CHAPTER-V

Orunodoi and *Assam Bilasinee*: Background, context and politics of the early Assamese Press

5.1 Origin of the press as an institution

The press in Europe essentially developed through phases and challenging periods like when its freedom was restricted by the authorities during the Civil Wars in seventeenth century England. However, across Europe, during the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, in nations like England, Scotland, France and Germany, middle classes and the trading sections developed informal networks of communication and information exchange through its the coffee house cultures. This led to the formation of what is referred to as the bourgeois public sphere. Alongside, in Europe's commercial centres and networks professional news writers at the service of leading traders composed reports on various topics and developments of interest of their masters. These news reports were hand written and contained confidential intelligence which was only shared between business partners and associates. Bypassing official restrictions and control and even reaching large provincial towns, newsletters were 'written by professional newswriters who charged a premium price for their handwritten, intellectual and challenging accounts of political life' (Harrison 2009, 48). With the expansion of trade in the continent and beyond, the traffic of commodities led to a concurrent traffic in news and information. The same very forces which dealt in commodity exchange turned information and news into a commodity over time. As Jürgen Habermas remarks: 'Commercial news reporting was…subject to the laws of the same market to whose rise it owed its existence…It is no accident that the printed journals often developed out of the same bureaus of correspondence that already handled hand-written newsletters' (Habermas 1991, 21). As the European colonialism expanded to different parts of the world, so too along with it, the news media or the press as an institution developed intermittently in the colonised parts. The progress of news media in the colonised countries was often challenging and developed gradually in conjunction with related socio-economic and political processes as the institution of press was moulded to the needs and visions of those forces who patronized and supported it. The foreign imperial administrations also found itself in quandaries as to the question of freedom of the press in the colony as the project of colonialism was justified on moral ethical grounds of 'civilizing' missions. Sir Charles Metcalfe who as acting Governor-General of India

(1835-1836) brought in press reforms during his regime, contemplated on his minute to proposed press laws for India thus: 'I am…of opinion that any restraint on the native press beyond what is imposed on the European would be injudicious; and that any restraint on either, beyond that of the laws, is not requisite. The Act proposed will be productive of good by giving general satisfaction and promoting knowledge' (Natarajan 2022, 47). In a different context, few years later, but somewhat with a comparable vein, the prominent American Baptist missionary Dr. Nathan Brown who was influential in the process leading to the publication of the first newspaper of the state of Assam, wrote to a fellow missionary about the publication : 'The Orunodoi' monthly 'has been considered by the mission as one of the most powerful instrumentalities for gaining access to the mind of the Assamese,…No other instrument that we could use would exert half the influence in enlightening the native mind and undermining their shaster as a paper of this kind…we found it to succeed beyond our expectation' (Barpujari 1986, 156).

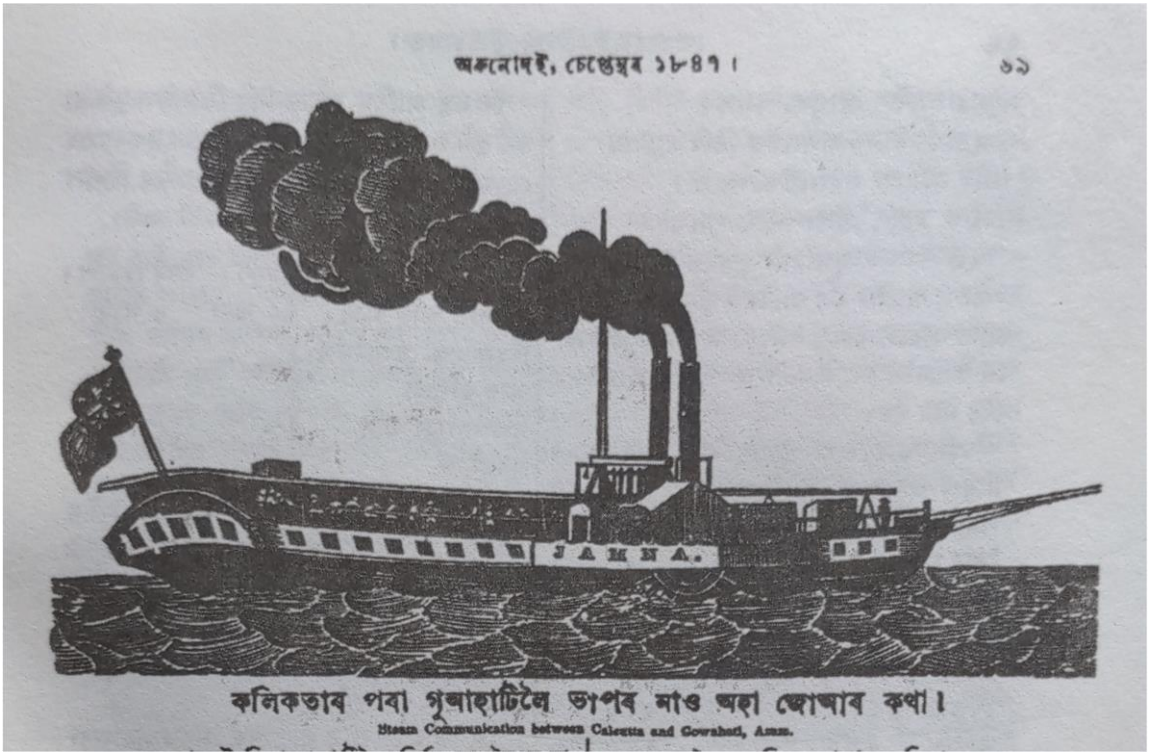

Image 5.1: Illustration of a steam ship on the pages of Orunodoi
Source: Orunodoi (1846-1854) Collected Volume, Publication Board Assam.

Growth of press is intrinsically related to the availability of the technology of printing that forms the basic infrastructure of the trade. In Assam, naturally, the development of the press through the nineteenth century was slow as the necessary components of the

infrastructure for running even a monthly publication required more than a month to reach the place of publication. One can get a sense of the scenario through an unsigned article in the Assamese monthly *Orunodoi* of the month of September, 1847. It states that the 'steam ship containing the types meant for the press at Sivasagar left Calcutta in March and then reached Guwahati after about four months but had not reached its destination even on the 30th of the present month' (Orunodoi, Sep, 1847 Issue, 69) No wonder, Assam got the epithet land of 'lahe lahe' (Assamese expression meaning a slow place) during the colonial age.

5.2 Beginnings of the development of the press in India

The Indian subcontinent has a rich and diverse history of printing. 'Woodblock printing had been practiced in Tibet and the Himalayan regions centuries before Jesuit missionaries established the first movable type press in Goa in 1556' (University of Chicago, Chapakhana Project). However, the journey of the modern Indian press begun with the publication of the English language weekly newspaper titled *Bengal Gazette or the Calcutta General Advertiser* in Calcutta circa 1780. The political intrigue and differences of opinion amongst English East India Company officials and the civilian European community during the time paved the way for the pioneering effort on the part of the publisher and editor James Augustus Hicky. Encashing on the murky and quirky sides of the burgeoning metropolis of Kolkata, Hicky positioned his paper with the slogan 'Open to all Parties, but influenced by None' in the manner of Revolutionary period American newspaper to highlight the independent nature of his venture. Like back in England, the policy of the colonial government was not conducive for the development of newspapers in India. The story of William Bolts, a resourceful Dutch trader and an ex-servant of the East India Company illustrates the hostile atmosphere for starting any enterprise related to newspapers in India of that period when the British consolidated their power. Legend goes that around September, 1768 Bolts affixed a notice to the doors of the Council House in Calcutta and other public places, which clearly stated of his intention to bring out a newspaper. As he was already facing censure from the Court of Directors for his private trade and involvement in political intrigues with the Dutch, it was just a matter of time for his deportation to Europe as was the practice of the colonial authority for any insubordinate European in those days. Around fourteen years later, the *Bengal Gazette* had to close down thanks to a sensational clash between the irrepressible editor that Hicky was and a colonial

government allergic to any contrarian opinion, whether they be of an Englishman or a native. In spite of the scurrilous and satirical nature of many reports and a vindictive government, Hicky's gazette, before closing shop, reported on the civic problems, social issues, British wars, and corruption in the Company government with an unconventional panache and wit which was characteristic of its owner-editor. The sufferings and issues of many ordinary soldiers of both English and Indian descent in the Company's war with Indian states like Mysore found their way into Hicky's weekly. These war reports gave an international identity to the newspaper since they were republished verbatim in news publications in Britain, America, France and even Germany as these countries had an interest in the affairs of the East India Company. The only newspaper in Asia during its time, *Bengal Gazette*, found many imitators in Calcutta and other cities but few displayed the pugnaciousness and the breeziness of it for long a time. In a short span of time of just two years, from an irreverent publication, Hicky eventually 'made his newspaper" *Bengal Gazette* 'an independent voice for reform' and 'spotlighted the subalterns that occupied the lower rungs of society, shut out from patronage and prestige…and gave them the means to express their complaints. All he could hope for was that those in power would respond' (Otis 2018, 82)

Roughly the next three decades of Indian journalism did not find a favourable condition for growth as the shadow of the infamous press Regulations of 1799 issued by Governor-General, the Marquess of Wellesley cast its long shadow. Clearly, the colonial government did everything in its power to control and tame the press of the times as it wanted to keep all the opinion and developments related to the Company under wraps fearing retributive measures from London. It is also to be noted that during this phase and later also, the East India Company contemplated on publishing an official newspaper but abstained because of the expense involved and the formulation of a policy of barring its officials from connecting themselves in any capacity with the press. S. Natarajan comments on the evolving character of the press of this period in this fashion: 'the press on the whole accepted the restrictions and with evasions of pre-censorship on the one hand and warnings on the other, a working basis was established which obviated the need to resort to deportation' (Natarajan 1962, 24).

In 1814, with the coming of the Governor General, the Marquess of Francis Rawdon Hastings, the government of the day reoriented its policy towards the press. Hastings'

regulations made it obligatory for editors to refrain from 'discussing the measures and proceedings of the Court of Directors or any other public body in England connected with the Government of India, from commenting on transactions of the local administration; to avoid discussing the public conduct of members of the Council, judges of the Supreme Court and the Lord Bishop of Calcutta; to abstain from publishing private scandal and personal remarks which would cause dissension in society; and to eschew alarmist reports and reports likely to rouse suspicion in the local population or interference with their religious practices' (ibid, 26). Before Marquess of Hastings, Lord Minto tried to persuade the Serampore missionaries to shift their base to British Calcutta territory in order to regulate them but settled to their request that the cost was prohibitive. But importantly, the missionaries agreed to submit their publications for censorship.

Meanwhile, in 1816, the first English newspaper titled *Bengal Gazette* run by an Indian came out under the leadership of a teacher named Gangadhar Bhattacharjee, a follower of the reformist Raja Ram Mohun Roy. Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who was actively working towards bringing certain reforms in tradition bound Hindu society by incorporating western education, bought out journals and periodicals in three languages which respectively addressed multiple constituencies of public and administration. Roy's *Sambad Kaumudi* (Bengali weekly), *Brahmanical Magazine* (an English language magazine to counter missionary propaganda) and *Mirat- ul- Akhbar* (the first printed journal in the Persian world) displayed for the first time the versatility of Indian press in channelling indigenous concerns. Following subtle criticism in *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* of British policies, particularly in the context of the imposition of the Press Ordinance of 1823 led to Roy's voluntary closure of his paper. In the last issue of the paper, he protested against the policy of penalty and licensing of the colonial government in no uncertain terms:'I…here prefer silence to speaking out' (Sonwalkar**,** 2022).). In two separate lengthy memorials addressed to the government and to the English King, Roy critiqued the press policy of the company administration.

So, in the first fifty odd years since the time of *Hicky' Gazette*, in a challenging atmosphere for journalism, we see three basic strands in Indian journalism. First, the newspapers were brought out by Englishmen for principally the European community in the three major presidencies of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, secondly, newspapers and periodicals (in both English and vernacular) were coming out of the Christian Missionaries, and third, the

publications and journals of a reformist and reactionary character in the manner of Raja Ram Mohun Roy's journalism.

5.3 Changing policy of the colonial government towards the press in India

Afterwards, as the East Indian Company established its supremacy in India and the other rival European colonial powers subsided, the draconian restrictions on the press were eased. Subsequently, between the years 1836 and 1856, there was a gradual and steady growth of newspapers in India as the attitude of the Company government towards press saw some positive changes in that the establishment saw the benefits in the existence of a relatively free press in the process of governance and administration. In this regard, the tenure of Lord William Bentinck and Charles Metcalfe proved to be a turning point as both of them had a liberal view of the role and function of the press in the Indian empire. Refuting common apprehensions of the Court of Directors, Metcalfe in his note on proposed press laws for India commented : 'Disaffection and sedition will operate…with more concealed weapons than an open and free press, under the guidance of responsible persons amenable to the laws, from which I do not apprehend that we have anything to fear, unless we must necessarily fear the progress of knowledge; but do what we will we cannot prevent the progress of knowledge; and it is undoubtedly our duty to promote it whatever may be the consequences. It is quite unnecessary to take any measures to watch the proceedings of the native press. They will soon bring themselves to our notice if they require any peculiar precautions' (Natarajan 2022, 47). Afterwards, 'under Charles Metcalfe's Act No. XI 1835, the press in India developed rapidly not only in Bengal, Bombay and Madras but also in the North West provinces' (ibid, 49). The newspaper was well on its way to grow into an institution in India by then as it evinced an interest in current events and controversies, and became a respectable forum for serious presentation and discussion of ideas and issues.

5.4 The early period of colonial rule in Assam

Socio-politically, the state and society of Assam was in disarray due to repeated attacks by the Burmese and pestering political intrigue among the Ahom ruling elite in the early 1820s. Moreover, a sizeable section of the population was under the addictive influence of opium which contributed to social decay in different areas. In fact, by June, 1822, Assam was already reeling under a foreign ruler in the form of Burmese commander

Mingimaha Tilwa as the Burmese unleashed horrifying torture on the people of Assam for almost four years which had led to a sharp depletion in the population of the valley. The East India Company intervened in the situation and pushed the Burmese king into signing the Treaty of Yandabo, much to the relief of the Assamese people. Prior to these developments, the prolonged civil war between the Moamorias (the adherents of the Mayamara Sattra) and the Ahom kings wreaked havoc in the very fabric of the society as the conflict exposed deeply unequal class relations amongst the people. The British troops under Captain Welsh intervened for a brief while during the Moamoria revolt at the request of the Ahom administration but had receded soon as further pleadings before the Governor General of the East India Company were cast away. But when the British set foot in the valley to thwart the Burmese, they had their own designs for the region and gradually they overtook the authority of ruling Assam from the Ahoms. The East India Company government's proclamation in a notice published in the Bengali weekly *Samachar Darpan* that their only motive was to overthrow the Burmese to establish peace in Assam was a subtle diplomatic move as it created a goodwill in the minds of the Assamese people for the British. It is true that Assam, through the Treaty of Yandabo, passed from the hands of one foreign rule to another but it also pushed the region from a medieval feudal system to a colonial capitalist system wherein traditional mores of the people got exposed to modern western ways of life. From 1826 onwards, the next few years were politically not propitious for Assam as the province was gradually but surely brought under Company rule. There were incidences like armed resistances against Company rule from members of erstwhile Ahom royal gentry, first under the leadership of Dhananjoy Borgohain and Gomdhar Konwar in 1828 but were routed by Company forces of Captain Rutherford. Subsequently, another resistance was attempted by the likes of Piyoli Phukan, Jiuram Dulia Barua, Ruochand, Bom Singpho etc which met a similar fate like the first. These attempts on the part of the representatives of the former ruling dispensation really could not get the support of the masses as the connivance of sections of the former rulers to bring in the Burmese was probably fresh in the public mind. Although Purandar Singha as the king was installed in the mid-1830s, his tenure suffered severely under the unfavourable financial arrangements by the British which paved the way to the annexation of the entire area under Ahom rule. Subsequently, a new colonial administrative system took root as the Company government made changes and adjustments with the extant systems of justice and governance in the province. In fact, the 'British with their records and treaties were able to supplant the value and place of 'oral' authority with that of written authority'

which had deep consequences as it gave them 'the power to control cross-sectorally negotiations with the subject population and manipulate outcomes that strengthened the Empire' (Thomas 2010, 40-41).

5.5 'Bhasha' of administration and administration of 'bhasha'

Around the early part of British rule in Assam, the lingua franca of the region which has come to be known as Assamese was referred to as 'deshi bhasa' (alternately known as bhodagamya bhasa' or simply 'bhasa'). It was adopted by the colonial government initially as the language of administration as the British took over the reins of authority from the Ahoms. This language was the result of centuries of organic processes of social and cultural interactions between the different ethnic communities living across the region. Every community had their own languages but the 'desi bhasha' was thus born of the practical requirements of living and interacting in a multi-ethnic society. Naturally, the common language incorporated most of its components from the ethnic languages, most notably from Bodo. The rise of the Ahom kingdom in the medieval era precipitated this process of formation of the local vernacular. However, as Assam was gradually made a part of the Bengal Presidency in the late 1820s and early 1830s, administrative imperatives and exigencies played its part in making the government adopt the policy of using Bengali in official works. As the number of educated Assamese was miniscule, quite a number of clerks (called *amolahs*) and officials from Bengal (where there was a much higher percentage of literacy) were recruited to run the newly formed colonial administration and judiciary. Accordingly, Bengali was introduced as the language of courts and education in 1836 in Assam. On the other hand, for that matter, internal social hierarchy and differences between the Hindu castes and the majority of the ethnic communities (who have their own languages) in Assam had created a social structure where usually it was the former class which led the way, and in the developing scheme of things under colonial government the picture did not change as such. In the emerging socio-political order where the old order gave way to the new, the 'deshi bhasa' also lost that special place and dignity. This very same 'desi bhasa' in fact largely was the basis of the region specific Bajravali dialect of Vaishnavite saint leader Sankardev which he used as the means for the transmission of his ideas amongst the largely tribal and ethnic masses of Assam. In the erstwhile Ahom administrative system, a professional class of people titled 'Katakis' were adept in writing letters in various languages of the multilingual region were in service at the royal court.

An article titled 'Axomiya Bhasha Buranji' in *Assam Bandhu,* the pioneering Assamese literary and cultural magazine of the 1880s documents the evolution of Assamese in the following words: '…the papers and accounts which were kept by our royal house was in our language itself. The Kotokis and other gentlemen who wrote and kept the buranjis (histories) was also done in Assamese. Among the common subjects, there was no custom of language education. Those who were students learnt only Sanskrit…there was no use of letters. If occasion demanded letters were composed in the spoken language itself…from the days of King Rudra Singha this form took shape…' (Assam Bandhu 2015, 461-462). Talking about the scribal culture at the Ahom court, contemporary scholar of colonial Assam Bodhisattva Kar has commented: 'Indeed, the ability to operate in the multiple registers of communicative competencies was considered a prized skill for the higher Tungkhungia (A lineage of Ahom royalty) officials. According to Jenkins (East India Company commissioner and agent for Assam) from 'the Rajahs Poorunder Sing and Chunder Kant Sing, with their chiefs', he had 'never heard any other languages spoken than Hindoostanee and Bengali' (Kar 2008, 30-31)

Thus, it appears that the ruling class for varied practical administrative considerations were relatively polyglot in nature. The Ahom rulers, it appears, being largely secular and accommodative by nature, also welcomed Bengali language and culture as during the days of Rudra Singha, Bengali music was performed at the royal court while coins issued had Bengali script engraved on it. However, the language of the masses remained the common tongue. But, with Assam included under Bengal Presidency between 1826 and 1832, the leading sections of the society increasingly found Bengali as the preferred language of communication and discourse. This can be perceived from the fact that Holiram Dhekial Phukan, a leading citizen and a magistrate of the new foreign government wrote the history *Assam Buranji* (1829) in the Bengali language. Other examples from the same period includes Maniram Dewan's *Buranji Bibekratna* (1838) and Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan's two treatises on law and administration which were composed in Bengali. Hemchandra Baruah, one of the first lexicologists of the Assamese language in 19th century wrote about the condition of the 'desi bhasa': 'In Assam, Bangla was the respected language, the mother tongue was despised, in schools, courts, among youths and in their letters, Bengali was used, everyone made Bengali their preferred language, I wasn't an exception to this…' (Kotoky 1982, 25). In the writings of other eminent figures 19th century public life like Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan too initially the epithet Assamese

was used to refer to the people of Assam yet the common language spoken by the large majority was not referred to as Assamese.

The plain fact on the horizon was that even as the literati realized the importance of Assamese language for the free and independent growth of the Assamese people, the 'desi bhasa' at that point of time was not considered somehow 'proper' by the leading intellectuals of Assam. Social scientist Dr Prafulla Mahanta decodes the matter thus: '…the new Assamese middle class tried to model themselves on the elite class of Bengal. The common language developed by all communities was refashioned on Sanskrit grammar and by relieving it of 'lowly', 'uncivilized' clothing of the non-Aryans, Hemchandra Barua clothed the language with Sanskrit and Magadhi dress and thereby became its custodians and basing themselves on that very language and jati (community) the Assamese high caste Hindus emerged as a formidable middle class' (Mahanta 2010, 23) Thus, even as fractious social cleavages existed between Aryan caste Hindu communities and non-Aryan tribal ethnic communities, the nameless common tongue without a guardian continued to function as the primary communication link among the ethnically diverse social groups. In the scenario, for understandably practical conveniences the British colonial establishment right after they took charge and made Assam a part of Bengal Presidency, adopted this common vernacular for administration and judicial processes. Even in 1831 when Bengali was brought in place of Persian or Farsi as the official language in Bengal, the vernacular common tongue of Assam continued to be language of courts and administration in Assam. But just after a decade's time of Company rule, the vernacular Assamese was replaced with Bengali by the administration without any protest from any of the leading sections of public in Assam. This was a natural result of the virtual loss of self-esteem on the part of the emerging Assamese middle class leadership and the older gentry which preferred and identified with Bengali language and culture and were increasingly indifferent to the fate of the vernacular language in the altered power equation of a new provincial colonial region. Part of it also had to do with the fact that they had a sense of superiority whether of caste or religion over the majority of the people of Assam who belonged to different ethnic tribal communities. The influential leading Assamese circles favoured Bengali and English as learning these languages could make them employable in the new administrative system. As Assam then had become part of the Bengal Presidency, officially there were no two opinions regarding granting official language status to Bengali as the language was seen to be adequately

understood in the region. In fact, such moves, on the part of the British, often constituted one of the 'effective means used' to control any large multi-ethnic region 'through the introduction of writing to a subject community who were hardly literate in the sense of being able to read and write' (Thomas 2010, 40-41).

In the circumstances, culturally too, the people of Assam were on the backfoot and this contributed to their low self-esteem in a time of political subordination by a foreign power. This was in contrast to the attitude of one of the first American Baptist missionaries in the region, Dr Nathan Brown (1807-1886), who, as an able linguist intuitively discovered the independent character of the Assamese from the Bengali language. However, with time, the implications of the language policy of the government on the independent identity of the Assamese people became apparent to this very middle class and they took the necessary efforts to restore it to its rightful place.

5.6 Origin and context of the press in Assam

It was in such a context that the press emerged in Assam, and the first newspaper brought out became an experiment in terms of developing a print standard for the vernacular tongue and a space for debates surrounding it. Towards development of newspapers and journalism in Assam, the first step was taken by the American Baptist Missionaries through the publication of the first Assamese language newspaper titled *Arunodoi-Sambad Patra* (later *Orunodoi*) in 1846. Prior to this, 'the vacuum created by the absence of journalism' in Assam 'was filled up by the newspapers and periodicals in Bengali and English published from Bengal' like '*Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika, Somprakash, Sanjivani*, *Masik Patrika*' which 'played a significant role in arousing public opinion and explaining the views on political, social and economic matters relating to Assam.' (Barpujari 2018, 229). The editors of these publications very often commented on the changes in Assam in the context of the implications of British rule with their views in the form of short notes and editorials. 'The earlier years of British annexation, important issues like restoration of Ahom monarchy, the rule of Purandar Simha, resumption of Upper Assam were duly covered by the *Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika and Sanjivani*' (ibid). However, the stage for the transformative chapter of Assamese renaissance in the realm of press, language and literature was laid twenty years before *Orunodoi*. The American Baptist Missionaries, who were to play a decisive role in catalysing these changes, arrived at Sadiya (in upper Assam) in the year 1836. They

worked for a decade's time translating, composing and printing varied projects related to the local languages and their grammar, apart from evangelical activities among people. It is noteworthy, that the first printed Assamese book was a translation of the Bible from the Serampore Mission which was published in 1813. Equally, the context for the coming of the American Baptist Mission to Assam was prepared by the socio-political developments in the region during the 1820s, and this process started with the Treaty of Yandabo, signed by the representatives of the Burmese King and the English East India Company in 1826. Thus, the social, political, economic and cultural history of Assam of the twenty-year period from 1826 to 1846 was pivotal in the emergence of *The Orunodoi*.

5.7 The American Baptist Missionaries in Assam

The Charter Act of 1813 encouraged the dissemination of useful knowledge among Indians which may contribute to their religious and moral wellbeing. For the purpose, the Act pointed out the need of capable English persons to go and stay in India. However, long before this charter the missionaries began their work in Bengal with even without a valid licence. The consolidation of British power in Assam also paved the way for beginning work in similar directions. The Charter Act already provided official protection to Christian missionaries and encouraged company officials to support such activities in their respective administrative areas. In Assam, James Rae, a young Scottish gentleman, was the first missionary to arrive in the state at the request of David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General in the North-East Frontier in 1829. The British Missionary Society played a part in introducing Bengali language in the schools of Assam but the mission was disbanded sometime later due to a number of constraints. Meanwhile in America, the Second Great Awakening during the time created immense interest and drive among the foreign missions and sections of the public to spread the gospel in the non-Christian parts of the globe. The constitution of the American Board for Commissioners for Foreign Affairs in June 1810 had ushered in a new era in American foreign mission initiatives. In 1836, when the American missionaries came to the state, the property in Guwahati city belonging to the British Missionary Society was handed over to the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. Captain Jenkins, who excelled as an administrator and a philanthropist was the person instrumental in bringing in the American missionaries to the region who believed that conversion to Christianity of the local population may well the secure the prospects of the English in the province. In 1834, he wrote to Rev. W.H. Pearce,

an English Baptist Missionary and Mr. E.C. Trevelyan, an officer of the civil service at Calcutta apprising them of the character of the region and its people in the light of possibilities for missionary activities and work. The proposal was received favourably by the board of the mission, while Jenkins himself offered to contribute a thousand rupees for the mission and another thousand rupees for the establishment of a printing press. Anticipating an entry into the Chinese territory via Sadiya for the Company and a general upsurge in the influence of English rule, the proposal was immediately recommended by the higher authorities.

However, due to the inability of the British missionaries to come, American Baptists of the Burma mission were contacted who already familiar with the work of the British missionaries in India via their frequent communications. Sadiya meanwhile was emerging as a strategic point for British interests, located since it was in the midst of a topography well suited for tea and coal exploration. The missionaries also saw Sadiya as a gateway to Chinese territory because earlier attempts to enter the Celestial Empire were thwarted due to the close door policy of the Chinese and the opposition of the Burmese government. It was also assumed that the American Baptists in Burma, being well versed with Shan language, would be suitable for a region like Sadiya which had considerable Khamti population who have linguistic and racial similarity with the Burmese. Under these considerations, in due course the matter was informed to the missionaries at Mawlamyine in Burma to execute the proposal. The name of the missionary Nathan Brown was proposed by the Board in America in response to Captain Jenkin's request and described Brown as having 'strict integrity, enlarged views and truly Christian kindness' (Quoted from Introduction, Dr Neog, Maheshwar, *The Orunodoi* (1846-1854), 2021, 80,). Regarding the developments leading to the entry of the American missionaries in Assam, Nathan Brown's wife Elizabeth W. Brown notes: 'On the 8th of June' in 1835 'an important meeting of the mission was held. It had long been a cherished hope of the Board at home, as well as of missionaries in Burma, to introduce the gospel among the Shans—an interesting family of tribes inhabiting unexplored regions to the north and east—and through them it was expected by inland routes to reach China, whose sea-ports were at that time sealed against foreigners. A proposal was now made by the Rev. W. H. Pearce of the English Baptist mission in Calcutta, and several other friends of missions in Bengal, that the American Baptists should commence a work among these people in Assam, this country having become a part of the British dominions at the close of the Burman war'

(Brown 1890, 100). Nathan Brown was reported to have embraced the proposal with instant enthusiasm, seeing the opportunities for proselytization in the ethnically diverse region which was deemed to be a gateway to China. Oliver T. Cutter was appointed along with Brown to start the mission at Sadiya. Nathan Brown took permission of American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and both he and Mr. Cutter arrived in Calcutta on 20 November, 1835. They received a printing press, reams of paper and other relevant materials for printing. They were also assured of an additional press and the required complete apparatus in a short period.

On the way itself they understood that there was almost no possibility of entering China via that route and the fact that Assamese is the spoken language in the parts they were heading to. On 23 March 1836 they reached Sadiya, after a tedious and challenging four months' long upward journey by boat through the Brahmaputra River. From the very beginning the mission received generous aid from the officers and residents attached to the civil and military services of the East India Company. Captain Jenkins, besides fulfilling his early promises, presented a large printing press to the mission and contributed annually five hundred rupees for its support. Apart from the contributions, Captain Hannay on his transfer to Sibsagar in 1843 presented his brick building for the use of the printing establishment. However, 'hopes of the missionaries doomed to bitter disappointment' as after the Richmond Convention it was revealed that 'the operations of the Board had increased beyond its resources' and 'without increase in its revenue it must "either recall some of the missionaries or go deeper and deeper in debt".' (Barpujari xxii, 1986). Irrespective of such inputs from the home front, the work of the mission in Assam did begin amid a physically difficult terrain where epidemics like malaria, cholera, kala-azar etc were almost endemic. Moreover, transportation even in the plains proved to be another hurdle as no other means of transport was available apart from the human bearer. In such a challenging atmosphere, the support from the government, no doubt, proved to be extremely valuable for the missionaries in beginning their work in the region.

The decision to invite the missionaries was influenced to a great extent by the suggestion of the British explorer and tea planter C.A. Bruce who thought that conversion to Christianity of communities like the Khamtis and Singphos in upper Assam will lead to an overall better trading environment for tea. Indeed, 'political and security reasons,' and 'not so much of evangelism, that had actuated the local authorities to welcome the

missionaries into Assam or North-East Frontier' (ibid, xiii). However, the work of the American Baptist Missionaries at Sadiya was short-lived and marred by clashes and attacks from the Khamti tribe with the Company officials. On 28 January, 1839 British political officer Colonel Adam White and his associates were killed in a brutal attack at Sadiya which pushed the American missionaries to go to a place called Joypur. Joypur, too, proved to jinxed, hence the mission was shifted to Sivasagar, formerly the capital of Ahom kingdom, in the plains of upper Assam on 24th May, 1841. The missionaries were also joined by Dr Miles Bronson (1812-1883), the other prominent face of the mission, who was working in a place called Namsang among the Nocte community in present day Arunachal Pradesh.

Thus, the real purpose with which the American Baptists were invited to the interiors in upper Assam failed. Oliver T. Cutter and his wife Harriet Cutter also came to Sivasagar in 1843. The press of the mission which was used to print books at Sadiya and Joypur in Assamese, Khamti and Singpho languages was finally installed at Sivasagar. The Mission press at Sivasagar was developed into a full-fledged press with printing, binding, engraving, type casting and block making departments. 'O.T.Cutter was the Superintendent of the printing department and thirty-three men worked under him' (Talukdar 2012, 104). This press, which was christened 'Sibsagor Baptist Mission Press' was precisely the press from which the first Assamese language newspaper or a magazine, *The Orunodoi* was printed and published. The publication described itself as 'a monthly paper devoted to religion, science and general intelligence.' The first issue came out in the month of January in the year 1846.

5.8 The marriage of colonial and missionary policies: *Orunodoi* and its universe

The British government, it must be noted, started administrative rehaul of the older feudal order in the form of investigating land relations just couple of years after the Treaty of Yandabo. Slowly but surely, as the rein of power went onto the hands of the Company, colonial explorations and investigations into the socio-cultural and economic realities of the province also became routine practices. The missionaries, on the other hand, having already spent a few years deeper in the upper Assam had basic intelligence of ground realities to begin to craft appropriate strategies for their work at Sivasagar. They knew they were in the heart of the local society and as was the norm (of printing material in the language of the targeted addressee) started producing printed materials like books and a

newspaper, which was the first of its kind in north-east India. The Baptists had a long-term plan for their Assam Mission as can be seen from this passage of a private correspondence of missionary Denforth: "We can reach a portion of the more influential part of the people in no other way. They have too great contempt for our scriptures and religious books to read them until we can dissipate their prejudices and engender a sense of enlightenment. They will receive and read the paper [Orunodoi] and by this medicine a curiosity will be existed to know our…religion" (Barpujari 1986, 156). Additionally, thus, for the purpose, the missionaries from the earliest period started focussing on creating an educational infrastructure in the vernacular so that the Bible could be read and understood. The missionaries were under the impression that 'the masses in Assam were illiterate mainly because of the influence of the priestly classes who deliberately kept them ignorant. Their strategy was not to attack them personally, but to enlighten the masses by opening up village schools' (ibid, xxxi-xxxii). Mission schools were opened across the valley and the hills, and with the publication of textbooks in Assamese, the process of evangelisation was fortified in a formal set-up for young minds. Subsequently, hence, bounded volumes of *Orunodoi* were made available for buying by interested pupils and their parents as the journal contained a lot of general knowledge, apart from bits of mission news and theology.

Canadian economic historian and media theorist Harold Innis argued that any new media is 'pulled' into broad use by rising demand, and not driven by rising supply (Innis 1951, 33-36). From this perspective, apparently it is seen that the monthly *Orunodoi* was not brought out because of any pressure or demand from the local communities. Even a very primary type of socio-economic infrastructure needed for a periodical press was not available in Assam in those days. However, as far as the local populace was concerned, the leading sections among them were subscribers and readers of the different publications of Bengal press. So, in a way, the impulse and interest for printed material and periodicals existed amongst the gentry and other power holders and those specific classes who dealt in official communications in Assam in the Ahom administration. When multiple attempts to tame and win over the bordering tribes of upper Assam failed, the colonial government felt the need of an alternative strategy and the arrival of Baptist missionaries was a result of that decision. Accordingly, the publication of the first Assamese monthly, was itself a by-product of the consequent activities of the American Baptists and the larger of project of British colonialism in the region. Thus, it can be seen that the need for press was not

felt either by the colonial administration or the local public but was an unwitting consequence of a policy adopted by the ruling dispensation to invite the American Baptists. In the process, the publication of the first journal of the state *Orunodoi* became a socially transformative chapter as it created, if not demand, at least, interest and need for printed news and information among common members of the public. In this connection, it can be mentioned that by necessity the ruling empires and to an extent influential traders of the times had their own news writers (referred to as *waqia-navis* in Mughal Court). These writers had no independence to comment of the nature of the events reported and recorded from various parts of the country.

Thus technically, press in the modern sense of the term and object, surfaced in India only after consolidation of British power. However, even after the decline of Mughal Empire and the ascendance of East India Company's rule, local newsletters called 'akhbarats' 'continued to be produced and distributed by various Indian courts, as well as privately by former news writers. Not only did print journals draw from the akhbarat, the latter also reproduced content form the former' (Sonwalkar 2019, 26).

Initially, the Company government was not keen on a functioning press, but when there was enough divergence or conflict of opinion among the ruling class, space was created for the first newspapers in India. The East India Company had their printing presses but they were never used for publishing a newspaper until Hicky, a disgruntled trader started the *Bengal Gazette.* Whereas in Assam, although in a different context and sixty-six years later, the same colonial government in combination with the American Baptist missionaries intentionally facilitated the emergence of *The Orunodoi.* This comparison probably indicates the early trajectory of the press in India from being looked upon initially as a public nuisance by the colonial government to a realization of it as an ally in daily governance. After the pioneering efforts of Hicky, the Serampore Baptist missionaries and Raja Ram Mohun Roy respectively, the press gradually but surely took root in India irrespective of the attitude of the government. Concurrently, the gradual development of the railway, the telegraph and unform postage laid the necessary infrastructure for newspapers and periodicals in most parts India including Assam. These developments in the domain of communications, as can be seen, later proved to be critical in the spread and transmission of ideas, attitudes and information during the protracted period of anti-colonial movement of India.

5.9 *Orunodo*i, the invention of 'Asamiya' and the colonial administration

The avowed objective of the journal *Orunodoi* was the spread of the Christian faith among the people of Assam. For that purpose, along with general news and information of far and near regions, the paper provided ample coverage to the activities and tasks of the Baptist mission. It is significant that at a time when the official language was Bengali, the missionaries brought out the paper in Assamese. The missionaries definitely paid attention to the fact that Assamese was the lingua franca in the region and that they have to communicate in Assamese to reach the heart and minds of the local populace. Perhaps, the fact that the specific dialect used in 'Sankari language-literature already formed a basis of Vasihnava consciousness in society', the missionaries may have 'decided to make use of the common spoken language of upper Assam' (Oza 2011, 168). In this context, it is to be noted that the word 'Asamiya' was never used before *Orunodoi*, either to denote the language or the nationality. It shows that 'there was no linguistic consciousness or nationalism in pre-Orunodoi, pre-press Assam' (Sharma 2002, 87). Therefore, a major share of the credit for fusing together a modern nationality and imbuing it a sense of self-identity goes to the institution of the press in Assam. Since the coming of the American Baptists to the region was facilitated by the colonial government, the paper often took a position in terms of its content and editorial viewpoint not to upset the state apparatus. The colonial government and the missionaries had their own separate objectives, but as can be gauged from their alliance, both the forces were considerate of the aims of each other. For instance, the Baptist missionary Denforth served as a military security official during suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and the leading missionary Miles Bronson operated the Dibrugarh mission from complete support from the European tea barons (Neog, Maheshwar, Introduction, *Orunodoi* 2021, 79-85). Thus, in the process of going about their own objectives, most of the times they complemented each other in creating an atmosphere suitable for their activities. In fact, a majority of the subscribers of *Orunodoi* were all leading British and other Europeans living in Assam like 'the British trader C.A Bruce and administrator Col. F. Jenkins' who 'continued to subscribe to the journal regularly for many years' (Misra 2011, 78). In most issues of the newspaper, the names of the subscribers and patrons were published on the last page and from such lists it can be seen that apart from the eminent European traders and officials, the native Assamese subscribers were either people of high social status like the aristocrats or government servants. In this connection, what Benedict Anderson says with reference to reading

publics in nineteenth century Europe is prescient: 'If we note that as late as 1840, even in Britain and France, the most advanced states in Europe, almost half the population was still illiterate (and in backward Russia almost 98 percent), 'reading classes' meant people of some power. More concretely, they were, in addition to the old ruling classes of nobilities and landed gentries, courtiers and ecclesiastics, rising middle strata of plebian lower officials, professionals, and commercial and industrial bourgeoisies' (Anderson 2015, 75-76) 'In the first seven years, the circulation of *Orunodoi* varied between 390 and 568. Majority of the subscribers were based in Guwahati and Sibsagar' (Saikia, 2002). Many of the headlines of the news reports were also printed in English, obviously, for the convenience of the colonials.

5.10 *Orunodoi*: Form, content and readers

Early development of the newspaper and the press as an institution was slow in all parts of India, due to a variety of factors like limited access and availability of printing presses, restrictive governmental outlook on the press, pre-censorship, limited development of modern education, inadequate transportation and communications facilities etc. In Assam too, these factors were very much present and led to a general stagnancy in all spheres of life where there was virtually no possibility of an environment conducive to regular publication of newspapers. Amongst the common local population, folk media and various oral cultural practices were part of the communicative and performative traditions. It was only a handful among the Assamese gentry and elites whose minds were touched by the winds of Bengal Renaissance had any idea of modern media like the newspaper and other print media. Commenting on the cultural affinity of Assamese gentry with all things Bengali, historian H.K. Barpujari writes: 'Assamese gentry evinced a liking for the *punjabi* (long shirt), *shawl* and *santi puri dhuti* of the Bengalees and perhaps for their food and delicacies. Bengali newspapers and periodicals like the *Samachar-Darpan* and *the Samachar-Chandrika* had Assamese subscribers, some of whom even supplied local news and contributed articles' (Barpujari 1963, 269). The fact that certain Bengali newspapers had quite some subscribers, circulation and popularity among the elite and leading citizens in Assam is evident from this excerpt of the missionary newspaper *Samachar Darpan* published from Serampore in Bengal*:* 'The Assamese gentlemen who are highly respected in Assam keep touch with Bengal through Bengali newspapers. No district in Bengal can claim as many subscribers to Bengali newspapers as those in Assam. Besides one hardly

comes across letters written from the different districts of Bengal, in the Bengali newspapers. But, seldom does a week pass without a letter from Assam to one or the other of the Bengali newspapers' (quoted from Baruah, 1999).

However, current historiography on the nature of information and communication in colonial India highlights the need to look beyond simplistic categories of elite and masses in terms of debate and discussion of public and social issues among people through media like print. Irrespective of the growing importance of printing technology during early colonial experience, existing traditions of communication and debate in different parts of India played a role in the formation of public opinion on social, religious, political and cultural questions. The British historian C. A. Bayly writes: "Colonial ideologues and leaders of Indian opinion sought to draw on this tradition of communication and argument when 'public instruction' and 'useful knowledge' became slogans after 1830." (Bayly 2009, 49) In Assam, too, we see this network of local communication and its participants responding to the issues brought forth by the *Orunodoi*, and the paper largely followed an instructional and pedagogical thrust in its columns as much of the content had to do with general knowledge.

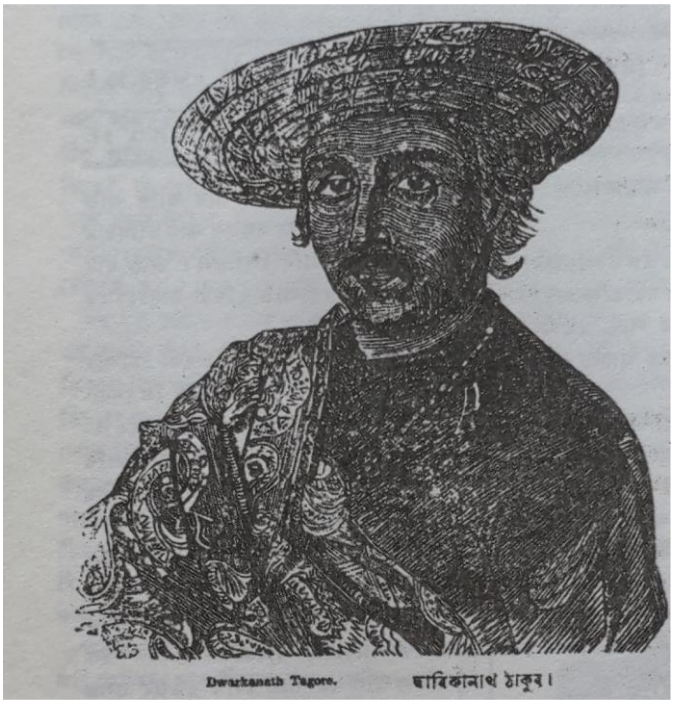

Image 5.2: Example of the quality of illustration by local engravers in Orunodoi. In the image: Dwarkanath Tagore, a leading Indian industrialist of his time to form an enterprise with British partners

Source: Orunodoi (1846-1854) Collected Volume, Publication Board Assam.

It seems the publishers of the *Orunodoi* broadly drew on the model and policy of the newspapers of their counterparts in Bengal. In form and content, the paper combined the features of a magazine and a monthly newspaper which tapped onto the illustrated form of journalism prevalent then in western newspapers and magazines. It is noteworthy that the artwork in *Orunodoi* were 'copiously illustrated by native engravers, whose work was pronounced in Calcutta superior to anything that had then been produced there by Bengali workmen' (Brown 1890, 416). Reports in the *Orunodoi* were written in simple prose sans Sanskritized complex words and formations which was a step towards making 'Assamese' a fit medium for modern journalistic reporting and communication understandable by a large majority of the semi-literate masses. The fact that Nathan Brown was a linguist who had a feel for both spoken and written Assamese influenced the kind of language used in *Orunodoi*. The system of spelling adopted was based on the phonetical usage of the words, and the orthography was based on an unpublished dictionary by an Assamese scholar named Jaduram Borua. By and large, the language used in the paper tried to reflect the speech practices of the region of Sivasagar (where the press was located), and because the editors were American, the printed language at times sounded stilted when compared with the spoken 'bhasha'. In the *Orunodoi,* the majority of the news items were about national and international developments, while reports about local incidents and events were very few in comparison which were provided by private correspondents from different parts of the state. The news segment in the paper was titled 'Anek Deshor Sambad' (News from many lands). The news reports about national and international developments were collected from reputed English and Indian language newspapers and periodicals. Some of the notable newspapers from which writings were translated and published in the *Orunodoi* were '*Times (*of London*), Times (*of Lanka*), Agra Messenger, Lahore Chronicle, Benares Recorder, Delhi Gazette, The Enquirer, Friend of India*' and Bengali papers like *'Samachar Darpan, Dig-Darshan, Purna-Chandrodaya, Bhaskar, Baartabah (*Rangpur*), Upadeshak* etc' (*Orunodoi,* Neog, 2021, 94-95). As far as local news was concerned, majority of the reports were about petty crimes, natural disasters, social gossips etc and on the average very few in comparison to national and international news. In this sense, *Orunodoi* like provincial papers of the era can be 'deemed provincial only by virtue of their being printed in a particular region' as the local content in the issues was pretty low (local news was mostly submitted by ordinary folks at the press site or based on hearsay) and the editorial responsibility for the main national or international news remained with the source publications (Harrison 2009, 50).

5.11 *Orunodoi*: Coverage of local political developments

As a matter of policy, the newspaper never deviated from absolute loyalty to the British government and made it a point to never to criticise the company government's rule in the province. After all, it was on the colonial government's goodwill and help that the American Baptist Mission in Assam depended and developed as outlined before. In this regard, the American Baptist Mission in Assam was no exception as missionaries all over India steered clear of publishing politically sensitive and charged issues in detail. Along with this aspect, the missionary publishers also probably wanted to avoid any legal entanglement as the colonial era press laws were stringent in nature (the practice of deportment of contrarian European editors by the colonial authorities was pretty common in those days). It suited them as their goal was rather evangelical rather than political. However, they 'never failed to bring to the notice of the Home Board the political events which had affected their operations' (Barpujari 1986, xxvi). One can get a sense of this policy in relation to the coverage of the death of Maniram Dewan, the leading citizen of his day in the pages of *Orunodoi*. When Maniram Dewan, a pioneering businessman, tea-planter and collaborator with British East India Company in many trading activities turned to the side of sepoys during the mutiny of 1857, the authorities made an example of him by giving capital punishment. In the February issue of the newspaper in 1858, there were all total 8 news-items in the column 'Anek Deshor Sambad', among which three stories were related to Assam. The first story was about the crisis of rice production, while the second story was about the sudden death of a goldsmith in a place called Sonari in Sivasagar. The third story was about the news of the death of Maniram Dewan: 'On Friday the 26th of February at ten o'clock in Jorhat jail on the charge of sedition Maniram Dewan and Piyali Sharma Mauzadar have been hanged' (Orunodoi, February, 1858, referred in Choudhury, 2014, 33). 'This news sentenced so have been wrapped up in just five lines. That is, less than half number of words have been used to report the death of Maniram Dewan, the leading citizen of his day in comparison to the news of the death of an unknown goldsmith…in the news the name of Dewan has been written without any address suitable for a respectable person as was the practice…as per the status of a person *Orunodoi* used to use 'Sri' and 'Srijut' (ibid). However, this same newspaper in its earlier reports had referred to Maniram Dewan with the respectable epithet 'Srijut' before and it is believed that Dewan largely cooperated with the activities of the Baptist Mission and 'had donated Rs. 101 to the paper' (Dutta 1990, 194).

In a similar fashion, *Orunodoi* also dodged reports about the peasant uprisings of Phulaguri in Nagaon district in the early 1860s, or probably it would be more appropriate to say that whatever little news and comments it published about it was grossly incomplete. Opium addiction was a serious social evil in Assam then, and when the government issued a notice to ban the cultivation of opium to which the people at large of the province were addicted, it attracted volatile reactions from the public. In a colonial transitional economy moving towards monetization, the majority of peasants were dependent on opium for cash. So, when the colonial government in a financial crunch and hungry for taxes made the move to ban the cash crop, it parallelly made sure that the addicted people buy only the government procured opium of North India. The decision resulted in a wave of peasant protests and public meetings locally called 'raij mels' which were held at Phulaguri to deliberate on the ban and the issues surrounding it. Led mostly by tribal peasants, the Phulaguri uprising was one of the first organised public protests against British Raj in the region. More than a thousand peasants armed with lathis (heavy bamboo sticks used as a weapon) gathered as peasants from distant villages joined in the protests whereby it was decided not to pay any taxes. When the security forces were deployed to control the mob, it led to inadvertent scuffles which resulted in the death of a British Lieutenant named Singer. In the report which was published in the *Orunodoi*, the incident was entirely described from the point of view of the government, and it did not take note of the increased taxation on the people. It is very unlikely that the publishers of the newspaper were unaware of the discontent among people regarding increased taxation, and in fact in a missionary report prepared a few months after the uprising noted 'a growing spirit of discontent among the people in consequence of the greatly increased taxation' (Barpujari 1986, 94). In the news report of *Orunodoi* about the Phulaguri protests it was instead mentioned that the tax rates in Assam were mild in comparison to other places of the empire, and thus echoed internal sentiments of the higher officials of the colonial government. In the November issue of 1861, the paper wrote 'In response to the ban on opium and on the issue of tax, those people of Nagaon did this audacious activity.' (Dev Goswami 1959, 133)

In context, it needs to be mentioned that this stance on a burning topic of the day on the part of the *Orunodoi* was very contrary to what the paper had been preaching about the opium evil. In fact, from the very first issue, the paper had been vocal about the socially detrimental effects of opium in Assam. Tilottoma Misra sums up the attitude of *Orunodoi*

in relation to local news in the following words: 'There was hardly ever any mention of the political affairs of Assam, though several important political issues like the debate centred round the official language issue, had affected the whole intellectual atmosphere of Assam in those days. All important events like the visit of A.J. Moffat Mills to Assam in 1853, received only a passing mention…' (Misra 2011, 80). Thus, in a tacit fashion, the American Baptists, through their monthly paper, played their part in creating an ideological consensus for the colonial government in Assam.

5.12 Life-span of Orunodoi

Although there are different opinions regarding the life-span of *The Orunodoi*, what is significant is that the paper continued to come out (at times irregularly) for four decades. A reliable chronological list of the names of the missionaries who were editors of *The Orunodoi* is unfortunately not available. Profulla Chandra Borua reasons: "First, in those times it was not compulsory to publish the names of the editor, publisher and printer of the newspaper as in these days. Secondly, not all the issues of Orunodoi are available…Though the *Orunodoi* had been published since January 1846, it was only in the August 1850 issue of the paper…that the name of the editor was printed for the first time. And that name was of N. Brown." (Borua 1997, 10). From the available volumes, it is seen that some of the noted editors of the paper apart from Dr Nathan Brown were A Ploton How Denforth, Samual M. Whiting, William Ward, Edward W. Clark, Mrs Susan R. Ward and A.K. Gurney.

5.13 Dr Nathan Brown: The key personality behind *Orunodoi*

Dr Nathan Brown, who was trained as a missionary in Newton Theological Institute also had a background in journalism via his experience of editing a weekly religious newspaper named 'The Vermont Telegraph' in America. It is to be noted that by eighteenth century, North America was swept by a printing revolution of sorts as 'printers discovered a new source of income -the newspaper' (Febvre and Martin 1976, 208-11). In America, between the years '1691 and 1820, no less than 2,120 'newspapers' were published, of which 461 lasted more than ten years' (ibid). By 1830, America 'had 650 weeklies and 65 dailies' and 'the average circulation of a daily was 1,200, so the total daily circulation was roughly 78,000' (Schudson 1978, 13) Beginning and developing as part of a burgeoning market economy, most of the early American newspapers were brought out by printers starting

new presses where usually they were the principal sole contributors. Especially, the emergence of the penny press in the 1830s brought significant changes in the direction of American journalism as the associated commercial model of it redefined the concept of news by the twin processes of commoditization and democratisation. Benedict Anderson has termed the emergence of the figure of the 'printer-journalist initially' as an 'essentially North American phenomenon' (Anderson 2015, 61). No doubt this newspaper culture back home must have influenced and sensitized Brown to the role of newspapers in community and social life. According to scholar Nanda Talukdar, *Orunodoi Sambad Patra* was published as per the resolution of the Baptist Mission annual conference held at Sivasagar in December, 1845. Dr Brown insisted on the retention of the press in upper Assam because its removal would lead to the abdication of the Mission in Assam. The press consisted of two printing machines with provisions for printing in Assamese, English, Bengali and Shan. The Baptist Mission press at Sivasagar functioned for about forty years and most of the Assamese books of the mid nineteenth century were published there. The first issue of *The Orunudoi,* under the joint efforts of Mr. O.T. Cutter and Dr Brown. came out as a mouth-piece of the American Baptists' Assam mission in January, 1846.

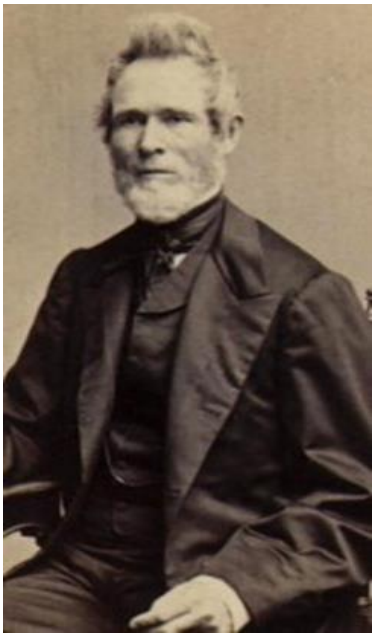

Image 5.3: Dr Nathan Brown

Source: Boston University, School of Missiology, (official website: bu.edu

5.14 The vision behind the title 'Orunodoi'

It is telling that the paper was titled 'orunodoi', meaning the rising sun in Assamese. It is not known who suggested this name but the name is revealing of the proselytizing intent and design of the publishers. One can read the symbolic import of the title, at least, in two ways: first the title was used to the refer the light of the message of Christ, and second, just as sunlight is life giving, the paper's title can be seen to mean the civilizing mission of the Baptists. A well-established pedagogy of the missionary activity in the colonial world, this binary epistemological scheme positions the Europeans as a deliverer and the annexed people as needing to be delivered from darkness. Interestingly, in American press of the period, where Brown had been a member, saw a change in trend of the names or titles of newspapers. Historian of the American press, Professor Michael Schudson observes regarding the development: 'Before the 1830s, when newspapers sought the readership of commercial elites, they named themselves accordingly…But, after 1830, few newspapers were founded which bore such names. Instead, there were a great many papers whose name express a kind of *agency*---names like "critic", "herald", "tribune." One might also include as part of this development the papers named "star" or "sun," for both words suggest active objects which illuminate the world' (Schudson ibid, 17). Schudson here was referring to a process in the development of American newspapers wherein it was seen that titles of the publications seemed to convey in a more self-conscious way the editor's personality and convictions after 1830, whereas earlier the papers had titles which reflected their primary commercial or political clientele (like *The Boston Daily Advertiser* and *Federal Republican and Baltimore Telegraph*). It is not entirely improbable that Brown was influenced in his choice of title for the mission monthly as *Orunodoi* (meaning rising sun in Assamese) from such trends in contemporary American papers with which he was familiar. In the nineteenth century, the socially progressive minds had immense passion for newly invented and discovered wonders in the natural and scientific world. It can be interpreted that the titles of many Bengali and Assamese newspapers of the times had names which suggested concepts of light, liberation, civilization etc. Some of the titles of the journals which came after *The Orunodoi* in Assamese like *Assam Mihir*, *Chandrodaya*, *Assam Tara*, *Jonaki*, *Bijuli* bear testimony to this trend. In the light of this development, it is apparent that American missionaries were inspired by the name of the titles of Bengali periodicals like *Samachar Chandrika, Sambad Timitnashok, Sambad Kaumudi, Purnachandrodaya, Prabhakar, Dibakar* etc. all of which suggested the concept

of ‘light’ and the project of enlightening ‘heathens.’ In response, it is to be noted that sections of Hindu society too resorted to using the new printing technology to spread the light of their own religion. Bengali titles like *Hindu Dharma Chandrodaya* (1847) and the Assamese periodical *Assam Deepak* (1876) brought from the Dharma Prakash Yantra press of Auniati Sattra are examples of this tendency. Quite clearly, this fusing and conflation of the ideas of religion and light into one captures the essence of the debates surrounding one’s personal faith in a time of colonisation. The discourse of light of the rising sun, about which the American Baptists were talking about, are strewn across the pages of *The Orunodoi* itself. For instance, in the September, 1854 issue of the paper, N.L.F (Nidhi Levi Farwell, one of the first local converts to Christianity) writes in an article titled ‘Krishna Pal name prothom Hindu Christianor biboron’ (roughly translates as ‘A descriptive account of Krishna Pal the first Hindu Christian’): “In the days of Krishna Pal the sun only rose, but now it is peak afternoon where there is blazing light”. At the same time, there were articles in the paper on Hinduism (September, 1852 issue) and Islam (July 1851 issue) also. What this diversity implies is that the missionaries were ready to be flexible in their approach to create space in the minds of the local readers and thereby condition the local public discourse for favourable reception of Christian ideas. It is doubtful if the American Baptists were successful in this regard as the number of converts were abysmally low.

Difficulties in regular operations of the missionaries also came in the aftermath of the first nationwide revolt led by the sepoys in 1857 which resulted in strained relations between the Indian people and the Europeans in general. With the transfer of power from the Company to the Crown in 1858, the English government again started adopting a neutral policy towards Christian missionaries as they felt the evangelists also partly contributed to the atmosphere of the outbreak of the mutiny through their activities. Additionally, the Civil War in America during the 1860s dried up the funds for the Assam mission. Subsequently, it is only after the war was over in America that ‘more funds and assistance were available for the Assam field’, but by then the missionaries realised that ‘they must turn to the hills rather than the plains’ (Barpujari 1986, xix).

5.15 Contribution of *Orunodoi*

However, it is to be noted that through their monthly paper and educational works, the Baptists were able to win the goodwill of the people of Assam. The *Orunodoi* made

immense contribution towards consolidating modern Assamese literature, education and thereby broadened the intellectual horizon in the region. By raising public consciousness against evils like opium addiction, the monthly paper *Orunodoi* consistently put the issue in the public sphere. In collaborating with the new Assamese middle class leadership in their fight towards restoration of the Assamese language as the official language of the province, the American Baptists and their monthly played a historic role. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's momentous memorial to the colonial government titled 'Plea for Assam and Assamese' in which he established the distinct and separate identity of Assamese language and literature vis-à-vis Bengali was in many ways a result of the debates started by the American missionaries in *Orunodoi*. Almost all the noted personalities of the contemporary Assamese society were contributors to the pages of the journal. Maniram Dewan, the leading personality of the era even contributed financially for publication. In fact, the paper which 'attained a wide circulation among the native population' was in many respects found 'to be more efficient than ordinary tracts in breaking down their prejudices and enlighten their ignorance' (Gammell 1850, 224). The Baptists missionaries, thus, contributed to the emergence of a regional public sphere geared to the needs of a society in doldrums which needed regeneration in different aspects.

In 1882, one of the press machines was sold to the Assam Company of Nazira, and the second press was sent to the Naga Hills. Although, there are different views regarding the date and year in which *The Orunodoi* ceased publication, it is pretty much evident that the last issues were published in the early 1880s. The Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1880-81 recorded that 'the Arunoday, a paper formerly published at Sibsagar, has been discontinued from January 1880′ (1882, 230).

The leading scholar of Assamese literature, Dr Nagen Saikia notes that 'no information is so far available in regard to publication of the paper from 1875 to 1878' and 'advertisements about combined volumes of the journal continued to appear till 1857, but such advertisements obviously give rise to doubts regarding continuity of the paper…' (Saikia 2007, 57). On the other hand, Sunil Pawan Baruah comments on the concluding days of the paper thus: "It should be noted that since the close of the sixties…the missionaries had changed their direction and for the second time moved towards the hills of the region…the paper from its very inception ran on a deficit budget and there was a wide gap between income and expenditure" (Baruah 2021, 31). Reverend S.M. Whiting in

one of his pieces revealed that the annual expenditure for the paper was Rs. Six hundred, whereas the management received Rs. Four hundred only from the subscribers (Orunodoi, Vol XII, Issue No. 6). The statistics of the circulation from 1846 to 1854 shows that the percentage of the local subscribers gradually decreased and the overall circulation was also not satisfactory. Guwahati commanded the highest sale among the foreigners, Sivasagar among the local people (Orunodoi Vol IX, No. 6). The circulation of the paper increased up to seven hundred in the year 1867-1868. The fact that the monthly *The Orunodoi* ran for almost four decades' time, in spite of challenges, explains the quality of influence the journal wielded in Assamese society. Giving literary status and dignity to the spoken language of the masses, *Orunodoi* in a sense reinvented the Assamese language. The overall secular nature of the general information and educational content no doubt proved to be a boon for the student community as well as the general public as it opened up the Assamese mind. In fact, even 'orthodox Assamese found' *Orunodoi* to be 'interesting and instructive since it embodied new ideas in attractive form…' (Barpujari 1986, xxxviii). Inspiring successive generations of Assamese towards an intellectual awakening, the periodical developed amongst them a love for the printed word and germinated the idea of the role of news and literary periodicals in general among different sections. Moreover, For the first time, the missionary backed journal, through dissemination of news and information from around the nation and the world educated and stimulated the collective mind of the region to a new sense of time and space. As Benedict Anderson has remarked: '…the very conception of the newspaper implied the refraction of even 'world events' into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers; and also how important to that imagined community is an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time' (Anderson 2015, 63). In this context, it is telling that there was virtually no competition for the *Orunodoi* till 1871, when the second newspaper of the state, *Asam Bilasinee* was published by the Auniati Sattra (A leading Vaishnavite monastery). In terms of influence, it is true that the majority of the population of the province were illiterate to be avid readers, but as it often happens in such societies, through those of whom could read information and ideas transmit and travel to other people. Meanwhile in the neighbouring Garo hills, the missionaries brought out a monthly called *Achikni Ripen* (Garo's Friend) in 1879 which ran for over thirty years.

Assamese society was a hierarchical society during the nineteenth century, although the old mores and social etiquettes of the feudal period were slowly giving way to modern secular attitude due to the introduction of modern western education, awakening of rational

thinking and social reforms. As the first newspaper of the region, *The Orunodoi* was a success because it was able to engage the mind of the emerging generation. The paper covered almost all the important and useful topics and issues and hence served in a minimal way both the functions of a newspaper and a periodical or magazine. In fact, as Dr Maheshwar Neog, in his pioneering study of the paper showed that *The Orunodoi* has actually "two forms, newspaper and magazine. Both the forms were in circulation at least till 1854…apart from the broad-sheeter four-page Orunodoi another 16-page Orunodoi of 12 fingers length and 7 fingers breadth is also published every month. This book of knowledge is known as magazine. Its price is same as the longer Orunodoi, but it has more information than the other." (Neog 2021, 94-95).

5.16 *Orunodoi* as a mouthpiece of the Baptist missionaries and the local socio-religious world

As the mouthpiece of the American Baptist Mission, *Orunodoi* performed its primary duty of propagation of Christianity among the local readers and the British resident subscribers. But in a matter of few years, it became apparent to the missionaries that Assamese people across communities were not easily susceptible to Christianity. Society in Assam for centuries was connected with Brahmin religious practices along with community specific rituals and it was reformed to a great extent by the arrival of Sankardev's neo-vaishnavite movement in the medieval era. Add to it, probably, were reasons like the deeply entrenched varna or caste system which worked against potential converts as they feared excommunication from society. A missionary named Moore and others in The Baptist Missionary Magazine wrote that even if certain people accepted the justification of finding refuge in Christ, 'they' were 'held fast by the tremendous power of caste' (Baptist Missionary Magazine July, 1889). The sattradhikars or gosains (abbots) of the neo-vaishnavite sattras had considerable influence among people of all sections and their influence was something which the Baptist missionaries had to covertly counter if they were to be even remotely successful in their endeavours. The degree of animosity in the minds of the missionaries was considerable which is evident from this passage from Bronson's journal: 'You will see, therefore, why it is that I feel rejoiced to find that full two thirds of the priesthood are in trouble…I verily believe that God will ere long remove this great impediment to the spread of the gospel out of the way, and therefore do I rejoice. May God help us to do something to hasten their downfall! (Barpujari 1986, 209). In 1842,

when *Orunodoi* had not even started coming out Nathan Brown had visited Auniati Sattra and wanted to see the abbot. But as per Brown, the 'Auniati Gosain seemed altogether averse to seeing us' (ibid, 188). Missionary Barker had gone to another important monastery named Kamalabari Sattra and gave books to the abbot but the books were not touched due to fear of spiritual contamination, stating that the gifted book, 'True Refuge' had been rejected as it 'directly aims at the overthrow of their religion' (ibid, 88). The followers of the abbot also apparently did not touch the books of missionaries due to fear of sinning (ibid, 189). From these instances it is clear that the established religion of 'ekasarana dharma' and its primary institutions and leadership had strong opposition to the enthusiastic preachers of the new religion in the region. In contrast, as per Nathan Brown, the 'ex-nobility and civil officers' of the Ahom administration 'received them cordially', while 'the priests and spiritual heads disputed and bitterly opposed missionaries' (ibid, xiv). The missionaries also never faced the kind of resistance that they encountered amongst the hills and frontier tribes in the midst of common Assamese folk. In fact, the missionaries were warmly received by the ordinary Assamese. Incidentally, for the Christian missionaries as they roamed the province on foot with their kit from village to village, the 'namghors' were the occasional resting place as was the wont in those days for any weary traveller.

The *Orunodoi*, on occasions, took opportunities to reveal certain corrupt and unethical practices in the Vaishnava sattras or monasteries. It was part of the missionary strategy and belief that only by exposing the faults in the local religion they can ever hope to win popular support. In the June issue of the first year of the newspaper in 1846 (Vol I, No VI), a report appeared about a quarrel between the Satradhikar and the Deka Adhikar of the Auniati Satra. It opposed capital punishment meted out by the Satradhikar to their disciples when the latter broke caste-based rules. This news report, although its exposition of the role of sattras as an enforcer of caste hierarchies is laudable, was not entirely without design. Many other reports were published subsequently on the pages of *Orunodoi* which were purposeful in relation to the sattras. In one such report, there is the descriptive account of an incident involving greedy members of a sattra over a few gold coins which led to mutual thuggery and conflict (July, 1847). In a travel account headlined 'Missionary Tour of Native Assistants', the writer (signed as N.L.F, most probably Nidhi Levi Farwell) describes a couple of interactions and debates with a few members of Auniati Satra around a Miri community (a tribal ethnic community) village in Sivasagar concerning the notion

of sin and caste issues in Hindu society after which reportedly the members were convinced of the superiority of the Christian worldview (Feb, 1852 issue). Nidhi Levi Farwell, the writer of this report, was a low caste individual who was one of the first local converts to Christianity also wrote other reports in the *Orunodoi* which described the Hindu pilgrimage sites of Kamakhya, Hayagriva Madhav, Kedarnath etc as hotbeds of prostitution and liquor. The Brahman pundits in these places of worship were also described as hustlers of prostitutes and money. 'Whether these things were true or not is a different matter, but it was clearly a form of propaganda of one religion against another religion' (Sharma 2013, 120). Implicitly also, on occasions, reports in *Orunodoi* exposed certain superstitions in Hinduism through secular discourse on topics like geography and history. For example, in the August issue of 1852, in the item titled "Hindustanor Bibaran (Description of Hindustan'), physical details of the Himalayan Mountain range are printed along with a dismissal of the common Hindu belief that Himalayas touch the sky. Such reports and the overall role of the American Baptist Mission in Assam's public life must have caused some apprehension in the minds of certain sections amongst the local social and spiritual elite. Reminiscent of the manner in which Ram Mohun Roy's journals took on the propaganda of the Serampore Missionaries, these personages made a determination to preserve old practices against strange new religious and cultural inroads made by foreign missionaries. However, whereas Roy's efforts were progressive in the domain of ideas, the work of the conservative forces like the Sattras in Assam remained confined to religion only.

5.17 The institutional backdrop of *Assam Bilasinee*

In Assam, apart from the priestly Brahmin sections, the religious sphere mainly consisted of the age-old sattras (neo-vaishnavite monasteries). As was wont, the East India Company administration adopted the policy of non-intervention in religious matters in Assam like other parts of the Indian subcontinent. However, initially the missionaries were patronised to an extent by the Company administration for strategic reasons as described earlier. With transfer of power to the Crown, the colonial government reverted to the policy of non-involvement in any religion for that matter (including Christianity). In spite of this policy, it is to be noted that the 'spiritual aristocracy' (Guha, 1991) who were in charge of the Vaishnavite monasteries had developed a cordial relationship with the British colonial government. Because of administrative mechanisms introduced by the imperial

government, land issues and relationships prevalent from the Ahom era were gradually adjusted to the colonial revenue and tax system. This new system put a lot of pressure on the common masses, cultivators and other professional classes as they were not used to this kind of taxation. The lack of an evenly developed economy where there was enough generation of cash further complicated the process. However, the British administration wanted to the keep the extant land settlements of religious institutions like the sattras intact, while they put continuous pressure on the local populace to align themselves to this new reality. The unjust situation is evident from the fact that while the sattras themselves were granted tax rebate on their land, and the tenants who provided different service in the sattras were not exempted from paying full taxes to the heads of the sattras. The arrangement served the government since the colonialists on the one hand wanted wide tax collection and increased agricultural production by involving more farmers as landed ryots, and on the other it helped them in maintaining power equations by continuing the old patterns of land settlements of the Ahom period for the sattras.

The Ahom kings used to give huge land grants to the sattras through the issue of inscribed copper plates with grant details. Land grants in the past in Assam were usually divided into categories like Brahmottar (land grants to the Brahmins, priests, or the highly-learned), Debottar (land grants dedicated to religious idols), and Dharmottar (land grants for religious activities or religious institutions) which were either tax-free or partially taxed. Noted Assamese writer Dr Dhrubajyoti Bora, comments regarding this scenario: "Actually, the British who were experienced in colonial administration wanted a section of the rich, respectable and influential of the local population on their side. In all parts of India, the British had done that. In Assam too, they had to naturally select a venerated local institution like the 'sattra' and they did it" (Bora 2015, 14). The British government had reportedly donated 22000 acres of nishkar (rent-free) land to the sattradhikar (abbot) of the Auniati Sattra, and people usually inferred such gestures as deservedly worthy for respectable authority figures of society. In this fashion, the social and moral-spiritual authority of the sattradhikars were appropriated by the colonial government. During British Raj, the sattras thus enjoyed a more secure tenure and their social prestige and privilege was enhanced as the land and other related issues were settled unlike earlier when they had to face at times an uneven relationship with Ahom monarchy. The Vaishnava sattras over time were divided along four competing 'samhatis' or orders: (i) Brahma-samhati, (ii) Purusha-samhati, (iii) Nika-samhati, and (iv) Kala-samhati. Sattras which

belonged to the Brahma-samhati upheld the age-old caste hierarchy and conformed to Brahminical rituals and idol worship, and they invariably had a high-caste abbot. In these aspects, sattras of the other three orders had variable degrees of reservation. The sattras belonging to the Kala-samhati, however, were the most radical and their philosophy was based on the interpretation of the teachings of Sankardev and Madhavdev by Gopaldev. People of various communities and ethnicities where there were Brahmins, other caste Hindus and ethnic communities at different stages of Sanskritization were followers of these sattras. However, it was the monasteries or sattras of the Kala-samhati which had the largest following among the lower castes and tribal communities. The Moamora Sattra, belonged to this order, whose followers led a rebellion against the Ahom monarchy which resulted in a series of civil conflicts from 1769 to 1806. Known as the Moamoria rebellion, the event virtually paralysed administration in the state and led to the first entry of the British East India Company into the political affairs of the state as the struggling regime called in for military assistance from them to tackle the crisis.

The Ahom kings, who belonged to the South-Asian Tai community were over time sanskritized and in the administrative aspects, from time to time, sections of Brahman pundits and abbots of vaishnavite sattras, especially of the Brahma-samhati order had considerable influence. Because of the increasing influence of Brahmin priest in the Ahom court, interference also began in the day-to-day activities of the important sattras. Especially since the reign of Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) when a pundit named Krishnaram Bhattacharjya of Bengal was given royal patronage, caste centric practices came to the forefront in a sharp manner, and increased the divide between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. The extent of Brahminical influence at Ahom court can be understood from a celebratory Sanskrit play called 'Dharmodaya-natakam' which was staged to celebrate the restoration of the kingdom from the clutches of the Moamoria rebels at the end of the first phase of the revolts. 'The forces of Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism were shown to be on the side of the royal camp, and all sorts of bandits and slaughterers of cows, brahmans and children on the side of the Morans' in the drama (Guha 2015, 141-142). At the beginning of the 19th century when Ahom monarchic system was in ruins and British were making tentative moves in the region, the sattras too were in a deplorable condition.

However, as already mentioned, with consolidation of British rule and support from the foreign colonial government, the sattras regained their health and status.

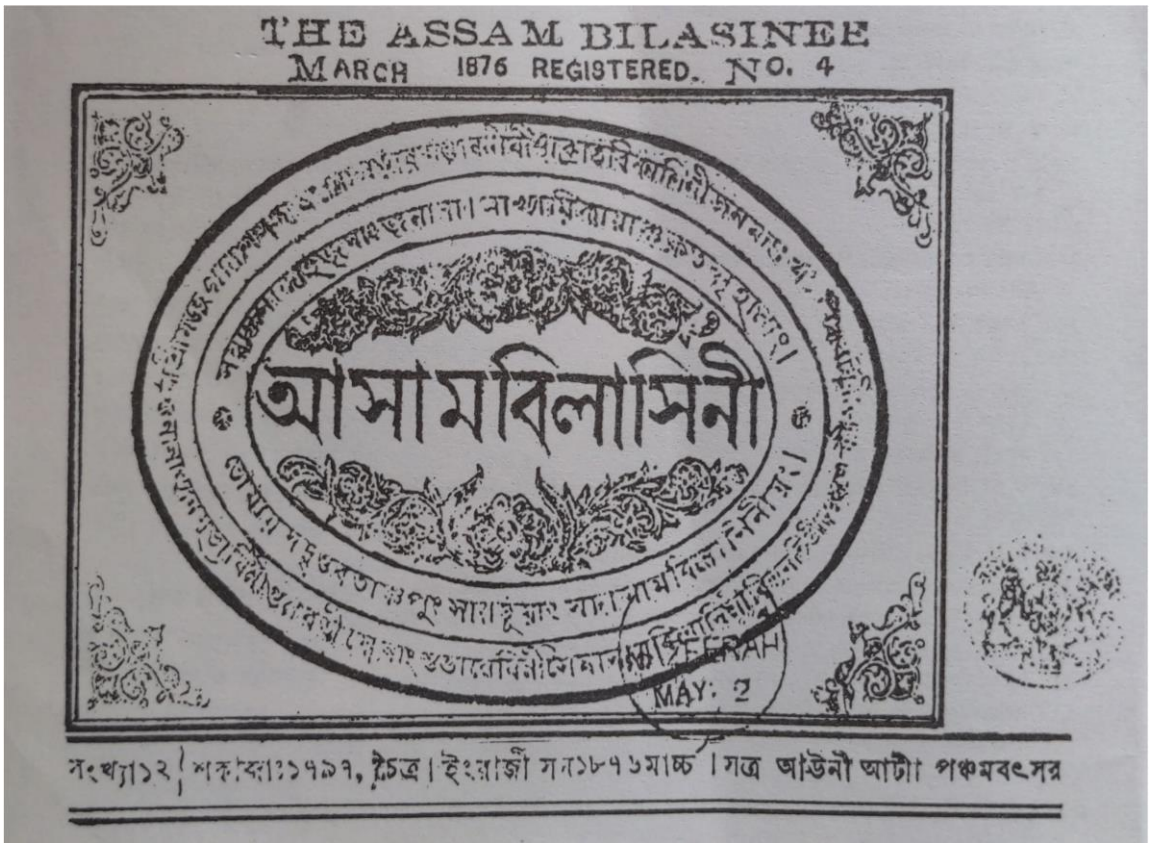

Image 5.4: Cover page of a remaining copy of Assam Bilasinee
Source: 150 Years of Journalism in Assam, Media Trust, Guwahati

The second newspaper or more precisely the second monthly paper of Assam, and the first to be published through local initiative, *Asam Bilasinee* came out from one such revered monastery or sattra named Sri Sri Auniati Satra of Majuli, the seat of neo-vaishnavite religious and spiritual tradition in the region. Established in 1653, the sattra was a well-known centre of learning and faith of 'Eka Saran Nama Dharma', implying the worship of one God and salvation through Nama Dharma. One of the four main sattras at Majuli (the largest river island on the planet), representing the Brahma-samhati (Brahmanical) sect of Vaishnava belief decided to bring out a monthly journal to counter the propaganda of the American Baptist missionaries active in the region. 'Sri Sri Dutta Deva Goswami, the Sattradhikar (Head of Auniati Satra) observed with concern the spread of Christianity through the medium of the Baptist Mission press of Sibsagar. With his foresight, he could realize the need for a printing press of his own at Majuli. Accordingly printing machinery was brought from Calcutta and in 1861 Dharma Prakash Press was established at Majuli

to publish religious works in the local language (Sarma 1999, 38). So, after ten years of the establishment of the press at Auniati sattra, and twenty-five years after *Orunodoi*, the monthly *Asam Bilasinee* under patronage from one of the oldest sattras in the state, came out in 1871 and ran till the year 1883. It is to be mentioned here that the first owner of a press in Assam was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, an officer in the British government who played an instrumental role in the restoration of Assamese language as the official language of the state. His press, named 'Calcutta New Press', was established in Kolkata and one of the key texts of Assamese vaishnavite literature *Namghosha* was published from here in 1852. (Barua 2007, 107)

5.18 *Asam Bilasinee*: Motive and vision

The printing press at the sattra at Majuli was named Dharma Prakash Yanta, which clearly indicated the religious worldview behind the initiative. Sri Sri Dutta Deva Goswami, the Satradhikar or the abbot (head of a satra) of Auniati Sattra, ventured to publish the journal at a time when the Mission Press of the American Baptists was the only printing press in Assam. Although by that time much of the initial energy and enthusiasm was missing among the American missionaries, the *Orunodoi* had established itself as a credible monthly paper. It also proved to be a critical space for debates concerning Assamese language and literature. It was true that the number of converts to Christianity was meagre in the Brahmaputra valley and reflected poorly on the proselytizing activities of the American Baptist mission. However, the Baptist Missionaries at Sivasagar had by then grown in influence in the socio-cultural life of Assam due to its consistent efforts with the local literati to restore Assamese as the official language of the state. In fact, it was largely due to the concerted effort on the part of the American Baptist missionary Miles Bronson that in 1873 Assamese was restored as the official language of the Brahmaputra valley.

Apart from publishing *Orunodoi* and religious tracts, the Baptist Mission press at Sivasagar was also emerging as an active centre for publishing of other secular literature from Assam. '*Assam Buranji* (1844) of Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam* (1855) of Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, *Bangal Bangalani* (1871) of Rudra Ram Bordoloi were some of the important books printed in the Mission press' (Talukdar 2012, 104). Moreover, elementary school text books, a translation of the Indian Penal Code, a Vocabulary and Phrase Book etc were other publications from the press. In fact, the 'Two iron-printing machines in the

Sibsagar Mission Press were tirelessly active throughout the 1840s and 1850s. There were also a Bindery, with two Standing Presses, a small Type Foundry and three Engravers' (Kar 2008, 38-41). Additionally, 'frequent tours were made by the preachers to address gathering at *hats*, markets, fairs and religious assemblies distributing portions of scriptures, tracts and catechisms which set forth in a pointed manner errors of Hinduism or Islam' (Barpujari 1986, xxx-xxxi). These developments were, no doubt, observed by the leading lights at Auniati Satra. Dutta Deva Goswami is believed to have spent a considerable time in Guwahati where he came under the influence of modern Bengali culture and language, and this experience supposedly paved the way for many significant changes in the monastery. Both these aspects must have played their part in inspiring the revered Gossain to start a press and a paper along with it. The press at Auniati Satra was meant not only for publishing a monthly newspaper but brought in for long-term objective of publishing of important and preservable documents, religious texts and manuscripts. In this context, it is to be noted that only after a decade's time of the installation of the press at Auniati Satra, the monthly *Asam Bilasinee* began to be published from the year 1871.

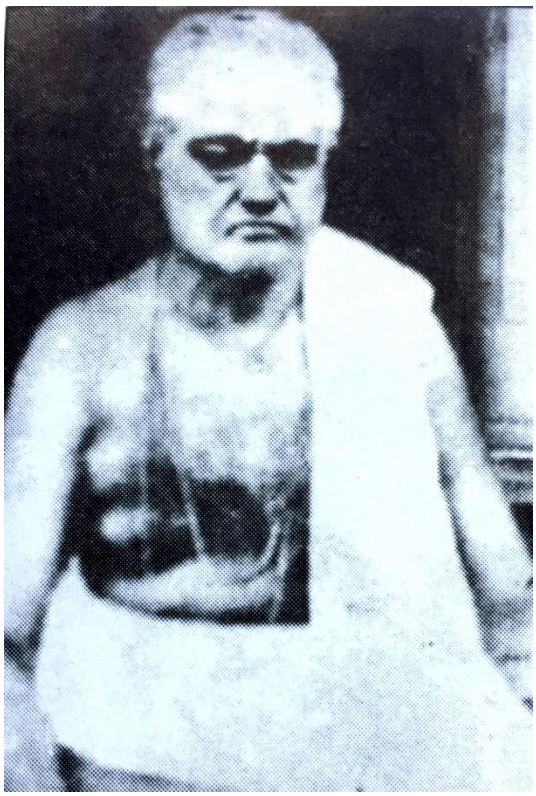

Image 5.5: Sri Sri Dutta Deva Goswami, the abbot of Auniati Sattra
Source: Auniati Sattra website

Asam Bilasinee was the reflection of a specific section of the neo-Vaishnavite order in response to the activities and the role played by the foreign missionaries in Assam. As the number of local converts was minuscule, the Christian missionaries over time began to concentrate more in the hill regions. The monthly paper of the Auniati Satra, specifically, thus seems, designed more as a prestige project of an older religious order in the face of a foreign Christian mission in the provincial colonial order where the Satras held a respectable and influential position. It is known that in the pages of *Assam Bilasinee* Dutta Deva Adhikar for the first time used the tile of 'Goswami' in a published or written form (Nath 2015, 16). The abbots of the Satras never before used titles like 'gossain'. 'Santa-Mahanta' were never titles, but rather used to convey respect. "In the colonial era, Satradhikars or the abbots started using tiles like Deva-Goswami in the manner of the heads of the temples of Bengal and North India…thus adopting the title of 'Goswami' started to bore symbolic significance. In all probability, the trend of using the tile of 'Goswami' before or after the name of the abbot began from Auniati Satra itself. Dutta Deva Adhikar (1838-1904), the head of Auniati Satra, is the first Satriya Adhikar to have adopted the title of Goswami (ibid, 17). This can be logically seen as a display of power and status in colonial Assam as the use of the title 'Goswami' in the manner of Brahmin heads of Hindu temples and shrines of North India and Bengal spread among the abbots of all the sections of the Satras including those of non-Brahminical order like Kala Samhati. In a lengthy report in the March issue of 1876, the monthly *Assam Bilasinee* contained a report of the visit of the first Chief Commissioner of Assam Col. Kittings to Auniati Sattra. Describing the elaborate arrangement made by the sattra in the form of hoardings having the name of the Commissioner and the English Queen, the report also states that the guest had visited the press at the sattra, among other sightings (based on the extract of the report in Goswami. J, Role of The Assam Bilasinee vis-à-vis The Orunodoi, Sarma, Gobinda Prasad ed. *150 Years of Journalism in Assam* 2007, 81-82). Written with lucidity by a native official of the colonial administration named Sheikh Feraudddin, the report perhaps best reveals the nature of the relationship between an older local power holder and the new colonial power. It is also to be noted in this connection that the monthly paper of the Auniati Sattra often printed 'news on the contemporary Indian rulers and nobles' and 'at the same time the paper also paid tribute to the persons enjoying status in the society' (Baruah 1999, 41). Assamese historian Benudhar Sarma marvelled at the foresightedness and vision of Sattradhikar Sri Sri Dattadev Goswami 'to set up a printing press…in a backward place like Majuli…and to venture to publish a newspaper from it.

The business of newspaper did not generate resources in those times, but rather created an outlet for expenditures through borrowings' (Sarma 2014, 1696). It was indeed a courageous and bold step on the part of the Sattradhikar who was thirty-two years old young man at the time. The Auniati Sattra displayed rare initiative in bringing a printing press to a remote place which had no communication facilities other than boats, and thereby strengthen the foundation of print culture of the state. Some of the landmarks of Assamese Vaishnava literature like *Kirtan, Rukmini Haran. Ganamala, Niminavasiddha Sambad, Lilamala* were first published through this Dharma Prakash Press. Majuli may have been physically cut off or geographically distant as the river island is, yet culturally it constitutes the mainstream of the society since the island is virtually the seat of neo-vaishnavite ethos of the region.

5.19 *Orunodoi* and *Assam Bilasinee*: Reflections of the prevailing order

In terms of its cultural politics, *Orunodoi* too could not rise above the caste based social hierarchy of the period in that in its reports it almost always described the various individuals by the name of their community. Though Christian, the paper 'had a very keen sense of cast, ethnicity etc. Interestingly, it rarely referred to any Assamese identity even in its news section. In the '*News from the Province*' section every silly report was made on the basis of caste references' (Sharma 2002, 109). The following descriptions quoted from *Orunodoi* should clarify this point: 'On 17th May a Namghar of the Doms caught fire and got burnt (Doms were an untouchable caste at that time) …Sumthiri, daughter of Kalitas, and wife of an Ahom, died…A Kalita called Tuaram died in the river…A Dhekeri (an insulting term used for people from lower-Assam) coolie died in the river…' (Neog 2021, Orunodoi, 1846, 33-49)

Like the American Baptist Mission, the Auniati Sattra was an organised religious and social force. But the sattra had deeper roots and thus had a stronger socio-cultural register in the public mind. Nevertheless, both the first and the second Assamese newspaper were finally mouthpieces of the respective religious institutions they were backed by. If *Orunodoi* was part of the changes brought in by colonialism, *Assam Bilasinee* was part of the age-old feudal set-up of the society. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, one of the leading formative litterateurs of Assamese literature and language in his memoir contemplated that the paper of the Auniati Sattra '*Assam Bilasinee* was a great achievement of the great vaishnavite and erudite scholar revered Dattadev…but it cannot be said that the educated

young generation was impressed by the topic selections, sentence framings etc' of the paper and it would have continued for many more years if wealth would have only mattered in bringing out a newspaper. (Hazarika, 2005, p.39). The paper had to be closed down in 1883 owing to shifting of the sattra to another site. On the other hand, the *Orunodoi* had a better design, diversity of content, popular appeal and a functional apparatus behind it which contributed to its more lasting success and legacy. The *Orunodoi* was a read by a cross-section of the people of Assam and it reportedly used to receive hundreds of correspondences often in faulty Assamese from remote and diverse corners of the province during its heyday (To the Readers of the Orunodoi, *The Orunodoi*, May, 1853). Elizabeth Brown had noted that the 'reading natives liked this wide-awake magazine; the Brahmans found it interesting, and obtained some new ideas in an attractive form, besides information on topics of general interest' (Brown 1890, 416). Subsequently, a monthly magazine named *Asam Dipak* was published from the Dharma Prakash Yantra press at Auniati Sattra in 1876, which lasted for a year only. From the same press, another monthly named *Asam Tara* under the editorship of Sridhar Barua Ojha (who was the publisher of *Assam Bilasinee*) was published from 1888 to 1890. Needless to say, the subjects covered by these couple of publications largely were limited to religion. It is seen that following the tradition of *Assam Bilasinee*, couple of other publications came out in the period. In 1873, a monthly magazine was brought out by Sri Binanda Chandra Goswami, the sattradhikar of Dihingia Sattra of Nagaon which was printed in Guwahati which was circulated amongst the disciples. Called *Chandroday*, the monthly was edited by Jibeshwar Barua.

Both *Orunodoi* and *Assam Bilasinee* were driven more by the spirit of missionary zeal rather than any motive for material profit for its publishers. Since both were backed by powerful institutions of the day, they could continue for a considerable period without the thought of immediate profit or loss. Thus, in the first phase of development of the Assamese press, the nature and character of the newspapers were clearly religious in nature and they dabbled in mutual attacks and counter-attacks on the religion of their opponent, although a minimal share of the local news, issues and incidents were also covered in the respective publications. Additionally, both the newspapers were entirely loyal to the colonial British government and hardly published any serious local political news, thus falling short of fulfilling the fourth estate role of the press. On the other hand, contemporary newspapers from undivided Bengal like the *Dacca News* and *Som Prakash*

‘continued to draw attention of the government to vital matters attracting the interest of the people of Assam’ (Barpujari, 2018, 231).

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