



The Punjab Press and the Indian National Congress – A Case Study Tribune and the Civil and Military Gazette (1885-1893)

Dr Amrit Kaur Basra

Associate Professor

Department of History

Delhi College of Arts and Commerce

University of Delhi

Date of Submission: 28-06-2021

Date of Acceptance: 12-07-2021

ABSTRACT: The role newspapers in providing public space to subordinate Indian people during British colonial rule has been documented in several works. It was also used by the British rulers to glorify their policies. It was evident in colonial Punjab where the Civil and Military Gazette represented and defended colonial policies. In sharp contrast the Tribune founded in 1881 came to represent voice of Punjabis in particular and Indians in general. The paper within this context study the views, reports and attitudes of both newspapers towards Indian National Congress which was the main medium for articulation of Indian nationalism.

KEY WORDS: Indian National Congress, The, Civil and Military Gazette, The Tribune, Nationalism, Consciousness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Under the British rule, the press had emerged as the most effective medium of mass communication. The nationalists used it as a medium to highlight the oppressive nature of the British rule in order to generate political consciousness among the people. When the Indian National Congress was established in 1885, the press become its chief spokesperson. But the opponents of this national organization were equally vocal in employing this medium. In the process, the supporters of the British rule ridiculed the goals of the Indian National Congress, dismissed its very existence and raised suspicions at the involvement of nationalist Indians in it.

In Punjab both these trends were evident while most of vernacular newspapers were busy in highlighting socio-religious activities in the province, the political orientation was only shown by the Tribune. Since its establishment in 1881 the

paper had decided to 'act for public weal' and represent the "public opinion of India".¹

The paper provided the institutional basis to spread the cause of Indian National Congress but in its opposition the Civil and Military Gazette came up. Both published each and every little activity of the Congress in the Punjab but their aims remained different. While the Tribune pleaded the Congress cause, exhorted Punjabis to, join it and regarded it as a 'Symbol of National Unity', for which Hindus and Muslims should work together. The Civil and Military Gazette regarded it "alien to Punjab, a seditious body, only a Bengali agitation having so many loopholes that it deserved to be avoided." The paper was interested in pointing out its defects and consequent opposition to it. Thus, the political outlook of both was different from each other.

In 1880's the centre of political activities in Punjab was Lahore Indian Association and the Tribune had been acting as its chief reporting agencies². The first session of the Indian National Congress was duly reported by the paper. In fact out of two Punjabi delegates Babu Murlidhar had been representative of the Tribune³. While hailing this session as a success, the paper felt that in the next session precaution would be taken to unite all the political associations in different parts of the Country to cooperate and observed "...the Congress should be thoroughly national in all its features and aspects and we would strongly deprecate anything on the part of any body that would tend to mar or reduce its national character⁴. With these observations, the Tribune took up the task of enlightening the Punjabis about the Congress movement. It stressed the unity and cooperation among all people, irrespective of caste, religion for any kind of progress.⁵ It offered few suggestions for the Congress. It wanted Congress to discuss



questions of representative institutions for the country, give wide scope for more discussion, have a permanent fund and Congress bodies at local level to work for it.⁶

The paper desired larger participation from the Punjab but at the same time cautioned that such delegates should "give expression to the prevailing sentiment in the province rather than to their individual opinions".⁷ The paper was very much aware about the prevailing communal tension in Punjab on 'knew that participation of Muslims in the Indian National Congress was imperative for unity. It blamed the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy⁸ for creating this division and hoped for their support as "being once the rulers of the country, their association would add to the prestige of the movement"⁹. It entered into arguments with those who were asserting that the congress was a Hindu organisation, did not represent the Muslim point of view and Muslims were not interested in it. Thus observations of the Pioneer, Ameer Ali and Sir Sayyed Ahmad were strongly refuted.¹⁰

The first observation of the Civil and Military Gazette on the Indian National Congress appeared in its issue of December 30, 1886. While asserting that the congress was not national in nature, its special correspondent gave a brief summary of the proceedings and no comments were made.¹¹ Very soon, the paper highlighted the Muslim apathy towards it. Thus non-participation of Muslims was, for the Civil and Military Gazette, sign of their "wisdom and forbearing". For it, the opposition of Muslims showed their willingness to cooperate with the Government and it wanted latter to be equally responsible to former.....¹² Thus the paper came to represent official outlook. It even ridiculed the demand of the Punjabis for the legislative Council. It felt that poverty of Punjab would make the Council only a burden on the exchequer and in case such a Council was guaranteed, then self-appointed representative would dominate it.¹³ It concluded that India was not in need of political reformers but social reforms.¹⁴ However, in a subsequent article, the paper while publishing the proceedings of the third congress session noted "...no true friend of India can fail to rejoice at the collection of educated men at Madras for the welfare of their country".¹⁵ But these types of comments were very rare.

The year 1888 saw genuine efforts by Punjabis to popularise the Congress movement in the province. There was a desire to hold its session in the coming year. The Tribune was once again in the forefront. Its press premises were used for holding many political meetings where eminent speakers like Raja Rampal Singh spoke and urged Punjabis to unite. While giving wide coverage to such meetings, the Tribune appreciated the participation of Muslims in them. The lectures and meetings of outside eminent Muslim leaders mainly Ali Bhimji were given wide publicity.¹⁶

Such efforts were not very fruitful as many anti-Congress meetings at Lahore, Gurdaspur and Delhi were also held. It was the Civil and Military Gazette which

highlighted this fact. It maintained that Bhimji was regarded as unwelcome in Punjab. For instance, the paper pointed out that the meeting held at Peshawar in honour of Bhimji could attract very few Hindus and Muslims had been warned before "hand to abstain from it".¹⁷ "In fact "Muslims from Delhi to Peshawar were anti-congress their support was just imaginery".¹⁸ Mr. Bhimji was accused of spreading sedition and disturbing the peace of the province so that there was need of checking his actions.¹⁹

The paper went on to assert that even Sikhs were opposing the Congress²⁰ and regarded Congress agitation in Punjab being initiated by Bengalis which should be curbed by the Government. For it, "the protest of the Musalmans and Sikhs against the Congress agitation was the protest of the Punjab against the Bengali plague".²¹ The Sikh opposition to the Congress was refuted by the Tribune when it disclosed the "bhai Nikka Singh and Pratap Singh of Khalsa Dewen of Amritsar, issuing anti-congress resolutions were employees of the Civil and Military Gazette and were following their owners' instructions."²²

Elections of delegates to the Allahabad session further provided both the newspapers with an opportunity to attack on counter-attack each other. Reporting the election of delegates, the Tribune was hopeful of election of more than two thousand delegates as sixteen stations had to yet elect their delegates. It stated that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and even Europeans had been enrolled as its representatives.²³

This rousy picture was refuted by the Civil and Military Gazette when it pointed out that many Punjabis had been enrolled against their wishes as representatives. It published the names of Pandit Maharaj Kishen, Editor, Gamkhar Hind, Pandit Selig Ram, Editor, Khair - Khah and others who refused to be delegates to the Congress. It maintained that Congree in Punjab "was only the most oudacious and childish fraud and if Bengalis were removed, then, there would have been no one take the trouble to hire, bribe or flatter "Delegates into going to Allabad".²⁴ In fact, after the Allahabad session was over, the complaints of false names as delegates or forcible inclusion of Punjabis as delegates continued to find expression in the columns of Civil and Military Gazette.²⁵

Indeed, there was disappointment as Punjab was not given the permission to hold the annual session of the Congress in 1889. While the Civil and Military Gazette stopped writing with congress, the Tribune attempted to restore the confidence of local people in it.²⁸

The discontent was very much there. It was explicit in the fact that very few meetings were held to elect delegates for the coming session. The Civil and Military Gazette was quick to note it and observed that though in Lahore and Amritsar meetings were held but those who were elected, refused to go.²⁹

The Confidence in the Congress was restored when in 1892, the Congress decided to hold the next session



in the Punjab. Once again leading congressmen organised public meetings, collected funds and created strong organisational basis to hold the session. The Tribune not only reported it but also helped in it. The Civil and Military Gazette was more interested in pointing out anti-Congress meetings held by Anjuman-I-Islamia of Lahore, Anjuman-I-Islamic of Amritsar and others in Lahore, Amritsar, Jhang Dera Ismail Khan, Rawalpindi and Multan.³⁰ While reporting such meetings, the Civil and Military Gazette also published many letters to show that the Muslim names included in the delegates list were fraudulent.³⁰ It evoked reaction from the Tribune. In a meeting held at the Baoli in the centre of the Lahore city under the chairmanship of Dyal Singh Majithia, speakers like Raja Rampal Singh and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya accused the Civil and Military Gazette for deliberately showing false Muslim opposition.³¹

II. CONCLUSION

On the basis of above narration it can be concluded that the Tribune was not only a simple newspaper, rather it was the part of the Congress activities in the Punjab and worked relentlessly for its popularity. The Civil and Military Gazette exhibiting official standpoint was interested in proving that the congress was not popular in Punjab. In the process both newspapers, well aware of each other's existence, occasionally clashed with each other. The biased reporting of the Civil and Military Gazette was disclosed by the Tribune. The former was equally quick and successful in pin-pointing the fact that letter was not always correct its assertions.

1. The paper is based on the study of both newspapers.
2. For an overview see, Amrit Kaur Basra, Press and Politics in the Punjab 1860-1905, New Delhi: Shree Kala Prakashan, 2015.
3. Tribune, January 9, 1886, p.3
4. Tribune, January 9, 1886, p.3
5. Tribune, March 13, 1886, pp.5-7
6. Tribune, November 13, 1886, p.4
7. Tribune, December 4, 1886, p.4
8. Tribune June 6, 1886, p.1
9. Tribune, December 18, 1886, p.3
10. For details See, Tribune, December 29, 1886, pp. 5-6, February 5; 1887, p.5, December 29, 1886, p.5; March 12, 1887, pp. 3-7.
11. Civil and Military Gazette, December 30, 1886, p.1,3.
12. Civil and Military Gazette, January 10, 1887, p.2. The paper had commented upon the article of W. Gregory on Indian Muslims which was published in the Nineteenth Century and then had expressed above mentioned views.
13. Civil and Military Gazette, March 3, 1887, p.2.
14. Civil and Military Gazette, December 30, 1897; p.3.
15. Civil and Military Gazette; April 5, 1888; p.6.
16. Tribune; May -12, 1888; pp.2-3; May 23, 1888; pp.2-3; May 23, 1888; p.2; May 30, 1888; p.2, July 4, 1888; pp.2-3; September 15, 1888; p.2; October 10, 1888; p.2
17. Civil and Military Gazette; October 10, October 24, 1888; p.3.
18. Civil and Military Gazette; October 17, 1888; p.2 October 24, 1888; p.3
19. Civil and Military Gazette; November 1, 1898; p.3.
20. Civil and Military Gazette; December 7, 1888; p.6, A Letter to this effect was also published.
21. Civil and Military Gazette; December 28, 1888, p.2.
22. Tribune, October 10, 1888, pp.2-4.
23. Tribune; December 15, 1888, p.3.
24. Civil and Military Gazette, December 28, 1888, p.2.
25. Civil and Military Gazette, January 2, 1889, p.2.
26. Civil and Military Gazette; February 5, 1889, p.3.
27. Tribune, November 20, 1889, pp.2-3.
28. Tribune, November 6, 1889, p.5.
29. Civil and Military Gazette; December 4, 1893, p.7
December 11, 1893, p.4, December 23, 1893, p.3, November 10, 1893, p.3
30. Civil and Military Gazette, December 23, 1893, p.3.
31. This meeting was reported by the Civil and Military Gazette only, See, Civil and Military Gazette, October 17, 1893, p.4.