
Freedom Struggle of Punjab and Role of the Tribune

Manraj Singh

This study attempts to trace out the origin, evolution, and growth of The Tribune through successive stages of its development. It seeks to explain how and why The Tribune was started, what gave impulse to the thought of publishing it, what were its aims and ideals, how they were realized and what were its guiding principles which were cherished, nourished and sustained.

At the first instance it is necessary to focus on the precise role that Surendranath Banerjee and Dyal Singh Majithia played in embarking on a new venture, that is to start an English weekly from Lahore. It has been maintained that Dyal Singh Majithia had felt the need of publishing an English paper and sought Surendranath Banerjee's help to provide him with an infrastructure for this purpose. Prakash Tandon avers that English weekly, The Tribune, was specifically started with the object of countering a general tendency in educational institutions of Punjab to take to Oriental rather than Western learning.¹ S.N. Banerjee in his

memoir 'A Nation in the Making' has written that he persuaded Dyal Singh Majithia to start a newspaper at Lahore and purchased for him at Calcutta the first press for The Tribune. Dyal Singh Majithia had visited Calcutta in 1880 and become an active member of the Indian Association. On his return, he took over as president of the Lahore branch of the Indian Association and started The Tribune on 2nd February, 1881. Dyal Singh Majithia then entrusted him the duty of selecting the first editor. Banerjee recommended the name Sitala Kanta Chatterji of Dacca to be its first editor and his successful career as the editor completely justified his choice.² Dyal Singh Majithia, a farsighted man wanted The Tribune to be a clear sighted, independent, fearless paper, free from any sectarian and commercial bias and political party. He insisted that the paper must care for the poor, regenerate the Indian society and build up the country the nation. He also wanted that The Tribune should be run by a public trust consisted of men of integrity and wide experience who were

* Manraj Singh, Research Scholar, Department of History, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

¹ Pran Nevile., *Two Anthologies of the Tribune*, Hay House Publishers, New Delhi (Reprint 2008), pp. 28-29.

² V.N. Datta., *The Tribune: 130 Years: A Witness To History*, Hay House, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 27-28.

inspired by high public interest, and not by consideration of a family or a corporate body with vested interests.³

The Tribune has had its ups and downs. By the end of the 19th century, The Tribune began to be seen as the “Chief Advisor” of the British Government. But this phase was short lived. The early years of the 20th century marked a change in The Tribune’s work and outlook. It became a patriotic and nationalist newspaper. It stood on its own and challenged the British ruling power, for which its trustees were arrested and harassed. The Tribune became a vehicle for spreading the cause of nationalism and mobilizing public opinion on matters of serious concern. The paper took stand against the passing of the Punjab Land Alienation Bill. It expressed the view that the Bill, if passed, would severely affect the interests of agriculturist, moneylenders and the government at the same time. However, the Bill was passed by the British Government and became an Act in 1900. The Tribune aroused public concern on the decennial census conducted by the Government in 1881. The Tribune whereas depicted that the exercise was being carried out to select and transport some virgin female

Punkha (fan) pullers for the Queen of England, in 1901 it paid more serious attention to the careless manner in which enumeration was actually conducted at Lahore. On one hand Curzon’s achievement regarding creation of Archaeological Department under Sir John Marshall, and setting up of University Reforms Commission under chairmanship of Walter Raleigh were appreciated by the Tribune which wrote that his works “will leave his name and rule for posterity to remember,” On the other hand The Tribune upheld the view of instituting always had abroad and liberal view of education, and the ‘Sectarian Universities’ in the country. It published an article applauding the ambition of Mrs. Annie Besant’s efforts to upgrade the Central Hindu College, Benares, to the BA standard. From October 1905 onwards, The Tribune started writing a series of articles criticizing Curzon’s hasty and ill-conceived action and supporting the Swadeshi Movement launched against the partition of Bengal. The paper condemned Curzon’s action as a sinister design of dividing Hindus and Muslims with the object of strengthening the British position in India. The year 1906 was a major landmark in the history of The Tribune. Not only did the paper turn a quarter

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

century old but it also did make the final shift in frequency of publication when it now began to appear as a daily paper. From the 1930's The Tribune made its mission to support the Congress in its fight against the menace of communalism, which was threatening the unity of the country. The paper also warned that the divide between Hindus and the Muslims would give the British a convenient handle to exploit the situation in perpetuating their rule. The paper did not spare the poet-philosopher Sir Muhammad Iqbal in its criticism of his anti national attitude on political issues. A trustee and the editor of The Tribune were arrested, and the editor of The Bombay Chronicle, B.G. Horniman, was deported to England on 26 April 1919. The Tribune raised issues concerning higher intake of Indians in the ICS, rural indebtedness and forest conservation at the cost of tribal rights. It condemned Congress's tame policy of prayers and supplication. It articulated outrage over Jallianwala Bagh, protested Lajpat Rai's deportation for "sedition", and rallied around Gandhi's dynamic leadership in post-1919 period. It opposed the idea of Pakistan, but with that fast becoming a reality, called for a modern state, free of religious bias. The Tribune emphasized the

need for unity among different sections within the Congress in order to fight for the cause of India's independence. Sir Umar Hayat Khan Tiwana, a loyal and spirited supporter of the raj, said in his evidence before the Hunter Committee that The Tribune aroused feelings of disloyalty among the intelligentsia. The Martial Law Commission headed by Lieutenant Colonel Irwin under Sec 124-A of the Indian Penal Code 25 of the Defence of India Consolidation Rules charged Kali Nath Ray, for publishing articles in The Tribune dated 3,4,6,8,9,10 and 11 April, 1919. Commission sentenced Kali Nath Ray on 28 May, 1919 to two year's imprisonment together with a fine of rupees 10, 000 or in default six months further rigorous imprisonment. Mahatma Gandhi was much disturbed by Kali Nath Ray's arrest and he mounted great pressure on the government to set him free. The 'Congress Report on the Punjab Disturbances', which Gandhiji had prepared contains his appreciative account of Kali Nath Ray. Gandhiji held Kali Nath Ray in high respect and called him a much talented editor of The Tribune.⁴ On account of its convictions, striking individuality and broad-minded approach on critical issues,

⁴ V.N. Datta., *The Tribune: 130 Years: A Witness To History*, Hay House, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 125-26.

The Tribune earned a unique reputation of being the spokesman and guardian of the people and their welfare. Mahatma Gandhi regarded The Tribune as the “best views” paper in the country. The Tribune continued to uphold the liberal, ethical and democratic standards for the freedom of the country, national unity and reconstruction of society on progressive and modern lines.⁵

During partition the paper had warned that the partition proposal would in no way solve the majority/minority question but inflame it to an explosion. Taking up the case of the Sikhs who had “No Homeland” and constituted the largest third party minority in Punjab, The Tribune criticized the various parties and their activities and made constructive efforts.

The Tribune never lost the opportunity of showing its concern about the rising tide of communalism, which was regarded as a threat to the growth of Indian nationalism. In its three-column editorial entitled ‘Communal Representation’ dated 8 November 1928, it strongly condemned Mohammed Shafi for promoting the spirit of communalism, to which Mohammed Ali Jinnah too subscribed. In November 1925,

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

The Tribune had criticized Sir Fazl-i-Hussain for widening the rift between the urban and rural classes for the advancement of the Unionist Party’s vested interests.

The Tribune attacked the Wavell Plan of 25th JUNE 1945 and gave wide to the coverage of Simla Conference. The Tribune showed a great admiration for Subhash Chandra Bose’s patriotism, courage and sacrifices for the freedom of his country. The Tribune also condemned the Soviet Journal “Pravda” and Communist Party of India for being critical of Subhash Chandra Bose. The Tribune also condemned the " INA TRIALS " as a grave blunder and commented that public will be satisfied only with the release of one and all men without exception. The Tribune also condemned the provincial governments of Sind and Punjab which levied charges from each voter to cover expenses. Sind Government charged Rs.10 per voter while Punjab was demanding 12Annas. When Cabinet Mission favored the grouping of Provinces; The Tribune warned that the grouping of provinces would fracture the country.⁶

During the Direct Action Movement

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-90.

launched by the Muslim League, Punjab was thrown into turmoil on an unprecedented scale. The Tribune published the reports on riots breaking out in various parts of Punjab especially in Amritsar, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Sheikhpura and spreading to rural areas. Dr.Saif-ud-din Kitchlew the Congress leader escaped with injuries inflicted by Muslim rioters when an attempt was made on his life. The Tribune captured the entire atmosphere when League anti Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana agitators were abusing, cursing and using foul language for the Punjab Premier and his effigy. This all led to the collapse of Unionist Ministry in Punjab which had provided, on a whole a stable rule for about 25 years. The Tribune reminded him about his own declaration in the past that he would keep the flag of unionism flying. After the fall of ministry in Punjab, The Tribune continued to give reliable accounts of destruction of property and killings of innocent people in various parts of Punjab from March till the partition in August 1947. The Tribune from March 1947 started making appeals to the Punjab governor, political leaders and people to take immediate steps for controlling riots, suppressing aggressive actions, restoring law and order and steering the province away

from the danger of anarchy.⁷

The Tribune as a witness to India's pre- and post-Independence history has been a powerful medium of informed opinions and principled stand. It derives strength from being a champion of the people having a sacred mission "to echo the real feelings of the community". It does not represent any caste or class interests. Its policy tone set by the first editorial of February 2, 1881, states: "The projectors and conductors of The Tribune have no pet theories or any personal interest to maintain through the medium of this journal." Its guiding principle is liberalism, Catholicism, free from any trace of bias or partiality. Its sweep is broad and wide as spelt out in the first editorial, which made it clear that "The Tribune would go beyond the region and the country and conduct interminable conversations with the people of the world and reflect the colouring of public mind". How these basic objectives, policy framework and institutional credibility have been maintained by the editors and trustees have to be judged by readers. The Tribune has, by and large, stood the test of times. Its pursuit of liberal values and fair play in men, matters and public

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-94.

affairs make it different from other newspapers.⁸

Of course, everything has to change with the changing times. The Tribune, too, has changed to keep up its competitive edge and understandably so. The Tribune received invaluable assistance from close associates of public standing such as Surendra Nath Banerjee, Jogendra Chandra Bose, Lala Harkishan Lal and Charles Golak Nath. The only newspaper that followed The Tribune example of placing itself under a public trust was that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Mahratta*, which was also founded in 1881. The First Press Commission (1952-54), too recommended a similar form of trust that The Tribune had set up. However, its greatest strength even in today's competitive media world has been its unique concept of the 'Trust' which is not controlled by the family of its founder, Dyal Singh Majithia. The institution has always been manned by outstanding people from various segments of public life. This is what makes The Tribune stand out vis-à-vis other publications. The quality of The Tribune at any given time depends on the quality of public men manning the Trust and the strength of

character and fighting public spirit of the editor. The Tribune as an institution has been lucky on both these counts. VN Datta methodically assesses the role played by the newspaper and its custodians before and after Independence. The narration is wide-ranging and absorbing. It fills certain crucial gaps in the history of India's freedom struggle.⁹

During freedom struggle, its editor Kali Nath Ray had to face the wrath of the colonial masters for his free, fair and bold writings. Ray was arrested following his article 'Blazing Indiscretion', which was an indictment of O'Dwyer's brutal regime and his speech before the Punjab legislative council. On Mahatma Gandhi's suggestion, a memo signed by C Rajagopalachari, Subramanian Iyer, R Ramaswamy Iyer and George Arundale was sent to the Viceroy for Ray's release. The author rightly says: "What could be a greater tribute to The Tribune than Gandhiji's taking up its cause of prosecution and making it an issue of national importance, which created widespread sympathy and support for it among political

⁸ Pran Nevile, *Two Anthologies of the Tribune, Hay House*, New Delhi (Reprint 2008), pp. 11-12.

⁹ Prakash Ananda, *A History of the Tribune, Hay House*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 271.

leaders and the intelligentsia in the country?”¹⁰

A small printing press near the Ridge, Simla known as Liddell’s was available, which The Tribune trustees secured through the aegis of the Punjab government. A large bungalow ‘Bantony’ on the Mall was obtained for providing accommodation to The Tribune office and staff and some other employees, who occupied three rooms on the first floor. The Tribune began to function under difficult circumstances because of the small printing press, inadequate staff, and financial crunch. The Tribune’s headquarters was shifted to Ambala Cantt in October 1948. Throughout its 25-year stay at Ambala, the paper was printed on a gloss Duplex Unitubular stereo rotary, which had a speed of 40,000 copies per hour of a 16-page newspaper, occasionally in three columns printed, folded and ready for dispatch. The Tribune’s march after Partition from Lahore to Simla to Ambala Cantt to Chandigarh has itself been a fascinating story of its continuity, commitment and determination to meet the challenges boldly. The author has brilliantly recorded every move of the organisation, its

trials and tribulations as well as its welfare face towards the employees.¹¹

The newspaper had to face the official wrath during Emergency when Bansi Lal was the country’s Defence Minister. But what was inspiring was the way the editor could stand up to the pressure with the support from the trustees who were living up to the great tradition of the institution. VN Narayanan, too, had his moments of glory in the face of high-handedness of Khalistanis during those difficult days in Punjab. HK Dua got his experience of the national dailies he had worked for to the working of the newspaper. The undersigned would not wish to talk about his nine-year stint as editor. The author has recorded his assessment. One would speak further only in his memoirs as and when opportunity unfolds. There may be some gaps and misplaced information, but his workmanship as a historian is highly impressive. The Tribune had anticipated that dangerous consequences would follow if the government and the political parties persisted in following their self-righteous and inflexible approach towards the Punjab problem. Tragically the crash came, which

¹⁰ V.N. Datta, *The Tribune: 130 Years: A Witness To History*, Hay House, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 185- 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

forms a part of one of the saddest and most dismal chapters of our history.¹²

History is much more than a mere recount of events. It is a powerful medium that surveys events, appropriately classified and analysed for posterity. Prof Datta has done a good job in this respect. The function of history is also to promote a deeper understanding of the past for its onward march today and tomorrow. The Tribune as a witness to history is a source of inspiration as well as warnings so that this great institution does not go astray from its high path of liberalism, secularism, objectivity, fair play and unflinching commitment to the people and the country.

Media persons would find the volume highly educative and informative. It could help shape their right attitudes towards the profession and the people. After all, journalism is all about the people and their “masters”. And the quality of democracy depends on the “sacredness of facts” and “integrity of ideas” conveyed to the people.

After reading the text I personally feel that the author V.N. Datta had contributed a lot in explaining each and every aspect. I would like to add that Prime Minister Dr.

Manmohan Singh released a book titled The Tribune 130 Years: A Witness to History. Secondly Dyal Singh Majithia, the newspaper’s founder was a man of rare foresight and a great reformist. He was inspired by high ideals and wanted The Tribune to be free of any sectarian or commercial bias, and unaligned to any dogma or political party and the newspaper has by and large lived up to its founder’s vision. While being an effective watchdog of the interests of the people it has practiced responsible and credible journalism. One can say that we have come a long way from the early years of The Tribune. Today, while India sits at the high table of nations and is looked upon and heard with respect, a vibrant media is crucial to our needs—a media that informs and educates a media that is inspired by public interest and not guided by sectarian or commercial considerations. I can say that The Indian media of today has its inevitable highs and lows. Every day we see examples of journalism of a very high caliber. There are instances of fair and accurate reporting, free of biases. There are stories with painstaking research to back them up. Journalists often expose wrongdoings even at considerable risk to themselves. There are efforts to report constructively on subjects

¹² Pran Nevile., The Tribune files from 1881 to 2006, (Second Anthology), p. 11.

that are of vital national importance.¹³

The Tribune which still stuck to its stand for a united India and not its partition was inciting the Sikhs to take arms if their demands for the alignment of the boundary were not accepted. The policy of The Tribune has always been to work for the unity of India as division of India into two parts will be wrong on grounds of Defence, Economic policy and on grounds of culture and sentiments.¹⁴

The Tribune wrote: let us all Muslims and non-Muslims while leaving in India and Pakistan forget our differences and work in a spirit of goodwill and cooperation for the common good. There lies the future, prosperity, and happiness of the two democracies and their 400 million people.¹⁵

The Tribune suggested to the Pakistan rulers to set up a democratic state, where religion would be divorced from politics and power derived from people. The Tribune hoped that Jinnah essentially a modern statesman, after having secured his objects be dexterously using Muslim sentiments would Endeavour to create a modern state. The paper suggested the setting up of a democratic form of

government as the only way for ensuring the sovereignty of people and protection of the minorities.¹⁶ The Tribune editorial 14 August 1947, entitled “*Pakistan A Non Communal State*” was the last one published from Lahore. How and why The Tribune publishing from Lahore is a tragic story.¹⁷

¹³ V.N. Datta., *The Tribune: 130 Years: A Witness To History*, Hay House, New Delhi, 2011, p. 295.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁵ *The Tribune*, Lahore, 14 August 1947, p. 3.

¹⁶ V.N. Datta., *The Tribune: 130 Years: A Witness To History*, Hay House, New Delhi, 2011, p. 194.

¹⁷ *The Tribune*, Lahore, 14 August 1947, p. 3.