

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Based in the North Indian city of Allahabad (United Provinces) and founded in 1865, *The Pioneer* newspaper was once the leading English language newspaper in British India, famous earlier in the 20th century for employing Rudyard Kipling as a reporter and assistant editor and for carrying the despatches from the North West Frontier of the young Winston Churchill (*Pioneer*, 9 September 1897). Despite the loss of its monopoly of official news with the establishment of the Associated Press of India in 1910, it remained 'the leading mouthpiece of those Anglo-Indians determined to preserve the political status quo in India' (Allen 2007, 286) and for all practical purposes it had always been a mouthpiece of the Government of India (Ahuja 1996, 106).

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However, from the standpoint of the hegemonic press themselves, there were clearly dilemmas to be faced in owning and editing such organs during the twilight years of the Raj. The word 'hegemonic' is use here in accordance with Gramsci's definition: 'The 'normal' exercise of hegemony ... is characterized by the combination of force and consensus which vary in their balance with each other, without force exceeding consensus too much. Thus it tries to achieve that force should appear to be supported by the agreement of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion-

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newspapers and associations (Gramsci, Quaderni del Carcere, p.1638, cited in Joll 1977: 99).<sup>1</sup>

Since Gramsci's time, scholars have argued that if there is hegemony, then there can also be counter-hegemony. The concept was first developed - in terms of definitions of modernity - by structuralist philosophers such as Louis Althusser (1969), Theodor Adorno (trans. 1997 from 1970, (7)), subsequently critiqued by the post-structuralists Marshall Berman (1983), and Jacques Derrida (1992), and has been widely discussed within journalism history by scholars in relation to minority communication (Downing 1984, 2001); Murdock, 2000; Cottle, 2000; Chapman 2007). Using the North Indian English-language *Pioneer* as the main archive, this paper looks at articles on and about women's activism from 1928-1934 in order to address a practical issue for counter-hegemony in newspapers: how far it was possible for an establishment paper to entertain dissent within its pages, in particular the voice of indigenous, female supporters of the 'freedom movement'?

Although coverage of female protest can be found to a greater or lesser extent in most of the other English language press, *The Pioneer* was chosen because as a newspaper business, it manifested *change* during a specific time frame. By 1928 the paper was produced by a handful of staff, circulation was in decline and advertising revenue in need of a boost. At this time constitutional talks were reaching a crucial stage against a backdrop of the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements, and the then British owners were prompted by the existing editorial staff themselves to beef up the

managerial team by appointing a new editor, F.W.Wilson, to improve the paper's fortunes. He did so by exhibiting liberal sympathies towards the nationalist movement, in the hope of increasing Indian readership.

Wilson's progressive experiment lasted less than two years, and was followed by a move of headquarters to Lucknow in 1933, and sale of the paper to a Cawnpore business group of Indian princes in 1934. The paper then reverted to a more conservative stance. Jawaharlal Nehru recognised this period of temporary flirtation with liberalism, selected as the time frame for analysis

here, when he wrote: 'For a while it was a live paper, the most readable in India. It amused or pleased or irritated or angered, but it was not dull. And now that Mr Wilson has left it, it has gone back to its old rut, and lest its hapless readers may be unable to find out what it is or what it stands for, it reminds them daily of "law and order."' (Wilson, 1929 vi-vii). Law and order notwithstanding, the episode raises bigger questions about the dilemmas of hegemonic editorial expression during the transition from Empire to an independent India.

'FW' as he was referred to, gave cautious support to Dominion Status and for women's rights, whilst also attempting to 'Indianise' the editorial staff and introduce a modern editorial style. (Rao 1965) He campaigned against the all-white Simon Commission imposed by the Tory government and gained approving public mentions from Motilal Nehru as a result. (*Pioneer* April 15 1928,1) In 1929 Wilson wrote in an editorial called 'the Awakening of Indian Women': 'Probably in no country in the world is it so necessary for women to

take a prominent part in social and political life than in India' and that 'every encouragement should be given to the emancipation of the sex and to all attempts to give women their proper place in the body politic' (*Pioneer* January 13<sup>th</sup>:12).

Wilson was close to both Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, who lived in Allahabad, and it was Jawaharlal Nehru who commented about protest during this period: 'Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes – peasant women, working-class women – pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organisational power they showed' (1946:23). This new role for women has been acknowledged by historians: 'Politics completely altered the goals and activities of organized women. Education, social reform and women's rights appealed to some progressive women, but the movement to rid the country of its foreign rulers attracted people from all classes, communities and ideological persuasions' (Forbes, 1996:121). So did women, through their actions, speak in the pages of Wilson's paper? This article uses empirical quantitative and qualitative methods to examine evidence of the counter hegemonic voice.

### **Literature Review**

The press as agency between coloniser and colonised is insufficiently studied, and only serves to problematise some of the seminal binary analyses of classic post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said –in particular his

contention that understanding of the Orient and hence of the 'other' is always seen through the lens of the colonial power (1978). Information in *The Pioneer* and other Anglo Indian newspapers was not always subsumed into the colonising 'self': *The Pioneer* featured articles by Indian contributors and columnists (including prominent political women such as Annie Besant) with their own bylines, according to our content analysis. Thus, depending on the definition of 'subaltern' in Spivak's much quoted theorisation (1993), the 'subaltern' could – and did - 'speak'. Scholars such as Howard Spodek (2010) have suggested that "all women" could be considered "subalterns," but members of the Subaltern Collective have defined women subalterns in terms of class and caste. Most of the women mentioned in this article belonged to the highest castes and highest class of their region, and were often privileged by Western education and in many cases by experiences abroad. They became the mouthpieces in *The Pioneer* of rural women and labourers who joined nationalist protests.

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Definitions aside, more recently colonial discourse analysis has accepted that the relationship between coloniser and colonised is more complex (Bhabha 1983), with writers such as Suleri (1992) talking of an 'anxiety of empire' on the part of the colonial power – an anxiety that clearly emerges from Wilson's editorial stance. Similarly, Spurr (1993) in his study of colonial discourses within journalism, writes of contemporary 'instability' that is not just manifest in colonial and post colonial divisions but is also evident within systems and writings about them.

Our findings supplement academic attention on the way newspapers in mainland Britain reported matters relating to India (Kaul, 1999;2003) and an existing focus on the rise of indigenous, nationalist newspapers within India that challenged the hegemonic, English language, colonial owned press (Jeffrey, 2000; Murthy, 1966; Mazumbar, 1993). Indian press historians have approached nationalist coverage from the angle of the birth of their own vernacular newspapers rather than the demise of existing colonial ones such as *The Pioneer*. The parallel decline and consequential re-adjustment of existing colonial newspapers in India to the ascent to power of the nationalist movement has been overlooked.

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This may well be because, according to Jawaharlal Nehru, the Anglo- Indian press was an anomaly: 'Cut off entirely from the life of the people and living in a world of its own, it has specialised in dullness and inanity' (Wilson 1929, vi – vii). Nevertheless, press censorship of Indian English language and vernacular newspapers, particularly from 1931 onwards, forced the nationalist movement to seek more coverage in the colonial press – and with considerable success. There has been some research on censored material and issues of press freedom (Barrier, 1974); and Israel (1994) has looked at the role of government, press and news agencies in the nationalist struggle in relation to *The Bombay Chronicle*, but only briefly mentions *The Pioneer*.

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Although women's empire studies is a growing field of study (ed. Kleinberg, 1988; ed. Midgley,1998; ed. Samson, 2001; Levine, 2004; eds Sangari & Vaid,1989), there has been no systematic study of newspaper coverage of

women's nationalist awakening as protesters. The practice of Charkha and Khadi (home spun cloth) is well documented, however. (Taneja, 2005; ed.Mody, 2000; Jain, 1985; Jain & Mahan, 1996; Bakshi, 1994; Forbes, 1996; Kumar, 1993); Wieringa, 1995; Mohanty, 1996; Kaur, 1969; Woollacott, 2006 ; ed. Nanda, 1976)

Predictably, contemporary memoirs have their own agendas. Desmond Young (1963), the former *Pioneer* editor who moved the headquarters to Lucknow and negotiated for the paper's sale to a consortium of princes, seeks to justify his own role by dismissing Wilson's contribution (see later). In contrast, Rao (1965), who worked under Wilson, is more complimentary about Wilson's 'Indianisation' of the editorial team and the other changes to the paper's style. Press historian Natarajan (1962) remarks significantly that Wilson had a 'close understanding' with Motilal Nehru, ~~at a time when Nehru's~~ committee was drafting a constitution (Sethi 1958; Spear 1981). Was Wilson aiming to fill the market gap left by the demise of Nehru's *Independent* in 1923? Both *The Pioneer* and the Nehru family were based in Allahabad. Wilson took the paper to the left of its main competitor, *The Leader*, already left of centre in Anglo-Indian terms, but notably less lively in its coverage than the new-style *Pioneer*.

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According to Jawaharlal Nehru (1936, 2004), the freedom movement was unable to communicate publically at this time – presenting activists with a big organisational problem. The need for the nationalist movement to address this is articulated by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (1939) who connects public

awareness with the economic imperative and with a rationale for the political strategy of nationalist protest. Clearly support for the nationalist cause - even limited support - had economic implications, for as Jain (1985) has argued, nationalism for Gandhi was a social and economic programme, rather than simply a political one.

### **News values**

*The Pioneer's* style of reporting was un-sensational, summing up the facts and presenting news in concise packages, augmented with direct speech. Sometimes court reports and accounts of women's conferences were covered verbatim. Significant technical improvements in the printing capability of the newspaper during Wilson's tenure facilitated the publication of a greater number of photographs, beyond the confines of the traditional pictures page. More photographs of Indians began to appear with a marked increase in the frequency that female activists' photographs appeared in the paper: for example, *The Pioneer* carried a photo of Annie Besant on 6<sup>th</sup> Jan 1930 and the front page for 10 September 1928 displayed a portrait of Sarojini Naidu, a female leader of the Congress and a noted poet, departing for a European tour,

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*The Pioneer* was constructed of 24 pages, with the first 4 pages consisting of news, summary editorial and news in brief. Court reporting dominated pages 5-6; pages 7-9 covered overseas news and some political comment; the occasional 'Women's Topics' column was located on pages 10-11 –otherwise this space was reserved for book reviews. Although circa 90 per cent of the

paper reported news, political, judicial, sporting and economic affairs deemed to be of interest to the imperialist male, the rest of the paper focused on women. Pages 12 to 24 comprised of editorial and letters, sporting events and results, local market and share reports, commentary on global markets, and classified advertising. Display advertisements were located on almost every page, mostly for cars, alcohol, guns and machinery, with a few promoting toiletries and medication for women.

By 1928 *The Pioneer's* circulation was in decline and advertising revenue in need of a boost. During Wilson's tenure *The Pioneer* moved offices in London (to The Aldwych) and procured new rotary printers for India - capable of producing 36,000 twenty four page editions per hour. He encouraged advertisers to take advantage of the broader demographic of this 'modern' paper, highlighting the 'advertisers' opportunity' to utilise these machines to provide 'greatly enhanced value' for *The Pioneer* in order to reach its wider readership 'from the Viceroy to the humble inhabitants of the bazaar'. Such people, he claimed, were able to afford the one anna paper after he reduced the sales price (Wilson, 1929 *The Pioneer* 1 October: 1).

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It is interesting that reports of the nationalist and women's struggle for independence were embedded in a framework of advertising that supported the hegemonic status quo. Wilson wanted the paper to be increasingly reactive to local events in order to make it more attractive to local advertisers – also a logical strategy due to the fact that United Province, as one of the

main centres of nationalist protest, and the venue chosen by the Congress Party to launch the 'no rents' campaign, was a 'hard news' region.

Although professional news values demanded objectivity in the presentation of facts, editors who gave coverage to anti-colonial events were providing a window for nationalist communication, however narrow. By 1928, the activities of the nationalist movement were wide ranging, so to some extent, there was a choice in terms of editorial priorities for coverage, such as the positioning of a story within the paper, the size and nature of the headline, and the number of column inches allocated to it. *The Pioneer* had its preferences, like any other paper. Wilson drew the line at supporting violence- although perceptions of what sells newspapers (new values) and professional journalistic 'objectivity' dictated that the paper would still cover it. Conversely, he favoured education and self-improvement for women and gave a platform to some Indian female writers (see later).

Female protest may well have assumed a high priority in Wilson's editorial thinking because of the British elections on 30th May 1929, when three times as many women as men voted (*Pioneer* 1st June, 1929 :3). The voting age in Britain was reduced from 30 years of age to 21, resulting in an increase of 5 million new female voters. This had an impact on public debate in India, as 'The Awakening of Indian Women' by Wilson noted: 'recent conferences...dealing more particularly with subjects primarily affecting women ...have shown that there is a new spirit abroad ...and that, side by side with the wider political movement towards Swaraj, there will exist a

parallel series of movements, without which any serious attempt at self-government will be doomed' (*Pioneer* 1929 Jan 13:12, 1-2). Thus, in the context of general interest in female citizenship, global campaigns were also reported in *The Pioneer*: Millicent Fawcett visited Ceylon, Lady Irwin campaigned on Indian women's behalf back in London, Sarajini Naidu did a promotional tour of the US. Similarly, in 'The Rights of Women -Plea for a Changed Outlook' Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (who also travelled abroad as a representative of Indian women at international conferences) argued that the 'Women's Movement was one of the greatest forces in the world today and one of the factors shaping the life of humanity all over the world' (*Pioneer* 1929 Jan 14: 4, col 4). Subsequent editors Thorniley then Young continued to report women's campaigns.

Yet female *direct action* in the form of boycotts, pickets, burning of cloth, and other forms of civil disobedience presented a dilemma. First, there was the question of appearing to condone violence; second the issue of giving publicity to illegal activities – for this could damage morale and British confidence; and third there was the question of economic damage to both *The Pioneer*'s revenue if advertisers withdrew support and the danger of the paper being accused of contributing to the damage that British business was already suffering.

### **Methodology and Research**

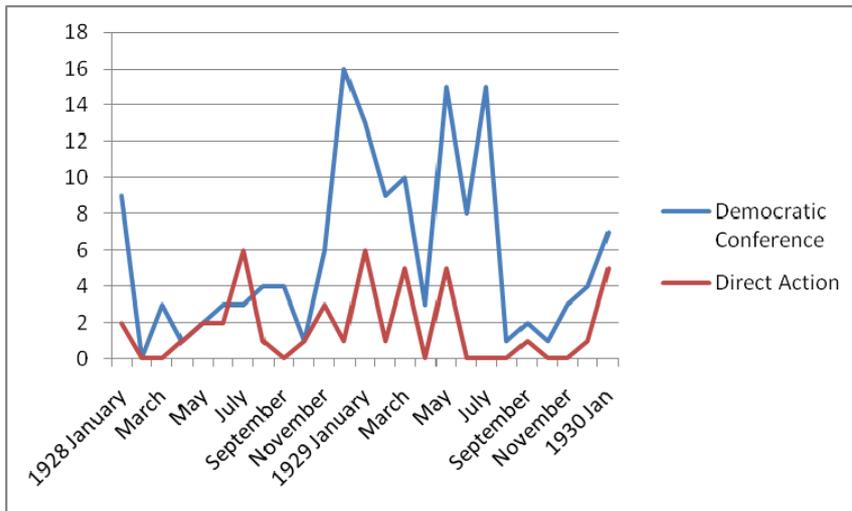
In terms of research design, it was therefore logical to differentiate between different sorts of coverage. Thus, researchers created two data sets: one for

peaceful self-emancipation, such as education and conferences and one for direct action, sometimes but not always violent and /or illegal. The first category was important for the emerging citizenship of women, as well as in terms of social reform. The second reflects the interface of economics with ideology in the press, for it brought women into the public sphere with an organisational and collective consciousness, reflected for instance, in trade union activities, and politically motivated economic boycotts.

Qualitative interpretative content analysis, combined with quantitative methods and descriptive statistics of nominal and ordinal data from advertising records of *The Pioneer* have been used. The primary source material was arranged into 2 major sets of data, analysing actual content about women and protest over 100 per cent of the 600 issues covering January 1928 to January 1930 -encompassing Wilson and Thorniley's editorships. Peaceful democratic conferences and other meetings account for 78 per cent of political coverage on women and examples of direct action such as strikes, hartals, boycotts and cloth burning account for the remaining 22 per cent. Furthermore, records of amalgamated trade figures and tax revenues provide supporting evidence of severe economic difficulties faced by the Indian cotton trade due to strikes, boycotts and foreign cloth burnings. Researchers also looked at *The Pioneer* in January 1934 after editor Young moved the paper to Lucknow and brokered the purchase deal with a consortium of Indian princes.



Table 1 *Pioneer's* coverage of women's protest 1928-1930



It is important to differentiate on the one hand between a newspaper speaking 'for' women - that is on behalf of the colonial 'other' as framing - and on the other hand direct reporting - where a newspaper includes quotes from protagonists, or the protagonists themselves actually contribute articles directly to the newspaper. Therefore the data was also tabulated to show percentages of articles on women divided into framed reporting of their activities or use of direct quotes/writing from the women themselves.

Table 2. Percentage proportion of framed reporting and women's direct quotes/writing in female-oriented articles

	Framed	Direct quotes
1928	67	33
1929	78	22
Jan 1930	83	17

### ***Women and peaceful democratic self-emancipation***

*The Pioneer's* most numerous accounts about women fall into the category of democratic meetings, conferences and lobbying for emancipatory parity in education, increases in marriageable age for child brides, and changes to the status of widowed women so they could inherit and re-marry. The 1929 figures establish a 60 per cent increase from 1928 in reports supporting women's suffrage – in particular January to March that year, in anticipation of strong female voting in London (*Pioneer* 1st June, 1929 :3).

From November 1928 to February 1929 there was an increase of 30 per cent in the reporting of female conferences, similar events and speeches calling social and political for reforms. Women used the paper to announce events organised by Chattopadhyaya, the Nehrus, Dowager Maharani of Mandi and others, that were subsequently reported at length. Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu, Onila Chatterjee, Mandi, Maharani Sahiba of Lahore and Mrs M Nehru also wrote articles in the paper with bi-lines, thus appealing directly to the readership. There were even debates in the paper between leading women: feminist Eleanor Rathbone, for instance, accused Miss Mayo of slandering 'Mother India' and not giving a true picture of national life- prompting an editorial in the same edition on her views (Jan 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929, p.10 and p.12)

Before the 1920s Spivak's assertion that an imperialistic and paternalistic hegemony would speak for women is largely accurate. In its early years the campaign to improve conditions for women that began with the United Provinces Social Conference (UPSC) in the 1880s, was largely dominated by

a colonialist determination to assign only a partial mandate for women. Yet by the late 1920s a hardening of attitudes towards independence and the constitutional form it should take provided a parallel impetus for women to act and speak for their own emancipation- now the conferences and their mandates were run by women themselves. In fact, in 1929 the UPSC's leader Uma Nehru, in front of veteran campaigner Annie Besant<sup>ii</sup>, expressed her regrets that over a 40 year period there had been a 'failure' to deal with women's issues at a communal level. She praised the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, established 1926) for its success at a national level (*Pioneer*, April 3 1929:4).

By 1939 Chattopadhyaya was arguing that: 'in order to mobilise and harness the mass energy to the anti-imperialist struggle there must be a political consciousness in the masses' (1939:44). By this she meant to use the press as a platform when she included it in her 10 point list for her anti-imperialism and, by association, women's emancipation (1939: 45). The deliberations of such organisations, consistently reported in *The Pioneer* along with other meetings and articles written by powerful women reflect a change in the way women organised, took part and voiced their concerns in Indian politics. Thus a combination of attempts at self-emancipation and newspaper coverage amplified their voices.

This redefining of the notion of female citizenship and the associated rights and responsibilities was symbolised by the appointment in 1925 of activist Sarojini Naidu as the first female president of The Indian National Congress.

By 1929 the women's movement had gathered momentum: alongside the AIWC, the Women's Indian Association was overseen by Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi, the first Indian female to be elected as a deputy president of a legislative body. *The Pioneer* also reported on Allahabad Women's Meeting, Gonda Ladies Conference, Indian Women's Education Conference, Rajputana Conference, Delhi Women's Conference, Agra Province Education Conference, All India Women's Movement, Women's Franchise Union, All India Moslem Ladies Conference, World Conference for Women, Women's International Congress, Women's Institute Movement, All India Congress, and Women's Education Allahabad . In fact, 71 per cent of reported meetings were comprised of 18 separate organisations, and 29 per cent of them were AIWC.

On Dec 17 1928 (p11, col 1-2) the Maharani Sahiba of Lahore wrote a long article, 'Emancipate Indian Women', about the urgent need for social reforms and education. She proposed that 'there is nothing that will help the Indian woman to realise herself and make others realise her dignity, except the consciousness that she is free and independent.'<sup>iii</sup> *The Pioneer* also noted the increasing interest of Muslim women in social parity: (*Pioneer* 1928 June 18: 17).

Probably the most controversial female contributor, best known for her gravitas but also her incisive and outspoken comments was Annie Besant. Initially she was sceptical about the chances of success for Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, calling his demand that the British government should

accept Dominion status in its entirety, or else the Congress would not pay taxes, an 'insolent challenge' (30<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1928, p.1) and 'destructive' (Jan.11<sup>th</sup>, p.9). She believed that this 'setback to political activity' would prove divisive for Congress and that 'the masses would be the main sufferers of non-cooperation in a country like India where it could not be made effective'. However, by May that same year she had become convinced of the success of the tactic, stating in *The Pioneer* on May 22<sup>nd</sup> that she was sure of India winning home rule (p.3).

### ***Women and Direct Action***

Gandhi's charisma attracted thousands of women to public life (Tomlinson 1996:129; Forbes, 1996: 126; Jain 1985: 37) and his return to politics in 1928 saw a change from 1920-1 Congress party non-cooperation, boycotting schools and law courts, to a more extensive form of civil disobedience.

From February to August 1928 Vallabhbhai Patel and Gandhi reignited the land rent dissent campaign and specifically sought women's support. *The Pioneer* reported on 24 August female led land 'satyagrahis', in an article called 'Path of India's Deliverance'. The article an earlier incident in 1921 at Bardoli -a land tax protest in Gujarat state<sup>iv</sup>. Wilson in particular was sympathetic to covering mass protests from poor men and women, often connecting past events with contemporary protest, thus the paper ran a 3 part feature over 3 days, 'Bardoli and the Future'. A correspondent covered a pilot protest over raised land rent where, on rent collection day villagers simply deserted their dwellings and ran off into the forest. The rent collectors could not identify the owners since there

were neither people nor written evidence present to provide any sort of identification, so they went away empty handed. 'Determined men and women have seen the demonstration through' and [the] 'influence of the charka and looms for weaving khaddar' and Gandhi-ism allowed them to protest at unfair 'enhancement' of land rent (Part II, *Pioneer* 1928, November 8:10). The protest caught on and those who continued the action elsewhere were said to have the 'Bardoli Spirit'. (*The Pioneer* 1929, 10 January: 3) In terms of the economic effects of such tactics, tax revenue figures for the period from 1921 to 1940 show a fall in land revenue from Rs 27m in 1921 to RS 23m in 1930, decreasing further by 1940 to Rs19m. Similarly, customs revenue fell from Rs 36m in 1930 to Rs 28m in 1940; and by 1946 salt tax had also declined to Rs 2m from Rs 5m in 1930 (Tomlinson, 1993:150).

The 42 (22 per cent of total) direct action articles during the period of our study are divided into 3 categories of women's participation: industrial strikes (50%); boycotts and hartals connected to the Simon Commission protests (17%), and open defiance linked to salt marches, land rent issues and foreign cloth burning (33%). The three most active peaks, July 1928, October 1928 and March 1929, are respectively linked to extensive coverage of women's involvement in mill strikes, Swaraj Day protests (10<sup>th</sup> March 1929) and the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements.

### *Simon Commission*

There was also much coverage in *The Pioneer* of the Simon Commission, that was discussing the future form of India's constitution, yet did not have a single

Indian member on its board. All over India Simon was greeted by a sea of black flags and mass civil disobedience. Gandhi led a massive demonstration and complete hartal – shut down of shops - in Bombay on the commission's arrival in that city on 3rd February 1928 (Forbes, 1993:147). Educated women spoke, led and participated in a series of protests against the Dominion Status proposed by the commission, arguing that it was an arrangement to ensure the continuation of British control. *The Pioneer* reports on these events total 17 per cent of women's direct action category.

In 'Another clash at Lucknow [Simon Commission and J Nehru injured]' the paper recorded 10,000 demonstrators who attended the procession. 'The boycotters on their part were busy making preparations from five in the morning. Pandits Jawaharlal Nehru and Pant, accompanied by the local leaders and Mrs Mittra, led a huge flag procession of 10,000 men with big posters and placards bearing the slogan 'Simon Go Back' and 'Down with Imperialism' ... and occupied a place nearest the Commission's route before seven o'clock.' ...[Police charged the crowd and beat them]... 'University students who were in the procession kept Pandit Jawaharlal and Mrs Mittra surrounded but Pandit Pant and other local leaders took their share of the beating' (*Pioneer* 1928 December 2: 13,1).

Two weeks later the paper reported that the Dowager Maharani of Mandi had led a deputation before the Simon Commission claiming a reservation of seats for women in the legislatures. The paper also noted what was called 'The Feminine Touch': Lady Simon taking on board the appeals of women to have

their concerns heard by the Commission (Feb.10<sup>th</sup>, 1929). Despite Lady Simon's categorical support for Indian women to take their part in (peaceful) public life (March 13<sup>th</sup>, p.13) , Annie Besant was ready to do battle with her husband in the pages of *The Pioneer* for interfering in the Viceroy's business, as reported in *New India* (29<sup>th</sup> Nov., p.7). She even followed up with the blunt comment 'He (Simon) knows nothing about India and Indian feelings.' He refuted this as 'fantastic nonsense' (Nov. 30<sup>th</sup> p.9). The row made good copy.

### *Women and Strikes*

From 1928 to 1930 stories about textile strikes (where women formed a significant part of the workforce) were prominent – they account for 50 per cent of the 22 per cent 'direct action' category. Whilst the paper deplored direct action and violence against the British political and economic infrastructure, it nevertheless reported accounts of women's attempts to improve their own wages upwards from Rs33 per month (*Pioneer*, 9th December 1928: 20, 4) and subsequent arrests.

'Bombay Strikes. Determined to hold out. [At Kemp & Company] about 300 employees, consisting of compounders, clerks, hamals, and women labourers suddenly struck this morning' (*Pioneer* 1928, 21 April: 1).

The strike escalated and the paper reported that 150,000 workers were on strike (*Pioneer* 24<sup>th</sup> April 1928). 'The Sweepers Strike in Calcutta' (June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1928, p4) resulted in the arrest for alleged 'riotous conduct' of Miss Prabhati Gas Gupta, President of the union; while some carters were removing refuse, they were attacked by the strikers who pelted stones at them. She was sent

before the magistrate but, as she was well educated and respectable, was bailed for Rs 300.

Equally intimidation of strike-breakers was commented on: 'FEAR OF WOMEN PICKETS. [sic] Bombay. No attempt was made today to open the mills and the women pickets, who were posted at the mill gate to deal with the blacklegs, had an easy time. /Clerks, oilmen, and other mechanics... hitherto abstained, fearing humiliating treatment at the hands of the pickets' (*Pioneer* 1928 July 4:9).

#### *Foreign cloth boycott and burning*

Women also sought to disrupt mill production by making their own cloth. Although women were active in both nationalist and labour movements, that occurred at the same time, the women involved were not necessarily pursuing the same goals : whereas trade union led strikes and picketing were for wage increases and labour rights, Gandhi's Door-to-Door campaign encouraged women to participate in a foreign cloth boycott in every village and town, to 'collect foreign cloth and deliver or receive orders for khadi. Foreign cloth should be burnt whenever possible' and they were told to 'picket shops selling such goods' [Ahmedabad] (*Pioneer* 1929 26 Jan: 15). It was important to undermine British cotton production and its infrastructure: 'The help of patriotic ladies should be enlisted to prosecute this boycott campaign' (ibid). Gandhi also encouraged Muslim women to renounce foreign cloth to 'save Islam' (Forbes, op.cit., p.125).

'Women's excesses at Jamshedpur . Chastisement with brooms. Vigorous picketing continues. They have engaged women pickets with brooms and buckets of dirty water, and posted them at all important points. The women are indulging in excesses, male picketers, mostly Punjabis, always being at hand to encourage and incite'. (*Pioneer* 1928 16 July: 9, 3)

Before Swaraj Day (10<sup>th</sup> March 1929) the paper covered an increasing amount of stories involving the public destruction of foreign fabric in major cities. On March 6<sup>th</sup> *The Pioneer* reported on its front page a huge foreign cloth bonfire held at Mirzapore Park in Calcutta the day before. It attracted a 'monster crowd' and Gandhi was arrested. Events on Swaraj Day itself were covered extensively in *The Pioneer*. 'India Celebrates Swaraj Day (New Delhi Mar 10). Huge Processions and Foreign Cloth Bonfires. Women in Procession. The Demonstrators held National flags and placards and sang national songs along the route. A feature of the demonstration was the presence of about 60 women who formed a part of the procession' (*Pioneer* 1929 Mar 13: 3, 1-3). When women participated in bonfires of cloth, they would automatically be reported in black type pull quotes as if their presence were so unusual a concept as to be highlighted for special attention.

The bonfires spread far and wide across many cities including Calcutta, Peshawar, Nagpur, Benares and Allahabad. On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1929 Annie Besant called for a complete boycott of British produced cloth- an about turn that provoked the wrath of editor FW Wilson: on 29<sup>th</sup> June he penned an editorial headed 'Mrs Besant's Foolish Speech'. It was a catch phrase that Wilson

hoped would stick, for he followed it with a further article on 8 July referring again to: 'The Central Committee and its Dissentions. Mrs Besant's foolish speech.'

Meanwhile in 1930, the Secretary of the UP Chamber of Commerce had already noted: 'The movement for boycott of foreign cloth, particularly British, is sweeping the country with an intensity and vigour that have never been known before. Importers and dealers of foreign cloth in all principal markets of the country are entering upon solemn undertakings to abandon trade in foreign cloth.' He added that this action 'is the outcome of their resentment against the economic and political policy of Government' (ed Mitra 1930; 423-424). The minutes of the United Provinces Chamber of Commerce recorded that British textile business had ground to a halt as a result of boycott (Ed. Mitra, 1930:423).

Reports of women's speech, protest and actions were set alongside contextual coverage of considerable trade difficulties especially cotton mills, facing stiff competition from China, US and Japan by February 1929. The cumulative effect of sustained strikes exacted its toll. Five years later Currimbhoy Ebrahim & Sons Mill, the second largest Anglo-Indian mill in Bombay and one of *The Pioneer's* most regular advertisers, was wound up. Its demise was reported on 18 January 1934 (page 4 col 3).

### ***Editorial dilemmas***

By reiterating accounts of riots, the paper had to be careful not to be seen to condone such behaviour. This editorial ambivalence was recognised by Wilson when he castigated other papers as hypocritical : 'Indian newspapers which violently proclaim the boycott of foreign goods and declare that the purchase of such goods is a heinous sin and will delay the progress of the nation to the haven of Swaraj [self-government], do not hesitate to sell their advertising space to dealers in foreign goods' (1928 *The Pioneer* April 28:12). How could *The Pioneer's* editor reconcile news values and liberalism with the obviously disastrous impact of strikes on the imperial economy? Anglo-Indian operations such as Elgin Mills, Currimbhoy and Cawnpore Cotton Mills had suffered during the Bombay Mill strikes in 1928 and their share prices were badly affected.

The effect of the strikes and cloth burnings on trade was also demonstrated by a correlation between the dates of highest protest activity and lowest production. Britain's import trade dropped from 63% to 48% of total in 1927, as reported in the *Pioneer* 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 1928 (12, 1-2), and this was directly linked to mill strikes and foreign cloth burnings. Concurrently, the Indian cotton spinning statistics charted the disastrous crash in national textile production rates for spun cloth in 1927 from nearly 70 million pounds (weight) to 61m (India Office Records 1928-1931). Regionally, Bombay mills suffered the worst fall from 43m in July 1927, plummeting to 14m in July 1928. United Province's production rates also fell from 6m to 4.6m in March 1928, with a further small decrease in March 1929. Three peaks of activity in July and October 1928 and March 1929, of foreign cloth burnings and Swaraj Day

protests coincided with the sharp fall in production rates. *The Pioneer* splashed on their front page: 'European's Suicide. Worry Over Mill Strike in Bombay. Worried into a fit of temporary insanity on account of the frequent labour troubles in Bombay, James Samuel Smith, a European, aged 53, Superintendent of the Weaving Department of the Currimbhoy Mills, committed suicide by cutting his throat with a knife' (*The Pioneer*, 1928, 22 Nov:1).

A fierce campaign of public foreign cloth burning on Swaraj Day (*The Pioneer* 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March 1929, pages 1 and 3) was followed in that same year by a sharp increase of advertising in *The Pioneer* by the cotton mill companies. Protests were also reported in Calcutta, Peshawar, Nagpur, Benares and New Delhi. Mill shares dropped sharply: Elgin Mills' share price fell from Rs10 to Rs3 in a week (*Pioneer* 1929, 4 May: 21). Extensive strike action severely affected production at the cotton mills. Jawaharlal Nehru urged the purchase of khadi only and not Swadeshi Mill cloth, produced by an Anglo-Indian owned mill. The Swadeshi mill owners in Allahabad had tried to make a product similar to khaddar but Nehru insisted on *homemade* khaddar to drive the owners out of business (*Pioneer* 1929, March 20:7). By appropriating the name 'swadeshi' [self-dependent] the mill owners hoped to present themselves as supporters of the Indian workforce, although this cloth was being made for export.

Meanwhile as Gandhi encouraged workers to be independent and to spin their own cloth on charkas, the impact of textile strikes was felt in the UK, and

British trade was affected. The paper rallied to boost interest in British goods. 'Foreign Cloth Boycott. 'The steady reduction in Great Britain's share in the import trade of India is causing serious concern and suggests that the British should make an especial study of bazaar demands with a view to the mass production of goods of low grades and should extensively seek to advertise' (*The Pioneer* 1928, 6<sup>th</sup> January :4).<sup>v</sup> The mill owners were slow to respond to this advice and placed a series of adverts in the paper only when they were in real trouble; these appeared regularly from March 1929 and on through to January 1934 and beyond, with 2 or 3 appearing in each day's edition. Most mills recovered by March 1932 due in part to the import of new machinery, enabling production to increase exponentially (Tomlinson, 1993:114; India Office V/14/284). Although the figures for March 1932 demonstrated a healthy recovery of 86m pounds of spun cloth, of which Bombay produced 49m and United Provinces 7m, the pressures were still immense.

Some mills did not survive – one of the largest, Currimbhoy Mills, the object of many strikes, went into receivership, as *The Pioneer* reported on January 18<sup>th</sup> 1934. As a newspaper business *The Pioneer* also experienced this economic flux. When Young took over as editor in 1933, he moved the paper to Lucknow, claiming that circulation was down to c. 5000 and that the Allahabad premises were decaying and decrepit, with snakes inside. Even Kipling's desk has been allowed to rot, but the librarian had made replicas to sell, and had stolen valuable books and papers. Re-financing started immediately after the princes had taken a lead (for the last time during British

rule) at the Round Table constitutional negotiations, by accepting a federation to reduce their dependence upon London. Young sought funding from business interests based in Cawnpore, and significantly, also from the princes as the main regional landowning interest. This coincided with the no-rent campaign that had been launched first in United Provinces. Significantly, there was no rent strike coverage in January 1934 editions of the paper, nor indeed any reporting of direct action.

## **Conclusion**

Events and activities provided news and this in turn enabled newspaper coverage that challenged existing assumptions about gender. *The Pioneer* showed a real sense of women's sorrows, aims, resolutions and triumphs. Although only receiving a small proportion of *The Pioneer*'s political coverage, female conviction shines through their actions, intelligent use of the newspaper medium, and in their language. Arguably even a short news report telling readers about an event where women were active, but without direct speech, nevertheless still gave those women a foothold (however tenuous) in the public sphere, by drawing their activities to the attention of readers and increasing their profile.

*The Pioneer*'s coverage of women's boycotts exposed a weakness in the paper's imperialistic armour. Traditional Western journalistic values of objectivity and a preference for 'bad news' dictated that direct action be covered, but the ethical dilemma for *The Pioneer* was where to draw a line between support for the women's democratic cause, and women's unseemly

behaviour in riots, boycotts, cloth-burning and strikes. Nehru's statement quoted earlier about women's organisational ability refers to 1930 when nationalist men were in prison but there is considerable evidence of female-led campaigning in advance of that date.

Women attracted journalistic attention to their social and political cause, some directly and others indirectly – for this was a period when the notion of female citizenship was in the process of being re-defined. Educated 'new women' were able to take advantage of *The Pioneer's* short-lived liberalism at a time when almost anything female provided newspaper content – including book reviews, such as 'Mr West's 'The Life of Annie Besant' ( 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1929, p.10).

The ongoing struggle by counter-hegemonic voices to achieve a public window in establishment communications challenged existing colonial assumptions about indigenous women, whilst simultaneously weakening the economic resolve of British business and administrative authority. In-depth study of the press can problematise otherwise clear-cut post colonial philosophies. It is clear that newspapers needed to obey the triple responsibility of embracing news values, reflecting ideological change and conveying political pressure, and that as enterprises they are often not run primarily to maximise profits. Although newspaper fortunes do not always follow mainstream business cycles, in the process of conducting their everyday work, colonial organs such as *The Pioneer* became part of the economic and ideological maelstrom that they were reporting on. In depth study of this process can tell scholars a lot about how easy, or difficult it was

to get ideas and information disseminated. In this case the nationalist movement's limited counter hegemonic window also demonstrated the Congress Party – and their women's - organisational capabilities as a ruling party.

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<sup>i</sup> In his book *The Indian Chaos* (1932) Wilson describes the country as effectively being a police state. For the context of press censorship and issues of press freedom see Barrier 1974 ; Jones 1983

<sup>ii</sup> On the pioneering influence of Annie Besant, see ed. Cousins, 1947.

<sup>iii</sup> The Maharani continues her article citing literacy statistics. 'In the whole of India, we see that where there are 139 literate men to a thousand, there are only 21 literate women to a thousand.'

<sup>iv</sup> The 1921 Bardoli satyagraha was a protest against a 30% tax rise on the Bombay Presidency's levy. After disastrous famines and floods affected farmers' crops and income that year, the Gujarat taluka (subdivision of a district) rebelled against the Presidency's refusal to waive the extra payment on compassionate grounds.

<sup>v</sup> *The Pioneer* March 13 1929:9 sported a photograph of Empire Marketing Board's Appeal Poster in a British factory exhorting them to 'BUY INDIAN'.