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EMERGENCE OF ENGLISH NEWSPAPER IN COLONIAL ASSAM

Perismita Basumatary

Research Scholar, Department of History, Sikkim University

Abstract

The press in Assam has a prolonged history that dates back to the arrival of Christian Missionaries. The inception of the region's press journey began with the publication of first newspaper in 1846 "Orunodoi" by the American Baptist Mission. The vernacular newspapers served as a platform for disseminating information in languages like Bengali, Assamese to non-English speaking populations and shaping regional socio-political discourse, thus the emergence of English press in colonial Assam marked a significant turning point. Though the first newspaper of Assam was published with the venture of Christian missionaries and British editors, the English weekly newspaper "Times of Assam" was published much later on 5th January, 1895. Subsequently, English newspapers such as Eastern Herald, The Citizen, The Advocate of Assam, The Assam Tribune etc emerged catering to grow urban literate middle class. Not only the proliferation of English press in colonial Assam was spurred by the increasing interaction between the British colonial rulers, local elites and the general public but also served as a platform for cultural, literary and political expression. The English press played a dual role both constructive and critical role in reflecting and influencing contemporary realities. In this context the paper seeks to explore the growth, development, challenges and contributions of English newspapers in colonial Assam, emphasizing their involvement in spreading knowledge and awareness. This study attempts to analyse the overall journey of English newspapers, their motive and their contribution in the region.

Keynote: English Newspaper, Growth, Development, Assam, Christian Mission

Introduction

The land of Assam came under the control of British rule after the treaty of *Yandaboo* was signed on 24th February, 1826 with the Burmese. During the Burmese dominion the condition of the Brahmaputra valley was miserable and approximately thirty thousand Assamese were taken as the slaves and also the natives had to bear the barbarous and inhuman conduct (Gait, 2013). The invasion of the British in Assam did not become much beneficial, as the public learned to oppose the injustice done to them and tried to denounce the forced regulations made by the ruling administration. Therefore, Assam under British rule had acquired both advantages and drawbacks in many things. One such commodity which was brought in Assam by the British East India Company was printing press. Although the printing press was brought to popularize Christianity in Assam the local people, civilians and leaders who were fighting for freedom of the country could utilise this press for the region's benefit. Additionally, the introduction of printing press in the country put forward the consequent development of vernacular languages and it had a tremendous effect on other issues too.

Literature Review

Sunil Pawan Baruah in his work, "*Press in Assam: Origin and Development*" discussed the historical background of the press in Assam focusing on the growth, evolution, motives and transition. The book highlighted how the both vernacular and foreign language newspapers were politically and socially involved in their journey of weekly to dailies, technological and industrial issues, circulations and limitations. Though the author tried to provide a well -organized historical sketch, ideas regarding some of the newspapers escaping the small regions papers, some limitations could be found such as there is no audience demography, subscriptions cost and mainly the impact on the society.

In the book "*A Descriptive Account of Assam*", William Robinson provides an overall sketch work of Assam that is geography, nature, political and social demography, British administration etc. Though the author did not focus on the portion press but gives a detailed account on the establishment of missionaries and institutions built by the British



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government to spread Christianity and provide education to the people who could not get access to study and even stated that Assam was not that developed compared to Bengal in numerous areas.

Here in “*Assam Mission in Missionary Magazine, Boston: An Evangelical History of Christianity in Nineteenth Century Assam Vol. I*” of Biswajit Das gives an elaborated information on the English periodical print that is on *Orunodoi*, first magazine of Assamese, the magazine published articles on society, science and natural habitat, general knowledge and mainly on religion. Also, the book provides deep analytical explanations on the contributions done by its foreign editors.

Printing Press in Assam

The Press in India originated during the British period as the first printing press was brought by the Christian mission to promote Christian literature. In the same way the journey of press in Assam started as the British Administration invited the American Baptist Mission in Assam. Thus, as a head of mission Rev. Nathan Brown (Preacher), Mrs. Brown, Mr. Oliver T Cutter (Printer), Mrs. Cutter Rev. Jacob Thomas, Mrs. Thomas and Rev. Miles Bronson, Mrs. Bronson arrived at Sadiya with a printing machine, ink, sufficient supply of paper and other materials needed for the printing press (Das, 2019). The main motive of bringing a printing press was for the propagation of Christianity in Assam that led to the publication of the first magazine ‘*Orunodoi*’ from Sibsagar Mission Press. From here onwards the large number of publications of journals, periodicals, books and newspapers on regional language commenced.

Following the establishment of the Mission Press, several other printing presses emerged across Assam. First was Dharma Prakash Press was founded in 1861 in *Majuli*, followed by Radhanath Press in Dibrugarh in 1881. In 1891, the Barkakati Company was established in Jorhat. Guwahati later became home to both Chidananda Press and Assam News Press. In 1900, the Assam Central Press was set up in Tezpur.

English Press

The first English newspaper of Assam as recorded in the administrative report on the Province of Assam was called *Dibrugarh Telegraph* published from the Exchange Lithographic Press of Lakhimpur district. As the paper belonged to the Planters Store Company limited, its main focus was within the tea planters of Upper Assam (Baruah, 1999).

The *Times of Assam*, a weekly newspaper which appeared on every Saturday was launched from Dibrugarh on 5th January 1895 edited by Radhanath Changkakoty. The newspaper was first printed at Radhanath Press. From the very beginning this paper gained importance as it got selected to handle all the government printing works under the order of Sir William Ward, who was the Chief Commissioner of Assam at that time. Soon, the paper also got an opportunity of advertisement project from various sources tea gardens, commercial companies and government (Baruah, 1999). In the starting phase, the paper consisted of only four pages but eventually it expanded to fourteen pages filled with advertisements in fact this was the primary source of income for the paper. Though, the *Times of Assam* was financially dependent on advertises, it did not sit back and took a bold step to work for the people. The paper had protested against the opium policy and expressed the viewpoint that the collected revenue from opium was ‘tainted money’ (Baruah D. , 1994). Then under the editorship of Radhanath Changkakoti, the paper regularly published news related to women’s rights such as it always supported women’s education, spoke out on social injustice which were implied only on women, even commented on the government’s illicit acts for all this publication he was summoned to court multiple times (Phukan, 1977). Later when Basambad Mitra lawyer by profession joined Radhanath as the co-editor the newspaper started to evolve in both scope and tone. Under their joint leadership, it broadens the focus beyond local news, exploring the international affairs and paid closer attention to the struggles faced by the people of Assam. With the change of editor’s, the character of newspaper kept on evolving now the paper turned to be pro- government but did not lose its integrity and continued to report on the unfortunate conditions of the society and circumstances of the riots in an honest manner. Basambad’s legal background made him valuable ally in a time when the government had tightened its grip on the press through strict laws. Recognizing the need for both courage and legal insight in the news studio, Radhanath invited him to join, as Mitra had been closely associated with *Times of Assam* since its launch.



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Kedar Nath Goswami had also served as one of the editors of the newspaper and openly supported the policy of the Indian National congress which automatically depicts that the paper was standing against the planter community of Assam. Eventually this tension led to Goswami's resignation from the post of editor. Then after the death of its founder-editor Radhanath Changkakoti in 1923, Lakshminath Phukan took over the position (Phukan, 1977). His headship came at a time of significant political upheaval in India as the Non- Cooperation Movement had just started to gain intense across the country including Assam. Recognizing the importance of freedom struggle, Phukan used *Times of Assam* to support the movement through publishing articles related with the broader call for independence. Over the years, the country experienced a series of transformative incidents from the rise of police control on activists to major developments in national movements eventually the effect of World War II. These stormy times brought extensive changes to economy, society and politics apparently influenced the fate of many newspapers as well *Times of Assam*. After serving for decades, the newspaper ceased its publication in 1949. This weekly in its fifty-two years of existence had left a great legacy. It has covered a wide range of important topics from regional to international which attracted the large number of people, despite the editors and contributors not being fluent in English. And one of the most remarkable aspects of the newspaper was that it was run by the Assamese people, not by the missionaries or British Officials. Thus, this can be the main reason for being able to survive for longer period as the authorities of the newspaper remained connected to their roots Assamese society, providing a platform that reflected the true concerns and emotions of the people.

From Dibrugarh another weekly published and printed by Wm, S. Taylor at Albino Press (Navaneeta, 2013) named the *Eastern Herald* was started in 1898. This paper explored themes of society, politics, morals and published the lectures which were delivered on various occasions by important persons. The editorial pages contained letters which were sent to the editors containing important subjects concerning the society. Then in the news columns, political news of both in and outside the country was published, often commented on the social issues of Assamese society. The paper was progressing and the contents were also subtle but could not survive for a long period and ceased its publication in 1901 (Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1901-1902, 1903).

The *Advocate of Assam* started from Dibrugarh in 1905 as a weekly appeared on every Monday. The paper was started during the partition of Bengal and covered the subjects on politics, agriculture, abstract of news items of foreign newspapers like 'London Daily News' as it wanted to acquaint the people with the development of international politics (Baruah S. P., 1999). As the country was fighting against the foreign rule in its own land the nationalist sentiment was bound to arise as a consequence the press stood firmly for the deals of Swadeshi, Swaraj, and National Movement and encouraged the people to stand united against the British domination. On this point, the newspaper published articles denouncing the policy of the government and strongly opposed land laws imposed on the cultivators i.e., eliminating the permanent rights of cultivators over the land. Subsequently, the *Advocate of Assam* turned to be the weapon of the public opinion, boldly criticizing the unnecessary rules and regulations forced on the common people of Assam which were generated by the British administration.

A famous weekly the *Assam Tribune* was published from Baruah press of Dibrugarh on 4th August, 1938 published on every Friday under the editorship of Lakshminath Phukan. During the starting phase *Assam Tribune* mostly published the problems of the tea planter community. In course of time, the newspaper reached the position maintained by the *Times of Assam* in the field of English Press and gradually with the determination of Radha Gobinda Baruah obtained the place of daily newspaper from 14th August 1946 onwards, then the whole press was shifted to Guwahati. Like any other regional newspapers of Assam, The *Assam Tribune* not only highlighted major socio-political issues but also brought attention to the smaller issues which were often overlooked that affected the common people. During the pre-independence era, *The Assam Tribune* came out as a vocal critic of many controversial government actions. One notable example was its firm opposition on the land policy introduced by Saadullah Government, where they wanted to settle the people from Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh) into Assam (Saikia, 1998). *Tribune* made a strong objection arguing that such a move could disrupt the demography of the region and adversely affect local communities. *Tribune's* unwavering stand for the people against the government earned support and gained huge popularity that even the centre could not ignore its voice. Over the years, *the Assam Tribune* played a vital role in various developmental movements of Assam from advocating for



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infrastructures such as in construction of bridges, to introduction of language bills that aimed to reserve the linguistic heritage of the region (Saikia, 1998). Then again in the educational reform movements, the newspaper worked for the common people utilising its platform to raise awareness. However, it is evident that such a fearless verbal comments often came to a huge cost. Due to its open criticism towards the government works, the newspaper faced several challenges like was blacklisted from many other benefits provided by the Government, then actions were taken upon the editors and owners associated with the publication for daring to publish against the governments and huge fines were also imposed against the press authorities for which it became difficult to print regularly and often the press had to work upon debt. Despite the hurdles *the Assam Tribune* stood bold, overcame the obstacles and survived for long period and today it continues to serve as one of the most respected newspapers in the state. Adapting to the changing scenario of print media the newspaper had evolved with the modern methods and techniques, digital platform to connect with wider readers.

Later many newspapers were also introduced such as *The Citizen* (1902), *Assam Chronicle* (1905), *Assam Herald* (1912), *The Assam Advertiser* (1889). All these newspapers survived only for a few years as it could not make much impact on the society of Assam.

Contribution of Christian Missionary

Christian Missionaries in India, particularly during the colonial period, have been subjects of both praise and criticism. They were often accused of damaging the indigenous culture, traditions and religious beliefs of Indian society. However, despite the criticisms, its equally important to acknowledge the significant and lasting contributions made by these missionaries, especially in the fields of education, language development and literature.

In the context of Assam, the American Baptist Mission had played a crucial role in the history of Assamese literature and promoting the culture. The most notable figures of this Mission, Nathan Brown, his wife Eliza Brown, Miles Bronson and Oliver T Cutter were the pioneers for shaping the sense of community and providing a path to the people for evolution. At that time, under the British administration Bengali was made the court language and the medium of instruction in schools across Assam. This decision ignored the linguistic identity of the Assam people and caused widespread dissatisfaction. In spite of that, the Baptist Missionaries took a different approach, they started to use the Assamese language as the medium in schools which they had established and also translated many English hymns in Assamese, thereby preserving and promoting the native language, which was overshadowed by Bengali. This move had a deep psychological and cultural impact on the mind-set of the public as they saw their language being used in formal education, religious text and books which turned out to be a positive outlook giving them a sense of identity and self-worth and also helped to earn trust of the village folk. Some of the major contributions of Nathan Brown includes- translated book '*Grammatical Notices of the Assamese language*' one of the structured grammatical analyses of Assamese to systematize the language, then published the '*New Testament*' into simple Assamese which made the Bible accessible to the common people, translated the book '*Pilgrims Progress of John Bunyan*' into Assamese and prepared books of elementary school children in Geography, Mathematics and on other subjects which were essential in laying the groundwork for modern education for local people. Brown's wife Eliza Brown was equally involved. She focused especially on women's education, had established a boarding school for girls and also translated many books, one such is Worcester's Primer into Assamese for children specifically designed for early education. (History of 175 years of Media in Assam & Beyond A compilation of Assamese and English articles are completion of 175years of Media in Assam, 2021) . Then Miles Bronson worked extensively on the collection and documentation of Assamese vocabulary which led to the publication of English-Assamese dictionary. This works though it may have their own religious agenda but their dedication in the sphere of societal development cannot be overlooked.

Conclusion

These newspapers played a crucial role in delivering the news to the public on the political issues, literary development and especially on the advertisement and for tea planters. During the colonial era these newspapers had an intricate purpose which was influenced by various factors such as the company's governance, movement for freedom, development of the region



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and many other issues. The English press had complex perspectives thus newspapers are often seen as publishing neutral viewpoints. As some of the newspapers frequently supported the British administration policies and portrayed their positive character. A huge impact could be seen after the arrival of the American Baptist Mission in Assam. The changes were positive that there could be drastic progress in numerous topics especially on education, healthcare and awareness about the socio-economic issues. A worthy transformation was brought to the society of Assam.

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