

Revisiting the Crafting of an Assamese Nationalist Print Media in the Day's Colonialist: A Review

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ABSTRACT

It is a matter of fact that a colonialist knowledge, its function was to erect that past as a pedestal on which the triumphs and glories of colonizers and their instrument, the colonial state, could be displayed to best advantage. It is seen that the colonizer comprehensively measured differences between India and Great Britain. The colonized reconstructed their past for purposes opposed to the Indian rulers and made it ground for marking out their differences in cultural and political terms. In Assam it was hard to see any such indigenous nationalist project of counter appropriation except two or three agents from colonial bureaucracy in early decades of colonialism. The rivalries between two bourgeoisies (colonist and Indian) and their representations in colonialist and nationalist discourses did little to diminish the importance of this essential agreement. On the contrary, all transactions between the two parties which made up the stuff of elite politics followed from an understanding to abide by a common set of rules based on the British constitutionalist parliamentary model. Most of the Assamese dramas were translated from Bengali drama. There was hardly seen the original form of Assamese drama at that time. On the other hand on the behest of plantation industry an Assamese tea planting class begins with Maniram. The industry had also credited in producing a lot of political leaders besides enriching the literary and intellectual history of Assam right from the latter half of 19th century. So on the in hey days colonialism the print media Assam searching for space for Assamese cultural identity as well as Assamese nationalism.

Objectives:

The paper intends to understand the impact of political awareness and national consciousness in the project of print media in Assam which developed in response to the changes introduced by colonial modernity, development of colonial knowledge system.

The paper also seeks to examine the political position of emerging middle class in the early part of twentieth century which was come out from the Assamese Print media. To understand the process and the politics of the making of historical knowledge and nationalist identity through print media in the colonial Assam, the impact of the inculcation of the spirit of identity politics and nationalism by the Assamese middle class needs to be examined.

Method:

Historical analysis has been adopted for this work. Although the data or facts have been collected from the secondary sources mainly, the primary sources are consulted whenever necessary.

Discussion:

There were multiple contradictions faced by the Assamese people in colonial period i.e. the influx of non Assamese businessmen, coming of number of Bengali persons to work as clerks into Assam. *Orunudoy*, (1846) after two decades of British installation of administration in Assam necessitated to spread Christianity and the processes of conversion to Christianity among subject people, though their declared objective was "*Orunudoy*, a monthly magazine

devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence." ¹ The birth of *Orunuday* was a blessing in disguise for Assamese people who brought a movement in Assamese language and literature, a renaissance for Assamese people. Later, the modern Assamese drama *Ram Navami* was written by Gunabhiram Baruah after eleventh year of publication of '*Orunudoy*'. Hemchandra Baruah and Bezbaroa wrote '*Kaniya Kirtan*' and '*Litika*' respectively. In the first decade of 20th century most of the dramas were performed on the occasion of *Durga Puja*; both the Assamese and Bengalis were enjoying it. The Christian Missionaries were success in their purposes to spread Christianity among the tribes of North East, but in case of Assamese people, they were summarily failed. So they were optimistic that through the print media using local language i.e. Assamese, it would be easy to convert them to Christianity. It is on record that Maniram Dewan raised his voice of protest against the government measures of giving employment to Bengali and Marwari people in the revenue department in Assam and wrote a petition to Mills (1853) on behalf of Ghanakanta Singha. This complaint of Maniram found favor with Mills himself.² The fear of encroachment on government jobs and employment avenues remained the central point in the politics of the Assamese middle class for a long time down to the present day. Such way, particularly the Bengali job seekers haunted the mind of nascent Assamese middle class since the days of Maniram. Later in the first decade of 20th century, Jagannath then president of *Sarbojanik Sobha*(Feb10,1904) wrote to the government among others, 'all inferior appointments in Assam proper should be entirely reserved to the Assamese, and at least 75% of the superior

appointments be likewise be reserved to the Assamese.' The sentiment was echoed while Manik Chandra delivering his speech (April 8, 1909) in the Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam, along with other, he emphasis, "Assam for the Assamese." Dr. R.C. Kalita observed that British simply appeared to play the role of an honest broker, without any material benefits being offered to the people of Assam whatever.³ So the size of the Assamese middle class were increasing, ideas and opinions regarding the maintenance of Assamese linguistic identity and the apprehensions for its future was being articulated in the contemporary print media.

Against the background the educated middle class had deployed their full energy in the developments of literature, development of a standard Assamese language and publication of a range of Assamese journals; first of all *Assam Bilasini*, *Assam Mihir*, *Assam Darpan*, *Assam Dipak*, *Bijuli* and *Assam Bonti* which was followed by *Usha* and *Banhi* was commendable in this regards. In the year 1872, Jagganath, Manik Chandra and Ganga Gubindra formed '*Asomiya Sahitya Sabha*' at Calcutta which subsequently converted to *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*(ABUSS) in 1888. The literati group who was alive up to 1885 while came back they formed *Sarbajonik Sabha* and *Ryot Sabhas* in Assam. Gunabhiram deployed his full energies in his paper *Assam Bondhu*, which was by and large a pro-British along with the newly formed socio-political organization. Gunabhiram pointed out in his first editorial, 'the pro-British emerging middle class were the real friend of '*Assam Bondhu*' which was dissociated from politics despite having a series of Peasant protest through *Raiz Mels* bouncing in that time. The traditional *Raiz Mels* or People's assemblies which were revived in the course of the peasant struggles against excessive taxation gave fillip to Assamese nationalistic feelings.⁴ But, the collaboration between emerging Assamese middle class of 19th century and the peasantry was not seen as a team against colonialism. Gradually right from *Jonaki yug* a body of literary group was formed which was extensive and distinctive enough to merit recognition broadly as a nationalist approach. The way the educated Bengali middle classes welcomed the capitalist growth in Bengal, the emerging middle classes of Assam were not exception to that point.⁵ The Assamese identity formation and its political articulation underwent a similar trajectory where cultivation of culture and history provided the sustenance to the emerging nationalist project. Linguistic nationalism was the prime motive force behind the ABUSS which wanted to make Assamese one of the richest and most advanced languages of the world. The objectives of the *Usha* were reflected in the first editorial by Gohain Boruah as, "the development of national literature is the prime intention. Along with other areas like study of sciences, agriculture, arts & craft, commerce etc., had been given top priority. Within its purview the discussion on religious & political matter is excluded...."⁶

The efforts which were undertaken by *Usha* was praiseworthy, but in these efforts they were by and large conscious not to wreck relation with the imperialist. As the politics remained outside their purview, they accepted the *Jonaki* approach. As for example the news of the death of King Edward VII, a poem was published in loving memory his Majesty, praising the king and their empire.⁷

"Today the crowd of the world is worried
Not being realize the wishes of the God

The death of their father stroke the heart

Many of the subject people lose their temperament."

Sarat Ch. Goswami rightly depicted in his article "*Amar Sahityat Abhab*" about the growth and development of Assamese national literature.⁸

The article wrote by Debeswar Chaliha '*Asomiya Bhasa*' published in three issues emphasis on the standardization of Assamese vocabulary, composition and pronunciations. He also invited the emerging literati to take responsibility of such discrepancies arising out in the above-mentioned field.⁹

In addition to literature, Hemchandra Goswami's valuable contributions was among others '*Saraighatar Yudha*'¹⁰ '*Asomiya Bhabisyat*' by Radhanath Phukan (p.188 *Usha*); L.M Bhagawati's '*Amar unnatir Mul*(p.235 *Usha*); Satya Nath Bora's '*Dhan O Dhanar Byebahaar, Karma, Kotyavya -Gyaan*' etc (p.184, 259& 116 *Usha*) and Bhudhar Choudhory's *Kheti*(p.113 *Usha*) had sarcastically indicates the foundation of Assamese national rouse. Jogendra Barua's article '*Banijya*' also had encouraged to keep in business matters (p.58 *Usha*). Another mentionable literati person Ananda Ch. Gupta (later Agarwala) who is popularly known as "*Vangani Konwar*", his valuable contributions '*soha aaru pandit*', *Maan* etc.¹¹ led to the development of translation literature and it gave a new boost in the domain of Assamese literature also.

The increasing popularity and glory of *Usha* was amassed by the contributions of Bezbaroa through his articles mainly '*Kripabar Barbaruar Prottyahgoman*'(a series of article), '*Bharat Uddhar*', *Bande Matarang*, *Swadeshi aaru Boycott*, *Bhul*, *Somalusona*, *Hindu aaru Musolman*, *Parliament*, *Bomo*, *Anglo-Indian* etc., equivocally defining the marks of Assamese linguistic nationalism. But Bezbaroa article *Anglo-Indian*¹² caused much uneasiness to *Usha* and particularly Gohainboruah. British had noticed the development of anti-British attitude, as if a crime to Gohainboruah. To continue his pro-colonial state of affair, he wrote entitled '*Rajbhakti Asomar*' to redress the wrong conduct reflected in *Usha*, "...the line of thinking which core issue of disagreement between them was different. I also feel that the British loyal Assamese people put in uneasiness. Hope the King and the people excuses him." Gohain Boruah then withdrew the article from *Usha*. Interestingly, in the same article Bezbaroa had also shown much pro-colonial attitude 'approved the lasting of British Imperialism in India.' While he stresses and warned British, "if you are not keep distance from racial discrimination to the Indians you have to suffered a lot." This was a clash between the groups of pro-British literati. However, Bezbaroa recognized the British colonialism, yet he was dissatisfied, the obstruction heaped by the British in his feudal honor and life style.¹³ They had been deploying their best effort to rejuvenate the Assamese language and literature as their coveted business, because the all- India nationalist approach guided by Congress was far behind in Assamese middle- class domain. From the hey days of *Swadeshi* and *Boycott* movement till to the end (1905- 1911) the two associates of British capital namely Manik Chandra and Jagganath did not allow the way to all India nationalist agenda of Congress. So, their successor with that confinement of middle class Bezbaroa & Gohain Boruah did not enrolled themselves against the Curzon plan.

One of his editorial *Sampadakiya Sarai*, he urged the farmers to used systematic farming with an industrious

mindset.¹⁴ The way of Gohain Boruah had contributed to the literary movement through *Usha* in his editorial he was aware of the social reality of Assamese society, the increase of taxes on land, flood which was faced by Assamese farmers. His social reform agenda which was reflected in *Usha*, despite his loyalist attitude to British was in a nutshell the social reality of Assam. When a stronger and renewed attempt to revive the idea of a *Ryot Sabha* movement began the Assam provincial Congress Committee attempted to come close to the Assamese peasantry in the 1920s. Among the increasing number of Assamese Congress legislators, Gohain Boruah, spoke of the concern about the sufferings of peasant in Assam Legislative Council.¹⁵ But Bezbaroa was an independent in political thought and action though not an eloquent speaker of Indian freedom struggle, devoid of social reality of Assamese people. So the element of utopian is seen in his writing on *Usha*¹⁶

The series of article on Music (Sangeet) by Lakshmiram Baruah gave a fillip to classical music, theory and musical-notations in *Usha* which eventually composed as "*Sangeet Sadhana Aaru Sangeet Prashor*" which was the direct creation from *Usha*,¹⁷ was a milestone of Assamese music. In addition to, the article on *Ahom* Dynasty, series of biographies along with Women related topics pushed a congenial approach to imbibe Assamese nationalism. In his *Usha* Gohainboruah created a numerous promising writers like Jogendra Nath Baruah, Lakhmikantra Mishra Bhagawati, Gopal Chndra Bhuyan, Lakhyaswar Borthakur, Benudhar Das, Bishnu Ch. Baruah, Lokeswar Goswami etc. (1st generation). Among the second generation of new writers who have contributed to *Usha* were Sidheswar Gohain, Rajeswar Baruah, Premadhar Gohain and in the third generation of writers Mohesh Ch. Bora, Surya Kr. Bhuyan, Sarbeswar Sarmabaruah, Jwalatiram Lahkar, Padmadhar Chalih, Ratnakanta Borkakoti, Jatindranath Dowerah, Indeswar Borthakur, Jnyananath Borah etc. The creation of such new literati group by Gohain Boruah through the pages of *Usha* enriched our national literature. It is well known fact that Gohainboruah was a teacher in his early career. The emerging wave of Assamese literature had facing lots of problems in different areas. Gohain Boruah acknowledged that the Assamese mother tongue yet to be recognized in a full participatory way. So with a convincing way, he had faced many hurdles. He realized the shortcomings of systematic mood of learning in Assamese mother tongue, the numbers of people who enrolled as writers for the project from school curriculum to theoretical-spiritual book. So he wrote '*Sikhsha Pronali*'; '*Sikhsakar Hatputhi*'; '*Deshi Kacharat*' and '*Srikrishna*'.¹⁸ In such way he stress upon the production of school textbook like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bengal.

The origin of *Banhi* was *Anglo-Indian* published in November, 1909. Bezbaroa was the sole writer for the entire thirteen article published in the first issue. In his second editorial he emphatically stress upon the objectives of *Banhi*, "to invite reading public so much so that it would help to increase the circulation of the paper."¹⁹ Secondly, in his declared objective of *Banhi*, Bezbaroa was very assertive in stating that the first step towards development of Assamese literature is Assamese language. He further stated it is the self respect of the Assam and not their false ego that will remove their sluggishness. And the way to achieve, this is through acquisition of knowledge and an effort for the development of

the mother tongue. Reiterating on the role of mother tongue Bezbaroa stated that it is the harbinger of an all round progress and well being of one's own nation and fellowmen. He had therefore urged all dedicatedly put in both their physical and spiritual effort which would make an extensive development of Assam. He aptly said, '*Swadesh aru Swajateer unnati aru mangal mondirar singhaduar hoise Matribhasa*'.²⁰

Despite his commendable influence in the rural areas, his enterprising work on Sankardeva as the national hero of Assam from the confinement of *Monikut* and *Naamghar*, the quantity of the paper did not cross the member of 500. To counter attack the anti Assamese linguistic lobby in a regular manner, standardization of Assamese language, acceptance of Assam and Assamese Language, Literature and culture etc. of mine; *Banhi* assured the leadership at that time with a promising nod. Chandra Kr. Agarwalla, one of the mentors of *Jonaki Yug* regretted while communicating with a letter (dtd. 09/06/1931)²¹ that sole cause of less number of *Banhi's* customer was the inclusion of *Bihu* and their appraisal in the pages of *Banhi*. While at a time *Assam Bandhav* equivocally advocated for the putting Durga Puza in place as national festival of Assam, *Banhi* along with *Aluchani*, *Times of Assam*, *Asom Bonti* etc., were against the current.²² According to Chandra Kr. Agarwalla, most of the people thought that *Bihu* was nothing but a slangy or ugly. One of his writing '*Borboruar Gaat Chatar Bihu*'²³ Bezbaroa portrayed the customs of *Bihu* in a lucid manner. So the way Bezbaroa rediscovered *Bihu* through the pages of *Banhi*²⁴ was not only an answer to the criticism sited often by the colonial bureaucracy but also recognized folk culture could be source of cultural nationalism.

One of his letters (dtd. 6.1.1918) sent to Jatindra Nath Dowerah, "Each copy of *Banhi* is a part and parcel of my body." "But I have not enough time to invest in the name of *Banhi*; not an established organization or office of my own, no one dared to come forward to help with money and mind, but I am confident enough to carry out the business."²⁵ So on *Banhi* was continued till 1930 with a convincing way under his guidance of Bezbaroa redressing all the grievances and hardship.

Bezbaroa one of his article, '*Asamor Swatantrata*' in *Banhi*²⁶ condemn the Goalpara *Zamidar* be fitting attention and endowment from rich Bengali literature who carried a nexus of *Brihattar Banga Desh* to destroy the identity Assamese people. He admits, "Unequal combination should always be avoided because they are disadvantageous to the weaker side."²⁷

In the *Banhi* editions numerous articles like '*Asomiya Sahityat Sankar Madhavar Sthan*'; '*Gutediyek Chintar Dhow*'; '*Mahpurushia Samprodayar Dharmamat*'; '*Asomiya Na-Lekharur Mahavidya*'; '*Asomiya Gauripurat Bangala Sahitya Sabha*'; '*Gurucharit*' etc. produced many rich intellectual circles at that time. Along with in the pages of *Banhi* some of the contributors portrayed the about '*Dihing Satra*', '*Dinjoy Mayamora Satra*' etc. Therefore, *Banhi's* contributors had not only stroke on main stream *Satras* of Assam; it also bears the testimony of subordinated anti-state *Satras* of Assam.

Bezbaroa challenged the chauvinist nature of Bengali writer (Jogesh Ch. Roy Vidyandhi's article '*Asamer O' Utkaler Bangabhasa*') through his editorial with many examples.²⁸ Most importantly, Bezbaroa's effort towards the formation of a composite Assamese nationality stands unrivalled; in his essay entitled "Assamese"²⁹ discusses the process of formation of the Assamese nationality through the

assimilation of different linguistic and tribal groups as well as from the rest of the sub continent and the reflection was seen with the writings of the origin of the ethnic groups like 'Sonowal jati, Miri, Singpho, Khamti, Kaivatta etc. in the pages of *Banhi* by various contributors. Bezbaroa's Assamese linguistic nationalism was a part of broader Indian nationalism, yet in his writings 'Asom Desh' is pictured as an autonomous socio-cultural and political entity.³⁰ This clearly revealed in poems like 'Mor Desh' and 'Assam Sangeet'. (*Banhi* P.1262 ed LNT) Written in 1910, 'Mor Desh' eulogizes Assam as a country of unparalleled beauty and uniqueness, not to be found anywhere else. Nowadays, it turns into our "Jatiya Sangeet" which is sung at all public occasions in Assam along with national anthem. According to Udayan Mishra, 'From this, we see that two types of nationalism co-existed side by side in writings published in *Jonaki* and other journals of the period. This was a common phenomenon throughout India.'³¹

Against such background, Bezbaroa has reason to criticize in many ways. According to Devabrata Sarma, 'the loyalty to British was shown by *Usha* was a continuous process with *Banhi* itself. In 1917, after eight years of publication of *Banhi*, there was seen no change of attitude of Bezbaroa in case of British loyalty. In this year he took part in a drama (*Dashyu Sardar*) for British war fund organized by Sir Ashutosh Choudhary, who acknowledged, 'A subject nation has no politics'.³² As *Jonaki* group aptly followed the same and *Banhi* had also shown same tune. However, the exception was that the two contributors Chandra Nath Sarma and Lakhidhar

Sarma in the *Usha* had augmenting colonialism. Chandra Nath Sarma, a staunch follower of regionalism without misreading of nationalist approach even criticized Gandhiji. But his thoughts and actions were seen a point of no discussion at all. Even his senior veteran Bezbaroa criticized him through the writings of 'Dhokaram Sarma', 'Saruja Pitt'.³³

Conclusion:

A handful of Assamese middle class does not necessarily mean for an Assamese nation. Unfortunately, the notions of class consciousness and national consciousness both were overlapped in some point. It is well known fact that a subject country is bound to take stand against feudalism and imperialism. So the consciousness comes out of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism could not be excluded in respect of nationalism. Some intelligentsia could not able to find in depth of Bezbaroa's line of nationalism. While a subject nations aiming at flourishing their national art & literature it is recognized as best weapon against imperialism. Bezbaroa along with Gohain Boruah through their *Banhi* and *Usha* did the same. According to linguistic Dr. Banikanta Kakoty said, 'Bezbaroa's sincere and passionate love for country reflected through his literary creation word by word.' Both were assiduously worked against the hegemonic nature of Bengali language and literature, which was also an underling factor for the growth of linguistic nationalism in Assam. But the dichotomy was seen in their indigenous nationalist project of anti-imperialism.

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