



STUDY MATERIAL

VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE THAKURPUKUR

NAAC ACCREDITED GRADE – 'A'

**Journalism
&
Mass Communication**
(HONOURS)

The Vernacular Press Act, 1878

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Vernacular Press Act 1878

Introduction

The Sepoy Mutiny was India's first battle of Independence. The mutiny had a great impact upon Indian press. A new thought regarding nationalism started revolving Indian middle class and the vernacular Press. It was the age of the growth of Indian Public opinion.

The double standard of the British Imperialism regarding liberalization at Home and suppression in the colonies had been gloriously exposed by the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, which was directed only against the vernacular presses. The post 1857 phase had seen a parallel impetus in the growth of the vernacular press and an unprecedented growth of national consciousness. The newspaper far from acting as an outlet for grievances who were becoming instrumental in instilling a feeling of nationalism. A new generation had come up who harboured no illusion about Whig liberalization and was determined to pay the British back into their own coin. The self confidences of the colonialist were so shattered that almost in despair Lord Lytton passed the Vernacular Press Act.

The Vernacular Press Act empowered any magistrate or district or of Commissioner of the Police in a Presidency town to call upon a printer and publisher of news papers and force him to sign a hand undertaking not to publish certain kinds of materials to demand security and confiscate if it thought fit, confiscate any printed matter deemed objectionable. No reports to a court of law were open to such a printer and publisher.

Immediate Effects of Vernacular Press Act

Bail bonds were issued against **The Sahachar**, **Bharat Mihir** (mairan Singh), **The Dhaka Prakash**.

Somprakash mourned in its farewell address –“In all our writings we have been actuated by a sincere desire to do good both to the rulers and the servants. Seditious sentiments never found place in our mind, but since Government has by passing a law sought to establish , the charge of sedition against us, we should but admit it where we now to execute a bond...the honour of the man and not his wealth is the superior consideration we cannot stoop to the definition on the ground that by the discontinuance of the paper . It would not only be an insult to ourselves but to the people whom we representwith our salutation to God, subscribers and contributors. We now take the leave.

The Dhaka Prakash wrote that, "The death of the *Somprakash* would lead to extinction of all other papers, which do not choose to follow the view of the Government."

The Sulabh Samachar wrote, "The Bengali character must be given up for it is difficult to be independent and yet keep the press act in content view.....He will only be saved on whom the Government smiles"

The Bharat Mihir refused to even sign the bond," Not to give way to despondency but to take hard from the noble examples of *Somprakash*, which had died in the loyal service of the country. **The Bharat Mihir** continued with its rhetoric of martyrdom. Like the *Somprakash* we too have never wished any evils to the British Government which has fostered us from our childhood and by Western learning and science infused a new life into this countrywe pray for a long continuance of the British rule in India.....but while doing this we cannot forget the height of we have imposed upon ourselves.....In seeking to speak the truth in clear language a thunder bolt fell on our head of the *Somprakash*. Such death is not ignorable." **The Sadharani** condemned the **Amrita Bazar Patrika** as "*worthless gesture*" for changing into English daily; **The Bharat Mihir** and the **Mushirdabad Patrika** pledged with its editor to continue writing in vernacular.

It was as if the act called for a reappraiser. The new journalist believed that they should take a good look at their own bar. One result was an overwhelming profession of loyalty on the part of every Bengali newspaper in the scene. **The Pratikar** wrote "whatever abuse it may showered down on us in spite of all these, we are its well wishers" A thousand times over **The Hindu Hitaishi** in its editorial refers to the reproachable loyalty of Bengalis and goes on to emphasize its point by arguing on the context of oppressive Muslim rulers.

The Bhatrat Mihir wrote, it was set that the passing of such an act was necessary for the safety of the empire, now in the name we are what evil actually resulted and what was apprehended of the Indian Empire from the newspaper. None of them has even consciously even for a day written anything with a view to the sub version of the British rule or the excitement of a General dissatisfaction towards it in the minds of the people.

The **Sadharani** wrote, "Thanks to the British that the days of the *Bargis* and the *Pandaris* are over. It was their *Wilbur* forces *hampers*. *Mill*, *Bright*, *Metcalf*, *Macaulay* and 1000 of other great men whose liberal principles have quite captivated us."

The Somprakash wrote" Instead of being ungrateful our heart is full of gratitude. It went on to pay its tribute to British educational system and ended on an apologetic note. "Without the benefits of that education our press would not been fostered with such a great care." Some of the newspapers resolved to move away from politics and concentrated on sociology, moral, religion and agriculture, industry and education.

The Bharat Sanaskarak saw it as a blessing in disguise and urged the newspapers to concentrate in the development of Bengali language. The vernacular press could not believe that at its infancy it could have aroused so much official concern.

The Sadharani wrote, "Does the Government really believe that by our writings in the Vernacular we are causing a diminution of preventing an increase of loyalty in the newspaper ever effect the loyalty which should spontaneously always reign in the hearts of the people in Government really sought their welfare."

Criticism

The Vernacular Press Act is the most latent example of the imperialistic images of the British. The outrageous shock the very foundation of the British Raj. And of course it was ruthlessly suppressed. But unfortunately for the Indian nationalist and the tide of nationalist consciousness could not be controlled, while the colonist became more and more a potent force. The colonialist almost in despair blamed the foundation of its philosophy and policy its worse inadequacy its narrow mindedness, its shallow rationalism and its idealistically disguised strive for profit, its struggle against all forms nationalism. The veneers of liberalization cannot cover economic and political ruthlessness and suppression. Marx's prediction '*Bourgeoisies were most naked in colonies*' was then exposed and beyond repair.

Frame work:

- a) Need to discriminate between Vernacular press and the English press.
- b) The vernacular and nationalistic slogans and its growing popularity. Example-
 - a) "Men are born free and those who stole the independence of others or who surrendered their liberty willingly or unwillingly were punishable for the violation of a natural principle."
 - b) "To explain the principle objects and strategy of those who solely for the welfare of the Indian themselves didn't allow the latter to participate in the administration of their country."

c) A boom in journalism

Vernacular Press 1870:

62 newspapers in Bombay

60 newspapers in North Western and Central Provinces.

87 newspapers in Bengal (1 Yearly, 50 monthlies, 7 bimonthlies, 22 weeklies, 1 tri weekly, 1 daily)

More than 1, 00,000 readers and 3000 circulation in Bengal alone.

The English Press:

- 1) 1861: Bombay Times, Courier, Standard and Telegraph to form The Times of India.
- 2) Pioneer
- 3) Civil and Military Gazette in Lahore
- 4) The Statesman in Calcutta
- 5) Madras Mail
- 6) The Hindu

d) Lord Lytton (1876) and the official debates :

Sir George Campbell, Sir Alexander Arbuthnot, Sir Ashley Eden , - official opinion were in favour of such a law.

e) Opposition came from Robert Knight and W. Robinson.

“Attitude of the Government on the press decides the attitude of the press on the Government.” (Robert Knight)

Both further argued that the government should take on a positive attitude like i) Press Bureau ii) Informed of Government policies.

Excerpts are also circulated among the Indians and Surendranath Banerjee on the behalf of the Press association opposed it.

f) Government overruled all opposition on the grounds

- i) A better control had become necessary.
- ii) Government needed more scope to punish for sedition
- iii) Prevent unscrupulous writers from using newspaper as a means of intimidation and extortion.

g) The law passed as Act IX of 1878

The law empowered any magistrate of a district or a commissioner of Police in a Presidency town to call upon the printer and publisher of a newspaper to enter into a bond undertaking to publish a certain kind of matter, to demand, to scrutiny and confiscate it if thought necessary. No recourse to a court of law in such cases were open.

A distinction was made between “Disloyal Natives verses loyal British”

h) Reactions –

Furore- Fierce criticism from all sections of the native population. Amrita Bazar Patrika called Lord Lytton “**an autocrat of autocrats**”. Became an issue to be decided in open confrontation.

i) Protest and Criticism

Amrita Bazar Patrika turned English overnight

Even **The Statesman** criticized. The only exceptions on Editor who surrendered to Lytton's wooing was **The Hindu Patriot** under Babu Kristodas Pal . **Somprkash** was prosecuted.

1880: Liberals came to power in British Parliament under Gladstone. Lord Ripon was sent to India and he repealed the law in 1881.

j) Conclusion

True face of British Imperialism law imposed. Strengthen Nationalistic fervor

Further Reading:

1. History of Indian Journalism, J. Natarajan p.81,100-102,108-112
2. Mass Media Law and Regulations, C.S.Rayadu and S.B. Nageswar Rao, p- 1,3-6,8-11
3. The Indian Press 1870-1880: A Small World of Journalism. Modern Asian Studies, Cambridge University Press.