



The might of the radical pen: Hindi journalism and the Indian Independence Movement (1905–1920)

Utsawi Chaturvedi

Department of History, St. Xavier's College, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Abstract

This article investigates the transformative role of Hindi-language journalism during a pivotal and turbulent time in Indian nationalism, covering the fifteen years from the Partition of Bengal in 1905 to the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. It posits that Hindi journalism underwent a significant evolution during this period, moving from the cautious constitutionalism characteristic of the Congress's moderate tradition to a more assertive, mass-oriented, and culturally rooted approach to nationalism. This shift not only anticipated but also facilitated the Gandhian turn in Indian politics. The article tracks this transformation through a detailed examination of key publications, influential editorial figures, and significant political events, including the Swadeshi agitation of 1905-08, the Lucknow Pact of 1916, the Rowlatt Act agitation of 1919, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It analyses the rhetorical and ideological strategies employed by Hindi journalism, including religious nationalism, economic critique, swadeshi (self-reliance) mobilisation, and the politics of memory and martyrdom.

Furthermore, it explores how the press navigated the increasing colonial censorship and repression. In conclusion, the article situates Hindi journalism within the broader shift towards mass nationalism instigated by Mahatma Gandhi's emergence. It argues that the vernacular press laid the cultural and political foundations for Gandhi's movement, a role historians have yet to acknowledge fully.

Keywords: Hindi journalism, Indian nationalism, swadeshi movement, garam dal, home rule movement, rowlatt Act, jallianwala bagh, Gandhian nationalism, vernacular press, colonial censorship

Introduction

The Partition of Bengal, announced by Lord Curzon on 19 July 1905 and formally effected on 16 October of the same year, did not merely divide a province; it divided Indian nationalism into before and after (Sarkar 1983, p.106). The administrative act — framed by the colonial government as a rational reorganisation of an unwieldy territory but understood by the nationalist movement as a deliberate strategy of divide-and-rule — provoked a response of unprecedented breadth and intensity that transformed the character of Indian political life. The swadeshi and boycott movements that erupted in Bengal spread rapidly to other parts of the country; new forms of political organisation, new modes of cultural resistance, and new rhetorics of national identity emerged in rapid succession; and within the Indian National Congress itself, a fundamental tension between moderate and extremist factions came to a crisis that would reshape the organisation for a generation (Sarkar, 1973^[23], p. 1).

For Hindi journalism, this transformation was both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lay in the dramatically enlarged space for political commentary that the nationalist upsurge created: readers who had previously engaged with the press primarily for literary and educational content now demanded political analysis, organisational guidance, and moral inspiration, and those publications that could supply these needs found their circulations and their public authority expanding rapidly (Natrajan 1962, p.161). The challenge lay in the intensifying hostility of the colonial administration, which responded to the nationalist agitation with a battery of repressive measures — press ordinances, sedition prosecutions, preventive detention — that placed

Hindi journalists who remained committed to critical and confrontational journalism at genuine personal risk.

This article traces the evolution of Hindi journalism through three overlapping phases. The first, covering the years 1905 to 1908^[27], examines the press's engagement with the swadeshi agitation and the split in the Congress at Surat. The second, covering the years 1908^[27] to 1914, analyses the press's response to the intensifying repression of the Hardinge years and the emergence of a more explicitly revolutionary nationalism in certain sections of Hindi print culture. The third, covering the years 1914 to 1920^[33], traces the press's engagement with the First World War, the Home Rule movement, the Rowlatt Act agitation, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, before concluding with an assessment of Hindi journalism's role in preparing the conditions for the Gandhian mass movement. Throughout, the article examines the relationship between the political content of Hindi journalism and its literary and cultural dimensions, arguing that they cannot be separated without distorting our understanding of either.

The Swadeshi Moment and Its Vernacular Mediations

The Swadeshi movement that erupted in Bengal in 1905 was, among many other things, a movement of and through the press. Bengali-language newspapers and journals — *Yugantar*, *Sandhya*, *Bengalee* — were at the vanguard of the agitation, providing organisational infrastructure, ideological coherence, and emotional intensity to a movement that might otherwise have remained confined to the educated urban classes (Sarkar, 1973^[23], p. 49). But the significance of the swadeshi press was not limited to Bengal; the movement's ideas, slogans, and strategies were transmitted to the Hindi-speaking world through a

vernacular press that translated, adapted, and in some respects radicalised them for northern Indian audiences.

Hindi newspapers responded to the partition announcement with an alacrity and passion that had no precedent in their previous history. Bharat Mitra, *Hindustan*, *Abhyudaya* (founded in Allahabad in 1907 by Madan Mohan Malaviya), and the Lucknow-based *Prabhā* all devoted extensive coverage to the anti-partition agitation, reproducing speeches by Bengali leaders, reporting on public meetings and bonfires of foreign cloth, and publishing original editorials that framed the partition as an injury to the entire Indian nation rather than merely to Bengal (Orsini, 2002, p. 214). This coverage was not politically neutral; it consistently supported the most confrontational wing of the agitation, celebrating the boycott of British goods, endorsing the concept of national education as an alternative to colonial schooling, and treating the leaders of the extremist faction — Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai — as heroes of the national cause.

Lala Lajpat Rai's special significance for Hindi journalism warrants emphasis. The Punjabi leader, whose political formation had been shaped by the Arya Samaj and who combined religious reformism with fierce anti-colonial politics, was both a politician and a journalist whose Urdu and Hindi writings were among the most widely read nationalist texts of the period. His deportation to Burma by the colonial government in May 1907^[1], without trial and based on intelligence reports about alleged sedition, transformed him into a martyr figure whose treatment became a rallying cry for the Hindi press (Barrier, 1974^[7], p. 67). Bharat Mitra and *Abhyudaya* published extensive coverage of the deportation, accompanied by editorials that challenged the legal basis of the government's action and called on Indians to recognise that the colonial state's claims to operate under the rule of law were a fiction maintained only when convenient (Lajpat Rai, 1908^[27], p. 34).

The Swadeshi movement also catalysed the founding of new Hindi publications that were more explicitly political than their predecessors. *Abhyudaya* (Uplift/Progress), which Malaviya established at Allahabad in 1907, was conceived from the outset as an instrument of nationalist mobilisation as much as a literary or educational journal. Its pages combined coverage of Congress politics with economic journalism focused on the condition of Indian industries, biographies of nationalist leaders, and sustained advocacy for swadeshi and self-reliance in language that drew on the religious vocabulary of the Ganga-Yamuna cultural zone — pilgrimage, sacrifice, devotion — to invest economic choices with spiritual significance (Bhatt, 1993^[5], p. 145). This fusion of the economic and the spiritual was characteristic of the Hindi nationalist press of this period and distinguished it from both the secular constitutional language of the Congress mainstream and the more purely political rhetoric of the Bengali extremists.

The year 1909^[39] also saw the founding of *Karmaayogi* in Allahabad, a weekly that pushed the boundaries of permissible political commentary further than most contemporaries were prepared to venture (Agarwal 2021, p.122). Its editors drew explicitly on the revolutionary nationalism of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and on the philosophical framework of the *Bhagavad Gita* — specifically the concept of *nishkama karma*, selfless action performed without attachment to its fruits — to argue that the struggle for national liberation was not merely a political

project but a moral and spiritual imperative, a form of devotion to the motherland that superseded conventional calculations of prudence and self-interest (Mishra 2012^[29], p.80). This philosophical nationalism, which sought to ground anti-colonial resistance in the deepest resources of the Indian ethical tradition, would become increasingly influential in Hindi political culture as the movement intensified (Sunderlal 2012^[29], p.80).

The Surat Split and Its Journalistic Aftermath

The annual session of the Indian National Congress at Surat in December 1907^[3] ended in a dramatic split between the moderate faction led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale and the extremist faction associated with Tilak (Sarkar 1983, p. 136). The split was the culmination of years of growing tension over questions of strategy, ideology, and leadership; it resulted in the formal exclusion of the extremist faction from the Congress organisation and the effective dominance of the moderates for the following decade (Wolpert, 1962^[48], p. 198). In Hindi journalism, the Surat split posed a question of political alignment, with different publications offering different answers, revealing the ideological diversity within the Hindi press and the complexity of its relationship to Congress nationalism (Orsini 2002).

The majority of established Hindi papers — *Hindustan*, *Bharat Mitra*, *Abhyudaya* — maintained their formal association with the Congress but expressed varying degrees of sympathy for the extremist position. Their editorial responses to Surat reflected a characteristic ambivalence: they condemned the disorder that had marred the session, affirmed their commitment to constitutional methods, but also insisted that the extremists' critique of moderate timidity was not without substance and that the Congress needed to adopt a more assertive posture toward the colonial government if it was to retain the confidence of the politically awakened public (Orsini, 2002, p. 221). This equivocal position reflected the genuine complexity of the Hindi journalistic community's political allegiances, which did not map neatly onto the moderate-extremist binary that dominated Congress politics (Natrajan 1962).

A smaller number of Hindi publications identified more explicitly with the extremist tradition. The Lahore-based Punjabi, edited by Lajpat Rai's associates, and the Allahabad *Karmayogi* both adopted positions closer to those of Tilak's faction, arguing that the Surat outcome represented the triumph of a colonial collaborationism masquerading as political responsibility and that the real Congress — the Congress of the people, not of the English-educated professionals — lay with the extremists (Barrier, 1974, p. 89). These papers faced heightened scrutiny from the colonial government following the Surat split, which was accompanied by a significant increase in sedition prosecutions against the vernacular press.

The colonial administration's response to the political agitation of 1905–08 included the Seditious Meetings Act of 1907, the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908^[27], and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908^[27], all of which significantly expanded the government's powers to suppress political activity and to prosecute those responsible for it (Barrier, 1974, p. 92). The 1908^[7, 27] Newspapers Act specifically targeted the vernacular press, empowering magistrates to order the forfeiture of the press and property of any newspaper that published material deemed to excite feelings of disaffection toward the government or to

encourage violence. The Act was used aggressively: between 1908^[27] and 1910, dozens of Hindi and other vernacular newspapers received notices, and several were prosecuted, their editors imprisoned and their presses confiscated (Natarajan, 1962^[31], p. 156).

The prosecution of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1908^[27] for sedition, arising from articles in his Marathi newspapers, had a profound effect on Hindi journalism. The trial — in which Tilak conducted his own defence with a brilliance that transformed the courtroom into a platform for nationalist argument — was extensively covered by Hindi newspapers, many of which published Hindi translations of Tilak's defence speeches. The six-year sentence of transportation that Tilak received radicalised a section of Hindi journalistic opinion that had previously been cautious about endorsing confrontational politics; the naked demonstration that the colonial legal system would imprison a man for political journalism regardless of its constitutional propriety made the pretensions of the rule of law harder to sustain (Chandra, 1989, p. 134). Several Hindi editors subsequently adopted positions that they acknowledged, in private correspondence if not always in print, owed something to the lesson of Tilak's prosecution: that the colonial government regarded political journalism itself as a form of sedition, and that any journalism which accepted the colonial legal framework as legitimate was, at least implicitly, endorsing its own potential suppression.

Repression, Resistance, and the Hindi Press, 1908^[27]–1914

The years between the Swadeshi agitation and the First World War marked a crucial phase of growth for Hindi journalism, despite the challenges it faced. In the wake of the anti-partition agitation, repressive legislation imposed limitations on political commentary, prompting several notable Hindi journals to adapt their approaches or, in some cases, suspend publication (Bhatnagar 1962, p.255). However, this era also witnessed remarkable progress in both the institutional framework and literary quality of Hindi journalism. These advancements laid a strong foundation that would eventually contribute to the press's evolution and radicalisation, shaping its role in the broader struggle for social and political change (Ninan 2007).

The most significant institutional development during this period was the continued growth of the *Saraswati* magazine under the editorship of Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, alongside the emergence of a substantial network of Hindi literary journals (Bhatnagar 1962, p. 268). These publications, while steering clear of overt political commentary, played a crucial role in cultivating a reading public whose cultural formation was profoundly nationalist (Ninan 2007, p.40). At its founding in 1900, *Saraswati's* circulation was modest. However, it steadily increased throughout the first decade of the century, reaching several thousand subscribers by 1910—a notable figure for a Hindi-language publication of that era (Orsini, 2002, p. 246). The magazine's pages featured a blend of literary criticism, biographical essays on prominent Indian cultural figures, translations from both Indian and European literatures, and discussions on social reform (Sharma 2016). This combination fostered a cultural nationalism that operated just below the threshold of explicit political advocacy, while continuously reinforcing the belief that India possessed a civilisation of the highest order, deserving of self-governance (Singh 2000)^[42].

The publication in 1909^[39] of Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* — initially in Gujarati and translated almost immediately into Hindi and other Indian languages — introduced into Hindi print culture a set of arguments about the relationship between civilisation, colonialism, and self-rule that would prove enormously influential in subsequent years (Iyer 1973)^[23]. *Hind Swaraj* was reviewed and discussed in several publications, though the response was not uniformly enthusiastic. Gandhi's own 'mentor', the political leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale, opined that the book was 'so crude and hastily conceived that he prophesied that Gandhiji himself would destroy the book after spending a year in India' (Gokhale cited in Gandhi 1938^[17], p.xxii). Nevertheless, the text's circulation through the Hindi print sphere introduced Gandhi as a political thinker to an audience that would be crucial to his subsequent career as a mass mobiliser (Bulla & Becker 2022)^[9].

The Ghadar movement, founded in 1913 by Punjabi migrants in North America, represented a more explicitly revolutionary challenge to colonial rule than anything that had yet appeared in mainstream Hindi political culture (Puri 1993)^[13]. The movement's newspaper, *Ghadar* (*Mutiny*), was published in Gurmukhi and Urdu as well as Hindi, and its virulently anti-colonial content — which explicitly celebrated the 1857 uprising and called for armed revolution to expel the British — circulated clandestinely in northern India through networks of radical nationalists (Josh, 1977^[24], p. 23). Mainstream Hindi journalism maintained a cautious distance from the Ghadar movement, whose explicit advocacy of violence placed it well outside the bounds of what established editors considered responsible political journalism. Still, the movement's ideas permeated the political atmosphere of the Hindi-speaking world and contributed to the press's radicalisation, which accelerated during and after the First World War.

The years 1911 and 1912 brought two events that had significant resonance in the Hindi press. The annulment of the Partition of Bengal in 1911, announced at the Delhi Durbar as a royal gift from the Crown, was celebrated across the Hindi press as a vindication of the nationalist movement's sustained agitation; even papers that had been cautious about endorsing the more confrontational tactics of the swadeshi period could present the annulment as evidence that popular pressure — including the pressure of a mobilised vernacular press — could compel the colonial government to reverse its policies (Sarkar, 1973^[23], p. 289). The announcement of the capital's transfer from Calcutta to Delhi elicited a mixed response. Hindi journalists expressed satisfaction that the new capital was situated in the heart of the Hindi-speaking region. However, they were also acutely aware that the Durbar, with its elaborate ceremonial affirmations of British imperial sovereignty, was intended to suppress rather than embrace nationalist sentiment (Lahiry 2018).

The second significant event was the founding of Madan Mohan Malaviya's Banaras Hindu University project, which the Hindi press embraced as a landmark institutional expression of the cultural nationalism that Hindi journalism had been cultivating for decades. *Abhyudaya* and other Malaviya-associated publications devoted extensive coverage to the university fundraising campaign, presenting it as a collective project of the Hindi-Hindu community—a demonstration that the nation could build its own educational institutions without depending on colonial

patronage (Bhatt, 1993 ^[5], p. 189). The BHU project also provided an occasion for the articulation of a specifically Hindu nationalism that was increasingly difficult to distinguish, in the pages of the Hindi press, from Indian nationalism more broadly — a conflation with important consequences for the relationship between Hindu and Muslim participants in the independence movement.

The First World War and the Radicalisation of Hindi Journalism

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 created a new and complex situation for Indian journalism. The Congress, under the influence of its moderate leadership, initially adopted a posture of loyal support for the war effort, calculating that Indian cooperation would earn constitutional concessions from a grateful imperial government (Nanda 1898). This posture was reflected in many Hindi newspapers, which published patriotic editorials emphasising Indian loyalty and hinting at the rewards that might follow from military sacrifice (Chandra, 1989 ^[30], p. 156). But the relationship between the war and Indian nationalism was never so simple. As the conflict dragged on for years of grinding attrition, with no sign of the promised political reforms, the tone of Hindi journalism grew progressively more impatient and assertive.

The Home Rule movement, launched simultaneously by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Annie Besant in 1916, found enthusiastic support in the Hindi press. Tilak's Home Rule League and Besant's All India Home Rule League were distinct organisations with somewhat different political emphases. Still, they shared a common demand — *swaraj*, or self-rule, within the British Empire — and a common strategy of mass mobilisation through meetings, pamphlets, and the press (Wolpert, 1962 ^[48], p. 256). Hindi journalism was well positioned to support this mobilisation: the networks of readers, correspondents, and activist editors that the press had built over the preceding decades provided exactly the organisational infrastructure that the Home Rule movement required, and several prominent Hindi journalists became leading figures in the movement.

Among the most important journalistic figures of this period was Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi (1890–1931), whose Kanpur-based weekly *Pratap* (*Glory/Radiance*), founded in 1913, rapidly established itself as one of the most politically engaged and editorially courageous Hindi publications of the era. Vidyarthi combined extraordinary personal courage with a journalist's instinct for the politically significant, covering subjects — agrarian distress in the Awadh *talugdari* system, the conditions of indigo labourers in Bihar, the brutality of colonial police towards political prisoners — that most of his contemporaries either avoided or treated with excessive caution (Trivedi, 1990 ^[45], p. 45). His willingness to publish material that the colonial government considered seditious earned him multiple arrests and imprisonments, which he bore with a composure that enhanced his public authority and made him a symbol of journalistic martyrdom for a generation of younger Hindi writers (Bhargava 1988) ^[4].

Pratap was notable among Hindi newspapers of the period for its systematic attention to working-class and peasant experience. Vidyarthi understood — earlier and more clearly than most Hindi journalists — that the nationalist movement's future lay with the masses rather than with the educated classes, and that the press's responsibility was not

merely to educate or inspire the masses but to listen to them, to give voice to their grievances, and to connect their local experiences of exploitation to the larger political structures that produced them (Vidyarthi, 1919 ^[46], p. 12). This commitment to what might be called a journalism of the subaltern — practised within the constraints of a periodical literature that was still primarily addressed to a literate, relatively comfortable readership — distinguished *Pratap* from its contemporaries and pointed toward the more explicitly populist journalism of the Gandhian era.

The Lucknow Pact of 1916, in which the Congress and the All-India Muslim League reached a historic agreement on the terms of future constitutional reform and the principle of separate electorates for Muslims, was widely covered by the Hindi press, with a mixture of cautious optimism and barely concealed anxiety. The agreement represented the Congress's formal acceptance of the principle of communal representation — a concession that many Hindi journalists regarded as politically necessary but culturally troubling, since it implicitly recognised the Muslim community as a separate political entity rather than as an undifferentiated part of the Indian nation (Hardy, 1972 ^[21], p. 178). The ambivalence of the Hindi press toward the Lucknow Pact reflected a deeper tension within Hindi nationalism between the ideal of a unified, secular national community and the communal anxieties generated by the language controversy and the politics of representation over the preceding decades (Brass 1974) ^[7].

The Montagu Declaration of August 1917 — in which the Secretary of State for India announced that the policy of the British government was the gradual development of self-governing institutions in India with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government — generated intense discussion in the Hindi press. The declaration's vagueness about timescales and mechanisms was immediately noted; Hindi editors pointed out that the promise of "gradual development" and "progressive realisation" contained no commitment to any specific reform, and that the history of British promises to India provided little grounds for confidence that this one would be honoured without sustained political pressure (Mishra, 1973 ^[23], p. 167). Nevertheless, the declaration was treated as evidence that the nationalist movement's pressure was having an effect, and as an argument for intensifying rather than relaxing that pressure.

The Press, the Rowlatt Act, and the Road to Jallianwala Bagh

The Rowlatt Act, passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in March 1919 over the unanimous opposition of its Indian members, represented the colonial government's definitive rejection of the argument that wartime loyalty would be rewarded with political concessions. The Act, which extended the wartime emergency powers for the detention of political suspects without trial, was experienced by the nationalist movement as a profound betrayal. The response it provoked — including Gandhi's call for a nationwide *hartal* (strike) on 6 April 1919 — marked the beginning of the era of mass nationalist politics (Brown, 1972 ^[21], p. 145). Hindi journalism's response to the Rowlatt Act was unequivocal and furious. Papers across the political spectrum — from the moderate *Abhyudaya* to the more radical *Pratap* — condemned the legislation in terms that drew on every rhetorical resource available: constitutional

argument, moral indignation, historical parallel, and emotional appeal (Bhargava 1988; Vyas 1987)^[4, 47]. Pratap published a special issue devoted entirely to the Act, reproducing its provisions in full translation, providing a legal commentary that exposed its incompatibility with basic principles of due process, and publishing statements of opposition from prominent political and religious figures (Trivedi, 1990^[45], p. 78). This kind of comprehensive, accessible journalism — which simultaneously informed, contextualised, and mobilised its readers — demonstrated the political maturity that the Hindi press had achieved over its decades of engagement with nationalist politics.

The colonial government's response to the Rowlatt Act agitation included imposing press censorship in Punjab and banning the entry of newspapers from outside the province. These restrictions were themselves newsworthy, and Hindi papers outside Punjab covered them extensively, making the suppression of information into a political issue in its own right (Barrier, 1974^[7], p. 134). The coverage of the censorship itself was an act of resistance. By making visible the colonial government's attempts to control information, Hindi journalism undermined the legitimacy of those attempts and reinforced the argument that the government had something to hide.

What it had to hide was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 13 April 1919, in which Brigadier General Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to fire on an unarmed crowd gathered in an enclosed garden in Amritsar, killing at least 379 people and wounding more than a thousand. The massacre, and the subsequent imposition of martial law in Punjab with its associated humiliations — the crawling order, the public floggings, the aerial bombardment of villages — represented the most extreme exercise of colonial violence against unarmed civilians that India had witnessed since the suppression of the 1857 uprising (Collett, 2006^[14], p. 267).

The Hindi press's coverage of Jallianwala Bagh was shaped by the conditions of censorship that made direct reporting difficult in the immediate aftermath, but as information filtered out through private correspondence and the accounts of witnesses who had escaped the Punjab, the full horror of the event became clear (Bhargava 1988^[4], p.24; Parmanand 1985, p.374). The response of Hindi newspapers was not merely journalistic outrage — though that was amply present — but a sustained attempt to construct a narrative framework within which the massacre and its aftermath could be understood as a moment of political revelation. Jallianwala Bagh was presented not as an aberration from the normal operation of colonial rule but as its logical culmination: the endpoint of a system of government that rested ultimately on violence, and whose civilisational pretensions were exposed as fraudulent by the willingness of its representatives to massacre unarmed worshippers on a festival day (Datta, 1999^[16], p. 112).

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi's Pratap was among the most courageous and comprehensive in its coverage of the Punjab atrocities, publishing accounts of the massacre and of the subsequent martial law regime despite the risk of prosecution (Bhargava 1988)^[4]. Vidyarthi understood that the moral and political stakes of the moment were too high for journalistic caution: the public needed to know what had happened in Amritsar, and the press's responsibility was to tell them, regardless of personal risk (Trivedi, 1990^[34], p. 89). His coverage of Jallianwala Bagh established Pratap as the most trusted source of information on the Punjab

situation among Hindi readers, significantly expanding the paper's circulation and political influence.

The Congress's investigation into the Punjab atrocities, conducted by a committee that included Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, and C.R. Das, produced a report published in Hindi and English and widely circulated through the Hindi press network (Gandhi et al., 1920^[33], p. 2). The committee's findings — which documented the massacre in detail, condemned Dyer's actions as brutal and unjustifiable, and criticised the colonial government's initial support for Dyer — were presented by Hindi newspapers as official confirmation of what the vernacular press had been reporting for months (Gandhi et al., 1920^[19], p. 34). The report's publication in Hindi was itself significant: it demonstrated that Congress leadership, increasingly influenced by Gandhi's emphasis on mass mobilisation, recognised that the findings needed to reach a vernacular audience, not merely the English-educated public (Orsini 2002).

The Politics of Memory and Martyrdom in Hindi Journalism

A recurring theme in Hindi journalism throughout this period was the cultivation of a nationalist memory and a politics of martyrdom — the transformation of the dead and imprisoned into symbols of the national cause whose sacrifices called on the living to renew their commitment to the struggle. This practice had deep roots in Hindi literary and devotional culture, which had long celebrated the figures of the bhakta (devotee) and the shahid (martyr) as models of selfless commitment to a cause higher than personal survival (Pinney, 2004^[35], p. 178).

Hindi journalism adapted these cultural templates for political purposes with considerable sophistication. The deaths or imprisonments of nationalist figures were marked with memorial essays, biographical sketches, and poetic tributes that situated their subjects within a narrative of sacrificial heroism stretching back to the 1857 uprising and, in the cultural nationalist imagination, to the ancient Indian past (Bhargava 1988^[4]; Parmanand 1985). Bal Gangadhar Tilak's death in August 1920^[19] — which occurred just as the Non-Cooperation Movement was getting underway — was commemorated across the Hindi press with an intensity that reflected his iconic status; Pratap, Abhyudaya, and Saraswati all published special memorial issues that presented Tilak's life as the embodiment of the ideal of national service (Orsini, 2002, p. 263).

The 1857 uprising occupied a special place in the memorial politics of Hindi journalism. The colonial government's characterisation of 1857 as the "Indian Mutiny" — a criminal outbreak of military indiscipline and religious fanaticism — had been contested by nationalist historians since the late nineteenth century, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's history of the uprising, published in 1909^[39] and immediately banned by the colonial government, framed 1857 as the First Indian War of Independence (Savarkar, 1909^[39], p. 1). Hindi journalism enthusiastically embraced this reframing, publishing articles and essays that celebrated 1857 heroes — Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi — as martyrs of the national cause (Chakravarty, 1988^[10], p. 45). The figure of Rani Lakshmibai was particularly significant for Hindi political culture: a warrior queen who died fighting the British, she provided a model of heroic femininity that challenged both colonial

representations of Indian women as passive and domestic and the social conservatism of much Hindi nationalist discourse on gender.

The politics of martyrdom intersected with the language question in revealing ways. Hindi journalism consistently presented the advocates of the Hindi language — editors who had been prosecuted, scholars who had been passed over for government positions, teachers who had lost their livelihoods for refusing to teach in Urdu — as martyrs to the cause of national cultural identity. This rhetoric of sacrifice served to mobilise emotional identification with the Hindi cause and to make resistance to colonial language policy feel not merely politically justified but morally obligatory — a duty to the nation and to the ancestors who had preserved the language and its literary traditions across centuries of foreign rule (King, 1994^[26], p. 201).

Gandhi, the Vernacular Press, and the Transition to Mass Nationalism

Mahatma Gandhi's return to India from South Africa in January 1915^[8] and his gradual assumption of leadership of the Indian nationalist movement over the following years constituted the most significant transformation in the political landscape that Hindi journalism had yet confronted. Gandhi was himself a journalist of long experience — his editorship of *Indian Opinion* in South Africa had been central to his political development — and he understood the press as an instrument of mass communication and political education in ways that previous Congress leaders, most of whom operated primarily through the English-language dailies, had not (Gandhi, 1948^[18], p. 212).

Gandhi's approach to the vernacular press was strategically shrewd and culturally attentive. He consistently worked to communicate in and through vernacular languages rather than relying solely on English, publishing his political writings in Gujarati, Hindi, and English, and cultivating relationships with vernacular journalists who could carry his message to audiences beyond the reach of the English-language press (Bulla & Becker 2022)^[9]. His founding of *Young India* (in English) and *Navajivan* (in Gujarati and later Hindi) in 1919 gave him direct access to the vernacular print sphere; *Navajivan* in particular became one of the most widely read Hindi publications of the early 1920s^[33], providing a model of accessible, morally serious journalism that influenced a generation of Hindi editors and writers (Tendulkar, 1951^[44], p. 267).

The relationship between Gandhi's political programme and the existing tradition of Hindi journalism was one of both continuity and rupture (Bhattacharyya 1965)^[6]. The continuities were substantial: Gandhi's swadeshi and boycott politics drew on a vocabulary and a set of political arguments that Hindi journalism had been developing for fifteen years; his emphasis on self-reliance, on the rejection of foreign goods, and on the transformation of everyday economic choices into political acts was entirely consonant with the economic nationalism that papers like *Bharat Mitra* and *Pratap* had been advocating since the swadeshi agitation (Chatterjee, 1986^[12], p. 134). His use of religious imagery and vocabulary — the framing of political resistance as spiritual discipline, the concept of *satyagraha* (truth-force) as a morally superior alternative to violence — resonated with the devotional nationalism that had characterised the best Hindi journalism of the *Bharatendu* tradition.

The ruptures were equally significant. Gandhi's insistence on the centrality of the rural poor to the nationalist

movement — his consistent challenge to the educated, urban bias of Congress politics — posed an implicit critique of a Hindi journalism that, despite its rhetoric of popular mobilisation, remained primarily addressed to a literate middle-class readership. His championing of Hindustani — a mixed register drawing on both Sanskrit and Persian sources, written in both Devanagari and Perso-Arabic scripts — as the national language, rather than the Sanskritised Hindi that the language movement had been promoting, created tensions with Hindi nationalist journalists who regarded this position as a dangerous concession to the Muslim minority (King, 1994^[26], p. 225). These tensions were managed, in the Hindi press, through a combination of genuine respect for Gandhi's political genius and strategic ambiguity about the specific points of disagreement (Orsini 2002). Most Hindi papers endorsed Gandhi's political programme while maintaining discreet silence on aspects of his vision that conflicted with their cultural nationalism. This selective endorsement was politically effective in the short term. Still, it left unresolved contradictions that would become apparent in subsequent decades, when the Hindi movement's communal dimensions and Gandhi's inclusive nationalism came into sharper conflict (Pandey 1990)^[34].

Colonial Censorship and the Hindi Press

Any account of Hindi journalism in this period must grapple seriously with the material reality of colonial censorship and its effects on what the press could say and how it could say it (Natrajan 1962)^[48]. The legislative arsenal available to the colonial government for suppressing inconvenient journalism was formidable and was deployed with increasing frequency as the nationalist movement intensified. The Sedition Act (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code), the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908^[27], and the Press Act of 1910 together gave the administration extensive powers to prosecute editors, forfeit presses and assets, and require publishers to provide securities. This financial burden was effectively prohibitive for the undercapitalised Hindi press (Barrier, 1974^[7], p. 145).

The colonial government's monitoring of the Hindi press was systematic and detailed. Provincial governments maintained regular records of the political content of major Hindi newspapers, and summaries of their editorial positions were transmitted to the central government and to the India Office in London (Kaul 2003). Press commissioners and intelligence officers read Hindi papers with close attention and flagged material that seemed to cross the threshold of sedition or incitement (Arnold, 1988^[2], p. 56). This surveillance apparatus shaped the practice of Hindi journalism in complex ways. For example, editors were constantly aware of being watched, and this awareness inflected every editorial decision, from the choice of topics to cover to the precise wording of commentaries on colonial policy (Israel 1994)^[26].

The response of Hindi journalists to this surveillance was varied. Some adopted a strategy of studied restraint, confining their political commentary to subjects and phrasings that could not easily be construed as seditious (Agrawal 2021). Others developed sophisticated rhetorical strategies for saying radical things in technically defensible forms: allegory, historical parallel, Socratic questioning, the device of the naïve vernacular commentator who asks

innocent questions about colonial policy. Still others — Vidyarthi and the editors of the more radical papers — accepted prosecution as an occupational hazard and wore their imprisonments as badges of honour, understanding that the spectacle of a journalist jailed for writing the truth was itself a form of political communication (Trivedi, 1990 [45], p. 112).

The impact of censorship on the content of Hindi journalism extended beyond individual acts of suppression to shape the press's culture more broadly (Natrajan 1962) [48]. The constant threat of prosecution created a form of self-censorship that was more pervasive than the external censorship itself, discouraging editors from pursuing stories that might attract government attention and fostering a culture of caution that coexisted uneasily with the ideological commitment to truth-telling and national service (Sethi 2019). Understanding this dynamic — the tension between the press's self-image as the voice of the nation and the practical constraints of operating under a repressive colonial regime — is essential to a full appreciation of what Hindi journalism achieved in this period and what it was prevented from achieving.

The Hindi Press and Gender: Women, Nationalism, and Print Culture

No account of Hindi journalism in this period would be complete without attention to its construction and treatment of gender — a dimension of the press's politics that has received insufficient scholarly attention relative to its importance. Hindi newspapers and magazines from the 1905–1920 [33] period were produced almost exclusively by men and addressed primarily to male readers. Yet, they were far from silent on questions of women's education, status, and role in the nationalist movement.

The dominant frame through which Hindi journalism addressed gender was that of the educated, patriotic Indian woman — the grihalakshmi (goddess of the household) who embodied national virtues of purity, sacrifice, and devotion, and whose educational uplift was presented as both a moral imperative and a national necessity (Chatterjee, 1993 [13], p. 130). This frame was deeply conservative in its assumptions about women's primary roles as wives and mothers, and its advocacy for women's education was explicitly instrumental — women needed to be educated so that they could educate their children in national values, not so that they could participate as equals in public life. The occasional women writers who appeared in the pages of *Saraswati* and other literary journals were celebrated as examples of female achievement within this conservative framework, their literary talents presented as ornaments to the nation rather than as evidence that women deserved the same public roles as men.

Yet the frame was not entirely static. As the nationalist movement intensified and women began to participate more visibly in swadeshi activities, boycott campaigns, and the Home Rule agitation, the Hindi press's representation of women evolved in ways that, while remaining within patriarchal limits, acknowledged and celebrated women's political agency (Nijhawan 2008) [32]. The figure of the nationalist woman — who participated in swadeshi demonstrations, organised boycott campaigns in the domestic sphere, and educated her children in love of the motherland — appeared with increasing frequency in Hindi journalism after 1905, her political engagement presented

not as a departure from femininity but as its highest expression (Sarkar, 1987, p. 248). This expanded representation of women's nationalism, however limited by its patriarchal framework, was a significant development in the Hindi press's political culture.

Conclusion

The period from 1905 to 1920 [33] witnessed a fundamental transformation in the character, scope, and political significance of Hindi journalism. From a press that had been, at the turn of the century, primarily concerned with literary and cultural questions and only secondarily with political ones, Hindi journalism emerged by 1920 [33] as a primary site of nationalist mobilisation, political education, and anti-colonial resistance. This transformation was driven by the cumulative effect of political crises — partition, swadeshi, the Congress split, the First World War, the Rowlatt Act, Jallianwala Bagh — that repeatedly demonstrated the urgency of the nationalist project and the indispensability of a vernacular press capable of communicating that urgency to mass audiences.

The achievements of Hindi journalism in this period were real and substantial. It had translated the Congress's constitutional politics into accessible vernacular discourse, enabling a much wider audience to engage with the nationalist project than the English-language press could reach. It had developed a sophisticated economic nationalism that connected the abstract language of political economy to the lived experience of famine, dispossession, and deindustrialisation. It had cultivated a politics of memory and martyrdom that gave the nationalist movement its emotional depth and historical resonance. And it had, through the work of editors like Vidyarthi and journalists like Malaviya, developed models of politically committed journalism that combined factual rigour with moral passion, influencing Indian journalism for generations.

The arrival of Gandhi transformed this tradition but did not replace it. The Gandhian mass movement of the 1920s [33] and beyond drew heavily on the organisational networks, rhetorical resources, and political culture that Hindi journalism had spent decades constructing. The concept of satyagraha may have been Gandhi's philosophical innovation. Still, the vernacular public sphere within which it resonated — the community of Hindi readers who understood political resistance as a form of moral obligation — had been created by the editors and correspondents, the printers and distributors, the subscribers and letter-writers of the Hindi press. In the famous formulation that the pen is mightier than the sword, the Hindi press of this period demonstrated that the pen could also be something more than a weapon of individual combat: it could be the instrument through which a colonised people came to understand themselves as a nation, and a nation began to find the courage to demand its freedom.

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