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Newspapers as material artifact of Indian society (pre-partition era): An Analysis of *The Tribune* (16 December 1922)

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Abstract

Newspapers as material artefacts have been a much-debated arena over its trustworthiness as a source, yet much research has expounded on utilizing media as a source of providing insights into the working of society and culture at large. The present paper takes a holistic approach for studying The Tribune newspaper dated 16 December 1922 as a historical artefact to take into account its topographical aspects as well as content and linguistic variations in the choices of lexemes to depict a pre-partition society. The analysis unravels that on topographical aspects local and foreign news sections remain perplexed, on contextual level, the newspapers is more concerned about the economic and health issues of the society and there is muting of coverage of communal riots. On the linguistic level, the results are enthralling as certain lexemes used in this artefact are archaic, whereas multi-lingual choices at many places can be observed.

Keywords: newspapers, artifacts, partition

1. Introduction

Newspapers is a medium which is rich in historical, cultural, political and economic narratives, thereby presenting the multi-dimensional aspects of the societies in which these newspapers are published. Though now-days newspapers have transcended borders both physically and otherwise yet a glimpse in the previous centuries indicate that the impact of globalization was not much vast, and the news used to be more embedded in local cultures than the foreign. In the case of colonial history, the newspapers tend to cover at least the two societies i.e., colonizers as well as colonized, though there are imbalances in the status conferral attributed to each actor. In this present paper, the focus of the study is to investigate *The Tribune* newspaper published on December 16, 1922; owned by the colonized actors in the pre-partition era of India (present day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and to scrutinize how the dynamics of Indian societies are embedded in it, thus making the newspaper as a historical artefact i.e., revealing the rich,, dynamic and complex historical roots of the Indian

culture and at the same time serving as a snapshot of the reality of complexities. By snapshot, I mean that a complete, social, historical and cultural narrative is missing and like a photograph, the complete contextual realities are missing. From the perspective of the form of the newspaper, again the arrangement of the news items is at times logical but most of the time arbitrary pointing to the capitalistic trend of the newspaper. It is also important to clarify that most of the time when we will be using the term *India* in this paper, we use the historical notion when the place was one country i.e., before 1947's partition.

2. Newspapers as Material Artefacts

Newspapers as historical artifacts have an immense potential for researchers to investigate into the polygonal aspects of the past cultures, thus bringing into light the areas which are often not catered or are elapsed. The trouble for history researchers has been pre-dominantly the availability of newspapers as artifacts as the physical form of newspapers published in the previous centuries was very limited. Thus, the unavailability of such artifacts led to smart solution of digitalizing these historical artifacts (Allen & Sieczkiewicz, 2010). The digitalizing of such material artifacts aids in opening spaces and debate for data which might have been obscured over centuries to understand not just the content produced at a particular time but also helps in understanding how these artifacts might have shaped societies and their behavior at large (Hirtle, 2002). It implies that newspapers as artifacts becomes a source of data which might not be found in any other material form, leading to graphical visualization of the society (Hoy, 1945).

The utilization of material sources for interpretation and re-interpretation stems from "Western epistemological attitudes" (Petrov, 2012), when applied to newspapers, lay stress on not just the content but also surface and layout topographical aspects along with the spatial and temporal factors. So, utilizing newspapers as artefacts is not just studying the content but taking into account the whole newspaper including the paper size, quality, structure, color schemes as well. This also suggest researching the newspapers as artefacts through the multimodal approach.

Despite the fact that historian have traditionally expounded on newspapers as material artefacts and scholars like American historian James Rhodes in the early 20th century has ardently advocated for newspapers are as reliable source as they are based on factual information. But contemporary debates over the use of newspapers as artefacts highlight the challenges and weaknesses in utilizing them as a primary source of data, thus a caution is advised which adopting these material artefacts as a primary source of data (Soriano, 2025).

3. Methodology

Before going into brief history of the selected newspaper, I deem it important to mention the reason behind taking the year 1922. This year is considered pivotal from the perspective of the rebellions against colonialism in India marked by religious strain. Similarly, the independence movement has been in complete sway and we see that just after 15 years, the British left India and divided it into two countries in 1947 i.e., India and Pakistan (Bangladesh emerged as the third country in 1971).

The Tribune newspaper's role is considered crucial in the independence movement (Maclean, 2018) as it did play a pivotal role in disseminating the message of freedom (Singh, 2011). The name of the newspaper has historical roots to the Roman empire where it meant an official whose duty was to protect the rights of the

citizens (Lendering, 2002; see also Merriam Webster dictionary). So, it implies that the newspaper was probably established on a social-responsibility model of the news production where the role of the media is to act as the watch dog of the social ills. For this reason, it did play its part in the independence movement.

The paper was first established in the year 1881 by an Indian philanthropist, Dayal Singh Majhihthia (Chhina, 2016) at Lahore (the present-day city in Pakistan). Despite the fact that the majority of the population in that region was Muslim, yet the economic giants were Hindus and Sikhs thus controlling the economic activities in the city (Chattha, 2012). The city was one of the educational and banking hub of the Northern India (Talbot, 2007). The establishment of *The Tribune*, also, is one of the marker of this strain as it was the first English newspaper in the region at that time implying that it was catering to the educated people who were well versed in the English language. The purpose of discussing the social and economic environment of the region is then to see what kind of religious tensions, if any, and economic interests are presented in the newspaper under study. It is pertinent to mention that after the partition of India in 1947, due to the partition arrangement, Lahore became a part of Pakistan and the newspaper's head office was transferred to Chandigarh. Today, it is the leading English paper in the present-day India.

4. Analysis

4.1 Topography

Starting with the form of the newspapers, the paper which we selected is of 16 December 1922, comprising of 10 pages where on each page there are majorly four columns except that it varies across a couple of pages. There are varieties of sections in the newspaper ranging from comments to local and foreign news. The enthralling aspect is the abstruseness and vagueness in what news constitutes as local and foreign. At certain places, the foreign becomes the local as the news is related to British colonizers, so the news about London appears in provincial news. It can be due to the connection of Britain with India as well as might be a strategy to make British read the news from an Indian perspective. Similarly, India's railway contracts are discussed in the foreign news section; which though has foreign elements like the foreign companies' investment, but it remains unclear if India's connection with foreign countries is a local or a foreign news. The newspaper strengthens the stance that in the time period we are taking about i.e., 1922, people had no concrete stance of what is local and foreign perhaps due to the impact of colonization.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of the Content

With respect to the content, in all the columns majority of them discuss the tensions at political, financial, and social level. Starting with the political sphere, the newspaper mentions one of the most significance movement in the history of Indian independence i.e., non-cooperation movement by the Congress leaders in India which started in 1920. The movement was originally and initially marked by a peaceful retaliation against the British unjust policies and rule, where the local were asked to give up their titles, jobs, boycott British products and stop paying taxes. Mohandas Ghandhi had been its major focal person and believed in non-violent protests. Yet when the movement adopted violent means, such as an incident at Chauri Chaura resulting in protestors killing the police officers who opened fire on them, the non-cooperation movement was called off in 1922. In the same year in March, Ghandhi and many of the leaders were arrested by police and put in jail. The newspaper on its

very first page states that such imprisonment and debarring the leaders to participate in the political process is an irrational step on the part of the British colonizers, the journalist states “ you have most foolishly made a rule debarring men from serving on Councils, who if they had been Englishmen living in their own country would have been deemed qualified to sit in the mother of Parliaments itself...” (p,1). Side by side, the nationalist stance of journalists/editors is also visible where there is vocalization on the merits of such men, “Indian gentlemen of the highest character and attainments, who are disqualified by a stupid rule from serving their country in its legislature” (Ibid).

There is absence of religious tensions in the newspaper implying that the communal riots with religious identity markers are not given much coverage. This presents the Indian society of Lahore to have a rift between the colonizers and colonized where the formers are alleged to be one entity; free from communal problems. Even when riots which are rooted in religious tensions, their coverage tend to be free from religious sensationalism and the news about ‘Multan riots cases’ do not allude to religious identities or ideologies of the people involved in it. Multan riots on 1922 were largely based on religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims (Hardy, 1972). The absence of this link suggests that the newspaper’s stance in 1922 was to be mute on religious tensions among colonized community and it directed its energy against the British rule. This again allude to the historical fact that the Hindus and Sikhs demanded the British to leave India and give back the rule to the local people, but the Muslims believed in the two-nation theory and demanded the colonizers to split the country between Hindus and Muslims, which actually happened in 1947. The two-nation theory though was officially vocalized in the year 1930, but the rift on the religious issues have had already started in terms of riots from 1920s. The muting method on such religious riots suggest that the newspaper was careful so as not to give sensationalistic air to such issues.

The newspaper implies that there were riots and rebellions in India more specifically against the British rule. The very first news item is pertaining to martial law; setting the tone of tensions in India. But the news is rich in history and cannot be understood only via just reading the newspaper section. It actually refers to Martial law being placed in the Punjab province of India specifically during the aftermath of Amritsar riots of 1919. The riots are considered the darkest chapter in the history of British colonialism where 379 people were killed, and thousands of others were injured (Stancati, 2013). The comment section in the newspaper highlights that the Martial law after the end of rebellion and riots in Punjab was unjustified and superfluous. Another example of such disturbing situation, is the coverage of ‘Moplah prisoners tragedy’. Moplah rebellion is also termed as Malabar rebellion which started as an effort to decolonize India from the British rule in 1921 in the Malabar region of India. The rebellion failed, and the people were captured. The section on prisoners in the paper highlight the atrocities committed against them where they are forced to drink urine, and some died due to extreme thirst. But the last section on the page three regarding the rebellion is paradoxical which refers to how the government awarded the police for working against the rebels. There seems to be not a direct but a subtle criticism on British rulers where the journalists wanted the readers to think to decipher whose treatment has been just i.e. police and government.

The educational sector is also covered by the newspaper where news related to prize distribution ceremonies to legislations pertaining to education are given much coverage. This trend of covering education can be due to two things; (i) Lahore being the educational hub and, (ii) the newspaper's founder's own interest heavily rested on education that he used to donate money for colleges. When he died in the year 1898, he willed his property to educational institutions. Perhaps for this reason, the newspaper have had been covering the educational matters as well.

On the judicial level, again there is agitation where the courts are seen to be very active in those days. A trend, which is not very common now, of court notices being published in the newspapers is also there. This implies that perhaps the newspaper was seen an information sharing commodity which can inform people on almost every matter.

There are said to be tensions on financial sector in India in the year 1922. The country is said to be in huge deficit where large amount of taxation is being carried out. The one of the article states; "The financial position in the beginning of the year was this. All the Province except Bengal and Burma were working at a deficit and the Government of India also found itself faced with a deficit of 13 crores and 63 lakhs" (p,2). In finance matter, the journalist is even more vocal and gives very strong opinion on how the government is handling with the financial sector as he writes; "Lest it should be said that the Government of India have failed in their duty as the supreme authority in India of pointing out the ways and means of meeting the grave financial situation.."(Ibid). It is interesting to see side by side the balance sheets of provincial Congress being published in the newspaper. It could imply the public interest in financial matters as well as a trend on the part of the congress to remain transparent in monetary issues.

In order, to view the newspaper from a capitalistic stance, the range of the advertisements in the newspaper highlights how it caters to various business and in turn disseminate their products to the readers. The advertisements are numerous in number; contributing to almost 40 percent of the content. Their topics range from insurance companies, banking, jobs, auctions, to matrimonial and astrological ads. What is intriguing in these advertisements is not only how the varieties of businesses are addressed but also how they are presented. To reach more market economy, and keeping in view the cultural taboos, the advertisement on problems pertaining to the female related sexual organs is in Urdu i.e., the local language. The purpose of using Urdu in an English newspaper is on one hand to reach more public, more specifically women who are unable to read English and on the other hand provide a direct access of herbal medicines to women.

The second thing to consider in these ads is the religious strain, where majorly, the reference to Hindus and Sikhs are given and the majority of the population of Lahore region i.e., Muslims are not mentioned. This muting can be due to multiple reasons; (i) the businesses are owned by Hindus and Sikhs as they were the economic giants at that time, (ii) reaching out to ethnic cum religious readership, (iii) Muslims businessmen themselves perhaps did not want to publicize in a Sikh owned newspaper, (iv) and there could be other reasons as well. Reaching to any one of this possibilities as the only conclusion can lead to false assumption as the cultural complexities in India at that time were too dense. But if one does not take the social context of the newspaper

and, view the Indian culture via newspaper lens, it seems that the dominant majority in the Lahore region is Hindus or Sikhs and they are the only economic giants when it comes to religious strand.

When it comes to the representation of genders in the ads, it is rather strange that men related sexual problems' ad is in English whereas women specific in Urdu perhaps referring to the fact that women at that time in India have had very low literacy rate as compared to men in general. But there are certain ads where gender-based discrimination is very much evident. The insurance ad has one clause stating that 'female lives also insured under certain tables' (Vidyarthi, 1922; p,5). This suggests that females were not covered normally under insurances and extending such an offer to females is an additional benefit provided by the company. It is to be bear in mind that even females were covered under certain conditions.

The fourth point of consideration in these ads is how they are placed adjacent to one another. Most of the time, there are no logical and ideological connections between one ad to the other; at times even, the arrangement is absurd. The advertisement on the leprosy appears adjacent to the banking, the matrimonial ads are positioned with the sale ads, and the cartridge ads are placed beside the astrology etc. Such placement of news items makes each news story of the same worth and there is no ideological connection thus leading to what Sloterdijk (1983) termed arbitrariness leading to cynicism.

4.3 Linguistic Domain

The last section which I think is worth discussing is related to the use of language in the newspaper. The use of Hindi and Urdu words in Roman and in one advertisement also Urdu's Persian transcription implies that the newspapers wanted to reach to more audience at one hand while optimizing the relevancy and narrowing down the distance with the readership. Such words are both used in the articles as well as in the advertisement. Words like *Sawarj* (self-rule), *Desi* (locals) , *Chaddars* (bedsheets or shawls), *Fatwa* (religious legal decree) and *Zemindars* (land owners) etc are among the words used in the newspaper. Apart from this, there is intriguing lexical cum semantic aspect can be seen which has changed historically. The word *Mohamdans* usage in one of the articles, implies how the word at that time was used for Muslims but later it was subject to objection of being a misnomer and no longer is used as an alternative for Muslims. But in 1920s it was commonly used for Muslims. The overall use of language in the newspapers is not prone to sensationalism, however on few occasions use of strong language is evident; "Make your Christianity a laughing stook. Make you culture a reproach. Damn yourself for ever, and crucify Christ again" (p, 4). Similarly, sweeping and false claims in advertisements can be seen where white leprosy is claimed as curable in just one day via 'face powder' (p,9).

Conclusion

In short, *The Tribune* gives a snapshot of India in 1922 as a country which is marked by political tensions and agitation against the British rule, stuck with bad governance and financial deficits, and issues of rebellion and riots. The common man as consumers are attracted to a variety of products which is the trade mark of capitalistic economy. But this common person largely remains to be either Hindu or Sikh. The advertisements do reveal the conditions of health facilities where people are more prone to buy herbal products as well as lack of their access to certain medications which are offered by advertisers in the newspapers. Side by side, the ads do divulge into the societies' fixation with health insurances, and on the other hand where there are gender

biases. I think, such a society is just a snapshot of the cultural complexities and other communities and issues remained unattended by the newspaper intentionally/unintentionally such as reference to Muslim community and communal conflicts etc. The newspaper as a historical artefact does give some historical pieces of the Indian society but still it remains incomplete. This snapshot via series method where other copies of the Newspaper published in the same year 1922, can be taken for future studies to enhance the cultural dynamics and put closer lens to visualize the Indian society at large.

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Data

The Tribune. December 16, 1922). Lahore