

A Critical Study of Assamese Literary Magazines (1846–1985)

Dr. Bipul Deka

Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese Bapujee College, Sarukshetri

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ABSTRACT

The history of Assamese literary magazines begins with the publication of *Orunodoi* in 1846. From that seminal beginning, a succession of literary periodicals played a decisive role in shaping the course of Assamese literature. These magazines were instrumental not only in laying the foundations of modern Assamese literary expression but also in opening avenues through which the people of Assam could engage with the wider intellectual and cultural world. Through their pages, new literary ideas and aesthetic movements emerging in the West found entry into Assamese literature.

Although *Orunodoi* was originally published with the primary objective of propagating Christianity, its contribution to the revival and establishment of the Assamese language remains unparalleled. In the subsequent phase, *Jonaki* ushered Romanticism into Assamese literature, inaugurating a new era of literary sensibility. *Bahi*, edited by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, significantly enriched the tradition of satirical and humorous writing. Likewise, the magazines edited by Padmanath Gohaibaruah made enduring contributions to the growth and refinement of modern Assamese literature. *AsamBandhu*, under the editorship of Gunabhiram Baruah, played a pivotal role in nurturing the spirit of national consciousness and literary creativity.

The evolution and expansion of modern Assamese poetry received remarkable impetus through *Ramdheni*, edited by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. However, *Ramdheni* did not equally foster every branch of Assamese literature; its contribution to the development of the Assamese novel was comparatively limited. This lacuna was effectively addressed by the later magazine *Prakash*, which offered a more comprehensive literary platform. *Prakash* made outstanding contributions to the development of the Assamese novel, the short story, and modern poetry, thereby occupying a distinguished place in the history of Assamese literary periodicals. These magazines have played a significant role in the history of the development and expansion of modern Assamese literature.

Keywords: Assamese, Literary Magazines, *Orunodoi*, *Jonaki*, *Ramdheni*, *Prakash*.

INTRODUCTION

The Assamese language, literature, society, and culture share a deep and inseparable relationship with literary journals. These journals have played a particularly significant role in the evolution of modern Assamese literature. Acknowledging their importance, literary critics have classified the various phases of modern Assamese literature according to the names of influential literary magazines—for instance, the *Arunodoi* era, the *Jonaki* era, the *Awahan* era, and the *Ramdheni* era. Literary journals have served as powerful instruments in the enrichment of the Assamese language, the romantic awakening of Assamese literature, the discussion of diverse social issues, and the documentation of important historical moments.

This research seeks to examine the historical evolution of Assamese literary journals, their contribution to the socio-cultural life of Assam, their role in fostering new literary ideas, and their importance in shaping the sphere of literary criticism and editorial practice.

The study has been conducted primarily through an analytical approach. Its principal sources include notable literary journals published during different periods, while secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and other relevant writings by various authors on the subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several research works have already been undertaken on different aspects of Assamese literary magazine. Among them are: Dipika Devi's "*Unabimsha satikar Orunodoir prabhabmukta gadya: eti addhyayan*"; Pramathesh Bayan's "*Unabimsha satikar Asomiya gadyar dhara (Orunodoir bises ullikhanmaha)*"; Swapnali Bora's "*Unabimsha satikar Asomiya alochani aru sabmadpatra: samajbiksha aru bhasasailir ek addhyayan*"; Tanayjyoti Duwara's "*Unabimsa satikar batori kakat aru alochanir prabandha sahitya: ek samikshatmak addhyayan*"; Satish Chandra Bhattacharya's "*Orunodoi jugar sahityat Asomiya samaj aru sanskriti: eti addhyayan*"; Chandamita Chakravarty's "*Jonaki jugar galpat loka sanskritik upadan: ek bislesanatmak addhyayan*"; Nirada Mahanta's "*Awahan jugar galpa lekhakar sristit nari: eti parjalochana*"; and Hemalata Devi's "*Ramdhenu jugar chute galpatAsomiya samaj sanskritir pratiphalan: eti addhyayan*".

These research works have provided valuable discussions on the contributions of literary magazine to modern Assamese literature. Significantly, however, no research has yet been undertaken on the development of literary magazine in the period following after *Ramdhenu*. This does not imply that no significant works of Assamese literary magazine appeared after it; on the contrary, a considerable number of important literary works were produced during this period.

Through varieties of writings, literary magazine *Prakash* ushered in a new phase in Assamese literary magazine. Munin Bayan, in the edited volume "*Asomar batari kakat alochanir dera basariya itihās*", included an essay entitled "*Prak Ramdhenu aru Ramdhenu paravarti Asomiya sahitya alochani*". Likewise, Sashiprabha Das's essay "*Prakash*", published in "*Katha Guwahati*".

Contribution of Literary Magazine

Orunodai

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, *Orunodoi* sought to acquaint the Assamese people with the wider world, though it could not always persuade them to appreciate that world in its proper perspective. At that time, Bengali literature had already reached a considerable degree of maturity. Yet there is little evidence that Assamese readers were deeply influenced by Bengali literary traditions. Instead, through the publication of *Orunodoi*, a broader intellectual horizon was opened before Assamese society. Although the journal was essentially missionary in purpose, it nevertheless succeeded in introducing its readers to new currents of thought.

The missionaries undoubtedly intended to propagate Christianity, and many of their writings were openly directed toward that end. At times they even denounced Hindu religious beliefs and customs. Nevertheless, despite these sectarian intentions, *Orunodoi* gained widespread acceptance because it also addressed issues of general human concern. Its pages encouraged readers to cultivate the habit of rational inquiry and independent judgment rather than unquestioning acceptance. Human life and its varied experiences gradually became central concerns of Assamese prose, giving it a new depth and vitality.

This orientation toward humanity, though not entirely unprecedented, found its most articulate expression in *Arunodoi*. In this respect, the periodical opened fresh avenues for Assamese literary expression. It was among the first publications to familiarize readers with developments taking place across the world. Reports on distant countries, scientific discoveries, and contemporary social changes broadened the intellectual outlook of Assamese readers. Consequently, Assamese society encountered new ideas and perspectives that had previously remained beyond its horizon.

One of the journal's greatest achievements was its effort to awaken cultural self-awareness among the Assamese people. *Arunodoi* reminded its readers of the richness of Assam's historical and cultural heritage while simultaneously introducing them to the intellectual achievements of the modern West. The journal thus fostered a balanced vision in which respect for one's own tradition coexisted with openness to new knowledge and scientific inquiry.

Equally significant was *Arunodoi*'s contribution to the revival of the Assamese language. During a period when Assamese had been displaced from official use and educational institutions, the journal consistently argued for its rightful recognition. It played a crucial role in restoring confidence among Assamese speakers and strengthening their sense of linguistic identity. In doing so, it became closely associated with the emergence of Assamese nationalism, though its primary objective remained the cultural and intellectual advancement of society rather than political agitation.

It is true that the nationalist spirit reflected in *Arunodoi* did not arise in isolation. Contemporary political developments also influenced its outlook. After the replacement of Assamese by Bengali in schools and administration, the educated Assamese community began to voice strong protests against this injustice. Appeals and petitions demanding the restoration of Assamese gradually gained momentum. Although these efforts did not produce immediate success, they laid the foundation for the eventual reinstatement of Assamese as the language of education and administration.

In retrospect, therefore, *Arunodoi* must be valued not merely as Assam's first newspaper but as the pioneer of modern Assamese intellectual life. By combining historical consciousness with literary expression, rational inquiry with cultural pride, and scientific curiosity with linguistic revival, it opened the gateway through which modern ideas entered Assamese society and permanently transformed its literary and cultural landscape.

Jonaki

The seeds of modern Assamese literature first sprouted in *Orunodoi*. Those tender shoots blossomed into full bloom in *Jonaki*.

Although the foundations of modern literature had already been laid, Assamese readers were, by and large, still unfamiliar with its true nature. It was only after the publication of *Jonaki* that they established a broad and meaningful connection with modern literary thought. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Hemchandra Goswami, and other young students, upon travelling to Calcutta for higher studies, encountered the new currents of modern literature and were deeply inspired. Even neighbouring Bengali literature had already advanced considerably along the path of modernity. Faced with this reality, they resolved to usher Assamese literature into the modern age. It was this determination that gave birth to *Jonaki*.

Within the pages of *Jonaki* found expression the collective aspirations of the Assamese language, literature, culture, and national consciousness.

Herein lies the fundamental difference between *Jonaki* and the journals that preceded it. The Bengal Renaissance, led by visionaries such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, had cast a profound influence upon the Assamese students studying in Calcutta. The ideals of that renaissance extended far beyond Bengal. At its heart lay a new way of looking at society and the nation—replacing inherited conventions with fresh and enlightened perspectives.

For those deeply concerned with the destiny of Assam and its people, the Bengal Renaissance became an inexhaustible source of inspiration. The new linguistic and literary ideas that stirred their minds were rooted in this awakening. It would be unfair to claim that the writers before *Jonaki* lacked patriotic feeling. Yet the founders of *Jonaki* possessed a collective and organized national consciousness that had not existed before. This unified spirit was itself a legacy of the Renaissance. Without such a powerful sense of national purpose, they

could scarcely have dared, in an age when paper was prohibitively expensive, printing was fraught with difficulties, and readers were few, to undertake the arduous task of publishing a literary journal like *Jonaki*.

Awahan

The emergence of *Awahan* was deeply intertwined with the awakening of national consciousness among the Assamese people. Its founding editor, Dr. Dinanath Sharma, envisioned two principal ideals—national consciousness and literary consciousness. Guided by these twin objectives, *Awahan* soon became one of the most widely circulated Assamese journals of its time. Its readers, regardless of age or social background, embraced it with enthusiasm, and the magazine quickly became a cherished presence in Assamese households.

Awahan dedicated itself to cultivating literature while simultaneously awakening the spirit of nationalism among the Assamese people. This commitment was reflected in its active support for the Indian freedom movement. Consequently, it was only natural that the Assamese public, for the first time, became consciously and collectively aware of the ideals of national identity. The publication of *Awahan* had a profound impact on this awakening, and in many ways, the magazine itself was a product of that growing national consciousness.

The progressive outlook of *Awahan* found expression through the writings of its contributors. The nationalist spirit resonated particularly in the poetry of Prasannalal Choudhury, whose verses became a powerful voice of patriotic sentiment. It was largely for this reason that he came to be regarded as *Awahan*'s foremost poet.

Among the magazine's prose writers, Lakshmidhar Sharma emerged as one of the earliest and most distinguished short story writers. However, the progressive ideas championed by *Awahan* were not universally accepted. Both its editor, Dr. Dinanath Sharma, and its chief patron, Nagendranarayan Choudhury, faced criticism from conservative circles. The publication of stories dealing with themes of man–woman relationships particularly provoked controversy. Some critics argued that these stories bore the influence of Freud's theories. They claimed that Freudian psychology had encouraged writers to portray relationships between men and women with excessive freedom. Lakshmidhar Sharma and several other authors responded to these criticisms through their own writings. Such stories became the subject of heated debate. As a result, *Awahan* succeeded in laying a firm foundation for modern Assamese short story. The journal's progressive spirit became a central theme in later discussions of Assamese literature. By harmoniously blending progressive thought, national consciousness, and literary sensibility, the writers associated with *Awahan* ushered in a new era in modern Assamese literature.

Asam-Bandhu, Bijuli, Usha, Ramdhenu, Prakash

Modern literary consciousness and national consciousness played a significant role in shaping the intellectual foundations of *Asam Bandhu*. For the first time, the creative spirit and awareness of the Assamese people found expression through a distinctly modern literary and national consciousness.

In keeping with the editorial vision announced in its inaugural issue, *Asam Bandhu* remained devoted to the promotion of literature, culture, science, and the arts. The first issue appeared in January 1885, and by April 1886 the magazine had brought out its fourteenth issue.

The magazine *Usha*, edited by the eminent intellectual Padmanath Gohain Baruah, emerged as one of the most influential literary periodicals of its time. A few years after the publication of *Bijuli*, Gohain Baruah brought out *Usha*. Although it was conceived in the wake of earlier literary developments, *Usha* represented a profound response to the changing literary consciousness of Assam. The influence of *Bijuli* on *Usha* is unmistakably evident.

Padmanath's editorial vision was deeply rooted in a spirit of national awakening. The magazine featured the writings of distinguished authors such as Radhanath Phukan, Jogendranath Barua, Hemchandra Goswami, Deveshwar Chaliha, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Lakshmikanta Mishra, and several others. Through its pages,

Usha fostered thoughtful discussions on the selfhood and antiquity of the Assamese language, as well as the industriousness and cultural identity of the Assamese people.

Most critics have accorded greater significance to *Bahi*, edited by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, than to *Usha*. One principal reason is that *Bahi* ushered in a new literary environment that had not existed before its appearance. Moreover, after *Bahi*, there was no poet of the stature of Lakshminath Bezbaruah. His powerful expression of the varied experiences of life left a profound imprint upon Assamese literature, enabling *Bahi* to attain an unparalleled position through the creation of enduring literary works.

Nevertheless, *Prakash* enjoyed a wider circulation than *Bahi*. It stands among the foremost periodicals of modern Assamese literature. Equally noteworthy was its social role. *Prakash* remained keenly aware of the problems confronting society, and its editorials addressed these issues with seriousness and discernment.

Just as *Bahi* had introduced a new current into Assamese literature, *Prakash* too brought about meaningful changes in the established literary tradition. These transformations were both timely and constructive. In shaping modern Assamese language and literature into a distinct and mature tradition, *Prakash* played a vital role. One of its most remarkable achievements lay in its broad-minded editorial philosophy: rather than restricting itself to a single ideological standpoint, it welcomed writings inspired by diverse schools of thought. Consequently, *Prakash* became not merely the voice of a particular doctrine but a forum representing a wide spectrum of intellectual opinion, a characteristic that is clearly reflected in contemporary critical discussions.

In addition, literary magazines such as *Monideep*, *Jayanti*, and *Prantik* played a significant role in building a strong foundation for Assamese literature during this period. Through their editorial pages, these magazines made sincere efforts not only to promote literature but also to guide society towards progress. Before the publication of these magazines, Assamese readers had little or no exposure to foreign literature. These magazines were the first to introduce Assamese readers to world literature. Furthermore, they played the most important role in the revival, re-establishment, and development of the Assamese language.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of Assamese magazines was not limited to creating a literary environment. They also played a significant role in awakening the Assamese people in the linguistic, political, cultural, economic, religious, and other spheres of life. As a result of this awareness, the Assamese language became more developed and enriched. Thus, the contribution of Assamese magazines to the growth of the Assamese language was far-reaching.

Before the publication of these magazines, Assamese did not have a universally accepted standard form. People wrote literature and other works mainly in their regional dialects. Even the Vaishnavite poets and writers, including Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, used regional dialects as their medium of expression. Sankardeva, in particular, mostly used the Kamrupi dialect in his writings.

Later, linguistic awareness gradually increased among the Assamese people. Assamese magazines made serious efforts to end the language-based disputes between the Upper Assam and Lower Assam dialects. Although magazines such as *Bahi* and *Asam Bandhu* witnessed conflicts regarding the use of these dialects, those debates eventually helped establish a standard form of the Assamese language.

Assamese magazines were also the first to introduce nationalist ideas among the Assamese people. They played a major role in the movement to restore the status of the Assamese language and to preserve the rich heritage of Assamese literature. In fact, it can be said that Assamese magazines helped shape the Assamese people into a united and organized nation.

From the findings of the present study, the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Although a number of studies have been conducted on Assamese periodicals, no comprehensive research has yet been undertaken to examine their overall impact on Assamese society.
2. Assamese literature, society, culture, and language have all been significantly influenced by these periodicals.
3. These periodicals constitute valuable sources for understanding the socio-political history of Assam.
4. The periodicals played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual and ideological foundations of Assamese society.
5. A systematic analysis of these periodicals can provide important insights into the evolution and development of the Assamese language.

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