Chapter VII
BENGAL PRESS AND THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION IN EARLY BRITISH ASSAM

VIII.I The process of westernization in Assam in the 19th century was expedited through the medium of three broad factors. The spread of British administration in the region, the cultural activities of the Christian Missionaries and the direct and indirect impact of the Bengal renaissance equally influenced and contributed to the formation of the background of renaissance in modern Assam. In this respect the growth of public opinion in the early stage of the British rule in the State was the direct influence of the latter two factors. It is acknowledged on all hands that American Baptist Mission had started the era of Assamese journalism through the publication of Arunoday; the first ever paper that appeared in Assam. However, long before the publication of Arunoday educated sections of the people of Assam had the benefit of coming across newspapers. It was noted above how in the early period of the British administration till 1874, Assam was governed as the part of the Bengal presidency and the Assamese language did not occupy its rightful place. Till that time there existed only three local newspapers in the Assam Valley. The first two appeared in Assamese from Sibsagar district and the third was an Anglo-Bengali weekly paper published from Gauhati. Displacement of Assamese had its undoubted deleterious effects on the cultural and economic life of the
indigenous people. Further, it facilitated the growth of the Bengal press. Discussing the position of Bengal press in the country Pat Lovett said that the Indian press of Bengal bore the burnt of the battle with dauntless courage. The first in glory, as the first in place. In wide perspective of the development of the press in India he was right in his assessment on the position of Bengal press. It is to be remembered that the course of events in the political history of India in the 19th century had established closed link between the people of Bengal and Assam and naturally, therefore, the Assamese people were brought within the orbit of the Bengal press both English and vernacular. In the early phases of British administration accounts of events in Assam appeared in the Bengal press as in other places of the Bengal province in British India. Despite the hurdles imposed by the language factor, it objectively helped the people of the region for exchange of ideas, as well as, making themselves aware of the developments outside their own province. It led to the growth of public opinion.

Samaober Darpan (1818–1840), a Bengali weekly published from Serampur Mission happened to be the oldest vernacular paper, not only in Bengal but in the whole of India. From the very beginning this newspaper gave adequate space to Assam in its columns and was well received by the readers. Some leading citizens of the province not only subscribed to the paper but also occasionally expressed their views on contemporary events through the columns of the paper. In fact
the paper published both news and views of contemporary issues. Similarly Samoohar Chandrika (b.1822) had wide circulation in Assam at the early period of the British rule in the region. Holiram Dhekial Phukon (1802-1832), a leading thinker of the period was the first subscriber to Bengali papers in the province and persuaded others to do so. He was for the female education in the country and in an anonymous letter published in Samoohar Darpan supported the cause of female education against the policy of contemporary papers like Samoohar Chandrika and Prabhakar. It was revealed after the death of Dhekial Phukon by the editor of Samoohar Darpan in its issue of 25 August 1832. Bengali papers like Samoohar Darpan (30 July 1831), Samoohar Chandrika (22 September 1831) and Bengadut (7 November 1839) took note of the publication of his Asom Baranji in 1839, written in Bengali and the first printed history of the region. Holiram Dhekial Phukon published a synopsis of his proposed book Kamarupa Yatra Paddhati in advance through a letter appeared in Samoohar Chandrika in its issue of 15 October 1831 and invited opinion from religious people. Besides this letter, he also wrote another letter in Samoohar Chandrika discussing the commercial prospect in the region. It appeared in its issue of 4 June 1831. The paper expressed happiness in its issue of 18 March 1832 at the appointment of Holiram Dhekial Phukon as the Assistant Magistrate of Gauhati. Samoohar Darpan elaborately published his obituary report in its issue of 18 and 25 August 1832. Juggoran Dhekial Phukon (1805-1835), the brother of
elder Dhokia Phukan and the Seristadar and Sader Amin of Gauhati was one of the few distinguished people of Assam who maintained contact with early Bengal press. In a letter published in Samochar Darpan in its issue of 9 July 1831 he congratulated the Government of India for abolishing the sutee and respectfully referred to Raja Ram Mohan Roy as mahaprajina. He also ridiculed the orthodox Brahmans as living on idol-mongering. In another letter to this weekly, published on 19 May 1832 he suggested the popularisation of Hindustani printed in the Bengali script. He translated an English poem to Bengali which was appeared in Samochar Darpan in its issue of 30 July 1831 with a special note from the editor on the increase of knowledge in Assam. Maniram Borhundar Baruah, an Assamese noble man and patriot wrote letters to the editors in contemporary Bengali papers. In his letter to the editor of Samochar Darpan containing a brief note on the political history of Assam he tried to depict the background situation in Assam on the eve of the Company's Raj in the province. In fact through this letter he welcomed the coming of the Company's Raj to Assam. The letter appeared in the paper in its issue of 21 September 1839. Subsequently, however, Maniram Dewan became a rebel and was executed in 1858 on the charge of conspiracy against the rule of the East India Company in Assam. It is to be noted that Weekly India Gazette (b. 1780) published a news item in its issue of 30 September 1858 concerning the death of this Assamese patriot. Jaduram Deka Baruah and Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (1810-1870) both high
officials under British administration and also champions of reforms in Assam expressed themselves through the columns of the Samachar Darpan and Samachar Chandrika. Citing an example of suttee at Kovarapur of Sibsagar district Jadunath Deba Barua criticised the system of suttee in sharp language. Similarly, he wrote another letter to Samachar Darpan pointing out few mistakes in Asom Burenji written by Holiram Dhekial Phukan. It appeared in its issue of 15 October 1831. Samachar Chandrika was also popular with merowari traders even in the interior village of Kalangpar in Darrang district in 1855.5 Later Samprakash (b. 1858), a Bengali paper published under the joint efforts of Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Dewaraka Nath Vidyalankar took keen interest on Assam. In its issue of 22 July 1867 the paper advocated administrative charges in the province to develop its vast untrapped resources. Commenting on the new judiciary rules limiting the right of appeal of the common man to the higher courts in certain civil suits, the paper in its issue of 5 August 1867 suggested that in a non-regulated province like Assam the judges and pleaders be appointed only after they did their qualifying examinations. The paper protested in its next issue on 12 August 1867 against frequent re-assessment of revenue since such practices compelled the ryots to migrate to areas where revenue was lower. Naturally it made collection of revenue difficult for the Munsadars in their respective areas. The paper also focussed attention on the plight of the tea garden labourers of Assam. Besides these papers Bangabashi (b. 1881), a Bengali
weekly serving the cause of Hindu orthodoxy, Samaj (b. 1883), a rival of Bangabashi and mouthpiece of Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and Weekly Hitabadi (b. 1891) were popular vernacular Bengali papers enjoying wide circulation in the province.

VIII.II With the circulation of the vernacular papers the English press of Bengal owned by both Englishmen and indigenous proprietors had also circulation in Assam. In the early part of British rule an English paper named Friend of India (b.1818) appeared from the Serampur Mission of Bengal. It had occasion to comment on the annexation of Upper Assam and the administration of Raja Purandar Singh, the last ruler of whom kingdom in Assam. It appeared in the paper in its issue of 22 March 1838. The editor published letters from enthusiastic readers on such affairs with personal remarks in the form of small notes.6 Upendra Nath Baruah (1859-1955), renowned educationist and thinker of Assam maintained close links with the English press of Bengal like the daily Englishman (b. 1821), Indian Mirror (b. 1861) the latter being the first English daily under Indian management, Bengali (b. 1868), the mouthpiece of independent thinking and Amanta Bazar Patrike (b. 1868), published first in Bengali and later on in English. U.N. Baruah protested against Ilbert bill of 1894-1895 and expressed unhappiness over the illegal execution of Maniram Dewan. The editor of the pro-British conservative paper Englishman asked Baruah to write regularly in his paper. In fact it was regarded as honour at that time.7 The Bengali of
Surendra Nath Banerjee, the nationalist leader of Bengal made an impact on the educated section of the Assamese people of that period. Mathuramohan Borooah, an Assamese journalist of the early period established close relations with newspapers published from Calcutta and other parts of Northern India in the later part of the 19th century. Bhola Nath Borooah, an Assamese timber magnate proposed to offer financial assistance to Padmanath Gehain Baruah, the editor of Assam Banti if he could undertake to publish a first class English daily like the Englishman or the Statesman. Like the English-owned Bengal press the national press under Indian management also attracted the Assamese intelligentsia. Benudhur Rajkhawa, an Assamese writer of repute suggested to Chandra Kumar Agarwala, the founder of Weekly Assamiya for the publication of an English daily in the style of the Bengali of Calcutta. Some renowned Assamese journalists of post-independence era like Laskhi Nath Phukon had started their early journalistic careers through the medium of the Bengal press.

The growth of public opinion and the influence of the Bengal press in the province in the early period of the British rule in Assam may be judged from a remark made by Samachar Darpan in the middle of the year 1831. Under the title of "Assam Desho Jnyan Biddhi" (Increase of knowledge in Assam) it was noted with surprise in Samachar Darpan (30 July 1831) that within seven years of coming under British rule, some gentlemen there had attained remarkable success in their quest for knowledge. According to the paper the distinguished
persons of the province of Assam maintained contact with every affair in and about Bengal through the newspapers of this province. In no district of Bengal are found so many subscribers to our newspaper (Samachar Darpan) as are found amongst the people of Assam. Moreover, while from about half the districts of Bengal no letter is sent and appears in newspapers, hardly a week passes without a letter being sent from Assam to us or to other newspaper editors of this province (Bengal). It is a best example of the impact of Bengal press and attitude of the people of Assam in the early part of the 19th century. It may be further noted that this appreciative remark was made five years before the arrival of the American Baptist Mission and fifteen years before the publication of Arunoday, the first Assamese newspaper in the region.
NOTES ON CHAPTER VIII


2. Lovett Pet, Journalism in India, (Calcutta, 1928), p. 42


7. Sarma, op.cit., p. 154
