Chapter three

Missionaries, *Orunodoi* and the Agitation

I have divided this chapter broadly into three parts, the advent of the American Missionaries into Assam, the arrival of the printing press and the initiation of literary activities, like the first Assamese print journal *Orunodoi*, secondly, the role of the press in the Assam agitation days and thirdly how press in Assam evolved during the post-agitation period. Any historical analysis on the growth of the press in Assam cannot be complete without a mention of the contribution of the missionaries to Assamese language and consciousness. I have selected the three epochs to understand the growth of journalism and journalistic activities in nineteenth century Assam to late twentieth century post-agitation evolution of the press. These three divisions are by no means a comprehensive list of events, and only have been applied keeping in mind the objectives of this study.

3.1 The Advent of Missionaries in Assam

The American Baptist Missionaries, who made Assam their field of evangelical activity, had an important role to play in the collective life of the Assamese people. It was the role of resuscitation of the Assamese Language from a ban in administrative and educational matters and its culture as a medium of expression. As a result of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, which was signed by the British and the Burmese, Assam became officially part of the territories of the East India Company. By
1836 the British had made Bengali as the language to be followed as medium of instruction and also in administrative practices.

The colonial history of Assam, as is similar to other such histories, was marked by the imposition of whimsical decisions that had grave effect on the development of Assamese identity per se. The British rule saw the irony of losing to Bengali language even in Assamese speaking regions. Education in schools was in the Bengali medium. The colonized, enthused by nationalistic zeal, often make efforts to distinguish their manners and customs, religious and social institutions, and culture and civilization. In Assam the struggle to carve an identity, language of its own was marked by the exemplary efforts of the missionaries along with like minded individuals who by their hard work established Assamese as a language with its own specific grammar. Resistance to the imposition of a new culture is nothing new in the dichotomy of colonialism and the colonized.

In the history of decolonization, intellectuals and activists fought against colonial rule and defied the notions of nation, language and race that were continually being revised and thrown at them. Ironically, Miles Bronson and the Baptist missionaries, who were brought by the British colonialists to serve their imperialistic interests in Assam, were the pioneers in resisting the dominant discourses of language and nation that was defined by the narrow interests of the Britishers. “Apart from bringing out an issue of Orunodoi every month, the Baptist crew continued to publish a number of religious tracts (including Brown’s fresh translation of the New Testament), ‘a number of elementary books for Schools’, a translation of the Indian Penal Code, and a Vocabulary and Phrase Book which claimed to reflect the ‘authentic Assamese spirit’” (Kar, 2008: 40).
The British annexation of Assam in 1826 was not as momentous an event in Assam’s history as the ones that followed the political occupation. In the new colonial regime, David Scott\textsuperscript{10} employed former officials of the Ahom\textsuperscript{11} kings in the revenue and judicial departments, but their lack of expertise and unfamiliarity with the new system made them unfit to man the lower echelons of the administrative apparatus.

They had to gradually make room for men from outside Assam, especially from Bengal. Bengali clerks then poured into Assam seeking employment in the newly-established government offices. Since Bengali was the official language adopted by the British for the administration of the Bengal Presidency and also the mother tongue of the Bengali clerks working under the British in Assam, it was considered economically most convenient by the colonial rulers to enforce Bengali both as the official language and as the medium of instruction in the so-called vernacular medium schools of Assam.

Among the cultural characteristics of nationality, language is, and has always been, pre-eminent. In forming and sustaining a nationality, language is the chief factor. That loyalty to one’s national state, and pride in one’s language and belief in its intrinsic excellence play a supremely significant role in defining one’s nationalistic spirit, was exemplified by Bronson.

A strong allegiance to one’s own linguistic group, which was earlier absent in the Assamese society, was achieved through Bronson’s campaign – a demonstration of a truly nationalistic spirit. “Reportedly the first wordbook of Assamese, the manuscript contains three parallel

\textsuperscript{10} David Scott was made the Commissioner of Assam after Assam became part of the British Empire.

\textsuperscript{11} The Ahoms originally from Tai descent ruled Assam from 1228 to 1826. The invasion by the Burmese and consequently Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 between the Burmese and the Britishers ended the 600 years rule of the Ahoms.
columns of words classed as ‘Sanskrit’, ‘Ashami Bhasha’\textsuperscript{12} and ‘Camarupa Bhasha’\textsuperscript{13}. Even if we believe that ‘Ashami Bhasha’ refers to the dominant speech of Upper or Eastern Assam (Ujani) and ‘Camarupa Bhasha’ to that of Lower or Western Assam (Namani), no definitive comparison between the two is possible” (Kar, 2008: 33) In nineteenth-century India, the emergence of nationalism was closely related to the spread of Western education and rapidly developing means of communication. Unflinching loyalty to one’s linguistic or religious group was also considered the genesis of nationalism.

Multiculturalism on Indian soil posed complex problems for social scientists in defining Indian nationalism, and it took the conscious effort of a foreigner like Allan Octavian Hume, a retired British ICS officer, to moot the formation of the Indian National Congress. It was not spontaneous outpourings of deep nationalistic feelings of Indians but a foreigner who brought together the leaders of the Indian intelligentsia on a common platform that led to the formation of the Congress. Similarly, in Assam, Bronson, was instrumental in the process of bringing together a nation based on the idea of a common language. Partha Chatterjee (1993: 05) argues “It (nationalist history) might also tell us that the decade preceding this (formation of Indian National Congress) was a period of preparation, when several provincial political associations were formed. Prior to that, 1820’s to the 1870’s, was the period of ‘social reform,’ when colonial enlightenment was beginning to ‘modernize’ the customs and institutions of a traditional society and the political spirit was still very much that of collaboration with the colonial regime: nationalism had still not emerged.” It is in this light that the advent of missionaries and their institutions should be viewed in the context of Assam. The history of nationalism is replication of the history of Europe to the colonial societies

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} The dialect of Assamese spoken in the eastern part of Assam
\item \textsuperscript{13} The dialect of Assamese spoken in the western part of Assam
\end{itemize}
too. And the arrival of press, language and modernity is just a part in that ‘modular form’ of nationalism served up by the west.

The Assamese intelligentsia was, therefore, in no way alone in its espousal of the cause of regional nationalism; the focal point for the Assamese intellectuals at that time were the existence of Assam as a separate nation with its own cultural tradition, language and religion. Bronson\textsuperscript{14} leading the language movement was a rare example of a missionary’s direct involvement in the social affairs of Assam.

The agitation was definitely a manifestation of nationalism as it gave vent to the simmering discontent at least among educated elites like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan\textsuperscript{15}. “The British-owned and nationalist press were closely associated with the freedom struggle, presenting and countering contending versions of issues of the day. The rapidly growing newspapers introduced and consolidated ideas of modernity, and contributed to the evolution of a national identity, despite low literacy and strict press laws introduced by the colonial administration” (Sonwalkar, 2002:823). And \textit{Orunodoi} was one such journal which served that purpose. Bronson’s missionary career, if measured by the number of converts he gathered, could not be called successful, and he finally had to shift base to the hills of Meghalaya where he finally found success in his missionary goals.

We may presume that failure to resolve conflicts at the religious level with the Brahmins led Bronson to another method of interaction with the common people, and as a result, the consciousness of direct participation in any form of national uprising against the colonial government might

\textsuperscript{14}Miles Bronson was one of the first missionaries who came to Assam in 1838 for their evangelical activity. He also brought along with him a printing press, the first in the region.

\textsuperscript{15}Assamese youths from wealthy families would go to Calcutta for their education, and thus it became the center of Assamese intellectual class in the nineteenth century.
not have dawned upon him, if he considered the language movement as a manifestation of linguistic nationalism.

Regeneration of the Assamese language and culture definitely did not occupy the first place on the missionary’s list of priorities, for evangelization work challenged him to limitless scope and opportunities. At this juncture, it will be appropriate to remember Bronson and his origins. Baptist missionaries had a legacy of nurturing republican and egalitarian ideas and their origins were, at best, anything but extraordinary.

As dissenters, they had been excluded at home from most opportunities for advancement and exposed to radical political views. From time to time the authorities in India made it clear that they regarded them as politically dangerous, and people of conservative inclinations saw the endeavor, particularly by dissenters of low social status and with suspect political opinion, to convert Hindus to Christianity as inherently seditious and likely to lead to tumult and insurrection. Colonial rulers saw them as a threat to the British empire.

The dangers anticipated as a result of the missionary work of the Baptists and others were greatly exaggerated. They did arouse some minor controversies with their aggressive preaching and polemical pamphlets attacking the religious beliefs of Hindus and Muslims, but they never posed a serious threat to law and order, nor were they enough to justify any charge of sedition. The Baptist missionaries allied themselves with progressive Hindus, such as Rammohun Roy¹⁶, on a number of issues of social reform and also engaged in various theological debates with them. They tended to distinguish between Hindu religion which they wished to destroy or write off as false idolatry, Indian cultures which they

¹⁶Rammohun Roy was the founder of Brahma Samaj, a reformist organization. He was considered to be the father of ‘Bengal Renaissance’.
regarded as, in many ways, excellent; and Indian society which, they believed, required radical reform to make it conform to Christian or western ethics.

In Bengal, the missionaries were convinced that only Christianity could provide a secure foundation for true patriotism. In Assam, Bronson’s Christian ideas about the uplift of the marginalized and oppressed sections of society spurred him on in an endeavor that was divorced from purely missionary pursuits.

Whereas Alexander Duff\textsuperscript{17} saw Christianity as the panacea for all ills in India and sought to introduce it for instilling patriotic feelings, Bronson’s idea of inculcating nationalism into the natives of Assam differed greatly from Duff’s. He did not stress Christianity first, before he could step into agitations like the language restoration. Linguistic nationalism and ideas pertaining to it were the birthright of any citizen of any state – Christian or otherwise.

Bronson, on this issue, made no demarcations between Christians and non-Christians. He did not wait for the conversion of key individuals or the gradual percolation of Christian ideas to the natives. For him, moral and spiritual enlightenment were of least significance and even the triumph of Christianity assumed secondary importance at this juncture. To awaken the natives of Assam from their slumber, Bronson could not wait for them to become Christians.

Bronson’s Christian ideas were to instill into people love for and pride in their language, and this he sought to do, even though they were not Christians. Missionaries’ actions have more often than not met with criticisms. “The language of the 864-page Assamese Bible, with all its painful struggles to maintain a precarious balance between dead Sanskrit

\textsuperscript{17} Duff was a Scottish Missionary who came to Calcutta in early nineteenth century and established institutes of higher learning like the Scottish Church College.
and living speeches, was too much of a product of the linguistic laboratory at Serampore\textsuperscript{18} to strike any ready chord of familiarity or belongingness in Assam” (Kar, 2008:34). William Carey’s attempt at translating the Bible into Assamese without knowing the nuances of the language, and trying to export experimental Assamese from Serampore as the language of the people flopped. A single language through the Bible was not successful. There is a tendency in certain quarters to deny that the missionaries had anything to do with colonial powers and to lay too much stress on the so-called religious neutrality of the British administration.

While the missionary support for colonialism and its commercial and political interests retarded the progress of Christianity in India, Bronson’s involvement in social issues might partly be the retarding factor in his not very successful missionary career; but at the same time it became the cause of his contribution to linguistic regeneration in Assam, especially his making the Assamese take pride in their own language in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Bronson’s participation in the language regeneration process led to Assamese being again recognized as a distinct identity of the Assamese people, for which Bronson continues to be remembered. “By the early years of the 1830s, the idea of gathering the local speeches in Assam into a distinct category of Assamese was deemed unrewarding in the official circle” (Kar, 2008:35). In this context the relevance of Bronson’s achievement cannot be ruled out.

Modernisation that was brought in by the British administrators and Western missionaries in the nineteenth century ushered in social consciousness in Assam. Assertion of tribal identity has become stronger

\textsuperscript{18} Srerampore in Bengal served as the headquarters of the American Baptist Missionaries in the eastern part of India in the nineteenth century, and established the Mission press here.
during the post-colonial period. A situation, which has been termed the birth pangs of a new social order, has arisen in Assam where there is heightened political consciousness among every ethnic group with little readiness to concede anything to others.

3.2 The Orunodoi

Orunodoi\textsuperscript{19}, as is suggestive of the name was the most important literary achievement of nineteenth century Assamese society. Referred to as ‘The Dawn’ in English it proclaimed its motto to be as ‘devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence.’ Nineteenth century Assam was marked by an intellectual movement and Assamese youths of aristocratic families went to Calcutta for their studies. “Calcutta also became the cradle of Assamese literary activities in the second half of the nineteenth century. The ‘Jonaki Age’, a glorious chapter in the history of Assamese literature, had its origin in Calcutta. …Even Boli Narayan Borah and Benudhar Sharmah have said that almost throughout the nineteenth century, government services were manned by competent Assamese of good (aristocratic) families without taking into account any academic qualifications. Competition for jobs on the basis of English education developed at a later stage. But gradually educated youths, whether Assamese or non-Assamese (mainly Bengali) began to get government jobs that were open to them (Boruah, 1980: 49).

Orunodoi started publication in 1846 from Sivasagar under the editorship of Nathan Brown; and O.T. Cutter was involved with the production processes of the press. “This journal set a new trend in Assamese writing which may broadly be termed as a secular one. Like

\textsuperscript{19} The first Assamese journal published from Sivasagar Mission Press in Assam was started in 1846 and continued till 1880’s.
**Digdarshan**\(^\text{20}\) and **Samachar Darpan** in Bengal, *Orunodoi* devoted itself not only to the spread of religious education but also to the progress of ‘science and general intelligence’” (Misra, 1985: 1561). The American Mission Press thus became the precursor to the modern thought process in history of the modern Assamese nation. It produced a separate identity for the language by its important publications. “In 1848, Brown published his famous *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language*, which not only rejected the official understanding of Assamese as a dialect, but also outlined the theoretical principle on which the identity of the language was to be sought and found” (Kar, 2008: 37). The *Orunodoi* also gave rise to the first journalists in the history of Assam. If Nathan Brown himself was the editor and contributor of articles it was intellectuals and nationalists such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah and Hemchandra Baruah who by virtue of their contribution to *Orunodoi* became the first generation of journalists from Assam. Although people writing for Bengali journals was prevalent in Calcutta based publications. “Holiram Dhekial Phukan, Jaduram Deka Barua, Jajnaram Kharghoria Phukan and Maniram Dewan were among these prominent figures of the Assamese aristocracy who contributed regularly to Bengali journals like *Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika* and *Banga Doot*” (Misra, 1985: 1558)

The publication of *Orunodoi* also led to the publication of other journalistic publications such as *Asam Bandhu* published in 1885 from Nagaon, *Asam Bilasini* published in 1871 from Majuli, *Asam News* published in 1885 from Guwahati, *Asam Darpan* published in 1874 from Tezpur, *Asam Mihir* published from Guwahati in 1872, *Goalpara Hitashadini* published from Goalpara in 1876 etc. *Jonaki* published in 1889 and *Mau* published in 1886 were two publications which were published in Calcutta by the Assamese intelligentsia there. All these

\(^\text{20}\) *Digdarshan* and *Samachar Darpan* were published from the Sererampore Mission Press. While *Digdarshan* was a monthly in Bengali, *Samachar Darpan* was the first language newspaper published in India in 1818.
newspapers and magazines took inspiration from the contribution of *Orunodoi*. Mainly published in the second half of the nineteenth century they reflected the golden age in Assamese literature.

As is evident from the articles published in the *Orunodoi*, it did not only add to the development of languages, but made its mark on the advent of modernism in Assamese society. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan one of the regular contributors of the journal in his writings time and again had emphasized on the inculcation of scientific temper. Being in Calcutta, he got to know the value of western education and its effect on the masses. He argued for mass education and training in scientific temper. He was impressed by the advancement made by Britain in the field of industry and commerce and had seen from close quarters the kind of impact education was having on Bengal. The Bengal renaissance and its movement against the evil of superstition found mention in the pages of *Orunodoi*. “Not only in the sphere of general education for the masses, but also in relation to the problem of women’s education, *Orunodoi* played a leading role in the first half of the nineteenth century. It echoed the spirit of the Bengal Renaissance in this as in many other respects” (Misra, 1985: 1563)

Gunabhiram Barua also wrote on the universalisation of education and after looking at the equality of education in Calcutta, the ideas of Bengal Renaissance that was sweeping across he argued in favour of women’s education in Assam too. In fact, the *Orunodoi*, was severe in its criticism of social evils that were prevalent among the Hindu population of the state. *Orunodoi*, although published from missionary press did not limit itself to the religious teachings and as seen on various occasions talked on issues of social relevance, like disease and superstition.

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21 The Bengal Renaissance was a reformation movement of nineteenth century Bengal that affected the whole country. Intellectual awakening that revolted against religious orthodoxy and conservatism marked the period.
“Orunodoi also played a pioneering role in arousing social awareness against some of the prominent social evils prevailing in the Assamese society of the day” (Misra, 1985: 1563). One of the important contributions of Orunodoi was its diatribe against the opium consumption in the state. Orunodoi gives interesting accounts of the deeply widespread use of kani as it is known locally, by the people. It accounts for how people would not work and only look out for kani, which would make them lethargic and lazy and was eating the society up. Orunodoi thus touched upon a wide variety of issues of local relevance to the people of Assam. The popularity of the journal only went up and it continued with its publication till 1880. The missionaries took extreme pains so that the journal could reach the interior villages of the state and there are incidences of the journal being read out in schools.

The popularity of Srerampore Missions two journals, Digdarshan and Samachar Darpan in Assam made it seem necessary to have a journal in the language of the natives. That Assam was an important frontier in the expansion plans of the British was evident from the publication of ‘The Bible’ in 1833 from Srerampore in Assamese. The effort of the missionaries in the legitimate use of the language was exemplary. Later on, from the Mission in Sivasagar, the Mission Press published scores of translation of religious texts into Assamese. By virtue of being stationed at Sivasagar, the dialect in use in and around Sivasagar came to be the language used by the press in their publications including the Orunodoi. But on the issue of standardization of language there were nationalists who refute the Missionary model of the language and have tried introducing their own version based on Sanskrit rules. Post-1856 after the departure of Nathan Brown, Assamese language activists started to chart their own course for the language. As Bodhisattva Kar says (2008: 46):

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22 Sivasagar in upper Assam became the center of Missionary publication. The press was set up here and Orunodoi and the other books that were printed used the language in use in and around Sivasagar.
“...when Hem Chandra Barua (Hemchunder Shurma) published his *Asamiya Bhashar Byakaran*, the first grammar that was written in ‘Assamese’. ‘[T]he native language is the entrance to the temple of knowledge,’ wrote Barua in his English preface to the first edition. The entire book made no allusion to any work by the Baptist missionaries, a gesture strikingly different from Dakeal Phookun’s. Indeed, Barua suggestively insisted that there were no ‘proper books’ in Assamese, that ‘by the negligence and ignorance of our people, our language is going through a gradual decay,’ and that ‘this is the first time the grammar of the Assamese language has been made’.

Yet the impact of the missionaries could not be discounted. *Orunodoi* was fashioned after the *Digdarshan* and *Samachar Darshan*, and carried articles on local, national and international issues. It also carried reprints of articles printed in other newspapers published from Bengal that were deemed important for the readers. It received good number of letters as posts which were again published. *Orunodoi* by virtue of its wide variety of articles is an important historical document on the history of the nineteenth century Assam.

*Orunodoi* can thus be termed as the epitome of excellence of the nineteenth century Assamese intellectual mind. If not for the journalistic writings of people such as Gunabhiram Baruah, Hemchandra Baruah etc., and the zeal of Nathan Brown, *Orunodoi* would not have been successful. Any treatise on Assamese history is incomplete without the mention of the contribution of the journal in shaping the identity of the modern Assamese nation. *Orunodoi* is a classic case of vindication of Anderson’s (1983) argument about the formation of a community based on ‘print capitalism’. However thinkers such as Partha Chatterjee have basic doubts on the formulations of the contours of nationalism based on ‘modular forms’ served up by the modern European states. He (1993: 05) argues “History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the post colonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the
Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.”

The Assamese press continued to play an important role in the history of the independence movement. The long history of the press throughout the nineteenth century changed the press from missionary activity to one with a nationalist agenda. “The press had matured in the acid bath of the freedom struggle, and when India became free in 1947, ‘she had already acquired a sophisticated press, experienced in agitation, but also knowledgeable in the arts of the government’ (Smith, 1980: 159 cited in Sonwalkar, 2002: 824). After 1880, when the Orunodoi stopped publication there was a huge void that was hard to fill. Although dailies had not appeared until 1935, a few weeklies that existed along with Orunodoi also stopped after few years. The first daily in Assam was the Dainik Batori that was published from Jorhat. Nilomoni Phukon was the editor, and it started functioning on August 12, 1935. It was distributed mainly in the upper Assam region and carried advertisements for most parts. It closed down in 1937. The next daily that emerged was not until 1946 when the Dainik Asomiya was published under the editorship of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla. It too closed down in 1949. These dailies played an important role during the freedom struggle. Although press in Assam draws its roots from colonial enterprises, the press revolted against the very source of its existence, the colonial powers. “A notable feature of the Indian press was the speed at which the ideas, tools and processes of modernity were introduced, absorbed and spread across the sub-continent, and then deployed against the very source that had introduced them in the first place: the British colonial system” (Sonwalkar, 2002: 824). In 1949 itself Notun Asomiya, another daily was published from Guwahati. Notun Asomiya was helmed at various stages by icons of Assamese journalism viz. Debakanta Baruah and Birinchi Kumar Baruah. This newspaper went
on publishing till 1982. The next line of dailies came only after independence, and the major two newspapers were *Dainik Asom* and *Dainik Janmabhoomi* which started publication in 1965 and 1972 respectively. While *Dainik Asom* came out from Guwahati, *Dainik Janmabhoomi* belonged to Jorhat. These next set of newspapers played an active role in the nationalist movements of Assam post-independence, better known as the Assam Agitation.

### 3.3 Assam Agitation and the Role of Press

Assam has historically been a melting pot of civilizations. The coming of the British into the North East and consequently Assam in the early part of the nineteenth century, and their contribution towards the language and culture of the state was unparalleled.

One of the most important events in the history of Assam was the agitation against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh then known as East Pakistan. And the language issue was at the center of the agitation, popularly known as Assam agitation. The agitationist felt that the Assamese language could soon be wiped out as a result of the large scale migration of Bengali speaking refugees. Most of this fear was historical in nature, as educated Bengalis were preferred by the British to work for them in the tea gardens of Assam. It was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, a freedom fighter from Assam, who first talked of an Assamese ‘nation’ and made language the unifying symbol of its modern national consciousness. He also saw it as a member of the family of nationalities that, today, form the Indian Union. (Guha, 1980: 1701)

The language question was always imperative and played out in the consciousness of the middle class Assamese people. In fact, the micro-
nationalism based on language was a distinct movement which arose in opposition to the cultural domination of the Bengali language. As Sanjib Baruah (1994: 654) points out “Assamese micro-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal.” The fear of the cultural domination in Assamese society persisted for a long period. The neglect at the hands of the British administration, treatment of the region as an extension of the Bengal province was historical flashpoints. “Assamese also tend to view Bengalis as ‘cultural imperialists’ who, if given the opportunity, would attempt to assimilate the Assamese, especially since the Bengali language is seen as more ‘advanced,’ its literary traditions stronger, and its cultural institutions dominating” (Weiner, 1983: 287).

The influence of press in a mass movement such as Assam Agitation was a record of sorts. A very important point to be noted is the idea of language and literacy. Literacy levels were quite low at that time thus what language the people of the state would use for education became a sensitive issue. Many people argue that the whole plot of the agitation was only an urban phenomenon as newspapers had quite limited reach in flaring up the issues in question. Language was at the center of the agitation. “Two key organizations that play a central role in the constitution of Assamese civil society are: the ‘Assam Sahitya Sabha’ and the ‘All Assam Students Union’24. That both organizations call themselves ‘non-political’ is significant in order to understand their location in civil society” (Sanjib Baruah, 1994:665).

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23 Assam Sahitya Sabha is a literary body founded in 1917, that works for Assamese literature and culture. It plays an important role in the national life of the state and remains an important voice in matters of national relevance

24 All Assam Students Union is an important students’ organization that actively participates in matters relating to state interest. It played an active role during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985).
“It was in sessions of the literary organization the Assam Sahitya Sabha that the call for uniting under the banner of language was first sounded. Historically the question of language always remained pertinent for the state of Assam. That this issue was discussed in the forecourts of the annual events of the Sabha was proof enough of the role of the ‘Sabha’ as accumulator of public opinion against the hegemonic forces of Bengali domination. It is interesting to note here that the ‘Sabha’ grew in popularity as it took up the language issue strongly, and its annual sessions held across the state saw lakhs of people visiting it. It was in one such event “while presiding over the annual conference of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927, Tarunram Phukan (1877-1939) said: We, Assamese, are a distinct nationality amongst Indians. Though our language is Sanskrit-based, it is a distinct language. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas! it is otherwise, we are incapable of self-defence today! We are not only dependent, but even a dependent neighbour is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asamiya! recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation” (Guha, 1980: 1703)”

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) was along with the Assam Sahitya Sabha the backbone of the agitation. It took up the cause of Assamese nationalism and represented the aspirations and vision of the young educated middle class Assamese intellectuals. The rise of the AASU could very well be ascribed to its nationalist call rather than political affiliations. Infact, after the agitation the AASU riding on popular support and success of the movement formed a political party which subsequently came to power. AASU was seen by the Assamese people as the upholder of the Assamese language and culture, it organized rallies, took out processions, and made cultural icons out of singers whose song it used to use as rallying call for the agitation. In effect, the Assam Sahitya Sabha was the ideologue and AASU became the organizational backbone for the agitation.
The phase from 1978 to 1985 was also marked by political turmoil for Assam. The Congress which had ruled Assam for major part post independence lost the elections. ‘Janata Dal’ formed the government in Assam in 1978 along with the Communist Part of India. This government lasted for a total of 18 months led by Golap Borbor. The Janata Dal government was initially in favour of screening of the voters and eliminating non-citizens from voting, one of the major demands of the people leading the agitation. The agitationists demanded that the electoral roll preparation be completed before the parliamentary elections of 1980. But the fall of the Janata government in 1979 complicated matters. The new caretaker coalition government with J.N. Hazarika refused to screen voters arguing that many genuine citizens who had come during partition as refugees would be left out as a result, and they too deserved to be Indian citizens.

The Congress and the Communist Party of India were against the screening process of electoral rolls. This crisis was a flash point in the agitation which ultimately led to the boycott of the 1980 parliamentary elections, in which elections to 12 out of the 14 parliamentary constituencies could not be held. One of the important events was the anti-communist stance taken by the pro-agitation groups. They argued that the left in Assam were agents of the Bengalis, and even many Assamese intellectuals were viewed with suspicion during the time. The anti-left stance also resulted in widespread violence across the state, as they were accused of harbouring the Bengali Muslim tenants, who worked on the agricultural lands of landowners. Sivaprasad Barua one of the famous tea planter of his times started in the 1935 Assam's first daily newspaper, the Dainik Batori, with Nilomoni Phukan as its editor. It was in course of an article published in this news-daily in 1937 that Jnananath Bora, a law teacher, held of the threat of Assam's secession from India. This idea of secession again found voice during the agitation when the All
Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP)\textsuperscript{25}, an active organization during the agitation, raised the demand for secession. The non-committal nature of the government to screen the electoral rolls according to their wishes led AAGSP to raise the idea of exploitation of the region of its mineral riches.

From the period of the fall of the Janata government in 1979 till the time the parliamentary elections got over in 1980 and Indira Gandhi took over there was complete lawlessness in the state. The agitation was at its peak during the period, and the press in Assam played a pivotal role during this phase. “Detect, disenfranchise and deport or disperse all ‘foreigners’ these are the main slogans around which the agitation was built up and is still sustained by a united front of several local organizations, with the backing of the local press media” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 843).

Post fall of the Janata government, the volatile situation in Assam continued unabated. “Not just the members of organizations such as AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) who were active during the agitation even government machinery was found to be hand in glove with them. The police, the bureaucracy, the lower echelons of the judiciary and even the Guwahati Broadcasting Station of the AIR all were found colluding to boost the agitation” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 843).

It was during this period that the press took an active role in the agitation. Some of the left leaning publications also had to face the brunt of the agitators; while in general, the press supported the idea of the agitation. “From June 1979 onwards, the press directed its hatred

\textsuperscript{25} All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was an amalgamation of several organization that were fighting for the same cause during Assam Agitation. For better leverage, the Parishad was formed to pressurize the central government to give in to their demands.
campaign almost exclusively against the so called ‘Bangladeshis’” (Guha, 1980: 1706).

It was in July 1978 that in a working committee meeting of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, a resolution was passed expressing concern over the fresh influx of immigrants across the border. The daily *Dainik Asom* flashed the news the next day with a large space for the article. Press’ response was both open and subversive. “The message of violence was carried even in the state’s premier daily newspapers. On the election day of February 16, 1983 when the Brahmaputra Valley was burning, The Assam Tribune of Guwahati, for instance, carried a significant quotation under the caption ‘MESSAGE FOR TODAY’ on top of its editorial column. It was as follows: ‘The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence-Adolf Hitler’. ‘Message for Today’ appeared in the same paper and in the same place, again, on the last day of the elections, i.e., on February 21, in the form of yet another quotation. This time it was from Benito Mussolini: ‘There is a violence that liberates, and a violence that enslaves; there is violence that is moral and a violence that is immoral” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 844).

The attack on the left leaders also spilled into attacks on their institutions. *Kalakhar*, a progressive Assamese weekly came under attack. Its printing press in Guwahati was ransacked and broken up by force by a rally of protesting youths on August 17, 1980. The attacks on the left came under scrutiny “in an editorial article entitled ‘Nationalism: In Whose Interest?’” in its October 1978 issue, the *Sampratik Sainyikii*, a progressive Assamese monthly, viewed the rising chauvinism as an indication that the conspiracy of the national and international vested interests against the growing leftist forces had started yielding its bitter fruits. The editor deplored the complacency and lack of political will on the part of the left to close their ranks and forestall any further worsening of the situation by an alternative programme of left and democratic unity
to combat the danger and, at the same time, to voice the frustrations and injured feelings of the Assamese people (Guha, 1980:1706). The Assam Tribune, on November 8, 1979, published news with the caption: “Fear of Assamese about Outsiders Is Genuine and Real - Says Jyoti Basu.”

The agitation therefore was a result of the direct control of the press by the capitalist class in Assam. And the press enabled itself to be the change that the middle class was looking for. Without the active participation of the press in Assam during the period of 1979-1985, the agitation would not have been successful, the rallying call were given by the press editors most of whom became active members of the protests. Many journalists were activist reporters who helped in opinion formation in favour of the agitation. The Assam Sahitya Sabha and organizations such as those remained only ideologues and tried to remain away from the political process. It was AASU that became politically involved, as seen later it transformed itself to a political party, in organizing the groundswell of support that the agitation needed and, which was dictated by the press instilled by its idea of cultural imperialism.

### 3.4 Post-Agitation Press

Overnight a young class of students, barely out of their teens, basically students had become extremely powerful in the new dispensation. Aided by a media, that was only too eager, to crown new heroes of a society that was bereft of them since the times of Lachit Barphukan\(^{26}\), the Ahom general. The press during the agitation was one of the crucial factors in whipping up public sentiment for the movement. Language which was the

\(^{26}\) Lachit Barphukan was an Ahom general who had fought against the Mughal Army and defeated them a number of times.
corner stone of the whole movement became a tool in the writings of the press.

The Assam Agitation and its aftermath saw the rise of print media with a new vigour. The resurgence was particularly characterized by effusion of Assamese nationalism and the new found confidence of having formulated a treaty with the Indian state that made the pressure groups particularly the AASU, the student’s group at par in negotiating terms with the Indian state. This renewed confidence in the spirit of nationalism was nothing short of historical.

After the signing of the Accord between the AASU led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the state assembly was dissolved to be followed by fresh elections. The Assam Accord was historic, as the central government recognized the demands of the agitationists, like updating of the electoral rolls, setting up of central university, an IIT, and various other demands which would fulfill the economic potential of the state and give the resources at the hands of the people.

The national media went gaga over the achievements of the youth brigade. In 1985 after the elections were held Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a new regional dispensation which was led by the former leaders of the AASU won the elections and formed the new government. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the youngest chief minister in the history of independent India. The expectations from the new government were huge, and the people of Assam had high hopes.

The performance of the new government left many things to be desired and the press’ honeymoon period with the movement leaders got over soon. The AGP came to power twice first from 1985-1990 and again
from 1996-2001 and both terms Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was the Chief Minister.

In an article in The Indian Express, Shekhar Gupta (2001) aptly summarizes the general feeling of media’s disappointment with the new leaders,

“Northeast, particularly Assam, was then a unique story, perhaps the only one in independent history when the national media’s sympathy – even admiration- was with the trouble-makers. In conversation, they were just “boys” …… the first time such a thing happened in our independent history. If you spoke Bengali, you were an infiltrator” and, therefore, in trouble. But what Mahanta, Phukan and others also proved subsequently was that ethnic hatred was negotiable as long as they had political power. They forgot the foreigners’ issue, deported even fewer infiltrators than the Congress governments had done in the past and failed to bring in even the most basic concessions to their impoverished state from the Centre….. Mahanta has run the most ineffectual, unimaginative and worthless government in Assam in a long, long time and chances are that his own voters are now going to make him pay for it.”

Other such excerpts from the press in Assam portray the sense of pessimism and disappointment that had engulfed the state. The press which had so passionately supported the movement leaders was now asking for their removal.

“The Assamese people would realize their mistakes then when not even a single AGP minister would be able to go to the legislative assembly”- Homen Borgohain, *Sutradhar*, June 1990.

“Bhrigu Kumar Phukan is the most corrupt minister in my ministry” was said by his own Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and there appeared rift within the ministry which was reported widely- *Dainik Agradooot*, 3rd April, 1991.

“Mahanta’s worthlessness, weakness and treacherousness created such grave law and order problems that President’s rule had to be imposed” Bhrigu Kmar Phukan, another minister made a public statement against the Chief Minister after the imposition of President’s rule in the state- *Natun Dainik*, 26th March 1991.

“People caste their valuable votes and brought the AGP party to power so as to implement the Assam Accord and detect and deport foreigners (illegal migrants) from Assam. But even after fighting for four years could not gather information of lakhs and lakhs of foreigners. Hence, during AGP’s tenure it was proved that presence of lakhs of foreigners in Assam is not true. That means the AASU-Ganasangram Parishad’s 6 years of agitation was based on false data”. – Hemen Das, *Sutradhar*, May 1990.

The Press in Assam thus, played an extremely crucial role in shaping the contemporary history of Assam. Right from the beginning when *Orunodoi* was published, Press has been the cornerstone of the essence of Assamese identity. It helped formalizing the idea of a modern language system with proper grammar under the guidance of the Missionaries. The standard Assamese language had an intrinsic connection with the dialect that the *Orunodoi* made popular as Anderson (1983: 45) says “the origins of print-languages and the differentiation of status between them were largely unselfconscious processes resulting from the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity”, thus setting the idea in motion of the formation of a modern nation which the Press in Assam so diligently pursued throughout the Independence
movement, the language movement and the Assam agitation. The morphology of the modern nation has language as its central argument and Assam also faced the issue of language until its very recent history.

What started as a print revolution in Assam brought along by the Baptist missionaries in a pre-print era where national boundaries were imagined as traveled distances and national consciousness was absent to the era of print-capitalism as we see in the agitation days, with the birth of a imagined nation, Assam in the twenty first century moved towards the post-print era.

I will analyse the press in Assam in the post-print era, the advent of electronic media and the surge in satellite television in the context of Assam in the next chapter.