CHAPTER -IV

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF THE PRESS
IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC LIFE

It is difficult to determine the extent of influence of the Indian Press during the period of our study. The thoughtful members of the Fourth Estate were also not of identical opinion on this issue. Our period extends over a little more than three quarters of a century (1780 to 1857) and the Press enjoyed full freedom during the last of these quarters (during September 1835 to June 1857 on the strength of Act XI of 1835 and for few years prior to that by indulgence of Lord William Bentinck). Prior to this, during his administration as the Governor General of India Lord Hastings removed the Press censorship but his government was not ready to allow the Press to go upto the legitimate extent of freedom in expressing its views and misconception on this point in the mind of James Silk Buckingham brought down utter ruin on him and his Calcutta Journal during the short spell of administration of John Adam.¹

In a well written article (The Press in India), the Saunders' Monthly Magazine, a periodical in the Presidency of Agra, elaborately deliberated on this issue and wrote:

1. This has been discussed in details in the Chapter on the "Struggle for Freedom of the Press."
"Its influence on the Indian Government is all too trivial and illusory to affect a serious change in the policy which the Government has once set its mind on pursuing. It is free indeed to comment on public matters as often and loudly as it pleases. But its power to enforce the lessons conveyed by its comments on public matters, is about as great as the power of an English sovereign to raise supplies without the consent of parliament. In some few cases, where the question to be considered had no material bearing on the interests or the declared policy of the Government, the voice of the Press may not have been raised entirely in vain. But, whenever the Government has been bent on going one way, it is idle to suppose that any representations of the Press have ever induced it to go another. English Government acknowledges even when it decries the power of the English Press. An Indian Government acts and speaks as if the Press of India were a thing of the past, or at least a thing of the dunghills. An English official works with the fear of the Press before his eyes. An Indian official seldom troubles himself to think of the Press at all."

The Friend of India was however of different opinion and wrote:

"We have carefully watched the progress and the influence of the Local Press from the period when Lord William Bentinck granted it practical freedom, and have noticed the effect which its discussions have produced on public measures, sometimes even in direct opposition.

to the views of the existing Government

Eighteen years ago, the Transit and Town duties were justly denominated the 'curses' of the country, and this intolerable nuisance, which brought in a revenue of Thirty lakhs of Rupees was, week by week, held up in the journals of the day, to public reprobation. It was the constant and reiterated remonstrances of the press which at length induced Mr. Ross and then Lord Auckland to repeal them, in the teeth of the strongest opposition of the Board of Customs. This was followed by the abolition of idolatrous oaths in the Courts of Justice. To this succeeded the relinquishment of the Pilgrim tax at Jugmarnath, Allahabad and Gaya. It is well known that Lord Auckland was so averse to this measure that, in the presence of a friend of ours, he threw down on the floor a newspaper in which it was vigorously urged, exclaiming, that he was not going to give up two lakhs a year for a few fanatics. Yet the fanatics carried the day and that through the medium of the local journals, as well as the aid of coadjutors in England. The next triumph of journalism was in the matter of the state lotteries, which the head of the Government at the time was determined to maintain. But the press was unanimous and uncompromising in its censure, and lost no opportunity of pointing out the demoralisation which flowed from them; and the nuisance was at length swept away. In the same manner, to the Press belongs in no small measure, the credit due from the appointment of Deputy Magistrates and the increase of the pay of Darogahs. The same may be said of the Post office enquiry. It was through the constant and spirited remonstrances of the public journals, that Government was at
length induced to order the appointment of Commissioners *****

To this long list of the Friend of India, the Banaras Recorder (a paper in the North Western Provinces) thus added one more:

"The Friend of India ***** enumerates a number of instances of recent occurrence in which the press can claim the credit of having hastened if not originated important reforms. Among them ***** (may be mentioned) the enquiry into the Calcutta Police *****. It was very shortly after his Lordship's (Lord Dalhousie) arrival in India that certain articles appeared in the Hartkary calling attention to the abuse of the Police *****. We have heard that an attempt was made to bully the editor of the Hartkary into silence. It was not, however, successful. Our contemporary followed up the first blow by calling loudly for a Police Commission; and a very few days after was able to announce that such a commission had been appointed. At home the press is proud enough when it can lead public opinion *****. But on the occasion to which we refer, the Calcutta Press not only led public opinion, but led the Governor General himself, who is commonly supposed to be above public opinion *****."

The native periodical, the Literary Chronicle, also wrote on this line on the Police Commission:

1. The Banaras Recorder, July 17, 1852 extracted in the Bengal Hartkary And India Gazette, July 23, 1852.
2. Literary Chronicles, Sept. September 1853, p. 3.
"The Calcutta Police — Newspaper agitation had in no instance been attended with so many apparent advantage to this country, as it has been in the Calcutta Police question ***** To the Indian Press is due ***** all the credit of having brought to light, facts which no human being ever imagined before to exist; and to it must also be given the credit of reform, which is likely to be introduced into the Judicial and Executive branch of the Calcutta Police ***** The Police investigation seems to have owed its birth to a report lately current that the Senior Magistrates were respectively indebted to a rich native of Calcutta and that in consequence of such involvement the stream of justice was polluted ***** The rich Baboo was no other than Kuttylal Seel."

The Eastern Star (a Calcutta Weekly) wrote on this issue on a line different from that of the Friend of India:

"***** for all political purposes the press of India is a nonentity. Since its enfranchisement has its voice ever once swayed the government in any important measure? Never ***** In little things the utility of the press is undoubted. Many a petty official has doubtless been urged by warning voice to an extraordinary display of zeal and petty peculations have been in the same manner suppressed. But surely this is not the voca­tion of the press *****"

That the Press in India could not have much influence

in determining the policy of Government was in the very nature of things. The ultimate authority in the Indian affairs rested with the Court of Directors of the East India Company and the Board of Control. Quite naturally the Directors would prefer to keep India as a close preserve for the Company and was highly disinclined to tolerate a Press which might expose their officials and invite attention of the English public to the Indian affairs. They would like to perpetuate the Censorship for the Indian Press imposed in 1799 by Lord Wellesley and took serious offence when Lord Amherst set it aside in 1818. They would have reimposed it but for the Board of Control which suppressed the draft for Despatch by the Court of Directors commanding the reimposition. They took mortal offence when Sir Charles Metcalfe liberated the Press in 1835 and would have set aside the Act XI of 1835 through a mandate from the East India House but for the recollection of their bitter experience on the suppression of the Calcutta Journal of James Silk Buckingham. It was indeed tragic from the point of view of the Directors that their alter ego in India — the Governor Generals in the person of Lord Hastings and Sir Charles Metcalfe — would think and behave in a diametrically opposite manner over the issue.

The long distance between India and the seat of her administrative and political power in the U.K. was a source

1. Discussed in detail in the Chapter II, pp. 116-117.
2. Discussed in detail in the Chapter II, pp. 181-182.
of weakness for the Indian Press in the days when a journey from England to India would take six months. They could get no opportunity to make known to the Home public their sentiments expressed through their columns on any live issue. Deliberating on this point, though in a different context, Buckingham wrote:

"There is so wide a difference between the situation of a public Editor in England and of one in India that it would be very difficult in any given instance to institute a comparison between them. (He) in London treats of events immediately occurring and occupying the public mind and his observations will influence the opinions and conduct of an immense number of persons immediately within the sphere of his action. Not so in India. Here, we are widely removed from the scene of action, and view the battle from afar. Here our differences of opinion on questions of politics are mere matters of abstract speculation, for to influence them by our action is impossible, and before our opinions can reach the spot, the question is buried in oblivion."

Buckingham could put up his case before the English public through his letters addressed to the Editors of the London papers in September 1828 — long six months after the order of his banishment from India and after completion of the execution of the order in full. It was by then a question of

merely of academic interest.

Another point of weakness for the Indian Press was that in India there was yet hardly any public and consequently, scarcely any public opinion through which the influence of the Press could be exerted. In his Minute dated April 12, 1822, on the Press in India, the British Statesman, Sir Thomas Munro, then Governor of Madras, wrote:

"There is no public in India to be guided and instructed by a free press. The whole of the European society is composed of civil and military officers belonging to the King's and Honourable Company's service, with a small portion of merchants and shopkeepers. There are but a few among them who have not access to the newspapers and periodical publications of Europe, or who require the aid of . . . . an Indian newspaper."

There was no improvement in this aspect even in the fifties. The Indian Press was conscious of this weakness and the Eastern Star of Calcutta wrote:

1. Minute by Sir Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras, on the Press in India dated 12 April, 1822; delivered to the Select Committee on the Suppression of the Calcutta Journal by Thomas Love Peacock in reply to Question No. 622 in course of his examination on July 15, 1834; Parliamentary Paper, House of Commons, 1834, Vol. 8, p. 116.

"The press is defined to be an organ of public opinion, and so it doubtless is. But in India where are we to look for a public? Until the last few years there was none—absolutely and literally none, — and even that which we now call the Indian public is so utterly powerless and unimportant, that the term is far more frequently applied in derision than in respect. Then, as there is no public, there can of course be no public opinion and then wherefore a press? The anomaly can not be explained, and while it exists the Press of India can not ascend above its present position."

1. The Eastern Star continued further:

At home each class of the community has its organ in the press, and by that organ are its sentiments made public. Here the creed of a newspaper fluctuates and varies with the changes in the editorship. The editor gives the tone to the paper, and it depends solely on him or upon his means of information, whether it shall sink into a medium of for the retail of his low jokes and lower personalities, or become a legal, military, or commercial organ as the case may be."

Commenting on this article in the Eastern Star the Citizen editorially observed:

"Again, as to the Press of India being powerless for good. We don't believe it. We hope that no one will continue a

1. Ibid.
2. Citizen, July 23, 1852.
member of the Fourth Estate who does believe it. He is unfit for his profession as a coward for the ranks of the army .... To promote free discussion, to encourage a manly and independent spirit among our native brethren, to speak up for the rights of labour, to protect and plead the cause of the wronged of all classes .... to deride all that is mean, to expose all that is false; this is our vocation — and it is not without its delights. The Press forsooth is to be a nonentity because there is no public. This is not strictly true: there is a public, though as yet like the handful of leaven in the barrel of meal, which will bye and bye leaven the whole lump. To help to bring this about is the call which the Press of India should feel. Where we have but a small public we must keep its flagging energies alive, where we have no public we must make one."

The anomalous position in which the Press stood in this period was in the way of its having much influence in the body politic of India. This was most lucidly depicted by Lord Ellenborough on the floor of the House of Lords on December 7, 1857 while addressing the House on the motion — "India — the Arms and Press Acts" :

"..... the difference which exists between the press in India and the press at home. In this country the press is emphatically the press of the people of England. It advocates their interests; it is supported

by them. Different opinions may be expressed by the editors of different newspapers; but they all endeavour to impress upon their readers that their object is the general interest of the people, and if they did not it would be impossible for them to exist... But the press in India is in a totally different position. In the first place there are two kinds of journals — Native and English. The English press is not the press of the people of India. It is the press of the stranger, the press of the Government, the press of the governing class. It advocates their interests. I do not say that it may not occasionally also advocate the general interest of the country; but that is not the particular object of the English press; it is to represent the interests of those by whom it is especially supported — the governing class — and these interests the English journals may have to support in direct contradiction to the general interests of the people of India. The Native press, on the other hand — erroneously as we think, traitorously as it has lately seemed — takes up what it conceives to be the cause of the population generally, and is opposed to the personal interest of the governing classes. Being published in the English language, the English press is perfectly innocuous as regards the people of India until the articles it contains are translated; meanwhile it has no more influence on the people of India than the English journals would have upon the people of this country if they were published in Greek or Latin. On the other hand the Native press has no influence whatever upon us, for by us it is not read...
Hence in the final assessment the optimists could at best write: "Yet, not withstanding all its disabilities, the press of India, we feel assured, would in process of time become a very respectable institution."

When such was the extent of influence of the English Press under European management, obviously the native (English) Press could not then have any better success. But there was one redeeming feature for the latter — it had a population to serve which in course of a short time would constitute a public through which the influence of this Press will work on the policy making authorities both in India and in England.

The English papers under native management during our period reveal that the native English Press was gradually gaining in self confidence and was thus befitting itself for the onerous task it had to undertake in the post-Sepoy Mutiny period. To illustrate this point — the gradual development of the sense of self confidence — we may quote two passages from two native papers of our period — the Reformer and the Hindu Intelligencer.

(A) The Reformer, December 1883, says by way of criticism of the Charter Act of 1853:

"... sorry are we to say that upon the whole we think it is calculated rather to

2. Reformer, December 25, 1883.
increase than decrease the misery which at present afflicts the Indian population. The framers of this Bill appear to have consulted the benefit of England only, disregarding the evils which might befall India in consequence of the operation of the proposed system. It is natural that the legislators placed at so great a distance and aware of the utter helplessness of the people of this country should do all they can to please the nation upon whose nod their honour depend and if necessary even sacrifice the comforts of millions to benefit a few influential people."

The Reformer, as the above passage reveals, attributes the genesis of the miseries of Indians to the disregard of interests of the Indian people by their foreign masters. But it could not suggest a remedy.

(B) In the same spirit, but with a more positive attitude the Hindu Intelligencer, February 1854, says criticising the Charter Act of 1858:

"The people of this country must be taught the advantage of self examination before they can hope to remedy their present deplorable condition. They must know that no government ever conceded to its subjects anything unless they have actually wrung it from the hands of their rulers. We would give the same advice to our countrymen which Jupiter is said to have given to the Waggoner, the wheels of whose chariot stuck fast in the mud. More idle prayers will never be of any avail; we must set to work in right earnest

1. Hindu Intelligencer, February 27, 1854.
and put, like the driver referred to, our own shoulders to the wheel. Union and agitation are the only means of obtaining redress from our grievances. If we can come to adopt them for our motto, we shall be able to keep the English public informed of our wants and induce the British cabinet to remove them."

The difference in tone and emphasis of the two — on an identical issue, the neglect shown by the foreign rulers of the land to the interest of the sons of the soil in framing the Charter Acts extending East India Company's authority in India, within a period of two decades, is striking.

The main hindrance standing on the way of expansion of the influence of the native English Press was the limited, very limited, circulation of the English papers and periodicals under native management. But this too would pass off soon, beginning from the time of Sepoy Mutiny — the watershed of the Indian history. On this point we may cite the case of the Hindoo Patriot, which survived long beyond our period. The following extract from the obituary notice of Murris Mukherjee in the pages of the Hindoo Patriot itself reveals the position:

"X X X X In June 1855 he (Murris Mukherjee) bought the Patriot in the name of his brother .... Upto the later end of 1857 he had suffered on account of the Patriot a monthly loss of from £100 at the beginning to a small sum at the end .... From 1858 it began to yield a trifling income till at his death he left it a respectable property X X X X".

We have no definite information as to the circulation of the Hindoo Patriot in this period. But definitely it had an enviable circulation which could make a losing concern into a "respectable property" within a short period of four years. We should guess that in the same way, may not be to the same extent, the circulation of other native English papers also increased, adding influence to the native Press as a whole.