

**CENSORSHIP AND PROSCRIPTION IN BRITISH INDIA**

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**Abstract**

The relationship between government and the press or publication houses has always been one of the most burning topics in every country and in every kind of government whether it is democratic, autocratic or communist. Perhaps inevitably, government officials, intellectuals and journalists throughout the world often have a clash over the nature of information passed on to the public. Sometimes their struggles produce social or legal safeguards to freedom of expression; at other times, the consequences include censorship, proscription or banning and seizure of publications judged dangerous to the 'national interest', 'security' and 'human decency'. In India's case, the British during their rule had to defend their own 'empire and hegemony' over Indians. This Research Paper intends to study the censorship and proscription policies of British Government in India.

**Keywords: Proscription, Censorship, Repression, Sedition, Independence Movement, Press Laws, Publication Houses, Patriotic Literature.**

The functioning of the British Government in India involved coordination within the bureaucratic chain stretching from the office of the Secretary of State and his Council to the district office. The vast bureaucracy depended on an efficient system of communication and information. Without detailed information on the attitudes and the activities of Indians, the colonial administrators lacked sufficient evidences to assess policies and to base new decisions. Hence, the government tried to keep a close watch on all that used to be published and also it tried its hardest to have a control over that.

The emergence of Indian publication industries complicated the political life of British rule. Caught between a tradition that favoured a free press and anxiety over severe criticism, the British swung back and forth from strict controls to illusive freedom of expression. The government did not have a uniform or set policy for controlling the Indian Press. Its Press controls were based on the exigencies of the prevailing political situation. During the times of intense political agitation or direct challenges the methods of the government got repressive. But when the national struggle was at a low

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pitch, its attitude was comparatively mild. During the course of the freedom struggle, British raj had many opportunities to bully the patriotic writings or so-called 'inflammatory or seditious literature'. As the intensity of situation went up, along with the imprisonment of great freedom fighters, censorship, restrictions and proscription of nationalist writings also shot up.

### **Proscription Policy during British India**

Proscription Policy during British India was defined by the Press Regulation Acts which were passed from time to time during the period. Censorship in India started in 1823 with Adam Regulations Act in Bengal which introduced licensing to control press. It was replaced by Metcalfe Act, 1835 which discontinued licensing. Licensing was however reintroduced in 1857 by Canning. Then came the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867 which made registration of books compulsory. The notorious Vernacular Press Act of 1878 authorised District Magistrates and Commissioners to demand security and to confiscate any published matter which they found objectionable.

However, throughout the nineteenth century, the government of India preferred a low-key policy of informal influence over the press instead of direct subsidies and persistent application of penalties. But the whole scenario changed in the subsequent century which witnessed the passing of several repressive legislative measures to suppress the freedom of the Indian Press and publication houses, like the 1908 Act, the 1910 Act, and the 1930 Ordinances. It was the period of heroic conflict between the nationalist press and the imperialist government in India. To meet the challenges of the movements the government unleashed a tornado of counter propaganda.

The relationship between the government and the Press was based on hostility, which was inevitable due to the clash of interests between the two. While the Indian Press reflected the aspirations of the Indian people for freedom, the interest of the government was in the perpetuation of the colonial rule. The role of press in the Indian National movement has been grand. In bringing about national awakening in the country and preparing the people for the freedom struggle in India, it played a glorious part. The press vigorously fought for the freedom of the country and for its own freedom. The struggle for liberty of the Press in India was a part of the nation-wide struggle for self government.

The Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon, 1898-1905, brought to prominence the new political trends. Politicians explored new methods, strategies and measures to mobilise masses. The official injustices by Lord Curzon facilitated the emergence of new intensity and sense of nationalist mission. Curzon's

most unpopular and controversial measure – the partition of Bengal (1905), triggered the swadeshi and boycott movement along with the emergence of extremist politics. So much followed this-Surat split and also shift to revolutionary movement. Hence the year 1905 emerged as the landmark in the history of Indian National movement. Further in the history of Indian Printing Press also, the year 1905 marks a turning point. It was from that year that the press and publication houses in different regions of the country became bold and started attacking the alien government, without any fear or inhibitions.

Indian literature became a major vehicle for communicating and stimulating the new political ideology by revealing the bare nature of the oppressive British Government of India. Consequently, government unleashed repressive Press Acts of 1908 and 1910 which authorised the authorities to start judicial action against editors, to confiscate printing presses and its connected properties, to demand high security deposits (which could be forfeited) and if necessary, presses could also be impounded, and printers or publishers jailed. The number of prosecutions under these Acts was naturally skyrocketing. The Press expressed its positive disapproval of the 1910's Act by observing hartals. The government ignored all and went ahead with the Act. The number of prosecutions under this Act was naturally skyrocketing. Ceaseless agitations were being carried out to repeal the Act. 'The unusually large number of cases dealt with under the Act of 1910 in the first few years of its operation bear ample testimony to the unwisdom of vesting such extensive powers in the hands of an executive free from the guidance and control of judicial authority.'<sup>1</sup>

The death rate of newspapers was very high due to the operation of the Press Act. Innumerable warnings were also issued to newspapers for transgressing the provisions of the 1910 Act. Proscription of books and tracts followed similar lines. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908 and the Official Secrets Act also strengthened the hands of the Government in controlling the press. The Defence of India Act, which was enacted in 1914 due to the outbreak of the First World War, was also sometimes invoked against the Indian Press. Hence, besides the legislative measures which were exclusively concerned with the Press, other ordinary or emergency laws were also utilized for controlling the Indian Press and to curb the anti-government writings.

Numerous writings (books, pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, handbills and posters) including some penned by British themselves were prosecuted and banned; several acts and ordinances were introduced to curb the press and publication houses. The government initiated 86 cases (warnings, security demands, and prosecutions) against printing presses during 1910. The

number dropped to 75 in 1911 and 68 in 1912, then shot upward to 126 in 1914 in response to an increase of the revolutionary activities.<sup>2</sup>

Under the 1910 Press Act steps were also taken to check the import of certain newspapers and other anti-British material from abroad. The Post- Master General under section 15 of the Act, the Board of Revenue under section 13 and the Sea Customs Act were asked to take action against the import of Indian nationalist literature from abroad. 'Though outwardly the government was proclaiming that the Press Act was absolutely essential for the country, in its own secret circles there was an awareness of its harshness and moves were made to modify it. But finally with the coming of the constitutional reforms it was felt that the Press Act would be a great hindrance for enlisting the support of the people to the government. Hence it was completely repealed.'<sup>3</sup>

Events during the First World War brought to light the conflicting principles of government inherent in British rule- Coercion and Conciliation. The Government of India responded to war time crises and the non cooperation challenge of the Congress by repressive measures i.e. banning, security demands, censorship and imprisonment. An alliance between German and Indian revolutionaries (formation of Gadar Party) living abroad threatened India and the hostility of Indian Muslims who were concerned with the fate of Turkey (Khilafate question) further aggravated the situation for British. Several groups of pro-khilafat Indian Muslims were at the same time based in Turkey. All these groups issued material in English and other western and oriental languages, some of which were secretly distributed in India and therefore proscribed and several measures were taken to see that the government did not have any trouble from the newspapers. As a result government dealt it with the iron hand. Large number of works on revolutionaries and their activities, religious controversies and British rule fell into the police net. The anxiety of the government to control the Press increased more as there was an urgent need to ban German and Turkish propaganda inciting mutiny among Indian troops serving in the British Army both in Europe and the Middle East.

The Indian Government emerged from the war to find itself confronted by two domestic threats i.e. the massive agitation against the Rowlatt bill and dismemberment of Turkish territories. Congress and Khilafate leaders joined forces and mobilized mass support. The British had never faced such concerted opposition. Not only were the disturbances widespread but the techniques employed such as non payment of taxes, resignation from government posts, work stoppages and above all passive resistance proved disastrous for British rule which had to fall back on repressive measures. Gandhi transformed the Indian Freedom Struggle into a mass movement and under his leadership the struggle became an integral part of every household in the country. Consequently, the awakening was so

intense that it gave a great impetus to the generation of intense diverse nationalist ideas which were expressed many times through the literature written during that period. This literature apparently was extremely patriotic which threatened the Government due to the obvious reasons hence it banned it from circulation.

Banning increased as did demands for security. Most restrictions pertained to Congress Khilafate material, Punjab disturbances and Jalianwala Bagh. Hence, non-cooperation movement led to the first mass circulation of collections of nationalist writings. Many of these were banned. In an attempt to conciliate Indian politicians and public feeling, controls were relaxed for a time. In 1922 much of the 1910 Act was repealed in the Press Law Repeal and Amendment Act.

The removal of the 1910's Act from the statute book resulted in the removal of the special restrictions on the Indian Press till 1930, when the Indian Press was again bound by heavy shackles with the passing of the two Press Ordinances. The Civil disobedience movement in particular and the other fragmented political awakenings made the situation very difficult for government. Lahore resolution of the Congress had changed the course of struggle and broadened public support throughout the country which was echoed by the demonstrations and cries of "Full Independence". Nationalist and anti-British writings were circulated freely in many parts of India and dozens of publishing houses troubled the rulers. Rising communist literature was another problem.

The chaotic socio-political situation moved government to issue a fresh new Press Ordinance in 1930. The two Ordinances were issued in April and July 1930 respectively and contained severe restrictions on the freedom of the Press. Under these, by 1931, the number of presses from which security was demanded increased, a number of newspapers destroyed and plenty of publication offices were seized. Almost every nationalist publication house became the victim of the Press Ordinances of 1930. The method of prosecuting prominent editors and proprietors of newspapers to control the Press was also adopted by the government. The exorbitant security demands from the press and the publishers sabotaged the birth of numerous newspapers and nationalist publications. After the lapse of these two Ordinances in 1931, the Indian Press Act (Emergency Powers), 1931 was passed, which gave the sweeping powers to the provincial governments in suppressing the propaganda for the Civil Disobedience Movement. In 1932, the Press Act of 1931 was amplified in the form of Criminal Amendment Act of 1932.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of the June 1930, the British had issued formal warning to 150 publishers and banned nearly 400 books and tracts, 40 posters and 50 numbers of Newspapers (As per Government of India

Home political Proceedings, 1930). Thereafter during the intermittent period socialist, communist, communalist and revolutionary literature caught the attention and rage of the Government.<sup>5</sup>

Censorship again became prominent due to immediate Japanese threat that set the stage for a showdown between the Government and the Congress. On August 8, 1942 before Gandhi could launch his Quit India campaign, menaced by rapid Japanese advance and on the verge of losing political control, the government struck again. Most Congress leaders were imprisoned by August 10 that led a wave of massive confrontation and repression. Quit India movement unleashed a barrage of emergency press measures against any sort of anti-British and pro-nationalist printed matter. After the Quit India movement of 1942 had subsided, press controls were again relaxed, although censorship continued until 1945. From 1946 until independence in August 1947 very few publications were seized.

“Although proscription removed a substantial amount of Indian literature from circulation, the process also led to the preservation of many works that probably would have scattered and lost. Attempts to meet political challenge thus have produced a cultural heritage that should make possible a re-evaluation of many yet uncharted facets of nation building in modern South Asia.”<sup>4</sup> As the matter of fact these literary works are preserved safely at National Archives of India, New Delhi (in English as well as in various vernacular languages) for the convenience of the scholars to study and research upon. They are in various languages, e.g. Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, English, Punjabi, Urdu, Assamese, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Pashto, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, etc. in the forms of books, leaflets, letters, posters, pictures, pamphlets, booklets, a massive number of magazines, newspapers and journals.

If analyzed properly, it can clearly be seen that along with the full-fledged direct struggle for freedom, another struggle was going on alongside, which the nationalist writings had waged, keeping the atmosphere continuously charged. During that period writings and literary works were the most powerful and effective medium of communication. Newspapers and literature and in broader terms, public meetings and speeches were the only ways of showing resentment, distress, anger and dissatisfaction against the repressive policies of the British government and educating and motivating the masses to contribute towards their motherland. These limited means were also scrutinized and controlled by the government so that no awareness could reach the people about its misdeeds.

In spite of tough and stringent laws and prosecutions the government was not fully able to curb the patriotic literature while on the other hand the nationalist and patriotic feelings amongst the

Indians was becoming more and more intense and it was quite evident in the literature that the Indians were producing. The proscriptions on the contrary reaffirmed the determination of Indians to produce more and more writings to vent out their feelings for their country. The wave of nationalism which the government was seeing in the form of literature was never going to stop but was rising against all odds. The weapon named literature was fatal and life threatening and proved to be one of the most important reasons of British Government's downfall because it was fighting the war of minds, thought and ideologies in which only the party which is on the right side of justice wins not the more powerful one.

After independence, though on the whole India has been moving from shadow of control of information towards an open society in which expressions of a variety of views is permissible and even encouraged. However, the issue of restrictions on freedom of expression keeps coming in news every now and then.

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