freedom throughout the Indian nationalist movement. The Press alone made possible exchanged of views among different social groups of different parts of the country. The establishment and extension of the Press in India brought about a closer and intellectual contact between the Indian people. It also made possible the daily and extensive discussions of programmes of inter-provincial and national collaboration in sphere of social, political and cultural. National committees were appointed to implement the programmes adopted at these conferences throughout the country. This led to the building of an increasingly rich, complex, social and cultural, national existence. The Press also helped the growth of provincial literatures and cultures, which were provincial in form and national in content. The Press was an effective weapons in the hands of social reform groups to expose social evils such as caste fetters, child marriage, ban on remarriage of widows, social, legal and other inequalities from which women suffered and others. It also helped them to organize propaganda against such inhuman institutions as untouchability. It became a weapon in their hands to proclaim to the masses, principles, programmes, and methods of democratic reconstruction of the Indian society. Further, the Press also brought to the Indian people, knowledge of the happenings in the international world. It became a weapon to constrict solidarity ties between the progressive forces of different countries. Such was the role of the Press in the building up of an increasingly strong national sentiment and consciousness among the Indian people, in the development and consolidation of their growing nationalist movement, in the creation of national and provincial literatures and cultures, and in the forging of bonds of fraternity with other progressive peoples and classes in the outer worlds.

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