

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ASSAMESE PUBLIC SPHERE: IT'S EMERGENCE

The chapter attempts to study the creation of the Assamese public sphere during the colonial period and the key role played by print in this. In colonial India, with the introduction of western education, new and modern ideas of nation and national identity made their entry and influenced the socio-cultural milieu. Against such a background public spaces gradually emerged where discussions on topics public or common to all or rather to the entire nation, took place. In Assam these spaces were formed after the entry of the British and introduction of a new administrative system and of the western form of education which was indispensable for those who aspired to participate in the colonial form of government. In this chapter I shall try to understand the role of various actors, particularly the members of the Assamese middle class, in shaping the Assamese public sphere which only at a later stage included matters related to politics. I shall also study the contact of the Assamese intelligentsia with the Bengali public sphere and its earliest participation in a public sphere through Bengali periodicals.

Print has no doubt played a significant role in constructing the Assamese public sphere. The Assamese language has had a complicated trajectory since its inception the earliest evidences being in the *Caryya Padas* composed around ninth and tenth centuries (Neog 2008: 12) till date. However, when it was used for printing by the American Baptist missionaries for the first time, the need to fix the spelling system and syntax and formulate its grammar on scientific lines arose. The literary associations and periodicals for many years firmly declared that they kept all matters related to politics at bay, but interestingly it will be seen that it was the results of government linguistic policy followed in 1836 and the new political system pursued by the colonial rulers that influenced the structuring of the public sphere as well as fixing of the Assamese language.

A general model is needed to understand the shaping of the Assamese public sphere. Habermas's "concept of the public sphere" becomes useful for this study because of, among other reasons, the weightage he gives to print. Habermas's *Strukturwandel der*

Öffentlichkeit published in 1962 was a critical investigation into the growth of the public sphere in civil society and its transformation. Written originally in the German language, it was translated into English only in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In his seminal work, Habermas traces the genesis of the public sphere as well its transformation. “The two major themes of the book include analysis of the historical genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life” (Kellner 2000: 262).

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere is useful for the present study since the Assamese intelligentsia had the European, or more specifically the English public sphere as a model before them while developing the Assamese public sphere during the colonial period. Habermas’s conceptualisation of the public sphere is based on his study of the growth of the bourgeois society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to him the public sphere reached its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the feudal society the ruler and the feudal lords displayed their status before the subjects who took the part of silent audience.

When the territorial ruler convened about him ecclesiastical and worldly lords, knights, prelates, and cities (or as in the German Empire until 1806 when the Emperor invited the princes and Bishops, Imperial counts, Imperial towns, and abbots to the Imperial Diet), this was not a matter of an assembly of delegates that was someone else’s representative. As long as the prince and the estates of his realm “were” the country and not just its representatives, they could represent it in a specific sense. They represented their lordship not for but “before” the people. (Habermas 1991: 7-8)

But with the growth of the capitalist market there emerged a space between the ruling class and the private citizens. Thus Habermas is of the view that the public sphere emerged as a space where private individuals came together as public to discuss critically the affairs of the state using their reason.

The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 in Habermas's interpretation, was to mediate between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and public life. This involved mediation of the contradiction between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, to use terms developed by Hegel and the early Marx, overcoming private interests and opinions to discover common interests and to reach societal consensus. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls and other public spaces where socio-political discussions took place. (Kellner 2000: 263)

For the present study it becomes imperative to note the role, as underlined by Habermas, of the print media and the literary associations in providing a space as well as shaping opinions on matters common to all.

Habermas states that the public sphere emerged in the world of letters. "Even before the control of the public sphere by public authority was contested and finally rested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form, the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain." (Habermas 1991: 29). He further explicates that the literary world provided the training ground for the use of critical reason, debate. Fransisca Orsini in her work, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, states that her analysis of the Hindi public sphere begins with her investigation of institutions that make up the literary sphere. "Journals, school and textbooks, literary and other voluntary associations, and literary publishings were the institutions which provided the spaces, the arena, for a more public minded activism. They shaped language and literary production, and emphasized certain linguistic styles and literary tastes at the expense of others" (Orsini 2009: 18). In Assam in the early years of the colonial period as indicated in the previous chapters, the "public minded activism" related foremost to the Assamese language. Thus it can be observed that the linguistic policy of the colonial rulers since

1836 ultimately led to the imbibing of the ideology of linguistic nationalism by most of the Assamese intelligentsia. Here I shall study the actors behind the voices that shaped public opinion, the journals and newspapers that provided space for debate and creation of such opinion as well as in enabling the Assamese language to participate in such deliberations. I shall try to present an overview of how various actors tried to establish the unique identity, its antiquity, and capacity of the Assamese language to be used as a means of communication in the public domain.

In the colonial age the Assamese middle class had the educational training to generate and participate in public debate as well as shape public opinion. In the early stage the debates were related to the Assamese language and the members of the middle class tried to universalise the ideology of linguistic idealism among the people of Assam. This was mostly done with the aid of print genres like the book and the periodical. It was in another traditional public arena that issues related to and critical of the British administrative system were discussed and debated upon. This was the *Raijmel* in which the poor ryots assembled to fight against the oppression of the British rulers when the burden of tax grew too great to be borne. The members of the middle class, many of whom were land owners, were also present in these meetings as they were also affected by the taxes. It was obligatory for them to be present in those gatherings and abide by the decisions taken. Thus while most of the members of the Assamese middle class who received modern education devoted their energy in developing the nation through the promotion of the Assamese language and avoiding direct conflict with the rulers, the leaders of the *Raijmel* discussed the grievances of the ryots regarding the rising taxes, openly criticised the government policies, and directed their revolts against the British. The ryots were aggressive in their agitation as they were not bound by the interests of the middle class the members of which were mostly government employee and businessmen. Thus an active political sphere was inaugurated. The members of the Assamese middle class considering the violent activities of the ryots detrimental to their class interest formed other association like the *Ryot Sabhas* and *Sarbajanik Sabhas* to channelise their grievances in a way that would be inoffensive to the rulers and thus paying an active role in opinion shaping (Mahanta 2009: 212-13). Eventually with the formation of the APCC, a large section of the middle class became active in the discussion and debates of the political sphere. In it print played a useful and specific role.

As mentioned in the earlier chapters the affects that the introduction of the Bengali language in Assam in 1836 as the medium of instruction had on the development of the Assamese language were unfavourable. However, Assam's cultural interaction with Bengal during the colonial period resulted in "a complex relationship of conflict and collaboration" (Barua 2006: 16). As per the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, between the British and the Burmese invaders, Assam was annexed by the British. Thus "Assam came under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bengal government with its seat in Calcutta. The province was placed directly under the charge of David Scott, the Agent of the Governor General for the north-east frontier of Bengal" (41). As we know, with the introduction of the new form of administration, there arose the need for officials, clerks, and other assistants who had to be recruited from Bengal in the early period. The next important occurrence was the introduction of the western form of education which was indispensable for any person who wished to participate in the colonial government. The Assamese youth who received education in government schools had to proceed to Kolkata for higher education. Here at the capital these young men witnessed the public sphere that was vibrant with literary, socio-religious as well as political debates and discussions. They also observed the major role played by thriving print culture in the formation of this sphere.

"Nearly three generations of the educated elites in Orissa and Assam derived their mental make-up and intellectual aspirations by their study of the English language and contacts with the Bengali intelligentsia" (Barua 2006: 17). Before the coming of the printing press to Assam printed books and journals were in circulation in Assam. These were Bengali books and journals; most of the books were brought by the Bengali *babus* along with them while the periodicals were subscribed by them. Bengali books particularly religious books were in circulation in Assamese households, whereas persons from Assam wrote letters to Bengali newspapers. The poet and dramatist Sailadhar Rajkhowa writes in his memoir *Atitor Sowarani* about his mother that though she had no formal education yet "by reading Bengali Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various *Purana* at home she was able to understand the Bengali language as well" (my translation) (Rajkhowa 1969: 16). The daughter of the nationalist leader Nabinchandra Bardoloi, poetess Nalinibala also writes in her memoir *Eri Aha Dinbor* how her father would bring books in Bengali from Kolkata for his widowed sister. "My father brought many good books from Kolkata among which were poet Nabin Sen's three volumes of

poetry *Kurukshetra*, *Raibotok*, and *Prabas* and gifted them to his dear sister” (my translation) (53). These were all based on the Mahabharata and were meant for her solace (53). Circulation of Bengali religious books in Assamese homes was a common phenomenon. Gunabhiram Barua, in his play *Ramnabami-Natak*, refers to this phenomenon; Jayanti, the friend of the heroine of the play, mentions a number of the Bengali books that were in her home (Barua 2007: 15).

In Assam the discussion and debate on a public issue was first initiated by the American Baptist missionaries. The issue no doubt belonged to the world of letters as it dealt with the status of the Assamese language in the province. But at the same time, it is interesting to note that, it was a state policy matter and hence a political subject. Reference to this debate, on the use of Assamese language as the medium of instruction, has already been made in the chapter on journals. No doubt, it was the internal policy of the Baptist missionaries to preach in the language of the people which motivated them to urge the British Government to declare Assamese as the medium of instruction. Yet the steps taken by Nathan Brown, Miles Bronson, Rev. A. H. Danforth, and other missionaries in that direction ultimately took the form of a movement. This was the first deliberation on the Assamese language in the public domain. The Bengali language was made the language of the court and the schools in 1836 and even when the Wood’s Despatch in 1854 provided for the use of the vernacular as a medium of instruction in government schools this was not followed in Assam (Barua 2006: 64). As a consequence of degeneration of Ahom rule, internal strife of the Ahom nobility, various revolts like the Moamoria rebellion, the invasion of the Burmese and extreme atrocities caused by them the Assamese people were demoralised. They did not make a “public use of their reason” (Habermas 1991: 27). They at that moment of history did not possess the courage or strength to protest against any policy imposed on them. Thus when Bengali was made the language of the region no public opinion worth considering was garnered. The American Baptist missionaries wrote grammars, dictionaries, and books on Anglo-Assamese words and phrases to organise the language on scientific lines. The language they used was as they heard from the mouth of the natives, whereas the spelling system they followed was based on the dictionary of Jaduram Barua. It was a time when very few Assamese persons were engaged in literary composition (Neog 2008: 217).

The American Baptist missionaries in their effort to re-establish the Assamese language as the medium of instruction put forward a number of representations before the colonial rulers. In this effort Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the first Assamese to take active participation, he was the first Assamese to oppose and criticise the colonial language policy. “Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the first Assamese to object to this practice-first on the pages of *Arunudoï* [sic], the missionary journal and later through his reasoned memorial submitted to A. J. Moffat Mills who visited Assam to enquire into the conditions prevailing in the province” (Barua 2006: 67). He also contested the view that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali through his book *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam*. The missionaries kept up their argument with the government while establishing schools in different places of Assam with Assamese as the medium of instruction, writing textbooks for those schools and at same time publishing a periodical from the Sibsagar Mission Press. The importance of the periodical *Orunudoï* for the Assamese people was that it provided a space in the public domain where they learnt to use the language in a modern way under the influence of the English language. Through the pages of the journal the readers were informed not only about the Protestant faith but also about a new world. The missionaries used the language in a new way, the spelling system was based on pronunciation and the sentence construction was influenced by English language as the missionaries were native English speakers. According to Maheswar Neog a modern prose style was the greatest contribution of the missionaries.

We know that in Assamese a kind of rhythmic prose was employed. . . . But now in contact with English speaking people Assamese developed modern prose-style; and this should perhaps be considered the greatest contribution of the Baptists to Assamese literature and culture. The everyday language of the people could now be the medium of literary expression, which now began to imbibe the qualities of English rhythm and syntax. (Neog 2003: .66)

The missionaries translated tracts into Assamese, established schools with the language of the region as the medium of instruction, prepared textbooks in Assamese and in short, tried in all ways that the word of the Lord would be understood by the common man, they would acquire the ability to read and appreciate the religious books. The

Sibsagar Mission Press, along with the works of the missionaries also printed the secular works of the native people. On the other hand the colonial government followed a different linguistic and educational policy; rather there was no defined policy. The result of using Bengali and English in the government schools was unfavourable and adversely affected the literacy rate. Only a small section of the society received modern education to actively participate in the public spaces. The following table indicates that the literacy rate shows an increasing trend yet the pace is very slow. As already mentioned the Assamese language was declared as the official language of the region in 1873 but textbooks in the language were not readily available.

Table 4

Total Number of Government Schools and Pupils studying therein in the Several Districts of Assam from 1876-77 to 1880-81^a

District	1876-77			1877-78			1878-79			1879-80			1880-81		
	Schools	Pupils	Average per school	Schools	Pupils	Average per school	Schools	Pupils	Average per school	Schools	Pupils	Average per school	Schools	Pupils	Average per school
Cachar	101	2,457	24.3	104	2,631	25.3	111	2,476	22.3	119	2,881	24.2	107	3,025	28.2
Sylhet	246	8,362	33.9	270	9,160	33.9	282	9,567	33.9	262	8,995	34.3	317	11,508	36.3
Goalpara	105	2,310	22.0	95	2,268	23.9	110	2,719	24.7	111	2,744	24.7	106	2,922	27.5
Kamrup	240	5,493	22.9	248	6,391	25.4	204	5,451	26.7	203	5,426	26.7	218	6,261	28.7
Darrang	84	2,498	29.7	76	2,530	33.3	86	2,586	30.0	95	3,089	32.5	105	3,165	30.1
Nowgong	98	3,249	33.2	101	3,473	34.3	104	3,514	33.8	104	3,635	34.9	108	3,844	35.5
Sibsagar	92	3,319	36.1	110	3,749	34.1	120	4,375	36.4	119	4,076	35.9	133	4,547	34.1
Lakhimpur	65	1,893	29.1	65	1,872	28.8	67	2,068	30.8	65	2,222	34.1	60	2,271	37.8
Khasi Hills	76	1,882	24.8	85	2,004	23.6	89	2,265	25.4	97	2,235	23.0	103	2,670	25.9
Garo Hills	24	405	16.9	29	464	16.0	26	279	10.7	23	362	15.7	30	458	15.2
Naga Hills	2	57	28.5	2	60	30.0	2	38	19.0	2	26	13.0	*	*	*
Total	1,133	31,925	28.2	1,185	34,512	29.1	1,201	35,338	29.4	1,200	35,891	29.9	1,287	40,671	31.6

Source: Willson, J. comp. General Report on Public Instruction in Assam for 1880-81

Assam. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1881. 2. Print.

- a. The table states the total number of government schools in the various districts of Assam from the year 1876-77 to 1880-81, the total number of pupils in each district and the average pupils per school in every district.
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When the American Baptist missionaries came and used the Assamese language for their tracts and textbooks, there was no printed book in the language to be used as a model. The Assamese translations of the Bible brought out by the Serampore missionaries were full of Sanskrit words and the language used could not touch the native hearts. Thus the American missionaries used the language as they had heard it from the native people. *Orunudoi* provided the space for using the everyday language for secular writings. As underlined by Maheswar Neog, the main aim of the non-Christian native writers of the journal like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, and Hemchandra Barua was to lure away the Assamese writers from the appeal of the Bengali language. These writers were the pioneers of the effort for establishing the unique identity of the Assamese language. Despite coming from an orthodox Hindu family and opposition from his father, Hemchandra Barua (1836-97) secretly received English education from Captain Brody, the then Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar district, who was a great enthusiast of education and learning. This could not be carried on for a long time as it had come to the knowledge of his uncle but later on he could learn the language from the American missionaries (Neog 1999: 303).

Already a Sanskrit scholar, Hemchandra Barua started writing in the pages of *Orunudoi*, and tried “creating balance among the *tattsam*, *tattvav*, and *deshi* form, he tried to fix the spelling system of Assamese vocabulary. In this he received no support from Brown, Nidhi Levi Farwell, and others” (my translation) (Neog 2010: 237). Thus we witness another debate related to the Assamese language in the public domain. The issue this time belonged to the literary sphere. Barua disapproved the spelling system followed by Brown and was adamant in his view; ultimately his suggestions were accepted by the publishers of the *Orunudoi*. His work on lexicography, *Hemkosh* (published posthumously in 1900) and on grammar *Asamiya Vyakaran* (1859) gave a

definite shape to the Assamese language and his textbooks *Adipath*, *Pathmala*, *Asamiya Lorar Vyakaran*, and *Padhasaliya Abhidhan* were thoroughly dependable guide for students when confusion was the order of the day in the education department (Borua 2007: 6-7; Neog 2008 [Ed. P.Neog]: 270).

The years from 1873 to 1889 forms a significant period for Assamese language and literature, a formative stage when upcoming writers tried to use their talents, attempts were made to try out new genres and new styles of writing. The importance of the first date is that it was the year when the Assamese language was once again declared as the language of the court and schools and that of the second date is that it was in this year that the literary journal, *Jonaki*, was published. During this period a number of periodicals in the Assamese language came to be published. Most of these survived for a very short period of time: the *Assam Bilashini* (1871-83), published from Dharma Prakash Press of Auniati Satra (Sibsagar district); Hemchandra Barua's the *Assam News* (1882-85); Gunabhiram Barua's the *Assam Bandhu* (1885-86); Harinarayan Bora's the *Mou* (1886); Sridhar Barua's the *Assam Tara* (1889-90); and Karunabhiram Barua's children magazine *Lora Bandhu* (1888). Imbibing linguistic ideology, the publishers and editors of the periodicals considered it their contribution toward the development and progress of the Assamese language. The newspapers and magazines provided a platform as well as encouragement to the writers to write in the Assamese language.

As already stated the public spaces were formed in colonial Assam with the introduction of a new system of government and the western form of education. The linguistic policy followed by the new government had a very destructive effect over the education of the province which was already demoralised and devastated by the internal conflicts and external invasions prior to the coming of the British. With the establishment of a few schools by the government and the missionaries, a small section of the indigenous people gained education and with the gradual venturing to Kolkata for higher education they were also exposed to the public sphere that flourished therein. Those who did not travel to Bengal also tried to keep themselves abreast of the happenings through books and periodicals. The periodicals that were brought out by these early members of the Assamese middle class no doubt survived for a short period of time. Yet at the same time they were early attempts at forming the Assamese public sphere. It goes without saying that a low level of literacy owing to a faulty language and education policy followed by the British was a major deterrent in mass participation in this sphere. With

the formation of literary bodies, particularly the Asam Sahitya Sabha (1917), improvement in the education scenario, and greater awareness amongst the masses of the importance of the sphere, there was increased involvement of the common people in these spaces. The ABUSS was formed in Kolkata in 1888 and it gradually formed its branches in different parts of Assam. The Asam Sahitya Sabha tried to involve the people of its entire region in two ways; first by holding its annual sessions in different parts of the province and second by establishing its branches in various towns and villages of the region. These attempts have been discussed in the chapter on literary bodies.

Table 5

Total Number of Government Schools and Pupil studying therein in Assam in the Two Years 1879-80 and 1880-81^a

Class of instruction Pupils		1879-80		1880-81	
		School	Pupils	School	Pupils
Secondary	High school	10	1,351	11	1,930
	Middle English	32	2,431	32	2,463
	Middle Vernacular	53	2,989	51	3,199
Primary	For Male	1,028	27,635	1,115	31,555
	For Female	63	1,072	66	1,136
Special	<u>14</u>	<u>413</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>388</u>
Total.....		1,200	35,891	1,287	40,671

Source: Willson, J. comp. General Report on Public Instruction in Assam for 1880-81

Assam. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1881. 1. Print.

- a. The table shows the number of schools under regular inspection on the 31 March 1881 for the two years 1879-80 and 1880-81, together with the number of pupils attending them.
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While various efforts were being made in Assam for fixing the language and shaping it to be a medium fit for public communications mostly in the spaces provided by

periodicals, in Kolkata we observe the formation of the first Assamese literary association in 1872. The young students from Assam who travelled to Kolkata for higher education were inspired by literary movements in Bengal to form organisations like the Asamiya Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Literary Society) and later Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Students' Literary Club). The club became the meeting place for the various students living in different quarters of the city. The most significant step taken was that they tried to shape the Assamese literature in the mould of English literature. This club ultimately reorganised into ABUSS (1888) the agenda of which had a far reaching effect on Assamese language and its literature (Talukdar 1975: 49-50). While in the earlier years the effort was to retrieve the language from fading into oblivion due to the imposition of the Bengali language, during the *Jonaki Yug* or the *Jonaki Age* the effort was made to shaping the Assamese literature on the line of English literature, particularly of the Romantic Age, along with improving the language. The members of the ABUSS were the students from Assam undertaking higher education in Kolkata experiencing the literary and socio-cultural ferment of nineteenth-century Bengal. The social reform movements had limited influence on the Assamese whereas literary movements had far-reaching effect. The Bengali periodicals, literary organisations as well as various Bengali writers impressed the minds of young Assamese students. Equally significant was the influence of English romantic literature.

The education policy of the British and infiltration of Bengali culture were decisive factors in shaping the mental make-up of the Assamese people in the early British period. The Assamese found Bengali language, songs plays, poems, and other genres very attractive and soon came to consider them superior to Assamese forms. Lakshminath Bezbarua records in his memoir *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, of his contact with this “love of all things Bengali” in his early childhood when his father came to be posted in Sibsagar, a town in Upper Assam. He writes

The Assamese youth of the times were deeply afflicted by the disease and felt that Bengali language, Bengali songs, Bengali way of hair styling, wearing of dhoti and shirt, in short Bengali ‘fashion’, and everything Bengali was superior to our Assamese things, not only this the effect of the disease was so great that the *Gosain-Mahantas* (religious heads) of important *Satras* took pride in composing

plays in corrupt Bengali instead of *Ankiya* plays and *Bhavnas* (religious plays in Assamese) and felt that they were able to please the audience. (my translation)
(33)

The children attended either Bengali or English medium schools. In the Bengali schools the textbooks used were those that were followed in the schools of Bengal, states Padmanath Gohainbarua in his memoir *Mor Sowarani*. He also writes that he was greatly inspired and lured toward literature by the Sankritised Bengali that he was acquainted with through his school education (9). It is only natural that when Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohainbarua, and others travelled to Kolkata for higher education, they would be influenced and inspired by the literary movements of Bengal to do something for their mother tongue.

A significant achievement of the Assamese youth studying in Kolkata was the publication of the literary magazine, *Jonaki* in 1889. The magazine was published by Chandra Kumar Agarwalla but it flourished under the leadership of the trio Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, Lakshminath Bezbarua, and Hemchandra Goswami. The birth of the *Jonaki* is considered by Maheswar Neog as also the birth of modern Assamese literature; it was the birth of a literary movement with a definite agenda to modernize Assamese literature taking English romantic literature as its model (Neog 2008: 246). The *Jonaki* provided the space to carry on experiments in literary creations. Comprehending the adverse effect of Bengali language on their mother tongue, the Assamese youth followed the ideology of linguistic nationalism and tried to compete with Bengali litterateurs and avert the negative forces. While the ABUSS in an organised way and following a well defined agenda strove for the welfare and development of the Assamese language, the *Jonaki* was the public arena where the new literary movement was carried on. The writers emulated various literary genres from English literature like the lyric, the novel, prose article, and drama. The first lyric in the Assamese language “Bonkowari” composed by Chandra Kumar Agarwalla was published in the first issue of the *Jonaki*. In this context Bezbarua writes in his *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, “Those who formerly thought that the Assamese language was not fit to be used for composing poems suited for the present age were disillusioned” (my translation) (81). Romanticism that was created in the poem was continued in poems such as Hemchandra Goswami’s “Kaku Aru Hiya Nibilau”, Kamalakanta

Bhattacharyya's "Pahoroni", and Agarwalla's "Niyar". Substantial prose articles were also published; some of them were "Atmasiksha" by Ghanashyam Barua, "Asomot Maan" by Ratneswar Mahanta, "Asamiya Bhasar Akhoror Jutani" by Lambodar Bora, "Saumar Bhraman" by Gunabhiram Barua, and "Sankardev" by Bishnuprasad Agarwalla. Bezbarua's play "Litikai" was published in serial form from the first issue of the literary magazine. His "Kripabar Baruar Kakotor Tupula" was based on Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (81). The western genre of short-story was taken up by Bezbarua; in the fourth issue of the fourth year his "Seuti" was published and the story established him as the father of modern short story in Assamese (Saikia 2010: 1). A number of his short stories were published in the later issues of *Jonaki*. After Kolkata, the magazine came to be published from Guwahati under the editorship of Satyanath Bora and came to a close after three years. In the pages of the magazine it can be witnessed how the Assamese writers taking English romantic literature as its model as well as imbibing influences of Bengali writers, shaped a literary movement. It proved to be a significant step in the mission of developing the Assamese language and its literature. Bezbarua states that even one year of *Jonaki* had accomplished considerably for the Assamese language and thus many English educated persons who considered the Assamese language as a useless thing would have to take back their opinion (Bezbarua 1998: 81-82).

Following the ideology of linguistic nationalism and keeping political matters at bay, most of the periodicals of the first half of the colonial period strove to shape the Assamese language and its literature. According to Habermas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the coffee houses in England and the *salons* in France emerged as "the centers of criticism-literary at first, then also political..." and "literature had to legitimate itself" in these spaces (Habermas 1991: 32-33). The *Jonaki* emerged as one such space. It had inspired as well as instructed many an Assamese youth like Padmanath Gohainbarua to try their hand at literary composition. Gohainbarua declares in his memoir, "Honestly, it was *Jonaki* that attracted me to Assamese literature" (my translation) (Gohainbarua 2003: 28-29). *Bijuli*, *Banhi*, and *Usha* were similar spaces for literary activities. It has already been mentioned that the Assamese language was declared as the official language of Assam in 1873 after it had lost its position of glory in 1836. The Assamese intelligentsia through their literary works tried to improve the language and was also becoming successful and the periodicals were a definite proof of

it. However, the concept that the Assamese language was a dialect of the Bengali language was still being upheld by certain Bengali writers. In the pages of *Banhi* (1909) we can witness the attempts to refute such misconception. In 1909 there was an attempt to reorganise the ASL club by some Assamese gentlemen residing in Kolkata and students studying there. They also intended to bring out another magazine like the *Jonaki*. The responsibility of its editorship ultimately fell on Lakshminath Bezbarua who was then residing in Kolkata. Like *Jonaki*, *Banhi* was able to gather a group of writers and Bezbarua was the sun around which they moved drawing sustenance as well as being controlled by him. The literary movement initiated by the *Jonaki* was taken forward by the *Banhi* to an advanced stage (Goswami 2001: 6).

Banhi provides a classical example of how a literary journal offered a space for practising the critical use of reason in the public. It is interesting to note a number of debates on issues related to the Assamese language in *Banhi* which reflect how people were becoming more and more conscious as well as sensitive to these matters. Bezbarua expresses his concern for the adverse effect of the Bengali language on the use of Assamese language in his article “Bartaman Bhasar Avastha” (The Present Condition of the Language) published in the third issue of the first year:

So long a foreign language had been sucking out the life-blood of the Assamese language rendering it sick and unhealthy. As many of the pure Assamese words have gone out of use the present day Assamese writers feel that there are no such words in the language. They feel ashamed to use the words that are prevalent in rural areas. Those who are habituated readers of Bengali books tend to use Sanskrit words. Hence I think that Assamese as a spoken language is gradually going out of use. This is not a good sign. (my translation) (Bezbarua 2001: 78)

He also tries to establish the lineage of the Assamese language in his article “Purani Asamor Jilingoni” (A Glimpse of Ancient Assam) published in the sixth issue of its first year (Bezbarua 2001: 168-79); he refutes the claims of Bengali litterateurs that Assamese was a patois of the Bengali language in a series of articles titled “Asomiya Gauripurat Bangla Sahitya Sabha” (Bengali Literary Assembly in Assamese Gauripur). There were four parts of the article published in the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth

issues of the first year (277-86, 305-18, 348-55, 362-69). Along with literary compositions like poems, plays, and short stories, Bezbarua and other writers such as Gyanadabhiram Barua, Ambikanath Bora, Durgeswar Sharma, Jatindranath Duara, Chandrakumar Agarwalla, Balindraram Khaund, Chandradhar Barua, Anandachandra Agarwalla, and others through their prose articles on varied topics tried to enrich the Assamese language. As in many of the periodicals, in *Banhi* as well there was a section where criticism and comments on newly printed books were published. This section is a rich source of information on the kind of works that were being printed and published. Thus *Banhi* following the ideology of linguistic nationalism continued to work for the development of the Assamese language and created a space for literary activities.

In the public sphere, thus it can be seen the issues that were discussed and debated upon were related to the Assamese language. With the declaration of Bengali as the official language of the province, efforts were being made to bring back Assamese to its former position. The endeavour initiated by the American Baptist missionaries was taken up by the Assamese middle class with full vigour and dynamism and in it books and periodicals functioned as crucial tools. The middle class that was ever grateful to the British could not think of throwing out the colonial rulers; their aim was to form the Assamese nation and structure its cultural identity. In this attempt, establishing the unique identity of the Assamese language became a very important component. Hence we find the members of the middle class taking up such matters in the public spaces. As Habermas points out that the literary debates in the public sphere of the continent gave way to political ones (Habermas 1991: 32-33). This could be witnessed in the case of Assam. Political issues could not always be kept away from these spaces, particularly with the increasing oppressive measures of the British. No doubt, it was the poor, downtrodden, and illiterate peasants who first dared to revolt against the British, but soon a section of the educated became vocal in their criticism of the British form of administration. With the formation of the Assam Pradeshik Congress Committee (APCC), mass participation in the political sphere is observed. Soon, along with public meetings and traditional socio-cultural sites, pamphlets, books, and periodicals were used as spaces for political matters and for mobilising public opinion, and in such an atmosphere both literary and political sections intersecting and overlapping to produce a vibrant and dynamic public sphere.

While the Assamese middle class got its inspiration for working for the development of the Assamese language from the upheaval in Bengal, it also learnt its first lessons in politics in Kolkata. The economic condition of Assam and their experiences in the colonial capital made the members of this class, who were mostly government employees, landowners, and a few businessmen feel that their wellbeing depended on the goodwill of the colonial masters. Thus we had seen that the members tried to construct and lead the Assamese nation following the dictum that “a subject nation had no politics”. Guided by the ideology of linguistic nationalism they focussed, mostly in the first half of the colonial period, on the development and progress of the Assamese language and its literature. Thus, when the cultivators of the region rose in armed rebellion against the financial oppression of the British, the Assamese middle class was alarmed.

In the second half of the nineteenth century a number of revolts of the *ryots* took place in Assam in which the people’s organisation known as *Raijmel* (*rai*j – people, *mel*-assembly), played a crucial role. The *Raijmel* was an assembly of leading persons sometimes of a number of villages which settled matters of common interest (Barpujari 1999 [vol i]: 91). A traditional organisation of Assamese rural life, the decisions taken by such *mel* was hardly opposed. When the *ryots* raised their voice against the rising government taxes, the *Raijmel* became active in providing energetic leadership. “This leadership (of the *Raijmel*) was group leadership. Here the decisions were taken as per the opinion of the majority of the common people. Hence the agrarian revolts were actually lead by the *ryots*” (my translation) (Mahanta 2009: 175). From 1861 to 1894 a number of uprisings took place in places like Phuloguri in Nagaon district, Patharughat in Darrang district, Gobindapur in Barpeta sub-division, and Rangiya and Laichima in Kamrup districts. In these revolts large number of *ryots*, who were offended by the numerous taxes, the ever increasing rate of revenues, and the total banning of opium cultivation by the local cultivators, took part and faced strong oppression from British forces. Very often these revolts turned violent and aggressive resulting in the death of one British officer, Lieutenant Singer, the then Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon district on 18 October 1861, one *mouzadar* (revenue official) of Sarukhetri *mouza* in Kamrup district on 21 January 1894, and thousands of *ryots* in different parts of Assam. These revolts were spearheaded by the *Raijmels*; thousands of villagers, tribals and non-tribals, Hindus and Muslims, gathered in these *mels* to discuss about the unjust revenue earning

measures of the British (Barpujari 1999 [vol.i]: 94-99). Thus these *mels* provided a platform to the *ryots* wherein to discuss and debate on the government policies and how best to resist them along with other “matters of common interest”.

The *Raijmels* were thus traditional institutional spaces and in those spaces debates on universal issues took place and as the decisions were popular verdicts they were to be accepted by one and all and were to be defied only at the cost of being socially ostracised. One thing needs to be pointed out that in these spaces the political debates did not evolve out of literary ones for the major participants were illiterate cultivators. Along with the cultivators, the members of the Assamese middle class also participated in these discussions as their interests were affected by the increasing rate as well as number of taxes.

There is hardly any doubt that the Lalungs and Kacharis of Nowgong being hard hit by the prohibitory measures of the government were in the vanguard of the movement; but they were blessed, if not actively cooperated with by educated and well-to-do middle class consisting of small land owners, government servants, *mouzadars*, traders and merchants who were no less affected by recent taxes on income, trades and dealings. (Barpujari 1999 [vol. i]: 94)

The Assamese middle class always thought that its well-being depended on the goodwill of the colonial rulers and thus did not actively participate in these movements. The members rather felt that the violent and aggressive nature of the riots would adversely affect the interest of their class (Mahanta 2009: 223).

The Sarbajanik Sabha and the Ryot Sabha were associations formed by the elite middle class and as has been pointed out by Dr. Prafulla Mahanta, it was the fear of the middle class at the violent character of the peasant movements that led to the formation of these organisations (Mahanta 2009: 212). There were other reasons as well, such as the influence of organisations formed in Bengal like Indian Association and various Ryot Sabhas organised in different parts of Bengal, the members of the class were also affected by the rise in taxation and the aim of the middle class to lead the nation. The Upper Assam Association, the Shillong Association, the Tezpur Ryot Sabha, the Nagaon Ryot Sabha, and the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha all had their birth in the 1880s. As

quoted in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, the founder of the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Jagannath Baruah, writes about the aim of founding of the Sabha: “representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the Government, (and) explaining to the people the objects and policies of the Government and generally ameliorating the condition of the people” (Barpujari 2007 [vol. v]: 239). It can be stated that it was also the aim of the other associations. This is indeed an interesting and enlightening statement.

In 1905 another political association, the Assam Association, was formed with Manik Chandra Barua as its general secretary and Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua and Jagannath Barua as its president and vice-president respectively. The organisation had a broader base than the earlier associations with its headquarters in Gauripur (in the then Goalpara district) and Guwahati and branch offices in several towns of the state. However, its policy was similar to that of the preceding organisations (Barpujari 2007 [vol. v]: 241-42).

The foundation of these associations is a clear indication of an emerging political sphere in Assam and this leads us to the issues of leadership and participation. The leadership undoubtedly belonged to the educated, moneyed, and landed members of the society who actually acted as mediators between the British rulers and the uneducated masses, the *ryots*. While in the *Raijmels* the *ryots* directly participated in the deliberations and discussions, here the dialogue was between the educated members of the middle class and the rulers. Though the Sabhas argued with the rulers for the welfare of the middle as well as the lower classes they never directly antagonised the colonial masters, for the middle class firmly believed that without the blessing of the British it could never prosper.

We find that as these political activities were taking place, the periodicals the avowed policy of which were to keep all matters political were outside their scope, hardly represented these issues in their pages. But matters gradually changed. Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha was an organisation formed by Priyalal Barua the Deputy Inspectors of Schools in 1885. A noteworthy deed of this organisation was that it issued a circular asking the people to present their grievances before Lieutenant Governor of Bengal (Barpujari 1999 [vol.i]: 158). The organisations like the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, the Tezpur Ryot Sabha, and the Assam Association were political in nature. It can be so

said for these were formed as platforms for discussing government policies. But as already mentioned they avoided direct confrontation with the British rulers for that would affect the interest of the middle class. In the public sphere, as Habermas puts it, “the mind was no longer in the service of a patron; ‘opinion’ became emancipated from the bonds of economic bondage” (Habermas 1991: 33-34). However, in Assam as the middle class was yet dependent on the British rulers it steered clear of such altercation. The driving force behind these associations like Ganga Gobinda Phukan, Jagannath Barua, Manik Chandra Barua, and Haribilash Agarwalla were also related to the literary world. In 1872 a literary organisation was formed in Kolkata named Asamiya Sahitya Sabha under the aegis of Ganga Gobinda Phukan and the leadership of Jagannath Barua and Manik Chandra Barua. Manik Chandra Barua and Annada Phukan, the son of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, were the proprietors of the *Assam News*, whereas Haribilash Agarwalla (father of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, editor and publisher of *Jonaki*), one of the leaders of the Tezpur Ryot Sabha, was involved with the *Jonaki*. Under such circumstances it was natural that similar attitude toward the government would prevail in the literary as well as the political sphere.

The distinctive matter related to the Assam Association was that it created a connection between the political sphere of Assam and that of the rest of India. As Indian National Congress became more active the association kept itself abreast of the principles and programmes of the national organisation and also sent representatives to its various sessions. Soon after the formation of the Assam Association a significant political event took place affecting Assam. A large part of Eastern Bengal was incorporated with Assam. In the editorial of the issue of the periodical *Assam Banti* published on 17 July 1905 it was written “It is the time for the Assamese people to arise and if they do not take the opportunity it would be too late. The Assam Association should hold a meeting and soon take a decision” (Sharma 2013: 29). Soon meetings were held by its various branches as well as its general committee and strongly opposed the step taken by the British Government. The association though focussed on regional issues kept itself informed of the national matters. “This was facilitated by the infiltration into it of members with nationalistic outlook like Tarun Ram Phookan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Chandranath Sharma” (Barpujari 1999 [vol. i]: 174). Planning to adopt the programme of non-cooperation as outlined in the Nagpur session of Congress, in its

annual session held at Tezpur in December 1920, the Assam Association decided to merge with the Indian National Congress (174-75).

In June 1921 the leaders of the Assam Association formed the APCC in Guwahati. Consequently its branches were formed in the various districts (Sharma 2013: 54). Soon the people of the entire region, both literate and illiterate, entered the political sphere. There were those who still firmly believed in the efficiency and fairness of the British rule, those who enjoyed the fruits of government service and kept away from the nationalistic activities and those who still thought that development of the nation could be attained through the development of language and literature. Thus the Asam Sahitya Sabha which was formed under the aegis of the Assam Association disassociated itself from the latter when it decided to form the APCC. The Sabha kept itself completely away from political matters. On the other hand the name of the students' organisation Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sanmilan (Assamese Students' Literary Club) was changed to Asamiya Chatrar Sanmilan (Assamese Students' Club) for it would restrict its activities only to language and literature. Another organisation the Tezpur Asomiya Club is an illustration of the elite middle class's attitude toward the British Government as well as the Congress activities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the social workers of the town of Tezpur who were the members of various organisations like the Tezpur Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha, the Tezpur Library, the Ban Theatre, and the Tezpur Ryot Sabha were also the members of the Tezpur Asomiya Club established in 1915. A section of its members subsequently participated in the national movement and soon became actively involved in it. Of these a few like Gahan Chandra Goswami, Mahadev Sharma, Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, and Mohikanta Das came to the notice of the British administration due to their strong and influential leadership and also had to undergo imprisonment. This ultimately posed problems for the functioning of the club. Moreover, as the congress members did not have any space of their own, they came to use the club as a congress office. This fact became a hurdle for the members of the club who were government employees or were dependent on the British Government and ultimately there was great decline in its membership (Saikia 2011: 21-22).

After Congress committees were formed at district as well as provincial levels, a number of meetings were held to acquaint the illiterate and under-educated people of the villages with the national political movement. Thus these meetings and assemblies became spaces for the Assamese masses receiving their political training, to chalk out

programmes for involving more and more people, to inform people about Mahatma Gandhi and his principles of truth and non-violence as well as the concept of *Swaraj* and in short, to debate and discuss matters that would soon affect the entire nation. Krishnanath Sharma, a freedom fighter from the district of Jorhat, writes in his memoir which is also a history of the Congress in Assam:

We began to enrol members into the Congress with a fee of four anaas. The Jorhat District Congress Committee was formed. I was selected as the secretary. . . . Volunteers came in groups to join the Congress. The students who boycotted their schools and colleges came to the villages to spread the message of the Congress. In this way in a short time the news reached the people. About two thousand to two thousand five hundred people gathered in the meetings. Hindus, Muslims, and others irrespective of caste and creed came to consider the message of the Congress as their own. (my translation) (Sharma 1972: 85-86)

Besides public meetings, the traditional and familiar cultural sites of the masses also became spaces for communicating with them. *Bhauna* or One Act plays first created by Sankardeva, were popular forms of entertainment for the people of Assam. These became effective sites for the Congress workers to reach out to the common, mostly illiterate masses. Benudhar Sharma, who gave up his education just prior to the final exams of the B.A. course he was pursuing in Kolkata, describes in his memoir of one such performance that took place on 27 January 1922. A two-day celebration was organised in a place called Aamguri in Jorhat district. A large number of people from the neighbouring areas assembled to enjoy the presentation; however, with the audience shouting the names of Congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi with the same fervour as they took the names of their Gods, the socio-religious occasion was transformed into a Congress gathering. The play was *Ravana Badh*, that is, the demolition of Ravana, the *asura* or demon king. The purpose of a *Sutradhaar* (a form of chorus) in such a play was to introduce the story which was subsequently to be enacted, to the audience. But on that day, at the request of the audience present, Benudhar Sharma instead of the person to play the role of the *Sutradhaar*, entered the arena and recited the message of Gandhiji and the freedom movement. His presentation greatly enthralled the audience,

inspiring them to destroy the Ravana in the form of the British rulers (Sharma 1986: 390-91). Other such means of reaching out to the common people were composing of *naams* or songs sung during socio-religious functions, on themes related to the freedom movement. These were mostly composed extempore and Boloram Chaliha collected such songs and got them printed in the form of a book along with many written by him. It is known from the memoir of Benudhar Sharma that Chaliha bore the expenses of printing the book personally and *Swarajor Naam* greatly touched the hearts of people (460).

Printing of matters related to the national movement was considered a seditious act by the British Government. Hence only a few presses dared to undertake such activities. One such was Jadumoni Chapajantra established by Tirthanath Goswami with the aim of printing and publishing works on Vaisnava religion as propagated by Sankardeva, which the press is carrying on even today. During the period of freedom struggle, the then proprietor Purnananda Goswami, the son of Tirthanath Goswami, a supporter of the movement ventured the printing of pamphlets and books on the movement. Prafulla Chandra Bora writes in his article, “Eti Chapasale Kora Aitijya”,

In this Jadumoni Chapajantra a number of pamphlets and books for publicity and such other matters related to the freedom movement were printed. Purnananda Goswami by printing as well as publishing a book entitled *Swarajor Sangeet* by Sankar Barua, a well known freedom fighter of the time, had to undergo imprisonment. He also brought fame to the press by publishing *Abhijan*, a collection of poems of the pioneering Assamese progressive poet, Dhiren Dutta. All these were in 1935. (my translation) (Bora 2011: 15)

The machine that was used for printing such matters is still preserved states Khirod Kumar Goswami, one of the present proprietors and the son of Purnananda Goswami in an interview. It is a treadle machine, operated by foot made by Reddish Jobbar Company. A hood was constructed that would cover the printer as well as the machine so that the police would not be aware of the printing activities that would go on during the night. In the morning all traces of such nocturnal ventures would be removed.

Shantanunath Bhattacharjee of the Bhattacharjee Agency, Dibrugarh, another printing and publishing concern that has continued in its glorious existence since its foundation in 1886, states in an interview that often printing of matters related to the freedom movement were done in the printing machines of their press. Many a time the composition would be done in different places whereas the printing would be carried out swiftly in the press to avoid the sharp eyes of the agents of the C.I.D. who were quite active during those days. The Borkotoky Company of Jorhat also had contributed by printing the Congress weekly newspaper *Asam Raij* in 1936 (Goswami 2013: 127). The paper was published every three days under the editorship of Devendranath Sharma. Its aims were to spread the ideals of Gandhiji, service to the Harijans and organisation of villages. In 1937 the government imposed a fine of Rs. 10,000 for criticising its policies and this led to the closure of the periodical (Baishya 2014: 206-07).

Periodicals were a popular means of communicating with the people on political matters. They were the result of institutional, group or even individual effort. Benudhar Sharma in his work *Kangrekar Kanchioli Rodot* mentions of a daring effort to bring out a periodical to publish news and information of the Congress. Bimalakanta Barua had boycotted Cotton College like many others of his contemporaries as it was a government college and got admitted to the national college in Allahabad and gave his final exams from that college. Returning home in Sibsagar he became the joint secretary of Sibsagar Congress Committee along with Sibaprasad Barua.

. . . he (Bimalakanta Barua) started to publish *Swadesh*, a fortnightly handwritten by him. He cyclostyled the paper and secretly got it distributed in the villages. During those days spreading any information of the Congress was a great offence. Hence much caution had to be maintained for publishing it; even then escaping the prying eyes of the government agents, the Congress workers secretly distributed the paper. The news of the increasing government atrocities on the one hand greatly saddened the people but on the other encouraged them. Because of door to door search of the police, the machine used for printing the *Swadesh* had to be moved from place to place. Consequently due to the lack of manpower for

continuing the work the periodical came to an end abruptly. (my translation) (22-23)

One more example of a cyclostyled paper was *Kongress* where news of atrocities committed by the police on the members of the Assam Congress was published in the early days. When the government was putting restrictions on newspapers cyclostyled sheets became the means of communicating information of the freedom movement. Such sheets were published from other towns as well like Tezpur, Jorhat, and Guwahati. They contained translated versions of Gandhii's writings in *Young India* (Barpujari 1999[vol iii]: 223).

Another technology used for printing such pamphlet was lithography. Lakhi Das, a Congress worker constructed a lithographic printing machine to print leaflets describing the appalling atrocities of the British Government. The police searched for it in the residences of the leaders while the young boys moved it from place to place (Devi 2012: 94-95).

Habermas states that gradually the public sphere in the world of letters which was equipped with public institutions and forums of discussion were being converted into a sphere of criticism of the state authorities by the public using its reason (Habermas 1991: 51). Thus in Assam, with the rise in the national movement, the newspapers and journals were used for criticising the oppressive activities of the British rulers and publishing news of the movement. As is stated in the chapters on periodicals, the newspapers, and magazines of Assam in the early colonial period were driven mostly by linguistic nationalism. A great number of them explicitly declared that they would not publish matters related to politics. The most befitting way to serve the nation was by contributing toward the development of the language and literature. But as the national movement grew in pace and the consequent formation of the APCC, many periodicals came to provide spaces for discussions and debates on political matters. They dared to publish about the activities of the Congress and the development of the movement. It needs also to be stated that at least the educated section of the people of Assam kept themselves aware of national politics through periodicals published from other parts of the country. Benudhar Rajkhowa writes about his father, "My father died in Dibrugarh in 1917. He was greatly interested in the news of political matters. . . . During those

days the Bengali periodicals were the only source of receiving news of other parts of the country. My father used to regularly read the *Sanjivani* published from Kolkata” (my translation) (Rajkhowa 1969: 34). The Congress office of Sibsagar used to subscribe to the *Bombay Chronicle* along with other Assamese newspapers like the *Asamiya*, *Awahon*, and *Ghar Jeuti* (Sharma 1986: 462).

As already discussed *Asamiya*, *Assam Bilasinee* (1916), *The Advocate of Assam*, and *The Assam Sevak* were some periodicals which published news of the national movement. Benudhar Sharma in *Kangrekar Kachiali Rodot* describes *Assam Bilasinee* (1916) as the only “extremist weekly newspaper of the times. Krishnakanta Bhattacharyya, a government pensioner was its chief editor. Ghanakanta Bhattacharyya was the sub-editor. As the paper began to publish continuously severe criticism of the British Government’s cruel atrocities, not only did *Assam Bilasinee* enter into the grip of the black laws, but the editor had to face various problems” (my translation) (13). *Asamiya* brought out by Chandra Kumar Agarwalla has been depicted by Nalinibala Devi as Assam’s most powerful weapon (*Pashupat Astra*) (Devi 2012: 90). The inception of the paper in 1919 coincides with the commencement of the Gandhian era in Indian history. It published all the significant events and activities of the movement in Assam along with criticising the British Government for its repressive policies and atrocities on the masses. “The *Asamiya* almost led a crusade on behalf of the crusaders” (Barpujari 1999 [vol. iii]: 216). A weekly newspaper, *Asamiya* was published daily during the Pandu (near Guwahati) session of the Congress in 1926 (Sharma 1986: 478). The other periodicals like *The Advocate of Assam* and *The Assam Sevak* had their own contributions in generating public opinion about political matters during the freedom movement.

Another significant aspect was the participation of the women in the political sphere. The question arises what spaces were available for women particularly with the entry of print into Assam. It can be said that it were the American Baptist missionaries who first established institutions for formal education for women in Assam; albeit there was the implicit motive of proselytisation. Gradually some of the gentlemen of the upper castes agreed to educate the ladies of the house under the supervision of the women missionaries in their residences. It was a miniscule section of the society that got the opportunity to learn to read and write. In the early years the women knew only to read. Benudhar Rajkhowa writes in his memoir about his mother’s lack of the skill of writing

though she could read. “In ancient days the women were taught to read whereas it was not considered necessary to teach them to write” (my translation) (Rajkhowa 1969: 18). But with the establishment of the missionary schools at least a few girls could learn to write. The missionary Assamese periodical *Orunudo* provided a space for women to publish their write ups once they acquired some education. Maheswar Neog in his preface to the collected volume of *Orunudo*, mentions three women native Christian writers who published their work in different issues of the journal; they are Kunti Carolyn Simon, Numoli Sufford, and Subhadri (151-57). The two works of Padmavati Phukanani, the daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phulan, *Sudharmar Upakhyan* (1884) and *Hitsadhika* (1892), *Niti-katha* of Gunabhiram Barua’s wife Bishnupriya Devi and *Arhi Tirota* of Barua’s daughter Swarnalata Devi were published under the supervision of Gunabhiram Barua (Mahanta 2008: 156-57). Soon women came to publish their creations in the local journals *Jonaki* (1889), *Usha* (1906), *Alochani* (1910), and *Banhi* (1909) (163). However, these were journals published by men, whereas, *Ghar Jeuti* was the first journal published exclusively by women.

With the establishment of government schools for girls in places like Dibrugarh (1885), Tezpur (1932), and Goalpara (1939) there was some improvement in the field of women’s education. Young girls were also being sent to Kolkata for higher education. It was only natural that women were seen participating in the public sphere and curving out niches for them (Mahanta 2008: 163). As Aparna Mahanta points out:

The first record of a women’s organization is that of the Sevak Mahila Samiti of Dibrugarh which was started about 1915. . . . In the first decade of the 20th century a number of enlightened professionals and citizens of the town formed a discussion forum called the Alochani Club. The club sat weekly at the Amolapatty *nam-ghar* (community prayerhall) and later began publication of a progressive journal *Alochani* (1910). Women also attended these meetings and read papers which were published in *Alochani* and other journals of the time. In about 1915 the local ladies including Hemprova Das, the Headmistress, and the teachers of the Girls’ School began organizing their own weekly sittings, calling themselves

the Mahila Sevak Samiti. Their chief aim was encouragement of women's education and giving aid to destitute women. (98)

Another such organisation was formed in Sibsagar in about 1916, that is, the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti which also facilitated the participation of women in the public sphere. But the most important achievement of this association was the publication of the first women's magazine in the Assamese language, the *Ghar-Jeuti* in 1927 by two women, Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Kakati (Mahanta 2008: 127). This journal, which provided a platform to women in towns and villages, ultimately became the spokes organ of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS) when it was established in 1926 (131). The APMS was a non-political organisation which focussed on the emancipation of women through education and financial independence. At the same time spinning and weaving advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, were an integral part of the Samiti. Chandraprova Saikiani who was the guiding spirit of the organisation was the first woman of Assam to deliver a speech in a public assembly. With the commencing of the non-cooperation movement the functioning of the Mahila Samiti weakened as most of its members participated in the national movement (124).

After the Congress was formed in Assam there was mass participation of women in the political sphere. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam in 1921 he addressed a large public meeting in Guwahati. Besides he separately spoke to the women and explained to them the organisational aspect of the various programmes. Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam greatly inspired the masses and it provided a golden opportunity to the women to be organised. After that they visited the villages in groups to spread the message of Gandhiji and of the freedom movement (Barua 2013: 189). Participation of women in the public sphere both literary and political, was thus gaining in pace. Along with *Ghar-Jeuti*, women got their writings published in the pages of *Awahan*, a monthly literary which was also quite vocal in political matters of the time. In the first issue of the first year of the magazine that was brought out in October 1929 a short story, a poem, and an article written by women writers were published. These were the first part of a story, "Akul Pathik", by Chandraprova Saikiani (Majumdar 2015: 26-34); a poem, "Aradhana", by Dharmeswari Baruani (41); and an article, "Negrojatir Ganatantra", by Golok Devi (95-98). News and information related to the women's organisation also found a space in this periodical. The speech delivered by the president, Narayani

Handique, of the third annual session of the Asam Mahila Sanmilian (179), a short report of the organisation and functioning of the Asam Mahila Samiti (162-64), and the concluding part of the story “Akul Pathik” (179-86), were included in the second issue of November 1929. An article, “Samajgothonot Narir Dayitwa” by Kanaklata Bhuyan was published in the third issue of the journal (263-66). Though there was no contribution by women in the fourth issue two poems by Nalinibala Devi, “Awahon” and “Prohori” were published in the fifth and sixth issues respectively (508, 644). We observe similar participation by women in the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth issues of *Awahon* with a short story, “Bhumura” by Sudha Barman (722-25); a play, “Karna Kuntir Sangbad” by Priyolata Kakoty B.A (834-36); a life-sketch, “Bhattadevar Jibani” by Khageswari Debi (885-90); a short story, “Aai” by Punyaprobha Das B.A. (921-24); and an article “Nabajugar Narijagoron” by Swarnalata Saikia (1073-75). Along with these the speech of the president Chandraprova Saikiani of the first session of the Asam Kachari Mahila Sanmilian (672-79) and a report of the Joymoti festival celebrated in the month of April 1930 (1078-82) were published in the seventh and tenth issues of the first year of the magazine. Out of the twelve issues of the first year of the journal, there were writings by women in nine issues; the fact is an indicator of some improvement in the literacy scenario of women, the rising consciousness in women of the need to participate in the literary and political public sphere and bring about emancipation of women.

As already mentioned in the chapter on periodicals, though *Awahon* (1929) was primarily a literary magazine, it was openly critical of government policies and activities. The editor Dr. Dinanath Sharma, in his editorial very often made such comments underlining the fact that he was quite observant of the political developments. In the editorial of the first issue Dr. Dinanath Sharma expresses his feelings regarding the freedom movement. Referring to Gandhiji’s opinion of the Viceroy’s declaration he comments that gone were the days when the British politicians could deceive India. The country had been deceived many a time in the past by their crafty words. In another editorial he has stated how Gandhiji had chalked out the plan of carrying out the civil disobedience movement and the role he had allotted to men and women in it. Expressing his feelings the editor states that boycotting of foreign goods and liquor were indeed powerful weapons in the war. He also writes how students could take part in the movement and what they should do. This editorial was published in the sixth issue of the

magazine. Sometimes articles from other important national newspapers, which he considered the reading public of Assam should be aware of, were republished in *Awahon*. For example, a piece of writing by Mahatma Gandhi in which he addressed the student community calling upon them to participate in the freedom movement and at the same time exhorting them about the principles to be followed, was published in the first issue of the *Awahon*. The piece was already published in the *Amrit Bazaar Patrika* (brought out from Kolkata) as was declared by the editor (Majumdar 2015: 57). Thus news regarding national politics found space in the journal. In the third issue, the speech of the president of the forty-fourth session of Congress held in Lahore and the speech of the president of the Reception Committee of the same session were published. While Jawaharlal Nehru was the president of the main session, Dr. Kitchlew was that of the Reception Committee. The literary magazine *Awahon* was fearlessly vocal about political matters; here we see how Assamese nationalism was gradually becoming a strand of Indian nationalism. There were other periodicals as well that were platforms for political matters and these have been mentioned in the chapter on periodicals.

Thus it can be concluded that with the introduction of a new form of government in Assam by the British and subsequently a new form of education, there emerged spaces where private individuals gathered as public to discuss matters common to all. Periodicals and associations played a significant role in the creation of these spaces. In the early colonial period the discussion in these spaces were about the progress of the nation through development of language and literature along with education. The major and crucial participants in these spaces were the members of the Assamese middle class who for the interest of their class did not want any conflict with the colonial rulers. The focus was on establishing the unique identity of the Assamese language and its literature. And in this effort of the middle class, print genres like books and periodicals played a significant role.

Except a few and unsuccessful attempts by some members of the aristocracy in the early years to overthrow the British rule, it were the poor peasants who first dared to rise in revolt against the atrocious policies of the British. The increase in the number and amount of taxes hard hit the cultivators and *Rajmels* emerged as spaces for debating and discussing such issues. As no relief was on the way the *ryots* at times became violent in their fight against the rulers. Though many members of the middle class were also adversely affected by the rising taxes and participated in these village

assemblies, yet they did not think of offending their masters. The aggressive nature of the peasant movement alarmed the middle class leading them to form associations like the Ryot Sabha and Sarbajanik Sabha to mediate between the poor and uneducated peasants and the colonial masters. As people became politically conscious we see the formation of the Assam Association which had a broad base; even after the formation of the INC in 1885, the association remained in action till 1921 when the APCC was formed. With the formation of the Congress in the region the emergence of a vibrant political sphere with mass participation in it can be witnessed. The rich and the poor, the city-dweller and the villager, the educated and the illiterate, men and women, equally participated in the political activities. As Fransesca Orsini puts it, “The ‘public’ that was the target of nationalist rhetoric seemed finally to be physically *there*. . . . Literature, the press and politics were seen as a continuum, a joint effort to liberate the country” (emphasis writer’s own) (2009: 309). In the pulsating public sphere where the literary and political segments were related in a “complex” manner, the Assamese language becomes a confident medium for reaching out to the masses by the leaders and also in communicating with the rulers.