



Mains Practice Question

Q ."The press played a catalytic role in mobilizing public opinion during India's struggle for independence." Examine how colonial policies sought to suppress this voice of dissent.
(250 words)

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Approach

- Introduce the answer by briefing the rise of press in India and its role in mobilizing public opinion
- Delve into the Role of the Press in Mobilizing Public Opinion
- Highlight the Colonial Policies to Suppress the Press
- Delve into the Nationalist Response to Repression
- Conclude by highlight the significance of press in Indian national movement

Introduction

The second half of the 19th century witnessed the rise of the press through **Indian-owned newspapers**, both in **English and vernacular languages**, which became instrumental in mobilizing public opinion against colonial policies.

- These newspapers were **pivotal in spreading ideas of self-governance, democracy, and civil liberties** while criticizing colonial policies.
- In response, the British government enacted several repressive policies to curb this dissent.

Body

Role of the Press in Mobilizing Public Opinion

- **Awareness and Political Education:** Newspapers like **Kesari (Marathi), The Hindu, and Amrita Bazar Patrika** spread nationalist ideas and educated the masses about civil rights, democracy, and industrialization.
- **Formation of Public Opinion:** The press urged unity among Indians, **critiqued British policies**, and opposed **discriminatory practices** like famine mismanagement and exploitative taxation.
- **Platform for National Leaders:** Leaders like **Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Surendranath Banerjea, and Dadabhai Naoroji** used newspapers as platforms to propagate nationalist ideology and inspire collective resistance.
- **Political Mobilization in Remote Areas:** Newspapers reached even remote villages, where editorials and articles were **read aloud in local libraries**, encouraging discussions and political participation.

Colonial Policies to Suppress the Press

- **Vernacular Press Act, 1878 ("Gagging Act")**
 - Aimed to **suppress the vernacular press**, which was critical of British policies, especially during events like the famine of 1876-77 and the extravagant Delhi Durbar.

- **Provisions:**
 - District magistrates could demand security deposits and confiscate press equipment if newspapers caused "**disaffection**" or religious/caste-based antipathy.
 - **No appeal could be made against the magistrate's decision.**
 - Pre-censorship of vernacular newspapers was mandated to gain exemption from the Act.
- Public opposition led to the repeal of the Act in 1882 by **Lord Ripon.**
- **Section 124A and 153A of IPC (Sedition Laws)**
 - Section 124A **criminalized any attempt to cause disaffection** against the British government, with punishments including life imprisonment.
 - **Section 153A targeted writings that caused hatred between different classes,** primarily aimed at preventing anti-British unity.
 - **Example:** Bal Gangadhar Tilak's writings in *Kesari* led to his imprisonment multiple times, including a **six-year sentence in Mandalay for his articles and speeches.**
- **Newspaper (Incitement to Offences) Act, 1908**
 - Enacted to suppress the **extremist nationalist press during the Swadeshi Movement.**
 - Empowered magistrates to confiscate printing presses and penalize newspapers publishing content inciting violence or rebellion.
- **Indian Press Act, 1910**
 - Revived the **harsh provisions of the Vernacular Press Act,** requiring printers to deposit securities and submit copies of newspapers to the government for censorship.
 - This Act sought to curtail nationalist newspapers and severely restricted the freedom of expression.

Nationalist Response to Repression:

- **Strategic Subversion:** Nationalist journalists used creative **tactics to evade censorship.**
 - For example, they **prefaced critical articles with declarations of loyalty to the British government** or quoted criticisms of imperialism from English newspapers to indirectly target colonial rule.
- **Mass Mobilization:** Repressive laws often backfired, fueling protests and enhancing public support for the nationalist movement.
- **Role of the Swadeshi Movement:** During this period, newspapers like *Kesari* and *Bande Mataram* openly advocated for **swadeshi movement and boycotts,** despite government crackdowns.

Conclusion

The press served as the **lifeblood of India's freedom struggle by fostering political consciousness, disseminating nationalist ideas,** and holding colonial policies to critical scrutiny. Despite repressive laws like the Vernacular Press Act and sedition laws, the resilient nationalist press became a **key pillar of the independence movement, bringing the ideals of freedom and democracy to the masses.**