

ABSTRACT

The project studies the intellectual and material history of the book in Assam during the colonial period as it is intended to be a contribution to the history of the book in India. No study of the impact of printing in Assam has been made even though Assam (where the first printing press was established in 1836 by the American Baptist missionaries at the behest of the colonial rulers) provides an especially good example of how print culture plays a decisive role in the construction of modernity and transformation of political, social, and cultural identities.

The project has tried to reconstruct (as far as possible) the pre-print scenario in the early nineteenth century Assam since this is vital to our understanding of the reception and resistance to the book; to provide a pioneering study of the introduction of print culture in Assam, including the efforts of the American missionaries and those of local publishers, printers, and collaborators who appropriated the new technology for their own purposes; to trace the development of the local book publishing industry in the period after the missionaries (that is, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Assam); to trace the formation and growth of literary bodies and to study their agendas from a book history point of view; to study the emergence of the Assamese public sphere and above all to understand the socio-political and cultural conditions with which the book history of Assam is inextricably bound up.

The project has underlined how the novel print technology that was introduced by foreign agencies like the American Baptist missionaries and the British Government was appropriated by the indigenous people and used to fulfil their own aims and objectives. The faulty language policy followed by the British had a detrimental effect on the education of the people of the Assam valley and on the Assamese language leading to the merging of the identity of the language of the province with that of the Bengali language which was unacceptable to the people of the region. Print became a crucial tool in establishing the unique identity of the Assamese language and also structuring the cultural identity of the people. Though print did not immediately replace the indigenous means of recording information or of communication, gradually the people understood the “power in print” and a print culture emerged though in its nascent stage during the colonial period.