

Public spaces of discourse: innovations and interventions in colonial India.

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The early 20th century witnessed the growth of nationalist political activity all over India and this activity was manifested in a variety of ways in an ever burgeoning public sphere. In one chapter of my PHD thesis, I examine the strategies employed by Indians to create and mediate public spaces of discourse, and to engage in social and political exchanges through newspapers, pamphlets and public meetings. I describe how political activists in the city of Delhi created and became involved in national networks of activities through various public media, in response to the proposed partition of Bengal in 1905. At the same time, I uncover the practices by the colonial state to regulate these evolving spaces of public discourse. I look at how the colonial state defined certain Indian practices as ‘seditious’ and how it employed the laws of sedition as well as various press acts to set the terms and conditions of access to public arenas of discourse.

Newspapers emerged as an important medium for the construction and communication of Indian public opinion. The earliest newspapers printed in India were British owned and catered largely to the British community and to the English educated Indian elite. Indian newspapers, owned and edited by Indians, were not produced in any significant number in most parts of India until the latter half of the 19th century. A professional middle class soon emerged that was keen to participate in and initiate public commentary and debate through literary spaces. Newspapers and pamphlets were not only spaces of discourse, but they were materials that, through their circulation, created important connections and facilitated the continual reformulation of nationalist practices. The colonial state became very concerned with regulating these mediums of Indian public opinion. During a period when more Indians than ever were coming together through the press and public meetings in order to promote nationalist causes, the state created a deliberately broad yet comprehensive definition of sedition in order to vilify and sensationalise these activities, thereby attempting to deny Indians access to their own public spaces of discourse. However, when the state’s practices reached across colonial spaces, they were often challenged, thwarted and rendered ineffective.

In another chapter of my thesis, I focus specifically on the initiatives of Mohamed Ali, a journalist and political activist in Delhi, to create national and global networks of concern and support for Muslim causes through his newspaper, the *Comrade*. Mohamed Ali edited and published the *Comrade* between 1911 and 1914, before it was shut down by the colonial state. He wrote and published several articles that focused on the plight of Muslim countries and peoples. He wrote about the Balkan Wars, the occupation of Egypt by the British and, during the First World War, he discussed Turkey’s role in the War. After becoming involved in the First World War, the British were very keen to ensure that the Indians were loyal to the Allies cause. The Delhi government was especially concerned about Muslim public opinion and related Pan-Islamic activity because of Turkey’s involvement against Britain in the War. The colonial authorities in Delhi singled out Mohamed Ali and his newspapers for galvanising Muslim sentiment and

opinion in support of Turkey and against the British and the Allies during the early period of the First World War.

I discuss how Mohamed Ali used the *Comrade*, not only to establish links between Muslims in India and beyond, but also as a medium to convey Muslim concerns to the colonial government. Ali believed that Muslim newspapers had a responsibility to support their Muslim brethren by reporting on causes that affected them. He believed that the establishment of Pan-Islamic networks and connections was the responsibility of all Muslims. However, Ali also tried to negotiate his identity as a Muslim who was Indian as well as a British subject. While he criticised certain British actions and the European invasions of Muslim territories, he was usually careful to balance his criticism with professions of support for the colonial state. He also made concerted efforts to encourage cooperation with Hindus. Attempts by Ali to try and reconcile his attachment to Muslim causes with his allegiance to the British did not work in his favour.

The British intensified their campaign to police Delhi's public spheres with a specific emphasis on the Muslim press and Mohamed Ali's activities. Mohamed Ali's efforts to create Pan-Islamic networks of support were often vilified and blamed for inciting Muslims against Christians and the British. As a result, several newspapers were penalised or closed down entirely under the 1910 Press Act. In my case study, I read several articles from the *Comrade*, including the ones that had been singled out by the Delhi government as objectionable, in order to draw my own conclusions about Mohamed Ali's motives for holding together local, national and global Muslim causes. I found that, in most cases, certain passages or statements in his articles had been taken out of context in order to portray them as seditious. Mohamed Ali was a charismatic and articulate journalist and activist who was a threat to the colonial state's campaign to manipulate Indian public opinion in its favour.

Through my case studies, I aim to show that negotiations and competitions between the Indians and the colonial state over access to public spaces of discourse were an enduring feature of the political landscapes of Delhi and India. The constitution and boundaries of public media where citizens engaged in social and political exchanges were fluid and constantly being negotiated. I hope to show that emerging forms of Indian journalism such as newspapers and more informal media like pamphlets ushered in distinctive forms of nationalist politics as well as new forms of colonial governmentality. These new media practices made public spaces matters of politics and they created important links between colonial spaces. Newspapers like the *Comrade* made Muslim causes and events like the First World War matters for public concern and they were also important mediums through which colonised peoples communicated with the colonial state and with each other.