

Unceremonious departure of a popular Assamese weekly



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Amid an existential crisis in the Guwahati-based Assam Tribune group of newspapers, which worsened after the Covid-19 pandemic, a popular Assamese weekly newspaper lost its publication in the latter part of 2025. *Asom Bani*, once a mainstream weekly for Assamese readers for decades, stopped hitting the stands from September last year, as the management lost interest in continuing its printing every Friday. Even though the seven-decade-old Assamese-language weekly was lost from the media market, the management did not make any statement about *Asom Bani*'s fate. Prior to its departure, the weekly was merged with *Dainik Asom*, an acclaimed Assamese daily from the prestigious media house, as its Friday supplement.

Once edited by prominent Assamese journalist-authors namely Satish Chandra Kakati, Tilak Hazarika, Phani Talukdar, Nirod Chowdhury, Homen Bargohain, and Chandraprasad Shaikia, the weekly had Dilip Chandan as its last editor, who served *Asom Bani* for nearly three decades. Launched on 1 July 1955 by legendary Assamese entrepreneur Radha Govinda Baruah, the weekly witnessed and reported various important socio-political developments, including the Assamese-medium (instruction in schools) movement, the Assam anti-influx agitation, the abrupt rise of separatist-influenced insurgency, social unrest, the emergence of regional politics, and its diminishing popularity, with all sincerity to the indigenous population.

As the pandemic severely affected the circulation of all newspapers published by the Assam Tribune group, the subsequent impact was observed in shrinking advertisement revenues from commercial entities. Like many other media institutions across India, the Assam Tribune group also faced a severe financial crisis, which started reflecting in irregular salary disbursements to employees, including working journalists. The employees' union came out in public with various difficulties, including unpaid dues meant for retired employees. The union leaders also made allegations that the group was not receiving a huge amount of money from the State Information and Public Relations Directorate against published advertisements.

Soon, rumours spread over the probable sale of the entire media group to another city-based television house. However, the Assam Tribune management strongly denied this, terming the reports as false portrayals. In an official statement, the management assured its firm commitment "to its editorial independence, journalistic integrity, and continued services to its readers, advertisers, and stakeholders". The management even urged all concerned to "disregard such baseless speculation and refrain from spreading misinformation". Needless to mention, its primary news outlet, *The Assam Tribune*, which came into being on 4 August 1939 (with Lakshminath Phukan as its first editor), continues to be the highest-circulated English daily in the north-eastern region.

But assurances of the management led by Prafulla Govinda Baruah (second son of R.G. Baruah, who died on 14 December at the age of 93) did not prevent the handing over of the responsibility of *Dainik Asom*, now over six decades old, to a different media group owned by young entrepreneur Kishor Borah, who runs the Assamese satellite news channel ND24. The deal was made public on 17 September last year, following which the new management took responsibility for publishing *Dainik Asom*, but did not prefer to take care of *Asom Bani* (which had already ceased to be an independent publication). As a supplement of *Dainik Asom*, the weekly hit the stands on 12 September 2025 for the last time.

The new management of *Dainik Asom* did not absorb all engaged media employees, and on a single day, on 18 September, over 70 employees (many of whom were enjoying extended tenures with a monthly lump-sum payment) lost their jobs. The Assam Tribune management assured them of all legal dues within a few weeks, but this did not materialise. Having no other options, they approached the labour court demanding their dues, which seemingly amount to around rupees six crores altogether. It is unfortunate that the media house, which was India's first institution to implement the recommendations of the statutory Majithia Wage Board in 2010, has now taken the route of escapism by avoiding legal payments to retired employees.

Media observers believe that the Tribune house usually maintained its credibility while disseminating information, editorial viewpoints, and other articles, but in recent times, the same principles were largely compromised. Its prime mover (*The Assam Tribune*) lavishly supported the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act movement that broke out in 2019, where it provided huge space to the public uprising that denounced the Union government's initiative to politically support persecuted Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian families coming from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to India. The chaos engulfed the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam for weeks, with the narrative that the new citizenship law would discredit the Assam Accord (signed in 1985 to culminate the six-year-long anti-foreigner agitation).

Moreover, the people of Assam remember when the newspaper produced a series of voluminous reports on the backdrop of a city press club election with little credibility, where the editorial focus was exposed as biased, unprofessional, and marred by character assassinations of a particular press club official, putting its integrity at stake. The present financial status of the Assam Tribune group remains pathetic, but it was not entirely orchestrated by the pandemic alone. Rather, the situation was made more complicated by a section of arrogant media professionals who enjoyed all due benefits only to create disorder within the media house, where, shockingly, the management turned out to be a mute spectator.

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