

Public Opinion & Different Facets of the War of Independence

Seemi Naghmana Tahir

Abstract

The war of independence of 1857 though ended up in complete failure, but it also paved the way for the end of Company's rule in India. During the last 150 years, much has been said or written about its objectives and the causes of its failure. Both historians and fiction writers drew their conclusions from multiple and diverse perspectives. These conclusions, mostly based on selective truths, partly help the young generation to understand and learn a lesson from the history. The war, which broke out in various corners of Indian domain, was inspired and motivated by various reasons. This multi-faceted event of world history caused human miseries to both sides. The question here is whether this was only a reaction to Company's policies which gained momentum with the final spark from Meerut and then things took there own course? Or, it was only the vested economic and political interests of various players, which successfully maneuvered the public mood and motivated them to take part in the war? Moreover if it was a war for regaining the sovereignty of India, as claimed by many scholars of South Asian origin, could Indian nationalism have existed then? Most of all, were there present such tools which could have effectively influenced or helped in the formation of a public opinion from which rebellions get inspired? While trying to look afresh on the various facets of the event, this paper will unfold the role of the press, its influence, policies, laws regulating the press and the level of mass participation in the war.

Revisiting history

Eighteenth century was marked by new scientific inventions and discoveries throughout the world. During this period of human history mankind revisited ancient sciences, belief systems and production relations and formulated new laws as guiding principles for the establishment of welfare states. More scientific inventions enhanced the need for new markets to consume the additional products. This quest for

new markets coupled with creation of monopolies slowly developed close linkages with political, administrative and military interventions. In this perspective scientifically infertile agrarian cultures fell prey to their own internal and external conflicts. The war of independence of 1857 may be termed as a failure in history but it was also the beginning of a new era of governance in India. This system includes modern statehood, revitalizing administrative structures, trade and commerce, fresh strategies for armed forces (a shift in recruitment policy from Awadh and Banaras to Punjab and NWFP).¹ Eventually the role of army within the hierarchy of the government grew immensely with the ultimate aim of economic conquest of India.² A second reason for the change in the military policy after war of Independence is stated to be the role of army during the war. In this connection Carter and Mears state:

Probably the fact that the natives in the Indian Army outnumbered the British by 5 to 1 was a deciding factor—that and the memory of Afghan and Crimean Wars, which, had proved that the British soldiers though brave, were not invincible.³

Use of communication technology

It must also be kept in mind that the war did not engulf the whole Indian domain. Although the fire of dissent and discontentment spread far and very fast and so the control mechanism acted upon with the help of 4,044 miles of telegraph cable that had been strung up in India.⁴ In fact by 1850s the British had begun laying both railway and telegraph lines. Governor General Lord Dalhousie while sanctioning the first major telegraphs line from Calcutta to Peshawar had predicted that it would be the most important political and economic asset of the empire. These lines were strung up from Calcutta to Banaras, Allahabad, Agra, Ambala, Lahore and Peshawar.⁵ Aitzaz Ahsan quotes Wolpert as saying,

The telegraph has clearly proved its worth throughout the war. Its humming wires helping to hang many mutineers.⁶

¹ Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords, Pakistan its Army and the Wars Within*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.7-8

² *Ibid.*

³ E.H. Carter. & R.A.F Mears, *A History of Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p.864.

⁴ Shuja Nawaz, *op.cit.*, p.10.

⁵ Aitzaz Ahsan, *The Indus Saga: From the Pataliputra to Partition* (New Delhi: The Lotus Collection, 2005), p.302.

⁶ *Ibid.*

These communication links later proved vital and the small British garrison which was stranded for several months out side Delhi without a contact with the world beyond, received reinforcement for ultimate assault on Delhi with the help of telegraphically transmitted messages. There were no alternate strength with the natives to match the control on latest communication technology of that time. The correspondent of *The Times* of London also verifies the use of telegraph and its vital importance in subversion of war and reported that, in the absence of telegraph, the commander-in-chief must had lost contact with half of his forces.⁷ That was the reason that rebels first ransacked the telegraph house at Barrackhpur, as they knew that every telegraph pole itself was an intelligence agent but they were unable to beat the power of technology.

From 1757 to 1857

While exploring various dimensions of the war one must not forget the fact that the East India Company was a trading company and after the battle of Plassey in 1757, the Company became the *de facto* sovereign of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. After winning the battle in 1757, European colonialism established its foothold in India through Bengal and its new capital Calcutta. To understand the reasons of a war which was fought a hundred years later, one should not ignore or undermine the economic aspect which eventually helped to demolish that basic structure which was to give birth to modern intelligentsia and through which the nature of statehood, polity, press and the enforcement of laws from time to time can be understood. The dilemma for historians, in our part of the world, is that even today we tend to study, understand and describe 1857 in the political context only. Moreover after 1857, we further describe history in the light of two-nation theory and try to translate the feelings of modern Pakistani in the similar context and thus convert the history into a supernatural imaginary tale. Eventually it was the conquest of agrarian India by a capitalist world regime.

It is a fact that Lord Clive conquered Bengal by force in 1757; but after seven years in 1765 he obtained a charter from emperor of Delhi through which East India Company was made *dewan* or administrator of the province. Now the company had a legal status. In the following years Lord Clive affected some reforms in civil and military administration, and left India in 1767, but the scheme of administration brought by him badly failed. According to Romesh Chandra Dutt:

⁷ Ashuk Mehta, *Baghawat Ke Nakami Kay Asbab*, in Ahmad Saleem (ed.), *Adab Syyasat Aur Maashra*, 1991, p.248.

The people of Bengal grievously oppressed under the dual government of Nawab and the company; the revenue failed; and a series of famine carried off one third of population of Bengal in 1770-1771.⁸

This economic onslaught did not end here, and in the subsequent years, Warren Hastings disregarded the hereditary rights of zamindars or landlords and sold their estates by auction to get more revenue for the Company. In 1833 the East India Company ceased to be traders and became rulers and administrators.

Radhay Shayam Rangta has explored the economic history of India from 1850 onwards. He in his valuable Ph. D. research work has tried to derive the economic history with the help of files of *Times of India*, *Bombay*, *Friends of India*, *Calcutta*, and *Madrass Mail*. He felt astonished to note:

The changes that took place in the financial mindset of the people are normally found absent from the work of historians.⁹

He also raised question as to why the first Company Act was passed in 1850 and why it was made a carbon copy of British Act of 1844? He traces the establishment of trade relation between Indian and European traders in 17th century, and found that after the decisive battle of 1757 the changes brought in the policies for local trade and industry resulted in virtual abandonment of the local trader and industrialist. In fact the Company had established themselves in Bengal but they did not assume any administrative responsibility till 1772. The oppression of the tax- collector, the corruption of the officers, the illegal transactions of the Company's servants added to the miseries of the people already suffering from the famine.

Bengal was the first to be colonized but it was also the first to rise and rebel against. Another stepping-stone in the same direction was annexation of the state of Punjab in 1849. The main objective was to acquire direct control of the most productive and fertile region of the subcontinent. The revenue surplus of only first year was 500,000 rupees although to control the region it had to bear the cost of two army corps stationed in Punjab. This was not the end of the loot and yet more had to come. By then industrial revolution in England was complete with the aid of the wealth from India. Now they required outlets for the English

⁸ Romesh Chandra Dutt, *The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule. From the Rise of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1857*, Vol.1 (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ Radhay Shayam Rangta, *Hindustan Mein Bayupari Corporation Ka Farugh* (Delhi: Taraqeeay Urdu Board, 1978), p.12.

goods. The dominance of manufacturing industry in England required a shift in the economic policy for India. The colonies had to be transformed from cotton exporters into cotton importers, and this clearly indicated a structural change in Britain's relationship with India. Necessary legislation to achieve this objective was already completed.¹⁰ Moreover large amount of annual surplus was being spent to buy the loyalties of landlords and rulers of princely states and to produce traitors. During the period 1793-1857, cultivated land of Bengal was enhanced from three crore aces to seven crore acres but only an additional income of 60,000 pounds was added to the government exchequer while huge sum of 14 crore rupees went to the landlords.¹¹ This was how economies of Bengal and Punjab were deliberately destroyed and this policy was applied all over the subcontinent, resulting in wide spread economic onslaught of the masses of India. In fact the uprising that started from Meerut in May 1857 was an overt expression of dissent over the Company's policies of no less than one hundred years.

The emergence of Indian nationalism

In the process of determining the multiple causes of the war of independence, nationalism is often cited as the driving force of the revolt. It is assumed that there was a unity of purpose and motive among all the dissenters from Meerut to Assam and that was to fight to regain national sovereignty. Aitzaz Ahsan rejects the existence of Indian nationalism mainly because of the following facts: That Indian regions, and states princedoms were involved in many wars with each other and traditionally their commanders kept changing loyalties for slightest benefit or gain, so the concept of loyalty was not as strong as to be woven in the delicacies of nationalism. Secondly the Mughal army men, he believes, might be linked together by some personal loyalty to those who brought them into service, but without any national spirit and with no or little idea of joint loyalty to Islam; the enemy was often Muslim and there were Hindu princes among the emperor's allies. Nor was there any personal loyalty to the emperor. In the imperial legacy, father fighting son and brother killing brother for the sake of crown remained the normal practice of the monarch. This gave a feeling to the subjects that in royal business nothing is permanent, so the absence of any such value system resulted in the failure of nationalism taking roots in India.¹²

¹⁰ Aitzaz Ahsan, *op.cit.*, p.268.

¹¹ Ashuk Mehta, *op.cit.*, p.250.

¹² K.V. Punnahiah, *The Constitutional History of India* (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1938), p.13.

In other words the brutalities of royal monarchs did not provide the space for the growth of nationalist feelings. The Indian nation as a whole did not enjoy that unitary bondage which is a must for any big nationalist movement.

A recent study though gives a different account of the presence of nationalist's feelings beneath the revolt. Dr. Sachi Ghosh Dastidar, a distinguished Professor at State University of New York, observes the period between late 18th and early 19th century as the beginning of the rise of modern Indian nationalism. According to Dr. Ghosh:

Yet the foreign rule would not go unchallenged for long, and soon Indian nationalism and sentiments for free India would take hold beginning with the educated intelligentsia. This nationalistic feeling, an all India, multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-cast, multi-race gave rise to what is commonly a known as Indian Renaissance.¹³

Dr Dastidar further mentions Raja Ram Mohan Rai and Dawarka Nath Tagore who are said to be the first people to start *Brahmo Samaj* movement. He also observed the establishment of centers of learning and centers of Indian nationalism springing up from Calcutta and spread over to cities like Bombay, Madras, Lahore, Lucknow and throughout India. This nationalist movement was paralleled with the establishment of English education as well. This pro- Indian nationalism that was led by Calcutta- based learned groups soon spread to other provinces and indigenously-ruled kingdoms i.e the princely states.

Role of princely states

The political importance of Indian states by and large has been ignored while painting the landscape of India at the time of the revolt of 1857. On the political map of the then India almost half of its large land mass was covered by the states. These states numbering about 600 occupied an area of 712,000 square miles, with a population of 81,310,845. They were in India and yet they did not form part of British India. The laws of Indian legislature did not bind their people; the Indian courts could not punish them.

Politically speaking their people were not British subjects. They were governed by the ruling princes.¹⁴ These states often referred to as

¹³ Sachi Ghosh Dastidar, *From the first war of independence (1857) to another war of independence.....*, proceedings of two day international conference, Department of History, University of Peshawar, p.37.

¹⁴ L.R Nair, *How India is Governed?* (Calcutta: Longman Green & Company, 1938), p.98.

subsidiary states were varying in size, some of them as small as the size of a village kingdom and some as large as a full nation–state. The concept initially involved the appointment of a British resident or agent at the head of a substantial force to help and advice *nawab* or *raja* to continue his sovereign authority. After gaining strong foothold in the affairs of the state, the next step was to pave the way for the annexation through internal intrigues, normally on the pretext of misgovernance of the state. Under this subsidiary system powers remained in the hands of the British government through its resident. The British resident imposed ministers upon the ruler. In case of state of Kalat, the third largest state of India, the resident appointed the prime minister of the state, and both Khan and the subjects kept suffering at his hands for many years. Under this subsidiary system, Lord Dalhousie alone annexed eight states including the most prestigious Muslim state of Awadh in 1856. In this manner before the uprising of 1857, Britain already had almost the whole subcontinent under its flag. These princely states comprising almost half of the subcontinent and having a population of over 80 million people, must have had some share in this uprising either for or against the revolt. It is believed though, that most of them remained totally indifferent to the war, and some clearly sided with the East India Company. A fresh look and analysis would help in determining the public opinion and level of mass participation in the war.

Public participation in the war

Another relevant question with regard to the reasons of uprising in 1857 is whether it was only the self- respecting educated Indians who started confronting the colonizers or the movement also enjoyed some degree of mass support? The answer to this political query has economic roots. Tension was also rising at the level of Indian working class, peasants and the poor in general. Import of cheap goods from English factories, with protection and subsidies of the British government, had forced the Indian working class out of their jobs. To protect market for the British goods and to promote rapid colonization, East India Company destroyed local industry, like Bengal's Muslim industry, with which it could not compete. Similarly in the case of Indian farmers many were forced to grow crops to support British economy instead of crops of higher value or that sustained local life.¹⁵

Another view expressed in this regard is in the cultural context and refers to the prevalent cast system of the Indian society. At that time, according to that view, the enlightened and the powerful Hindus and

¹⁵ Sachi Ghosh Dastidar, *op.cit.*, p.38.

Muslims were totally unaware of the democratic norms of politics, had no faith in the power of the masses and hence failed to mobilize them. This was one of the potent causes of the failure of the war.¹⁶ This was one of the reasons why the sepoys from Bombay and Madras did not accept the message to revolt. In contrast to forces of Bengal, the sepoys from these areas were recruited from lower casts. Bengal army consisted of 400 Brahmans, 200 Rajputs, 200 Muslims and 200 low casts Hindus. Likewise most of the sepoys in the forces of Awadh were from superior casts. The rebel basically addressed to these superior cast people. The active participation of forces of Awadh, Rohailkhand and North Western Provinces in the revolt displays that in those areas rebellious sentiments were diluted at the popular level.

Contrary to this, and besides very important economic reasons, on the part of a section of Indians especially some Muslims, there was a strong desire for Muslim rule over Christian–British rule. They wanted to bring back the Mughal rule through Bahadur Shah Zafar. In this way pressure kept rising against Company's colonialism from all sides: educated and uneducated, Indian and English educated, professional and the working class, Hindus and the Muslims. This combined force erupted and took the shape of the first war of independence.¹⁷

Press and public opinion

This new era witnessed use of press in preliminary democracies and creation of new mechanisms of command and control through it. The press also paved the way for intellectual debates and established new civilized resources. Exploitation of internal religious conflicts for political gains became part of governance, and to restrict the circulation of capital to certain classes, capitalist economic policies were enforced. India was still starring at the world with shallowness. In the same perspective press as the most modern invention of the time was established and started gaining momentum. When war broke out in May 1857, the Indian press had no less than 75 years old tradition. Apart from English language press, which was largely patronized by the British ruling class and yet was confined to elites of Indian society, a number of Urdu and other vernacular papers had their roots in the society as a

¹⁶ As described by Javed Naqvi, Bureau Chief Daily *Dawn*, New Delhi, in an international conference recently. He also cited excerpts from the proclamation issued by Hazrat Mahal almost two years after the forcible annexation of Awadh in 1856.

¹⁷ Sachi Ghosh Dastidar, *op.cit.*, p.38.

whole. Dr. Tahir Masood has listed 122 Urdu language papers which were published during the period 1822- 1857.¹⁸

Some of them focused on the policies of Company's government especially its economic, cultural and religious onslaught. This also includes some Persian as well as Bengali and other vernacular papers. These carriers of public opinion had their hand on the pulse of the masses. An analysis of the major issues of these newspapers can show extent to which this press was capable of projecting mass aspirations and can provide us some insight towards establishing a correlation between press and the mass thrust to overthrow colonial rule. This analysis should focus on the role of press in the formation of public opinion in the specific areas of the subcontinent to see whether they were for or against the war.

Land, people and the landscape of war of independence

Before embarking upon the analysis of public opinion, during war of independence, a fresh look at the magnitude of the confrontation and dissent can help in developing a rationale for further discussion in a more scientific manner.

At the time of war India, though a geographical unit, was politically divided into two parts: British India, with 267 million people living in about 860,000 square miles of area. The Indian states, with population of about 81 million people and an area of about 712, 000 square miles.¹⁹

The British army was relatively small, consisting of 46,000 Indian soldiers, in a country whose total estimated population at that time was 300 million people. The predominance of the Indian troops in the British army was due to Britain's pre-occupation in the Crimean war. These soldiers though unhappy, due to imposition of General Service Enlistment Act 1856 which enforced on them the obligation to serve wherever required, were also filled with the sense of pride and importance.²⁰

Although the fall out of the war was widespread but basically it was fought in three areas: Dehli and its adjoining areas, Agra, Awadh and Central India. Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Punjab, Sindh, Rajputana and Indian states remained aloof and did not take part in the war or revolt with two exceptions, Awadh and Jhansi. Other than the soldiers of

¹⁸ Dr. Tahir Masood, *Urdu Sahafat Uneesveen Sadee Mein*, Karachi, Fazlee Sons Pvt., pp.1090-96.

¹⁹ L.R. Nair, *op.cit.*, p.68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.65-74.

British army, Nana Saheb, Jhansi ke Rani, Hazrat Mahal, Tatya Tope, Bakht Khan and Moulvi Ahmadullah also took part in the war.²¹ The motives for uprising were diverse and included political, social, economic, cultural and religious factors and so was its scope. The issue of Enfield Rifles and greased cartridge become the reason for outburst at Meerut, which later engulfed Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Agra and other parts of Central India.

War of independence and the press

To determine a causal relationship between press and the war of independence a brief look at the growth of press in the subcontinent during 19th century and subsequent legislation would help us understand the environment in which public opinion was to grow in a certain direction. The history of journalism in the subcontinent goes back to 1780 when James Augustus Hicky, on 29 January 1780, brought out the first newspaper, *Bengal Gazette* or *Calcutta General Advertiser*. The newspaper did not last very long and Mr. Hicky was forced to leave India by Company's government in Bengal. He left India but laid the foundation of a press that was not meant to praise the authorities.²² After Hicky's *Gazette* many other English newspapers were published during last twenty years of 18th century under the patronage of the Company. According to Dr. Tahir Masood, this press was neither Indian nor local in nature because these papers, though coming out from India, were breathing in England and thus could not be seen to express the internal discontent of the common Indian.

In the press history of India, the first 50 years of nineteenth century were quite significant due to many reasons, especially in the context of 1857 revolt. A brief chronology and salient features of the press were:

- a. Beginning of vernacular press in India, to represent the common sentiments.
- b. From 1801-1818 growth of press remained slow due to strict control, new restriction were imposed as many as five times in seventeen years period. John Adam as head of the censor department had a very harsh attitude towards press.
- c. In 1813 Lord Hastings, the new Governor General, restored some liberties for the press. He abolished censor department in 1818 and many newspapers came out during this year. Most significant of

²¹ Mohammad Atique Siddiqi, *Hindustani Akhabaar Naweesi Company Kay Ahad Mein* (Karachi: Indus Publications, 1980), pp.174-80.

²² *Ibid.*, p.191.

these papers was *Calcutta Journal* of James Silk Buckingham, who not only brought quality in journalism but also made his paper a true representative of public opinion. The paper started as bi-weekly and became daily next year.

- d. The second decade of 19th century witnessed the beginning of newspapers in Indian languages. Christian Missions and Bengali Hindus brought out these newspapers. Baptist Mission of Serampur took the lead and during 1816-1830 brought out five Bengali papers and one each in Persian and Hindi. Motivated by the efforts of Baptists Mission, educated Bengali Hindus entered into the field of journalism. The most significant among them were, Bal Ganga Dhar Tilak, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Hari Hari Dutt, Dawarka Nath Tagore, Prasna Kumar Tagore, all belonged to educated Bengali families. Their efforts for bringing out newspapers in Bengali language gave Bengali press a lead over other vernacular newspapers. In 1830, when the only Urdu newspaper of India closed down, there were thirteen newspapers and magazines in Bengali alone. Similarly during 1831-33 nine new Bengali papers came out and two bi-lingual papers in English and Bengali started publication.²³
- e. Being frustrated by the consequences of wars of Plassey and Buxaar, the Bengali Muslims remained distant from both modern education and the press. The only newspaper from Bengal was *Samachar Sabhara Jandra*, which was brought out by a Muslim Sheikh Aleemuddin from Calcutta in 1831.²⁴
- f. In 1833, Lord Hastings resigned as Governor General, and former censor officer Mr. Adam assumed the temporary charge of office of the Governor General. Within a short period of time he enforced the first Press Ordinance in December 1823 for the printing of newspapers, books and printing presses. According to the new law, acquiring license for printing of newspaper, books and operating printing presses was made mandatory. This law, which was initially enforced in Bengal Presidency, was aimed at limiting the press freedom to a great extent. The same law was challenged in the court and two appeals were filed. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one of the

²³ Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press: A History of the Growth of Public Opinion in India*, George Allen and Unwin, 1940, p.197.

²⁴ Tahir Masood, *op.cit.*, p.64.

appellants. Both appeals were dismissed and in protest Raja Ram Mohan Roy closed down all three of his newspapers.²⁵

- g. On 30 December 1825, another order was issued from London that prohibited all members of legislative council, all civil and army officers or any government official including priests to have any relationship with newspapers and magazines. They were also barred from writing in any such publication. The order was enforced in Bengal, Madras and Bombay at the same time.²⁶
- h. In January 1827 Government of Bombay also enforced similar restrictions for the newspapers, which were enforced in Bengal presidency by John Adam four years ago. These restrictions were also applicable to other publications and printing presses.²⁷
- i. In 1828 Lord Bentinck was appointed as Governor General of India who was a great supporter of press freedom. A new era for the growth of public opinion in India started. Raja Ram Mohan Roy once again entered in the field of journalism with new zeal and enthusiasm. Along with Bengali news papers bilingual press came into being. Bombay did not lag behind; in the year 1831, ten English newspapers were coming out from Bombay. Marathi press also started in this period.²⁸
- j. In August 1835 Governor General Charles Metcalf enforced a new law, which lifted many restrictions and introduced declaration instead of license. Lord Auckland, as the new Governor General of India, maintained a balanced policy and consequently the number of daily and weekly newspapers increased substantially.²⁹

This chronology of events and subsequent legislation can provide us an insight of the environment in which press was born in the subcontinent. According to Zamir Niazi within a span of fifty years this press attained maturity, both editors and politicians were very clear about their objectives, though their paths were different but destination was same, to get rid of the colonial rule.³⁰

²⁵ Mohammad Atique Siddiqi, *Hindustani Akhabaar Naweesi Company Kay Ahad Mein*, Karachi, Indus Publications, pp.174-80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.191.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.220.

³⁰ Zamir Niazi, *Sahafat Paband-e-Salasal*, translated by Ajmal Kamal (Karachi: Pakistan Study Center, 2004), p.18.

Press, war of independence & public opinion

The first phase of Urdu press in the subcontinent is spread over a period of twenty years from 1837 to 1857. Although *Jame-Jahan-Numa* as first Urdu newspaper of subcontinent had marked the press history during 1822-23, but it did not continue as Urdu paper and was converted into Persian paper very soon. In northern India, Urdu press grew after 1840. According to Dr. Tahir Masood the period from 1844 onward witnessed the fast growth of Urdu press, while during 1851 to 1856, it remained fastest. During this period newspapers were brought out from 29 cities of India, but main centers were Delhi, Agra, Madras, Lahore, Lucknow, Banaras and Bombay.³¹ In other words all those areas where freedom battle was fought directly also happened to be the main centers of journalism, and hence this fact may help us in developing a causal relationship between the two. On the other hand there were Indian states, most of which remained totally indifferent during war and some of them even provided help to the British. If we have a look at the Urdu press of India, before war of independence, we can see a list of 103 newspapers, including printing presses, assembled by Mohammad Attique Siddiqui, while Dr. Tahir Masood has listed some 122 Urdu newspapers from all over India prior to 1857 uprising.³² An analysis of few of these papers can help us in understanding the role of the then Urdu press in the formation of public opinion.

Delhi Urdu Akhbar of Moulvi Mohammad Baqar, who was sentenced to death by the British rulers on charges of supporting the mutiny, is said to have played the most courageous role during the war. This newspaper, which had a very careful tone earlier, completely changed once the revolt started. The text of the paper that contained the news of revolt began with the verses of Holy Quran, the editor declared:

The mighty rulers whose strength, rule and administration, could not even imagine of the downfall, it did happen in the blink of an eye.... Most of the people still think whether this all has happened or they are still in a state of dream.³³

In the subsequent text the editor gave a very objective eyewitness account of the events that took place on 11 May 1857 in Delhi. The paper continued to publish the contents that were filled with the anti-English sentiments. In the subsequent editions the paper kept on providing the details of the events, especially in the edition of 17 May 1857, Attique Siddiqui reproduces the full text of that paper. Moulvi

³¹ Tahir Masood, *op.cit.*, pp.319-20.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.1090-98. Attique Siddiqui, *op.cit.*, p.449.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.359-60.

Mohammad Baqar had to pay a heavy price for his courage, his son and veteran Urdu poet and writer Maulana Mohammad Hussain Azad and his family had to suffer a lot, their property was confiscated and they had to leave their home.

Sadiq-ul-Akhbar, another prominent newspaper, took active part in motivating the people to revolt against English rule and openly conveyed the sentiments of the rebellion. The reporting was highly anti-British most of the time. *Sadiq-ul-Akhbar* also published such stories in large number. Jamiluddin Khan Hiji, the editor and his newspaper was extensively quoted during the trial of last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. *Sadiq-ul-Akhbar*, while supporting the revolt, also published *fatwa* of 35 ulema in which fight against the British was openly declared as *jihad*. After the war of independence, the editor of *Sadiq-ul-Akhbar*, Jamiluddin Khan, was arrested on charges of misreporting against the government and was sentenced to jail for three years.³⁴

Tilism-e-Lukhnow started in 1856 by Moulvi Yaqub Ansari as an Urdu weekly from Lucknow, almost after five months of forcible annexation of state of Awadh. The paper truly mirrored and heavily criticized the deteriorating circumstances of the state of Awadh after coming under the British administration. In the edition of 1st May 1857, the paper pointed towards the beginning of revolt and its reasons. The paper was forced to close down after the war.

Sultan-ul-Akhbar was brought out by Rajab Ali Lukhnavi in 1835 as a Persian weekly from Calcutta. It is not astonishing to note that most of the newspapers from Bengal, took an entirely different position during the war of independence from that of the papers of Delhi or adjoining areas. *Tyis* was one of the very few newspapers of Bengal which supported the mutiny. The paper was also known for its bold criticism on the policies of East India Company.

Press covering of Delhi proclamation

On 11 May 1857, a group consisting of Meerut mutineers and garrison stationed at Delhi, alongwith some sections of civil population, met Bahadur Shah Zafar and requested him to assume leadership of the mutineers. As a result famous Delhi proclamation of 11 May 1857 was issued. In this proclamation it was announced that all Hindus and

³⁴ Attique Siddiqui, *op.cit.*, pp.402-03.

Mohammadans, the subjects and servants on the part of the officers of English forces, stationed at Delhi and Meerut must unite to fight against the British.

Sultan-ul-Akhbar, Calcutta, carried the text of this proclamation on 10 June 1857, almost a month after the issuance of proclamation. Another newspaper *Harkara* also published the translation of the text on 12 June 1857.³⁵

These two examples clearly indicate the role of press and its direct concern regarding the war. It is important to note that *Sultan-ul-Akhbar* was a Persian newspaper from Calcutta and was known for its bold criticism on the policies of East India Company. In an era when news sources were very limited this paper regularly covered the important events from all over India. *Sultan-ul-Akhbar* also took a clear position on the murder case of William Frazier, the resident of Delhi, in which Nawab of Luvaro was implicated. The paper published the proceedings of the case, even refused to accept the verdict of court and termed the death sentence of Nawab Shamsuddin as murder. The paper continued till 1862. After the war of independence, many newspapers were implicated in criminal cases on charges of publishing seditious material, *Sultan-ul-Akhbar* was also one of them.³⁶

Another newspaper to publish the text of Delhi proclamation is *Harkara* from Patna, which started on 21 April 1855 by Shah Abu Turab as first Urdu newspaper of Patna. Most of the content of the paper consisted of news, which were collected from own resources and sometimes also lifted from other contemporaries. *Harkara* was also a bold and anti-establishment newspaper, the first news item of its very first issue was about the atrocities committed by the English citizens.³⁷

Four streams of press

Newspapers coming out from the subcontinent at the time of the war may be classified in to four categories:

1. English and vernacular press that was enjoying full support and patronage of the East India Company, their officers and other

³⁵ Biplob Chakraborty, *Indian Response to the First War of Independence*, proceedings of two day international conference on the war of independence, Department of History, University of Peshawar, p.42 (English translation of the proclamation of Dehli, 11May 1857, reprinted in the *Bulletin of Asiatic Society*, May 2007, p.5).

³⁶ Tahir Masood, *op.cit.*, pp.112-14.

³⁷ Attique Siddiqui, *op.cit.*, pp.404-05.

English citizens, and was playing its role accordingly. *Jam-e-Jahan Numa*, *Fawaed-un-Nazreen*, *Quranus-Saadain*, *Kohinoor*, *Sadarul-Akhbar*, and *Kurrachi Advertiser*, are only few to mention.

2. Those English, Bengali, Persian and other language newspapers, founded by people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dawarka Nath Tagore, Hari Dutt and other educated Indians. This reformist press was different from that of Delhi and adjoining areas. These nationalist Indians used their press with a complete understanding of the changing political, economic and cultural environment with their major focus on development of society and the people. Besides them though there were other Bengali newspapers that overtly opposed the war like *Sambad Prabhakar*, in its issue of 25 May 1857, denounced mutiny and proposed that every possible help be extended to the government. Contrary to that *Hindu Patriot*, a patriotic paper edited by Bengali editor Harish Chandra Mukherjee, is said to report the war quite faithfully. The same newspaper, soon after the Delhi proclamation, reported its detail and said that this war is no more a mutiny but a rebellion.³⁸

Harish Chandra through his paper maintained that the nation was thoroughly prepared for a revolution, which means that there was a small group of Bengalis who were trying to extend their support for the war against the British.

3. There were some Urdu newspapers that were supported by the rulers and *nawabs* of Indian states, perhaps to please the paper or to make use of them for achieving certain goals. For example, Raja of Nepal, supported *Banaras Gazette*. *Mazhar-us-Saroor* of Bharatpur, *Gwalior Gazette* and *Bagh-o-Bahar* from Banaras also come in this category.
4. This includes that category of Urdu, Persian Bengali and other vernacular papers' press which had played a significant role during 1857 war of independence and, as a result, had to pay its price as well. These include *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* of Moulvi Mohammad Baqar who is also remembered as first martyred of Urdu journalism; *Sirajul Akhbar*, *Sadiqul Akhbar*, *Tilism-e-Lukhnow*, *Gulshan-e-Naubahar*, *Harkara*, *Sultanul Akhbar*, *Hindu Patriot* and many others. The reason to quote these few is that many of these newspapers had to suffer due to their significant role during the war. Besides these there is a long list of newspapers, mostly coming out from the areas where war of independence was eventually fought. A number of other Urdu news papers also come in this category, which

³⁸ Biplab Chakraborty, *op.cit.*, p.48.

were overtly supporting the restoration of Mughal rule in the subcontinent; they had their focus on the atrocities of British rule and influenced the public opinion in areas where the battle eventually took place. A list of Urdu newspapers compiled by Dr. Tahir Masood reflects that during 1822 to 1857 a total number of 122 Urdu language newspapers were founded. Out of these, only three papers were political, 27 were partially political, and rests were social, scientific, educational, literary and religious. The list also provides circulation figures of 36 papers, which is 3858 copies altogether.³⁹ Another list of the topics covered by prominent magazines of that era also indicates that the Urdu press had no or little insight of the issues confronting the society at socio-economic and cultural fronts.⁴⁰

Conclusion

A deep insight of the history of Indian press clearly reflects that right from the beginning this press was bold and rebellious in nature, mood and expression. In the third decade of nineteenth century, the Indians started publishing newspapers in Persian, Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English languages. Initially these seemed very benign in nature, and were reformist in purpose.

As the British rule expanded and its colonial designs started getting exposed, the tone and issues of the newspapers also changed. During war of Independence the level of dissent touched new heights. During this volatile period Lord Canning gave his historic judgment regarding the role of press:

People do not understand or know, that during last few weeks these vernacular papers under the cover of providing news have inserted rebellion sentiments in the hearts of Indian people making them so brave, and that they have done it very efficiently and cleverly.⁴¹

Lord Canning's statement coupled with the subsequent actions taken against those newspapers which were declared the accused of the revolt, clearly indicates the power, strength and impact of newspapers in influencing the opinion of the masses and converting the same into action. The reporting of events before, during and after the war clearly indicate that this press had a powerful role in inciting people to revolt and creating anti-British sentiments among the people. On the other

³⁹ Tahir Masood, *op.cit.*, pp.1090-96.

⁴⁰ Rao Roshan Ara, *Majallati Sahafat Kay Idarati Masael Muqtadrae Qaumi Zaban*, Islamabad, 1989, pp.16-17.

⁴¹ Attique Siddiqui, *op.cit.*, p.357.

hand, these might be criticized for not providing a practicable solution for coming out of the situation. This may be cited as one of the reasons of the failure of the war also. Moreover, one must not forget the fact that this war was not an immediate result of a mass movement rather it was a revolt of the soldiers serving in Indian army. Truly speaking this war was not only an overt expression of dissent against foreign rule, but at the same time this was also a clash of different economic, financial, administrative, legal, educational and warfare systems. In this connection, Urdu, Persian and other vernacular press that supported the revolt, was though successful in expressing public sentiments but at the same time it failed to guide the masses through a functional approach and complete understanding of the issues; instead, they remained emotional rather than logical. On the other hand, the journalists mostly belonging to educated elites of Bengal like Raja Ram Mohan Roy used the weapon of press in an entirely different manner and with full realization of the changing circumstances. This contradiction of approach later created a void between the social and political status of Hindus and Muslims of India in general. Another important aspect of this war lies in the fact that it was not fought at the level of the masses, therefore, along with the formal media, one should also study the informal forums of public expression of that time to have a more realistic vision of the public about this great event of history of the subcontinent, which had economic and political roots but armed and fortified expression.