

**Debbie Lakshmi Baishya** PhD Scholar, Dept. of English, Delhi University Ph. 8377975409

The twentieth century depicts a paradigm shift in the nature of Assamese print media. In the nineteenth century the Assamese journals were particularly driven by the cause of the Assamese language and its standardisation. This linguistic movement was spearheaded by the Assamese magazine *Jonaki*, published from Calcutta in 1889. The Assamese magazines published post-*Jonaki* were driven towards the formation of Assamese linguistic identity. However, in the twentieth century the engagement of the Assamese news-magazines with the question of Assamese identity became more nuanced and multifaceted. Although, in the earlier decades of the century, the preoccupation with the standardisation of the Assamese language persisted to some extent, it can be observed that the Assamese print media engaged with Assamese political and socio-economic issues in the context of the nation for the larger part of the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, the first half of the twentieth century can be marked for the conceptualisation of Assamese sub-nationalism. The early decades of the twentieth century leading up to the nation's independence further showcased different trends of Assamese regionalism in Assamese print media. Although the core of Assamese regionalism remained linguistic, the emerging twentieth century discourse on Assam's sub-nationalism involved issues that were beyond the language questions. Thus, topics such as improvement of the economic condition of the people of Assam, protection of their economic and land rights amid the rising influx of migrants from then East Bengal, the rights of the tea-garden labourers, the issue of opium along with strong criticism of the government and its policies found prominence in the Assamese news-magazines of the time.

The Assamese press in the twentieth century depicted a broad range of issues. For example, the news-magazines of the first two decades of the twentieth century dealt with the language question of the *Jonaki*-era. Magazines such as *Banhi* (1909) *Assam Bandhab* (1912), *Usha* (1907). *Alochani* (1910) can be placed in this category which were involved in the debate regarding the standardisation of the Assamese language. By the end of the 1920s news-papers and magazines appeared in Assamese which dedicatedly served the cause of Swaraj. This was a direct result of the 1920 session of the Assam Association held in Gauhati which effectively marked the beginning of Assam's participation in the national movement. Immediately following this was Gandhi's first visit to Assam in 1921 which further accelerated the Assamese middle-class's patriotism towards the nation. (Baruah 695) This was reflected in newspapers such as Chandra Kumar Agarwala's *Asamiya* (1918) and magazines such as Ambikagiri Raychaudhuri's *Chetona* (1919) which passionately advocated for Gandhi's nationalistic imagination and aspirations. The press in this category was also crucial in giving rise to the Assamese middle-class' imagination towards Assam's sub-nationalist aspirations. Another category of Assamese news-magazines was especially crucial in Assamese literary history as they introduced new trends and literary forms in Assamese literature, be it in terms of the novel, short-story, drama, general prose or poetry. The magazines *The Awahon* and *Jayanti* published in 1929 and 1937 respectively were the most noteworthy in this regard. *Jayanti* introduced a new age in Assamese literary history which was primarily defined by new forms in Assamese poetry. Its editor Raghunath Choudhary was a key figure in the world of Assamese poetry. *The Awahon* particularly contributed to the growth of the short story in Assamese literature which were notable for their inherent realism. Both the magazines were representative of the changing socio-political environment of Assam, of the nation and of the world in general. They marked the rise of a socially and politically aware Assamese reading class. Especially *The Awahon* engaged with issues such as the polarising colonial politics in the nation, the advent of the fascist regime in Germany, the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and the question of regional sentiment among the Assamese middle class. This paper, through an evaluation of *The Awahon*, aims to study how the magazine engaged with the question of Assamese regional identity. The paper seeks to establish that as opposed to the twentieth-century mainstream Assamese regionalism, the regional sentiment expressed in *The Awahon*, entailed the trope of amalgamation and assimilation that was at

the core of the society and polity of the pre-colonial Brahmaputra Valley in particular and Assam in general.

*The Awahon* was published from Lakshmbilash's press (Majumdar 0.21) from Calcutta in 1929 and was edited by Dinanath Sarma. (Sharma 196) The zamindar of Lakhipur tea estate Nagendra Narayan Chowdhury was the proprietor of the magazine. During the Goalpara session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927 when a newly published Bengali journal *Prantabashi*, financed by the zamindar of Gauripur, made derogatory comments on Assamese language and literature, the need for a "high-class journal comparable to current Bengali journals like *Masik Basumati*, *Bharatbarsha* and *Prabasi*" was felt to re-assert the status of the Assamese language and literature. (196-197) This particular session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha of which *The Awahon* was a product was held amidst immense tension between the Assamese and Bengali speaking people of Assam. This political and linguistic anxiety primarily centred around the demand for reunion of the Sylhet, Goalpara and Cachar districts of Assam with Bengal. Preceding this, the Dhubri session of the Sahitya Sabha was held in 1926 amidst similar political tensions where Bengali zamindars serving under the colonial rule demanded introduction of Bengali language in the schools of the region. (Bhuyan and De 296) The Dhubri session was also noteworthy for the inception of the first Assamese magazine, *Ghar Jeuti* in 1927. The Goalpara session was held amidst severe unrest as Prabhatchandra Baruah, who was one of the chief spokespersons for the separation of Goalpara from Assam, attempted to mobilise the people of the neighbouring regions of Goalpara to prevent the Sahitya Sabha session from taking place. Simultaneously, Baruah and his group also launched a campaign for the introduction of Bengali in the offices and educational institutions of the Goalpara district and to encourage the masses to boycott the literary organisation's meetings. (297) However, with protection from the government, when the Goalpara session of Sahitya Sabha did take place in 1927, among various other resolutions pertaining to Assamese language and Assamese identity, the resolutions towards "retention of Goalpara in Assam, (and) introduction of Assamese in the schools and courts". (Ibid) were also adopted. In the same session the need for a magazine like *The Awahon* was realised which would not only be able to stand at par with the Bengali magazines in terms of quality and appearance, but would also be able to represent the cause of Assam and the Assamese people. Considering the context of its inception, it is not surprising, therefore, that the magazine extensively discussed on the Assam's regionalism and the prospect of the people of Assam in the context of the nation and of Assam's contemporary political turmoil. *The Awahon's* approach to Assam's regionalism was, however, an all-inclusive one. The magazine's vision for Assamese identity represented the amalgamation of all the ethnic groups and cultures of the historical greater-Assam.

*The Awahon* was successfully able to assert its position in the history of Assamese print media as one of the longest running magazines with a wide readership. For example, in terms of its print quality it was able to excel all other magazines of the past in the state. In terms of readership and contributors the magazine did not face any dearth as was attested by its wide circulation of its voluminous issues. It was published with aesthetic covers. Moreover, it had pictures of the leaders of the ongoing freedom movement and of prominent people across the world. (Majumdar 0.11) Every issue of the magazine also included coloured paintings by painters from Assam and elsewhere. The paintings published here reflected the pan-Indian nature of *The Awahon* which can also be observed in the magazine's engagement with the question of the nation. The magazine also published many pages of advertisements, thereby making it a successful business venture as well. many photo-essays were published in the magazine as well, probably making it one the earliest Assamese magazines in this regard.

Interestingly enough, *The Awahon* witnessed its glorious period of twenty years while it was being published from Calcutta from 1929 to 1948. In 1948 when the editor Sharma met the then chief minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, the printing work for the upcoming census was promised to Sharma by Bordoloi. Following this Sharma shifted the Awahon Press from Calcutta to Gauhati. However, Bordoloi passed away soon after and the promise made to Sharma could never be fulfilled. Sharma sold the press to the Indian Communist Party and left for Calcutta from where the magazine was again published from 1953 onwards. From 1963 after Sharma's relocation to Gauhati the magazine

continued to be published sparsely till 1974. In 1985, Dilip Sharma, his son again began publishing the magazine which continued irregularly till 1991. (Majumdar 0.18)

*The Awahon* was remarkable for its engagement with the women's question in Assam following the legacy of *Ghar Jeuti* (1927-1931) the first Assamese women's magazine. The magazine's discourse on national and local women's movement was evident in its regular women-centric sections. Prior to *The Awahon*, *Ghar Jeuti* religiously published news of the nationwide women's movements and remarkable achievements of women leaders across the world. Besides *Ghar Jeuti* was also pioneer in engaging with the discourse of the ongoing freedom movement, thereby, discarding the erstwhile apolitical nature of Assamese magazines. Following this, *The Awahon* presented women writers with a platform which was much needed to fill the void left by *Ghar Jeuti*. It regularly published news on the women's movement across the world and created dialogue on issues such as importance of women's education, issues of child marriage and the new rules prohibiting it. Furthermore, it regularly reported on the activities and the presidential addresses of the *Assam Mahila Samiti* of which *Ghar Jeuti* was the earlier unofficial mouthpiece. Like *Ghar Jeuti*'s section "*Samoyik Jagat*" ["Current World"] *The Awahon* also maintained a regular section called "*Biswa Prabah*" ["World Flow"], which dealt with information on noteworthy people from around the world. Some such accounts that were published in the first year of the magazine were –the development of women's movement in Russia in the first issue; the Japanese women and their contribution towards the development of the nation titled "*Jati gathanat Japanee Nari*" in the second issue; an article on Joan of Arc titled, "*Biplabi Naari*" in the third issue; on Madam N.P. of Yugoslavia who was a political spy whom the author called "*Neelnayana Sundari*" in the fourth issue and on a Hungarian woman who visited India three years prior to 1929 in the sixth issue. In the section "*Mahilar Jagat*" ["Women's World"], *The Awahon* published black and white photographs of prominent women across the world along with news related to women's movements and their achievements.

The expression of the literary and political sentiment in *The Awahon* was different from the established norm in the Assamese print media as the literature of *The Awahon* was inspired by the progressive and socialist attitude of the time. Although the magazine did not directly refer to the ongoing Progressive Writers Movement of the time, its sympathy for the downtrodden and its particular interest in the rising temperament of socialism, hint at the influence of the PWA on *The Awahon*'s writers. The Assamese middle-class was influenced by the socialist milieu of the post-war Assam which was largely governed by sympathy for the tea garden labourers and the Assamese peasant class. According to Bhuyan and De, "During the interim period of the two great world wars (1919-1939) a sense of class consciousness emerged amongst the wage-earning and peasant population of Assam which was infused mainly by the Socialist and Communist groups. As a result, independent class organisation came into being to focus and resist exploitation of the labourers." (Bhuyan and De 235) The political views expressed in *The Awahon* was dominated by such sentiments to a great extent. The magazine can also be assumed to have been inspired by the formation of the Communist Party of India in 1927, following which some students from Cotton College, Gauhati were recorded to have contacted the Bengal Peasant's and Worker's Party. As a result, they were introduced to literature of similar ideology and were able to propagate Marxist ideology among the intellectual class of Assam. (246) As a product of this period of socialist consciousness, *The Awahon*, diligently published news and thoughtful articles on Soviet Socialism, the Revolution and its worldwide effect in general. Further, the general aim of the Progressive Writers Association for literature to depict the realistic seems to have influenced the literature of *The Awahon* especially the short stories. In this regard the stories of Tirthanath Goswami, Mahi Chandra Bora, Haliram Deka and Lakshminath Phukan were noteworthy who depicted the hypocrisy of the middle class and wrote satirical accounts of the middle-class's aspiration towards climbing the social ladder. (Sharma 209) Besides, depiction of the Assamese peasant class often seemed to have found prominence in these short stories. Perhaps these writers were influenced by Premchand's conviction that "...literature should become the medium to send strong messages across and use it as a tool to initiate action..." (Akhtar and Zaidi 149)

This inherent politics of *The Awahon* can be attributed to factors such as the aftermath of the First World War, The Bolshevik Revolution which inspired many nations to fight for their freedom,

India's own movement for freedom, especially Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, the Assamese middle class's active involvement with the Congress, the successful forty sixth session of All India National Congress at Pandu in Guwahati in 1926 which further mobilised the Assamese people towards freedom and the anticipation of the Civil Disobedience Movement. (Majumdar 0.11) *The Awahon* was a political product of these factors. All these elements, combined together, gave rise to a society which was modern in its outlook. The publication and popularity of *The Awahon* exemplified the arrival of this new age in Assamese literature and a new political sensibility in a section of the Assamese middle class. According to Upendranath Sharma, *The Awahon* displayed "the aspirations of the writers of the post-*Jonaki* era" (Sharma 196) which reflected the general sentiment of the transitioning period between the two World Wars (ibid) in its politics and literature. Thus, the magazine maintained a "progressive and nationalistic outlook". (198) In the same spirit *The Awahon* sought to represent the 'new age' in the nation as was proclaimed in the earliest editorial. According to this initial introduction of the magazine in the first issue of the first year the primary aim of this new age was considered to be service to the nation and development of the region the key to which was literature. Dinanath Sharma, the editor, held that literature was the reflection of a community's culture. Invoking writers such as Tolstoy, Russel, Gorky the editorial maintained that the core of all the revolutionary developments across the world were literature by great people. Similarly, Sharma expressed that the primary aim of *The Awahon* was service towards the region through literature. (*Awahon*, Vol. 1, 4-5)

The literature of *The Awahon* further seemed to have been influenced by the post-war literary modernism to some extent. For example, following the revival of the British drama after the first World War, the magazine, for example, published an Assamese prose adaptation of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as *Tarun-Kanchan* by Nabin Chandra Bordoloi. According to critics like Jon Kott this play, although one of Shakespeare's less popular ones was revived in the post-war period due to its modern attributes. (Sharma 198) The effect of literary modernism was also evident as another writer Lakheswar Sharma wrote on the subconscious state of the human mind. He talked about concepts such as the conscious, the unconscious and the sub-conscious, Freudian interior etc. (Majumdar 20-25) However, it will be wrong to assume that *Awahon* completely abandoned the romanticism of the *Jonaki*-age of Assamese literature. In fact, the romantic poets of Assamese literature like Raghunath Choudhary, Jatindranath Dowerah, Ganesh Gogoi – the Keats of Assamese poetry (Sharma 200), Dev Kanta Barooah – the "poet of love" and who introduced Browning's dramatic monologue into Assamese poetry (202), and Parbati Prasad Baruah a famous song writer and a singer himself continued to contribute immensely to the poetry of *The Awahon*.

*The Awahon's* politics for Assamese linguistic identity appeared to be more inclusive than the prevalent norm of the time. The magazine did not partake in the debate around the standardisation of the Assamese language. By the time of its publication, the debate around the standardisation of the language was settled to a great extent as one can see the standardised version of the language already in circulation in the magazines of the time. For the same reason it can be observed that there were not many conversations around the language-issue in the magazines of the twentieth century beginning from the second decade. Though *The Awahon* did not counter the established standard language by the literature of the *Jonaki*-era, its linguistic politics was different from the latter. For example, Nagendra Narayan Chowdhury, the proprietor of the magazine and a renowned story-writer depicted the rural society of the Goalpara district in particular and lower Assam in general. As a zamindar himself he was familiar with the conditions of the peasant class of the villages of Goalpara district which found expression in his stories. (Sharma 205) Many of these stories were written in the local dialect of the Goalpara region, which bore the influence of both Assamese and Bengali language due to the geographic location of the region and its social history. When Chowdhury wrote in standardised Assamese, he was criticised of having shunned his mother tongue (the dialect of Goalpara). Many assumed that he wrote in the standardised Assamese language because of his second marriage to Prafullabala who was from the Ahom royal family. However, Chowdhury learnt the standard Assamese language much later in his life as in the schools of Goalpara he was taught Bengali due to the close cultural, historical and geographical affinity of the region to Bengal. It was eventually his



own realisation that “the language of the towns of Goalpara district was not very different from the language spoken in other Assamese towns with dialectical variations” (Sharma 206) This encouraged Chowdhury to give due credit to a dialectical variety of the now standardised Assamese language in the magazine. In this context, Sharma has commented that

In his writings Nagendra Narayan Chowdhury used words current in the district of Goalpara; it was his desire that the standard literary Assamese language should be enriched with as many words from the various districts as possible. The writer possessed of a remarkable insight, came to realise that our language and literature cannot be enriched without such interactions. His love for the language of Goalpara was equal to his love for standard Assamese. (207)

*The Awahon* represented the heterogeneous nature of the Assamese society and its multi ethnic linguistic history in terms of content as well. In the magazines of the *Jonaki* era where the primary concern was standardisation of the language, the discourse of the other ethnic groups of the Brahmaputra Valley were overlooked although these groups have been part of the Valley preceding the arrival of the Ahoms. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, one of the primary formulators of the standardised Assamese language and the editor of the magazine *Banhi* had undermined the language and the culture of these ethnic groups under the pretext of their “uncivilised” status. Contrary to this *The Awahon* published historical accounts of these groups from the beginning. Chandraprabha Saikiani’s presidential address at the Kachari Women’s Conference which was published in the first year of *Awahon* was an important case in point. Her account provided an analysis of the Assamese society which primarily focused on the ethnic groups of Assam, particularly of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the address she charted out plans and programmes for the welfare of the women of these communities which are relevant even today.

*The Awahon*’s regionalism, thus, entailed an all-embracing imagination which sought to be representative of the cultural aspirations of the different ethnic groups of Assam. However, the cause of Assamese regionalism did not deter the writers of the magazine from engaging with the larger question of the nation. The editor Dinanath Sharma and the proprietor Nagendra Narayan Choudhury both were believers in Gandhi and were involved in Assam’s participation in the freedom movement. Sharma was a true Gandhian himself. Following Gandhi, he went to nearby villages of his home town and encouraged the women to come together to fight for the nation’s freedom. The proprietor of the magazine Nagendra Narayan Choudhury being a zamindar could not openly encourage people towards the Swadeshi Movement. So, he encouraged people towards the Movement through agents. Thus, following the legacy of *Ghar Jeuti* and responding to the call of the hour the editorials aimed to focus on the ongoing nationalist movement and the importance of Gandhi’s ideals of non-violence in it. However, the magazine did not adhere to Gandhi’s ideals towards the aim of Assam’s regional politics, but solely for the freedom of the nation. Thus, the editor in the fourth issue of the first year of *The Awahon*, while flagging the importance of Gandhi’s politics in attaining freedom, proclaimed that the freedom movement needed to be based on the sole ideals of nationalism. He further stressed that on “the sands of regionalism” it was impossible to create the foundation of a permanent Indian nationalism. (*The Awahon*, Vol 1., 333)

In spite of the above statement by the editor, it will be, however, wrong to presume that *The Awahon* did not adhere to the brewing notion of Assamese regionalism or Assamese identity. As discussed above, the magazine was published and circulated at a time when politically Assam was in the midst of severe unrest which resulted in the Assamese middle class’s anxiety over the existence of Assam and Assamese identity in the larger map of the nation. After Assam’s separation from the Bengal province in 1874 Goalpara and Sylhet were transferred to Assam which caused dissatisfaction among both the Assamese and Bengali people from the then larger Assam. Whereas the Bengalis living in these areas claimed for the return of these two districts to Bengal under the pretext of their lack of links and affiliation to Assam and the Assamese speaking people, for the Assamese middle class the issue pertained to Assam’s cultural, linguistic and historic past and preserving Assam’s identity. The Assamese middle-class of the Brahmaputra Valley were not keen on Sylhet being a part of Assam, as it was considered to be an economically deficit region and therefore, a liability. (Bhuyan and De 282) The separation of Sylhet from Assam became a pressing issue in the Assamese press especially post-

1930 in the midst of the rising influx of the migrants from East Bengal which to the middle-class Assamese was a threat to the survival of Assamese identity and language. (285) To maintain the Assamese linguistic identity of the Valley it was suggested by the Assamese middle-class that the Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley should embrace the Assamese language and cultural identity. In 1931, in the first issue of the third year of *The Awahon*, Jadunath Sharma raised similar concerns. Likewise, the editorials in the subsequent years too repeatedly addressed the pressing need of retention of Assam's cultural heritage in the face of the seeming threats.

Thus, *The Awahon* launched a parallel movement for a 'greater Assam' and against Sylhet being a part of Assam. In this version of 'greater Assam' the districts of Kochbehar, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Mymensingh were expected to be reunited with Assam in the light of the historical Assamese-ness of the inhabitants of these regions, which according, to the writers, was evident in their languages, culture and religious beliefs. They even suggested that if these districts continued to stay with Bengal their development will be permanently hampered. (*The Awahon*, Vol. 5, 36-37) *The Awahon* reported in the first issue of the third year that the Assam Mahila Samiti took initiatives towards similar goals. The magazine also made it clear that the claim towards the return of the above districts to Assam was not a reaction to the ongoing movement in Bengal for the return of Sylhet, Goalpara and the Cachar districts to the region, but it was a claim towards Assam's rightful lands. (Ibid) *The Awahon* also reported of similar claims that were made in the thirteenth session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Sivasagar. (365-366) The Assamese middle-class' concerns regarding the very existence of the Assamese identity in the political upheaval of the time had thoroughly been expressed in an article published in the first issue of the fourth year of the magazine, titled, "Asamiya Jati Tisthibone?" ["Will the Assamese Community Survive?"] written by Gyananath Borah. (*The Awahon*, vol. 7 16-21) The magazine was particularly bothered by the claim of a section of Bengali people from Goalpara for reunion of Goalpara with Bengal. *The Awahon* writers were vocal about the historical and cultural affinity of Goalpara to the larger Assam. The editor and the proprietor also often wrote about the ethnic groups of the region who generally spoke Assamese. This was probably another reason why Choudhury also wrote in the linguistic variety of Goalpara and claimed at several instances how the standardised Assamese and the linguistic variety of Goalpara were not very different from each other. Similarly, in order to highlight the cultural affinity of Cachar to Assam, there were regular articles on the different groups of people historically inhabiting these regions.

In conclusion it can be suggested that *The Awahon*'s imagination towards a 'greater Assam', especially in the pre-Independence era, formulated the magazine's regionalism for Assam, which was different from the mainstream Assamese regionalism. The mainstream Assamese regionalism evolved in the post-Independence era into a narrow regional sentiment focusing primarily on the caste-Hindu Assamese middle-class. *The Awahon*'s regionalism, however, pertained to embracing the innate heterogeneity of the state with a conscious focus on the overall development of the common masses. Towards this goal the magazine's primary tool was literature at its finest sensibility.

#### Works Cited

- Majumdar, Paramananda. *The Awahon*, Vol. I. Publications Board Assam, 2015.
- , *The Awahon* Vol. V. Publications Board Assam, 2016.
- , *The Awahon* Vol. VII. Publications Board Assam, 2016.
- Sarma, Upendranath. "Contribution of *The Awahon*" *150 Years of Journalism in Assam*, Media Trust, Assam, 2007
- Akhtar, Javed and Humayun Zafar Zaidi. "Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu Literature", *Indian Literature*. July-August 2006. vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 140-162.
- Baruah, Sagar, "Impact of Khadi on the National Movement", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Part One: Millennium (2000-2001)*. vol. 61, pp. 695-703.