CHAPTER-VI

Emergence and development of an Assamese Print-Elite Section: Context, Processes and Trajectory

6.1 Bengal Press and Assam

The first Assamese newspaper cum monthly *Orunodoi* in its May issue of the year 1851 published a list of the 'periodical publications in Bengali' with their titles, frequency, place of publication and yearly subscription rates. The list reflected the diversity of publications in contemporary Bengal as the province had dailies, tri-weeklies, bi-weeklies, weeklies, fortnightlies and monthlies. (Neog 2021, 577). As is well known, Bengal or to be more precise, Calcutta (Kolkata) then was in a sense the media capital of the nation because of the confluence of all the socio-economic and political factors necessary for a working press eco system. As the capital of the English ruled India, there was enough opinion and intelligence exchange, controversies, publicity and advertisements in the vicinity of the government quarters and its multiple stakeholders to sustain a news and information culture in the city and the province. Even then, between 1836 and 1856, in Bengal, 'the growth was perhaps unhealthy because a number of journals were started and ceased to exist within a year or two or three years after first publication' (Natarajan, 2022, 49). In sharp contrast, Assam had only one publication which was a monthly run by the Sibsagar Mission Press. Interestingly, the list published in the *Orunodoi* referred only to Bengali newspapers, and not the English titles published from Bengal. In all probability, it was an attempt by the American Baptists to engender a sense of the growing newspaper culture in the neighbouring province among the local readers, and thereby encourage a similar culture in Assam. No doubt, it was a thoughtfully put item in the paper by Nathan Brown, the editor of *Orunodoi* to enhance the level of general awareness in the reader like many other such items of current interest. However, amidst a parched market, low literacy levels, poor communications and a general sense of aphasia engulfing the society in the wake of multiple blows to its body politic, a similar flowering of newspaper titles in Assam was a pipe dream of sorts. In fact, as outlined in the previous chapter, infrastructural lags both technologically and socially put Assam far behind not only in the sphere of press but also in other important indices of progress in comparison to Bengal. In the event, the development of Assamese newspapers and magazines was slow and patchy. Unless there

were interested individuals or groups of individuals with adequate capital and motivation to use the press for influence and profit, it was unlikely that a local regional press would take root fruitfully. Also, those of whom who could have started ventures in the press sector must have backtracked in the absence of the conducive factors. Further, the language controversy centring around the legitimate status of Assamese in the province further created a bottleneck in that regard. Assamese was reinstated to its proper place in 1873 just before the state was turned into a Chief Commissioner's Province, yet there were justified discontents in parts of the province like in lower Assam where a section submitted a memorandum to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal expressing their view against giving official vernacular language status to Assamese. In this context, the significant function fulfilled by *Orunodoi* was that the publication was able to build a bridge of commonality around the contentious issue of language between people from both upper and lower Assam. The very print standard of the Assamese used in the newspaper became the accepted model (irrespective of modifications later) 'which created unified fields of exchange and communication' between members of a multi-ethnic society (Anderson, 2015, 44). Thus, the project of the construction of the Assamese nation through the medium of newspapers, however uneven, began through *Orunodoi* as it made 'deep, horizontal comradeship' possible for people and readers belonging to different parts of Assam who had different socio-cultural proclivities and relations of inequality in a transitional period in the state's history (Anderson, 2015, 7). Historian Sunil Pawan Baruah comments on the scenario thus: '…wide circulation of Bengali papers in Assam put some hurdles in the natural growth of press in Assam. Eminent persons having direct contact with the Assamese papers were always aware of this fact and tried to draw the attention of the people to this aspect of the matter vis-à-vis the Assamese press. At the beginning Goonabhiram Borooah in his editorial comment in *Assam Bandhu* (January/February 1886) discussed the causes of the short-lived nature of the Assamese papers. He said that those who could subscribe to a newspaper or journal opted for Bengali or English papers and it filled the needs of a newspaper. Thus, the people belonging to the upper class of the society preferred quality at the cost of the new born local press' (Baruah 2021, 149-150).

6.2 Roots of the Assamese middle class

By the 1870s and 1880s the flourishing business and trade activities of the British and other Europeans in the region had made Assam a prized possession of the Empire. Alongside the imperialists, quite a few local Assamese individuals joined in the bandwagon and developed their own little spaces in the burgeoning colonial economy. Tea, which was the crème de la crème of the businesses, especially attracted local indigenous entrepreneurial talents right from the days of first Assamese tea planter Maniram Dewan in the middle of the 19th century. Most of these local aspiring businessmen came from the small Assamese middle class. The members of the new Assamese middle class, however, did not develop from the ranks of the former nobility. The slave system (called *paik-system* locally), the base of the ruling Ahom gentry, was discontinued as a result of anti-slavery legislation that led among other reasons, to the start of the dwindling fortunes of the erstwhile ruling elite in the middle of the century. Since most members of the former ruling dynasty had a distaste for paper work, the jobs which were created as a result of the streamlining of British administrative system were hogged by the caste Hindus of the broader Assamese community. This very same class had also functioned as clerks and officials in the former Ahom administrative system. Because of the general dreary and devasted state of the society at the hands of the marauding Burmese, the middle class offered sincere support to British East India Company intervention and eventual rule in Assam which was also accepted largely by the other sections like the peasantry. There was no local affluent class of traders in Assam, and most needs of the various classes of people was procured from within the society itself. Historically, the Assamese middle class had little connection with trade (apart from the few trading and professional castes of the medieval era) and that led to a virtual triumph of traders from outside like those of the Marwari community who came into the province during British expansion and exploited the limited opportunities available in the local economy. In the situation, 'the Assamese middle-class had only two sources of income-service in a government department or tea-garden and *mauzadari*, or agency for collection of land revenue in the countryside' (Gohain, 1973). Though the British government made assertions regarding its intentions to develop the region's education, health and other public services, more energy went towards exploitation of coal, petroleum, timber and other forest products. In fact, the attitude of the British towards the region, likewise to the rest of the country, suffered 'from a landlord's view of the world' where 'the landlord was

the best and the natural representative of his estate and his tenants' (Nehru 2004, 316). As a result, the state of Assam languished in all aspects with very limited progress in the basic public services for a long time. In the domain of education, with no universities and colleges for a very long time after British annexation of the province, only youths who could afford and got scholarship went to Calcutta for higher education. Maniram Dewan, who was one of the early facilitators of British trade and expansion in Assam was a brilliant success in tea and even surpassed many Europeans in the domain. As a person associated with the earlier feudal Ahom order and the new colonial order, he saw the pros and cons of both. Independent and resourceful by nature, he soon proved to be a competitor with the Europeans, and vengefully the colonial authorities cut his wings by sudden increase in revenue assessment of his estate and other measures. The Dewan turned foe overnight, and in the wake of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny he was found involved in a plot in connivance with a prince of the former ruling house. Subsequently, he was executed in public even without a trial, and his two tea gardens were confiscated by the government. The people of the families involved in the plot were also harassed by the colonial government for years which sent a message to the local middle class of the consequences of antagonism to the British. Thus, 'anything that disturbed the tenor of their colonial exploitation was destroyed' (Gohain 1973, 15). The Assamese middle class learnt its lesson well as in the subsequent decades there was no ferment of protest from them till the time of the freedom movement in the country. The class of tea planters which arose among the Assamese, in the event, had almost no say in the matter of distribution and marketing. Whereas British capital saw unhindered growth, the efforts of the few Assamese businessmen were constrained and contained by British interests. However, the local Assamese tea-planters came to form the wealthiest section of the local bourgeoisie. Some of the notable Assamese tea planters of the era were Dinanath Bezbarua, Rosheswar Baruah, Manik Chandra Baruah, Hemadhar Baruah, Jagannath Baruah, Rai Bahadur Bistu Ram Baruah, Sarbananda Barkakati, Rai Bahadur Siba Prasad Baruah, Debicharan Baruah, Haribilash Agarwala, Maulavi Shah Noor Ali Hazarika, Kali Prasad Chaliha, Ghanashyam Baruah, Gangagovinda Phukan, Radhakanta Handique etc. From the early stage of British administration in the province, it was the government jobs and employment opportunities that provided the basis for the growth of a local middle class. This class, from the very beginning, was vigilant against encroachment of limited government posts by outside elements, mostly from neighbouring Bengal (which was a populous state) because government jobs alone was the source which could ensure a steady flow of hard cash

necessary in the new economic system created by the British. In that phase, 'money was the scarce commodity, and only the government and tea garden employees among the Assamese or some traders had a steady supply of it' (Kalita, 2011, 15).

6.3 The Assamese middle class and its discontents

It was Maniram Dewan, who for the first time raised his voice of protest against government measure of giving employment to people of other regions like Bengal and Marwar in the revenue department in a petition submitted to A J Moffatt Mills, the visiting British official who came to review the prevailing situation of Assam in 1853. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, who hailed from the rich Duwariya Baruwa family, (who were custom-officials at Hadira Chowki of the Assam-Bengal trade route from the Ahom era), went onto become a Sub-Assistant Commissioner in the colonial government was another leading individual who gave expression to the concerns of the middle class. Educated in Calcutta, and supporter of liberal Western style material progress in the province, he viewed British rule as a boon to Assamese society in all directions provided minor adjustments were made by both sides. Like Maniram Dewan, Dhekial Phukan in his memorial to Mills criticized the government for its failure to effectively improve the material condition of the people of Assam. However, in terms of temperament and character, Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, reflected opposing tendencies. Dewan sought to retain certain rights and privileges of the former Ahom feudal system while appreciating business expansion, Dhekial Phukan on the other, welcomed the waves of change brought forth by British rule and Bengal Renaissance. From land relations, opium, tax, language, social evils, rights and privileges, all the important issues of the day found reflection in the petitions of Dewan and Dhekial Phukan, and thereby, it can be said that these two leading citizens of their times ushered in a form of constitutional and modern democratic practice of politics in Assam. Leading historian of the region, late Amalendu Guha commented on the matter thus: 'The memorials…reveal two opposite trends in the new political consciousness that was emerging. But both reflected certain popular grievances that were going to dominate Assam politics for a century to come' (Guha 2014, 16). In subsequent times, this practice and politics of petition was largely followed by the leading members of the middle class to address critical issues faced by the Assamese community. In August 1874, a few months after the reconstitution of Assam into a Chief Commissioner's Province, Lord Northbrook, the then Viceroy and Governor-

General of India had paid an official visit to Assam and the middle class expressed many of the issues of the various sections of the people in their address on the occasion.

In retrospect, it appears that the middle class in Assam had 'four distinct roots of growth and development…trade and commerce, government jobs, land and the tea plantation industry' (Kalita 2011, 6). Almost all members of this emergent and pioneering group of Assamese businessmen 'was from the higher caste groups with a background of modern education' and belonged to 'land-owning and/or service-holders' and lawyers' families. Investments in a tea garden or two particularly suited them, because certain features of tenant exploitation could also be carried over into the realm of tea production. Other sections if not necessarily involved in any production activities, were nevertheless forerunners of a creed which was congenial to accumulation and associated values of capitalism. In fact, the 'bourgeois stratum that was merging was enlightened as well as enterprising, and it provided leadership, however tenuous, to the Assamese society in every field' (Guha, ibid, 48). Couple of sections of this middle class owe their origin to the prevailing administrative and economic arrangement of the period before beginning of British rule in Assam from the 1820s and 1830s. For instance, from the revenue system introduced in Kamrup district by the Mughals a certain class of people with interests in land emerged (with titles like Choudhury, Talukdar, Thakuria, Tarui) who were continued in both the Ahom and the British administrative systems. The British on their side always followed the policy of creating and nurturing a set of local talents from influential backgrounds. Indeed, the colonial strategy in this regard was nothing but to create a class of people who would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, values and intellect. Quite a few Assamese young men like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gangagovinda Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah, Jaduram Dekabaruah etc who were guided and moulded in their careers by higher officials of the British regime went onto take leading roles in the evolving world-view of the middle class. If the emerging local business entrepreneurs functioned in many cases as compradors in the burgeoning tea industry, the learned natives played similar requisite roles in the day-to-day administrative affairs.

6.4 Public associations in colonial Assam

To give expression to public concerns of various kinds, including those of the peasantry, few public associations and socio-political organisations began to come up in Assam from the 1870s onwards. After the restoration of Assamese as the language of courts and

medium of public instruction, the educated sections of the Assamese middle class became increasingly self-assured regarding their identity and they sought to express themselves through organized social and literary activities. With an educated middle-class leadership who were largely loyal to the British, the concerns of the socio-political bodies in question were reform in collection of revenue, tax, civil administration, criminal justice, education, employment, representation in bodies etc. An organization called Assam Association was formed in 1867 in Guwahati with its leading citizens but did not find much favour with the government, and soon became defunct. The Assamese middle-class leadership was influenced by their experiences in Calcutta which being the capital of Colonial India offered various avenues in the field of education, culture, trade and business. Personalities like Jagannath Barooah and Manik Chandra Baruah, who later took on the baton of middle-class leadership were educated in Calcutta, and in their university days itself formed different student bodies and literary societies centring on Assamese identity. From their experiences and observations, the members of the middle class were able to understand that being loyal to the British was the only way to safeguard their limited business interests, and at the same time to function as leading respectable citizens they must ventilate larger concerns of the masses. While the local trader and merchant classes in Bengal organized themselves and asserted their independence over time from the British, their Assamese counterpart were pliant to the colonial masters due to various circumstantial factors. In many aspects, they seemed to display a semi-feudal character as they were still awed by feudal rights and privileges of a gone by era and intimidated by the limited regard for entrepreneurs in Assamese society at large. In fact, like the Bengali landed class of zamindars who were benefited through Permanent Settlement, the Assamese middle class too wished for a similar arrangement but tea industry's rapid hunger for land thwarted that dream. Additionally, the colonial set-up also stunted the growth of Assamese tea planters into a full-blown capitalist class. In the contemporary colonial Assam, 'the class which engaged in business and commerce were socially marginalized. The tea-planters who had semi-feudal features rather than investing their earnings in industry or business, devoted themselves to building namghars, temples, schools etc and contributed to various religious rituals to immortalize their own and family names' (Mahanta 2010, 214). The decades from the 1860s to the early 1890s in Assam were marked by various tax enhancements on the part of the government which affected the interests of land proprietors as well as the peasant class. While the peasant class of different ryots clearly expressed their opposition to the government measures through 'raij mels' which took on many occasions a violent

turn, the middle class comprising various landed interests like mauzadars, sattradhikars, priests or pundits, government employees and businessmen tried to mediate through peaceful means on behalf of the peasants with the government. In short, the various middle-class organisations made efforts to explicate various government measures among the public, and within limits tried to express the issues of the peasants to the authorities. The older feudal remnants enjoyed benefits from huge swathes of land, and the new elements of the incipient middle class concentrated on their own material advancement. In such a dynamic it is but natural for them to be protective of their own class interests and show disinterest to the peasant rebellions. Nevertheless, the peasant rebellions at different places shook the middle class, and their leaders understood the call of the times in giving the issues a direction. In the event, various segments of the middle class accepted the leadership of the Assamese tea planters as they were more influential from the point of view of both income and power. On the other hand, immigrant labourers forcefully brought from various parts of mainland India by agents of the European planters came to form another segment of the working-class population in the province. The abdominal working conditions for labourers in the tea gardens went entirely unheard for a long time before Bengal press and other national newspapers and leaders took note. On this issue, the Assamese middle class hardly spoke as their leaders' class interest as planters were involved.

Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha was one of the first socio-political organisations of modern Assam which emerged in the town of Jorhat in 1884. Inspired by other 'sarbajanik' (meaning public) organisations like the Poona Sarbajanik Sabha of the times, the organisation was established for 'the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the Government, explaining to the people the objects and policy of the Government, and generally ameliorating the condition of the people' (*Royal Commission on Opium*, Vol. II, 1893, Govt. of India, 1894: 297). Jagannath Barooah, acted as the President and Devicharan Baruah was the Secretary of the organisation, and both were conferred with the title of 'Raibahadur' by the colonial government. Moreover, both were leading tea-planters (Jagannath Barooah had the largest area under his tea states among his contemporary planters), and thus their interests, expectedly, drove the functioning of the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha. Since, the Sabha appealed for tax revenue reduction to the government, it could attract sections of the peasants. Infamously, the organisation in 1893 submitted a memorial to Royal Opium Commission against the proposed prohibition of

opium in the state as it tried to justify the habit amongst the working class and remind the colonial government of huge losses to its exchequer. Nevertheless, the Sarbajanik Sabha in Jorhat undertook many other developmental works which benefitted small traders around the town of Jorhat. The activities and influence of the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha was mainly limited to upper Assam. There was another socio-political organisation known as the Upper Assam Association during that time. On the question of opium, unlike the Jorhat Sarbjanik Sabha, the views of the organisation were unequivocal in its demand for abolition of opium across all classes and recommended recovery of losses by curtailment in military and civil areas. Responding to the slightly different socio-economic condition of middle and lower Assam, couple of organizations called Tezpur Ryot Sabha and Nowgong Ryot Sabha emerged around 1884-85 and 1886-87 respectively. The word 'ryot' refers to a tenant farmer, and thus ryot sabhas actually means an organization of the peasantry working for the benefit of the peasantry. Led partly by sections who moved to the new middle class from their rural agricultural origins, the ryot sabhas had close connection with the rural masses and their issues. Ryot sabhas were in part inspired by similar formations in Bengal like the Bharat Sabha. Moderate in method and temperament, these ryot sabhas were a contrast to the working of the 'raj mels' (which were under collective leadership), and appealed to the government for resolution of issues through constitutional means. The Tezpur Ryot Sabha was organized by a section of the local bourgeois which included merchant planter Haribilas Agarwala, Lakhsmikanta Barkakati and Lambodar Bora. During the vehement peasant protests of 1893-94 in places like Patharughat, the Ryot Sabhas proved to be the space of a series of meetings with the leadership of the 'raij mels'. Primarily addressing and protesting the enhancement of land revenue, the middle-class politics of the times thus percolated down to the masses of the Assamese people through the Ryot Sabhas. However, 'the educated middle-class elements had no action-oriented programme of agitation and could not take the popular discontent outside the channel of petition-making' (Guha ibid, 51). In the event, it is probably indicative of the partial success of middle-class politics in that where these modern ryot sabhas and associations were active, no hostile mass struggles on the lines of the raij mels ever took place. Thus, these public associations proved to be harbingers of modern political consciousness and nationalism in Assam. These developments also indicate the fact that 'in a predominantly oral culture characterized by very low literacy levels' familiar and organic public assemblies, especially raij mels in the context of Assam 'had a larger impact on anti-colonial political mobilisation than the press whose readership was strictly

limited' (Thomas 2010, 8). In that sense, the 'raij' or the public of the raij mels constituted a kind of counter public to the mainstream middle-class formations. It may be mentioned here that the last decade of the 19th century also saw the beginning of the politics of ethnic revivalism (which have affected the course of Assam politics in subsequent decades) in the state through the formation of the Ahom Sabha or Ahom Association.

6.5 Public opinion in colonial Assam

During the period, 'Assamese public opinion increasingly focussed on three social evils of the day: (i) the plight of the widows of the Brahmin, Kayastha and Daivajna castes, (ii) the prevalent practice of polygamy, and (iii) the widespread addiction to opium' (Guha, 2015, 19). Accordingly, in addition to the socio-political bodies, under the gradual influence of the growth of modern Western education, certain organizations developed in the state which contributed to the expansion of mental horizons of number of young minds and members of public. Influenced by the winds of the Bengal renaissance, these bodies were devoted towards exchange of ideas. These were essentially cultural and literary bodies and tended to avoid political controversies of the day. Gyan Pradayni Sabha, Goalpara Hitasadhini Sabha, Asam Desh Hitasadhini Sabha and Borpeta Hitasadhini Sabha were some of the prominent organizations of this nature which sought to throw light on social issues and disseminate scientific ideas.

6.6 Cross-currents in the press of Assam vis-à-vis the Indian press in the mid-19th century

The Indian language press 'was slow in growing outside Bengal, Bombay and the North-West Province' and 'there were no journals in an Indian language except those run by Christian Missions' (Natarajan 1962, 69). The scenario slowly changed during the 1870s and 1880s as there was a gradual growth of newspapers in both English and Indian languages. Concurrently, the expansion of telegraphy played its part in connecting the interior parts of the country with the metropolitan centres, thereby contributing to the emergence of a more centralised colonial state. Media historian Robin Jeffrey notes: 'A significant web of Indian-owned newspapers dates from the 1870s. It awaited supporting technology: the Suez Canal to bring more of the products of the industrial revolution (small presses among them); railways to carry such heavy equipment out of the great port cities; and telegraphs and postal services to help with the assembling of news and the distribution

of newspapers' (Jeffrey 2010, 222). Indeed, 'by 1875, it was estimated that there were 475 newspapers in India, the vast majority owned and edited by Indians' (Tharoor 2016, 98). However, the number of publications in Assam was not encouraging: 'even as late as 1872…there were only three local newspapers—none of them a daily; two published from Sibsagar and one from Guwahati (Guha 2015, 259). None the less, if the different socio-political and cultural-literary associations played their part in creating a sense of commonality for the Assamese community in public life, then the newspapers and other publications of the times in Assam became another forum for the middle class to express themselves. Almost all the Assamese writers and intellectuals of the times wrote in the local press and forcefully expressed their ideas. At the same, in Assam, due to the wide use of Bengali among sections of the middle class, certain newspapers from Bengal enjoyed a limited circulation and following. Amongst them, the particularly popular were papers like *Samachar Chandrika*, *Samachar Darpan* and *Somprakash*. Beside these publications, '*Bangbashi* (b. 1881), a Bengali weekly serving the cause of Hindu orthodoxy, *Sanjbani* (b. 1883), a rival at *Bangbashi* and mouthpiece of Sadharan Brahma Samaj and *Weekly Hitabadi* (b. 1891) were popular vernacular Bengali papers enjoying wide circulation' in Assam (Barua 2021, 130). In addition, certain English newspapers of Bengal of both indigenous and British ownership also had a limited circulation amongst sections of the Assamese. What this implies is that although leading newspapers 'were printed and published in the big cities, editions made their way, sometimes three days later, to the rural areas, and 'mofussil towns', where they were eagerly awaited and avidly read' (Tharoor 2016, 98,). Following the two pioneering efforts of the American Baptist missionaries and the Auniati Sattra, those few newspapers and magazines which were published in Assam in the 1870s and 1880s reflected different cross-currents of the contemporary society. The Brahmo Samaj which was a monotheistic reformist Hindu religious movement during the Bengal Renaissance and led by Ram Mohun Roy influenced many educated individuals of Assam in those days. In fact, the Brahmo society affiliates from Bengal had begun to travel to parts of Assam to discourse on the key ideas of their movement. For instance, in 1880 a Brahmo fellow and writer named Ram Kumar Bidyaratna had visited the town of Dibrugarh in upper Assam and delivered a lecture there with the express purpose of forming a local Brahmo society (Chattopadhay 1989, 164). Meanwhile, *Assam Darpan*, edited by Lakshmikanta Barkakati was published from Darrang district around 1874-75. A follower of Brahmo religion, and active in various social work, Barkakati was the representative of Tezpur ryot sabha at the first national

convention of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The first weekly of Assam, and perhaps the first newspaper to be published from Guwahati, the *Assam Mihir* was a bilingual (Bengali and English) and lasted for around a year or more (1872-73). It discontinued due to lack of support. The editor Jadunath Chakravarty was a follower of Brahmo religion. However, according to Benudhar Sharma, *Assam Mihir* was edited by Chidananda Choudhury who was the owner of Chunchali Garden of Guwahati and a supporter of the policy of introducing Bengali language in Assam, although he was an Assamese gentleman (Saikia 2014, 1697). In 1876, another Bengali newspaper titled *Goalpara Hitasadhini* came out and lasted till 1878. An English paper called the *Dibrugarh Telegraph* (perhaps the first English publication of the state) is also believed to have come out in 1877 from Lakhimpur which probably reflected the interests of the tea planters of the area. Unfortunately, almost all of these lasted for brief periods and could not sustain. Inadequate economic development, paucity of advertisements, very limited urbanization and insufficient communications facilities in general posed as hindering factors in the proper development of newspapers and magazines in Assam. More importantly, because of the slow expansion of education in the state, an adequate readership base was not created, and the leading sections of Assamese middle class had a weakness for Bengali publications and books in those days. Even sections of the abbots of some sattras favoured Bengali, and did not mind the continuation and limitation of Assamese for social purposes only. This excerpt from a letter of late Assamese writer Ratneshwar Mahanta, written in 1888, i.e., well after fifteen years of restoration of Assamese as the official language, confirms this tendency: 'You have perhaps heard that our venerable Auniati Gossain has come here. I have had interviews with him regarding the Assamese language. It is very painful for me to let you know that Auniati Gossain does not seem to like our mother tongue; he says, let Assamese be used in our daily transactions and ordinary talks, but books written in Bengali' (Bora 2018, 20). However, people from cross-sections of Assamese society were interested in reading, even if they had almost no access for either acquiring or reading printed matter.

6.7 Popular attitudes towards reading in colonial Assam

Various encounters recorded in the private journals of missionaries like Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson give a picture of popular attitudes towards reading in Assam. The following couple of excerpts can be seen as indicative:

‘We first reached Panisukia, where people refused to take books by saying that there no persons in their village who can read. After striking a conversation one by one listeners joined in. at the time of bidding farewell few of them asked for books. Inspecting them we could tell that they could very well read.’

‘We arrived in a Deodhai village where the people can read books written in the Ahom language…From there we came to Bhuinhat where people collected a few copies of our pamphlet. Among them there were a couple of disciples of the Auniati Gossain. Although during our travels we met many such disciples, this was the first time someone from Auniati took books from us. They had come in relation to tax collection work from people under Auniati Gossain…when asked if they would collect books, they replied they can’t read which was a plain lie.’ (Quoted from Tamuli, Gitashri, *Aalap*, Volume IV, Issue: Oct 2018-Mar 2019, p 66-67, translation ours) For some time at the initial phase of British rule the old system of education of the Ahom era like Tols, Sattras and Pathshalas were continued, and the first Commissioner David Scott is said to have stressed the need for promotion of the indigenous system which evidently cannot be said to be leading to broadening of the mental horizon of the students. Even in the schools which were opened at the initiative of the government, ‘the medium of instruction was Sanskrit, because education at that time was intended mainly for the pupils of the Brahmins’ (Talukdar 2012, 57). Only gradually western modern school education was introduced in the district headquarters and that led to a democratization of primary education in the state by making it accessible among different sections.

Around 1885-86, according to a government estimate, there were only 4 printing presses in Assam, while Bengal had 229 (Sripantha, 1977, 31). However, slowly as the foreign technology of printing developed to accommodate regional Indian languages like Assamese, a limited number of printers and intent publishers gradually made their appearance. The resourceful journalist Radhanath Changkakoti, (editor of *Times of Assam* later) is said to have bought a wooden printing machine from Kolkata in 1881 itself (Phukan 2012, 72). It seems, apart from the religious forces who used the technology of print, the popularity of devotional literature opened up commercial prospects for printing. Thus, by the end of the 19th century a developing printing infrastructure can be seen in both eastern and western parts of Assam. It is however, doubtful, if most of these presses had the professional finesse of the Calcutta presses. Hence, it is seen that most of the

Assamese journals, magazines and books of the time were printed in Kolkata which was the hub of printing in different languages of South Asia. This was also in a way suggestive of the close connection of the Assamese publishers and intellectuals with the cultural and commercial networks of Calcutta. Yet, at the same time, the new technology could not drive away older methods of writing and storing knowledge, at least in the sattras. The fear of losing sacredness associated with handwritten xansiputhis if opened to printing drove many a gossains to do a religious ritual before printing of religious texts. 'The tradition of handwritten xansiputhis did not become extinct; till the second decade of the 20th century the practice of copying religious books for purpose of reading continued to a limited extent…To maintain the 'aura' around xansiputhis, arrangements were made to print texts like *Kirtana* with the form and design of xansiputhis' (Aalap, Oct 2018-Mar 2019, 68).

6.8 News and communication in a Chief Commissioner's province

Assam was turned into a separate province under a Chief Commissioner in 1874. The decision was a result of the 'inconvenience of governing the Assam districts as a division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency' which took into account the 'fairly differing local conditions and the unique position there of British planters' (Guha 2015, 22). Meanwhile, Guwahati, the capital of the state of Assam in later times, in the early 1880s was slowly emerging into a hub of business and administrative activities due to its strategic location and importance. Situated on the side of the majestic river Brahmaputra, and populated by mixed communities from the indigenous ethnic groups like Bodos, Rabhas etc along with sizeable settlement of government employees of Bengali and Assamese descent, the emerging municipal township also housed the British and other Europeans engaged in the judiciary and branches of the administration and security. Within the circumstances, Dibrugarh and Guwahati those days were emerging as the important townships in the Brahmaputra valley, connected as they were via railways and telegraph with Calcutta. It is pertinent here to point out that India, among other British colonies, had a telegraph network that 'was the densest in Asia, reflecting British security needs as well as commercial designs' (Mann 2017, 5). However, this fact did not necessarily translate into equal opportunities and progress for the people of the state as the entire communications infrastructure was put in place with an eye on the needs and conveniences of the British administration and traders. In fact, colonial communications policies projected the usual British attitudes of the time towards Indians which saw them as uncivilized. 'Existing

British cultural prejudices and, since the middle of the nineteenth century, growing racism prevented the transfer of technological knowledge to a society that was allegedly not only unfamiliar with modern technology but, due to its backwardness, was also unable to understand it' (Mann, ibid, p 7*)*. In the backdrop of such a worldview, it is not surprising that the pace and tenor of urbanization in Assam was patchy, as the towns 'were mere permanent camps of government servants and traders, or just glorified villages, where non-indigenous elements constituted the overwhelmingly dominant section' (Guha 2015, 21). Thus, considering the very limited avenues as a provincial part of the Indian empire, residents of almost all classes in Assam can be said to have lived then 'on a starvation diet so far as news of the outside world was concerned' (Cranefield 1962, 4). Nevertheless, the overall change in the environment as a result of British rule created its own dynamics in the social fabric as the need to know and understand the world grew among people, however slow the process may have been. In such a milieu, apart from the limited print media, need of important and useful information and news in colonial Assam among the masses must have been fulfilled through traveller's oral accounts of cities like Calcutta, traders' grapevine, market intelligence, middle class circles, fairs, village assemblies around namghors and social networks old inter class relations and the then new tea garden settlements etc. In this context, the Assamese students who went to study in Calcutta, formed an important layer and line of communication which transferred significant intelligence and news from the big city to local vicinities and settlements around the state. 'Most of the Assamese students of this time, for instance, could speak and write in fluent metropolitan Bengali, were *au fait* with the incipient idioms of nationalism and modernism in contemporary Calcutta, and had access to various polite *addas* or informal gatherings of the *bhadralok* literati' (Kar, (2008), 51). The more or less consistent publication and influence of the missionary monthly *Orunodoi* as well as the limited circulation of newspapers and periodicals of neighbouring Bengal in the social sphere from 1846 till the early 1880s meant that among sections printed news about the contemporary events at regular intervals gradually led to 'the creation of modern cultural conceptions of information in time' (Conboy 2004, 19). With serial publications of creative literature, news about contemporary world events and stray local incidents, *Orunodoi* definitely contributed towards this process of what is called a curious and eager readership i.e., readers who expect news at particular intervals, develop world views on the basis of what they read, and feel the need to comment and resist different narratives.

6.9 Profile of a formative print-elite: Manik Chandra Baruah

A select segment of the Assamese middle class, as outlined before, had begun to more or less successfully try their hands at the different thriving businesses of the region, albeit within the limited space left by the British colonial enterprises. Among them, Manik Chandra Baruah (1851-1915) was a pioneering Assamese entrepreneur. For the record, Manik Chandra Baruah's father Habiram Baruah also was a resourceful citizen of his times. Appointed a sheristadar (chief administrative officer in court) in the early stage of British annexation, he saw the transition of Assamese society from its feudal vestiges to a full-blown colonial province. In 1857, Habiram Baruah was one of those persons from Nagaon who was mentioned (with his name and position) in *Orunodoi* to have been one of the donors for the publication. (Goswami 1977, 2). In 1858, the announcement of the text of transfer of power over the Indian subcontinent to Queen Victoria was translated to Assamese by Sub Assistant Commissioner of Nagaon Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Habiram Barua. In the Duar War (Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65), Habiram helped the British by supplying grocery. Such history of collaboration between the members of the colonial system and leading sections of the local gentry point to the precise ways in which colonial power operated from the very early days of British occupation, and the outlook of the new Assamese middle class. Manik Chandra Baruah first came into prominence when he, along with Jagannath Barooah, on behalf of the Assamese Literary Society, had submitted (both were college students in Calcutta then) a memorandum to the Viceroy Lord Northbrook in 1872 which threw light on the potential resources of Assam. The memorandum urged upon the Viceroy to connect the province with Bengal by a railway line (work regarding which was already on). Such activities foreshadowed the type of modern political consciousness which was take centre stage sometime later. It is to be noted in this connection that Manik Chandra Barua was awarded the position of honorary magistrate in 1884, and became a leading member of the Assam Association which was formed in 1903.

Independent by outlook, young educated Assamese men like Manik Chandra Baruah who came from affluent backgrounds could afford to bypass government jobs and instead explore the world of business and enterprise. His close collaborator, Jagannath Barooah, too was a representative of such impulses as he chose an independent path in his life thanks to his father's expansive interests in tea. Manik Chandra Baruah started his career as an

assistant officer in the Indian General Steam Navigation Company, and subsequently came to the tea business. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's son Annadaram Dhekial Phukan was a close associate of Manik Chandra Baruah, and both the young gentleman went onto form the first conglomerate of the region owned entirely by Assamese proprietors named Baruah-Phukan Brothers. Barua-Phukan Brothers dabbled more or less successfully in tea, shipping, timber, coal, banking etc. Said to be the first Assamese business enterprise and organization built along modern western lines, the owners' standing in the social and public arena was also noteworthy. A pubic spirited personality, Manik Chandra Baruah was instrumental, among others, in the establishment of the first institution of higher education in the state, Cotton College and the first community gathering hall, Curzon Hall in Guwahati respectively. Purportedly, 'people had so much trust in the efficiency and trustworthiness of this company that many rich men deposited money here as in banks' (Goswami 1972, 141). After the premature of death of Annadaram Dhekial Phukan in 1884, Baruah-Phukan Brothers became 'Manik Chandra Baruah and Company' (M.C.Baruah & Company). A resourceful Assamese entrepreneur who was committed to social causes named Bhola Nath Barooah became for a time the manager of the M.C.Baruah and Company.

Individuals like Manik Chandra Baruah were exposed to the scope and role of newspapers in social change during their student days in Calcutta. The ideas and discourses on religion, society and politics which found expression in the Bengal journals and newspapers influenced the minds of the Assamese students there. Thus, as emerging entrepreneurs with an interest in social organisation and change, they saw both profit and power in the press as it allowed the emergence of a common space for important conversations with both the rulers and their subjects. No wonder, as emerging nationalists of their region, they dreamed and parleyed on the pros and cons of owning and running a newspaper. As opinion leaders of a transitional society, operating a newspaper also brought prestige and influence, if not commercial gain. Thus, in spite of the meagre commercial prospects, resourceful individuals of the times started newspapers with an idealistic and social purpose. Moreover, there was the chance that 'money could be made out of printing press' by getting printing orders for 'schoolbooks, government notices, handbills, visiting cards, stationery, office forms, and ledgers' (Jeffrey ibid, 222). Publishing a newspaper on the sidelines of the press was a more or less cosy arrangement for the entrepreneurs during those times, and as long as the paper did not print politically charged stuff, it made good

business and kept the press running. The business organisation Baruah-Phukan Brothers had also entered the printing business whereby a press named Assam Printing Corporation was opened in Guwahati.

6.10 *Assam News*: Beginnings of a weekly Assamese press

The first bi-lingual (Anglo-Assamese) modern weekly newspaper of the state called *Assam News* was published in 1882 from this press. Patronized by the Baruah-Phukan Brothers, *Assam News* (1882-1885) 'which came out every seven days was called an Assamese-English seven-dayer newspaper instead of a weekly…' (Sarma 2014, 1697). The newspaper was 'printed on foolscap paper with 8 pages' (ibid). Hemchandra Barua, after his retirement from the Judicial Commissioner's Office as Superintendent government servant joined the newspaper as the founding editor, while Rai Bahadur Abhoysankar Guha functioned as the assistant editor, who looked after the English segment of the weekly. Manik Chandra Baruah, apart from being the owner also contributed regularly to the English section of the weekly. Earlier, it must be remembered, at a critical juncture in the language controversy which started from the early 1850s, Hemchandra Barua, along with Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Goonabhiram Borooah had formed the triumvirate who successfully fought the battle for reintroduction of Assamese language in the judiciary and administration of the state. Thus, the first modern bi-lingual weekly of the state clearly was a project backed and run by well ensconced members of the emerging Assamese middle class who had interests in business, culture and politics of the region.

Image 6.1: Manik Chandra Baruah

Source: Asamor Batori-kakot Alochonair Itihas (1846-2014, Paresh Bishya

Orunodoi had shown that a vernacular newspaper tuned to the needs and requirements of the local populace can be sustainable provided there was enough support from readers and consistent quality content. Featuring news and articles in both Assamese and English, the weekly *Assam News* was favourably received by the readers. The fact that the weekly was bi-lingual is indicative of the constituency of readers the newspaper reached and targeted. Manik Chandra Barua, being a leading and active member of the middle class had a need to reach out to his own brethren as well as the English government officials. In fact, he had started his entrepreneurial journey in partnership with a European named Mr. Benbridge in the tea estate sector. More importantly, he was awarded a significant position in the administrative cog as a honorary magistrate in 1884. Both educated Assamese and English communities around Guwahati and beyond were its probable readers. Because of the long association of the both owner and the editor with the English rulers, the weekly could earn the trust of the government. Thus, on many instances, during the lifetime of the weekly, it was found that the newspaper functioned as a bridge between the rulers and sections of the public. 'Both the ruler and ruled had great faith on the newspaper' (Kotoky 1982, 66). In that regard, *Assam News* also reflected the gradually growing discontent of the people against high-handed attitude of certain English administrators. Benudhar Sarma in his detailed article on the history of Assamese newspapers mentions that in one of its editorials, *Assam News* criticized one Superintendent named Mr Lamb of Calcutta because of his unfair treatment towards Indians who visited him with their shoes on. The editorial went thus: '…a clerk named Ramesh Ch. Bandopadhyay went near him (Mr Lamb) to take salary. Unfortunately for the clerk he was having shoes in his feet. It came to the notice of the white man; he ordered Mr Ramesh to put the shoe off, but like a good Brahmin the latter refused to obey the order…We are glad of Mr Ramesh's self-respect befitting of an Aryan' (Sarma, 2014, 111). Here, it is seen that the editorial interpreted the natural expression of self-respect of an ordinary Indian babu in the light of his higher caste only. Such instances are indicative of the social outlook of even otherwise progressive writer-editors like Hemchandra Baruah. Such limitations notwithstanding, the very fact that weekly expressed such inequities probably indicated the possibilities and limits of political journalism in an era when the war cry of the freedom movement had not even started. It is significant because unlike *Orunodoi*, the weekly *Assam News* at least did not fall prey to blind adherence to the adverse actions of the colonial government, and fulfilled to an extent the fourth estate role of the press.

In the context, it is quite unfortunate that the weekly *Assam News* could not sustain for a longer period considering that the newspaper had a well-heeled organisation behind it. The ill-health of Hemchandra Barua and the dwindling financial condition of the weekly are said to have contributed to the closure of the publication in such a short period. Additionally, and importantly, the differences between Manik Chandra Barua and Hemchandra Barua are indicated to have created difficulties in the proper functioning of the weekly. 'The viewpoints of Hemchandra Barua were stern, strong. Naturally, Hemchandra Baruah did not agree with the moderate Manik Chandra Baruah' (Borgohain 2005, 256). Historian Kanak Lal Baruah, who was privy to both the Baruahs described their opposite tendencies in this fashion: 'On many occasions, their viewpoints regarding politics did not match. In spite of his seniority in years, Hemchandra Barua was a radical when it came to politics. Manikchandra and his friend Jagannath Barooah were moderate since their young days. In *Assam News* it was the views of Hemchandra Barua that prevailed' (ibid). At the time of the closure of the newspaper in July 1885, the weekly had a circulation of about 450 copies a week and 900 subscribers.

6.11 Hemchandra Baruah and *Assam News:* The legacy of an uneasy alliance

Although the paper ran for only around three years, the newspaper came to be well regarded for its 'high standard of language and writings' (Baruah 2021, 72). Hemchandra Baruah as the editor of *Assam New*s played a critical role in the formation of modern literary and journalistic Assamese language as it came to be written in later periods. An intellectual successor to the stream of social consciousness ushered in by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra 'sought to shape himself after Dhekial Phukan, whom he considered in many respects an exceptional personality' (Goswami 2019, 138). He successfully challenged the spelling style initiated by the Christian missionaries in their monthly *Orunodoi* as the latter also adopted the style upheld by Hemchandra Barua and his ilk from the early 1860s. It is indicative of the influence garnered by Hemchandra Barua and the emergent form of cultural politics in the intellectual sphere of the state. Indeed, Hemchandra Barua 'had brought his strength of personality to bear on the confusion in the literary sphere of his time and fixed a standard of written idiom' which is 'still a model for aspiring writers to emulate' (ibid, 40). As the composer of one of the first systematic dictionaries of the Assamese language *Hemkosh*, Hemchandra Barua was known for his fastidiousness in all questions relating to the Assamese language. Much

inspired by Sanskrit language and grammar, he dedicated the major part of his life-time towards his passion project *Hemkosh*. As a person who started his career as a translator in the judiciary, he clearly understood that for its use in the sphere of bureaucracy and modern education, Assamese language has to be given a precision and standard. Along with the dictionary, the weekly newspaper *Assam News* gave a definitive turn to the Assamese language towards its modern shape and usage. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, in his autobiography, remembers the contribution of the weekly in the following words: '*Assam News* soon occupied a pride of place thanks to the merit of Hemchandra Barua's pen. Everybody took the paper with much interest and read it…brought a new era to Assamese language' (Bezbaruah 1966, 65-66). Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, the late eminent scholar of Assamese language and literature noted that 'when *Assam News* first came out people ridiculed its language by finding faults for its common colloquial expressions…However, the language which was used by *Assam News* is the language of Assamese prose today' (Goswami 1972, 141). Reportedly Barua was so strict about spelling that many a times he used to halt publication of articles for want of appropriate types in the press (Roychoudhury 2019, 268). At a time when there was no print model for Assamese apart from the somewhat uneven style of *Orunodoi*, Hemchandra Baruah's writings and articles became 'a model of precision: evidences for and against a case are weighed with meticulous care and paragraphs arranged according to the nature of arguments' (Goswami, ibid, 140). In fact, *Assam News* coined many words in Assamese for which there was no alternative than to use English words. 'Batori Kakot', the Assamese word for newspaper, was the gift of the weekly, 'which is still in currency' (Sarma 2014, 1697).

Hemchandra Baruah was well regarded by his contemporaries for upright ways and in the cultural memory of the Assamese, he remains an unconventional personality who did not go down the beaten path. Although like many of his leading contemporaries he did not visit Bengal, he came under the influence of the Brahmo movement, and was much inspired by the secular personalities of Bengal Renaissance like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. A self-taught scholar who combined discipline with austerity, Hemchandra Barua was in many way 'a non-conformist. He dared to offend the conservative society by eating food cooked by non-Brahmins. He defied tradition even in his death as he wanted his dead body to be thrown at a deserted place. He was an avowed agnostic if not an atheist. He was a secular person which implies that *Assam News* was also a secular paper' (Sharma,

2011, 112). Baruah had fairly progressive views when it came to questions of the women's rights. He declared: 'Man and woman are equal creatures. Hunger and thirst, sleep and hope, life and death…are all equal for both. It is an injustice to grant the right of one and deny that of the other…' (ibid, 2002, 49). An advocate of widow remarriage, though after his wife's untimely death, he himself never remarried. He raised the question: 'If the husband can remarry after his wife's death, why should the wife be deprived from that right?' (ibid). In brief, he was a crusader against superstitions and conservative mores of the times. On the other hand, Hemchandra Barua, as earlier mentioned, like the select few bright middle-class representatives of his ilk, were nurtured by the English administrators from an early stage. Encouraged to learn English by the Deputy Commissioner of Sivasagar district Captain Brody, later Hemchandra Barua proved to be a loyal officer of the British Indian government. Hemchandra Barua, it seems, somewhat in the manner of Rammohun Roy in Bengal, came to regard the role of the press as a space both for expression of popular grievances and official policy deliberations. In fact, as a former faithful and trusted servant of the government, Hemchandra Barua as the editor of *Assam News* commanded the confidence of both the government and the public, and in that sense the role and function of the press was understood to be a bridge between the ruler and the ruled. It used to be case that often 'whenever government found it opportune, Barua was consulted' on the efficacy of various policy matters, and the issue was deliberated subsequently in the paper (Kotoky 1982, 252). In this manner, various pressing issues of the times related to pubic vaccination, places of worship, opium, land taxation etc were deliberated in the pages of *Assam News*. The thing to note in this regard was that 'whenever any issue pertaining to the relation between the subjects and the government or language and literature was published in *Assam News*, the matter did not go unresolved' (ibid). After the closure of *Assam News*, after nine long years, another weekly newspaper named *Assam* was published from Guwahati in 1894. Printed at a press called Assam News Press, the weekly was an Assamese newspaper which published occasional articles in English.

6.12 The middle class weekly Assamese press and the colonial administration

Kaliram Barua (1847-1903), a retired school sub-inspector of Guwahati was the editor and Manik Chandra Barua, the entrepreneur and journalist behind *Assam News* associated himself with the editing, particularly in the English section of *Assam*. Following the path of *Assam News*, the weekly proved to be the print space where public questions of the day

of the region were deliberated. Most notably, *Assam* had invited the views of individuals and groups regarding opening of a college, and consequently the weekly was instrumental in the debates leading to the establishment of Cotton College. 'Besides news and views it published a number of articles on the Hindu way of life. Although nationalist in outlook, it primarily reflected the views of the orthodox section of the higher castes' (Baruah 2021,m 72). Facing financial handicaps, after about seven years since its inception, *Assam* ceased publication in 1901.

Both *Assam News* and *Assam* are indicative of the nature of the public sphere of the state during the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century when middle class elites primarily defined the parameters of interaction with the colonial government. In fact, bi-lingual newspapers 'addressed themselves to' local readers 'but in the awareness that their views would be paid attention to by the colonial authorities' too (Tharoor 2016, 98). Accordingly, in the weekly *Assam*, it is seen that public issues and 'subjects like Durga Puja at Gauhati; high fare at Puthmari ferry ghat; appeal for exemption of taxes for flood and poor cultivation; utility of gift were selected for comments and discussion in the editorials' (Baruah ibid, 73). Accordingly, the association of Manik Chandra Barua who 'passed his whole life in fighting for the advancement of the Assamese people both in sphere of industry and politics' with the weeklies underlines the emergence of a print-elite section who understood the role of the press and used the medium of newspapers for discussion and exposition of ideas and issues with readers and the administration (Bhuyan 1962, 20). As Benedict Anderson reminds us, the rise of commercial and industrial bourgeoisies, 'no matter where', however uneven or stunted, 'has to be understood in its relationship to vernacular print-capitalism' as it is essentially through the solidarities developed through print language and press that the modern nation was imagined and conceived (Anderson 2015, 76). In fact, the developments were somewhat similar with other parts of India, as since '1870s…a 'print-elite' mode' of mass communication via newspapers took shape as 'a railway and telegraph network covered the country and cheap printing presses and Indian language fonts became available…' (Jeffrey 2010, 216). The fact that *Assam News* gave space to a regular column of book review also indicates its literary and print-elite orientation. As literacy was still very low and public mobilization on significant issues found expression mostly through meetings, the influence and reach of the press remained limited among the British residents and sections of the middle class. However, notable printed ideas and views had a way of finding their way to the public

consciousness as newspapers then often were read aloud in different private and public gatherings. The press in Assam, being owned and run by middle class representatives, who had a penchant for entrepreneurship, was thus only one of the means through which common social questions were deliberated on behalf of the public. As the newspapers of Assam of the period hardly published anything critical and offensive to the sentiments of the British rulers, it seems, publications like *Assam News* and *Assam* catered and fulfilled their limited role within the jurisdiction implicitly defined by the colonial government. Additionally, the attitude of the government towards Indian language newspapers was not very favourable in those days as can be gauged from the rather unfair and stringent Vernacular Press Act, 1878. In fact, after the mutiny of 1857, a racial orientation influenced British policies towards India which was responsible for a growing 'wedge between English-owned and Indian newspapers' and 'a distinction between the English language and Indian languages journals (Natarajan 1962, 50). In the context, respectable middle-class elites who brought out newspapers hardly wanted confrontation with the powers that be until the time of the peak of the freedom movement later when the press became one of the chief means for influencing public opinion. With respect to *Assam News*, the Commissioner of the Assam valley districts had this to say: 'this newspaper, no doubt represents the views of at any rate, its conductors, contributors and subscribers, who are not numerous. Its tone contrasts, I think, favourably with the native press of lower Bengal. With the exception of some rather strong language on some recent criminal cases in the Sibsagar district, in which Europeans were connected, I find nothing in this newspaper calculated to foster ill feelings between the native and the Europeans' (Report on the Administration of the province of Assam, 1883-1884). Thus, in the context, public sphere of Assam, like in many colonial South Asian milieus of the period, apart from its limited critical functions, became a forum also 'of cooperation and collaboration' (Mann 2017, 22) On one hand, the Assamese middle class banked itself on the development of their regional identity and of the province within the bounds of colonial administration, and on the other, the British colonial government had no conflict of interest with this expression and assertion of regional consciousness through either the press or public associations like ryot sabhas.

So, in the second stage of development of news media in the state after the *Orunodoi* age, Assamese newspapers did not develop to their full potential and those few which showed promise did not live long, as the infrastructural edifice and elements required for a fully

functional press like a broad readership, capital, technology, efficient transportation, advertisements, distribution etc eluded it. The weeklies *Assam News* and *Assam*, in any way were more or less a product of the solo efforts of committed social individuals (in spite of the association and backing of the businessman Manik Chandra Baruah with/for both the papers) who almost single headedly edited and managed the publications which probably was also a factor leading to their short life. In the absence of able successors, it was unlikely that they would have sustained, keeping aside the other disruptive contextual factors.

6.13 The limits of a middle class literary monthly press: *Assam Bandhu* and *Mau*

Parallelly, in the late 1880s, two literary-cultural Assamese monthlies appeared on the horizon under the leadership of two leading representatives of the new Assamese middle class. The Assamese monthlies in question were *Assam Bandhu* (1885-1886) and *Mau* (1886-1887) respectively which left their imprints on the future trajectory of the Assamese literary sphere and press in their own ways. Bolinarayan Borrah, the driving force behind *Mou*, was a Britain Engineer with the colonial government, and like the leading educated Assamese gentlemen of the era was a literary aficionado who had deep passion for European literature and art. As a well-off higher government official probably, he did not lack the capital to run publication, and as he conceived and planned *Mou,* it appeared that he had a long-term plan for the monthly. For, it is seen that in the last issue which got published before the abrupt closure of the paper, a notice appeared which invited articles and poems from interested contributors. The announcement read: 'for encouragement of essay writing we are initiating a monthly literary prize' consisting of cash (Sarma, 2008). The monthly was printed in Kolkata at the India Press in Bowbazar area of the city by a certain gentleman named B.C. Sircar. Speaking of his brother Haranarayan Borrah as the manager and care-taker of the proposed monthly, he wrote to his wife: 'Let him stay on, take up a lodging somewhere, and edit a paper of which I had talked to you sometime ago.' (ibid. 110). Although his brother's name Harinarayan was published in the monthly paper as the editor, it was virtually Boilnarayan who edited and almost wrote all the articles. *Assam Bandhu*, which came out before *Mou* during in 1885, was similarly started and edited single-handedly by a high-ranking government official of the period, Goonabhiram Borooah, who was serving as an Extra Assistant Commissioner in Nagaon when the journal came out. Borooah, who played a pivotal part in grooming many young Assamese

students of the period of Kolkata, pitched his monthly along for the promotion of entertainment, knowledge and literature among common readers. In terms of their politics, the subtle divergence between the two monthlies, *Mau* and *Assam Bondhu* is telling of the contours and directions of the public sphere of Assam of those years. *Assam Bandhu*, in its very first issue declared: 'We have no intention to interfere in the political matters like administration, justice etc. We are inexperienced in politics. We will not publish views on communal religion. We have no pedantic pretensions in compositions, and neither we wish to display it. We will not debate over the theories of grammar. We will not venture into praise or criticism of others. Narrating news is also not our business. Our aim is humble. Hence, ---of general diversion and discussion of knowledge (Saikia, 2015). While *Mau* never declared its editorial policy in none of its issues in this fashion, it is clear from even a cursory glance at its contents that Bolinarayan Borrah used his journal (which he was 'rather anxious to get out' as he wrote in another letter to his wife, ibid) to put forth his personal views on public issues of the day. The first issue of the monthly had articles on the issues of immigrant labourers of tea gardens (titled 'Chah Bagisar Kuli/ Kulis of tea-gardens), local board, English education and a critique of the old gentry class and their ways through a poem titled 'Dangoriya'. His descriptions of the immigrant labourers from different parts of India in the tea gardens of Assam was starkly racist and smacked of a wilful disregard for real conditions of the life of tea-garden labourers. Accusing the Calcutta press of publishing exaggerated reports about the harsh reality of tea labourers, Borrah's write-up was his own rejoinder to the issue in that he saw the average quality of life of a tea labourer much better than a common Assamese peasant. Bolinarayan Borrah was a nominated member of a few of the local boards, and as such he had ground knowledge of the whole experiment in self-government. In the article on local boards, the colonial government is criticised by the writer because he considered the developments as entirely manufactured by the authority towards creating only an illusion of self-government and robbing people of the real possibility of upgradation of their knowledge regarding the process. About the sensitive issue of language, the role of *Mau* is problematic (although its calls for strengthening of Assamese-Bengali solidarity and opposition to chauvinism is laudable) as it suggests that Assamese is indeed an independent language but its separation and independence have done more harm than good as it has deprived the people of Assam from gaining the fruits of progress of Bengal. In fact, such 'self-negating inferiority complex in regard to their own language and nationality' was seen in many early modern Assamese intellectuals (Sharma 2002, 15). Bolinarayan Borrah's article on

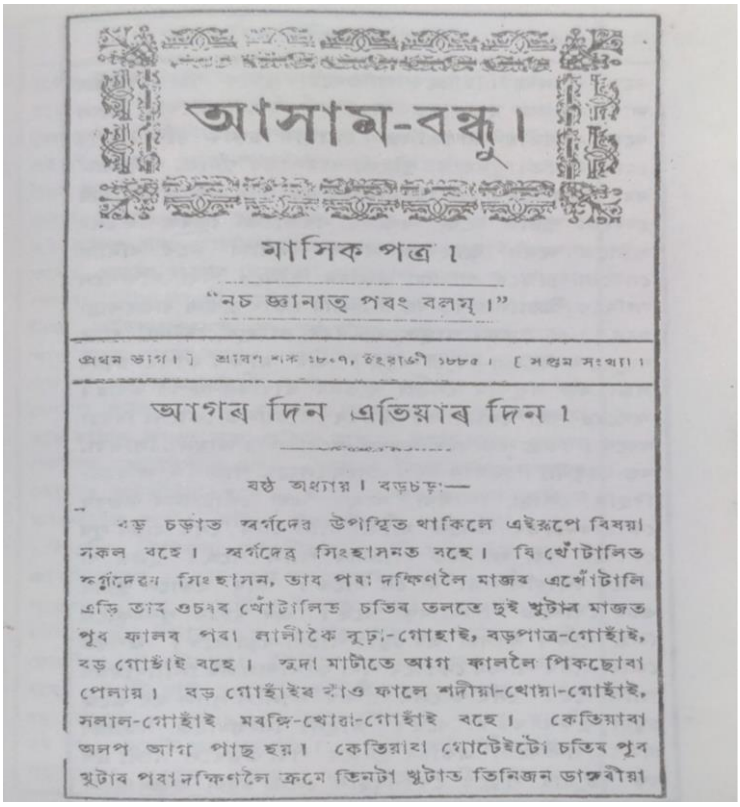
women's preoccupations presented a regressive position as the piece suggested that the domain of women is the four walls of the home and education of the fair sex should only consist of certain basics. Thus, the writings in *Mau* are indicative of the pitfalls and patterns of the thoughts and ideas cultivated by one of the highly educated Assamese citizens of the times. Goonabhiram Borooah, who was his friend and fellow government servant had progressive views when it came to the women's question. A supporter of widow remarriage and women's education, Borooah was inspired the ideals of Brahmo movement and he formally became a member the religion in 1869 while in government service.

Image 6.2: Goonabhiram Borooah

Source: Asomor Batori-Kakot Alochanir Itihas (1846-2014), Paresh Baishya

Goonabhiram Borooah was shaped by his experiences in the social and intellectual cross-currents of Calcutta along with Anandaram Baruah who was his relative and mentor. The press named Calcutta New Press which was established by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was in effect managed by Goonabhiram, along with the responsibility of distribution and sale of the noteworthy monograph on law authored by Anandaram in Bengali. With such a background, it was but natural that he delved into publishing a literary monthly at an opportune time in the intellectual and literary-cultural history of Assam. Although the commercial prospects for running a literary monthly was not good, Goonabhiram Borooah decided to publish it at his own personal initiative, and the monthly was printed and

published from 100th no. Street, Bowbazar, Kolkata. It is believed that a set of Assamese students studying in Kolkata helped in the process of publication of the monthly. Talking about publishing the journal with a noble of mission of people's cultural development along the lines of the developed nations, he invoked in the editorial statement in the first issue: 'In other nations, there are other many avenues for the progress of the commoners. In those nations, through scientific meetings, art fairs and periodical journals, the general population is greatly benefited. But in the unfortunate Assam province because of the absence of such institutions, the mental horizons of her people are very narrow. Because of lack of educational progress, its old art and literature is almost on the verge of extinction…Those public gatherings and meetings which take place in our province is limited to discussions pf social customs and rituals only. There in, science, art and literature are absolutely absent. With the hope of removing the dearth of such movements, Assam Bandhu is treading its footsteps…In those subjects everybody can express their views here. Fair or contrarian, every type of views will find space here. We will not become a mouthpiece of a specific class or section of society…' (Assam Bandhu, 2015). Clearly, a sense of national duty in the arena of art, culture and society is reflected in the statement. In the first issue of the second year of the monthly, the editorial message poignantly reflects, amid expressing the challenges for the journal in the state: 'There is a paper in the province, let it stay. Whether it is necessary or not, let it be the pride of the nation and the road of language open to new vistas' (Saikia (ed) Assam Bandhu, 2015). Sentiments apart, the statement is also indicative of a belief in and appropriation of the technology of print to foment change. Whereas *Assam Bandhu* represented a well-defined literary and cultural agenda for the times, *Mau*, it seems, wanted to break new ground and use the forum of the journal to put forth arguments on the immediate socio-political issues. Bolinarayan Borrah expressed in a piece in his monthly: 'Our government is foreign. Our people's thoughts and aspirations are not easily comprehensible to the foreign government. A lot of our misfortune resides in our inability to express about our needs and to communicate what needs to be communicated. There's no one who would go to the authorities as our spokesperson. How's this to go on? The number of Assamese people who are educated is so low that forget independent speakers, there is lack of able people to serve in government…' (Mau, Vol 1, Issue 2, 1887, 113)



আসাম-বন্ধু।

মাসিক পত্র।

"নচ জ্ঞানাত্ পবং বলম্।"

প্রথম ভাগ।] শ্রাবণ শক ১৮০৭, ইংরাজী ১৮৮৫। [সপ্তম সংখ্যা।

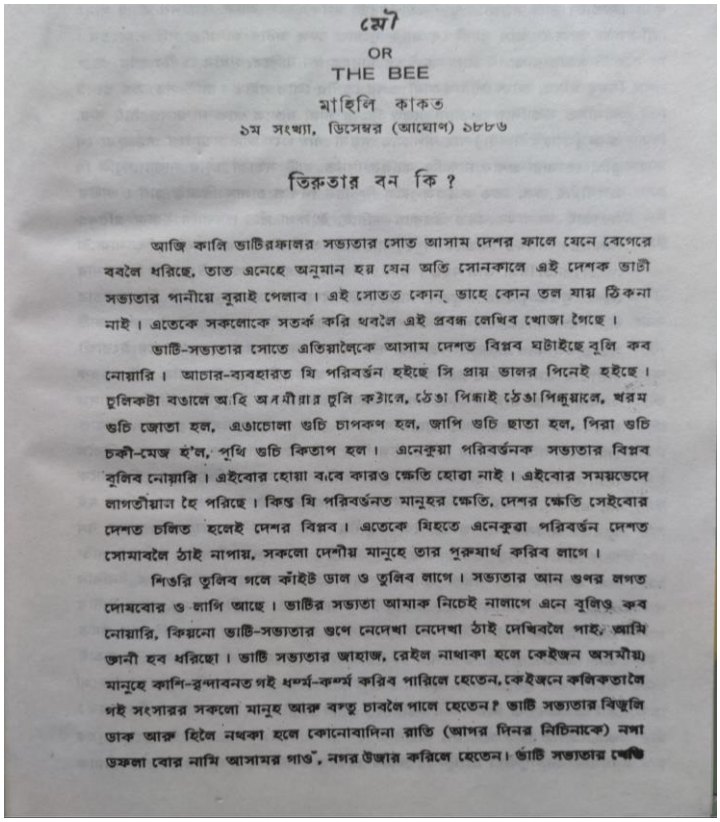
আগর দিন এতিয়ার দিন।

ষষ্ঠ অধ্যায়। বড়চড়া—

বড় চড়াত স্বর্গদেব উপস্থিত থাকিলে এইরূপে বিষয়া সকল বহে। স্বর্গদেব সিংহাসনত বহে। যি খোঁটালিত স্বর্গদেব সিংহাসন, তার পবা দক্ষিণলৈ মাজব এখোঁটালি এড়ি তার ওচবব খোঁটালিত চতিব তলতে দুই খুটাব মাজত পুব ফালব পবা লালীকৈ বুঢ়া-গোহাঁই, বড়পাত্র-গোহাঁই, বড় গোহাঁই বহে। স্বদা মাটীতে আগ ফালৈ পিকছোবা পেলায়। বড় গোহাঁইব বাঁও ফালে শদীয়া-খোয়া-গোহাঁই, সলাল-গোহাঁই মবন্দি-খোৱা-গোহাঁই বহে। কেতিয়াবা অলপ আগ পাছ হয়। কেতিয়াবা গোটেইটো চতিব পুব খুটাব পবা দক্ষিণলৈ ক্রমে তিনটা খুটাত তিনিজন ডাঙ্গবীয়া

Image 6.3: Cover page of an issue of Assam Bandhu

Source: Assam Bandhu Collected Volume, Publucation Board Assam



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OR

THE BEE

মাহিলি কাকত

১ম সংখ্যা, ডিসেম্বর (আঘোণ) ১৮৮৬

তিৰুতাৰ বন কি ?

আজি কালি ভাটিৰফালৰ সভ্যতাৰ সোত আসাম দেশৰ ফালে যেনে বেগেৰে বৱলৈ ধৰিছে, তাত এনেহে অনুমান হয় যেন অতি সোনকালে এই দেশক ভাটী সভ্যতাৰ পানীয়ে বুৰাই পেলাব। এই সোতত কোন্ ডাহে কোন তল যায় ঠিকনা নাই। এতেকে সকলোকে সতৰ্ক কৰি থবলৈ এই প্ৰবন্ধ লেখিব খোজা গৈছে।

ভাটি-সভ্যতাৰ সোতে এতিয়ালৈকে আসাম দেশত বিপ্লব ঘটাইছে বুলি কব নোয়াৰি। আচাৰ-ব্যবহাৰত যি পৰিবৰ্ত্তন হইছে সি প্ৰায় ভালৰ পিনেই হইছে। চুলিকটা বতালে আহি অসমীয়াৰ চুলি কটালে, ঠেঙা পিন্ধাই ঠেঙা পিন্ধুয়ালে, খৰম গুচি জোতা হল, এডাচোলা গুচি চাপকণ হল, জাপি গুচি ছাতা হল, পিৰা গুচি চকী-মেজ হ'ল, পুথি গুচি কিতাপ হল। এনেকুয়া পৰিবৰ্ত্তনক সভ্যতাৰ বিপ্লব বুলিব নোয়াৰি। এইবোৰ হোয়া বাবে কাৰও ক্ষেতি হোৱা নাই। এইবোৰ সময়ভেদে লাগতীয়াল হৈ পৰিছে। কিন্তু যি পৰিবৰ্ত্তনত মানুহৰ ক্ষেতি, দেশৰ ক্ষেতি সেইবোৰ দেশত চলিত হলেই দেশৰ বিপ্লব। এতেকে যিহতে এনেকুৱা পৰিবৰ্ত্তন দেশত সোমাবলৈ ঠাই নাপায়, সকলো দেশীয় মানুহে তাৰ পুৰুষাৰ্থ কৰিব লাগে।

শিতুৰি তুলিব গলে কাঁইট ডাল ও তুলিব লাগে। সভ্যতাৰ আন গুণৰ লগত দোষবোৰ ও লাগি আছে। ভাটিৰ সভ্যতা আমাক নিচেই নালাগে এনে বুলিও কব নোয়াৰি, কিয়নো ভাটি-সভ্যতাৰ গুণে নেদেখা নেদেখা ঠাই দেখিবলৈ পাই, আমি জানী হব ধৰিছো। ভাটি সভ্যতাৰ জাহাজ, ৰেইল নাথাকা হলে কেইজন অসমীয়া মানুহে কাশি-বৃন্দাবনত গই ধৰ্ম্ম-কৰ্ম্ম কৰিব পাৰিলে হেতেন, কেইজনে কলিকতালৈ গই সংসাৰৰ সকলো মানুহ আৰু বস্তু চাবলৈ পালে হেতেন? ভাটি সভ্যতাৰ বিজুলি ডাক আৰু হিলৈ নথকা হলে কোনোবাদিনা ৰাতি (আপৰ দিনৰ নিচিনাকে) নশা ডফলা বোৰ নামি আসামৰ গাওঁ, নগৰ উজাৰ কৰিলে হেতেন। ভাটি সভ্যতায় স্থিতি

Image 6.4: The cover page of the first issue of Mau

Source: Mau Collected Volume, Publication Board, Assam

6.14 The political in a literary press: Status of the Assamese press at the end of 19th century

It is interesting that this very aspect of the monthly of speaking on issues which led to a sudden confrontation against it from the increasingly influential Assamese students of Calcutta and led to its immature death. As the political climate of the country was gradually but surely drifting towards the reformist Congress movement of the times, Assamese students of Calcutta were also coming under its influence. When the Calcutta daily *The Englishman* published an appreciate piece on *Mau*, it created a furore amidst the students against the monthly. and created an outburst against the publication among the increasingly influential Assamese students of Kolkata. Litterateur Lakshminath Bezbruah, who was one of noted students who protested against the monthly remembered the episode in his memoir in the following way: '…Our minds were then shaped in the political workshop of the new Congress. Looking at *Mou* going on an unknown path to us, we became agitated. And when we saw that the anti-Congress newspaper *Englishman* published an appreciation of the monthly…in our mess, in meeting after meeting we came through to the decision to attack *Mau*. In the leadership of Kalikanta Barkakati and Mathuramohan Barua, few of us got ready to burn an effigy of Mr Borrah… me and Mathuramohan sent letters of protest to *Mau* which were published…I remember how Mr Borrah gave a rejoinder to the write-ups by stating how our attempt to kill *Mau* is a failure…Unfortunately our misdirected energy contributed to the demise of *Mau*…' (Bezbaruah 1968, 46). The sudden closure of *Mau* seems to reveal a fracture in the emerging Assamese middle class opinion regarding the contours of acceptable debate in the press and displayed a rather unflattering aspect of juvenile student activism. On the other hand, it is rather strange and ironic that the Congress influenced Assamese students were provoked by the anti-Congress paper *Englishman* to crush the pro-Congress *Mau*. The fact of the matter was that '*Mau*, far from opposing the Congress, did not even disregard it; but instead, welcomed its advent with faith' (Saikia, 2007, 130). In the event, it is more probable that the pro-Bengali stance of *Mau* on the controversial language issue may have inspired the whole backlash against Bolinarayan Borrah and his *Mau* from the Assamese students of Calcutta who were at the forefront of the contemporary culture wars concerning Assam.

Meanwhile, in retrospect, *Assam Bandhu,* which was published before the *Mou* imbroglio, had become a grooming ground for a number of writers. While *Mau* had remained limited with the writings of its owner and closet editor, *Assam Bandhu* had opened its pages to both young and old writers and anticipated the renaissance in Assamese literature of the early twentieth century. On the issue of language, the monthly did not 'strictly adhere to Hem Chandra Barua's directives' and 'was comparatively liberal in that respect' (Saikia (ed), Assam Bandhu, 2015, 64). The liberal attitude of the monthly was also reflected in its editorial decision regarding publishing letters and articles written in the lower Assam variant of the Assamese language from readers of that part.

An interested readership was there for printed material as discussed earlier, but the situation somehow did not give rise to a stable news media outlet in the Assamese language. The fact that education and literacy did not expand adequately to every section of the society created a major barrier. In the absence of a conducive environment those who initially invested in the sector did not probably want to further jeopardize their capital base in the face of uncertain return. As a result, a vibrant regional newspaper culture did not could not flower in the period. For instance, the editor of the weekly newspaper *Assam* 'regretted the fact that during the period of six and seven years the paper had to face a financial loss of about rupees four thousand' (Baruah, 2021, 73). The owner of *Assam News*, Manik Chandra Baruah, too faced difficulties in his business as the Kala-azar epidemic adversely affected his timber trade which reportedly forced Baruah to settle with a limited tea enterprise later while dedicating his remaining life in the public cause. In retrospect, *Assam News* remained an exception in the development of press in the 19th and early 20th century Assamese journalism as it steered clear of the religious controversies and struck a secular note. Additionally, the weekly was a step forward in the direction of public oriented journalism, which earlier publications like *Orunodoi* and *Assam Bilasinee* could not perform to a greater extent due to their religious orientation and patronage, apart from other constraints. However, the trend of journalism initiated by the weekly *Assam News* could not develop to a more mature form in the 19th century as the 'middle class world-view of the era was chiefly controlled by the emerging linguistic-cultural component of Assamese national consciousness' which restricted the space for political communications (Choudhury 2007, 172) This development was somewhat in contrast to the scenario in more advanced provinces of the country where the emergence of the Indian National Congress in 1885 gave a fillip to journalism as the influence of newspapers in the

vernaculars as well as in English rose in the spheres of administration and opinion formation. In the event, we see a kind of literary public sphere in the subsequent phase of the development of Assamese press, as the era marked a new turn for Assamese literary and creative expressions via journals and magazines like *Jonaki*. Magazines of the period like *Assam Bandhu* as already described, openly declared a policy of abstaining from political questions and vowed to commit itself to moral and intellectual improvement. *Jonaki* stated in its opening issue: 'Politics is outside the domain of our discussion. What is conceivable in a depended country is the service to the people' (Jonaki, 13 January, 1889, Bezbaruah 1968 (i), 47). This trend of an apolitical outlook was in a way a continuation of the various societies like Gyan Pradayni Sabha which were formed in the wake of wind of change in the realm of ideas brought in by *Orunodoi* and middle class intellectual and cultural activism. Yet, the open declaration of non-political official policies of the pioneering literary Assamese periodicals was to a great extent influenced by the position of the Indian National Congress which called for a peaceful and constitutional engagement with the government. In fact, such an outlook at that point of time was more or less representative of the educated and westernized middle classes across the nation. As the flow and channel of conversation regarding language and literature shifted to the circle of idealistic Assamese students of Calcutta, the situation at the end of the 19th century necessitated the creation of bridge through print discourses with and between the members of Assamese literati. The landmark literary magazine *Jonaki* was the result which was brought out by the Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (Assamese Language Development Society), formed at the 67 Mirzapur Street mess of the city of Calcutta on Saturday the 25th August 1888. It is worth mentioning here that Goonabhiram Borooah, the editor of *Assam Bandhu* chaired the first meeting of the 'Axomiya Bhasha Unnati Xadhinni Sabha'. In fact, the Assamese Literary Society, formed in 1872 by the first generation of Assamese students like Manik Chandra Baruah and Jagannath Barooah in Calcutta was renewed in 1888 with the establishment of the Axomiya Bhasha Unnati Xadhinni Sabha which had developed a set of goals for itself in a more pointed way to overcome the challenges in the path towards regeneration of Assamese literature and language. Till the year 1885, Devi Charan Baruah, one of the noted leaders of the emergent middle class was the secretary of the Assamese Literary Society. These very same set of individuals, as outlined before, were instrumental in the organisation and management of public associations like the Sarbajanik Sabha and later Assam Association. It is notable that the literary monthly *Assam Bandhu* was published after the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha

and other ryot sabhas had begun to play the role of public associations in the state. The Axomiya Bhasha Unnati Xadhinhi Sabha, the association which was formed by the Assamese students of Calcutta with the express purpose of safeguarding and developing the Assamese language noted in its charter that one of its endeavours would be to 'stimulate interest of people in newspapers, and to develop only one written language in all parts of Assam' (Hazarika, A (ed) *Bezbaruah Granthvali*, 49, 1968).

Thus, the older generation and the newer generation of a middle class which formed and organized itself through forums and associations now found a new ally in the literary periodicals more than newspapers per se. By coming together through and for the common cause of language and culture, the members of the Assamese middle class formed this new 'public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority' of mess life and family world, 'by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself' (Habermas 1991, 51). For quite a while, thus, the creative and imaginative energies of the literate Assamese mind was diverted to literary and cultural causes which synchronised more with magazines or periodicals than newspapers. Magazines were a monthly affair which were a better match than newspapers for the communication of fleshed out cultural arguments and literary discourses of the Assamese middle class. Also, the individuals and groups which were producers of these magazines were aligned for a sustained politics of culture, language and literature where print magazines were a natural ally. In the event, more burning issues affecting the masses of the province, like the agrarian issues and the resultant peasant unrest, were overlooked. The middle class literary and cultural periodicals reflected middle class concerns of language and culture, while the common socio-political issues were channelised through more mass-based associations like the ryot sabhas which adopted a position of middle ground towards both the masses and the government. *Mau* tried to be an exception by developing itself in its brief existence as a journal of politics and culture, but as described before, succumbed to an unforeseen situation which led to its death only after four issues were published. More importantly, *Mau*'s politics more or less belonged to the same status quoist stance of the other Assamese periodicals of the era although the writings reveal the restless bent of the mind of their author. On some issues the monthly sharply exposed the lacunae in the government administration as in the article on local boards (Mau, Volume one, Issue one, December, 1886) which called for actual representation in the body from the public and not just some ornamental officials from the

government departments which do not really make things happen. On the trend of ryot sabhas he cynically wrote: 'If the ryots by coming together have to submit petitions, then let it be on the issues like irrigation in farm fields, security of livestock, and development of rural roads which will immensely benefit the communities. But making long speeches on politics which is neither wanted nor understood by the ryots and sending the proposals to the government does not lead to anything substantial' (Volume one, Issue two, January, 1887). But in its core, the journal proved to be a blind British loyalist monthly. On the issue of new land relations of the British administration which plagued the peasantry with increased taxation, and led to massive protests, *Mau* supported the foreign government and opposed the grievances of the local masses. It proclaimed on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria's rule: 'If there's a country which should celebrate this jubilee with more enthusiasm, then that country is India…whatever happens in the coming days everyone should hail the Queen Victoria's jubilee celebrations with cheers in India' (Sarma 2008, 89-90). Thus, it is pretty apparent that *Mou*, in spite of its zeal for certain practical reforms in administration, ultimately subscribed to the continuation and glory of the British Empire.

6.15 Challenges of Assamese press at the end of the century

Both the short-lived monthly journals, *Assam Bandhu* and *Mau*, are examples in the second stage of development of the Assamese press wherein the middle-class representatives of a society fully in the cusp of British rule created a space for the expression of its new literary, cultural and social sensibilities and aspirations. In a sense, these journals, like the early American newspapers, were small operations where 'one man generally served as editor, reporter (insofar as there was any reporting at all), business manager, and printer' (Schudson, 1978, 16,). Regarding the exigencies of running *Mou* through the purely solitary effort of Bolinarayan Borrah, historian Rajen Saikia comments: 'The pressure of editing, preparing report, rejoinders, and taste-oriented enlightening articles on a single head…the indifference of readers and the subscribers, the inevitable failure in business…' created unenviable constraints (Sarma, 2007, p 130-131). The editor-owners of the monthlies, Goonabhiram Borooah and Bolinarayan Borrah, both were high ranking officers of the British Indian government of the times and came to use the medium of the press to express their ideas and opinions with a sense of mission and purpose. Thus, as described before, an incipient class of Assamese 'print-elites' came to the forefront during

this phase. They had the will and vision to run their journals, but contextual and unforeseen factors disrupted their onward march. For instance, *Assam Bandhu*, after fourteen issues were published for two years, reportedly ceased publication due to inadequate subscribers and readers. *Mau*, too suffered, on account of 'inadequate support from Assamese writers and readers' (Sarma 2008, 3) No wonder, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, in one of his light satirical essays on the social landscape of late nineteenth century Assam made a fictional character say: '…These are the Assamese people who are literate. None of them read a single newspaper which came out from Assam…One of them had not read the newly launched Jonaki magazine and laughed at others who did so…' (Saikia 1997, 105). In the humorous essay, Bezbaruah also criticised the wayward subscribers of the Assamese journals of the time. Clearly, lack of an adequate reader base and a section who did not pay their subscription dues on time were hurdles for the publishers to carry on their business in a media ecology bereft of a regular advertising revenue. Thus, even if the owners did not look at their publications in purely commercial terms, it appears that navigating practical commercial dynamics is always an unavoidable aspect in the press business.

Nevertheless, Assamese literary magazines were on their way to become a major defining marker and influence in the course of development of Assamese literature and language as the impact of a series of literary magazines like *Jonaki*, *Bijuli*, *Usha*, *Banhi* and *Awahon*, from the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century demonstrate. Patronised by literary associations and leading middle-class individuals of the era, the Assamese literary magazine became the torchbearers of new literary trends in Assamese literature. In comparison, the trajectory of development of Assamese newspapers remained uneven throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century.

6.16 An expanding public sphere

Meanwhile, public reasoning on socio-political issues through different associations in different regions of India had begun to become a viable platform. In fact, this process had started from the late 1870s itself through the efforts of pioneering nationalist leaders like Surendranath Banerjea, as they moved from province to province to organize a national forum of diverse voices. Europeans like the journalist Robert Knight of *The Statesman* and the retired civil servant Allan Octavian Hume constantly exhorted the Indians towards making the government accountable to the decisions taken on behalf of the public.

Notably, the Illbert Bill in 1883 heated up the public sphere as the proposed legislation brought in greater impartiality by removing distinctions between European and Indian magistrates in deciding criminal cases involving British subjects. In this connection, probably nothing demonstrated the unequal relations between the Europeans and Indians more than the hostile realities in Assam's tea plantations where certain British managers committed horrific acts on indentured labourers where the abuser often went scot-free. The Bill drew sustained agitation from the European community, and the resultant controversy served a useful purpose as the 'vast Indian population came to understand…how extremely sensitive the European was when his own privileges were touched as well as of providing a practical demonstration of how grievances should be organised and agitated' (Natarajan 2022, 124). In such a context, the systematic organisation of Indian opinion also became imperative. The first Indian National Conference was held in Calcutta on July 17, 1883 which anticipated the Indian National Congress. The government too welcomed these efforts as they afforded the public a forum for ventilation of issues of mutual interest. Lord Dufferin who served as Viceroy between 1884 and 1888, was said to be on the whole 'disappointed with the Indian press which seemed to represent more the editors themselves than any section of opinion' and hence he 'wanted an all-India association which would function virtually as an opposition, pointing out the defects of administration' (Natarajan 1962, 126). Nevertheless, in the first convention of the Indian National Congress in Bombay in the year 1885, 'of the seventy delegates that attended…about a third were associated with the Indian newspapers of the time' (ibid). In Assam public associations had appeared in the form of bodies like the ryot sabhas and Sarbajanik Sabha in the 1880s as described before to express the wishes and grievances of the public. Establishing an active dynamic between mass media like newspapers and associations is a challenging task on many fronts, and it was more so in a province like Assam where literacy and the role of the middle classes in galvanising public opinion on important public issues remained half-hearted. Nevertheless, socially active and educated middle class individuals were beginning to form themselves into collectivities in the small townships of Assam, and deliberated on the means to initiate dialogue on public issues. They were often trusted by the British authorities too as they were helmed by educated and well-known individuals. In its essence, this was in line with the then growing national Indian National Congress movement which called for a common platform for dialogues on civic and political issues across the nation. Correspondingly, the birth of the Congress and the period thereafter saw

many controversial issues like the Local self-government Act, the Age of Consent Act, 1891 etc wherein through its articulations the Indian press really came into its own.

6.17 The Assamese newspaper at the beginning of the 20th century: *Assam Banti* and its travails

Assam Banti, a weekly bi-lingual (Assamese and English) newspaper which was published from Tezpur, situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river, was the result of an initiative from a group of citizens of the town. Founded in the year 1900, the paper turned out to be the longest serving Assamese paper of the colonial period, though it had to face tremendous challenges on account of financial and technical issues. From debt to poor types in the press, the company formed to run the press in reality turned out to be a liability. According to a contemporary observer, 'the paper could not become sound in health' and 'hope of Tezpur was not fulfilled amidst many inconveniences like hand composing press, broken types and other difficulties' (Das 1967, 84). *Assam Banti* was the result of the collective will and vision of a few public-spirited citizens of the town of Tezpur at the turn of the nineteenth century. As the need for a press and a local newspaper was felt by the citizens of the town for purposes of ventilating public concerns, leading citizens of the town like writer Padmanath Gohainborooah, Joydev Sarma, social reformer Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya and Bhawanicharan Bhattacharya founded a press named Assam Central Press for the purpose. The whole initiative in a sense was an example of crowd funding of a media outlet in a district headquarter town during colonial rule in Assam the sense that leading citizens belonging to the different trade and profession and communities (Assamese and Marwari) came together to form a company for running a press and a newspaper. Thus, although a company was formed for the purpose, the weekly reflected the early impulses in Indian journalism which looked at the institution of press as a mission of serving society. Padmanath Gohainborooah wrote in his autobiography: '…after joint deliberations with Srijut Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, it was decided that a press would be established in Tezpur as a mouthpiece of the public. The project after being in hibernation for a few years gained momentum as we got active to execute it. For the purpose, Bhattacharya and me went to different sections of the people of Tezpur… After a few months of the release of the proposal, we got elated as more than 3000 rupees was donated which was beyond our expectations, so accordingly a public meeting was held between the Assamese and Marwari society about the nitty-gritty of the plan…' (Gohainborooah

2017, 123). The paper carried on the tradition of the weeklies *Assam News* and *Assam* because like these two papers *Assam Banti* was also a bi-lingual weekly newspaper and tried to serve the needs of the educated public and the administration. Also, the fact that titles like Prajabandhu (Friend of the people), Ryotor Mukhapatra (Ryot's mouthpiece), Asam Pataka etc were considered before finalising on the title Assam Banti (meaning lamp or light) indicates the worldview and outlook of the body of individuals involved. in that the proposed weekly. In the paper, 'articles and letters were published in both Assamese and English' and 'from time to time considering the gravity of the subject, the editorial used to be written in English' (Saikia 2014, 1699). On the other hand, the news in the weekly consisted mainly of reports on weather, environment, health, agriculture, visits of government officials in villages, local markets etc. Besides, the paper drew attention to issues like 'revival of Moujadari system, increase of the salary of mandal and kanangu, introduction and extension of Assamese in educational institutions of Assam, introduction of Assamese literature as a subject of study at University level' and 'the establishment of the first college in Assam' (Baruah, ibid, 75-76). Because of its long life (it ceased publication in 1944) in comparison to its immediate predecessors like *Assam News* and *Assam*, the name *Assam Banti* became synonymous with newspapers in general locally, and was 'received warmly in nooks and corners of Assam like *Orunodoi*' (Sarma, Benudhar. Ibid). The weekly tuned out to be particularly influential in advancing the cause of the use of Assamese textbooks in schools, employment of Assamese youths in the education department of the government etc which indicates that the paper became an instrument in the assertion of public issues close to the Assamese.

6.18 Murmurs of national concern: *Assam Banti* and the contemporary political developments

Although the Guwahati weekly *Assam* was running then, that paper reportedly could not satisfy the needs of the educated and suffered from poor circulation beyond the townships. As the political developments in the country took a turn after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, public opinion in Assam also saw a surcharge as the development directly affected the fate of her people by making the province a part of the new unit called Eastern Bengal and Assam. The division of the Congress into extremists or radicals and moderates in 1907 also seeped into the political cross-currents of the region. Initially edited by an emerging Assamese journalist of the period (whose writings had appeared in the English press of

cities like Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Lahore and Bombay) named Mathura Mohan Baruah, *Assam Banti* at the start of its journey reflected the independent and nationalist thinking of the editor. In fact, the weekly 'frequently discussed the country's political situation' and in its editorials 'of 10 July and 17 July, 1905 warned the people to take immediate steps for the preservation of the separate identity of the people and the state' (Baruah ibid, 75). But after some time, Mathura Mohan Baruah, a friend of Gohainborooah and closely associated with the process of the birth of *Assam Banti*, left the weekly probably due to differences of opinion with the owners and management, and started the independent minded English weekly *Advocate of Assam* from Guwahati. Padma Nath Gohainborooah who was the driving force behind *Assam Banti* was a government employee, and as per regulations of the period he was not officially the editor of the weekly although in effect he wrote most of the editorials for the Assamese section of the paper along with his fellow associates like Jaydev Sharma. *Assam Banti* gradually tried to keep its writings moderate, thus steering clear of inviting trouble from the government and at the same time serving as a forum of expression of public grievances. In terms of his intellectual outlook, Padmanath Gohainborooah belonged more or less to the middle class world-view of the leading members of the Assam Association which was formed in 1903 with the purpose of expressing public issues affecting the people of Assam. Assam Association emerged under the wake of the tense political and administrative developments of the partition plan of Bengal which proposed to attach certain Bengal districts to Assam. When Denzil Ibbetson, the Revenue Secretary to the Government of India made a visit in the early part of the year 1903 apparently to examine the land revenue system of the province, he met around 40 prominent members of the Assamese middle class from different parts of the state and deliberated the issue of the reconstitution of the province. Subsequently, the Assam Association developed as a pro-establishment organization of the colonial regime with branches in different districts as it espoused 'to give its loyal support to the British Government to ameliorate the conditions generally of the people of Assam by taking up social, commercial and economic questions and to ventilate grievances or to take such measures as may lead to their removal' (Kalita ibid, 62). As Padmanath Gohainborooah took an exception to the proposed Lord Curzon's Bengal partition in one of his editorials, and appealed to the Assam Association and the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha to stand up against the measure, neither of the associations responded 'for…both Manik Chandra Baruah and Jagannath Barooah, their respective spokesmen, had extended conditional support' to the Partition plan (Guha ibid, 59). But at the same time Gohainborooah's objection in this case

cannot be taken as a symptom of anti-colonialism as he only wanted a better deal for Assam in the Curzon Plan. To be specific, he wanted at least the name 'Assam' to be kept in the name of the new province.

6.19 Vision and reality: *Assam Bandhu* and its beleaguered journey

Assam Banti was notable after *Assam News* in giving a new direction to Assamese journalism as it introduced well-conceptualised lay-outs and columns for systematic presentation of news and views. Subsequently, in spite of having a person of the stature of Padmanath Gohainborooah, who was in the good books of the colonial government, the weekly after its initial take-off, 'became irregular, resulting in financial losses for want of co-operation from the subscribers' and the press 'had to bear a loan of Rupees Eighteen hundred' (Baruah, p 74, ibid). In the event, the shareholders of the company which ran the press and the paper had demanded the liquidation of the company. Subsequently, the 'shareholders agreed to hand over the charge of the press and the paper to whomever agreeing to repay the loan in the name of the company' (Baruah ibid, 74). In the following years, the functioning of the paper fell entirely on the shoulders of Padmanath Gohainborooah, and he carried on the job as per a moral commitment made to his friend Jaydev Sarma, apart from editing the Assamese literary magazine *Usha* from 1907. Seeking donations to improve the health of *Assam Banti*, Gohainborooah went to many well-known individuals across Assam and even to Calcutta. In his memoirs, Gohainborooah documents his experiences of meeting Raibahadur Jagannath Barooah in Jorhat, Raibahadur Ghanashyam Baruah in Golaghat, Munchi Mandhan Saikia and members of Bengali society of Nagaon, Manik Chandra Baruah of Guwahati and the Queen Abhayeshwari Devi of the Bijni Zamindari house for the purpose. Amongst them, Jagannath Barooah expressed the hope that 'among the Assamese, interest for newspapers is on the rise', hence *Assam Banti* has a future and Gohainborooah should stick to the paper (Gohainborooah 2017, 202). Thereafter, liabilities were cleared with the collected amount, and the press at Tezpur was renovated, which led to a broadening of the subscriber base by around 1200 and led to immense public goodwill for the weekly. This aspect of collaboration and support to the extent possible between the members of the Assamese middle class of the times for their respective ventures suggests that these individuals belonging to different parts had a sense of purpose and solidarity developed through their common outlook and vision towards developing their state's cultural and social resources

along modern dynamic lines. This segment of the Assamese society, as the donation drive for *Assam Banti* testifies, had a vision and willingness to see newspapers as an institution serving the needs of society. Whether or not Assamese newspapers reached their potential in this regard is a different matter but it is on record that Bhola Nath Barooah, the Assamese timber magnate (who was associated with Baruah-Phukan Brothers for some time at the start of his career), during Gohainborooah's visit to him for raising money for the fledgeling weekly, reportedly proposed to offer adequate financial assistance with a first class press 'if Gohainborooah could undertake to publish a quality English daily like the *Englishman* or *The Statesman*' in Assam (Gohainborooah 2017, 208).

Image 6.5: Padmanath Goahinborooah

Source: Prakash Magazine, January, 2022

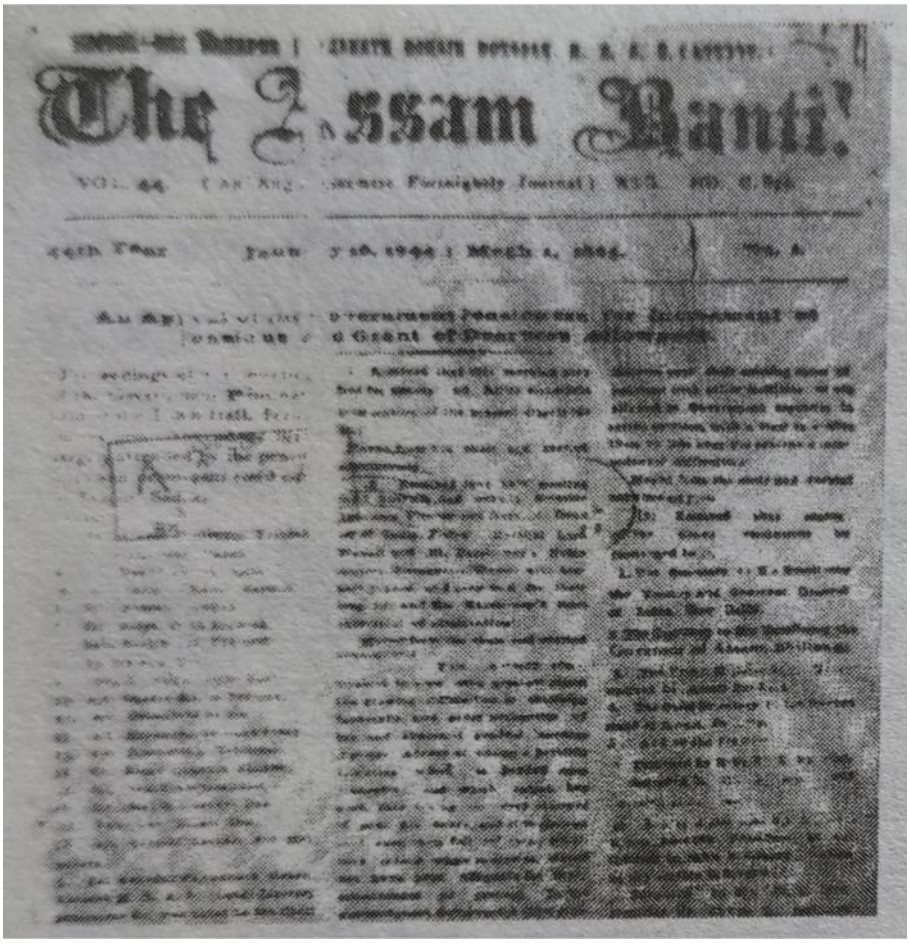

The Assam Banti

Image 6.6: A cover page of Assam Banti
Source: Asamor Batori-Kakot Alochanir Itihas, Paresh Baishya

As already noted, Bengali newspapers used to enjoy circulation amongst the newspaper reading public of Assam, and around the time *Assam Banti* came out, a Bengali paper named *Hitabadi* had that privilege. *Hitabadi* in fact was one of the many language newspapers in India at that time which supported an extremist form of politics and 'kept up a virulent campaign with considerable ingenuity, leaving practically nothing to the imagination of the reader', while reaching and representing every province of the country (Natarajan 1962, 144). Historian Benudhar Sarma notes that '*Assam Banti* countered this inroad' of the Bengali press and created a special place for itself in the minds and hearts of the reading public (Sarma, ibid, 1699). In the circumstances, it is apparent that Padmamanath Gohainborooah who was a leading member of the Assamese middle class represented through his weekly moderate views. President of the first session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1917, he devoted his creative energies zealously towards building a solid national literature. Campaigning against opium addiction among the people of Assam,

individuals of the ilk of Gohainborooah wanted a reformed society in Assam free of social evils. Gohainborooah belonged to a noble Ahom family, which had long association with colonial officials, and was trusted by the government officials like other leading representatives of the Assamese society. *Assam Banti* and its owner Padmanath Goahinborooah (awarded with the title of 'Raisahab' by the British Indian government in 1917 and later made honorary magistrate) thus were loyalists to the foreign government, and soon that model of moderate journalism was losing its currency among the reading public as the wind of the freedom movement began to blow in every corner of the nation. In spite of such limitations, the newspaper for many years was the only publication catering to the needs of both the government and the people of Assam. It is noteworthy that around 1906, 'there was only one Assamese newspaper…as compared to ten in Hindi, nine in Oriya and eight in Bengali' which gives a fair idea of the progress of newspapers in the province (Guha ibid, 60). Around the time, in fact, the government itself published a bi-lingual (Bengali and Assamese) weekly propaganda sheet named *Biswa-Barta* (1907-1911) from Dhaka in an attempt to counter the impact of the Swadeshi movement.

6.20 Freedom movement and the contours of middle class opinion

Gradually with the passage of time, *Assam Banti* became petty irregular and even lost its periodic nature as the issues came out occasionally only. The developments before and after the start of the Non-cooperation movement in 1920 under Mahatma Gandhi for self-governance in the country had affected the political environment in the entire country towards a clear anti-colonial direction. The question of 'swaraj' or self-government for the country became the leading issue driving public opinion and discussions. The political atmosphere in Assam too could not remain untouched by the developments. The noted Assamese political leader Chandranath Sharma was influenced by the Congress ideals even as a school student. The fact that in 1909 students in Tezpur resolved to follow the principles of Swadeshi underlines the growing influence of the Indian National Congress on student society. Under the changing circumstances, the Assamese middle-class leadership and the leading public organisation Assam Association also had to realign its politics. In its Guwahati session of the year 1916, the schism between the older and younger leaders of the association came to surface in a pronounced way. In fact, 'the session marked the infusion of new blood and new political content into the life of the Association in particular and the people in general' and indicated 'the end of the old policy

of the Association as well as the emergence of the politics of confrontation and conflict with the colonial regime' (Kalita ibid, 67-68). The Assam Students' Conference which was organised in 1916 had actually marked the arrival of the students as a new force in the socio-political field of the state. However, the student outfit was initially formed with the specific purpose of literary and cultural development only and vowed to keep itself out of politics. Guided by the leading luminaries of the Assam Association and other emerging public personalities like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Tarun Ram Phukan, the Assam Student's Conference only gradually made a space for itself in the regional public sphere. One of the founding leaders of the students' movement in Assam, Chandranath Sharma and a few of his friends were instrumental in ushering in this new energy and role for the local student community in public life of the state. Inspired by student formations of Bengal and Bihar and their conferences like Bangiya Sahitya Sanmilan, Uttar-Bangiya Sahitya Sanmilan and Bihari Students' Association which some of the Assamese students attended, a similar association for the Assamese students was conceptualised but the idea was not immediately approved by the leading senior citizens. However, a literary association of the Assamese students finally came into being with the holding of the inaugural session with Lakshminath Bezbaruah as the President on 25 December 1916 at the same venue where the Assam Association earlier had its session. In that session itself, Bezbaruah held up the personality of the social reformer Gopal Krishna Gokhale as an ideal and 'advised the students to remain non-political and render service to the society with a selfless zeal' while discarding the terrorist activities associated with revolutionary politics of the students and youths of Bengal (Kalita ibid, 86).

Thus, it is apparent that the senior public intellectuals, members of the Assam Association and the middle class wanted to limit the activities of the students to service in the arena of language, literature and culture only. Nevertheless, issues of underdevelopment which directly affected the students and their consciousness came to the surface and their young minds were influenced by both the moderate and radical currents of the freedom movement. On the other hand, the middle class largely wanted only reform and changes suitable for the overall development of the state under British rule. In 1920, Chandranath Sharma, Umesh Chandra Das, Bidyadhar Sharma etc of the Assam Student's Conference attended the All India College Students' Conference held in Nagpur. Simultaneously, the annual session of the Indian National Congress was going on in Nagpur wherein the policy of non-cooperation with the British Indian government was adopted which was supported

by the national body of the students too. It is worth mentioning here that Profulla Chandra Boruah and Lakshmidhar Sharma from Assam had participated in the Nagpur session of the Congress as press correspondents. Subsequently, the Assamese students who went to Nagpur led the way in mobilising the Non-cooperation movement in their own state by boycotting classes. Thus, bypassing the restrictions imposed by the Assam Association and the middle-class leadership, the student community organized the Non-cooperation movement in Assam and even led the way towards consolidation of the Congress in the province. Hence, 'the credit goes to the Assamese student force in strengthening both the Provincial Congress Committee and the Non-cooperation movement in Assam' (Mahanta 2010, 259).

With such a developing background, it is but natural that in lieu of the somewhat irregular publication and inconsistent politics of *Assam Banti*, couple of other emerging Assamese weekly newspapers reflected the concerns of the zeitgeist in a more effective and pungent way. *Assam Bilasinee* (1913-1924) and *Asamiya* (1918-1958) led the way in this connection.

6.21 *Assam Bilasinee*: A newspaper at the vanguard of the freedom movement

The Dharma Prakash Yantra press at Auniati Sattra of Majuli from where the pioneering Assamese monthly paper *Assam Bilasinee* used to come out in the 1870s under the visionary leadership of the sattradhikar Sri Sri Dattadev Goswami was sold off to a government official named Krishna Kanta Bhattacharya around the start of the second decade of the twentieth century. Bhattacharya, who was a Peshkar at the Jorhat court was a fervent follower of the freedom movement, and wanted to publish an independent newspaper. He succeeded in persuading the then Sattradhikar of Auniati Sattra, Shri Kamaldev Goswami, to sell off the press to him since the old machine was lying somewhat idle. In return, Krishna Kanta Bhattacharya was told to abide by certain conditions like the fact that 'the name of the press would remain as Dharma Prakash and that the proposed newspaper would be known as *Asam Bilasini*' (Baruah ibid, 80). Subsequently, the Dharma Prakash Yantra was installed in Jorhat in 1912 and the new *Assam Bilasini* was published from that press from September, 1913 as a weekly newspaper. Because of his government job, Bhattacharya's brother Ghanakanta Bhattacharya functioned as the editor of the weekly though in reality the paper was the vehicle for the expression of the views and opinions of Krishnakanta who was the soul of the whole venture. A nationalist

newspaper from its start, the weekly made copious criticism of the corruption and defects in the administration and the government, and at times 'presented news items on the activities of the British officials with a bit of humour' (ibid). Although in terms of its design and look, the paper was shabby, the weekly was successful in highlighting public issues and in drawing the attention of the government. The editorial commentary was the mainstay of the weekly and it 'very often occupied several columns and encroached upon the space for news' (Bhattacharya, Kumar Birendra, The Issue of Swaraj in the pages of Assam Bilasini, June 26, 1952, *Natun Asomiya*, 1952, quoted from Borua, ibid, 60). The writings were particularly influential in translating and transmitting the ideas and message of the political cross-currents of the nation from the Home Rule Movement to the Non-cooperation movement to the Assamese people. Blacklisted by the Jorhat administration for its tone and news of the local jailed leaders and activists of the freedom movement, *Assam Bilasinee*'s writings were fuelled greatly by the influence of the young student leader Chandra Nath Sharma who was greatly instrumental in the ushering in of the Congress movement in the state.

Image 6.7: Krishna Kanta Bhattacharya

Source: Asomor Batori-Kakot Alochanir Itihas, Paresh Baishya

The weekly soon faced the wrath of the establishment, and Bhattacharya had to face a series of persecutions from the government. For his involvement with the weekly, he had to seek voluntary retirement from his post in 1916, and he was warned not to involve himself in any anti-government activities. It is worth mentioning here that the meeting which led to the formation of the Assam State Congress Committee was chaired by Krishnakanta Bhattacharya at Nabin Chandra Bardoloi's residence 'Shanti Bhawan' in Guwahati on 5th June, 1921 (Mahanta 2010, 34.) As a nationalist and anti-colonial paper, *Assam Bilasinee* indicted the role of Marwari traders in the economy of Assam as akin to that of British profiteers of the province. Although the paper contributed to the formation of Assamese nationalism at a critical moment, its writings at times worked against integration in society like when an unsigned article castigated the selection of Padmanath Gohainbaruah as the President of Assam Association for its annual session of 1919 because it deemed the concerned person more Ahom than Assamese. It had the following to say about Gohainbaruah: 'It was not as per procedure to make such a person president as he is a communal representative who searches for communal interests' (Sharma 2013, 440).

Following the absolute support of the weekly to the Non-cooperation movement after Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in Assam, the government deprived him of the pension which landed him in severe financial crisis. Booked under the provisions of the Indian Press Act of 1910, two-thousand rupees were demanded from *Assam Bilasinee* as security, following which Bhattacharya published a strong retort but to no avail as the paper crumbled to the pressure. Afterwards, in true guerrilla style, an underground path to the locked press was developed where printing took place in the night, and copies were distributed through vegetable hawkers in the morning thereafter. However, due to repressive measures adopted by the government, Krishnakanta Bhattacharya was harassed to the extent of confiscation of his ancestral property. The paper entirely ceased publication in 1925. The fate met by *Assam Bilasinee* was not an exception or an isolated incident because almost all other Indian newspapers (whether English language or vernacular) of the time which had an anti-imperial agenda faced legal action in some form or the other. In fact, a kind of witch-hunt against the Indian language press persisted then as even war time laws like The Defence of India Rules were applied to repress the scope for the press and free speech in general. The Press Association of India which was formed in 1915 to protect the interests of the press pointed out in its memorandum submitted in the year 1919 that in the years

between 1917 and 1919 ‘some 963 newspapers and printing presses which had existed before the Press Act of 1910, had been proceeded against under the Act—in all 286 cases of warning which stifled the victims, and 705 cases of demand of heavy security and forfeitures by executive order’ (Natarajan 1962, 72). The memorandum also noted that ‘173 new printing presses and 129 new newspapers’ were ‘killed at birth by security demands, and many more were deterred from coming into being by the very presence of the Act’ and that, in the process, the government ‘collected nearly Rs. 500,000 during the first five years of the Act by securities and forfeitures’ (ibid). In such circumstances, it is pretty much understandable to what extent the already existing challenges for a press of a marginal region like Assam were affected. Subsequently, Krishna Kanta Bhattacharya published another short-lived weekly named *Janani* from Jorhat in the early 1930s which gave ample coverage to the political developments of the time. It is interesting that Bhattacharya cherished dreams of entering into business competition with the influential Marwari traders by opening an organisation named The Assam Produce Trading Company (Sharma 2013, 166). The editorial of ‘December 16, 1920 issue’ of the paper ‘strongly urged the people of Assam to abandon jobs with government and take up entrepreneurship so as not to be subject to government’s discriminatory policies’ (Bora 2002, 53-59). In the development of press in the region, *Assam Bilasinee*, probably represented an example of the democratisation of the press as an institution in the context of Assam as it was started, edited and managed by an ordinary government employee belonging to lower rungs of the middle class, unlike earlier and other contemporaneous Assamese publications, which were all more or less owned by more influential institutions and individuals.

6.22 *Asamiya*: Instance of the changing outlook of the incipient Assamese print-elite section

Asamiya, the other notable Assamese weekly of the period was published at the initiative of the tea industrialist and litterateur Chandra Kumar Agarwala from the town of Dibrugarh in the year 1918. During the decades of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century Dibrugarh had emerged as an important town because of the prolific colonial trade and business in tea, timber, coal, and oil in the region. Connected by railways and the river with Calcutta, the town had a sizeable population of Europeans and Bengalis, Biharis etc who filled the middle and lower sections in the administration and industries. The Dibrugarh based English weekly *Times of Assam* (1895-1948), edited and

managed by Radha Nath Changkakoty, was a publication that largely represented the interests of the tea industry and the planter community. On the other hand, as noted earlier, Bengali newspapers like *Sanjeevani, Hitabadi, Bangabashi* etc which circulated in the region had a following among educated sections. In such a milieu, Agarwala, who had in the past also spearheaded the publication of the pioneering Assamese literary magazine *Jonaki* (1889-1896) in a way responded to the needs and call of the times again by bringing out *Asamiya* with the express objective of representing an Assamese voice on the growing churning of the national freedom movement. Chandra Kumar Agarwala had a 'patriotic bent of mind' and along with Hemchandra Goswami and Lakshminath Bezbarua, he formed the 'triumvirate who in their college days at Calcutta fought valiantly in the cause of the Assamese language to protect it from the onslaught that it was a mere patois of Bengali' (Bhuyan,1962, p 3) Indeed, the initiative to publish the newspaper in a way continued the effort on the part of the middle class to use institution of the press to voice their concerns and as a carrier of Assamese nationalism.

No doubt, the laws and orientation of the colonial government was not conducive for the press, yet a 'great deal took place between 1910 and 1920 which influenced the growth of the press' in India in terms of infrastructure as 'cable charges were drastically cut and the cheaper press rates' were introduced, along with 'amendment of the Indian Telegraph Act' which 'enabled news agencies to come into being by extending press facilities to them' (Natarajan 1962, 179). In this regard, it is to be noted that Chandra Kumar Agarwala was an astute entrepreneur, unlike many other Assamese press owners, and he had a grounded strategy for the purpose. For instance, he understood the specific contours of the Assamese psyche, and as such Agarwala from the start 'highlighted Assamese nationalist emotions with an eye on capturing the local markets in Assam' (Sharma 2013, 166). 'Stop reading Bengali newspapers of Calcutta, start reading Assamese papers: such was the core messaging of the *Asamiya*' (ibid). The paper's tagline, 'Swargato Adhik Janambhumi' (Homeland is even more than heaven), fitted in with the scheme of things and echoed the noble sentiments of devout nationalism the venture espoused. As a print capitalist, the publisher Agarwala from the start understood the need of advertisements to make a newspaper sustainable. To corroborate the matter, it is worth noting here that the weekly *Asamiya* which usually had twelve pages in its issues 'on the average published around 114 advertisements' and 'the paper's first 4-5 pages were covered by ads only' (Baishya 2014, 204). In this light, the paper, in a sense reflected the growing collaboration between

the business class with the call for development of indigenous industries, the need regarding which was repeatedly articulated by Mahatma Gandhi and the nationwide movement for swadeshi.

After his success in the tea sector via his planation in Tamolbari, Agarwala along with certain leading Assamese citizens of Dibrugarh like Sadananda Dorroah, Gangaram Chaudhury, Nilmoni Phukan, Mahindraram Khound etc. formed an organization on joint stock lines and named the organization as the Assam Printers and Publishers Limited. A poet at heart and a visionary in both the spheres of business and culture, Chandra Kumar Agarwala always cherished dreams of making Assam a progressive province. In fact, to make the organization more representative, Agarwala took some initiatives to incorporate shareholders even from different interior corners of the region, and around 19 shareholders were there at the initial stage. Reportedly, part of the purpose of associating different Assamese shareholders in the company was the desire on the part of Agarwala 'to inspire the Assamese people in getting involved in cooperative enterprises' (Phookan 2012, 39). As an able businessman he could have afforded to run the paper even without the shareholders, and yet he involved a few of his fellow Assamese in the enterprise formed for the purpose. Among the key persons who backed *Asamiya*, there were five tea-planters who were Chandra Kumar Agarwala himself, Dhirendra Nath Agarwala, Tarun Kumar Agarwala, Ganga Ram Choudhury and Nilamoni Phukan respectively. However, with *Asamiya* which started with an investment of Rs.50,000, Chandra Kumar 'did not get adequate encouragement from the Assamese shareholders' and the paper 'initially for a few years ran on losses'(ibid). Subsequently, the press and the weekly were supported through investments made by Agarwala and his certain family members.

Asamiya was shifted from Dibrugarh to Guwahati in 1924 with the vision and prospect of making the newspaper into a daily. Guwahati in those days was a rather sparsely populated (with around a population of 16,000) place, with limited improvements in communications, and other infrastructure. Because of its administrative importance in the colonial apparatus, many noted lawyers, medical practitioners, government servants and officers settled in the town which created a limited gentle literate society in its vicinity. Moreover, its educational institutions, social spaces like clubs, associations of varied interests, natural beauty, business and trading sites attracted people from all parts of the province who made the town their own and created different localities. Amongst them, it

was the ‘Assamese social workers and leaders like Manik Chandra Baruah, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi etc who controlled and gave direction to the social life of Guwahati’ (Roychoudhury ibid, 395) *Asamiya* was printed and published in Guwahati at a new press in the Kharghuli area of the town where an office cum establishment was built. At the very outset, it was an eight-page paper with ‘a circulation of only 500 copies’ (Borua 1997, 90). However, the influence of the newspaper has been significant from the point of view of both socio-political developments in the state and the trajectory of the Assamese press.

6.23 *Asamiya*: An instance of the rising influence of press as a social institution in Assam

Between During its lifetime of four decades, it was edited by a host of noted personalities like Sadananda Dorroah, Omeo Kumar Das, Harendra Bath Baruah, Lakshmi Nath Phookan, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Dev Kanta Barooah, Ananda Chandra Baruah, Mohan Chandra Mahanta, Padmadhar Chaliha and Jogendra Nath Borkakoti. Lakshmi Nath Phookan, who actually started as a manager for the paper, was put in charge as editor of the paper for a period in the year 1930 by Chandra Kumar Agarwala. It is worth noting it because over the years of its existence, *Asamiya* became a veritable workshop for many notable Assamese journalists. Benudhar Sharma notes that ‘*Asamiya* picked up many young men and turned them into noted journalists’ (Saikia 2014, 1704). Lakshmi Nath Phookan, who went onto become the leading Assamese journalist of his time, after his stint at *Asamiya* and *Times of Assam,* served later in various capacities in both Assamese and English newspapers of the state. When the *Tindiniya Asamiya* (tri-weekly) came out side by side with the weekly *Asamiya* in 1930, the tri-weekly edition was edited by Phookan. In fact, he also served as an assistant editor at *Amrit Bazar Patrika* of Calcutta during his sojourn in the city for a few years. He is also said to have reported for a few other Calcutta newspapers like *Statesman, Forward, Liberty* and *Hindustan Standard.* He also spearheaded the leading English newspapers of their time of Assam like *Times of Assam* and *The Assam Tribune* for a few years. Referred to as a ‘ojha sambadik’ (total journalist) in the lore of Assamese journalism, Lakshmi Nath Phookan served in around 25 publications. It is said that in his time, perhaps there were very few journalists like

Lakshmi Nath Phookan across India who was experienced across reporting, news editing, article writing and editing.

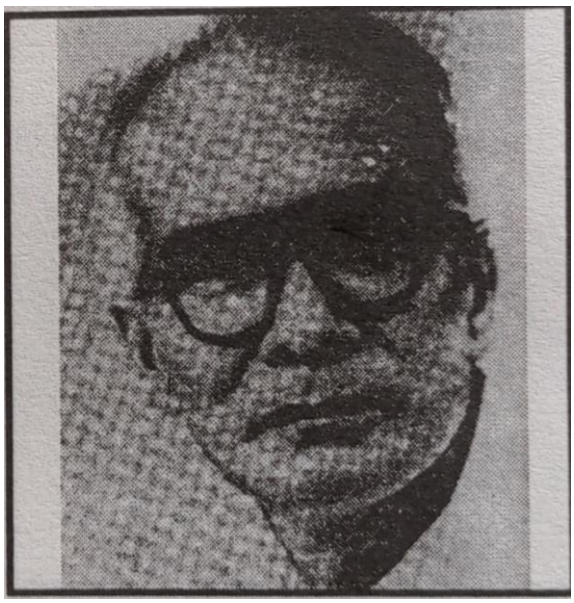


Image 6.8: Lakshmi Nath Phookan
Source: Asamor Batori-Kakot Alchonir Itihas, Paresh Baishya

Image 6.9: Sadananda Dooarah
Source: Asamor Batori-Kakot Alchonir Itihas, Paresh Baishya

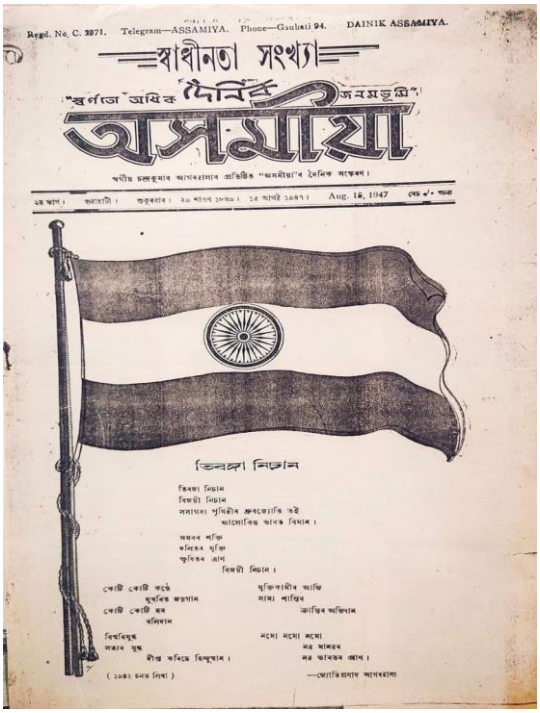
The weekly paper referred to as *Sadiniya Asamiya* over time became intimate with the reading public to such an extent that any newspaper was referred to as 'Asamiya' by the local public. From the outset, the weekly made it a point to involve the readers and the public through various strategies. In the very first issue of the paper, it announced its policy of service and welfare for all the communities of Assam and acting as a mouthpiece for the various issues affecting them. Inviting writings from readers and appealing to every Assamese to become its subscriber, the paper thus from its early days pitched itself as a people's paper. It appears that *Asamiya*, pretty soon after it started publication, was a sought-after paper as this extract of a letter sent by a reader and addressed to the publisher from the year 1918 indicates: 'The notice published in your paper states that the newspaper has been sent to all learned educated members of the state. But what exactly you're implying by such references is not clearly apprehensible to me. A copy of your paper has been sent to the Mouzadar of our village. Yet, you haven't sent to me. Who doesn't know that I am held in higher regard than the aforesaid person in the area? You've ventured to the publication of a newspaper and yet you do not seem to know this fact. Since you

haven't sent the paper at my address, my social status has been affected. Amongst the common folks a belief seems to be forming that to those whom *Asamiya* is not posted, he's not even considered an Assamese gentleman…' (Bhagawati 1998, 405). Thus, from this extract, it can be deduced that *Asamiya* was successful in building on the social capital of the media of newspapers in general amongst readers, and additionally in carving out a distinct identity for itself. The comment also is a statement on the prestige and growth of Assamese newspapers in the popular estimate, and as an index of social status.

6.24 *Asamiya* as an instance of party-political press

As the ideas of the freedom movement pervaded the minds of the public across the country, Assam too could not stay untouched by the new political winds. The middle class in Assam was not an exception in this regard, as even the conservative representatives of the class made space for the Non-cooperation movement and its demands in a manner which suited their present needs. For instance, a thirteen-member delegation of the Assam Association for the first time joined an annual conference of the Congress in 1917 which was held that year in Calcutta. It is to be noted that Rai Bahadur Sadananda Dorroah who was associated with *Asamiya* (its first editor), was also a part of this delegation. To add another instance, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, who led the delegation of the Assam Association to the Congress convention of 1920 initially opposed the proposal of non-cooperation with the government. It was only after the return of the delegation that through a special session of the Assam Association it was decided that 'some of the items' of Gandhi's proposal 'should at once be adopted in Assam' (Mahanta 2010, 273). Earlier, the decision of the Congress in 1917 to organise the provinces on the basis of language, and correspondingly the process of forming provincial committees of it on that logic had inspired the middle class in Assam and initiated their way into the national movement. Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam during the course of the Non-cooperation movement in 1921, and Chandra Kumar Agarwala hosted Gandhi in Dibrugarh which is said to have influenced his ideals and outlook to a great extent. Agarwala, as already mentioned, was a pioneer of Assamese literary magazines, and as such was at the vanguard of language based Assamese nationalism. With such a personal history, it is not entirely out of place that the paper started by Agarwala was titled 'Asamiya'. In terms of its editorial philosophy and vision, the paper thus was married to the evolving political movement led by the Congress. Expressing a symbiotic relationship of Assamese sub-nationalism with Indian nationalism,

Asamiya became a strong plank in the evolution of public opinion in the state during the heady moments of the freedom movement. The newspaper evolved a strong character and personality for itself as it faced persecution from the colonial government on multiple occasions during the period. In its issue of 5 February of the year 1922, *Asamiya* published a translated version of an editorial of the *Young India* journal where Mahatma Gandhi critiqued the alleged deliberate destruction of the sanctity of an area of the Sundardia Sattra by Mr. W.H. Calvert, Assistant Superintendent of Police of Barpeta subdivision in course of his duty in relation to the Non-cooperation movement. Taking objection to the piece, Mr. Calvert filed a defamation suit against the editor and the printer of *Asamiya,* and in response, the owner Chandra Kumar instructed his paper's personnel not to apologise. In the event, the newspaper was fined of rupees 1,150, and non-payment of which led to the immediate prospect of imprisonment of the concerned persons for three to four months. Subsequently, in the defamation case against *Asamiya*, 'the management had to spend a large sum of money to defend its editor and printer;' but the 'episode of the defamation case enhanced the prestige of the paper' (Baruah 1999, 86). This can be known from the fact that part of the expenses of the case came from members of the public after the paper published a notice inviting donations. Parts of the notice read: 'From the last four years from you esteemed readers *Asamiya* has received adequate love and reception. But of course, how much the paper has come to the service of you all is not without doubt. But we haven't left any stone unturned for the purpose. In the course of service to the nation and society, *Asamiya* hasn't paid heed to any challenges to it whatsoever. Hence, today our newspaper can be said to be in a state of grave crisis. In looking after the needs of ten, it was bound to offend one or two…As a result, the case which was levelled against *Asamiya* has already led to an expenditure of around rupees 4,000, and we don't know how more we have to spend…But let no one think even in their dreams that *Asamiya* will not buckle down so easily. The reason we have put forward the matter so forcefully is because we know that *Asamiya* will not be without your blessings at this critical hour…Dear reader you're everything to *Asamiya*. As the only paper of our poor province, is it not one of your duties to nourish it?' (Asamiya, 28 June, 1922 quoted from Bhagawati, Radhikamohan, Chandrakumaror Asamiya: Asamiyar Chari Doxokor Itihash, in (Saikia, 1998 407).


Regd. No. C. 2071. Telegram—ASSAMIYA. Phone—Gauhati 94. DAINIK ASSAMIYA.

স্বাধীনতা সংখ্যা

স্বর্গত অম্বিকা দৈনিক অসমীয়া

অসমীয়া

Aug. 16, 1947

Image 6.10: Cover page of the Asamiya on the occasion of independence of the country
Source: Personal collection

This is yet another instance in the history of Assamese journalism after *Assam Banti* of a newspaper calling for public donations with an inspired message to carry on public spirited and public service journalism as it was understood then under a colonial set-up, and a burgeoning national freedom movement. It is worth noting that the notice articulates the paper's own self-understanding of its role and prods on the public consciousness to appreciate that understanding. The language used is also strategic as it is deployed as a nudge to the colonial authorities in the knowledge that the notice will be read by the officials of the concerned department of the government. At the high tide of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, an editorial titled 'Alohi Government' (Guest government) of the *Asamiya* commented: 'The English government in Assam should be actually termed a guest government…the English trader has sucked the country to its core. They're not at fault, it is we who're responsible for the state of affairs…now is the time of the duty of the Assamese public to take responsibility for their own house while bidding adieu to the guest government…The whole of India is preparing to gain independence, -- Assam shouldn't back off from raising its justified demands' (Bhagawati 1998, 406). From this extract, it is clearly observable that *Asamiya* juxtaposed the main resolution of the All India Congress Committee regarding the comprehensive campaign of civil disobedience with the core issue of the subjugation of Assamese nationality under a foreign power.

Meanwhile, in the nine years between 1920-21 and 1929-30, the peaceful relationship between the press and the government again deteriorated as a result of the call of civil disobedience to the public and the repressive response of the government. In the disturbed environment, the government issued a 'Press Ordinance…reproducing the stringent provisions of the repealed Press Act' of 1910 which forced around 130 newspapers of the country to deposit securities 'amounting to nearly 2 lakhs of rupees' (Natarajan 2022, 214) 'Nine refused to pay the security demanded and had to suspend publication' (ibid). Among these nine publications, *Asamiya* was one of them, and as a result the paper had to cease publication for two and a half months. For the matter, it is worth noting here that the publishers of *Asamiya* brought out a tri-weekly paper titled *Tinidiniya Asamiya* in 1930 which ran parallelly with the weekly version till 1940. It seems *Tindiniya Asamiya* functioned to meet the exigencies of a politically charged environment where the publisher had to constantly manoeuvre the hostile ambience for the press. The fact that even earlier *Asamiya* was turned into daily for a few days during the Pandu session of the Congress in 1926 held in Guwahati amply demonstrates this fact and tactic on the part of the publishers. Indeed, the tri-weekly edition of the paper immediately followed the celebrated adoption of the resolution of independence by the Lahore Conference of the Congress in 1930. Needless to say, the tri-weekly too continued to criticize the attitude of the government towards the press. In this sense, as the paper continuously complemented the key activities of the Congress, *Asamiya* in a way, perhaps, stands as one of the very few examples of a party-political paper or press in the trajectory and growth of Assamese newspapers. The Administrative Report of for the year 1929-1930 of Assam noted that 'some of the newspapers especially the *Asamiya*…were inclined to misrepresent government policy and government officials' (Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1929-30, quoted from Baruah 1999, 87). In the event, it is but natural that the paper 'did not receive adequate government advertisements' (Baishya ibid, 204). Such forbearance and resistance in the face of government repression no doubt added to the gravitas the paper commanded among the reading public, and contributed towards strengthening of the national movement at the local and regional level.

6.25 Beyond freedom movement: *Asamiya* and social questions

Apart from its contributions during the freedom movement, *Asamiya* also reported and set forth its views in questions of social justice. Notably, the paper was instrumental in

highlighting the issue of the inhuman treatment meted out by certain European managers in the tea gardens of Assam. Because of the reporting of a physical assault on a w orker named Telehu (which led to his death) by a certain Mr Bate who was the manager of Balijan Tea Estate in Golaghat district, the issue drew attention of the press of other provinces like *Forward* of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. Subsequently, in the year 1928, two members of the British trade union congress visited the tea gardens of upper Assam who were accompanied by Omeo Kumar Das, then the editor of *Asamiya*, which led the government to form the Royal Commission on Labour to study the working conditions in tea plantations in India. However, when it came to the policy of recruiting immigrant labours from parts of central India, Chandra Kumar Agarwala had no difference with his British tea-planter counterparts, as he was 'directly involved in surreptitiously bringing labourers for his estate from Jharkhand area of central India' (Sharma,2013 p 165). On occasions, the paper expressed its disaffection through its editorial comments regarding the government policy of granting land for plantations only to Britishers and not to Assamese tea planters. In this sense, it seems, one of the chief reasons for its difference with the British government was this conflict emanating between European capitalists and Assamese bourgeoise. On the other hand, the *Asamiya* constantly campaigned against the opium issue which was also one of planks through which the Congress made impressions on the public consciousness of the state. In relation to labour issues, the paper lent support to the strike of the workers and staff of Digboi Oil Refinery in 1939 when police opened fire on the protesters. In 1946, when under the grouping scheme, Assam faced the imminent prospect of merger with the proposed East Pakistan, Bhimbor Deori, the leader of the Assam Backward Plains Tribal League played a key role in thwarting the process by providing support to the Congress. Deori's press release regarding the issue was published in *Asamiya*. By then, apart from the weekly edition, a daily from the same publishers titled *Dainik Asamiya* had started publication from 26 January, 1946 which was edited by Dev Kant Barooah. An editorial column of the daily welcomed Deori's intervention and lauded his role for 'uniting the tribal public with the Assamese public' at a moment of grave danger for the province (Majumdar, 2022 p 160-161). Thus, it is significant that the paper remained true to its name and ideal at critical hours in the political developments of the day. In the very first editorial of the daily *Dainik Asamiya*, it had expressed: '…The call of the 'Dainik Asamiya' is the collective welfare of the inhabitants of Assam. Especially, 'Asamiya' has always paid attention to the overall development of the backward communities, tribals of the plains and hills and labourers so that differences

merge and the Assamese community in independent Assam can occupy a respectable place' (Bhagawati 1998, 414).

It is creditable that the managing committee and the publishers of *Asamiya* did not hesitate to change the editor of its daily edition, Dev Kant Barooah, who became an active member of the Socialist Party in 1947 and later of the Congress, as a step to counter the paper's pro-Congress perception. Parts of the minutes of the meeting reveal the outlook and idea of the paper's management on *Asamiya* itself : ' Taking into consideration above the Directors of the company acknowledging the service of Sreejut Devakanta Baruah, the present editor, in building up the "Dainik Assomia" request him to help the Board of Directors to maintain the independent position of the journal by giving them an opportunity to select an editor who will be able to maintain a tradition compatible with the ideals, it was the dear wish of the founder of the journal, to maintain' (ibid 1998, 457).

6.26 Assamese newspapers after hundred years of its birth

In concusion, it needs to be mentioned that Chandra Kumar Agarwala, the founder of the paper, cherished hopes of converting his weekly into a well-functioning daily which he could see in his lifetime as he unfortunately passed away in 1938. It was only on January 26 of the year 1946 that daily edition of the paper, *Dainik Asamiya*, was published for the first time on a regular basis as the body politic of the province strongly felt the need for an Assamese daily considering the urgency of the political issues of the times like the Grouping scheme which threatened the very existence of Assam as a state of India in the wake of the Partition plan.

It is to be noted in conjunction with the discussion so far that with the passage of the freedom movement entering the nooks and corners of the province, and greater availability of the technology of the printing press, different streams of Assamese nationalism and concerns were expressed through weeklies, magazines and papers of the time. *Chetona* (1917-1927), *Deka Asom* (1935-1968), *Batori* (1930-1935), and *Dainik Batori* (1935-1936) were some of these publications. For instance, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, the driving force behind *Chetona* and *Deka Asom,* although associated with the Congress, nevertheless used his journals to express his brand of ultra-nationalism which was more or less at odds with Indian nationalism. In an editorial of the magazine *Chetona*, it was expressed that 'between the fragmented consciousness (of Assamese nationalism) and

world consciousness (internationalism), the latter is not possible without the former' (Majumdar, *Chetona*, 2019). To reiterate a related point here, Assamese publications of the times such as these largely reflected the concerns and views of its editor or proprietor and relied more on circulation than advertisements for revenue. In fact, across the nation in the regions in contrast to the major cities, journalism was yet to be a fully formed profession and survived mostly on private philanthropy.

As the colonial state made provisions for institutions like local boards and councils at the regional level for gradual realization of self-government for the people of Assam, simultaneously political space outside of formal bodies and structures was created and outlined. In this regard, the press as a concrete institution of the civil society made its appearance through private initiatives via the effort of middle class individuals and groups and grew in stature as it lent its support to the country-wide anti-colonial mass movement. In conclusion, it can be said that this phase in the growth of Assamese newspapers during the course of the freedom movement, represented the emergence of the Assamese press as a veritable part of the socio-political processes of the state where its role as a fourth estate was developed and consolidated. From the literary public sphere of the late 19th century, with its pliant and loyalist publications, the press of the region, through the nationalist Assamese newspapers of the period of the early decades of the twentieth century, really came into its own as they began to question, critique and indict the unjust actions and policies of a foreign colonial government. In this way, the Assamese newspapers of the period deepened and extended the scope of the local political public sphere, and developed a character and personality of a press worthy of an imagined independent India.

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