

CHAPTER-III

Research Methodology

The present study is an inductive study and attempts to analyse and describe the institutions, processes and individuals involved in the emergence of Assamese news media. In each of the four main chapters dedicated to analysis, an attempt has been made to understand the context, background and the nature of the early Assamese press and its trends. Accordingly, a socio-historical approach has been adopted for this study which is in consonance with the aim and objectives of the research. As a corollary to the process, the theoretical framework adopted for the study is political economy of communications since a key strand in the framework involves understanding the history of communications and media. In fact, ‘communication research making use of’ political economy approaches ‘has always been sensitive to history’ (Mosco et al. 2010, 109).

3.1 Political economy of communications: A theoretical framework in media research

The political economy of communications is a significant theoretical and methodological approach in media research. Rooted in critical theory, it scrutinizes the ways in which economic structures, political power, and media industries intersect to shape the production, distribution, and consumption of media content. This approach provides a comprehensive framework to understand media as a form of power that influences and is influenced by broader socio-economic and political contexts. It examines the interplay between institutions, media, technology and social processes to arrive at an understanding of how power and ideology is sustained, consolidated and resisted. In brief, it treats media as a site of politics, power and influence and seeks to contextualize the role of individuals, socio-economic and political factors in determining the character of mass media in a particular period.

3.2 Key concepts of political economy of communications that frame its analysis

- (i) **Ownership and Control:** This concept examines who owns and controls media industries and how this concentration of ownership impacts media content and diversity. Political economy of communications posits that media ownership tends to be concentrated among a few large corporations, which can lead to homogenized content that serves corporate interests rather than public interest.

- (ii) **Commodification:** Political economy of communications explores how media content is commodified, meaning it is produced and sold for profit. This includes the analysis of advertising's role in shaping media content and the implications of treating audiences as commodities to be sold to advertisers.
- (iii) **Hegemony:** Borrowing from Gramsci, political economy of communications investigates how media perpetuates dominant ideologies and power structures. Media is seen as a tool for maintaining hegemony by disseminating the worldview of the ruling class and marginalizing alternative perspectives.
- (iv) **Globalization:** This concept addresses the global expansion of media corporations and the impact of media globalization on local cultures and economies. Political economy of communications critically examines how global media flows contribute to cultural imperialism and the dominance of Western media.
- (v) **Labour and production:** Political economy of communications analyses the labour conditions within media industries, focusing on issues such as exploitation, precarity, and the impact of digital technologies on media work. This includes examining the labour of content creators, journalists, and behind-the-scenes workers in media production.

3.3 Methodological Approaches

The methodological approaches of political economy of communications are diverse, drawing from both qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Key methodologies include:

- (i) **Historical analysis:** This approach involves examining the historical development of media industries and their regulatory frameworks. It aims to understand how historical contexts shape contemporary media structures and practices.
- (ii) **Institutional analysis:** This method focuses on the study of media institutions, including their ownership patterns, organizational structures, and regulatory environments. It seeks to uncover the economic and political forces that influence media operations.
- (iii) **Content analysis:** Political economy of communications employs content analysis to investigate how media content reflects and reinforces economic and

political power structures. This involves analysing the representation of social groups, issues, and ideologies in media texts.

- (iv) Case studies: Case studies provide in-depth examinations of specific media organizations, industries, or events. They offer detailed insights into how broader political-economic forces manifest in particular contexts.
- (v) Policy analysis: This approach examines media policies and regulations, assessing their implications for media ownership, content, and access. It often involves analysing policy documents, regulatory decisions, and the lobbying activities of media corporations.
- (vi) Audience research: Although less common in political economy of communications, some studies incorporate audience research to understand how media consumption practices are influenced by and respond to economic and political conditions.

3.4 Analysis of history of mass media and communication

Analysing mass media through a historical lens involves employing specific research methodologies to understand its evolution, progress, and development over time. Historical analysis of mass media employs a range of research methodologies to explore its evolution, impact, and significance within society. Archival research, content analysis, oral history, and cultural studies approaches offer complementary methods for investigating media history from multiple perspectives. By integrating these methodologies, researchers can uncover the complex dynamics of media production, circulation, and reception across different historical contexts. Thorough historical analysis contributes to our understanding of how mass media has shaped and been shaped by social, cultural, and technological forces over time.

The present study focusses on the origin and context of the emergence of the Assamese news media in the following four dimensions:

- (i) Pre-print media and communication practices or types of Assam
- (ii) Origin and context of the early Assamese press
- (iii) Emergence of a print-elite section in Assamese press in the nineteenth century
- (iv) Origin and background of the state's first private satellite television news channel

Accordingly, a descriptive and historical approach have been adopted for the study. Very often, knowledge of the past illuminates the present, and in light of rapid changes in mass communications in the present, socio-historical studies of mass media and communication may lead us towards a better appreciation of the present fluxes.

3.5 The historical approach as a method of media and communication research

All historical studies have some conceptual framework that works a guide and helps in the selection of materials to draft a particular narrative of the main elements and themes. Historical studies of media and communications, along with the changing trends of historical studies, have also attempted to go beyond the conventional chronological accounts, and thereby focus on lesser known facets and apparently ordinary aspects, or ignored regions. The subaltern studies, in this light, forms a veritable dimension of writing histories from the margins or below. In brief, such studies tries to show that history is political and often there are many narratives of a particular area or topic. In fact, starting with such 'histories from below' (Sharpe 1991) that dates from the 1950s and 1960s, as opposed to history from above that media became a worthy subject of historical attention and enquiry. But by and large, media and press histories, in general attempts to look at the progress and developments of its chosen objects, chronologically. Chronological accounts of media and communications are often helpful, because it gives us a perspective in looking at things temporally, and thereby, arrive at an appreciation of change and continuities. It also gives us an idea that all technologies and media of communication were once new and novel, and had interesting effects in their time. Based on the selection of the materials, and the scope of interpretation, historians may differ although they could be writing about the same subject or area.

3.6 Types of media and press histories

History of media and press can be of different types based on the emphases or combination of emphases provided to a particular subject or area. Accordingly, they can focus on one of the following areas or may choose to attempt to provide a more balanced picture by combining the following elements involved in the evolution of media: (i) national histories of media/press, (ii) comparative studies between media of different nations, (iv) regional media/press histories, (v) institutional studies focusing on particular media organizations, (vi) case histories dealing with specific social settings of a single event (vii) studies of

media trends and processes and (viii) biographical studies of journalists, editors and media owners. All of these possible dimensions of study are worthwhile in themselves, and one may choose to pursue any one of them, or may decide to combine which may provide interesting results based on the aim and objectives.

Since the concerned study here attempts to provide a picture of the background, context, processes and individuals involved in the development of the early Assamese press and news media in a broad socio-historical context, a combinational approach consisting of the concerned elements have been adopted. Media scholar Klaus Bruhn Jensen classified media in terms of their development from human based expressions like oral culture to technically reproduced forms of representation which facilitate communication across space and time as ‘media of the first degree’ and ‘media of the second degree’ respectively (Jensen 2002). This study, by combining the developments in the domain of pre-print communication and media traditions, early press and satellite television news of the state of Assam, in a humble way, attempts to provide a possible connected narrative.

3.7 Selection of media, newspapers, and periodicals and their time period for the study

This study focusses on the trajectory of the early Assamese newspapers, and as such have chosen the key newspapers of the periods concerned. The two pioneering Assamese newspapers, *Orunodoi* (1846-1882?) and *Assam Bilasinee*, (1871-1883) which were monthly publications have been obviously selected as they provide the foundational impulses driving the press of the region. The collected volumes of particular periods of the four-decade long *Orunodoi* is available and accordingly news stories and items published in it have been analyzed in the chapter concerned. Additionally, the news stories published in the monthly itself are an index of the history of the period, hence they too have been purposively selected to lead towards the goals of the study. Unfortunately, no copies of *Assam Bilasinee* are available either in the archives or market. Whatever little analysis of the stories published in the *Assam Bilasinee* have been featured in the study is based on extracts found in other secondary sources and narratives.

The subsequent phase in the development of Assamese newspapers after the age of *Orunodoi* saw the appearance of a weekly press and a concurrent trend of literary monthlies run by a section of educated Assamese individuals. As the study attempts to

provide an assessment of the individuals behind the newspapers and periodicals in relation to their social background, this part of the research investigates the dynamic of the emerging Assamese press with the larger socio-political processes. Among the weeklies, the notable newspapers were *Assam News*, *Assam*, and *Assam Banti*. However, the original copies of the publications have been lost, and as such analysis have largely developed by a careful examination of the individuals, background and context of the period from 1880s to the early twentieth century when these papers came out. Additionally, in the circumstance, the analysis is dependent on remaining extracts of certain news stories and views found in other secondary sources. The two literary monthlies, *Assam Bandhu* and *Mau* have been selected because they reveal the views of the educated middle class individuals who brought published them, and throw light on the attitude of the section on the political questions of the day. Fortunately, the copies of these two monthlies are available, and extracts of select articles from therein have been analyzed in light of the objectives of the study. It was necessary to see the transformations and changes in the politics of the papers and the individuals concerned if there were any, during the defining moments of the freedom movement in the Assamese newspapers. Hence, the two leading newspapers of the period, *Assam Bilasinee* (weekly) and *Asamiya* have been chosen for study in relation to the political developments of the day. As the copies are not available, necessary adjustments have been made by looking at the secondary literature containing editorials and stories from these two influential newspapers.

Since the study begins with an aim to provide a brief overview of the different media and communication practices and cultures prevalent in the state and region of Assam prior to the arrival of modern print, a preliminary classification of the same have been made in the concerned chapter on the basis of references from existing literature on the subject. However, the classification of the older oral and written communication practices here been made with an awareness to look at their use as a carrier of information, intelligence, and news. In this sense, this part of the study, in a limited way, attempts to look at the development of news as a indigenous phenomenon. ‘De-westernizing’ media studies (Curran and Park, 2000) has been a preoccupation of current research as it has become necessary to uncover different communication and media histories of specific regions in order to resist plain narratives where it starts purely at the arrival of printing press. It is not that such histories that start with modern print are in itself the issue, but looking at communication and media cultures of a region in a holistic manner often broadens our

understanding of the dynamics of news and information transmission and diffusion in societies like Assam. For, when modern press began in Assam, certain older existing communication practices were still in vogue, and did not disappear overnight. As communication theorist Dennis McQuail observes: ‘Certain technologies survived the evolutionary struggle, so to speak, and some others...did not make it’ (McQuail 2010, 45).

The study concludes with a picture of the overview of the prevailing media scenario in the state of Assam in the 1990s, leading to the arrival of regional private satellite television news in the early 2000s. For the purpose, a descriptive account of the forces, background, and individuals involved in the first private satellite television news channel of the region, *NETV* have been attempted on the basis of secondary and primary sources. It is to be noted that *NETV* was the first private satellite news channel of the region which started broadcasting news in Assamese and other languages of the north-eastern states.

3.8 Sources of the study

Both Primary and Secondary sources have been employed for arriving at a nuanced perspective on the topic of the study.

Primary Sources:

- (i) Newspaper archives (volumes and collections)
- (ii) Government reports, Press Commission reports etc.
- (iii) Interviews
- (iv) Television archival footage.

Secondary Sources:

- (i) Books: Books (biographies, autobiographies, histories, theoretical literature) related to the research topic as well as literature related to the socio-historic and cultural currents of the region have been consulted.
- (ii) Journal articles.

3.9 Limitations of the study

This study, although it is about the past processes that played a part in the formation and manifestations of the different media that emerged at different points of time in the history of the state of Assam, is conducted by scholar who is not a trained historian. As such, there will be limitations in the study for sure, as many of the methodological rigour and finesse of perspectives of trained historians will be missing here. As Arthur Asa Berger comments: ‘We must keep in mind that many scholars regard history as an art, not a science. At first, history was written by amateurs—that is, people who were not trained in universities to be historians but who were involved, in some cases, in events of consequence or interested in writing about those events’ (Berger 2000, 138-139). The present study, too has emanated from a personal interest in the subject, although the researcher was not in any way involved in the development of the Assamese press and media, either in its past or present. To put the issue in context, mass communication studies, in its essence, is actually ‘a field of interest, not a discipline’ and as such ‘may be illuminated from different disciplinary positions’ (Halloran 1998, 18).

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