

Pens of Protest: Malayalam Press in the Freedom Struggle

Minooja Beegom A.

Research Scholar, Department of Kerala Studies University of Kerala , Kariavattom

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ABSTRACT

The Malayalam press played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and nurturing nationalist consciousness during India's freedom struggle. Newspapers and journals in Malayalam emerged as vital instruments of political awakening, providing a platform for debates on colonial policies, social reform, and cultural identity. The language of the press during this period was characterized by a blend of simplicity and assertiveness, making nationalist ideas accessible to both the educated elite and the common reader. By employing persuasive rhetoric, literary styles, and localized expressions, the Malayalam press fostered a sense of unity among diverse social groups in Kerala. At the same time, it confronted censorship, legal restrictions, and financial hardships imposed by the colonial regime. Despite these challenges, Malayalam newspapers served as vehicles of resistance, linking regional aspirations to the broader struggle for independence. This study highlights how the evolution of press language in Malayalam not only reflected the socio-political climate of the era but also contributed significantly to the mobilization of collective action against colonial rule.

Keyword's-Malayalam press, Freedom struggle, Cultural nationalism ,Public opinion ,Press freedom ,Indigenous expression, Revolutionary writings, Swadeshi movement

INTRODUCTION

The freedom struggle in India found a strong ally in the regional language press, and Malayalam newspapers played a decisive role in shaping nationalist thought in Kerala. Emerging from the late 19th century, the Malayalam press became more than a medium of information—it was a forum for debate, a platform for reform, and a tool for resistance. Editors and writers harnessed the expressive power of Malayalam to reach both the educated elite and the ordinary reader, thereby bridging social divides in the collective fight against colonialism. The use of Malayalam language in the press not only strengthened regional identity but also contributed to the larger national movement by contextualizing freedom, justice, and self-rule in familiar cultural idioms. Despite colonial restrictions, suppression, and prosecutions, the Malayalam press nurtured a spirit of resilience, giving voice to nationalist leaders, reformers, and the general public. The study of its language during this transformative period reveals how words became weapons, shaping public opinion and inspiring action against imperial domination.

FREEDOM STRUGGLE NARRATIVES IN MALAYALAM PERIODICALS

The struggle for the rights of India's backward classes is portrayed as a continuation of larger civil rights movements, emerging during an era of increased social consciousness inspired by reformers and revivalist movements. This context aided the expansion of the independence struggle. Beginning in September 1920, the Non-Cooperation Movement organised national efforts and, together with the Khilafat Movement, increased protests in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The period of 1920-21 was a watershed moment, marked by state repression, widespread agitation, and horrific incidents such as the Wagon Tragedy. publications like Swadeshabhimani and Kerala stopped publishing after Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai was deported, and Cochin's publications also encountered difficulties under the strict enforcement of the Press Killing Act in Travancore and Cochin. Notable journals of the time, such as Samadarshi, Vivekodayam, and Mitavadi, vigorously opposed prejudice and caste practices while promoting social reforms, civil rights, and press freedom. The majority of these publications, however, did not advocate for independence; many from underdeveloped areas favoured the British government because of its efforts to eradicate caste discrimination and its educational policies for the underprivileged. They were also against the Congress because of its upper-caste leadership. However, some journals continued to favour British authority and were obedient to the government.

Despite their increasing importance, newspapers in Kerala initially opposed the Indian National Congress's fight for independence. In an effort to rally the populace, Congress officials started publishing their own periodicals, such as Lokmanyam and Swarat. Founded in 1920 in Thrissur under the editorship of Kurur

Neelakandan Namboodiripad, Lokmanyam concentrated on state affairs in Kochi and Congress news. After its editor was imprisoned for sedition, it stopped publishing in 1923. Launched in Kollam in 1921 under the editorship of A.K. Pillai, Swarat chronicled the Travancore liberation fight before becoming into a daily in Thiruvananthapuram in 1926. Prior to the Fifth Press Regulation's publishing being halted because of financial issues made worse by the Press Killing Act, Swarat was actively involved in the Vaikom Satyagraha and opposition to the regulation. In honour of Swadeshabhimani, A.K. Pillai launched the magazine Swadeshabhimani, which included the first biography of Lenin in Malayalam and biographies of other notable figures. Lenin died at the age of 53, according to the text, which also mentions earlier reports of his passing and his recent recuperation from a disease close to Moscow before passing away from a pulmonary stroke. According to the author, great thinkers like Karl Marx and Lenin's ideologies guarantee their permanent legacy and spiritual presence, hence their deaths shouldn't be considered actual deaths.

During the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements, few Kerala newspapers backed the independence struggle, while many others, including C. Krishnan's moderate party and periodicals such as Kerala Sanchari and Kozhikode Manorama, opposed it. As Congress leaders, notably K.P. Kesava Menon and K. Madhavan Nair, congregated in Kozhikode, and many lawyers abandoned their practices to join the cause, a need for their own press and newspaper grew. This was especially visible in early 1922, after the Malabar riots and Gandhiji's incarceration, when printing problems emerged and local presses refused to publish Congress-related documents, including as reports on police brutality. This circumstance generated conversations among leaders such as K.P. Kesava Menon, K. Madhavan Nair, and others about starting their own press and newspaper.

MOBILIZING THE MASSES THROUGH MALAYALAM EXPRESSION

The Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Company was founded on February 15, 1922, with a capital of one lakh rupees to support the newspaper. Operations began in May, but share acquisition remained difficult. The company paid Rs. 21,500 for the Empress Victoria Press building and land on Robinson Road (now K.P. Kesava Menon Road) in Kozhikode. An antique cylinder press was also purchased. K.P. Kesava Menon worked as editor, and K. Madhavan Nair as manager. Mathrubhumi's debut issue was produced on March 17, 1923, and it was published three days per week. The first editorial emphasised personal responsibility, liberty, and the abolition of restricting norms, viewing national independence as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Mathrubhumi identified economic inequalities, caste and religious discrimination, social injustices, and the absence of political freedom as impediments to national progress. The newspaper consequently adopted a mission to combat these issues, advocating for the freedom of nations under foreign influence, including India, and supporting protests against misrule in Travancore and Cochin. A core pledge of Mathrubhumi was to promote community harmony, mutual respect across different castes and religions, and to champion the welfare and upliftment of downtrodden classes. Additionally, the newspaper advocated for a unified Kerala decades before the concept gained formal recognition.

An early edition of the newspaper Mathrubhumi featured a distinct page structure: page one was filled with advertisements, page two contained various articles, page three reported on legislative assembly proceedings, and page four was dedicated to editorials and a manager's notice. Subsequent pages included general news (categorized by Kerala, India, and World), specific news about Gandhiji (including the poem "Ente Gurunathan" by Vallathol), scientific articles, and further advertisements. The newspaper's policy guided its advertising content, which included appeals for Khadar. Subscription rates were 1 rupee 4 annas per month, with advertising fees based on lines or columns. The first issue's headings were single-column, and the initial published image was of Gandhiji.

The newspaper content expanded in August to include reader letters, correspondence from various locations, and opinions. A significant news item from August 16th was the death of poet Kumaranasan in a fireboat accident on the Pallana river. The fireboat, overloaded with passengers, capsized due to its weight and waves, leading to numerous deaths, including Kumaranasan's. He was a notable figure, serving in the Travancore Legislative Assembly and as secretary for a meeting. The report notes the delay in news publication, with the accident

appearing on the 24th, reflecting the era's limited communication and the absence of daily publications or immediate news reporting. The text contrasts this with a brief mention of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai's death, reported in a single column with a headline, indicating a different presentation style for prominent figures' deaths.

The Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924, supported by Gandhiji, was a significant protest against the exclusion of certain Hindu castes from a road near the Vaikom temple, a practice indicative of untouchability. This movement paved the way for Dalit entry into the temple and the eventual legal prohibition of untouchability. Key figures in the protest included Mathrubhumi editor K.P. Kesava Menon and manager K. Kelappan. Mathrubhumi played a pivotal role in planning and organizing the Satyagraha, solidifying its position in Kerala's freedom struggle. Both Kesava Menon and T.K. Madhavan faced arrest and imprisonment for their involvement. Later, Mathrubhumi transitioned to a daily newspaper in 1930, pioneering the practice of reporting global and national events simultaneously via telegrams through a column titled 'Swantam Lekhakante Kambikal'. Mathrubhumi's history is deeply intertwined with Kerala's freedom struggle and civil rights movements, including opposition to the Press Killing Act. The newspaper actively participated in the Salt Satyagraha and the Guruvayur Temple Entry Satyagraha, demonstrating advanced news presentation and insightful editorials that served as historical documents. Mathrubhumi consistently supported Gandhiji's path during political divergences within the Congress party.

PRINT NETWORKS AND CIRCULATION OF IDEAS

When Mathrubhumi became a daily newspaper on April 6, 1930, its strength in the national struggle increased. With this, the governments began to think about how to control the newspaper. In the meantime, the editorial titled "Courage or Defiance" published on September 7, 1932 became their weapon. The Madras government ordered that a fine of two thousand rupees be deposited for publishing such an editorial. Later, the newspaper was published without writing an editorial for about four months. The newspaper faced another ban in 1939. On November 24 Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer banned Mathrubhumi in Travancore, 'Printed by Mr. K.A. Damodara Menon from Kozhikode. The Travancore Government Notification prohibited the bringing of any copy of any issue of the Mathrubhumi newspaper, a weekly, to or from Travancore by sea, by backwater or by land', the notification read. The article details Mathrubhumi newspaper's reporting during significant historical periods in India. During the Quit India Movement, it reported the arrests of prominent figures like K.A. Damodara Menon and K. Kelappan. Following Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945, an editorial titled "The Bell of Victory" reflected on the war's horrors and India's lack of independence, questioning the sincerity of victory celebrations in India while other nations regained their freedom. The newspaper also covered the post-war period, including protests against delayed independence, discussions with the British government, the Muslim League's stance, secessionism, the formation of an interim government, and subsequent riots. In 1946, Mathrubhumi advocated for a united Kerala in response to Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer's declaration of Travancore's self-government. The article also notes a shift in news reporting style over time, moving from chronological narration to prioritizing the most important facts first.

The Mathrubhumi newspaper reports that Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Diwan, was seriously injured by a man with a sword after a festival inauguration; he was hospitalized but recovering, and the assailant remained uncaught. It also details the peaceful opening of the Guruvayur temple gates for lower castes ("Avarnars") on June 2nd, fulfilling promises linked to temple entry satyagraha and government acts. The period leading to India's independence was marked by anxiety over the partition decision on June 4, 1947, with Mathrubhumi newspaper describing independence on August 15, 1947, as the "fulfillment of the mission of my birth." Other newspapers active during the national struggle.

Al-Amin, a newspaper established in Kozhikode in 1923 by Muhammad Abdurahman Sahib, aimed to involve people in the freedom struggle and foster Hindu-Muslim unity amidst post-Malabar riots distrust. Despite opposition from some within the Muslim community, Al-Amin became a daily in 1930. Its initial editorial addressed the harsh conditions faced by Mappila prisoners deported to Andaman, leading to the withdrawal of a restrictive law. Abdurahman utilized editorials, such as "Jihadul Akbar" (July 6, 1930), to link religious faith with patriotism, arguing that true Muslims should sacrifice for the motherland's freedom. The text highlights the shift to daily publication among newspapers like Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, and Al-Amin during this era, which revolutionized news reporting by focusing on current events rather than historical ones, influenced by the need to disseminate information on movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha.

The evolution of newspaper language transitioned from opinion-heavy editorials and articles to direct, factual news reporting, exemplified by early news snippets. This shift occurred as newspapers developed, moving from the passionate, fiery language of earlier civil rights and social reform movements towards a more mature, distinct voice. While intertwined with the freedom struggle, this period is characterized by less explosive enthusiasm and more wisdom in its prose. Newspapers prioritized content and the message over stylistic refinement, focusing on preparing people for the fight rather than perfecting the delivery. Despite the lack of organized language reform, this era's emphasis on simplicity and clarity laid the groundwork for future prose styles.

CONCLUSION

The Malayalam press, through its distinctive use of language, proved to be a vital force in Kerala's contribution to India's freedom struggle. By blending persuasive rhetoric with the cultural and social idioms of the region, it transformed journalism into a tool of resistance, reform, and awakening. Newspapers and journals written in Malayalam not only disseminated nationalist ideas but also strengthened the sense of identity, unity, and purpose among the people. Despite censorship and colonial repression, the press nurtured a resilient spirit of defiance that inspired generations to fight for justice and self-rule. The legacy of this language-driven movement endures, reminding us that the press was not merely an observer of history but an active participant in shaping the destiny of a nation.

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