

A Comprehensive Analysis of Gandhiji's Contribution to India's Press Freedom Movement

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Abstract: Gandhiji was a great Journalist and was a pioneer to free press concept. His contribution in struggle for freedom of speech and expression was never to be forgotten. He launched a weekly newspaper, Indian Opinion, in South Africa. After he returned to India, published Navajivan, Harijan and Young India. He made an arena of mass communication; and created a platform for free press movement in India. Gandhiji said that, one of the objects of a newspaper is-"to fearlessly espouse popular defects". He wanted to flourish regional media too and always inspired other Journalists to write in regional languages.

Key Words: Newspaper, Press, Press Freedom, Nationalist Movement

Introduction: Press freedom is an important component of development. The absence of free press and the suppression of people's ability to communicate directly impoverish human mind and impair development. The intrinsic role of free speech and public communication are inescapably linked with the freedom of the press. The informative role of the free press allows for critical scrutiny and gives voice for the constructive contribution of free public discussion in the formation of values and emergence of shared public standards and plays a protective role in human insecurity. Thus freedom of the press defines both a right and a duty, having good reason to stand. A free press is an integral part of the inner strength and dynamism of a democracy.

In our struggle for independence, press took an objective stand and turned itself as an instrument for public education. The press created the national consciousness among people. Colonial rules did not respect the freedom of the press. Indian press was subjected to many coercive laws and regulations. Yet Indian press was firm to show its resentment.

In the 1880s, the Nationalist movement gathered momentum and that gave a stronger push to the Indian Press. Inevitably, the government, wary of the Press and

passed several laws to control it and suppress political agitation. Reba Chaudhuri writes in *The Story of the Indian Press* (published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1955), “A number of Press Laws and restrictions were enforced and placed on the statute book from time to time. After the establishment of the Indian National Congress, there were sections 124A and 153A of the Penal Code enacted in 1898. There was also section 565 of the Indian Penal Code. Four new measures were enacted between 1908-1911; namely, the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908, the Press Act of 1910, the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act of 1911 and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908. There was also “the Official Secrets Act as amended in 1903.”

The Press Act of 1910 hit the Indian papers hard. Chaudhuri gives an insight: “The Press Association of India in a memorandum on the operation of the Press Act of 1910 stated that nearly 1,000 papers had been prosecuted under the Act. The total amount of securities and forfeitures which went into the hands of Government during the first five years of the Act was nearly Rs 5 lakhs according to another official return made in 1918. Over 500 publications were proscribed under the Act.” Several editors were charged with sedition for publishing anti-government editorials. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, for instance, had to pay, a security of Rs 5,000 to the government.

The tension between the Press and the Government was slowly mounting. The Press Emergency Act of 1931 further heightened the tension. During Mahatma Gandhi’s Satyagraha, he used the press to advocate his feelings and rally the masses to protest against the British.

An expert on South Asian history, Judith M. Brown, writes in her book, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922*, “Satyagraha lasted from 22 March until 6 June. According to the press, the peak was reached by 21 April, when there were 2,337 signatories to the pledge. Gandhi himself worked on two main lines, external publicity and internal consolidation. As far as the rest of India was concerned, he did his utmost to capture public sympathy, writing to friends, speaking in Bombay, and courting the press...with letters to the editors and numerous public statements. In his own words, ‘it is not the money they want so much as the voice of a strong, unanimous and emphatic public opinion.’”

Objective of the study: The study paper attempts to highlight on-

- Gandhiji as a Journalist and his contribution in the field of journalism
- His views on Journalism
- focus on his famous newspapers
- his struggle for freedom of press in India

Research Methodology: The study paper is basically made on the basis of content analysis; and has been made on various books, newspapers and online open source tools. That paper is based on explanatory research work.

Content Analysis: Gandhiji launched his first newspaper, Indian Opinion, in 1903. The weekly newspaper was to serve the interests of British Indians in South Africa. The guidelines on policy that he published in the first issue on June 6, 1903 enunciated the advocacy principle in working for the community by asserting their rights and invoking a sense of responsibility among them. The newspaper was published in four languages, English, Gujarati, Tamil and Hindi.

Indian Opinion laid the foundations for Gandhiji's contributions to Journalism after his return to India in 1915 to take up the larger cause of Indian Independence. Seeking time from Gokhale, his mentor, he decided to travel to familiarize himself with his homeland. The Indigo farmers' plight in Champaran became a starting and rallying point for his first Satyagraha in India.

In the 'Young India' of 2 July 1925, he wrote: "I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and present under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of satyagraha which is a direct corollary of nonviolence."

Gandhi (1956), himself wrote, "So long as it (Indian Opinion) was under my control, the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life. The Indian Opinion in those days, like the Young India and the Navjivan today, was a mirror of part of my life."

His desire for addressing the communication needs of the General Public became evident when he expressed that English alone could not be a medium of the newspaper. Therefore along with the editorship of Young India, he also took over the editorship of Navjivan, a Gujarati monthly that he converted into a weekly. Harijan (English), Harijansevak (Hindi) and Harijanbandhu (Gujarati) are some of the other papers he started in his campaign against untouchability and poverty, especially in village areas. These papers published no advertisements even then they enjoyed wide circulation. Although during the Second World War, there was an unprecedented advance in communication technology; India was lagging far behind in these developments. As a result the Indian press had no other way, but to depend on news- both foreign and domestic -on Reuter. That news agency had a large network for news gathering and dispatching in various Countries. While the nationalist press was reeling under the rigours of the ordinance restricting the freedom of speech, the Anglo Indian Press was enjoying the patronage of the Government for its support of the measures taken after the

outbreak of the war. The Statesman of Calcutta said, "there is in the first moment of war an inevitable urgent censorship of news."

On 25th October, 1940, the British Government imposed fresh fetters on the Indian press by an amendment of the Defence of India Rules published in the Government Gazette on 21st October, "empowering the Government of India to require in the name of public safety and prosecution of the war, printers, publishers and editors to submit for scrutiny to a government Officer any matter relating to a particular subject or class of subject before publication to prohibit or regulate the printing or publishing of any document or class of document or of any matter relating to a particular subject or class of subject or the use of any printing press." These orders prohibited publication of any matter calculated directly or indirectly to foment opposition to the prosecution of the war to the holding of meetings or making speeches for this purpose.

For that reason many newspapers stopped their publication. The most significant being the suspension of Gandhiji's papers. Harijan, Harijan Bandhu, and Harijan Sevak followed a notice from the District Magistrate. He directed to submit all new copies to him, which were related to Vinoba Bhave's Satyagraha; and the papers were suspended. On that context, Gandhiji stated to the Press, "I will not be provoked into any hasty action. I am still not ready with the next move. But as I have said in my previous statement every Act of Civil Disobedience is complete in itself. This press notice shows how effectively it has been. Every Act of repression adds strength to the reality. Satyagraha thrives on repression till at last the repressor is tired of it and the object of Satyagraha is gained."

He said, "I believe and my belief has been tested repeatedly that a thought deliberately thought and controlled is a power greater than steam which is harnessed and controlled. We see the latter everyday carrying incredible weight even across steep precipices. Thought power overcomes much greater obstacles and easily carries greater weights. But let me give a practical hint to the non-believer in the power of thought harnessed and controlled."

The Indian Press expressed its deep regret at the suspension of Harijan. The Hindustan Standard of Calcutta showed a tribute on 12th November, 1940; and said, "The suspension of Harijan will clog the free flow of what has been inspiration to many and stimulation to all while world's literature will undoubtedly be poorer for it. The soul indeed, has been killed out of the Indian Press and it has been forced to shed even its primary characteristics of being an authentic and faithful record of events in the country."

Conclusion: One of the objects of a newspaper, he said, "is to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects."

He also expressed his worry and said," Let everyone become his own walking newspaper and carry the good news from mouth to mouth. This does not mean what boys used to do in the past, viz. trumpeting about bits of news. The idea here is of my telling my neighbor what I have authentically heard. This no Government can overtake or suppress. It is the cheapest newspaper yet devised and it defies the wit of Government however clever it may be. Let these walking newspapers be sure of the news they give. They should not indulge in idle gossip. They should make sure of the source of information and they will find that the public gets all the information that they need without opening their morning newspapers ;which they should know will contain garbled, one sided information and therefore not worth the trouble of reading. For it may be that even public statements such as I am now issuing may also be stopped. It is the condition of life under an autocratic Government wheather foreign or indigenous."

The eminent journalist and freedom fighter Salien Chatterjee who covered Mahatma Gandhi, his actions and programmers for a number of years died a few months back. In an article, 'Reporting Mahatma', he had written for the special issue of Vidura on, Gandhi as a Journalist, (Jan-March, 1998) he said:"I joined journalism in 1942. Reporting Mahatma Gandhi and my tours with him were the best and most memorable period of my journalistic career. Gandhi himself was a journalist. During my tours with him, he often told me how he worked day and night to produce his journal 'Indian Opinion' in Natal, South Africa. He described 'Indian Opinion' as the most useful weapon in his struggle in South Africa. He always stressed the importance of newspapers in educating the people. Gandhi always believed and always emphasized that the sole aim of journalism should be service, service of the people and the country.

In 'Young India' Gandhi once gave a glimpse of the exacting code he had set up for himself. "To be true to my faith, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peek into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds."

In his message for the editor of the newspaper, 'The Independence', on 30 January 1919, he wrote: "In wishing you success in your new enterprise, I would like to say how I hope your writings would be worthy of the title you have chosen for your journal; and may I further hope that to a robust of independence you will add an equal measure of self-restraint and the strictest adherence to truth."

Mahatma Gandhi wrote:"It is now an established practice with newspapers to depend for revenues mainly on advertisements rather than on subscriptions. The result has been deplorable. The very newspaper which writes against the drink evil publishes

advertisements in praise of drinks. In the same issue, we read of the harmful effects of tobacco as also from where to buy it. Or we shall find the same issue of a paper carrying a long advertisement for a certain play and denouncing that play as well. Medical advertisements are the largest source of revenue though they have done, and are still doing incalculable harm to the people. These medical advertisements almost wholly offset the services rendered by the newspapers. I have been eyewitness to the harm done by them. Many people are lured into buying harmful medicines. Many of these promote immorality. Such advertisements find a place even in papers run to further the cause of religion. This practice has come entirely from the West. No matter at what cost or effort we must put an end to this undesirable practice or at least reform. It is the duty of every newspaper to exercise some restraint in the matter of advertisements.”

In 12 November, 1947, in the studio of All India Radio, he said: "This is a miraculous power. I see 'shakti', the miraculous power of God". According to the 'Hindustan Times' of 13th November, "He spoke for 20 minutes and his voice was very much clear. His message was followed by recorded music of Vande Materam".

Gandhiji looked upon journalism as a means to serve the people. He said in his autobiography, "the sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countrysides and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want to control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within. If this line of reasoning is correct, how many journals of the world would stand the test? But who would stop those that are useless? And who should be the judge? The useful and the useless must, like good and evil, go on together, and man must make his choice."

To define the role of newspapers, he said, "Newspapers are meant primarily to educate the people. They make the latter familiar with contemporary history. This is a work of no mean responsibility. It is a fact, however, that readers cannot always trust newspapers. Often facts are found to be quite the opposite of what has been reported. If newspapers realized that it was their duty to educate the people, they could not but wait to check a report before publishing it. It is true that often they have to work under difficult conditions. They have to sift the true from the false in a short time and can only guess at the truth. Even then, I am of the opinion that it is better not to publish a report at all if it has not been found possible to verify it."

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