

CHAPTER-VII

Satellite television news in Assam: Origin, Context and Development with reference to *NETV*

7.1 Broadcast news in the Assamese language: Early developments

Mass communication in the Assamese language through broadcast media goes back to the time of the Second World War when the British Indian colonial government ‘decided to transmit war news and programmes on government developmental work from Calcutta with the purpose of winning the support and sympathy of the people of Assam in its war efforts’ (Das 2022, 43) Later, in the Calcutta All India Radio (AIR) station itself a thirty-minute slot was created for Assamese programming in its evening schedule which consisted of an assortment of music, talk, plays, news etc. This fare was directed at the Assamese speaking population in the city of Calcutta which was largely composed of students, businessmen and other professionals. After independence of the country from foreign rule, the Government of India established a series of radio stations around the country as the radio medium was deemed as a true aid to nation-building amidst low national literacy levels among other factors. The first Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, who was a member of the Constituent Assembly, also played an instrumental role in this regard as he put forward the demand for the establishment of a radio station in the state to the central government. Before the consolidation of British power, different parts of India had ‘many forms of extant communications—from traditional dance and drama to indigenous postal systems based on ‘runners’ in some of the princely states’ but ‘these were by no means national in scope’ (Thomas 2010, 35). It is in this context and sense that ‘the British played an absolutely central role in introducing Indians to the project of modernity via systems of mass communication’ (ibid).

The Shillong-Guwahati All India Radio (AIR) station was started on July 1 in the year 1948 with transmissions from both cities as Shillong was the administrative capital and Guwahati was the commercial gateway to the region. It is interesting to note that on the very first day of broadcasts, these two stations faced strong public protests over the choice of the anthem song to be performed in the inaugural function. Since the Indian government had not yet decided the national anthem, the selection of the Rabindranth Tagore composed

song ‘Jana Gana Mana’ (which became the national anthem in 1950) sparked off strong disaffection from sections of the public and the artists community. A song titled ‘Aji Bondo Ki Chondere’, written by Assamese nationalist icon Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, was proposed earlier to the concerned authorities by senior broadcaster Ubeidul Latif Baruah and other programme assistants like Bhupen Hazarika, Birendra Kumar Phukan and Phani Talukdar. However, the proposition was overturned and an instrumental version of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ was finally played at the opening function. The grievance of the public assembled at both the Shillong and Guwahati station was that when the number of Assamese patriotic songs were adequate, there was no justification to use an original Bengali composition. In Shillong, the public had demanded the programme should open with ‘O Mur Apunar Desh’, the state anthem of Assam which was penned by Lakhshminath Bezbarua, one of the greatest writers in the Assamese language. The incident took on a further political hue when the minister of the Publicity Department of the government Maulana Mohammad Tybullah walked over a few of protesters on his way to the station building (Das 2022, 47). Finally, the broadcasts on the particular day went on fine as the programmes were already recorded, even while the protests went on outside of the stations. What the incident reveals is the underlying tensions in the polity of the then Assam and further, the gap between an incipient state broadcaster’s policy and local cultural sensibilities. The incident had no long-term impact as the issue was sorted by the protesting artists and the AIR keeping in mind the larger public interest. In 1953, the station was shifted to Guwahati and renamed as Akashvani Gauhati. The station was turned into a full-fledged radio station in 1957 and from that year the regional bulletin of the Guwahati AIR station started broadcasting. Thus, the people of the region got a taste of broadcast news in their own tongue after independence for the first time through this news bulletin. Over the decades, the Guwahati AIR station with its line-up of news bulletins (produced in Assamese and English), informational, educational and cultural programmes have developed a deep connection with the listening public of the region. Later on, in 1969 the Dibrugarh AIR station was established which also developed its own identity among regional stations from all over India. The Dibrugarh AIR station was strategically located in the easternmost urban centre of India, and thus fulfilled an important function of taking mass communication through broadcast radio in India to the remotest parts of the region. The station over time proved to be the means through which news in the dialects and languages of the ethnic and tribal communities of the region was broadcast, apart from Assamese. Talking about his time at the Dibrugarh AIR station, a now retired editor at the

news section of the station during the early 1970s says: ‘In 1973, I was transferred from the Press Information Bureau in New Delhi and posted to Akashvani Dibrugarh Kendra as a junior staff. Although local news in Assamese was not broadcast at that time, the news department of the station was the medium through which news was broadcast for the Adi, Apatani, Tangsa, Nishi languages of the nearby state of Arunachal Pradesh’ (Baruah 2019, 102). Since then, the AIR Dibrugarh station has won accolades and national broadcasting awards for its music, drama and other original programming. Assamese cultural and musical icons like Khagen Mahanta and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika had been associated with the All India Radio in Assam in the past. Thus, in the overall cultural order of the region, radio broadcasting added another dimension by creating a new platform for cultural expression as well as news gathering and transmission. But gradually with the expansion and popularity of television in the region, ‘especially after the arrival of private channels, it seems many programmes of Akashvani have faded away from the popular mind’ (ibid, 108).

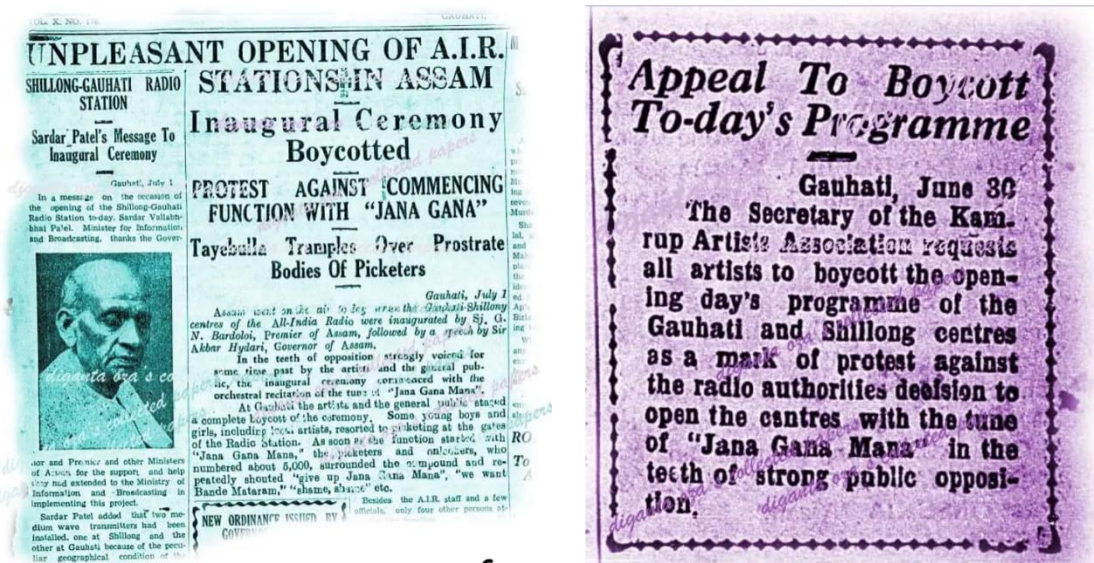


Image 7.1: Press coverage of the AIR Station opening controversy
Source: Personal collection.

7.2 Television news in Assamese: Early days

Indian television broadcasting partly took inspiration from the form and structure of the radio news bulletin which was adapted for the small screen. In fact, after the introduction of television in India in 1959 as an experimental service in Delhi till its limited expansion to other cities like Amritsar and Mumbai in the 1970s, television broadcasts were taking place within the purview of All India Radio. It was on April 1, 1976 that television finally transitioned to become a separate department in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, though still serviced by All India Radio, especially for its news. During the expansion of regional Doordarshan centres in the decade of the 1980s across India, the Guwahati Doordarshan Kendra was established on March 24, 1985. The Guwahati station of Doordarshan initially started functioning with limited staff from a temporary studio set up in the Mahendra Mohan Choudhury Hospital located in the heart of the city. On 7 February, 1992, the station was permanently shifted to Radha Govinda Barua Road in Guwahati. Since then, the station has covered every major political, socio-economical and sporting events of the last four decades in Assam. As the sale of television sets in the region picked up in the 1990s, television became a familiar household object like in other parts of the country. Late Pratap Bordoloi, who was associated as a news anchor and editor with Guwahati Doordarshan Kendra for a long time writes: 'There are many stories both big and small of those days of the people of Assam when they wished to watch television programmes in their own language. The Guwahati Doordarshan Kendra was inspired by these stories to take up news and couple of programmes. The interest and involvement of the people at that time gave a boost to the news of Guwahati Doordarshan...Even today the Guwahati Doordarshan is prevalent among 79% of the Assam's population. Similarly, its programmes can be accessed in 83% of the total geographical area of Assam.' (Bordoloi 2012, 39). The Assamese morning bulletin on the Guwahati Doordarshan centre began on 19th December, 1992, while the evening news bulletin broadcast in English for the entire North-eastern region was started on 1st March, 1997.

Thus, around the time when Guwahati Doordarshan Kendra started television news, sections of audience in Assam were already exposed to the then popular national channel of Doordarshan and emerging cable and satellite channels. Never the less, amidst the national programmes broadcast on most hours of the day on television, the Assamese news bulletin, especially its evening broadcast created its own space as the local audience were

gradually habituated to a brief televisual round up of the day's main developments. The role of the seven o'clock bulletin on Guwahati Doordarshan in the context of a development of a dedicated audience who watches Assamese news on television is significant. After the launch and subsequent popularity of the Assamese private satellite news channels in the 2000s, the programme producers there tapped onto this schedule created by Guwahati Doordarshan. Journalist Atanu Bhuyan, who has been associated with quite a few of these Assamese news channels writes: '...the prime-time news starts in Assam's news channels start at seven in the evening. It's an old habit of the people of Assam to watch the news at seven. Guwahati Doordarshan developed this habit in people...From two decades' time it has been a social habit for people to watch the news as it strikes 7 each day. This pattern continues till date' (Bhuyan 2017, 117). Broadcasting has long played such a role in temporal lives of a community through the recursive character of radio and television schedules prepared in conjunction with the daily routines of its audiences, thereby creating the effect of 'dailiness' (Scannell 1996, 149).

7.3 News Media in Assam since the 1980s

The 1980s and the 1990s were the decades when Assamese newspapers and magazines got a boost in their circulation and impact in comparison to earlier decades due to a combination of factors like the turbulent socio-political situation in the state due to the Assam Movement and its aftermath, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) led insurgency, and on the other hand, improved printing technology in the form of desk top publishing and offset printing, transportation and communication facilities, advertising, increasing population, expansion of literacy etc. created a readership across different socio-economic strata. It appears that the impact of Assamese press during the heady days of the Assam Movement multiplied as dailies like *Dainik Asom* 'actively supported the cause and even published calendars of agitational programme chalked out by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Sadou Asom Karmachari Parisad' with leaders of the movement at the district levels looking out eagerly for local dailies 'to take stock of the day's happenings and the programmes ahead' (Sarma 2020, 107). Alongside, the flow of journalists from the leading media houses of the country to the region increased due to these socio-political disturbances as news from the state had ramifications beyond. It was also a time when the Indian news media developed a new tempo, as publications in English and other languages modernised and expanded its operations, as up-to-date technology and

interesting political developments created new audiences. Former journalist Sabita Goswami who used to cover the region of Assam during the 1980s for BBC World Radio Service remembers the atmosphere for news and journalism in Assam those days in the following way: ‘The movement for deportation of illegal foreigners drew the attention of the national newspapers which usually displayed an attitude of neglect for news from Assam and North-East... The profession of journalism was still not popular in Assam. Only after the journalists from national media visited Assam did the supporters and leaders of the movement entertained journalists in general.’ (Goswami 2017, 68-73). By the 1990s, circulation of Assamese newspapers grew by almost six times (highest among all Indian language newspapers) compared to the all-India figure of 167% (Sarma 2020, 94-96).

The period from the 1980s and 1990s can be considered as a turning point for the trajectory and shape of the Assamese news media in general as it created new trends in business, technology, news language, journalistic cultures and reading habits. Assamese news media scene in the 1990s was composed of the dailies, weeklies, magazines and in the segment of broadcast news it was limited to the bulletins produced in AIR and Doordarshan centres in Guwahati. But it was basically the newspapers which created the ethos of journalism in Assam, and when the regional satellite news channels started operating in Guwahati from the 2000s, they brought along with them the televisual news forms current in the national satellite news channels. However, as stated earlier, the Assamese bulletins aired on Guwahati Doordarshan for the first time gave the local public a taste of credible television news in their own language amidst many limitations. As it was a politically charged situation in the state during the start of Assamese news on Doordarshan, it inevitably produced mixed reactions. While the newscaster or presenters became household names due to the para-social connect (Horton and Wohl, 1956) through the small screen, those on the progressive sections of the intelligentsia had an oppositional reading of the news on the national broadcaster. Late Parag Das, one of the firebrand intellectuals and journalists of the times in an article on the violation of human rights by the state machinery in the early 1990s wrote: ‘Since the stories and incidents of human rights abuses have been brought to light through factual reports in the formation of public opinion, the government apparatus and its acolytes is discomfited...the creation of a false and a threatening narrative through government publicity mechanism have become a regular affair’ (Das 2014, 03).

7.4 The early 2000s: The age of satellite television news in India

The early 2000s was a period in contemporary India when its mass media projected a largely buoyant and consumerist image of the country. Its major addressee in the circumstances, no wonder, was the growing middle class of the country which is spread out across its innumerable cities, towns and villages. As the number of households with cable TV and dish connections across urban and rural areas amplified, so too the influence of television was seen in the ushering of consumerism, conservative nationalism and changing female images (Singhal & Rogers 2001, 122-123). A liberalised and deregulated economic environment since 1990s had opened up new sectors of the economy, including IT, telecommunications and media. For instance, in segments of mass media and its support sectors, FDI over time was increased to 100%, and in television news it was increased from 26% to 49% in 2015. It was around the turn of the millennium when private satellite television news channels really came into their own in India after a few enterprising efforts by networks like Zee News Ltd, Network18 Group, TV Today Network, and Satellite Television Asia Region Ltd. (Star TV). In terms of private independent news production, the pioneers were journalist-entrepreneurs like Prannoy Roy and Madhu Trehan. In the late 1980s and early 1990s they navigated their way in a broadcast environment when India's national broadcaster Doordarshan was the only television channel which aired both entertainment and current affairs programming. The very first Doordarshan newscasts were broadcast in 1965 in Hindi and English which were precisely five-minute short bulletins targeted for the entire Indian public. By the 1980s, apart from Hindi and English news telecasts, regional newscasts were also transmitted in over a dozen languages. In a linguistically and culturally diverse country with developmental lacunae in many respects, television was projected as a tool of modernisation. Unlike the print media like newspapers and news magazines which enjoyed immense plurality and freedom during the 1980s in the regional languages, the public broadcaster and its programming were carefully deployed and controlled to reflect the government objectives of national integration, development and public education through the audio-visual medium. The control over the news bulletins, specifically, was overwhelming and the presentation was heavily filtered hence it tended to be on the lines of official propaganda. The television news space 'opened up for only a brief period when Rajiv Gandhi began his prime ministerial tenure in 1984 with a plan for television reform but, when this failed, it went back to status quo' (Mehta 2008, 47).

So, when satellite television arrived in the early 1990s, and news and current affairs channels started operations from the middle of that decade, it was seen as a sharp break with the staid and official news bulletins on Doordarshan. In the initial phase of growth of private satellite television news channels, i.e., from the late 1990s to the early 2000s it was the Delhi based English and Hindi language news channels that ruled the roost in the nation's television news channel space. From around 10 in the year 2000, the number of private satellite news channels rose to around 40 in 2005. Subsequently, between 2005 and 2012, the number of news and current affairs channels in India increased exponentially to more than 200. This growth in such a limited period was probably unprecedented in the annals of television anywhere in the world. Partly this was a result of liberalising policies of the government and the eagerness of older and new entrepreneurs in the media to come into the broadcast news business for influence and profit. Media critic Sevanti Ninan describes the scenario thus: 'The decade and a half from 1991 to 2006 in India belonged to television and the Internet. This was the period when satellite television took birth and took off...All this changed media habits, transformed connectivity and created a new public discourse as television channels...blossomed' (Ninan 2007, 13).

In the context of these global and national media developments, the media in Assam joined this 'mediascape' almost a decade later with the launch of the private satellite news and current affairs channel *NETV* (Northeast Television, now defunct) in 2003 which was pan north-east in its ambitions as it used to broadcast bulletins in various languages of the north-eastern states.

7.5 Satellite television news in India and government policy

In the early and mid-1990s cable and satellite television in India created a sort of moral panic and socio-political anxiety over fears of westernisation as American TV shows and music videos became an influence on the urban youth of the country via channels like STAR and MTV. Debates on regulation of private broadcasting may have raged inside Parliament but the government was either unable or were not determined enough to bring in appropriate measures as befits a free modern democratic country. Apart from the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act of 1995 (which in gist specified practical aspects of cable television operations), there was not much the government did to initiate a healthy robust broadcast eco system which could foster diversity, pluralism and credible news and information in the public interest. As for the Prasar Bharati, the extent of autonomy

enjoyed by the country's premier public broadcasting organisation (which runs Doordarshan television network and All India Radio) is still an open question as it has been appropriated more for staid official broadcasting rather than true independent broadcast reportage. 'Doordarshan and All India Radio remain, in effect, responsible to the minister of information and broadcasting. The cushion between government and broadcaster, the key ingredient of a BBC model, has not been achieved (Jeffrey 2010, 248). In the meantime, the number of private television news channels mushroomed in the first decade of 2000s, and created a new kind of televisual news sphere which quickly occupied a commanding position in/as the fourth estate along with the newspapers and news magazines. However, flawed it may be, or far from the ideal of the public sphere, India's burgeoning market for news via the media of print and television contributed to strengthen India's claim to be one of the leading democratic nations of the world. In terms of the freedom enjoyed by its news media, India seemed to be plodding along: from a rank of 80 in the inaugural World Press Freedom Index Report, 2002, India's rank fell to 122 in 2010 and 131 in 2012. Probably, part of the reason for this uneven performance in this regard, is the fact that the government did little to regulate this new televisual news sphere along proper ethical and democratic lines. As the private news channels pursued viewership and cut running costs (especially after the global recession), they increasingly resorted to trivial, sensational and at times irresponsible content (Bhushan 2008, 18-28). The matter was often in the public discourse but no stakeholder seemed to do anything decisive about the crisis in content and its presentation. In 2007, for purposes of self-regulation, News Broadcasters Association (currently it is known as NBDA after the current digitalization of all aspects of broadcasting) was formed as a collective body by different Indian current affairs and news television broadcasters as an industry voice for addressing matters ranging from regulatory, operational, technical, legal and ethical. However, as usually happens with such associations, the body could only speak for its own interests to the government when the occasion demanded and as a redressal mechanism to hear viewer complaints which over time proved to be inadequate as a checks and balances mechanism. One of the pioneers of mass communication research in India, Dr N Bhaskara Rao surmises the matter thus: 'Despite minister after minister publicly favouring a national policy at the outset of taking charge, one saw them choosing political convenience and giving into pressures of "media giants", who, for obvious reasons, preferred 'no national policy'. For them, an ad hoc approach suited their interest better.' (Rao 2017, 8)

7.6 Regional satellite television news channels

There was a rapid mushrooming of news channels between 2005 and 2010 in India as more than 200 news channels were permitted during this period. Like what happened with language advertising and regional newspaper growth and expansion in India's newspaper revolution in the 1980s (Jeffrey, 2000), the direction of potential for further growth in Indian television news seemed to point towards the regional markets. South India led the way in this respect with networks like Sun TV (Tamil), Asianet (Malayalam) and Raj Television (Telugu) starting in the early 1990s. The Hindi 'national' television channels, whether of news or the general entertainment variety, had very limited connect there because of clear differences in language and culture with North India. Also, the region's politics historically had been shaped by movements based on language. For instance, the state of Tamil Nadu had seen massive political mobilisation against imposition of Hindi as the official language of the nation both before and after independence. So, when satellite and cable television arrived, the region's television sector developed largely with local players who had a grip on the pulse of the southern states society and connect with its public. Particularly, politicians have ventured into broadcasting in the region. Sun TV which was founded in 1993 is a 'successful venture of Kalandhi Maran, the grand-nephew of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) President M. Karunanidhi and son of Murali Maran, who had served as DMK minister in coalition-led governments at the centre. Today, Sun Network owns seven publications, two radio brands with 45 FM radio stations and 32 television channels...' (Ranganathan 2015, 35). In the course of the next decade, the Southern market has been explored by the top national level broadcasters like Zee, Star, Sony and Viacom. 'Since 2008... India's television map has changed significantly with a spate of buyouts and moves towards consolidation. This phase has coincided with a greater corporatization of the industry, the availability of greater capital for expansion, and with a realization that it is the regional markets where the primary growth lies' (Mehta 2015, 14).

The growth in the number of private cable and satellite regional language news channels in India have been picking up steadily through the first two decades of the twenty-first century. By 2019, the number of regional private cable and satellite news channels stood at 100 as per the market research firm Statista. In 2021, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report mentioned that India had 392 news channels 'dominated by regional

language channels and private players' (Reuters Digital News Report, 2021). News channels are presently operating in 14 of the major Indian languages. South Indian language news channels are highest, followed by other regional languages like Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi, Odia, Assamese etc. There are certain regional languages where the number of news channels is as high as the number of general entertainment channels. There are more than 15 news channels and 18 general entertainment channels in the Telegu language. Kerela, with 33 million population, currently has around 10 news channels and nearly twice this number of general entertainment channels, few of which have daily news bulletins. Assam currently has 10 cable and satellite news channels, all operating from the capital city of Guwahati.

With over 210 million TV homes and well over 900 million viewers (BARC, 2020), the possibilities of television news channels as a medium and genre are immense from a socio-political and market angle. Around 2012, when the number of regional language satellite and private news channels were seeing an increase, news channels occupied one-third space of all channels combined. Four to five Assamese private cable and satellite television news channels which had begun functioning by then were gaining traction and started to play a role in the media and socio-political scene of the state. However, the increase in the number of television news channels nationally and across regions have not consistently corresponded to an increase in viewership. In fact, viewership figures have been uneven even before the digital juggernaut in the second decade of the 2000s. For instance, as per TAM Media Research firm, television rating points (TRP) of news channels after 2008 have indicated either decline or stagnation in viewership in India. On the other hand, the overall media convergence of recent years has opened up new avenues of reach for regional television news channels as they are adapting and reaching newer segments of audience by rebuilding their operations and strategy. Especially, after, the COVID-19 pandemic, media habits have seen a definite shift towards digital media and content. Assamese news channels are no exception this regard as most of them have endeavoured to keep existing audiences and create new audiences for their offerings through outreach in the web space. Thus, the news channels are expanding their reach from television screens through DTH cum cable to mobile phones, tablets and laptops through digital channels as well as programming on YouTube and Facebook. According to the FICCI-EY media and entertainment report of March 2021, the online news audience grew to 450 million in 2020 (FICCI Report, 2022).

Most of Assam's towns and cities fall under the category of tier-II and tier-III cities, and as per current market indications, audiences in such socio-economic spaces will take it longer to gravitate towards the trend of 'cord-cutting' (meaning cutting off traditional linear cable and DTH connections and switching entirely to digital) which is now prevalent in metros and urban centres. By this logic, both mobiles and television will co-exist in this space for quite some time as both these media 'are doing very well in tier 2 and tier 3 cities' (The Economic Times, Sep 1, 2023). In fact, TV households in eastern states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam and Northeast (most of these regions were out of the purview TRP for a long time) had witnessed double-digit growth in 2020. As per the latest Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India TV Universe Estimates 2020, the three states recorded 23%, 13%, and 14%, growth in TV households respectively, resulting in an overall increase in viewership as well.

In this context, the pertinent issue that comes to the forefront is the question of probable reasons of opening up of new news channels across regions in India in the face of factors like uneven viewership, limited share of news channels in the television market, challenging business dynamics and low rates of profitability.

Gradually, over time, it appeared that media, especially with emergence of regional television news networks will (in contrast to Delhi centric and based television news) develop new models of television broadcasting and culture. In reality, however, the forces and actors which led the way towards localisation and regionalisation of television news channels in most parts of the country were operating in an atmosphere of regulatory vacuum as far as broadcasting is concerned. Most of India's media regulations and laws were there for the press, and as a result, broadcasting developed and grew in a haphazard manner resulting in a television broadcasting system without an official regulator unlike most democracies in the world. For such an environment, it was not that the investors, promoters and owners complained and the central government, in spite of a number of assurances by a series of Information and Broadcasting Ministers, hardly took the initiative of fixing the television news broadcasting space with an independent regulator but rather chose to deal with emergent issues in an ad hoc and case to case basis instead of developing certain general guidelines for the operation and functioning of private television news.

7.7 The establishment of *NETV*: Context and background

Through the decade of the 1990s Assam saw both the Congress and an alliance government led by the regional party AGP respectively. The socio-political processes of the decade were rather complex as the conflict between ULFA and the central and state government took rather murky twists and turns with the result that Assam was in a more or less permanent state of unrest. The Congress, which formed the state government in the early 1990s was able to create a short phase of normalcy because of ‘two counterinsurgency campaigns by the Indian Army and a series of clever political moves widely credited to the state Congress (I) Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia’ (Baruah, 1994). Subsequently, the AGP which came to form government for the second time in 1996, saw wide misrule in governance, economy and administration. To add to the woes, a series of brutal killings between insurgents and surrendered insurgents, with tacit complicity of the government often referred as ‘secret killings’ in the press, created a virtual climate of terror in the public psyche. The early 2000s was a period of transitions and change. In 2001, the alliance government led by regional political party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was ousted and the government was formed by the oldest national party Indian National Congress as they won the majority of seats to the state assembly. Tarun Gogoi, who was a seasoned figure in national politics was selected as the new Chief Minister of Assam. Increasing accountability and expectations on the part of the public on the one hand, and a fresh approach on the part of the new government on the other, created the opportunity to bring about a much-needed processes of reform and development in the state. The first decade of the 2000s threw up its own challenges in the areas of governance, peace-building, socio-economic change and resistance from newer pressure groups to the government’s version of development. Although the central government then was led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the chief political rival of Congress, both the parties were largely on the same page when it came to the question of economic reforms. Both the parties created policies which opened the markets and led to greater private investment. The mass media sector was no exception in this regard.

Around 2003, a company named Positiv Television Private Limited started operating from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, which is often referred to as the gateway to the north-eastern region of India. In March 2004, the first satellite television news channel from the region, called *NETV* (North-East Television) was launched by Positiv Television Private

Limited. This television company was owned Matang Sinh, a politician from the Congress party who was elected as a member of the upper house of the Indian Parliament in 1992. He also served a term as a union minister of parliamentary affairs from 1994 to 1998. The managing director and chairperson of *NETV* was Manoranjana Sinh, a former journalist with leading national dailies like Indian Express and the Asian Age among other publications. Matang Singh, originally hailing from Tinsukia district is said to have made his fortune in the coal mining business in upper Assam. Believed to be close to former Chief Minister Hiteshwar Saikia, he often camped along with Congress MPs from Assam and soon moved to the close power circuit in the national capital. Having the keen instinct of a businessman, he developed access to even the Prime Minister's Office, or rather it would be more appropriate to say that he generated the impression of a very important man who was seen as close to the then scholarly Prime Minister Dr P.V. Narasimha Rao. So, when he was made a minister of parliamentary affairs in the Rao government, it raised quite a few eye-brows as he was virtually unknown in the national capital's political circles. The leading national magazine *India Today* ran the story with the sub headline "Matang who?". (Agha 1995). The soirees at Matang Sinh's Delhi residence attracted powerful bureaucrats, politicians and journalists. Talking about his influence, senior journalist from Assamese media, Manoj Goswami, recounts: '...almost illiterate, Matang Sinh was probably the most powerful among politicians from Assam who became minister in Delhi. Having influence in PMO and close to bureaucrats, he could place a Governor in some state, break state governments, transfer judges or threaten some senior minister or bureaucrat with CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), Income Tax Department...' (Goswami 2022, 25). He developed close networks with leading journalists from Delhi media like M.J. Akbar, Rajat Sharma, Mrityunjay Jha, Deepak Chaurasia and other senior editors from national dailies like Times of India and Hindustan Times. On the other, he hosted journalists from Assamese media who came to Delhi to cover political developments. However, Sinh curiously, was 'not a reliable source of news, because majority of his leads and information were motivated' (ibid, 26). Reportedly, he had a hand in giving wide coverage in the Delhi press about the multi crore rupees LOC (letter of credit) scam in the state veterinary department during the second term of AGP government in Assam which led to a soiling of Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta's image nationally (Bhuyan 2012, 119). However, Matang Sinh's manipulative ways earned him the wrath of his own party bosses, and he was suspended from the Congress for his anti-party activities in the year 2000. Curiously, despite falling out of favour within the Congress party after

he made disparaging comments about party president Sonia Gandhi, Singh continued to enjoy the privilege of Z-plus security cover, usually reserved for the most powerful people in India. When *NETV* was launched in 2004, the Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi was present as the chief guest in the inauguration of the channel.



Image 7.2: Manoranjana Sinh in an interaction with media post her fallout with Matang Sinh and NETV

Source: Screen grab, You Tube.

Manoranjana Gupta, was one among other journalists who was cultivated by Matang Sinh in Delhi. She was to marry Sinh later and her name Manoranjana Sinh became famous in Assam after the launch of *NETV*. Daughter of noted Delhi journalist and editor K. N. Gupta, she was earlier married briefly to an Assamese journalist named Shantanu Saikia who was arrested in 2010 by Delhi police in a corporate espionage case involving the Oil Ministry. During her stint with the *Asian Age*, Manoranjana used to work as the editor for the North-East edition of the national daily in Guwahati. After her union with Matang Sinh, she decided to start her own media ventures in Assam. She was *NETV*'s joint partner along with Matang Sinh. 'In 2003, the duo Matang and Manoranjana formed a company Positive Television Private Ltd. and launched North East Television which was regarded as a top-ranking news channel in the North-East, and had the licence for five more channels as well as four FM radio stations. The crown jewel was *NETV*, which reached 6.5 million

homes in the region. Dish TV and Tata Sky used to pay the company around Rs 70 lakh per annum to get the channel on their platform' (Business Standard, 2008). Thus, it could be inferred that *NETV* enjoyed complete monopoly in the initial phase (2004-2008) in the region's television market as it was the only satellite news channel in Assam then. An ambitious journalist turned media entrepreneur; it was actually Manoranjana Sinh who used to be the de facto boss at *NETV*. Her official position in the network was as its editor-in-chief, managing director and chairperson. Around the time *NETV* was launched, the channel's publicity hoardings were splashed all across the city of Guwahati which projected Manoranjana Sinh as a powerful lady and made her face recognisable in the public space. The tagline of the channel 'Follow the Leader' pitched Manoranjana Sinh and her network in the forefront as things in the broadcast media sector of the region. It can be said that she brought in a kind of rough professional Delhi energy to her channel's newsroom not seen usually in Assamese media. 'Her way of running the channel was like a thorough professional which is what is demanded of by the television news business. She was demanding and tough on the young and the senior recruits alike', says Ravindra Chauhan, a former news anchor at *NETV* (PI). Debajit Bhuyan, a senior journalist writes about his stint at *NETV* thus: 'I learnt professionalism from working with Manoranjana Sinh. There's a lot to learn from Manoranjana in TV journalism. I'll not comment on her personal life. But one thing is sure that she created ripples through her arrival across the journalistic fraternity of Assam...Although it's also that she couldn't use the power she generated. At times, the power of being the owner of the channel got to her head. Hence, there are many examples of her high-handedness with employees' (Bhuyan 2014, 19).

NETV in its initial phase of development was enjoying both popularity and influence across Assam and rest of north-east India. As it was then the only satellite news channel, the channel could justifiably claim to speak for the entire region because it was broadcasting news bulletins through the day in the various languages spoken in the region. It may not have matched the national news channels in terms of visual appeal and presentation, but nevertheless it could find a place in the mind of the viewers in the region in a multi-channel television environment. Beyond the region also, the channel developed a positive image for itself. In terms of reporting of issues, the conflict-prone region represented a plethora of challenges and opportunities for any media organisation as there was ample scope for coverage of issues related to insurgency, under-development, immigration, environment, substance abuse, politics, culture and society. Thus,

apparently, the channel seemed to encompass and provide a platform of expression to diverse voices of the region. However, the region referred to as 'north-east India' is one of the 'most complex in Asia, with over 200 ethnic groups and as many languages and dialects. Just this one characteristic makes governance under the standard administrative format developed from colonial times, extremely difficult because different local conditions demand different responses. Then there is the problem of insurgencies and militancy, seeking separation from India or greater rights or just recognition. There is migration, largely from Bangladesh, and cross-State movements from Bihar. Large populations are on the move, creating new faultlines in traditional societies' (Hazarika 2008, 44)

7.8. NETV and the contemporary field of socio-political forces

NETV, it seems, from the start had an undercurrent of friction with the media and the socio-political ecosystem of the state. For any media organisation, 'these relationships are often active negotiations and exchanges and sometimes conflicts, latent or actual' (McQuail 2010,280). When *NETV* was picking up tempo and finding a footing in the media space of the region, the government of Assam was gearing up to rectify the conflict torn image of the state by giving importance to development-oriented change and activities. In the 2006 Assembly elections, the Congress party came to power for the second time in the new millennium. Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi wanted display that he meant business by putting emphasis on development. In Gogoi's own words, his test was to 'change the mindset of a people mired in misery, persuading them to cast away gloom and belligerence and be more optimistic about the future. Equally hard would be to change the perception about the state among other people in other parts of India and the world. Brand Assam would have to be attractive, its resources inviting and its people enterprising. A change of image was essential' (Gogoi 2016, 69-70). How successful he was in this regard is another matter, but when the opportunity to host the National Games came to Assam in 2007, the government wanted to capitalize on the chance and prove that Assam was on its way to normalcy and progress. However, opposition to the decision to host the 33rd National Games came not from opposition parties but from the secessionist underground group ULFA which maintained that unless the long pending issues between the organisation and the central government is not resolved, they will continue to oppose such events initiated by Delhi. ULFA, in an e-mail message on November 18, 2006 declared their boycott call

of the 33rd National Games, with the political chief of the outfit Arabinda Rajkhowa asking sports persons of the country not to participate in the sporting event. He argued that New Delhi was 'imposing the National Games on the state' at a time when it was passing through trying times and made an appeal to all the players not to participate in the National Games so long as the Assam-India conflict was not resolved. It must be mentioned here that ULFA in the run up to the 33rd National Games in the state created a climate of fear in the state by continuing a spree of indiscriminate killings and attacks on security forces. In the circumstances, 'armed operations against ULFA intensified in Assam and a red alert was sounded across the state in the wake of its violent attacks by the militant group on non-Assamese people in Assam' (The Tribune, Jan 6, 2007).

However, the state government in the face of the boycott continued to maintain its stand to organize the sports event on schedule. This was helped by the fact that the boycott call by ULFA was met with strong resentment from different sections of society in Assam. Facing pressure, ULFA receded from its stand. Around this time, *NETV* broadcast a news story in its English and Assamese bulletins wherein it was indicated that the state government had entered into a behind the scenes deal with ULFA whereby the matter was settled. The story, which aired on January 27, 2007 'narrated that the state government had persuaded the ULFA through a company in Kolkata to keep silent during the National Games'. *NETV* drew strong reactions from both the government and the ULFA over the veracity of the story as both the parties denied the allegation that there was a 'hidden tie up' as reported in the channel. ULFA military wing chief Paresh Barua had asked *NETV* to submit proofs within a month that the organisation took money from the government and accordingly run a corollary corrective story. On the other, Chief Minister of the state, Tarun Gogoi had expressed that his government took the matter of *NETV*'s malicious reporting seriously and would file a case against the network in due course. In the face of such heat from a feared insurgent outfit and the government in power, Manoranjana Sinh took a bold stance by stating that her channel would stand by the concerned aired story and her channel would not bend to the imminent threat irrespective of the dangers to her life.

In 2007, just after the National Games were successfully held, a Press Council of India committee was designated for the purpose of assessing the ground situation of press freedom in Assam wherein the members took stock of the views and statements of

concerned journalists who faced threats of various kinds from the state and insurgents in pursuit of their duty. Formed by the Chairman, Press Council of India, Justice G.N. Ray, 'the Assessment Committee conducted an on-the-spot study of the state of freedom of the press in Assam, on March 26, 27 and 28, 2007. Comprising Shri Hiranmay Karlekar, Shri Sachidananda Murthy and Mr. Geetarth Pathak, the Committee held a formal inquiry at the State Government's circuit house on March 27, 2007. Among the deponents were Shri Dhirendranath Chakravarti, Editor, Dainik Asom (Assamese daily) who has been asked by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), to give up journalism. Shri Pranjal Sen Deka, son of Shri Kanak Sen Deka, editor of Agradoot (Assamese daily),' who had also 'been asked to quit journalism, also deposed, as did Shrimati Manoranjana Sinh, Chairperson and Managing Director of North-East Television (NETV)'. In the submitted interim report to the Council, 'the Committee asked *NETV* and others to submit details of the attacks and pressure exerted on them. However, *NETV* did not respond to the directions of Press Council of India. Although the Government of Assam responded after persuasion and pressure, it seems that incidents of violations of freedom of media are not controlled to the desired extent. ULFA is continuing its attack against the media persons. The ultra outfit also reportedly prepared a hit list of media persons who are critical of the outfit' (PCI Annual Report 2008, 106-108). In light of the threat issued by ULFA, the government provided security to senior editors like Kanak Sen Deka and Dhirendranath Chakravarti, while Manoranjana Sinh, had told the PCI committee she was provided security but that her correspondents were not. Instead, they were being coerced by the Government to resign. These two episodes, (the pressure exerted on Manoranjana and her subsequent submission before the PCI brought to the fore that Manoranjana was a bold and smart journalist and if occasion demanded she could hold to account the powers that be. Probably, behind the bold posture, there was also a calculative move to create some amount of leverage for her network higher in the media/journalistic echelon of the region and by extension in the local public sphere. In an atmosphere where freedom of reporters was restricted due to circumstantial situations, it showed resilience on the part of Sinh to back her channel's reporters. "We are anti-establishment and are popular among the viewers for our quality content," she said presciently in an interaction with financial publication *Business Standard* at a later date.

Majority of the population in Assam do not subscribe to the idea of secession from the Indian union as espoused by ULFA, but the political and economic issues related to

Assamese nationality raised by the outfit has resonance across different social and ethnic formations. As a result, in spite of the organization's declining appeal, ULFA continues to express unresolved ideological and identity issues between India and Assam. Specifically, the reason behind 'underlying sympathy for ULFA among the ethnic Assamese are the unresolved key issues that have been central to the legitimacy of government institutions in Assam' (Baruah 1999, 156). Different Assamese newspapers have articulated the concerns and issues raised by ULFA, and on occasions, have made images of heroes in the fashion of Robin Hood (Dutta, 2008). Local television channels too have relayed the underlying conflict between the state and ULFA, quite often in a dramatic way. Manoranjana Sinha, it seems, tried to espouse a brand of anti-establishment journalism a la *The Indian Express* by sticking to her own stand over the story that alleged implicit understanding between the state government and ULFA on the National Games event.

However, the episode of *NETV*'s tiff with the state government and ULFA probably reveals a deeper systemic arrangement in regional media across India. The promoter-editor duo of a relatively new regional satellite news channel like *NETV* in a state like Assam was an exception as most media owners historically were entrenched in the state's social elites which created its own complexities and challenges as the network was trying to develop a strong connect with the local public. For owners who were perceived as outsiders (in spite of both Sinha's Assam connection), it is often difficult to stitch that thread of commonality which usually binds a local media owner with the local public. Quite often across states, it has been seen that operating a media outlet in India's regional markets requires sensitivity, alertness and empathy on the part of the owners to the prevalent socio-political cross-currents developing and influencing different constituencies of the local polity. Without that response, media organisations often find it hard to develop and flourish. In the context of regional language newspapers in India, the following statement of Robin Jeffrey is illuminating: 'Although the strengths of Indian-language newspapers lie in their sensitive responses to their own peoples and cultures, the capitalists who control these papers have all-India, national visions and interests which their newspapers serve. The newspapers and their owners are like prisms: constantly catching beams from above and below and refracting them—interpreting India and the world to their region and their region to India and sometimes the world' (Jeffrey 2010, 183). Coming to Assam, it is also the case that the Assamese press, and by extension a regional satellite channel like *NETV* is pulled in two different directions: the region and the nation. But additionally, as a state

marred by insurgency, Assam's media face contradictory pulls; i.e., one of expressing national concerns and at the other end of giving space to anti-India rhetoric of the state's insurgents. But economic compulsions and national affiliations of the owners have stopped the press/media from calling for separate nationhood. Through its lifetime, *NETV* got mired in other messy issues which led to its ultimate downfall but first and foremost, the channel, it seems, failed to develop that special working relationship with different institutions in the very state in which it was based.

7.9 *NETV*: Market dynamics and its challenges

Running a television channel in a parched market like Assam and Northeast India entails its own sets of challenges as advertising is often limited. To thrive, television news channels must be able to create viewership and, in the process, attract advertisers. Political ownership may help in certain other dimensions and a free-to-air regional news channel like *NETV* from the start was almost entirely dependent on ad revenues for its sustenance and growth. Government advertisements usually has been the staple ad revenue for the press in an economically backward state like Assam. Advertising in the regional language media, especially newspapers began to grow by the 1980s as national advertisers realized the potential and importance of connecting with India's vast rural and small-town markets and readers. As readership increased with better circulation, newspapers in Assam saw immense growth in the 1990s. The socio-political turmoil the state was going through during the period also fed newspapers as readers lapped up the latest reports. With the entry of a regional satellite television channel into mass media system of the region, advertisers and media entrepreneurs saw possibilities and potentials for growth of their respective products among consumers. New players like Manoranjana Singh saw potential in the region as the market here was under-served. At the beginning of the new millennium, television's popularity was taking off and high-profile people across regions in India wanted to invest in the medium for varied reasons. Talking about the growth of media in north-east India in the new millennium, Singh had stated: 'There has been a phenomenal growth in the last 10 years. When I started, there was nothing except a few print media houses. I started *The Asian Age*, 2000, when national dailies hadn't yet started shop here. And later, I realised that the Northeast needs a TV station. I launched *NETV*, as I was passionate about television as a medium. Those were times when media was so slow here that it took a long time know what was going on right next to you. A lot of development

here, can be attributed to television' (Singha and Borbaruah 2013, 27). Though the numbers on the total television advertising in the region are not available, according to media industry estimates, Assam alone generated Rs 75 crore in a year in print advertising at the time *NETV* was picking up (Business Standard, 2013, *ibid*).

News channels in India are a genre which has very low viewership percentages as per television ratings. As a result, generally television news channels do not attract much advertisements in comparison to general entertainment channels. But 'advertising on news is generally lower priced than other genres and is a low-cost entry mechanism for people entering TV' (Mehta 2008, 165). Along with *NETV*, the couple of channels which opened in Assam around 2008 were only news and current affairs channels. So, in that sense, the entire advertising market for private satellite television media in Assam then composed of only news channels. At the same time, it meant that a major portion of advertising earmarked by the ad agencies for the mass media of the region got divided with the entry of a regional channel like *NETV*. Advertising meant for regional television market in Assam at the time almost exclusively went to *NETV*, keeping aside the share meant for Guwahati Doordarshan Kendra. During the time, television news channels in India were beginning to be affected by the global recession of 2008 as advertising gradually dried up and networks started investing in trivial and populist programming to stay afloat in the ratings. But ratings do not always lead to revenues so the revenue stream from advertising is absolutely crucial for news channels. Also, local news channels face another logjam in respect of subscription revenue. As the monetary contributions from millions of viewers never go to free to air news channels in the stipulated rate due to complications in the cable distribution process, channels run on a tight leash. *NETV*'s fortunes began to dip as it faced competition from newer entrants in the local market, apart from other internal factors which added to its woes. When *NETV* was growing in its initial years, viewership in the north-eastern region was not measured by TAM (Television Audience Measurement System), the agency then responsible for measuring viewership in India. Till '2005, vast areas like all the north-east states, Bihar and Kashmir were not represented' in the TAM system' (Mehta 2008, 181). Thus, technically, in terms of market impact and viewership data, the region was out of the ambit for the national satellite channels. But when *NETV* was becoming popular, advertisers took note. As per industry grapevine, *NETV* used to make 'about Rs 50 lakh to 60 lakh a month in advertising' (Business Standard, 2013) until competition began to come in from newer channels.

The Positiv Television Ltd. running *NETV* over time opened a general entertainment channel named NE-HiFi, and expanded beyond the north-east by opening channels like Focus TV, Hamar, HY TV and NE Bangla targeting the regions of Delhi, Jharkhand, Hyderabad, Bengal and Tripura respectively. That the company wanted to expand beyond Assam and north-east India pointed to ambitions of Matang Sinh and Manoranjana Sinh as entrepreneurs who were targeting small to middle range regional markets.

7.10 Conflict at the top

However, before Positiv Television media empire could take proper shape, conflict developed between Matang Sinh and Manoranjana Sinh over personal differences and marital issues. It gradually blew into a full-fledged business spat and things came to such a pass that Manoranjana, who was the driving force of the channel was ousted not only from her official position but fully removed from the company's board. The Guwahati based English tabloid weekly, *G Plus* reported: '...after 2007-08 a major rift occurred between the couple and it spilled onto the public domain...Manoranjana Sinh wrote to the ministry of corporate affairs, and information and broadcasting, alleging that she was illegally ousted from the board of Positiv Television. The issue came to light when an advertisement in a Guwahati daily said that she had been removed from the capacity of director in the company' (Chanda 2015). In the letter addressed to the government ministries, Manoranjana dismissed the notice and termed it as inconsequential as it was issued by a vice-president who was her subordinate in the company. She further alleged that Matang Sinh fraudulently bloated the equity base of the company, which helped him borrow Rs. 195 crores from banks. She had added in the letter, that the figure was way beyond what the company required to give shape to its business plans. The company's current turnover, her letters indicated, was just around Rs. 5 crores. Matang Sinh issued rejoinders to the press where he stated that all procedures were duly followed when his wife was removed from the board. According to Matang Sinh, Manoranjana Sinh was removed because she was disrupting the functioning of the news channel. Subsequently, both Manoranjana and Matang filed court cases against each other and separated. The acrimony signalled the end of the Sinh's partnership and association with *NETV*. At the time of Manoranjana Sinh's departure, it was reported that Matang Sinh owned 'almost 90 per cent in Positiv Television, while the rest was with his wife. The two had started the company as 50:50 partners some years back. Matang Sinh said his wife's stake in the

company was brought with the money given by him. All subsequent changes in shareholding are above board and the registrar of companies has always been kept in the loop, he added' (Business Standard, 2008).

The conflict did not seem to have an immediate effect on the health of the *NETV* network. Its 'journalists and staff at that time in Guwahati and Noida' expressed that 'the spat between the two had not impacted the functioning of the company.' (Business Standard, *ibid*) According to insiders in Positiv TV, the Sinhs had raised huge loans from banks to set up their broadcast business which they were finding unable to repay (G Plus, *ibid*). While the TV business flourished initially, it began incurring losses as competition mounted in subsequent years. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) reportedly was often vocal about the financial irregularities of the channel. The ED and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in 2011 in fact raided the offices and residence of Matang Sinh. Simultaneous raids were also conducted at Sinh's Gole Market residence in New Delhi and the offices of *NETV* in Noida and Guwahati. The raids were based on complaints of financial irregularities and money laundering against Sinh and his media companies. Sinh brushed aside the complaints saying they were triggered by personal and family rivalries (Daijiworld.com, 2011).

7.11 Post conflict scenario of *NETV*

Post the conflict with Manoranjana Sinh, Matang Sinh did try to sort out the plaguing issues of the network company as a whole. For a brief while Matang Singh struck a deal with the publishers of leading Assamese daily Asomiya Pratidin (Sadin-Pratidin Group) and the channel took on a new name on air as *NETV-Pratidin*. The arrangement was not long lasting as Jayanta Baruah, the owner of Sadin-Pratidin Group had his own ambitions in regard to develop an Assamese satellite television news channel with its unique identity just like his daily broadsheet. Matang Sinh, meanwhile, attempted to revamped the channel with new investors. Speculations were rife then in market and media networks that Naveen Jindal, MP from Kurukshetra, Haryana, and Chairman of Jindal Steel and Power Ltd (JSPL) was reportedly eyeing or discussing buying a majority stake in *NETV* through his family and associates (Exchange4media, 2013). Although, *NETV*'s new arrangement with the corporate group Jindal was never announced publicly, Positiv Television network's channels took on a new epithet 'Focus', and *NETV* came to be known as Focus NE. Post this deal, *NETV* recruited senior journalists with experience in both print and electronic

media in editorial positions, and brought Matang's brother Rupinder Singh to oversee matters. Among the senior journalists from Assamese media who came in as editors to the channel included Ajit Bhuyan, Manjit Mahanta and Atanu Bhuyan. Atanu Bhuyan, who had previous knowledge of Sinh's influence and reach, came on board in 2012 as the editor of the sister channel of the company called NEHiFi with an implicit understanding with the owner that he would be mostly looking into functioning of the news channel. Manjit Mahanta was the editor of *NETV*. By Atanu Bhuyan's own account Sinh reportedly told that *NETV* is going to be given a new shape and direction and Bhuyan must help in its planned uplift as the new investor is powerful and there will be no dearth of resources. Bhuyan's inference from the initial discussions he had with Sinh and the new CEO of *NETV* Chetan Sharma was that a large share of *NETV* has been sold off (Bhuyan 2015, 128).



Image 7.3: Atanu Bhuyan in a talk show on NETV

Source: Screen grab, You Tube

As per Bhuyan, who spent couple of years in the channel before its closure, the journalists at *NETV* lacked leadership and he tried to inject some much-needed enthusiasm into its staff. The technical set-up and aspects of the channel like its studio were not up-to-date, and *NETV* was the only channel in Assam where there was no online graphics. In spite of these limitations, the channel was making its way due to the drive and energy of its staff.

and broke some stories like the revelation of the identity of the ULFA (I)'s chairman Abhijit Asom.

The fact that a big corporate group like Jindal had bought majority stakes in the Positiv Television Limited ideally should have secured *NETV*'s fortunes. However, there were more things to the development than met the eye. Naveen Jindal, apart from being scion of the Jindal empire, was also a Congress MP. Tarun Gogoi's government then was facing an internal turmoil as one of the powerful ministers in his cabinet, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma was having continuous differences with the party leadership. Sharma's wife, Mrs. Riniki Bhuyan Sharma was a successful entrepreneur and her media company Pride East Entertainments Private Limited ran the sleekest Assamese satellite news channel in town called *News Live*. Strategically, in the situation, the channel proved to be a boon for Dr Himanta Biswa Sharma, which often was seen as pro-government. The rancour deepened between Gogoi and Sharma, and it was reflected in the media as both began to criticise each other in public. At a time when the political temperature in the state was flaring up with the ruling party going in two different directions, it was an exciting time for any political journalist covering the developments. While Himanta Biswa Sharma had a news channel to advance his cause when occasion demanded, other politicians whether of the ruling party or the opposition had no such immediate access to any of the other channels. *NETV*'s coverage of issues in those days was pretty plain as the network was functioning within limitations. Atanu Bhuyan, who had a reputation and knack for reading the popular pulse of viewers tried to jazz things up at *NETV*. Bhuyan, in his tell-all book on Assamese television channels, *TRP* writes that a minister in the government revealed to him that Naveen Jindal and the Chief Minister of the state, Tarun Gogoi had an understanding about the tone of coverage to be followed by *NETV* (ibid, 130-131). Being a senior journalist, Bhuyan had deep network in the political capital of Dispur, and *NETV* constantly flashed latest developments in the power struggle between Gogoi and Sharma before other channels. Bhuyan's career as a journalist almost runs parallel to Himanta Biswa Sharma as both are contemporaries, while he had very limited interactions with Gogoi who was their senior by decades. When *NETV* aired an interview with Sharma during that phase, Bhuyan was told by the CEO of the channel not to anymore give space to Himanta Biswa Sharma on *NETV* and that the Chief minister himself had a talk with Naveen Jindal regarding this. 'I became cautious. Even when I happened to have prior intelligence about the developments, I abstained from telecasting them. I didn't want to antagonise Tarun

Gogoi again’, acknowledges Bhuyan in his book (ibid, 130). Clearly it appears that Gogoi wanted to use *NETV* in the battle of perceptions with Sharma, his once protégé.

However, to the detriment of the channel, *NETV* was losing out in the ratings battle with other newer channels like *News Live*. According to a former anchor-journalist at *NETV*, ‘The control from Noida increased and even stories prepared there began to be sent to the channel.’ (PI, Ravindra Chauhan, Anchor-Journalist).

7.12 The *NETV* story: A missed opportunity

To conclude the discussion on *NETV*, the following issues can be surmised to be acting as obstructions in the proper functioning of the news channel, which led to its ultimate closure. They are discussed in brief under the following heads in brief.

Management issues: The personal conflict between the two owners spilled out into the professional and management space which obviously affected the morale and spirit of the staff, and that led to its gradual decline.

Technological lag: The technical set-up and infrastructure of the channel were somewhat becoming outdated which did not keep track with the fast changes in the operation and technology of satellite television news broadcast in the region and the country. Apparently, it was the staff’s energy and talent alone which somehow kept up the show running for the first news channel of the region.

Competition from other new channels: Assam, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, had an evolving sections of consumer class of its population which was waiting to be engulfed with satellite television news in the main regional language like in other parts of the country. In that sense, *NETV* had the first entrant advantage which it exploited in the initial years of its operation, but soon faced tough competition from the then new Assamese satellite news channels (*News Live* and *DY365*) with a more attractive and cutting-edge presentation of the local realities.

Financial issues: With the fragmentation and competition in the market, it seems, *NETV* soon saw its advertising revenue affected adversely. Additionally, corruption charges on the owners over diverting money through shady means with certain business organisations

created a cloud of uncertainty over the financial state of the channel. virtual allegations and counter-allegations

Societal disconnect: The owners of the channel, Matan Sinh and Manoranjana Sinh, although Punjabis, had an Assam connection before they jointly decided to launch NETV as described before. But they were increasingly seen as outsiders by the social elite and opinion leaders of the state, as they were perceived to be purely business-minded without any connection to the soil and culture of the state. Whether it was real or not is a different matter, but this obviously painted their media outlet in a negative light in the court of public opinion of the state. Moreover, reportedly, the owners did not have the best of terms with the then Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi. No wonder, the second private satellite Assamese news channel of the state, News Live, on the other hand, came to be widely perceived as pro-establishment as the owner of the channel, Riniki Bhuyan Sharma was the wife of one of the most powerful ministers in the then Gogoi government.

When the Verghese Committee, formed in 1977 by the Government of India for the purpose of working out the modalities of autonomy for Doordashan and All India Radio, visited Assam for inputs, its members met Dr Bhupen Hazarika, the cultural icon and ambassador of the region. Dr Hazarika, who had done his PhD in mass communication at Columbia University, in an editorial of a publication, documented the experience in the following words: ‘...If the life patterns of this region is telecasted by other stations of India, its culture will get public visibility. At least, India will get to know that India does not end in its east direction in Calcutta itself...I criticised the deprivation of the north-eastern region from the satellite programmes. Because the inclusion of north-east within SITE is a scientific truth. This editor also told the Verghese Committee that the reason of this state of affairs is due to the absence of leadership in the east (Hazarika 1993, 50-51). NETV was a missed opportunity in this broader sense too, because a single satellite news channel covering news and current affairs in almost all the important connecting languages of the north-eastern states was a novel experiment. The public service state broadcaster *Doordarshan* (DD) had its regional networks for each of the states, yet each regions had its own subjects for broadcast, and the *DD North-East* channel which was dedicated to some common programming for the north-east region as a whole had not really evolved into a popular choice for the audiences in the satellite television age. In the circumstances, NETV could have been a viable alternative, had it not found itself engulfed by the issues

outlined above. More importantly, the channel could have worked as a mouthpiece for the collective concerns of the people of north-east India as a whole.

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