

CHAPTER-I

Introduction: Origin of Assamese News Media

Many people, starting from older versions of society, have seen the growth of modern communications not as an expansion of men's powers to learn and to exchange ideas and experiences, but as a new method of government or a new opportunity for trade.

(Williams 1966, 1-2)

1.1 Background of the study

1.1.1 News Media in Assam

In the north-eastern part of the India, Assam has a unique and distinctive tradition in the sphere of news media which developed out of the specific processes of encounter and interplay between historical circumstances, institutions and individuals. 'News media' in the modern sense of the term in the Assamese language arrived in the province via the efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries and their monthly paper *Orunodoi* in the year 1846. The second monthly *Assam Bilasinee* which came out in the year 1871 was, however, the first publication that was brought out through a local initiative. Result of the pioneering effort on the part of the visionary abbot, Sri Duttadev Goswami of the Auniati Sattrra of Majuli, *Assam Bilasinee* provided an early indication of the drive and vision in co-opting the technology of print by leading members of the Assamese society. Thus, in the first phase of the development of the news media in the state, like in many other parts of India, it is chiefly the religious forces and controversies under a colonial regime which shaped the nature and character of the periodicals and newspapers. In this context, the role played by *Orunodoi* was significant as the missionary monthly transcended its propaganda role, and broadened the mental horizon of the readers across the province by enlightening and ushering in new ideas and knowledge. This development however, did not entirely originate in altruistic motives as the contents of the monthly was carefully edited by missionaries like Nathan Brown to fit in with their proselytizing objectives. The 'civilizing' goals of the American Baptist Missionaries was the key factor in this regard as they wanted to make inroads to the hearts and minds of the local readers in the common language, and thereby create a more responsive field for the reception of the main tenets

of Christianity. For the purpose, they had already translated the Bible into Assamese and opened schools where instruction was carried out in the vernacular.

1.2 Society in Assam and the Assamese language

The society in Assam was an admixture of different ethnic communities, apart from caste Hindus in the fold, whose needs over centuries, contributed to the emergence of a common language serving the needs of the administration and the populace at large. The common spoken language which developed out of the socio-cultural interactions between the communities (all of whom had their own languages) in the course and influence of different forces was generally referred to as the 'desi bhasha'. This common language got a boost from the neo-Vaishnavite movement in the medieval era because the core ideas of the movement were communicated in the literary Brajavali language which liberally infused elements from the speech of the commoners belonging to different ethnicities. On the other hand, the needs of the long six-hundred-year rule (1228-1826) of the Ahom dynasty also served to make the common speech a part of the administrative apparatus, and thus contributed to the greater circulation and acceptance of a common speech across the Brahmaputra valley.

However, with decadence of the Ahom regime from the late eighteenth century, and the consolidation of British rule in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the region, this common spoken language faced challenges in the absence of patronage and prestige. The British administration initially made this common 'bhasha' the language of its administration but soon opted for Bengali as it better served their administrative processes. Also, the fact that adequate number of staff and clerks were not available locally also forced the government to bring in officials from Bengal who were more used to the functioning of the colonial government. The local elite and gentry were already prone to be under the influence of Bengali language and culture generally, and as such the common speech of the valley further went into neglect during the period. Additionally, in the primary schools which were started by the government Bengali textbooks became the norm, and gradually apprehensions emerged in the mind of the public about the fate of their common spoken language in the prevailing circumstances.

1.3 The Baptist Missionaries and the Assamese language

The Baptist Missionaries who worked in Assam and North-East India were learned men, and Nathan Brown, who led the initiative in starting *Orunodoi* was a noted linguist who appreciated the variety of tongues found in the region. As Brown spent some time in the province, he came to understand the independent character of the common language of the valley, and valued ‘its open, agreeable vocalization, its picturesque Sanskritic characters, its quaint inflexious idioms’ (Brown et al.1890, 416). Brown, in particular, it seems, saw the impending doom for the local common tongue in the evolving atmosphere and warned everyone concerned. In such a context, the decision of the American Baptist Mission at Sivasagar to use the ‘desi bhasha’ for its monthly periodical is very significant as it ushered in a print standard for it, and brought it again into reckoning in a new social order under British rule.

As the controversy about granting official status to the common spoken language of the province rose from the early 1850s, the term ‘Ahamiya’ or ‘Asamiya’ entered the official and literary discourse to stand for the lingua franca of the region. Accordingly, the term ‘Assamese’ came to be applied to refer and describe the common spoken language of the Brahmaputra valley. In building pressure on the government to reinstate Assamese as the language of courts and education, the Baptist missionaries worked in tandem with the leading lights of the local society like Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan. The British colonial establishment, if it wished, could have continued with Bengali in the courts and administration, but it cannot be ruled out that they too ‘probably felt a need to patronize Assamese language and culture as a mark of respect to the very region they had annexed for their own political and economic interests’ (Oza et al. 2011, 169). Irrespective, under the circumstances, Assamese of the variety spoken in Sivasagar, where the American Baptists were based, became the basis for the print standard of the language, and as a consequence of the first newspapers or monthlies also which targeted a general mass readership.

1.4 The Assamese middle class and the press

In the subsequent stage of the development of the Assamese press in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, different social, cultural and political cross-currents influenced the trajectory of the newspapers and periodicals. As a regional and middle class

developed under a colonial government through education and exposure in Calcutta, emergent members of the class started publishing periodicals, magazines and journals with literary, cultural and other social orientations which largely sought to disseminate useful knowledge combined with articles and commentaries. As the prominent Assamese author Nagen Saikia points out: ‘the history of the period of fifty years from the publication of *Orunodoi* (1846-1880) to that of *Jonaki* (1889-1903) is not just the history of birth and growth of newspapers and journals in Assamese; it is the history of growth and development to maturity of modern Assamese mind and modern Assamese language and literature as well.’ (Saikia, 2007).

1.5. Post *Orunodoi* phase in Assamese newspapers

Few of the noted papers or publications which were published in the post *Orunodoi* phase include *Assam Deepak*, *Assam Tara*, *Chandrodaya*, *Assam Darpan*, *Gyanodaya*, *Goalpara Hitasadhini*, *Assam News*, *Assam Bandhu*, *Assam*, *Mau*, *Jonaki*, and *Assam Bonti*. Amongst these, the three bi-lingual (Assamese and English) weekly newspapers, namely *Assam News*, *Assam* and *Assam Bonti* actually mark the passage or course of news media in the state at this stage. They served as a kind of bridge between the government and the public whereby the grievances of the public were expressed and discussed, backed and edited as they were noted personalities of the society. Concurrently, the period also witnessed the expression and organization of public opinion through associations like ryot sabhas, sarbajanik sabhas and raj mels. In this period, the literary and political public spheres were separate and did not converge adequately to form a strong fourth estate. However, with the development and influence of the anti-colonial movement in the country, the Assamese press too came to the forefront in a robust manner to question the powers that be. In the twentieth century Assamese journalism continued its role as a social and cultural force, developing and shaping Assamese language and literature, while providing news. For most of twentieth century, Assam had very few daily newspapers and weeklies. However, improvements in technology, significant socio-political changes and an expanding middle class contributed to a growing number of newspapers and magazines in the 1980s.

1.6 Assamese media in the age of globalization

Journalism in India is witnessing interesting changes in terms of media ownership, production, practice and consumption in the last two decades. These changes have taken place because of shifts in economic policy in the form liberalization in the wake of globalization in the early 1990s. In 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 et al. 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* in 2003 which is pan north-east in its viewership ambitions. But with significant implications for print media in the state, most leading vernacular dailies including the most popular and highest circulated, *Asomiya Pratidin* have shown decrease in readership lately (Thakuria, 2011). Amongst other factors, this can be attributed to the growth of regional television news channels in the last ten years or so (since the launch of *NETV* in 2003). In the last ten years, the number of private satellite television news channels broadcasting news and current affairs programming in Assamese has risen dramatically. Today there are around eight to nine round the clock news channels operating in Assam catering to a population of over 30 million. Thus, in a relatively limited period of time it has become an increasingly crowded and multi-channel environment. Amongst them *News Live* and *DY365* initially became particularly popular and as a result often set the news agenda. Subsequently, a number of other channels have also become popular and influential like *Prag News* and *Pratidin Time*. However, survival and growth for these channels is a tough task as their business model is entirely dependent on advertising revenue. Nava Thakuria, secretary of the Journalists Forum of Assam (JFA) points out that “there are seven news channels and all of them are free-to-air. They may have fared better if they had expanded their coverage to include news from elsewhere in the region but all of them are just Assam-specific and there’s not enough generation of advertisement revenue” (Outlook Magazine, Mar 03, 2014).

In spite of these challenges the growth of television news has important implications for the larger media culture and industry of the state. Assam represents a fairly diverse public sphere and is an emergent regional mediasphere which demands critical attention in a time

of rapid regionalization and localization by global media organisations. In many ways the emergence of television news both nationally and regionally has important implications for democracy. With the growth of news television across India in many languages, it is seemingly adding to the diversity and multitude of viewpoints and perspectives on issues. Indian media academic Vibodh Parthasarathi highlights that current news television in India reflects two tendencies: ‘of sameness and of breaks with sameness’ which constitute the ‘crisis of content’ (Parthasarathi, 2012). He goes on to add that this indicates deeper fractures in the structure of the business model of television news in India. Opaque promoters, irregularities in viewership ratings and politically affiliated owners are a reality both in the case of national, regional and sub-regional television news business. Assam is no exception in this regard as can be seen from the ownership trends of Assamese television news networks. On the other, in a different light, television news has opened up a new space for debate and discussion in Assam’s social and political life. Indeed, “politics now passes through a mediated arena and the media create a new kind of publicness that is de-spatialised, non-dialogical and received in settings spatially and temporally remote from the original context of production (Thompson et al. 1995, 82-84). On the flipside, launching of media outlets, either newspapers or television or radio channels has become a matter of investment choice rather than any ideological drive (Anbarasan, 2013). It seems, in an economic environment where media is a profitable business, sections from politicians, corporate houses and owners of other media have made a beeline to join the television business to exercise influence and garner profit in many directions.

1.7 Research question

Studies of the development of the Assamese news media has largely confined itself to an analysis of the state’s print media along conventional historiographies where the emphasis is usually on the chronological development of individual publications (See Saikia ed. 1997, Borua, 1997, Baruah, 1999). More importantly, there is a lack of studies which provides a connected and integrated account of the development of Assamese newspapers, press and other media. In addition, there is a lacuna in terms of looking at the evolution of the news media in the state from a broader communication and media theory perspectives. Also, the communication and media cultures and practices of the region, if taken along with mass media, forms an intricate universe of older and newer media. The present study, therefore, aims to identify and analyze the origin and development of news in the

Assamese language from its pre-print manifestations, key early newspapers and finally to developments in the arena of satellite television news in the new millennium. A moot question in this regard is to enquire the nature of the forces, individuals and historical circumstances which have influenced and shaped the contours and context of Assamese news media. In this regard, a systematic attempt has been made to study the emergence and development of the Assamese news media in the colonial period through a study of the context, forces, and individuals propelling their trajectory. All in all, these are developments which need study and enquiry through a socio-historic frame work and critical media theory.

1.8. Significance and rationale of the study

The Assamese mass media in general is an under studied area of research. The news media and press component of the state has grown and evolved in the last hundred and seventy odd years and now has a presence in all the types of media from print, audio-visual and digital. In the light of this trajectory, it has become necessary to look at its origin, development and growth with renewed interest and new perspectives, so as to better understand its nature and journey. It is also needed from another perspective since most of the noted studies so far has dwelled on the developments in Assamese press in either simple chronological terms or as part of literary/social history. The ‘regional’ in the Indian mass media in its complexities and diversities is an increasingly celebrated chapter of media and communication scholarship of the last decade or so, as it has attracted considerable critical attention. In such a developing context, it has become imperative that critical contextual studies are also conducted on the different facets of the media of the region of Assam and north-east India. With such a perspective, the present study humble attempts to analyse and describe the origin and development of the Assamese language news media of the state in a socio-historical framework.

1.9 Scope of the study

The study looks at the origin and development of news in the Assamese language, the lingua franca of the region of Assam, across historical periods and types of media. For doing so, the study has focused on the period of emergence of each of the types of media and the influence of the context on the evolving media and its nature. The scope of the study may be briefly summarized in the following way:

- (i) Overview of the pre-print media/communication practices of the ancient and medieval period
- (ii) The colonial period and the arrival print news/press
- (iii) Satellite television news of the new millennium.

1.10 Organization of the thesis

The first chapter introduces the topic in question and provide an overall framework and themes of the study. The research question, aim and objectives, scope and significance of the study is detailed in the chapter. The second chapter offer the review of literature on the topic by an analysis of the key takeaways from the referred books, book chapters, documents, and journal articles. The third chapter focus on the research methodology of the study which details the theoretical as well as methodological techniques applied. The fourth chapter provides a broad assessment of the different media and communication traditions of the state of Assam in the pre-print epochs. The fifth chapter details the role of the context and the institutional dynamic within which the first two Assamese monthly cum newspapers emerged and developed. The sixth chapter critically engages with the process of the emergence of an Assamese middle class and their politics during the colonial era and the resultant features of the Assamese press of the period through an analysis of select publications and their owners. The seventh chapter provides a picture of the changing trends in the landscape of Assamese news media from the 1990s to the early 2000s when satellite television news in the state arrived in the form of the first private television news network that broadcast news in Assamese and other languages form North-East India. It delineates the dynamics of starting a television news channel in a marginal state with a focus on the nature of the owners, the role of the state government and the broader satellite television news culture of the nation. The eight chapter mentions the key conclusions to be drawn from the overall study on the basis of the aims and findings.

1.11 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to identify and analyze the origin, process and trends in the evolution of Assamese news media from its pre-print traditions, print and satellite television

1.12 Objectives of the study

- (i) To study the evolution of the Assamese news media in a historical perspective including its pre-print traditions
- (ii) To study the context and factors influencing the emergence of the early Assamese newspapers
- (iii) To examine the nature and character of key Assamese newspapers of the colonial period
- (iv) To identify and describe the type of institutions and individuals in the initial period of Assamese news media in the print and television space.

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