

Influence of print technology in building national consciousness in colonial south India

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Abstract

The upsurge and growth of nationalism in India was the result of various subjective and objective forces that emerged during the British rule. The emergence of Printing Press played a significant role to bring national consciousness among people. As a vehicle of change, printing transformed the methods of storage, data collection, the way of communication used by the learned community and also redefined the relationship between individual and society. This paper focuses on how print technology basically by the evolution of newspaper in colonial south India spread the idea of nationalism among people and how the development of print culture has also accelerated the development of state language.

Keywords: print culture, colonial south India, technology and national change

Introduction

“Behind every political revolution there should be writers. Letters are the powerful weapon. It can transform the society. It can make new world”. Assertion by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai truly depict the role of letter or books as an integral tool to change the society in an innovative way. The upsurge and growth of nationalism in India was the result of various subjective and objective forces that emerged during the British rule. The advent of transport (railways), communication (postal service and telegraph) and the emergence of Printing Press played a significant role to bring national consciousness among people. As a vehicle of change, printing transformed the methods of storage, data collection, the way of communication used by the learned community and also redefined the relationship between individual and society. In this paper, I will focus on how print technology basically by the evolution of newspaper in colonial south India spread the idea of nationalism among people. Many scholars wrestles with the question about the role that print play to propagate national consciousness and have presented their ideas. For McLuhan “The invention of print technology destroyed the spontaneity and openness of oral culture. also print brought ‘lineality’, it meant that every experience could be described in print, pinned down, ordered and preserved”(Jeffrey 5) The Canadian scholar Harold Innis believes that discovery of printing press has shaped human history as he asserts that “ the effects of the discovery of printing was evident in the savage religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Application of power to communication industries hastened the consolidation of vernacular, the rise of nationalism, revolution and new out breaks of savagery in the 20th century”.

Benedict Anderson famed for Imagined Communities consider print revolution as a centrally important factor which laid basis for national consciousness. According to him the convergence of print and capitalism has made it possible for large number of people to think about themselves and to relate it with others people. The consumption of newspaper seemed to confirm the existence of other people of the same nationality. The fact that I read my newspaper in Hindi at 11 and the fellow Indian readers newspaper in Gujarati at 11 was less important than the

fact that both the newspapers use same Indian agencies to notify us the weather, Indian stock market, Indian politics and Indian cricket and to remind us editorially that we are Indians. To quote in the words of Renan “Nationalism is a daily referendum”, so the purchase of newspaper justifies it and we daily experience the feeling of nationalism by reading newspaper. Supporting the view point of Anderson I believe the printing press was not only the carrier of nationhood but it was also a major element in creating it. The idea to trace it through newspaper is because of the fact that they are the first modern style mass produced industrial commodity. “The newspaper is our national treasure...our literature... our culture... our recent history... our university”.

Starting from the history of print in Tamil language, which was brought to the west coast in 1556 and published the first book in 1577. With the arrival of print technology, the efforts of Tamil intellectuals was to bring forth the works to print as they were existing on the palm leaves from the time immemorial and also ill - treated by the ravages of time and climate. Since the feeling of nationalism developed under the age of British, thus a lot of obstacles came in its development and consolidation as missionaries started their proselytization by setting up the press and distributing newspaper and periodicals. In reaction to this the pundit publishers by the means of publishing propagate the idea of nationalism. It is at this time the pundits gain even more recognition as now they are not limited to edit, correcting and authenticate the texts but they would create all together the new texts which in turn stirred the nationalist sentiments of the people. The nexus between public patronage, pundits and printing cemented by the formation of college of St George in 1812. Initially these pundits face various problems in the form of press control but soon they created a new literary culture in which they produced and printed Indian texts for Indian audience.

The early Indian vernacular journalism started from the arrival of weekly called Madras Courier followed by Madras Gazette, Madras Conservative and the Madras male asylum but these newspaper did not survive long. Followed by these The Crescent became the milestone of nationalism of colonial Tamil. According to L.Chetty the purpose was to amend the

position the condition of Hindus. Chetty through the publication of newspaper wanted to defend Hindu values countering missionary propaganda and alleged British injustice. It concentrated on the public debates and highlighted the activities of Madras Native Association. Thus it became a more explicit weapon in the anti-missionary and it is also declared that Hindus stand aloof from the Europeans, "the influential part of whom, the evangelicals, the look upon as their declared and implacable enemies". The emergence of newspaper made people aware of the political affairs that are taking place in the country and now started asking questions for their rights. In the 1870's, English began to dominate the public sphere which though lead to controversies and lot of debates but at the same time arose the nationalist feeling among people. This resulted in the Vernacular Act Press, proposed by lord Lytton to restrict the freedom of Indian language press and to prevent them stating criticism against the British policies. Due to this, people does not have the right to express and freely publish their opinion which might lead to aversion and dissatisfaction against British policies. Madras, unlike Bombay and Calcutta does not have a plan of action to mobilize opposition to Lytton policies. During this time there was no particular organization or newspaper that would constantly voice the interest of Indian people and opposition to the British policies. So, there was a need of well conducted newspaper that will propagate the idea of nationalism. Later, this act was abolished by Lord Ripon as the leaders condemned the act as unwarranted and unjustified and kept on critiquing it via newspaper. Soon The Hindu came into existence.

The Hindu made its first appearance in 1878 by six young nationalist also known as 'triplicane' six. The newspaper is concerned with the social, political issues and also to the peasant class at the time of famine as it was started by elite class so some scholars considered it undisguised voice of professional elites in south India. Robin Jeffrey in his book counter Anderson in a way that the idea of nationalism is carried by the press but not created by it. Here, The Hindu is not just the carrier of nationhood but it played a major role in creating it by publishing the articles. In the era of lord Rippon, the Ilbert Bill suggested an improvement in existing laws to allow Indian judges and magistrates the authority to try British offenders in criminal cases. To this situation, the Hindu actively participated by writing in the columns and also tried to discredit Ripon's reforms. The Hindu commented in 1903

"..... Newspaper in this country has not so far attracted the attention of capitalist and speculators. It has thriven by the efforts of patriotic men who disregarding the rewards of the legal profession of the public service have affianced themselves to it. This is peculiar journalism in India. It has been specially so to Hindu".

The Hindu aims to promote unity and harmony among the people by publishing so that they can fight for their nation and also building a "shared confidence between the governors and the governed". Initially it was started as tri weekly newspaper afterwards it become a daily newspaper informing people about the current topics. Newspapers has also mobilized the poor villagers who are now taking part in food riots and protests. Newspaper like Madras Mail, Madras Standard and Madras Times actively involved in the social grounds of Madras Presidency. The emergence of newspaper has also lead to the peasant consciousness who are now together to fight against the injustice. Madras times acquainted us the

exploitation of children and landless laborer's as they have to go through the harsh treatment inflicted on them by grasping money lenders.

One of another newspaper, Swadesamitram was first newspaper owned and operated by Indians in Tamil language. It was initially started as a weekly newspaper but later it was circulated on daily basis. It was a chronicle of Indian National Independence movement from its very beginning and is mainly used to propagate the nationalist feeling among Tamil people. The eminent person like VVS Iyer, Subramania Pillai and others worked as the editors and subeditors of papers during the struggle of Independence. These men used narratives of Ramayana and Mahabharata, devotional songs in praise of Hindu-God Shiva in Tamil to arouse nationalist feeling. The poetry of emotional bhakti guides us into the world of classical Tamil civilization and also explain to us the ethnic -National consciousness of Tamil as a whole. Such patriotic songs and anecdotes inspires people to kill or die for the nation which Anderson also believed. In Bengal also, the idea of nationalism was promoted by writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee through his hymn 'BandeMataram'. Though BandeMataram was originally written when the press asked him for a poem to fill the blank space of the page but later it became popular among the masses and the song actually filled the void of their life. It symbolize the dying and killing for the nation and a battle cry against the British rule in India. Thus the influence of print is not only limited to Tamil but Bengal was also spreading the idea of nationalism by publishing poetry, newspapers and novels via print. Bengal used Amrita Bazaar Patrika as the nationalist newspaper during the British rule like other newspapers popular in South India played a major role in the evolution and growth of Indian journalism and made a striking contribution to create and nurture the Indian freedom struggle. The newspaper played a significant role in arousing the sentiments about motherland and motivating people against the British misrule. In this context, the role of the Amrita Bazaar Patrika group was so prominent that the national leaders depended on the newspaper for information and for inspirations and scholars even considered it as the best nationalist newspaper. Thus printing of newspaper played an imperative role in Bengal which arouse the national consciousness among people.

Eventually people got an easy access to the books, they can read and interpret by themselves. National press, particularly vernacular journals played a key role in gathering the masses towards freedom struggle and almost all leading national leaders owned newspaper. Similarly Pandian Periyar found the print media as an important medium to transform the civil society and to govern his ideas on human dignity and social equality. He started the Revolt and KudiArasu (the republic) newspaper. Through his newspaper, he questioned the other ideologies prevailing during that time in place of nationalism and interrogated the ways in which lower caste Muslims and women were excluded from the nation. He reflects his deep concern and abiding interest to destroy caste as he believes "in only by following the Mahatma's principle of Non-cooperation and his conservative policies can we attain progress. This progress will be permanent". Hence, the writing of scholars and patriots brought transformation in the minds of Indian masses responsible for the growth of Indian nationalism.

The development of print culture has also accelerated the development of state language. Language is a catalyst and a symbol of identity for a citizen to represent his nation but due to the diversity of language there is a problem in the level of communication. With the emergence vernacular journalism, the communication gap was bridged as now they can understand the same media agenda and a nation can be formed by coming together of individuals who are able to share a common life. The effect of print capitalism as Anderson believes is that it gave a new fixity to the language and created a language of power. Language is a tool that enables any nation to be ethically and culturally rooted and spread out to a national level to forge civil ties in the nation. He asserts:

“..... speakers of huge variety of the language who might find it difficult or impossible to understand one another in conversation became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In this way they gradually become aware of the hundreds and thousands of, millions of people in their particular language field [.....] These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed in their secular, particular, visibly invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (Anderson)

To conclude I would say newspaper revolution has led to the unity and harmony of a state like India. Nationalist either Brahmin or Non- Brahmin used newspapers, weeklies, Journals to bring national consciousness and considered them as a medium to carry out political and social formulations. All the examples of newspaper that have been given in the paper delineate the role of print as an integral element in propagating the idea of nationalism. Print has changed the appearance and state of the world and an explosive increase in the literacy rate. After the advent of print technology in the history of India, the idea of nationalism was not only carried out by print but it created the nationalist feeling among people and disintegrated British rule in India.

Reference

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