CHAPTER - IV

SISIRKUMAR ON THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

In the previous chapter, efforts have been made to explain why Sisirkumar was an uncompromising critic of the British administration. To say that his expectation of the British rule was much higher than its actual performance is to repeat a truism. In the seventies of the last century such a dauntless spirit was a rare phenomenon in India. His criticism, although ruthless and uncompromising at times, was characterized by a high moral tone which gave it a rare dignity.

It is held by the sociologists that a man's personality is a product of his cultural milieu. A proper appraisal of the personality of Sisirkumar and, therefore, his views, and ideas can only be made against the background of Bengal renaissance. His intellectual life owed its development, in a greater or lesser degree, to that great historical event.

The spirit of renaissance became evident in Sisirkumar in the bold and straight-forward manner in which he pursued what he thought to be the truth. It was this spirit of truthfulness which made him a social rebel from his teens. It may be recalled that he renounced his traditional faith of Hinduism early in life to embrace Brahmoism. Again, the cult of personality worship, as expressed in the deification
of Keshab Chandra Sen by his disciples, was condemned by him as definitely false and evil. * Thus repelled, he took a spiritual refuge in Vaishnavism as a true faith. This rebellious spirit was not exhausted by the social sphere only. It found expression in the political sphere also. The perpetual rebel in him led him to challenge and defy the formidable British power in India as a journalist. Among the contemporary journalists he had few equals as a champion of his country's cause, the greatest of all truths as he envisaged.

This truth was his life-breath which he infused into the columns of the Patrika. It is well known that he espoused, as Jessore Correspondent of the Hindoo Patriot, the cause of the indigo ryots against the tyrannical European planters. Later, he founded and edited the Patrika to channelize the grievances of his countrymen as a whole. The good of the country was to him the greatest truth which a son of the soil was blessed to serve. So he could not remain a silent spectator to India being subjected, like a helpless victim, to the ruthless process of economic exploitation. He made a truthful and brilliant expose of this dark chapter of Indian history under the British rule in a series of articles published in the Patrika. These have been dealt with extensively in connection with the discussion of his

* See above, P. 58.
contribution to the rise and growth of Indian nationalism. * Nothing could dissuade him from this task which was singularly courageous if only for the fact that it exposed him to the wrath of the authorities, who were not accountable for their actions to the people. As he once declared in his paper, it was his only duty as a journalist to disclose the truth which was incapable of being suppressed just as the fire could not be wrapped up in a piece of cloth. **

Indeed, Sisirkumar had established a journalistic tradition of his own by dint of his truthful and independent spirit which was unique even while judged by the modern standard. Journalism has undergone a qualitative change in spirit and outlook these days. In the time of Sisirkumar journalism was something like an ideal, to be approached with devotion and sacrifice. But this ideal has now become a forgotten one. Newspapers now-a-days sell news for profit. This is a worldwide phenomenon with rare exceptions. Moreover, the process of printing and publishing a newspaper has become such a complex affair that persons connected with its different branches are like so many cogs in a huge machine. This machine will have to be set in motion before the newspaper reaches the hands of the reader. There is, of course, a central figure, supposed to be its guiding spirit and to hold its

* ' Chapter III, specially from P. 97 to P. 110.
** Opp. Cit., P. 78.
unity, the editor. But the role of the editor in a modern newspaper has value only as a symbol rather than as a concrete personality except in case of some highly accomplished and colourful personalities. Although the paper bears the impress of his name he is actually an anonymous entity. Therefore, it always speaks with an impersonal and, sometimes, ambiguous tone. But it was otherwise with the editor of the Patrika. He was what may be called, in sociological term, in a "face to face" relations with his readers. He projected his personality all through the columns of the Patrika. He was a soul to it, animating every particle of the words which filled its columns. Anybody going through it cannot help coming under the irresistible magic spell of the vitality and brilliance of his personality.

Thus, it was quite in the nature of things that he fought for the freedom of the press all through his life. He was convinced that a man must be allowed to express his opinions freely and without fear as his opponent had all the right to oppose him. Out of this conflict of ideas would emerge a true perspective. He once remarked: "Without controversy there can be no revelation of truth in its brilliance and without pure truth there can be no true progress of anything." (1)

This will explain why he was such a powerful advocate of democracy. According to him, democracy and the
freedom of the press were inseparable. Democracy means free discussion in which contrary views on problems facing the country are presented. Ideally, a true democratic spirit consists in striking a harmony between these contrasting points of views. In a democratic country, a national legislature is an approximation to that spirit. But a people under foreign domination has no scope for expressing their opinion through a representative body. Hence the press becomes the only medium through which to voice the wishes of the people. Thus in a country devoid of independent existence, the press has a far greater responsibility than in a free country. In such a condition, the press, if it is worth anything, must try to personify the hopes and aspirations of the people.

With this end in view, Sisirkumar started his paper. Through its columns he tried to channelize, on the one hand, the popular grievances for redress by the Government and, on the other, to make his countrymen aware of the depth of degradation to which they were forced to plunge. He once defined the object of his paper as representing to the people their true condition just as a photographer took a picture of an event or object. It was of little or no consequence to him whether the authorities were annoyed or displeased. In fact, he was not to blame if glaring instances of social wrong or political injustice formed part of the reality which he tried to focus faithfully in the Patrika.
The Patrika by its fearless and independent spirit made a tremendous impression upon the literate section of his countrymen. If the function of the press is to form public opinion informed by political consciousness the Patrika may be said to have been the only paper which more than succeeded in its mission as much as it was accused of being the chief cause of "native" discontent. When Bankim Chandra, the renowned Bengali novelist, charged the "Native Press" with creating "general distrust towards the Government", * he had mainly the Patrika in his mind. Bankim Chandra was sharply criticized by Sisirkumar for this remark. He was so much indignant that he subjected the novelist to a scathing attack. He observed that Bankim Chandra's remark betrayed his ignorance about the true relations between the rulers and the ruled, and about the function of the native press. Sisirkumar observed:

*... In independent countries the people govern themselves by their own representatives. So whenever new measures are introduced into these countries, the people themselves introduce them and the people themselves reject or adopt them. People there have not a distinct existence from the Government and the interests of both are blended together. But in this country Government is carried on by aliens who rigidly exclude the natives of the soil from all share in governing their own country and the people and

* Amrita Bazar Patrika, September 28, 1873.
Government are quite distinct entities, so distinct that their interests clash; opinions, aims, scopes differ, and there is a ceaseless struggle between them for prerogatives, privileges, taxes, exemptions and so forth. Their interests clash so terribly that the British India Government cannot in any instance further the interests of the people without injuring its own interests directly or indirectly. Such is the position of the two parties and Government must thank itself for this state of things. It was the choice of the English people to govern this vast country alone without any help from the natives of the soil and the English people must bear the fruit of this policy. One of the inevitable consequences of this policy is that the Government is not trusted and its wisest, best and most benevolent measures are received with distrust and suspicion...

"Now let us see what the function of the Native Press in this country can possibly be ... Here the interests of the people clash with those of the Government, the native newspapers are the organs of the people and the only function of the Native Press is to seek the interests of the people. It comes to this, the chief function of the Native Press, like the opposition members, is to oppose Government measures or, in other words, to seek the interests of the people. To seek the interest of the people is to criticise Government measures without reserve, to point out their inutility, inexpediency, and if necessary, the
hollowness of the motive and the insincerity of the author, and the inevitable consequence of such criticism would be to create a distrust towards Government... To exist, to perform its legitimate function, the action of the Native Press* must be to oppose our despotic Government at every step."

This remarkable statement reveals a daring spirit and independent outlook. In the history of the Indian national and democratic struggle it should find a permanent place as an important document which defined as well as vindicated in brilliant and unambiguous terms the freedom of the press. He was convinced that the function of the press was to oppose a Government whose interests clashed with those of the people. This conviction led to his demand for the freedom of the press. It also underlined his unshaken faith in democracy.

There were, of course, other important arguments which he offered in order to enlarge and safeguard the freedom of the press against the encroachment of the authorities. One should not forget the innumerable odds against which he had to fight. He chose to champion the cause of the native press at a time when it was beset with all sorts of obstacles created by the enemies. It was an uphill task to overcome those obstacles. The native press was viewed with suspicion.

* By the term "Native Press", Sisirkumar particularly meant the Vernacular papers which were more close to the hearts of the people and, as such, would give expression to their views and sentiments more freely and frankly.
by the Government, and it found in the European press its inveterate enemy which was in the habit of attacking it in season and out of season. But the difference between Sisirkumar who represented the native press and those who represented the European press was that while the former as an advocate of the oppressed and down-trodden had morality and the principles of humanity on his side, the latter were the "lackeys" of the European vested interests. So Sisirkumar was more than a match for them. Unable to face the superior logic and moral outlook which made his arguments invulnerable, they would invent "pleas" to vilify him and attributed to him anti-state motives with a view to confound the main issue at point, that is, the right of a subject people to freedom of expression. The papers like the Englishman, the Observer, and the Pioneer would take recourse to one device or other to silence particularly the Patrika, as they were afraid of its invincible moral outlook and the straightforward manner of expression. In fact, they pretended not to see the virtues which sustained it and elevated it to the position of a national paper — one of the most effective organs of the Indian people. They tried every means to bring it to discredit. As a result, it became a kind of ritual with them to charge it with sedition and disloyalty off and on.
According to Sisirkumar, the vernacular newspapers were the only means by which the Government could hope to seek a proper communication with the people. They were the only channel through which the thought and sentiments of the people could reach the authorities, thus providing them with opportunities to consolidate ties with people's loyalty and affection. As he pointed out:

"We are conversant with the condition of the country to such an extent as the English have little scope to know. We are also acquainted with the custom and practice of the country better than the English. The editors of the English papers perhaps know politics better than we do, they may have a better education than ourselves, they may exert greater influence to induce in the Government a desire for some action and, what is more, they may even open a discussion on some serious matter. But we can know thousand times better than they can afford to do the manner of change a policy of the Government brings about inside the country and the nature of effects it produces on the people. We can cite thousands of instances to show that it was due to the native papers that grave cases of oppression have been brought to the notice of the Government and that thousands of culprits have been brought to the courts of law for trial.... The fact that there is still injustice and oppression in the country may be attributed to a Government which is reluctant to believe the stories publicized in the native papers. Only when the Government will develop a real
goodwill for its subjects the native press will receive their due honours from it."  

Here Sisirkumar argued for the recognition of the status of the native papers by the Government. His basic reason was that they were closer to the hearts of the people and, as such, served to mirror their innermost thoughts. In the following passage, he again argued in a more persuasive manner as regards the utility of the native papers. He showed that they were in a position to render a service both to the rulers and the ruled which nobody could afford to dispense with. He observed:

"Some of our contemporaries are alarmed at the tone of the English Press and are afraid lest the Government put a stop to Native papers. They need not entertain such fears so long as they do not betray each other ... Our masters must either keep the native newspapers intact or come down from their high position to mix with us freely. If without taking any such steps, they suppress the native papers, they do it at their own peril. The native papers are the only links which connect the governed and governors. They are the only means by which they can communicate with each other. To stop the Native papers is to cut off all communication with the Natives. They may keep their chambers brilliantly lighted but an impenetrable darkness will surround them. They are a handful surrounded by myriads. They depend entirely upon the Natives for their existence. ... The Native papers keep them informed of the minutest particulars of the country
and of the innermost feelings of the nation, yet the best statesmen of England find it a Herculean task to govern the country properly. The natives are composed of various races and religions, with different degrees of enlightenment. In number they are myriads scattered over a continent as large as Europe minus Russia. It is impossible to govern such a country by feeling in the dark. It is impossible to establish any system of espionage* which can do the service as efficiently as the native papers are doing now. With the help of the Native Press India can be governed from India House, and without its help the Sub-Divisional Officers will scarcely be able to know what is going on beyond their own compound. The native Press is the pulse of the nation, and so long they hold the pulse in their hands, they can rest in peace...."  

As a journalist, Sisirkumar was engaged in a constant warfare with the authorities as also with the European press in order to safeguard the liberty of the native press as well as enlarge it. The European press could hardly conceal its spite and hostility particularly towards the editor of the Patrika for what may be called, from the European point of view, "presumptuous" tone in asserting the right and

* Sisirkumar must have used the word "espionage" in a very special sense which goes beyond its conventional meaning of dictionary in so far as the "native" papers enabled the Government to assess the popular sentiments.
and freedom of the native press. It was what it found impossible to tolerate with equanimity. It considered itself the mouthpiece of the conquering race with a morbid consciousness about the European privileges. So it always displayed jealously an excessive eagerness to remind the native papers of the "place" where they belonged. It was not some dissertation on the "native ambition" or a habit of plain-speaking which it wanted to see in the native newspapers but a taste for "good manners" and a submissive tone in speech fit for a conquered race. It always surpassed even the authorities in denouncing them, particularly the Patrika. Indeed, the European papers of the time, with few exceptions, were a true exponent of a master-slave relationship between the Government and the subjects. The master might sometimes, in a given mood or by a rare whim, become magnanimous so as to bestow some boon upon his slaves. But the latter can have no claim to that as a right. It would be deemed an unpardonable offence on the part of slaves to air their wishes which must be kept under restraint for decency's sake. It was this psychology that would explain the hostile attitude of the European papers towards the Bengali intelligentsia. The Bengalis were the first to awaken to political consciousness among the Indians. They developed a critical attitude towards the British rule. In fact, they provided political leadership to the rest of India in the early stage of Indian political history, and personified the national aspirations. The result was that they were looked upon with
suspicion and prejudice by the more zealous of the European papers and earned their hatred. Sisirkumar, as a representative of the Bengali intelligentsia, made a critical analysis of this puerile attitude of the European Press in the following passage:

"The other day the editor of the Daily News plainly said that England would never leave India nor was it true that she ruled India for the sake of her progress. Therefore, the Bengalis should not hanker after big posts. For this plain-speaking we have been very much pleased with the editor of the Daily News because he appears to be honest. There is a class of Englishmen who, with their eyes half-closed with emotion, protest that the natives are ungrateful so much so that they are quite incapable of appreciating the difficulty which the English face in administering India. By comparison, the editor of the Daily News seems to be made of better stuff than those Englishmen, because an avowed enemy is better than a hypocritical friend.

"Again, the Englishman has recently compared the Bengalis with the English matches. But he (Sisirkumar means the editor of the Englishman) says that whatever pains they might take, the Bengalis will be able to do nothing in Bengal. They will be able to ignite trouble everywhere if they spread out to the North-Western regions. Not only the Englishman but majority of the English people regarded the Bengalis with suspicion, as if they are actually such a lot, as if the Bengalis aspire for freedom. If that were so, what
is to be done? Those who share the view of the Englishman opine that the Bengalis must be cut down to size. Don't give them education, they must be kept from higher posts. In this way their power will be diminished and England will continue to rule comfortably. ...

"The British conquered India by their merits but they are likely lose it by their vices. You can occupy a country by force but you cannot retain it by force alone. So long as they would rely on their sixty thousand bayonets to rule India the foundation of the Indian Empire will remain very much weak. The English nation will be able to rule India without anxiety whenever it would be in a position to convince her inhabitants of its goodwill towards them." 5

In those days the European press was a force to be reckoned with. It exerted a great deal of influence with the Government, and set the basic patterns in terms of predispositions and tendencies out of which were formed official policies. In other words, it also determined Government policies. Indeed, the British rule in India was, in a sense, a double-faced phenomenon -- the European press reflecting one face and the Government itself another. While the former was a true index to the attitude and outlook of the ruling race in its uninhibited form, the latter mirrored the same in a rather "sublimated" form. One of the reasons why the Patrika under the editorship of Sisirkumar became an eyesore of the European press, and was the main target of
its attack was that, by virtue of its tremendous influence over the Indian mind, it began to dictate terms which the Government would do well to take into account in framing its policies in regard to India. But that was the last thing for the European press to concede. Thus began Sisirkumar's long and valiant struggle as a journalist against the European press which formed a fitting and glorious prelude to the national struggle which began in its full-fledged vigour from 1905. It will hardly be an exaggeration to say that the first battle of India's struggle for freedom was fought in the columns of the Amrita Bazar Patrika long before the country was prepared to challenge the British regime on the open streets.

Sisirkumar suffered from a deep sense of humiliation at the abject condition of his country. Perhaps this would account for his patriotism being extremely "touchy". This susceptibility would become provoked into his usual habit of plain-speaking at the slightest oblique reference to his country by the European papers. He was not to allow any of these papers to abuse and taunt his country and to get away at that with impunity. The following passage illustrates how by the master stroke of his mighty pen he avenged what amounted to a national insult. Sisirkumar observed:

"Few weeks ago the Pioneer * entertained its nigger- hating portion of readers with a remarkable article. Remarkable,

* Published from Allahabad."
because anti-Native articles are now-a-days an anachronism. Some years ago it was quite a fashion to abuse the Natives, and Editors, when the market of politics happened to be dull, as a matter of course, filled up their columns by writing a dissertation on the lying propensities of the Natives, or the faithlessness of the Bengalees and so forth. But the times are now changed. As the Native journalists cannot abuse the Europeans without bringing upon them the censure of their countrymen, English journalists also cannot abuse the Natives as in the days of yore with impunity. Both the races, it seems, are tired of this sort of effeminate warfare and they have come as it were to a mutual understanding. No gentleman with a particle of regard for his character would now-a-days dare to indulge in such mischievous ravings which serve to widen the breach which unfortunately exists between the two races. ... The writer (of the Pioneer) is very angry with the Native Press because the Native Press audaciously counsel their governors. He has no objection to see them move in their own level and to advocate "Native Pretensions" but the writer cannot tolerate them "to taunt the powers that be". The writer tells the Native Press to mind their own business and not to meddle with affairs of Government. Pray, what is meant by "Native Pretensions"? The writer may pretend to be a gentleman, but the Native Press and Natives can advocate only Native rights. Because the Native Press struggles to secure some advantages to their countrymen, the writer tries
to stop their mouth by brow-beating. Little does the writer know the extent of the Bengallee's ambition! If he prays to stop the Income-tax to-day, few years hence he will lay claim to have some control over the finances of the country. If he struggles to-day to throw open the door of the Indian Civil Service, few years more and he will lay claim to the Lieutenant Governorship of Bengal..."5

Irrationality was just the word appropriate to describe such attitude of the European press towards its Indian counterpart. It was not unlike that of a privileged man which considered his rights inherent and, as such, inviolable and sacrosanct. Just as a privileged man was likely to react with hostility towards anyone who would question the very foundation on which his privileges were based, the European press was incapable of objective judgment whenever any of the native newspapers was seen to criticize the Government or to voice the native claims. It saw this as an encroachment upon the privileges of the Europeans. As is usual with someone destitute of objective outlook, it would, draw wild and baseless conclusions. To illustrate this point a reference may be made to a para which formed part of an article written in Bengali by Sisirkumar on the "Sedition Law" (1870),. It was aimed to make punishable any writings in the vernacular press likely to create, in the opinion of the Government, disaffection among the people. The paragraph in question threw the European papers into a flurry because they read into it a most ominous sign of sedition. The para
"The Englishmen ought to remember that they have enemies enough already and it is certainly not desirable to arouse the disaffection of 140 millions ... of India. Lord Mayo's connection with the country ceases after 3 years hence but who can tell what poisonous fruits might result from the seeds sown by him? The want of foresight of some successive Governor Generals occasioned the Sepoy Mutiny. We pray to God that Lord Mayo's blunders may not again inundate India with blood! In short, if such a law is passed that if the subjects who show a dark face will be thought seditiously disposed, only three courses left for them are to rise in arms against Government, or leave India or be exterminated as a race. It is impossible that the loyal subjects like the Indians should rebel; the Aryan race is not to be destroyed; so it is very likely that they shall be compelled to leave the country."  

It was the mistranslation of some of the words contained in the article by one Mr. Robinson, official translator, which added fuel to the fire. The overall effect of rendering Bengali words into English wrongly was that it gave the paragraph a meaning somewhat different from what was intended by the author himself. But the Englishman was too eager to lose such an opportunity to castigate a "native" editor without pausing to verify the authenticity of the translated version. The editor of the Englishman was
beside himself with rage and charged Sisirkumar with sedition. According to him, Sisirkumar should be hanged from the "topmost bough of the nearest tree." Sisirkumar's reply was:

"... He (the Editor of the Englishman) ... is a most inveterate enemy of the native Press. It seems that he is almost determined to put it down either by legislation or ridicule. When we have provoked such an honest man, we are willing to admit that we have failed somewhere, though precisely where we do not know. We are more ignorant than the editor, no doubt, but the native Press is yet in its infancy, we hope to improve by and by. Considering that the Government is always very careful of its secret and considering also that the natives have no hand whatever in the administration of their own country, the ignorance of the native Press is easily accounted for. Our highest functionary is the Deputy Collector who knows absolutely nothing of the movements of the Government he serves. Neither do the European officials mix with the natives. We strive hard to learn, placed as we are, we can know nothing of the machinery of the Government but what we can gather from the meagre reports in the blue books and the misrepresentations of the Anglo-Indian Press. However, we believe the editor is too generous to be angry with us because we are ignorant. It is more probable that the tone of our criticism the editor does not like. He wishes us to be less abusive and more
respectful. We do not know whether the writer wishes to monopolise all abusive language for his own use, but we can assure the editor that we never abused, we never dared to abuse Government as severely as he and some of his contemporaries have been doing. Then again the editor with all his generous sympathies can never feel like a native. Sympathisers must always feel less than for whom they sympathise. Does the editor think we have no cause for complaint?

It is truly a wonderful piece of journalism. He has blended together modesty and pride with a subtle and sharp-edged ironical smile, diffused all through the passage by the magic stroke of his pen. Only a man of Sisirkumar's calibre could maintain his composure and usual sense of humour against the blue-blooded contempt and haughtiness of an English journal. But Sisirkumar was a hard nut to crack as will be evident from the following few lines with which he concluded his article:

"... The Editor "expresses a fervent hope" that we "may be the first to swing from the topmost bough of the nearest trees". We most heartily thank him for the pious wish and in return we fervently hope that he must be allowed the privilege to come immediately after us." 9

The inevitable clash between the European press and Sisirkumar became increasingly bitter at every turn of events.
From the days of Indigo struggle the European journals were seen to identify themselves with the interests of the conquering race instinctively in utter disregard of every question of ethics and humanity whereas Sisirkumar incurred their odium by his total commitment to the interests of the oppressed people. He always took a leading part in registering a voice of protest against every retrograde measure of Government. He found no words of conciliation for, nor could he extend his cooperation to, a Government which was always inclined to reduce the genuine grievances of the Indian people to a problem of law and order, instead of harnessing its resources towards ameliorating the condition of the people with sympathy and understanding. So he condemned the Government for exhausting its efforts in tightening its grip on the minds of the people by such enactments as the Sedition Law and Criminal Procedure Code (1872), and in increasing its income by new and exacting taxes. It was he who opposed the imposition of a road cess which he thought would press hard on the poor peasants. It was he who whole-heartedly supported the introduction of income tax in the teeth of opposition of the Europeans because he wanted them in particular, and the rich in general, to return a portion of their earnings to the coffer of the Government. According to him, it was the only just and equitable tax which was ever imposed by the British in
India because it spared the poor. But in the eye of the Europeans this stand of Sisirkumar was a great offence for which they could not forgive him. As he once said, the conflict of interest between the ruler and the ruled was so irreconcilable that one could not further one's interest without simultaneously injuring that of the other.* It was, therefore, natural that the European papers would clamour for action against Sisirkumar whenever he tried to lay bare the deep wounds inflicted by the Government on the heart of the Indian people, sometimes by its cruel indifference and sometimes by its harmful policies and actions.

Sisirkumar, a true champion of the freedom of the press, doubted the practical wisdom of a means which was confined solely to putting restraint on the freedom of expression, irrespective of the question of merit or demerit of any idea. One of his arguments for the freedom of the press was that there must be some outlet for popular grievances instead of sending them underground. It is a healthier process to give free access to the human thought and feeling because those who speak freely and openly are unlikely to harbour any dangerous thought against a constituted authority, and to form secret plot against it. It was from this conviction that Sisirkumar was straightforward and outspoken in his criticism of Government policies which he considered evil

* Opp. cit., 1695.
and retrograde. But it was exactly these qualities which brought him into conflict with the English journals. Once the *Englishman* vented its spleen on Sisirkumar because he supported income tax which the Europeans opposed and because he denounced the road cess which affected only the poor ryots. On another occasion, Sisirkumar called the Criminal Procedure Code (enacted into law in 1872) a "Draconian Code". The *Observer* advised the Government to suppress vernacular papers because they disseminated sedition. But the irony of the whole thing was that the *Englishman* itself condemned the Procedure Code and commented that it would put half the population of Bengal in jail. But, after all, the *Englishman* was a journal of the conquering race while Sisirkumar was a member of the subject race and, as such, it must have been a criminal, nay, seditious, offence on his part to condemn a Government enactment in such a strong language! However, Sisirkumar wrote an article as a reply to these two European papers:

"... Our contemporary (the *Englishman*) regrets that he can find neither courage, unselfishness, nor straightforward dealing in the spirit of the native press. We are sorry for this, for sincerely we would covet his good opinion but we must say in spite of offending him that we cannot advocate a road cess because it touches us not but the poor peasantry of the country, and we cannot cry down the income
tax because it affects us but touches not those who can ill-afford to pay it. There are Englishmen who come to India to make money; if Government were to view the country from their stand point of view it would be ruined within a short period. What do such writers care for general discontent, or the lamentable state of the country? They are quite sure that the British Indian Empire will endure at least as long as they choose to remain in the country and if after that the Government turns bankrupt or people die of starvation they will not be "at all affected by it". But Government looks and ought to look from a different stand point of view. It is its duty to see whether a general discontent actually prevails or not, if it does, to try to allay it and not to let deepen and spread itself. While on this subject we cannot pass over a leader which appeared in the Observer, commenting rather maliciously on our article headed the "Dragoon Code" ... The writer thinks that the tone of our article is seditious and urges Government to suppress or control vernacular papers. Well, we wrote strongly because we felt strongly and we are yet of opinion that the greatest wrong ever done to the natives was the passing of "the Criminal Procedure Code" ... 10*

* Emphasis added.
Whether consciously or unconsciously, the Observer seemed to be advocating one standard of behaviour for the conquerors and another for the conquered. There must not be one set of rules by which to judge the conduct of the two categories of people. The Procedure Code came in for sharp criticism both by Sisirkumar and the editor of the Englishman but by a strange rule of logic only the criticism of the former was adjudged seditious by another European journal, the Observer.

At any rate, Sisirkumar knew that the European journals, as organs of the ruling class, were too arrogant to tolerate the free criticism of the Government in vernacular papers. So they conspired to silence the vernacular papers by raising the bogey of sedition against them. To counter this mischievous propaganda Sisirkumar had to make it plain again and again that the Vernacular papers never meant to subvert the Government because it would be sheer madness to do so through public journals. In the following passage, he not only reiterated this point but also exposed the hollowness of this charge of sedition by showing that ideas and sentiment, when published in vernacular papers, were considered seditious even if they were mere echoes of ideas and sentiment originally expressed in the English-owned newspapers. As he remarked:

"When such respectable journals as the Pioneer,
the Observer and the Englishman have made up their minds that vernacular papers generally, especially ourselves, write sedition, it is high time that we should calmly examine whether there is any actual foundation for the charge. The Englishman ... was furious if nothing else... against ourselves and our sins must have appeared very great in the eyes of our contemporary when he could so far forget himself as to lose his temper and, be it said, to talk almost nonsense. We have no wish to quarrel with our able contemporaries, for, for various reasons, we are quite unequal to the task; ... we shall take the liberty to point out two facts, very important ones. One is that, however strong our language may be, we can never mean the subversion of the present Government, for only mad men, devoid of the very essence of common sense, would undertake to do it through the columns of a public print. The second is very curious. The sentiments of the article which was thought seditious by the Pioneer were almost copied letter by letter from the Observer and the article found fault with by the Observer was but the echo of an article of the Englishman only developed and dilated..."...11

The psychology of the European editors might perhaps he explained in this way. As belonging to the privileged class, they also seemed to have monopolized the privilege of criticizing their own Government and the natives had no business whatsoever to criticize it. According to them,
the Government perhaps owed no explanation to the subjects. However, Sisirkumar then went on to analyse the reasons which made the European Press so much angry with the vernacular journalism. He wrote:

"When we examine the standpoint of view of these writers, we can divine the cause of their indignation. Englishmen have conquered India by force and India is theirs, not its peoples'. They have every right to do with India whatever they like. The natives have lost all claim to India and if they get anything at all, it is because the Englishmen are so good. ... You cannot satisfy their appetite for favours, you cannot make them feel grateful for the favours already granted. Give them one, they won't thank you for that, but abuse you because you did not give more. The educated classes, though creations of the English rule, are still more ungrateful; if possible they abuse the Government under whose protection they live and grow. The vernacular papers do not appreciate the generosity which gave them liberty of speech; on the contrary, they take advantage of the goodness of Government and abuse it whenever they find an opportunity. Such is the list of sins which the natives of Bengal and the Vernacular Press are credited with and a long and dreary list it is."

Thus analysing the psychological factors underlying the anger and annoyance of the European journals with the
vernacular press, Sisirkumar presented the Indian views and sentiment without mincing matters and in a most dignified tone. His words reveal that although the British had conquered India they could not take away a sense of pride which still lingered in the minds of her sons, a sense of pride of being Indians. Like a true patriot, he asserted that the British might have occupied India but still she morally belonged to the Indian people. Indeed, it was the will of the people which, in the last resort, protected the British India Government. So the Indian people had an inalienable right to press forward their grievances against any wrong, injustice and oppression. He remarked:

"... The country is theirs (Indians') and not England's, they cannot forget their claim to it and their country's claim upon them, because it happens that English people have obtained its possession. ... They live under the protection of a Government which is again completely under their protection, so the question of gratitude between the people and the Government is simply out of the question. Government graciously establishes a college and forthwith English people point out to us the generosity which prompted the thing, forgetting that it was established by our money, created by the sweat of our brow. Of course to the English people the natives owe a great deal, but it is extremely difficult to weigh accurately whose obligations are greater,
the English people's to natives or natives' to them... They have gradually taken their political liberty one by one, so that now a tree cannot be cut without the permission of Englishmen. What conquerors ostracized a whole nation from the Government posts of their own country? ... Witness the Railways and Telegraphs, the roads and canals, they have benefited the country, no doubt, but they have benefited England much more. They have given education to the natives at the cost of the natives but has not the Government been benefited as well? ... Then the appalling array of taxes, the haughtiness of individual Englishmen, the rigours of criminal law, the oppression of young civilians and Indigo planters, the intense hatred of Englishmen for the natives of Bengal, all these certainly do not soothe the feelings. These are the grievances, imaginary or real matters not, of the natives, and Government, if it chooses, may suppress the expression of these feelings, putting a stop to our mouths, but suppression is not extinction. We write honestly what we feel, and what we see all around us, if we were to write sentiments which the people do not feel, they would stop to support us. If we stop, people wont stop feeling. It is said we occasionally create discontent, possibly we may, but we cannot help it, that is one of the evils of a free press in every country. ... We write now and then strongly. But we are not inanimate beings, sometimes we see great danger to our country and we cannot help loudly crying for redress. ... If they
actually mean to kill vernacular papers, let one of them advocate the cause of the natives."\(^1\) *

What could be more bold, sincere and straightforward than this statement which he made in defence of the freedom of the "native" press in particular and the press in general? This statement along with the one which he made to refute the charge of Bankim Chandra against the native press — creating distrust against the Government — should be regarded, both in letter and spirit, as classic in the history of Indian journalism.

As shown before, Sisirkumar's personality carried the imprints of Indian enlightenment. His truthfulness, for the very fact that it was a rare phenomenon, also set him apart from his contemporaries. Hence he had to bear a certain burden of loneliness.

Naturally, there was a communication gap between him and his contemporaries. The conflict of opinion between the Amrita Bazar Patrika and other papers of Indian origin like the Hindoo Patriot ** must be traced to a different life orientation which Sisirkumar had from that of others who did not like his radical tone and outlook, the result of a total

* Emphasis added.

** After the death of Harish Chandra Mukherji, a great patriot, who fought for the cause of the indigo ryots during 1859-60, a glorious chapter of the Hindoo Patriot came to an end. Afterwards the management of the Hindoo Patriot passed into the hands of Krishnadas Pal, a benevolent citizen of Calcutta, who also edited the paper. He was rather conservative in his political outlook.
commitment to the cause of truth. So while Sisirkumar was uncompromising as regards certain aspects of the British rule, compromise formed the keynote of their attitude to the Government. Therefore, while Sisirkumar was sometimes ruthless and vehement in his criticism of the Government for its anti-Indian policies, and was not afraid to fight for the legitimate demands of the Indian people, the tone of their writings was predominantly conciliatory, as if anything that the Government could do for the "natives" was to grant some "favours." * They did not oppose the views of Sisirkumar from any philosophical conviction. No clash between liberalism

* In this connection it will be interesting to refer to an episode which brings out clearly the difference in the point of view between the Amrita Bazar Patrika and another Indian-owned newspaper, the Bengalee. During the early part of 1870, the Government proposed to abolish higher education on the plea of financial difficulty. At the same time it proposed to promote mass education. Sisirkumar started a vigorous campaign against this move which, according to him, was prompted by the fear of the English educated Indian youths who exhibited a high degree of political consciousness and became critical of Government policies. So the proposal, of the Government came in for his scathing criticism. But the Bengalee did not like this tone. In fact, it found no ulterior motive behind the proposal which should, at worst, be attributed to its want of adequate knowledge of the state of affairs. The Bengalee advised the countrymen to "eschew the bad habit of attributing evil motives and sinister designs to those who, being imperfectly acquainted with the exact state of affairs, are doing they know not what mischief..." (The Amrita Bazar Patrika, June 30, 1870).
and extremism was involved here. Arguments have already been offered against the notion of Sisirkumar being branded as extremist. * There is no reason to suppose that the papers like the Hindoo Patriot presented a liberal point of view. The truth is that they seemed to have personified the traditional Indian attitude of acquiescence towards the "powers that be", always ready to render to them an uncritical and unquestioning allegiance. Of course, the British power was superior to anything that had gone before but that did not justify one to barter one's rational judgement or independent and critical outlook to choose between right and wrong. That would be tantamount to repudiating the very value which the Indian intelligentsia owe[d] to the Western political tradition — the boon of a spiritual freedom from the medieval thraldom.

As a champion of the freedom of the press, Sisirkumar took a leading part to vindicate the right of the vernacular papers to freedom of expression against the united attack of the European papers. Some of the native papers repeated, instead of rallying behind him, the same charge of sedition as the European papers. A reference has already been made to the episode in which the Englishman took Sisirkumar to severe task for his alleged use of seditious language and hoped to see him "swing from the topmost bough of the nearest tree". ** But strange of all, the editor of the Hindoo Patriot also joined the Editor of the Englishman to condemn Sisirkumar. This pained him very much and he wrote:

* PP. 75–82.
** P. 182.
"We have been more pained by perusing the remarks of the Hindoo Patriot who as a Native ought to have first of all satisfied himself by perusing the passage in question before bringing such a serious charge by which we might lose our necks". 14

It may be recalled, incidentally, that Sisirkumar's idea of the freedom of the press became an object of misunderstanding in many quarters including Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the renowned novelist, who is also regarded as the high priest of nationalism. Bankim Chandra, in fact, questioned the wisdom of using the press for anti-Government purposes. It is rather interesting that these two nationalist thinkers should hold such widely different views as regards the morality of the use of the press against the British rule. After all, Bankim Chandra thought that such a use might incite the people against the Government. On the contrary, Sisirkumar was convinced that one of the chief functions of the press was to fight for the cause of the people. But this view was not shared by Bankim Chandra. This paradoxical difference of opinion between two nationalists may perhaps be explained in the following way. The nationalism of Bankim Chandra, although inspired by the Western political tradition, projected back to the medieval past with which was associated the humiliation of the Indian people at the hands of the invading Islamic race. He looked upon the civilized English as divinely appointed deliverers from the tyranny of the Muslim rulers, and, as such, considered the civilizing influence of the British rule
good for India. As one of the characters of his famous novel, *Anandamath*, remarked, England was destined, by a divine dispensation, to rule India because the latter, although rich in spiritual knowledge, lacked material knowledge, the root of her present degradation. In contrast, the nationalism of Sisirkumar was projected towards the future in which he saw the British power as a positive hindrance to India's progress, for all his admiration for the British rule. After all, it was a question of point of view which must account for the divergence in their evaluation of the British rule.

However, unlike Sisirkumar, some of the editors of native journals like the *Hindoo Patriot*, the *Bandhab* etc. did not regard the interests of the rulers and the ruled as opposed to one another. On occasions, they went so far as to support the Government against their own kind. So when Sisirkumar vehemently condemned the Government for deposing Malhar Rao, the Gaekwad of Baroda, on a dubious charge, and started a regular campaign through the columns of his paper to secure redress for the glaring wrong done to the Indian ruler, the *Hindoo Patriot* came forward in defence of the authorities.**

In this connection the following extract which appeared in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on April 22, 1875 is interesting. It shows that he took the act of the Government as a national wrong. He remarked:

*A monthly Bengali Magazine edited by Kaliprasanna Ghosh.*

**Malhar Rao was dethroned during the reign of Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy. He was alleged to have attempted to poison Colonel Phayre, the political resident in his state.*
"The Hindoo Patriot says, - "The country could afford to lose many a Malhar Rao, but could ill-afford to lose the services of such an enlightened, high-minded and just statesman as Lord Northbrook."

"We fully endorse the eulogies bestowed on Lord Northbrook, but the country could well-afford to lose many a Lord Northbrook rather than allow the Indian Government to commit an outrageous injustice. Not that we love Lord Northbrook less but that we love India more".

Kaliprasanna Ghosh, the editor of the Bandhab, a Bengali monthly magazine, was perhaps an extreme case of how far the Indian loyalty could go. However, he may be taken, in a general way, to be the representative of those who gave an unreserved and uncritical moral support to the British Rule. The following is a typical example. During the viceroyalty of Lord Lytton the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was passed in the teeth of fierce opposition from the Indian public opinion. It was generally believed that the real motive behind the enactment was to suppress completely the vernacular papers and the Act became so much odious to the people that it came to be called "Press Gagging Act". And it was only to avoid the rigours of the Act that the Patrika which was actually a bilingual paper (it used to contain articles both in English and Bengali) completely switched over to the English language almost overnight. From the stage of its contemplation to that of its actual enactment, Sisirkumar put up a stiff resistance against
the Act through the columns of his paper. But the Editor of the Bandhab came out with an unstinted support. In the words of B.B. Majumdar:

"The monthly magazine "Bandhab" ... supported it (the Press Act) on the ground that it aimed at punishing those who were the enemies of mankind. First, it would punish those who attack the English as oppressors. But as a matter of fact, the English Government is bringing about the national unification of India; it is trying to ameliorate social and political condition of the people; and it has conferred greater amount of individual liberty than what the people had enjoyed under the Hindu and Mussalman Governments. The journalists who would ignore these benefits of the British rule and only incite the people to discontent really deserve punishment. Secondly, those who by their writings would rouse religious passions or would intimidate others, would be brought within the ambit of law. Persons who inflict so much injury on society should really be punished." 16

Two things emerge from the above criticism of Kali Prasanna Ghosh. First, as an estimate of the British rule, it is characterized by a "regressive" outlook as much as its sole criterion is confined to the consideration of law and order situation, a very elementary condition to be fulfilled by the "powers that be". Secondly, it betrays the lack of the writer's democratic consciousness which was not too much to be expected of one conversant with the Western political tradition. The essence of democratic ideal consists in accepting opposition
and conflict between opinions and, therefore, the right of
criticism is its fundamental principle. Criticism, however
strong and outspoken, does not necessarily spring from sedi-
titious or subversive motive. On the contrary, those who harbour
evil thoughts, as Sisirkumar believed, never speak out openly.
As for Sisirkumar, he brought a progressive outlook to criti-
cize the Government as much as he laid a great stress on the
possible effects its actions were to have on the future of
India. This forward-looking orientation was at the root of
his conflict with the Government and its allies, whether Indian
or European. Otherwise he had no secret motive to subvert or
undermine the foundation of the British Empire in India.

In the last resort, the test of any idea, view or
opinion is the kind of reaction it produces in the minds of
the people. The people in general are characterized by an
inertia which makes them gravitate round the traditional path of
life. They have an instinctive dislike for those ideas or views
which disturb their accustomed way of life. On the contrary,
although dubbed by some as extremist, Sisirkumar's ideas as
disseminated through the columns of the Patrika roused sympa-
thetic echoes in the hearts of larger sections than did those
of other thinkers. Indeed, no other journalist or, for that
matter, no other political thinkers, during the period from
1968 to 1885, could represent the Indian point of view so
forcefully as did Sisirkumar. Very few thinkers could feel
in such an acute and profound manner the deep sense of humilia-
tion of the Indian people as manifest in the following few
words:
The English Government with Railways, Telegraphs, Courts of Justice, Universities may be agreeable enough but a short experience may teach them (Indians) that a speedy journey, good education may be fully antidoted by the haughtiness of European officials who would not condescend to shake hands with a black man or treat him like a fellow creature. They may feel at least that whatever advantage they enjoy, they are required to pay cent per cent for it much more than they can afford to do.  

The Amrita Bazar Patrika made itself outstanding among the Indian papers by the dignified manner in which it gave depth and poignance to the ideas and sentiments of the Indian people. On every issue vitally affecting the Indian people — whether it was a question of violation of secularism professed in the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 or of excluding the educated Indians from the administration of their own country — the Patrika never failed to rise to the occasion and to give voice to the Indian sentiments. It was always on the forefront to raise a voice of protest against any official wrong or injustice to the people in the name of higher law, humanity and justice.

Thus it is evident that there was no reason for the Government to be fond of the Patrika. There was a bitter and intense rivalry between the two for mastery over the public opinion. Rather, there was every reason
for the Government to curse the occasion on which the Patrika saw the light of the day. From the moment of its very inception it occasioned to the Government no end of annoyance, discomfort and, sometimes, trouble of conscience by its bold and independent spirit, its penchant for plain-speaking, a tone which was both challenging and uncompromising and, above all, its vigorous national outlook. Naturally, the Government would find few merits in the Patrika for praise. So it was not at all difficult to comprehend the degree of astonishment to the editor when he came across the following observations in an "Administrative Report of Bengal":

"The Amrita Bazar Putrika is believed by some to be more extensively read than others. The language of its articles is occasionally rough, but it has a merit of discussing social and agrarian subjects both from the tenants's and landlord's point of view."  

It is also interesting to read the comments of the editor of the Patrika provoked by the above report.

"... Government means to say that the Putrika is an independent Journal. We are glad that the Bengal Government allows at least one merit to the Putrika, we did not expect even that much from such a source. As regards the roughness of the language of its articles, we beg to leave to state with great humility that what may appear rough to Government may appear very sweet to the people."
Although totally indifferent to praise or blame, let alone the prospect of material gain, it must have been a source of great satisfaction to him when he found wide appreciation for the selfless services he rendered to the cause of the country through the Patrika. The Sanmilani, comparatively a new-comer in the world of journalism of the time, paid its homage to him in the following words in acknowledgement of the unrepayable debt his country owed to him:

"In all parts of Bengal, and in most parts of India, the Amrita Bazar Patrika is at present recognised as the leading exponent of Indian Public Opinion. The Editor of that paper, whatever he may do or not in other respects, never fails in his duty as a representative. He possesses in a more than sufficient degree the qualities which constitute a representative man. Whatever he writes is not the opinion of one or two men under the influence of opium. It is the echo of the public voice. To represent public opinion and the heartfelt grievances of a nation, many adopt the trickery of a woman, the cunning of a coward, and the nasal twang of the sanctimonious. But the Amrita Bazar Patrika does it not. His words are guileless and unrivalled in boldness. His attacks are like thos of a man and for the public good. His earnestness is invincible, his aspirations unchangeable. It is for these reasons that every patriot loves the Amrita Bazar Patrika like his own life, and it is for these reasons that one or two Editors, seeing the uncommon circulation of the paper, have vomitted forth poison..."
of malice in deep grief. But we humbly beg to let them know this, that whatever they may say from malice, the Patrika is at present above the reach of their attacks ..." 20

This discussion may be rounded up by examining a remark made by B.B. Majumdar in connection with his assessment of Sisirkumar's views on the freedom of the Press. He observed:

"Sisirkumar wrote much on the freedom of the Press, but he could not improve upon the masterly arguments given by Raja Rammohun Roy in his famous appeal for the liberty of the Press." 21

This remark does not seem to be entirely justified so far as Sisirkumar is concerned. No analogy can possibly be drawn between two historical personages standing as they did at two different historical times. That would be quite unhistorical, because the test of the Raja's greatness as an exponent of the freedom of the Press should not be made with reference to any inadequacy of Sisirkumar, if any, and vice versa. The appraisal of their respective achievements must be made by what they have done with relation to their historical contexts. It will be an injustice to Sisirkumar to make a judgement of him with reference to what the Raja had accomplished.

The Raja and Sisirkumar formulated their views at two different historical times which were irreversible and, as such,
the two bore no comparison between themselves. The Raja, the apostle of Indian enlightenment, wanted to reform the sterile and ossified Hindu Society, introducing into it progressive measures. In this difficult task he invoked the coercive power of the state. He thus looked upon the British power as his ally. But he came into conflict with the conservative forces of the society. His struggle was not so much with Government as with a section of his own countrymen, opposed to his progressive outlook. But by the time Sisirkumar appeared on the scene the situation was changed or, to speak more accurately, the situation obtaining in the country was interpreted by him from a different angle. It was the Government which ultimately came to be looked upon as blocking the path of country's progress. One reason for this change in the situation and consequently in the outlook particularly of those whose ideal was akin in some way or other to that of Sisirkumar must be traced to the priorities which the political questions got over the social questions in their thought. Sisirkumar interpreted the political situation in his own way and he was not afraid to act on that interpretation. While Rammohun Roy saw no incompatibility of interests between the people and Government, Sisirkumar envisaged the interests of the people and Government as inherently opposed to one another.

Thus it is clear that Sisirkumar had to face a challenge quite different from what his illustrious predecessor had faced. Therefore, the task of Sisirkumar as a
champion of the freedom of the press was different from that of Rammohun. The classic arguments put forward by the latter in his famous appeal for the liberty of the press may be said, great as they are, to have been more or less of a theoretical nature valid for all time. For Sisirkumar the liberty of the press was a full-blooded practical question in the context of his time with a Government hostile to the hopes and aspirations of the people. In short, he was engaged in a life and death struggle to defend the freedom particularly of the "native" press in the teeth of opposition and against the onslaught of the Government and its allies.

The truth is that Sisirkumar worked on a tradition which was built by Raja Rammohun. Therefore, his achievement must be judged by the extent to which he was able to follow and, in the process, strengthen that tradition.
References


3. "The Vernacular Newspapers" (Translated from Bengali), Ibid., June 30, 1870.

4. "The Native Press" (Translated from Bengali), Ibid., July 1, 1875.

5. "The English Newspapers and the Bengalees" (Translated from Bengali), Ibid., March 10, 1870.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

15. Ibid., April 22, 1875.


17. Amrita Bazar Patrika, February 1, 1872.

18. Ibid., February 28, 1872.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., July 1, 1875.