

By SOMEN SENGUPTA

A cultured and politically aware Bengali can be identified by many factors. His affinity of reading a vernacular newspaper named Anandabazar Patrika (ABP) an indispensable part of Bengal’s cultural heritage over a century is just one of those.

From Bengal, India’s first English, Urdu and Hindi newspaper saw its light and need-less to say from 1818 onwards plethora of Bengali newspapers and periodicals were born and bloomed there. Sadly till mid of 1920s the Bengali upper class English edu-cated society used to read only English news-paper as a source of their information and Bengali newspaper market was limited among the masses. Thus its market was small in size and mostly based in rural area.

The game changed on the evening of 13th March 1922 on the day of Holi. That evening a four page red inked broadsheet newspaper named Anandabazar Patrika (ABP) priced at 2 anna was launched in Calcutta and within few hours it sold 1000 copies - an amazing figure of that time.

The paper housed at 71/1 Mirzapur Street of central Calcutta was noticed by both natives and Europeans specially for its bold print in red ink. The European owned *The Statesman* described it “peculiar feature” while another Brit owned newspaper *The Englishman* lightly ridiculed it as ‘coloured like a danger signal’.

The ironical reality is this ABP indeed became a danger signal for every single ruler of the country for the next hundred years. It was punished 19 times during British period and many of its editors were jailed for report-ing riot, supporting revolutionists, writing explosive editorials and even printing photo-graphs.

It is to note that in 1878 a Bengali weekly named “Anandabazar Patrika” came into market and after that another named ‘Vishnupriya O Anandabazar’ was also there from 1899 but none of these had any direct relation with the paper that was launched in Calcutta in 1922. At the beginning a punch line like ‘Founded by Amrita Bazar Patrika’s Management – First published in 1877’ was also mentioned but later on it was with-drawn.

ABP became a morning daily of 6 days on 1st June 1923 with 6 pages and from 1925 it became a 16 pages newspaper to match any English daily of that era. From 1st January 1939 it became a seven day newspaper.

From its day of conception, ABP’s outlook was audaciously ground breaking. In 1926 it published a separate Durga puja number with literary inputs while during Calcutta Congress of 1928 it came up with a special Congress number with 120 pages. The issue sold like hot cakes in Bengal. Concept wise these all were revolutionary because no ver-nacular daily of that time could even think this way.

Even in its political gambit ABP broke tra-

# Hundred Years Of Anandabazar Patrika

## The Sentinel Of Bengali Sentiment

ditional Bengali model. Edited by Prafulla Kumar Sarkar whose name was finally print-ed on the paper from 1st June 1922, the paper took a unique political stance from the beginning.

In Bengal, where newly emerged leader Gandhi’s position in popular mind was yet to be cemented and his non-violence move-ments were yet to be steamed up, ABP indi-rectly took charge to build an image of Gandhi. Bengali readers from Allahabad to Rangoon were mesmerised by a new political approach explained first time in Bengali and it established both ABP and Gandhi as two brands in Bengali heart.

Such was ABP’s love for Gandhi that it cas-tigated Rabindranath Tagore when he ques-tioned Gandhi’s Charkha policy and ruthless-ly attacked young Subhash Chandra Bose when he organized a military styled reception in 1928 Calcutta Congress. On the other hand it took head on with Nehru-Bose’s Congress when, they, after consulting Tagore rejected *Vande Mataram* as India’s national anthem. By that time one Charu Roy started contributing political cartoons.

Meanwhile in 1936 ABP started covering a court room drama of Dhaka that beat even a thrilling fiction.

It was the famous Bhawal Sanyasi case and ABP did an extensive coverage of the event giving every single detail of the battle inside the court and that created a mayhem. Unimaginable it may sound, but the fact is ABP sent its own correspondent to Berlin in 1936 to cover Olympics and planted couple of reporters in London for all war news. It did an excellent pictorial coverage of Bihar earth-quake.

With *Vande Mataram* printed on its editori-al masthead from the beginning, ABP min-gled its power and influence solidly with national movement. A staunch supporter of Gandhian school of politics, it also rendered enough sympathy to the armed struggle of Bengal and openly supported many convicted revolutionists at the price of jail terms. Prafulla Sarkar and Suresh Chandra Majumdar, its editors were jailed many a time.

From 1937 it launched its English sister paper *The Hindustan Standard*. The paper though never became number one in Bengal but did perform well till 1970s. It then start-ed declining and stopped its publication in 1982. Soon ABP re-launched it with a new name *The Telegraph* donning a jaw-falling modern design unthinkable in India of 1980s. The paper bloomed and scripted histo-ry by vanquishing *The Statesman*, a newspa-per Bengal was reading since 1875.

There was a time when ABP became very close to Tagore and many of his write ups at

his last stage of life were published in ABP. One of his novel *Laboratory* was published in ABP and he himself acknowledged ABP’s high standard of journalistic and literary standard in writing.

From 1939 ABP became a pro-Bose mouthpiece by sacrificing much of its reputa-tion. In 1940 when Subhash Bose, then out of Congress and cornered in national politics was involved in many unethical political con-ducts in Bengal politics, ABP almost became a supporter of him. It even forced one of its editor Makhanlal Sen to resign for being vocal against Bose’s wrong doing that includ-ed open threat to media.

The man-made famine of Bengal in 1943 followed by fratricidal riot before and after partition were very boldly covered by ABP. The massacre of Hindus in East Pakistan from 1950 was exposed by the paper and soon it was banned in Pakistan. Later in 1971 ABP became the best medium to know Bangladesh liberation war.

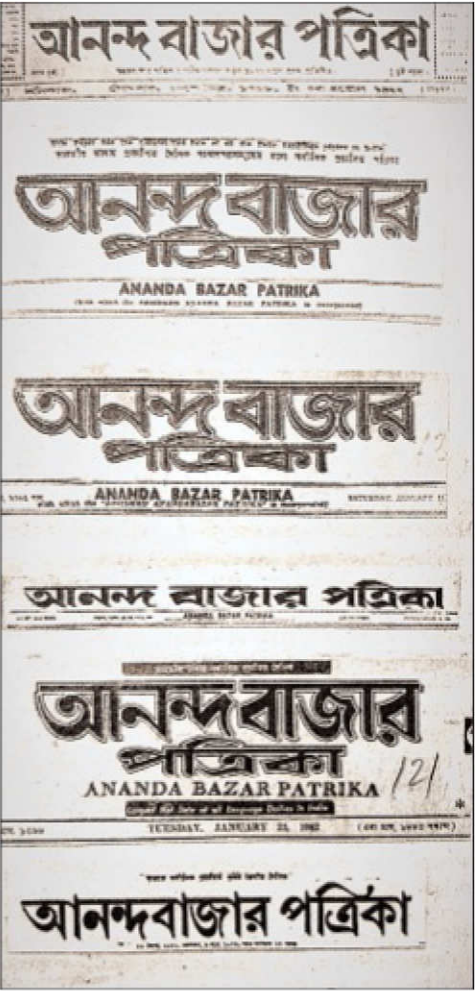
The open and liberal mindset of the paper produced some of the finest vernacular jour-nalist of the country. Names like Bibekananda Mukhopadhyay, Gour Kishore

Chakroborty later joined Communist party and went on to become Tripura’s Chief Minister.

It initiated technological knowhow in printing - that had given ABP an edge over all its rivals. In 1925 it introduced flat machine that enabled it to print 25000 copies in one hour and by 1933 it was upgraded to 58000 copies in an hour. As soon as air service started between Calcutta and Dhaka in mid 1930s ABP was one of the first to ship its morning copies to Dhaka grab-bing a huge Eastern Bengal market.

Lino type was introduced on 26th September 1935 and ABP was one of the front runner newspaper in India to introduce computerized page making. ABP evolved Bengali fonts and changed its masthead many a time.

In independent India though initially ABP leaned towards Congress but soon became a bitter critic to both Nehru and India Government. ABP castigated Nehru for its inadequate support to repatriate Bengali refugees, the plan to merge Bengal and Bihar and also Nehru’s diplomatic failure during Indo-China war in 1962. It was the first



■ Changing mastheads of ABP

Nehru but on their demise ABP paid the rich-est tribute to these tall leaders. Even Lord Mountbatten admitted that ABP and *Hindustan Standard* paid best tribute to Gandhi after his assassination in 1948.

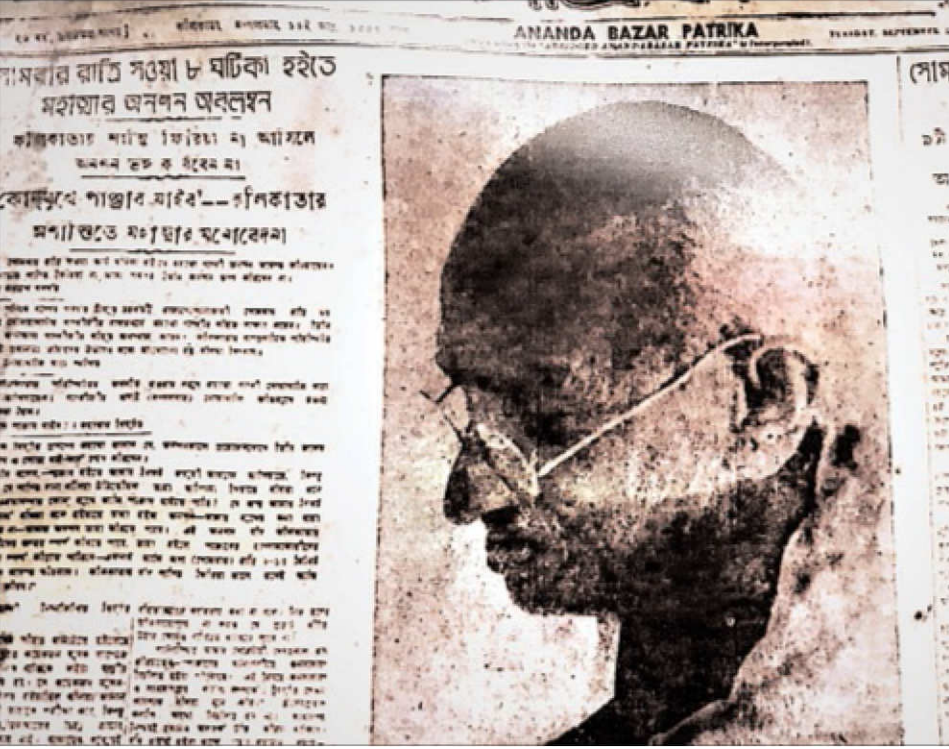
ABP was attacked by all rulers since its inception. There were 14 cases of sedition against it during Raj. It vehemently protested emergency and attacked Indira and Sanjay through its reportages and political cartoons drawn by PKS Kutty. There was a time when people used to buy ABP only to read Barun Sengupta’s report and Kutty’s cartoon.

It was never in the good book of CPIM and in 1984 left backed trade union stopped the paper of months by attacking and damaging its property and people. It was the darkest saga of journalism in Bengal.

Today after a hundred years ABP is a colos-sal media house and in Bengal it practically dominates Bengali political and cultural out-look.

Such is the power of ABP that an author does not consider himself an author till his name is not printed in ABP or a reader does not believe a news unless it comes in ABP. No vernacular daily in India perhaps has such a gargantuan impact among its readers and that is also over a century.

(Pics: ABP archives)



■ Mahatma Gandhi’s fast - covered on the front page of ABP

Ghosh, Barun Sengupta, Sudhangshu Bose are just few of the icons who were products of ABP. One of it’s sub-editor Nripendra

paper to interview Naxalbari leader Charu Majumdar.

Though it was critical on both Gandhi and