3.1 Introduction

The transition of orality to writing and then printing is also the story of evolution of mankind. In Indian context, the historical relationship that framed the shift from orality to traditional writing and then the shift from traditional writing to print was an outcome of colonialism. This shift affected and engaged social, economic, political and other structures. It had also shaped the social history of Indian vernaculars as their standardization and modernization was extensively influenced by the technology of printing.

In literate societies, messages can be stored and transferred in absentia of the sender. In oral cultures, however, messages are always transferred in presence of the speaker. Oral tradition brings people together whereas the written tradition engenders greater individuality as reading is a rather solitary activity.

Unlike European tradition, pre-colonial Indian philological and aesthetic curiosity always pointed to Vak – the utterance, rather than
the written language. The way Indian tradition structures the internal practices of languages cannot be adequately captured by a standard distinction between oral and literate culture. Here, the distinction between literate or written and oral is not homogenous between the educated and uneducated or illiterate. Even literate Indians have their traditions and institutions of oral performance. In pre-colonial Assam, the written and oral administrative practices were in use. The Ahom kingdom specially appointed officers for writing buranji, the chronicles, but their judicial proceedings were held orally. The importance accorded to written records is culture specific and British and pre-colonial Assamese tradition stands on the opposite end of the scale. That is why most of the erstwhile Ahom officials could not adjust to the new colonial administration. A continuous shift from orality to written word and vice versa was also visible in medieval Vaishnavite literature as well as in the folk-literature of Assam.

The study of print came to the academic forefront with the writings of Elizabeth Eisenstein who established the relation between the impacts of printing with Protestant Reformation
Natalie Z. Davis and Roger Chartier's analyses of the impact of printing on early modern Europe have drawn attention to the transition of book as a cultural and commercial object (Davis: 1991 & Chartier: 1989). It also points to the new phenomenon of printed words' polarization with orality. Anderson emphasizes the impact of print capitalism on the formation of national identity (Anderson: 1983). He also underlines fixity and standardization as the defining feature of print culture. But later scholarships question this hypothesis and present counter hypotheses that fixity and printing was not always identical and nationalism cannot be associated with only print capitalism. Adrian Johns argues that earlier printed books did not gain fixity easily and it was associated with vagueness (Johns: 1998). Likewise, in south Asian context, printing and nationalism was not always simultaneous (Chatterjee: 1993, Smith: 1998, Ghosh: 2006). On the contrary, print language and literature were vital instruments for crafting social identities in colonial India (Ghosh: 2006).

In Indian context, the shift was not homogenous as its western counterpart. Here, the shift was not only the result of the printing
technology. It was also accompanied by the changing attitude of a new generation of authors about their native literary traditions as well as the new literary trends imported from Western literature. The technology also opened up avenues for creating grammars, dictionaries and many literary genres in Indian vernaculars which were not in practice in most of the pre-colonial India. A new translation practice which emphasized on translation from English into Indian vernaculars as well as translation of Indian classical literature and folklore into English and other European languages came into force. That practice was different from the earlier one way medieval Indian translation practice which was based on translation and adaptation of classical literature into Indian vernaculars. Blackburn argues that the print did not create new texts and print did not usher in a new cultural or literary era in colonial south India (Blackburn: 2001). But his hypotheses seem to be not applicable for all of the Indian languages. This chapter will explore the inter-related themes by examining the transition of orality and traditional writing practices to colonial printing and the impact of this practice in the language and literature in the nineteenth century Assam. It is going
to explore whether and how much the Assamese language and literature was divested of cultural associations by the early users of the print technology. Whether the strong link between language, oral literature and cultural history was ignored or suppressed at the modernization or the standardization process of the language? What does the rationalist drive to change language into a collection of lexico-semantic units, rather than a collection of pragmatically useful registers and genres, affect the prospects for language revitalization?

The management of power through an internalized regime of control, as Foucault's work has showed, had become an important and integral part of the colonial policy in the nineteenth century (Naregal: 2001: 150). It wanted to exert power primarily through authority over the norms of discursive production, reception and dissemination (Ibid). Scholars working on the rise of print culture in the West have emphasized on the impact of the shift in reading practices and the ensuing laicization of culture in the formation of modern subjectivity and collective identities. Initially, the colonial government hesitated about the introduction of Western education in
the Indian colony, but the overall ideological advantage of regulating literary as well as literate practices through the introduction of print paved the way for the introduction of English language and literature. Elphinstone Report of 1818 in this regard confirmed the attitude of the colonial administration:

I do not perceive anything that we can do to improve the morals of the people except by improving their education. There are already schools in small towns, and in many villages; but reading is confined to Brahmins, Baniyans, and such of the agricultural classes that have to do accounts. I am not sure that our establishing free schools would alter this state of things, and it might create a suspicion of some concealed design on our part. It would be more practicable and more useful to give a direction to the reading of those who do learn, of which the press is so easily affords the means.1

An analysis of cultural history of nineteenth century Assam points to prolific print materials in Assamese during the period of displacement and after the relocation of the language spurred by the sudden identity crisis of the language. Colonial authority's repeated refusal to acknowledge Assamese as a separate language, the
missionaries’ initiative for creating a modern Assamese language based on a new orthography, the counter actions by Assamese intellectuals, and later the obscurity of printed textbooks in Assamese are some of the features that played important roles in the printing history of nineteenth century Assam. This chapter will trace and explore the journey of print itself as well as its impact on Assamese linguistic history, formation of nationalism, and emergence of a new generation of young Assamese intellectuals.

3.2. Orality to Print: the shift in Indian languages

Orality is one of the most important features of ancient Indian literature. Before written tradition came into existence, Indian classical literature was orally transmitted to the next generation. Even after writing down a text was in practice, oral performance or oral transmission did not lose its prominence till the colonial period. However, the history of orality in literature has not been well recorded in literary histories of the country and this has to be inferred from literary references and epigraphical guesswork.
3.3 Orality in Assamese literature

References in medieval Assamese literature suggest that a rich oral tradition was present in Assamese. Hemchandra Goswami who edited Asamiya Sahityar Caneki or Typical Selections from Assamese Literature suggests that the period of oral tradition had started in the seventh century and it continued to the ninth century (Goswami:2002:25). Later literary historians placed the beginning of Assamese oral tradition in as late as twelfth century. There was not any evidence of existence of an Assamese language in the seventh century A.D. except the Chinese traveler Huen tsang's oft-quoted reference about the difference of the language of the region from Madhadesa, i.e. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But the reference did not imply the existence of a language having literary tradition of its own. It might merely suggest about some distinctive features of the language of the region. It can be assumed that oral traditions of song, dance, drama and folk narrative pre-dated the earliest written Assamese texts, but their contents or cultural status at that point of time cannot be verified now.
3.4 Orality and pre-colonial written tradition in Assamese literature

The continuous shift between orality and written condition noticed in other Indian languages is a major feature of pre-colonial Assamese literature too. Besides the usual folk-literature repertoire, the so-called written literature of medieval Assam was also orally oriented. An easy transition between texts and performance had given pre-colonial Assamese literature a unique fluidity and flexibility which blurred the difference between literate and illiterate. For example, *charit puthis*, the hagiographies of medieval Assamese Vaishnava saints, were textualized; but their oral performance became part of the daily rituals of the *satras*, i.e. Vaishnavite monasteries. On the other hand, performance oriented folk-dramas like *ojapali* also used written texts as *Manasa kavya*. Moreover, as the most of the people were illiterate, written books were also orally transmitted and memorized as normal oral literature.

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3.5 Print and colonialism in Assam

3.5.1 Print and vernacular

The printing of Assamese books drastically changed the course of history of books as well as the history of reading in Assam. It also altered the relation between the author and the readers. The beginning of printed books also marks the beginning of new style and fonts for letters; new orthography and new punctuation marks for a new literary language suitable for new literary practices. As a result of these changes and innovations, the Assamese vernacular acquired new perspectives as an object of knowledge as well as a medium of knowledge. With colonialism as the background, print produced the shift of looking at one's own language through the eyes of others and then standardizing and modernizing it with a Western model. In the context of the Assamese language, the missionaries were prominent and strongly linked with other institutions of colonial modernization. They produced the early printed books in Assamese and thus using a spoken language as the literary language. This led a fundamental shift in the way
Assamese people viewed their language. It was not any longer just the mother tongue; but a tool for self expression that also became the national identity marker.

The history of printed books in Assamese had started with the Assamese translation of the Bible which was a part of the pan-Indian project carried out by William Carrey of British Baptist mission based at Serampore. In 1813, the first part of this book was published. The project was continued up to 1833 when the New Testament of the Bible was printed at Serampore. But it did not open the floodgate of Assamese printed texts as the project was too isolated and far away to have any impact in Assam.

3.5.2 Coming of print to Assam

Printing technology came to Assam as part of the colonial project in the third decade of the nineteenth century. It had started with the initiative by Major Jenkins, who invited missionaries to the province and assured them of providing amenities and monetary assistance.
In 1836, American Baptist missionaries arrived at Sadiya with a printing press (Barpujari: 1999: 135). After abandoning their preliminary work stations, the missionary finally settled at Sivasagar in 1839 and here starts the printing history in Assam. However, in 1813 itself *Dharma Pustak*, the first Assamese printed book was published by the Serampore missionaries. But this Assamese prose version of the Bible was indigestible even for the American missionaries. They discarded it and took up a project of the *Bible* translation which was completed in early twentieth century. In fact, the first Assamese printed book never gained popular acceptance and it did not produce a new era of a new technology. The Assamese language had to wait another twenty years before the actual print revolution.

Reliance on the language of the native as the medium of their evangelical mission was the common policy of the missionaries throughout the nineteenth century. After deliberating extensively on their medium of mission for Assam which has been discussed in the previous chapter, they finally decided on the Assamese language.
Like in other languages, the missionaries stationed in Assam began with printing of two types of books. The books were either religious tracts or language tools as the missionaries need to study, learn and then teach the language to the new arrivals at the mission. The colonial officers and traders also benefited from the second category and hence, grammars, vocabularies, dictionaries along with translation of scriptures dominated the first phase of printing in nineteenth century Assam.

It was Charles Bruce, the trade agent of the company at Sadiya, who proposed for setting up a Christian mission at the eastern frontier. Accordingly, Jenkins wrote to the secretary to the government of Bengal for inviting the American Baptists to establish a mission at Sadiya. He promised to give a monetary incentive of one thousand rupees per month to the mission and it would be doubled if they had a printing press at the mission. The American missionaries set up their first mission at Sadiya and then at Jaipur. But rebellion and tropical deceases forced them to wound up those
missions and they finally settled at Sivasagar. It was evident from records that Jenkins showed more interest in the mission than believed by the Assamese literary historians that generally stressed the strained relationship between the missionaries and the colonial administrators which became more prominent in the time of linguistic debate of the province (Neog: 1981: Sarma:1986). But it seems that the discord was a temporary phase and the mission was assisted by the administration all along as the missionary works complemented the colonial administration and it added a human face to the administration. Missionary historians acknowledged the help and contribution of Major Jenkins and other colonial officials to the mission. This help included ‘contribution of money’, attentions to the comfort of the missionaries’, and ‘the erections of commodious dwellings and other buildings for their accommodation’ (Gammell: 1849: 221). In addition to his earlier commitments, Major Jenkins provided a large printing press to the mission and also an additional annual sum of five hundred rupees towards its support. He also contributed five hundred rupees for replenishing the fonts of type (Ibid: 217). This new font of type was brought by Mr. Cutter from
Calcutta in April, 1839 (Ibid: 218). Mr. Cutter was found to be ‘constantly employed at the two presses’ (Ibid: 215). In 1839 itself manuscripts of *Gospel of Matthew* in Assamese and the Khamti dialect were ready for printing. After coming from Calcutta with an additional set of type, Mr. Cutter commenced printing them. In early summer of 1842, school books and scriptures printed at the mission press were available. In 1845, Captain Hannay made some brick houses and also a brick godown for the mission which was acknowledged by Brown in one of his letter. He was more impressed by the godown as it would be a secure and safe place for types which points to another aspect of the nineteenth century printing in Assam – the value of font for the printers. The missionaries acquired fonts from different sources – the first set came with the press itself from Calcutta. There are records about the wooden blocks they had made but there is not any mention about making of fonts in Assam. On the contrary, *Orunodoi* publishes news item on the coming of type font from Calcutta by river route (Neog: 1983:169).
Orunodoi had been found in many respects to be more efficient than ordinary tracts in breaking down the natives' prejudices and enlightening their ignorance (Gammell: 1849: 224). The Baptist Mission Magazine, in 1862, published a letter from Mr. Ward, the in-charge of Assam Mission, which stressed the better and more influential position of the journal:

The Orunodoi has an increasing circulation, and seems to awaken growing interest in the native mind. By this paper, we reach hundreds of readers who cannot be reached by any other means, and who, if we attempted to preach to them – which we have not the means to do at present, - would not hear. But here we mix in the knowledge of gospel truth along with news and matter which they are becoming eager for: and thus, all unawares to themselves, their modes of thought are undergoing a gradual but certain change.\(^3\)

3.5.3 Print and Assamese enterprises

The coming of print created a sensation among the Assamese writers which was reflected in their writings. Several writings, especially poems on the marvels of the printing press were
published in the Orunodoi (Neog: 1983: 902-903). It is interesting to note that despite being in good terms with the missionaries and printing his earlier books at the mission press, Anadaram Dhekiyal Phukan choose to buy a press at Calcutta in 1852 for printing his later books. And thus, he became the first Assamese printer and publisher. Anandaram never explained his decision of buying a press exclusively for printing his own works. According to Gunabhiram, the biographer of Anandaram, the press was bought as printing at other presses became costlier (Barua: 1992: 94). But he also mentioned that the first part of this series containing legal proceedings of the previous year was published at the Mission press itself. Then Anandaram shifted the base of the printing works to Calcutta and he had to appoint two persons for managing and supervising the press.

The second press was the Dharma Prakash Jantra, set up at Auniati Satra, a Vaishava monastery. In fact it was the first native press of the province which was established by Dattadev Goswami, the Satradhikar or the religious head of the Satra in 1871. This press
challenged the missionary dominance in the Assamese print culture which was used for propagation of Christianity. *Asam Bilasini*, the second Assamese newspaper was published from that press in 1871. Like the mission press, this press also worked for cultural and religious self representation and social identity. Moreover, it was also a tool of power for the Vaishnavites which could challenge the hegemony of the colonial printing and created an alternative space different from the missionary propagated Western norms. This press printed and published new texts, both religious and secular. But that press created an impact among the new readership by creating an alternative indigenous religious space with the publishing of major Vaishnava manuscripts. These texts got a much wider readership as the earlier circulation of these hand written texts was very limited. More or less this trend also effectively resisted the missionary project of spreading Christianity among the Assamese community. Despite the inferior quality of its products, the *Auniati* press thus became instrumental in the process of identity formation in the nineteenth century Assam. It was also instrumental in providing the much needed self-confidence to the new Assamese intelligentsia.
and entrepreneurs that the print technology could be used indigenously without the help or patronization from the colonial power. It was later bought by Krishnachandra Bhattacharya and was set up at Jorhat. The second chapter of the Asam Bilasini was published from this press. A number of Assamese newspaper and journals followed Assam Bilasini in the later part of the nineteenth century.

3.5.4. Categories of publications

It is fascinating to take note about the range of the publications from these presses. The publishing list of the mission press is somehow predictable as it followed the path of the other foreign missions and that list included translations of the scripture, text books, grammars and dictionaries, magazines as well as several pre-colonial texts and specimens of folklore such as folktales and buranjis which were not religious in character.
Language tools such as wordbooks, phrases and vocabularies, dictionaries and grammars of native languages were very important for the missionaries and those were used for both themselves as well as their intended students. Therefore, from the beginning of the mission in Assam, writing and printing of such matters were delegated to different missionaries. These language tools tried to make Assamese accessible to non-speakers of the language with reference to English. For example, Cutter explains the Assamese vowel sound /o/ with reference to English 'o' as in 'pole' and as /o/ in 'for' (Cutter: 1877:iii). It is interesting to note that before the 1859 grammar by Hemchandra Barua, no book on language by a native speaker was published in Assam.4

The contributions by missionaries to the study of Assamese culture and language and then bringing them out as printed matters in the nineteenth century was the most important and visible effort. They were the most active participants in the project of highlighting the unique features of the Assamese language which separated it
from Bengali in the earlier part of that century. Much before the Assamese language was declared as the official language, numerous linguistic publications had appeared. Barring one publication from Hemchandra Barua\textsuperscript{5}, all these linguistic studies were done and published by the missionaries. But this process was not an exception — missionaries in almost all of their foreign missions started their missionary project by learning the local language and then publishing linguistic teaching aides like vocabularies and grammars. The same pattern was also visible in the early twentieth century Belgian Congo where colonialism and missionary activities controlled the linguistic activities of the country. The Catholic and Protestant missionaries of that country began their missionary activities by learning local languages from natives and collecting words and useful phrases and by observing grammatical rules. The earlier linguistic publications included vocabularies and grammars which were required by the missionaries for oral preaching as well as translating scriptures into the local languages. Fabian stated that the translation project was designed for use by the missionaries in their oral work of evangelization rather than for
their illiterate African converts as ‘perfect command of native language’ was considered as a ‘grave obligation’ of the missionaries (1986:76). The production of language guides on all levels, from word lists to grammars and dictionaries was determined by the same practical concerns which were parts of colonial project of creating an education system which can make a class of employable persons. Later mass-publication of these works were used as teaching aides for the literacy project initiated by the missionaries and supported and sponsored by the colonial authority.

The nineteenth century missionary project in Assam also was of the same pattern. The knowledge of local language was given top priority and several missionaries were assigned to master one or two local languages. For example, Dr. Nathan Brown, a missionary and linguist, was appointed to study the Assamese language and the Khamti dialect. Miles Bronson also wrote a word book in English, Assamese and Sinpho in his first year in Assam.
In the first ten years in Assam, the missionaries printed fifty-five books in Assamese, English, Bengali, Shyan and Naga. Most of these books were related to the scripture. Others were either elementary text books or language teaching aides like books of phrases and vocabularies. This trend was somehow changed in the second decade. In 1853, Bronson submitted a list of their publications in the previous year to the colonial authority where the diversion can be easily noticeable [Table 3.1]. The mission press started to publish texts other than religious texts written by non-missionary Assamese writers.

The emergence of public reading in nineteenth century Assam was mainly initiated by newspapers and magazines published in the province. Orunodoi, Assam Bilasini, Assam News, Assam Dipak, Assam Tora, Mou, Assam Bandhu, Jonaki, Bijuli are the major Assamese magazines of the nineteenth century. Most of them documented the transition of the oral tradition to the print culture of the people of the province. This transition was not always smooth.
Table 3.1

List of Books and Pamphlets printed and published from the American Baptist Mission Press, Sivasagar, Assam during the year 1852

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Name of Press</th>
<th>Name of each Work</th>
<th>Description of each Work</th>
<th>No of copies of each Work</th>
<th>No of Copies of each work sold</th>
<th>Price of each Work per Copy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seebasgar, Upper Assam</td>
<td>The American Baptist Mission Press</td>
<td>Buronji Byug Kotha</td>
<td>8 vo., 2 pages, Assamese</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Report of Assam Mission Holy Incarnation</td>
<td>12 mo, 100 pages, English</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Address</td>
<td>12 mo, 12 pages, Assamese</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Memoir of Jun Harmaden</td>
<td>18 mo, 16 pages, Assamese</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Harmony of the 4 Gospels</td>
<td>8 vo., 1 pages, 4 sig, Assamese</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psalms of David</td>
<td>8 vo., 1 pages, 3 sig. Assamese</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Gratuitous Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assam Company's Monthly Account Sheet and Miscellaneous printing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Prepared from Long: 1855: 106)
3.5.5 The Transition

The changes from a community of oral performance based culture which was related to a religious context to a private, secular and silent reading was abrupt. The change of the medium from verse to a prose style added more confusion for the first generation reader of print in colonial Assam. They were used to the narration and then explanation by the literate reader or pathak. Now they were facing the new world of printed texts which was not targeted only on salvation of self or atma. They had to clear the first hurdle of illiteracy to enjoy these texts as new texts were meant for individual reading. In pre-colonial Assam, reading was limited to high castes like Brahmins and Kayasthas as generally only they had access to literacy. Moreover, the limited numbers of manuscripts meant a more limited readership. The arrival of print and growth of literature paved the way for much broader readership among the cross section of society. A larger social participation from the common people in literary activities was a focal point in the socio-cultural history of the nineteenth century Assam. In pre-print literary culture,
such participation was possible for folk-literature only. The mainstream literary activities were dominated either by upper castes or by elites of the society as formal education in pre-colonial Assam was accessible to them only. Thus pre-colonial illiterate readership had to be content with passive participation – the texts were read out to them by literate and professional readers. They were not supposed to be the active participant or producer of elite literature. They could actively participate only in the performance of ankiya bhaonas, and nam-kirtans, two popular Vaishnava genres. Oral literature was the domain of the common people which they could create and perform without hesitation or inhibition. Print technology, for the first time blurred that difference between the literary activity of elites and commoners. The so-called non-elite literary genres also entered the domain of elite literature with the help of printing. The growth of literature among the common people also encouraged them to create different genres of literature. It is interesting to note that the first modern Assamese biography was on the life of a common man who died much before completing his education (Sarma: 1872).
3.5.6 Print technology and Assamese language

The printing history was influenced by dislocation and the later relocation of Assamese vernacular as the official language and the medium of education in Assam. The American Baptist Missionaries accorded press and printing as a major apparatus for the spread of Christianity. Gammell, in his *History of American Baptist Missions in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America*, described missionary 'system' of establishing their network, which were "substantially the same in every land":

> The opening of schools, the operations of the press, conversions at the Zayat and other places of public resort, together with frequent excursions into the country around them, must always be made the principal agencies on which they rely for the promulgation of the gospel.  

(Gammell: 1849: 215).

The establishment and spread of vernacular education in the later part of the nineteenth century had brought the print matters within an easier reach of a larger social group. Apart from new social
groups, different gender and age groups also came to the fold of the print world. It also helped in the spreading of vernacular print materials required as text books and for leisure reading.

In 1852, the American Baptist Mission Press had two iron printing presses in operation and they executed printing in Assamese, Bengali, English and Shyan languages. The missionaries had in their possession one new Pica font, one small long primer size, one small font great primer and one font of double Great Primer Assamese and Bengali types. For English, they had one old font Pica size, one font Long primer size, one font Nonperil for notes and headings, and a variety of very small fonts for Title pages and Job works. The press also had a small font of Burmese and Shyan type. In the foundry, there were a set of Bengali and Assamese matrices of Pica size, a set of Burmese and Hujan matrices, Great primer size, three type moulds, and a lead mould etc (Long: 1855: 107). It is noteworthy that the Baptist Mission Press was the only press in the entire province till 1871 and, hence, the
assets of the Mission press were the only available printing tools in the province.

The colonial authority had obtained information about the published texts and other materials by the missionaries regularly. In an 1853 correspondence to Captain Holroyd, the Deputy Commissioner of Sivasagar, Bronson submitted two lists that comprise all the printed matters printed at the mission press (Long 1855: 105-106).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the process of standardization of Assamese language manifested through the development of print and media in Assam. The process of differentiation from Bengali language and culture was one of the major linguistic features of the nineteenth century Assamese print history. Simultaneously the process of assimilation and to some extent differentiation among different dialects of the Assamese language was also going on which was culminated in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1829, the first printed and published
book by any Assamese was in Bengali. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan wrote in Bengali probably for two reasons - the book was meant for the outsiders only and Assamese was not recognized as a different language from Bengali till that time. Maniram Dewan used a mixture of Bengali and Assamese as the medium of his book on history *Buranji Bibek Ratna*. There may be two reasons for this mixture of language – Maniram was not exposed to the Bengali like Haliram and secondly he might be using the language used by the Assamese elites of that period. Anandaram, on the other hand, used a language that had its base on the new Assamese prose of the Baptist missionaries. At that point of time, the missionary style Assamese was the dominant and prominent form of literary language. But gradually questions were raised about the authenticity and purity of that form. In the second decade itself, a debate had been started in *Orunodoi* about the model or form the Assamese language should have. The camps were clearly divided – the missionary group vowed for their type of language which was based on the spoken forms of Sivasagar. The second group was made of persons who had knowledge of Sanskrit and considered Sanskrit as
the mother of Assamese. Hemchandra Barua led the second group and to substantiate his view on the language he published an Assamese grammar, which was the first Assamese grammar written by a speaker in Assamese. In his grammar, Barua distanced himself from the missionary group as he emphasized that Assamese should acknowledge Sanskrit model as both the languages were related. And it was most interesting to note that this grammar was printed at the Mission Press itself. Orunodoi also published a review of the book and Barua was praised for his labour. But he was criticized for his leaning on Sanskrit grammatical rules and spelling modes.

The emergence of printed books changed the reading habits of Assamese readers in the nineteenth century. However, it is interesting to note that other traditional modes of reading coexisted with the new mode for quite a long period. Prior to the penetration of print, it is quite likely that the concept of private reading existed only sporadically. The traditional Sanchi-bark manuscripts were to be handled with extreme care while reading to prevent damage. The orthography meant for traditional manuscripts constituted a major
determinant of the mode of reading. Letters, words, lines, verses, commentaries followed one another without a space and hence, deciphering the text demanded a high level of scholarship, knowledge of prosody, and the possession of a vast vocabulary. Absence of any of these qualities paved the way for misinterpretation of the texts. The mode of writing of these texts made reading aloud the only way of reading to comprehend the meaning. Reading the same text again and again enabled the reader to memorize the text thoroughly and thus reciting from memory became a corollary to this mode of public reading. Moreover, some of the illiterate listeners also could recite the entire text from memory. Generally, public reading was performed at religious occasions, fairs and festivals and sanctity was associated with all these contexts. This kind of oral performance restricted the listeners from personally interpreting the text as the interpretation was mediated by the performer himself. The availability of the text in multiple copies and printed form had changed the way Assamese readers’ interpretation of the text. Earlier interpretation of a text depended on the performer and it was shared by a numbers of
listeners who attended the same reading session. Now that had changed to individual interpretation of the text. The new mode of silent and individual reading became popular among the neo-literates. The older practice of community session of reading also existed along with the new practice. Besides these two modes, a curious new practice assisted by two other practices also came into existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After listening to a reading by a literate reader, an illiterate anchor could hold a recital of the entire text from memory. Several Assamese intellectuals of the period, in their autobiographies, mentioned about this reading habit of their female relatives (Choudhuri: 1999: 12).

The print also influenced the Assamese writers of the nineteenth century to change the nature and scope of literature so much that it was accorded a separate tag as modern Assamese literature. The transition was abrupt as it did not evolve from erstwhile Assamese literary tradition. The new tradition deliberately moved away from local literary tradition in the first decades as it was considered as outdated by the neo-educated. The missionaries and
the colonial government wanted to spread Christianity based Western literature and culture among the natives. There was a reasonable difference between the languages that were used in different genres and styles of pre-colonial Assamese literature. The difference between the folk-literature as well as panchali literature which were outside the fold of the contemporary elite literature and other mainstream literature can be easily noticeable. The cause might be that the first category was meant for oral performance and the second was mainly for literary reading which was mediated by a professional reader for illiterate listeners. The literary language of the second group was a kind of barrier for the mass as the language was far removed from spoken form and influenced by Sanskrit vocabulary and grammar. Of course, the prose of seventeenth-eighteenth century buranjis was not much influenced by Sanskrit. Rather the vocabulary of a buranji varied depending on the subject of that particular book. The Padshah Buranji, for example, used many words from Persian-Arabic origin as this buranji was based on Moghul-Ahom relationship. However, the prose of the buranjis did not change the reader-audience equation in pre-colonial Assam.
as they were not available for mass consumption. The *Charit puthis* or the hagiographies of the Vaishnavite saints, which were also free from Sanskrit expressions, were meant for *satras only*. The language used in folk-literature was believed to be based on spoken forms; but it was not considered as a literary genre by the elite litterateurs. Hence the language of the modern Assamese literature was a fresh and new phenomenon in the literary history of Assam. The missionaries had used the existing prose model of *buranjis* as it was the most secular genre. But spelling and syntax had been changed so much that it had got a new look. The missionaries led by Brown and Bronson emphasized that the medium of literature should be based on spoken forms and spellings should follow pronunciation of the common people. This policy was continued through the next twenty years when the missionaries agreed to review their policy. They also admitted that any change in the language should be done by the native speakers, not by foreigners. The second stage was started by Hemchandra Barua who tried to change the way the Assamese prose have been written by the missionary school. Interestingly, the grammar which was the first
and most effective attempt by any Assamese to mould the language by moving away from the missionaries was printed at the Mission press itself in 1859. An unnamed reviewer reviewed this grammar in Orunodoi and he criticized that abundant use of Sanskrit letters as well as united letters would make the book difficult for the young students. He also complained about Barua’s methodology of transliteration which according to the reviewer, followed Bengali pronunciations, not Assamese (Saikia: 2002: 158). He cited the example of the transliteration of the word Russian with the sibilant alphabet \s.\ which is actually pronounced in Assamese as \x\. But just after one year of the grammar’s publication, the newspaper group itself had started to initiate some of Barua’s modification in Orunodoi. This was the first initiative of streamlining the excessive differences of the two groups. In the latter history of the mission in Assam, Orunodoi did not get much coverage which can be attributed to the failure of the journal to convert. It seems that the language of the journal acted as a barrier between the propagators and the Assamese community and it did not get much success as expected from a first ever journal should get. There was no doubt that the
journal had got a large readership as evident from the subscribers’ list published in the journal (ibid: 465-474). But it did not achieve the main target of conversion among the local intelligentsia. Unlike in Bengal, no intellectual or writer from nineteenth century Assam converted to Christianity⁹. But a majority of that was drawn from the colonial officials, tea planters and missionaries stationed at the province who were already Christians. The second large group consisted of native government officials which group was already using Bengali language at their office and not very much interested at the linguistic style adopted by the missionaries.

Anandaram, a colonial official who himself propagated for the installation of Assamese as the official language, did not try to change the missionary style. It seems that he was too grateful to the missionaries for using Assamese as their official medium to question or challenge their style. At the time of his premature death in 1859, Anandaram was engaged in writing an Anglo-Assamese dictionary which was getting published serially in the missionary journal (Saikia: 2002:146-149). He also wrote extensively on Assamese

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language, its distinctive features and the literary heritage. But he was not occupied with the difference of the missionary style with the erstwhile literary language. Nor did he say anything about the pronunciation based spelling system adopted by the missionaries. He followed this system in his dictionary and hence it can be inferred that he did not oppose it (ibid). Moreover his other writings in Assamese such as Asomiya Lorar Mitra, a book meant for young Assamese also bore the trademark of missionary style. He too followed the spoken version and his spellings were based on it and neither in Assamese literary tradition nor in Sanskrit like the practice of contemporary Bengali linguists and authors.

After the restoration of Assamese as the medium of school education, the colonial government tried to streamline the orthography of the language of the text-books. Apart from the normal school going students, Assamese text-books became important for the colonial officials serving in Assam too as they had to pass Assamese vernacular examination from 1876. However, the officials serving in the districts of Cachar, Goalpara and Garo Hills were exempted as the knowledge of Assamese would be
"useless" there (ibid). The government tried to implement a uniform orthography in school books as "great variety" existed at that moment:

Great variety exists at present in the spelling of (so-called) Assamese books. The set of primers now introduced, will probably become the standard of spelling throughout the Assam proper. You should therefore be careful that their orthography is as much according to ordinary literary cannons as may be. For instance, the CC would not tolerate the changing of (ch) into (s) merely because in Assamese, as in Bengalee, ch is nowadays pronounced as s. When you have brought these primers to a precise and reasonable standard of orthography, you may introduce them.¹¹

3.5.7 Thematic preferences

The history of printing in the nineteenth century Assam showed some marked preference towards some distinct themes. The earlier writers used this technology for pedagogy, reformation and propagation. Except one or two, most of the writers were non-native speaker of the language and they used the press for changing the
mindsets of the mass and got them ready for conversion. The second stage was a crucial period as more Assamese writers began to write in the Assamese language and their writings were mostly directed to the uplifting and modernization of fellow citizens. Their style and attitude was also different from the earlier stage. This generation of writers was from the same root and they shared a common tradition with their target readers. The third stage had started on pedagogy as Assamese was restored as the official language and therefore, textbooks were of prime importance. Most of the contemporary renowned writers were engaged in writing school text books in the 1870s shortly after the restoration of Assamese. The nature of the text-books did not vary from the earlier text-books written by the missionaries, but the language and the attitude of the writers had changed. And the young writers who benefited from this exercise directed their energy towards a national identity formation process based on the language and they created the firsts among almost all the Western or so-called modern literary genres like short story, novels, romantic poetry and so on.
In 1813, when the printing of Assamese books had started outside Assam, the printers were essentially non-Assamese except Atmaram Sharma.\textsuperscript{12} It was part of a larger project of Dr. Carrie who planned to translate the \textit{Bible} to all major Indian languages. The project in the language of Assam took more than twenty years and it also oversaw the evolution of the connotation for the language which changed from the Assam language in 1813 to the Assamese language in 1833. But American Baptist missionaries were not satisfied with Carrie's version and they started the project anew. The translation of other religious tracts and psalms were also a part of this project of the missionaries in their first decade in Assam (Table 3.1). Preparation of language tools both for the native students and non-native missionaries and others was the other project that was given top most priority by the mission as the proficiency of the local language would enable the missionaries to propagate the Christianity to the natives in their local language. Moreover, these books could be used as school text-books at the mission schools. At the initial years mission schools were established at every missionary stations as well as in the neighbouring towns and
villages. Generally managed by the ladies of the mission and aided by English ladies residing there and in part by native assistants either belonging to the country or obtained from Kolkata, these schools had about one thousand students. The curriculum mainly consists of religious texts as the schools aimed to instruct the students in “the doctrine of the gospel” (Gammell: 1849; 223). Introduction to Western education was considered to be the gateway as it would distance the natives from their cultural roots. That is why the grammars and dictionaries of the local languages were analyzed and structured with a western model. It is interesting to note that the first grammar of the Assamese language was done by William Robinson, a British Baptist missionary and a successor of Carrey (Robinson: 1839). And it had the signature mark of Carrey School that wanted to uniformly structure the Indian languages in a western model. This grammar was not aimed for native speakers. Contents of this grammar book were organized to cater to the interest of non-native speakers entirely for official and business communications and hence sections of the grammar were selected:
The rules of Prosody have been altogether omitted, because they seem an obsolete object of which is of little interest to European students, and are rather a matter of curiosity than of real utility in a language like the Assamese (Robinson: 1839: ii).

Robinson was in Assam for at least four years before writing the grammar. But his grammar did not seem to be based on the rules of spoken Assamese or local literary tradition. For example, his section on the particles of sudden prohibition and expletives were entirely based on Bengali and all the examples were Bengali too (Robinson: 1839: 61). The section on the particle of comparison was also classified like Bengali, as the classical form used by the learned and the common mode. But the examples were either not applicable to Assamese or too Sanskritized:

Dsonat koi teonr mukh kanti mati
Her face is brighter than moon. (Robinson: 1839: 25)

The second grammar on Assamese was also by a non-native speaker. Nathan Brown, an American Baptist missionary was
entrusted for writing grammars of different local languages and
dialects and his grammar on Assamese was published in 1848 as a
part of this project. Before that Baptist missionaries published a
wordbook of English, Assamese and Sinpho by Miles Bronson
(Bronson: 1839) and a vocabulary of the Assamese language
(Cutter: 1841). But it is interesting to note that Dr. Brown started to
write that book as a compilation of some grammatical rules that are
useful for the students:

The following Notices do not claim to be regarded as a Grammar of the
Assamese Language; nor were they prepared with a view to publication in
their present state. They were commenced with the intention of printing
only a few sheets, for private use, of the most common grammatical
forms; but the work having extended beyond what was anticipated, it
may not. (Brown: 1848: iii)

The third group may cover the school level textbooks the
missionaries prepared for their mission schools. In the first batch of
printed book at the mission press in Assam, there were books meant
for the schools. Though the emphasis was on religious instruction, some elementary concepts of alphabets and arithmetic were required for the students and hence the preparation of such books in Assamese as well as in other local languages got attention from the missionaries in the initial stage.

The 1850s emerged as the decade of the Assamese neo-intellectual writers who had Western education and tasted English literature as well as Western civilization. It is interesting to note that almost all of these writers were influenced by the missionaries. Several of these writers like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua were guided by the colonial officials and missionaries since their childhood. Those who did not had close connection with the colonial people were also influenced by their literary activities. Hemchandra who later compelled the missionaries to change their spelling modes, also started his literary carrier in Orunodoi itself. 

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An interesting development in the later nineteenth century was the formation of Assam School Book Society. The Society was established by the government for requisition, scrutiny and approval of school text books for schools in Assam. It created a competitive atmosphere for the young as well as established writers of Assam to write school texts on different subjects for different classes. The society also announced cash incentives for the best book in a category which encouraged many to write a text book. There was an extensive debate going on the structure and the medium of education even after the declaration of 1873. There were two very important Government notification on the medium shortly after the restoration. In an 1874 notification by the Chief Commissioner, Assam, the Assamese vernacular was declared as the medium of primary and middle class schools. However, “if the boys understand Bengalee better than Assamese, or any other language – for instance Kachari better than Assamese, the teaching of the Vernacular, which in Primary schools will be a great extent oral, may be carried on in that language.”16 In another notification two months...
letter it was allowed to study Classical Bengalee in the three higher classes of higher class schools.¹⁷

3.5.8 Standardization of the Assamese script

Assamese script was a major problem for the beginners of Assamese printing. The first group of the printers who printed Assamese books at Serampore used the Bengali script itself. Absence of a printable Assamese script amongst the major Eastern languages may be observed in the accompanying list (Figure 4). The absence of Assamese /rl/ and /lw/ in the Bengali script poses a major hurdle for Assamese printers. But the American missionaries used the Bengali font with slight modifications of the two letters /rl/ and /lw/ from the first issue of Orunodoi where Sivasagar, the place of publication was spelled as /siwasagar/. Still they were accused of not using the letter /lw/ in all possible situations by Hemchandra Barua. Actually, rather than usage, it was a battle of orthography between the missionaries and Barua. Missionaries did not use that
letter where it was not phonetically present. Barua emphasized on orthography. The missionary school later had to accommodate Barua-style orthography in 1860s not to antagonize the emerging and demanding Assamese readership who actively participated in that debate. At the same time the missionaries did not reject their orthographic style which was evident from the orthography of the Bronson's dictionary. Published in 1867, much later than officially changing the orthographic style, this dictionary still followed the pronunciation based style initiated by Joduram Deka Barua in 1839. This ambiguity maintained by them is a pointer towards the dilemma between differentiating between Sanskrit and bhasa, the term they generally used for Assamese and also expanding their readership. The orthography of the American Baptist missionaries was influenced by various factors. Firstly, there was not any established norm of orthography.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Alphabet</th>
<th>Roman</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Usage</th>
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<td>Aa</td>
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<td>![Image]</td>
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<td>Bb</td>
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<td>Dd</td>
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<td>I</td>
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<td>Jj</td>
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<td>![Image]</td>
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**Note:**
- **Alphabet:** The table includes various alphabets from different cultures.
- **Roman:** The corresponding Roman representation of each alphabet.
- **Image:** An image of the alphabet.
- **Usage:** The usage or context in which each alphabet is used.
Secondly, they wanted to alienate the Assamese from Sanskrit as it was considered as the Hindu language. Thirdly, they differentiated between the literary and the spoken form of the language and considered the second one to be more convenient platform to reach the masses. And last but not the least they used the orthography to prove that the language is different from Bengali language. They defended their style and rejected the allegation of arbitrariness by declaring that their orthography is perfect as they were read by the natives ‘with such ease and fluency, that it is to them like breathing their native air’ (Long: 1855: 167).

But the spellings took a very long period to be standardized and several debates about the standard Assamese orthography were held in different levels in that century. Different publishing group adopted orthographic styles which were slightly or drastically different. Before 1873, that debate was limited to the missionaries and Assamese intellectuals. But after 1873, the colonial government tried to standardize the spellings of the language. It tried to regulate the language in the form of text-books as this was the foundation of
language learning for the young native readers. It was hoped that the language would take the required shape through the text-books.

3.6 Translation project

Translation has often been used as a major apparatus in European colonialism. Bernard Cohn demonstrates that the codification of Indian languages was utilized for colonial commanding (Cohn: 1997). Apart from that, translation has also been used for the construction of European model of civilization which the colonized should follow. In this case, the act of linguistic translation may be defined as a cultural translation. Colonial translation from the native language and vice versa generally served to reinforce the dominance of colonial aesthetic sensibility through a process of ‘modern’ language and their functioning to represent national identities. In the nineteenth century Assam, translation process was extensively used for colonial dominance. Colonial government as well as the American Baptist missionaries tried to create an enlightened, modern and Western alternative for the natives.
Translation works into Assamese contained a major part of the print texts in the early print history of the language. British Missionaries started the project on Assamese language with the translation of the Bible into Assamese. American missionaries also clearly emphasized the importance of translation works to shape the language as part of their evangelical project.

The translation project initiated by the colonial powers in early nineteenth century flourished into a large scale product at the end of that century. The project started with a religious touch which was evident from the vast corpus of Christian texts in Assamese. However, around the middle of that century the scene began to change. It was not dominated by foreign missionaries anymore. Moreover, different non-religious texts also got translated. Meanwhile the Christian translation project too continued with the ongoing translation of the Bible as well as other Christian texts like Kaminikantar Upakhyan, Elokeshi Beshyar Bishay etc. Towards the end of the century, the focus shifted to the European classics rather than religious texts. Kolkata based Assamese young writers’
targeted Western plays and poetry as the theme for their project. In 1888, Shakespearean drama *Comedy of Errors* was translated into Assamese as *Bhramaranga* and it was staged in Kolkata in that year itself (Saikia: 2001: .009)

The language community, and hence its language can be seen as a precipitate of socio-cultural process (Silverstein: 1998: 402). But printing and the attempt to structure the language in a ‘modern’ model usually takes away the capability of processing a new and living language. In this shift, the material and indexical meanings of utterance are stripped away, so that what remains is a purified semanticity. In the case of the Assamese language the same trend can be visible where conscious and structured process of language streamlining was perfectly visible throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The Baptist Missionary School along with the Hemchandra Barua School and the Gunabhiram Barua School was emphasizing different styles for the written version of the Assamese language. They had their followers too. Meanwhile the colonial government also tried to streamline the language at
least in the textbooks. In the last decade of that century the literary language was almost standardized and stable. The impact of printing was the major catalyst in this standardization process.

But at the same time, the Assamese orality also resisted the onslaught of print technology to some extent. Like the situation of Bengal, as suggested by Anindita Ghosh, oral traditions like community reading or popular performance coexisted with the fixity of printed literature in the nineteenth century Assam (2006: 153).

3.7 Pre-print Manuscript to print

The new paradigm of print culture made some spectacular changes in the erstwhile written tradition of the state. Apart from giving fixity to the text, the print sometimes made some changes to them too.

In Assam, printing was used for two opposite mediums – oral literature and written literature. Along with print, oral performance also continued. Interestingly, some oral performers used printed text for their performance. Sometimes they used it ditto, and sometimes
they improvised or adapted the text suitable for the context. *Bohagi*, a collection of *Bihu* songs by Nakul Bhuyan in 1923 was used for oral performance as well as written texts.

End Notes:

1. Selections from the minutes and other official writings of Mountstuart Elphinstone, R. Bentley and Sons, 1884, p.334.
4. Anadarma Dhekial Phukan's booklet cannot be categorized as a linguistic tool as it primarily emphasized on the difference between Assamese and Bengali language only.
5. Hemchandra Barua published *Asomiya Bhasar Byakaran* in 1859, but his more famous *Asomiya Bhasar Abhidhan* was published in 1900 after his death.
6. *Dayakarar Jiban Charit*, written by Dibakar Sarma was published in 1872. Anandaramar Jiban Charittra was the second published biography and it was the life history of a renowned Assamese literary figure.
9. Michael Madhusudan Dutta, the great Bengali poet converted to Christianity in the early nineteenth century.
10. S O B Ridsdale, secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam informed the Government of India of its decision that 'officers under Assam commission must pass Assamese vernacular examination...but it is useless for those who were in Cachar, Goalpara or Garo Hills'. Letter 165
11. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 14 April, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August, 1876, BL.

12. Atmaram Sharma, hailed from Kaliabor, was said to be associated with the printing process of the New Testament of the Bible from Serampore.

13. Robinson was appointed as the Head Master of Gowhatti Seminary in 1835.

14. E.g. *kala* (black), *kalatar* (blacker), *kalatam* (blackest) where particles are same as the Sanskrit particles of comparison. *Ibid*, p. 25

15. Hemchandra wrote several pieces in the journal with the pen-name *Sonar Chand*.

16. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 24 February, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August, 1876, BL.

17. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 14 April, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August, 1876, BL.

18. Padmanath Gohainborooah referred to the Hemchandra Barua School and the Gunabhiram Barua School in his autobiography. It was also mentioned in an article by Benudhar Rajkhowa published in the eleventh issue of the second volume of *Bijulee* (*Bijulee*: March-April: 1893: 229).