CHAPTER VI

PRESS BEFORE AND AFTER EMERGENCY.

The periods immediately preceding the declaration of emergency on June, 1975 and after the declaration of Lok Sabha elections in 1977 are very important for the study of the role of Press in Assam. Many events took place during this periods under study. It is impossible to take all the events for consideration. So only very important national events like J.P.'s movement in Bihar in 1974, the Allahabad Judgment of 1975 and pre-election scene after the lifting of censorship of 1977 are taken for the study in this Chapter. The period of emergency is deliberately excluded from the study since the newspapers were under the strict censorship imposed by the Government.

The year 1974 was a year of dissent and questioning. Many events contributed towards making the year 1974 a remarkable one in the Indian history. These are : dissolution of Gujarat Assembly, import licence scandal and Sarvodaya leader, Jayprakash Narayan's movement in Bihar. Initially J.P.'s movement was not an anti-congress or anti-Indira Gandhi crusade. His
movement was against the menace of corruption, unprecedented price rise, and for an immediate electoral reforms and change in the system of education. Although these were frequently talked about by the Opposition in Parliament, but Swarodaya leader gave them a new dimension and relevance. It was because of a man like Jayprakash Narayan, whose "credibility with the people ranked higher than the sum of all Opposition parties together" (Statesman, November 29, 1974), the Bihar movement received a countrywide significance. He gave the people a new mood of dissent in Parliamentary democracy.

The prevailing socio-economic conditions in India were the main factors which fuelled the J. R. movement in Bihar. There was an economic crisis all over India. The situation in Bihar was worse than in the other States in India. Even after 25 years of independence people in the village have been living at the proverbial "Rip Van Winkle" stage with all the traditional way of life completely divorced from the modern way of living. There was no proper co-ordination between the Society and the State or Government. The Statesman of November 29, 1974 wrote:
"The countryside in Bihar shows more sharply than the towns the great gap between the society and the State. The two are unintergrated."

But the people's upsurge that swept the State gradually permeated into the countryside also. The Indian Express, April 26, 1974 reported:

"As the Ghafoor Ministry is struggling to take a final shape to be able to meet the situation arising from the students' agitation, . . . . . . procession of men, women and children passed through different parts of the city demanding dissolution of the Assembly and expressing support for the agitation against high prices, corruption and unemployment. Procession by advocates, teachers, students and others were reported from districts."

To meet such an explosive situation the Government of Bihar left no stone unturned including the delisting of two dailies of Patna - The Pratibha and Pandem - which were very critical of the Ghafoor Ministry."
Against this backdrop of the Bihar scene, it will be interesting to study how the newspapers of Assam covered the J.P. Movement with reference to the problems of Assam since Assam too was not immune from the disease of price hike, corruption, old education system and electoral defects. Her people have been equally affected by the problem of unemployment because of lack of industrial development during the 25 years of Congress rule.

Before analysing the news coverage and editorial comments on the movement in Bihar certain factors should be emphasised: On March, 1974 Sri Jayprakash Narayan started his movement in Bihar which reached its climax in the month of November in the same year and received a nationwide significance. It was an event of much importance to all Indians and all the States of India. It was a crusade against corruption and it was really the corruption which fuelled the agitation in Bihar. J.P. has been a non-political leader and his movement was a movement for reforms rather than for any political gain. The wave of the movement had the chance of percolating into other States suffering from the same disease of corruption. There was no Press censorship, so the Press was free to write or comment.
These factors will have to be considered, therefore, in analysing both news coverage and editorial comments. The questions which have to be asked are: What was the view of the newspapers on rampant corruption that prevailed at official or Ministerial level? Were the newspapers bold enough to expose corrupt practices? Could the paper foresee any alternative rule or change of party Ministry? What was the role of the Press in bringing about the electoral reforms to curb corrupt practices?

On November 3, 1974, a day before the 'Patna Bundh' call given by Jayprakash Narayan, The Dainik Assam, the largest circulated Assamese daily, expressed its concern for the "Uneasy tension in Bihar". It advised both the parties - Government and the Organisers of the 'Bundh Call' to avoid such a "face to face Confrontation" in the interest of the people and State of Bihar. On November 3, 1974, Dainik Assam in its editorial said:

"In view of the present economic crisis particularly the drought conditions which has already weakened the State of Bihar, it would be better to avoid such a great face to face confrontation."
The Dainik Agra realised that Sri Jayprakash Narayan was a force and his movement had the popular support. So it cautioned the Government that "trial of strength" would 'intensify' the movement only. On November 6, 1974, Dainik Agra in its editorial wrote:

"The speed of the 8 months old Bihar Movement led by Jayprakash Narayan remains unabated. The movement cannot be stopped by dubbing it as "reactionary" and bringing Sarvedaya leader into contempt. Even the use of Police force cannot put down the movement ....... if this present trial of strength continues, the problem will be complicated. The government should realise it."

But the paper was not in favour of "dismissal of elected representatives". It wrote on November 13:

"We should try to strengthen whatever principles of democracy have been built up in India. Our national leaders should not forget it."

On November 28, it admitted that the movement had yielded some results. It wrote: "It is true that J.P. movement compels the Government of Bihar to undertake some reform measures but at the same time it cannot overthrow the Government of Bihar."
It also expressed doubt that the movement might take a turn to satisfy the "narrow political ends" and the "interest of the common people" might be jeopardised.

On November 6, 1974, an Assamese Weekly "Natu Amomiya" published from Gauhati said that J.P.'s movement had turned into a 'People's movement'. It said: "The successful gheras of the Assembly Secretariat and M.L.A.s amply proves that Jayprakash Narayan's movement for reforms has turned into a people's movement. While taking all measures to throttle the gheras programme, the Government has virtually gherased themselves and by doing so the Government has indirectly acknowledged the success of the J.P. movement...

..... This proves that the J.P. Movement which has turned into a people's movement can be compared with the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi during the British Rule in India".

The popularity of this movement had also been compared with that of Mahatma Gandhi's movement against the British rule in India. On November 17, it came out with another editorial urging upon the Government to come to a compromise with J.P. and criticised the Govt. for use of lathi and bullet on the peaceful procession. It also extended its full support to the J.P. movement and vehemently condemned the 'brutal attack' on Jayprakash Narayan. It said:

"...

..."
"Jayprakash's movement is not conducted without any reasons. Instead of coming to a compromise with J.P. both the centre and the State Government under Mrs. Gandhi's direction took people's movement as an 'attack' on them. By launching a 'counter attack' on J.P., they have greatly increased the miseries of the people. It is well known that the Ministry of Bihar is the most corrupted Ministry in India. What is condemnable is the Government's use of force and bullet on the peaceful people's movement and even the most respected old leader like Jayprakash Narayan was not exempted from such a brutal attack."

On November 27, 'Nawam Amarniya' in two and a half column editorial again lashed at the Government and the Congress leaders for attacking J.P. personally and giving a distorted version of his movement. "Neither Jayprakash Narayan nor his movement is the enemy of the nation". It said: "The "Corruption and the lust for power" among the high officials and Ministers were the main causes for the sad state of affairs in the country. In another lengthy editorial on November 29, it predicted that the Centre might stifle the 'most corrupted Bihar Ministry' for fear that the movement may spread to other States."
The 'Santantara', another Assamese Weekly published from Nongpoh, went a step further. It did not only lend an unqualified support to the J.P. movement but also threw a bait before the youth of Assam. On November 6, 1974, it said:

"A good number of leaders have been preparing for such a movement in Assam, it is learnt. Such a movement will surely depend upon the people's support. We call upon the youth of Assam to make the movement a success."

Again on November 20, it lashed at the Congress President, Sri Deb Kanta Baruah. "Under the guise of Save democracy slogan", it said "the Congress is doing the election campaign."

The Janshakti, the oldest Assamese Weekly published from Jorhat, extended a moral advice to the Congress. It said that Congress should "win the heart of the people" to counteract the J.P. movement. On November 20, it wrote:

"The only way to counteract the J.P. movement is to win the heart of people of every hamlet of Bihar. The numerical strength of people joined in the procession is not the real index of mind against the J.P. movement. Since the number of people in the procession can be increased by various dishonest means."

With an ironical caption, 'save Congress', 'Mahajati', an Assamese Weekly from Tezpur, wrote in its editorial on November 17, that in the name of the 'Save democracy' there were processions on 11 and 13 November in Patna only to 'Save CPI' and 'Save Congress'. It further said that a huge amount was spent under the Centre's direction in this programme of so-called 'Save democracy'. The paper supported the J.P. movement in Bihar.

The day after the Patna Bundh, i.e., on November 5, 1974, the Assam Tribune, the premier English daily, in a news item with three columns headline in the front page said: "J.P. lathi - charged" and again on November 6 it published a news item in the front page with two columns headline which read as "Patna Bundh passes off peacefully". Till November 7, the paper did not comment anything on 'Patna Bundh' in its editorial.

But on November 8, the paper came out with an editorial on 'Patna Bundh' which was captioned "Living with J.P." The editorial said that the 'Patna Bundh' was marked by violence and "Living with J.P. and agitation had many disadvantages". The editorial begun with a
"The incidents of removal of railway tracks, cutting tele-communication links, looting of goods, attacks on a Railway station and some Rajya Transport buses that marked the Wednesday's Bihar Bundh should make J.P. ponder over what his present movement is likely to lead to."

It concluded with:

"The people of Bihar must have also felt that living with J.P. and agitation has many disadvantages. It is, therefore, this time serious thought was given to coming to an understanding with give and take on both sides."

But later the *Assam Tribune* changed its attitudes and admitted that J.P. was a force and his movement was a real challenge to Mrs. Gandhi's leadership. It did not subscribe to the views of the Congress leaders that J.P. movement was a threat to democracy. It said on November 20, 1974:

"....... J.P. movement launched by S.P. Narayan is a serious challenge to Mrs. Gandhi's leadership but to say that it is also a threat to democracy is hardly convincing."

Again, on November 20 it said:

"Political movement launched by J.P. posed a serious threat to the Congress though the
latter is trying to meet the challenge through its counter-offensive. Undoubtedly it is a great problem that the Congress has seldom faced after independence.

So it appears that the *Assam Tribune* had frequently changed its attitude towards the J.P. movement and its editorials were marred by inconsistency.

However, it has been found that the newspapers in Assam accepted the fact that the J.P. movement in Bihar was really a movement to be reckoned with although they did not support the demand for the dissolution of the Bihar Assembly. They observed that the J.P. movement was a "challenge to the Congress party and the Government". But many of them did not subscribe to the views of the Congress leaders that the movement in Bihar was a "threat" to the democracy.

Some of the newspapers particularly small papers with poor circulation boldly termed the J.P. movement as a "People's movement". These papers were more critical of the Congress leaders than the big papers. They made no hesitation in making the Government and the Congress responsible for the rampant corruption in the country. What was more interesting was that few small papers welcomed the Bihar-type movement in Assam.
The Allahabad Judgement.

In the history of the Congress rule the Allahabad Judgement of June, 1975 was another landmark which paved the way for the rule of the Janata Government in the Centre and some States of India. It is important to study the reactions of the newspapers of Assam on the Judgement which had unseated Mrs. Indira Gandhi who had been the Prime Minister of India for more than a decade.

On June 13, 1975, the day after the Allahabad Judgement, the Dainik Azam, which expressed "surprise" at the judgement, came out with a novel advice to the Congress to dissipate the doubts that existed in the minds of people about the corrupt practice in elections which proved true in Mrs. Gandhi's case. The paper feared that the demand for the change in the election regulations would be intensified by the Opposition. However, the paper believed that the truth of the allegation would be known only after the verdict of the Supreme Court. The paper was not in favour of Mrs. Gandhi's resignation on the basis of the Allahabad Judgement.

On June 18, 1975, it said that the J.P. movement would not be able to provide a "third alternative to the people" as the opposition parties would never give up their separate identity. Referring to the Congress rally of June 26 in New Delhi in support of Mrs. Gandhi, the
Dainik Assam in its editorial on June 22 criticised the Congress leaders for their disrespects to the law and court. The paper was very critical of the Congress President, Deb Kanta Barooah for his statement "Indira is India" which made him, according to the paper, "a laughing stock" before the public.

For Nauta Assam, the Allahabad judgment was an opportunity to lash at Mrs. Indira Gandhi. According to the paper there were widespread corruption during Mrs. Gandhi’s regime and Mrs. Gandhi herself gave indulgence to corruption in many ways. On June 13, 1975, in a two column editorial it said:

"During Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s rule there have been widespread corruption in many fields and Mrs. Gandhi herself has given indulgence to corruption . . . . Although she has sometimes shown eagerness to remove corruption but in most cases she has remained indifferent."

It indirectly insisted on Mrs. Gandhi’s resignation:

"Not to speak of the Opposition leader, even one of her own party’s important leader and her Cabinet’s ex-Minister Sri Mohan Dharla himself said that she should resign."
Again on June 15, 1976, *Nagar Assaaniya* in a two
column editorial harped on Mrs. Gandhi's resignation.
The paper said that it would be better if Mrs. Gandhi
resigned forthwith.

Like *Nagar Assaaniya*, the *Gantautra* also repeatedly
demanded the resignation of Mrs. Gandhi after
the Allahabad Judgment on its June 18 and 25 issues. This
weekly said that it was wrong to presume that the congress
party would cease to be a powerful political party if
Mrs. Gandhi resigned.

Curiously enough, *The Himalachal*, another weekly, avoided
serious comment on the judgment. However, it observed that
Justice Singh's verdict was not the final one and Mrs. Gandhi
had the right to appeal to the Supreme Court.

The *Kahajati* expressed the same opinion. After
demanding Mrs. Gandhi's resignation it said on June 29, 1976
that "no leader was above the people in any democratic
country". *Alok*, another weekly, demanded the resignation
of Mrs. Gandhi.

On the other hand, the observations of *Assam Bost*
were to a great extent similar to those of *Hailak Assa*,
*Himalachal* and *Janakhand*. On June 29, it asserted that
there should not be any demand insisting on the resignation
of Mrs. Gandhi since she had the right to appeal to the
The *Assam Tribune* at the outset did not endorse the Opposition parties' demand for resignation of Mrs. Gandhi following the Allahabad judgment. It said that Mrs. Gandhi could continue as Prime Minister till the final verdict of the Supreme Court where Mrs. Gandhi had filed an appeal. In support of its contention, it placed reliance on the views of the World Press. On June 20, 1975, it observed:

"It is incidentally relevant to find that the reaction of the World Press by and large has contrary to expectation been quite sympathetic to Shrimati Gandhi, in fact, the World Press has found no valid reason for Shrimati Gandhi to step down."

But the paper did not extend its support to the 'stage-managed' Congress rally in New Delhi in support of Mrs. Gandhi. "Friday's massive rally" it said on June 20, "was a sign of unprecedented nervousness on the part of the ruling Congress". It said further:

"It appears that attempts are now-a-days being made by not only immature and small parties but also by a party like Congress to settle certain issues on the street which is bound to strike a severe blow to proper functioning of democracy and Parliamentary system of Government."
The opposition parties made the question of resignation of Mrs. Gandhi not only an All India issue but also an important international news. The situation was such that the newspapers dared not to go against the public opinion. It appears that the \textit{Assam Tribune} was gradually changing its earlier stand on the issue of resignation of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. On June 26, \textit{Tribune} raised the question of resignation of Mrs. Gandhi. It commented:

"But the questions are: Will it help the Congress and Prime Minister to refurbish their position under the cloud caused by the Allahabad judgment and the vacation Judge's refusal to grant an absolute stay? Will the rallies and statements in support of the Prime Minister as stage-managed by the Congress silence the people not to question the propriety of Shrimati Gandhi's refusal to step down from the post of Prime Minister till the final judgment is made by the Supreme Court? . . . . there is also the question of morality which cannot be divorced from the reality of the situation."

So the study reveals that the newspapers in Assam were divided on the question of resignation of Mrs. Gandhi in the beginning. The big newspapers or papers with a good circulation did not support the Opposition parties' demand for resignation of Mrs. Gandhi. But subsequently due to the increasing popularity of the demand the big papers had also fallen in line with the small papers running with a poor circulation. These small
papers not only demanded the resignation of Mrs. Gandhi but they found in the Allahabad Judgment an opportunity to hit the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and harped on the common complaint - corruption among the ministers which was prevailing at that time. It has been found that these papers were very eager to play the role of the Opposition only to boost up their circulation. Their news headlines and editorial contents reflected the voice of the opposition. They did not hesitate to use superlative degrees of adjectives. They often made pungent remarks against the ruling party.

Lok Sabha Elections of 1977

The Lok Sabha elections of 1977 immediately after the lifting of the Press Censorship was a watershed which marked the end of 30 years Congress rule and the beginning of Janata Party rule in India. For the first time in the history of Independent India the political ideas were polarised, the Congress and its allies seeking a fresh mandate and the newly formed Janata Party and its allies fighting to end Mrs. Gandhi's family rule and the Emergency.

The Janata Party campaign stressed and highlighted the Emergency excesses and high-handedness,
the Prime Minister's move towards a autocratic rule, rise of her son as extra-constitutional centre of power and forced sterilization. In fact, the entire election campaign was centred around the slogan "dictatorship – versus – democracy".

In contrast, the Congress party campaign focussed on the idea of National Unity, and stability which was safe only with the ruling party, for the country would prosper only under Congress rule and Mrs. Gandhi was a symbol of strong progressive forces.

In the light of the massive Janta victory it is necessary to study how effective was the newspapers' role. What was the impact of their reporting on the electorates ? Could the newspapers foresee any change? Was the Press hostile to the Congress ? How did the Press see the emergence of Janata Party in Indian Political arena ?

In Assam all the newspapers – big or small hailed the Government's decision to hold Lok Sabha election on March, 1977. While appreciating this decision, some newspapers "advised" the Congress Government to revoke the declaration of emergency so that the elections to the Lok Sabha could be held in free and fair atmosphere. On January 28, 1977 the Assam Tribune wrote :
"But there is a psychological aspect of the matter. Since the emergency has not been fully withdrawn and only all laws relating to it have been liberalised, it is just natural for the Opposition parties to suffer from certain inhibition affecting the freedom that is necessary in the election campaign. Therefore, Government would be well advised to consider if the Emergency can be revoked."

The 'Assam Express' another English daily of Assam, on the other hand, asserted that the restrictions would have been lifted long ago had there been normal situation in India. On January 20, 1977 it said:

"As a matter of fact, all these restrictions would have been lifted long ago had there been a normal situation existed in the country in pre-emergency days. It is probably meaningless to remind our people the situation which necessitated the declaration of emergency."

The paper further advised the people to vote for the best persons in whose hand the future of the nation would be safe. On January 26, 1977, the 'Assam Express' after appreciating Mrs. Gandhi for her "New Economic Programmes", desired that Mrs. Gandhi should lead the nation for "another decade." It said:
"Te-day the New Economic Programmes of India has been hailed both inside and outside the country. If this most esteemed leader of us leads the Nation at least for another decade India will undoubtedly be one of the top most countries of the World".

The absence of a viable opposition party in the Indian Parliamentary democracy was well realized by newspapers. But the possibility of such a party by merging all opposition parties was bleak, according to the *Asiam_Tribune*, since the opposition parties had some "deep-seated qualitative deficiencies". On January 21, 1977, *The Asiam_Tribune* in its editorial said:

"A viable opposition with well-defined aims and co-herent programmes capable of providing a Government alternative to that of a party in power is a sine-qua non for the success of democracy, that political life in this country is poorer for the absence of such an opposition is all too evident............ Such a unity is not yet in evidence. Besides, none of parties has a truly national character. Each is dependent for its existence on some limited pockets of support mostly urban based. Until these deep seated qualitative deficiencies are removed a merger by itself will not constitute to the emergence of a really strong and viable opposition that the country sorely needs".
The *Assam Express* on the other hand, held the Opposition parties responsible for creating unnecessary 'disturbance' in the country. On February 18, 1977 it wrote:

"Most of the Opposition parties only had a pastime of criticising the doings of the Government, when they could have given some constructive advice to add some more steps for successful implementation of various plans and programmes. What is irony of fate it is that while the Government is engaged in a programme of peace, a climate conducive to disturbance is being created by certain people and there are mounting tensions these days in the verter of India's politics."

The paper also cautioned the people to keep a watch over opposition parties who according to the paper did never contribute anything to the development of the country. Again on February 25, 1977 the *Assam Express* said that it was the Opposition parties who encouraged the students to refrain from the examination. According to the paper a 'big conspiracy' had been working to create "chaos and disorder" and "confusion and anarchy" in the country.

Interestingly, the editorial of the *Assam Express* clearly reflected the voices of the leaders of the Congress party. It seems that the paper had no hesitation
in carrying the voices of the Congress through its news and views columns day after day during the election period.

The ideology and election manifestos of political parties and their likely impact on the voters had also come in for criticism in the editorials of the newspapers. Some papers scrupulously refrained from passing any serious comments lest they might earn displeasure from the political parties. A few came forward to support the election manifestos of political parties. On February 10, 1977, the Assam Express referring to the Congress manifesto said:

"It once again brings high hope in the minds of the people to look forward to a bright future. . . . . . In spite of the best efforts of the ruling party the country is still not free from the exploiters and middlemen."

According to the Assam Tribune, the electorates would be influenced by the 'personalities' involved in the poll rather than by the ideology or by any slogan like "dictatorship—versus—democracy". On February 19, the paper observed:
The electorate being composed of diverse castes having different regional and other interests would be greatly, if not wholly influenced by personalities involved in the poll rather than by other factors.

The Dainik Aajtak apprehended some 'clashes' during the elections. On February 19 and 23, 1977, the paper repeatedly urged upon the political parties to avoid "clashes" during the election period. It scrupulously refrained from passing any other serious comments on the elections. The Dainik Janshakti made similar comments. The weeklies Ganashakti and Mahajati on the other hand came forward to support the popular "Janata wave" against the ruling Congress party. They made no secret of their desire to extend a whole-hearted support to the Janata party. The Alok - a R.S.S. sponsored weekly, had a good time to avenge its old scores.

Generally, the newspapers - big or small - were in favour of a congenial atmosphere where a free and fair elections could be held. A few papers went to the extent of advising the Government to withdraw the emergency rule so that the Opposition parties and Press could do their job freely and fearlessly during the elections.

Some papers on the other hand, high-lighted the so-called "gains of emergency" during the elections. Some scrupulously refrained from passing any serious comments.
on the controversial issues. Their comments were of
typical type, drab and had a tendency to escape from
the main and vital questions. They did not like to earn
displeasure particularly from the ruling party or
Government.

What was most discreditable on the part of the
newspapers was that they could not properly assess the
people's upsurge that led the Janata party to victory.
Their news columns and editorials could not visualize the
emergence of a new power. Their reportings were monotonous
and unbalanced. They gave more prominence and frequency
to the news or statements of the Government or ruling party.

The victory of the Janata Party clearly indicates
that the Press had no impact on the people who were
disgusted with the 30 years Congress Rule as well as with
the emergency excesses. It seems that Press was a 
silent spectator. Interestingly, as soon as the election
results were out there was a mad rush among the newspapers
to warm their hands in the rising sun of power. It
appears that the style and the content of a newspaper have
a relation with the political system of a country. It
varies alternatively with the change of Ministry or
Government.