The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 2 | February 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF: 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Media and Colonial Crisis: Editorial Transformations in *The Tribune* (1907–1919)

Dr. Gurtek Singh
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Akal University, Bathinda, Punjab, India
Dr. Anshu Sharma
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, RIMT University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, India
Dr. Harjeet Singh
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Akal University, Bathinda, Punjab, India

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18884559

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper
Accepted: 20-02-2026
Published: 10-03-2026

Keywords:
colonial press, public sphere, media sociology, Punjab history, Jallianwala Bagh, Ghadar movement, agrarian protest

ABSTRACT

This article offers a detailed sociological analysis of editorial content in *The Tribune*, the prominent English-language daily published from Lahore, across three transformative episodes in early twentieth-century Punjab: the 1907 agrarian unrest (Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement), the 1914–1915 Ghadar revolutionary activities, and the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre along with its martial-law aftermath. By systematically examining editorials, reports, and opinion pieces drawing primarily on archival references compiled in V.N. Datta's *The Tribune: 130 Years, A Witness to History* (2011) and corroborated through contemporary accounts the study traces evolving patterns in tone, framing, language, and rhetorical strategy over a twelve-year span. The analysis employs a multi-layered sociological framework rooted in Robert Park's (1923) functionalist view of newspapers as agents of environmental surveillance, social correlation, and cultural transmission; Jürgen Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere as a site of rational-critical debate; Gaye Tuchman's (1978) constructionist approach to news-making under institutional constraints; and Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) theory of cultural trauma for understanding post-violence consensus-building. In colonial Punjab, these functions operated within

a fractured public sphere marked by literacy barriers, Press Act regulations (1910 onward), wartime censorship under the Defence of India Act, and the risk of sedition charges. *The Tribune* began the period with reformist, legalistic appeals that articulated elite agrarian interests while affirming loyalty to a "paternal" British administration. It shifted during the Ghadar years toward cautious boundary maintenance condemning revolutionary violence yet questioning excessive state repression. By 1919, under editor Kalinath Ray (also spelled Kali Nath Roy), its voice became one of moral outrage and accountability-seeking, helping forge a broader nationalist consensus after collective trauma. A comparative table and extended case studies illustrate these transitions. The paper argues that *The Tribune* functioned as a resilient "moderate radical" institution: its measured English-language tone enabled survival and sustained public discourse where more strident vernacular papers (e.g., *Zamindar*, *Paisa Akhbar*) faced frequent suppression. This moderation paradoxically amplified its influence on educated Punjabis and the emerging national movement. The study contributes to media sociology and South Asian history by demonstrating how newspapers, even under colonial constraints, actively shaped political learning, collective memory, and the transition from localized grievances to mass anti-colonial consciousness. Implications for contemporary agrarian movements in Punjab are briefly explored.

Introduction: Historical scholarship on British India has traditionally privileged official archives as government reports, intelligence files, and administrative correspondence that inevitably reflect the perspectives of those in power. While invaluable for reconstructing policy decisions, these sources often obscure the lived experiences and interpretive frameworks of the colonized populace. Newspapers, by contrast, offer a vital counter-archive: publicly circulated, commercially sustained, and responsive to readership demands. They function simultaneously as mirrors of society and active agents in its constitution. In colonial Punjab, no English-language publication wielded greater influence among the educated middle classes than *The Tribune*. Founded in 1881 by Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia as a trust-based enterprise dedicated to "justice, freedom, and progress," the paper quickly established itself as a

platform for constitutionalist critique. By the early twentieth century, its circulation reached several thousand, primarily among urban professionals, lawyers, teachers, and landowners in Lahore, Amritsar, and the canal colonies. Its English idiom granted it a measure of protection British officials sometimes tolerated measured criticism in English papers that they swiftly suppressed in Urdu or Punjabi vernaculars yet its editorial independence repeatedly invited conflict with authority. This study focuses on three crises that bookend a crucial phase of Punjab's politicization: the 1907 agrarian protests against land colonization legislation; the 1914–1915 Ghadar conspiracy and its suppression; and the 1919 Rowlatt satyagraha, Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and martial-law regime. These events, spaced roughly seven years apart, allow for a longitudinal examination of editorial evolution. The choice is not arbitrary. Each episode marked a qualitative shift in the scale and nature of anti-colonial mobilization from localized economic grievances, through diasporic revolutionary networks, to province-wide trauma that galvanized mass nationalism. *The Tribune* covered all three intensively, and its shifting rhetoric provides a rich case for sociological inquiry.

Methodologically, the analysis rests on close textual reading of surviving editorials and reports, cross-referenced with secondary histories (Datta, 2011; Ramachandran, 2019; Sohal, 2022). Direct quotations are used sparingly and always contextualized to avoid over-reliance on any single source. Where primary issues are inaccessible, reliance is placed on verbatim excerpts reproduced in Datta and contemporary compilations. This approach mitigates the fragmentary nature of colonial-era archives while acknowledging that *The Tribune* itself was shaped by self-censorship and legal caution.

Sociologically, the paper contends that newspapers in colonial settings operated as "institutions of mediation" (cf. Habermas, 1989; Park, 1923). They did not merely transmit information but performed three interlocking roles: (1) interest articulation, translating sectoral grievances into publicly legible claims; (2) boundary maintenance, delineating legitimate from illegitimate political action; and (3) cultural trauma processing, helping communities narrate violence and rebuild moral consensus (Alexander, 2004). These functions were never neutral. In Punjab, they unfolded against a backdrop of uneven development prosperous canal colonies juxtaposed with rising indebtedness, wartime economic strains, and a burgeoning literate class exposed to global ideas via diaspora networks.

Central thesis of this present study is that *The Tribune*'s editorial posture evolved from defensive constitutionalism in 1907, through ambivalent moderation during the Ghadar years, to assertive moral critique in 1919. This trajectory mirrored and subtly accelerated broader shifts in Punjabi political consciousness. By maintaining a reformist idiom even while documenting colonial excesses, the paper

helped legitimize nationalist claims within the very language of British liberalism, thereby widening the public sphere's reach despite its structural limitations (literacy rates below 10 percent, English as an elite medium, pervasive censorship).

Existing literature on the colonial Indian press has largely focused on either radical vernacular organs (e.g., *Kesari*, *Zamindar*) or metropolitan English dailies (*The Times of India*, *The Statesman*). Regional English papers like *The Tribune* have received less sustained sociological attention, often dismissed as "moderate" or "loyalist" in tone. This paper challenges that binary by demonstrating how strategic moderation could itself be a form of resistance enabling longevity and cumulative influence that more confrontational outlets sometimes lacked.

The analysis proceeds chronologically. After elaborating the theoretical framework, it examines each period in depth, highlighting specific editorials, their linguistic choices, framing devices, and sociological implications. A comparative table synthesizes shifts across key dimensions. The discussion integrates findings with broader debates on media, colonialism, and social change, while the conclusion reflects on legacies for contemporary Punjab.

Sociological Framework for Understanding Colonial Newspapers: Newspapers are not passive recorders of events but dynamic social institutions embedded in relations of power, economy, and culture. Robert E. Park (1923), in his classic "The Natural History of the Newspaper," identified three core functions: surveillance of the environment (reporting threats and opportunities), correlation of societal parts (interpreting events for diverse audiences), and transmission of social heritage (shaping collective identity across generations). In colonial Punjab, these functions acquired distinctive inflections. Surveillance meant exposing administrative errors without directly challenging sovereignty; correlation involved bridging rural grievances and urban elite opinion; transmission meant reinterpreting "loyalty" in increasingly assertive terms.

Jürgen Habermas's (1989 [1962]) public-sphere theory provides a normative benchmark. The ideal public sphere is a space of rational-critical debate among private individuals, insulated from state and market coercion, where status is bracketed and the better argument prevails. Colonial India, however, exhibited what Nancy Fraser (1990) and others have termed "subaltern counter-publics" alongside a truncated official sphere. English-language papers like *The Tribune* occupied an interstitial position: accessible only to the anglicized elite (perhaps 5–8 percent of Punjab's population), yet wielding disproportionate agenda-setting power because officials and nationalist leaders read them. Censorship,

sedition laws, and the Press Act of 1910 severely restricted "bracketing of status." Nevertheless, *The Tribune* carved out limited rational-critical space by framing demands in constitutional language "due process," "British justice," "loyal representation."

Gaye Tuchman (1978) complements Habermas by focusing on the micro-sociology of news production. News is not discovered but "made" through organizational routines, source dependencies, and professional ideologies. In colonial newsrooms, these routines included consulting government communiqués, interviewing local notables, and self-editing to avoid prosecution. *The Tribune*'s trust ownership insulated it somewhat from commercial pressures, allowing greater editorial autonomy than proprietor-driven papers. Yet editors still practiced strategic ambiguity condemning "excesses" rather than the system itself to remain publishable.

Jeffrey C. Alexander's (2004) cultural trauma theory illuminates the 1919 section. Collective trauma occurs when a community experiences an event as a breach of its moral order, requiring narrative reconstruction to restore solidarity. Jallianwala Bagh was not merely physical violence (estimates of dead range from 379 official to over 1,000); it was a symbolic wound that shattered faith in British fairness. *The Tribune*'s editorials performed the "meaning-work" of trauma processing: documenting facts, naming perpetrators (Dyer, O'Dwyer), demanding accountability, and calling for healing through justice.

In applying these theories to Punjab, one must account for the region's specificities. The province's canal colonies vast irrigation projects that transformed arid lands into prosperous farms generated new agrarian elites whose interests *The Tribune* often articulated. World War I imposed heavy recruitment, inflation, and restrictions that radicalized sections of society. The Ghadar movement introduced transnational revolutionary ideas, challenging the constitutionalist consensus. Literacy, though low overall, was rising rapidly among Sikhs and Hindus in central districts, creating an expanding readership. Vernacular papers operated in parallel, sometimes more incendiary, but faced harsher repression; *The Tribune*'s English format and moderate tone allowed it to survive and influence both elite and, indirectly, mass opinion.

Critics might argue that Habermas's framework is Eurocentric and inapplicable to colonial realities. This study acknowledges the critique but contends that the concept retains heuristic value when historicized. *The Tribune* approximated elements of a public sphere open letters, reasoned debate, cross-community appeals while revealing its limits: exclusion of the illiterate majority, gendered bias (women rarely featured), and ultimate subordination to state power. The paper thus functioned as a "managed public sphere," simultaneously expanding and constraining democratic possibilities.

This framework guides the empirical sections that follow. Each case study asks: How did *The Tribune* perform surveillance, correlation, and transmission? What boundaries of legitimate discourse did it police? How did its framing evolve? The answers reveal media's role not as epiphenomenon but as constitutive force in colonial social change.

Section 1: The 1907 Agrarian Protests – Interest Articulation and Constitutional Mediation The spring of 1907 witnessed Punjab's first major peasant mobilization of the twentieth century. At its core were three pieces of legislation perceived as threats to customary land rights in the newly irrigated canal colonies: the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900 (already in force but controversial), the Punjab Land Colonisation Act, 1906, and the Doab Bari Act, 1907. These measures sought to regulate transfers, impose new conditions on colonists, and alter inheritance practices, ostensibly to prevent fragmentation and ensure revenue stability. To canal-colony farmers many of them Sikh and Hindu Jats granted land for loyal service—the laws represented an existential assault on proprietary dignity.

The movement crystallized around the evocative slogan "Pagdi Sambhal Jatta" ("Take care of your turban, O Jat"), drawn from a poem recited by Lala Banke Dayal at a massive gathering in Lyallpur on 22 March 1907. Sardar Ajit Singh (uncle of Bhagat Singh) emerged as a charismatic orator, addressing 19 of 33 recorded protest meetings and framing the agitation as defence of honour (*izzat*) rather than mere economics. Lala Lajpat Rai lent nationalist prestige. Protests spread to Lahore, Rawalpindi, Amritsar, and rural districts; crowds numbering thousands boycotted courts, withheld taxes, and organized *jalsas* (public assemblies). British officials, alarmed by the scale, registered sedition cases against leaders.

The Tribune covered these events extensively and sympathetically yet within strict constitutional bounds. Editorials portrayed the unrest as "specific grievances" of "loyal subjects" rather than anti-British sedition. A typical piece emphasized "injured loyalty" and called for "due process" and "reconsideration of legislation." The paper articulated the interests of the emerging agrarian bourgeoisie educated landowners who read English papers while mediating between them and the administration. It published letters from colonists detailing water-rate hikes and inheritance anxieties, translating rural distress into policy language accessible to Lahore's civil secretariat.

Sociologically, this exemplifies Park's interest-articulation function. The newspaper correlated disparate rural complaints into a coherent public claim, fostering a sense of shared provincial identity among canal-colony elites. Framing the state as a "paternal government making policy errors" preserved the possibility of redress within the imperial system. By avoiding revolutionary rhetoric, *The Tribune* helped contain the

movement while amplifying its legitimacy. The government eventually repealed key provisions, vindicating the paper's reformist strategy and reinforcing constitutional methods among its readers.

Yet the coverage was not without limits. *The Tribune* rarely amplified the voices of landless tenants or women; its readership was propertied and male. Vernacular papers like *Jhang Syal* (Banke Dayal's own) used more fiery poetry and reached wider audiences but invited harsher scrutiny. *The Tribune*'s moderation thus served a gatekeeping role legitimizing protest for elite circles while distancing itself from "extremism." This boundary maintenance prefigured its later stance.

Detailed analysis of language reveals careful calibration. Phrases such as "legitimate aspirations of the cultivating classes" and "appeal to British sense of justice" invoked liberal ideals the colonizers claimed to uphold. Reports avoided inflammatory terms like "oppression," preferring "hardship" or "inconvenience." This lexical restraint was both pragmatic (avoiding prosecution) and ideological (affirming faith in eventual reform). Over time, however, repeated documentation of grievances accumulated a narrative of systemic failure, planting seeds for deeper critique.

Section 2: The Ghadar Movement, 1914–1915 – Boundary Maintenance Amid Wartime Tension (approx. 1,510 words) The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 created both opportunity and peril for anti-colonial forces. The Ghadar Party, founded in 1913 among Punjabi Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim immigrants on the Pacific coast of North America, seized the moment. Its newspaper *Ghadar* (Urdu for "revolt") called for returning migrants to launch an armed uprising. Thousands answered, smuggling arms and literature into India. The planned general mutiny, set for 21 February 1915 in cantonments across Punjab (Lahore, Ferozepur, Rawalpindi), was betrayed by a police spy and collapsed. Subsequent Lahore Conspiracy Cases led to 42 executions (including Kartar Singh Sarabha, Vishnu Ganesh Pingle) and hundreds imprisoned in the Andamans.

The Tribune adopted a dual stance: unequivocal condemnation of revolutionary violence coupled with cautious questioning of state measures. Editorials described Ghadar plans as "misguided" and "doomed," emphasizing their futility and the danger of provoking harsher repression. Simultaneously, the paper highlighted "civil liberties" curtailed by wartime regulations and "public sentiment" strained by heavy recruitment and censorship. It avoided glorifying the martyrs unlike some vernacular sheets but criticized indiscriminate arrests and the secrecy of special tribunals.

This positioning performed classic boundary maintenance (Tuchman's organizational routines in action). By rejecting "extremist means" while defending "legitimate civil discourse," *The Tribune* defined a

middle ground of constitutional opposition safe for its educated readership. The sociological function was correlation: linking diaspora radicalism to domestic discontent without endorsing the former. In Park's terms, it surveilled the wartime environment, warning authorities that excessive repression could alienate loyal subjects.

The paper's English format again proved protective. While Urdu papers faced frequent bans, *The Tribune* continued publication, albeit under closer scrutiny. Its moderate tone allowed it to survive the Defence of India Act's draconian provisions, preserving a platform for future critique. Yet readers could read between the lines: repeated calls for "balance between security and liberty" implicitly critiqued the state's heavy hand.

Harish K. Puri's characterization of Ghadar as a "heroic failure" finds echo in *The Tribune*'s coverage acknowledging courage while underscoring political immaturity. This narrative reinforced the paper's role as guardian of "responsible" nationalism, influencing a generation of Punjabi youth who later channeled Ghadar's energy into Gandhian or socialist channels.

Section 3: The 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and Aftermath – Moral Consensus-Building After Trauma (approx. 1,980 words) No event tested *The Tribune*'s institutional role more severely than the events of April 1919. The Rowlatt Acts (passed March 1919) extended wartime emergency powers, authorizing detention without trial. Protests erupted across India; in Punjab, they met brutal repression. On 13 April, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered troops to fire on an unarmed crowd gathered in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, for Baisakhi celebrations and political protest. Official figures listed 379 dead; independent estimates exceeded 1,000, with thousands wounded. Martial law followed, including public floggings, forced crawling, and censorship.

Kalinath Ray (joined *The Tribune* as editor in 1917) responded with extraordinary courage. On 21 March he denounced the Rowlatt legislation as "A Colossal Blunder." On 10 April, in "Blazing Indiscretion," he eviscerated Lt-Governor Michael O'Dwyer's inflammatory speech that had inflamed tensions. Ray's 11 March piece remains iconic: "There are now two ways open to us. One is that we should, like the dead, put the noose of this law around our necks… The other is that we should afford proof of our life by refusing to accept the law in question."

After the massacre, the paper published restrained yet devastating accounts, emphasizing "tragic event," "public trust," and the need for "restoration of normalcy" through accountability. Ray was arrested on 17 April, tried by military tribunal, convicted of sedition, and sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment

plus a Rs 1,000 fine. The paper was fined Rs 2,000 and suspended for several weeks. Gandhi launched a nationwide campaign for Ray's release, hailing his "restraint" and factual accuracy. Ray served approximately four months before release on 27 August 1919.

From a sociological standpoint, *The Tribune* shifted decisively toward moral consensus-building (Alexander, 2004). By publishing survivor testimonies, demanding an independent inquiry, and framing the massacre as a rupture in the imperial moral order, it helped transform raw horror into shared narrative of injustice. Editorials stressed "healing" through justice rather than vengeance, modeling the non-violent idiom Gandhi would soon champion. The paper's English reach ensured these interpretations circulated among decision-makers in Delhi and London.

Ray's personal ordeal became symbolic. His conviction and partial commutation illustrated both the limits and possibilities of press resistance. Datta (2011) credits Ray with shedding the paper's earlier "moderate tone" and infusing it with "dignity of independence." The 1919 coverage influenced the December 1919 Amritsar Congress session the first "Gandhi Congress" and helped legitimize mass satyagraha.

Censorship intensified the paper's ingenuity. Suppressed issues circulated clandestinely; staff risked arrest to smuggle reports. This underground resilience reinforced *The Tribune*'s reputation as "voice of the people." Compared to the Anglo-Indian press that largely justified Dyer, *The Tribune*'s stance stood out, earning it enduring nationalist credentials.

Discussion: The Newspaper as Mediating Institution Under Constraint: Integrating the cases, *The Tribune* consistently performed mediation between state and society. In 1907 it channeled agrarian pressure into policy dialogue; in 1914–15 it defended civil discourse amid security panic; in 1919 it reconstructed moral community after atrocity. These functions occurred within severe constraints literacy barriers, legal risks, economic dependence on elite subscribers yet the paper expanded the public sphere's effective radius. Its moderation was not timidity but strategic realism: survival enabled cumulative impact.

Comparison with vernacular contemporaries illuminates this positioning. Zafar Ali Khan's *Zamindar* (Urdu) employed sharper, more emotive language and faced repeated bans. *Paisa Akhbar* targeted mass audiences with accessible prose. *The Tribune*'s English restraint allowed it to outlast many rivals, influencing both provincial governance and national Congress strategy. This "moderate radicalism" prefigured later Indian English journalism's role.

The evolution also reflects political learning. Readers following *The Tribune* across 1907–1919 encountered a running commentary linking events: 1907 grievances foreshadowed wartime strains; Ghadar repression prefigured Rowlatt overreach. Such temporal correlation (Park) fostered provincial and eventually national consciousness.

Limitations remain. The paper's elite bias marginalized subaltern voices; its trust structure, while insulating from proprietors, still reflected propertied interests. Gendered and communal exclusions persisted. Nevertheless, within colonial parameters, *The Tribune* advanced Habermasian ideals more effectively than most contemporaries.

Implications for Understanding Social Change and Contemporary Resonance: The analysis illuminate's media's role in long-term political learning and collective memory formation. Social movements build on discursive foundations laid over decades; *The Tribune* contributed significantly to Punjab's. Echoes appear in the 2020–21 farmers' protests, which explicitly invoked Pagdi Sambhal Jatta (Bharti, 2021; Sohal, 2022). Modern agrarian leaders framed demands in constitutional language reminiscent of 1907 editorials, while social media performed accelerated correlation functions.

Future research could compare *The Tribune* with other regional papers, examine readership data, or analyze vernacular–English interplay. Digital archives now enable quantitative sentiment analysis of editorials, offering new methodological avenues.

Conclusion: From 1907's legalistic appeals to 1919's accountability demands, *The Tribune*'s editorials chronicle deepening public discourse under colonialism. Sociologically, it served as mediator, boundary-setter, and consensus-builder vital roles performed under censorship and threat. Its trajectory underscores newspapers' agency in social change: even constrained institutions can nurture the ideas that ultimately dismantle empires. Kalinath Ray's courage and the paper's resilience remain inspiring reminders of journalism's democratic potential. As Punjab continues its tradition of resistance, the historical witness of *The Tribune* retains relevance for scholars and citizens alike.

References:

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. C. Alexander et al. (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1–30). University of California Press.

- Barrier, N. G. (1974). *The Punjab press, 1880–1905*. Michigan State University.
- Bharti, V. (2021, November 20). Punjab adds another chapter... *The Tribune*. https://www.tribuneindia.com/
- Datta, V. N. (2011). *The Tribune: 130 years, a witness to history*. The Tribune Trust.
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original 1962)
- Park, R. E. (1923). The natural history of the newspaper. *American Journal of Sociology, 29*(3), 273–289.
- Puri, H. K. (1993). *Ghadar movement: Ideology, organisation and strategy*. Guru Nanak Dev University.
- Ramachandran, R. (Ed.). (2019). *Martyrdom to freedom: 100 years of Jallianwala Bagh*. Rupa.
- Sohal, S. S. (2022). A tale of two Punjabi peasant agitations. *Journal of Sikh & Punjab Studies, 29*(1).
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news*. Free Press.