

History of Media in Bengal: A Chronological Overview

Arani Basu

1 Introduction

This article aims at capturing the historical journey of media¹ (or press, as it was known earlier) in Bengal from the day *Hickey's Bengal Gazette* was published in 1780 in the then Calcutta, to the media boom that has happened in the state today. While chronicling the trajectory of media in Bengal, it is imperative to identify the various spaces of media-politics interface wherein political situations in the state often shape the growth and functioning of the media. Its translation from 'press' to 'media' has been fraught with incidents in the larger political context of the state and the country at large. Therefore, here the focus is to present the rise and growth of media in Bengal in relation to the concomitant political changes that the state has faced till date.

Bengal always had a strong legacy of intellectualism and a rich cultural heritage that had its reflection in all spheres of social life in the state such as art, literature, science, politics and journalism. The state enjoyed a deep scholarly tradition, courtesy the pool of Bengali middle-class intelligentsia. Even before the British could instill the spirit of western scientific education in the minds of Indians, Bengal was already bestowed with men of letters and visionaries who were critical of the then British rule in the country, and also saw through the weaknesses and malpractices of the Bengali society and community in their times (Palmer, 1976). Together such thinkers gave birth to the era of Bengal Renaissance (Chatterjee, 2011). Bengal Renaissance refers to a social reform movement during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the region of West Bengal in an undivided India during the period of British rule. The era can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and ended with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), although the intellectual legacy was taken forward by succeeding scholars. Nineteenth century Bengal was a potent blend of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators and scientists, all merging to constitute the image of a renaissance, and marking the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern'.

2 Renaissance and Bengali Press

Right from the time of renaissance, Bengali press has been dynamic and critical of the existing government, the onslaught of the British during India's struggle for independence, and a consistent voice of dissent for the masses against the bourgeoisie. The first newspaper of India *Hickey's Bengal Gazette* was published in Calcutta in 1780; so were the first four non-English newspapers in Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. The year 1818 marks the beginning of Bengali journalism, with *Samachar Darpan* as the first newspaper in Bengali language published by Serampore Mission Press on May 23, 1818. Started by missionaries Carey and Marshman, it began as a monthly, but soon converted into a weekly (Chatterjee, 2011). After surviving a number of crises, it closed down in 1852. Meanwhile, another remarkable Bengali journal *Sambad Kaumadi* was published under the patronage of Rammohan Roy in 1821, however, it did not survive for long.

Sambad Prabhakar was the first Bengali daily newspaper published in 1839, patronized by Ishwar Chandra Gupta. It was followed by *Tattobodhini*, published by Akshya Kumar Dutta in 1843. The other Bengali journals during this time were *Samachar Chandrika*, *Bangadoot*, *Vividhartha Sangraha* (1851), *Masik Patra* (1854) and *Som Prakash* (1851). The early Bengali papers took up the cause of the oppressed workers in

¹In this article, the term is primarily restricted to newspapers and news channels; radio and new forms of social media e.g. blogs etc have been not considered.

the indigo plantation and of the peasants. Notable among them were *Som Prakash*, *Grambartha Prakashika* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (before it became an English weekly). *Amrita Bazar Patrika* became a threat for the government with its exposure of the exploitation of labour in plantations and on the fields, violent denunciation of the European planters and the government. In the course of this campaign, it became the most significant newspaper of its time in Bengal and led to the births of many smaller newspapers in villages and districts in the state. However, any attempt at socio-cultural empowerment faces opposition and resistance, and Bengal's journalistic revolution was no exception. It was countered perpetually by blows from the government. The British government legislated and executed various repressive laws to jeopardize the functioning and freedom of press. However, it could never compromise the commitment Bengali press had towards its readers for fighting against injustice, racial prejudice and mal-administration; also Bengali press was among the pioneers to assail the Moderate leaders of the nationalist movement with timidity and lack of courage in front of the British onslaught. However, the Bengali press suffered much in the reprisals launched by the government after the mutiny in 1857, especially by the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 (Sengupta, 1982).

The Vernacular Press Act 1878

The Vernacular Press Act was passed in 1878 under the Governor Generalship and Viceroyalty of Lord Lytton. The purpose of the Act was to control the printing and circulation of seditious materials producing disaffection in the minds of the masses against the British. Sisir Kumar Ghose, the then editor of *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was summoned by Sir Ashley Eden who offered to contribute to his paper regularly, if the former would allow what he published to go under scanner by Sir Ashley's office first. Refusing right away to succumb, Ghose remarked that there ought to be at least one honest journalist in the land. The Vernacular Press Act stated that any magistrate or Commissioner of Police had the authority to call upon any printer or publisher of a newspaper to enter into a bond, undertaking not to print a certain kind of material, and confiscate any printed matter it deemed objectionable. However, in the year 1910, the British Government revived the features of Lytton's Vernacular Press Act, replacing it with Indian Press Act 1910. In the year 1921, the Press Act was repealed on the recommendation of a Press Committee appointed by under the Chairmanship of Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, the then Law Minister of Viceroy's Executive Council to review the working of press laws.

3 Moving towards Independence: Bengali Newspapers in the turn of the 19th century

Meanwhile, till the 1880s, Bengal was the hub of newspaper publication. A survey of the Indian Language Press by Sir George Campbell in 1876 showed that half of the total number of thirty-eight newspapers was published from Kolkata, though by that time newspapers from other parts of the country were also coming up. End of 1890s and the beginning of the 20th century saw some remarkable newspapers and journals coming out from Bengal including *Sulava Samchar* (1870) by Keshab Chandra Sen and *Haishakar Patrika* edited by Babu Kisari Mohan Ganguli. The first newspaper to espouse the cause of the working class, *Bharat Shramajibi*, was started as a weekly during this time. The first Bengali daily to adopt modern methods of production was *Basumati* (1880), founded by Hemendra Prasad Ghosh and edited by Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya. Surendranath Banerjee published *Bengalee* (1900) which was the first vernacular paper to subscribe to Reuter's foreign news service. An associate of *Bengalee* was *Nayak* (1908), published by Panch Cowrie Bannerjee. Through *Bande Mataram*, another important newspaper of this period, Aurobindo Ghose proclaimed his philosophy and the "New Path" which meant passive resistance as an instrument of political action. In 1922 came *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, started by Mirinal Kanti Ghosh, Prafulla Kumar Sarkar and Suresh Chandra Majumdar. Together with its English counterpart, *Hindustan Standard*, it played a glorious role in the freedom movement. Later, Chapala Kanta Bhattacharya, president of the All-India Newspaper Editors Conference became its editor and contributed immensely towards building the paper's readership and popularity. Another daily named *Jugantar* was started in 1937 by the management of the *Amrita Bazar*

Patrika, which scaled great heights under the editorship of Vivekananda Mukherjee. After Gandhi took over the leadership of the national movement, *Bangalee* and *Nayak*, which were the organs of the Moderates, lost ground rapidly in spite of official support because of the tremendous pressure exerted by C. R. Das who was the undisputed Congress leader in Bengal during that period.

4 Post Independence and Journalism in Bengal

Bengali newspapers suffered after the partition in 1947 as they lost a significant part of readership to East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). Nevertheless, new publications including *Loksevak* (1948) and *Jansevak* kept coming in the first two decades after independence, especially under the leadership of Congressman Atulya Ghosh. However, the biggest challenge for journalism and media in Bengal in particular, and the whole of India in general, came during 1975-77 when the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared Political Emergency in the country.

Emergency and Media in Bengal

Political Emergency of 1975 brought the proliferation of media in Bengal into a sudden stand still. The entire contingent of vocal media was gagged by the government; press censorship, hitherto unprecedented, was imposed in all the states; in each and every state, some government officials were deputed to supervise and oversee each and every copy (Sengupta, 1982). Also, power cuts were inflicted on newspapers, primarily not so much to curb attempted defiance but to enable the government to gain time to work out modalities for enforcing censorship (Palmer, 1976). Bulk of the papers were compelled to write either in the favor of government or forced to remain silent on the critical social, economic and political issues; it was a media of the government, by the government and for the government. Thus, media including majority of the newspapers, radio and television channel (Doordarshan) could speak what government wanted them to talk on. Media virtually played into the hands of the Indira Gandhi Government who silenced every voice during the emergency. As a result, most of the newspapers in Bengal, like the other states in India, gradually turned pro-government newspaper echoing only one voice – that of the Congress party. Not only were the anti-government sentiments curbed, all voices of dissent including that of the journalists were also put down from time to time. Eminent journalists and political columnists from Bengal like Gour Kishore Ghose, Barun Sengupta and Jyotirmoy Datta were arrested and taken to custody during the Emergency by the Government.

Another way of diverting the readers' mind away from the miscreants of the government was to emphasize on extra-political news items like that of sports, entertainment and films. Front pages and lead news were fed upon by these beats so that political information would receive an obvious backlash. Interestingly, this facilitated the popularity of BBC News in India especially Bengal, where readers often felt discouraged to read local dailies essentially publishing pro-government news items.

English dailies in Bengal were largely divided in terms of each of their political stands during Emergency; newspapers with pro-Congress ideologies lent their support for Indira Gandhi government, whereas others were essentially critical of the emergency decision. At that time, there were mainly three leading English dailies that Bengal had - *The Statesman*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Hindustan Standard* (Ananda Bazar Patrika Group). *The Statesman* (number one daily from the region during that period) and *Hindustan Standard* were critical towards the Indira Gandhi government in the pre-emergency period. Though they did not openly support the movement led by JP Narayan, records say that both the newspapers were little inclined to anti-Indira agitations (Sengupta, 1982) before, during and after the Emergency. On the other hand, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was biased towards the Indira Gandhi Government, largely because the owners of the paper were cabinet members of the Siddhartha Shankar Roy led Congress Government in the state.

Among vernacular newspapers, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (1922) and *Jugantar* from Amrita Bazar Patrika Group (1937) had the highest number of circulation during the seventies; *Basumati* and *Satyajug* were relatively new and were fighting hard to set their foot in the market. *Ananda Bazar Patrika* was initially more pro-government but later changed their stance during 1975 and became critical of the Congress Government

led by Mrs. Gandhi. *Jugantar*, on the other hand, belonged to the Amrita Bazar Patrika Group and thus completely supported the Congress party right from 1960s till the beginning of the eighties by consistently publishing editorials, articles and reports in support of the Indira Gandhi at the Center and Siddhartha Shankar Roy Government at the State. *Satyajug*, established in 1972 had an extreme left bias since its inception and remained so throughout; however, *Basumati*, though supported the left and their movement for the people but had to change their stance to pro-congress after it was taken over by the Government during the seventies.

Calcutta (now Kolkata) was the second city in the country to have a radio station after Bombay (now Mumbai). In British India, broadcasting started in June, 1923, with programs aired mainly by the Radio Club of Bombay. Later, by an agreement in 1926, Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) was granted permission to operate two radio stations – the Bombay station was inaugurated on July 23, 1927, followed by Calcutta on August 26, 1927. On the other hand, the first television station i.e. Doordarshan was started by the government in 1975; in June, 1984, Calcutta Doordarshan entered the world of colour transmission. Both Doordarshan and Aakashbani were fully government controlled and thus became a strong platform to voice government's opinions; in fact, Calcutta center of Doordarshan was started only after the Emergency was declared, with a deliberate aim of operating as a mouthpiece of the government. There would be two or three daily news bulletins informing about the government's functioning and various decisions during the emergency; similarly, Aakashbani also would air pro-government news from time to time.

Despite the suffocating situation *The Statesman* played a significant role during the emergency by leaving those spaces blank in the editorial pages whenever an article criticizing the government decisions would be stopped from being published. Such steps sent strong message to its readers about the newspaper's clear anti-Congress stand and complete disapproval of state-imposed censorship (Sengupta, 1982). Among the readers it created much sensation. Also, Tagore's writings would be published in newspapers as words of wisdom for critiquing the measures of the government; with newspapers often reproducing this famous line from his poem "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" in large font size concluding with the prayer "Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

Media in Bengal: Three decades in between

On June, 1977, the Left Front led by Jyoti Basu, uprooted the Congress and stormed into power in Bengal. Post Emergency and with the subsequent change in Government in Delhi there was a sigh of relief in media. The events and stories during Emergency started to come out which had an effect on the people's mind. Media welcomed the changes which were applauded by all. But we learn now that these were temporary as few steps by the Left Front Government made the media critical of them. During that time media criticized the newly elected government on the grounds of their decision on land reform and support in labour movement in the state. They were also slammed by media for the closure of the industries in Bengal. Most of the papers during the period were against the Government except *Satyajug*, who endorsed and backed Left Front's decisions on almost every issue. In early 1980s three new newspapers entered the market – *The Telegraph* in lieu of *Hindustan Standard* (1982), *Aajkal* (1982) and *Bartaman* (1984). *Satyajug* was closed due to financial reasons in 1987. But the vacuum left by *Satyajug* was taken by *Aajkal* with a change of guard as it shifted from anti-government to a pro-government paper. On the other hand, *Bartaman* took an anti-government stand along with the rest. Apart from these the CPI(M) started their mouthpiece in Bengali *Ganashakti* and CPI came up with *Kalantar* during that period. In this period, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Jugantar* were shut down and another paper entered the market in 1992, *Sambad Pratidin*. For almost a decade the paper was known for its unbiased and balanced role.

5 LPG and Bengal: Beginning of Electronic Media Boom

Till early 1990s media in Bengal was dominated by print but during the regime of Narshima Rao as Prime Minister and Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister, Indian economy took a sharp turn from Nehruvian concept of mixed economy to a liberalized one that opened the door for more privatization and a globalized

economy (Jeffrey, 2000). Impact of this was not direct on the print media but it had an immense effect on the electronic media. Till about the beginning of nineties, the nation only saw government run television channels like *Doordarshan*; however, the step by Rao opened Indian market for the foreign private owners. Foreign channels such as *BBC*, *CNN*, and *Star* were also allowed to air from the country.

Soon after this, Bengal saw a boom of electronic channels. *Doordarshan*, along with its daily telecast of Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and English News, was the first to launch an infotainment program called *Khash Khabar*; followed by *ETV* and *Tara News*. Soon the ABP Group launched its 24 hours news channel *Star Ananda*, (now known as *ABP Ananda*). With Zee launching its 24 hour news channel in Kolkata, *24 Ghanta*, national channels started opening their regional news channels in Kolkata one after the other (Jeffrey, 2000). These channels brought an overall transformation for the media scenario in Bengal, facilitated by the country's growing economic integration with global capital and investment. By mid-2011, there were about fifteen satellite television channels airing Bengali news programs including *Doordarshan*, *ETV (Bangla)*, *Channel 10*, *ABP Ananda*, *News Time*, *Kolkata TV*, *Tara Newz*, *24 Ghanta*, *Mahua Khobor*, *Ne Bangla*, *CTVN Plus*, *R Plus*.

At the same time, several FM radio stations owned by private companies started operation from the state. Some radio channels with infotainments and panel discussions became more popular than the newspapers in the state. At the moment, there are over 20 private radio stations in West Bengal including *Radio Mirchi*, *Radio One*, *Red FM* (Kolkata, Asansol and Siliguri), *Big Friends*, *Power FM* etc. There are also three campus radio stations in SRFTI, Jadavpur University and Netaji Subhas Open University.

However, soon these channels began competing with each other for the sake of viewership (TRP), and began delivering and disseminating news in tune with their vested interests, courtesy the giant corporate and regional political parties in Bengal funding these news channels. Same news would be telecast in different fashions in different news channels. Today, media in Bengal support the political parties of their choices depending on which party would earn them better TRP and advertisement revenue, and not on news capacity; For example, Bengali news channel *24 Ghanta* is known to have left inclination while channels like *ABP Ananda* is considered to be close to the TMC line in the state.

Five years between 2006 and 2011, between two Assembly elections, the state became a hot bed for politics with a direct impact on the media which was sharply divided. Circumstances lead to few issues on which media took sides. One was the movement at Singur – a movement of the opposition against the Mamata Banerjee led Trinamool Congress against the government's land acquisition for a Tata Group industry. Similar movement was seen in Nandigram. These two movements made the people of the state furious and distinctly bipolar in their views - with some supporting Government's decision of land acquisition for industrialization while the rest opposing land grab (Sardesai, 2006). Papers like *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *Times of India*, *Telegraph*, *Bartaman* were all against government's decision of land acquisition and rallied behind Mamata Banerjee. Industry or agriculture, which one to be given more priority became the issue of the state; in fact a major section of Bengali intelligentsia joined the movement later.

With the political polarization within the state, media both print and electronic became polarized. While *Aajkal* and *24 Ghanta* advocated strongly the cause of industrialization and supported the steps taken by the Left-Front government, papers like *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India*, *ABP Ananda* were against the land policy taken by the government and were criticized harshly during that period. Also, the division was far more prominent just before 2011 Assembly polls. In some occasions newspapers or news channels became an extended organ of the political parties in the state, propagating party manifesto.

Also, political parties have been observed to be using news channels for their campaigns just before elections. Favoured news channels telecasted live programmes either with the ministers of the Government or the opposition leader during the days leading up to the election; this often led to maneuver of news content and confused the weak public (Chomsky, 1997). On the other hand, in USA, the normal practice is that big newspapers sponsor one or the other major parties but such aid comes through a special page and contributes to a particular major party, Republican or Democratic, which is official and at the same time never affects the objectivity in reporting or unbiased editorial writing (Goldberg, 2003).

6 Conclusion

Journalism's journey - from 'press' to 'media' has thus been a multifaceted one in the state of Bengal. As mentioned in the beginning, media and journalism is a close associate of a state's politics which makes political upheavals an essential factor in determining media's paradigm, ideology and relevance in the state. From the days of *Hickey's Bengal Gazette* to *ABP Ananda* and *24 Ghanta*, media in Bengal has travelled a long way, experiencing in between the rise of Congress, its decline, the rise of the Left Front-led CPI (M), and its backlash by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress. One of the defining trends that can be observed in the course of these events is a gradual shift in the composition of power elite in the state. Observantly, political stronghold and monetary command have become enmeshed which manifests itself very clearly in the way media functions in Bengal today. Media in Bengal has travelled much ahead from the days of complete state-imposed press censorship to an over archaic space of state-market bonhomie wherein threads are pulled by the government and business barons together to reinforce certain news items and undermine some others. Opening up of the economy has definitely led to commnality in vested interests of the political and the economic class, which calls for a scrutiny of the democratic rights of the citizens. As Chomsky (1997) explains, the ultimate tool for the capitalist government in Bengal today is media – through which the former successfully silences the citizens. If during Left-front government, it was only '*Ganashakti*' that epitomized and supported the government's decisions, Mamata Banerjee's regime has brought majority of the newspapers and news channels under its fold to propagate their manifesto. Such shifts in the nature of media's functioning in Bengal lead to a certain loss of credibility for the fourth pillar of democracy. A sharp contrast to the role media played during the nationalist movement in Bengal, today the latter have become less of a democratic forum – sustaining largely as an instrument of transferring diktats of the government. To conclude, in its journey from 'press' to 'media', journalism in Bengal has undergone significant transformation, and as a result, has changed the fundamental mode of functioning of the state in certain ways.

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