Chapter 8
Findings and Conclusions

In this concluding chapter we present the major findings of the research, the role of various stakeholders with regard to social responsibility of the press, suggestions based on the research, proposals for further research and conclusions.

8.1 Findings

While we presume that the newspapers under study have accepted the traditional roles and functions of the press as their primary guiding principles, we have analysed and tested certain hypotheses pertaining to the social responsibility of the print media. The study of newspaper content has resulted in the following findings:

The press is subject to various kinds of biases. The press has a gender bias which is unfavourable towards women, and is expressed overtly and covertly in numerous ways – disproportionate presence of women in the press, particularly in positions of importance and power; absence of women as sources of information and comment. Proportionately the news items dealing with women are very few, they enjoy less prominence, bringing to light the fact that a gender bias against women does exist. We must also admit the fact that news about women will be less in the
newspapers as long as politics continue to dominate our news pages, and as long as
women continue to be only marginally present in politics. Newspapers thus point,
though unwittingly, to an existential reality, that is, marginalisation of women in
politics, governance, administration etc.

There is also an urban bias in the press, which is unfavourable to the rural
areas and people. The urban news reports far outweigh the rural news as the data in
our study indicates. Even events that happen in rural areas are often covered from the
urban centers without the reporters visiting the place. Newspapers should maintain a
healthy balance between rural and urban news.

The press has a religion bias manifested in inadequate coverage of news about
religion, religious issues and events. Religion is often portrayed in the press when the
event is negative and when there are scandals. Our study shows that religion has news
value when there is something bizarre, scandalous or controversial. The coverage
religion gets under normal circumstances is only marginal. On any given day, the
religious content in the papers under study is scanty. This is quite surprising when we
consider the fact that religion is very important for people at large, including large
segment of newspaper readers. Obviously there is a bias against religion both in terms
of the sheer quantity and quality of news reports on religion. Ignorance about
religions among journalists is also evident in the reports published. Sometimes a
religious controversy is played up to enhance reader interest. Bias, whatever may be
its target and motif, affect the newspapers and erode their credibility.

The press focuses more on negative news (violence, conflict, killing,
kidnapping) in relation to positive news, that is, news dealing with peace, harmony,
development and other such issues. Press has a penchant for sensational news and even tends to sensationalise news. Violent or sensational events get greater coverage in the newspapers than those that deal with peace and development. A militant gets more attention in the press than a peacemaker or social activist working for the welfare of others. Thus we can state that the press is inherently prone towards publishing the negative news.

Commercial interests dominate the press as against principles of service and social responsibility. Commercial interests and considerations prompt the press to ignore important issues, or cover inadequately news pertaining to the masses. ‘Saleability’ is often a dominant consideration than reader interest. As a cynic has observed, news is what is written behind the advertisements. In many newspapers the advertisement space is sold out first and only what remains is available to the editorial desk to carry news. Social responsibility of the press demands that the news and other columns receive precedence over advertisements.

The press has contributed to build social awareness, national integration, and promotion of communal harmony, literacy and education, participation in democratic processes and a host of other values. Geographically isolated from the rest of the country, the newspapers in Northeast have served as important catalysts in fostering nationalism, integration, political education, social consciousness, communal harmony and peace.

The press in India and Northeast has enjoyed considerable freedom to report, publish and circulate newspapers. The press has also enjoyed freedom of expression without serious attempts by the governments or other forces to muzzle or censure the
press or suppress the voice of the people. Militancy has, time and again, served as a
deterrent to freedom of the press and the normal functioning of the press.

The press needs to effect serious changes in its content and coverage if it is to
be socially more responsible and face the challenges posed by the new media, and the
fast decline in newspaper readership worldwide. Besides competing with faster
medium like television, which breaks the news ahead of the newspapers, the press
devotes more energy and space to analysis and interpretation of events for the public.

Politics, crime and violence are given proportionately much greater
importance in terms of space and prominence than news about several other important
issues. This leads to the downgrading of other important news items or their omission
altogether.

Newspaper content does not always fulfil the needs of the readers as they fail
to address the important concerns of the audience. Only a small segment of what is
important to people is being offered in newspapers. This trend manifests the great
chasm that exists between the journalists and readers. The data available on the theme
classification in the letters to the editor clearly illustrates this point. There is a
mismatch between reader interest as evident in the letters to the editor and rest of the
content.

Press persons seldom analyse the content of the newspapers, and are often not
aware of the subject-wise distribution of content issues, space allotment and
prominence given to specific issues or the gender or geographic distribution of
content. There has been no serious effort to study and analyse the contents of the
newspapers in the region. Though the two papers we studied have completed their

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golden jubilees, there have been no serious efforts to analyse the content both for quality and quantity.

There exists hardly any training and on-the job formation for the newspaper staff including reporters, sub-editors and editors. Their punishing work schedules and low pay, impede them from enhancing their journalistic training and acquiring new skills. Journalists seldom get opportunities to attend professional courses and seminars to update themselves. Qualitative improvement in content would evolve only when journalists’ competence increases.

Editors are often not critical enough and thus many errors and unethical practices creep into the pages of the newspapers. Elsewhere we have discussed about the erosion in the authority, role and identity of the editor. Smaller papers with low circulation and small budgets find it difficult to employ able and competent editors who can judiciously check, verify and edit the newspaper content.

Most of the persons working in the newspapers do not seem to be aware of the social responsibility of the press, ethical issues, press laws, rights of citizens etc. Many journalists in the field do not have any professional training and hence their work reflects inadequate knowledge of legal, ethical issues and their responsibilities to the public. Hence our study points out the fact that the press in the region is not socially responsible.

Newspapers do not adequately cover social issues. Our study has amply proved that the newspapers provide much space to report events and little space to cover issues. Reporting social issues need a greater degree of competence and depth of knowledge. Politics, crime and violence dominate the content of the press.
serious effort to effect significant change in content is essential if the press is to live up to its social responsibility.

Newspapers give excessive coverage and prominence to celebrities at the detriment of neglecting rural poor and the majority of population. This trend is growing in the press, and is prompted by commercial considerations like profit and popularity among a section of the readers. We are currently witnessing a merging or even disappearance of the boundaries between traditional broadsheets and populist tabloids. The sensational coverage of trivial events is on the increase. Information is being presented as entertainment leading to the increase of what is being described as infotainment. Newspapers today are facing threat to their survival. It is worrying to note that some of the things being done by newspapers today seem to be determined by a mere survival strategy and the need to stay alive.

One can witness the absence of serious effort to separate news and opinion. News is becoming more interpretative, opinionated and sensational. Sometimes opinion masquerade as news: the distinction between the two seems to be fast blurring in the press. News reports tend to be more and more opinionated today as there is a growing tendency to include editorial comments and editorialise the news. Activist journalism and advocacy journalism are on the increase. Indian newspapers have for long preserved objectivity by reporting news without editorial comments, and this has been a distinguishing trait of the journalism in the country. This becomes obvious when we compare them with newspapers of other South Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Today the newspapers are heavily influenced by television. Several 24-hour news channels on television are available. A growing section of audience has
also moved away from reading newspapers to browsing the Internet for their daily fare of news, thus reducing the people’s dependence on newspapers for breaking news. The readers expect from the newspapers depth of analysis, interpretation, elaboration and background information. While these are necessary and welcome, it is not a healthy trend when reporters tend to editorialise news. Journalism trainees need to be taught to clearly differentiate news from opinion. It is for the editors to ensure that any unhealthy practice in trying to editorialise news is checked.

The reports of the regional and local journalists tend to show greater degree of bias, exaggeration and lack of professionalism. Proximity and emotional involvement as well as political, ethnic, religious affiliation of journalists sometimes colour their writings and often reduce objectivity and impartiality. News reports sourced from international agencies and sources as well as national news agencies like PTI, UNI show greater journalistic professionalism. But the regional press is sometimes over dependent on the agencies for objectivity. Often the attribution is vague and generic. A story loses its objectivity and credibility when the source is simply cited as ‘according to reports’, ‘according to sources’ without full authentication or appropriate sourcing. Attributions like ‘from reliable sources’ do not necessarily enhance the credibility of a news item.

Many local reports based on press releases received by the newspapers indicate poor editorial quality. Adjectives and expressions intended to enhance public relations image of the issuing organisations damage the quality of the reports. Such coloured and exaggerated reports show ignorance or lack of professional training. Such stories, if published without major editorial changes, will obviously please those
who issue them, not serious readers. But the newspapers by lowering standards to publish such reports are undermining their own credibility and the readers' preference for well-written and objective stories.

In several of the local news stories the sources are not available or are vague. Some reporters take shelter under generalisations like 'sources said'. This can considerably reduce the quality of news, making reporters less responsible. There is also a serious lack of effort to contact and get a point of view from the people or institutions involved in or affected by the news. Sometimes facts can be verified but the reporter tends to take them for granted. By not checking with the sources, especially by not giving the accused party the opportunity to defend, deny, refute or clarify, the reporter or the newspaper can show that it is partisan and biased.

According to the data we have analysed, the reports by international and national agencies seem to be more responsible. Local reporters tend to take for granted the requirements of providing to the readers the source of news. Quite often press releases are left unedited and they border on becoming public relation pieces. Some of the news items do not have sufficient news value as they do not have relevance to a large section of the readers. Some of these items would do well if they are included in the classified columns. These include announcements of programmes and events organised by NGOs or institutions. If they are published at all, reporters ought to rewrite them in such a way as to sharply focus on the news angle.
8.2 Role of Stakeholders in Promoting Social Responsibility

The social responsibility of the press is the collective task of all, chief editor, editors, reporters, management or proprietor, ombudsperson and the public. Collectively we shall call them stakeholders. There are specific and common tasks that each category of persons needs to carry out. The press if it wishes to be socially responsible ought to have a thorough knowledge of social issues, awareness about gender matters, and need to pay greater attention to rural realities, ensure adequate balance between news, features, letters to the editor and advertisements. Social responsibility is a goal, which can be achieved only gradually and through a careful and judicious process, something to which every newspaper ought to be committed, and strive for in view of the serious nature of the mandate the newspaper enjoys in the eyes of the public.

8.2.1 The Editors

We include in this category the chief editor and others who have the responsibility of editing and deciding the content. The editors of newspapers play a decisive role in monitoring and checking the news content and their quality. The chief editor, as the head of the newspaper is truly at the helm of affairs and should take complete responsibility for the entire content of the paper. In the history of the Indian press, we have had many towering personalities as chief editors, whose voice was listened to and whose views were respected. We observe a gradual diminishing of the power and responsibility of the chief editor. In some of the big newspapers, the chief editors have become invisible, anonymous. Sometimes their powers have been
usurped by the management or proprietors. It is a worrying phenomenon for the newspapers if the proprietors and managers are becoming more powerful and control editorial policies and act in ways that would be detrimental to the authority of the editor. The former often decide or influence the content of the newspaper.

Many editors today do not seem have a clear policy guideline on which to make decisions regarding the day to day working of the newspaper. Editors often do not have a universal standard or criteria to apply in deciding which stories to use, which to reject. They invent their own criteria, and each editor makes a different choice. Working under deadline pressure each editor decides almost entirely what his or her paper will publish about the world the next day. At times commercial considerations such as circulation, advertisements affect editorial decisions and assume greater role in determining the content, be they news or editorial pages. In some instances, the place of the editor has been taken over by owners, advertisement managers, commercial heads and spin-doctors. If newspapers are to maintain its traditional independence, the role of the editor need to be reaffirmed and the figure of the editor is to be restored.

8.2.2 The Journalists

As society is becoming more complex and knowledge pool is expanding rapidly, journalists ought to be more than those who can write creatively and well. They need more professional training in journalism as well as knowledge of the social forces at work. They also need to learn about legal and ethical issues. They need a more comprehensive knowledge and education on gender, religions and social issues. Each newspaper should evolve internal guidelines regarding ethics and code of
conduct for journalists. Journalists are to be trained in reporting adequately and in a balanced and objective way. Overall reporting quality has to be improved especially with regard to local and regional news.

Journalists’ training should include on the job refresher and updating programmes. Reporters, especially the inexperienced ones, need better editorial supervision. Editors should carefully check for quality, bias, credibility and objectivity. Rigorous adherence to principles would result in overall qualitative improvement.

8.2.3 Ombudsperson

One of the proposals to improve the functioning of the papers and to ensure that they are more responsible is the appointment of an ombudsperson. The ombudsperson is available to receive feedback and criticism from readers and address their grievances and offer redressal. The very fact that a newspaper appoints an ombudsperson is in itself an indication of its willingness to accept corrections and admit mistakes and address issues of redress; and that the readers are taken seriously.

The ombudspersons can be effective in promoting interaction and ensuring effective feedback system; they act as link between editors, managers, journalists and the public. They can also initiate feedback through opinion polls, surveys, and commissioned studies. Content analysis by independent teams under the supervision of the ombudsperson would be an effective way to check the content and quality of the press. The existence of an ombudsperson greatly enhances the credibility of a newspaper.
8.2.4 Newspaper Owners and Management

The newspaper owners and managers need to understand that the newspaper is not merely an industry or business but an activity that involves social obligations, and the welfare of the community. As Thakore (2007) observed, issues of press freedom, protection of journalists, key components of democracy are all connected not to the relation of the newspaper with the advertiser, but with the reader. A press that is overly concerned with profit, or too partisan in its political ideology at the cost of sacrificing its social responsibility, will lose its credibility and effectiveness. The owners and management must also be conscious of the fact that its primary responsibility is to the reader and not to the advertiser or sponsor. The task of business is to cater to markets that can bear to pay. The task of democracy is to cater to a population. So newspapers that serve a population will have different standards than newspapers that cater to markets. Newspapers that are driven by commercial interests as the primary purpose of their existence will exhibit a low level of reporting on social issues from those areas where the markets are not drawn. Whether the press tends to serve the market or the public, it is important that the management clarify what does a paper stand for, whether it is primarily a business, or is it driven by the motive of service with remuneration and costs.

Newspapers in India have considered a healthy balance to have a news, advertisement ratio of 60 to 40 percent. But for many big newspapers, the advertisement revenue is higher than the revenue from circulation. If not conscientious, the temptation for such papers is to serve the interests of the advertisers and those who pay more. The newspaper in such instances can become a
pawn in the hands of the highest bidder. They tend to oblige the interests of the better paying master, namely the advertiser.

The moral authority of a newspaper comes from the way it carries out its obligations to the public. It is important that the owners and management while bearing this in mind adopt a balanced approach to the various stakeholders: editors, advertisers and circulation departments, the public and the government.

8.2. 5 Public

The public is variously described as the reader, audience or consumer. The interest of the public is paramount in the functioning of a newspaper. A newspaper need to mirror not only the society in all its varied aspects, but must also help set the agenda for the public discourse on issues pertinent to the community as a whole.

8.2. 6 Government

The press has often been described as the Fourth Estate, indicating the role the press has in relation to governance. In a democracy, the press is expected to be the watchdog. This means the press must maintain its independence and should not become too close to the government or receive undue favours that might compel it to compromise with its principles. The government on the other hand should not interfere in the free functioning of the press, free expression of ideas, including criticism of public policies. Laws and regulations enacted by the government should be aimed at helping the press to carry out its functions, and not to control and impede its effective functioning.
8.2.7 Judiciary and Press Councils

The judiciary as the guardian of the Constitutions is to ensure that the freedom of the press is not impinged upon by any government interferences or policies. The judiciary must arbitrate in case of disputes between the government and the press. It can also oversee and support the functioning of other independent bodies like the Press Council, which monitor the free and fair practice of newspaper journalism. Legal disputes should be attended to without undue delay. The Press Council should become more visible and the public needs to be made conscious of its existence and role.

8.2.8 Press Institutes, Reviews, Professionals and Critics

Though the press institutes, media professionals and critics of media are not officially appointed with a mandate to control or govern the press, by virtue of their expertise, experience and acceptance by the public, they enjoy prestige and credibility. The press should consider and evaluate the guidelines and proposals of these and effect necessary changes in favour of rendering more effective service to the public through the press. The growing number of media reviews have an important role in critiquing the press and its functioning.

8.2.9 Schools of Journalism

One of the emerging institutions that can have a positive impact on the press is the growing number of schools of journalism and media training institutes. Formerly journalists did not have any formal training before they entered the profession, but today there are several institutes that confer university degrees in journalism. Media
studies including journalism have emerged as an academic discipline in its own right. Newspapers can draw much benefit by availing of the services of these schools and institutes to undertake serious research, study and documentation. Today there are several international and national professional bodies that have decisive impact on journalistic activities all over the world. They monitor curtailment of the freedom of the press, violence against journalists and other media persons, and play advocacy roles. Seminars and study sessions at national and international levels also enhance the professionalism of the press in various ways. A greater interface between the newspaper industry and these schools of journalism and bodies would augur well for a more effective functioning of the press.

8.3 Suggestions Based on the Research

In this concluding chapter it is necessary to propose certain suggestions that are the result of the research undertaken to examine the social responsibility of the press. The study analysed the nature and extent of bias in newspaper content. It has been conclusively proved that the press has a gender bias which is unfavourable to women. To overcome this bias, it is proposed that the press pay greater attention to address the issue by increasing the number of news and features and other items on women. Women should become more often sources of information and be quoted in the press. The number of photographs of women should be increased; they should be given more prominence in the news by placing stories in prominent places, by improving headline prominence, by increasing space allotment for female news. The
newspapers, if they are to successfully implement gender equality, must be willing to change the news perspectives and diversify the themes adopted for coverage. A greater emphasis on rural news, development issues etc can also contribute to improve gender balance. There should be a numerical gender balance in workplace by employing more women in the press and this should be followed by allocating them important decision making roles and responsibilities. Women related issues should not be relegated to women's supplement pages or women's magazines, as they are common concerns for all. Newspapers should also periodically review their content to examine the quantity and quality of gender related news.

In order to address the problem of urban bias in the press, it is proposed that the newspapers give greater attention to the coverage of rural news. This can be effected by increasing the number of rural reporters and ensuring that they file stories from the rural areas. More reporters and stringers can contribute stories from rural areas, if the press consciously strives to do so. Greater financial allocation to enable rural reports should be adopted. It is necessary that the newspapers periodically check and verify the rural-urban ratio of reports to see where they stand. The press must also diversify its choice of themes to give attention to issues relevant to the rural people, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, rural development or lack of it. Newspapers can ensure that every reporter is assigned, at least for a few days of the month, to visit rural areas and report from location.

As far as regional, national and international news items are concerned, the study revealed that the readers prefer regional news items as the first choice, followed by national news and international news items. The press needs to maintain a
judicious balance between regional, national and international news items, in that order, and reduce the prominence given to international news in favour of greater coverage of national issues.

The study has found the inadequate reporting and bias with regard to covering of religion. The reporters should be trained on religious matters and issues, and the press should give more attention to cover stories on religion. Religion reports, as has been found, are more negative, hence efforts should be made to give more positive stories related to religion in the press. Newspapers should, periodically, undertake content analysis to find out the number and kind of stories on religion published by them. Just as the newspapers have a sports correspondent, or other theme based beats, there could be a religion correspondent with a specific beat.

The data on positive and negative news in the newspaper content show that negative news are far more than positive news in number, and that they enjoy a higher prominence index and prominence impact. Journalists and media firms consider negative news as more newsworthy. It is necessary to adopt a balanced approach to the distribution of news between positive and negative items. Traditional news perspectives on newsworthiness of events should be re-examined and reformulated. Even when covering negative news items, the press can provide better background information which include causes of conflict or violence, and efforts being made to restore normalcy, peace and other steps to improve the situation.

The press needs to become socially more responsible if it is to fulfil its mandate. It is not enough that the newspapers have more responsible items than irresponsible items, but the press is bound to publish each and every story only after
duly verifying them and ensuring that they are objective and authentic. Even objective items need to be reported suitably with discretion and responsibility. Social responsibility will be enhanced when newspaper staff, public authorities and the consumers consciously strive to improve the quality of the newspaper content to make it more wholesome and constructive. The study also found that several important social issues are not covered adequately. When the press consciously adopt a policy focusing more attention on the marginalised, the minorities, rural population, women, and emphasise development issues, the press would become more responsible.

8.4 Proposals for Further Research

The methodology for carrying out content analysis of newspapers as developed and used in the present research can be effectively used by newspapers, students of journalism and those interested in specific issues as covered by newspapers or other media. Newspapers which occupy a prominent place in society, in democratic governance and in mirroring society in all its aspects, need to periodically examine the content and assess their own performance. Such studies could be further compared with data on reader expectations, public perception and audience feedback. The public needs to monitor and analyse how the press deal with certain issues pertinent to society. Greater exchange, interaction and review of the findings of content analysis with the public and the journalists would result in a mutually beneficial functioning of the press.
Content analysis as carried out in the present research offers immense possibilities to study newspapers and other print media. The present study was focused on two newspapers. We studied a large data sample of 312 newspaper issues and 24450 items. We examined thirteen different variables such as newspaper identity, news identity, column weightage, news location, space allotment, headline weightage, photo prominence, content quality, content value, geographic location, rural-urban location, gender and theme.

Following the same methodology, a smaller sample could be selected from several newspapers across the country for content analysis. One can also study the press coverage of just one single issue using content analysis. The programme and methodology we have developed are suited to undertake much smaller studies based on particular subjects or specific themes, or area specific content analysis. For instance, a researcher desiring to study any particular item such as news, editorials, photographs, letters to the editor etc. can do so. Similarly major headlines and related stories of a week in the country or a region could be studied to examine how the newspapers dealt with current issues. Pollock's studies dealing with specific issues as reviewed in the present study are a good model one can adopt in order to study how newspapers treat particular issues of relevance to the community. As more and more newspapers are becoming available on the internet, and as soft copies of archival materials are also becoming obtainable, it would be easy for researchers to use one of the computer programmes available for content analysis.

In our study we excluded study of advertisements. A possible further research is to undertake a comparative space allotment, prominence and content of the
advertisements. Study of advertisements would help understand the target group of the newspaper audience such as age, income category, consumer preferences etc. It is also important to study how advertisers control and influence the newspaper content, influence behaviour, social habits, policies etc. Researchers can also compare what is available as content with what is absent and what ought to have been published. Content analysis data could be compared and co-related with audience surveys and studies and reader preferences. The Impact study we have reviewed is a good model which has combined content study with reader expectations.

Newspaper content comes from a variety of sources: individual journalists employed by the newspapers (own correspondents), news agency sources or wire services, as they were formerly known, public relations persons of firms, NGOs, government agencies and the citizens. Comparing the news source with the content quality would help to understand issues like reporter or source bias and professional quality.

Content analysis could be used as an effective tool to do peer reviewing of news reports among journalists of a particular newspaper. This can help enhance professionalism and improve quality, journalistic integrity and ethics, and responsibility. Some newspapers make it mandatory for their journalists to read the publications of their competitors. Journalists could be asked to evaluate the contents of these papers through analysis of the data therein.

In the age of globalisation, when media giants are becoming more and more powerful, it is imperative to support small and medium newspapers through a process of public, private partnership. Promotion of vernacular press in Northeast India, in
particular, is vitally important in the context of linguistic pluralism that exists in the region. These need to be done without however, impinging on the freedom of the press and without excessive government control. Single newspaper towns need alternative newspapers so as to provide alternative perspectives and to end monopoly. The nature and quality of newspaper content will depend very much on professionalism on the part of the newspaper management and vigilance and active participation by the public. All stakeholders need to work collaboratively and concertedly to promote understanding and awareness about regional, national and global issues, to avoid bias and to ensure that the press is socially responsible.

Newspapers need to balance the content in favour of processes than events. Even violent events need to be reported in a perspective, and the press should not ignore causes of conflict that lead to violence or peace processes. We need to re-examine and if necessary reformulate the traditional definitions and canons of journalism.

8.5 Conclusion

The press, the oldest among the various modern means of communication, today faces a serious challenge from electronic media like radio, television and internet. In the light of sweeping changes affecting the press, we thought it pertinent to study the issue of social responsibility of the press. Our study primarily focused on Northeast India with a view to understand at some depth the role and function of the press in ushering in development, peace, good governance and democracy, ethnic
harmony and national integration. The print media is considered to have played a key role in enhancing these processes. The literature in various languages is growing steadily. However, no critical study of the social impact of the press has so far been done by any research scholar. Hence the present researcher undertook to study critically the social responsibility of the press through content analysis of two leading newspapers of the region.

The study entailed examining the nature, role and function of print media and its contribution to the country. When one observes the growth and expansion of the press in Northeast India, it is important to examine critically the social responsibility that the press ought to have. The study assumes particular importance in the light of a host of problems such as militancy, unrest, unemployment, lack of development, geographical isolation and ethnic and linguistic unrest. The region of Northeast India has sometimes been called ‘a Paradise in Peril’. It may be observed that the entire region has been exposed to modern education and various modern media of communication only recently. The importance of the press can be gauged from the ever-growing number of newspapers and magazines in the region as well as interest in journalism studies.

Newspapers play a very vital role in ensuring that democracy is alive, vibrant and participatory. Traditionally newspapers are expected to fulfil the ‘watchdog’ function. The press is also called the Fourth Estate in view of the importance it has in influencing public policy and governance. These and other attributes of the press express beyond doubt that the press is expected to be socially responsible and that it is a reliable source of support to guide the destinies of nations and individuals.
The press in India was born and brought up under the constraints imposed by the colonial masters. However, the press has enjoyed great credibility because of the important role it played in the freedom struggle. Many of our patriots and freedom fighters recognised the press as a potential instrument to mobilise public opinion, to provide information and to debate issues, to launch nationwide non-violent protests, to fight against social evils, to promote unity and integrity of the vast sub-continent that India is. The press was seldom seen as a medium of entertainment or a means to make profit or as a lucrative business venture, but as a powerful tool to promote national interest and development.

The press in India possesses many admirable qualities. It has enjoyed the trust and confidence of the masses. Personalities like Raja Rammohun Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and a galaxy of eminent personalities, through their involvement in the field of newspaper journalism, have lent prestige to the profession and ennobled it. Some of the leading journalists and editors who followed the path traced out by them in the post-independent history of Indian journalism have carved out a niche for themselves for objectivity, impartiality, patriotism, professional integrity and ethical conduct.

But the phenomenon of the shrinking social space in newspapers has become a major concern for media critics and readers of newspapers. While television is seen by many others as a primarily entertainment medium, and radio a mouthpiece of the government by virtue of its ownership and management, it is to the press that many look up for information. Readers expect to get up-to-date and objective news through the pages of the newspapers. But our analysis of content shows that the space allotted
to social issues is fast shrinking in favour of trivia, issues of little consequence to most readers.

When critics raise this issue, media often take shelter under the alibi saying the people want such and such news. There has not been any accurate study on what the readers want, the papers have not done adequate research, and hence it is inaccurate to claim to know what the readers want.

Newspapers in the region have to address several issues if they are to maintain professionalism and accuracy and make qualitative improvement to win the respect and admiration of the readers. In our study, we have found stories repeated verbatim in different issues, public relations and even advertisement materials appearing as news and features. Many regular columns like the city round ups lack reporting quality. The journalists as well as the editors do not seem to duly weigh and evaluate the newsworthiness and news value of such stories. Many news items are devoid of appropriate sourcing.

Many stories are poorly edited or not edited at all. Sometimes stories that do not have relevance to readers are published. Inaccuracies of facts and language style also creep in into reports. Opinion and fact are often not clearly separated. The reasons for these range from poor judgment to lack of adequate training or presence of bias.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the press is faced with an unprecedented challenge from the new media. The press today is under serious pressure to meet the competition imposed by television, Internet and other media, and the compulsions of the market to make it a commercially successful business venture. Those who suffer
most in this dialectics seem to be the public, the readers. Social responsibility can be
witted away gradually when the press forgets its basic commitment to serve the
public, and focus on profit as its primary concern. The press also suffers from a lack
of credibility when it compromises with its independence and indulges in party
politics. In order that the newspapers be the voice of sanity, it must keep its head
above the troubled waters of vested interest groups including political parties,
government or other ideological groups.

Today circulation and marketability seem to be greatly influencing the choice
of content, and the angle in which a particular event is presented. Newspapers create
‘heroes’ out of political leaders, film stars, singers and musicians, sports personalities
or tear them down as ‘villains’. In the process, they leave behind the majority who are
left in the margins, the voiceless, the marginalised sections, the dalits, scheduled
castes, scheduled tribes, the rural and urban poor, who hardly ever figure in the pages
of the newspapers.

The inadequate representation or near absence of these categories in the
mainstream press often betray a lack of social commitment which the press ought to
have. Lack of appropriate training about ethical, moral and social issues, absence of
adequate laws and regulations within the press, affect journalistic work, making it
socially less responsible. The press also has various kinds of bias, expressed covertly
or overtly. Bias is expressed in the inadequate representation of ethnic or religious
minorities as well as through gender disparity.

We have discussed at some length issues like newspaper’s propensity to
publish negative news at the cost of leaving out positive news and events. Some of
the inherent beliefs that the events reported should be negative, violent, need to be challenged. Hence, many pressure groups, including terrorists and militants, use violence to get media attention. It is in the psychology of reporters to highlight the negative, the bizarre, the unsavoury things that happen in society. It is unfortunate that the media favour a militant to a peace maker. Sometimes newspapers use several arguments to justify their action. These include, the claim that the readers want such news and features, that newspapers have an obligation to tell its readers what is wrong with society with a view to help improve it, that readers are wary of reading your paper if you highlight positive news and leave out negative news and so on. But one of the dominant factors that prompt newspapers to give greater attention to publishing negative news is a matter of financial motives, of wanting to boost sales and circulation. Journalism students and beginners are taught to report on the criteria such as human interest, prominence, timeliness, conflict, proximity, oddity, consequence.

There have been proposals to lessen the emphasis on conflict as a news criterion. If riots and civil disobediences merited news coverage, it was reasoned, so did some of the causes of the unrest. The conflict approach to news coverage gives prime news space and news time to those urging violence and ignores those working for non-violent solutions to various problems. Newspapers need to shift its emphasis from negative news to balance the news coverage with positive and neutral news items. Development communication and positive news need to be given more prominence in order to have a balanced and healthy newspaper.
Definitions of news are not static, and news values such as prominence, conflict, and timeliness have been modified in recent years, not always to the benefit of the news audience. The definitions and descriptions of news elements and criterion on what constitutes news taught in every school of journalism clearly imply that the unusual, negative, and conflict related events constitute news. Journalism needs to review such traditional attitudes towards news as negative and evolve a more balanced and comprehensive approach.

News is also a highly perishable commodity. News has a short shelf life. Nothing is as old as yesterday's news. It is helpful for news reporters, the news audience, and news sources to distinguish between the timeliness of news and the immediacy of news coverage. Timeliness speaks of the topicality and relevance of a news report. There is a danger that the substance of such a report will suffer in the quest for the glitter of immediacy.

Newspapers not only provide information, but manifest bias in numerous ways. The strong pro-urban bias is evident in the number and kind of news featured in the newspapers. Bias is also evident in the way individuals or ethnic communities, racial groups or people of different nationalities, genders, are portrayed by the press.

Gender bias and imbalance continue to be a matter of concern as far as responsible journalism is concerned. The press should show the way in effecting gender equality by giving greater representation to women in news reports, editorials and columns. They should be quoted more often as sources of news.

Similarly, stereotypes and glaring disparity in the way newspapers treat various themes point to the need to balance and diversify themes in order to ensure
that other issues are adequately covered. Religion, integral to people’s lives, development news, peace efforts are some of the issues that need to get more attention, if the press is to effect a course correction.

In spite of fears to the contrary, the print media continues to hold its importance. The publishing industry is a fast growing one. New newspapers and magazines keep on being added to the already existing array of publications in India. No doubt, the television and internet have paused many challenges to the newspaper, but as far as India is concerned, there is no immediate threat of the press being extinct. The press has its own unique role and function in society.

Instead of resting on the laurels of the past, the newspaper industry in India needs to introspect on its current performance and plan for its future. The healthy press is not a finished product. It is ever evolving. It needs to reinvent itself everyday. The present study, it is hoped, would some way contribute to this on-going process of evolution, growth and change.