

## CHAPTER – III

### HISTORY OF THE PRESS IN ASSAM

‘History of the Press in Assam’ is the third chapter of this research work. This chapter is an attempt to discuss in brief about journalism in India. The chapter then proceeds to explore the changes in journalism of Assam over time in its historical, cultural, developmental and professional context.

#### 3.1. PRESS IN INDIA

In ancient India news was given in inscription on walls of temples and on copper plates and through victory coins and writings on rocks. There were government officials who use to beat the drum and gathered the populace and announced the policies and decisions of the king or government. The king who met his ministers and commander-in-chief daily at a ‘*darbar*’ gathered news of what was happening in his kingdom and abroad from his counselors who were expected to be fully informed of events and public opinion. According to the tradition the very first question the king asked to his prime minister at the ‘*darbar*’ was “well, Prime Minister what is the news today?” Indeed, news was communicated at that time by words of mouth. Kings and noblemen had their own sources of news. Wandering minstrels acting as a ‘correspondents’ moved from one royal court to another, picking up news of battles won or lost. They gathered useful information for courtiers and merchants. They also embroidered their news to make a good story as the reporters of today do.

In India newsletters containing general information of the royal court or extraordinary events from the provinces were in circulation during the Moghul Rule. But this was not for general people. It was available only to a group of nobles. Christian Missionaries brought the printing process to India in the 16th century. The British also brought printing press India augmenting the efforts of the Missionaries. Initially, the pioneers of journalism in India were English men. In India the first newspaper in the modern sense was the *Bengal Gazette* or *Calcutta General Advertiser* which made its appearance on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1780. It was edited and published by James Augustus Hickey. It was a weekly newspaper well-known as *Hickey's Gazette*. The paper was exclusively meant for the Britishers as a result the Indian community was unable to

join. By the passage of 38 years an Indian language newspaper was published by an Indian, Ganga Kishor Battacharjee. He is the first Indian to bring out a newspaper; perhaps he is called the 'Papa of the Indian Press'. The weekly paper known as the *Bengal Gazette* was published sometime, between May 12 and May 18 in 1818 A.D (Ghosh, 1991).

During the Period from 1818 A.D to 1857 A.D, there was rapid growth of Vernacular press in Bengal. Apart from the newspapers and periodicals owned by the European missionaries, leading Bengalis also came forward to edit papers of their own. Indian-owned English newspapers and periodicals also emerged in other parts of India apart from Bengal. The Bengali press had a head start and attained maturity faster than the language press in other parts of India. But during 1818 A.D to 1857 A.D, there was also a growth of various Indian language papers. This was facilitated by the efforts of Christian missionaries as well as the Indian reformers. And finally politically consciousness had already struck roots in India before 1857 A.D and one of the striking trends of the Indian awakening was the growth of political movement. Leading to broader nationalist movement in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rapid growth of the press and the growth of political consciousness were inter-linked (Neogi, 1977).

The exploitive nature of the British rule was thoroughly exposed; protesting voices raised against the repressive measures of the Government and nationalist ideas were spread among the educated Indians. The role of press in India's struggle for Independence was even more glorious and active in next ninety years. Between 1818 A.D and 1857 A.D, there appeared many dailies, weeklies, bi-weeklies and monthlies which were published from Bengal. The Bengali papers included *Sambad Kumudi*, *Samachar Chandrika*, *Sambad Prabhakar*, *Jnananvesan*, etc. The first Hindi weekly *Oodunta Martand* (1826) and first Hindi daily, *Samachar Sudha Varshan* (1854), appeared from Calcutta. The first English Journal *Satyadoota* was published from Bellary in 1836 A.D by the missionaries. The first Oriya paper *Jnanaruna* came out in 1849 A.D. The first Tamil paper was *Tamil Magazin* which appeared in 1832 A.D. The first Kannada paper *Karmada Samacher* appeared in 1832. The Malayalam newspaper *Vignayana Nikshepam* appeared in 1840. The Marathi newspaper made its

appearance in 1822 followed by so many Gujarati papers like *Bombay Darpan*, *Prabakar*, *Vartaman Dipika*, etc. (Neogi 1997) It is to be noted that most of the ventures were patronized by the Christian missionaries (Ahuja, 1998).

The pioneers of the Indian language journalism were the Serampur Missionaries started a journal *Samachar Darpan* in June 1818 A.D. The famous Raja Ram Mohan Roy also brought out periodicals in English, Bengali and Persian. Some of Roy's papers were *Sambad Kaumadi*, *Brahmical Magazine*, *Mirat-ul-Akhbar*, *Bangadoota and Bengal Herald* (Kumar, 1981).

The phase of the period of 1868-1919 witnessed the rise of Indian press as part of the nationalist or anti-imperialist struggle and the manifestation of two tendencies in the press. The one is the support to the colonial Raj and its policies; the other is a line of criticism and opposition. This stage sees major technological developments such as the opening of the telegraph line (1851) in Calcutta, the appearance of the railway and the completion of the land telegraph line from England to India. During this phase, Indian press comes into its own. Some notable events in this respect are the founding of the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* (1868) and the *Hindu* (1876) with the pro-raj newspapers. *The Statesman*, also appeared in 1875. The founding of the Indian National Congress under the leadership of an English man A. O. Hume in 1885 reminds us that the history of the patriotic Indian press pre-dates the history of Indian party politics. This period witnesses the 'Sedition' trials of Tilak (1897 and 1908), the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India (1915) and the struggle against the Rowlett Act and against uncivilized colonial repression. Tilak and Gandhi, themselves journalists, wielded a major influence on the field. The Jalianwala Bagh massacre closes this stage, with the press divided sharply into that section which condemns the crime and outrage, and the opposition camp which defends or provides apologies for (Bhatt, 1997).

During the phase of 1919-1937 the Indian press sees the differentiation into 'moderate' and 'radical' tendencies in relation to the strategy and tactics of the freedom movement. The struggle between the nationalist and pro-British press continues. The 'Sedition' trials of Gandhi in 1922 witnesses a heroic response. In Britain, the first Labour Government is formed and new attitudes to the Indian questions were shaped and expressed. In India, nationalist newspaper such as *The*

*Hindustan Times* and *The Indian Express* were established while those already established make impressive progress in their reach and influence. The struggle for the freedom of the press and for wider civil liberties acquired a full voice.

Next the phase of the period 1937- 1947 sees the maturing and assertive tendencies in the press along with significant professional developments such as the news service, the pooling of arrangements and the expanded coverage of foreign news.

In pre-Independence era, the Indian language journalism took its birth with the experience of English journalism behind it. Raja Ram Mohan Roy who is the founder and father of Indian language journalism. As a fighter for the rights of women, a social reformer with refined standards and as the founder of Brahma Samaj he will be remembered for all times to come in the pages of Indian history.

On November 1, 1858, Queen Victoria took charge of the administration of India. To maintain a better relationship between the press and the Government, Lord Canning, who continued to be the British representative in India, established the 'Editors Room' where the journalists had an access to come and examine the Government papers relating to public interest. From 1858 A.D onwards, the sale of both English and Indian newspaper went up. The Indian language newspapers were vehement and strong in their criticisms of Governments policies and actions. The Vernacular Press Act IX of 1878 became law in March 1878 and the language press all over the India was muzzled (Basu, 1979). This act was great blow to the freedom of the press in India, which caused the language newspapers to suffer drastically.

*The Hindu*, an English newspaper, was started as a weekly on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1876 from Madras. It was converted into a tri-weekly in 1883 to create a political awareness among the people (Padhya, 1997). The birth of the Indian National Congress heralded a new era in the history of Indian journalism. Towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time, a conference of editors and journalists was held in Calcutta. In 1891, 'The Native Press Association' was founded with an objective to improve the tone on native press (Padhya, 1997).

During the First World War, Indian press whole heartedly supported the cause of the Allied Powers and lent a helping hand to Great Britain. In return the Indians wanted

the freedom and independence. A new national group called the Home Rule League inspired and encouraged by Anne Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak emerged on the Indian political scene. Annie Besant and Tilak both were genius journalists of high reputation. Mahatma Gandhi after returning to India from South Africa in 1915 took the charge of Indian freedom movement. He was not new to journalism. He published a newspaper called *Indian Opinion*. He acquired an English and Gujarat weekly to spread his ideas. He took over *Young India* in 1919 from Jamunadas, Dwarkadas of Bombay and also started a Gujarati weekly, *Navajivan* (Partha Sarthy, 1991). Articles written by Gandhiji covered most crucial issues like Hindu-Muslim unity, abolitions of liquor and wine, promotion of khadi and village industry, removal of untouchabilities, etc. (Moitra, 1969).

During the struggle for Independence, the need of national language daily was very much felt by the leaders for propagating the view of the Indian National Congress. So, on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1920, the *Aaj* was born. Started by Shiv Prasad Gupta, it was a nationalist independent paper and whole heartedly supported the views of the Congress. It is to be mentioned that the newspapers' freedom was curbed by a number of press acts and ordinances. As a result, most of them suffered in terms of publication and circulation. Many nationalist newspapers which were publishing nationalist views suffered a lot and stopped publication (Padhya 1997).

The year 1947 brought Independence to India and it heralded a new era in the history of Indian press. It witnessed not only the opening of a new chapter in its history but also saw the emergence of press with a role to play with much vigour and energy. Before Independence the role was to support the cause of national Independence. But after the Independence its role has become much more difficult and significant as it has to address itself to the task of national development and nation-building. It acquired a new dimension in both make-up and content. The scenario has completely changed in respect of publication and circulation (Natrajan, 1962).

A press commission was appointed in September 1952 under the chairmanship of Justice Rajadhyaksha. The commission submitted its report in 1954 recommending the establishment of press council. The press council was established by an act of parliament in 1965. Its first president was Justice N. Rajagopal Iyengar. The Press

Council Act was repealed in January 1976 during the Emergency and the council was re-established under the Press Council Act of 1978 (Pandey, 1999).

The second press commission was set up in May 1978 under the chairmanship of Justice P.K. Goswami. The commission was reconstituted in April 1980 under chairmanship of Justice K.K. Mathew.

The declaration of emergency in June 1975 by the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came as a shocking blow to the Indian press which was its greatest victim. The Government suppressed transmission of news from one place to another by imposing censorship on newspapers. The underground newspapers were however active. More than 30 presses were seized and over 7000 people were arrested in connection with the publication and circulation of underground literature (Kumar, 1981). However, all the restrictions were removed by the Janata Government which came to power in 1977 and Indian press once again breathed freedom.

The evolution of the Indian press from the obscure beginning in East India Company up to present time has striking features of its own. Equally significant has been the development of the press on the technical side. When country attained Independence, the days of professional and with a missionary ardour gradually reduced. The character of newspaper ownership changed fast. The newspaper proprietors evinced keenness in building up commercial position. As a result group newspaper, chain publication and trust publication emerged with a new control of newspaper readership (Kumar, 1998).

In the post-Independence period, to cope up with increased circulation it was found necessary to become self-sufficient in the matter of paper. This was done by starting factories in India. Newsprint shortage gave an impetus to new industry to manufacture newsprint in India. The Nepa mills at Neapanagar near Nagpur started production in 1956 with a production capacity of 120 tons per day (Murthy, 1966). With the phenomenal rise in circulation advertisement revenue multiplied. The high profits enabled many papers to build up large resources which were used for expanding and modernizing their technical equipment. Latest machineries were placed and with their installation, a striking improvement in the quality of Indian newspaper production

took place. As Dr. Nadig Krishna Murthi observed, “*Gradually the newspaper curved for more effective professional techniques and conveniences. Provision was made for better opportunities for special correspondence at home and abroad*”. Feature writing which was hardly an activity of Indian journalism got an impetus. Encouragement was given personalized columns. This helped columnist to shine and the time was ripe for individual triumphs. Eminent journalists like B. Shiva Rao, Pothan Joseph, Durga Das, N. Raghunath Iyer, Khasa Subba Rao, M. Chalapathi Rau, S. Gopal Swami, Krishnalal Sridharini, H .Vankatasubbiah and Frank Moraes achieved destination in various ways in the Indian newspaper world with their sparkling bi-lined columns. Besides the columnist writing in English, there were numerous other equally famous columnists in almost all the Indian language newspapers who popularized columns through their facile pen. Journalistic rank expanded itself and administrative improvements were also effective inside. The newspapers became better organized and were now systematically managed (Murthy, 1966: pp. 115-116).

The most remarkable development after Independence was the formation of the Press Trust of India (PTI) in 1949. The PTI is still the biggest nationwide newspaper agency. The PTI has longest teleprinter link in India and is one of the biggest news agencies in Asia. The PTI was founded with a view to raise the status of the members of profession of journalism and to maintain the highest standard of professional contact. Another significant development was formation of Audit Bureau of Circulation in 1980 to guarantee the circulation of each of its member publications. The certificate regarding circulation issued by ABC is accepted at face value all over the world.

Thus, generally speaking at present journalism is flourishing in India. The English newspapers are overtaken by Indian language newspapers in number and circulation. Despite the fact that less than 5 percent of the population of India claim English as their mother tongue the English newspapers have enjoyed the highest circulation till the 1990’s. As Hindi is the national language of India and where the main language of 10 Indian states- Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Haryana, HimachalPradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh is Hindi. Today Hindi newspapers have the largest total circulation in India.

The media in India represents a confluence of paradoxes: anarchy and order; tradition and modernity; diversity and unity; feudalism and democracy; conflict and cooperation; news and views; the free market and monopoly. India's complex cultural mosaic, especially linguistic and communal, strengthens its diversity. Economic realities and relationships between press, television and those who own these engines of control and change will eventually determine the future of India's communication culture. The press and media continue to play a dominant role in deconstructing the diversity discourse that sometimes flares up in explosive situations. Presently, India is rapidly approaching the UNESCO norms of ten newspaper copies for 100 persons for developing countries. At present there are more than eight copies per 100 persons. (Bhatt,1997).

### **3.2. ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE PRESS IN ASSAM**

The history of the press in Assam forms a fascinating study. The history of the printing press in Assam is only ten years older than the history of Assamese journalism. The first printing press in Assam was brought by an American Baptist Missionary in Sibsagar in 1836. He published a series of brochures informing the public about the merits of Christianity and glorifying the biblical stories (Murthy 1966: p. 284). Its motto was to propagate Christian religion. The first Assamese periodical *Orunodoi* (Dawn) made its appearance in 1846. The main purpose to start the journal was to spread Christianity in this region. Oliver T. Cutter an American missionary was the first editor of this journal. Rev. Garney was the editor when *Orunodoi* ceased publication in 1882 as the press had been sold to Assam Company of Najira. This journal played a memorable part in shaping modern Assamese literature and enjoyed a long lease of life serving regularly for over 36 years. Many renowned writers of Assam like Gunaabhiram Barooah, Hem Chandra Barua, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Ananadram Dekhial Phookan contributed articles to this first Assamese newspaper.

In 1871, the second Assamese newspaper *Assam Bilashini* appeared from Dharma Prakash Press with Sri Sri Dutta Deva Goswami as its publisher and editor. Between the years 1871, the year of publication of the *Assam Bilashini*, light newspapers and magazines were published in Assam. These years saw the beginning of a new era of



Assamese literature. But all of these newspapers and magazines did not exist longer. (Baruah,1999). After 12 years of publication *Assam Bilashini* ceased its publication in 1883. After that Krishna Kumar Bhattacharya revived it in 1913 as a weekly from Jorhat which includes write-ups in English.

During the period (1872-1873) *Assam Mihir* appeared as the first Assamese weekly newspaper which was published from Guwahati of Kamrup district. Later, an English section was added to it which unfortunately survived for one year. By the time after the laps of about ten years of the publication of *Assam Mihir*, *Assam News*, an Anglo Assamese weekly newspaper was published from Guwahati in 1882, which actually opened the era of modern Assamese journalism in the state. However, the first daily newspaper of Assam was *Batori*. It was founded as a weekly in 1929 and in 1935 it became a daily and came to be known as *Dainik Batori*.

In the light of the short-lived nature of Assamese papers and journals in the period of our review, it may be observed that the early English press in Assam has set a good example in the journalism of the state with its rich heritage. *The Times of Assam* (1895-1940), the oldest English weekly newspaper in the state enjoyed the longest period of circulation for nearly forty-five years.

During (1935-1940), many weekly newspapers appeared in Assam which were short-lived but have played their respective part in the progress of Assamese journalism. The *Dainik Asamiya* that started in 1946 was the second daily newspaper in Assamese. Many newspapers in Assamese language were published but they have all ceased to appear. Journalism in Assamese language has not developed for want of literacy and financial support. But now Assamese people have begun to take great interest in their language and they are now feeling the importance of newspaper in Assamese language too.

It is an acknowledgement fact that Bengali language and culture played a dominant role in the affairs of Assam for a good part of the nineteenth century. The Indian press, by and large, was the by-product of British rule and it appeared first in the form of the Bengal press. Obviously, enlightened sections of the Assamese opted for taking advantages from the Bengal press. Later on, indigenous efforts received a great flip

when Assamese was restoring to its rightful place. Since the days of *Samachar Darpan* wide circulation of Bengali papers in Assam put some hurdles in the natural growth of press in Assam. The competition of Calcutta papers very much determined the future of the Assamese papers in the Brahmaputra Valley, not only in the early period, but even in later stage of the development of the press in Assam. At the same time lack of literary contribution from the educated sections of the people was another important factor for cessation of Assamese journals and papers at the premature stage. Naturally, it hampered the growth to a great extent.

Until 1979, the editor and the reporter used to treat journalism as an instrument of social change and thus, the newspapers and magazines in Assam were mainly focused on social themes. But the student agitation of the 1980s changed the face and picture of journalism. Print journalism became more aggressive and started concentrating on investigative reporting. Amidst all the turmoil and social chaos, the local media emerged.

Recently many newspapers and periodicals are published from Assam in different languages. Among the English dailies- *The Sentinel*, *The Assam Tribune*, *The NorthEast Times* and *The Eastern Chronicle* are the few which are very popular and have multiple editions. Among the prominent Assamese dailies *Dainik Janambhumi*, *Dainik Agradoot*, *Dainik Batori*, *Dainik Janasadharan*, *Dainik Asom*, *Asomiya Khabar*, *Asomiya Pratidin*, *Amar Asom*, *Aji Edinor*, *Sangbad* have more than one edition to fulfill the readers demand in the nook and corner of Assam. *Dainik Jugashankha*, *Samayik Prasanga*, *Dainik Samay Prabha*, *Prantojyoti Dainik*, *Dainik Janakantha* is some of the prominent Bengali dailies. *Purbanchal Parahari*, *Dainik Puvoday*, *Pratah Khobar*, *Sentinel* is among the few Hindi dailies widely circulated in Assam.

The Guwahati city alone witnesses to published more than 20 morning dailies; half of this comprises the Assamese language. Most of the dailies have more than one centre, whereas hardly three Assamese daily newspapers claim to enjoy around 1, 00,000 circulations. National newspapers such as *The Hindustan Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times of India* made their entry to the North-East market with the launch of its

Guwahati editions but unfortunately, in the subsequent year due to some reason *The Hindustan Times* ceased its publication.

According to Guwahati Press Club estimates, Guwahati city alone consists near about 500 working journalists among which most of them are associated with the Press Club (Thakuria Nava, President, Guwahati Press Club).

Recently, four satellite Television news channels- *New Live*, *News Time*, *DY 365* and *NE TV* have flourished from the city of Guwahati, and a more including *Frontier TV* are in the process of being launched adding, more than 100 working journalists to the team of the sentinels.

Thus, in about 26 million of population both the print and electronic media have created 8,000 direct jobs, and provided 20, 000 indirect employments throughout the state.

Overall like the Indian Press, the press in Assam, has its original roots in the missionary efforts. Through the sources of origin in both the cases are extraneous, the press in India was initiated by the missionaries and was brought up systematically by the British for their administrative needs whereas in Assam the press emerged and developed through the Assamese language and literature. Administrative machinery came up to use it at a later stage. Thus, with the passage of time the Assamese press took off and gained a self-reliant status. At present, the Assamese press has got a status which is well recognized in India.