JHSR Journal of Historical Studies and Research,ISSN:2583-0198
Volume 5, Number 2 (May - August,2025),PP.457-468.
Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal
Website:www.jhsr.in
Email:jhsr.editor@gmail.com

Harish Chandra Mukherjee: A Saga of Social Awakening

Bipasha Raha[1] and Pintu Das[2]

[1] Professor
Department of History
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan
Birbhum ,West Bengal ,India
Email: bipasha.raha@visva-bharati.ac.in

[2]Research Scholar
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan
Birbhum ,West Bengal ,India
Email: pintudas5233@gmail.com

Abstract:*Harish Chandra Mukherjee (1824–1861) was a pivotal figure in the sphere of nineteenth-century Indian journalism and social reform. This article discusses Mukherjee's transformative role as editor of the Hindoo Patriot, where he championed the rights of Indian people under British rule, most notably during the Indigo Revolt, giving voice to oppressed cultivators and prompting a significant government inquiry. Mukherjee's fearless editorials criticized colonial policies and advocated progressive social change, including widow remarriage and female education. Despite facing financial hardship and official persecution, his pioneering investigative journalism and for justice left a lasting legacy, shaping the emergent nascent Indian nationalism and establishing the rightful place of periodicals as a vital agent of social transformation.*

Keywords: *Discourse, Hindoo Patriot, Indigo, Journalism, Periodicals, Peasants etc.*

Date of Submission: 23.07.2025 **Date of Acceptance: 26.07.2025**

Harish Chandra Mukherjee: A Saga of Social Awakening

Introduction: Genesis of Bengali Periodicals

The mid-19th century constituted a transitional phase in India's history, marked by the emergence of social reform movements and the birth of a nascent nationalist consciousness. In this ambience, the press played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and advocating change. One of the most influential publications of this era was a Bengali-language newspaper the *Hindoo Patriot*, which became a platform for social reform and political activism. At the helm of this publication was Harish Chandra Mukherjee, a journalist whose contributions to the history of Indian journalism and social reform have left an indelible mark.

Bengali periodicals, serving as a cornerstone for the cultural awakening were central to the shaping of the socio-political and cultural landscape of Bengal under colonial yoke. They acted as catalysts for social reform, cultural revival, and the emergence of a modern literary consciousness. The inception of Bengali periodicals was primarily as a medium for disseminating information and ideas. The first significant Bengali weekly newspaper, *Sambad Kaumudi*, launched in 1819 by Raja Rammohan Roy, set the precedent for future Bengali publications. In 1831, *Sambad Prabhakar* was founded by Ishwar Chandra Gupta, becoming the first Bengali daily newspaper. Later, the emergence of other notable publications like *Sulabh Samachar* (1870) and *Bangadarshan* (1872), contributed uniquely to the intellectual milieu of Bengal.

Bengali periodicals became platforms for advocating social reforms, catalysts for social reform. *Sambad Kaumudi* was instrumental in campaigning against the practice of Sati, a social evil, contributing to the eventual legislation banning the practice in 1829. Similarly, *Sambad Prabhakar* addressed issues like widow remarriage and caste discrimination, fostering a discourse on social justice and equality. *Bangadarshan* founded by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, promoted Bengali as a literary language. It published serialized novels, essays, and poems, making literature accessible to a broader audience. As British colonial policies became more assertive, Bengali periodicals began to reflect and foster nationalist sentiments. *Bangadarshan* published articles that critiqued colonial rule and emphasized the importance of cultural identity. The publication of Bankim Chandra's novel *Anandamath* in *Bangadarshan*,

which included the song 'Vande Mataram,' became a symbol of resistance and played a role in the burgeoning nationalist movement.

Many of the periodicals were instrumental in shaping public opinion and stimulating political discourse. They provided a platform for discussing contemporary issues, including politics, education, and social reforms. Through editorials, letters, and serialized content, these publications engaged readers in critical thinking and debate, thereby influencing the political discourse of the time. Their impact on education and culture was profound. They published translations of Western scientific and philosophical works, making them accessible to Bengali readers. This exposure contributed to the intellectual awakening of the Bengali middle class. Moreover, the periodicals promoted cultural activities, including theater, music, and art, thereby enriching the cultural fabric of Bengal.

Between 1830 and 1870, Bengali periodicals emerged as powerful instruments of change. They not only facilitated the spread of ideas but also actively participated in the shaping of modern Bengali society. Through their advocacy for social reforms, promotion of vernacular literature, fostering of nationalist sentiments, and influence on public opinion, these publications inspired and informed the cultural and intellectual life of Bengal and the broader Indian freedom movement. They provided a platform for voices advocating for change and progress, contributing to the emergence of a modern, enlightened, and self-aware Bengali identity.

Rural Bengal: The Backdrop

Rural Bengal during this period was characterized by a predominantly agrarian economy, with the majority of the population engaged in agriculture. The socio-economic conditions were marked by economic exploitation, social inequities, educational backwardness and health challenges. The zamindari system led to the exploitation of peasants, with high rents and arbitrary taxes. Caste-based discrimination and gender biases affected the rural populace's access to resources and opportunities. Limited access to education in rural areas hindered social mobility and awareness. Poor sanitation and inadequate healthcare facilities contributed to high mortality rates.

These issues necessitated intervention and Bengali periodicals became instrumental in bringing them to the forefront. While *Sambad Prabhakar* covered a wide range of topics, this

daily newspaper also addressed rural issues, including the plight of farmers and the need for agricultural reforms. Its wide circulation helped in spreading awareness among the urban elite about rural concerns. *Grambarta Prakashika* edited by Kangal Harinath Majumdar from 1863, would focus specifically on rural Bengal, highlighting the challenges faced by the agrarian community. In the narrative on how Bengali periodicals mirrored not only the evolving societal landscape but also played a pivotal role in addressing rural issues *Hindoo Patriot* ably steered by Harish Chandra Mukherjee made its rightful place.[1]

The Man behind the Pen

Harish Chandra Mukherjee, born in Calcutta (1824) to Ram Dhun Mukerji and Rukhini Devi, hailed from a modest background. He received his early education at the Union School, where he was admitted as a charity student. At the age of fourteen, he left school to seek employment, starting his career by writing bills, letters and petitions, and translating Bengali documents into English.[2] In 1848, he joined the office of the Military Auditor General, where he rose from a clerk to the position of Assistant Military Auditor. In 1852, he became a member of the British Indian Association, furthering his engagement with political and legal affairs.[3]

Mukherjee's foray into journalism began with *Hindu Intelligencer* and *The Englishman*. The inception of the *Hindoo Patriot* can be traced back to 1853 when Madhusudhan Ray, a Burabazar banker, approached Sreenath Ghosh, the founder-editor of the *Bengal Recorder*, and his brother Girish Chandra Ghosh to start an English newspaper. Initially, Girish Chandra Ghosh served as the editor, with Harish Chandra Mukherjee joining the editorial team shortly thereafter. In 1855, Harish Chandra Mukherjee assumed the role of chief editor and later acquired the newspaper from Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1856. His leadership marked a transformative period for the publication. Under his stewardship, the newspaper became a powerful voice emerging as a significant platform for political commentary, social reform, and nationalist discourse in colonial India, playing a crucial role in shaping public opinion and advocating for various causes that resonated with the Indian populace. He was soon to emerge as a pioneer of journalism and social reform.

Harish Chandra Mukherjee: A Saga of Social Awakening

A Chronicle of Resistance and Reform

One of the most notable social issues that Mukherjee championed was the cause of widow remarriage. At a time when Hindu society viewed widowhood as a life sentence of social ostracism, Mukherjee used the *Hindoo Patriot* to advocate for the legalization of widow remarriage. He drew inspiration from reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, who were also proponents of this cause. The newspaper's support for widow remarriage was instrumental in garnering public support for the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856

Mukherjee also recognized the importance of women's education in societal progress. He advocated for the education of girls, challenging the prevailing notion that it was detrimental to Hindu religious beliefs. Through the columns of the *Hindoo Patriot*, he encouraged society to follow the example set by reformers like Bethune, who had established a secular school for girls in Calcutta Mukherjee also recognized the importance of women's education in societal progress. He advocated for the education of girls, challenging the prevailing notion that it was detrimental to Hindu religious beliefs. Through the columns of the *Hindoo Patriot*, he encouraged society to follow the example set by reformers like Bethune, who had established a secular school for girls.

Beyond social reforms, Mukherjee attempted a critique of colonialism, of British policies and governance: highlight the benefits that accrued:

> "The Company has imposed laws on lawless herds of bandits, given security to possession and property, where it was perpetual danger and disturbance, scattered the luxuries of European civilization, diffused the blessings of Anglo-Saxon energy and industry, founded an admirable system of political equality and brought justice to the poor man's door."[4]

Yet, he opposed Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, which led to the annexation of Indian states like Jhansi and Nagpur, arguing that it sowed the seeds of discontent among the Indian populace. He was a vocal critic of the latter's policy towards Oudh. During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the *Hindoo Patriot* provided coverage that highlighted the grievances of the Indian people, though it also criticized the rebellion's leadership. Glorifying the march of the mutineers to Delhi from Meerut in May 1857 to reinstate Bahadur Shah Zafar as the Mughal Emperor, Mukherjee wrote:

> "It is no longer mutiny, but a rebellion. Perhaps, it will be said that all mutinies, when they attain a certain measure of success, rise to the dignity of a rebellion. But recent mutinies of the Bengal army have one peculiar feature- they have from the beginning drawn the sympathy of the country. The sepoy who, in accepting service under the British Government, neither relinquished the rights of citizenship nor abnegated national feelings have been led to believe their national religion in danger. They have rebelled against the authority which they have sworn to obey, and the forsworn men are deemed by their countrymen justified in sacrificing a minor obligation to a paramount one. They have hazarded all their most valuable interests; and their countrymen view them as martyrs to a holy cause and a great national cause. The mutineers have been joined and aided by the civil population. They have hastened towards the ancient capital of the country where resides the remnant of the former dynasty to which are turned in times of political commotion the eyes of all Indian legitimists."[5]

While acknowledging the complexities of the uprising, the newspaper expressed solidarity with the rebels and criticized the British response. It highlighted the contributions of leaders like Rani Lakshmi Bai and Kunwar Singh, portraying them as symbols of resistance against colonial oppression. He referred to the mutiny as 'the great Indian Rebellion of 1857'[6] as also 'the great revolution in India.'[7] Mukherjee believed that "The nation had been roused and thoroughly prepared for a revolution."[8] He was disenchanted with the transfer of power from the English East India Company to the British Crown[9] without any recourse to Indian public opinion:

> "Can a revolution in the Indian Government be authorized by Parliament without consulting the wishes of the vast millions of men for whose benefit it is proposed to be made? The reply must be in the negative. The time is nearly come when all Indian questions must be solved by Indians. The mutinies have made potent to the English public what must be the effect of politics in which the native is allowed no voice."[10]

In 1859, when Tantya Tope was hanged, the *Hindoo Patriot* saluted his martyrdom. Aware of the pitfalls of colonial domination he asserted "we want that the acknowledged right of the native Indian subjects of the Crown to participate in the Government of their own country be no longer allowed to be set at naught by the executive."[11] This was a tentative voice raised in demand for self-rule. While sceptical about the success of the rebel sepoys in ensuring the welfare of the country at large, he was apprehensive of the pitfalls of colonial domination. He was hinting at good governance when he wrote after transfer of power to the Crown:

> "Between the Government and the people, therefore the bond is one of reciprocal obligation… We owe you a cheerful allegiance. You owe us all that a good Government ought to do for its subjects."[12]

Mukherjee, like many of his contemporaries displayed an ambivalent attitude towards colonialism when he wrote:

> "You [British] rescued us from an odious tyranny [Mughal rule]. We assisted you in the gaining of a kingdom with our means."[13]

The *Hindoo Patriot*, under the able editorship of Harish Chandra Mukherjee became the mouthpiece of protest against imperial injustices. In the late 1875, when one Jagadananda Mukherjee invited the Prince of Wales to his residence and zenana, the *Hindoo Patriot* commented that the national feeling had been outraged.

One of Mukherjee's most significant contributions was his support for the indigo farmers during the Indigo Rebellion of 1859. The British planters had exploited the peasants by forcing them to cultivate indigo under oppressive conditions. From 1858 onwards through detailed reports and editorials Mukherjee initiated a well ordered crusade against the indigo plantation system:

> "We have said that the system of Indigo planting as it now exists in Bengal is a system of organized fraud and oppression. This fact, though well-known throughout the country, has not been admitted in those quarters from which relief is to be expected. The legislature has not admitted it. Officials ignore it. The British Public do not know it. The civilized world has not an idea of it."[14]

Hindoo Patriot lauded the attempts of the ryots to initiate petitions to inform the higher administration about the oppression of planters:

> "They [ryots] are learning to exercise the privileges of British subjects to meet together in public, discuss questions of public importance and to convey full expressionof their opinion thereupon to their rulers."[15]

Mukherjee refuted all attempts by planters to enumerate the advantages of indigo cultivation:

> "If Indigo Cultivation were really so paying as the planter insists, why, in the name of goodness, does the ryot seize the first chance to fly the factory and resort to the cultivation of rice?"[16]

His journalists, Sisirkumar Ghosh who later founded and edited the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and Manmohan Ghosh the future editor of the *Indian Mirror*, highlighted and brought under public gaze the atrocities and brutalities of European indigo planters emboldened by the tacit support of

the local administrative officials.[17] Reports came in particularly from the districts of Nadia and Jessore. Between March and August 1860 Ghosh sent nine eloquent journalistic pieces from Jessore depicting the sad plight of the hapless indigo peasantry.[18] These were based on direct eye witnessed accounts. He described how the ryots were prepared for repressive measures and arrests.[19] He fiercely criticized the rapacity of corrupt administrative officials in the indigo growing areas including the "dozen corrupt, bribe eating magistrates…who have prostituted themselves" in their attempt to promote the planters.[20] Mukherjee was an active participant in the agitation helping the struggling peasantry with legal support[21], authoring memorials and petitions, publishing reports of exploitation of ryots by the planters from the indigo growing districts and writing lucid editorials:

> "Bengal might well be proud of its peasantry. In no other country in the world is to be found in the tillers of the soil the virtues which the ryots of Bengal have so prominently displayed ever since the Indigo agitation has begun. Wanting in power, wealth, political knowledge and even leadership, the peasantry of Bengal have brought about a revolution inferior in magnitude and importance to none that has happened in the social history of any country. They have battled with adversaries possessing some of the most formidable elements of power. With the Government against them, the Tribunals against them, the law against them, the press against them, they have achieved a success of which the benefits will reach all orders and the most distant generations of our countrymen. And all this they have done by sheer force of virtue by patience, perseverance and fortitude and without committing a single crime or almost a single act of violence."[22]

Peasants flocked to his house in Calcutta to apprise him of their woes. A relentless struggle was thus launched.[23] Mukherjee however, advised ryots against a jacquerie and preferred agitation within he bounds of law:

> "I invariably advised them to apply to the district authorities in the proper form for redress and to go to the next appellate authority, if they found no redress at the hands of the district authorities. I cautioned them against ever committing any breaches of the peace or committing themselves in any manner by acting illegally. I explained to them [ryots] that the operation of the Act [Act XI of 1860] was temporary, and that better measures would be devised next year."[24]

The indigo planters, in particular, initiated multiple lawsuits against Harish Chandra Mukherjee, leading to financial strain.[25] While a section of the zamindars aided the struggling ryots some remained detached motivated by self-interest as they profited from having their lands lased out to

the planters.[26] Mukherjee was undaunted. He along with Kissory Chand Mitra, both members of the Central Committee of the British Indian Association, carried on a relentless campaign against the planters. *Hindoo Patriot* found an ally in *Som Prakash* edited by the erudite Dwarkanath Vidyabhushan. His advocacy led to the formation of the Indigo Commission, which investigated the grievances and led to reforms in the indigo industry. He was among the first of the Bengali urban intelligentsia to testify in favour of the indigo ryots when he appeared before the Indigo Commission in 1860. He had to pay a heavy price as the European planters took him to court and he had his house mortgaged to pay his legal fees. Describing the relentless struggle of the indigo ryots Mukherjee observed:

> "This conduct of the ryots has taught two lessons,- the one to our rulers and the other to our countrymen. The former have learnt not to reckon too confidently on the passive patience of the Bengallee; and our countrymen have learnt that if India is ever to improve in her political condition, it will bee, not indeed by the force of arms, but by the united will and inflexible determination of her sons never to yield their lawful rights to voracious rapacity and insolent hauteur of any class of oppressors. They have learnt that unflinching perseverance to claim and assert whatever belong to them, by natural or legal justice, as creatures of the same creator or as subjects of the same sovereign, is sure in the end to be crowned with success."[27]

Mukherjee's unceasing campaign against the atrocities of the planters and the unjust system contributed greatly to the ultimate disappearance of indigo cultivation from Bengal proper. He represented the attempts of the urban intelligentsia to emerge as spokesman of the rural populace. This would go a long way in serving the cause of the nationalist movement in later years. The rural world would gradually find its rightful place in the imagination of the western educated urban literati in Bengal.

Mukherjee also recognized the importance of women's education in societal progress. He advocated for the education of girls, challenging the prevailing notion that it was detrimental to Hindu religious beliefs. Through the columns of the *Hindoo Patriot*, he encouraged society to follow the example set by reformers like Bethune, who had established a secular school for girls.

In 1852, the Gyan Prakashika Sabha was founded in Calcutta at the initiative of Sambhu Nath Pandit and Ananda Prasad Banerjee to foster progress in spiritualism. Mukherjee joined as

its secretary. Though not a Brahmo, Mukherjee played an active role in the establishment of the Bhowanipore Brahmo Samaj in June 1852. In 1854he became a member of the executive committee of the Social Reform Association founded by Kissory Chand Mitra. One may argue that Mukherjee was drawn towards cultural and religious matters.[28]

Conclusion

Despite its influence, the *Hindoo Patriot* faced significant challenges, particularly financial constraints due to its critical stance against the British and the indigo planters. Following Mukherjee's untimely death in 1861 at the age of 37, the newspaper's future seemed uncertain. However, philanthropist Kaliprasanna Singha provided the necessary financial support to keep the publication afloat. Subsequently, Girish Chandra Ghosh returned to edit the paper, followed by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Krishnadas Pal, who continued its legacy of advocacy and reform. Pal was the editor of the paper for 23 years. During this period he opposed the imperial laws like the Immigration Bill, the Vernacular Press Act and the Ilbert Bill through the columns of the *Hindoo Patriot*. He protested against the oppression of tea workers and termed the Immigration Bill as 'The Slave Law of India'.[29]

Harish Chandra Mukherjee was a trailblazer in the field of Indian journalism, using the press as a tool for social reform and political activism. Through the *Hindoo Patriot*, he addressed pressing issues of his time, challenging societal norms and advocating for the rights of marginalized communities. By bringing these issues to light, it sought to mobilize public opinion and advocate for reforms and foster a sense of empathy and the need for change. His legacy continues to inspire journalists and social reformers, reminding us of the power of the press to effect change and the importance of standing up for justice and equality. Mukherjee's contributions to Indian journalism and social reform have been commemorated in various ways. In 1913, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation named a road in his honor—Harish Mukherjee Road. A memorial tablet at 68/3A Harish Mukherjee Road marks the site where he lived and worked. The *Hindoo Patriot's* contributions to Indian journalism and social reform are enduring. It set a precedent for the role of the press in advocating for social justice and political change. The newspaper's fearless journalism and commitment to reform inspired subsequent generations of journalists and activists. The *Hindoo Patriot* was a testament to the power of the press in

shaping public discourse and challenging oppressive systems. Mukherjee was a product of the influence of western thought and philosophy, having imbibed the sense of European justice and values. These attributes guided his handling of the *Hindoo Patriot*, dictated his prioritization of issues that were pertinent to contemporary society and his critique of prevailing injustices.

The periodicals of 1830–1865 laid the foundation for a more informed and socially conscious society in Bengal. Their focus on rural issues brought to light the challenges faced by the agrarian community and spurred efforts for reforms. The legacy of these periodicals is evident in the continued emphasis on rural development in subsequent periods. They played a crucial role in addressing rural issues, contributing to the socio-cultural renaissance in colonial Bengal. Their impact extended beyond mere reportage, influencing public opinion and policy, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility towards rural development.

Notes and References

[1] Ghoshz, Manmathanatha, *The life of Grish Chunder Ghose, the founder and first editor of "The Hindoo patriot" and "The Bengalee,"*, Calcutta: R. Cambray, 1911 pp. *85*–88
[2] Sastri, Sivnath, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj*, p. 197
[3] Chattopadhyaya, Kanai Lal, 'The Struggle of Indigo-Peasants in Bengal and the Role of Harish Chandra Mukerjee," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 34, 1973, p. 169
[4] *Hindoo Patriot*, 14 January, 1858
[5] *ibid*., 21 May, 1857
[6] *ibid*., 13 May, 1858
[7] *ibid*., 27 May, 1858
[8] *ibid*., 14 October, 1858

[9] Chottopadhyaya, Kanai Lal, op.cit., p. 170

[10] *Hindoo Patriot*, 14 January, 1858
[11] *ibid*., 12 February, 1857
[12] *ibid*., 9 December, 1858
[13] *ibid*.
[14] *ibid*., 29 July, 1858
[15] *ibid*., 17 August, 1854
[16] *ibid*., 27 January, 1859
[17] Bagal, Jogesh Chandra, *Peasant Revolution in Bengal*, Calcutta, Bharati Library, 1954
[18] *ibid*., pp.7-36
[19] Guha, Ranajit, 'Neel-darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1974, 2:1, p. 4
[20] *Hindoo Patriot*, 26 May, 1860
[21] Kling, Blair B., The Blue Mutiny, Indigo Disturbances in Bengal 1859-1862, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 121

[22] *Hindoo Patriot*, 19 May, 1860
[23] *ibid.*, 24 March, 1860
[24] Report of the Indigo Commission Appointed under Act XI of 1860 with the Minutes of Evidence taken before them; and Appendix (Calcutta 1860) 3873 (answer by witness to questions put by members of the Commission.
[25] *Hindoo Patriot.,* 24 March, 1860
[26] *ibid*., 26 August, 1858
[27] *ibid*., 26 May, 1860
[28] Nakazato, Nariaki, 'Harish Chandra Mukherjee: Profile of a "Patriotic" Journalist in an Age of Social Transition,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s., vol. XXXI, no. 2, August 2008, p.250

[29] Sengupta, Subhodh Chandra, Basu, Anjali, (eds.) 'Kristo Das Pal,' *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan (Bibliographical Dictionary)* (in Bengali). Vol. 1 (4th ed.). Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 2002 p. 104