# CHAPTER-IV

## Media and Communication Culture in Assam before Modern Print: An Assessment

### 4.1 Background of transportation and communications of Assam

Because of its hilly geographic terrain and isolation, Assam and North-East India historically have had to deal with basic transport and communication challenges as the land-locked nature of the region made traveling arduous for both outsiders coming in and insiders going out. The nature of the socio-cultural life of the various mongoloid ethnic communities was also inward looking, and thus trade and social relationships remained largely endogenic. Additionally, the region had been vulnerable to periodic natural calamities like floods and earthquakes. All these factors contributed to the physical and psycho-social isolation of the region from the rest of the country for large parts of historical time. In the 19$^{th}$ century, modern transport and postal facilities were introduced during the British annexation of the state with the primary objective of serving the extractive colonial economy. The Assamese monthly journal *Assam Bilasinee* in its February issue of 1877 wrote in amazement at the developments in communications of the region thus: the 'telegraph lines expanded till Dibrugarh—miraculous technique of the English' (Saikia, 1998, 139). The modern communications brought in by British rule were indeed staggering because palanquins (called 'dola' or 'palki' in Assamese) were the only means of transport available, and that too was only largely available for the rich and the influential considering the deeply ingrained social hierarchy. Iconic Assamese musician and cultural legend, Dr Bhupen Hazarika immortalized the figure of the ever-toiling bearer of the palanquin in Assam of yore in his famous ballad titled 'Hey dola hey dola'. The words of the ballad go on to contrast the comfort of the lives of the privileged who sat inside palanquins and the pain of their human bearers through the ages:

'Juge juge japidiye

met mora bojati

Kand bhangu bhangu kore

Bor bor manuhe dolat tuponiyai…'

For a long period in the medieval era, 'good roads (notably Dhodar Ali and Gosain Kamala Ali) throughout many villages in the Upper Assam were built by the Ahom kings. After the fall of the Ahom power these roads became useless owing to lack of maintenance' (Medhi 1978, 40-41). British civil servant and historian Edward Gait writes about the transport system in Assam during the early colonial phase in this fashion: '…in 1853, carts and carriages were unknown, and the roads were few and bad. The two great trunk roads, which now run east and west along both banks of the Brahmaputra, had not at that time been commenced, and there were practically no roads at all in Sylhet and Cachar' (Gait 2011, 346). In this situation, it was the traditional river routes and the railways that formed the backbone of the transportation and communications system of the state for a long time. In the absence of modern mass media, it is information that came through word of mouth of rulers, travellers, traders, diplomats, priests, peripatetic sages, and townsmen which contributed to the processes of social transactions. In 1947 with the independence of the country from British rule and consequent partition of Bengal, Assam and north-east India's established trade and communication routes were again disrupted which created a major bottleneck towards proper socio-economic development. Thus, a region 'which was from time immemorial a part of the continuous land mass stretching across the Gangetic plains into the plains of Bengal and spreading across to the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, was suddenly turned into a landlocked region connected to India by a tenuous stretch of 22km of land called the 'Siliguri Corridor' (Misra 2014, 42).

The development of mass media like newspapers depend to a great extent on a stable socio-economic environment and the parallel development of a vibrant socio-political culture and public opinion. From colonial times to the present era, the Assamese press and media too have witnessed and withstood socio-economic and political challenges, and its functioning and role accordingly have been invariably affected. The forces, institutions, and individuals behind Assamese news media have ranged from religious institutions, business houses, individual entrepreneurs, freedom fighters, and nationalists who have tried to galvanize the press and media with different objectives at different points of time in the history of the state with varying effects. The first Assamese newspaper cum monthly *Orunodoi* translated the English word 'printing press' in the vernacular Assamese as 'chapakhana' (a Hindustani word precisely meaning print factory), and in a passage on a report on ' Discovery of Printing', self-referentially glorified the missionary publisher's own activities and pondered on the revolutionary potential of printing in bringing about

social change: ‘ before apart from the gentle classes, the common people could not get enough opportunities to read, but now he is acquiring knowledge through reading, and what book one needs can be gotten in the chapakhana’ (Orunodoi, March, 1847 issue).

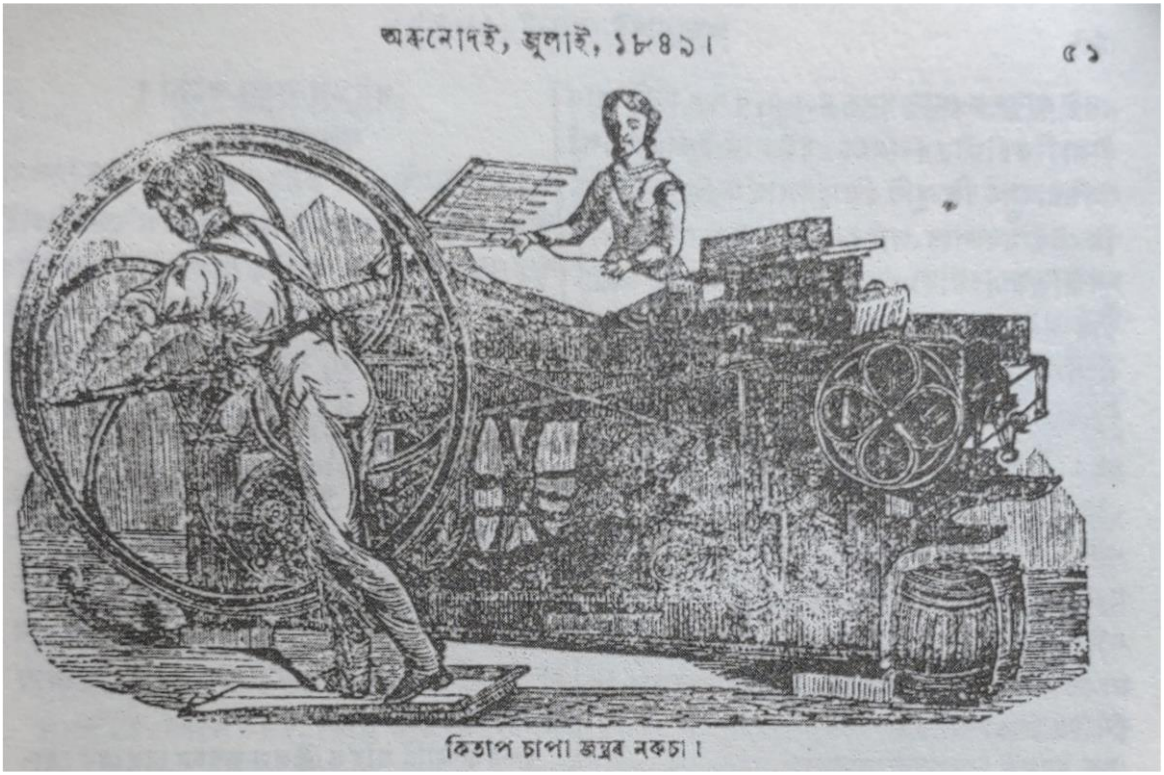


**Image 3.1:** Illustration of a printing press on the pages of Orunodoi.
**Source:** Orunodoi (1846-1854) Collected Volume, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.

Information and communication are basic requirements for the emergence and functioning of societies. However, power dynamics, invariably, in one or another, always come to influence the prevalent communication structures and practices in society. In this context, it can be said that the function of news media in the past across human societies before print and modernity was fulfilled to varying degrees by different media and communication practices. Of course, this was hardly in the line of functioning of a free press in a modern-day democracy, and most of the existing media and communication resources were created and directed towards fulfilling the bardic function of story-telling and information-sharing characteristic of tribal life worlds. As language evolved from cries, grunts, gestures, expressions, and commands of dance and song into speech, it enabled the human faculty ‘to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement’ (McLuhan 2018, 86). In the case of the region of what is in the

present day called Assam, information and knowledge sharing among the myriad tribal communities has been predominantly oral till the time of British colonialism when Christian missionaries along with English officials intervened to create written script systems based on alphabets of languages like Roman and Bangla. In what way oral cultures have been affected by writing systems is a question better left for more specialized studies. However, we can here probably concur with what the internationally known historian Yuval Noah Harari says regarding the matter: 'The most important impact of script on human history is precisely this: it has gradually changed the way humans think and view the world. Free association and holistic thought have given way to compartmentalization and bureaucracy' (Harari 2019, 151).

Historiography of Assam usually divides the region's history into basically three periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. These three broad categorizations can also be applied to an understanding of the media and communication practices of the region. For the ancient and medieval periods, historical studies have tried to build a credible narrative of the province of Assam by using both mythological narratives and concrete historical materials. From these sources, we can know there were media and communication cultures and practices in ancient and medieval Assam which can be categorized broadly in terms of oral and written types.

In the ancient period, Assam, a north-eastern province of India, was known as Pragjyotishpura and Kamarupa. It was referred to as Pragjyotishpura or the City of Eastern Lights because of the region's wide reputation as a centre of astrology and astronomical knowledge. That the region developed these practices to considerable expertise is indicated by the ancient temple of Navagraha (temple of nine planets) situated in the capital city of Guwahati. In the religious text, *Kalika Purana* (which is one of the eighteen minor Puranas in the Shaktism tradition), believed to have been composed in the $9^{th}$ to $10^{th}$ century, it is thus stated: "Here Brahma (Hindu God of creation) first created the stars and hence the city is called Pragjyotishpura, a city equal to the city of Indra or Sakra" (Barua 1962, 15). Legend has it that Pragjyotishpura was made up of what now constitutes modern-day Assam and parts of north and east Bengal. References to Pragjyotishpura are found in the major Indian epics and other classical texts which highlights the fact that with the cultural world of the Indian subcontinent, the region had connections for more than thousands of years. Late Hem Barua, the eminent writer from Assam comments in this

regard: ‘It was a famous kingdom in ancient times, as the deep-toned references to it off and on in the *Mahabharata* epic show and establish. It is referred to here as a mleccha or asura country, which is a non-Aryan empire; the princes of this great kingdom were invariably of the Mongoloid stock. Praghyotisha is mentioned in the epic as the country of Bhagadatta, son of the Asura (non-Aryan) king Naraka who ruled in this country, and later participated in the Kurukshetra war as an ally of the Kauravas’ (ibid). As far as concrete historical evidence is concerned the first reference to this region was found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of King Samudragupta’s time (350 A.D.). Here Kamarupa is mentioned as one of the frontier states outside of the famous Gupta Empire. In the 7th century, Chinese pilgrim Hsüen Tsang visited Assam during the reign of King Bhaskaravarman, and in his travel account, a detailed description is found about Kamarupa. Tsang mentions Kamarupa as ‘Kamopo’ or ‘Komelu’ and that the people of the land were followers of animism, and the king was a worshipper of Shiva. Indeed, the temple of Kamakhya, one of the most revered ancient Tantric sites of the Sakta (power) cult, located on Nilachal hills in Guwahati city, shows different religious influences of Aryan and non-Aryan strands including Buddhism. Patronized by successive ruling dynasties from the Palas, Kochas, and the Ahoms, the temple is thus indicative of the power relations operative from time immemorial in the region.

In this context, the point to note is that the socio-cultural traditions of Assam are a reflection of the culture of both tribal and caste Hindu communities living for centuries in the region. Both tribal and non-tribal elements have contributed to the specific cultural mosaic of Assam which has been seen to be a unique example in the entire world of a composite society. In this regard, migrations to ancient Assam played its part in the formation of the type of society it eventually became. Human migration to ancient Assam is said to have taken place chiefly through the means of river routes and land routes. However, human migration in the ancient period to the region from both neighboring as well as distant places was more dependent on land routes than on rivers. Such land routes were usually used by sages, shamans, travelers, and traders. Among the travel routes, ‘the first category were the hilly routes or roads, the second was the routes on the plains, the third route was the river route’ (Borgohain 2005, 41) Thus, the chief travel routes through Assam, before the modern age, used to consist of ‘(i) the river route from the Ganges to the Brahmaputra river…(ii) land route from the eastern Bengal region of tributaries of Ganga through to middle part of Manipur and probably towards Myanmar…(iii) through

upper Assam of Brahmaputra valley till Yunnan…(iv) a land route through Pataliputra, Bhagalpur, Rajmahal, Gobardhan of Āryāvarta to Pragjyotishpura in Kamarupa…(v) another route from Pragjyotishpura to the capital of the Mlechchhas called Hatappeswara (or Haruppeswara). This path which goes through near present-day Tezpur was known as Gohain-Kamal Ali during the days of King Naranarayana which expanded till Narayanpur, (vi) another road could be construed to have existed from Pragjyotishpura through Dimoria and Maibong to Manipur which was also connected through Jayantiya regions to Srihatta in present-day Bangladesh…(vii) a route through Manipur was connected with Bhamo (in Myanmar) which in turn was connected to the routes through the Patkai and Arakan ranges. Bhamo is connected via land with China, Laos Campuchia, and Thailand. (viii) another land route from Cooch Behar, the capital of Koch kingdom, reached Lhasa and from there on it is known to have expanded to Central Asia, Russia, etc' (ibid, 42-43).

Such varied land and river routes naturally point to the socio-cultural networks prevalent in the region of Assam from time immemorial with regions of China, Tibet, and mainland India. Scholar of Assamese folklore Dr Birendranath Datta says in this regard: 'While assimilation and fusion are known to have played their role in the evolution of the Indian people as a whole, what is striking about the Assamese society is that they are very much at work even in the present day: fresh elements, both indigenous and non-indigenous, are constantly being admitted into the fold of the Assamese society and culture…' (Datta 1991, 45).

### 4.2 Oral communication traditions in Assam

Media sociologist John B. Thompson has observed that 'before the development of the media, most people's sense of the past and of the world beyond their immediate milieu was shaped primarily by the symbolic content exchanged in face-to-face interaction' (Thompson 1995, 179). This is very true in the case of communities living in Assam and its adjacent states because of the inherently tribal nature of the societies. In the modern era, mass media have largely made only tentative footsteps and limited impressions in these societies, due to a variety of factors at work which range from the infrastructural to the sociological. In the circumstances, it is the traditional and folk media that have had deep-rooted appeal among the communities.

Among oral traditions or practices in Assam, there are Dak's sayings, popular proverbs or adages, ballads of various hues, etc. Dak is the name given to the personage associated with the pithy sayings usually in the dialect of lower Assam. Studies have variously tried to either establish Dak as a historical figure or as a construction of the popular public psyche. Various communities across regions in the Indian subcontinent from Rajasthan to Bengal have claimed Dak to have originated in their specific milieu whose sayings at times echo Buddhist philosophical undercurrents. Dak's sayings in Assamese are the oldest forms of oral literature of the region and a treasure trove of popular wisdom as they reflect a people's response to various types of human predicaments. Dandiram Dutta, the editor of the definitive collection of Dak's sayings summarises the essence of the oral tradition thus: 'Dak is Veda Vyasa of Assam. One can get pleasure and education from a reading of these verses which cover a range of issues like politics, religious principles, society, complex phenomena like economics, knowledge, power, agriculture, cooking, astrology, disease, men's and women' (Dutta 2013, 8). Another type of proverbs, commonly referred to as 'fokora -jojanas' constitutes another type of oral tradition which again reflects the collective wisdom of the common folks of Assam down the ages. In terms of their design and form, they range from one-line sayings to stanzas, and at other times they are in rhythmic couplets conveying varied human experiences in a poetic and attractive form. The meaning of the word 'fokora' and 'jojana' has been translated into 'an adage' and 'a short sentence expressing a moral lesson; epigram' respectively by the pioneering Assamese lexicographer Hemchandra Barua in *Hemkosh* (Barua 1900, 614, 801). 'Behind every (fokora), there is the trace of a story or an incident. As per subject and relevance, fokora-jojanas express through wit, satire, appreciation, instruction etc' (Rajkumar 1982, 11). A famous one concerning the spread of news and rumour runs like this: *"iyate Marilu tipa; Gargaon palegoi xipa*", roughly meaning the phenomenon that news and information travels far and wide from one place to another once communicated. Couple of other noted Assamese proverbs concerning the understanding of the individual and the public in the collective Assamese psyche are stated below:

*'Dhantue prati konto, manuhtowe prati manto'* (As there is a germ in every corn, so there is a mind in every human being) – this proverb reflects the essentially democratic recognition of each and every individual's mind and will. Alongside the concept of collective will is also emphasized here.

*'Raijei raja gyatiyei ganga'*- this proverb conveys the underlying idea that it is the public or the community (raij) which is the monarch and the actual object of veneration.

Such proverbs reflect the deep wisdom of the people relating to its own existence as a collective being. It is not that such oral communication cultures existed only in the Assamese language of the region but have been found in other languages of the myriad ethnic communities of Assam like Jayantia, Bodo, Kachari, Karbi and Mising. Srimanta Sankardev, a polymath and the spiritual leader of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in sixteenth-seventeenth century Assam was an adept user of 'fokora-jojanas' in his creative works. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the first Assamese newspaper cum magazine *Orunodoi* ushered in this age-old practice of the region into the age of print by publishing many of these local adages in its pages. Other nineteenth century Assamese periodicals like 'Mau' and 'Jonaki' too adapted these adages for the modern age by using them in appropriate contexts. In brief, Dak's sayings and Assamese proverbs are both only types of maxims or adages, and while the former is more pointed and didactic, the latter perhaps can be termed as reflective of observations and insights of ordinary people. Since many of such pithy folk expressions interrogate and critique the powerful and the underlying truth of social realities, probably they can be seen as evidence and part of what Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has identified as 'the argumentative tradition' of the people of India since time immemorial. Regarding the inherent mental prowess of ordinary Indian people as against socially dominant groups and their sophisticated articulations, Sen comments: 'It would be a great mistake…to assume that because of the possible effectiveness of well-tutored and disciplined arguments, the argumentative tradition must, in general, favour the privileged and the well-educated, rather than the dispossessed and the deprived. Some of the most powerful arguments in Indian intellectual history have, in fact, been about the lives of the least privileged groups, which have drawn on the substantive force of these claims, rather than on the cultivated brilliance of well-trained dialectics' (Sen 2015, 12).

Ballads centring on themes of rural life, folk stories, wild-life (termed Bon-geet) are more of a celebration of nature, agriculture, seasons, festivals etc, and thus they have more value as ritualistic expressions rather than as sources of news and information. However, ballads documenting socio-political developments of their time have come to be known as historical ballads. A ballad known as Borphukan's ballads (Barphukanar Geet) or the

Ballad of the Viceroy is a long ballad that narrates the repeated attacks of the Burmese on the Ahom kingdom in the beginning of nineteenth century, and evokes a picture of the political intrigues of the time. Such ballads were performed by 'professional minstrels who eked out a living by reciting ballads is also evidenced' in the words of the ballad itself (Goswami 1982, 151):

Let my lord pay me five-quarter rupess,

I am singing the ballad of the Barphukan,

It is my good fortune

That my lord I have met here.

Another section of ballads, known as Maniram Dewanar Geet, in an elegiac note pays tribute to the sacrifice of Maniram Dewan, the first Assamese tea planter who rebelled against the British empire in 1857 during the Sepoy Mutiny. Performed by minstrels, these ballads apart from their artistic aspects, have value as socio-historic documents of the times. Indeed, as Ong argued, in oral cultures knowledge is not owned but performed (Ong, 2002). In a sense, these ballads were the news discourse of their times as they evocatively described the contemporary socio-political developments of import. Though by the time these ballads were performed, print journalism arrived had arrived in Assam, information and knowledge transmission was largely oral as is the case with any society stepping into the modern print and literacy. It is also to be noted that these oral communication traditions continued side by side with the print media brought in by the Christian missionaries and the overall changes brought in by a foreign colonial government in the nineteenth century. However, over time, with the gradual inroads made by mass media and with the attendant change of society from feudalism to modernity have pushed such rich oral cultures to the brink of extinction today.

### 4.3 Written on the stone: media of the kingdoms

In contrast to people's culture like oral traditions, there are the stone, copper and metal inscriptions of the ancient and medieval period which were the first written forms of media that reflects the power and influence of monarchs of Assam in varying degrees. The Gondhokoroi Stone Inscription, recovered in 2015 from Gondhokoroi Village, Sarupathar, is one of the earliest such inscriptions which speaks of the unique culture and history of

Daiyang- Dhansiri Valley of Golaghat district in Assam. The tentative date of this plate has been confirmed to be 719 AD by palaeographic analysis. It is a victory inscription and speaks about the defeat of a king of a province called 'Dilli' (whether or not it is the present city of Delhi or some other prince is not confirmed) at the hands of king Sadyaramyak, who has been linked to the family of the mythological king Bhagadatta (Parashar 2023, 9). 'The Badaganga epigraph of king Bhutivarmana (c. 510-555 AD) is considered the earliest known dated inscription of ancient Assam. The Doobi and the Nidhanpur grants and the three Nalanda clay seals of Bhaskaravarmana (c. 600-50 AD)' indicate the extent of relations maintained by ancient kingdoms of Assam (Baruah 2013 31). Another medieval era vertical stone pillar inscription from the time of Chutiya rule known for its unique serpentine design conveys the details about an announcement made by the Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539) regarding the sanctity of a diplomatic understanding arrived with the Mishmi tribe of the present-day state of Arunachal Pradesh. From these instances, it is evident that competing kingdoms and kings relayed a message through the available media to their peers and wanted to leave their footprints in history and time about their power and status. Thus, it can be said that, media in ancient Assam, as in all ancient civilizations, was used by those in authority with an eye towards connecting past, present and future. Harold Innis, in his noteworthy study on civilizations and communication means had interpreted time-biased media as those that 'emphasize time' and 'are...durable in character such as parchment, clay and stone' (Innis 1950, 7). During the rule of Ahom dynasty in the medieval period, the ruling establishment minted and issued gold coins which in their design and text (the three scripts of Tai-Ahom, Devanagari and Assamese were used) were meant to give a message of the economic and religious aspects of the feudal regime. Similarly, Koch kingdom of 16$^{th}$ and 17$^{th}$ century Assam issued silver coins while the script used in them were 'Sanskrit and…archaic Assamese' (Baruah 2013, 42).

### 4.4 Paper and written media in Assam

Coming to the use of paper for purposes of writing, Assam has a rich history in this regard. Old hand-written manuscripts found in Vaishnavite monasteries, personal collections of noble families and private households point towards the tradition of writing in the region. It means, in the olden days, before print, Assamese society like many other regions of India was a 'literacy-aware society' (Bayly, 1996, page 49) Later creative as well as non-fictional Assamese written literature of various genre have built on these manuscripts for

its further growth. As per noted Assamese writer and historian, Benudhar Sharma, the old hand-written manuscripts of Assam were 'written on tulapaat (paper made from silk cotton), baahpaat (paper made from bamboo), maduri-bon (paper made from a local variant of grass) and xansipaat (which is made from Xaansi tree and called xannnsiputhi)'. He corroborates the matter by stating that since time immemorial, the word tulapaat has been in vogue in Assam to mean paper. The fact that paper was is use in Assam from the ancient times is verified by the literary evidence in the seventh century Sanskrit text *Harshacharita* which mentions Kamarupa king Kumar Bhaskar Varma's gifts to Harshavardhana's empire. The gifts included a 'ogoruttvak nirmito pustika', meaning xansi-puthi (Sharma 1966, 153-154). The persons who carried out the manual work of writing or copying were called 'likhok' or 'likharu', while the persons who originally wrote any composition were referred to as 'lekahru'. These writers were patronised by the Koch and Ahom kings. In medieval Assam, Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568), made abundant use of 'xansi paat', a type of manuscript paper made up from aloes tree or sanchi tree as they are called locally for composing and storing religious, spiritual and creative literature

### 4.5 Communicator par excellence: Sankardev

Sankardev was a prolific communicator, and the diversity of media that he used (plays, poems, paintings, songs, dance etc) for propagating Vaishnava ideals and to reach the hearts and minds of the masses may well be taken to be evidence of a mass communicator before the age of mass media. In a region which was a victim of Brahminical and Tantric excesses in the past, the great saint-scholar Sankardev ushered in many ways egalitarian values in a hierarchical society. Late Dr. Maheshwar Neog, a renowned scholar of Assamese literature and culture commented: 'Sankardeva brought the message of the religion of love home to the people, released the soul of the common man from the oppressive burden of sacerdotalism…and democratised Hinduism…' (Neog 1967, 63). A physical and social space known as 'namghar' (prayer house) was another gift introduced into Assamese social life by Sankardev. Conceptualised as a congregational site for devotees, namghars have been a part and parcel of public life in Assam over centuries now. Its influence as a kind of public sphere could be known from the fact that public meetings in villages are held here, apart from it functioning as a theatre for bhaonas (devotional plays) and other cultural performances even today in the digital age.

Around two hundred years after Sankardev, Sufi saint and poet Hazrat Shah Miran, popularly known as Ajan Fakir, who was believed to have come from Baghdad, was another spiritual leader who played a role in unifying the people of the Brahmaputra valley. Doing away with many orthodox elements in Islam, and distilling the essence of humanism found in the religion for the common local Muslims, Ajan Fakir had a considerable social following. His positive influence could be known from the fact he was active at a time when repeated conflicts between the Ahom kingdom and the Mughals potentially had debilitating effects on the social climate. What is of relevance here is the aspect that the great Sufi Ajan Fakir composed his Zikirs (a form of devotional music glorifying Allah) inspired by the borgeets of the Sankardev which touched all classes of people. The songs were a glorification of God or Allah but successfully communicated the message of instilling of those human values which bring peace to the soul and establish social harmony.

Thus, in medieval Assam, we see two great communicators using different cultural media developed and adapted appropriately to reach out to masses of various communities, and bringing greater social cohesion in the process. Reportedly, Sankardev's disciple Damodardev, while asking Bhattadeva (considered the father of Assamese language prose) to write *Katha-Bhagavata* instructed him to compose with as much simplicity as possible so that each of the communities and castes in the social order gets the message of the work. The literary works associated with Sankardev flowered under the royal patronage from the Koch kings and later Ahom kings contributed to the process by granting lands to set up the venerated centres of neo-Vaishnava learning called sattras. Socio-culturally, what was significant was that the neo-Vaishnavite movement through propagating their message in a common understandable form built a bridge of communication with and between the different communities living in different parts of the province.

### 4.6 Buranji: The written chronicles of the Ahom period

The written chronicles or annals of the Ahom administration during its six hundred years of rule in the region are another evidence of Assam's legacy in the domain of written media. The chronicles, referred to as 'buranji', is originally a Tai-Ahom word which means a repository of knowledge that enlightens the ignorant. Composed in both Tai-Ahom and Assamese scripts, these reports in general dealt with political events, warfare, diplomatic correspondences, administrative matters etc. First written during the reign of Suhungmung

(r. 1497-1539), the buranjis were written by anonymous writers under the orders of the kings, ministers and chief officers of the court on manuscripts made from barks of tress. These written accounts were produced for convenience in decision-making and worked as references in the matter of administration. So that the accounts remain more or less authentic and accurate, there was the practice of mentioning the time (with day, date, year), place and family lineage of the persons described. 'Since much importance was laid on accurate description of the events, the chroniclers were given free access to all necessary State-papers including despatches from local administrators and military commanders, diplomatic correspondences, day-to-day annals of the courts, proceedings of important judicial trials etc. An officer called Gandhia Phukan was in charge of these documents as well as the buranjis in royal possession. Buranjis were often made up-to-date with fresh information and later additions' (Baruah 2013, 44). Some of the buranjis are voluminous and cover all topics relating to political history, whereas, others are small, narrating a single event only. The former class is called *Lai-Lik-Buranji* in Tai Ahom (a main chronicle) and the latter *Lit Buranji* (meaning a chronicle dealing with one event only) (ibid). Apart from historical value, these reports also had literary flair as proverbs, myths, similes, maxims, digressions etc were used creatively. Moreover, the opinions and views of the king, ministers, high officials and at times, exceptionally, of ordinary folks were also documented in buranjis. Pre-dating the Assamese newspaper of a later time, the factually driven and simply composed buranjis, especially those focussed on socio-political and administrative matters were a kind of news-letters even as the powers that be monitored and edited what was written and what was left out. However, like news-letters which served their immediate masters and their circles, the people who commissioned buranjis also had no need or interest for them to circulate beyond their network. Considered as one of the first instances of secular prose literature in Assam, buranjis were looked upon with a sense of scaredness and devotion. In the first Assamese newspaper cum magazine, *Orunodoi*, brought out by the American Baptist Missionaries, many of these buranjis were printed in a serialised form.

Thus, conceivably, it can be one of the conclusions to draw in light of the above description is that the region of the present-day state of Assam had a news and information transmission network mediated though pre-print media and communication practcies at different points of time in her history. Historically, it has been the case across India that usually it is the trading classes who usually travel and bring information to wider

circulation in society. However, trade in Assam was not an extensive activity as the rural and tribal economy was more or less self-reliant with transactions based on 'barter of agricultural and animal produce in exchange mostly of foreign salt' (Barpujari 2018, 110). Irrespective, Assam also had its own communities like Baishyas and Mudois who engaged in trade with the neighbouring hill regions and Bengal, and thus must have parleyed useful information and news. Media historian Robin Jeffrey has identified a 'peasant mode' of communications in India which has subsisted and intersects with the mass media of the modern era in interesting ways. Reliant on word-of-mouth processes and transmission, indeed 'peasant mode' of communication is inherent to the social structures of India from the past. Robin Jeffrey comments: '…a 'peasant mode' of communications prevailed in India before the extension of railways, telegraph, printing presses, steam engines, and other attributes of the British colonial state. Information travelled and people communicated. But they did so largely by word of mouth through markets, pilgrimage, marriage, and soldiering. A tiny commercial and religious elite dealt in written words that were essential to their vocations and to serving political regimes' (Jeffrey 2010, 216). The American Baptist missionaries did bring out the first printed journal in Assamese but around it in the larger life-worlds of the various communities there were both oral and written forms of media which preceded and existed even after the onset of print, and served the needs of the society and administration. In a word, print intersected with oral cultures and communication. Indeed, 'the tools and practices of communications introduced by the British formed another layer over pre-existing traditions of communications in India that were predominantly oral' which included 'dance, theatre, music, ritual, art, literature and poetry' (Thomas 2010, 34) Thus, it was seen that the practice of writing buranjis continued for some time even as power shifted from the Ahom kings to the British East India Company in the 1820s. In the early part of the 19$^{th}$ century when British power consolidated itself in the region, Kasinath Tamuli Phukan and Harakanta Sarma Barua Sadar Amin compiled two buranjis entitled *Asam Buranji Sar* and *Asam Buranji* respectively. Even, Maniram Borbhandar Barua, representative of Ahom court during early British occupation and later made 'dewan' by the Company government wrote a history entitled *Buranji Bibekaratna*. Every one of these buranji writers mentioned were either leading officials or important citizens of a feudal province as it transitioned into a colonial hinterland. It is indicative of the position of buranji writing in Assamese society in that many of these histories were written in a transitional phase when power shifted

permanently to the English from the Ahoms. The new colonial authorities, it seemed, welcomed these efforts as these accounts proved handy in administration and governance.

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