The Vernacular Press

The Vernacular Press act was aimed at curbing the freedom of expression of leaders in their regional languages. They were not allowed to speak or write against the Britishers. The Vernacular press act was passed on 14th March 1878 by Lord Lytton in British India.

This act was passed with onset of the second- Anglo Afghan War of 1878. It received a lot of British criticism in the India. In the 19th century there was a remarkable growth in publication and in newspaper also.

It was a medium of expression through which people expressed their opinions. Previously newspapers were published only in metro cities and some big cities of India. But during 19th century they were started publishing newspapers in smaller places also. This aimed at making people aware of the happening in their surroundings. Also expression through newspaper became a tool of creating patriotism among the people. It instigated them to stand up for themselves and fight off the unjust acts of Britishers. The language of communication was regional in small cities. So the newspapers published there were also vernacular. For the common man to easily understand the views, expressions and opinions, it became important to publish vernacular newspaper.
At those times our leaders and revolutionaries took the help of this medium. They wanted to raise awareness in the common man. These vernacular newspapers played a great role in spreading the wave of nationalism. When this act was passed into existence, only 20 newspapers were published in English. Contrary to that, 200 newspapers used to be published in vernacular language. These papers made the common man aware about different political affairs growing in India. Due to the popularity of the vernacular newspapers, the Indians started questioning the Britishers about their rights.

Even before, Britishers had made several attempts to destroy the freedom of press. But their attempts had failed. In 1799 during the rule of East India Company, Lord Wellesley regulated the press. He banned two newspapers namely Bolt and the Bengal Gazette. In 1857, during the first Indian rebellion war, Lord Canning had passed the ‘Gagging Act’. This imposed restrictions on printing any material which brought criticism to Britishers. But all these efforts were in vain. The aggression piled up in the hearts of the people from years of tortures and oppression stemmed up the rebellion.

The onset of Vernacular Press Act

During that time Sisir Kumar Ghose was the editor of vernacular newspaper Amrita Bazar Patrika. He was called in by Sir Ashley Eden. Sir Ashley Eden offered to contribute in his papers. But only if he submitted the final copy of his editorial
regularly to the company. Ghose refused this offer, held his head high, walked out of this deal. He said that “there ought to be at least one honest journalist in the land”. The vernacular press act was said to be passed due to this incident. It was just a way of establishing British dominion. It gave an outlet to the Britishers to unleash their fury.

Key features of vernacular press act

1. The district magistrate or commission of police had the authority to call any editor and publisher without any prior permission of the government. They would be call in to sign the bond or undertaking anytime so as to not publish anything which was against British government or which might cause dissatisfaction amongst the government against the publishers.

2. The magistrate had the authority to take the security from press. Their newspapers be expropriated anytime if found violating any rule.

3. If the violation repeats the press could also be seized. This caused dissatisfaction among the publishing houses.

4. All the editorial final sheets of publication had to be submitted to police prior publication for approval. This bad news here was that the police on clerical level were Indian natives and understood the regional languages. They were brainwashed by Britishers into accepting these jobs for the
money. But sometimes they were also forced into this profession for the fear of their family.

5. All the seditious news was handled by the police and not by judiciary. This was also a grave reason for widespread violence.

Aftermath of Vernacular Press act

1. Under this act, several newspapers were banned from publishing their content writings completely.

2. Many newspapers were fined and their editors were put behind the bars.

3. They were not allowed to ask for redressal in the court.

4. Britishers had passed this act in a hurry. So as to immediately put an end to the growing influence of the regional papers. Initially no one understood the origin of this act. Why this was happening. But as soon as the people become aware of vernacular press act, they started reacting. All the people irrespective of caste and creed criticized the government for this act. They strongly opposed this and claimed it to be an unethical and an unjustified act by Britishers. Britishers tried to overpower the freedom of power through this restricting act. The National and regional leaders condemned the Britishers of this act and wanted immediate withdrawal. The resentment in people’s heart had initiated the agitation of growing
independence movement. The Indian Association was one of the biggest critics of this act.

5. Due to the colossal amount of agitation forced by them from the public and other organization Britishers were forced to review the act. In October 1878, within six months after its application it was modified by Lord Ripon. But it was modified in a very minor way. It did away with the submission of final editorial copy of publication, but it was still insisted by them. Even now, the publishers and editors could still be imprisoned any time according to this act, that too without any reasoning.

Conclusion

This act taught Indians how to stand up for themselves. Even when they were oppressed and tortured brutally, they did not give up without a fight against the Britishers. This law became one of the largest catalysts of Indians independence. It also gave us a lesson for the future asserting the importance of freedom of press and media in establishing a nation which gave freedom to it’s press and media.

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