Chapter IV
PRESS IN ASSAM:
AN OVERVIEW
4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an attempt to discuss in brief about journalism in India and explores the changes in journalism of Assam over time in its historical, cultural, developmental and professional context.

4.2 PRESS IN INDIA

India's newspaper evolution is nearly unmatched in world press history and its press a metaphor for its advancement in the globalized world. The two-hundred-year history of the Indian Press, from the time of Hicky to the present day, is the history of a struggle for freedom. But today, India's newspaper evolution is nearly unmatched in world press history. The evolution of the Indian media since has been fraught with developmental difficulties; illiteracy, colonial constraints and repression, poverty, and apathy thwart interest in news and media (Aggarwal & Gupta).

Emperor Asoka’s pillar inscriptions & rock edicts in different parts of the Mauryan Empire during 3rd century B.C are considered examples of imperial political communication to the informed & literate section of the population. Ashoka used the Prakrit language in his communication on ethics & morals as evidence by his inscriptions.

The learning languages were confined to high castes, the aristocracy, priests, army personnel & landowners. Another feature of communication in ancient India was the emphasis placed on oral & aural systems. Writing was done on palm leaves using a style, but the written documents were considered too
scared to be touched or used by the lower classes. The ruling class used certain methods for coding, transmitting & decoding messages secretly through the network of spies to information about neighboring enemies.

According to historians of journalism, news was collected in a well-organized manner during the regime of Akbar the Great. In 1574, Akbar established a recording office that helped later medieval historians to gather materials for chronicles.

James Augustus Hicky was the founder of India's first newspaper, the Calcutta General Advertiser also known as Hicky's Bengal Gazette, in 1780. Soon other newspapers came into existence in Calcutta and Madras: the Calcutta Gazette, the Bengal Journal, the Oriental Magazine, the Madras Courier and the Indian Gazette. While the India Gazette enjoyed governmental patronage including free postal circulation and advertisements, Hicky's Bengal Gazette earned the rulers' wrath due to its criticism of the government. In November 1780 its circulation was halted by government decree. Hicky protested against this arbitrary harassment without avail, and was imprisoned. The Bengal Gazette and the India Gazette were followed by the Calcutta Gazette which subsequently became the government's "medium for making its general orders".

The Bombay Herald, The Statesmen in Calcutta and the Madras Mail and The Hindu, along with many other rivals in Madras represented the metropolitan voice of India and its people. While Statesman voiced the English rulers' voice, The Hindu became the beacon of patriotism in the South. The Hindu was founded in Madras as a counter to the Madras Mail.

Patriotic movements grew in proportion with the colonial ruthlessness, and a vehicle of information dissemination became a tool for freedom struggle. In the struggle for freedom, journalists in the twentieth century performed a dual role as professionals and nationalists. Indeed many national leaders, from Gandhi to Vajpayee, were journalists as well. Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Delhi were four main centers of urban renaissance which
nourished news in India. It was only during and after the seventies, especially after Indira Gandhi's defeat in 1977, that regional language newspapers became prominent.

There were nationalist echoes from other linguistic regional provinces. Bengal, Gujarat, Tamil, Kerala, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh produced dailies in regional languages. Hindi and Urdu were largely instrumental in voicing the viewpoints and aspirations of both Hindus and Muslims of the Northern provinces. As communalism and religious intolerance increased before and after partition, Urdu remained primarily the language of Muslims, as Pakistan chose this language as its lingua franca. After partition, the cause of Urdu and its newspapers, suffered a setback as Hindu reactionaries began to recognize the association of Urdu with Islam and Pakistan.

_Digdarshan_ was the first Indian language newspaper. It started in April 1818 by the Serampur missionaries William Carey, Joshua Marshman & William Ward. They soon started another journal in June of the same year & named it Samachar Darpan. The famous Raja Ram Mohan Roy also brought out periodicals in English, Bengali & Persian. Some of Roy’s papers were _Sambad Kaumadi, Brahmical Magazine, Mirat-ul-Akhbar, Bangadoota & Bengal Herald._

In 1947, the major English newspaper in India were the _Times of India_ (Bombay), _Statesman_ (Calcutta), _Hindu_ (Madras), _Hindustan Times_ (New Delhi), _Pioneer_ (Lucknow), _Indian Express_ (Bombay & Madras) _Amrita Bazaar Patrika_ (Calcutta), _National Herald_ (Lucknow), _Mail_ (Madras) & _Hitavada_ (Nagpur). Of these, the _Times of India, Statesman & Pioneer_ were under British ownership till 1964, when it came under a group of Indian business.

During the long struggle for India’s Independence, the major English newspaper that served the national cause were _the Hindu_ (1878), _Amrita Bazaar Patrika_ (1868), _Bombay Chronicle_ (1913), _Free Press Journal_ (1930, it became _Indian Express_) & _Hindustan Times_ (1924). Among the
Indian language newspapers, the prominent ones were Aaj (1920), Ananda bazaar Patrika (1922), Sakal (1931), Swadeshamitran (1882), Mumbai Smachar (1822), Malayala Manorama (1890) & Mathrubhumi (1930).

Generally speaking, journalism is flourishing in India today. The Indian language newspapers have overtaken the English newspapers in number & circulation. The highest circulation till the 1990’s was enjoyed by the English newspapers despite the fact that less than 5 percent of the population of India claim English as their mother tongue. But today Hindi newspapers have the largest total circulation in India where the main language of 10 Indian states- Bihar, Chattisgarh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttranchal and Uttar Pradesh is Hindi.

Certain trends in communication & journalism throughout the modern world prompted several sociologists & media experts to discuss the desirability of re-examining the trends in the light of basic issues. In other words, ‘back to the basics’ say the experts. This is where Gandhi becomes relevant. High technology is good, but if it does not enable us to solve basic problems confronting the succeed in catering to the greed of a few to the exclusion of the need of the many-as it has done through the recent decades and in all countries that experienced colonial subjugation in the past.

The media in India represents a confluence of paradoxes: tradition and modernity; anarchy and order; diversity and unity; conflict and cooperation; news and views; feudalism and democracy; the free market and monopoly. Economic realities and relationships between press, television and those who own these engines of control and change will eventually determine the future of India's communication culture. India's complex cultural mosaic, especially linguistic and communal, strengthens its diversity. The media and press continue to play a dominant role in deconstructing the diversity discourse that sometimes flares up in explosive situations.
Today India is rapidly approaching the UNESCO norms of ten newspaper copies for 100 persons for developing countries. There are now more than eight copies per 100 persons (Bhatt, 1997).

4.3 PRESS IN ASSAM

The history of press in Assam forms a fascinating study. The first printing press in Assam was brought by an American Baptist Missionary in Sibsagar in 1836. He published a series of brochures informing the public about the merits of Christianity and glorifying the biblical stories (Murthy 1966). The motto behind this was to propagate Christian religion. The first Assamese periodical ‘Arunodaya’ made its appearance in 1846. Its first editor was an American missionary, Oliver T. Cutter. This journal has played a memorable part in shaping modern Assamese literature. The journal was regularly published for over 36 years. The Journal, “Arunaday” (1846-82) was the first magazine of Assam regularly published for 36 years. Reverend Oliver T. Cutter was its first printer and publisher for a long time and it was only from 1850 that Nathan Brown was mentioned as its editor. About the journal Nadig Krishnamuthy, historian of journalism has the following comments: “besides news items.....[it] contained pictures produced with wood-cut blocks. [It] was published for over 36 years. Learned articles from many eminent writers such as A.R.D. Phookan, Hem Chandra Barua and G. Barua....adorned this journal.” (Krishnamurthy 1966).

The ‘Assam Mihir’ is considered the first known weekly newspaper in Assamese language. It made its appearance in 1872. The first daily newspaper of Assam was Batori. It was founded as a weekly in 1929. In 1935 it became a daily and came to be known as ‘Dainik Batori’.

During 1935-1940, many weekly newspapers appeared in Assam. They were short-lived but have played their respective part in the progress of Assam Journalism. The ‘Dainik Asamiya’ that started in 1946 was the second daily newspaper in Assamese. Many newspapers in Assamese language were published but they have all ceased to appear. Journalism in
Assamese language has not developed for want of literacy and financial support. But now Assamese people have begun to take great interest in their language. More and more Assamese people are now feeling the importance of newspaper in Assamese language.

At present many newspapers and periodicals are published from Assam in different languages. Among the English dailies The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, The North-East Times, The North-East Daily, etc. are popular. Among the Assamese dailies Dainik Asom, Aajir Batori, Dainik Janmabhumi, etc. are popular. There are also some Bengali dailies published from Assam. These are Dainik Samay Prabaho, Dainik Jugasankha, etc.

The city of Guwahati alone witnesses the publication of more than 20 morning dailies, half of those are in the Assamese language. Most of the dailies are published from more than one centre, whereas three Assamese daily newspapers claim to enjoy around 1,00,000 circulation. Lately, four satellite Television news channels - NE TV, News Live, DY 365, and News Time have emerged from the city of Guwahati, and a couple more including Frontier TV are in the process of being launched adding, hundred more working journalists to the team of the sentinels. National newspapers like the The Telegraph, The Hindustan Times and The Times of India made their entry to the Northeast market with the launch of its Guwahati editions. The Hindustan Times, however in the subsequent year ceased publication.

According to Guwahati Press Club estimates, there are over 500 working journalists in Guwahati city alone, most of whom are associated with the Press Club (Thakuria Nava, President, Guwahati Press Club).

Until 1979, newspapers and magazines in Assam were largely focused on social themes, with the editor and the reporter treating journalism as an instrument of social change. The student agitation of the 1980s changed the face of journalism. Print journalism became more aggressive and focused on investigative reportage. Amidst all the turmoil and social chaos, the local media flourished. Today, almost all the prominent Assamese dailies – Asomiya Pratidin, Dainik Janamkhumi, Amar Asom, Dainik Agradoot,
Asomiya Khabar, Dainik Batori, Dainik Janasadharan, Dainik Asom, Edinor Sangbad, Aji - have multiple editions to reach more readers in remote areas of Assam.

Among the English dailies, The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, Eastern Chronicle and The Northeast Times, are among the few English dailies which have multiple editions. Dainik Jugashankha, Samayik Prasanga, Dainik Janakantha, are some of the prominent Bengali dailies. Purbachal Parahari, Daink Puvoday, Pratah Khabar are among the few Hindi dailies widely circulated in Assam.

Both the print and visual media have created 8,000 direct jobs, and provided indirect employment to 20,000 throughout the state with a population of 26 million.

4.4 PRESS IN BARAK VALLEY

Newspaper and Journalism in Southern Assam, or to be more specific in the Bengali dominated Barak valley started after the establishment of a printing press in Silchar. The three districts of Barak Valley were under the administration of Cachar district. Babu Harikrishna Gupta was the pioneer in bringing printing press in Silchar was back in 1885. With the introduction of printing facilities, the first newspaper was a Bengali weekly Silchar made its appearance in 1886. Prabhati, a Bengali fortnightly edited by Krishna Kumar Aditya, was the first newspaper from Karimganj. This Bengali newspaper was short-lived but had a chequered history. Since then the era of journalism began in the valley. (Paul, 2011)

Origin of journalism in Barak Valley was different from that of the rest of the country. The History of Journalism in Barak Valley is closely linked with the journalism of Surma Valley which was divided during partition. Sylhet district went to Pakistan and Barak Valley remained in India. Due to topographical and political distribution, the valley was undivided in the pre-independence era and was known as the Surma valley, covering Cachar and
Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). The commencement of journalism was from Surma valley. While discussing the origin of journalism in Barak Valley, journalism in Surma Valley has to be discussed. The Sylhet district as heart of Surma Valley had its own identity for creative works, literary invention and business. It was also the birth-place of some of the great sons of Indian soil who fought for India’s independence and also contributed to the field of journalism. One such legendary personality was Bipin Chandra Pal. The first language newspaper of Surma Valley saw the light of the day from Sylhet with the publication of ‘Srihattaparakash’ in the month of January, 1875. Due to the lack of printing press ‘Srihattaparakash’ was printed from Calcutta. ‘Priyadarshan’ edited by the great freedom fighter Bipin Chandra Pal was the first newspaper from Sylhet. ‘Priyadarshan’ has attained distinguished place among the newspapers of Surma Valley. Sylhet, thus, was the pioneering place of journalism in Surma Valley and from Sylhet Journalism scattered in the entire valley and came to Silchar too.

In the early part of 20th century, some Bengali newspapers- weeklies and fortnightlies were published from Sylhet and Cachar. Among these, Prajashakti edited by Mahendra Dey made its appearance in 1909. Deshabrata, established in 1909 survived for about a decade. In 1911, Pandit Bhuban Mohan Vidyarnav founded Surma. Both these papers were active supporters of swadeshi movements and had to face repressive measures of the government. However the most powerful advocate of the country’s struggle for freedom was Janashakti- a Bengali weekly founded in 1920 by two stalwarts, Bipin Chandra Pal and Dr Sundari Mohan Das. From its inception till the partition in August, 1947, Janashakti functioned as a fearless champion of people’s urge for freedom. Janashakti published from Sylhet and Surma published from Silchar were on the vanguard of national movement for freedom. Both the newspaper had to face severe repressive measures and fine ranging from Rs 50/- to Rs 2,000/-. After the partition of the country Janashakti was brought to Silchar and published from there till the early seventies of the 20th century.
Of the pre-independence newspapers of the Surma Valley, only the *Jugashakti* weekly is still published regularly from Karimganj. *Jugashakti* is the only Bengali newspaper of Assam of the pre-independence period which is still in existence.

*Prantajyoti*, a daily was published from Silchar in early sixties. Its editor was Jyotindra Chandra Dutta. At present several numbers of dailies are published in Bengali, English, Hindi and Assamese language from Barak valley. With cut throat competition among themselves, Dainik Jugasankha is the oldest and largest circulated daily of Southern Assam. (Source: Nag, A.K. (2007). A peep into Bengali Journalism in Assam: 150 years of journalism in Assam (pp.248-61). Guwahati: Media Trust, Assam)

Many remarkable changes have occurred in the field of journalism in this part of the world. Now newspapers are published from offset press with colour photograph. Daily newspapers have their advertisement offices in different places. They also have correspondents in few big cities to get firsthand coverage of national events. Many other such changes have taken place in the field of journalism which has paved the way of new developments.

Till now, no systematic effort has been made to study the nature of social issues covered by the language press in Cachar district of Assam. The study thus revolves around the question: What is the nature of the social issues covered by the language press in Cachar district of Assam? And the study tries to answer this question by analyzing the content of two leading Bengali newspapers of this district for a period of four months.