Chapter- 6

Advertisements in the Print Media in Colonial Assam:
Analyzing the Socio-Economic Impact

The discussions in the previous chapters have reflected that in nearly one hundred newspapers and magazines various advertisements were published in colonial Assam. It is necessary to learn whether these advertisements had any impact on society and the magnitude of the impact. To find out this some interviews of octogenarians for whom part of colonial Assam was contemporary, were taken. These octogenarians had seen those advertisements published in colonial Assam when they were in their childhood and teens. They have seen the impact of advertisement in those days. This chapter is an attempt to understand the impact of the advertisements based on oral sources.

The impact of the advertisements is connected to circulation of the newspapers, periodicals, etc., and their readership. An attempt was made to know the circulation and readership of the newspapers and magazines of the colonial period, especially those which survived for a long time and got a good number of advertisements. Some information about their circulation was found from different sources. The circulation of Asomiya as declared in the court as a witness by Chandrakumar Agarwalla who was a managing partner of the publication group was 1700 in 1922,\(^1\) that of Chetana was 2000 in 1921,\(^2\) that of Awahan was 2000 in 1929 and 10000 in 1931,\(^3\) that of Banhi was 2000 in 1922\(^4\) etc., give an idea that the
number of subscriber was not very less in comparison to the population of the province at the time. Nearly 70 newspapers and magazines were published in the province and if all had a circulation between 100 to 1000 then even the number of gross subscribers were more than 50000 which was significant enough to spread massages. Another important dimension of this question is that while today it is assumed that a paper has 6 to 8 readers but our interviews have revealed that in those days one newspaper was sometimes read by 50 or even sometimes more than that.

It may be unbelievable today but it was the reality in those days. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika an octogenarian and a prominent citizen of Jorhat said that though the newspapers were subscribed by only few, the people in the villages had a desire to have a look at the papers.

Mr. Hemanta Bordoloi, an octogenarian and a famous social activist said that normally the teachers, village headman, advocates, few govt. employees in the villages, mandals, etc., subscribed to newspapers and journals but many people read those newspapers and magazines. Even some illiterate people were assembled normally in the evening in the houses of village headman or some other who had subscribed paper and a man read out the paper loudly and others heard. There were advertisements in *Asomiya, Deka Asom,* etc., where special schemes of subscription were announced by the papers for ‘*Pundits of Pathsala or ME Schools, Mandal, Gaonburha,* etc.’ (Teacher of Schools, *Mandal,* and Village Headman). Mr. Rishi kumar Barua said that sometimes in the remote areas paper reached in the next day or even after two days, but people had the same enthusiasm for the paper. He said
that at least 20 people came to their house to read the paper and interestingly the time for reading the paper was fixed for different persons. “For the whole day people used to come to our house to read papers”, he said. In the evening when people gathered in large numbers, one read the paper and the others sat around him to hear. Sometimes the reader mention the names of the goods advertised prominently. He said that in those days the people in the villages or in the town had very good relationship without any complex and therefore coming to someone’s house daily was a normal affair. He also added that that as in those days people were not busy in multifarious activities like today and that people frequently assembled in someone’s house to discuss various matters.

Important information collected from interviews with octogenarians was that, apart from the newspapers and magazines published from Assam, several newspapers and magazines from outside Assam had their circulation in Assam and the advertisements published on those papers also had impact on the people. The advertisers of Calcutta had a good market in the state. Late Bijay Krishna Handique, Ex Central Minister and eminent tea planter of Assam said that the house of their grandfather Late Radha Kanta Handique had regular subscription of *Amrit Bazar Patrika, The Hindustan Standard* and *The Statesman*. Mr. Ananda Dutta had seen papers and magazines published from outside Assam like *Amrit Bazar Patrika, Jugantar, The Statesman, Hindustan Standard, The Gardeners Chronicle, Eve’s Weekly, and Basumati*, etc. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika, Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua, Mr. Hemanta Bordoloi, Late Aboni Kanta Bhattacharyya, Dr. Nagen Saikia, etc.,
also had seen different newspapers and Magazines from outside. As already stated that annual almanac *Panjika* was widely used to find auspicious moments for different works by the Hindus and was full of advertisements. The people found the *Panjika* very attractive as it had various pictures. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika said that the *Directory Panjika*, published from Calcutta was the most popular *Panjika* of that time and contained 20-25 pages of advertisements and for many people especially for the children. The main attraction of the *Panjika* was the advertisements. According to Dr. Nagen Saikia the advertisements of the *Panjikas* were most attractive with different pictures and people gave importance to those advertisements because of their pictures. Associated with print media for a long period Dr. Saikia has analysed that in Assam, the print Media had tried to avoid printing of pictures with the text as the process of making wooden or metal blocks for the purpose was difficult.

Another important aspect that is sought to be examined here in is whether the impact of the impact of advertisements was limited only to the middle class, the class which was the main subscriber of the newspapers and magazines in colonial Assam. From the interviews it was noticed that the assumption was partially right. The advertisements of the print media had some indirect impact on the other classes of the society. It is true that the main impact of the advertisements was on the middle class. However like other ideas and processes the impact of advertisement also expanded subsequently to the other classes of the society through the middle class.
In those days branding of products was limited to some household goods, cosmetics, etc., and not to readymade clothes and consumer goods of higher category. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika said “Jabakusum tel, Esteria Battery, Eveready Battery, Amrutanjan, Panama blade, Borolin, Madan Mohan Companir Balti adiye bigyaponor madhyamere raiyor majot sumai porisil. Etiya lora chowali hote jenedore branded bastu loi tetiyao bigyapone budhhoi brand toiyar korisil; Karon Bengal Chemical namor sabon, tel adi toiyar kora company raiyor asthabhajan asil. Natun sabun ba tel kinilei gharat koi Bengal Chemicalor kinibo lagisil” (“Commodities like Jabakusum hair oil, dry cells like Esteria, Eveready, Amrutanjan balm, Blade of Panama Company, Antiseptic cream Boroline, Buckets of Madan Mohan Company, etc., were branded through advertisements. In those days also the advertisements created brands. The Bengal Chemical Company famous for its cosmetic products was a reliable brand for the people. If one went to the market and bought hair oil or soap of other company, it was enquired at home ‘why the product of Bengal Chemical was not bought?) Veterans like Ananda Chandra Dutta, Hemanta Bordoloi, etc., also have confirmed this influence of branded product on the public. There might be two reasons for such impact. Firstly, the educated middle class was the torch bearer or path finder and people normally used those things which were used by this class. Secondly most of the things advertised as brands were products of daily use only. The people preferred those products for their day to day use which became popular through advertisement or some other reason. As most of the products mentioned above were of use for all classes and in that level the advertisement had its impact on almost all classes.
Another important question to be considered was whether the information provided by the advertisements regarding quality, price, impact of the product etc were trustworthy. From the interactions with the octogenarians, it could be observed that though all information provided by the advertisements were not acceptable in totality, yet most of the information was true.

The advertisements had significant impact on the middle class of colonial Assam. The nature of the products or services shows that the advertisers were getting profit out of their advertisements. Different hotels of Calcutta gave regular advertisements in the newspapers and magazines of Assam. The advertisements published in the English papers or the Bengali papers of Barak Valley can be considered as the advertisements meant for the European population and the Bengali people living in this part of the country but the advertisements of different hotels published frequently in almost all the newspapers and magazines of Assam indicate that those had their customers in Assam. During our interviews it was reflected that the people from Assam frequently visited Calcutta for various reasons.

Late Aboni Kanta Bhattacharya told that people especially belonging to the higher middle class visited Calcutta at a regular interval. Mr. Bibhucharan Barua, the grandson of Late Devicharan Barua, the famous tea planter of Assam recollects joyfully their close relations with Calcutta. He told that for his grandfather as well as his father streets, markets and institutions of Calcutta were as familiar as of their home town. Mr. Barua said that it was not only their family but many other families in Assam who had a close relation with Calcutta. Apart from the
machineries and other requirements of the tea garden, various household items were bought in Calcutta. Mr. Barua said that furniture and many other goods of their house were purchased in Calcutta. Describing the relation of the Assamese middle class with Calcutta, Mr. Barua said that some of the people who had to visit Calcutta regularly had a permanent tie with the hotels. He said that Mr. Sachiprasad Barua, an eminent tea planter of Jorhat who had a good relation with their family had a permanent room in a hotel named ‘Broadway’ in Calcutta.

Prior to the establishment of Cotton College, Calcutta was the hub of higher education for the students of Assam. Even the Renaissance in Assamese literature, culture, etc., were started at Calcutta. For many people of the state, Calcutta was their second home. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika told that in those days though distant, Calcutta was familiar for the people. He told that before the festivals many traders went to Calcutta to buy commodities for business. The link between Assam and Calcutta as reflected in the interviews was justify the regular occurrence of the advertisements of the hotels and various other stores dealing with different items.

Another impact of advertisement revealed by the interviews was the import of different goods from outside through order. Orders were placed in the addresses mentioned in the advertisements and goods arrived safely on time. In most of the advertisements of the outside establishments, it was mentioned that goods were supplied on postal order. Late Bijay Krishna Handique mentioned that their grandfather Radhakanta Handique bought various goods from other states especially from Calcutta through postal order. He even mentioned the names of famous
establishments of Calcutta like ‘Hall & Sons’ which sent catalogues to their valuable customer like Radhakanta Handique. His grandfather received catalogues of various companies through post and preserved them and whenever he felt the necessity of any goods he opened those catalogues and placed orders through post. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika informed that the Mouzadar of Chowkhat Mouza Laxminarain Sarma placed an order for a harmonium of Doyarkin Company by post. The advertisement of the Doyarkin Company was published regularly in the newspapers and magazines of Assam. He has probably seen the advertisement and got the address of the company to place the order. Dr. Nagen Saikia also has written about placing orders through post and receiving of goods through VPP(Value Payable by Post). Late Bijay Krishna Handique, Mr. Bibhucharan Barua, Mr. Rishi Barua, Late Abonikanta Bhattacharyya and many others have shared their experience of receiving goods through post from the companies of outside.

There are many interesting stories regarding such placement of order and receiving goods through post. Today there is an advantage to have a clear look on the goods ordered for delivery on the computer screen, television or mobile phone, but in those days people had to place order by looking into a two dimensional photo or by reading a description of the item. Sometimes on receiving the item that was ordered, the people were shocked to find that the product was not that what was expected. Such incident were not uncommon and almost every person who was interviewed have heard such incidents. Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua had narrated such an interesting incident. Once one of his friends placed an order for a as it was not
mosquito net. Interestingly the length and breadth of the net was mentioned in the advertisement and his friend did not think about the height. When the ordered net arrived its length and breadth was found as per the order but the height was nearly two feet only. Some advertisers intentionally deceived the customer by giving wrong information or description of the product. Late Bijay Krishna Handique and his cousin Aboni Borgohain who later on became an eminent tea planter of the state had placed an order for a camera as per the advertisement published in a newspaper published from Calcutta during their teen age. It was mentioned in the advertisement 101 items would be supplied for Re 1 where the main attraction was a camera. The teenagers had placed their order and sent Re 1 but when the parcel arrived it was found that it was full of useless and some small items like toffee, needle, pin, etc. In the name of camera a wooden box fitted with glass panel was sent. Similar allegation against the suppliers was also raised by Dr. Nagen Saikia and many others.

Most of the persons interviewed were of the opinion that advertisement played an important role in developing consumerism in the state. Various consumer goods were introduced to the people of the state through the advertisements. The people of the state had a very limited demand for consumer goods as they did not know about all these. The Europeans and the people who came from outside the state mainly from Bengal to Assam as employees of the British government and for trading had brought many new consumer goods to the notice of the people of the state. The advertisements published in different newspapers and magazines had
made all those things familiar with the people of the state. It was said well by Late Aboni Kanta Bhattacharyya that the newspapers and magazines published during that period were viewed as symbols of Assamese renaissance. The Assamese middle class had deep attachment with those newspapers and magazines. As those printed materials were limited and the people were comparatively less busy than today, the advertisements in the papers also got attention from the people. The pictures in the advertisements attracted the people a lot. The pictures seen in the advertisements created brands in the minds of the people. Sometimes the texts of the advertisements have come in the form of story, poem, etc., and same also attracted the people. Such texts become popular among the people. Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua and Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika are very much correct in this context when they said that in case of Panjikas, common people were less interested in its genuine use rather the people took interest in the advertisements. They said that the picture of a huge fat man that appeared in one of the advertisements of Panjika is still alive in their memory.

The large number of advertisements seen in the printed media of colonial Assam and the list of 32 insurance companies working in Assam in that period makes it necessary to know about the people’s response to this business. Therefore all the persons interviewed were asked about the business of the insurance companies and the awareness of the people about insurance. Dr. Ananda Chandra Dutta expressed that there were many insurance agents or organizers in their period. The people did not like them because firstly people had a conception that the person insured would die immediately and therefore people found it difficult to buy an
insurance policy. He said that as he was the only son of his father, the insurance
agent was driven away from their house by his father. Secondly the agents never
left one without selling a policy if he was approached once. Mr. Bhabananda
Hazarika has mentioned that Bhaskar Insurance Company, Mahalaxmi Insurance,
etc., were very popular during that period. He said that known people of towns or
villages who were enrolled as agents by the company visited the houses of the
prospective customers with their officers or senior agents of the company who had
thorough knowledge of the insurance plans. The people felt it comfortable to insure
in the companies which were known to them through advertisements or some other
way. The Bhaskar Insurance earned faith among the people as a local company.
This local sentiment in support of Bhaskar Insurance Company was equally visible
in case of Guwahati Bank also. The interviews proved that the Assamese
Nationalism which was already discussed in the chapter four of this thesis became
very strong in this period. This sentiment was used in their advertisements by both
Bhaskar Insurance Company and Guwahati Bank and the establishment could ensure
its impact. Dr. Ananda Dutta, Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika, Mr. Hemanta Bordoloi,
etc., recollected the well functioning branch of the Guwahati Bank in Jorhat. They
also recollected the advertisements of Guwahati Bank published in the printed media
of colonial Assam. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika said that the Bank was very popular
and he had opened an account in it.

Dr. Ananda Chandra Dutta while speaking about the influence of advertisement had supplied very interesting information. He said that advertisements
of Opium and Ganja were also published in the newspapers. The advertisement was
in the form of a two line poem—“Ganja tola bara anna; afing tola panch anna” (the
price of the unit of Ganja called tola in local language was 12 anna and that of opium was 5 anna). It was very difficult to understand the motive of such advertisement as it is not expected that the addicted people were the subscribers of the papers. Perhaps the assumption regarding the readership of the paper that though the papers were subscribed by few middle class people, its readership was quite large appears true. Somehow the advertisers were benefited from the advertisement. He mentioned the names of few establishments of Jorhat which gave advertisement in print media to attract customers. He mentioned the names of Nirmal Cycle Mart, Doss & Co., Dentist Haren Hazra, Niyamkora Bora, a goldsmith for Assamese ornaments, Chilarai Motor Company, etc. He had seen the advertisements of those establishments. Similar advertisements of the establishments of Guwahati, Dibrugarh, etc., were seen in the newspapers and magazines published from their own place. In places where there was no local paper the reputed establishments of those places advertised in the newspapers and magazines of other places with good circulation.

Advertisements were considered very important for the smooth functioning of a newspaper or a magazine. This was evident from the fact that only few papers which got advertisements regularly survived in the colonial Assam. Mr. Hemanta Bordoloi associated with the newspaper *Janambhumi* and had a very close relation with the persons related with print media during that period informed that advertisements played a very important role in the financial management of a paper. The owners of the publication houses gave importance to advertisements. He said that many people were employed by the papers for collecting advertisements. Moreover, the advertising agencies also supplied advertisements for the papers and
magazines. It can be gauged from the advertisements that the advertisements coming from the distant places might have come through agencies. The advertisement of Alfonse Company dealing with mattress advertised in *Asomiya* belonged to Cochin, Kerela.\(^2\) In those days it was impossible for a company of Kerala to advertise in a newspaper of Assam without an Advertising agency.

In those days also for some commodities advertisement was the only effective means to take them to the people. Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua said that the information regarding new books, gramophone records, etc., advertisements in the newspapers and magazines provided proper information.\(^3\) While observing the advertisements, it was found that different gramophone record companies gave advertisements of their gramophone records. Among those companies ‘Sanola ’had maximum number of records in Assamese and it advertised regularly in different newspapers and magazines. Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika said that they had seen a number of advertisements of *Sanola* company. He said that in those days they had thought that only Sanola Company released records in Assamese. He said that they had heard those records. Late Bijay Krishna Handique also said that Sanola was the most famous gramophone company of that period and it regularly advertised its latest records. Later on His Master’s Voice (HMV) also became popular in this field with different records and regular advertisements. Records of Assamese drama popularly known as *palla* were brought out which became popular among the people of the state. Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnuprasad Rabha jointly directed a drama *Jaimati* written by Laxminath Bezbarua and produced by Sanola. Later on
Jyotiprasad Agarwalla made the first Assamese movie from it. Late Bijay Krishna Handique mentioned about the plays or *palla* of famous Assamese poet Ganesh Chandra Gogoi. *Sakunir Protishodh*, a mythological drama written by the late poet was described as very famous by late Handique. Similarly, for the information of new arrival of books one had to depend on the advertisements. To provide information of new books to the customers by the writers or the publishers advertisement in the newspapers and magazines was the most reliable media in those days. For these products advertisement was beneficial for both the customers and the advertisers.

Thus the interviews of the octogenarians have not only complemented the information provided by the advertisements, they rather supplied many new information. The interviews were planned to understand the impact of the advertisement on the society. It was seen that even in those days when the circulation of the papers and magazines were not very high, advertisements in the print media attracted the people of the state. The huge number of advertisements proves that it was a successful tool of marketing in those days. The interviewees have described how different spheres of social life has been touched by advertisements in colonial Assam and interviews have made us realize that the analysis of advertisements can help us to reconstruct the history of colonial Assam.
Notes and References


2. *ibid*, p. 146.

3. *ibid*, pp. 53-54.

4. *ibid*.

5. Information provided by Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua.

6. Information provided by Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika.

7. Information provided by Mr. Hemanta Bordoloi.

8. Information provided by Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua.

9. Information provided by Late Bijay Krishna Handique.

10. Information provided by Dr. Nagen Saikia.

11. Information provided by Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika.

12. *ibid*.

13. Information provided by Late Aboni Kanta Bhattacharyya.

14. Information provided by Mr. Bibhucharan Barua.

15. Information provided by Late Bijay Krishna Handique.

16. Information provided by Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua.

17. Information provided by Late Bijay Krishna Handique.

18. Information provided by Late Aboni Kanta Bhattacharyya.
19. Information provided by Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika and Information provided by Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua.

20. Information provided by Dr. Ananda Chandra Dutta.

21. Information provided by Mr. Bhabananda Hazarika.

22. *ibid*.

23. *Asomiya*, April, 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1940, Guwahati.

24. Information provided by Mr. Rishi Kumar Barua.