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The Influence of Vernacular Newspapers on the Mobilization of the Masses during India's Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911)

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Abstract

This paper mainly tries to explain how vernacular newspapers played a big and active role during the Swadeshi Movement in India from 1905 to 1911. As we all know, in our country newspapers were not simply writing news at that time, but they were guiding people, spreading nationalist ideas, and encouraging protest. The movement started after the Partition of Bengal, and this moment became a turning point where the press turned small economic issues into a strong and emotional political message. In this study, I am looking at different nationalist newspapers, from moderate ones like Sanjibani to more intense ones like Jugantar, to see how they used many writing styles to create unity and support Swadeshi (self-reliance), Boycott of foreign items, and Swaraj (self-rule). From my understanding, the press had both success and failure. It strongly influenced urban students, youth, and women, which is commonly seen in Indian people from towns and cities. But it could not reach the peasantry much because most newspapers were run by the bhadralok (educated middle class) who had their own class and communal thinking. The British government also got very scared of the growing power of these newspapers, so they passed strict laws like the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908 to stop them. In the end, I feel the "pen" became a powerful weapon, even if it mainly helped certain classes only. Still, the Swadeshi press created an important base for mass mobilization and political communication, which later shaped the long journey of India's freedom struggle.

Keywords; *Swadeshi, Bengal, Nationalism, Foreign Goods, Boycott, Vernacular Press, Mass Mobilization, Colonial India.*

Introduction

The beginning of the 20th century in British India was a time full of hidden anger, because for many years the colonial government had been taking away the country's wealth. As we all know, in our country many nationalist thinkers like Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chunder Dutt, and Dinshaw Wacha had already explained the "drain of wealth" idea, where they showed how heavy taxes, loss

of resources, and sending Indian money to England made India poor. They said India, which was once rich, was now only used to give raw materials and buy British goods. But for a long time, these economic ideas stayed only with educated people and did not reach common citizens. Everything changed in 1905 when Lord Curzon decided to divide Bengal. The British said it was for easier administration because the population was too big, but most Indians believed it was a political trick of "divide and rule." The partition divided Bengal on religious lines, with Hindu-majority West Bengal and Muslim-majority East Bengal and Assam, which people saw as an attack on Bengali culture and unity. More importantly, they felt the British wanted to break Bengal because it was the center of nationalism and resistance. This partition became the main spark for the Swadeshi Movement, which officially started on August 7, 1905, in Calcutta. This movement was the first major mass protest in the freedom struggle, built on two main ideas: Swadeshi (use Indian goods) and Boycott (reject British goods). In this highly emotional situation, the Indian press, especially the vernacular newspapers, started to speak very strongly and became a powerful voice of the people. This paper mainly argues that during the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911), the vernacular newspapers were not just simple news sources, but actually became a very strong weapon in political struggle. As we all know, in our country the press is very powerful, and in that time, it used focused language, strong ideas, and smart spreading of information to build the nationalist story. These newspapers helped people understand the goals of the movement, brought together many different groups (even though it was still limited to some social classes), and even showed the exact methods of protest. Because of this, the colonial government felt directly challenged and responded with strict laws. The press became the place where old economic complaints were mixed with the fresh emotional pain of the Bengal Partition. By changing difficult economic theories into a simple story of cultural and national attack, the newspapers made common people feel the urgency, which explains why the movement spread so fast. In this study, I will first explain how the vernacular press created a strong nationalist message and shaped the main ideas of the movement. Then I will compare moderate and extremist newspapers to show different writing strategies. After that, I will discuss how the press influenced various social groups, showing both its achievements and its clear limits.

Objectives of the Study

- To trace the historical trajectory of folk influences from early talkies to the contemporary era.
- To analyze the technical and narrative methods used to integrate folk music and dance.
- To investigate the impact of "Pan-Indian" films on the global visibility of local folk myths (e.g., the *Bhoota Kola* in *Kantara*).
- To evaluate the socio-cultural implications of reimagining folk "others" for an urban audience.

Literature Review

The Swadeshi Movement has been discussed a lot by many historians, and they have studied its political, economic, and social sides in great detail. As we all know, in our country this movement is very important in history, and one of the most famous books on it is Sumit Sarkar's The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908. His work is very detailed because he used many types of sources like government reports, private letters, and also vernacular newspapers. Sarkar explained how the movement had both peaceful constitutional methods and also violent revolutionary actions. One main point in his study, which this paper also agrees with, is that the movement had big limitations because its leaders mostly came from the bhadralok (educated middle-class) who

were land receiving people. He said these leaders were "hostile or indifferent" to the problems of peasants and tenants, which is why they failed to mobilize villagers in large numbers. This paper's focus on the failure to reach the peasantry is also guided by the ideas of the Subaltern Studies group, especially Ranajit Guha. In his work Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Guha shifted attention from elite leaders to the independent thinking and resistance of peasants. Even though his study is from a slightly different time, his theory helps us understand why any nationalist movement that ignores agrarian issues cannot become truly mass-based. Other historians like Mridula Mukherjee and Walter Hauser, who studied rural history in later periods, also show that if peasant problems are not included, mass mobilization will not succeed. This paper uses these scholarly views to understand why the Swadeshi Movement was strong in cities but weak in villages. The importance of the press in spreading nationalist feelings has been clearly mentioned by many historians like Bipan Chandra and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, who show how newspapers helped share ideas and build a sense of national unity during the freedom struggle. As we all know, in our country the press has always been a major force, but this paper wants to go deeper by focusing specially on the vernacular press and carefully comparing the content of different newspapers. This paper also looks at how nationalism and communalism were shaped through the press. The writings of Partha Chatterjee (The Nation and Its Fragments) and Gyanendra Pandey (The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India) help us understand how the Hindu revivalist language used by the Extremist press, while very strong in motivating Hindus, ended up pushing away many Muslims. This explains why communal differences appeared during the movement, which is also discussed by Ayesha Jalal in her works. While many studies have already examined the leaders, methods, and weaknesses of the Swadeshi Movement, the unique aim of this paper is to connect all these themes by looking through the lens of the vernacular press. Here, the press is not just treated as a source of information, but as an active player in shaping events. By comparing different newspapers and studying their impact on different social groups, this paper shows a clear picture of how the "pen" became a class-based weapon—very powerful in mobilizing the urban middle class, but not very successful in reaching the rural peasants in the countryside.

Methodology

This study uses a simple qualitative historical method, where I mainly read and analyze many secondary scholarly sources to understand how the vernacular press worked during the Swadeshi Movement. As we all know, in our country newspapers played a major role in spreading ideas, so this research focuses on a qualitative content analysis of the most important nationalist newspapers of that time, based on how they are shown in historical writings. I bring together different scholars' views on the main themes, writing style, ideologies, and calls to action found in famous newspapers like the Moderate Sanjibani and Bengalee, the Extremist Kesari, Sandhya, and Bande Mataram, the revolutionary Jugantar, and even the regional paper Swadesamitran. The study compares how Moderate newspapers used polite and constitutional language, while the Extremist papers used more aggressive, emotional, and sometimes revolutionary tone.

The Strategic Role of the Vernacular Press

The real strength of the vernacular press during the Swadeshi Movement was not only in what it wrote, but in how it spoke and who it tried to reach. As we all know, in our country language plays a big role in connecting with common people, so these nationalist editors made a smart decision to publish in regional languages like

Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil. By doing this, they did not limit their message to the English-educated elite, but directly spoke to the wider public. This was very important in building a national feeling that did not depend on knowing English. Even though literacy was low in those times, these newspapers still reached far because one copy was often read aloud in villages and city neighbourhoods, which multiplied their influence a lot. The press played a big role in explaining and simplifying the main ideas of the movement and turning them into patriotic beliefs. Newspapers strongly promoted the use of Indian-made goods, saying it was not just an economic choice but a national duty and a way to build Atmashakti (self-power or self-reliance). They supported traditional crafts like handloom weaving and encouraged new Indian-owned industries like textile mills, soap factories, and match factories. In this way, the press turned economic activity into political protest, arguing that India could never rise without economic independence. The boycott of British goods was shown as the powerful and aggressive partner of the Swadeshi program. Newspapers said it was a strong non-violent weapon that every Indian—man, woman, or child—could use against British economic control. They reported and glorified events like burning foreign cloth, picketing shops, and socially avoiding people who bought foreign goods, making the boycott a public and active mass protest. The press also understood that British education was made to produce loyal subjects, so it encouraged people to boycott government schools and colleges. Instead, they supported "National Education," meaning Indian-run schools that taught in local languages, promoted patriotism, and gave technical training for self-sufficiency. Through these efforts, the vernacular press helped turn ordinary actions into symbols of national pride and resistance.

A Content Analysis of Key Newspapers

The vernacular press during the Swadeshi era was not one single voice. Instead, it was a very active and sometimes argumentative space where many nationalist ideas were fighting with each other. As we all know, in our country different leaders had different methods, so the press also showed that same difference. On one side, the Moderates believed in slow and constitutional protest, while on the other side, the Extremists were ready to talk about direct action and even revolution. When we study the main newspapers of that time, we can clearly see this variety of thinking. In the beginning, the anti-partition movement was mostly guided by the Moderate leaders. They trusted in tools like press articles, petitions, and large public meetings to raise their voice. Their newspapers also followed this path of peaceful and legal protest. One important example is Sanjibani, a Bengali weekly edited by Krishna Kumar Mitra. It became famous because on July 13, 1905, it was the first newspaper to officially suggest the boycott of British goods. But it presented the boycott in a careful way, as a temporary and logical political method to put pressure on the British so that they might cancel the partition. Its language was calm and reasonable, trying to appeal to the British sense of fairness while also encouraging economic self-reliance. Another major Moderate newspaper was The Bengalee, edited by Surendranath Banerjea, who was a well-known leader at that time. This paper strongly opposed the partition with powerful editorials and full reports of protest meetings. It became the main Moderate voice in the early stage of the movement, showing how the press tried to shape public opinion and influence colonial policies in a peaceful but determined manner. As the Moderate approach did not bring real results, the leadership of the movement slowly shifted into the hands of the Extremists, and naturally their newspapers also became bolder and more aggressive in tone. As we all know, when people lose patience, new voices become stronger. One famous example is Kesari, the Marathi paper published from

Poona by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. It was a very powerful force in western India. Tilak used this paper to promote the four important ideas of Swaraj, Swadeshi, Boycott, and National Education. He strongly said that Swadeshi and Boycott are "two sides of the same coin," meaning they cannot be separated. He was very skilled in political messaging and often mixed political thoughts with cultural and religious elements. By quoting texts like the Bhagavad Gita, he gave spiritual support to the idea of resisting an unjust government, which made the people feel that their fight was both moral and sacred.

Colonial Repression and the Press

During the Swadeshi Movement, the British government very quickly understood that the vernacular press was not just reporting news—it was driving the nationalist spirit in a powerful way. As we all know, in our country the press can influence people's minds very strongly. At first, many newspapers used a polite and moderate tone, but soon their language became more bold, emotional, and even revolutionary. When extremist papers started openly attacking British rule and calling for radical action, the colonial rulers got frightened. They realised the press had become a real weapon in the political fight. Instead of allowing free speech, the government shifted from simple monitoring to strict suppression. Interestingly, the harsher the laws became, the clearer it was that the British feared the power of these newspapers. In fact, the government's reaction itself proves how effective the press was in spreading nationalism. Some papers like Jugantar even went as far as giving guidance on violent resistance and bomb-making, which the authorities treated as direct encouragement of sedition and terrorism. To crush such voices, the British passed strict laws that targeted the financial and legal survival of nationalist newspapers. One major law gave district magistrates the power to seize printing presses and property of any paper that was accused of promoting violence or crimes under the Explosives Act. This was very dangerous for the press because the government could shut down a paper immediately, without even waiting for a full trial. Soon after, another law was introduced which made things even worse. It forced publishers to deposit a large amount of money—sometimes as high as 5,000 rupees—before starting a press. If the paper printed anything the government did not like, this deposit could be taken away. The definition of "objectionable material" was extremely broad. Anything that created hatred against the government, upset soldiers, or caused tension between social groups could be punished. Because of such rules, many small nationalist papers could not survive. This shows how the British tried to silence the voice of the people, but at the same time, it also shows how powerful the press had become in inspiring the Swadeshi spirit. The British government did not waste any time in applying these strict press laws, and the impact was very serious. As we all know, in our country when the voice of the people becomes strong, those in power try to silence it. Many leading nationalist newspapers like Jugantar, Sandhya, and Bande Mataram were forced to shut down completely. Their printing presses were taken away, and editors, writers, and even printers were arrested on a large scale. One of the most famous cases was that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In 1908, he was arrested for what he wrote in Kesari and was given six years of jail in Mandalay, Burma. This showed how scared the British were of the press. Other respected leaders like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay also faced court cases and punishment. By the end of 1908, this continuous government attack had almost destroyed the open and radical side of the nationalist press. Many revolutionaries had to go underground to continue their work secretly. Because of this harsh repression, the mass, energetic phase of the Swadeshi Movement slowly came to an end. This moment reminds us how powerful the press was—

and how much the rulers feared its influence on the people of India.

Conclusion

The vernacular press during the Swadeshi Movement truly became a transformative force in our country's fight for freedom. As we all know, at first the agitation against the Partition of Bengal was mostly led by educated elites. But these newspapers helped turn it into a much larger movement that reached many sections of society, even if it was not fully inclusive. By building a strong nationalist narrative, explaining the ideas of Swadeshi and Boycott, and creating a shared identity, the press politicized a whole new generation of Indians. It also introduced new ways of mass struggle. In this period, the "pen" really acted like a weapon. It brought urban middle-class people, students, and even women into active political life on a scale never seen before in our country. When we look closely, we can see that this weapon also had serious limits. The press was shaped by the class and communal views of the people who controlled it. The bhadralok leaders did not focus on the everyday problems of peasants, so the largest section of the population stayed outside the nationalist movement. At the same time, the frequent use of Hindu symbols and religious language may have inspired some, but it also made many Muslims feel excluded, increasing communal tension that later became a big problem in the subcontinent. So, the press was not a universal tool—it was more effective only within certain social groups, and it could not break the deep realities of rural India. Even though the government suppressed the press and the movement declined by 1908, the legacy of the Swadeshi press was very deep and long lasting. It changed the nature of Indian nationalism itself. The goal was no longer just asking for small reforms within the British system—it now became Swaraj, or self-rule, which the press helped to spread with strong cultural and even spiritual meaning. The methods that the press supported—like boycott, passive resistance, and non cooperation—later became the main tools of future struggles. These strategies were first tested in the fiery pages of Swadeshi newspapers, and later leaders like Mahatma Gandhi used them on a much larger scale. In this way, the Swadeshi press became, as historian Sumit Sarkar said, the "nursery" of the future Indian National Movement. It created a new political language and a strategy book that continued to guide the fight for freedom until it finally succeeded in 1947.

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