CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

The Press plays a very important role in the modern age. It seeks to bring important developments in the world. Whether newspapers are big or small, as champions of the rights of citizens they carry on campaigns for eliminating the undesirable conditions prevailing in the society. They exercise tremendous influence on their readers through editorials, articles and certain special features. As Bradley said, "A controversial Press, made up of many newspapers disagreeing with each other, supplies us with enough segments of the truth and variations on it to allow us to make intelligent decisions. No one paper will answer all of our questions satisfactorily, but together they give us the information we need to find our own answers."¹

The Assam movement on foreigners' issue during 1978-85 has been of great significance not only to the State of Assam but also to India as a whole. It cannot be denied that the movement had received spontaneous response and active participation from all sections of people irrespective of their language and religion. At the same time the movement generated hopes and fears among the people. During the six years of agitation there had been many events of national and international importance which swept through the state of Assam. The fall out of the movement in the socioeconomic and political field has been tremendous.
During the period there had been change of ministry both in the centre and the State. The Janata Government came into power in the centre as well as in many states including Assam in 1977. Again the Congress (I) came into power after its victory in the 1980 General election. The state of Assam, where no election could be held in 1980 because of All Assam Students Union (AASU) opposition to elections, came under the president's rule. Ever since the movement begun there had been many dialogues between the Governments both at the centre and the state and the movement leaders. But most of the negotiations were ended in a fiasco. Thus an era of uncertainty, frustration, resentment and social tension began. Then came the 1983 Assam elections and AASU's boycott of elections, and finally Assam Accord followed by the elections in Assam.

The Press in Assam played a vital role when dark clouds were massing over the socio-political firmament of the state. As the movement gained momentum the mechanisms of modern democracy like the political parties, specifically those with national commitment became inarticulate, ineffective and practically nonfunctional. The wide void left by the political parties was filled in by the student community. In this crucial situation the Press in Assam exercised a tremendous influence on the mass people by articulating the common aspirations of the movement and exhibiting the gravity of the problem. The Assam move-
ment is a unique type of movement because of the nonpolitical nature of the movement. The movement continued for a long period because the leaders of the movement established proper rapport with the people at large. The Press sustained the psychological atmosphere generated by the mass participation in the struggle. Had the authorities been responsive to popular feeling at the very first manifestation of it, things would have been different. But it is the common experience, not in Assam alone, that the authorities do not respond unless and until there is some extremist manifestation, and that is one reason why often even common movements take an extremist turn.  

The logic of the Assam movement has been understood in different ways. Gail Omvedt maintained that the agitation was one of national self-determination. He highlighted the dangers from the Bengali influx to the autochthons' cultural-national identity. Amalendu Guha thought that the ideological and organizational roots of the agitation were in the Assamese upper classes who controlled the state's powerful local Press. He said...
ends". While from Guha's Marxist standpoint, the movement was national in form but chauvinist and undemocratic in content and proto-fascist in its methods, Udayan Mishra disagreed with Guha's assessment but admits conflicts and contradictions that characterized the approach to the Assam problem. As Udayan Mishra observes, "The demand for the detection and deportation of foreign nationals in the state must be viewed not in isolation but in broad perspective of the Assamese national question ... It would be erroneous to see the movement purely as one directed against outsiders and whose motives force in Assamese chauvinism, and fostered by the numerically small and economically weak but culturally influential Assamese middle class".  

The growth of ultra-nationalists in the movement posed as a threat to the development of Assamese identity, it will be wrong to blame the movement for the fissiparous tendencies seen in the overall social fabric of Assam. The fear of the Assamese of being reduced to a minority in their own state and of losing their culture, language and way of life has strong historical roots and cannot be dismissed as xenophobia.

Professor D.P. Barooah observed "It was precisely because of the Government failure to deal with the silent invasion of the Assam part of the country by foreign nationals that a most unusual highly patriotic and popular movement started in Assam under this
leadership of AAGS and AAGSP. Nothing could be more characteristic of national unity than to stigmatise such a movement as either secessionist or anti-Indian or, for that matter, communal. In Assam the issue was not one between the majority or minority communities. The issue is decidedly one against foreign nationalism only. The influx of foreign nationals to whichever religion or community they might belong has reached an acutely dangerous stage in the eastern part of India. The movement began with almost total participation of an entire people. The aim was to defend the country's integrity and sovereignty while seeking to preserve the states distinctive identity and its indigenous people. The question of majority or minority community was entirely irrelevant in this context. The legitimate rights of minorities, religious and/or linguistic, are guaranteed under the constitution and nobody has challenged these recognised rights. As Dr. Ambedkar observed, looked at from any consideration the Assam movement is a truly national one and assertions to the contrary are not based on facts but rank chauvinism and politically motivated considerations.

The Press brought into focus the callousness, indifference and failure of the Government. Take effective steps to stop the influx of foreigners into Assam which had been agitating the people for a long time. The Press also agitated for the establishment of a University at Dibrugarh and after a huge rese
Crude oil was discovered in Assam, it was very legitimately demanded that a full-scale oil refinery should be located in the state. But it was not before a very big mass movement was built up that thing very legitimate demand was conceded and even then, only a toy refinery Com-petro-chemical complex was established in Assam. But the fact remains that the bulk of Assam Crude is pumped out to feed a refinery at Barauni. If Assam had demande a steel plant, thought there is no iron ore here, it would have been unreasonable. But why could not a big refinery Com-petro-chemical complex be established in Assam, basing on the available Crude in this state.  

The major part of the N.E. Railway runs over Assam and it is very reasonable that the Head quarters of this Railway should be located in Assam. Yet, it needed a mass movement to persuade New Delhi to locate the Head quarters of the N.E. Railway in Assam. If industries based on the locally available raw materials are not set up, how can you remove the regional imbalance.  

Transport bottleneck is often held out against any demand for setting up industries in Assam. Yet, it required a mass movement to persuade New Delhi to convert the metre gauge Railway in to broad gauge and that too is not to cover the entire portion of N.E. Railway in Assam. How does one tackle this problem of unemployment if no industry is to be built up in this state on the basis of locally available raw materials? Why should not
population pattern be reflected in the employment, giving the Assamese their due share in the jobs, however scarce these may be? There are specialised fields for which adequate trained manpower is not locally available and nobody will grudge recruitment of specialists for these jobs from other parts of the country. But this cannot be an excuse for denying the due share to the Assamese people even of non-technical jobs.

The Assamese people felt that they had rather a precarious majority in their own state. They had the apprehension that they might be outnumbered by hordes of foreigners from Bangladesh who over the years wriggled their ways insidiously into even the voters lists to claim their citizenships. "This chaotic state of things has been created by pimping politicians of the state with the full support and connivance of those at the centre. For these myopic and greedy local politicians it is all a matter of keeping their seats in the parliament and the legislature intact with the votes of those Bangladeshis whom they have illegally settled in their own constituencies. What better instance of feudal value on a demotic structure little do they realise that having sold away their land and birthright for a 'mess of pottage' they themselves are now due for rejection from their own constituents once they are properly entrenched".

The story of "influx" into Assam is an old one. In the
days of the Muslim league Ministry in pre-Independence period immigration of Muslims from the then East Bengal was encouraged with a view to making it a muslim majority province so that it might be included in the contemplated Pakistan. The Muslim peasants, brutally exploited by the zemindars, migrated to Assam and settled here with the patronage of the Muslim league Ministry. This created a stir and the people grew restive. Even the "line system" could not check this influx totally. Then in the wake of partition of the country a large number of Bengali Hindus began to migrate to Assam and quite a sizable number settled here. During the days of the struggle for Bangladesh about eleven lakhs of people crossed over to Assam and Meghalaya. Some of them did not go back, though there may be some dispute about the number of those who stayed back. And even after creation of Bangladesh partly because of economic situation there and partly because of the lack of full sense of security some people did come to this side. The result of this influx was that the Assamese people felt scared that they might be outnumbered in no distant future. The current movement has to be assessed in this over-all context. As professor D.P. Barooah remarks, "It is known that while citizens enjoy full civil and political rights, aliens are denied a good many of them including the right of suffrage and the right to become members of elective bodies under the constitution. This simple truth needs to be borne in mind while trying to understand certain basic problems of India's northeast."
The students of Assam who looked up to their elders for years for a solution to the problem of foreign nationals mobilised public opinion and spearheaded a peaceful movement under the banner of the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad to safeguard the country and the constitution. Assam Sahitya Sabha laments, "They have mobilised public opinion and spear-headed a peaceful movement under the banner of the All Assam Students' Union and the Gana Sangram Parishad to safeguard their country and the constitution. They have launched the movement in complete awareness of the consequences, loss of a precious year of Studies, imprisonment and loss of lives at the hands of a Government manned by the elected representatives of the people. This is no mean sacrifice, and the people of India should be indebted to them for thus striving to defend country and constitution so spiritedly."\(^{12}\)

The Assam Press projected the silent civilian invasion by horde of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal before the rest of the country. The movement to preserve the identity and ethos of the Assamese people was often misrepresented as a communal or a linguistic one. The Press in Assam made a laudable effort to highlight the gravity of the problem and advocated a dispassionate study of the situation. All the newspapers clearly pointed out that the movement was not directed against the non-Assamese Indian of the state. As AASU declared, "We
declare unequivocally that we are not secessionists. Our main aim has been to maintain the territorial integrity of India and to thwart the evil designs of those who want to create instability through infiltration. On the other hand those who allege us of being secessionists have many skeletons in their cupboards .... "our struggle is only against the illegal foreigners whose presence in Assam threatens the economic, cultural and political existence of the indigenous people of Assam. It is only against Non-indians staying illegally in India and not against people from rest of India who are residing in Assam. We accuse all those, who are saying that this movement is against all non Assamese, as being blatant liars with some hidden motives. Time and again we have said that only those people should be deported, who fail to qualify as citizens of India according to the constitution. To the detractors of this movement our firm answer has been a foreigner is a foreigner; a foreigner shall not be judged by the language he speaks or by the religion he follows. Communal considerations '(either religious or linguistic) can not be taken in to account while determining the citizenship of a person; the secular character of the Indian constitution does not allow that."

In content, colour and magnitude the Assam movement has no parallel in the history of the political movement in India. The problem created by large scale infiltration of foreigners
w as made more acute by the geo-political isolation of the area. It was not that the Government were unaware of the problem. But the steps taken so far did not go even half way to meet the challenge. Besides, there were vested interest among politicians, bureaucrats, even among the guardians of law who were not whole heartedly committed to the task of detecting and deporting. The list of grievances on the economic front was endless, equally strong the political and historical facts of the alienation. The Assamese blamed the central Govt. for the Balkanisation of the state which took away most of its tribal region. They genuinely believed that the centre considered Assam a colony. As Dr. Pinendra Kumar Bhattacherryya describes the Assamese mind, "The Assamese today is not at peace with himself. He sees his material world crumbling before his very eyes. His precious possession, land, has become scarce. His educated son or daughter is facing unemployment. He has no capital or incentives to start industries or business. All openings seem closed to him in the competitive capitalist and centralised economy. He fought for freedom along with his brethren in the rest of the country in the hope of getting a state of his own. He got one in 1947. But today he feels that whatever he got is an illusion. He is now in the danger of being dispossessed. He has right only to give, and no right to preserve or manage his own precious possession. He is frustrated and angry. He resents and complains. But his voice is lost in the din. His soul is about to die out of agony. It
is the comity of Indian nationalities, his nationality has no status except as an unequal and wronged partner. Others are more equal than it. As a wretched member of the club he feels that he is being humiliated. The Assamese feels that his fight for the basic right is being jeopardised in the name of an abstract and remote idea of national integration. The communal ratio or the pattern of the population of his small state is being silently altered in such a manner that within another decade his majority status will be reduced to a minority status. This agony of mind is rarely understood by a Bihari in Bihar, a Bengali in Bengal or a Tamilian in Tamilnadu.14

The very fact that the people of Assam rose like one man in the defence of their selfrespect and in the search of their identity indicated that a deeper socio-cultural regeneration was set in motion in Assam. It is a tragedy that the Indian political parties failed to protect and preserve the self-respect of the people of Assam. Rajmohon Gandhi rightly remarked, "The truth is simpler and uglier. The North East and Assam feel neglected because India has neglected them. We are ignorant and indifferent about they are.... The people of Assam and its neighbours have got used to Indian ignorance and Indian arrogance... But by now they are tired of these failings on our past, and they have decided to force us to lend them our attention. Indians failure in Assam is above all a failure of involvement.
The so-called heart-land of India has been parochial and absorbed with itself. It has no time and no space in its heart for the frontier regions. The latter have had to live with economic neglect and with the burden of illegal immigrants and of refugees. Yet in the creation of the Assam movement the throes of the soul have had a greater part than the throes of the stomach.  

The mass movement in Assam raised the basic issue. Which authority in the Indian Federation commanded the residual loyalty of the citizen? Was it the centre or the constituent unit? The people of Assam gave their unqualified verdict in favour of the constituent unit. It was the crisis of the constitution. As Mahesh Joshi observed, "Assam is caught in the whirlwind of Indian duality the duality of being simultaneously Indian and Assamese. Like all other linguistic groups in India, the Assamese have allowed this duality to torment them for thirty years with the hope that they could conquer it, the end. But now, they are standing at the threshold of a dilemma: Indian or Assamese or both? The substance of the crisis, thus, is Indian. The issue of immigrants or foreigners is just the shadow. The crisis is not a creation of the immigrants; The problem of immigrants, in fact, was born out of the crisis. The crisis matured slowly; but it did climax abruptly."  

Who are the foreigners? In 1978 and early 1979, the terms
'bideshi' (foreigner) and 'bahiragata' (outsider) were used interchangeably. These terms not only denoted non-Indians, but also those Indians who had come to Assam from India's other states. Later the meaning of the term is narrowed down to post 1951 immigrants from foreign countries with questionable citizenship status, and this was widely accepted by the different constituents of the movements. It represented a major tactical shift. Udayan Mishra said, "The mass upsurge centred round the foreign nationals issue must be seen as the outburst of a nationality which has had a long history of neglect, suppression and exploitation. What Assam is witnessing today is the outburst of an oppressed nationality trying to assert itself." Taking advantage of the people's eagerness for immediate solution of the problem and the geographical position of the area, divisive and racist forces tried to utilise the movement for their nefarious ends. Amalendu Guha said, The bourgeois land lord chauvinists skillfully used the press and other communication media to create an impression amongst the politically backward sections of the people that the Bengalis as a community are opposed to the aspirations of the Asamiyas, that they are all leftists and that all leftists in Assam are, in general, a mere agency of Bengali expansionism in eastern India". No doubt there was a fear psychosis, built into the Assamese mind, of being outnumbered by outsiders in due course. Even Jyoti Basu, the chief Minister of West Bengal, whom the local press made the scapegoat for all
The Assam movement has established two theses in the politics of India. (1) people are sovereign and (2) every state of Indian Republic has and identity which the entire India must
respect and conserve. The Government of India insisted on centralisation of the political structure and negation of centrifugal forces. Assam's revolt was against this authoritarianism. Hence Mahesh Joshi said that, the Assam movement "acquired the proportions, dimensions and conditions of a war between the centrifugal and centipetal forces within the Indian polity". Continued and unmitigated economic and social negligence gave rise to intense political anger. All that Assam immediately needed was not boastful patronage nor undue favour but justice pure and simple. No lipful sympathy or high-sounding theory could silence the explosive Assamese mind.

When the student community of Assam under the banner of AASU evolved a strategy for highlighting the gigantic problem of preservation of culture and identity of the Assamese people, all political parties virtually remained silent. The mass movement according to AASU, was built up on Gandhian lines and tactics. Demanding detection and deportation of the illegal aliens took place since 1979 till the signing the Assam Accord in 1985. During this period repressive laws with little respect for safeguard for human rights, dignity and civil liberties were imposed in the state. By and large people violated the laws which to them were found to be undemocratic and illfounded. The Karmachary Parishad which supported AASU participated in the mass movement. In this crucial period the Press in Assam also played a very laudable role, offering constructive suggestion to the Govern-
ment and the leaders of the movement and at the same time expressing resentment against the cruelty and ruthlessness of the security persons. The intensity of the civil disobedience attracted the attention of the national Press also.

Kuldip Nayar wrote about the public violation of the curfew in April 1980 in the following words, "It (state Govt.) imposes a daytime curfew in Gauhati and this proves utterly counterproductive. Nearly the entire population of Gauhati, in an awe some display of solidarity, marched into the streets to break the curfew. It had to be lifted because it became meaningless, repression was also reduced."^21

When dialogue started between the leaders of the movement and the Central Government, the question of deletion of names of the foreigners from the electoral rolls and their deportation bristled with serious difficulties. For, one, the definition of the term "foreigner" was not so simple as it appears on the face of it. There was wide divergence of opinion on the question of fixing the date for accepting immigrants from east Pakistan, now Bangladesh; while the student leaders of Assam insisted that 1952 should be the deadline, the Union Government was reluctant to go back beyond 25 March, 1971, the date mentioned in the Mujib-Indira agreement wherein India undertook to accept all migrants having entered prior to this date as its permanent liability. And finally, the actual deportation had not only
country-wide but international dimensions; on the one hand, it could affect the traditional "vote bank" of the ruling congress party as well as spark off communal riots in rest of the country, on the other hand, it could estrange India's relations with Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Muslim countries of West Asia. The agitation leaders were however alive to the enormity of the problem and realised that this was the last battle for their survival as distinct nationality. They were determined to face it squarely whatever the odds. Professor D.P. Barooah observed, "There can be no doubt as to who is a citizen of India. The Government of India document cited above stated. The rights of citizenship and nationality are governed by India's constitution and the Indian citizenship Act. Articles 5, 6 and 7 of the constitution and sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the citizenship Act clearly define and prescribe who is an Indian citizen. It goes without saying that when one's citizenship in doubt or questioned, one is bound to produce evidence that one satisfies any of the provisions of the constitution of the citizenship Act regarding citizenship. The document also stated that mere inscription of a person's name in the voters list did not prove or confer Indian nationality or citizenship. The Assam movements' insistence on the constitution and the existing laws is perfectly in accord with this established position".

The agitation leaders firmly believed that the Government
of India had no alternative but to fall back upon the National Register of citizens (NRC) of 1951 to identify foreigners in Assam. The 1952 electoral rolls could be another guiding factor. The leaders of the movement rejected the Govt's proposal that 1971 be regarded as the 'starting year' for identification of foreigners because this date had not constitutional sanction. The only significance of 1971 was that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi agreed that those coming to India illegally after March 25th, 1971, would be the responsibility of Bangladesh and not those who had come before this date because the country did not exist then. But for the leaders of the movement this date only determines whether the nationality of the foreigners, Bangladeshi's or not. It does not define an Indian citizen. The constitution and the citizenship act do that.

Assam continued to bleed while years rolled on the name of dialogues. By politicising a constitutional and national issue the Central Government leaders dragged on the futile talks for month after month. In the name of minorities, in the name of ethnic groups, attempts were made by interested quarters to perpetuate the internecine conflicts between one section of indigenous people against another. But it was generally realized and the press contributed a great deal in this regard that a negotiated and political solution to the problem
of foreigners would bring Assam back to its normal peace loving self.

The Assam problem did not originate suddenly, nor could it be solved with a stroke of the pen or the most liberal use of lathi and rifle. The issues involved were much more complex. The pains of the Assamese people were deeper. Essentially that was asserted in their frequent outbursts was an expression of will by sub-nationality for greater participation in the mainstream of national life. Sakhar Gupta rightly observed, "what happened in Assam should set not just the Assamese but the rest of the country, thinking. Are we, as a nation, conscious of the serious problems that crop up in distant regions which may not affect Delhi or Lucknow so much but which may be life and death issues for a small beleaguered national minority? Assam is the test case." 24

REFERENCES:


9. Ibid.


13. AASU & AAGSP : Save Assam To-day to save India Tomorrow : An appeal from the people of Assam, PP. 4-6.


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