Chapter - II
Chapter II
Press and the Development of National Consciousness

One of the notable consequences of the impact of western culture in India in general and Bengal in particular was the growth of modern journalism. In the 19th century, Bengal witnessed remarkable changes in its social and political sphere and the Bengali press was instrumental in bringing about the change. The press worked to transform heterogeneous hoard into a homogeneous nation. By disseminating information on political, social and economic matters, the press paved the way for the growth of nationalism in Bengal in particular and India in general. Margarita Barns observed that the dissatisfaction over company’s monopoly and administration prompted enlightened section of the society to develop and nurture the Indian press.¹

way, prepared the ground for the emergence of nationalist consciousness among the native people. The rapid growth of vernacular press at the initiative of the enlightened natives became a matter of great concern to the Company’s official circle and it alarmed Company’s high officials. Even personalities like Elphinstone and Munro, who were all along sympathetic towards the cause of the Indians, expressed their unhappiness over the developments. This unhappiness took the shape of apprehension that Indians might become critical of the authorities and this apprehension led the authorities to impose restrictions on the native press under Company’s regime. This, in a way, was beneficial, because it helped the growth of public opinion in Bengal and the responsive intelligentsia started raising their voice against the injustice and abuses of the Company’s authorities.

The Great Revolt of 1857 and the subsequent transfer of power from Company’s hands to the British Crown under Queen’s Proclamation of 1858 were two significant events in the history of Indian Subcontinent. Though the Great Revolt of 1857 failed to fulfil the aspirations of the Indians, yet it provided boldness and determination to the Indian masses in expressing their views and thoughts in a courageous manner. The post-mutiny period witnessed a rapid consolidation of the forces of nationalism and this gave a tremendous fillip to the press activities in India. If the first half of the 19th century was the childhood of Indian nationalism, the second half

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witnessed its steady march towards maturity. Actually, nationalism and press were complementary – one influencing the other in its path of progress. The press had become the carrier of the seeds of nationalism and in this process, it enriched itself. Moreover, when the nationalist leaders propagated their political philosophy through their organs, they indeed furthered the cause of the press in general. Tilak’s Kesari, Surendranath Banerjee’s The Bengalee and Matilal Ghosh’s Amrita Bazar Patrika were all mighty organs of nationalist ideas in the country.

When Bengal was experiencing the growth of nationalism and patriotism backed by the indigenous press, Surma Valley consisting of the district of Sylhet and the plain portions of Cachar received the tidal wave of nationalism. Though the native press made its appearance at a latter stage, yet prominent press personalities like Gourishankar Bhattacharjee popularly known as Gurgure Bhattacharjee, brought Sylhet into the arena of journalism and became successful in securing a place of his own among the Calcutta-based journalists.

A person of indomitable courage and exceptional merit, Gourishankar had the opportunity to work under the guidance of Raja Rammohun Roy when he joined the weekly Sangbad Kaumudi as one of its editors. He was greatly influenced by the reforming zeal of Raja Rammohun Roy, a person commonly known as the father of Indian Renaissance. His association with Jnananneswan, which led a crusade

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3 J. Natarajan, op.cit., pp.81-82.

against various social odds under the leadership of Henry Vivian Derozio, was the evidence of his radical outlook. Gourishankar incurred the displeasure of the alien government when he highlighted various contemporary events in a satirical manner. The imperial government reacted sharply by throwing him behind the bars. But this could not dampen his spirit. As an editor of *Sangbad Bhaskar* started by Kamal Krishna Deb Bahadur, Raja of Shovabazar, Gourishankar highlighted issues like cultural regeneration, spread of women education, prohibition of *Sati*, introduction of widow remarriage etc., which stimulated the growth of national consciousness among the people of Bengal and especially among the local inhabitants of Surma Valley. Though he lived far away from the place of his origin, yet his inspiring writings became a source of inspiration to the people of Surma Valley and helped in the development of national consciousness among them.⁵

The year 1874 witnessed an administrative reorganisation which adversely affected the destiny of Surma Valley. The Chief Commissioner’s province of Assam was created by carving it out from the Presidency of Bengal. The economic viability of the newly formed province was not encouraging and in order to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province, the two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were incorporated in the province of Assam, though linguistically, culturally, socially and geographically these two districts were distinctly different from the districts of the Bramhaputra Valley which was known as Assam proper. The administrative

decision to transfer these two districts of Sylhet and Cachar simply unnerved the people and consequently, the people raised their dissentient voice against this high-handed administrative decision.

Considering the new administrative arrangement as the first partition of Bengal, the residents of twin districts of Sylhet and Cachar opposed the transfer. It raised a tumult of protest throughout the valley. To undo the grievous wrong, the residents of the district of Sylhet initiated a movement for reunion with Bengal. Submitting a memorial to the Government of India on August 10, 1874, Hamid Bakht Mazumdar on behalf of the inhabitants raised the demand for transfer highlighting Sylhet's long association with Bengal. It was followed by another memorandum submitted on August 14, 1874 on behalf of Sylhet People's Association. Signed by 2130 inhabitants of Sylhet, the Sylhet People's Association claimed that from ancient time Sylhet formed an integral part of Lower Bengal and governed on the same principles, rules and forms without any distinction. It should not be transferred to Assam. The memorialists asserted, "... the Bengalees and Assamese were two separate nations, and the pride of the people of Sylhet as of belonging to the former nation will certainly be humbled to the dust with the loss of all connection with the Government of Bengal; there can be nothing more degrading and mortifying to them than to lose their very national name, so dear to them."^6

The sentiments of the people can be realised from the profound writings of Ajit Kumar Neogi, who in his book *Partition of Bengal* observed: ‘While the official world held divergent views on the question of the creation of Assam’s Chief Commissionership and the redistribution of districts and divisions, the public opinion of the areas affected was united in condemning the measure. Neither the Press nor the people of these areas acquiesced in the decision. Their reaction was quick and profound.’ The Bengal press also took up the issue and *Indian Daily News* wrote that the youth who had been for years above the age of a schoolboy should not be sent back to the birch. Hitherto government had never “fallen into a mistake so discreditable, for it has been the rule to raise the status of outlying districts, not to lower the rest of India to their level.” The *Hindu Patriot* ventilated the feelings of the people in the following words, “Sylhet was the golden calf which was sacrificed for the new idol called the Province of Assam.”

The press in the valley started its journey in the midst of turmoil centring on the administrative decision to tag Surma Valley to Assam. The year 1875 was a landmark in the history of journalism in the valley when Sylhet witnessed the emergence of a weekly paper, namely *Srihatta Prakash*. The weekly under the editorship of Pyaricharan Das, a resident of Latu, Karimganj was successful in leaving a deep mark in the minds of its readers for a long time to

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7 Quoted by J. B. Bhattacharjee from Ajit Kumar Neogi’s book *Partition of Bengal* in his paper “Reaction of the people of Surma Valley to transfer of the Valley to Assam”, proceedings of NEIHA, Shillong, 1989, p. 448.


come. Right from its inception, the paper attempted to ventilate the grievances of the people of the Surma Valley. It was instrumental in highlighting public feeling. Actually, the grievances of the people found its expression in the pages of Srihatta Prakash. When the people of Sylhet were apprehensive about the future of their own language, culture, education and identity, the paper stood to their expectation. To be precise, the ground for nationalism in Surma-Barak Valley was prepared by regional and linguistic consciousness, but at no stage of its development, it gave priority to its regional demand subordinating the national cause. Srihatta Prakash, the first newspaper from the valley embarked on that particular line and gave a fillip to the concept of nationalism in this remote part of the world at the initial stage.

Its first editor Pyaricharan Das was also a victim of racial discrimination when he was involved in a false murder case of killing a European and awarded imprisonment. After three months, he was released from the jail. Immediately after his release, he left his job in Calcutta and returned back to Sylhet once and for all. Perhaps, the incident made him convinced that the Indians in general were in a helpless condition even in their own country and it brought about a revolutionary change in his outlook and roused in him the feeling of nationalism. It was this spirit of nationalism that made him to start a nationalist weekly like Srihatta Prakash. Though its publication came to a halt after a period of 8/10 years, yet it inspired the masses with the

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11 Ibid.
spirit of nationalism and patriotism and prepared the ground for early national awakening in this valley in the subsequent period.\textsuperscript{12}

It is interesting to note that with the intensification of the discontentment and with the arousal of the nationalist sentiment among the people, there appeared divergence between the views of the press and those of the government. While the native press was trying to find its rightful place, Vernacular Press Act of 1875 came as a sudden blow to the activities of the press. But the Indian press, especially the native press, faced it with courage and determination. The Indian press in general and Bengali press in particular took it as a serious challenge and a Anglo-Bengali weekly, \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika} which started its journey in 1868 under the able guidance of Ghosh brothers stood against the Vernacular Press Act of Lord Lytton. To counter the notorious act, the paper converted itself into English weekly and became instrumental in criticizing various measures of the colonial government. The paper incurred the displeasure of the alien government and had to face the vengeance. Though it was subjected to repression and many members of its editorial board had to face imprisonment, yet the paper by its powerful and constructive writings propagated the spirit of nationalism which helped in the growth of national consciousness in the country. The same was the fate of \textit{The Bengalee}, edited and owned by Surendranath Banerjee. For publishing an article in 1879, considered highly provocative by the imperial government, its editor was awarded an imprisonment of two months. It nevertheless developed a feeling of patriotism among the people of Bengal. Though by this time, Surma Valley was thrown out of the

\textsuperscript{12} M. Shiru, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 25.
geographical boundary of Bengal, yet it had an impending influence in the arena of press as far as Surma-Barak Valley was concerned.\textsuperscript{13}

When the country was passing through a period of turmoil, \textit{Paridarshak}, a nationalist weekly started its publication from Sylhet in 1880. \textit{Paridarshak} followed the footstep of \textit{Srihatta Prakash} and completed the work initiated by the latter in awakening the people and led the valley towards national consciousness.\textsuperscript{14} Its first editor Bipin Chandra Pal, a nationalist and an active supporter of the Brahmo movement in this part of the country dedicated himself to the task of advocating issues like nationalism, liberalism, women education and social reforms. Through \textit{Paridarshak}, he tried to fulfil his dream. The weekly soon became the pathfinder in the realm of newspapers published from the twin districts of Sylhet and Cachar. In his autobiography, Bipin Chandra Pal made it clear that keeping parity with \textit{Bharat Mihir} of Mymensing district, \textit{Paridarshak} could also attract the attention of the masses and became the mouthpiece of the educated section of the Surma Valley. It became the carrier of the seeds of organised public opinion not only in the valley but throughout the province of Bengal.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Paridarshak} took up the responsibility of highlighting various national events such as Ilbert Bill controversy and thereby could make the people of the valley conscious as to how the alien government was determined to crush the nationalist feeling of the native people. Under the editorship of Bipin Chandra Pal, \textit{Paridarshak} became successful in infusing a sense of nationalism among the educated section of the society, who, in course of time

\textsuperscript{13} A.R.Desai, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 224-25.

\textsuperscript{14} Md. Abdul Aziz (ed.), \textit{op.cit.}, p. 340.

\textsuperscript{15} M. Shiru, \textit{op.cit.}, p.25.
influenced the masses. Though it was not possible to have all the copies of *Paridarshak* and to consult them, from the few copies of it found in Jatindramohan Sangrahashala, the archives section of the National Council of Education, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, it seems that *Paridarshak* played an important role and became a source of inspiration to the future generation in the valley. The role of *Paridarshak* can be gauged from the importance with which it highlighted the ill-treatment meted out to Kumudeswar Singha, a scion of the Ahom royal family by the local administration in Sylhet resulting in his premature death. The event soon found its place in a Calcutta based paper *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. The paper demanded a thorough investigation into the matter and stated without any hesitation that “a gross insult has been done to the people of Assam and to that great decayed family which one time held sovereign authority in the province.”

When Bipin Chandra Pal left Sylhet, its editorial responsibility was taken over by Rajchandra Choudhury and subsequently Radhanath Choudhury became its chief editor. Radhanath Choudhury, a close associate of Bipin Chandra Pal and a strong believer of Brahmo faith, took the responsibility of *Paridarshak* at a time when it was passing through a period of severe financial crisis. Mortgaging his own paternal property, Radhanath Choudhury maintained the publication of this weekly. Kumudranjan Bhattacharjee in his *Sahitye O Sangbadikatay Srihatter Abadan* paid tribute to Radhanath, a person

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17 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, July 13, 1885.
of exceptional merit, who sacrificed his life for maintaining the publication of *Paridarshak*, a nationalist weekly of rare exception.\(^\text{18}\)

Radhanath shared equal responsibility with Bipin Chandra Pal and Rajchandra Choudhury in establishing National School at Sylhet which was a source of national inspiration in this remote part of the country.\(^\text{19}\) A true representative of the nationalist ideas, he realised the utility of women education and even engaged *Paridarshak* to popularize its cause. In one of its issues published in 1301 Bangabda, *Paridarshak* also highlighted the prospects of women education.\(^\text{20}\) His wife Hemantakumari also took up the cause and it was due to her untiring efforts that a Girls' Primary School, the first of its kind, was established in the district of Sylhet.\(^\text{21}\) By highlighting different issues, *Paridarshak* hastened the growth of nationalism in the twin districts of Sylhet and Cachar. The uninterrupted publication of *Paridarshak* continued for a period of almost sixty years. Radhanath Das, Prafullamohan Das, Pyarimohan Das and Gopendranath Arjun were other noted personalities associated with this nationalist weekly.\(^\text{22}\)

Edited by Bidhubhusan Roy and published from Silchar in 1889, *Silchar* was the first newspaper published from Cachar. A fortnightly in its mode, the paper started its journey by following the footstep of *Paridarshak*. Its editor Bidhubhusan Roy believed in the dictum, 'Pen is mightier than the sword' guided his activities in the field of journalism. He was a brave personality who never hesitated to

\(^{19}\) K. Bhattacharjee, *op.cit.*, p. 92.
highlight high-handed attitude of the imperial government. Serving in a
government aided school, he spared none. He made a scurrilous
attack on the Inspector of Schools and the DPI for their alleged
misdeeds. His satirical writings created such an uneasy situation for
the alien masters that at one point of time, the then DPI issued an
ultimatum that his school would be debarred from securing
government grant if he continued to do the same. Finding himself in a
precarious position, he was compelled to stop the publication of the
paper for the time being. As soon as Wilson, the DPI who served the
ultimatum, was no more in the office, he started the publication of the
paper once again in 1897. He availed the opportunity and with same
zeal began to publish such news items which led a crusade between
him and the district administration. Threat and intimidation by the
alien rulers could not dampen his spirit. Rather, it further strengthened
his determination to raise voice against the odds. He never bowed
down before colonial high-handedness and tried his best to keep alive
the spirit of nationalism and patriotism intact in this remote corner of
the country. Actually, the paper right from its inception began to
highlight events of national significance which sowed the seeds of
nationalist thinking among the inhabitants of the valley and completed
the process of early national consciousness in the district of Cachar.
The key role that the paper played in the socio-political life of the
district was the creation of an organised public opinion which took a
concrete shape at the dawn of the 20th century.

The advent of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century witnessed a rapid and remarkable growth of nationalism in Surma-Barak Valley. A powerful factor behind this development was the press. By bringing into light the shortcomings of the alien government and its administrative high-handedness, the nationalist press in the valley made a tremendous contribution to the growth of national consciousness among its limited but highly potential circle of readers. \textit{The Weekly Chronicle} that made its appearance at this juncture definitely belonged to that category. Its editor Shashindra Singha, a person of indomitable courage, started his professional career in the steamer company office at Karimganj. He soon became an eyesore to the British authorities when he raised his voice against the step-motherly attitude of the British in the Boer War in South Africa and the inhuman torture and repression committed by them on the Boer people. At one point of time, Shashindra Singha became so disgusted that he resigned and left Karimganj for Sylhet.\textsuperscript{24} A true nationalist and fearless in spirit, he entered into the arena of journalism and decided to protest against the misdeeds of the British imperialists through his powerful writings. When the entire nation was surcharged with the spirit of nationalism, \textit{The Weekly Chronicle} raised its voice against the colonial misdeeds and became the vanguard of the nationalist ideas in the twin districts of the valley. The editor of the weekly was instrumental in highlighting issues of national importance which created sensation throughout the region. \textit{The Weekly Chronicle}, in its issue published on 4\textsuperscript{th} September, 1904 highlighted an event showing the racial arrogance of the imperial masters. The news read:

\textsuperscript{24} K.Bhattacharjee, \textit{op.cit.}, p.206.
“We are told that a novel circular has been issued by the D.S. Railway authorities (at Dibrugarh) who have the control of the company’s accounts office there. A large number of Bengali and Assamese gentlemen work in this office as clerks, and it is said, the circular prohibits them from getting into the office compound with their umbrellas open. Two chaprasis have been posted at the two gates to enforce obedience to this precious order.”

By publishing the news, *The Weekly Chronicle* strengthened the spirit of national consciousness. Much greater role was played by *The Weekly Chronicle* when its editor took up the Jagatshi incident which created a sensation not only in the valley but also in Calcutta. The paper carried on a series of articles exposing police atrocities that resulted in the death of a brilliant scholar. The event will be discussed in detail in the chapter titled ‘Politics of Agitation and the Press’. Thus *The Weekly Chronicle* not only strengthened the forces of nationalism but also set up an example to other papers which came into existence in the subsequent period in the valley.

Thus the press in the valley could prepare the ground for national movement. Though prior to *Swadeshi* movement, the people in the valley were mainly concerned with the regional issues, especially of the merger of Sylhet and Cachar to Assam, yet they were not totally oblivious of the issues of national concern. Actually, regional organisations and regional issues did make the people politically conscious and this consciousness could be successfully

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exploited to rouse national consciousness. The amalgamation of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar to Assam in 1874 gave the local press an issue centring which it could develop a new awakening among the people that would ultimately help in the growth of national consciousness. Thus when there started the first popular upsurge in the form of Swadeshi movement in 1905, the valley reacted in its favour and the much desired political activities started with mass participation. Being influenced by the Bengali press of Calcutta, the nationalist press in Surma-Barak Valley successfully propagated and prepared the people to join the nationalist movement. During the period 1875-1905, the native press injected the creed of nationalism among the people and the newspapers like Srihatta Prakash, Paridarshak and The Weekly Chronicle gave the lead in this direction.