Chapter III

Role of the language newspapers in Assam

While the language newspapers were started much earlier in other developed languages throughout the country during the British regime, newspapers in Punjabi, Oriya and Assamese came much later and, according to the Rev. J. Long, "They (Assamese and Oriya) are used by small populations who are too few to afford a prospect that like the Dutch or Welsh, they will be able to create a vernacular literature. Already in Orissa and Assam when boys make any progress in these dialects, they go on to the more polished Bengali, and the Government wisely encourage the study of Bengali in all the senior classes."

Rev. Long further observed that the native newspapers...

1) The Past Condition and Future Prospects of Press of Bengal: By Rev. J. Long (this was a report to the then Government in 1859)
were humble in appearance, yet like the ballads of a nation, they often acted where the law failed and as straws on a current, they showed its direction. In them, questions of *sati*, caste, widow re-marriage, polygamy had been argued with great skill and acuteness on both sides. They had always opposed a foreign language being the language of the courts. The atrocities of indigo planters and the blunders of young magistrates had been laid bare and letters to the editor opened out a view of native society nowhere else to be found. Now and then extracts from details of crime in England were given to show that there were faults with the English too. Moral tales were frequently published and there were (number of short pieces (in verse) on the seasons and on the varied aspects and objects of nature, many of them possessing considerable merit.

By 1870, the press in the Indian languages was growing rapidly. There were about 62 Indian language newspapers in Bombay, about 60 in the North-west Provinces, about 40 in Central Provinces, some 20 in Bengal, about 19 in...
in Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Hindustani) There were probably 100,000 readers of such newspapers and the highest circulation any one newspaper was about 3000. "The language press caused concern and uneasiness to the Government. It had acquired a mild reputation as having disseminated seditious thoughts through symbols and apparently innocent words before the Great Rebellion. The Government had to depend on Indians to be acquainted with what was published in the Indian language press and this led to forebodings."

That the language press caused concern and uneasiness to the British Government was clear when in 1878, Sir Alexander Arbuthnot, a member of the Viceroy's Council, introduced the Vernacular Press Bill which was ultimately passed as Act IX of 1878 to place the language newspapers under "better control" and to furnish the Government with more effective means than the existing law provided, of punishing and discouraging seditious writing calculated to...
to produce disaffection towards the Government in the minds of the ignorant population, and to prevent unscrupulous writings from using their newspapers as a means of intimidation and extortion.

The first Assamese newspaper, The Orunodoi (Sun-rice) was published in 1846 and this paper, edited by Rev. O. A. Cutter on behalf of the American Baptist Mission in Assam, was "a monthly paper, devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence". But the first Bengali newspaper, the Sambad Kaumudi, published in 1819 was edited by the late Mr Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), who was called the "Father of modern India" and who advocated through his paper against corruption in Hinduism, idol worship, animal sacrifices, polygamy, caste system and for abolition of sati. However, during that period, the Assamese language itself could not receive much recognition from the elite section of the society. The children of the so-called upper class people in Assam then used to get themselves educated.
Bengali medium and hence, during the early period, the
Assamese language newspapers failed to attract much attention
of the readers, particularly on matters of educating the
masses on certain vital socio-economic or religious matters.

The language press in Assam grew during the post-Independence period when several dailies, bi-weeklies, weeklies
and monthlies came up. Some of these papers started taking
keen interests in socio-political affairs of the people of
the region in particular and of the country in general.

Assam with a population of 1,46,25,152 (1971 census) and
rate of literacy being 28.72 (1971) was having 96 newspapers
by the end of 1976, 18 more than in the previous year. The
number of newspapers in Assamese was 44, Bengali 23, English
11 and Hindi 3. There were 6 bilinguals and 2 multilinguals.
Seven newspapers were of the "other languages" category.
Periodicitywise, there were 8 dailies, 32 weeklies, 22
monthlies and 34 other periodicals. (1)

(1) The 21st annual report of the Registrar of Newspapers
for India, 1977.
By 1976, there were 49 newspapers in Assamese language, including 4 dailies, 12 weeklies and 33 other periodicals.

Of the total 49 newspapers in Assamese, 44 were being published from Assam, followed by West Bengal (3), Tamil Nadu and Delhi (one each). The newspapers in Assamese obtained a total circulation of 124 million copies in 1976. The increase was by 8000 copies over 1975. The circulation of dailies rose to 45,000 copies in 1976 from 42,000 copies in 1975 (7.1 per cent). But the circulation of the Assamese weeklies came down to 53,000 copies in 1976 from 65,000 copies in 1975 (18.5 per cent). Other periodicals gained in circulation by 17,000 copies from 9000 copies in 1975 to 26,000 copies in 1976. During the six years ending 1976, the total increase in circulation of Assamese newspapers was 56,000 copies, an increase of 82.4 per cent.

There was and is no big category newspaper in Assamese language in Assam and only two Assamese newspapers belong to the medium category while 21 belong to small categories.
However, the circulation of medium papers in Assamese language went up by 2000 copies from 54,000 copies in 1975 to 56,000 copies in 1976, small category papers gained by 6000 from 62,000 copies in 1975 to 68,000 copies in 1976. The circulation of the only daily rose, in the medium category in 1976, to 24,335 copies from 23,420 copies in 1975. Small category dailies also gained in circulation in 1976 by 3000 copies from 18,000 copies in 1975 to 21,000 copies in 1976.(1)

The largest circulated Assamese daily, the Dainik Assam, created more impact among its readers than its English counterpart, The Assam Tribune, particularly before and after the mid-term elections to Lok Sabha in January, 1976. The editor of the daily, Mr K.N.Hazarika, who is a veteran in the field of Assamese journalism, started playing up the issue of foreign nationals registering their names in electoral rolls in Assam thereby endangering the very

(1) Press in India, 1977.
existence of the Assamese people in their own State. The newspaper immediately succeeded in building up public opinion on the problem, particularly in the rural areas. It went on publishing news and views on the subject and on average about 70% of the total news coverage by it was devoted to the issue of foreign nationals.

But the editorials of the Dainik Asam during the period of the movement were mostly balanced as well as thought provoking. For example, in the issue of January 7, 1980, the daily published an editorial under the caption: "Now is the time to be alert" in which it said that there had been a systematic effort by certain anti-Assam elements to frustrate and mislead the entire movement launched in the State to highlight the danger posed by the problem of foreign nationals. It said these elements had been trying to give the movement a parochial and anti-religious colour. Even some outside newspapers and their correspondents had been trying to give a regional colour to this national issue. Hence the people of Assam must not be misled.
by all these provocative actions. Instead they should try to highlight the basic problem and also to resist the move to frustrate the genuine movement, the daily said...

The Dainik Asam being the largest circulated Assamese daily went on highlighting the news about the death of Mr. Khargeswar Talukdar, a student leader of Kamrup district of Assam, who was killed during a clash between a group of students and the CRP personnel. It may be mentioned that the group of students led by Mr. Talukdar tried to stop the car in which Mrs. Abida Ahmed, wife of the late President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, was on way to Barpeta to file her nomination as the Congress-I candidate for the Lok Sabha election of 1980. The daily published the news as the lead story on front page giving the details about the incident leading to the death of Mr. Talukdar. The news-item also carried a photograph of Mr. Talukdar.

The news item created tremendous impact among the readers, particularly in the rural areas of Assam. The daily then published a series of news items, articles, letters,
photos and even poems on Mr Talukdar. It published on the front page a photo of Mr Talukdar with a caption: "He sacrificed his life for the cause of Assam, we have lost our son; but there are thousand of our sons who are now fighting for the cause".

The Mainik Asam again published a number of articles on the issue of foreign nationals in Assam. One article written by a former MP, Mrs Pushpalata Das, showed with relevant maps how the Bangladeshis nationals had been trying to "invade" the entire north-eastern region to fulfil their dream of "Greater Bangla".

Another Assamese daily, Dainik Janamkhumi, published from Jorhat, also played almost similar role during these months of agitation in Assam over the issue of foreign nationals. On December 17, 1979, the daily commented editorially that the Centre must see that the burden of foreign nationals does not fall alone on Assam and other States of the country should also share it, matter whether they like or dislike to do so in the
Government of India allowed these foreigners to stay back in our country.

The Asam Bani, the highest circulated Assamese weekly, published from the Assam Tribune group, equally played a vital role in popularising the movement in nook and corner of Assam. The weekly usually published news with comments on its front page giving eye-catching headlines and cartoons. The write-ups concerning the movement in Assam against foreign nationals were generally mixed up with comments to mould public opinion.

Another language weekly, the Agradoot which calls itself progressive, succeeded in becoming more popular during the period of the movement. In one of its editorials, the weekly made it clear that the people of Assam should not bother about what outside papers or journals tried to project things concerning the movement in Assam. The Nagas and the Mizos who were fighting for Independence did not bother about publicity; but on the other hand, the correspondents of different newspapers and journals
themselves came to the region in search of reports. If the youth of Assam could go on with the agitation, a day would come when the newsmen from outside the region would have to come and investigate into the real cause of the movement.

The language newspapers, by and large, used to write very critical editorials and reports about the functioning of the Government. They also publish sometimes some scandals about some high officials, Ministers or MLAs. Because of such writings, the language newspapers had to face tough time when they even had to lose advertisements from the Government. The Assam Government stopped all advertisements to the Dainik Asam and the Asam Bani thrice during the last sixties and seventies.

The Manipur Government blacklisted three noted local dailies: Eastern Standard (English), Anouba Samaj and Leishemba (both in Meitei language) for publishing reports exposing the corrupt dealings of the then Directorate of Publicity and Information of Manipur. The
DIPS of Manipur had written personal letters to all the
head(s) of departments ordering them to release advertisements
only to another language daily: Prajatantra. The three dailies
were deprived of all State Government advertisements during
the time when the Janata Party was ruling at the Centre.

The editors of the three dailies of Manipur made a
complaint to the then Janata Chief Minister of the State,
Mr Yangmaso Shaiza but to no avail. Eventually they had
to make several trips to New Delhi to inform the then Union
Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr L.K. Advani
of the real situation. It was only after Mr Advani intervened
that the Manipur DIPS's order was revoked.(1)

The Manipur Government even arrested, during the Janata
regime at the Centre, in November 1977, Mr B.Kumar Singh,
editor of Paojel, a local daily, for having published a
critical news-item on the rising prices in the State. The

(1) An Era of Harassment in Manipur: article by Iboyaiaa
Laithangbam in Surya India, edited by Maneka Gandhi,
January, 1980, page : 43
Government also arrested the editor of another local paper, Lamyanba, Mr N.K. Sarjaoba, on alleged ground of instigating violence among students.

The Khasi language newspapers were also generally vocal about the local issues. Most of the Khasi language papers being published from Shillong, capital of Meghalaya, although thriving basically on Government advertisements, used to carry news items criticising the Government policies. One of the popular Khasi weeklies, Ka Pyrta Lyngti, edited by Mr A.B.M. Ambros Roy, published one news item on November 20, 1979 under the caption: "Govt. Keeps Snakes at Polo Bazar". The news item referred to the Government's initiative towards rehabilitating the victims of the communal riot in Shillong at the Polo Bazar. It may be mentioned that during that time, serious clash between the Khasis and the Bengalis living in Shillong took place and a large number of Bengali people along with the members of their families were made homeless.
However, the State Government promptly denied the basis of the news item through a Press note issued in Shillong urging other language papers also not to publish such news as might create again misunderstanding between people belonging to two different ethnic groups.

Like the language newspapers in other parts of the country, the Assamese newspapers are also being read less, compared to the English language papers, by men in Government service, bureaucracy, in industry, trade and commerce and education. Hence the circulation of the language newspapers cannot grow and as such they cannot compete with the English papers. Because of the poor circulation particularly among the elite sections of the society, the language papers can make less influence on them. This may be our attachment towards the English language. Only those who cannot properly understand English, they opt for reading language newspapers.

Mr P.B. Gadgil, a senior journalist, had been saying
for many years that "unless the English newspapers are closed down completely, the rural areas will never be developed. The growth of language newspapers is of primary importance for the progress of the country as they are published in the languages which the masses cannot understand". (1)

It is a known fact that there are many restrictions on the growth of the language newspapers throughout the country. These restrictions are both direct and indirect. But the existence of the English newspapers and the tendency of the policy-makers, bureaucrats and educators to give them preference is the greatest handicap.

Language newspapers in Assam, like in other parts of the country, are smaller in size as they enjoy less advertising revenue. Even those attached to bigger group of newspapers do not get enough advertisements to expand. Fifty per cent of the Government advertisements

(1) Indian Language Press: Growing Despite Restrictions, article by Arundhati Nanavati in Himmat, Nov. 9, 1979
goes to the English newspapers and the rest is distributed among all the other newspapers in 24 Indian languages. The smaller newspapers are not given enough time to buy their newsprint quota as they often do not have enough ready cash in hand to buy their quota at once.

The English newspapers also offer bigger salaries. Hence the young journalists prefer to work for them. The language newspapers do not have enough staff and cannot afford to keep reporters in all the big places. Their choice of good writers and reporters is limited and they are dependent on news agencies. But the leading news agencies circulate their news only through English and these news have to be translated and the process of translation takes time.

The language newspapers are less read because the middle class and the poor cannot afford to spend money on buying newspapers. In smaller towns, and also in villages, people do not, by and large, cultivate the
habit of reading newspapers. Even in the big towns and cities, only 10 per cent read contents and most remained content to read only the headlines. According to one survey made by the Press Institute of India, "about 80 per cent of people in the rural areas in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Assam are not yet concerned at all about what was or is happening in the world or in India or in their respective States". (1)

It is true that there are many difficulties which stand in the way of the newspapers having their access to the vast rural areas. The transport bottleneck is the main hurdle in this regard. Secondly, the slow progress of literacy in the rural areas also hampers the circulation of the newspapers in the remote villages. Thirdly, the economic stringency is another major hurdle as the villagers cannot afford to buy the high-priced newspapers.

published by different monopoly groups. In the entire north-eastern region, about 75 per cent of the total population live below the poverty line. (1) The economic condition of the people living in villages and in the hills of the region is very poor and as such they cannot afford to buy newspapers.

The following chart shows percentage distribution of population by areas in the region:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States/Union Territory</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh. 100</td>
<td>96.30</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam. 100. 91.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur. 100. 86.81</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya. 100. 85.45</td>
<td></td>
<td>14.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mizoram. 100. 88.64</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland. 100. 90.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura. 100. 89.57</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total. 100. 90.56. 9.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-India. 100. 80.09</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.91</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Census of India, 1971, series I, India, Paper I, 1972

The language newspapers usually carry less political news and do generally take up social issues; but there is less investigative reporting than in English papers. However, the highest circulated Assamese daily, the Dainik Asam, regularly published more political news with even comments in the reports. It had a regular feature in the edit-page: Samayar Sar (Timely Comments) where interesting political developments were generally caricatured with relevant cartoons. The daily also published a regular single-column cartoon feature with comments on its front page. On Sunday issue, it published editorial in lighter vein but touching the contemporary political events. All these features had made the daily popular in Assam. What is surprising, the Dainik Asam which started appearing only in 1965 enjoyed a total circulation of 24,335 in 1976 while The Assam Tribune which was started in 1946 by the same organization commanded only 29,175 copies as total circulation in the same year. (1)

(1) Press in India, 1977
Two Assamese weeklies, the Saptahik Nilachal edited by Mr Bhabendra Narayan Datta Barua and the Nagarik edited by Mr Homen Borgohain have been able to make impact among their readers. These two weeklies generally publish very critical write-ups about the political developments in Assam particular and in the country general. They used to publish interesting reports about new happenings inside the political scene, particularly in Assam and they used to make cogent editorial comments on the contemporary political events. Although their total circulations are not yet encouraging, these two weeklies are popular among the readers, even in rural areas.

The Assamese newspapers are yet to take up certain social schemes as has been done by some other language papers in other parts of the country. Only during 1968-69, the Dainik Asam opened a "relief fund" for a promising Assamese singer, Miss Dipali Borthakur, who was then suffering from a bad disease. The readers in Assam responded...
to the appeal for extending financial help to the artist for her necessary treatment. The total collection within about nine months was about Rs 17,000. The singer was very happy when she received the amount and after two years she again started singing. The daily also helped a number of writers and artists of Assam during their difficulties. It also raised funds for treatment of one senior journalist, the late Mr Niron Bhuyan, who was then the General Secretary of the Gauhati Working Journalists' Association and was suffering from serious illness.

The highest circulated Assamese weekly, the Asam Bani, introduced in 1961, a scholarship of Rs 100 per month for one year to the student who secures the highest total marks in Assamese in the High School Leaving Certificate examination held under the Gauhati University.

Both the Dainik Asam and the Asam Bani used to organize annual short story competition in Assamese for the new writers studying in colleges and universities. There had been tremendous response from the young writers every year for the competitions.
One must admit the fact that the newspapers in Assam since the early days had helped considerably towards the growth and development of Assamese language and literature. There had been few structural changes in the constructions of words and spelling in Assamese due mainly to the practices evolved by the Assamese newspapers with a view to simplifying the language for the benefit of the common readers. It is a fact that "a history of Assamese journalism is yet to be written, but in every history of Assamese literature, a chapter is invariably devoted to it, as during the last 120 years of its life of earth, it has served literature more than democracy". (1)

There are more and more newspapers and journals coming up every year in Assam and gradually the readers

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(1) Journalism in Assam: article by Dr B.K. Bhattacharyya, in the Souvenir of Gauhati Working Journalists' Association, February 27, 1966.
are taking more interest in them. However, the late Mr L.N. Phookan, the first editor of The Assam Tribune, warned those young Assamese journalists who want to stick to the profession to be more hard-working, prompt and vigilant. He lamented that the young journalists in Assam were more interested in career building than in trying to achieve perfection in the profession. He even accused them of not taking the profession seriously.

According to him, the newspapers from Calcutta gave certain important news concerning the north-eastern region much earlier than the newspapers from Assam. However, for this state of affairs, he also blamed the managements of newspapers in Assam for lack of initiative in spending money to improve the quality of the papers. Mr Phookan who spent 45 years of his life in the field of active journalism in Assam commented: "I sincerely believe that the language newspapers in Assam have a bright future". (1)

(1) L.N. Phookan Commemorative Volume, (in Assamese), edited by Prof Upendra Barkakati, 1976, page 141
The role played by the Assamese newspapers during the post-Independence period had been both positive and negative. During the period there had been quantitative increase of Assamese newspapers and some of them had, no doubt, been able to enjoy better influence in their field of activities; while discharging their duty as watch-dog of democracy, most of these newspapers seemed to have played a negative role. This may be because of the fact that almost all the newspaper organizations in Assam are still financially weak. There is no newspaper chain or tycoon in its true sense in Assam. The newspapers and journals from outside the State are still exploiting the field in Assam as their colony. The small and medium newspapers in Assam are still engaged in fighting against such exploitation. However, a few newspapers in Assam have definitely played a positive role in defending the democratic institution, although in their limited scope. These newspapers in Assam had to play the role of the
Opposition which was missing in the true sense of the term in the field of politics during the post-independence period because of virtually one-party rule during the period.

One can hope that the future of Assamese newspapers will be bright since there had been an awareness in the minds of the people about the necessity of having better newspapers in the state. With spread of literacy, particularly in the rural areas, there will be more readers and as such the language newspapers will be able to earn more revenue from both circulation and advertisements. With financial improvement, there will be qualitative improvement of the language newspapers.