



## **Contributions of *Banhi* Towards Assamese Mass Media**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

*Banhi*, published under the editorship of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, opened up newer horizons within the Assamese populace. *Banhi* was able to lead from the forefront the contemporary socio-cultural as well as literary and journalistic aspects of the Assamese populace of that time. Through *Banhi* Bezbaroa opened up a new avenue for healthy journalism. Through the editorials of *Banhi* Bezbaroa tried to portray a variety of ideas. Starting from the field of language and literature, Bezbaroa, through these editorials, tried to make a critical and analytical study of all other fields like religion, society, politics, culture, science etc. The editorials of *Banhi* were the results of Bezbaroa's deep studies that were inclined towards progressive thinking. Bezbaroa also happens to be the first Assamese cartoonist. Through *Banhi* he created a history of cartoons in the Assamese mass media. *Banhi* also played a significant role in the direction of 'Opinion Writing'. Articles on various topics were published in *Banhi* which were written by Bezbaroa himself and several other writers as well. Bezbaroa wrote satirical essays in *Banhi* which were known as 'Kripabori' writings. And he also included cartoons in these writings. The Letters to the Editor of *Banhi* also have attained a special status. Apart from all these, *Banhi* also included poems, essays, short-stories etc. Through all these writings and genres, *Banhi* has made very valuable contributions to the Assamese mass media. *Banhi*, therefore, is a worth mentioning magazine of the Assamese mass media.

**Keywords:** : *Bezbaroa, Banhi, Mass Media, Editorials, Opinion.*

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### **I. Introduction:**

*Banhi*, published under the editorship of Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), happens to be an important magazine in the history of Assamese mass media as it opened up newer horizons within the Assamese populace. *Banhi* was



published in December of 1909 in the premises of ‘Assam-Bengal Stores’ situated at 2 no. Lalbazar in Calcutta. It was printed at ‘Salkiya Printing Works’ and the total number of pages was 32. The motto of *Banhi* was ‘Nahi Gyaneno Sadrisong Pabitraniho Bidyatey’. All the writings in the first edition were done by Bezbaroa himself. It was published on a monthly basis. Lakshminath Bezbaroa established himself as a magazine editor and a journalist with the publication of *Banhi*. Although Bezbaroa was associated with *Jonaki* for a few years before *Banhi*, his achievements as an editor were brought to the limelight only through the publication of *Banhi*. The editor-journalist of *Banhi*, Bezbaroa was a multi-talented individual. He was at the same time a poet, dramatist, novelist, biographical writer, short-story writer, humorist as well as a critic. Lakshminath Bezbaroa dedicated his entire life to the study of literature and tried to bring in a new wave into the Assamese literature. Along with this, he enriched the vast store-house of literature through his various contributions. Through the magazine *Banhi*, Bezbaroa hinted at a sense of new consciousness in the history of Assamese magazines. *Banhi* was published under the editorship of Bezbaroa upto the year 1934. Later in the successive years, *Banhi* was continued to be published under the editorship of Bezbaroa’s nephew Madhab Chandra Bezbaroa. Thus, *Banhi* played a significant role towards the development of Assamese language, literature and journalism as well.

## **II. Objectives of the Study:**

The main objectives of this study are-

1. To findout the Importance of Banhi in the healthy journalism of Assam.
2. To understand the role of the Banhi in the direction of ‘Opinion Writing’.
3. To know the types of articles published in the Banhi.



### III. Methodology:

The present study is based on data collected from secondary sources like journals, books and articles published in different times.

### IV. Result and Discussion:

There is a special incident behind the publication of *Banhi*. Bezbaroa wrote an article titled 'Anglo-Indian' in *Usha* published under the editorship of Padmanath Gohainbaruah. Considering the article to be written against the British administration, the government lodged a complaint against the editor and publisher. Editor Padmanath Gohainbaruah in a clarification wrote that the article of Bezbaroa was published by mistake and no such articles would be published in future in *Usha*. As such the well-wishers of Bezbaroa were displeased and due to their tremendous pressures Bezbaroa decided to publish *Banhi*.

Through *Banhi* Bezbaroa opened up a new avenue for healthy journalism. He did not even care the least to engage in war with the contemporary magazines. He raised his voice against *Usha* for its numerous misuse and mistakes of language and spellings. In case of the magazine *Prodipika*, Bezbaroa's *Banhi* engaged in a war of words centering on Sankardev and the religious teachings of Sankardev. But in both the cases *Banhi* emerged victorious. Through such works Bezbaroa has mirrored the issue of healthy journalism. Endless criticism of religion and other such spheres is the best example of a journalistic approach that can be considered healthy and it is depicted very clearly in *Banhi*.

*Banhi* also gave importance to the opinion of the masses which also is an important characteristic of healthy journalism. In the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Banhi* a woman with a cloth tied around her breast, was shown playing the flute on the



cover page. Seeing this, the Sattradhikar of the Auniati Satra, Kamalchandra Goswami through poetry made Bezbaroa know that it could never be right in making Radha play the flute. Bezbaroa without raising his voice included the poem in *Banhi*. Showing respect to Goswami, Bezbaroa removed the picture from the cover page. Such an act by Bezbaroa can be seen as the best example of healthy journalism. (Deka, Preface).

As a journalist Bezbaroa fought against all the social injustices and evils. Apart from essays dealing with inequalities and injustices of the society published in *Banhi*, Bezbaroa also wrote satirical plays.

Bezbaroa also happens to be the first Assamese cartoonist. Through *Banhi* he created a history of cartoons in the Assamese mass media. The word 'cartoon' is derived from the Italian word 'cartone' and Dutch word 'karton'. Cartoon was popularized by the magazine 'Punch' of England. In India the art of cartoon was introduced by K. Shankar Pillai. Later this art was taken forward by R. K. Lakshman.

Cartoon is a very popular feature in journalism as it satirically illustrates a burning topic. Topics that cannot be described with the help of many words can be made clear and intelligible through some lines and sketches. Thus, cartoons play a pivotal role in social and political criticism. Cartoons can also bring a change to the society.

Bezbaroa having knowledge in the English literature tried working for the welfare of the society through cartoons. He satirically pointed out the drawbacks and weaknesses of the Assamese people and the society through these cartoons and also included them in *Banhi*. He gave a special status to the art of cartoons through the writings associated with 'Kripabori'. Bezbaroa championed the



various responsibilities of the society and also drew a political cartoon titled 'Votor Upodrob'. Bezbaroa made a very precious contribution to the Assamese mass media by his introduction of cartoons. Now-a-days cartoons are an inseparable part of every newspaper or magazine. The cartoons published in *Banhi* are an invaluable resource for the Assamese mass media.

*Banhi* also played a significant role in the direction of 'Opinion Writing'. The important parts of opinion (edit page) are leader, leads, side articles, middle etc. All these parts are published in a beautiful fashion in *Banhi*. The editorial is called as the 'leader'. The editor takes extra care about the content of the editorials. This is because the editorial personifies the views of the paper on matters of importance. The policy of a newspaper or magazine is reflected through the editorial positions on significant affairs of the society. The editorials of *Banhi* brought into focus the important matters of the society. The problems of the society and the solutions to the problems were published in the editorials. Bezbaroa published the editorials by paying special attention to them. The editorials of *Banhi* have a special significance in the history of Assamese mass media. Bezbaroa tried to portray a variety of ideas. Starting from the field of language and literature, Bezbaroa, through these editorials, tried to make a critical and analytical study of all other fields like religion, society, politics, culture, science etc. Through *Banhi* Lakshminath Bezbaroa tried to inculcate something new in the world of Assamese journalism. *Banhi* was able to lead from the forefront in the contemporary socio-cultural as well as literary and journalistic aspects of the Assamese populace of that time.

The editorials of *Banhi* were the results of Bezbaroa's deep studies that were inclined towards progressive thinking. His perspectives in the editorials were distinct. Apart from language, literature and culture everything from



religion, society, science and arts found its place among the topics of discussion in the editorials. Bezbaroa wrote these editorials with a separate viewpoint from that of his contemporary editors of various magazines. The writings in these editorials were progressive in nature. Special thrust to the welfare of the society was also given in the editorials. He tried to justify his discussions from a scientific standpoint. A certain topic was taken into account and was then analyzed critically by journalist Bezbaroa in order to establish a relationship with the readers. Editor Bezbaroa's deep thinking and knowledge of the topics in the editorials can be seen. While analyzing any topic his stance was impartial; and use of logical views characterizes the editorials. He never discussed any topic without using logic. He analysed every topic very clearly so that the readers could perceive the underlying significance in them. He created the editorials in simple and lucid language so that readers of any quality could read and understand them. We can classify the subject matter of the editorials of *Banhi* into 12 divisions: Editorials related to Media, Editorials related to Literature, Editorials related to Language, Editorials related to Social Values, Editorials related to Health, Editorials related to Science, Editorials related to Religion, Editorials related to Indian Philosophy, Editorials related to Politics, Editorials related to International Issues, Editorials related to Education and Editorials related to Contemporary Issues.

An elaborate classification and a deep sense of thinking can be perceived in the editorials that were primarily written on the above mentioned subject-matters. The editorials were a manifestation of the contemporary consciousness. Bezbaroa adopted an impartial viewpoint in the editorials. He was resolute in providing static solutions. An approach of journalism that was devoted to the truth was also very evident in the editorials. He discussed the most important



matters of the society rather than spicing up the materials with valueless discussions. He emerged in the editorials as a critic who raised his voice against any unlawful activities within the society. We can also see Bezbaroa as a satirist whenever necessity arises in the editorials.

The topics included almost everything varying from contemporary society, language, literature, religion, science and international politics. It seems that Bezbaroa gave place to those topics that had an importance on the contemporary society of that time. The chief characteristic of Bezbaroa's editorials was contemporary consciousness and it is evident in most of the editorials of *Banhi*. He created the editorials by keeping in mind the social issues, religious and political affairs, health etc. of his time.

Bezbaroa was very concerned about health. He wrote the 2<sup>nd</sup> editorial of *Banhi* on health related issues. Speaking about common cold he said that it can happen to anyone at any time and thus wrote the editorial by discussing the symptoms, reasons and relief methods of common cold. During the time of Bezbaroa cholera, plague, malaria etc took the form of epidemic diseases. Thus, he alerted the masses about these diseases and elaborated on the precautions to be taken if affected through the editorial. According to the readers such alertness spread by Bezbaroa is very significant.

In *Banhi*, editorials related to religion was mostly written. During that time much discrimination related to religion arose in the society and especially regarding the religious teachings of Sankardev. A certain class of people made false facts about Sankardev and tried to establish the fact that Sankardev was the disciple of Saitanyadev and Damodar Dev. Bezbaroa tried to pacify the debates through proper evidences and logical arguments and tried to establish a stable



religious sentiment among the people. He once again established the greatness and importance of Sankardev. For such reasons he also engaged in a war of letters with *Prodopika*. He also created editorials based on the Indian Philosophy of 'Atma', 'Ishwar', 'Brahma', 'Veda', 'Krishna'. Bezbaroa tried to give an original picture of Indian Philosophy to the readers. A total of 35 editorials related to religion and Indian Philosophy have been published in *Banhi*.

Many editorials related to language and literature have also been published. The various spheres of literature have been discussed. Reviews of many books along with their pros and cons are pointed out. He forwarded a very new sphere i.e. book review. He also severely criticized the writers who were not able to use language properly while writing in the editorials related to language. He was always ready for the progress and development of native language and also in safeguarding it. We can see the beauty of the Assamese language in the editorials related to language. The present status of the Assamese language therefore can be said to have taken shape due to the active role taken by Bezbaroa.

In the editorials related to mass media Bezbaroa has tried to point out the avenues for the successful circulation of a newspaper or magazine and also in the establishment of the role of mass media in the society. He has also criticized *Prodipika* for its discriminatory views and has welcomed the first Assamese women magazine *Ghor Jeuti*.

In the editorials related to social values societal role of the masses is involved. While creating editorials about alcohol consumption as a social evil, Bezbaroa has warned the masses to refrain themselves from consuming alcohol. He also called for the creation of a classless society and the abolition of



discriminations of any kind either in the name of religion or based on language. He also called the new generation for the creation of positive values as well as a healthy religious and cultural atmosphere.

It is a very significant fact that Bezbaroa also gave place to science in the editorials. The creation of a scientific temperament in the society was perhaps the main intention of Bezbaroa. In the only editorial related to science he discussed aspects of astronomy.

Politics and international issues found a place in the editorials of *Banhi*. India's struggle for independence, Mahatma Gandhi, National Congress, communities of Europe, religious superiority of the Russians etc. were discussed in the editorials. The role of Bezbaroa in discussions pertaining to political and international affairs is highly appreciable.

Another noteworthy topic of the editorials of *Banhi* was education. He discussed in the editorials on the importance of education for women. He realized that the welfare and progress of the society was not possible without women's education and he was also a staunch supporter of the same cause.

*Banhi's* editor Bezbaroa, apart from providing his opinions in the editorials, appreciated the opinions of the readers and the masses. He communicated with the society by his clear expression of views or opinions. Thus, the editorials of *Banhi* have a significant role in the evolution of mass communication.

Through the editorials Bezbaroa worked towards social welfare and also took to mass media to reach the people.



The editorial section didn't have a place in the first edition of *Banhi* published in 1909. It was only in the second edition that Bezbaroa introduced the editorial section. Bezbaroa included the editorial segment only due to the tremendous demands of the readers of *Banhi*. A total of 63 editorials in the Bezbaroa-edited *Banhi* have been found in the publications from the year 1909 to 1934.

The articles are called 'Leads'. Articles (leads) on various topics were published in *Banhi* which were written by Bezbaroa himself and several other writers as well. The writers who wrote essays in *Banhi* include: Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Upen Chandra Lekharu, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya, Gyanabhiram Baruah, Benudhar Sarmah, Banikanta Kakoty, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Tarun Ram Phukan, Tirtha Nath Sarmah, Tulsi Narayan Sharma, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Birinchi Kumar Baruah, Ratna Kanta Borkakoty, Ruhini Kanta Baruah, Satya Prasad Baruah, Surendra Mohan Das, Sujoyakumar Bhuyan, Hem Chandra Goswami, Dimbeswar Neog, Kanaklal Baruah, Krishna Kanta Handiqui, Rohini Kanta Goswami, Kaliram Medhi, Pitambar Deva Goswami, Pragyasundari Devi etc. (Deka 201-208)

The various articles of *Banhi* centering round the Assamese culture, language, literature, cuisine and other spheres have enriched the Assamese mass media. Through these articles the writers expressed their opinions on various fields. Thus, the opinion writings had a position of significance in the discussions. Such opinions had a considerable impact on the society of that time.

Some other articles published in the magazine, apart from the Main Lead, were the Side Articles. These articles were somewhat smaller in size and would occupy a single or two columns. These were called the 'side articles' or the



‘second lead’ and if there were more than two of them, then they would be called the ‘third lead’, ‘fourth lead; and so on. These side articles also had a particular worth and affected the opinion writings.

The ‘middle’ requires a different kind of reading. It also calls for a different kind of writing technique too. The writing has a featuristic attitude in many respects. Yet, it is different from features. The subject matter in the ‘middle’ is treated in a very different manner, even though the subject-matter itself is an important one for the readers. The writer of the middle follows a very different approach unlike that of the articles, wherein the approach is quite scholarly.

The middles in *Banhi* were written on serious issues or relevant subjects or on usual occurrence but were treated in a very lighter vein. They were satirical, humorous and quite entertaining and many a times they were written on unusual experiences, circumstances etc. In certain cases they portrayed personality sketches of some renowned persons.

## **V. Conclusion:**

As already mentioned, Bezbaroa wrote satirical essays in *Banhi* which were known as ‘Kripabori’ writings. And it has also been said that Besbaroa included cartoons in these writings, which he himself drew. These cartoons were very popular among the readers. Other writings of this kind are: ‘Votor Upodrob’, ‘Bidyar Bisoni’, ‘Sonmuhon Kabya’, ‘Ghurir Banh’, ‘Khulor Bool’, ‘Kobir Jooj’, ‘Pokhiraj Baroar Songbad’, ‘Borbaroar Biyar Udyug’, ‘Borbaroar Hanh Suri Mukordoma’, ‘Khohota Dimoru Satradhikaar’ have special mention.

The Letters to the Editor in the edit page were a significant part of the publication. It is the column in which the magazine published the letters written



by the readers to its editor highlighting, may be an issue, any event or any grievance that required redressal. In other words, this is the feedback column for the magazine in which the readers sent in their feedback regarding public matters or public issues. They offered their personal opinions or judgments of any specific concern.

The Letters to the Editor of *Banhi* attained a special status. Apart from expressing their views and opinions on the various writings of *Banhi* the readers also provided suggestions and advice to the magazine and brought to light the various problems of the society. The other writers of the Letters to the Editor were – Sri Gajendra Narayan, Sri Basanta Kukil Sarmah, Sri Ufund Chandra Barah, Sri Paka Bekhuri Baroa, Sri Swadesh Hitoixi Dutta, Sri Garga Dev Sharma, Sri Champak Chandra Phukan, Sri Mahendra Nath Baroa, Sri Thuleswar Mahanta, Sri Puawaram Mahanta, Sri Bhadrakanta Deva Goswami etc. The topics of the letters were also specially important.

Besides all these, *Banhi* also included stories, poems, essays, short stories etc. The poets of *Banhi* were: Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Jatindranath Duara, Durgeswar Sarmah, Ratnakanta Barkakoty, Padmadhar Chaliha, Hiteswar Borbaroa to name a few.

The Short Story writers of *Banhi* were: Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Sarat Chandra Goswami, Mohichandra Bora, Lakshmidhar Sarmah and several others

While in the case of novelistic writings in *Banhi* we can say primarily about Sarat Chandra Goswami's *Panipoth*.

Through all these writings and genres *Banhi* made very valuable contributions to the Assamese mass media. *Banhi*, therefore, is a worth mentioning magazine of the Assamese mass media.

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