

# Background and Development of the Press in Assam (1818-1857)

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to trace the growth of the Press in Assam and assess its impact in bringing about a political awakening in the minds of the people of Assam. The study begins with the establishment of the Press in Assam in 1846 and critically analyses its role during the period of the national movement in Assam, till independence in 1947. The paper has attempted to begin with an overall assessment of the state of journalism in the country, especially in neighbouring Bengal. Moreover, since Bengal papers, like the Bengalee, Amrita Bazar Patrika had a huge following in the province, the impact of the Bengal press on the progress of journalism in Assam has also been analysed. The hypothesis arrived at, has been based on the part played by the Press up to 1857.*

**Keywords:** *Orunodoi; Bengal Gazette; Miles Bronson; Hindoo Patriot.*

## I. Introduction:

The birth and development of Press in Assam may be traced back to the introduction of the first printing Press by the American Baptist Missionaries. In 1846, the first Assamese monthly news magazine, Orunodoi came up under the editorship of Nathan Brown. The Orunodoi inspired the younger generation and prepared the ground for an intellectual awakening. The journal devoted itself to the spread of religious education, to the progress of science and general intelligence and spread of new ideas and dispelling prevalent superstitions in the Assamese society.

Talking about the Orunodoi, the **Friend of India**, observed that the object of the Orunodoi was to foster a spirit of enquiry among the lethargic people of Assam, which proved to be a great obstacle in bringing about their national improvement.

## II. Background and Development of Press:

The treaty of Yandaboo concluded between the British and the Burmese on February 24, 1826 sealed the fate of Assam, Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur and for the first time in her history, Assam ceased to be an independent state. The traders of the East India Company gradually began to develop an active interest in the affairs of Assam and introduced new measures for revenue collection and for the administration of justice. Since the British East India Company was more concerned about revenue collection than the welfare of the masses, the obvious result was mal-administration. *This was highlighted by Anandaram Dhekial Phookan, in a memorandum presented to A. J. Moffat Mills, who had come to enquire into the administration of Assam.*

Initially, the people of Assam welcomed the advent of the British and the expulsion of the Burmese, since the latter caused great misery and bringing about utter ruin to the local populace. But these hopes were belied and first flush of popular enthusiasm gave way to discontent. The first rebellion was initiated in 1828 by Gomdhar Konwar, a prince of Ahom royalty.

But the greatest resentment was the withdrawal of the Assamese language from the schools and courts of Assam in 1836 and the introduction of Bengali in its place created a great deal of repercussion amongst the indigenous population, who felt the very identity of their mother tongue being threatened. Anandaram Dhekial Phookan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Chandra Barua published numerous works to show academic competence of the language. The American Baptist Missionaries also stood by the Assamese language. Ultimately, the British India Government decided on April 9, 1873 that Assamese be introduced in the courts and schools of the Brahmaputra valley.

Journalism in India had struck roots even prior to the advent of the Christian missionaries, though the Company's officials did not encourage the publication of newspapers fearing the exposure of their illegal accumulation of wealth. James A. Hickey started a weekly newspaper called **Bengal Gazette** in 1780. Between 1780 and 1793, several newspapers were started in Calcutta. Though the Bengal Press grew by leaps and bounds in Assam, there was hardly any newspaper in Assam to ventilate the aspirations and grievances of the public at large. Assam came under the control of the British nearly a century after the Company's contact with Bengal. The growth of western education which had been responsible for the Renaissance in Bengal, struck roots in Assam only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bengali and English newspapers such as Samachar Darpan, Someprakash, Sanjivani and the Friend of India played a significant role in arousing public opinion on various political, economic and social issues in Assam. Letters written by both the Indian and foreign intelligentsia of Assam were sent for publication to the editors of newspapers and periodicals in Bengal. The increasing circulation of the Bengal papers and their popularity compelled the Samachar Darpan in its issue of July 30, 1831 to observe that :

*"The distinguished persons in the province of Assam maintain contact with every affair in and about Bengal through the newspapers of this province. Moreover, while from about half the districts of Bengal no letter is sent, hardly a week passes without a letter sent from Assam to us or other newspaper editors of the province."*

Dwelling on the language issue, the **Friend of India** on May 25, 1855 stated :

*"You are aware that Assamese, have a mother-tongue and Dr. Carry found it necessary to benefit the Assamese, as his translations of the Assamese Scriptures and also revised and printed St. Luke's Gospel and other works in Assamese."*

Rev. Miles Bronson argued for the reintroduction of the Assamese language through the pages of the Orunodoi and strengthened the cause of the Assamese language. The writings of the missionaries inspired Anandaram Dhekial Phookan to fight for the cause of Assamese language. When in 1853, Judge Mofatt Mills was sent from Calcutta to investigate into the administration of Assam, Bronson and Phookan submitted a memorandum to the Judge in this context. In his report, Mills clearly expressed his judgement that, *"I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengali and that the Assamese must acquire it."*

In this connection, the Orunodoi published a number of articles in the Assamese language pointing out certain comparisons between the Assamese and Bengali scripts. In one such article, the Orunodoi in February 1854, wrote on the deplorable state of the language in Assam. The writer lamented the fact that a few ignorant persons have tried to prove that Assamese is an off-shoot of Bengali. The major languages of India owe their origin to Sanskrit and that Assam, being surrounded by hill-tribes on all sides, had developed a language of its own and it is ridiculous to term Assamese as an off-shoot of Bengali.

The Orunodoi severely criticized those Assamese who made an effort to ape Bengali culture, rather than identifying themselves as Assamese in the spheres of education, dress, manners and habits. The Orunodoi's constant efforts to broaden the intellectual horizon of the readers in order to uplift the Assamese society from ignorance was the chief instrument in awakening a national consciousness in the minds of the Assamese people. Through the pages of this paper, they could now get information from all corners of the globe, as well as news of great events in other parts of the country.

The Orunodoi broadened the horizon of the Assamese people and made them not only conscious of their national identity but also the identity of their language. In the pages of the Orunodoi, dated march 1857, an anonymous writer expressed unhappiness and concern about the Orunodoi, the friend of India, which regularly kept itself abreast about the developments in Assam, observed that the object of the Orunodoi was to foster a spirit of enquiry among the lethargic people of Assam, a quality which till now had proved to be a great obstacle in bringing about their national improvement.

The Orunodoi lent support to the British Government, as well as to social reformers in their effort to uproot the social evils existent in Assamese society. Opium cultivation in Assam had greatly affected the general health of the population, making the Opium eaters lethargic and apathetic towards an overall improvement. In an article published in the Orunodoi, in January, 1846, entitled Evils of Opium, the adverse effects of opium smoking had been described in great details. The article pointed out that opium-eaters do not hold a position of respect in society and that opium slowly, but steadily, eats into the vital elements of our system and leads us to certain death. While the opium eaters stand to lose the love and affection of their family members as well as their wealth they, on the contrary, only earn scorn from the society. There are instances of fathers selling their sons, being unable to provide for their maintenance, of parents feeding opium to their babies when they go to work, making them unfit for any socially productive work. While the well-to-do sections of the society who have fallen prey to opium have been reduced to poverty, the poorer sections have been compelled to lead miserable lives due to ignorance. The article ends with an appeal to the masses to abandon the habit of opium smoking for the betterment of society.

The Orunodoi is credited for playing a leading role not only in the sphere of general education for the masses, but also in context of women education and echoed the spirit of the Bengal Renaissance. Gunabhiram Barua, a strong exponent of female education wrote letters emphasizing the equality of men and women in matters of education. The Orunodoi also published translations of relevant articles on women emancipation published in papers like the **Hindoo Patriot** of Bengal.

### III. Conclusion:

The Orunodoi thus played a crucial role in the spread of new ideas and in dispelling prevalent superstitions in the Assamese society. The objective presentation of facts, the scientific attitude towards knowledge, upholding the cause of modern science against superstition, enlightened views on social reforms were ushered into the Assamese society. However, it cannot be denied that the journal served as the mouth-piece of the missionaries and the imperialists, and had a clear religious bias. This was clearly evident in the news-items and articles published, where it never swerved from its policy of loyalty to the Government and also by its mounting attacks against the practices of Hinduism, prompted by the evangelical zeal of the missionaries. Nevertheless, by establishing a more rational outlook on life and rousing a spirit of enquiry, it succeeded in introducing a basis for the development of a scientific bent of mind. The Orunodoi played its role as the harbinger of a new trend at a crucial time in Assam's history. The greatest impact was the impetus which the journal gave to the birth of a galaxy of newspapers and magazines in Assam.

Unfortunately, the Orunodoi scrupulously avoided controversial political issues while projection news about events in other parts of the country. Consequently it appeared as if there was a constant effort made by the missionaries to establish their credentials of being loyal supporters of the Company's Government. Matters affecting the interests of the ryots or other issues which might affect the interests of the company were carefully avoided. At a time when papers in Bengal had taken up cudgels against the Government's policy towards the ryots, the Orunodoi was a silent spectator and thoroughly avoided the issue. Thus, people in Assam had to depend heavily on Bengal papers to place their grievances in public. The Someprakash and the Bengali took up the cause of the oppressed ryots in Assam from time to time, lending necessary support to their cause. The Orunodoi also did not mention about the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 and the sacrifices of the people of Assam especially the exploits of Maniram Dewan. It thoroughly avoided issues which could put them under scanner of the British Government.

In Assam, the Orunodoi was the only publication till 1870. While the Bengal Press was growing from strength to strength, the Press in Assam was still in its infancy. In Assam, the threat posed by Christianity heralded the birth of a new paper, the **Assam Bilashini**. Nearly twenty-five years after publication of the Orunodoi, **Assam Bilashini** started its publication in 1871.

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