Chapter-IV

Policies and Consumers Services of
Newspaper Industry in Assam

The major newspapers in Assam, whether in English or in any other regional language, do not follow the pattern generally set by any party mouth-piece. If the "Rajor Batori" (News of the People), Assamese weekly, published by the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Assam, is out and out the mouth-piece of the Assam Government, the highest circulated Assamese daily, the Dainik Asam, can never be termed as either pro or anti to the establishment, whatever political party may be on the saddle of power in the State. So is the case with the only major English daily, The Assam Tribune, which remained or at least wanted to remain impartial in its dealing with any political issue, both national and State.
There might be occasions in the past when the paper had to be deprived of the Government advertisements, but that did not mean that it tried, either knowingly or unknowingly, to be anti-Government during that period. It spoke or spoke out when it felt necessary for the greater benefit of the people. It openly criticised Government policies which, it considered to be against the interests of the people.

The Dainik Asam, being an Assamese daily, had been found more enthusiastic in finding fault with some of the policies pursued by the Government, particularly by the Assam Government. When the first non-Congress Ministry was formed in Assam after the victory of the Janata Party in the Assembly elections, the paper criticised the way the then Chief Minister, Mr Golap Borbora, selected his Cabinet members. The paper even openly criticised Mr Borbora for having listened to certain quarters on matters of Ministry making. It remarked that those quarters were not
interested in Assam having a stable and efficient Government. Mr Borbora did not listen to the advice given editorially by the Dainik Asam; but only after one year, he realized his mistakes when he found himself deserted by those whom he trusted most. The paper still continues to expose the mistakes of the Government and its policy-makers on various fields of human activities. It supports any move if it feels that the move is for the welfare of the people in the State.

Like The Assam Tribune, the Dainik Asam also went against the separate Hill State movement launched during the sixties under the auspices of the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference demanding creation of Meghalaya carving out of the then two hill districts of Assam.

In one editorial, the paper commented: "The movement of the APHLC for a separate Hill State cannot be encouraged by any right-thinking person, and if
Centre accepted the demand, it would be harmful not only for the people of the hills but also for the people of the plains". (1)

The Assamese weekly, the Asam Bani, also expressed almost similar view on the issue. However, the premier English daily, The Assam Tribune, could not maintain a balanced view on such vital issue concerning the political future of the entire north-eastern region. The daily went on harping on the same point saying that if the hill people wanted separation, the plain people would not oppose since the formation of the separate Hill State would only have adverse effect on the economy of the people living in the hills.

The Assam Tribune commented on the issue: "The hill people would do well to realise that the opposition of the people from the plains to their demand for a separate

State is entirely because of the latter's genuine anxiety to preserve what is left of Assam after Nagaland's severance and virtually Mizo Hills now. If, however, hill leaders insist on their demand and New Delhi accedes to it under duress, the hill areas would be affected economically more than any area in the plains districts. Doubtless, the Government of India, already burdened with liabilities because of the existence of a few economically unviable tiny States, will be a great sufferer too. Therefore, we would like to utter a word of warning to the policymakers that, should Assam be further truncated, the State capital will have to be necessarily shifted from Shillong, an eventuality which will spell a great disadvantage to the hill people themselves, not to the people of the plains in any case."(1)

While opposing the Hill State movement launched by

the APHLC under the leadership of Captain Williamson A. Sangma who later became the first Chief Minister of Meghalaya, The Assam Tribune failed to put forward cogent arguments to substantiate its opposition. What is more interesting is the fact that in the process of opposing the movement, the daily advocated, although unknowingly, for the creation of the separate Hill State. Here is another excerpt: "The sponsors of the separate Hill State move have been accusing over the years the plainsmen of being the villain of the piece as though the latter have been opposed to the creation of a separate Hill State for their selfish interest. That is far from truth. It is on record that the administration of the hill areas have been a heavy burden, if we can say so, both to the plains districts as well as to New Delhi, for the total revenue collected from the hill areas of the State Exchequer is hardly more than Rs 75 lakhs annually as against the high cost of expenditure required for administration and
development of the hill areas. If inspite of all these truths, the hillmen feel that they would be happy with a separate Hill State, the rest of the State's population will have no option but to reconcile to the inevitable position. However, we would like to make it clear that the Prime Minister would do well not to grant a separate Hill State at this time only because the APHLC leaders have been dangling the sword of a direct action movement". (1)

The separate Hill State movement that cropped up following the passage of the official Language Act Bill 1960 which was passed in the then Assam Assembly, provided the newspapers in Assam with an opportunity to prove their own mettle by way of expressing ideas.

(1) Editorial in The Assam Tribune, January 10, 1967
and moulding public opinion. But most newspapers, including The Assam Tribune and the Dainik Asam, failed to grasp the opportunity. The Assam Tribune being the only major daily which was also read by the people in the hills could not play its role in the way the people, mostly in the plains, desired.

The daily even went on publishing contradictory editorials on the same issue. During the sixties, the first editor of the paper, the late Mr. L.N. Phookan retired. He was succeeded by the assistant editor, Mr. S.C. Kakati in 1964. While Mr. Phookan was a man with no political leaning, Mr. Kakati has been all along a Congress worker, although later on he resigned from the party and again joined the party. He being the personal friend of Mr. Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury, former Chief Minister of Assam, tried sometimes to utilise the paper, directly or indirectly, to highlight the activities of the Congress Government in Assam headed
by Mr Chaudhury. On the other hand, Mr Chaudhury as the Chief Minister also used to take advice and guidelines from Mr Kakati on political matters, including issues like Ministry making.

During that period, The Assam Tribune lost its credibility of being impartial on political issues. Because, Mr Kakati as the editor, did never criticise any policy of the then Assam Government till Mr Chaudhury remained as the Chief Minister. The intelligent readers already started commenting on the paper being unofficial mouth-piece of the Assam Government led by Mr Chaudhury.

Mr Chaudhury, however, had to quit office in an embarrassing manner. The then Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi somehow could not see eye-to-eye with him during 1972 and he was asked while in New Delhi to step down. Mr Chaudhury had no other alternative left to him except obeying the dictate of Mrs Gandhi.

Then came Mr Sarat Chandra Sinha as the new
Chief Minister of Assam. Mr Kakati had some sort of personal misunderstanding with Mr Sinha and hence came the clash of interest between a politician and a journalist.

As editor, Mr Kakati started criticising the policies pursued by the Government headed by Mr Sinha. This had ultimately provoked Mr Sinha as the Chief Minister and he also tried to give the coin back to Mr Kakati. First, Mr Sinha put an indirect pressure by way of asking all the Government departments to exercise restraint on issuing advertisements to The Assam Tribune. Finally, the State Government stopped all advertisements to the daily. The conflict continued till the end of the Emergency. During the Emergency, even the Central Government also stopped giving any of its advertisements to the three publications of the group.

Mr Kakati, however, had to leave the paper during the Emergency. He complained that the Government put pressure to get him out as the editor of the paper. He said: "I willingly wanted to resign for the benefit of the Assam
Tribune organization which remained deprived of all advertisements simply on political grounds". (1)

With the exit of Mr. Kakati, the assistant editor, Mr. R.N. Barooah, became the third editor of The Assam Tribune. Mr. Barooah, who does not have any active connection with any political party, showed his courage in publishing, sometimes even provocative articles and news-items, particularly during the movement launched by the All Assam Students' Union against the foreign nationals.

Mr. Barooah published an editorial under the caption:

"A Cry in Wilderness" saying—"The fact of the matter is that nobody outside Assam, not even those in Government at New Delhi, have cared to assess the gravity of the problem in a dispassionate and pragmatic manner. The moot question is: can a foreigner staying in India

(1) Sunday magazine, June 9, 1978
illegally take part in the elections? If not why no effective steps have been taken to delete the names of such foreigners from the electoral rolls?... One reason of Government's inaction in the matter is that drastic steps will alienate a big chunk of the electorates.

The same consideration has influenced the all India parties which are not only not sympathetic towards Assam but, on the other hand, trying to thwart a popular upsurge. It would, therefore, appear that Assam's cry of distress is a cry in the wilderness. The Government's indifference apart, there are elements which are trying to give this genuine movement a communal colour". (1)

Besides editorials, the paper published a series of articles concerning the movement in Assam against the foreign nationals. It also serialised a few important memoranda submitted to the Central Government by some organizations or group of individuals detailing the problem of foreign nationals in Assam.

(1) Editorial in The Assam Tribune, November 8, 1979
The paper started with an article: "Awake, Assam", written by Prof Deven Datta, a lecturer in Cotton college, Gauhati. Prof Datta being the son-in-law of Mr Nibaran Bora, President of the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP), and leader of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, came into the real stage of the operators of the entire movement.

Mr Nibaran Bora who led the delegates of the AADSP to New Delhi for talks with the Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi and the Union Home Minister Mr Zail Singh during March, 1980, was generally considered to be "the think tank of the movement". (1)

Prof Datta's article made a strong plea for the people of Assam to be eternally vigilant, to act as a watch-dog and a sentinel. "Nothing is wrong in demanding that Assam must be protected not only from infiltration from foreign countries but also influx from

(1) Sumit Mitra in India Today newsmagazine, February 16-29, 1980
Other Indian States if the latter threatens to disturb her basic social, political and economic structures....

Does or does not Assam face the danger of having a non-Assamese Chief Minister in the near future if infiltration and influx are not stopped ? Has Assam ever wanted an Assamese Chief Minister in another State "?(1)

The editor of The Assam Tribune turned the "Letter to the Editor" column into a public platform for open debate on the foreigners' issue in Assam. In one of such letters, it was argued: "Assam produces oil, but Bihar gets the Refinery; Assam makes tea, but Bengal enjoys the Tea Board office. We have sacrificed everything from Assam for making others rich and cultured. Have we not paid royalty and employment to the people of these places at the cost of our youths ? If Barauni were to produce oil, could we have the Refinery in Assam"?(2)

(1) Awake, Assam : article by Prof Deven Datta, in The Assam Tribune, November 5, 1979.
(2) Letter to editor of The Assam Tribune, by Dr Himangshu Sekhar Hazarika, Gauhati University, Nov 5, 1979
That the Assam Tribune played a vital role in intensifying the movement jointly launched by the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad before the mid-term elections to the Lok Sabha, 1980, cannot be debated. This was the main reason for the attack of the paper's Calcutta office on the Chittaranjan Avenue by a group of angry Congress(I) demonstrators on March 19, 1980. "The Congress(I) demonstrators ransacked the office of the Assam Tribune on Chittaranjan Avenue in Central Calcutta and set fire to furniture, papers and files in protest against the atrocities on Bengalees in Assam." (1)

The Calcutta Correspondent of a New Delhi fortnightly newsmagazine, having made a on-the-spot study wrote:

"During January (1980) The Assam Tribune spent 75 per cent of its front-page space on news of the movement. "(2)

The Correspondent was correct; but he missed a point.

(1) PTI news-item with Calcutta dateline, March 19, 1980
(2) Assam and the North-east: The Danger of Secession: report by Sumit Mitra in India Today, February 16-29, 1980
to observe that The Assam Tribune despite spending 99% of its front-page space on the news about the movement, it also published a series of articles written by several noted social thinkers particularly on the issue of foreign nationals. The paper also published hundreds of letters in its "Letters to the Editor" column concerning the movement.

When the Congress(I) demonstrators damaged its Calcutta office, The Assam Tribune next day came out with "An Appeal" saying: "It is seen that a section of the people in West Bengal instigated by some political parties have taken up some programme of action in a planned manner such as attack on the office of The Assam Tribune in Calcutta, economic blockade of Assam, etc.

We appeal to the people of Assam not to be provoked by these actions keeping in view the underlying intention behind these actions."

"These provocations are intended to thwart the
present mass movement and to divert it to undesirable channels. We urge on everyone in the State to be vigilant and exercise restraint so that the aim of the movement is not lost". (1)

The Assamese daily, the Dainik Asam, equally played significant role during the days of mass movement in Assam. After the attack on the Assam Tribune office at Calcutta, the daily also published on its front page similar appeal to the people of Assam urging them not to be provoked by such actions. It also published the translated version of the article "Neglected Assam" (2) of Mr. M.V. Kamath. The article in its overall tone tried to give a correct picture about what was happening in Assam. He supported the cause of the Assamese people who, according to him were forced to launch such movement due to long neglect from the Centre.

(1) The Assam Tribune, March 20, 1980
However, one cannot overlook the fact that The Assam Tribune, being the premier English daily in the north-eastern region, should have played a role that could make a sobering impact on the society as a whole during the time of movement against foreign nationals in Assam. If one reads in between the lines, particularly the editorials on the issue of foreign nationals or movement, one could easily find out that the opinion expressed by the paper had been more or less simply the expression of the mob-psychology. The balanced view taking into account the entire problem with its causes and probable impact was often found missing in the editorial remarks occasionally made by the paper.

Being the leading English daily, it was expected that the paper would be able to give some concrete suggestions towards finding out solution to the problem of foreign nationals in Assam. But it failed miserably in this respect. The paper failed to provide its readers
with an adequate platform to discuss the entire gamut of the issue in its right perspective. It might be that because of such situation, the talks held at New Delhi between the student leaders and the Prime Minister ended in deadlock. Both sides were found adamant in their respective stand: the students wanted 1951 to be base year to determine foreign nationals in Assam while the Centre wanted 1971 to be base year.

On all-India or international issues, The Assam Tribune generally expressed its opinion editorially quite in the same approach made by the national papers, particularly The Statesman. The paper cannot, by and large, give its independent view through its editorials on the vital issues relating to the country or concerning certain international developments. What is more interesting to note is that The Assam Tribune often came out with editorial on national or international issue only after The Statesman or any other national daily published
editorial on such issue. Hence the paper had failed to make an impact among its intelligent readers who generally read the national dailies. This had not only damaged the image of the newspaper but also affected its growth in the field of journalism. The paper is now 44 years old; but its circulation is still below 50,000 copies per day. This is because of the fact that the paper is run by minimum staff in the editorial department. There is no regular meeting among the members of the editorial staff, the editor does not discuss any issue with anybody in the staff, because most editorials are purchased from outside on a meager monthly payment. The editorial writers from outside, who generally teach in college or University, used to write editorials without receiving any guidelines from the editor and as such they do whatever way they consider best. Sometimes they used to write editorials hastily due to lack of time since they have to be busy in their own professions.
Among the members of the editorial staff of The Assam Tribune, nobody was allowed to write any editorial. The editor himself seldom wrote editorials. He regularly looked after the letters which appeared in the "Letters to the Editor" column. The paper could not stick to certain policy on matters of editorial views, because the editorials were being supplied from outside.

The other English daily, The Assam Express, generally followed the stand taken by The Assam Tribune on matters of expressing opinions editorially. The Assamese weekly, Nagarik, owned by the Assam Express management, gave better opinion, particularly on Assamese politics, in its various columns (the weekly editorial column). This was because the Assamese weekly was being edited by Mr Homen Borgohain, one of the Assamese intellectuals. Mr Borgohain was once known for his popular Assamese short story mostly based on psycho-analytical themes. He earlier edited
Assamese weekly, the Saptahik Nilachal which is known for having a left-leaning in its policy. Other language newspapers are yet to make any dent in the society through their declared policies.

The newspapers in Assam can hardly serve the purport of their subscribers. Most of these newspapers are being purchased by the readers generally on compassionate grounds. The readers feel that since the publishers have made attempt to bring out the paper in Assamese, so being Assamese they have a responsibility to encourage the attempt. Only The Assam Tribune and the Dainik Assam have succeeded, to some extent, in fulfilling the desire of the readers. The Assam Tribune is being sold at 35 paise per copy, while other national papers in Assam cost minimum 50 paise per copy. The paper generally comes out with six pages, sometimes 8 pages and occasionally four pages.

According to the report of the Registrar of Newspapers for India, the Assam Tribune has to devote 60 per
of its total space to news and the rest 40 per cent to advertisements. (1) The paper enjoys maximum advertisements from various sources, particularly from the Central Government through the DAVP and other State Governments of the north-easter region. As usual, the paper devotes its second page and sometimes some portion of the third page for all classified advertisements. Here the charges are the lowest; but these advertisements serve more to the readers than other display advertisements published elsewhere in the paper, except in the edit page where no advertisement is entertained. The classified columns include advertisements about situation vacant, situation wanted, to let, sale notices on motor car & scooters, land & property, mach & hardware, tender notices, legal notices, public notices, loss and found, personal column, acknowledgement, in memoriam, matrimonial, trees and plants etc. All these advertisements are for the consumers service and they have been serving

(1) Press in India, 1977
both the advertisers and the readers. Particularly, the
advertisements like the information about rented houses
in a place like Guwahati and the 'situation vacant' do
much benefit to the readers. One of major causes of
attraction for the paper, particularly for the young
readers, is its serialization of the Phantom story
just below the classified advertisements every day except
on Sunday. The Phantom series published by the paper is
exclusive and hence it has special appeal to those
Phantom lovers. To be precise, all the informations
published in connection with the advertisements whether
classified or display do serve their purpose for the
benefit of the readers.

As a regional newspaper, The Assam Tribune, in its
limited scope, has been trying to cater to the needs
of various readers. The front page of the paper mostly
carries the important national and international news
and also the important news concerning the region.

Inside pages are generally utilized for coverage of
regional news while the edit page contains a regular article, two editorials, the Letters to the Editor column and the rest for news. The last page of the paper is a mixture of sport items and continuations of news items mainly from front page. The paper, by and large, covers more political news. It also subscribes to the national news agencies in English. Due to lack of adequate space, it cannot accommodate more reports on sports socio-economic and other cultural activities for which the readers generally complain.

The Assam Tribune with its still inadequate staff in the editorial department cannot cater to the needs of all the readers. It does not have the regular features like the Sunday magazine section, film review, children's section, etc. Earlier, the paper carried some of these features; but due to newsprint crisis during the sixties all these features have been discontinued. The new editor Mr Barooah tried to reopen the Sunday
section since 1977; but after a few months, it had to disappear again following newsprint shortage. However, he introduced a new feature particularly on cultural activities. The paper does not have its own film critic, book reviewers, legal reporter, drama and art critic and above all its own full-time photographer at its Gauhati office. The sports reporter who has his own camera has been supplying the necessary photos to the paper on payment basis. Strangely enough, he does not have any training in photography nor any experience for which the paper is exhibiting very poor show in the field of photo journalism.

In its regular Sunday issue, the paper now carries the Book Review section and also a regular single column feature of "Select Sayings". The book reviews are being purchased on nominal payment from some of the college teachers of Gauhati. Nobody from the staff, including the editor, except the two Special Spoons posted at Shillong and New Delhi, writes any features.
article on any topic. The edit-page articles are generally supplied by the INFA of New Delhi. The paper has a tradition of not encouraging writers from the region. The articles supplied by the INFA are mostly related to subjects which are irrelevant to the region. It has no tradition of publishing any news-letter from any of its correspondents. The Correspondents appointed in the district headquarters in Assam have never been asked for any special report nor do they get any guideline from the editor for coverage of any incident.

What is more unfortunate is that the paper, which is considered as the mouth-piece of the entire north-eastern region, does not have its own Correspondents at important places like Kohima, Imphal, Aizawl, Itanagary, Tura, etc. The Special Representative based at Shillong has to move around all these places and for one reporter it is impossible to do justice to the entire hill areas of the region.

The Assam Tribune does not give any importance
covering news concerning the rural life. The entire region has so many problems, particularly in the field of rural development by way of creating the necessary infrastructure. The newspapers in the region could have played their role in identifying the problems which have been responsible for slow process of economic growth in the region. The newspapers in the region, particularly those published from Assam, did not take any interest in bringing the problems faced by the tribals in the hills. The papers remained satisfied only with the reports about the armed insurgency in Mizoram and Nagaland. Even in reporting the news about the underground Nagas and the Mizo, the newspapers from this region failed to project the actual activities in the NNC (Naga National Council) and the MNF (Mizo National Front) hideouts. Not a single reporter from Assam, particularly from The Assam Tribune even visited any of the underground hideouts either in Nagaland or in Mizoram. The reports...
correspondent about the underground Nagas or Mizo was generally collected from the intelligence sources which were sometimes without any basis. However, one important thing about reporting the underground Nagas or Mizo was that they did not bother about what the newspapers use to write about them. Perhaps due to this there was no trouble for any correspondent sometimes even reporting just rumours.

Once the underground Nagas, particularly some followers of the Federal Government during the sixties, got angry with one editorial comment passed by The Assam Tribune. The underground elements sent a threatening letter to the then editor Mr S.C.Kakati saying that if the paper went on making such irrelevant comments on the Federal Government, it would have to face dire consequences. The management immediately informed the police and necessary pickets were posted in front of the press and also at the residence of the editor as precautionary measures. However, for about a month only the
prevailed but nothing was done to the press and the was also safe.

The newspapers in Assam, particularly, The Assam Tribune, failed to project the hopes and aspirations of the tribal people living in the hills of the region. At a time when all the hills, except Manipur, were inside the composite State of Assam till the last bifurcation in 1972 when Meghalaya was created just out of the two hill districts of Assam, the Assam Tribune did not care to find out the basic causes for which the tribals in the region opted for separation. "The Assamese leadership during the last fifties and sixties must be responsible for creating an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred among the hill leaders, none of whom could dream of one day becoming the Chief Minister of than Assam". (1)

It is said that the underground Naga leader,

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Mr A.Z. Phizo, now living in London for about last two decades, first wanted to enter into politics of Assam, (then Nagaland was a part of Assam) and reported to have expressed his desire to the then Assam Chief Minister Mr Bishnuram Medhi; but Mr Medhi was said to have discouraged him badly. During the days of the late Mr Bimala Prasad Chaliha as the Chief Minister of Assam & in the early part of sixties, Mr Laldenga, who was then working as office assistant in the office of the Aizawl District Council, mobilized the rebel movement. And the tribals living in the Garo and Khasi-Jaintia Hills (now Meghalaya) had to launch their movement for a separate Hill State when the Assam Assembly passed the official language bill, 1960, imposing Assamese language on the tribals.

All these political developments were not properly reflected by the newspapers in Assam, particularly by The Assam Tribune which was and still is the only
English daily in the region. The people in the hills did not and still do not possess a medium to ventilate their grievances. They were banking on The Assam Tribune; but the paper failed to respond to their wishes.

The newspapers in Assam also showed poor performance during the fifties and sixties in focussing the genuine needs and aspirations of the people of the region in general and of Assam in particular. The process of infiltration from Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon for the region. It started during the fifties and continued till today. The newspapers in Assam could not foresee the danger of such continuous process of infiltration from Bangladesh. None of the newspapers, either in English or in Assamese, could convincingly point out this issue during the long period of two decades: the fifties and the sixties. Now that the things came to a point of almost no return, the paper...
their war-cry against the existence of about 60 lakhs
Bangladeshi nationals in Assam and also several lakhs
in Meghalaya and other parts of the region. Had this
war-cry been sounded some twenty or fifteen years ago,
the problem could not become so acute and explosive.
Here the newspapers in Assam have miserably failed
to bring to light a vital issue concerning the very
future of the people of the State and also of the
region.

Again, during the fifties and sixties, there were
several major economic decisions taken by the Central
Government concerning the region, particularly Assam;
but the newspapers in Assam could not gauge the gravity
of those decisions during that time. One of such major
decisions taken by the Centre during the later part
of the fifties was the scheme to set up the refinery
at Barauni to be fed by the Assam crude. The Oil India
Ltd agreed to supply crude from the oil fields in Assam
through pipe-lines (710-mile-long). The
refinery has since been "enjoying 4.6 million tonnes of crude from the Brahmaputra valley every year." (1) The refinery is having three times more refining capacity than the refinery set up at Noonmati, near Gauhati. This refinery was set up only to satisfy the students and other socio-political leaders who raised a protest against setting up the refinery at Barauni in Bihar only to be run by the crude from Assam. The newspapers in Assam could not project the matter in its right perspective at that time and hence, the people of Assam could not organize a movement that could compell the Central Government to defer its decision on setting up the Barauni refinery. A major decision affecting the very economy of Assam was implemented without much protest made by the people of the State and in such a period, the newspapers in Assam played almost a role of passive onlooker.

(1) Sumit Mitra in India Today newsmagazine, Feb. 15
Since the days of the British regime, Assam is known for the tea industry. The tea industry has been, by and large, in the hands of individuals, mostly Assamese and a few Britishers and others. The industry as a whole has been covering vast areas of land in the State, particularly in Upper Assam. There are unending tea gardens in certain areas. The industry has a big labour force, mainly for occasional plucking of tea leaves. This labour force is mainly drawn from Bihar, Orissa and Nepal. There are 758 tea estates in Assam and the area under tea plantation was estimated to be 1,79,417 hectares in 1969. During 1970, 215 million kilograms of tea were produced. The average yield of tea is 1,161 kg per hectare; but in Lakhimpur district, the average yield is as high as 1,465 kg. per hectare. The average yield in the Cachar district is low, being only 735 kg. per hectare. Nearly 4 lakh people are employed in these tea estates and the average earning of a tea labour
in Assam was Rs 1,472.2 per head during 1968." (1) The newspapers in Assam, by and large, have not taken any serious interest to look at the tea industry in the state. Not a single paper had ever taken any initiative to highlight the issues concerning the tea industry. This has been a sad commentary on the part of the newspapers in Assam. Whereas, newspapers from outside the region used to send special correspondent to produce in-depth stories on the tea industry in Assam. The Statesman, for example, sent several times its own reporters to write detailed stories about the tea industry in Assam. The Bengali daily from Calcutta, the Ananda Bazar Patrika, sent its reporter during 1974 to study the problems of encroachment on other cultivable land in Assam, particularly the problem created by the tea labourers.

(1) The Economy of Assam: article written by Dr U.N. Bordoli of Gauhati University, in North Eastern Asia, Vol 1, No. 3, 1972.
The reporter gave a detailed picture on how the tea garden labourers were grabbing the land in the vicinity of their gardens and how this had adversely affected the economy of the local cultivators. He even apprehended some sort of major clashes in future between the tea garden labourers and the local land owners or tillers.\(^{(1)}\)

The Assam students are now complaining that since the bulk of the tea is being produced in Assam in the entire eastern region, the Tea Board office should have been set up within Assam instead of setting up in Calcutta. Although Assam has been producing tea for the last centuries, the product was being sold till 1970 at the Calcutta Tea Auction market. There was agitation in Assam against this practice since for the product of Assam, West Bengal was enjoying the relevant taxes because it was sold at the Calcutta Auction market.

\(^{(1)}\) Shyamal Ganguli in the Ananda Bazar Patrika, April 12-13, 1974.
The Assam Government also took up the matter and as a result, a tea auction centre was established at Gamhati in 1970. At the beginning years, the response, both from the buyers and the sellers, was not encouraging. The trend of price, supply and demand, was equally not encouraging in spite of several concessions given to buyers and the sellers by the State Government. The State Government has also established a Tea Trading Corporation which has been managing a few sick gardens. The Corporation also undertook manufacture, storage, blending and transportation of tea.

All these activities in the tea industry of the State were seldom recorded by any of the newspapers in Assam. Tea and oil are the major two products of Assam and hence the newspapers, particularly The Assam Tribune, being the major English daily, should have taken keen interest in these two industries. The newspapers in the State are equally found not concerned about the other vital issues affecting the people of the
The two major dailies in Assam, the Dainik Assan in Assamese and The Assam Tribune, during the post-Independence period remained preoccupied with politics which party formed the Government, who became the Chief Minister, who were taken in the Cabinet, etc. Because of this too much stress on politics, the papers overlooked the vital economic and other issues concerning the people. There was rare report disclosing any major corruption case in the higher Government circle. There was rarest story on misappropriation of plan money by the implementing authorities.

One journalist from outside the region commented like this: "In north-east India's sickening ideological vacuum, political power begets corruption faster than the spread of bacteria. Currently an investigation is in progress against Manipur's present and former Chief Ministers, Nagaland's former Minister, a former Minister of Arunachal Pradesh and the former Minister..."
One of the Chief Ministers of the region has appointed five of his brothers-in-law to important posts. A former Minister built assets worth ₹22 lakh in less than two years. The region is full of contractors who literally reek ill-gotten gains. The ministerial affluence comes from kick-backs on contracts awarded to them by devious means. The massive Central assistance, instead of developing the area, disappears down the bottomless pit of north-east India's contractor-ridden economy. (1)

If a journalist coming from outside can observe all these things happening in the region, why the locally based newsmen cannot report about these facts? It may be because the journalists working for the newspapers in Assam either do not have the courage to write about these facts or they are not allowed by the management...

(1) Sumit Mitra in India Today newsmagazine, February 16-29, 1980
to write about such affairs for fear that such reporting may have impact, directly or indirectly, on the economy of the organization. The newspapers in Assam will lose their credibility if other papers and journals published from outside the region have to report always on the vital issues concerning the State and the region.

Again the newspapers in Assam could not take up the case of Assam with the Central leadership. Take, for example, the case of royalty being paid by the Centre to Assam for the crude oil taken from the oil fields of the State. Though the State produces 4.6 million tonnes of crude annually, which is a third of the country's production, its revenue from oil is pegged by a ridiculously low royalty of Rs 42 a tonne. "The bulk of the 5.25 million tonnes of crude oil from Assam is taken out by pipelines to be processed at the Barauni Refinery set up against expert opinion, even though its refining cost per tonne of crude is 1.7 times the cost of the Guwahati
What Assam gets in return for the crude is a pittance of Rs 42 per tonne as royalty when the present price of crude oil is Rs 1600 per tonne. In other words, every year we get Rs 22 crores as royalty for Rs 840 crores worth of oil! The difference alone would have raised Assam's per capita income by Rs 454 every year."(1)

The newspapers in Assam could not properly focus the issue and lately it had to be focussed by the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the literary organization of Assam. The Assam Tribune is yet to publish any article on such issues.

The case for extension of the broad gauge railway line upto Gauhati is yet to be taken up seriously by the Centre because there is no strong public voice demanding early implementation of the work. It is a pity that after three decades of Independence, the entire north- eastern/is, in its true sense, yet to be touched by

broad gauge railway line. Oil worth Rs 840 crores and tea worth Rs 400 crores are being taken out every year from Assam; but the legitimate demand for extension of the Broad gauge railway line in the State, yet to be considered seriously by the Centre.

The north-eastern region is being exploited on other fields also. About 60 per cent of the N.F.Railway metre gauge tracks pass through Assam; but the percentage of Assamese employed in the N.F.Railways is less than 10. The same is the case with other Central establishments located in the region like the nationalized banks, the Post and Telegraph department, the Income Tax department, the Geological Survey of India, the Survey of India, the Accountant General's office, the Anthropological Survey of India, the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the Indian Airlines, etc. These offices located in the region hardly employ 10 percent of the local people. Most of these offices are manned by others.
people from West Bengal or from Bangladesh. How the Bangladesh nationals could manage to get employment opportunities in the region is still a mystery; but it is a fact that some of the employees working in the Central establishments located in the region are really Bangla nationals. This has caused much misunderstanding and heart-burning among the genuine job-seekers among the sons of the soil and hence, ultimately they launched the movement against the Bangladesh nationals. However, the issue of foreign nationals has been taken up seriously by the newspapers in Assam.

As the leading English daily, The Assam Tribune does not publish any feature like city notebook or any newsletter from any place either within the country or outside the country. Earlier, the paper used to publish occasionally the "London Letter"; but it was stopped since long time as the paper's London Office did not run smoothly. The former editor Mr. Kakati used to publish mainly two newsletters: one from the paper's
Special Representative at New Delhi and the other from its Correspondent base at Jammu. These two newsletters were very popular among the readers since they used to give the political pictures both at the Centre and on the border with Pakistan, including the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. Mr Kakati also made an attempt to publish supplements on the developmental issues of the neighbouring States and Union Territories of the north-eastern region, but he could not succeed following non-cooperation from the Governments of these units. Only Arunachal Pradesh Government and later, the Nagaland Government extended support to his proposal and others, including the then Government of Assam did not care even to respond to his letter. After that, no fresh attempt was made in this respect by the new editor of the paper.

The Assam Tribune is being printed on the Nepa newsprint which is cheaper. Due to bad quality of the
newsprint, the look of the paper is not impressive. The photos are not clear and the overall print is not satisfactory. On the other hand, the paper is edited in a bad way. The editorial staff generally takes less care to produce the paper in better way. The members of the editorial department do not take pain to improve the usual get-up of the paper. Nobody takes interest in improving the lay-out or the system of giving the headlines or body matters. There is always the lack of coordination among the various departments in the total production of the paper. There are a lot of spelling mistakes in print, a lot of grammatical mistakes in the local reporting (sentences like "the minister urged upon the people to cooperate with the government" or "the meeting was organized to discuss about the future course of actions", etc occasionally appear in the reports written by Staff Reporters) and there are more often than not funny headlines, like "Political Parties Accepts 1971 Base for Foreigners". (1)

The distribution system of The Assam Tribune is still far from satisfactory. Even at Gauhati, from where the paper is published, the readers get the paper generally after 10 a.m. Most readers who have to leave for office either read the paper at office or at home after office hour. Sometimes, the distributing boys give the paper the next day even at Gauhati. In other places outside Gauhati, the paper is being distributed either in the evening or the next day. The poor distributing system has obviously affected the growth of the circulation and as such it has affected the very economy of the organization itself.

The general readers of The Assam Tribune are not satisfied with its usual size with six pages. Because by selling the old copies on kilogram basis, the readers cannot get an encouraging amount of money as it is found in case of other national papers like the Times of India, The Statesman or The Hindu. The paper has only one edition and since its circulation is not encouraging it cannot afford to have more than one edition.
The Assam Tribune is being sold among its readers not because it is a well-edited newspaper; but because the readers can get more local news only in this paper. The paper is being run with inadequate staff, particularly in the editorial board. There are only two Staff Reporters, four Sub-editors, two Chief Subs, one News Editor and one Sports Reporter at the desk at Guwahati. Besides it has about 40 Correspondents in different places of Assam. The paper has been placed under Class III category in the list of the Wage Boards.

The other newspapers in Assam are yet to be brought under the binding of the Wage Boards’ awards. All these newspapers are in small category and hence their income is very low and circulation negligible. Although these papers claim that they are either weekly, monthly or of any periodicity, in actuality they appear only when the managements feel that they should appear. They are printed in limited copies, ranging from 1000 to 5000 depending on the need for
sending necessary copies to the advertisers, the
Government offices, few subscribers and others as
complimentary copies for reference. These papers can
seldom serve the basic needs of the people as the
owners, generally one-man organization, are busy in
running their own affairs. On vital issues these newspa­pers cannot express independent views because they
are always dependent on either the Government or other
advertisers for their survival. Some of the editors
of such one-man papers, used to do contract or other
business by influencing the authorities through his
so-called profession in journalism. Some have attempted
to term such type of journalism as "backdoor journalism." Through such policy, the so-called journalists serve
themselves more than the fellow people. They misuse the
power they get by way of editing and publishing a paper.

(1) Backdoor Policy of Journalism in Assamese
by Mr. Phiren Roy in the Souvenir of Assamese
Newspapers Association, 1975.
They use the newspaper, although published once in a blue moon, as the tool to serve their own personal design. This is definitely a sacrilege to the profession of journalism; but there is no escape from it as it is difficult to single them out. Again, unless the Government takes some steps against such persons, the common people have no power to punish those unscrupulous so-called journalists.

However, the newspapers in Assam have a tradition of doing good service to the people. The major newspapers, in their limited scope, have been doing good service to the people of the State and also of the entire north-eastern region.