Chapter IX

CONCLUSION

The survey of one hundred years of the history of journalism in Assam from 1846 to 1947 reveals that the establishment of printing press and publication of newspapers made the knowledge cheaper and easier and thereby, made a powerful impact on the transition of Assamese society from medievalism to modernism. Similarly, at the conclusion, it has brought certain other facts to the light relating to the nature, extent and future of the press in the province in the pre-independence period. The history of journalism in Assam had started with the publication of Arunoday. It was basically a religious paper as its conductors came to the province with motivated primarily by religious interest. However, the unprecedented situation created by the British conquest caused involvement of the American Baptist Mission and its paper with the movement for the restoration of Assamese language to its rightful position. Besides propagation of Christianity, incidentally the paper brought the literature within the easy reach of the people, started the basis of the formation of modern Assamese literature and caused a kind of revolution in realm of the Assamese minds. Since then religious patronage contributed a larger share to the development of Assamese journalism. It is to be remembered that the second Assamese paper Assam Bilashini also appeared under full religious patronage. In fact Assam Bilashini was the first paper in
Assam which was published completely under indigenous effort and attitude. Compared to the publication of large number of magazines and periodicals in the period of our review, the number of newspaper published in Assam was not encouraging. However, at the initial stage of the press in the State most of the publications served the purpose of both newspaper and magazine, and it laid emphasis on content instead of form. Moreover, in many respects the papers were managed by individuals with resource and mission. Asem Banti and Assamiya, two leading Assamese newspapers first appeared under collective efforts, however, later on both were shifted to proprietorial management. Besides a few professional journals, numerous magazines and periodicals appeared in this period were literary in character and managed by organisations and associations. But leading literary magazines like Banhi, Usha, Awahom and Jayanti were the works of individual effort and labour.

The development of a free press and domination of foreign rule are things of contrast and one could not expect peaceful co-existence of both for a long period of time. In reality this was to become an all India phenomenon. In the preceding chapter of introduction the attitude and the policy of the government towards the growth of Indian press and its effects on the formation of public opinion in India under British rule was discussed at some length. In fact the East India Company's officials in India were suspicious to the role of the press from the very beginning. But in the beginning
there was no such occasion to be displeased at the local press. In the early stages of development of the press in Assam, it carefully avoided confrontation with the British administration and as a result, by and large, the relations between press and the government were cordial. Now-a-days, a newspaper devote most of its pages for political news and comments. But like most of the language papers of 19th century India, Assamese papers also devoted much space for subjects like social reform, welfare of the people, religion, health and hygiene and spread of education. "A subject nation has no politics" - this confession of Jonaki (1889-1896), not only indicated the policy and programme of this monthly magazine, but reflected the views of almost all the contemporary Assamese journals and papers. In the light of this notion, the British government in Assam was satisfied with the conduct of the local press for a considerable period of time. Commenting on Assam News, the leading weekly of the period in 1883 the Commissioner of the Assam Valley district said that he did find anything in the paper which might create ill feeling between the local people and the Europeans. It may be accepted as an overall assessment of the official attitude to the papers of the time. The tone of the average newspaper was moderate and continued almost till the end of the century. However, from the beginning of the twentieth century the political scene of the region was suddenly changed as a result of the Partition of Bengal. The former Bengal Presidency was divided into two parts and in October 1905 a new province was created amalgamating the
province of Assam with fourteen districts of Eastern Bengal. For about seven years till 1912, Assam was an integral part of the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The Partition of Bengal caused a powerful popular movement in Bengal against the decision of the British government. It generated the spirit of Swadeshi, and nationalist movement in the country. With exclusive coverage of the political events of the region during these years circulation of both Calcutta and provincial newspapers had largely increased. During 1905-1906 the number of registered papers in the province was fortythree and not less than three quarters were classified as "extremist organs". Introducing the Newspapers (Incitement to offence) Act in 1908, the government tried to control the tone and temper of the Press. However, it is only fair to point out that this changed tone for nationalism was mostly confined to Bengali papers and the local press, particularly, the vernacular press of the Brahmaputra Valley, maintained sufficient restraint in expressing news and views on the political events of the region. The Administrative Report of the province for the year 1908-1909 recorded that the local press consisted of seven Angle-vernacular papers. The political events of the year naturally received almost exclusive attention in most of these papers. In this they followed the lead of the Calcutta press. Only three papers, which dealt with political questions ranged themselves on the side of the government, namely, the East of Dacca and two Assamese publications. Notwithstanding, the docile nature of the local press the British government took alarm at the widespread
influence of the Bengali press in the region and took precautionary measures to prevent the infiltration of anti-British racial and extremist ideas in the papers published for Assam. The government issued warnings against seditious writings in certain cases. This state of affairs continued till 1912, when the status quo was maintained and Assam resumed her separate identity as Chief Commissioner's province. In the new province, however, the number of the registered local papers for that year was reduced to sixteen. At the close of the decade waves of the Partition of Bengal disappeared but the outbreak of the first world war (1914-1918) and the beginning of the Home rule movement created a new political situation in the country. Meanwhile, several new Assamese newspapers and magazines with promising future added prestige to the Assamese press. Inspite of the changing pattern of the society, political environment and outlook of the press in Assam, in the opinion of the Provincial government, "with an exception here and there the tone of the press was unobjectionable" and this official attitude continued up to 1920.

In the days of the Freedom movement the British administration adopted almost a uniform attitude to the newspapers and journals owned by the Indian management throughout the country. Like other parts of the country Assam was also drawn into the orbit of the freedom movement led by Indian National Congress. The Non-cooperation movement reached its momentum in Assam with the visit of Gandhiji to
the province in 1921 and naturally, its impact was seen on the local press. The Provincial administration had now found their reasons to deal with the local press. It accused certain papers of preaching "active disloyalty" and "race hatred" and enough pretext was found to persecute the press and prosecute persons considered responsible for such publications. The Advocate of Assam (1905-1912), a weekly English paper was widely accepted as the forerunner of independent and nationalist thinking in the province. Later on newspapers like Assam Bhashini (1913-1924), an Assamese weekly, Weekly Assamya (1918-1947) and Bi-weekly Assamya (1930-1942) and Assam Sovak (1937-1941), another weekly Assamese paper played a positive role in the nationalist movement covering the period from 1921 to 1947. Assam Bhashini was the first Assamese paper to have fallen a victim to the repressive measures of the British government. The paper had to pay a sum of Rupees two thousand as security for alleged seditious writings and governmental repressive measures ultimately led to the closure of its publication in 1925. Both Weekly and Bi-weekly Assamya were victimised during the time of the freedom movement for playing an active role against the foreign rule. In 1922, the editor and printer of Weekly Assamya were punished in a defamation case filed by the Asstt. Police Commissioner of Burpeta Sub-Division of Kamrup district. Moreover, the government brought several charges against the publication of Assamya like "inclined to misrepresent government policy and government officials" and "to bring the government established by law
into hatred or contempt". Accordingly, on the plea of seditious writings government demanded a security of Rupees three thousand from Bi-weekly Assamya and when the paper refused to pay the security money, it had to suspend its publication temporarily. Due to the arrest and imprisonment of the editor of Assam Sevak, during the Quit India movement of 1942, the paper ceased publication.

It has been observed that as the freedom movement in the country entered different phases, the relations between government and the press also changed rapidly. In the eyes of the local government, after the suspension of the Non-cooperation movement during the period from 1923 to 1929 the tone of the press was "on the whole moderate" and hence, there was no persecutions during these years. Similarly, from 1932 to 1940 no action was taken against any newspaper under the Indian Press (Emergency powers) Act of 1931 published in the province. But the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945) synchronized the beginning of the Quit India movement in the country and the government again returned to the old policy of repression and kept the local press under strict vigilance. However, the tone of the majority of the newspapers and journals both English and vernacular published in Assam were certainly not anti-British. In fact the nationalist stance of most of the newspapers in Assam differed from the nationalism as understood by the country at large in terms of the freedom movement. A vague sort of uneasiness and apprehension of economic and cultural domination by the
outsiders influenced the tone of the Assamese papers of the
time. With the prospect of independence the economic, as well
as cultural interest of the different communities living in
the province acquired prominence in public life. So, in the
middle of the thirties the government regarded press in Assam
as moderate.

During the last phase of the transfer of power the
Cabinet Mission Plan in 1916 caused sharp reaction in Assam.
The grouping proposal satisfied nobody and the anti-grouping
movement rocked almost all parts of the province. The sentiment
of the Assamese people was clearly reflected in the local
press. However, in the long run Cabinet Mission Plan as well
as grouping proposal fizzled out and the local press played
a vigorous role in upholding the distinctive identity of the
Assamese people and the need for keeping Assam as a part of
India.

The enrichment of modern Assamese language and
literature is one of the important aspects of journalism in
Assam. Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami, one of the stalwarts of
Assamese literature listed six different periods of Assamese
literature since 600 A.D. to the beginning of the 19th century.
From 1800, the sixth and the last period as he termed it,
journalism developed in Assam. It is to be noted that within
the field of written Assamese literature, a kind of oral
literature, confined mostly to the villages also thrived and
with the beginning of the British rule and the impact of the
Vest, written literature itself assumed definitely urban complexion. During the time of British rule, Assamese prose literature may be broadly classified under Pre-Arunoday, Arunoday, Assam Bengali and Assam News, Japati, Bamhi and Awohen periods. As the classification was made on the basis of the influence of the writings of Assamese papers and magazines published during the period, it could serve the convenience of studying literary trends at some length with sufficient materials. It could show how Assamese journalism had enriched the modern Assamese language and literature at different times. It was already stated that Arunoday not only formed the basis of journalism in the province but also brought literature within the easy reach of the common people. It goes without saying that the American Baptist Missionaries had no extensive knowledge of the Assamese language and hence they adopted the spoken language of the common people for composition of Assamese prose. They tried to avoid Sanskritised words and mostly used the spoken word in their writings. Similarly, the magazine also introduced simple forms of words avoiding the complex ones. However, this innovations caused controversies between the conservatives and the new reformers. At the beginning, the language of Arunoday was very simple language used by the children. But within a decade of its publication the magazine could correct its initial mistakes and eventually it could reach the standard form of Assamese writing. In 1873, Assamese received official recognition as a language of education and administration and since then, overcomiing its
initial complex, it continued its steady march with new zeal and promise. *Weekly Assam News* had provided a definite shape to modern Assamese language and literature. It may be said that Assamese prose literature of the later period broadly followed the path shown by *Assam News*. The language of *Assam Bundeey* was somewhat different from that used in the *Weekly Assam News*, yet it enriched Assamese literature with its style of prose writing. In fact the magazine prepared the ground for the future romantic age in Assamese literature. *Jonaki* acted as the medium for transition of Assamese literature to renaissance and with the rise of a group of new writers, the period of romanticism sprang up in the pages of this literary magazine. The age of *Benhi* was slightly longer. The founder of *Benhi* was himself one of the stalwarts of the *Jonaki* age and hence, the magazine could complete the unfinished work of the *Jonaki* period. With the changing pattern of livelihood and outlook of the people from the beginning of the thirties, *Awahan*, the monthly magazine introduced realism in the Assamese literature on western lines.

The history of the printing press in Assam is only ten years older than the history of Assamese journalism. The American Baptist Mission press of Sibsagar was the centre of the Assamese printed works for a long period. Inspite of the establishment of several printing presses from the beginning of the seventies the recorded number of the printed published works in Assamese was not encouraging. So, the need for newspapers and magazines was indispensable for creation of
new readers and writers in the province. **Assamya Bhasa**

Unnati Sadhini Sabha, a literary organisation formed in Calcutta in 1888 resolved to introduce a single form of Assamese written language throughout the State. Despite some differences in the form of Assamese spoken language, almost all Assamese papers and magazines published in the period under reference had agreed upon the acceptance of a uniform written language. In this respect, the publication of Hemkosh of Hem Chandra Barua in 1901 removed to a great extent the prevailing confusion or dissimilarities. However, the controversy over the so-called perfection of language continued and created sometimes an undesirable situations for the Assamese press, particularly, in the second decade of the century. Most of the Assamese papers and journals, published mainly in the post-Jonaki period resolved to take proper care for the use of the standard form of writing. It is interesting to note that an Assamese journalist of repute had to resign his post of editorship of Weekly Assamya for not using local word to substitute the word “hunger”.

The Indian language press has a special role in the enrichment of modern provincial languages of the country considered in this light, the Assamese press had offered yeoman's service for growth and development of an accepted form of Assamese in all parts of the province. Herein lies the basic importance of press in Assam.

Chandra Kumar Agarwala, the founder-editor of *Jonaki*, in the first editorial of the first issue of the magazine
described the position of the newspaper in Assam as "a drop of water on a rum leaf". He was led to make this remark observing the nature of the newspaper and magazine published in the period from 1846 to 1889. During these forty-three years, at least fourteen newspapers and magazines were published in the province, and all of them were short-lived. Only Arunoday could complete its publication for more than three decades. Assam Bilashini (1871-1883) continued for twelve years; Assam News (1882-1895) lasted for three years; Goalpara Hitasadhini (1876-1878) and Assam Tara (1888-1890) continued publication for two years and most other papers even could not complete a year of publication. During the last decade of the 19th century, the position of the press in Assam gradually improved with the publication of several weekly papers both in Assamese and English. However, the census report of 1901 revealed that only one weekly Assamese newspaper Assam Banti was in existence with circulation of about fifteen hundred and that not a single Assamese magazine was in circulation. After ten years in 1911, in respect of newspaper the same position continued and the circulation of Assam Banti was reduced to nine hundred and fifty only. However, three Assamese monthly magazines were registered at that time in the State with about 1760 subscribers. It is to be noted that the Bhasi people of Assam at that time had the benefit of circulation of seven monthly magazines with about five thousand and eight hundred subscribers. In the one hundred years of Assamese press from 1846 to 1947 a large number of newspapers and journals appeared but only a handful of them
could attain maturity in publication. In this respect *Arunoday* (1846-1862), *Assam Banti* (1901-1944), *Assamiya* (1918-1947) comparatively enjoyed a longer period of circulation. Similarly, Assamese magazines like *Dipti* (1905-1938), *Bubi* (1909-1946) and *Awahon* (1929-1947) have set a record in respect of the continuation of a long period. In the light of the short-lived nature of Assamese papers and journals in the period of our review, it may be observed that the early English press in Assam has set a good example in the journalism of the State with its rich heritage. *The Times of Assam* (1895-1940), the oldest English weekly newspaper in the State enjoyed the longest period of circulation for nearly forty five years.

Discussing the nature and development of the press in Assam Lashmi Nath Baschner, the editor of *Bubi* put forward a realistic view on Assamese papers and magazines that appeared in the State. In the second issue of the first volume of *Bubi*, in January 1910 he revealed the secret for the smooth running of *Times of Assam* and at the same time outlined the factors responsible for the transitory nature of Assamese papers. He observed that good writing alone was not sufficient for the survival of a newspaper. If it were so, *Assam News* would have not have met with premature closure. If the strength of money mattered than *Assam Bilashini* could have still appeared in Assam. Without feeling the dearth of above two factors monthly *Now* disappeared. Besides these two factors, a newspaper must possess an essential quality, i.e., business policy for its survival. It seems Assamese press has refused to take notice
of the necessity of survival in its early stage of development. In fact lack of business policy was one of the important drawbacks in the early period of the press in Assam.

It is an acknowledged fact that Bengali language and culture played a dominant role in the affairs of Assam for a good part of the nineteenth century. As a result of early contact with the Company's rule the people of Bengal had the advantage of coming under the influence of English education and western liberal thought and ideas. The Indian press, by and large, was the byproduct of British rule and it appeared first in the country in the form of the Bengal press. Obviously, enlightened sections of the Assamese opted for taking advantages from the Bengal press. Later on, indigenous efforts received a great fillip when Assamese was restored to its rightful place. Since the days of Assamer Darpan wide circulation of Bengali papers in Assam put some hurdles in the natural growth of press in Assam. Eminent persons having direct contact with the Assamese papers were always aware of this fact and tried to draw the attention of the people to this aspect of the matter vis-a-vis the Assamese press. At the beginning Gunabhiran Borooah in his editorial comment in Assam Bandhu (January/February 1886) discussed the causes of the short lived nature of the Assamese papers. He said that those who could subscribe a newspaper or journal opted for Bengali or English papers and it filled the needs of a newspaper. Thus the people belonging to the upper class of the society preferred quality at the cost of the new born
local press. The Administrative report of Assam for the year 1893-1894 had recorded that no paper existed in the Brahmaputra Valley. The only newspaper in the province that existed throughout the year was Paridarsak, a fortnightly newspaper published in Bengali from Sylhet. Another Bengali paper Sribattabashi came into existence in the same district during the year. The circulation of both were limited owing to the competition of the cheap Calcutta papers. Similarly, this competition of Calcutta papers very much determined the future of the Assamese papers in the Brahmaputra Valley, not only in the early period, but even in later stage of the development of the press in Assam. At the same time lack of literary contribution from the educated sections of the people was another important factor for cessation of Assamese journals and papers at the premature stage. In most of the cases the editor and publisher of Assamese papers expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of expected co-operation from the Assamese writers of repute. Naturally, it hampered the growth of particularly, literary magazines to a great extent. So, the founder editor of Jonaki had to compel the members of the Assamiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha to contribute to the magazine under compulsion, in the face of a pecuniary fine.

Most of the newspapers and magazines published in Assam from the days of Arunoday fetched less income against high production cost. In fact, at the initial stage of the press in Assam almost all publications had to depend only on the subscriptions of the readers. But very few papers or
magazines enjoyed regular contributions from its patrons or subscribers. Now-a-days, side by side with circulation, advertisement, a powerful medium of modern business can determine to a great extent the fate of a particular publication. However, out of a large number of publications in Assam actually a handful of them only could enjoy the benefit of advertisement income for its survival. Inspite of good writing and attractive get up no newspaper can fully depend on the goodwill of its subscribers. It cannot be regarded as a permanent source if it failed to command a sufficient number of circulation and advertisement. As a result depending fully on a subsidiary budget, journalism was a mission instead of profession in its early stage of development in the pre-independence period. So, it showed that survival of a paper or magazine mostly depended on the capacity of its owner, for how long he could run the publication, ignoring the prospect of profit. Naturally, this outlook hampered growth of newspapers and development of journalism in the State as an independent profession.