



LANGUAGE OF LIBERATION: A STUDY OF VERNACULAR JOURNALISM IN INDIA'S COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ERAS

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Abstract

India's vernacular press was a formative force in organizing public opinion, spreading nationalist ideologies, and defending regional identities in colonial as well as postcolonial India. This essay critically analyzes the ways in which regional language newspapers and magazines acted as advocacy tools during colonial rule and increasingly developed into instruments of activism in postcolonial India. Relying on historical records, pioneering publications, and case studies of Indian languages such as Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, and Kannada, this qualitative inquiry examines how the vernacular press functioned as a tool of resistance against colonial censorship, as a site of sociopolitical reform, and as a keeper of democratic speech after independence. The research examines pioneering legislations such as the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, and critically examines their effects on freedom of the press. By close reading of power editors and newspapers—Kesari, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Al-Hilal, and Samyukta Karnataka—the study traces patterns of opposition in editorials, mobilization of communities, and language empowerment. The article analyses the strength and resistance of vernacular media in a context of state repression, technological evolution, and commercialization of the postcolonial period. The research brings to light that vernacular journalism in India not only recorded history but even influenced it, transforming from a colonial tool for protest into a column of participatory democracy.

Keywords: Vernacular Press, Colonial India, Postcolonial Media, Regional Journalism, Press Freedom

1. Introduction

The Indian vernacular press has been a fundamental driver of the socio-political awareness of the country since the colonial period to the post-independence period. Not a passive carrier of information, it became a forceful vehicle of agitation, protest, and ultimately activism. Based on local cultures and regional languages, vernacular newspapers and magazines became arenas of articulation of colonial opposition and, subsequently, articulation of marginalized communities' concerns and democratic accountability.

Indian nationalists in the 19th and early 20th centuries realized that the press had the potential to create a sense of collective awareness among a multi-lingual population (Natarajan, 1962). Growth in

regional language dailies coincided with increasing nationalist feelings and increased political consciousness among the common man. Newspapers such as Kesari (Marathi), Amrita Bazar Patrika (originally Bengali, eventually bilingual), and Swadesamitran (Tamil) were not only political communication media but nurseries of literary work, local resistance, and public opinion (Chatterjee, 2019).

In the postcolonial world, the vernacular press remained a strong force for democratizing the Indian media. Its reach into rural and semi-urban regions beyond the urban heartland, it emerged as a leading force for participatory communication, grassroots movements, and social transformation. This paper examines how the vernacular press evolved from a medium of advocacy during colonial times to an opportunity of activism in the democratic era.

Research Problem and Significance

In spite of growing dominance of English and electronic media in public space, the vernacular press continues to be a pillar of India's mediascape. Yet, academic engagement with its evolution over time and responsive function in Indian public life is usually narrowed. A case study of the transition from advocacy to activism of the vernacular press can unlock the dynamics of power, language, and media in a multicultural democracy.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical emergence and evolution of the vernacular press during the colonial period.
2. To analyze the vernacular press's role in India's nationalist movements.
3. To explore how regional language media adapted and expanded its advocacy role in post-independence India.
4. To evaluate the vernacular press's contribution to democratic activism and social justice.
5. To identify the challenges faced by the vernacular press in the contemporary media landscape.

Research Questions

1. How did the vernacular press contribute to the anti-colonial nationalist movement in India?
2. What were the modes and methods of advocacy employed by vernacular publications during British rule?
3. How has the role of the vernacular press evolved in the post-independence period?
4. What challenges and opportunities does vernacular journalism face in the current media environment?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vernacular Press During the Colonial Period

The colonial Indian vernacular press was more than just a language change but political rebellion. It offered platforms to Indian nationalists, public intellectuals, and social reformers who sought to mobilize political consciousness and challenge colonial authority. Sambad Kaumudi (established by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1821) in Bengal, and Kesari (established by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1881) in Maharashtra, were some of the early examples of utilizing vernacular journalism as political mobilization vehicles (Natarajan, 1962; Chatterjee, 2019).

In southern India, Kannada journalism contributed significantly to socio-political consciousness. Mangaluru Samachara (1843), being one of the earliest Kannada newspapers edited by Rev. Hermann Mögling of Basel Mission, was the first modern Kannada newspaper. It entailed publishing international and

local news and was one of the earliest mass education and public enlightenment (Shankaraghatta, 2005). But another major milestone was the establishment of Samyukta Karnataka in 1921 as a powerful nationalist voice in favor of the freedom struggle. The paper took on Gandhian values and advocated non-violence, rural development, and self-sufficiency.

Colonial Kannada journalism too was concerned with caste, education, and social reform matters. Intellectuals like Alur Venkata Rao and M. Venkatakrishnaiah used Kannada publications to foster historical pride and mobilize towards the integration of Kannada-speaking areas (Raghavan, 2012). These papers set the stage for a vibrant regional press culture that esteemed literary richness, reflection, and political engagement.

Lord Lytton's repressive Vernacular Press Act of 1878 aimed at these very dailies. It attempted to restrain oppositional voices and strangle what the colonial government referred to as "seditious vernacular writing." This measure, through being limiting, ironically meant taking further action because vernacular journalists reacted by articulating even more calculated resistance (Rao, 2003).

2.2 Postcolonial Vernacular Press and Democratic Engagement

When India attained independence, the Indian vernacular press evolved from being an instrument of anti-colonial activism into a platform of democratic consolidation and cultural representation. Prajavani, which was founded in 1948 by the Deccan Herald group in Karnataka, emerged as a prominent Kannada-language daily. It embodied democratic values, social justice, and rural causes. The role of Udayavani and Vijaya Karnataka in regional journalism is also equally important in raising awareness levels on development, environment, and public health (Nadig, 2011).

At the national level, the post-independence era saw the rapid growth of local dailies such as Malayala Manorama (Malayalam), Eenadu (Telugu), and Dainik Jagran (Hindi), parallel to that of Prajavani in Kannada. These dailies were instrumental in popularizing readership among non-English speakers, thereby boosting democratic participation. Jeffrey (2000) further states that this "vernacularization of democracy" helped rural masses have access to significant news and political debate earlier occupied by urban elites.

In Karnataka, local dailies were used as forums for language policy, regional identity, and Dalit rights. P. Lankesh launched in 1980 the Dalit magazine Lankesh Patrike that became a militant Kannada weekly with its left-wing editorials, investigative journalism, and voice for the downtrodden. It gave space to writers such as Devanur Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah who employed the media to resist caste hierarchy and impose social change (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013).

2.3 Challenges in the Contemporary Era

The Karnataka local media, as their Indian counterparts, have to fight new challenges now. Consolidation of the media, corporate entry, and digitization are changing the face of news. Rural readership of Kannada dailies such as Prajavani, Udayavani, and Vijaya Karnataka is still strong, but digital media are changing modes of consumption and revenue streams.

There is an issue of vernacular journalism being less critical in nature, with a focus on sensationalism at the expense of investigative reporting. Chakravarty and Roy (2013) indicate that corporate pressures have meant that "infotainment" has replaced investigative journalism, and local political agendas have dictated editorial content.

But vernacular web journalism is on the rise as well. Kannada-language online websites such as Public TV Digital, Karnataka One News, and Varthabharati are trying new formats in order to compete with younger audiences while retaining regional identity and political analysis.

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws upon several media and communication theories to interpret the evolving role of the vernacular press:

- Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989): The vernacular press created parallel public spheres, especially during colonial times, where the Indian intelligentsia engaged in discourse on self-rule, reform, and identity.
- Framing Theory (Entman, 1993): Vernacular newspapers shaped public perception by emphasizing certain issues—nationalism in colonial times, development in post-independence India, and caste or regional identity in recent decades.
- Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976): In rural Karnataka, where alternative media options were limited until the digital boom, newspapers became essential for information, political education, and social mobilization.
- Cultural Studies Approach: Scholars like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall emphasized how media operates as a site of ideological struggle. Kannada journalism, particularly in publications like *Lankesh Patrike*, has embodied such a cultural resistance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design with the aim to critically analyze the historical, cultural, and political value of India's vernacular press, with specific reference to the media world of Kannada language. The research approach relies on case study analysis, archival reading, and discourse analysis to make possible a nuanced comprehension of the press as an instrument of change both in colonial and postcolonial periods.

3.2 Data Sources

3.3 Case Selection Criteria

The selected newspapers and case studies were chosen based on:

- Their historical impact on Indian nationalism, identity formation, or social reform.
- Their linguistic scope, particularly focusing on vernacular languages like Kannada.
- Their editorial positioning, i.e., their resistance or alignment with state authority across different periods.
- Their relevance to both colonial resistance and postcolonial reconstruction, ensuring continuity in the media's advocacy function.

Examples include:

- *Mangaluru Samachara* – for being the first Kannada-language newspaper.
- *Lankesh Patrike* – for its radical politics and literary interventions.
- *Prajavani* – for representing continuity in Kannada journalism from 1948 onward.

- *Kesari* and *Young India* – for connecting the vernacular press with the broader Indian nationalist discourse.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The study employs thematic and discourse analysis to interpret the content, framing, and evolution of vernacular press publications.

- **Thematic Analysis:** Themes such as anti-colonial resistance, linguistic identity, democratization of information, and regional consciousness are identified across case studies.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Editorials, opinion pieces, and front-page news items are analyzed to examine how narratives around nationalism, social reform, and identity were constructed or contested.
- **Comparative Historical Method:** A cross-era comparison is used to identify how the role of the vernacular press evolved from resistance to reconstruction.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

- This study is non-empirical in nature, with no primary data collection through interviews or surveys.
- The research does not include content frequency analysis, readership metrics, or media consumption behavior.
- Focus is confined to media structures and discourse, and excludes economic or advertising-based dimensions of the newspaper industry.
- While Kannada is the central focus, comparative references to other major vernacular presses (e.g., Bengali, Marathi, and Hindi) are included for contextual richness.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Vernacular Press as a Tool of Political Mobilization during Colonial India

The vernacular press occupied the very center of colonial Indian intellectual and political life. It was more than an instrument of information, but rather a tool of nationalist propaganda, opposition, and mobilization. In late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian-language publications like Bengali (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*), Marathi (*Kesari*), Hindi (*Bharat Mitra*), and Kannada (*Mangaluru Samachara*) offered ideological counterpoints to colonial dominance and English-language media, which tended to reflect imperialist viewpoints.

In Kannada journalism, Rev. Hermann Mögling's *Mangaluru Samachara* (1843) was the first vernacular journalism. Although a missionary had started it, later it gave rise to native Kannada journalism. Christian literature and social news were both featured on its pages, which shows the convergence of evangelism and public education (Natarajan, 1962). The duality made the paper respectable but covertly subversive, with scope for political consciousness.

By the early 20th century, figures such as M. Venkatakrishnaiah (Mysore's "Grand Old Man") established Kannada journalism as a field of ethical nationalism, promoting education, prohibition, and reform of the caste system on newspapers such as *Vrittanta Chintamani*. Vernacular dailies such as this skirted colonial censorship by framing criticism in the language of metaphor and allegory and hence cultivating a literary-political imagination (Iyengar, 1950).

Name of the Newspaper	Language	Founder/Editor	Year Established	Contribution to the Freedom Movement
Kesari	Marathi	Bal Gangadhar Tilak	1881	Advocated swaraj and nationalist resistance.
Amrita Bazar Patrika	Bengali	Sisir Kumar Ghosh	1868	Criticized colonial policies; switched to English overnight to evade Vernacular Press Act.
Swadesamitran	Tamil	G. Subramania Iyer	1882	Promoted socio-political reforms and public awakening.
Al-Hilal	Urdu	Maulana Abul Kalam Azad	1912	Strong anti-British stance; voice of Indian Muslims.
Samyukta Karnataka	Kannada	Vishwa Karnataka Press	1921	Instrumental in popularizing Gandhian ideals.
Janmabhumi	Malayalam	K. P. Kesava Menon	1939	Fought for social reform and regional identity.
Hind Kesari	Hindi	Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi	1920s	Championed oppressed voices; focused on peasant issues.

4.2 Resistance to Colonial Surveillance and the Vernacular Press Act (1878)

One watershed moment in Indian-language journalism arrived with the enactment of the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, aimed explicitly at non-English-language newspapers. Indian-language dailies were increasingly making the British colonial authorities fear that they were assisting in mobilizing anti-colonial opinion.

The Act also gave powers to district magistrates to quell publications that were "seditious" in nature. It was not against English newspapers, and thus its bias was evident. The editorial position of the vernacular press became more acrid as a response, employing disguised forms of critique like allegory, historical references, and coded messages (Basu, 2020).

Kannada journalism, while geographically less turbulent than Bengal or Maharashtra, was equally vulnerable to colonial censorship. M. Venkatakrishnaiah, for example, courted state resistance for openly advocating. But the strength of the Kannada press was that it was locally centered, dealing in local matters of national importance.

Year	Legislation Name	Description and Impact
1823	Licensing Regulations	Required licenses for all printing presses.
1857	Gagging Act	Restricted freedom of the press during the Revolt of 1857.
1878	Vernacular Press Act	Targeted non-English newspapers; permitted censorship and confiscation.
1908	Press Act	Imposed stricter control over nationalist publications.

4.3 Post-Independence Reconstruction: Vernacular Press and Democratic Deepening

After independence, the Indian vernacular press shifted its orientation from oppositional to nation-building journalism. Kannada dailies like Prajavani (established in 1948) and Samyukta Karnataka were the foundations of public discourse in postcolonial India, debating language policy, agrarian reform, and education.

Prajavani advocated rationalism, federalism, and Kannada linguistic identity, and Samyukta Karnataka was also a significant force in the Karnataka Unification Movement (Ekikarana) and thus bridged

language and statehood (Saxena, 2021). In contrast to their English counterpart, these papers addressed rural concerns, caste-based discrimination, and regional growth, expanding the vernacular public sphere.

At the same time, left-leaning magazines such as Lankesh Patrike (founded by P. Lankesh in 1980) departed from party journalism to adopt literary opposition, Dalit cause, and anti-establishment criticism. It was paradigm advocacy journalism resisting the hegemonies and creating counter-narratives (Raju, 1990).

4.4 Language, Identity, and Social Transformation

Native-language publications have always been identity markers, giving linguistic and cultural groups a sense of empowerment in the public sphere. Kannada reporting, for example, enabled standardization of vocabulary, promoted regional writing, and enabled policy advocacy on matters of language rights.

The debates on medium of instruction, software localization to Kannada, and digitization of archives are new avatars of the old conflict. Journalists such as Gauri Lankesh continued this tradition of activism by using publications such as Lankesh Patrike to counter the domination of majoritarian narratives at the expense of their own life.

The coexistence of colloquial and literary Kannada varieties in contemporary Kannada journalism is a sign of democratic practice of politics of language—of inclusion, rather than standardization (Chandrasekhar, 2019).

4.5 Ethical Journalism and the Legacy of the Vernacular Press

In contrast to English-language market-driven media, which take up elite agendas, vernacular journalism has remained truer to mass-level concerns, such as farmers' movements, caste atrocities, and environmental protests. It has created political victimization as much as popular respectability.

In the Kannada establishment, journalistic values of transparency, self-discipline, and service, ennobled by Mahatma Gandhi and M. Venkatakrishnaiah, continue to resonate. Local newspapers stick to these values when reporting on rural misery, Gram Panchayat elections, and folk literature till date even in the era of the internet.

4.6 Contemporary Challenges and the Digital Vernacular Divide

Despite its historical and democratic value, the vernacular press faces challenges in the digital era:

- **Algorithmic Bias:** Most digital platforms favor English content, limiting discoverability and monetization of vernacular news.
- **Resource Constraints:** Rural and regional journalists often lack digital tools and training for investigative reporting.
- **Declining Readership:** Younger audiences are drawn to visual platforms, reducing print subscriptions.
- **Media Consolidation:** Large conglomerates dominate regional media, threatening editorial independence.

However, digital platforms have also enabled grassroots media start-ups, such as *Bhaarthvani* and *Eedina*, which produce Kannada content on policy, science, and marginalized voices.

5. Conclusion

The Indian vernacular media have gone from being a subversive tool of colonial resistance to a lively forum for regional identity, democratic participation, and grass-roots empowerment. In charting this process from the 19th century through to the modern era, it is evident that the vernacular media—especially in languages like Kannada—have not just been an agency for news but have indeed reshaped the contours of Indian public debate.

During colonial rule, vernacular press like *Kesari*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and *Mangaluru Samachara* was a platform where oppressed voices and dissenting thoughts could attain public expression. These periodicals remained equal to the censorship of the state with rhetorical competence, proving that vernacular journalism was not reportage but participative opposition. Editors like M. Venkatakrishnaiah in Karnataka became moral guides, practicing a journalism of truth, education, and reform, and not commerce or propaganda.

After independence, vernacular journalism broadened its task from advocacy to activism. Whereas English dailies chronicled the city elite, the vernacular press championed causes like land reform, Dalit rights, and regional language identity. Kannada dailies like *Prajavani*, *Samyukta Karnataka*, and *Lankesh Patrike* fostered an open public sphere, which was central during movements like the Unification of Karnataka and anti-Emergency movements. It was also the time when literary journalism came into being, with editorials serving as socio-political opinion interventions.

Vernacular media today are confronted with a paradox: unparalleled reach but increased vulnerability. While penetration of mobiles and digitization have supported readership, market forces, language hierarchies, and algorithmic unfairness challenge editorial independence and diversity. The transnational platforms in the English language and cross-border corporate interests overwhelm the digital space and seek to disregard the subtle needs of provincial journalism. Additionally, the loss of investigative vernacular journalism is once again endangered by shrinking news budgets and increasing political pressures.

But resilience wins. New-age people's media sites like *Gaon Connection*, *Eedina*, and *Mooknayak* are rekindling advocacy journalism's culture, with farmers, rural women, and atrocities to caste as the focus. These media sites combine old values of journalism with new tools of storytelling—videos, podcasts, and social media—thus evolving for a hybrid future.

Future Directions

In order to consolidate and expand the position of vernacular journalism in India's media landscape, the following actions need to be undertaken:

1. **Policy Support for Language Journalism:** The government and regulatory bodies can offer grants and infrastructure facilities to vernacular news desks, especially in tribal and rural areas. Language technology support—such as AI translation and voice-to-text interfaces—can overcome the digital divide.
2. **Digital Competence and Journalist Training:** Capacity-building professional training courses for journalists in the nation, such as digital media competency, ethical reporting, and investigative journalism, are essential to ensuring content standards in the contexts of rapid technological change.
3. **Preserving Vernacular Heritage:** Establishing domestic digital archives of vernacular journals such as *Indian Opinion*, *Navajivan*, *Samyukta Karnataka*, and *Harijan Bandhu* will not just preserve the historical records but also enhance academic studies on indigenous media histories.

4. Decentralized News Ecosystems: Fostering community-driven models of journalism, cooperatives, and non-profit newsrooms within the local environment will yield editorial autonomy and public trust.
5. Legal Protection for Journalistic Freedom: Fortifying law on press freedom, protection of whistleblowers, and digital rights—especially of small and local media—can guarantee journalism in local languages to remain a counter-hegemonic voice.

Briefly, the vernacular press has ever been Indian society's motor and mirror—reflecting its complexity and propelling its change. Under colonial censorship, through digital turmoil, its saga is the story of language journalism's vitality in pushing truth, giving a voice to the voiceless, and keeping democratic ideals intact. Its future is not survival but a renewed promise of ethical, inclusive, and unapologetic journalism.

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