

SUB-REGIONAL NATIONALISM IN ASSAM PRINT MEDIA

by

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***Abstract** – The genesis and growth of the nearly 170-year-old Assam print media is intricately linked to, and shaped by the sub-regional Assamese nationalism. Since the time when the first Assamese news periodical, Orunodai, was brought out under the aegis of the American Baptist Missionaries from Sibsagar or much later down the line when the first daily, Dainik Batori, began to be churned out from the outskirts of Jorhat in 1935 till the fag end of the last century when in 1995 the highest circulated Assamese daily, Asomiya Pratidin, was first published, Assam print media journalism has always rallied around Assamese nationalism. The birth of the Assam Tribune in 1939 and the Sentinel in 1983-both English dailies-and their subsequent rise to prominence also could not alter the trend. While such nationalist journalism at the formative stage of construction of Assamese identity is understandable, not unheard of also in other provinces of colonial India, and justified as well, continuation of the same strand even after 1947 and, in fact, till into the present time, has worked against some key principles of journalism like objectivity, accuracy, fairness and impartiality. Evidence of such journalistic aberration in Assam print media is particularly visible vis-à-vis the issue of rights of the Partition victim Bengali settlers in Assam.*

***Key Words**- Assam Print Media, Assamese Identity, Journalistic Ethics, Bengali Settlers*

Introduction

The history of modern Assam dates back to 1826 when under the Treaty of Yandabo the tract was annexed by the British at the fall of the Burmese. Two decades later, i.e. in January 1846, the first Assamese news periodical, Orunodai, was brought out in Sibsagar. Like in Bengal the

genesis of vernacular press in Assam is also credited to the Christian Missionaries. O. T. Cutter of the Missionary fold was instrumental behind the project. It was a magazine devoted to 'religion, science and general intelligence' and was printed and published at the Sivasagar Mission Press. Publication of Orunodai under the aegis of the American Baptist Missionaries, apart from heralding the age of modern printing and journalism in Assam, also significantly contributed in securing for the Assamese language its rightful place as the language of the courts and as a medium of instruction in the educational institutions of the state. The British rulers initially had introduced Bengali as the official language in Assam in 1838. This move was vehemently resented to by the emerging Assamese educated middle class many of whom by then had got exposed to the writings of nationalistic awakening from the 'Bengal Renaissance' thanks to their academic location in Kolkata. They considered the promulgation of Bengali as the language of court and as the medium of instructions in the schools by the British an evil design of linguistic hegemony over the Assamese people.

Even as Orunodai could not continue publication beyond 1880, this slim Assamese journalistic expression was relentless in waging the battle against the colonial government for restoration of the due status for the Assamese language. And well before the premature death of this first Assamese news magazine, Bengali was replaced by Assamese as the official language in Assam by a decree of the British government on 18 April 1873.

The trajectory of journalism of a language is historically linked to the growth of literature in that language in several Indian cases. However, in Assam, the inter-linkage is far too pronounced. Prasanta J Baruah, executive editor of The Assam Tribune, has been cited as saying as far back as in 2006: *'The spread of modern English education saw Assamese young men going to Calcutta for higher education. These patriotic and spirited Assamese made it their mission to imbibe the best of English and Bengali literary traditions and introduced these new elements in Assamese prose and poetry through various literary magazines. As a result, Assamese language has the unique privilege of having its literary history named after newspapers and magazines like the Orunodai period, the Jonaki period, the Banhi period, the Awahan period, the Jayanti period and the Ramdhenu period. It is said that Assam's literature, culture, arts, traditions and*

folklore have been chronicled in the pages of its newspapers and magazines during the last one hundred and fifty years.' This observation will get academic corroboration if one runs through the pages of Assam newspapers over the entire colonial era. Even though quite a few successful attempts were made in the intervening period to bring out Assamese news periodicals, and some good quality literary magazines, many of which had journalistic flavour as well, the first Assamese daily newspaper, Dainik Batori, could be started on 12 August 1935. Tea baron Shivaprasad Barua, egged on by nationalist zeal, published the paper from his residence at Thengal, 8 km away from Jorhat. Earlier, he had started the Sadinia Batori (a news-weekly) under his own editorship. In the first editorial of Dainik Batori, where the editorial policy of the newly born newspaper was spelt out, it was declared in no uncertain terms that '*Assam is only for the Assamese people*'. Interestingly enough, at a much later stage, close on the heels of the Independence, the first Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, while charting out the political philosophy of his state, came up with the same xenophobic utterance that '*Assam is only for the Assamese*'. Such a coincidentally common and communal comment made by two unconnected personae twelve years apart brings home the simple point as to how the parochial nationalist agenda of the power that be in Assam used to be shaped by the Assamese press.

This nationalist strand of Assam journalism bordering on the verge of chauvinism continued to be carried as a proud legacy even well into the post-Independent India.

Genesis of Chauvinism

As mentioned in the foregoing section, the colonial history of Assam started from 1826 when under the Treaty of Yandabo, the then geography of what could be called Assam came under the British rule, and the tract was made a part of the Bengal Presidency which, of course, very much included the erstwhile East Bengal as well. Cachar, now one of the three districts forming the Barak Valley in southern Assam, by a different turn of events, was annexed by the British after the fall of the Cachari Kingdom in 1832, and the same was also made a part of the huge Bengal Presidency. Such arrangements, much before the first Government of India Act, 1858 by which the Indian territories held by the British East India Company were to be vested in the Queen,

effectively meant that people of Bengal and of Assam transcending ethnicity, language and culture were living within the same administrative jurisdiction and under the same political dispensation. In 1874, by a whimsical decision of the British Government, two districts of East Bengal, viz, Sylhet (along with Cachar) and Goalpara, were jettisoned from the Bengal Presidency, and were joined with Assam to create a new administrative unit which was placed under a Chief Commissioner. This was technically the first Partition of Bengal which unfortunately escaped the due attention of the mainstream scholarship. Much has been written and read about the Bengal Partition of 1905 and the eventual roll back of the same by the British Government in 1911. But, surprisingly enough, the annals of modern Indian history have shown cruel indifference to the cultural knifing of 1874 whereby the Bengalis of Sylhet and Goalpara of the then East Bengal, for no fault of theirs, had to shift their regional allegiance to a completely different cultural geography. The colonial power had its own fiscal logic. The richest revenue district Sylhet in the British India was tagged with the revenue-deficit Assam to address the administrative purpose of fiscal rationalisation. These two districts thereafter continued to exist inside the administrative boundary of Assam for the remaining length of the colonial rule. In 1947, Sylhet was lost to Pakistan on the basis of the outcome of an allegedly rigged referendum. The communal carnage that took over the Sub-continent resulted in the biggest displacement of people in the recorded world history. And the humanitarian crisis had its ramification on the eastern and the western boundaries of the newly liberated India. But the intensity, number and continuity of the exodus far exceeded on the eastern front than that on the west. The internal political turmoil coupled with internecine communal riots first in East Pakistan, and then in Bangladesh kept the movement across boundary a regular feature even after 1971.

This repeated redrawing of political map of Assam along with the twin valleys of Surma-Barak by the colonial rulers in connivance with the Indian national leaders in utter disregard to the sentiments of both the Assamese and the Bengalis is causally connected to the emergence of the parochial political patriarchs who assumed power in the post-Independent Assam. As the Assamese middle class saw in the British actions of administering Bengali settlement on their 'own land' an evil design of linguistic hegemony, in the post-colonial Assam they tried to 'correct' the history. In a bid to retaliate what they felt a 'Bengali cultural invasion' on the Assamese fabric during 1826-1947, the Assamese elites, who by then got a fair share of political

power, began to treat the Bengali settlers on Assam's soil as 'culturally foreigners'. This paranoia about Bengali language and culture ostensibly as an insulation for the protection of Assamese race was also operative behind the tacit support of the Assam Congress for inclusion of Sylhet in Pakistan. The genesis of the anti-foreigners movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union during 1979-85, thus, dates back to the series of above happenings where politics played mayhem with culture. Most noteworthy feature is that the Assam print media has never factored in this historical development of colonial Assam while deciding on its positioning vis-à-vis the questions of language, identity and citizenship of the Partition victim Bengali settlers in the State.

Theoretical Location

Media theory refers to the complexity of social-political-philosophical principles which organizes ideas about the connection between media and society. Within this there exists a type of theory called 'normative theory', which is concerned with what the media ought to be doing in society rather than what they actually do. In general, the dominant ideas about the obligations of mass media will be consistent with other values and arrangements in a given society. In 1956 three professors of communication-Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm-brought out their Four Theories of the Press, which went a long way in establishing a typology in journalism. These four theories are: 1. the authoritarian theory, 2. the libertarian theory, 3. the communist theory and 4. the social responsibility theory.

The fourth one, i.e. the social responsibility theory places more emphasis on the press's responsibility to society than on the press's freedom. According to this classification, '*the press takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates*'. The theory has been drawn largely from a report published in 1947 by the Hutchins Commission in the US. Emerging from the Commission's publications almost as a revisit of the Four Theories this new theory maintains that the importance of the press in modern society makes it absolutely necessary that an obligation of social responsibility be imposed on the media of mass communication. In their view, press will reflect the '*basic beliefs and assumptions that the society holds*'. In the western liberal tradition, this refers to matters such as freedom, equality before the law, social solidarity and cohesion, cultural diversity, active participation, and social

responsibility. Different cultures may have different principles and priorities. The Assamese print media in the sovereign India appears to have accepted and followed this social responsibility theory in its journalistic ethics. While the adherence to social responsibility by a newspaper, working against the libertarian doctrine, puts it at risk of losing objectivity and impartiality, all the more broader question pops up regarding the very definition of the ‘society’ whose interest the particular newspaper is obliged to serve. In case of post colonial Assam, our particular area of interest now, the demographic composition of the State makes it very difficult to define a homogeneous society. The multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Assam, where the groups pay off always add up to a zero sum game, gives little chance for finding a Pareto-optimum state. It is theoretically impossible, let alone practically, to devise a social matrix wherein a newspaper can expect to serve the society by taking a clear position on either side of a contested political-economy problematic. If the aspiration, hope and despair are same for all sections of a society-which is perhaps possible in an extremely homogeneous set up-, only then perhaps the social responsibility theory finds a true expression for a newspaper. But the Assam Tribune, in its 20 July 1947 edition, wrote: *‘historically Assam is the home land of tribes and races... The civilisation of Assam is Mongolian. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Culturally, racially and linguistically every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam...every alien who came and resided in Assam for trade and other purposes after the occupation of the province by the British in 1826 A D might be treated as alien, and alien cannot be expected to take a dispassionate view of public affairs of our future free state.(sic)’*, In the light of the brief history of the colonial Assam given above, this observation is surely a travesty to truth, and thereby, goes against the principles of objectivity, truth, fairness, accuracy and impartiality. The fault line for the Assam print media, since its inception, is actually its premise *‘what is good for the Assamese is good for Assam’*.

The first Governor of post-Independence Assam, Sir Muhammad Saleh Akbar Hydari (in office during 15 August 1947- 28 December 1948), in his opening speech in the first session of the Assam Legislative Assembly, said: *‘The Natives of Assam are now the Masters of their own House. They have a Government, which is both responsible and responsive to them. They can take what steps are necessary for their encouragement and propagation of Assamese language and culture and the language and customs of the Tribal peoples, who are their fellow citizens*

and who also must have a share in the formation of such policies. The Bengalee has no longer the power; even he had the will to impose anything on the peoples of these hills and valleys which constitute Assam. The basis of such feelings against him exists in fear, but there is now no cause of fear. I would, therefore, appeal to you to exert all the influence you possess to give the stranger in our midst a fair deal, provided, of course, he in his turn deals loyally with us.'

Speech of the Governor, as is the Constitutional tradition in India, is prepared by the Government. This paragraph is then, needless to say, a sort of the objective resolution of the Bordoloi Government. What is pertinent here for our focal point is that the Assam print media- both then and now- has never been able to see that this is classic piece of hate speech in today's legal connotation. Right from the day one, then, the question of giving a 'fair deal' to the 'stranger in our midst'(read the Bengali settlers in Assam) was made contingent upon 'his' abject 'loyalty' to 'us'(meaning the Assamese) even as the 'people of India' had 'solemnly resolved' on 26 November 1949 in the Constituent Assembly to 'constitute India a sovereign, democratic, republic' and to 'secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality, fraternity'.

Conclusion

In more recent time, even as the ideas of democracy, pluralism, justice, liberty and equality-all enshrined in our Constitution- began to garner a general acceptance with the sovereign Indian State trying to become more mature, sensitive and responsible, the Assam print media has not been able to or ever tried to get rid of the liability of regional aspiration the manifestation of which is always sub-regional Assamese nationalism. The two planks of the editorial policy of the Assam print media have been '*colonial exploitation of Delhi*' and the denial of constitutional rights of Bengali-both as a language and race.

The controversial Official Language Act, 1960-which sought to declare Assam as a monolingual (Assamese) province, six-year long AASU agitation culminating in the inking of the Assam Accord in 1985, which was successful in curbing the domicile rights of a large number of Bengali settlers in the State, or in more immediate past, the NRC update process, which has been carried out on the basis of racial profiling-all these have found unstinted approval of the print media in Assam.

In September 2015, when the Government of India decided to go for a big ticket disinvestment amounting to over Rs 70,000 crore in the oil sector of the country, the Assam print media chose to oppose the move not on the ideological plank of anti-privatisation per se, but on the ground that ‘Assam’s resources were being plundered by the colonial Delhi’.

On a similar note, the same media created hullabaloo over the appointment of a ‘non-Assamese’ at the helm of an oil refinery located in upper Assam.

Asomiya Pratidin made a news headline in the nineties ‘A non-Assamese dares to molest an Assamese daughter’ while reporting an alleged sexual crime by a Hindi speaking person. The victim incidentally was indeed an Assamese lady.

Such and similar examples of news reporting based on racial classification in the Assam print media are plenty to come by. A proper content analysis will only add quantified truth to our rather qualitative observation here. The end result is that the print media in Assam-both Assamese and English- has failed to conform to the very basic journalistic codes set out by the Press Council of India, not to speak of expanding the ethical horizon.

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1. The Assam Tribune
 2. The Sentinel
 3. Amar Asom
 4. Ajir Asom
 5. Asomiya Pratidin
 6. Dainik Agradoot
 7. Dainik Janambhumi
 8. Sadin
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