



The Mightier Pen: The Role Of Hindi Journalism In The Indian Independence Movement (1885-1905)

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Abstract:

This article explores how Hindi-language journalism shaped and spread Indian nationalist ideas between the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the partition of Bengal in 1905. Drawing on historical records, it argues that Hindi journalism was not just a channel for political ideas but also played an active role in building nationalist awareness, mobilising readers, and forming a Hindi-speaking identity that became key to the independence movement. By focusing on important journals, editors, and political events, the article shows how Hindi newspapers navigated colonial censorship, made elite politics understandable to everyday readers, and helped create a sense of national community. The article also situates Hindi journalism within debates over language, religion, community, and modernity. It concludes that 1885–1905 was a crucial time when Indian journalism became literary, political, and anti-colonial.

Keywords: Hindi journalism, Indian nationalism, vernacular press, anti-colonialism, print culture, Indian National Congress, Bal Mukund Gupt, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Bharatendu Harishchandra

1. Introduction

The story of India's independence movement is often told through its leaders, mass movements, and institutions. Yet the roots of nationalism also lie in readers' daily habits. Benedict Anderson described the nation as an "imagined community," and said that reading newspapers, even alone, helps build this shared sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983, p. 35). In India, this means we should look beyond the English-language press to the wide and active world of vernacular journalism. Hindi was especially important, as it was spoken by the largest group in the region and carried a strong literary and religious tradition. By the late 1800s, Hindi journalism had become innovative, politically bold, and culturally influential.

This article examines the years from 1885 to 1905, beginning with the founding of the Indian National Congress and ending with the Partition of Bengal. Historians see these years as key to the rise of organised Indian nationalism. During this time, Hindi journalism underwent significant changes. It grew from a few periodicals supported by princes and missionaries into a lively, politically active field with hundreds

of publications, many committed editors, and readers from both cities and the countryside. This change was a key part of the development of Indian nationalism.

The argument is structured in four stages. First, the article offers a structural overview of the Hindi press in the late nineteenth century, contextualising it within the material and institutional framework of colonial printing. Second, it explores the relationship between Hindi journalism and the founding of the Indian National Congress, highlighting how Hindi newspapers mediated this relationship. The article is organised into four parts. First, it gives an overview of the Hindi press in the late 1800s and explains its place in colonial printing. Second, it looks at how Hindi journalism related to the founding of the Indian National Congress and how newspapers explained Congress politics to Hindi readers. Third, it examines the main topics and style of important Hindi publications, especially their views on language, colonial rule, and national identity. Finally, it discusses how the press responded to the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and how Hindi journalism turned it into a key moment in national awareness. The article ends by considering why it is important to see Hindi journalism as a main part of anti-colonial politics—owed, from the late eighteenth century onward, by the rapid expansion of colonial printing infrastructure, including government presses, missionary establishments, and, gradually, a commercial printing industry (Kesavan, 1985, p. 12). The establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800 gave a decisive impetus to the standardisation and publication of Hindi texts, producing grammars, dictionaries, and prose works that helped to define a literary Hindi distinct from Persian-inflected Urdu on the one hand and the Braj Bhasha of classical poetry on the other (Dalmia, 1997, p. 58).

The first Hindi newspaper, *Udant Martand* (The Rising Sun), was published in Calcutta in 1826 by Jugal Kishore Shukla, marking the formal inauguration of Hindi periodical journalism (Sharma, 1968, p. 44). Its life was short — it folded within two years for want of adequate patronage and subscribers — but it established a template that subsequent Hindi journalism would follow: a combination of news, commentary, literary content, and moral instruction aimed at an educated Hindi-reading public. Over the following decades, the number of Hindi periodicals grew steadily, though the pace of growth accelerated dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1885, approximately 100 Hindi periodicals were published across northern India, a figure that would rise to over 500 by the turn of the century (Gupta, 1966, p. 120).

This unprecedented surge in the number of Hindi and other vernacular publications was driven by several factors. The spread of colonial education created a literate reading public that, while partly anglicised in its tastes and aspirations, retained deep attachments to Hindi as a language of everyday life and cultural expression (Bayly 1975, p.149). The development of railways and the postal system dramatically reduced the cost and time of distributing printed materials across long distances, enabling papers published in Calcutta, Allahabad, Lucknow, and Varanasi to reach readers in smaller towns and even rural areas (Natarajan, 1962, p. 87). The growth of a commercial advertising market, initially modest but increasingly significant, provided Hindi publications with a revenue stream that reduced their dependence on direct patronage. (McGregor 1974, p.84)

Yet the material conditions of Hindi journalism also reflected the structural inequalities of colonial society. Hindi newspapers operated with minimal capital, perpetually underfunded and understaffed relative to their English-language counterparts (McGregor 1974, p.87). Many titles lasted only a few issues before folding; editors frequently doubled as printers, compositors, and distributors. The wages of journalism were meagre, and those who chose it as a vocation did so largely out of ideological commitment rather than financial calculation (Mishra, 1973, p. 34). This precariousness was not merely a practical inconvenience; it shaped Hindi journalism in fundamental ways, fostering an ethos of self-sacrifice and public service that would become central to its self-understanding as the voice of the nation.

A combination of surveillance, selective repression, and grudging tolerance defined the colonial state's relationship with the Hindi press. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878, enacted by Lord Lytton's government in the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, imposed stringent restrictions on vernacular newspapers, requiring proprietors to provide securities against the publication of seditious material and empowering magistrates to seize offending publications (Barrier, 1974, p. 23). Although the Act was repealed by Ripon's government in 1882, its brief existence had a lasting chilling effect on vernacular journalism, and the colonial administration continued to closely monitor Hindi newspapers, prosecuting editors for sedition when political circumstances seemed to demand it (Pinney, 2004, p. 112). This atmosphere of surveillance, paradoxically, reinforced the political commitment of Hindi journalists;

those who persisted in critical journalism despite the threat of prosecution did so with a consciousness of their role that elevated the practice of newspaper editing to something approaching a form of resistance.

The social profile of Hindi journalists in this period was distinctive. Most were Brahmin or upper-caste men, educated in both Sanskrit and English, who had entered journalism from careers in law, teaching, or government service. Many were deeply involved in the Hindu reform movements of the period — the Arya Samaj, the Sanatana Dharma Sabha, or local literary associations — and brought to their journalism a combination of religious conviction, cultural pride, and political ambition (Jones, 1976, p. 145). This social background shaped the content and rhetoric of Hindi journalism in important ways. For example, the press tended to be socially conservative on questions of caste and gender while being politically radical on questions of colonial rule. This combination reflected the broader contradictions of the nationalist movement.

2. Bharatendu Harishchandra and the Foundational Moment of Hindi Journalism

Any account of Hindi journalism in the nationalist period must begin with Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885), the poet, playwright, and editor whose life and work defined what has been called the "Bharatendu era" of Hindi literature and journalism (Dalmia, 1997, p. 193). Harishchandra was not merely a journalist; he was the presiding genius of a cultural moment in which literature, journalism, and politics were inseparable. His founding of the journal *Kavi Vachan Sudha* in 1868 and subsequently *Harishchandra Magazine* (later *Harishchandra Chandrika*) in 1873 represented a new conception of the Hindi periodical as a vehicle for cultural regeneration and political commentary simultaneously (Sharma, 1968, p. 76).

A distinctive political vision animated Harishchandra's journalism. He was deeply critical of British rule, though his critique was often expressed in indirect or allegorical form, constrained by colonial censorship and by his position as a member of the Varanasi mercantile elite (McGregor 1974, p.76). His famous poem "Bharat Durdasha" (The Wretched Condition of India), first published in a dramatic form, exemplified his method: the condition of the nation was rendered as the suffering of a figure, "Bharat" (India), whose degradation was attributed both to the exploitative character of British rule and to the internal failings of Indian society — its superstitions, its social divisions, its intellectual torpor (Orsini, 2002, p. 34). This dual diagnosis — colonialism as external oppression, social reform as internal necessity — became a structuring framework for Hindi journalism throughout the period under examination.

Harishchandra's influence extended well beyond his own publications. He was the centre of a literary and journalistic circle in Varanasi that included dozens of writers and editors who would go on to establish their own periodicals and carry forward the tradition of politically engaged Hindi journalism into the next century. His insistence that the Hindi writer and journalist bore a special responsibility to educate and uplift the reading public — to transform passive subjects into active citizens — was transmitted to a generation of younger journalists who would come to prominence in the 1880s and 1890s (Misra, 1963, p. 89). His death in 1885, at the remarkably young age of thirty-four, deprived Hindi journalism of its most charismatic figure at precisely the moment when the Indian National Congress was being established; but the tradition he had inaugurated proved resilient enough to sustain and extend itself through the political storms of the following two decades.

3. Hindi Journalism and the Indian National Congress, 1885–1895

The founding of the Indian National Congress in Bombay in December 1885 created new imperatives and new opportunities for Hindi journalism. The Congress, as a body dominated by English-educated professionals and oriented toward the colonial government's constitutional procedures, operated primarily in English; its sessions, resolutions, and proceedings were reported in English-language papers and were accessible only to the small minority of Indians with a command of that language. For the vast majority of the Hindi-speaking population, the Congress was a distant, somewhat abstract entity whose significance needed to be explained, contextualised, and translated — literally and figuratively — by vernacular journalists (Chandra, 1989, p. 78).

This translation function was performed with considerable sophistication by a range of Hindi publications in the late 1880s and 1890s. Chief among these was *Hindustan*, a daily newspaper founded in Calcutta in 1884 by the publisher and patriot Shitalaprasad Trivedi and subsequently relocated to Allahabad,

where it became one of the most influential Hindi papers of the period (Gupta, 1966, p. 145). *Hindustan* was unusual among Hindi papers of its time in maintaining a clear distinction between news and opinion, employing a correspondents' network that covered Congress sessions and nationalist activities across northern India, and adopting a relatively measured tone that made it acceptable to a wide range of readers, including government officials and reformers who more strident publications might have repelled (Misra 2016, p.10).

Equally important was *Bharat Mitra* (Friend of India), founded in Calcutta in 1878 and edited for much of its long life by Ambika Prasad Vajpeyi. *Bharat Mitra* was arguably the most politically committed Hindi newspaper of the Congress era, consistently advocating for the Congress's demands — greater Indian participation in the Indian Civil Service, legislative councils with elected Indian majorities, reduction of the military budget, and protection of Indian industries from foreign competition — in terms that translated the constitutional language of Congress resolutions into the moral vocabulary of Hindi public culture (Orsini, 2002, p. 112). The paper covered Congress sessions in detail and published Hindi translations of speeches by leading Congress figures. It mobilised a network of readers and correspondents whose letters and reports gave the paper a genuinely national reach.

The relationship between Hindi journalism and the Congress, however, was not one of simple advocacy. Many Hindi journalists were ambivalent about the Congress, for reasons that reflected both political calculation and deeper cultural anxieties. The Congress's association with the English-educated professional classes, its use of English as the medium of deliberation, and its relative neglect of specifically Hindi cultural concerns — including the contentious question of whether Hindi written in the Devanagari script or Urdu written in the Perso-Arabic script should be recognised as the official language of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh — all generated tensions between Hindi journalism and the nationalist organisation (King, 1994, p. 56).

The Hindi-Urdu language controversy, which had been simmering since the 1860s and came to a head in 1900 when the colonial government of the North-Western Provinces issued a directive treating Hindi and Urdu as co-equal official languages, was for Hindi journalists not merely a linguistic dispute but a fundamental question of political identity and cultural rights. Hindi newspapers across the political spectrum united in demanding the recognition of Hindi as the sole official language of the region, framing this demand in terms of democratic majoritarianism (Hindi speakers were more numerous), cultural heritage (Devanagari was the script of the ancient Indian civilisation), and nationalist logic (a unified national language was necessary for the creation of a unified national consciousness) (Lelyveld, 1993, p. 201). The Congress, anxious to maintain Hindu-Muslim unity, was reluctant to take strong positions on the language question; its hesitancy was a source of persistent frustration for Hindi journalists, some of whom concluded that cosmopolitan, English-educated elites dominated the Congress and failed to represent the interests of the Hindi-speaking masses.

This frustration found institutional expression in the founding of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Hindi Literary Conference) and various regional language associations that sought to promote Hindi education and standardisation independently of the Congress framework. Several Hindi journalists were active in these organisations, and their newspapers served as platforms for what might be called a cultural nationalism that ran parallel to, and sometimes in tension with, the political nationalism of the Congress (Dalmia, 1997, p. 267). This dual orientation — political engagement with Congress nationalism combined with a deeper investment in Hindi cultural identity — gave Hindi journalism of this period its characteristic complexity and prevented it from being absorbed into the Congress's political programme.

4. Key Figures and Publications in Hindi Political Journalism

The two decades between 1885 and 1905 produced a remarkable cohort of Hindi journalists whose work shaped the political culture of northern India in lasting ways. A close examination of their biographies, their publications, and their political positions illuminates the texture of Hindi nationalism in this formative period.

4.1 Madan Mohan Malaviya and *Hindustan*

Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) is best known to posterity as the founder of Banaras Hindu University and as a Congress leader of the moderate faction; his career as a Hindi journalist, though less celebrated, was central to his political formation and public influence. Between 1887 and 1889, Malaviya served as editor of *Hindustan* in Allahabad, transforming the paper from a relatively cautious publication into a more assertive advocate for Indian rights. His editorials on the famine conditions in the North-Western Provinces, on the inequities of the salt tax, and on the exclusion of Indians from the higher ranks of the civil service brought him to the attention of both the nationalist movement and the colonial administration (Bhatt, 1993, p. 112).

Malaviya's journalism was distinctive for its combination of meticulous factual documentation and passionate moral indictment. He understood that the credibility of the Hindi press depended on its ability to provide accurate information, and he invested heavily in developing *Hindustan's* network of provincial correspondents (Chaturvedi 1972, p.22). At the same time, he was unambiguous about the paper's political commitments: its purpose was not merely to report the condition of the country but to arouse its readers to the recognition that this condition was the product of a system of government that needed to be fundamentally reformed. His editorials were widely reprinted in other Hindi papers and helped to establish a style of engaged, documented journalism that influenced a generation of younger journalists (Malaviya, 1907, p. 45).

Malaviya's departure from *Hindustan* in 1889 to pursue his legal career did not end his involvement with Hindi journalism; he remained a contributor to various publications throughout his political life. His experience as a journalist shaped his understanding of public communication in ways that distinguished him from many Congress leaders who operated primarily through the English-language press. He was acutely aware of the gap between the Congress's English-language deliberations and the political consciousness of the Hindi-speaking masses, and his subsequent political career was in part an attempt to bridge this gap through a combination of popular religious mobilisation and vernacular political communication (Sundaram, 1995, p. 78).

4.2 Bal Mukund Gupt and *Bharat Mitra*

If Malaviya represented the moderate wing of Hindi journalism — reformist, carefully documented, and attentive to constitutional norms — Bal Mukund Gupt (1865–1907) embodied a more acerbic and combative tradition. As editor of *Bharat Mitra* for much of the 1890s and early 1900s, Gupt established himself as the most feared satirist in Hindi journalism, a writer whose *Shivashambhu ke Chitthi* (Letters of Shivashambhu) deployed the persona of a rustic Hindi speaker to deliver devastating critiques of colonial policy and of the pretensions of English-educated Indians who had lost touch with their vernacular roots (Orsini, 2002, p. 167).

The *Shivashambhu* letters are a masterpiece of vernacular political satire. Written in a deliberately colloquial, earthy Hindi, they addressed the Viceroy and other colonial officials as if they were familiar figures in a village community, subjecting their policies to a withering common-sense analysis that exposed the gap between imperial rhetoric and colonial reality. When Lord Curzon imposed restrictions on the press in 1897, Gupt responded with a letter from Shivashambhu that compared the Viceroy to a Mughal emperor whose authority rested entirely on force and whose claim to be governing for the benefit of India was contradicted by every aspect of his actual governance (Gupt, 1904, p. 23). The letter circulated widely in manuscript and in other publications, a testament to its political resonance.

Gupt's satire employed a specific rhetorical strategy: the deployment of the vernacular subject — the ordinary Hindi-speaking man, unimpressed by colonial dignity and unimpressed by imperial authority — as the standard against which colonial claims were measured and found wanting. This was not merely a literary device; it was a political argument about the relationship between cultural authenticity and political legitimacy. By positioning the vernacular Hindi speaker as a figure of moral clarity and common sense, Gupt implicitly challenged the colonial hierarchy that placed the English-educated Indian above the vernacular-educated one, and the Indian above the European, in the scale of civilisational development. His journalism thus performed a double critique: of colonial rule from without and of cultural colonialism from within (Orsini, 2002, p. 175).

4.3 Pratap Narayan Mishra and the Varanasi Circle

Another central figure in this period is Pratap Narayan Mishra (1856–1894), a prolific essayist, poet, and journalist associated with Varanasi's rich literary culture who edited the periodical *Brahman* from 1883 until his early death. Mishra was a student of Bharatendu Harishchandra and embodied the master's synthesis of literary engagement and political commentary, though his political positions were often more forthright than Harishchandra's allegorical indirections (Dalmia, 1997, p. 208). His essays on the condition of India under British rule, on the importance of Hindi as a national language, and on the moral responsibility of the educated classes to their less fortunate fellow citizens were models of the Hindi essay form and were widely read and anthologised in his own lifetime and after.

Mishra's *Brahman* was notable for its sustained attention to the condition of the rural population — peasants crushed by land revenue demands, artisans displaced by imported British manufactures, labourers recruited under conditions of near-slavery for the tea plantations of Assam. This social journalism, which prefigured the more systematic economic nationalism of later decades, was grounded in a genuine moral outrage at the material consequences of colonial rule, a stance that distinguished Mishra's work from the more purely cultural and literary orientation of some of his contemporaries (Mishra, 1963, p. 145). His death at the age of thirty-eight, like Harishchandra's decade before, cut short a career of remarkable promise and deprived Hindi journalism of one of its most socially engaged voices.

4.4 *Saraswati* and the Formation of a Hindi Literary Public

The founding of the monthly magazine *Saraswati* in January 1900 by the Allahabad publisher Chintamani Ghosh marked a new phase in the development of Hindi literary journalism. Under the editorship of Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who assumed charge of the magazine in 1903 and remained its editor until 1920, *Saraswati* became the most influential Hindi literary periodical of the early twentieth century and a central site for the formation of what Francesca Orsini has called the "Hindi public sphere" (Orsini, 2002, p. 5). Though *Saraswati* was primarily a literary rather than a political magazine, its cultural politics — its advocacy for a standardised, accessible Hindi, its promotion of women's education, its engagement with the social reform debates of the period — made it an important, if indirect, contributor to the nationalist project.

Dwivedi's editorship was distinguished by his commitment to literary quality and linguistic standardisation. He introduced rigorous standards of grammar and usage. His regular corrections of contributors' prose in the pages of the magazine were both a linguistic and a cultural intervention, asserting that a properly educated Hindi writer should command not the florid, Sanskritised register of classical literature nor the Persianised diction of Urdu, but a clear, vigorous, vernacular Hindi accessible to educated readers across the region (Dwivedi, 1909, p. 12). This linguistic project was inseparable from a political one: the creation of a standardised Hindi was simultaneously the creation of the linguistic community — the "Hindi nation" — that would constitute the social base for nationalist politics (King, 1994, p. 89).

5. Themes and Rhetorics of Hindi Nationalist Journalism

An examination of the major Hindi publications of this period reveals a set of recurring themes and rhetorical strategies that constituted the political discourse of Hindi nationalism. These themes were not identical to those of the English-language nationalist press, nor were they simply translations of it; they reflected the specific concerns, cultural resources, and political circumstances of the Hindi-speaking world.

5.1 Economic Nationalism and the Drain Theory

Among the most consistent themes of Hindi journalism in this period was the critique of British economic policy as systematically impoverishing India. The "drain theory" — the argument that British rule was facilitating the transfer of wealth from India to Britain through a combination of taxation, unfavourable trade policies, and the home charges paid to the colonial administration — had been developed by Congress economists like Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt in their English-language writings (Chandra, 1966, p. 34). Hindi journalists translated and popularised this economic critique for vernacular audiences, connecting the abstract language of political economy to the lived experience of famine, indebtedness, and agrarian distress that their readers encountered daily.

Bharat Mitra, *Hindustan*, and the Lucknow-based *Avadh Akhbar* were particularly active in covering the famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1900, which killed millions of people in central and northern India. Their coverage challenged the colonial government's claim that famines were natural disasters beyond its control, arguing instead that official grain export policies, the burden of land revenue, and the destruction of local industries by British competition had created a structural vulnerability to food crises that transformed seasonal shortfalls into catastrophes (Davis, 2001, p. 145). This journalism was not merely descriptive; it was accusatory, situating famine deaths within a political framework that held the colonial government directly responsible. The language of moral indictment — the insistence that thousands of deaths were not tragedies but crimes — gave these famine reports a political charge that more measured analyses could not achieve (Gupta, 1966, p. 178).

5.2 The Language Question as a Political Question

As noted above, the Hindi-Urdu controversy was a central preoccupation of Hindi journalism throughout this period. The colonial government's treatment of Hindi and Urdu as interchangeable alternatives in the official languages of the North-Western Provinces had long been a source of grievance for Hindi advocates, who argued that this policy disadvantaged the Hindi-speaking majority by requiring them to learn a script — the Perso-Arabic — associated with the Muslim minority. When the government issued its circular of April 1900 permitting the use of both scripts in official correspondence, it was celebrated by Urdu advocates and condemned by Hindi journalists as a betrayal of the Hindi-speaking masses (King, 1994, p. 157).

The response of the Hindi press to the 1900 language decision was swift and sustained. Papers across the region published angry editorials, mobilised readers to sign petitions, and organised public meetings demanding the recognition of Hindi as the sole official script. The language question was framed not merely as a matter of administrative convenience but as a fundamental question of cultural identity and political justice. Hindi was presented as the language of the Hindu majority, of the ancient Indian civilisation, of the vernacular masses who had been systematically marginalised by a colonial system that privileged English over all Indian languages and Urdu over Hindi within the official sphere (Lelyveld, 1993, p. 217).

This framing had important consequences for Hindu-Muslim relations and for the character of Hindi nationalism. By mobilising a specifically Hindu cultural identity in defence of the Hindi language, Hindi journalists contributed to the communalisation of the language question — the increasingly prevalent equation of Hindi with Hindu and of Urdu with Muslim (Brass, 1974, p. 119). This was not an inevitable development; some Hindi journalists were careful to distinguish cultural advocacy from communal antagonism, and the pages of *Saraswati* and other literary magazines contained contributions from Muslim writers who wrote in Hindi without apparent contradiction. But the dominant tendency in politically engaged Hindi journalism in this period was to define Hindi as a Hindu cultural possession, with lasting consequences for the relationship between language politics and communal identity in northern India.

5.3 Swadeshi and the Critique of Colonial Commerce

The swadeshi (own country) movement — the boycott of British-manufactured goods in favour of Indian-produced alternatives — had a longer prehistory than the formal swadeshi campaigns associated with the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Hindi journalism played an important role in this pre-history, consistently advocating for Indian economic self-sufficiency and criticising the consumption of foreign goods as both economically harmful and morally compromised (Sarkar, 1973, p. 45). Papers like *Bharat Mitra* carried regular features on Indian industries and manufactures, celebrated the establishment of new Indian-owned factories and workshops, and urged readers to support Indian enterprise in their purchasing decisions.

This economic nationalism was grounded in a moral vocabulary that distinguished it from mere protectionism. The consumption of foreign goods was not merely economically damaging; it was a form of cultural submission, an acknowledgement of the superiority of foreign production that reflected and reinforced the coloniser's psychological subjection. Conversely, the choice to buy Indian goods was a small but symbolically significant act of resistance, an assertion of cultural self-respect and national loyalty that prefigured the more systematic swadeshi campaigns of the post-1905 period (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 87). Hindi newspapers provided the conceptual framework within which these everyday

economic choices could be understood as political acts — a crucial contribution to the development of a mass nationalist consciousness.

5.4 The Representation of the Colonial Subject

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Hindi journalism to the independence movement was its ongoing work of constructing and disseminating images of the ideal Indian citizen. This was a complex and contested project pursued differently across publications and political tendencies, yet certain recurring figures and tropes can be identified. The figure of the selfless patriot — the educated Indian who sacrificed personal comfort and professional advancement in the service of the nation — was ubiquitous in Hindi journalism of this period, celebrated in biographical sketches, memorial essays, and editorial commentaries (Dalmia, 1997, p. 298). This figure served multiple functions: it provided a model for emulation, legitimised journalism as a form of national service. It constructed a narrative of nationalist heroism that could inspire readers without running afoul of colonial censorship restrictions that targeted more explicitly seditious content.

Equally important was the representation of the colonial subject's suffering. Hindi journalism was distinguished from English-language nationalist journalism by its greater willingness to represent the physical and material dimensions of colonial oppression: the bodies of famine victims, the degradation of indentured labourers, the humiliations inflicted on Indians by European officials and settlers (Pinney, 2004, p. 134). This journalism of the body — which insisted on the visibility of suffering that colonial discourse sought to render invisible or to naturalise — performed an important political function, transforming diffuse social distress into a legible narrative of injustice that demanded a political response.

6. The Press Response to the Partition of Bengal, 1905

The announcement by Lord Curzon in July 1905 of the partition of Bengal into two administrative units — a western province centred on Calcutta, and an eastern province centred on Dhaka — provoked the most intense and sustained response from the Indian press that the nationalist movement had yet witnessed. The Bengali-language press was, predictably, at the forefront of this response. Still, the Hindi press's reaction to the partition was also vigorous and revealing, illuminating how Hindi journalists understood their relationship to a specifically Bengali nationalist crisis.

For Hindi journalists, the Partition of Bengal was not merely a Bengali concern. It was an act of colonial divide-and-rule that threatened the principle of Indian unity and demonstrated, with brutal clarity, the true character of British power. The partition was understood as a deliberate attempt to divide the Hindu and Muslim populations of Bengal along communal lines — a partly accurate reading, since Curzon had explicitly noted that the new eastern province would have a Muslim majority — and this reading connected it to the language politics that Hindi journalists had been contesting for decades (Sarkar, 1973, p. 116). The colonial strategy of fostering communal divisions was not new, but the partition made it visible on an unprecedented scale, and Hindi journalists were quick to draw the lesson.

The Swadeshi movement that arose in Bengal in the wake of the partition announcement found an enthusiastic echo in the Hindi-speaking world, mediated and amplified by the Hindi press. Papers like *Bharat Mitra* and *Hindustan* covered the Bengali swadeshi agitation in detail, reported on public meetings and demonstrations, and urged their readers to join the boycott of British goods in solidarity with their Bengali compatriots (Orsini, 2002, p. 215). This coverage was significant not only for the political solidarity it expressed but also for the way it framed the Swadeshi movement as a national rather than a regional agitation, constructing the imagined community of the Indian nation around a shared experience of colonial injustice and a shared commitment to resistance.

Several Hindi newspapers went beyond reporting to active organisation in this period. *Bharat Mitra* published model forms for swadeshi pledges that readers could sign and return, effectively transforming itself into a platform for political mobilisation. Other papers organised or co-organised public meetings, circulated petitions, and provided a communications infrastructure for the nascent nationalist movement that the colonial government found it increasingly difficult to suppress without resorting to the kind of direct repression that itself generated political controversy (Barrier, 1974, p. 145). The Hindi press's role in the anti-partition agitation thus foreshadowed the more explicit political mobilisation that would characterise Hindi journalism in the Tilak era that followed.

The partition crisis also accelerated the radicalisation of Hindi journalism. The moderate, constitutionalist approach of the Congress mainstream — petitions, resolutions, deputations — appeared inadequate to

many Hindi journalists confronted with the reality of Curzon's imperious disregard for Indian opinion. The influence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose Marathi newspapers *Kesari* and *Mahratta* had been preaching a more assertive, culturally grounded nationalism since the 1880s, became increasingly visible in Hindi journalism after 1905 (Wolpert, 1962, p. 167). The vocabulary of swaraj (self-rule), boycott, and national education that Tilak's journalism had developed found ready echoes in Hindi papers that had been making similar arguments in their own vernacular idiom for decades.

7. Hindi Journalism and the Construction of a National Language

No account of Hindi journalism's role in the independence movement would be complete without attention to the specifically linguistic dimensions of its political project. The question of what Hindi was — what grammatical norms it should follow, what script it should employ, what lexical resources it should draw on, what social classes and regional communities it should address — was not a technical linguistic matter but a deeply political one, with implications for the definition of the nation itself (Cohn, 1987, p. 45).

The journalism of this period actively participated in the standardisation of Hindi, both through the practical exercise of editorial choices about language use and through explicit debates about linguistic norms conducted in the pages of major periodicals. Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi's editorial project at *Saraswati* has already been noted; his systematic promotion of a grammatically regularised, Sanskritic but accessible Hindi became one of the most influential contributions to the formation of modern standard Hindi (Orsini, 2002, p. 247). The political implications of this linguistic project were significant: a standardised Hindi, accessible to educated readers across the vast Hindi-speaking region from Rajasthan to Bihar, was simultaneously the literary infrastructure of a regional identity and the potential medium of a truly national public sphere.

At the same time, the insistence on Sanskritic rather than Persianised Hindi — on Devanagari rather than Perso-Arabic script — carried communal implications that many Hindi journalists were reluctant to acknowledge. The Hindi that Dwivedi and others promoted was, in important respects, a Hindu Hindi: its vocabulary drew on Sanskrit rather than Arabic or Persian sources, its script was associated with Hindu religious and literary tradition, and its cultural references were predominantly drawn from the Hindu textual tradition (King, 1994, p. 178). This was not a neutral choice; it reflected and reinforced a particular understanding of the relationship between linguistic community and religious identity, with lasting consequences for the politics of language in independent India.

8. Historiographical Reflections: Hindi Journalism and the Writing of Nationalist History

The relative neglect of Hindi journalism in mainstream historiographies of Indian nationalism reflects a broader pattern in which English-language sources and English-educated actors have been privileged at the expense of the vernacular world. The nationalism that historians have most extensively studied is the nationalism of the Congress sessions, the constitutional petitions, and the English-language editorial pages; the nationalism of the Hindi newspapers, the vernacular public meetings, and the popular pamphlet literature has received comparatively less attention (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 5).

This neglect has real consequences for our understanding of the independence movement. If we attend only to the English-language nationalism of the educated elite, we miss how nationalist ideas were translated, transformed, and sometimes radically reinterpreted as they moved into vernacular public spheres. We miss how the language question — the insistence on Hindi's rights against both English and Urdu — shaped the boundaries of the imagined national community and contributed to the communalisation of nationalist politics. We miss the economic journalism that connected abstract drain theory to the lived experience of famine and dispossession. And we miss the literary and cultural work of journals like *Saraswati* that constructed the vernacular public sphere within which nationalism could take root and flourish (Orsini, 2002, p. 310).

The Subaltern Studies historians of the 1980s and 1990s attempted to recover the agency of subordinate groups in the nationalist movement. Still, their primary focus on peasant and tribal resistance left the vernacular middle classes — the urban traders, lawyers, teachers, and journalists who constituted the social base of Hindi nationalism — somewhat underexamined (Guha, 1982, p. 12). More recently, scholars like Francesca Orsini, Vasudha Dalmia, and Ulrike Stark have begun the systematic recovery of Hindi print culture as a site of political and cultural formation, drawing on archives of Hindi periodicals that remain poorly catalogued and largely inaccessible to researchers outside India (Stark, 2007, p. 23).

This work is of great importance, not only for the history of Indian nationalism but for the comparative history of vernacular print cultures and their relationship to nationalist politics more broadly.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that Hindi journalism in the period 1885–1905 was not merely a secondary or derivative phenomenon in the history of Indian nationalism but a constitutive element of it — an active force in the construction of the imagined community of the nation, the articulation of anti-colonial political consciousness, and the mobilisation of the Hindi-speaking public in the service of nationalist goals. Through the examination of key publications, editors, and political episodes, it has traced how Hindi journalism navigated the constraints of colonial censorship, translated the constitutional politics of the Congress into accessible vernacular discourse, engaged with the pressing social and economic questions of the day, and contributed to the formation of a standardised Hindi linguistic community that would become central to Indian national identity.

The Hindi press's engagement with the Partition of Bengal in 1905 represents, in retrospect, a turning point: the moment at which the accumulated political experience and cultural authority of two decades of Hindi journalism were mobilised in response to a colonial act of such flagrant injustice that moderate constitutionalism was no longer an adequate response. The swadeshi movement that followed, and the more assertive nationalism of the Tilak era that succeeded it, were built on foundations that Hindi journalism had spent twenty years constructing.

If the pen is mightier than the sword, then the Hindi pen of this period was doing work that extended far beyond the literary. It was hammering out the conceptual tools with which a colonised people would understand, articulate, and ultimately resist their condition. It was constructing the readerly community within which individual grievances could be recognised as collective injustices. And it was cultivating, through the daily practice of critical journalism, a generation of writers, editors, and readers whose engagement with the public life of their country would prove, in the decades to come, to be one of the most powerful forces for social and political transformation that colonial India had ever seen. In recovering this history, we do not merely add a footnote to the story of Indian nationalism; we substantially revise our understanding of how a nation comes to know itself.

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