

# **Evolution of Assamese News Media: Origin, Processes and Trends**

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## **CHAPTER-VIII**

### **Origin and evolution of Assamese News Media: Conclusion and Key Findings**

This study has attempted to trace the evolution of the Assamese news media through identification of the key early stages in its emergence and development, and in the process, have described and analysed the emerging processes, institutions and the individuals involved in a socio-historical framework. While doing so, the study has tried to provide a contextual analysis of Assamese news media in the backdrop of its pre-print traditions, developing print news cultures and satellite television news.

#### **8.1 Pre-print media and communication cultures as sites of news and information**

A preliminary examination of the transport and communications system of the state in the medieval and the colonial period was attempted which pointed towards the varied physical and water ways through which ideas and knowledge must have travelled. The assessment showed the region's historical connection with distant regions of the Indian subcontinent and the South Asia in general, and indicated the composite nature of the culture and people of Assam. In the context, an enquiry into the pre-print communication traditions from an information centric perspective revealed that news and knowledge was exchanged through the certain oral and written forms of media in different epochs in the history of Assam. Accordingly, a classification of the different communication and media of the pre-print period as sites of news and information was attempted. The exercise revealed that indeed different forms of oral and written media existed at different stages in Assam's past history. Each of the communication practices and types of written media were implicated in the power structures of their respective eras, and revealed the politics of the users and their resonance and probable impact. Assamese news and information culture has a pre-print background in the sense that varied oral and written communication traditions and practices informed the social interactions over centuries

#### **8.2 Modern press as a corollary of colonial administration**

As is well known, it is under religious patronage (Baruah et al. 1999, 39-47) that the modern press took off in Assam in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Religious institutions

and forces which played a pivotal role in the formation of the first newspapers in the Assamese language, *Orunodoi* and *Assam Bilasinee* respectively, came from both exogenous and endogenous sources. But, both the Assam Mission of the American Baptists and the Auniati Sattrā of Majuli, operated under a colonial regime and their publications were primarily newspapers with a religious orientation which operated as mouthpieces of their respective institutions, and published limited news of local concerns. Both the pioneering Assamese monthly newspapers were in this sense were pliant and loyalist papers of the foreign regime as analysed in the concerned chapter of this study.

### **8.3 The idea and concept of modern news and a newspaper consolidated**

Among the two newspapers, *Orunodoi* was instrumental in the development and diffusion of the concept of news in the local readers' minds as the diverse news items from far and near were edited with the idiom and form of the modern newspaper narratives prevalent then. As Rev. A.K. Gurney (Gurney 1887, 127) who served as one of the editors of *Orunodoi* in its lifetime stated: 'A newspaper should be started, both secular and religious, giving the news of the religious world in India. Its special aim should be to interest and instruct the Christians on church matters. It should not be wholly devoted to the heathen, but largely if not mostly to the Christians' (). In this respect, *Orunodoi* was a success as the newspaper developed a resonance and connect among the local populace beyond its religious messaging.

### **8.4 The politics of the early Assamese press**

The ownership of the Assamese press since its inception have been driven largely by influential institutions and individuals of the society. The first phase of its development in the nineteenth century, characterised by the monthly press ran by the two leading religious institutions of its day, is the first instance in this regard. As the analysis of select news stories in *Orunodoi* and *Assam Bilasinee* demonstrated, both the publications were mindful of the social and caste hierarchies of its time. Thus, looking at this process, the role of the two newspapers were not progressive in terms of disseminating an egalitarian worldview to the readers, considering the usual view of looking at the press as a liberal agent of modernity. The modernity consisted, in this case, more so in the apparatus of the modern press rather than in the value system it upheld and communicated. *Orunodoi*, in this dimension, had a more positive social effect, as it published a series of articles on general

knowledge, geography, science, astronomy, history, and world events, albeit part of its editorial strategy of liberating the local people of its age-old superstitions and sensitising their minds towards important contemporary developments.

### **8.5 Language, nationalism and the early Assamese press**

As a state and region which have faced language controversies in the past, the important function fulfilled by the Assamese press, during the initial period of its development, have been in the direction of providing a common print standard for the language which had been functioning as the lingua franca of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. In this sense, the Assamese press, led by *Orunodoi* and the subsequent publications of the nineteenth century laid the foundation for the modern Assamese nation as it imagined a common readership across the Brahmaputra valley, and in turn, readers belonging to different ethnic proclivities, began to conceptualise themselves to be part of that same 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2015).

### **8.6 Emergence of a local print-elite section**

As the needs and requirements of the masses of the people living in Assam changed in the transition from the mediaeval feudal system to a British colony in the eastern part of the country, education and trade formed the twin gateways towards a sustainable livelihood. As a result, an incipient middle class took root in the period of British consolidation in the region, who sought to find security in the prevailing system. Part of a section of the local gentlemen, educated in the then capital Calcutta, developed a faith and love for the printed word, and by extension for newspapers and periodicals as a means of education and information. Meanwhile, sections of the earlier ruling gentry were already initiated into Bengali and other language periodicals and newspapers from the time newspapers in that neighbouring province developed in the early nineteenth century.

Beginning in the 1870s through the 1880s, educated middle class individuals, having the means and resources, began to bring out newspapers and periodicals reflecting different socio-cultural cross-currents. These individuals and groups ranged from government servants, intellectuals, native associations and formations, and student groups which led the way in this regard by starting periodicals and papers. Although almost none of the periodicals developed into modern newspapers per se, an incipient print culture took root

as they began to appreciate and value the new media for instruction, discussion and diversion. This added to the process of the education and refinement of the local populace as western education at the school level gradually developed.

### **8.7 The early Assamese press and the larger socio-political issues**

However, urgent issues like the agrarian distress, tea estate labour conditions and wide scale taxations by the colonial government affecting the large masses of the illiterate population of the province found little reflection in the local press managed by the middle class literati. Meanwhile papers from Bengal and beyond to an extent reported these developments which led to debates and repercussions in the provincial legislatures and British assemblies. In the event, the local peasant class led a series of public assemblies and protests known as 'raij mels' against the colonial government from the 1860s to the 1890s, while middle class associations emerged to mediate on public issues with the government. The period saw the pioneering Assamese literary magazines *Jonaki* and *Bijuli*, and as such reflected on the distance between the larger public issues and the middle class literary public sphere. However, the literary periodicals played a pivotal role in developing a modern literature in the Assamese language.

### **8.8 The early Assamese press: An example of a provincial weekly newspaper culture in colonial India**

On the other hand, true mass-based Assamese newspapers did not develop for a long time as the press struggled to find a strong foothold due to a variety of factors like limitations in market, advertising revenue, literacy, and other development indicators in the socio-economic structure of the society. For decades, from the late nineteenth century to the first three decades of the twentieth century, all the Assamese newspapers were weeklies. These papers, often bi-lingual (Assamese and English) in nature, indicates that the publications, run by influential middle class individuals, served as a bridge between the foreign government and the local population, and formed a part of the public sphere circumscribed by the colonial state. As a result, one can say that a weekly newspaper culture served the region's needs for a long time. Often the Assamese middle class, historically, it must be remembered followed the trends in Bengal in matters of literature and culture. In this regard, it seems, the evolving Assamese weekly newspaper culture followed the lead of the striking weekly press culture of Bengal. As the noted British journalist of the colonial

era India, Pat Lovett (Lovett 1926, 36) commented: ‘The weekly press of Bengal is a distinguishing feature of Anglo-Indian journalism in Calcutta, for nothing approaching its distinction and power exists in any other city of India’.

### **8.9 Assamese newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century: Political developments and the press**

Political developments like the Partition of Bengal and Swadeshi movement at the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century brought about immediate activity and discussions among the leading members of the local middle class. Organisation of middle class associations and public opinion came into the forefront as the interests of the evolving Assamese identity were to be adversely affected in the new political arrangement of the Bengal partition. The local newspaper press was particularly very limited in influence and quantity at that moment, as there was only one Assamese newspaper. In the circumstances, the Bengali papers circulating in Assam had an influence as they were more forthright in presentation of political issues affecting the interests of the large segments of the subject population. The gradual measures taken towards self-government by the government along with the Swadeshi movement also added to the new verve in the public psyche.

The greater impact and spread of the national mass movement under the Congress in the second and third decades of the twentieth century regenerated the patriotism and anti-colonial sentiments of the people of Assam. The developments favoured the gradual emergence of local language newspapers as a market and space for readership was created through the aspiration for swaraj in the public mind through the dynamic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. As the younger lot of the Assamese students led the way locally in this regard, the conservative middle class body, the Assam Association merged into the Congress. The period saw the emergence of the first truly nationalist Assamese newspapers which were *Assam Bilasinee* (1913-1924) and *Asamiya* which reflected the symbiosis between concerns of Indian nationalism with Assamese nationalism.

### **8.10 In search of a daily: challenges and quandaries of the Assamese press**

The press in Assam struggled for almost hundred years to get the first Assamese daily. The important political developments of the early decades of the twentieth century in

Assam led the stakeholders of the press in the state to consider seriously the scope and avenue for a reliable daily press. *Dainik Batori*, the first Assamese daily, first published 1935, and owned and edited by tea planter Siva Prasad Baruah survived only for around a year. Limited circulation, increasing expenditure and an oppositional stance to the nation-wide movement for independence did not really help the paper although it tried to have the feel of an updated paper with subscriptions to wire services (Borua et al. 1997, 133-134). *Dainik Asamiya*, the second notable Assamese daily was published for just three years before closing in 1949.

### **8.11 Readership base of the early Assamese press: affordances and constraints**

A key recurring pattern found in this study is the underdevelopment of a readership and subscriber base for Assamese newspapers. As mentioned in the chapters where concerned, the issue plagued the Assamese literary magazines as well as the weekly newspaper press of the period covered in the study. In this regard, it has been found that the Assamese press continued to struggle in the first hundred years of its existence to find a stable and reliable reader-subscriber base. The reasons can be listed as socio-economic underdevelopment, lack of proper distribution and communications facilities and inadequate expansion of the market system as a whole which worked as barriers towards development of an adequate reader base. Although, literary magazines like *Awahon* and *Ramdhenu* had wide influence in the literary field, circulation or profit wise the picture was not very encouraging (Bhagawati, 1998). The editor of *Dainik Asamiya* in a note to the readers in its final issue commented: ‘Feeling the absence of daily newspapers in Assam, and receiving encouragement from public, after spending considerable capital, we dedicated *Dainik Asamiya* to the readers. But alas even in its fourth year, in the absence of expected reception from public, we are closing the paper...’ (Bhagawati, 1998). The trend can probably be interpreted, at least, in couple of ways: limited diffusion of print culture among masses, and a general underlying pattern of a pre-dominantly oral culture of an older society, where newspapers had limited readership and information and news from papers and elsewhere disseminated through oral means.

### **8.12 Beginning of broadcast news in the Assamese language**

Assamese language programming in the broadcast media space saw its genesis during the second World War through brief radio programmes from Calcutta. On the other hand,

Assamese news through radio and television were introduced at the time of the opening of the regional stations of All India Radio and Doordarshan respectively after the independence of the country. Meanwhile, the impact and circulation of Assamese newspapers saw a spurt through the 1980s and 1990s as the tense and disturbed political environment created a readership, along with other related and necessary improvements. The early 2000s seemed to be an exciting new time for the local news media in general as readership continued to develop for the Assamese press. The beginning of the twenty-first century also saw the emergence of satellite television news channels in the Assamese language as the market for satellite television burgeoned under general economic climate led by liberalization policies. In the circumstances, *NETV*, the first private satellite news channel broadcasting news and current affairs programming started its operations from Guwahati. Owned by a politician with his journalist tuned media entrepreneur wife, the channel made a headway in the local and regional market as it was the only satellite channel. Competition from other channels which came up in a few years' time, and internal mismanagement along with corruption charges against the owners ultimately led to the channel's downfall.

### **8.13 Further Scope of the study**

The study conducted has only looked at the initial impulses and developments in the history of Assamese news media. The study needs to be complemented with textual and audience studies in the domain of Assamese news media which will go a long way in fulfilling and enriching media studies of the region. In the sphere of Assamese newspapers, especially the increasing circulation and impact from the 1980s and 1990s needs to be studied in depth. On the other hand, the phenomenon of satellite television news channels since the early 2000s needs a thorough investigation for their implications socially and journalistically. The current trends in digital news media of the region is another area in Assamese news which needs exploration.



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