

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi - A Great Editor and Freedom Fighter Who Was an Important Meeting Point for Several Streams of Freedom Movement of India

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Several newspapers and journals played a very different role during the freedom movement of India. While some of the big ones remained loyal to the colonial government, many others, including those with a very small resource base, contributed in very important ways to spreading the message of the freedom movement, even though they were victimized very badly by the colonial government which was ever willing to send editors to jail.

A newspaper of Urdu language called Swadesh (My Country) coming out from Allahabad could last for less than three years due to its commitment to the freedom movement. During this time it had as many as 8 editors who at various times were given imprisonment sentences by the colonial courts which added up to 125 years! When one editor was arrested, the ad for the next editor went along these lines—Required Editor, salary two dry pieces of bread and a glass of water per day, special reward—jail sentence! Even this kind of ads found many qualified persons queuing up to take up the editor's job.

Some of the most prominent leaders including Shahid Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi also functioned as very capable journalists and contributed a lot to the freedom movement in this capacity too. However the editor who best combined the roles of freedom struggle and journalism was named Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. He had a unique role in the freedom struggle as at a very young age he emerged as a meeting point of several streams of the freedom movement. He was also a leader of workers and peasants. His commitment to social reforms was also well-known and in fact he sacrificed his life at the young age of only 40 for the cause of inter-faith harmony, while trying to stop sectarian violence and rescuing persons trapped in it.

On his death Jawaharlal Nehru said, "He taught in his death what we will find difficult to teach while living for many years."

Mahatma Gandhi said—He has cemented Hindu-Muslim unity with his own blood.

Vidyarthi had a unique place as a bridge between the revolutionary movement and the mainstream Congress movement. He headed the Congress in the very important United Provinces (roughly Uttar Pradesh today) but also enjoyed complete trust and confidence of revolutionaries.

He was the greatest editor who fought the world's biggest imperialist force (and its many lackeys) relentlessly for 18 long years right till his death, one foot in prison or court, one in a small office.

He not only covered struggles of workers and peasants in his newspaper, he went right ahead and mobilized and unionized them.

Ganesh Shankar gave ample evidence of his writing skills and deep social commitments even in his school days. Moving to journalism in Kanpur, which became the main centre of his work, he soon attracted attention for his zeal and capabilities for public interest writing and campaigns. With the support of a few influential friends, he launched a magazine Pratap to report on freedom movement and other struggles. Public response was so good that this was converted into a daily newspaper.

This newspaper soon became the most committed voice of the freedom movement and struggles of peasants and workers. A magazine Prabha was also launched.

Vidyarthi was active in the Congress-led movements and established a well-deserved reputation as a leader of great commitment and honesty. At the same time he sympathized with young revolutionaries and arranged various kinds of help for them. He helped leading revolutionaries like Ashfaqullah, Ram Prasad Bismil and Bhagat Singh in various ways. In fact Bhagat Singh worked as a journalist in his office for some time as a sort of assistant editor, writing under a pen name to escape police attention. Later when Bhagat Singh, Jatindranath Dass and others were on hunger strike in prison, Pratap's reporting played an important role in informing people and mobilizing public opinion on this. The confidence of the revolutionaries in his judgment and understanding increased to such an extent that they would go ahead with some important plan of action only after ascertaining that this had the approval of Vidyarthi.

Meanwhile on the insistence of people he contested state council elections and won with a huge margin despite not having any financial resources. After this he was made the President of the State Congress Committee. More senior, national leaders could not have been unaware of his close relations with revolutionaries but he was selected for this important post on the strength of his great reputation of honesty and commitment as well as his huge popularity among people cutting across caste and religious divides. He also organized several meetings and gatherings on inter-faith harmony.

Ganesh Shankar was involved in a mobilization of textile workers of Kanpur and he played a similar role in taking forward some struggles of peasants of the United Provinces.

Apart from the main freedom movement, several sporadic struggles had started in various kingdoms. These involved very courageous and sincere activists, but faced brutal repression at the hands of the various royal regimes. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi took up their cause with a lot of zeal and courage. To check him and his reporting of these struggles (such as those in Bijoliya, Rajasthan and Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh) in Pratap, several court cases were started against Pratap and Ganesh Shankar which he faced with courage and determination.

His writings covered a vast ground of justice and struggle related issues, and he was a leading figure in the contemporary literary field. Even though he was writing mostly about freedom and other struggles of India, the struggles in other parts of the world also attracted

him, and we also find him writing with passion on a contemporary struggle of people of Morocco. Despite the extremely difficult conditions in jail, he managed to translate works of Victor Hugo during his imprisonment days.

He was jailed five times. He saw the terrible conditions of jails and prisoners from close quarters. He was so appalled by what he saw that he strongly wrote about demolishing these jails. He was a strong advocate of jail reforms and rights of political prisoners.

In 1931 he was released from jail and was trying to catch up with pending work when terrible sectarian riots (widely alleged to be pre-planned by the colonial rulers) erupted in Kanpur. It was in the course of trying to rescue trapped people of both communities, Hindus as well as Muslims, that Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was killed. Hence he sacrificed his life for Hindu-Muslim unity and harmony.

He will always be remembered as our greatest editor ever who also made most invaluable contributions to freedom movement and inter-faith harmony.

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Bharat Dogra is a recipient of the Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi Award for Hindi journalism presented by the President of India. In addition he has also received the Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi Award presented by several worker and peasant organizations of Chattisgarh, India. His books include *When the Two Streams Met (Freedom Movement)* and (in Hindi) *Azadi Ke Deewanon Ki Daastan* as well as several booklets on freedom movement. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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