CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION.

The role of newspapers can be stated in brief: Newspapers are a channel of communication between politicians and the public. Democracy requires that the public should have the information about political ideas and events necessary for rational judgments about politicians and in particular about the Government. Because newspapers are the supreme arbiter to decide what to print and omit and they are in a position of political power. Further, newspapers being a "neutral" channel can press upon their readers their own views instead of leaving them to work out conclusions for themselves. They can also influence politicians both by force of argument and more importantly by virtue of the influence politicians believe them to have over the views of the public.

This power enables newspapers to hold the Government responsible to the public by reporting, interpreting and criticising its actions. In view of this power of interpreting the policies of the Government, the newspapers must be independent of the Government.
They must also be fair and impartial in their reportings. Yet their power could be in a different way abused if newspapers suppressed and distorted facts. They would then be preventing the public from obtaining an accurate idea of Government actions and of political views and events in society at large. The power of the Press, therefore, has itself to be held responsible. Since the Press must not be controlled by the Government the ideal form of control is competition. So if there are papers reporting and commenting on the news from many points of view, the consequences of bias in any one are minimised. In brief, the basic assumptions are: that the Press has power, and that the more newspapers there are, the less likely will their power go against the interest of people, nation and democracy. The Press has many characteristic features: integrity, fairness, accuracy and objectivity, and self-criticism which should be devoted to the discussion of the shortcomings of the Press and providing a means through which the public can express its views through a system of accountability to show their responsiveness to readers' criticism.

**FINDINGS.**

Now it is time to set against these arguments the various conclusions about the real role of the Press.
that follow from the study of the factors determining it. During this long period 1954-78, it has been found that the Press in Assam has a chequered history with many ups and downs. The study reveals the following facts.

The growth and development of Press depends largely on the socio-economic factors like industrialisation, urbanisation, economic condition and literacy of a country. But this scientific assumption does not hold good in the case of the development of the Press in Assam. It has been found that although there had been considerable growth in the socio-economic field during the last 25 years yet the development of the newspapers—Assamese and English is far below the expectation. It appears that there is a large reading public which could be reached if newspapers and periodicals of popular appeal could be made more readily available to the people.

Lack of well qualified and trained journalists, and inadequate news coverage through correspondents are some of the causes responsible for the low standard of Assamese journalism. It has also been found that the big newspapers place heavy reliance on the news agency service rather than the staff reporters. As a result identical news with no change in the content and style is found in different newspapers. This makes the paper
null and monotonous. The lack of competition among the newspapers for styles and contents is the major defect of the newspapers - both Assamese and English. The sheer parrot-like repetition without variation in the content and style of the newspapers is bound to irritate the readers.

Turning to the editorials, it has been observed that most of the editorials are ambiguous, dull and boring. They are written in a style marked by verbosity and vagaries of views. They often do not put forward any concrete suggestion remedy for the solution of the problem. Their criticisms are stereotype, formal, vague and of the fixed pattern.

The ownership structure of the newspapers - English and Assamese - is purely based on the private proprietorship. Only a few houses control the important dailies and weeklies of Assam. Such concentration of newspapers in the hands of few monopoly houses tends to jeopardize the freedom of the Press in Assam.

Since its inception the Press in Assam has struck its roots in the aggressive linguistic nationalism. The Assam Press devoted its most chapter to the cause of the Assamese language. It set out its journey to create a language, a culture and a people. It has grown along
with the development of Assamese literature and culture. The declaration of Assamese as the only state language of Assam had given a tremendous impetus to the growth of the Assamese newspapers.

The evidence of the content analysis confirms that both English and Assamese newspapers are mostly urban oriented. They have completely neglected the rural people who constitute 80% of the total population. In the absence of the rural Press, the newspapers in Assam could devote a few columns to rural upliftment.

The newspapers of Assam have been found more critical of the Central Government rather than their own State Government. The Assamese newspapers in comparison to the English papers take more interest in and give more space and coverage to the state politics of Assam. This makes the Assamese newspapers more popular among the Assamese readers than the English papers.

Both the English and Assamese language Press never tried to offer a picture of the total society to its readers. It expressed its concern exclusively for representing the interests of the Assamese speaking people. The English language Press instead of giving recognition to all groups of people in the society, presented a sectarian view before its readers. The interests of non-Assamese people, who have been in Assam for generations, had been completely ignored by both the English
and Assamese language newspapers. As a result these papers could not attract the non-Assamese readers in Assam. The newspapers published outside the State of Assam - places like Calcutta and Delhi - have been more popular with the non-Assamese readers. Even a section of Assamese elite subscribes to the Calcutta and Delhi newspapers as these papers carry varied news and views catering to the needs of all section of the people.

The accessibility of the English Press to all racial and language group both plains and hills, who have a special admiration for the English language in this North-East region, helps the English newspapers to have a strong foothold in a wide field. Since the English language is acceptable to all people of this region, it could play a vital role in bringing about a peaceful and integrated society in this turbulent part of North-East India which has been witnessing since independence many linguistic and communal strife and unpleasant border disputes. But regrettably, the English Press completely failed to come up to the expectations of the people. It failed to bring about a cosmopolitan outlook among the various peoples living in this troubled area.

What is most distressing is that both the English and Assamese language newspapers could not keep pace with
the rate of literacy. They miserably failed even in maintaining their percentage of readers. There is no gradual upward trend in percentage of readers. The Assamese language Press depends completely on the Assamese speaking readers although it can to some extent penetrate into other language speaking people like Bengali since there is a little difference between the Assamese and the Bengali language. The English language Press on the other hand hardly took any step to attract the readers from all racial and language groups.

Accountability is one of the touchstones to determine the quality of the Press. Indeed this is a new concept of the world Press. The most common form of accountability consists of regular examination of errors and publication of corrections. Generally, corrections are printed under the heading "Beg your pardon" or "We were wrong". But this system has never bothered either the Assamese or English newspapers. There is nothing like this barring the 'Letters to editor' column in the newspapers of Assam. If a newspaper prints correction in this way, there would be fewer allegations of carelessness, undue influence, bias and suppression. Apart from this the idea of accountability will help improve the relation between the newspaper and its readers, makes the newspaper more credible and a genuine medium of two-way communication.
There is a tendency to use news for sensation. Both Assamese and English newspapers fall short of the standard of accuracy. Their news reporting is so imaginative that one will wonder whether they are newspapers at all. Misleading headlines, distorted quotations, biased paraphrases, omission of portions of speeches and emphasis on other portions by heavy type, all seem to be the outcome of a policy of views instead of news. They are to be blamed for disseminating rumours and inflating an insignificant event by catchy headline and lengthy story. They frequently present details of events that never took place and prostitute the language of eulogium to persons and things unworthy of public favour. The use of indecent language is not uncommon in the Assamese newspapers.

It is true that a newspaper is entitled to support or oppose a particular policy but common honesty demands that it should keep its opinion from colouring its facts. "State the truth, and let your comment be as severe as you like, but do not forget that a large section of the public begins to distrust the Press as soon as its suspects that the truth is being concealed or news deliberately misreported."

Power often lies in smallness. The small papers have a very distinct and important role to play because ultimately in a democracy it is the individual that counts and the small community that matters. To speak in global or national terms of news, of events, and of views that affect millions of people does not adequately do justice to the needs and requirements of small groups of people who have their own local aspirations, local problems, local grievances. They must have some means through which ventilate them. If a community is to grow, the people must know one another and a community paper, a small local paper whether in a village, a small town, or in a district or block catering to particular group or community fulfils a very distinct need.

In view of these roles of a community paper, the small newspapers in Assam present a unsatisfactory picture. Their size and number, and growth and roles are far below the expectation. Most of the small papers have grown out of the job-printing press. Obviously, these are more business-oriented rather than news-biased Press. They are more or less one man affair, that is the same man is the editor and proprietor and manager of the entire show. The editors have neither any journalistic background nor any definite mission to serve the society. To them the profession of journalism is a glamour and a means to earn easy advertisement revenue from their State Government and local authorities.
A country or community gets the Press it deserves. The reading public in Assam is unconcerned about the nature of its Press. The Assamese readers take no action to extract greater responsibility and responsiveness from the newspapers they read. Hence they cannot expect that there will be better newspapers and journalists. The Assamese readers have neither a good purchasing habit nor a reading habit. Naturally, the Assamese newspapers have failed to change the attitudes of the people.

There is no initiative or planning by the newspaper enterprises or journalists for better newspapers. A good paper should have - a training scheme for journalists, better documentation and reference centres, consumer reporting, community welfare schemes like setting up of a separate telephone line in the editorial department for direct calls from the readers, and symposium on community welfare projects. Such welfare schemes will help the newspapers to have a close link with the people of the community they serve. The ultimate value of a newspaper to a community will be judged not only by what it publishes but equally by what it promotes and does outside its office building.

Coming to self-analysis, the newspapers of Assam are completely different from those of the rest of India. It is the peculiar characteristic of the Assamese journalism
that it never talks of its own failings or of the community or of people it serves. The habit of self-criticism is conspicuously absent in both the English and Assamese newspapers. This queer phenomenon of the newspapers of Assam is really very surprising. What is more disquieting is that newspapers have the habit of hiding or suppressing the real truth if it is unpalatable to the readers. In this respect they are too touchy and sensitive.

The popular concept that a newspaper can create or change the attitudes of its readers has some relevance here in this study. The newspapers—whether Assamese or English have some impact upon their readers only when they deal with the issue like language or events about which people have preconceived notion or preference. The already existing opinions, more particularly people's predispositions influence their behaviour or attitude vis-à-vis the Press. So the newspapers have a limited influence on their readers.

On the question of newspapers' coverage to the opposition parties' views, the evidence shows that they had deliberately ignored statements of the Opposition parties during the period of elections and in normal times. There was not even any special column devoted to views of the Opposition during the elections as was generally
done by the newspapers published from the big cities of India. Their news coverage weigh heavily in favour of the party in power. Interestingly, after the 1977 General elections results which led to the change of Ministry in the Centre, there was a mad rush among the newspapers to warn their hands in the rising sun of power. It appears that the style and content of a newspaper have a relation with the political system of a country. It varies alternatively with the change of Ministry or Government.

But the newspapers are ignorant of the fact that the variety of views and news is the spice of life of the newspapers—whether dailies or weeklies. Publication of different shades of opinion not only makes the newspapers readable, interesting and presentable, but also improves the credibility of the newspapers.

The Press in Assam has been living on the fat of the political and economic aspirations of the Assamese middle class. The cause of this Assamese middle class, who aspired to have a share in the political and trade market of the country, had always been upheld by both the Assamese and English newspapers of Assam. While doing so the newspapers had a tendency of nailing the blame on others for the failures and shortcomings of the Assamese community. They ignited communal hatred between different groups of people. The non-Assamese, who have been in Assam
for generations, were made scapegoats holding them responsible for political and economic crisis.

The newspapers, which have a vital role to play in the political and economic tension, grossly abused the right of speech and expression given to them under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution. This freedom of expression is neither a licence nor a sacrosanct or an absolute right, but the right to expression is subject to certain limitations imposed by the same Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution. on the ground of decency or morality, security of the State, public order, contempt of court, defamation, incitement to an offence and friendly relations with foreign States. It has been found that the newspapers frequently made these constitutional restrictions on the Press freedom inoperative by creating a 'popular' mass hysteria in the State when the entire legal machinery was bogged down.

Such usurpation of constitutional provisions, which has been incorporated with a view to strike a balance between the individual liberty or freedom of the Press and social interest, does not favour the concept that the Press is the safeguard against the arbitrary action of the authority in power. The Press can well play its political game within the bounds of the constitutional limitations. It can easily serve the
The freedom of the Press is a bipolar concept involving both freedom and responsibility. There cannot be any right without duty. A free Press which is concomitant of democracy cannot shirk its responsibilities. What is most needed is a responsible Press.

During the period of 30 years since independence, the newspaper of Assam had witnessed and covered many events of national importance such as, six general elections, two Pak attacks, one Chinese aggression, creation of new States, change of Ministry and various social and economic changes. So the journalists had got the chance to play their part in great national events and come to the mainstream of the Indian Press. Besides, the prolonged domination of the Congress as a single dominant party in the State and the lack of effective opposition should have helped the Assam Press to play the vital role of the opposition from outside the Legislature but it chose to play rather a timid, uneven and dangerously biased role. The newspapers could have provided a platform for a wide variety of opposing political ideas.
Still the North-East India has a tremendous future for the growth of journalism. The frontiers of this region are full of immense international possibilities. Its varied people with their novelty of life, various customs and traditions, and political ambitions may provide a most interesting human dossier for news which may catch the headline of any all India newspapers. The political map of this region has already undergone vast changes. The newspapers have also to play a significant role in social and economic progress of Assam. Because information is now occupying a greater role as a productive force in society and this evidently holds good in Capitalist as well as Socialist system. It is a well established fact that improved communication facilities resulting in increased flow of information accelerate economic and social development.

It has to be admitted with honest admission that the journalists of this region have yet to acquire a position of honour and social status. Most of them are indifferent to their rights and responsibilities. Are they happy with the coverage, its fairness, its accuracy? How much is the content of the daily newspaper relevant to the real problems and interests? How great is the dependence on agency material? How does the Press helps maintain communal harmony in
society? All these are legitimate questions and the problem is that the passive readers take whatever the newspapers care to dish out and they hardly ever protest.

SUGGESTIONS.

A great burden always rests on the journalists and their organizations. If fact, obligations of the journalists are more onerous than those of the community as the Press yields tremendous influence on the people. To gather, present and interpret the news by whatever medium - Press - film - radio or T.V. demands not only high technical skill but also the ability to understand and make understandable to others the swiftly changing and complex panorama of modern times. The situation not only presents a challenge to those engaged in the profession, it carries wider social implications which affect everyone. If, as is generally conceded, an informed public opinion is one of the best guarantees for a healthy national and international climate and since the basis of public opinion is the information carried by the newspapers, then it follows that the validity of opinions held by the public will largely depend on the knowledge, understanding, responsibility of those who provide the information. The informed opinions of the people are
based upon the accuracy and completeness with which the facts and events are made known to them. Considering all these facts the following suggestions may be made:

The key to improving the quality of information lies in more through education and training of the journalists in all media. The training should be of a two-fold nature—technical, covering the techniques of the profession, and general education to give the journalists as much knowledge as possible concerning the subjects with which they deal. The needs of the modern world require that such education and training keep pace as far as possible with the development of new means of communication. The training will help reduce the half-truths and partial reporting. Bernard Rubin said:

"It is felt that biased and distorted reports on public affairs would be less numerous if standards of professional work were raised and were applied on an industry-wide basis."

---

2. Rubin, Bernard, Politics and Democracy, p. 1977
Unlike medicine, the law and similar well-regulated callings, journalism is unconfined. There is no gate of entry guarded by examiners, nor are any specific certificates of general education demanded. While admitting that the journalism can not be compared with professional callings like medicines and law, the beginner should come equipped with a minimum level of general education and training.

The Universities and other educational institutions can play a vital role in providing facilities for education and training in Journalism. Both the educational institutions and newspaper organizations should co-operate in providing training facilities to the beginners and also those who are already in the line. Both the Organizations jointly may take up such projects intending to give practical training to the journalists.

The attempt to suppress or twist news by the journalists will amount to a great abuse of freedom enjoyed by the Press itself. With a view to increasing the selling value, newspapers sometimes publish a most ordinary news item in a most sensational or distorted manner. The menace of such false and inaccurate news can be best dealt with by making laws which will require the newspaper to give equal space and prominence to a
correct news and different and opposing views.

It has been found that newspapers devote maximum space to the advertisement. While admitting that the advertisement is the lifeblood of the newspapers, the ratio of news - advertisement space in the newspapers should be brought down to 50:50 if not 60:40.

More newspapers mean more opinions. This is one of the characteristics of the democratic country. To encourage the growth of different shades of opinion, the advertising authorities particularly the Government which is the biggest advertiser should liberally patronise the small newspapers which suffer from circulation as well as financial difficulties. That apart, these small newspapers will serve people as an opposition to the monopoly press.

Newspapers have special responsibilities in the areas of socio-economic conflicts. Newspapers when they deal with sensitive and volatile subjects like race, religion, language, etc., have a very delicate responsibility. The reporting on these subjects is a difficult and delicate problem for the journalists because the very mention of these words in certain contexts and situations, may generate emotional heat among the public. The headlines, the length of the
report, the position of the paper - all these
determine the importance of a news item. The
amount of emotional heat generated depends
upon the prominence and frequency of the news
given in the paper. So the journalists must be
restrained while reporting such news, generating
feud between two different
communities. Some pressures like the withdrawal
of advertisement may be exerted on the newspapers
fostering such communal feelings among different
communities.

The newspapers have been giving wide
coverage to political news rather than develop-
mental news or matters crucial to economic and
social development. It is a deplorable fact that
the newspapers have failed in acting as catalysts
to social and economic betterment efforts. Even
today newspapers allot a minor space for construc-
tive contents and have a tendency to ignore the
important development activities and progress which
had been made in India. It pays more attention to
political bickerings, scandals, linguistic strife
and inter-state funds.

There should be more space for publication
of interviews, letters and more commissioning of
articles of dissent.
What should be the relationship between the newspapers and national security? What principles can there be about the handling of information relating to national security? The relationship is really very sensitive. Freedom of expression and full freedom to keep readers informed in matters like the country's defence is absent in almost every country in the world. But in developing countries like India, where the electorates are comparatively dumb, it is a common feature that secrecy in defence information is extended to absurd limits, with the result that the people are left free to entertain all kinds of notions and succumb to all types of rumours about the capability of the nation to preserve its security. In view of this it should not be unreasonable to say that a method may be devised by which defence information is periodically and correctly passed on to the people through the newspapers or other media in a form that will not only conform to the principles governing the newspapers' basic objective and the limits of safety of the country. Such an arrangement can be worked out through special co-ordination committees comprising representatives of the newspapers or mass media and the authority, which will set up a sort of screening process for all informative materials.
As regards internal security to preserve national integrity, a code of conduct is essential. This should be observed voluntarily by the newspapermen. A body like Press Council could most effectively prevent newspapers from moving dangerously away from the prescribed norms. A vigilant and intelligent reader is an additional safeguard in putting a persistently erring medium in its proper place.

Newspapers are still suffering from a hangover of the colonial and imperialist era. They are more the papers of agitation than the people's newspapers. Even now the newspapers cling to an editorial conception of "news" which is too official and obsessed by the activities of government. No newspaper will have, or hold a grip on its public unless it is a people's paper, a platform and forum for free discussion of the affairs of the community for which it is published. To survive a newspaper has to serve in a unique way. The newspaper is a guardian of the people's fundamental right to free expression of opinion.

The Press is a natural vehicle for the expression of the needs of the society and it
detects the breakdown in the social system. It provides a feedback system from the governed to the governing, from one state to the other, from the province to the centre, from the consumers to the manufacturers. Press is the mirror of times and through it the Government as well as people can see their mistakes. It is the spokesman of the People, it plays the role of the Opposition both inside and outside the Parliament, educates people and improves talent and character of the individual.

A free and open Press is characterised by criticism and counter criticism, clash of ideas, facts, and opinions. It is a process which seeks to ferret out truth. A critical public opinion through the mass media is the best safeguard against the arbitrary action of the authority in power.