

# The Story of the Indian Press

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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 varied fare, a sample survey of newspaper readership, a one-man 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 upto-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 ampli-

fyng 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 Bolt's 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.

## SUCCEEDING 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

\* Report of the Press Commission, Part II, History of Journalism. Compiled by Shri J Natarajan, Editor, *The Tribune*. Manager of Publications, Delhi, 1954 Pp 287. Price not mentioned.

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 Wan

In more than one sense, the turn of the century marks the end of a phase in journalism in India. During this period, there were no Press laws as such. If the person intending 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 unrepentant, it was first denied postal privileges; if it persisted in causing displeasure to Government, it was required to submit in part or entirely to pre-censorship, if the editor was 'incorrigible', he was deported. Another aspect of journalism in India during this period was that the journals contained material exclusively of interest to, and relating to the activities of, the European population in India. The early newspapers were started by ex-servants of the Company who had incurred its displeasure and their columns were devoted to the exposure of the evils and

malpractices of the time. The general features of the Press during this" period were:

(1) The first newspapers were started by disgruntled ex-employees of the Company, and they were aided 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 exceeded a hundred or two hundred; hence there was hardly any clanger 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 newspapers were not submitting to pre-censorship with any regularity. Consequently, other restrictions were

imposed on the press and all public-meetings were banned by -brder of the Governor-General in Council (April 9, 1807). The rigid restrictions imposed on the Press led to the publication of a spate of pamphlets which bore neither the name of the author nor that of the printer. 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 missionaries 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, followed two years later by a quarterly of the same name. *Samachar Darpan* 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)

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