

The Dodransbicentennial Journey of Media in Assam: Issues, Prospects and Way Ahead

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Abstract

Since 1846 Assamese media has come a long way in the national media scene and its steady growth has been bolstered by many noted personalities who excelled in the field of regional journalism. Orunodoi, first published in January 1846 was indeed a special occasion for entire North East India. It literally projected the entire region in the international arena. It also has major contributions towards the shaping of modern Assamese society. Later on vernacular media came to the fore and played a pivotal role during the colonial rule of British in India. The vernacular media in the state was instrumental and influential to the extent that British rulers introduced stringent measures to curb the power of the media. Many of these newspapers were short lived owing lack of proper management and business model. To be precise before the famous Assam Movement, the media in the state was not growing as per expectation. The movement gave media a much needed thrust to the media scene in the state. Radio is the first electronic media to reach Assam during 1948. Radio in Assam is a popular media and its reach is much more than any other media. Being a cost effective and mobile medium, radio has signified its place in rural Assamese society.

Media houses specifically TV channels in Assam have received strong criticism for allegedly distorting and sensationalizing the news content. Although many people believe that regional media does the real, grinding and taxing journalism. But all seems not be well with Assamese media. On ethical as well as legal grounds Assamese media have been found on the wrong side of the fault line many a times. Assamese TV channels are slammed for promoting alleged hyper-nationalism.

In recent times, mushrooming of digital media in the state has completely altered the media scene. Owing to inherent characteristics namely speed, interactivity, cost effective and instantaneity digital media has penetrated the already fragmented audience base and have become instant hit among youth and tech savvy generation. Unregulated digital media have been accused of disseminating news and content which are unverified, sensational and biased. Joymati (1935) directed by Jyotiprasad Agarwala marked the beginning of Assamese Film Industry. Although late, Assamese film industry has started to get both commercial and critical acclaim off late. Assamese films are known for their sensitive portrayal of human emotions and struggle. In last couple of decades, the treatment has been experimental with form and content which has again brought back audience in the theatre.

At this juncture this paper is an attempt to analyse the 175 th year journey of Assamese media and trace its current status and statis. Further, the paper discusses various issues and problems of Assamese media and also the prospects for the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Media are foremost pillars of a democratized society as they provide an effective platform for exchange of information thereby facilitating public opinion. Media are the vehicles of information, education and entertainment which provide a mirror to the world outside. Although media have undergone multifold changes in the second half of the 20th century and more so in the initial quarter of the current century still it remain as an important entity in strengthening democracy and shaping up a modern society.

Assam largely remained an independent dominion and lesser known territory for a long time till Ahoms landed on it in the 12th Century CE. Ahoms, who migrated from upper Burma, now Myanmar, is an offshoot of 'Shan Tribe'. The Ahoms ruled Assam for over 600 years and resisted Mughal invasion several times. In 1826, with the signing of Yandaboo Treaty, Assam came under British dominion.

Literature bears mirror to the society in specific and nation in general, in the realms of culture. In case of India, rich linguistic variations and sheer marvel of litterateurs were instrumental towards spreading ideas of national awakening and the right of freedom. In addition, the freedom movement also significantly impacted the trends in literature during colonial era. Works of Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore, writings of Bhagat Singh and Savarkar novels of Prem Chand and Bankimchandra, among many others greatly influenced the scale of freedom struggle and mobilised the masses to fight for their 'birth right', as proposed by Tilak. Even Mahatma Gandhi rejuvenated his quest for freedom drawing influence from famous 'Ekla Chalo Re' penned by Tagore. In Assam, many such literary luminaries carried forward the spirit of Indian freedom struggle through their writings, be it prose or poetry, drama and speeches. Literary stalwarts like Jyotiprakash, Hiteswar Barbarua, Rajnikanta Bordoloi, Jyotiprasad Agarwala wrote to inspire Assamese masses to unitedly revolt against the colonial rulers. The women writers like Chandra Prabha Saikiani, Puspallata Das, Usha Barthakur among others were also equally vocal for the Indian independence.

In Assam, the gateway state of North East India, media made its presence felt in the last decade of the first half of 19th century through the coming up of 'Orunodoi', a magazine in Assamese. The magazine was jointly published by three American Baptist Missionaries namely Dr. Nathan Brown, Miles Bronson and Oliver T Cutter at Sibsagar, Assam in 1846. The name which translates as 'sunrise' was indeed a sunrise era in Assamese media and immensely contributed towards the development of state's literature providing a platform for native litterateurs.

Although 'Orunodoi' was out of publication by 1879 but it had provided the much needed impetus for days to come. Following the footsteps of 'Orunodoi', many other newspapers, periodicals and magazines made their way into the public but many of them got shelved in quick succession. However, 'Orunodoi' remains a landmark as it is credited as being the first vernacular media venture of the state.

Compared to other parts of Indian nation, electronic media came late in North East India and even its growth was sluggish. The first radio station in Assam was established in 1948 with efforts of the then Chief Minister Gopinath Bordoloi (Online Sivasagar). Assam listened to its first news bulletin in Assamese only in 1957. Today Assam has the most number of AIR stations and private FM channels among all the North Eastern states. The primary language used by these stations is Assamese with a few dedicated stations and slots for other linguistic groups concentrated in specific pockets of the state.

Assam as well as North East got its first taste of audio-visual medium on November 19, 1982 with a TV station at Guwahati (Saikia, 2019). Assam had to wait till 2004 for having its first private satellite channel as NE TV. But the heydays of Assamese TV industry only arrived after 2010 with a number of private TV channels coming into existence.

In recent times, mushrooming of digital media in the state has completely altered the media scene. Owing to inherent characteristics namely speed, interactivity, cost effective and instantaneity digital media has penetrated the already fragmented audience base and have become instant hit among youth and tech savvy generation. Unregulated digital media have been accused of disseminating

news and content which are unverified, sensational and biased.

Joymati (1935) directed by Jyotiprasad Agarwala marked the beginning of Assamese Film Industry. Although late, Assamese film industry has started to get both commercial and critical acclaim off late. Assamese films are known for their sensitive portrayal of human emotions and struggle. In last couple of decades, the treatment has been experimental with form and content which has again brought back audience in the theatre.

With time, media has undergone manifold changes and Assamese media industry has not been untouched either. With the cut throat competition among various media formats, content segregations and presentation techniques have underwent sea change. The race for circulation and TRP has led to a never ending debate with regard to deteriorating quality of media content especially news. These have brought in a plethora of ethical issues too in Assamese media discourses.

At this juncture this paper is an attempt to historically analyse the 175th year journey of Assamese media and trace its current status and statis. Further, the paper discusses various issues and problems with regards to Assamese media and also the prospects for the future.

OBJECTIVES

- To record the journey of various media in the state of Assam
- To examine the present status of various media in the state of Assam
- To investigate various issues pertaining to media in Assam

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a mixed method comprising of a historical analysis of media in Assam followed by a descriptive analysis of issues pertaining to it. The paper deals in detailed, descriptive and analytic approaches towards the objectives under discussion. For this purpose secondary data sources like journals, articles, reports will be consulted in addition qualitative interpretation of the data available.

DISCUSSION

'Orunodoi'- The 'Sunrise' Moment of Assamese Media

Following the footsteps of their contemporaries at Serampore, American Baptist Missionaries started a printing press in 1840 at Sibsagar in Assam. The printing set up was primarily for disseminating religious gospel and later on it also gave birth to first Assamese magazine 'Orunodoi' in 1846. In no time the vernacular magazine became quite popular among masses owing to its attractive presentation of contents. The magazine was primarily themed on science, religion and general intelligence. The magazine copied wood-cuts engravings from Illustrated London News. During 1867-68, the magazine subscription touched 700 which is a grand feat in the context of socio-political perspectives of that time. It left such an impression on the readers that any newspaper delivered at that was called as 'Orunodoi' by the village people. Curtains came down on 'Orunodoi' with Mission Press getting sold in 1882.

Other Major Print Ventures of Pre-independence Era

Asambilasini was a religious newspaper started in 1871 by the Dharmapraksh Press in Majuli. The publication came to a halt in 1883. *Asam-Mihir* is credited as the first newspaper in Assam with weekly periodicity. It started in 1872 at Guwahati under the aegis of Chidananda Press. Initially the language of publication was Bengali and later it became bi-lingual with addition of English language. The newspaper was shelved in 1873 only, one year after its inception. *Asam Darpana* was also a short lived monthly magazine started in 1874-75 in Darrang in Assam.

Goalpara Hitasadhini was a weekly newspaper in Bengali language, and it was started in 1876 in Goalpara in Assam. Its publication ceased to exist by 1878. *Asam Dipaka* (1876) was another short lived monthly magazine published by the Dharmaprakash Press. It stopped publication in 1877. *Chandrodaya*, a vernacular monthly journal was published by Chidananda Press in 1876 from



Guwahati (then Gauhati). Assam News was a bi-lingual weekly newspaper in Assamese and English languages established in 1882 at Gauhati. The newspaper achieved a subscription of 900 in no time but saw a sharp decline in following years with the publication ceasing in 1885.

Gunabhiram Barua started a vernacular monthly magazine *Asam Bandhu* in 1885. The magazine consisted of well written articles themed on literature, science and arts. It also contained a series of articles under the banner of *Assam-past and present*. The series remained incomplete as the magazine was shelved because of little profit. *Mau*, a monthly journal on literature appeared in 1886 and got wrapped up in the same year owing to meager subscription. The journal editor was Babu Har Narayan Bara.

Asam Tara was a vernacular monthly newspaper paper themed on literature, history and religion published by Dharmapraksh Press. It started publication in 1888 but got shelved by 1890. A group of Assamese students studying in Calcutta started *Bijuli*, a monthly magazine in Assamese in 1890 but was off in within next three years. It had published a number of appealing articles on Muhammadan invasion in Assam.

At that point in time many newspapers were printed in Calcutta because of two reasons. Calcutta was administrative and business hub of Bengal Province of which Assam was a part. Secondly, Calcutta was one of the first seats of journalism in India and it had a number of print setups for aspiring newspaper owner. It is pertinent to mention that although 'Orunodoi' inspired a number of print ventures in the state of Assam but most of them were out of circulation in short period of time. The factors associated with quick curtains on newspapers and journals were dwindling subscription, strict Press Laws imposed by British, lack of finances and support among others.

Few Lasting Print Ventures from That Era

Jonaki, a monthly journal came into existence in 1889 which is still in circulation even today. It was initiated by a group of students studying in Calcutta. The magazine houses various subject matters including science and history. Jonaki marked an unprecedented growth in Assamese literature and

many scholars term 'Jonaki Era' as a golden period in Assamese literature. The journal published many of the path-breaking literary works and gave birth to future litterateurs. Assam was a weekly newspaper primarily written in Assamese with occasional articles in English. It started in 1894 and is still in circulation. The Times of Assam, a weekly newspaper in English language came into existence in 1895 under the aegis of Radhanath Press in Dibrugarh. It is still in circulation but with moderate profit.

Current Status of Print Media in Assam

Today, Assamese Print Media has emerged as one of the leading vernacular print media industries in the country and undoubtedly one of the frontrunners among North Eastern states. Today there more than 800 registered newspapers in the state as reported by RNI. The Assam Tribune founded in 1939 is the largest selling English Newspaper in the state with over seven Lakh daily circulations. It is also widely read in neighbouring states of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. At present more than 30 daily newspapers in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and English are published. Many of the newspapers namely Dainik Janambhumi, Dainik Asam has multicity editions like the big national newspapers. National newspapers like The Telegraph, TOI have Guwahati edition which caters to regional interest of the Assamese readers (Buragohain and Alam). In addition there are number of Bengali newspapers published primarily from Barak Valley, Assam which serve the interests of Bengali speaking community there. Prominent among them are Bartalipi, Samoyik Prasanga, Dainik Jugasankha etc. There are a number of Hindi dailies published in Assam which reaches the Hindi speaking masses of the state. Mention worthy among them is *Purvanchal Prahari*, *Pratah Khabar*, *Dainik Purvodaya* etc.

The domain of magazines is also rich in the state of Assam with a number general interest as well as specialized magazines targeting specific readers. Although the market is primarily dominated by Assamese language magazines but there are a few English language magazines that are also published. Popular Assamese magazines are Gariyashi, Prantik, Natun Padatik, Satsori etc. Some of the women centric magazines are Nandini, Priyo Sakhi, Xa-Parivar

among others. There are a few entertainment based magazines too namely *Rahasya*, *Bismoi*, *Hiya* among others. English magazines include *TNT*, *Eclectic*, *Northeast Sun* etc. There are a number of children magazine available which include *Sofura*, *Rongmon* among other. Science magazines namely *Bigyan Surabhi*, *Bigyan Jeuti* are also published from the state. There are also a good number of magazines on health and film beat in Assamese language. Following are the contemporary trends in Assamese print media industry

- A large number of vernacular newspapers have started their online editions
- A large of web portals are also in operation but sustainability is an issue them
- Conventional design and layout of pages to accommodate more stories
- Dwindling circulation
- Poor wages for newsmen
- Political parties having stakes in newspaper ownership

Electronic Media in Assam

For a long time, AIR and Doordarshan were the only electronic media available to the people of Assam. As per Table 1, Assam as well as North East got its first taste of audio-visual medium on November 19, 1982

with a TV station at Guwahati (Saikia, 2019). Assam had to wait till 2004 for having its first private satellite channel as NE TV. But the heydays of Assamese TV industry only arrived after 2010 with a number of private TV channels coming into existence. After 2000, a few privately run radio stations came into existence but it could not break the monopoly of AIR. The simple reason is the unmatched reach of this public broadcaster and also the ease of access of AIR all across the state. However, after coming up of private satellite TV channels the market share of Doordarshan has dwindled considerably.

Assam enjoys the highest listenership of radio among all other North Eastern states (Buragohain and Alam). The radio has appreciable popularity among all age groups till now. With the coming up of FM channels the listenership has only increased further owing to more infotainment programs served by these channels. Private FM radio has become a companion to the masses especially in the cities like Guwhati. The growing popularity of private FM channels set the bedrock for emergence of Community Radio in Assam. At present community radio in Assam is government controlled and limited to higher educational institutions. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University owns Jnan Taranga (90.4 FM, established in 2010) while Gauhati

Table 1: Channel Establishment Year-wise details

| <i>Serial No</i> | <i>Name</i> | <i>Established in</i> | <i>Category</i> |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | DD NORTHEAST | 1994 | ENTERTAINMENT |
| 2 | PRAG NEWS | 2001 | NEWS |
| 3 | NEWS LIVE | 2008 | NEWS |
| 4 | DY 365 | 2008 | NEWS |
| 5 | RANG | 2009 | ENTERTAINMENT |
| 6 | RAMDHENU | 2011 | MUSIC |
| 7 | RENGONI | 2013 | ENTERTAINMENT |
| 8 | NORTHEASTLIVE | 2013 | NEWS |
| 9 | JONAK | 2014 | ENTERTAINMENT |
| 10 | PRATIDIN TIME | 2015 | NEWS |
| 11 | ASSAM TALKS | 2015 | NEWS |
| 12 | NEWS 18 ASSAM NORTHEAST | 2016 | NEWS |
| 13 | INDRADHENU | 2017 | ENTERTAINMENT |
| 14 | DD ASSAM | 2020 | ENTERTAINMENT |

Source: Saikia (2019)

University runs Radio Luit (90.8 FM, established in 2011). There is another community radio station in Dibrugarh as Brahmaputra Community Radio (established in 2015).

Doordarshan was the sole TV channel available to Assamese masses till 2004. Assamese TV industry was growing very slowly till that time as there was no competition and no private players as well. NorthEast Television or NE TV came up in 2004 but still it was no match for the public broadcaster. A private satellite channel came up in 2013. After that the floodgates opened and now Assam has more than 10 private satellite channels enjoying enormous popularity among the viewers. It is pertinent to mention that Prag started as cable channel. The following is a list of popular TV channels in Assam

The TV channels especially private satellite channels in Assam inform, educate, and entertain masses through a plethora of content and programs. The Primary language used is Assamese but there are also programs made in English, Bengali, Hindi, Bodo and Nepali to cater the linguistic diversity of the state. At present Assamese TV industry is witnessing a lot of changes which is sure impact the days to come. These are

- Greater and wider choice of contents available to the viewers
- Political parties and figures having both overt and covert stakes in TV channels
- The diminishing quality of presentation of news
- Overt political affiliation shown by news channels through their contents and presentation
- Urban bias or city bias of Assamese TV channels giving only priority to state capital
- Sensational Journalism

Film industry in Assam

Assamese film industry or Jollywood kick started in 1935 with *Joymati*, a period film based on a play by Lakshinath Bezbaruah and directed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Agarwala was also the producer, script writer and production manager of the film. Since then, Assamese films have developed, although gradually, a style of its own; sensitive, slow paced and striking chords of Assamese society. Later filmmakers like Jahnu Barua and Bhabendra Nath Saikia carried forward the baton of Assamese films and established

it on national cinematic landscape. However, even with a long film history that dates back to almost 80 years now the Assamese cinema has not been able to capture the market. The simple reason is the dominance of Bollywood over the regional, vernacular films. Post 20th century Jollywood had witnessed the influence of Bollywoodish films on Assamese films. Still Assamese films are overshadowed by other bigger film industries. But off late the situation has changed. Assamese films have been able to attract crowd back to the theatres both commercially and aesthetically. It is evident from the fact that top five all time highest grossing Assamese films were made in last ten years. These are *Ratnakar* (2019), *Kanchanjangha* (2019), *Mission China* (2017), *Ramdheni* (2011) and *Tumi Ahibane* (2017). Till 2019, 50 films made in Assamese have won awards at the prestigious National Film Awards. In 2018, *Village Rockstars* directed by Rima Das won the Best Feature Film Award at the National Film Awards. *'Aamis'* (2019), an Assamese film written and directed by Bhaskar Hazarika won Best Director and Best Actress award at Singapore South Asian International Film Festival and Anurag Kashyap had announced to present the film in India. It comes as a testimony that Bollywood is recognizing the quality of Assamese films and ready to work together. The state capital also hosted the Filmfare Awards 2020. So tables are turning gradually for the Assamese film industry as more and more people from mainland are eyeing this state as the next big avenue in Indian Cinema. Some of the newer developments in Assamese film industry are

- Increasing commercial success
- Crowd funding of films
- Experimental genres
- Introductions of streaming sites

Some of the current issues faced by

- Lack of sufficient audience and screens for projection
- Competition from Hollywood and Bollywood
- Inadequate production and post production facilities at local level

Digital Media in Assam

Since 2017, digital media is witnessing a surge all across the society as well as in Assam. The reason is

fast and cost effective data services doled out by the telecommunications companies. InsideNE is one of first digital ventures to come out in Assam in 2017. Inside Northeast happens to be an independent digital platform which houses citizen journalism stories from across the Northeastern states. But this is a nascent stage for digital media in Assam and it has a long way to go in terms of visual appeal of the user interface and also to go beyond Facebook as a sole medium to connect with the audience. To gather own traffic and ad, the digital media ventures should invest on developing Android and iOS platforms. There are more than 100 pages on social media platform Facebook which are in operation without any licensing or approval from competent authority. These pages mushroom in the state especially when polls are round the corner and they are funded directly or discreetly by political parties and personalities. There are lot many web portals too which publish news and current affairs. In this era of infodemic these portals remain unregulated. Many a times it is alleged that these digital media outlets pass on rumours, half truths as news and rely on click baits to generate more views. Technical and ethical trainings are also issues with regards to digital media outlets in Assam. The self proclaimed reporters and journalists have little exposure to media both academically and professionally. A number of portals are fake and they engineer news in the editing rooms using spin offs and propaganda. In absence of any concrete regulations a section of digital news outlets are dishing out rumours and yellow journalism practices. The pandemic has created a chaos in the media industry too in past two years and many houses have curtailed their operations and as a result many employees were laid off. However, even during the Covid-19 period Assam saw a steady growth in the numbers of digital media operations. Many a times, news items are created to go viral and create unrest in the society. Plagiarized contents are also featured frequently in absence penalties and punishments. Validation of these 'journalists' are another issue because there is no proper approach in places and these people can jump up in gatherings tagging themselves 'reporters' and 'journalists'. Accountability is always causality with such lopsided media practices.

CONCLUSION

Assamese media has been on a steady rise in its own pace. It might not be wise to compare the growth of media in Northeast with the other parts of the country owing to its unique geography and socio-political dynamics. The dodransbicentennial journey of media in Assam has been gradual and upwardly. Print media, the first media to be introduced in Assam has made considerable progress with a good number of dailies, weeklies and periodicals. Publications in various languages cater to the varied linguistic interests of the masses. Although print media is regarded as one of the credible media in contemporary times but print media in Assam has been plagued by dwindling circulation and increasing competition from TV and digital media. To negate this, most of the mainstream newspapers have started digital version. Radio happened to be most sought after media because of its unmatched reach and access in Assam. With the introduction private satellite TV channels popularity of radio had gone down drastically. But in last decade or so there has been reincarnation of radio in the state through private FM channels which provide more infotainment than traditional radio. In addition, community radio is only limited to higher education institutions in Assam. TV industry kicked in the last decade with a number of private satellite channels coming into business. They have directly challenged the monopoly of Doordarshan and have created a niche of their own. It is pertinent to mention that Assamese TV industry is witnessing a plethora of recent developments including political stakes in TV channels, the diminishing quality of presentation of news, overt political affiliation shown by news channels, urban bias and sensational Journalism. Assamese film industry which 86 years now had a humble beginning in 1935 through 'Joymati'. With passage of time Assamese films have developed its own unique style of slow paced sensitive dramas. Off late the scenes are changing with filmmakers restoring to experimentation and this has brought in both commercial and critical success. Digital ventures surged in Assam in 2017 and since then there have mushrooming of web portals and social media pages which provide news and information.



In absence of regulation and licensing, many of these digital media outlets dish out fake news, unverified information and rumours which often create unrest in the society. The onus lies two-way; the news outlets, be it traditional or digital, should be more accountable and responsible and in addition audience should be more aware and literate to point out and counter misinformation, disinformation and malinformation served by media.

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