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Indigenous Media and the Making of India's Democratic Ethos in the Nineteenth Century: Decolonizing the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of print media in the articulation of democratic elements in India in the 19th century in Bengal in India. Did the media take a crucial role in such a manner in the colonial era during the 19th to mid-20th century? What was the role of emerging print media in India during the 19th century under British colonial rule? One of the reasons which made the nineteenth century remarkable was the historical emergence of print media in Bengal as well as India. It has been found that most of the liberal modernizers of the nineteenth century took journalism not only for their profession but also for the diffusion of their liberal ideas to form a keen public opinion in India. Though there were a good number of papers that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, it was only in the second half of the century that print media became the chief engine of the vehicle of growing political consciousness and constitutionalism in India. This study is theoretical and exploratory, focusing on the role of print media in 19th-century Bengal in India. It follows a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, utilizing archival and interpretative methods. Primary sources include books, magazines, biographies, letters, newspapers, and web data. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the studies of Jurgen Habermas on 'public sphere' locating print media as a platform of public debate, civil/political society; Frantz Fanon's decolonization as a liberal enfranchisement; Benedict Anderson's print capitalism and nation formation, Niogi Thiong's Decolonizing the mind and Partha Chatterjee or Ranajit Guha's Subaltern Studies catering indigenous resistance through vernacular political modernity. This paper, therefore, tries to explore the significant role of print media in the making of a liberal and democratic ambience in India in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Democracy, Print Media, Political Consciousness, Democratization, Nineteenth Century India

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Introduction

This paper examines the remarkable role played by the indigenous media in the making of democratic ethos in Nineteenth Century India, specifically in Bengal. In the context of colonial society in India in the nineteenth century the emergence, historical evolution and the mode of functioning of media had always been a matter of central attraction in any study related to the democratization process in India. The main reason behind selecting Bengal as the context of the study is that it was nineteenth-century Bengal which took the pioneering role in the rise of political consciousness, articulation of liberal and democratic ideals, giving birth to various political ideologies and formation of a reverential sense of national feelings. It would not be an exaggeration to mention that it was the historical birth of print media, especially the vernacular media which played a crucial role as the chief engine of preaching liberal democratic ideas in nineteenth-century renascent Bengal, the seat of the historical context of Renaissance and colonial modernity. Moreover, besides the historical birth of print media in nineteenth-century colonial India, the remarkable outgrowth of civil-societal associations and movements, and the incarnation of political associations also took a tremendous role in the making of a democratic intellectual tradition in India.

The Early Nineteenth Century: The Incipient Phase

Till the beginning of the nineteenth century in colonial India there was hardly any sign of political consciousness as it lacked any sense of integration and the whole society was bifurcated in huge socio-cultural and economic cleavages which, it may be argued were significant factors to the foundation and consolidation of the British rule in India. The British rule in India, Marx noted (in 1853), had an explicit "double mission to fulfil… one destructive–the annihilation of the old Asiatic society, and the other regenerative–the laying of the material foundation of Western society in Asia. It had begun the latter by imposing political unity, now (1853) to be strengthened and perpetuated by the electric telegraph; by introducing the first free press in Asia, a new and powerful agent of reconstruction". (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2010: 21-22). Here lies the significant role of a free press not only as an agent of reconstruction; but also, as an agent of bourgeois awakening in India to create a liberal democratic ambience enriched with freedom of expression, the right to resistance and the right to raise questions against authority, which it may be claimed are the most known conditions of democratization process.

The role of numerous newspapers and journals, both the vernaculars and English played a significant role in the making of public opinion in colonial Bengal in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The first paper, a weekly, named 'Bengal Gazette' was started by J. A. Hicky (in 1780) who described it as: "a weekly political and commercial paper open to all parties but influenced by none (Majumdar, 1971: 273-74). Hicky took a remarkable role in creating the anti-absolutist movement in Bengal through his rigorous and daring journalism. Though in earlier days Bengal Gazette published some non-political news, soon some hot libelous[12] gossip relating to the top-ranked officers including Governor General's issues made Hicky stand in front of the blood-shot eyes of Warran Hastings (Ahmed, 1976: 59; Chatterjee, 2013: 13). Declaring himself a 'freeman citizen' living in the main city (Calcutta) of the British Empire Hicky became more reactionary and the confrontation became fatal when he published the criticism against Hastings made by Charles Fox in the British Parliament. Even, the notion of 'representative democracy' which was the main trend of contemporary America, was first exposed in Hicky's Bengal Gazette in 1781, against the 'By law' that empowered the newly appointed Commissioners to put taxes on houses, shops and land. But Hicky, quite explicitly protested that and published: "Nobody can impose a tax without having representation of a particular mass." It produced undesirable consequences for Hicky in the form of imprisonment. In 1802 on the way to China Hicky died a premature death. (Chatterjee, 2013: 15).

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What Hicky did was significant enough to create a democratic ambience in favour of freedom of opinion and political consciousness. None of the vernacular papers appeared before 1818, the remarkable year not only for initiating the first Bengali newspapers, namely *Digdarsan*, *Samachar Darpan* and Bengal Gazette (Bose,1976: 368) but also it was the year which witnessed the abolition of censorship on the press imposed by lord Wellesley in 1799 (Ahmed, 1976: 1). This, undoubtedly made a considerable encouragement to the publication of a great number of newspapers (in both languages), viz. Gospel Magazine since 1819 (by Baptist Auxiliary Missionary Society), Brahminical Magazine since 1821 (by Rammohun Roy in the name of Sibprasad Sarma), *Samsad Kaumudi* since 1821 (by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay and Tarachand Dutta), *Samsad Pravakar* since 1831 (by Ishwar Chandra Gupta), *Samsad Rasaraj* since 1839 (Gaurusankar Tarkaragish) etc. There were some of the newspapers and periodicals run by the contemporary trend of thinking, i.e. bourgeois liberal democratic ideal, namely Bangadut (by Nilratan Haldar since 1829), *Jnananveshan* since 1831 (by Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay) Bengal Spectator (since 1842), Hindu Patriot, *Tattvabadhini Patrika* since 1843 (by Aksay Kumar Dutta), *Somprokash* since 1858 (by Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan), *Bangodarshan* since 1872 (by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee) (Kaviraj N, 1984: 163). Besides Bengali and English soon, by 1820 several newspapers in French, Urdu, and Hindi appeared in colonial India.

Rammohun Roy and the Free Press: The Bases of Democracy

Raja Rammohun Roy, the earliest promulgator of modern India took the most significant role in the emergence of print media in colonial Bengal in the early nineteenth century. One of the remarkable movements that Rammohun made against the authority was his movement for a free press to establish a free and vibrant public opinion. Till the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was hardly any sign of Political consciousness in India as it lacked any sense of integration and the whole society was bifurcated in huge Socio-cultural and economic cleavages which, it may be argued were significant factors to the foundation and consolidation of the British rule in India. In 1818[2], when Lord Hastings relaxed the censorship on the press imposed by Lord Wellesley in 1799 (Ahmed, 1976: 1), Rammohun founded three journals: The *Brahminical Magazine* (1821), *Sambad Kaumudi* (1821) both are vernacular magazines and the Persian weekly, *Miral-ul-Akbar* (1822) (Bose, 1976: 368). By this time Rammohun had correspondence with Silk Buckingham, the editor of Calcutta Journal, who radically championed the idea of a free press and propagated the liberal view of the West through his paper. Since Buckingham was a sharp critic of the faults and corruptions of the British Government he was warned and admonished by the Government but that could not stop his liberal and radical activities (Chatterjee, 2013:15-16). No sooner than Hasting left India Buckingham was deported and it was John Adam, who succeeded Lord Hasting as Governor General, re-imposed press censorship in March 1823 (Kar, 2009: 10; Singh 1989: 4). In 1823 after the deportation of his personal friend Buckingham and Stanford Arnot (who too was associated with Calcutta Journal), Rammohun started constitutional agitation, one of the significant attributes of liberal democracy (questioning against the authority) against the arbitrary Press ordinance. On 17th March 1823, he submitted a 'memorial' to the Supreme Court requesting it to withdraw the regulation, which went in vain (Sen, 2012: 143). It is important to note here that the petition was signed by five significant personalities, the close associates of Rammohun, namely Chandra Kumar Tagore, Dwarakanath Tagore, Harachandra Ghosh, Gouri Chandra Bandyopadhayay and Prasanna Kumar Tagore who also took significant role in modern bourgeois awakening in the nineteenth century Bengal (Majumdar, 1971: 276; Chatterjee, 2013: 17). On the rejection of the petition by the court Rammohun submitted an appeal to the King-in Council which too got the same treatment.

The excuse behind such arbitrary rejection was that since the government in India was not a representative constitutional democratic system and it lacked effective public opinion, a free press would be functionally

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redundant. Rammohun, on the contrary, argued that, since India was a colony, a free press was more necessary to generate such public opinion which would help the rulers to estimate and avoid any revolutionary activity (Sen, 2012: 143). "Your Majesty is well aware that a free press had never yet caused a revolution in any part of the world", he claimed in his appeal to the King-in-Council, "because, while men can easily represent their grievances arising from the conduct of their local authorities to the Supreme Government and thus get them redressed, the grounds of discontent that excite the revolutions are removed; whereas, where no freedom of the press existed and grievance consequently remained unrepresented and un-redressed, innumerable revolutions have taken place in all parts of the globe, or if prevented by the armed force of the Government, the people continued ready for insurrection" (Roy, 1947: 22, Part-iv).

Such a comment reveals the extent of his deep introspection about the significant role of free public opinion and free press in a political system. Both of these petitions, to the Supreme Court of Calcutta and the King-in-Council made by Rammohun and his associates, were remarkable as they marked the beginning of distinctly political activity responsible for the growth of public opinion in the nineteenth century. This daring act was rightly mentioned as "the epoch of constitutional agitation for political rights" by Ramesh Chandra Dutta (1981: 155- 59), one of the pioneers of modernity in Bengal. The next Governors[14], who made liberal policy towards the press to enfranchise it from all restraints took a tremendous role in promoting a liberal atmosphere in India and relaxed the pre-imposed press regulation. On this occasion, in March 1835 a Free Press Dinner was hosted at the Calcutta Town Hall where Prasanna Kumar Tagore, one of the co-petitioners to the Supreme Court against the press regulation, formally acknowledged Rammohun as the 'Liberator of the Press' (Sen, 2012: 144).

Rammohun bore a deep respect for the liberal public opinion in England and wanted the government to promulgate good laws for India based on such enlightened public opinion. In this context, he advocated for the freedom of the press from three explicit arguments: firstly, on matters affecting the public interest the government should predict the sentiment of the people, which none other than a free press can do properly as it would make laws correspond to the public opinion; secondly, through a free press people of India would enable to appeal to the British parliament against local authority and lastly, by a free press the court of Directors would anticipate the extent whether a regulation prove beneficial or perilous to the subjects and whether the excellent regulations are strictly put in practice or not (Roy, 1947: 21-22, Part- iv).

Thus, Rammohun, in his radical liberal activities paid the most importance to liberal public opinion. He firmly believed that it would be convenient for the Indians to derive the advantages of the liberal spirit of British public life if the laws were made by the British Parliament rather than by an Indian legislative council located on Indian soil, as there remained a fear that such council would be arbitrarily controlled by the British Governor Generals. It is necessary to note here that despite being a close correspondent of the British Governor General, he was conscious of the misuse of power and intended to rely on the liberal public opinion of the British people.

The Print Media and the Young Bengal Movement: The Diffusion of Liberal Ideas

The nature, role, intensity and complexities of the Young Bengal Movement between the 1930s and 1960s, it may be claimed, can be best judged by the contemporary newspapers and journals as almost all of the members of this new intelligentsia were closely associated with the print media either as editor or contributor. Like their predecessor Rammohun Roy, they took journalism as an important tool to give vent to their socio-political and economic ideas. The main newspapers published by the Derozians between 1830 and 1854 were the Parthenon (1830), The Hindu Pioneer (1830), The Enquirer (1831), *Jnananneshan* (1831), *Jnan Sindhu Tauranga* (1832), The Bengal Spectator (1842), and The Quill (1854) (Sen, 1974:

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328-34). Needless to say, all these papers during these three decades played a spectacular role in spreading rational and liberal ideals.

The liberal political view of the Derozians was first seen in their earliest journal *Parthenan*, an organ of the Academic Association; only one issue of it could be published on the 15th of February, 1830 and it was stopped by the management of Hindu College. (Bosu, 2011: 187). The only issue of the journal bore vivid liberal writings on female education, on the neutral judiciary, and advocated in favour of colonization (Banerjee, 1985:282). The Hindu Pioneer, started in 1830 was one of the important newspapers which published many articles regarding the duties of the government towards its subjects, and gave paramount importance to freedom. The article "India under Foreigners" was of crucial importance in terms of advocating the liberal role of the ruler to its subjects. It claimed that the government of India under the British was purely aristocratic as the people of India had no voice in the council of the legislature. Such a liberal democratic demand in the early 1830s refers to the liberal democratic consciousness of the Derozians. (Bosu, 2011, 187) Another renowned paper published by the Derozians was the Enquirer, an English weekly (Started on 7th May 1831) edited by Krishna Mohan Banerjee was a radical journal against orthodox Hindu religion. The expulsion of Krishna Mohan from his parental house (as a consequence of a Beef-eating case by his radical friends) and the ouster of Derozio against various unjust charges by the conservative patrons of the managing committee of Hindu College made Krishna Mohan more aggressive toward his relentless criticism against Hinduism. Despite being the helpless victims of gigantic social or religious domination, the Derozians never went beyond the liberal sentiments of resistance. They were too liberal to be intolerant against the vehement wrath of Hindu bigots. The last issue of July (1831) of the Enquirer proves the level of tolerance of these liberals against the vehement attack of the Hindu bigots. Krisnamohan wrote:

> "The rage of persecution is still vehement. The bigots are up with their thunders of fulmination. The heat of the *Gurum Sabha* is violent, and they know not what they are doing. Excommunication is the cry of the fanatic. We hope perseverance will be the liberal's answer… Let the liberal's voice be like that of the Roman knows not only to act but to suffer." (The Enquirer, July 25, 1831: 7-8)

'The rage of persecution' mentioned by Krisnamohan was led by a host of vernacular newspapers of conservative Hindus, among which Samachar Chandrika edited by Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay[3] (since 1822) was most reactionary in terms of its nature of vehement attack on the liberals (Bose, 1976: 369). In response to such a wrathful publication of Samachar Chandrika (on behalf of *Dharmasabha*), Krishnamohan wrote in Enquirer (15th August 1831)

> "The Chandrika's triumph (in having popularity) would be very short if the Hindoos could see their faces. The friends of humanity will, we trust, lose no time in enlightening the minds of the Hindoos and making them perceive the deceits practices upon them. The ill-liberal papers are indeed very great obstacles to improvement… venality is very strong in the orthodox; if therefore the influential sons of civilized England have any sincere wish to ameliorate the condition of the natives, they should render liberalism…" (*The Enquirer*, 15th August, 1831: 7-8)

The *Jnananneshan* edited by Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay at the teen-age of seventeen (in May 1831) was one of the radical papers having vivid introspection in politics. It continued to appear till 1844 and during this span of almost one and a half decades, the paper consistently focused on contemporary socio-political issues. It served a tremendous role in the amelioration of liberal sentiment in society by crusading against any form of inequality and unjust practices. During the 1830s the paper published several articles on issues like Kulin polygamy (23rd April 1836), Women Trafficking (17th June 1837), Widow Re-marriage (21st October 1837), Marriage system and the condition of women (16th Dec 1837).

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Despite such articles on social issues, the *Jnananneshan* earned a great reputation for articles against political matters. Since the right to criticize is the most important ideal of liberal democracy, it may be claimed that *Jnananneshan* played an important role in building the liberal democratic ambience in the thirties and early forties of the nineteenth century. It never compromised with any form of unjust governmental policy and severely criticized the function of government at a time when corruption had become rampant. It raised the voice against the evils of permanent settlement and corruption related to the salary of *Munsifs* in the Judicial System. In the article, *Pulish Darogaar Upori Aav* (in Bengali) dared to criticize the police system and urged the government to protect the life and property of the people against the arm-holders (Jnananneshan, December 31, 1836). Rashik Krishna Mallick, who was closely associated with *Jnananneshan* condemned that the British administration was incapable of administering fair justice to the people and promoting the welfare of the governed, as it was conducted in the interest of the rich merchants. He, through the columns of this paper also pleaded to the British government for the inclusion of eligible Indians into various executive and judicial posts as he believed it was nothing but an indispensable civil right of the governed (*Jnananneshan*, April 12, 1833). Such a view of Rashik Krishna, not only initiated the just demand for the Indianization of services, which in the second half of the century became an important issue in political agitations but also built the political consciousness in contemporary Bengal.

In 1832 Rashik Krishna Mallick started another vernacular paper named *Jnan Sindhu Sadhana* which played a significant role in building political consciousness among the people. This paper advocated for the promotion of good education through the agencies of government among the common people. Perhaps, the most familiar bi-lingual monthly journal brought out by the Young Bengal was *Bengal Spectator* which embraced the socio-political and economic views of the radicals. In a letter to Gobinda Basak on 10th January 1842, Ramgopal Ghose the chief initiator of the journal maintained that it would focus on issues like female education, re-marriage of Hindu Widows, arbitrary policies of the government and civil-political rights of the Indians[4] (Re-printed in Sanyal, 1976: 165- 67). Started in April 1842 The *Bengal Spectator* became a fortnight from September of the same year and subsequently, since March 1943 it was converted into a weekly. The journal ceased to exist after November 20, 1843 (Chattopadhyay, 1978: 181). Leading contemporaries like Tarachand Chakraborty, Pearychand Mittre, and Krishna Mohan Banerjee contributed articles to Bengal Spectator on various socio-political issues at regular intervals. Though it lasted for barely two years, the Bengal Spectator, for its tremendous role in political affairs as Shibnath Sastri (2007: 1018) rightly observed, became the chief 'political organ' of the Young Bengal Movement.

Harish Chandra Mukherjee and the Hindu Patriot: the Diffusion of Liberal Democratic Ideas in Bengal

In the conceptual genealogy of the tradition of democratic ideas in the second half of the nineteenth century, perhaps the most significant contribution was made by Harish Chandra Mukherjee (1824-1861), the turbulent editor of *Hindu Patriot*. His fiery pen, especially during the rebellious days of the Revolt of 1857 and the Indigo Revolt of the late 1850s earned him the title of "a terror to the bureaucracy as well as to white colonialists and planters in Bengal" (Moitra, 1993: 126). It was Girish Chandra Ghosh who started an English weekly 'Bengal Recorder' in 1849 and renamed it '*Hindu Patriot*' in 1853. Harish Chandra took charge of *Hindu Patriot* during 1856-57 and soon Harish Chandra through his remarkable journalism imbibed a keen sense of national sentiment, not only made *Hindu Patriot* the mouthpiece of the oppressed peasants but also made it the first national newspaper of India.

A staunch journalist as well as liberal modernist Harish Chandra bore almost all the indispensable features of modern liberal democracy such as raising questions and criticizing freely against despotic authority,

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arguing for the defence of equality and most of all acknowledging and ascribing most importance to public opinion in governance. He fearlessly raised questions against various arbitrary policies of Lord Dalhousie. Harish Chandra opposed Dalhousie's policy of annexation and confiscation of different provinces of India like Nagpur and Jhansi. Considering the policy as 'foolish' he attributed it as "the source of discontent in the country", which prepared the ground for the Great Revolt of 1857 (Moitra, 1993: 129). Under the Caption "the Confiscation of Jhansi" he wrote

> "Lord Dalhousie is determined to shame the devil and beat even Nicholas hollow in the matter of forcible appropriation of neighbouring states without the shadow of a pretext to colour his grasping policy …. An Indian Governor General is chartered to destroy dynasties with a scratch of his quill and the cry of the injured is smothered in the din of the roaring waters that separate him from the land of Liberty." (*Hindu Patriot*, May 18, 1854: 2).

Such an anti-colonial roar against a despotic ruler is one of the many he penned through the columns of his paper, which not only created a sharp liberal public opinion but also created an incisive popular national aspiration in contemporary society. It gave the most incisive impetus in kindling up the list of political consciousness through the constitutional battle against authority. Being an active member of the British Indian Association, he assisted Digambar Mitra in drafting the petition it sent to the British Parliament on the occasion of the renewal of the Charter Act in 1853, complaining against the misrule of East India Company and demanding to make arrangements for the inclusion of eligible Indians into the higher posts and constitutional rights of the natives (Majumdar, 1971: 283). The petition was emphatic against the perilous act of the Union of executive power with the Legislative and urged for the establishment of a legislature not only composed of distinct persons but also of those who possess a popular character representing the sentiments of the people.

On the demand of inclusion of Indians in the Legislative Council to represent popular sentiment he, on June 29, 1854, suggested that Prasanna Kumar Tagore should be appointed to the post of clerk Assistant to the Council which would help the members in understanding native aspirations and sentiments in a better way. Such sound advocacy for the establishment of public opinion especially in cases connected to public interest reveals his liberal democratic mind which, it may be argued, even made him stand against any form of codification of the penal laws (Civil and Criminal)[5] (Majumdar, 1967: 94). In an article entitled as "on the Penal Code" Harish Chandra argued, "Codification can only succeed under despotism, and codified law is always inimical to public liberty" (*Hindu Patriot*, January 29, 1857: 1-2). Again, his zeal for public opinion, political liberty and constitutional liberalism made him argue for the recognition of the right to self–determination and when, after the ruthless suppression of the Revolt of 1857 the British Parliament was making arrangements for the transfer of India from East India Company to the British Crown he vigorously argued for the restoration of public opinion through the following argument:

> "Can a revolution in the Indian Government be authorized by parliament without consulting the wishes of the vast millions of men for whose benefit it is proposed to be made? The reply must be in the negative…..The time has nearly come when all Indian questions must be solved by Indians. The mutinies have made patent to the English public what must be the effects of politics in which the native is allowed no voice. (*Hindu Patriot*, April 22, 1858: 4)

During the unrest days of the Revolt of 1857 and Indigo-revolt the *Hindu Patriot* became the month-piece of millions of oppressed Indians. Simultaneously, it took the most crucial role in bridging the rival stances of rebellions and the British authority as a mediator (Sanyal, 1976, 68) The Revolt of 1857which broke out on 10th May of the year was an inevitable reaction of ruthless torture and wide discriminations, eventually from the very beginning drew the sympathy of the country and after ten days on 21st May Harish Chandra,

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in his paper for the first time among the oriental print media raised the question, "How slight the hold the British Government has acquired upon the affection of its Indian subjects events of the past few weeks have shown. It is no longer a mutiny but a rebellion."(*Hindu Patriot*, 21 May 1857: 3)

Harish Chandra, in an era when the existence of a newspaper entirely depended on the allegiance and support it gave to the alien ruler, maintained an autonomous, impartial and liberal role as a journalist. Even when some Anglo-Indians, some English newspapers and some conservative vernacular papers deliberately advised the Government to dispossess all the land-holding classes in India of their lands and made them over to Europeans and the proposal of making extensive English colonization was sedately put forth, Harish Chandra fearlessly and impartially maintained an exemplary balance by criticizing the atrocities of the British as well as, by trying to open the eyes of the enlightened British public to the reality of discriminations and ruthless oppressions in the name of civilized and liberal governance.

When the 'Sepoy Mutiny' (the Revolt of 1857) was suppressed huge atrocities and mass murders were committed in the name of trial under Martial Law and some of the English-owned papers took a malicious role by encouraging the butchery in the name of retribution. The Rev. James Long in his report of Calcutta Press criticized those English Papers as "The English newspapers in too many cases cherish the spirit of antagonism of race" (Quoted in Moitra, 1993: 119). When the British army ruthlessly burnt the villages Harish Chandra (*Hindu Patriot*, September 17, 1857:1-2) wrote, "It would be paltry justice to set fire to entire villages and massacre innocent men, women and children…. The Martial Law is a mockery of law and is justifiable only under peculiar circumstances."

Such an anti-British absolutist stance of Harish Chandra and his Hindu Patriot, it may be argued, reveals that he intended to expose the hypocrisy of the so-called British rulers who claimed themselves liberal but suppressed the free ideas arbitrarily. Moreover, through his vigorous journalism, he took a remarkable role in diffusing a liberal democratic ambience as well as a patriotic and nationalistic consciousness. On June 14, 1861, at an age of mere thirty-seven he suffered a premature demise but left a remarkable legacy of activists imbibed with liberal democratic spirit, which had been rightly acknowledged by Girish Chandra Ghosh in his memory through the column of Mukherjee's Magazine where he wrote, "We had only recently learnt the value of political liberty… Harish Chandra Mukherjee was the soul of this movement." (Mukherjee Magazine, June 16, 1861: 16).

The Second Half of Nineteenth Century: Dwarakanath Vidyabhushan and his News Paper *Somprakash*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, it may be claimed the articulation of democratic elements in terms of raising questions against authorities, voicing for the oppressed people, resisting governmental atrocities and so on. In other words, the mind breeze of the first half became an unrest storm in the latter half of the nineteenth century in which it had been the print media that took the most crucial role in the process of creation of democratic conditions. Among the various liberal mouthpieces, it was Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan's two turbulent newspapers—— *Somprakash* and *Aryadarshana* which took a remarkable role in the promotion of such conditions in the early second half of the nineteenth century. He, through the columns of his *Somprakash* vehemently criticized the prevailing racial discrimination in the contemporary judicial system in India. During the 1870s and 1880s, his fearless pen had several times condemned the prevailing trial system of criminal cases, which was based on wide discriminations in favour of the British-born subjects who enjoyed the privilege of trial by a judge of their race only, on the other hand, the Indian Judges, despite having similar rank of the Magistrate or Session Judges had been deprived of any right to try any European criminal (Ghosh, 1976: 440). Such an almost similar Legislative measure (like Bethun) after three decades had been re-introduced by Mr Ilbert, the law Member of the Viceroy's Council

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to establish equality in the eyes of the law, which is popularly known as the 'Ilbert Bill'. It tended to abolish the racial privilege of the British subjects of trial by a Judge belonging to their race in criminal cases. No sooner than the Ilbert Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1883 a more organized and more violent agitation (than the Black Act agitation) was started by the British subjects in India (Brown J., 1985: 130, Agarwal, 2005: 72).

They took various constitutional as well as unconstitutional measures to combat such legislative attempts. In no time they united themselves by forming civil societal associations like 'Defense Association' with branches all over the country; organized meetings in regular intervals; generated a healthy fund of one and a half lakh rupees; sent petitions and memorandums to the British Parliament and even, quiet unconstitutionally organized campaigns of vilification against the Indian, especially who supported the Ilbert Bill from any respect. They took the most unconstitutional as well as atrocious stand against the counter-political associations like the Indian Association[6] founded by Surendranath Banerjee and other political associations of Bengal and Bombay which fought hard for the smooth approval of the Ilbert Bill. During those unrest days of agitation and counter agitation, Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan took a tremendous role in creating public opinion arguing for the approval of the Ilbert Bill on the demand for equality as well as institutional Indianization in the public affairs of the government. He, under the caption of '*Zamindardiger Sabha'* (in Bengali) published in *Somprakash* (*Agrahayana* 11, 1290 B.S.: 4) firmly raised the question:

> "Why are the Indian Jurors not given any right to try the Englishmen in any criminal suit? ... It is already well established that the Indian Jurors are performing their duties with remarkable efficiency in any criminal as well as civil suits concerning native people. But in the case of the British, they can only try civil suits. Even if they possess the rank of Magistrate or Session Judges they cannot try the European criminals. In which respect do the British subjects claim such an unjust and biased privilege for them? Indian Judges have already proved their Excellencies in their assigned jobs in civil as well as criminal cases. Is it not a stark example of racial haughtiness of the British who claim themselves civilized and liberal?"

Such fearless journalism particularly raising a voice against any form of discrimination reveals the significant role of Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan in creating a liberal public opinion in favour of the Ilbert bill. Broadly, it may be argued that the liberal democratic stance of Dwarakanath was an indispensable part of the anti-absolutist movement against the British, which had already been initiated by Raja Rammohun Roy in the early nineteenth century. Simultaneously, it also proved his remarkable passion for the Indianization of public offices based on self-dignity. Besides arguing for Ilbert's bill he severely condemned the Rent Bill introduced by the then-British Parliament (Ghosh, 1976: 438). Comparing the dual stance of the British he tried to unmask their hypocrisy by arguing:

> "The British claim themselves liberal but their two-faced policy becomes unmasked when they support the Rent Bill but agitate against that Ilbert Bill. A liberal can understand, without any effort, that the Rent Bill kicks out the ideal of equality by expropriating the legal owner, even the ancestral owner from his entitled land and simultaneously, it may assign land to another person who is not entitled to have it. On the contrary, such 'liberals' (!) are shamelessly creating impediments to the approval of the Ilbert bill. These duel activities of the British reveal their hypocrisy and racial insolence to a remarkable degree." (*Somprakash, Agrahayana* 11, 1290 B.S.).

The Ilbert Bill, despite being supported by political associations and vernacular presses in India, could not be passed unchanged as it was introduced by Mr Ilbert. It suffered almost the same consequence as the Black Act of 1849. It was not withdrawn by the government but was amended beyond recognition and

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served no tended purpose when it passed into law. But it is very significant to note that like the Black Act movement, the agitation against the Ilbert Bill helped the cause of Indian Political consciousness. They learnt the value and strength of organized movement in political struggle, which according to historian Jadunath Sarkar (1960: 78) led them to organize the Indian National Congress after two years in 1885.

Despite the defeat of Dwarakanath and *Somprakash* on the approval of Ilbert Bill, their role in creating political consciousness as well as liberal democratic ambience must be acknowledged. Dwarakanath, through his vigorous journalism and intellectual leadership, took a remarkable role in creating anti-absolutist and liberal democratic political consciousness in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Another significant aspect of *Somprakash* was its praiseworthy role in social reformation movements, like the Widow-remarriage movement. Regarding the historical contribution of *Somprakash* Partha Chatterjee has rightly labelled it as 'the most powerful liberal paper' in nineteenth-century Bengal. Moreover, its radical criticism against unjust of any form brought some undesirable perils in its publication and the paper had several times faced Press Censorship. Dwarakanath, as its chief editor, had to provide recognition to the government on various occasions whenever it, according to the government, transgressed the limits of legitimate criticism (Chatterjee, 1977: 69). But those perils were too scarce to make him compromise to any ill-conceived governmental measure.

Sisir Kumar Ghosh and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*: Advocating for Freedom of press

Like other liberal modernizers, Sisir Kumar Ghosh ascribed the most importance to the unhindered freedom of the press which he regarded as the most powerful apparatus for creating political consciousness among the people. He was closely associated with two newspapers: Hindu Patriot and his *Amrita Bazar Patrika* among which he started his career at just eighteen as a journalist with the former one during the revolutionary days of the Indigo revolt. Believing firmly that the chief purpose of the Indian press was to promote and represent the interest of the people by opposing ill-conceived government measures, he emerged as one of the important intellectual leaders of the anti-absolutist movement during the seventh and eighth decades of the nineteenth century-Bengal.

Like Rammohun Roy, Sisir Kumar Ghosh thought that the freedom of the Press is the most important guarantee of good government as it can fetch the factors responsible for popular discontent and helps the government to adopt good policies to cope with the desires and interests of the governed (Sinha, 1968: 275). He was always aware of the absolute freedom of newspapers, which made him stand against any sort of ill-conceived governmental measures regarding any undemocratic censorship of the print media. Dawarakanath Mitra, one of the reputed Judges of the Calcutta High Court once expressed his anxiety that *Amrita Bazar Patrika* due to its virulence in criticizing the government may influence the messes by spreading discontent and disaffection in the Country. Sisir Kumar Ghosh, quite boldly and categorically replied, "The mission of the paper is to awaken the people and to kindle in them the fire of patriotism. They are now more dead than alive and need to be aroused from their slumber and therefore our language has to be louder and penetrating" (Quoted in Moitra, 1993: 144). The *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, due to its fearless criticism of any reactionary Governmental measure, drew some perils to its smooth journey and its turbulent editor, instead of giving his allegiance to any sort of repression, used his fiery pen more strongly to create a politically conscious public opinion in contemporary Bengal. With the enactment of the Vernacular Press Act on 14th March, 1878 he, to evade the restrictions, aptly converted his paper from a bi-lingual one to a purely English newspaper. Partha Chatterjee (1977: 73) has argued that the undemocratic Press Act of 1878 though was promulgated by Lord Lytton to stop all contemporary Vernacular newspapers criticizing the Government but its chief target was nothing but the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. But its overnight conversion to purely English paper made Lytton's attempt in vain and subsequently, in a series of articles Sisir Kumar Ghosh criticized the arbitrary Act tooth and nail and

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ultimately, succeeded in convincing the Government of the utility of having a free Press, which was realized by Lord Ripon who repealed the Act in 1882.

Surendranath as a Journalist Politician: The Bengalee and the Indian Association

One of the distinct features of nineteenth-century re-awakening in Bengal was that most of the liberal modernizers took journalism not as a mere profession but also as a useful tool to popularize their liberal views and to create a keen political consciousness which was so amorphous in contemporary society. The process started with Raja Rammohun Roy's edited '*Sambad Kaumudi*' and continued throughout the century by different liberal modernizers whose role in the making of democratic awareness has been explored in the preceding chapters. But it was only during the second half of the nineteenth century that journalism emerged in a 'new avatar' as the chief engine of the vehicle of the anti-absolutist movement. Some of those papers were *'Hindu Patriot'* edited by Harish Chandra Mukherjee and later by Kristo Das Pal, '*Somprakash*' edited by Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan, '*Amrita Bazar Patrika'* edited by Sisir Kumar Ghosh and a host of others. Surendranath Banerjea took the same role by taking charge of *'Bengalee'* by buying its proprietary right[7] from Bacharam Chatterjee on 1st January 1879 during the most challenging days in the history of press in Bengal as well as in India on the backdrop of Vernacular Press Act of 1878 enacted by Lord Lytton.

Needless to say, the basic objective of Surendranath in venturing into the realm of print media was nothing but creating an active public opinion, as extra support to what he intended to carry out through his Indian Association (est. In 1976), i.e., integration of India to create a national reverential feeling of 'Indian-ness'. When the Vernacular Press Act was enacted, the educated middle class was alarmed by such a reactionary arbitrary measure. Being disheartened by the indifference of the British Indian Association (Banerjee, 1998: 56), the Indian Association under the leadership of Surendranath roused to protest and tried to repeal as early as it could. Even though some of the significant Brahmo leaders declined to help Surendranath in that anti-absolutist protest movement there were some Christian people like Rev. Krishna Mohun Banerjee and Rev. K.S. McDonald whole-heartedly supported the movement and subsequently, a big meeting was arranged by the Indian Association at the Calcutta Town Hall (the main centre of civil society movement) which Surendranath (1998: 57) described as "the first great political demonstration of the middle-class community in Bengal".

Despite some anxiety about the possibility of criminal prosecution against the gathering[42], the immense enthusiasm of Surendranath made the meeting a big success. It was Anandamohan Basu who, being advised by some of his Lawyer friends at the Bar Library, suggested that Surendranath postpone the Town Hall meeting. The news of a possibility of an outbreak of war with Russia was received in Calcutta, given the fear that a criminal prosecution against the gathering at Town Hall might be executed by the Government. To this Surendranath (1998: 58) argued:

> "It is one of the first great demonstrations of the Indian Association and the middle-class party in Bengal, and if it were to be postponed, it would never again be held. The people would lose faith in us, and it would mean the beginning of the end….. Nothing serious needs to be apprehended, so long as we are moderate and will keep within constitutional bounds"

The public demonstration against the reactionary Vernacular Press Act was a big success, which according to Surendranath "sounded the death knell of the Vernacular Press Act" (Surendranath, 1998: 58). A letter drafted by Surendranath himself was sent to Mr. Gladstone by the Indian Association against Lytton's Press Act and Arms act of 1878. Though during Ripon's administration, the Vernacular Press Act was repealed, the Arms Act was retained by the Government (Sinha, 1968:376). The Indian Association continued criticizing the Government's arbitrary policy of retaining the Arms Act which, according to

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Surendranath, was mischievous and was creating a sense of mistrust and distinction between Europeans and Indians on the grounds of racial lines (Banerjee, 1998: 54). However the agitation led by the Indian Association was of crucial importance in terms of creating a public opinion in favour of such a democratic right like 'freedom of speech'.

To sum up, it may be claimed that the historical emergence of print media and its steady subsequent growth throughout the entire nineteenth century had been remarkable in terms of creating a democratic ambience in Bengal as well as India. It has been found that most of the liberal modernizers of the nineteenth century took journalism not only for their profession but also for the diffusion of their liberal ideas to form a keen public opinion in India. Though there were a good number of papers that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, it was only in the second half of the century when print media became the chief engine of the vehicle of growing political consciousness and constitutionalism in India. Among those some of the most notable were *Hindu Patriot*, *Somprakash*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Kalpadrum*, *Indian Mirror* and *Bengali*. The impact of these newspapers as the mouthpiece of liberal modernizers was too significant to ignore. Even the British government could not stay indifferent to their activities and tended to impose arbitrary legal measures against newspapers from time to time, which ultimately led the Indians to be conscious of their civic and political rights.

Notes

1. The year 1818 also marked the establishment of the Calcutta School Society, The Serampur College, Calcutta School Book Society and most importantly in this year Rammohun Roy published his famous tract on 'Sati' in which he profoundly denounced the custom sanctified by tradition.
2. When the Press Censorship of 1799 (imposed by Lord Wellesley) was abolished in 1818 by Hastings, soon a good number of vernacular journals and papers enriched with the liberal democratic spirit were published which too caused a democratic ambience in the nineteenth century. Some of those were *Bangadut, Jnananveshan,* Bengal Spectator, Hindu Patriot, *Tattvabodhini, Somprokash* etc. For detail, see Kaviraj, N. 1984: 162-66.
3. Though Bhabanicharan was initially associated with Rammohun Roy ideological differences made them separated and soon Samachar Chandrika became popular as a rival of Sambad Kaumudi and other liberal minded papers.
4. In that letter he pointed out that the Bengal Spectator would be their 'peculiar organ'. See the letter printed in Sanyal, 1976: 165-67.
5. It is important to note that Raja Rammohun Roy had pleaded for the codification of civil and criminal laws but Harish Chandra opposed it.
6. The Indian Association founded by Surendra Nath Banerjee in 1876 was one of the most important centres for civil societal movement.
7. The Bengalee was started under the management of Woomesh Chandra Bonnerjee. Girish Chandra Ghosh conducted the journal for nearly eight years. Then Babu Bacharam Chatterjee became its proprietor. (see Sanyal, R. 1976: 114).

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