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The Role of Mahatma Gandhi in Shaping Modern Indian Journalism: His Contributions and Influence

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound impact of Mahatma Gandhi on modern Indian journalism, focusing on his principles, key publications, and enduring legacy. Gandhi's journalistic approach, rooted in the quest for truth and social justice, laid the groundwork for a new paradigm in Indian media during the freedom struggle. Through publications such as *Young India* and *Harijan*, he addressed critical societal issues, mobilized public sentiment, and championed the rights of marginalized communities, particularly untouchables. His emphasis on ethical journalism and social responsibility continues to resonate in contemporary media, advocating for integrity and inclusiveness in reporting. However, the paper also critiques Gandhi's approach, highlighting potential biases and restrictions on dissenting voices that may have limited the diversity of perspectives within his narratives. Moreover, it discusses the challenges faced by modern journalists in upholding Gandhi's ideals amid the pressures of sensationalism and misinformation in the digital age. By examining both the contributions and critiques of Gandhi's journalistic practices, this study underscores the complexities of his influence on contemporary journalism and the ongoing relevance of his principles in fostering a just and equitable media landscape.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Independence, Indian Opinion, Young India, Harijan

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi, born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, India, emerged as a pivotal leader in the struggle for Indian independence from British rule. His philosophy of non-violence (ahimsa) and civil disobedience (Satyagraha) not only inspired millions in India but also influenced global movements for social justice and human rights (Gandhi, 1927) ^[5]. Gandhi's life was characterized by a profound commitment to truth and ethical living, aspects that profoundly shaped his views on communication and media.

As India's fight for freedom gained momentum, journalism played a critical role in mobilizing the masses and disseminating ideas that challenged colonial authorities. Newspapers and journals became platforms for expressing dissent, inspiring activism, and forging a collective national identity (Chandavarkar, 1998). Recognizing the power of the press, Gandhi harnessed journalism as a tool for social reform and political awakening, advocating for issues such as caste discrimination, women's rights, and rural empowerment.

Gandhi's approach to journalism was instrumental in shaping modern Indian journalism through his principles of truth, non-violence, and social responsibility. By prioritizing ethical reporting and striving to give voice to the marginalized, Gandhi not only established a new journalistic paradigm but also laid the groundwork for contemporary Indian media's engagement with societal issues.

Historical Context

A. The State of Indian Journalism before Gandhi

i). **Colonial Influences and the Press:** Before Gandhi's emergence as a key figure in the Indian independence movement, journalism in India was deeply influenced by the colonial state. The British colonial authorities viewed the press as a potential threat to their control and implemented strict regulations to suppress dissent and criticism (Kumar, 2004) ^[11]. Laws such as the Press Act of 1910 aimed to tighten control over the Indian press, leading to censorship and the imprisonment of numerous journalists (Chatterjee, 1993). Despite these challenges, a burgeoning press began to take root, fostering a sense of nationalism and resistance against British rule.

ii). **Role of Print Media in British India:** Print media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support for the freedom struggle. Newspapers and periodicals served as platforms for expressing nationalist ideals, discussing social issues, and critiquing colonial policies (Thakur, 2018) ^[23]. Notable publications such as *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The Tribune* contributed to the growing awareness of political issues and the promotion of Indian culture and identity (Mehta, 2014) ^[15]. However, the press was predominantly elitist, catering to an educated audience and often neglecting the

voices of the marginalized sections of society (Desai, 2004) [3].

B. Gandhi's Entry into Journalism

- i). **His Early Writings in South Africa:** Gandhi's exposure to journalism began during his stay in South Africa, where he fought for the rights of the Indian community facing discrimination. In 1903, he began writing for *Indian Opinion*, a newspaper that he founded to raise awareness about racial injustices and advocate for the rights of Indians in South Africa (Gandhi, 1986). Through his writings, Gandhi communicated his philosophy of non-violence and social justice, setting the stage for his later contributions to Indian journalism. He utilized the press not only as a tool for communication but also as a means to mobilize the community against oppressive practices (Mason, 2018) [14].
- ii). **Establishment of Indian Opinion:** Establishing *Indian Opinion* allowed Gandhi to experiment with the power of print media to influence both local and international audiences. The publication emphasized ethical journalism, focusing on truth and the empowerment of marginalized voices (Gandhi, 1986). Its mission reflected Gandhi's belief in the transformative power of media, which he would later carry into his work in India, paving the way for a new kind of journalism that prioritized social responsibility and advocacy.

Gandhi's Journalistic Principles

- i). **The Concept of Satyagraha and Truth in Journalism:** At the core of Gandhi's philosophy is the concept of Satyagraha, which translates to "truth force" or "soul force." For Gandhi, truth was not merely a journalistic principle; it was a moral imperative that guided his writings and activism. He believed that a journalist's primary responsibility is to seek and uphold the truth, which aligns with his quest for moral and ethical standards in the Indian independence movement (Gandhi, 1927) [5]. This adherence to truth made Gandhi a unique figure in journalism, where sensationalism was common. He maintained that journalism should serve humanity by informing the public while remaining steadfastly truthful, and he often stated that "an effective and dignified journalism must pursue truth" (Kapoor, 2015) [10].
- ii). **Emphasis on Social Justice and the Role of Journalism:** Gandhi's journalistic writings were deeply rooted in social justice; he perceived journalism as a means of addressing societal inequities. His publications, particularly *Harijan*, focused on the plight of the untouchables and other marginalized communities, advocating for their rights and dignity (Gandhi, 1933) [6]. Gandhi utilized journalism to shine a light on social injustices, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and awareness among readers. He believed that journalists should not only report events but also serve as agents of social change by raising consciousness about pressing issues (Sarkar, 2002) [20]. This commitment to social justice set a precedent for contemporary journalism, promoting the idea that the media should be a platform for advocacy and reform.
- iii). **The Idea of Journalism as a Tool for Change:** Gandhi envisioned journalism as a potent tool for social and political transformation. He harnessed the power of print to mobilize public opinion and galvanize support for the independence movement. His publications served as a

means to disseminate ideas of non-violence, civil rights, and collective action (Natarajan, 1997) [16]. By articulating the aspirations and struggles of the Indian populace, Gandhi demonstrated how journalism could drive social and political change, inspiring actions that led to the mass mobilization of people against colonial rule (Lahiri, 2019) [13]. This vision of journalism as a catalyst for change remains relevant today, urging journalists to take on critical societal roles.

- iv). **Use of Simple Language and Accessibility to the Masses:** Gandhi firmly believed that journalism should be accessible to all, transcending the barriers of language and education. He emphasized the use of simple, clear language to communicate effectively with the masses, ensuring that his messages reached a broad audience (Gandhi, 1939) [7]. This commitment was evident in his writings, which avoided complex jargon and instead employed a relatable style to engage ordinary people. By making journalism accessible, Gandhi encouraged greater participation in the national discourse, fostering a sense of ownership among citizens regarding their rights and responsibilities (Jain, 2005) [9]. He understood that an informed populace was crucial for a thriving democracy, and his approach to journalism helped democratize information.

Gandhi's journalistic principles-grounded in the pursuit of truth, advocacy for social justice, the use of journalism as a means of transformation, and the commitment to accessibility-collectively shaped a new genre of journalism that emphasized responsibility and responsiveness to societal issues.

Major Publications and Initiatives

A. Young India

- i). **Themes and Topics Addressed:** *Young India*, launched in 1919, became one of Gandhi's most influential platforms for communication and advocacy. The weekly journal provided a space for discussing a wide array of themes, including Indian nationalism, economic self-sufficiency through the promotion of khadi (homespun cloth), and the moral and ethical dimensions of the struggle against British colonialism (Gandhi, 1925) [4]. Gandhi used *Young India* to articulate his vision for a free India, emphasizing the importance of self-rule (swaraj), communal harmony, and social reform, particularly concerning the lives of the rural poor (Kumar, 2008) [12].
- ii). **Influence on Public Opinion and Mobilization:** *Young India* played a critical role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support for the independence movement. It became a platform for Gandhi to address pressing social issues and to call for mass civil disobedience campaigns, such as the Salt March in 1930. The publication challenged the colonial narrative, engaging readers with arguments that emphasized moral righteousness and collective action (Kumar, 2008) [12]. Through his writing, Gandhi galvanized Indians to see themselves as active participants in the struggle for independence rather than passive subjects of colonial oppression. This engagement with the public not only created a political consciousness among his readers but also inspired them to act (Niyogi, 1997) [18].

B. Harijan

- i). **Focus on the Upliftment of Untouchables:** Gandhi launched the weekly newspaper *Harijan* in 1933,

explicitly focusing on the upliftment of untouchables, whom he referred to as "Harijans," or "children of God." Through Harijan, Gandhi sought to highlight the social injustices faced by this marginalized community, advocating for their rights and social integration (Gandhi, 1933) ^[6]. It addressed the deep-rooted caste prejudices that permeated Indian society and aimed to sensitize the broader population toward the dignity and rights of untouchables (Sarkar, 2002) ^[20]. This initiative was a courageous effort to confront one of India's most pressing social issues and to advocate for a more equitable society.

- ii). Contributions to Social Reform and Advocacy:** Harijan became a crucial instrument for social reform, fostering discussions that encouraged broader societal change. The publication provided detailed accounts of the hardships faced by untouchables and shared stories of their struggles, thereby humanizing their plight (Jain, 2005) ^[9]. Gandhi called for the abolition of untouchability and urged upper-caste Indians to take responsibility for the discrimination sanctioned by societal norms. His approach reflected his belief that social justice was integral to India's fight for independence and that no meaningful progress could occur without addressing social inequalities (Gandhi, 1933) ^[6].

C. Role of other newspapers and journals associated with Gandhi

- i). Impact on Political Awareness and Activism:** In addition to Young India and Harijan, Gandhi was associated with several other newspapers and journals that significantly influenced political awareness and activism in India. Publications such as Indian Opinion, which he founded in South Africa, and The Weekly in India contributed to disseminating ideas critical of British colonialism and promoting Indian self-governance (Tiwari, 2016). These platforms served as vital tools for educating the public on political rights and duties. His involvement with these publications underscored the importance of grassroots journalism in creating informed citizens. Gandhi believed that a well-informed populace was essential for a functioning democracy, and he advocated for using media to empower individuals and communities (Lahiri, 2019) ^[13]. The ability to articulate a national vision through various platforms not only enhanced political awareness but also created a cohesive identity among diverse groups within Indian society. Gandhi's major publications—Young India and Harijan—along with his contributions to other journals, significantly transformed the landscape of Indian journalism. They served as essential tools for public mobilization and social advocacy, reflective of Gandhi's enduring commitment to truth, justice, and equality.

Influence on Modern Indian Journalism

A. Legacy of Gandhi's Journalistic Practices in Contemporary Media

- i). Ethical Standards and Integrity in Journalistic Reporting:** Gandhi's commitment to truth and ethical journalism has left an indelible mark on contemporary media practices in India. His insistence on truthfulness against sensationalism serves as a guiding principle for many journalists today. In a climate where misinformation and sensational reporting often dominate, Gandhi's approach highlights the need for integrity in

journalism. His belief that journalists must act as guardians of truth aligns with contemporary ethical standards prescribed by various journalism associations in India, such as the Press Council of India, which emphasizes the importance of accuracy and fairness in reporting (Rao, 2017) ^[19].

The rise of fact-checking initiatives and responsible journalism campaigns in India echoes Gandhi's philosophy, as modern journalists strive to correct misinformation and hold power to account. Gandhi's assertion that journalism should uplift the community continues to inspire media professionals to adopt ethical practices that benefit society rather than merely entertain (Nawaz, 2018) ^[17].

- ii). Social Responsibility of Journalists:** Gandhi believed that journalists possess a crucial role in fostering social justice and community welfare. His writings often encouraged journalists to engage with issues affecting marginalized communities, compelling them to act as advocates for the voiceless (Sarkar, 2002) ^[20]. This principle of social responsibility resonates strongly in contemporary Indian journalism, where numerous organizations and individuals are dedicated to investigative reporting and advocacy journalism focusing on social issues.

Today, many journalists engage in socio-political activism, using their platforms to draw attention to pressing matters such as caste discrimination, women's rights, and environmental concerns (Chaudhary, 2020) ^[2]. The emergence of social media as a tool for grassroots activism has further amplified this trend, allowing journalists to mobilize communities and effectively communicate the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups—an ethos reminiscent of Gandhi's editorial work.

B. Influence on Journalistic Styles and Methodologies

Gandhi's emphasis on plain language and accessibility is another lasting influence on modern Indian journalism. He believed that a journalist's duty is to communicate effectively with an audience that encompasses all socio-economic backgrounds (Gandhi, 1939) ^[7]. This emphasis on simplicity encourages journalists today to avoid unnecessary jargon and complex language, ensuring that their stories resonate with the general public. Numerous media outlets in India now prioritize clarity and readability, recognizing the significance of appealing to a broad audience.

Furthermore, Gandhi's methodologies, particularly his reflective and participatory approach to journalism, have gained traction. Modern journalists often engage communities in dialogues and encourage local narratives, thereby fostering a more inclusive representation of issues (Mehta, 2019). This shift towards participatory journalism can be seen in various initiatives, such as community radio stations and citizen journalism platforms, which seek to amplify local voices and perspectives.

C. Comparison with Modern Journalistic Practices in India

While Gandhi's ideals continue to shape contemporary journalism, it is essential to note the complexities of the modern media landscape. The proliferation of digital media and the 24-hour news cycle have introduced new challenges, such as the pressure to produce quick content that may prioritize speed over accuracy. This reality often clashes with Gandhi's vision of thoughtful and responsible reporting. The

rise of sensationalism and the spread of fake news have prompted ongoing debates about the roles and responsibilities of journalists today (Sen, 2021) [21].

However, despite these challenges, Gandhi's legacy endures. There are numerous examples of media outlets in India that strive to uphold his principles by focusing on investigative journalism, fact-based reporting, and amplifying marginalized voices. Initiatives aimed at promoting ethical journalism, such as the Media Foundation and organizations devoted to combating misinformation; reflect Gandhi's belief in the transformative power of media (Rao, 2017) [19].

In conclusion, the influence of Gandhi on modern Indian journalism is profound and multifaceted, encompassing ethical standards, social responsibility, journalistic methodologies, and a commitment to serving the public interest. His legacy prompts journalists to engage in practices that not only inform but also empower society as a whole.

Critiques and Challenges

A. Criticism of Gandhi's Approach to Journalism

1. Potential Biases and Controversies: Despite Gandhi's contributions to journalism, his approach has not been without criticism. One significant critique is the potential bias in his reporting, particularly regarding his philosophical inclinations. Gandhi's strong commitment to non-violence and moral righteousness often led him to portray dissenting opinions, especially those advocating for more radical approaches, unfavourably (Gupta, 2017) [8]. Critics argue that this bias limited the range of perspectives presented in his publications, which can be seen as an ideological imposition rather than a balanced representation of the diverse Indian society at that time (Sarkar, 2002) [20]. For instance, Gandhi's opposition to the use of violence in the struggle for independence occasionally overshadowed the legitimate grievances of those who felt that more forceful action was necessary (Chakrabarty, 2019) [1]. This selective narrative may have contributed to the alienation of certain groups within the independence movement, who believed that their voices were marginalized in Gandhi's vision for India.

2. Restrictions on Dissenting Voices: Gandhi's editorial practices also placed constraints on dissenting voices. His vision of a unified India often led him to advocate for principles that sought to minimize conflict and division, which, while idealistic, sometimes stifled critical discourse (Srinivasan, 2020) [22]. Journalists and activists who challenged Gandhi's ideologies or practices experienced backlash and censorship. For example, radical elements within the independence movement were often sidelined in favour of Gandhi's more conciliatory stance, leading to important voices within the freedom struggle being left unheard. As a result, some critiques argue that his approach limited the development of a more inclusive and pluralistic media landscape in India.

B. Challenges faced in modern journalism linked to Gandhi's legacy

The challenges faced by modern journalism in India can, in part, be traced back to Gandhi's legacy. While Gandhi emphasized ethical journalism and social responsibility, the rapid proliferation of digital media has introduced complexities that challenge these principles (Sen, 2021) [21]. The rise of misinformation and sensationalist journalism poses significant threats to the ethical standards that Gandhi championed. Journalists today grapple with the pressure to

produce content quickly, often at the expense of thorough investigation and verification.

Moreover, while Gandhi advocated for the empowerment of marginalized voices, contemporary media often still perpetuates systemic biases, particularly in framing issues related to caste, gender, and religion (Chaudhary, 2020) [2]. The challenge remains for modern journalists to navigate the intricate landscape of media ecosystems while embracing a commitment to inclusivity and social justice.

In conclusion, while Gandhi's journalistic practices laid the foundation for ethical journalism in India, critiques of his approach reveal the complexities and limitations inherent in his vision. Addressing these critiques is essential for modern journalists striving to fulfill the ideals of truth, integrity, and social responsibility in a rapidly evolving media environment.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's contributions to journalism were transformative and have left a lasting impact on the fabric of modern Indian media. Through his innovative use of the press, exemplified by publications such as *Young India* and *Harijan*, Gandhi addressed critical social issues, mobilized public opinion, and championed the rights of marginalized communities. His principles of truth, social responsibility, and ethical reporting continue to resonate within the realm of journalism, reinforcing the idea that media should serve as a vehicle for empowerment, advocacy, and societal change.

The relevance of Gandhi's principles in today's journalism is more critical than ever. In an era marked by challenges such as misinformation, sensationalism, and polarized narratives, the call for integrity and ethical conduct in journalism remains paramount. Journalists who embrace Gandhi's commitment to truth and inclusivity can help counteract these issues and foster a more informed and engaged citizenry. Media professionals are encouraged to revisit Gandhi's philosophies as they navigate the complexities of reporting in a rapidly changing landscape.

Ultimately, the importance of ethical journalism in democratic societies hinges on its ability to uphold democratic values, promote transparency, and encourage public discourse. As Gandhi rightly believed, a responsible press is essential for a vibrant democracy. By embodying these ideals, journalists today can continue to honor Gandhi's legacy and contribute to building a just and equitable society.

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