Chapter VII
ENGLISH PRESS IN ASSAM

VII.1. The history of the press in India had started with the Bengal Gazette of James Augustus Hicky. It appeared from Calcutta in 1780. Bengal Gazette or Calcutta General Advertiser was an English paper devoted to the cause of the English people living in India. As discussed earlier, in 1646, after 66 years of the birth of the first newspaper in India, Arunoday, an Assamese monthly paper had laid the foundation of the press in Assam. Arunoday was the mouthpiece of the American Baptist Mission in Assam and it used Assamese as the medium of the paper. At the initial stage of the press in the province, nobody thought about publishing a newspaper in English. However, in 1877 after 31 years of the publication of Arunoday, in the Administrative Report on the Province of Assam it was recorded that a paper called the Dibrugarh Telegraph appeared from the Exchange Lithographic Press of Lakhimpur district. The reasons for the publication are not known but it sowed the seeds of the English press in Assam. The Dibrugarh Telegraph belonged to the Planter's Store Company Limited. So, it is reasonable to believe that it was basically in the interest of the tea planters of Upper Assam. Be that as it might be, Dibrugarh was the birthplace of the English press in Assam. On 5 January 1895, the Times of Assam, a weekly newspaper appeared from Dibrugarh launching an era in the history of journalism in Assam. As the first English
weekly, the *Times of Assam* had provided a definite shape and modernism to both English as well as the Assamese press in the State. On 5 January 1919 the paper had celebrated the silver jubilee of its publication and on that occasion Radha Nath Changkakoty (1856–1923), the editor and founder of the paper gave a detailed account of the birth of the *Times of Assam*. On the basis of that account, Lakhmi Nath Phukan, the editor of the *Times of Assam* of a later period had prepared a brief history of the paper. Moreover, on the request of Sir Karl-Loew, the Chief Commissioner of Assam the editor of the paper also prepared a brochure on the birth and growth of the *Times of Assam*. So, it helped to find a clearer account of the circumstances that led to the publication of the first English paper in Assam.

Since 1880–1881, the founder of the *Times of Assam* had conceived an idea of publishing a newspaper in Assam and he received encouragement in this regard from Dr. John Barry White, the Civil Surgeon of Dibrugarh and the founder of the Barry White Medical School, the first medical institution in the State. In order to back his moral support with concrete actions, Dr. White even sent a printing press to R. N. Changkakoty in the address of the Chief Engineer of the Assam Railway and Trading Company. However, the new manager of the company did not handover the machine to its actual owner and subsequently, it was used to print railway tickets of the A.R.T. company. In 1881, he managed to get a wooden press from Calcutta but within a short time it was destroyed by fire.
However, he was able to establish an iron printing press on the previous site. In 1893 he went to Calcutta to give evidence before the Royal Commission on Opium. During this time he drew a comprehensive plan to publish a paper and tried to collect donations from various places in Assam. In this mission he received Rupees one hundred from the fund of Borpeta Kirton Char. Rupees three hundred from Moheswar Goswami and Kalicharan Sen of Gauhati on behalf of their association and Rupees two hundred from Sri Sri Patta Chay Goswami, the satradhikar of the Anwati satra of Majuli. With this capital in hand, he was ready to publish an English paper, which was a novel idea at that time not only for Dibrugarh but for the whole of the region. It is to be noted that from the very beginning the Times of Assam had received the patronage of the British tea planters as well as government officials of Assam. Mr. F.C. Moran, the manager of Khanikor Tea estate and the Chairman of Dibrugarh Local Board named the paper as Times of Assam and offered help in other directions. In the month of October 1895 James Buckingham of Anguri T.E., invited R.N. Changkakoty to spend the Puja holidays with him. In response to the invitation he went to Anguri T.E. and they discussed the future of the paper. During the course of discussion Mr Buckingham suggested to him not to make the paper the mouthpiece of political parties. The paper was first printed at Radha Nath Press which was subsequently named as the Times of Assam press. Sir William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam appointed the Times of Assam press of Dibrugarh for all government printing works to be printed in
Assam. During his tenure of office, Edward Galt, the Chief Commissioner of Assam had ordered all the Deputy Commissioners and Sub-Divisional Officers of the Brahmaputra Valley to subscribe to the paper. The paper had received advertisements from tea gardens and commercial companies of Calcutta dealing with tea garden materials. Later on, it also managed to receive advertisements from the government side. At first the Times of Assam had only four pages in demy size, but in course of time the pages of the paper were increased to fourteen in royal size. Most of the pages were covered with advertisements. The Times of Assam also received advertisement from London and perhaps it was the first paper of Assam to have reached the capital of the U.K. At first the paper could not obtain more than twelve hundred permanent subscribers. So, it had to depend mostly on advertisement. Advertisements brought money and within a short time the Times of Assam and its press became an organisation to be reckoned with.

The Times of Assam weekly appeared on every Saturday of the week. Besides the contributions of the local writers, the paper had published a regular column by a columnist from outside the country. A British lady regularly wrote in the paper till the time of the first world war. An Englishman from Calcutta wrote on the subject of agriculture till his death. The Times of Assam in its infant stage had received the patronage of a person having proficiency in the art of journalism. He was Basambod Mitra (1854-1948), a rising advocate and leading citizen of Dibrugarh and he associated
himself with the paper since its publication. But within three years, he broke his relations with the paper and started a rival paper. However, the Press Act of 1910 paved the way for his return to the Times of Assam. Because at that time the management of the paper felt the presence of a legal expert in the establishment. In the hands of R.N. Changkakoty the Times of Assam became almost the spokesman of the British tea planter community of Assam. In fact the policy of the paper was determined by the planters and government officials of the State. However, as assistant editor of the paper, Basawat Mitra tried to maintain the balance and make it as the mouthpiece of Assam and the Assamese people. He was connected with the editorial board for about thirty years and during this time he wrote most of the editorials of the paper. The editorials of the Times of Assam covered a variety of topics from international politics, all India issues and problems of Assam to purely local issues of Dibrugarh and neighbouring areas. 

Interesting news items were transformed into editorial comment with satirical remarks. At the beginning of the first decade of the 20th century the Bengal government made a survey on the native-owned English and vernacular newspapers of Eastern Bengal and Assam. In the report for the year 1911 and 1912 the Times of Assam found an important place. It provided a true picture of the policy and character of the paper and its impact on the contemporary society. The paper, inspite of its pro-government character highlighted the poverty and degraded condition of the ryots and urged early remedial measures. Assam papers suggested that electorates of the Local Boards in Assam
should be composed of men who possessed some educational qualifications and not the Gaanbharas who were, according to Times of Assam "creatures of the Mausadars and had hardly any pretension of education." The Assamese press very often protested against the employment of non-Assamese in educational services and demanded Assamese headmasters for Assamese schools and lost no opportunity in pointing out the success of schools under Assamese management. Even Assamese members of the Legislative Council were not above the criticism of the local press. A Sibsagar correspondent of the Times of Assam in its issue of 24 June 1911, disparagingly remarked that they were not fulfilling the trust entrusted to their care in as much as they had concentrated their attention exclusively on the welfare of Kamrup and Nowgong. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 were introduced to give share to the Indian States in the administration. Welcoming the Morley-Minto reforms the Times of Assam with its pro-government leanings remarked: "If the reforms will not be able to reconcile the irreconcilables, we do not know that will. In that case the fault will not lie with the government." Apart from local and national problems the Times of Assam also covered international problems. With reference to the Turko-Italian War (1911-1912), the paper doubted whether, it would be possible for the Muslims of the British dominion to maintain their neutrality, since the Sultan of Turkey was their recognised Caliph. The position of the Indians in the colonies also excited criticism in the Times of Assam. The paper held the view that "treatment befitting helots was meted out to the Indians in the colonies" specially
in Canada and British Columbia and, therefore, it pleaded for intervention by the Government of India. It is interesting that a newspaper published from Assam, at the beginning of the century, took keen interest in international politics.

In 1923 Radha Nath Changkakoty, the founder editor of the *Time of Assam* died and Lakhi Nath Phukon, a young man of 28 years took charge of the paper. During that time Mahatma Gandhi started the Non-cooperation movement against the British and like other parts of the country Assam was also drawn into it. The new editor, though cautiously abstained from the politics of the Congress party but pursued a nationalist line. However, after completion of three years of service he had to resign from the post of editor of the *Time of Assam*. The *Time of Assam* had continued its publication till 1949 and celebrated its golden jubilee in 1945. In fact the *Time of Assam* was the only newspaper in Assam which enjoyed the privilege of celebrating the golden jubilee. After the resignation of L.N. Phukon, Probodh Chandra Dutta, Tilek Chandra Sarma, Kedar Nath Goswami, Md. Abdulle, Probhat Chandra Sarma, Indubhusen Chakravorty, Sarada Sankar Prasad Dutta and Jibanram Phukon respectively took the assignment of editing the paper. From 1937 to 1938 at the time of the editorship of Kedar Nath Goswami, the *Time of Assam* openly sided with the policy of the Indian National Congress. Naturally, the planter community of Assam became furious and as a result the editor had to resign. However, in spite of the resignation of K.N. Goswami the paper gradually freed itself from its pro-British policy.
In January 1910, Lakhni Nath Besboruah in his monthly magazine Bambh had posed the question of the long life of the Times of Assam and himself replied that it was the business policy of the paper which provided a long lease of life. The independence movement and the Second World War brought about rapid changes to the country and it also affected the fate of the paper. As a result of the changing policy, the paper had already lost its old patronage of the government as well as the planter community of Assam. In September 1947 for the first time the Times of Assam had broken its continuity and finally disappeared on 15 August 1949. The Times of Assam was not only a newspaper but an institution for the people of Assam. In its long life of about 52 years this weekly newspaper had influenced not only the elites of the society but the simple village folk without any knowledge of English language. In the remote villages the people had pronounced the paper as "Times of" instead of Times of Assam and for many years during the pre-independence period the Times of Assam had represented the concept of a modern newspaper in the minds of the common people of Assam.

VII.11 The Times of Assam had opened a distinct period in English press in the province. However, from the very beginning, the paper was regarded as the organ of the British community of Assam. So, in the elite sections of the Assamese society it was felt necessary to publish an English newspaper with purely indigenous effort and nationalist outlook. It was already stated that Basambad Mitra was associated with the Times
of Assam till 1929. However, since 1899, at least for twelve years he dissociated himself from the publication of the paper. During the period of his dissociation from the *Times of Assam*, Basabed Mitra edited two newspapers at his own initiative infused with a national spirit. In 1899 the *Eastern Herald* appeared from Dibrugarh as a weekly paper of "politics, morals and society". It was printed and published by Wm. S. Taylor at Albion press, on behalf of Durga Dutta Agerwala, a marwari businessman and proprietor of the paper. It appeared on every Monday and contained 12 pages in full-scape size and the first and last two pages were full of advertisement. In fact, every page of the paper represented the quality of its editor. The first page with the heading "Notes" published comments on lectures of important persons delivered on different occasions both in and outside the country. The editorial page contained regular editorial comments on important subjects concerning public life. Letters to the editor was an interesting column containing contradictory viewpoints. For instance a letter was published, written by a senior student, about the need of the foundation of a college in Assam. The editor of the *Times of Assam* had refused to publish the letter in his paper. However, the *Eastern Herald* published the letter of the student in support of the movement for a college in the province. In its regular news columns like news and notes provincial and local news, the paper carried news of different places inside and outside the country. The *Eastern Herald* usually offered comments on the social evils
of Indian society in general and the Hindu society in particular. It very often reproduced certain news items from the leading news papers like Pioneer Mail and Pioneer of that period. The Eastern Herald existed for a short time and during this period Dr. Umesh Chandra Banerjee, a Bengali citizen of Dibrugarh was associated with the editing of the paper. The paper ceased its publication in 1901.

The Citizen was the second English paper appearing from Dibrugarh in 1902 under the direct patronage and editorship of Basanbad Mitra. Kalinath Roy, the renowned journalist of that time had edited the paper for about two years and during this period the paper had secured a national status. In 1905 he had left Dibrugarh and later he edited the Tribune of Lahore. He was prosecuted by the British government for his writings on the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 and thus earned fame throughout the country. The Citizen continued its publication for about five years. An ex-professor of the City College and former advocate of the Alipore court, Calcutta, Basanbad Mitra had already proved his intellectual and political abilities as the editor of the Eastern Herald. He collected and compiled the important editorials of the Eastern Herald into a book called "Thoughts Eastern and Western". The writings of Basanbad Mitra could draw the attention of men like Rabindra Nath Tagore of Bengal. He wrote to Mitra to leave Dibrugarh and settle down in Calcutta for proper utilization of his talents.8
At the beginning of the century, a handful of newspapers in Assam actually stood for the idea of self-determination or *swadeshi* and *swaraj* when the nationalist movement sprang up in other parts of the country. In this respect, the Advocate of Assam, an English weekly firmly stood side by side with other newspapers of the country in defence of the spirit of *swadeshi* and *swaraj*. Mathura Mohan Barowa (Baruah), the editor and proprietor of the paper had enjoyed a special position as pioneer in the profession of journalism in the province. At the close of the 19th century, he started his career in journalism through a number of leading newspapers of the country. He was well versed in English and regularly wrote in a number of English newspapers published from Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Lahore and Bombay. Thus he established himself as a columnist of the contemporary press circles of India. In the first decade of the 20th century, he transferred his journalistic activities to his own state and concentrated his energy in the publication of a nationalist English weekly. However, before that he was the first editor of Asam Benti, an Assamese weekly published from Tespur. We are told that he received practical experience in journalism working at first in the Hyderabad Chronicle started by Aghor Nath Chaterjee, the father of Mrs. Soronji Naidu, one of the leading nationalist leaders of the country. The Advocate of Assam was a weekly paper "devoted to politics, agriculture, economics and sanitation and published particularly, in the interest of the people of Assam." The regular columns like Notes and News,
Editorial correspondence, News of the day covered the news and views of Assam and outside the State. The second page of the paper published editorial comments and dealt with a number of topics at a time. For example a particular issue of the paper had selected five topics of different taste and these were the unrest in India, a suicidal spirit, a correspondence and our reply thereto, election of a president and well-earned holiday. By selecting different topics for editorial comments having national and local importance the editor tried to maintain a balance between national and provincial interest. It also used to print the abstracts of news items of foreign newspapers like the London Daily News and wanted to acquaint the people with the latest developments in international politics. At the beginning of the present century Japan could impress the Indian elites with her rapid economic and industrial development on the line of the western world. The editor of the Advocate of Assam also discussed the achievements of Japan and asked—'What the Japs have achieved; can they be our model?'

The Advocate of Assam was published in 1905 and appeared on every Monday of the week. "Born of the people, fed by the people for whom should I work, but for the people?" these lines were printed over the date line of the paper. Charles Bradlaugh, a British M.P. and supporter of the Indian National Congress had quoted these lines, when he attended the Bombay Congress in 1889. In fact, the policy and programmes of the Advocate of Assam were reflected in this select saying of Charles Bradlaugh. The paper appeared at a time, when the
Partition of Bengal roused the nationalist sentiment of the people of Bengal and different parts of India. So the British government was very much concerned over the publication of this English paper with a strong dose of nationalism from Assam, since this part of the country was indirectly connected with the movement against the partition of Bengal. A survey made by the British administration on the native and the English press of Assam and Eastern Bengal directly pointed out the tone and character of the paper. The Advocate of Assam published articles from time to time, even condemning the policy of the government as "unsympathetic and retrograde". The paper strongly denounced the existing land laws of Assam since they denied the cultivators permanent rights over lands. "The ryot", explained the paper "cannot look upon his land as something which he permanently owns, he feels no abiding interest in it and cares not to improve it to the extent he would have otherwise done."

The Advocate of Assam practically stood for the ideals of swadeshi, swaraj, self-determination and nationalism and encouraged the people to stand unitedly against social injustice. It sought to promote the need for social reforms and extension of education in the society. The paper vehemently criticised administrative anomalies and injustice of the foreign rule in the country. The paper was naturally regarded as a "powerful weapon of public opinion." The paper from the very beginning had to face financial troubles which ultimately caused its premature death. After seven years of publication, it finally disappeared. However, the Advocate of
Assam with its short tenure of life made a powerful impact on the people, particularly, the elites of the Assamese society. At the initial period of the publication of the *Advocate of Assam* from Dibrugarh another English newspaper, *Assam Chronicle* was also published. It first appeared in 1905. Krishnadhar Barua had edited the paper, but it was short-lived and could not make an impact on the society. However, in a later period the editor of the paper had to take credit the editorship of another weekly, *Assam Herald*, which appeared in 1912 from Nowgong.

At the close of the fourth decade of the present century, a joint venture was made from Dibrugarh in the field of the English press in Assam. On 4 August 1938 the *Assam Tribune* appeared as weekly English paper from Bearnah press of Dibrugarh. It was published on every Friday and edited by Lakhi Nath Phukan, the former editor of the *Times of Assam* and the assistant editor of the *Hindustan Standard* of Calcutta. The *Assam Tribune* had maintained the policy of giving importance to the local problems and appeared as a formidable rival to the *Times of Assam*, the first English weekly of the province. In fact the *Assam Tribune* could wrest the goodwill of the planter community of Assam whose patronage was essential for smooth running of the English papers in the pre-independence period in the province. At the initiative of Mr. R.G. Rayel, the superintendent of Maizan T.E. of Dibrugarh the *Assam Tribune* obtained advertisements from the tea gardens. In course of time the *Assam Tribune* had gradually reached the position
formerly occupied by the Times of Assam in the field of English press. With the increase in circulation of the Weekly Assam Tribune, Radha Gebind Barua, the keyman behind the paper seriously thought about a daily English paper. It seemed an unrealisable dream at that time. He carefully studied the possibility of a daily paper in the region and silently proceeded with his novel scheme. As a first step, he shifted the venue of the press from Dibrugarh to Gauhati and managed to obtain the sole right of ownership of the press and the paper. From 14 August 1946, the Weekly Assam Tribune regularly appeared from Gauhati instead of Dibrugarh. 30 September 1946 is a memorable day in the history of journalism in Assam. On that day the Assam Tribune, the first English daily of the State and now a leading English newspaper of North-Eastern India appeared from the Tribune Press of Gauhati. From the very beginning, the Assam Tribune carefully abstained from being the mouthpiece of a particular interest or party. The paper adopted an independent national policy and not a purely Congress policy. The Assam Tribune had already celebrated its silver jubilee and it has come to enjoy the position of a leading national daily of the country. Moreover, due to the foresightness and sagacity of R.G. Barua the Assam Tribune establishment at present is a renowned newspaper group with three papers having extensive circulation in North-Eastern India.
VII,III Since 1864 for about one hundred and ten years Shillong continued as the capital of Assam. As a result Shillong was directly or indirectly connected with political as well as cultural life of the State for more than a century. Since 1874, with formation of a new separate province under a Chief Commissioner a complete administrative machinery had started to work from Shillong. As a part of the administration, an official news bulletin was considered essential to keep the people informed about the day to day development in the administration of the State. So, Assam Gazette, a weekly official news bulletin was regularly published by Her Majesty's Government. It appeared from the Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong. From the view-point of journalism, the Assam Gazette cannot be regarded as a newspaper. It was however, the first news bulletin appeared from Shillong. In 1889, the Assam Advertiser, a weekly English paper was published by Golam Hyder & Co. and it appeared from Assam Advertising Press. In fact it was a trade bulletin and most of the pages were covered with advertisements only. Simultaneously, in the field of vernacular press the Khasi & Jayantia Hills had already made remarkable progress. Even in 1902 two Khasi papers U Khasi Minto (the Khasi of today), the Kepatemg Christian (the Christian community) were published from Shillong and another Khasi paper the Mongialem Catholic was published by the Roman Catholic Mission of Leikynsew in Khasi hills. These papers received the patronage of the Christian Missions established in the district to spread Christianity in that region. Side
by side a number of newspapers, mostly in English medium appeared from Shillong. However, none of these papers could claim steady progress and a good many of them ceased publication before long. In 1927 International Times, an English weekly was published from Shillong under the editorship of Tarun Chandra Bhattacharyya. We are told that the editor unsuccessfully tried to give an international image to the paper at the cost of local problems. Soon, the policy of the editor was proved wrong and the paper ceased its publication. The names of newspapers like the Shillong Mail, an English weekly edited by Lala Bijoy Kumar Dey, the Messenger, a monthly English publication and organ of the Shillong Islam Mission and edited by Maulvi Abdus Samad, the Shillong Times, an English weekly first appearing in 1945 deserve mention in the field of the early English Press in Assam.
NOTES ON CHAPTER VII

1. Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam, for the year 1877-1878, (Shillong, 1879)


3. Sir James Bakingham, Member of the British Parliament in later period.


5. Ibid., p. 155

6. Ibid., p. 155


8. Saikia, op.cit., p. 6


10. The Advocate of Assam, Vol. III, No. 23 (June 10, 1907)


12. The Advocate of Assam, April 27, 1905

13. Barpumari, op.cit., p. 154

