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HISTORY OF PRESS: EVOLUTION, FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIC SIGNIFICANCE

~ *Sannavi Pandey*

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the historical evolution and structural transformation of the press, tracing its journey from the invention of the printing press in 15th-century Europe to its current status as a digital-first global institution. By analysing the transition from handwritten newsletters to mass-produced periodicals, the study highlights how the press matured into a vital instrument of public discourse during the Industrial Revolution. Central to this evolution is the constant tension between state authority and the quest for journalistic autonomy, exemplified by historical milestones such as the Licensing Act of 1662 and the emergence of the first news-periodicals in Germany.

A significant portion of the paper is dedicated to the development of the press in colonial India. It chronicles the pioneering efforts of James Augustus Hickey and the subsequent era of "Gagging Acts" and restrictive regulations imposed by the British East India Company and the Crown. From the Censorship Act of 1799 to the repressive Vernacular Press Act of 1878, the research illustrates how the colonial administration sought to stifle nationalist sentiment, contrasted against the brief periods of liberation under figures like Sir Charles Metcalfe. This historical survey provides essential context for understanding the Indian media's long-standing tradition of resistance and its role in the struggle for independence.

In the post-independence era, the paper investigates the constitutional status of the press in India. While the term "Freedom of the Press" is famously absent from the text of the Constitution, the research explores the "Ambedkar Assurance" and subsequent judicial interpretations that have firmly rooted media freedom within the broader "Freedom of Speech and Expression" under Article 19(1)(a). The paper also reviews the recommendations of the Press Commissions and the establishment of the Press Council of India, which were designed to safeguard professional standards and institutional independence.

Finally, the study addresses the complex challenges facing the modern Indian press. It evaluates the impact of digitalization, which has simultaneously expanded the reach of information while precipitating the decline of traditional print revenues. The research critically analyses contemporary threats such as the proliferation of "fake news" and misinformation, the increasing commercialization of media houses, political pressure, and the rising physical and legal risks faced by journalists. By synthesizing historical lessons with current realities, the paper concludes that a fearless and independent press remains the indispensable cornerstone of a healthy democracy, serving as a "watchdog" that ensures transparency, accountability, and the protection of civil liberties in an increasingly fragmented information landscape.

HISTORY OF PRESS

The history of press has always fascinated me because it reflects the relationship between power, society and freedom of expression. Through this research I'm trying to understand how press evolved from merely a source of information to becoming a powerful instrument for social awareness and fourth pillar democracy.

It aims to explore important acts, regulation and press laws with its influence on journalists, public and writers.

India is a country of 1.4 billion people, the largest populated country in the world. A country of civilisation of more than 5,000 years old; it's a diverse country where society exist as multiple religion, cultures, languages and communities to coexist. Freedom of speech and press remains deeply embedded in the country's democratic culture. There are 900 million mobile phones in India and these are important weapon and this freedom for speech and expressions makes our democracy a noisy one.

But there are two side of coin, after the India's rank on world press freedom index, India fell six places leads to remaining in "very serious" category. In may 2026, Editors Guild of India openly issues a statement on criticizing the government's intolerance to journalist scrutiny, Organizations like RSF have talked about India's serious conditions related to press from targets or censors on independent media outlets to misuse of laws like telecommunication act or IT amendments rules.

The press has its foundation in obsolete civilizations, where news and information were disseminated through various means, including town criers, handwritten letter, and messenger. Early newspapers emerged in Europe in the 1600s, maturing into popular mass media during the 1800s industrialization, spreading worldwide by the 20th century.

The key figures in the early history of Press were the invention of movable-type of printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440 in Germany, The Licensing Act of 1662 and *Avisa Relation oder Zeitung* was one of the first news-periodicals in the world. It was published Germany in 1609.

Licensing Act of 1662: This act of Parliament of England requiring registration of all intended publications with the government-approved Stationers Company. It restricted the publication of news, leading to the development of underground newspapers and the growth of a clandestine press although it was officially repealed by the Statute Law Revision Act 1863 (26 & 27 Vict. c. 125)

The press has undergone numerous technological advancements throughout its history. Some significant innovations include:

- **Rotary Printing Press (1843):** This technology enabled mass production of newspapers, increasing circulation and reducing cost.
- **Telegraphy (1830s):** The telegraph allowed for rapid transmission of news across long distances, revolutionizing the dissemination of information.
- **Offset Printing (1870s):** This technology improved print quality and reduced costs, making newspapers more widely available.
- **Digital Printing (1960s):** The advent of digital printing technologies transformed the newspaper industry, enabling rapid production and distribution of printed materials.

World Press Freedom Day was celebrated on May 3rd which acts as a reminder for all governments to respect the rights of media and press institutions around the world. It also substitutes as a day for all media bodies to reflect on the restrictions imposed and on the progress of accepting media freedom among different platforms.

A free press is the cornerstone of every informed society, empowering truth, accountability and democratic strength through fearless Press.

The theme of world press Freedom Day 2026 is “ Shaping a Future at Peace: Promoting press freedom for human rights, development and security.

HISTORY OF PRESS IN INDIA

The history of Press in India starts with the Englishmen in the days of the East India company. The Anglo - Indians and Europeans started writing their journals in mid Eighteenth century, the objective of this journal is in two-fold; amusement and information. These journals contain extracts from journals and newspapers published in England and Europe.

The credit for the origin of the Indian press in the colonial period goes to *James Augustus Hickey*, an employee of the British East India Company, who published the first newspaper in Calcutta in 1780 called the *Bengal Gazette*. The paper was also known as the *Calcutta General Advertiser*. This was first newspaper of India. The administration of the journal came into conflict with Warren Hastings who was Governor-General of Bengal at that time. The journal criticised Mr. Hastings and his policies which led him to take action against Mr. Hickey, soon after that he was arrested and imprisoned and the journal had to be stopped in 1872. (Mahajan, 2016)

Mr. Hickey was a bold man and great upholder of the liberty of the press. He was a pioneer in the history of the Indian journalism. He considers the liberty of the press to be essential to the very existence of the Englishmen and a free Government.

When Lord Wellesley came into reins of Government, he was concerned with potential French Invasion and Marathas ambitious dreams. He felt that there was need of strict supervision over the press to protect the interests of Englishmen in India and thus, CENSORSHIP ACT came into force.

CENSORSHIP ACT 1799

The Censorship of the Press Act, 1799, was enacted by Lord Richard Wellesley, it was designed to strictly regulate the printing and publication of newspapers and periodicals in British India. Its main features included:

1. Pre-Censorship Requirement:

- Every newspaper or printed work was required to obtain prior approval from the government's Chief Secretary before publication.
- This system of pre-censorship meant that the government could suppress any material deemed objectionable before it reached the public.

2. Licensing of Printing Presses:

- No printing press could operate without a government licence.
- Printers had to register with the colonial administration, providing details of ownership, location, and the nature of publications.

3. Restrictions on Political Content:

- Publishers were prohibited from printing any material related to British politics, foreign affairs, or colonial administration without prior clearance.
- Any criticism of the East India Company's policies, military actions, or officials was strictly forbidden.

4. Military and Security Concerns:

- The Act explicitly banned publication of any information that could endanger British military operations or compromise state security, especially during the wars against Tipu Sultan of Mysore and Napoleonic France.

5. Penalties for Violation:

- Failure to comply with the provisions could lead to closure of the press, confiscation of equipment, and imprisonment or deportation of editors and publishers.

Lord Hastings appreciated the important role of independent press and encouraged the pressmen to perform their legitimate functions. Later he modified the Censorship act and then abolished the post of Censor in 1818 after receiving certain complaints. However, regulations were still limited thus restricting criticism of the Indian Authorities, religion and local administration.

MUNRO'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of India deputed Sir Thomas Munro to examine and report on problem of press in India. Munro studied the whole scenario and then made his recommendations to the Government. Regarding the Indian Press, he expressed both anxiety and fears. He feared that a free press could spread principles of liberty among the people and establish a national

government. He stated, although the danger of a rebellious press was distant but it still existed and could disaffect the Indian Army and work to overthrow the British power.

The Government of India accepted the Munro's recommendations and placed a new regulation into force;

REGULATIONS OF 1823

- It was also known as Adam's Licensing Regulation, introduced by acting Governor-General John Adams in India.
- It stated that no press was to be established nor any paper or book was to be printed without obtaining License for that purpose from the Government.
- All the papers and books were to be printed in this system of licences were subject of submission to the Government for inspections.
- This primarily targeted the Indian-language newspapers and operating without licence was made a penal offense.
- Aimed to restrict the freedom of speech and suppress any anti-British movement.

The regulations continued to remain in force up to 1835 and then cancelled by Sir Charles Metcalfe.

PRESS ACT 1835 (Metcalfe Act)

- This Act was passed by Sir Charles Matcalfe restoring press freedom.
- Metcalfe was Governor-General from 1835 to 1836. It is also known as 'Liberator of the Indian Press'
- This act requires publisher to provide a brief account of the premises of a publication and to cease operation if similar declaration was issued.
- This led to huge expansion and growth of newspapers in India. People highly acknowledged Metcalfe's initiative and erected a noble hall in his honour.

LICENSING ACT OF 1857

- The freedom of Indian press continued to be free from 1835 to 1857.
- When the revolt broke out in 1857, the Government imposed restrictions on the Indian press in the country.

- The government reserved the right to prohibit the publication and distribution of any book, newspaper or printed matter.
- These restrictions were temporary in nature and were withdrawn soon after the Mutiny.

REGISTRATION ACT OF 1867

- The Metcalfe act of 1835 was repealed by to the Registration Act of 1867.
- The objective of this new act was to preserve copies of the books and periodicals printed in British India.
- Along with restoration and regulate newspapers and printing presses.
- It also requires publications to submit a copy of the book within a month to the local government.

RESTRICTION ACT OF 1870

- This is also known as SEDITION act was enacted in section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) by British authorities and now in section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).
- It was introduced by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen and motive was clearly to curb the freedom movements in colonial rule.
- It criminalised any type of actions expressed in form of writing or spoken or visible to cause disaffection and hatred towards the then government.
- Act was passed against the growing Wahabi movement in the subcontinent.

VERNACULAR PRESS ACT OF 1878

- This act was enacted by Lord Lytton, he was a great imperialist.
- It was also nicknamed as "*The Gagging Act*" because its attempt to
- nationalist voice and its repressive nature.
- Amrit bazar patrika and Akbhare-e-am at Lahore, started as weekly newspapers.
- The Act specifically targeted newspapers published in Indian languages, while exempting English-language publications.

- the act was intended to prevent the vernacular press from expressing criticism of British policies—notably, the opposition that had grown with the outset of the Second Anglo-Afghan War.
- The act empowered Magistrates to force publishers to sign a bond ensuring they would not publish content likely to incite disaffection against the government or create communal hatred.
- It also authorised the Government to warn as well to confiscate the plant, the deposit etc.. if publication of some unfavourable matter.
- The printer was given choice to either submit the proofs to the official censor and dropping all rejected publishing and release from clutches of law.
- There was change in Ministry in England in 1880 when the conservative Government of Disraeli was defeated in the General Elections and Gladstone came into power at the head of a great liberal majority. One of the result in the change in the Government at home was that Lord Lytton was called from India and Lord Ripon was appointed as his successor. The law was repealed in 1882.
- Although Indians were very happy with such gesture but Englishmen were disappointed. According to professor Dodwell, *“the freedom of the Indian press was bound to be injurious to the interests of the British Government in India. A free Indian press was bound to criticise the acts of omission and commission of the Government, and thereby bring it into disrepute”*.

THE INDIAN PRESS ACT 1910

The British Government’s approach towards the Indian Press changed time to time. After the Partition of Bengal in 1905, This led to nationwide agitation, also shaped the policies of Indian Press. This act is also known as Revision of Vernacular Act.

The British administrators thought that emergence of nationalist newspapers and journals will lead to creation of political ethos for revolution. Lord Risley, the home member of that time introduced a bill on 4th February 1910 to arrest the distribution of anti- Government literatures.

The bill’s three main Objectives:

1. To extend bureaucratic control over the importation and transmission of vernacular political literature;

2. To authorise the local government the local Government to declare forfeit any newspaper, or other printed document containing Anti-British affairs;
3. To increase Government control over the Indian Press.

On February 9, 1910, Lord Minto II, Viceroy of India, enacted the Indian Press Act of 1910.

The following are provisions of the Act;

1. The magistrate was required a deposit of 500 to 2000 Indian Rupees from the keepers of news printing presses and publishers of newspapers.
2. The local Government was empowered to collect deposit of 500 to 5000 Indian Rupees from existing printing press and publishers as security.
3. A magistrate was authorise to dispense with the security or cancel any order if he had any specific reason for doing so.
4. The act defined the term *Objectionable matter* whose publication was to entitle the British government to declare security forfeit to his majesty.
5. The definitions of seditious publication was widened to include writings against Judges, public servants, Indian princes and executive officers.
6. The act also authorise the custom officers and post office officials to seize any parcel or packet if suspension of objectional matter and deliver it to Provincial Government.

After the passing of the Government of India act 1919 along with inauguration of reforms, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru was appointed the first Indian Law Member. A committee was appointed to examine the working of this act and the report suggested that the act should be repealed. The recommendations of the committee was accepted by the Government.

PRESS COMMISSION

The Government of India appointed on 23rd September, 1952, a Press Commission consisting of 11 members. The chairman of the Commission was Justice G. S. Rajadhyaksha. The Commission submitted its report in August 1954.

- The Commission recommended the establishment of an all-India Press Council.
- The Council was to consist of 25 members of whom 13 or more were to be working journalists of standing in the profession, including working editors.
- It was to have in addition a chairman who should be either sitting or a retired judge of a High Court. He was to be nominated by the Chief Justice of India.

The following were to be the objectives of the Press Council:

1. To safeguard the freedom of the press and to help the press to maintain its independence.
2. By censuring objectionable types of journalistic conduct and by all other possible means to build up a code in accordance with the highest professional standards.
3. To improve methods of recruitment, education and training for the profession, by the creation of suitable agencies for the purpose such as a Press Institute
4. To keep under review any development likely to restrict the supply and dissemination of news of public interest and importance.
5. To publish reports, at least once a year, regarding its work and reviewing the performance of the press, its development and the factors affecting them.
6. To study development in the press which may tend towards concentration or monopoly and if necessary to suggest remedies thereof.
7. To encourage the growth of the sense of responsibility and public service among all those engaged in the profession of journalism.

The Press Registrar is to keep a close watch on the circulation of newspapers. If he comes to the conclusion that in a particular area or in a language, a monopoly has developed, he is to bring it to the notice of the Press Council who will conduct an investigation into the existence of the monopoly, whether that had acted against public interest, whether undesirable practices had been resorted for eliminating competition and what measures, if any, were necessary to deal with the situation.

The Commission recommended that the publication of newspapers and periodicals should be made a central responsibility and suggested the banning of cross-word puzzle competition forms.

It recommended the introduction of price-page schedule for newspapers and suggested that advertisements should not cover more than 40 per cent of the total space.

The Commission favoured single unit papers and recommended that in case of multiple editions, each unit should be separated from the others in the matter of accounts. Where a chain consisted of a number of groups, each group was to be separated from the other. The adoption of a strict code of advertising by an association of publishers was recommended.

The Commission recommended the enactment of legislation to regulate the newspaper industry which should make it punishable with fine or imprisonment to give fraudulent advertisement.

The news agencies should not be owned or controlled by the State and any assistance from the State to the news agencies should be without strings attached. The State should have no voice in the control of the agency either editorially or administratively.

The Commission recommended that a public corporation based on the existing organisation but controlled by a Board of Trustees under a chairman to be appointed by the Chief Justice of India should take up the management of the Press Trust of India. No organisational changes were prescribed for the United Press of India. The employees should have representation on the Board of Trustees.

In recent years, the Indian Parliament has passed a few laws concerning the Press in India. The names of some of them are the Delivery of Books and Newspapers (*Public Libraries*) Act, 1954, the Working Journalists' (*Conditions of Service*) and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1955, the Newspaper (*Price and Page*) Act, 1956, Parliamentary Proceedings (*Protection of Publication*) Act, 1960, etc.

THE PRESS COUNCIL OF INDIA

The Press Council of India is statutory quasi-judicial autonomous authority reestablished in 1979 under the Act of Parliament, Press Council Act, 1978 with two major objectives.

1. Preserving the freedom of press by maintaining and improving the standards of newspaper and news agencies of India.
2. Establishing code of conduct for journalists.

CHALLENGES OF MODERN INDIAN PRESS

- **MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS**

The rapid spread of fake news and misinformation are facilitated by social media platforms but it can be seen as both opportunities and challenges for press to improve as a practice and institution.

- **DECLINE OF PRINT MEDIA**

The digitalization of Press has led to reduction of readership and revenue.

- **COMMERCIALIZATION**

Primary focus of press is shifted from public interest to profit maximization. diversion of press from mission driven watchdog into profit led enterprise.

- **HOMOGENIZATION OF NEWS**

Media tends to focus on famous and elite issues ignoring the root causes of weaker sections of society.

- **CENSORSHIP AND POLITICAL PRESSURE**

Government and political parties highly influence or attempt to influencing the intergrity , independence often interfering their narratives.

- **THREATS TO JOURNALISTS**

Journalists faces several kinds of harassment, legal intimidation, backlash and violence.

CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE

The Press of India has long history from the struggles for freedom during British rule in India but there is change in perspective towards press after independence with commencement of Indian Constitution in 1950s. The makers of our Constitution believed that freedom of expression and the freedom of press are indispensable to the operation of a democratic system.

In this connection Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru said: *“I would rather have a completely free press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed and regulated press.”*

During the struggle for independence, Indian leaders fought hard against British censorship. Naturally, everyone expected that once India was free, "Freedom of the Press" would be a centrepiece of the new Constitution.

However, when the final document was drafted, people were surprised to find those specific words missing from the list of **Fundamental Rights**.

When members of the Constituent Assembly pointed out this gap, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, stepped in to clear the air. His logic was simple:

- The "Press" isn't a special entity with extra rights; it's just a group of individuals using their voices.
- Since every citizen was already guaranteed **Freedom of Speech and Expression** under **Article 19(1)(a)**, a separate clause for the media felt redundant.

To him, the right of an editor to publish a newspaper was exactly the same as the right of a regular person to speak their mind.

Since 1950, the Supreme Court of India has consistently backed this up. Through various rulings, the Court has clarified that even if the words aren't there, the intent is.

"Freedom of Expression" is the broad category (the genus), and "Freedom of the Press" is a specific branch (the species) of that same right.

So, while you won't find a "Press Clause" in the Constitution, judicial interpretation has given the media a solid constitutional foundation. It's a "silent" right that is just as powerful as the ones written in the constitution.

The most infamous questions on every mind that *"HAS THE SUPREME COURT DONE ENOUGH TO PROTECT PRESS?"*

Article 19(1)(a) of the constitution recognises the freedom of speech and expression as fundamental right.

OVERVIEW ON ONGOING SITUATIONS

The Indian Press serves as a link between citizens and government. The media, after the legislature, the administration, and the judiciary, plays a critical role in Indian democracy. In the contemporary era, it is very essential for the press to uphold the principles of responsible journalism while maintaining independence from any political or commercial influence.

The Press must also promote constitutional values, fact checking, a fearless press serves as a bridge between the government and the people ensuring transparency and encouraging informed public participation in the democratic process.

In a perfect world, the media serves as a monitor for the government, holding it responsible for its activities. Regrettably, the world we live in today is far from perfect. In India, according to World Press Freedom Index 2025, the conditions of journalism are very serious and half of the world's countries are same. International watchdogs have hinted at falling standards and chilling effect on the India's rank of 151st along with growing with economic disparities even in well established democracy, means the region is suffering from repression and increasing uncertainty.

However, the Constitution has safeguarded the rights of press in place and largely intact it but unlike during the emergency there is no Constitutional suspension of rights in present time.

Indian media is primarily funded by advertising revenues, billion dollars of funds are been spent on advertisement and media outlets are heavily pressurised to censor their content.

In recent years, India is considered as one of the most dangerous countries for media professionals, on average ever year two or three journalist are murdered due to their work.

There are routinely subjected to pressure, harassment and threats as well as criminal prosecutions.

CONCLUSION

The history of the press is a testament to the enduring human quest for information, truth, and the right to hold power accountable. From the revolutionary invention of **Gutenberg's printing press** to the digital frontier of the 21st century, the media has evolved from a nascent tool of communication into the "**Fourth Estate**"—a pillar of democratic governance.

In the Indian context, the press has always been a site of struggle. The journey from **James Augustus Hickey's** defiant *Bengal Gazette* to the sophisticated legal frameworks of modern India reflects a persistent battle against censorship and control. The colonial era, marked by repressive measures like the **Vernacular Press Act**, highlights how central the control of information was to the maintenance of imperial power. Conversely, the post-independence era, guided by the vision of **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** and the Indian judiciary, has successfully integrated press freedom into the constitutional fabric of **Article 19(1)(a)**, recognizing it as an indispensable "silent" right.

However, the modern era brings a new set of complexities. While technological advancements like **digital printing** and social media have democratized the flow of information, they have also introduced significant vulnerabilities. The press today faces a "dual crisis":

External Pressures: Legal intimidation, physical threats to journalists, and political censorship.

Internal Crises: The erosion of journalistic ethics due to **commercialization**, the spread of **misinformation**, and the "echo-chamber" effect of digital algorithms.

Ultimately, the significance of a free press lies not just in the right to publish, but in the public's **right to know**. As India continues to navigate its role as the world's largest democracy, the lessons of history remain clear: a society is only as free as its press. Protecting the integrity of journalism is not merely the responsibility of reporters or editors, but a collective democratic necessity to ensure transparency, justice, and informed citizenship in an ever-changing world.

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