Chapter - 1

INTRODUCTION
Chapter - I

INTRODUCTION

With the passage of time, the scope of History has widened. Today, the study of history includes every phenomenon of human activity — intellectual, political, social, philosophical, material, moral and emotional. In order to gain a comprehensive knowledge of and an insight into the civilisation of any country, a thorough appraisal of all these conditions is an essential pre-requisite. Thus, historians today are engaged in research in the allied branches of humanities and social sciences in an attempt to study human civilisation in a comprehensive manner as it has unfolded itself in successive epochs. It has been observed that -

"History, if studied without prejudice, teaches us the greatest lesson of all; to treat social lives not as a mechanical combination but as an organic process. We are constantly striving to shape and improve it, but it cannot be pulled to pieces and re-settled at pleasure, because its roots are in the past, and its functions stretch over centuries. Its growth and defects have to be studied in the light of social biology, social hygiene, social pathology, not in that of social mechanics. This is why, thoughtful men are instinctively or consciously
attracted by the 'links with the past', which are so numerous in our everyday existence."

The nineteenth century has been referred to as a 'century of history'. For India the century is of special significance. The period witnessed far reaching changes not only in the Indian economy but also in the patterns of Indian society, polity, administration, and culture. The old social fabric was replaced by a new social framework — India underwent a 'cultural revolution'.

The colonial impact on Indian society and culture was entirely different from what India had experienced earlier. Most of the earlier invaders who had come to India and had settled within her frontiers were absorbed by her superior culture. However, British conquest was different. Eighteenth century Europe had experienced novel intellectual currents which inaugurated an Age of Enlightenment. A new spirit of rationalism and enquiry had given a new dynamism to European society. The development of science and scientific outlook had affected every aspect of life — political, social, economic. In contrast to Europe, India presented the picture of a stagnant civilisation and a static and decadent society. Thus, for the first time India encountered an invader who considered himself racially superior and culturally more advanced.

A major factor contributing to the transmission of the Renaissance in Europe was the invention of the printing press. The printing press arrived well after the Renaissance was underway in Italy, but its power to mass-produce printed material dramatically affected the course of the Renaissance in Europe. The ability to widely disseminate knowledge enhanced scientific research and helped spread the Renaissance from Italy to other parts of Europe. The introduction of the printing press

2. B. Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1979, p. 7
also led to the introduction of public propaganda, which was used by rulers to strengthen nation states. The creation of the printing press further encouraged authors to write in the local vernacular rather than in the classical languages of Greek and Latin, widening the reading audience and further promoting the spread of Renaissance ideas.³

Within fifty or sixty years of the invention of the printing press, the entire classical canon had been reprinted and widely promulgated throughout Europe. Now that more people had access to knowledge both new and old, more people could discuss these works. A second outgrowth of this popularisation of knowledge was the decline of Latin as the language of most published works, to be replaced by the vernacular language of each area, increasing the variety of published works. Paradoxically, the printing press also helped to standardize the spelling and syntax of these vernaculars. This rise in importance of national languages as opposed to pan-European Latin was one of the causes for the rise of nationalism in Europe.⁴

The printing press acted as a formidable weapon in the hands of the European people during the seventeenth, eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The press played a dominant role in the growth of nationalism in Europe, in the struggle against feudalism, formation of the modern nation states, and transformation of society and culture. In France, the intelligentsia, the harbingers of new social order and advanced social conceptions, found in the press an effective weapon to expose the prevalent socio-economic inequalities and the autocracy of the ruling feudal class. Through the press, Voltaire and Diderot, Holbach, Helvetius, and others disseminated scientific social ideas among the people. This kindled indignation among them against the prevailing social order. They rose against serfdom and the oppression of the feudal nobility and

⁴. ibid. (3)
the State. The press became an indispensable weapon for the rising social forces led by the intelligentsia such as Mirabeau, Danton, Robespierre, Marat and others, to stir up the consciousness of the people, to enlighten them with new ideas and lead them through a historic struggle for the overthrow of the feudal state and society and the setting up of a modern nation state in its place. Without the press, it is extremely doubtful, whether it would have been possible to mobilise the masses in the anti-feudal struggle and in the establishment of a more democratic state and society. The press also helped in the development of rich scientific and artistic culture of modern France.5 Similarly, in England, German, Italy, and other modern European countries, modern ideas percolated to the masses through the medium of the press.

The consolidation of the British rule resulted in a similar phenomenon in India. It gave birth to what is now called Modern India and one of the main agents of this transformation was the introduction of the printing press. Though the Press was first introduced in India by the Portuguese Jesuits as early as 1557 to print Christian Literature, it became a real social force influencing the life of the people only during the nineteenth century. The Christian Missionaries introduced printing and publishing in India in an effort to publish the Bible in different languages. They established a number of printing presses in many parts of India, triggering off a revolution in language and literature. Within a hundred years of printing of Gutenberg's Bible in Germany, India initiated its groping towards fashioning of different fonts for the many Indian languages.6 But more importantly, the history of printing press in India is the story of the re-awakening of a nation. As Desai has commented - "The printing press played a big role in the history of a number of peoples, in their national awakening, in their imbibing progressive

5. A. R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Bombay, 1959, pp. 203-204
ideas, and in their being drawn as active forces into great social, political and cultural movements.\textsuperscript{7}

From the very beginning, the subjects that were dealt with at length by the Indian press were related to society. This was probably because the socio-religious reform movements had tremendous impact on people and society at large. This was particularly evident in Bengal. The advent of the printing presses, saw the appearance of newspapers in various cities. The first news journal in any Indian language, \textit{Digdarshana}, published in 1818 by the Serampore Mission in Bengali, followed by \textit{Samachar Darpan} were educative in nature. The \textit{Prabhakar} edited by I. C. Gupta gained the reputation for elegance in style and quality of its literary articles. The \textit{Bangadut} edited by Nilratan Haldar, enjoyed the reputation as the mouthpiece of the reformers. The \textit{Gyaneneshan} edited by two ex-students of the Hindu College, was a champion of Vernacular education and agricultural education. It wrote against the social evils prevalent amongst the Hindus and ridiculed the prejudice of caste. The \textit{Education Gazette} edited by Rev. W. Smith and Babu Rang Lal Banerjee, and published under the auspices of the Government Education Department, published articles on science, biography, history besides general knowledge.\textsuperscript{8}

"The native newspapers are humble in appearance, yet like the ballads of a nation they often act where the law fails and as straws on a current they show its direction. In them questions of Sati, caste, widow re-marriage, kulism, polygamy have been argued with great skill and acuteness on both sides. They have always opposed a foreign language being the language of the courts."

The atrocities of indigo planters and the blunders of young magistrates have

\textsuperscript{7} A. R. Desai., \textit{op cit.}, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{8} J. Natarajan., \textit{History of Indian Journalism}, Delhi, 1955, pp. 45-46
been laid bare and letters to the editor open out a view of native society nowhere else to be found. Now and then extracts from details of crime in England are given to show that there are faults with the English too. Moral tales are frequently published ... There are a number of short pieces (in verse) on the seasons and on the varied aspects and objects of nature, many of them possessing considerable poetic merit. PANEL

The introduction of printing and the consequent development of the languages of India had a tremendous socio-political impact. The second half of the nineteenth century began to witness a change from the old to the new, from the medieval to the modern. A scientific new educational system was being launched and practices like Sati (widow burning) and infanticide were being abolished, widow re-marriage legalised. In the realm of literature, the foundation of prose was laid. In the words of B. S. Kesavan, it was indeed 'the dawn of the Indian Renaissance'. The introduction of printing and publishing helped the Indians to think of the need for political freedom and social progress, and at the same time question certain traditional superstitious beliefs and practices. In a word, literature of the modern age became democratic. In the past, owning a handwritten book was a matter of pride; with the advent of the printing press, even a man of average means could read and possess books. Newspapers proved a powerful medium for people to voice their opinions and assert their rights. Mass illiteracy, great poverty, and repressive Press Laws proved to be certain major handicaps. Yet, despite these drawbacks, the Press emerged as a powerful factor in building up and developing Indian nationalism.

9 ibid.
10 B. S. Kesavan, Comprehensive History of Printing and Publishing in India, Vol.- I, II, III, Delhi, 1985. He sub-titled his work as 'A story of Cultural Re-awakening'.
The grounds for the restrictions imposed on the Press by the British Government were recorded as follows by W. B. Bayley, a member of the Governor-General's Council, in a minute dated Oct., 10, 1822:

"The stability of the British dominion in India mainly depends upon the cheerful obedience and subordination of the officers of the army, on the fidelity of the native troops, on the supposed character and power of the Government, and upon the opinion which may be entertained by a superstitious and unenlightened Native population of the motives and tendency of our actions as affecting their interests." 12

Initially, the circulation of the papers in India was very limited and only a microscopic proportion of the people had any access to them. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, eight newspapers published from Bengal between them had only around 1,300 subscribers; rural India subscribed to less than 200 copies. 13 However, by the end of the century, the scene changed and as educated Indians were increasingly becoming conscious socially and politically, there was a rapid growth in the number of newspaper. There were fifty Vernacular presses in Bengal, by the end of the century, printing periodicals and journals. 14

The nineteenth century was also of special significance to Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) between the British and the Burmese had brought to an end the six hundred year old Ahom monarchy in Assam and paved the way for the eventual establishment of British rule. The transition was swift. The changeover from the old order to the new was characterised by a complete overhauling of the administrative

14. ibid.
machinery which heralded far reaching political, economic and social changes in Assam.\textsuperscript{15} Despite certain negative aspects of British rule in Assam, the positive aspects cannot be denied. Progressive winds from the West entered Assam through Bengal. The intellectual currents that subsequently flowed into the region, brought about the renaissance and the transition of the Assamese society from medievalism to modernism. In this transition the printing press and the publication of newspapers played a significant role.

In Assam, the American Baptist Missionaries played the pioneering role in introducing the Printing Press. In 1846, the Christian Missionaries published \textit{Orunodoi}, the first newspaper in Assamese. British rule had brought about significant changes in medieval Assamese society. With the spread of English education, there also emerged a small middle class, helping the growth of new social ideas. The Press played a significant role in arousing public opinion and in focussing on political, social and economic matters relating to the province. In course of time, these views filtered down to the masses through the medium of the Press. The \textit{Orunodoi} inspired the educated section in Assamese society who provided an impetus to the birth of a series of newspapers and magazines in Assam, both in English and Assamese. Like in the rest of the world and in other parts of India, newspapers and magazines played an important role in providing a modern outlook to the intellectual life of the people of Assam also. Prior to the publication of the \textit{Orunodoi} in Assamese, the newspapers and periodicals from Bengal were the only source of information of the educated Assamese. Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Jagyaram Dhekial Phukan in their time kept regular contact with the newspapers of Bengal, specially with the \textit{Samachar Darpan}. The

\textsuperscript{15} P. Goswami, \textit{Assam in the Nineteenth Century : Industrialization and Colonial Penetration}, Delhi, 1999, p. ix
publication of the Orunodoi contributed immensely to the development of Assamese society. Moreover, it set the tone for all future Assamese magazines.

In 1871, the Asam Bilasini, the second Assamese newspaper was published from the Auniati Satra in Majuli. Sri Sri Dattadev Goswami (1838-1904), the Satradhikar felt the need of a newspaper in Assamese and in 1871, he brought a printing press from Calcutta for this purpose. The publication of Asam Bilasini testifies to the importance that was attached to the press as a medium of mass communication. During the later half of the nineteenth century not less than 25 newspapers and magazines appeared in Assam. Of these newspapers, the Orunodoi, the Assam News, the Assam Bandhu, the Mau, the Jonaki and the Bijuli played important and significant role within their own orbits towards promoting the growth of a modern intellectual outlook in Assam. On the whole, Orunodoi performed the role of a peaceful media of the missionaries against social injustices. Orunodoi tried to expose the evils of the Hindu society by publishing articles on these subjects. Assam News played a significant role in standardizing Assamese language. Mau and Assam Bandhu published articles on a variety of topics related to the socio-political and economic problems of Assamese society. These newspapers represented the views of the educated Assamese people and stressed not only on the material development of the province but also on the cultural and literary upliftment of the people of Assam. The Jonaki brought about renaissance in Assamese language and literature.

Newspapers and magazines published during the period under survey laid the foundation of a modern Assamese society. Superstitions gave way to reason and people began to develop a critical outlook. This was largely the influence of the print medium. In fact, these papers and periodicals created a whole genre of new writers, as well as a

(9)
A considerable number of readers, and contributed immensely to the foundation of a modern intellectual base.

Thus, for Assam, the second half of the nineteenth century was of great significance in the development of her culture and in the changing attitudes of the Assamese people. The establishment and consolidation of the British power in Assam had witnessed the introduction of English education, the activities of the American Baptist Missionaries and the incoming wave of Bengal renaissance, all having far-reaching consequences. The period was also significant for another important reason — it decided the future course of Assamese language and literature. The Press in Assam played a tremendous role in the rehabilitation of Assamese to its legitimate place and in the stabilisation of the modern Assamese language on a standard grammatical basis.

With the leadership and inspiration provided by Orunodoi, a healthy tradition of journalism struck its roots in the soil of Assam. It created conditions in which literateurs could work for the development of Assamese language and literature. The literary intercourse on widow-remarriage, status of women, social evils etc. brought together the different sections of the society otherwise divided on the basis of caste and religion. Secondly, it brought the Assamese people into contact with western knowledge and thinking. A strong national sentiment and consciousness grew among the Assamese people forging the bonds of fraternity with the rest of the Indian intelligentsia.

The present work is an attempt to study the growth and development of the Press in Assam during the latter half of the nineteenth century in the context of the Assamese society. It is based on both primary as well as secondary sources. Assamese Journals and Histories published during the period of study, autobiographies, diaries and memoirs of the important writers, and Reports and Accounts have been widely used as primary
source materials.

The work has been divided into six chapters. The primary intention in this organisational plan has been to focus attention on some of the major issues relating to the Assamese society that were widely discussed in the press in Assam during the period under survey. These issues are broadly indicated in the titles of the different chapters. Each chapter also contains a brief survey of those issues in the context of Bengal and other parts of India during the nineteenth century. The work begins with a survey of the growth and development of the press in Assam during the later half of the nineteenth century. In this chapter an introduction of the Indian press in the background of the world press has been given. In this context, the establishment of the British power in India, origin of the world press, origin of the printing press in India, background of the birth and development of both English and the Vernacular press and the contribution of the missionaries towards the establishment of the press in rest of India and Assam have been dealt with. The next chapter deals with the issues related to the progress of education in Assam as discussed in the press during the period of our survey. Development and expansion of Western Education in Assam helped in the growth of a progressive section of people in the Assamese society. This section developed a critical attitude towards the various social evils prevalent in the society of the period. Chapter Four presents a study of the issues relating to the social reforms that were widely discussed in the newspapers and the periodicals of the time. The fifth chapter deals with the contribution of the press in Assam towards the restoration of the Assamese language to its rightful status in Assam as well as the development of Assamese literature. Over all the work is an attempt to analyse the social impact of the press in Assam during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The last chapter is in the nature of conclusion
of our study. Translations of the original texts are ours. However, whenever translated works of others have been used, due acknowledgement has been made in the footnotes.

In the modern context, the term press is primarily applied to either a daily, by weekly, or weekly newspaper. However, all types of magazines, newspapers and periodicals have been included in the present study.

The British East-India company established its rule over Assam in 1826 and completed the annexation in 1838. From 1839 to 1874 Assam was governed as a part of Bengal. In 1874, a new province was formed under the rule of a Chief Commissioner and the district of Sylhet of Bengal was added to the new state of Assam. In 1905 Assam was amalgamated with 14 districts of Bengal and a new province Eastern Bengal and Assam was created with Dacca as its capital. But after seven years in 1912, Assam was again recognised as a separate province. These changes notwithstanding, our study is confined to the geographical frontiers of Assam as it is today with particular reference to the Brahmaputra Valley.