Chapter IV
Evolution of Print Media in Assam

The Beginning:

The printing press is inextricably linked up with the publication of newspapers. The Portuguese in 1556 brought the first printing press to India not for publication of newspapers but for publication of Christian religious material. The East India Company in 1674 set up the first printing press in Bombay, in 1772 in Madras and thereafter in 1979 in Calcutta. Even though the first printing press was set up in the third quarter of the 16th century in India, publication of a newspaper was delayed by more than two centuries. The absence of a newspaper must have created a vacuum in the field of communication. However, this deficiency was overcome when James Augustus Hicky, who might rightly be called the Father of Indian Journalism, printed, published and edited *The Bengal Gazette* or *The Calcutta General Advertiser*, the first newspaper of India in Calcutta on 29 January, 1780. *The Bengal Gazette* was initially intended to serve the local British settler population. The circulation of their interests and views came to represent public opinion that countered the absolute rule of the colonial authorities. With the growing power of the British press, the English press in India came to be associated with a liberal, reform-minded agenda that challenged the British rule in terms of responding to public demand and often being critical of the administration. For this very reason, the authorities treated the press with distrust and imposed stringent licensing and registration laws for the publication of newspapers (Padhy and Sahu 5-6).

The conflict between the free press and the administration was ingrained from the very beginning. While Hicky was a firm believer in freedom of the press, the Governor General, Warren Hastings in Bengal wanted to control the press because it was publishing libels against the Government. Similarly, the press in Madras was controlled because it was not in so good terms with those in power allegedly publishing libelous articles against the administration. Although the British allowed many newspapers to be published after *The Bengal Gazette* the control mechanism continued as a deterrent against the free press. The attitude to the press depended to a considerable extent on the personality and values of the person who was in power at that time (Raghavan 13). Sir
Warren Hastings denied all postal facilities to Hicky who hit back with the following words: “Mr. Hicky considers the Liberty of the Press to be essential to the very existence of an Englishmen and a free Government. The subject should have full liberty to declare his principles and opinions, and every act which tends to coerce that liberty is tyrannical and injurious to the community” (Keval J Kumar 78).

In June 1781, Hicky was arrested and put into jail, but he continued to write for the Gazette from the prison. He was stopped from bringing out his weekly only when the types used for printing were seized.

It was in November 1780, that B. Messink, who was connected with theatrical companies and Peter Reed, a salt merchant started The India Gazette, the second newspaper in India. His aim was to counter the libels published by Hicky’s Gazette. These gentlemen have keen eyes on business. In February 1784, a quarto sized journal the Calcutta Gazette was published under the patronage of the Colonial Government. Within a few years after Hicky’s Gazette many newspapers came into existence, e.g. The Bengal Journal 1785, The Oriental Magazine or Calcutta Amusement in 1786, The Madras Courier in 1785, The Bombay Herald in 1789 and The Bombay Courier in 1790. They were subservient to the government, and therefore flourished. The Press Regulations of 1799 also ordered to submit all material for prior examination to the Secretary of the Government for pre-censorship.

Digdarshan was the first vernacular newspaper. It started in April 1818 by the Serampur Missionaries: William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward. They soon started another journal in June of the same year and named it Samachar Darpan. To the British, the vernacular press exposed an India that they had only dimly perceived and rightly feared. Initially, the response of the authorities was dampened by an overall scarcity of British officials who were able to read the content directly. It was only gradually that the British became aware of the expanding readership and content of these publications, and began to set “reliable” Indian intermediaries to scrutinize their content for political agitation or anti-British sentiments.

In the struggle against the British, vernacular newspapers played a very significant role thereby inviting restrictions imposed on their freedom. This included the Hindi
Patriot, established in 1853, by the author and playwright, Grish Chandra Ghosh. It became popular under the editorship of Harish Chandra Mukherjee. In 1861, the paper published a play, “Neel Darpan” and launched a movement against the British, urging the people to stop cultivating the crop for the white traders. This resulted in the formation of Neel Commission. Later, the paper was taken over by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The paper strongly opposed the government's excesses and demanded that Indians be appointed to top Government posts. The Indian Mirror was the other contemporary of this paper that was very popular among the reading public. Yet another weekly, Amrita Bazar Patrika started publication from Jessore and edited by Sisir Kumar Ghosh.

A clear distinction could be drawn between the vernacular press and the British press. The Mutiny of 1857 sharpened this distinction. The journalists in India were divided on the basis of their nationalities. English journalists with one voice cried for blood after the Mutiny, while the Indian editors had sympathy with the rebels. The Indian press nurtured nationalistic impulse and appealed directly to the masses because it spoke in their own language. With the advance of national consciousness, the press run by the Indians gained influence and also faced increased restrictions. The Anglo-Indian Press grew jealous of this rival and the Government placed fewer restrictions on it in comparison to the Indian Press (Agrawal 52). Thus, Adam’s “Gagging Act” of 1823 and Canning’s “Gagging Act” of 1857 were directed more against the newspapers published in Indian languages and edited by natives than against English language, English-owned newspapers. With the exception of the Calcutta Journal, no English newspaper was deprived of license till 1823.

When Canning’s “Gagging Act” was withdrawn in 1858, the production of books, pamphlets and newspapers by Indians both in English and Indian languages increased manifold. By 1870, there were 644 papers in British India of which 400 were in vernacular; vernacular journals outnumbered the English journals. Convinced that the vernacular newspapers were spreading national consciousness, Lord Lytton on March 1, 1878 passed the “Vernacular Press Act” with more stringent control of publications in vernacular languages. One of the most comprehensive and rigorous acts, it furnished the Government with more effective means to punish and repress seditious writings supposed to cause disaffection with the Government among the ignorant population. It
empowered a Magistrate of a District, or a Commissioner or Police in a Presidency to force the printer and publisher of a newspaper to agree not to publish certain kinds of material, to demand security, and could forfeit the publication of any news. These officials were empowered to confiscate any printed matter if it was deemed to be objectionable in accordance with this Act. No printer or publisher against whom such action had been taken could have recourse to a court of law (Karkhanis 49-50).

Notwithstanding the force of a stringent control regime, the press played a vital role in shaping Indian nationalism. The leaders of the freedom struggle used it as a medium for arousing and mobilizing nationalist public opinion. They criticized Government’s policies and educated the public in understanding political issues through the press. It was a weapon in the hands of the nationalist leaders to popularize among the people, their political programs and methods of struggle. The support of the vernacular press for the national movement was strong and enduring, as it gathered momentum in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Thus, as Daya Thussu argues, “an Indian press both, in English and in the Indian languages, became an integral component in the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, providing a necessary vehicle for nationalist discourse as well as serving to develop informal political constituencies amongst their readerships” (Athique 17)

The dawn of a new century witnessed an increased number of newspapers, particularly vernacular newspapers; that supported the growing national consciousness. The Anglo-Indian papers always supported Government measures and policies. This created the distinction between the Indian and the Anglo-Indian press with the former favouring Indian nationalism and the latter favouring the government.

In consideration of the newspapers in Europe, the company’s officials in India were suspicious, from the very beginning, about the role of newspapers and it’s role in the society and its impact on the people. But, the real struggle started with the growth of the vernacular press from the second decade of the 19th century under native effort and aspiration. It caused alarm among many Englishmen occupying responsible positions in different fields. Even British officials like Munro and Elphinstone, who were by no means lacking in sympathy for Indian aspirations, expressed their apprehensions in this context. In the words of Munro, “a free press and the domination of strangers are things,
which are incompatible and which cannot long exist together, for what is the first duty of a free press? It is to deliver the country from a foreign yoke and to sacrifice to this one great object every measure and consideration” (Majumdar 228). In fact, this was the best example of the anxiety, showed by responsible Englishmen, over the growth of an unrestricted press in India.

So, the apprehension, which showed at the beginning of the 19th century, by and large influenced the policy of the administration towards the growth of the press in the country. With the spread of nationalist ideals and the freedom movement, the attitude of the British government became more stringent. However, as in many other parts of the world, the contribution made by the Indian press to the Indian renaissance, the rise of nationalism and the freedom movement cannot be overlooked at any cost. Especially during the phase of the freedom movement, which began in 1921, the Government tried to curb the movement by introducing rigorous Press Acts at different times. The nationalist movement in the country, under the leadership of the Indian National Congress may be broadly divided into three periods - that of moderate Nationalism (1885-1905), the Militant Stage (1906-1918) and the Gandhian period (1919-1947). By and large, journalism in India focused on the trend of public opinion in reflecting the contemporary political scenario of the country. The British Government in India also formulated its press policy to cope with the volatile situation.

**Growth of press in Assam:**

The American Baptist mission took the initiative in laying the foundation of the press in Assam through the publication of *Orunudoi* in 1846, as the first Assamese newspaper of the region. At the end of the 19th century, the Assamese press had managed to create its own independent image receiving the local patronage of different section of the society. Contrary to the restrictions imposed, by the Government, on the formation of public opinion through newspapers in other parts of the country, in Assam in spite of spreading nationalist ideals the news papers did not invite the ire of the administration. During the movement of upholding the cause of Assamese language American Baptist Mission made a valuable contribution. On April 19, 1873 Sir George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal ordered restoration of the Assamese language in the courts and schools in Assam. In the report of the Assam Mission in 1851, it was
observed, “the people must hear in their own tongue, the wonderful works of God. Missionaries to the Burmese must use the Burman language, to the Bengalis the Bengali language and to the people of Assam the Assamese language” (Report of the Assam Mission 32).

The missionaries came to Assam to spread Christianity and in the process planted the seeds of liberal western education among the indigenous people. Dr. Nathan Brown who came to Assam in 1836 made valuable contribution to the development of Assamese literature in the middle of 19th century. He insisted upon the retention of the press in Upper Assam as he apprehended predominance of the Bengali language in future in the lower provinces. The Orunudoi published from the Sibsagar Mission Press was the first newspaper to have ever been published from the region. In fact it did not possess the characteristics of a newspaper, as we understand it today. In Assamese, Orunudoi was introduced as “Orunudoir Sambadpatra”. The American Baptist Mission published Orunudoi basically to fulfill its religious mission in Assam. The management of the paper wanted to acquaint the Assamese people with the fundamental principles of Christianity through the medium of the local language. The publication of Orunudoi continued for four decades and the journal brought about a change in the mental outlook and consciousness of the Assamese people.

The Assam Banti, which appeared in 1901 as the first full-fledged Assamese newspaper and continued for a long period under the colonial rule, made the political development in the country its central concern vies-a-vies local/regional interests. It warned the people of Assam of the imminent danger to Assamese identity and territory during the partition of Bengal. Since 1901, for many years, Assam Banti was the only highly circulated Assamese newspaper in Assam. Its continuance was possible for it also complied with colonial Government wishes. Jonaki (1889-1896), an Assamese literary magazine, published from Calcutta by a group of Assamese students premised its objective in the statement that “A subject nation has no politics” that revealed the policy of the paper but reflected in general on the views of almost all contemporary journals and papers that existed in the State. In this background, there was hardly any scope for confrontation between the British administration and the local press. In fact, like many others outside the state, Assamese journals and papers mostly devoted their energy to subjects like social reform, welfare, religion, health, education, etc. During this period, the publication of Jonaki ensured restoration of Assamese language to its
legitimate status while heralding a new literary era, i.e. Age of Romanticism in Assamese literature. It also established a close link between the eastern and western thoughts in Assamese literature. It initiated new western literary forms such as sonnet, lyric, ballad and short story in Assamese language alongside developing the language in its grammar, spelling and syntax.

The British administration in Assam was by and large satisfied with the conduct of the local press for a considerable period. Even *Assam News* (1882-1885), which laid the foundation of modern Assamese journalism with a new progressive outlook, also enjoyed the good will of the British Government. In the opinion of the Commissioner of the Assam valley district:

…this newspaper, no doubt represents the views of, at any rate, its conductors, contributors and subscribers, who are not numerous. Its tone contrasts, I think, favourably with the native press of lower Bengal. With the exception of some rather strong language on some recent criminal cases in the Sibsagar district in which Europeans were connected, I find nothing in this newspaper calculated to foster ill feeling between the native and Europeans. (Barpujari 152)

A few decades into the 20th century, the political scenario of the region suddenly changed for a number of reasons. The partition of Bengal was the most important reason for rapid changes having an impact on the public opinion in the region. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of Bengal divided Bengal with a political motive and, in 1905, amalgamated fourteen districts of Eastern Bengal with Assam, thereby creating a new province under the name Eastern Bengal and Assam with Dacca as its capital. It was done ostensibly to facilitate better administration but the real motive was quite different. The British administration in India, under Lord Curzon, wanted to curb the rapidly increasing nationalist consciousness among the Bengali people by destroying the unity between Hindu and Muslims in Bengal. However, a powerful mass movement started against this Act of the Government in the form of the Swadeshi Movement (1905). It led to the rise of the nationalist movement throughout the country. The anti-British agitation that spread in the region with Swadeshi spirit gradually altered the former relationship between the Government and the people of the State. Meanwhile, 43 registered newspapers were published in the new State and the provincial administration identified one third of them having extremist connections. But the local papers
published from the Brahmaputra valley maintained some distance from the Swadeshi movement. In spite of the attitude, the authorities were concerned about the new political developments and decided to adopt a uniform policy towards all journals and newspapers published from the State. By passing the Press Act of 1908, it tried to control the public opinion. In fact, most of the Calcutta papers adopted an anti British policy and took extreme views on contemporary political events. Against this background, the Government took special measures to prevent the Assamese press from getting infected with extremism. With this view in mind, the authorities sometimes warned the local press for publishing provocative writings. Accordingly, *Usha*, an Assamese literary journal edited by Padmanath Gohain Baruah had to withdraw a satirical piece “*Kripabar Boruar Natun Topola*” in response to the warning of the British Government. Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1868-1938), a stalwart of Assamese literature, started a series of satirical writings in the magazine under the pen name of Kripabar Borboruah. Under the pseudonym he published a number of satirical pieces like “*Kripabar Borboruar Partyabartan*” (Return of Kripabar Borboruah) and “*Anglo-Indian Kripabar Boruar Natun Topola.*” The British Government considered the later one provocative. The Provincial Government was sensitive to any such writing as the Swadeshi movement was at its peak.

In 1912, the British policy was changed and the order of 1905 was withdrawn. Assam was reorganized as a separate province under a Chief Commissioner. As a result, political turmoil disappeared for the time being and the administration again expressed satisfaction at the policy of the local Press. In the opinion of the Provincial Government, “with an exception here and there, the tone of the press was unobjectionable” (Bhuyan 330). This attitude of the Government continued till 1920.

From 1919, the freedom movement in the country entered into a new phase under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The Indian National Congress under his leadership mobilized the masses against the British administration. The British administration under the changing circumstances adopted almost a uniform policy towards all newspapers throughout the country. In 1921, Gandhi, for the first time, visited Assam and his visit accelerated the momentum of freedom struggle in the North East region. Its impact was immediately noted in the local papers. Naturally, the
provincial administration now had firm reasons to deal with the local press and accused certain papers of preaching “active disloyalty” and “race hatred” in the province.

In 1905, Advocate of Assam, an English weekly was published and edited by Mothuramohan Barowa (Barooah). It continued for seven years (till 1912) but was a trailblazer spreading nationalist ideas in Assam. It was guided by the motto “Born of the people, led by the people for whom I should work, but for the people.” The newspaper firmly stood by the spirit of Swadeshi, Swaraj, and Nationalism while advocating the value of sacrifice for the nation (Baruah121). In fact, the paper was regarded as a “powerful weapon of public opinion.” Later, a number of papers and journals contributed to the same spirit according to their own style and authority. However, it should be noted that many of the newspapers were also critical of the freedom movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. In this respect, their support was to some extent conditional, and the interest of the province was always highlighted in their fight against alien rule. During this period only a handful of newspapers published in the state offered practically unconditional support to the policy and ideology of the Congress party. From this point of view, newspapers like Asam Bilasini (1913-1924) edited by Krishnakanta Bhattacharya, Weekly Asamiya (1918-1922) edited by Sadananda Duara and Bi-weekly Asamiya (1930-1940) edited by Lakshminath Phukan and also Asam Sevak (1937-1943) edited by Debendranath Sharma will be always remembered among the newspapers of Assam that directly suffered from the repressive policy of the British Government for lending support to the freedom movement. In this context, it is to be remembered that the notion of nationalism advocated by the newspapers from Brahmaputra valley was different from the concept of nationalism as understood by the country, at large, in terms of the freedom movement and its propagation by the Congress party. In fact, newspapers expressed uneasiness and apprehension of economic and cultural domination by outsiders to a certain extent, during the pre-independence period, and, even after independence. The attempt to preserve a separate identity of Assamese culture, tradition and history as part of the Indian nation was first seen in the pages of Chetona (1919-1927), a nationalist monthly paper published from Guwahati under the editorship of Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (1885-1967), a doyen of modern Assamese nationalism. Later, in the mid-thirties, Deka Asam (1935), an Assamese weekly and mouthpiece for the Sangrakhini Sabha, as well as Asam Jatiya Mahasabha were devoted to preaching
the new concept of nationalism in the region. This newspaper played a unique role in the growth of Assamese nationalism. Even newspapers, supporting the independence movement of the country, like *Prativa* (1936), a mouthpiece of the Milita Janasangha published from Guwahati, was critical about the activities and role of the Congress party in building the future of India.

*Dainik Batori*, a well-known Assamese newspaper during the pre-independence period, was launched by Rai Bahadur Siva Prasad Barooah, a tea planter, around five years after he had started a weekly named *Batori*, on 12th August 1935. The editorial board of the newspaper was headed by Nilmoni Phukan, an eminent personality of that period, who was also known as “Bagmibar” (eloquent). Equipped with all modern facilities, *Dainik Batori* subscribed and published the news of leading news agencies such as Reuters and Associated Press in Assam for the first time. It also collected a large number of photographic blocks of important personages within and outside the country. When King Edward VIII of United Kingdom abdicated the throne, *Dainik Batori* published the news immediately with photographs. The newspaper did not support the non-cooperation movement initiated by the Congress party. Rather, the paper stood for the ideology of “Assam for the Assamese people” and urged the acceptance of this dictum as the ideal of life. *Dainik Batori* was instrumental in ushering in an era of daily journalism in Assamese language. Besides, it had also established the fact that a newspaper could also be published from a rural set up. Noted journalist and litterateur Lakshminath Phookan, who worked for some time with the publication, wrote “The newspaper was published from the village Thengal. It was such a place where there was not even a post office. With the publication of *Dainik Batori*, a post office of a sort was established. No daily in any language was published in India from a village.” (Phukan 148).

The *Batori* newspaper was also no less active during the 1930s. It campaigned for the establishment of a university in Assam and also questioned the presence and future of 11 lakh Bengali population in Assam.

The newspaper *Dainik Batori* was published from Jorhat around the same time when *Deka Asam* was launched and *Asamiya* (the weekly and the bi-weekly) were being brought out from Guwahati. In fact *Dainik Batori* was printed to keep Assamese people away from the national politics but unlike *Times of Assam* (1895-1905), it could
not enjoy the goodwill of the people in general. In 1935, along with Dainik Batori, another daily by the name of Nagarar Katha came into being. However, according to Lakshminath Phookan: “the first Assamese daily was Dainik Batori. Earlier, Moffazal Hussain ran a daily newspaper by the name of Nagarar Katha, which was edited by himself. But in the strict sense of the term, it was not a newspaper. Rather Nagarar Katha was a news bulletin like Ranar Batori (War News) published from Dibrugarh during the first World War. But Dainik Batori was a daily in the true sense.” (Baruah 91).

In the history of newspapers in Assam, the year 1935 was of great significance to Jorhat. In addition to Batori, Dainik Batori and Nagarar Katha, Radha Kanta Handique, from Jorhat collaborated with the noted musician Kirtinath Sarma Bordoloi and published a two-day newspaper in the name Asom. This was the first two-day newspaper published in the Assamese language. The newspaper under the patronage of Radha Kanta Handique gave due importance to local issues concerning all walks of life. Another Assamese weekly Swaraj was published from Darpan press of Jorhat in 1939. This paper gave prominence to the news on the Second World War and stressed particularly on the role of the British power in the conflict. However, it never appreciated the role of the British army in the battlefield. In the same year another newspaper Tarun Asom, an Assamese nationalist weekly appeared from Dibrugarh. This newspaper published news with its independent style in a language having colloquial touch. It was also conscious of the future of Assamese people in the event of large-scale influx of immigrants from outside the State and its pages were full of news and views over the infiltration problem.

With the progress of the Independence movement, apart from the Congress party various other political organizations sprang up in the province, particularly among the youth. Their ideals and teachings were reflected in the contemporary papers and journals, which were published. Panchayat was such a weekly that came up in the 1940s that helped in shaping public opinion on the political situation created in the country by the freedom movement. As the freedom movement in the country entered different phases in different times, the relation between the Government and the press also changed rapidly. For instance, in the eyes of the local administration of Assam,
after the suspension of the Non-co-operation movement, during the period between 1923 to 1929, the tone of the press was “on the whole moderate” hence there was no persecution during these years and, practically from 1932 to 1940, no action was taken against any paper or journal in the province under the provision of the Indian Press (Emergency powers) Act of 1931. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and the beginning of the Quit India Movement in 1942, the provincial government again decided to return to the old policy of repression of the local press, which had an anti-British tone. Asam Bilasini was the first Assamese paper, which had to face the persecution of the provincial administration in different forms. It is to be remembered that in the beginning of the seventies of the 19th century, a monthly Asam Bilasini (1871-1883) appeared from Dharmaprakash press of Majuli in Jorhat district. Since the very beginning, the paper was anti-establishment but the government tried to ignore its criticism. It was a nationalist paper that gave due importance at first to the Home Rule movement started by Annie Besant and Balagangadhar Tilak for self-governance of the people of India. Later, it threw its weight behind the non-co-operation movement of the Congress party. With the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi at Jorhat in 1921, it was completely converted into an anti-British and pro-Congress paper. In the Administrative Report of the Government of Assam it was stated that “active disloyalty” and “race hatred” were preached by certain papers and in a number of cases it was found necessary to persecute the press. (Baruah 332) Sunil Pawan Baruah, Role of the Press in the Nationalist Upsurge – Brahmaputra Valley) Unfortunately, the report referred to the tone of Bilasini and considering the impact of the paper on the people, the Government decided to take stern action against it. So, Krishnakanta Bhattacharya (1863-1951), a Government servant and the key man behind the publication of Bilasini had to face persecution from the district administration. At first, he had to go in for compulsory retirement and later he was even deprived of his pension. Meanwhile, according to the provision of the Indian Press Act (1910), the Government demanded a sum of two thousand rupees from Assam Bilasini as security. At first the editor defended himself and demanded the withdrawal of the notice but as he failed to convince the authority, Assam Bilasini disappeared for a short period. Later, Krishnakanta Bhattacharya, the owner of the paper, had to deposit the amount as security and resumed publication from July, 1923. However, systematic repressive measures adopted by the Government compelled him to close down the paper and finally, Assam Bilasini disappeared in 1925. In this way, for the first time in the
Brahmaputra valley, a nationalist vernacular paper became a victim of the policy of the British Government for supporting the freedom movement. This newspaper took special care to safeguard the interest of the Assamese language and culture. The authority of the education department arranged translation of Bengali text books for Assamese students. *Bilasini* severely criticized this policy of the Government, on the plea that it was injustice for the Assamese writers and this policy arose out of official apathy to the interest of Assam.

However, modern Assamese journalism began in the true sense of the term with the publication of the *Asamiya*, a powerful nationalist weekly paper, on 26 August 1918, from the Asamiya Press of Dibrugarh. Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1938), one of the stalwarts of modern Assamese literature and a reputed businessman was the founder of *Asamiya*. In its forty years of existence, the paper served the nation in different ways. In 1921, during the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Dibrugarh, Agarwala was his host and this event not only changed the life style and ideals of the owner of *Asamiya* but also transformed the paper into an active supporter of Swadeshi and the Non Co-operation movement. In the same year, the paper was shifted from Dibrugarh to Guwahati. The Indian National Congress held its 4th Conference at Pandu, near Guwahati in December 1926, and to mark the occasion, *Asamiya* appeared as a daily paper for four days under the editorship of Omeo Kumar Das (1895-1975), a veteran nationalist leader and freedom fighter. After the historic Lahore Congress session of 1930, where for the first time the Congress party passed the Independence Resolution, the weekly *Asamiya* was converted into a bi-weekly with a new name of *Tinidiniya Asamiya*. From 1934 to 1942, under the editorship of Harendranath Baruah, a renowned journalist and freedom fighter, it became the mouthpiece of the Congress Party. However, at the close of the year 1942, the management of *Asamiya* was compelled to close down its publication but later in 1944 it reappeared as a weekly paper under the patronage of Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951), the architect of the modern Assamese music and film industry. Even from the beginning, the provincial administration could not digest the pro-nationalist policy of the paper and open confrontation started in 1922, when the government decided to take action against *Asamiya* for seditious writing. It was connected with the police atrocities of 18 January 1922 at Sundaridia Satra of Barpeta subdivision in Kamrup district. In fact, the paper simply reproduced the translation of an editorial already published in *Young India* edited by Mahatma Gandhi. W.H. Calvert,
the Assistant Police Superintendent of Barpeta filed a defamation case against the editor and printer of weekly Asamiya but took no action against Young India. As the owner of the paper instructed the editor, Maheswar Baruah not to apologize, the District Judge of Kamrup ordered the editor and printer of Asamiya to pay a fine of rupees one thousand and rupees one hundred fifty respectively failing which he ordered their imprisonment for three months and one month respectively. In spite of the loss of a huge amount of money, the defamation case had brought fame and reflected the uncompromising attitude of the paper towards the alien rule. In 1930, the Government of India used the India Press Ordinance II to suppress the Civil Disobedience movement in the country by curbing the freedom of the press. Meanwhile, Asamiya was identified as a hostile paper and the administrative report of the provincial Government recorded that “some of the newspapers, specially the Asamiya and Janasakti were inclined to misrepresent Government policy and Government officials” (Baruah 334). On the other hand, Tinidiniya Asamiya in its editorial column on 3 May 1930 severely criticized the Press Ordinance promulgated by the Government in 1930. Naturally, the Government seized the opportunity and on the basis of the Ordinance it directed the paper to furnish security “on the ground that they had published articles, which were likely to bring the Government established by law into contempt” (Baruah, p 87). So, the British government demanded rupees Two Lakhs and Forty Thousand from selected newspapers of India. Responding to this order, One Hundred and Thirty One newspapers furnished the required security money. But nine newspapers, including Asamiya refused to furnish security and, as a result, the bi-weekly Asamiya had to cease publication for two and a half months till 19 July 1930. Undoubtedly, this event provided this Assamese weekly with a new image in the history of journalism in pre-independent India. Apart from its pro-Congress policy, Asamiya very often stood for social justice towards all classes of people irrespective of their caste and position and, in this respect, the plight of the tea garden labourers of Assam under European management received the special attention of the paper. The Telehu episode was an interesting story published in the Asamiya, which depicted the inhuman attitude of the European manager to the tea garden labourers. The court sentenced the manager to two and a half years imprisonment for committing murder. British trade union congress sent two members of the British parliament and they toured the tea gardens of Upper Assam for a week accompanied by the editor of Weekly Asamiya. In 1928, they submitted their report and on the basis of this report the government decided to send “Whitley
Commission” to study the condition of the tea garden labourers. Similarly, Asamiya also severely criticized the opium policy of the government.

Dainik Assamiya under the editorship of Dev Kanta Borooah was published in 26 January, 1946 from the very establishment of Assamiya. Dainik Assamiya ceased its publication towards the end of 1948, owing to economic hardship and worker’s strike. Dainik Asamiya edited by Dev Kanta Barooah is the second step in the modernization of daily journalism in Assamese. Indeed, a band of professional journalists emerged through Dainik Assamiya and The Assam Tribune. These two newspapers were first to make use of the teleprinter. After Dainik Assamiya ceased publication on March 31, 1949, another newspaper with the masthead Natun Asamiya made its appearance from Ramdhenu Prakash Pvt. Ltd of Guwahati on June 26, 1949. This newspaper subsequently succeeded in occupying a place of distinction in the history of Assamese newspaper. This newspaper was concerned itself with various burning problems of Assam such as the state language issue, the state reorganization, the movement for setting up a new oil refinery in the state, etc. This newspaper amply demonstrated how strong a role a newspaper could play in shaping public opinion. This newspaper also created a congenial atmosphere for those who were keen to take up journalism as their profession and further fashioned itself to show the contribution of Press in the advancement of the Assamese language and literature.

In fact, Natun Asamiya was successful in drawing the attention of even the British Parliament to the condition of Tea workers and finally, the Government decided to send a Labour Enquiry Commission to study the condition of tea garden labourers of Assam. In discussing the role of the press it is known that a number of newspapers of Assam had offered their unconditional support to the freedom movement of the country under the leadership of the Congress party. One of the best examples of this is Asam Sevok, a weekly Assamese paper, published from Guwahati in 1937, under the patronage of Dr. Harekrishna Das, a veteran Congress leader while two other Congress leaders of repute edited the paper. Debendranath Sarma was the first editor and in 1939, the paper was shifted to Tezpur under the editorship of Bijoychandra Bhagawati. It became virtually the mouthpiece of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, the editor was imprisoned and as a result Asam Sevak ceased to be published for a long time. Meanwhile, the police locked the Asam Sevak press but after a lapse of about three years, the paper reappeared in 1945. To resist the
rigorous Press Act in 1922, Mahatma Gandhi appealed to the workers of the Congress party to avoid the use of printing press and instructed them to utilize news bulletins for circulating news and views of the party and its role in the freedom movement. Its impact was seen on the contemporary Swadeshi media throughout the country. Inspired by this idea, a number of news bulletins appeared in Assamese and were secretly circulated in the province. The Sibsagar District Congress of Upper Assam circulated a secret fortnightly news bulletin under the name of Swadeshi. In the initial stage of the freedom movement, the Assam Provincial Congress Committee issued a cyclostyled paper to circulate news about the activities of the party. With the patronage of the Satradhikar of Garamur Satra, a Vaishnavite monastery a cyclostyled news bulletin Janambhumi was published from Jorhat for Congress propaganda (Bhuyan and De 68). The advent of Janambhumi, an Assamese vernacular weekly in the first week of March 1947 marked the close of an era of Assamese journalism in Pre-Independence Assam and the beginning of a new era. It was first published from Darpan Press of Jorhat till the starting of Janambhumi press. Dulal Chandra Bhuyan was the first editor of the newspaper. Published four months before India’s Independence, its news and views regarding national issues received a lot of attention. The paper protected what it considered to be the national interest of Assam and firmly stood to save Assam from the possible annexation to alien states under the Group C scheme. Moreover, the newspaper expressed grave concern at the large-scale influx of outsiders to the region, which changed the demographic pattern of the state and harmed the interest of the indigenous population.

The Assam Tribune, an English newspaper, started as a weekly paper from Dibrugarh in 1939 and was shifted to Guwahati in the month of August 1946. During 1946, The Assam Tribune protested vehemently against the grouping policy of Assam. On the eve of the Assam movement, the newspaper provided full support against the influx of migrants to the state. According to the newspaper, the continued influx of Bangladeshi and other foreign nationals posed a threat to the peace, security and long-term interests of the strategic northeastern region. As the newspaper in its editorial on August 24, 1978 remarked, “These influxes, by no means a new problem, have now created a serious strain on this region's subsistence economy and its slender resource complex and threatened to upset the delicately poised demographic balance between its diverse ethnic groups.” The Assam Tribune expressed happiness at the Government’s intention to
strengthen the anti-influx measures along the Assam-Bangladesh border and activating the mechanism for detection and deportation of post-1971 infiltrators. The newspaper was bitterly critical of the left political parties who, it was alleged, tried to obstruct the process of detection in the name of harassment to the genuine citizens of India. It observed:

The attitudes of these parties need no surprise to anybody as they have persistently opposed the question of deporting the aliens who are known to be mostly encroachers on railway and forest reserve lands forming a sort of vote bank for the CPM and left parties (The Assam Tribune, May 20, 1982).

Keeping in view the elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly to be completed before the first week of March 1983 to avoid constitutional crisis, The Assam Tribune in its editorial observed:

That the election under the present circumstances will be a force is not the end of it. The decision of an imposed poll has already created a schism-giving rise to social tensions. Besides, it has alienated a whole nationality pushing it further from the mainstream of national life. This colonial attitude of the centre must go and a way must be found to stall the election (The Assam Tribune, January 10, 1983).

Asam Bani was the first important Assamese weekly published after Independence. The Assam Tribune establishment weekly launched this. Satish Chandra Kakati, who was then the editor of The Assam Tribune became the founder editor of this weekly, making its first appearance on July 1, 1955. From the very beginning, the weekly began to gain popularity among the reading public because of quality printing, get-up and various attractive features with pictures on every page. Besides weekly horoscope, the weekly devoted a special page on films, plays and the radio. The weekly gained in importance due to the regular contributions of renowned Assamese litterateurs of that time including Maheswar Neog, Mahendra Bora, Birinchi Kumar Barua, Lakshahira Das, Preeti Bhattacharyya (Barua) and others. Another mentionable attraction of the weekly was the cartoons of Bapat.
In 1963 *Asam Batori*, a bi-weekly, edited by Chandra Prasad Saikia, renowned litterateur was published from Guwahati Press, Guwahati. This bi-weekly ushered in a new era in the history of Assamese journalism. This newspaper served as the launching pad for many young journalists who later established themselves in the field of Assamese journalism. On August 4, 1965, when *Natun Asamiya* was still in circulation, another very popular Assamese daily started with the name *Dainik Asam* from the group of *The Assam Tribune*. The editorial caption of its first issue was: “Preface: Our Greetings”. The three introductory sentences of the first editorial were:

This is the first dawn of light. Light gives life, inspiration, and the signal for direction. With awareness of this, *Dainik Asam* takes its first step (4th August, 1965). This newspaper from its very inception took a pro-Assamese position. This position was a strong assertion of Assamese identity as reflected in the following lines of the same editorial: *Seeking pity will not do, we have to stand up with the quality of efficiency* (4th August, 1965).

A fortnightly *Uruli* was the first Assamese newspaper published exclusively for women. Launched on May 16, 1964 from the Ramdhenu Press of Guwahati, interestingly the newspaper had Hem Chandra Sarma as its editor. However the paper did not survive for long. Some Assamese newspapers that have apparently gone through a long life are *Agnigarh*, an Assamese weekly, published on October 8, 1991 from Tezpur, *Nam Ache*, a weekly published on December 31, 1991 from Guwahati, *Mangal Batori* launched in 1978, first as a fortnightly and then changed into a weekly in 1987, *Purbanchal Batori* (from Tinsukia, launched in 1977 first as a fortnightly, but soon changed into a weekly), the weekly *Na-Lakhimi* launched on October 2, 1971 on the occasion of the formation of the Lakhimpur district, changed into a weekly in 1979, *Natun Batori* (a weekly launched on August 15, 1977), the weekly *Sangbad* (published in 1989 from Tezpur), *Pahari Doot* the first Assamese weekly from Diphu published on August 24, 1989.

*Agradoot* appeared as a fortnightly from Mangaldoi on February 1, 1971. Kanaksen Deka was the proprietor and editor of the paper. The fortnightly *Agradoot* after being shifted to Guwahati in 1973 was converted to a weekly. It was in 1974, *Agradoot* was made a bi-weekly. *Dainik Agradoot*, as a daily newspaper appeared from the Agradoot Group of publications on October 6, 1995. In September 1982, an Assamese
daily *Pratidin* was launched from Pratas Prabah Press, Guwahati. This newspaper printed and published by Faijul Haq Choudhury on behalf of Afjalur Rahman, contained only four pages. The reading public did not accept the newspaper as it failed to introduce any novelty in the presentation of news and articles. It survived only for a few months.

Hiren Gohain, the renowned critic and intellectual launched *Kalakhar* in 1979, during the Assam Movement. He displayed extraordinary courage by exposing the negative aspects of the movement, for which he was even physically assaulted in the streets of Guwahati. This Assamese newspaper continued till 1982. Earlier Hiren Gohain edited two magazines, namely *Natum Prithivi* (jointly with others) and *Padatik* (1974-77).

Apart from the premier English daily *The Assam Tribune*, following are the English language newspapers published from the Brahmaputra valley during the Assam movement:

**a. The Times of Assam** is the first English newspaper published by Radhanath Changkakati in January 5, 1895. *The Times of Assam* (1895-1947 and 1948-50), *The Assam Tribune* (1939-) and, the weekly *Janambhumi* (1947-) are the three newspapers that completed 50 years around 1997. Till the demise of Radhanath Changkakati in 1923, the newspaper was a severe critic of Gandhiji and the Non-cooperation movement. The paper enjoyed full patronage of the government.

**b. The Advocate of Assam**

Despite a short lifespan, *The Advocate of Assam*, a fearless nationalist English weekly, launched by Mathura Mohan Barua in 1903 from Victoria Press, Uzan Bazar, Guwahati made significant contributions.

**c. Assam Express**

On January 26, 1969, Jibakanta Gogoi launched an English weekly by the name *Weekly Express* from Guwahati. On November 15, 1971, the weekly was changed into a daily. The founder editor of the paper was none other than the illustrious political leader and litterateur Hem Barua Gogoi. He was also the proprietor of the paper, held office as editor from 1972-82 and later from 1985-1991. In the interim period, Nakul Das served
as its editor. On Gogoi's induction into the ministry of Assam in 1991, his son Dipak Gogoi took over as editor. On November 14, 1993 the paper celebrated its Silver Jubilee. Basically the paper was a pro-Congress paper. From the same establishment, an Assamese weekly by the name of *Nagarik* was launched in 1977. Its founder editor was the celebrated litterateur, Homen Borgohain.

d. News Star

On January 30, 1982, *News Star*, completely a new-fashioned English daily, appeared from Maligaon, Guwahati. It was edited by Ramendra Narayan Dutta Barua, published by Sri Ranta Oja and printed at Sree Guru Press, Maligaon. Attempts were made to make the tabloid-size daily unconventional by giving a title to each of the eleven pages excluding the front page of the paper. However, the paper failed to get adequate response from the readers, which resulted in irregular publication. After a couple of years, the newspaper was published in the general format common to all newspapers but its publication remained irregular.

e. The Sentinel

*The Sentinel* was launched on April 13, 1983 under the editorship of Dhirendra Nath Bezborua. Its proprietor, Shankar Rajkhowa was a successful entrepreneur of the Omega Printers and Publishers. Presently, the establishment is publishing five newspapers with multiple editions of The Sentinel. *Ajir Asom*, launched in 1987 is quite popular among the Assamese readership. *Samay Prabaha*, a Bengali daily appeared in 1990 under the editorship of Sukumar Bagchi reportedly this newspaper that started without much funfair began to gain in popularity. A good number of columns published in its Saturday and Sunday editions were its major attraction. *Saptahik Prahari*, an Assamese weekly edited by Kamal Gogoi, was launched in 1985, but it did not survive long.

Newspapers from the Barak Valley

Under the British rule, people receiving English education across the country were aware of the need for information dissemination mostly in vernacular. Further vernacular newspapers were also vehicles for promotion of literature and culture. Bengali speaking Surma-Barak-Valley of Assam comprising of Syhlet and Cachar, had an independent tradition of Bengali
language and literature. While Raja Ram Mohan Roy is recognised as the father of Bengali prose, very few people know that Krishna Chandra Shiromoni, a Kushiyari Brahmin of present Karimganj district (then East Sylhet), published a Bengali prose edition of stories from the Puranas in a printing press of Varanasi (Kashidham) in 1827. In 1874, Sylhet and Goalpara districts were separated from the Bengal Presidency and tagged with the territory of Assam after the Treaty of Yandabo (1826).

Although the first Assamese newspaper, *Orunodoi* was published by the American Baptist missionaries from Sibsagar the first weekly newspaper *Assam Mihir* was published from Guwahati in 1872 by a prominent Assamese personality of Barpeta, Chidananda Choudhury. The first Bengali newspaper from the Surma-Barak Valley saw the light of day in 1875 within a year of Sylhet's amalgamation with Assam. This newspaper *Shrihatta Prakash* was printed in Calcutta and brought from there every week by its enterprising editor Pyari Charan Das who was also a renowned poet.

*Paridarshak*, published in 1888 under the editorship of Bipin Chandra Pal and Radhanath Chaudhury, was the first newspaper printed in the Surma Valley. Its motto was to bring national consciousness. It was first a fortnightly and then became a weekly. Bipinchandra Pal was a great orator and a prominent leader of national repute. He was honoured by a grateful nation-in-the-making as one of the distinguished trinity, Lal-Bal-Pal (Lala Lajpat Rai, Balgangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chadra Pal). His friend and the co-sponsor of *Paridarshak*, Radhanath Choudhury was no less dedicated to the cause of national freedom and national education. He was a pioneer of the national education movement and the main architect of the national school of Sylhet. The advent of *Paridarshak* with the seed of national consciousness germinating in it took place in the same year (1880) when the American Baptist Missionaries were closing down their Assamese newspaper, *Orunodoi* at Sibsagar. The irony inherent in this strange coincidence did not escape the attention of informed people. Another Bengali weekly, *Shrihattavasi* was brought out by Nagendra Chandra Dutta in 1893 and was very soon amalgamated with *Paridarshak* as *Paridarshak-Shrihattavasi*. The first newspaper from Silchar, *Silchar* was brought out in 1883 under the editorship of Bidhubhushan Sen from the Silchar Press (which still exists) founded by Maheshchandra Dutta, a leading lawyer and an eminent citizen of the tea town, and a close friend of both Radhanath Choudhury and Bipinchandra Pal. In this endeavour, Anandamohan Gupta and Shri Sadhya who had some experience of
running a printing press assisted him. During its existence, for nearly nine years, *Silchar* sometimes attracted the ire of the British authorities, for carrying contents considered to be inimical to their interests even though the policy of the newspaper was to remain within the limits of the law. The subsequent decades saw a number of newspapers in the Surma-Barak valley continuing the tradition of spreading national consciousness and awareness of rights of Indians living under the British domination. These newspapers mobilized enlightened opinion in favour of self-assertion and self-rule. The advent of the 20th century saw the publication of several such newspapers *Surma, Deshbrat* and *Prajashakti*. Bhuvanmohan Vidyarnav, one of the most eminent editors of his time, voiced his conservative view of nationalism as the editor of *Deshbrat*, for a couple of years from 1909. He took over the editorship of the newly started weekly, *Surma*, in 1911 and continued his mission of creating public opinion in favour of conservative nationalism for about a decade. For their unflinching devotion to the cause of Indian nationalism both newspapers had to encounter persecution and harassment in the hands of the British authorities. A major difficulty in objectively assessing the contribution of the Surma-Barak valley newspapers towards national awareness and to the struggle for independence is the absence of copies of old newspapers. For example, very little could be known about how news reports and comments had added details about contemporary developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But there is no doubt that the newspapers did not lag behind in commenting upon incidents of importance. The Calcutta daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 13 July 1885 acknowledged the publication of a news item regarding the ill treatment of an Ahom prince, Kumudeswar Singha by the local British officials (in Sylhet) leading to his ultimate death in *Paridarshak*. Publication of such a report in those days was undoubtedly an act of courage and determination. The English publication, the *Weekly Chronicle* (founded in 1900) played the role of a sentinel of people's cause by boldly espousing the cause of the indentured tea labourers crushed under the iron heel of colonial exploitation. The exodus of tea workers up to Chandpur railway-head in Bengal and their brutal suppression by the British was depicted without fear by the newspaper and its brave editor Sashindra Singha week after week when these hapless victims of colonial slavery in tea plantations were forcibly prevented from returning to their original homes in Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Central Provinces etc. For this, the newspaper had to face ire of the authorities. Most of the newspapers of the period contributed in their own ways to furthering of the cause of national consciousness and nationalist endeavours. The increasing national consciousness and the growing aspirations for national self-rule fired the imagination of the people in all
nook and corners of the country. The advent of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in the forefront of the movement for national assertion, and his success in drawing common people into the freedom movement undoubtedly echoed in both the Valleys of Assam. Newspapers of the time mostly weeklies (as dailies were yet to make their debut) became the vehicles of mass movement generating enlightened opinion of lawyers and others, under the magic touch of the Mahatma who "made us men out of dust" in the words of an eminent writer and journalist, D.F. Karaka. Most of the newspapers of the Surma-Barak Valley during the decades following the emergence of the newly rejuvenated national movement, carried the deep imprint of the struggle for freedom. While most of the newspapers generally supported and championed the cause held dear by Gandhiji, some of them also considered it necessary to lend support to the other streams of the freedom struggle, not always in full conformity with the Gandhian path. Apart from Deshbrat and Surma, the other newspaper from the Surma-Barak Valley was Prajashakti published from the sub-divisional town of Habiganj in 1909. A bold champion of the people's rights, against the imperialist domination, Prajashakti was in existence for only about a year.

Naya Duniya (1938-41), edited by Jyotirmoy Nandi Majumdar, was undoubtedly the first newspaper from Barak valley to champion the cause of scientific socialism. Jagaran and its sister publication, The Star were edited by Mahendu Dutta and Himangshu Dutta during 1948-52. The Weekly Chornicle edited by Shashindra Sinha, and published from Sylhet in the late 20s and 30s, offered full support to Mahatma Gandhi. When the indentured tea labourers (forced to a life of slavery in tea plantations) were mercilessly persecuted as punishment for their exodus from ten gardens in the Surma Valley, this newspaper took up their cause. Young Assam, an English weekly, edited and founded by Kalikrishna Deb Krori, in the early forties in Sylhet town was the outstanding mouthpiece of the Radical Humanist movement led by MN Roy. It remained in circulation till the time of partition.

The growth of the educated intelligentsia coincided with the emergence of new social and political ideas and in course of time these ideas filtered down to the masses through the emerging media of newspapers, journals etc. Thus, along with education, the press played an extremely vital role in the regeneration of Assamese society. Before the publication of regular newspapers and periodicals from Assam, newspapers and periodicals in circulation during this period like Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika, Somprakash, Sanjivani, Digdarshan and Friend of India were
all published from Bengal. These papers regularly reported on issues relating to Assam and were so popular that the *Samachar Darpan* in its issue of 30 July, 1831, observed:

> The distinguished persons in the province of Assam maintain 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 as are found among 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.

The press in Assam played a vital role in creating awareness by not only highlighting the various problems of the province but also suggesting remedies while discussing contemporary issues of national importance. Discussions on the issues were supplemented by regular coverage in papers like *Hindu Patriot* and the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*. One of the most important examples of the powers of the press to mobilize public opinion was seen when Dwarka Nath Ganguly, one of the pioneering reformists, went to tea gardens to gather first-hand information on the working conditions of the tea garden labourers of Assam. His reports in the press raised much concern and the problems of the tea workers of Assam figured prominently in the sessions of the Indian National Congress.

The only English daily published from Barak Valley is *The Frontier Sun*. The same establishment published *Energy Era*, an English weekly, and *Sonar Cachar*, a Bengali daily. The key figure of this establishment was Ranbir Roy.

Currently, the vernacular language press of India, like the English language publications, is increasing both in numbers and in circulation. An examination of the reports of the RNI shows that the increase in the numbers of newspapers published is directly related to increase in literacy, rapid urbanization, political awareness and finally, taking pride in the language of the state. The latest data available in RNI website show a total number of registered publications as on 31st March, 2016 figures 1, 10,851. The largest number of publications registered in any Indian language is Hindi, which is 44,557, and the second largest number of newspapers & periodicals registered in any language is English, which is 14,083 (Source [http://rni.nic.in/](http://rni.nic.in/), accessed on 13 April, 2017).
In Assam, there are at present more than 40 dailies in languages such as Assamese, Bengali, English, Urdu and Bodo, out of which the *Asomiya Pratidin* is the highest circulated Assamese newspaper with a circulation figure of 159,126 as on Jun 2016 (http://www.auditbureau.org/) followed by *Amar Asom* having a circulation figure of 75,000.

**The Assamese Press, Sub-nationalism and the Government**

Historically, the Press in Assam was like any other regional press in India till the end of the 60s. However, a strong sense of alienation crept into the minds and hearts of Assamese educated middle class. This class of people had whole-heartedly participated in the struggle for independence and also sacrificed for it. Nationalism triggered early surge of newspapers and periodicals in Assam although there were concerns regarding the “interest of Assam” from time to time. However, the lines were blurred between an overwhelming national spirit and a veiled regional aspiration that was Assam centric. Once the freedom was achieved most newspapers and periodicals turned inward and looked at Assam’s problems in terms of its development in all aspects visa a vies its natural resources. It was initially a call for remedying regional disparity that turned into giving birth to a robust regional aspiration underlying Assamese nationalism. For such a situation to arise, the central Government was responsible so also the successive state Governments. The state Governments was torn between a rising regional aspiration and the disenchantment of the middle class being neglected at the national level. During this period, Assam Sahitya Sabha a powerful body of writers and intellectuals exorted its influence to ensure that Assamese become the state language. This policy of the Government polarized the diverse constituencies of the state. As a reaction to this policy the Mizos rose in revolt against the state. The language policy was further aggravated by the failure of the state Government not being able to adequately addressing the problem of the Mizos. The Mizo resistance was the first sign of ethnic divide in Assam; the same spread like wild fire in the Northeast for each ethnic group clamouring for autonomy in an otherwise peaceful state. The sates of Meghalaya and Mizoram were carved out of Assam. However, the problem of ethnic assertion gave birth to Bodo, Dimasa and Karbi autonomy movements. The Assamese press during these troubled times remained pro-Assamese. This shows that the vernacular newspapers somehow championed linguistic identity of the state exclusively speaking on behalf of the Assamese linguistic groups while ignoring other diverse constituencies within the state of Assam.
Another major point of conflict was between the Assamese speaking Brahmaputra valley and the Bengali speaking Barak valley that took an ugly turn after the Government’s language policy. The Bengali and Assamese newspapers were divided on linguistic lines. The spirit of nationalism that created a bond of togetherness got fractured and the Bhasa Andolan in Barak valley took a toll on the relationship between the two valleys. During this period the Assamese language press continued to have an ambivalent position regarding the state policy and also the way the state Government handled the tribal issue.

This ambivalent position was further exacerbated during late 70s. One aspect of this was the immense fall out of the emergency of 1977. After the emergency, when the Janata Government came to power at the centre, Assamese politics took a different turn bringing about a decline of Congress rule. Although Congress returned to power, Assamese nationalism that was very subdued so far took an explosive turn making a once very peaceful state into a violent space.

*Nilachal*, a weekly that was launched on October 2, 1968 with Homen Borgohain as its editor sparked the flame of Assam’s separation from the Union of India. On September 7, 1979 the Assam Government filed a suit against the weekly before the Press Council. It was stated in the case that on July 25, 1979 the Editor-in-Charge published an editorial titled: “The Problems of Assam: Not a Hoax of Laughable Matters.” The summary of the piece was that the editorial was against the integrity of India. It was a direct call for separation of Assam from India. Its purpose was to create political instability in the regions of North East India as well as to bring about communal disharmony among various sections of the society. The Press Council passed its judgment saying that the newspaper was fit to be reproached. It was highly objectionable on the part of the paper to have encouraged the secession of Assam from the Union of India. According to the Press Council, the *Nilachal* paper had misused its power by crossing the legal limit of the right to freedom under Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution. Similarly, *Agradoot*, another fortnightly from Mangaldai under the proprietorship and editorship of Kanaksen Deka had to face similar consequences.

*Dainik Asam* was one of the first newspapers on which the State Government of Assam imposed censorship in 1980. *Dainik Asam* and *The Assam Tribune* group played a leading role in challenging the Assam Special Power (Press) Act, 1960, which was invoked for press censorship. Thus the press in Assam continued to support the developments later on in presenting a view that justified the Assam movement as a consequence of 1983 election and thereafter. Although the Bangladeshi problem
continues to become a strong political issue with the successive Governments, the Press unequivocally kept the issue alive. Assamese nationalism and identity question although remained the primary focus, the press in Assam further lost in ambivalence even when organizations such as ULFA unleashed its reign of violence. The tone of the press as the champion of Assamese nationalism and identity further got fractured as it was unable to take a constructive stance on large scale violence as in case of Nellie and in other parts of Assam from time to time. This historical development has its impact still on the Assamese press.