The Story of the Indian Press
Reba Chaudhuri

The Press Commission had many things on its hands: to prepare a history of the development of journalism in India was not among its terms of reference. Nevertheless, it felt that such an account would help its deliberations by providing a background to the enquiry. Hence this handy volume of 287 pages, compiled on behalf and under the direction of the Press Commission by Shri J Natarajan, Editor of The Tribune. Among the appendices to the Press Commission Report, there is a sample survey of the quality of news reporting in the Indian Press, in the style of reportage, but spoiled somewhat by too many missing issues of the papers that are supposed to be studied and so on. The volume on history is not such fancy fare. It is a useful compilation, albeit a little staid and fills a gap since there is no other up-to-date account available today.

The volume records in brief the origin of the Press in India, its trials and tribulations, Government patronage as also the repression it had to face. To provide a background to the Press Commission Enquiry, it presents a concise survey of developments both in the English language and Indian language Press. The evolution of the Press has been very closely connected with national awakening in this country, so much so that up to pre-Independence days, the history of the Press can hardly be separated from that of the social reform movement and Nationalist movement.

TRIBAL ORIGIN

Taking the functions of the Press to be those of conveying Government policies to the public, keeping Government informed of public needs and reactions to Government policies, and keeping Government and the public informed of events, the author takes back his story to primitive times and to meetings of the tribal society which developed the method of modifying or amplifying policies and of making the "will of the chief known to the tribe as well as of ascertaining the will of the tribe as a whole".

In a later era historical evidence shows the ruler making his will known to the people through edicts and proclamations. Another concurrent development was the agency whereby the ruler acquainted himself with activities which threatened in time to develop into a challenge to his authority. News letters from ministers, news writers and secret service men were also an early institution which kept the ruler regularly informed of developments in various parts of the country and among different classes of people.

In the Moghul period, news-writers were appointed to various administrative units in their territory, and were charged with the function of sending reports to the headquarters of the administration. The East India Company also requisitioned the services of news-writers for the same purpose as Moghul emperors.

THE FIRST NEWSPAPER

The first attempt to start a newspaper in Calcutta was made in 1776 by Mr William Bolts who had resigned from the Company's service earlier that year after censure by the Court of Directors for private trade. The notice of his intention to embark on the enterprise made it known that he had "in manuscript many things to communicate which most intimately concerned every individual", and this naturally gave rise to alarm in official quarters. He was directed to quit Bengal and proceed to Madras and from there to take his passage to Europe. For the next twelve years, no attempt was made to emulate Mr Bolts' example. In 1780, James Augustus Hicky started the Bengal Gazette or the Calcutta General Advertiser, in the first issue of which he introduced himself as "the late printer to the Honourable Company". Hicky's Gazette specialised in the exposure of the private lives of Company servants. This soon landed Hicky in trouble.

SUCCCEEDING VENTURES

The ventures that followed were promoted by men who benefited from Hicky's bitter experience. In 1780, Messrs B Messink and Peter Reed published the Indian Gazette. Four years later followed the Calcutta Gazette, published under the direct patronage of Government, and in the following year, came the Bengal Journal and a monthly, the Oriental Magazine of Calcutta Amusements. With the Calcutta Chronicle which was published in 1786, there were four weekly newspapers and one monthly magazine published from Calcutta within six years of Hicky's maiden effort. The new editors trod warily the trail which Hicky had blazed for them. The first newspaper in Madras, the Madras Courier, came into existence in 1785 as an officially recognised newspaper, founded by Richard Johnson, the Government printer. It continued without a competitor till 1795, when R Williams started the Madras Gazette, followed a few months later by the India Herald which was published without authority by one Humphrey who was arrested for unauthorised publication, but escaped from the ship on which he was to be deported to England.

Censorship was first introduced in Madras in 1795 when the Madras Gazette was required to submit all general orders of Government for scrutiny by the Military Secretary before publication. Free postage facilities were withdrawn, and on both newspapers protesting, it was decided to impose the levy at the delivery end. Bombay's first newspaper, the Bombay Herald, came into existence in 1789. The Courier, which was published a year later, carried advertisements in Gujerati. The Bombay Gazette was published in 1791, and the Bombay Herald was merged into it the following year, being officially recognised for purposes of official notifications and advertisements in the same terms as the Madras Courier.

ANXIOUS FOR OFFICIAL FAVOUR

In Bombay and Madras, newspapers do not seem to have come into conflict with Government in this early period. On the contrary, they were anxious to earn official recognition and to enjoy official favour. In Bengal, however, the
position was different, and in 1791, William Duane-whb, in partnership
with Messrs Dimkim and Cassan, acquired Bengal Journal and became
its editor, walked straight into trouble by publishing the rumoured
death of Lord Cornwallis who was then campaigning in the Maratha
War.

In more than one sense, the turn
of the century marks the end of a
phase in journalism in India. Dur­
ing this period, there were no Press
laws as such. If the person intend­
ing to start a paper was already
persona non grata with Government
or with influential officials, he was
deported forthwith. If a newspaper
offended and was unrepenting, it
was first denied postal privileges; if
it persisted in causing displeasure
to Government, it was required to sub­
mit in part or entirely to pre-censor­
ship, if the editor was ‘incorrigible’,
he was deported. Another aspect
of journalism in India during this
period was that the journals con­
tained material exclusively of inte­
rest to, and relating to the activities
of, the European population in
India. The early newspapers were
started by ex-servants of the Com­
pany who had incurred its displea­
sure and their columns were devot­
ed to the exposure of the evils and
malpractices of the time. The gene­
ral features of the Press during this
period were:

(1) The first newspapers were
started by disgruntled ex-employees
of the Company, and they were aid­
ed and abetted by servants of the
Company who used these newspapers
for the furtherance of their personal
rivalries and jealousies,

(2) The circulation of newspapers
published in this period never ex­
ceeded a hundred or two hundred;
therefore there was hardly any danger
of public opinion being subverted.

CONTROL OF THE PRESS

The bureaucrat of efficiency, Lord
Wellesley, imposed rigid control on
the Press. There was difference of
opinion at the highest level both in
India and in London as to what the
official attitude towards the Press in
India should be. The provocation
for issuing the regulation came from
the Editor of the Asiatic Mirror who
published some estimated figures,
giving the strength of the European
and native population. Strangely
enough, the seven newspapers in
Calcutta complied without demur.
But soon it was found that news­
papers were not submitting to pre­
censorship with any regularity.
Consequently, other restrictions were
imposed on the press and all public­
meetings were banned by order of
the Governor-General in Council
(April 9, 1807). The rigid restric­
tions imposed on the Press led to
the publication of a spate of pamph­
ets which bore neither the name
of the author nor that of the prin­
ter. Some significant developments
took place in the field of newspaper
publication between 1813 and 1818.
The first newspaper published by a
native, Gangadhar Bhattacharjee,
the Bengal Gazette, lived only for a
year. In 1818, John Burton and
James secured permission to publish
a newspaper under the name of
Guardian. The Serampore mission­
aries started three journals: Dig
Darshan, a monthly magazine in
Bengali, Samachar Barpan, a weekly
Bengali paper, and Friend of India,
a monthly periodical in English, fol­
lowed two years later by a quarterly
of the same name. Samachar Dar­
pan continued publication till 1840.
Press censorship was abolished by a
regulation issued on August 19,
1818, and the responsibility for
excluding matters likely to affect the
authority of Government or injurious
to the public interest was left to the
Editors themselves.

(To be continued)