Introduction

With the publication of "The Orumodoi" (Sun-rise), the first Assamese newspaper, from Sibsagar town of Upper Assam in January, 1846, the history of the newspaper industry or journalism in Assam started taking its shape. It is more than a hundred years now, but no attempt has so far been made to write a comprehensive and a critical account of it.

It was the American Baptist Missionaries who were responsible for bringing out the first Assamese newspaper. Printed at and published from the Sibsagar Mission Press, the first editor of The Orumodoi was the late Mr O.A. Gutter. Published for the American Baptist Mission in Assam, the newspaper was, as it was mentioned on its back page, "A monthly paper, devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence". The rates of subscription were one rupee per annum.
advance or rupees one and a half if paid at the end
of the year.

The Orunodoi continued to appear till 1882, covering
a long span of thirty six years in the history of
Assamese newspaper industry. In the first year of its
publication, it commanded a total of 577 subscribers
of whom 249 were Assamese and the rest foreign missionaries.

In the initial years, there had been gradual decrease
in the number of the subscribers. The annual number of
subscribers fluctuated between 1847 and 1854 as follows:
1847 (536), 1849 (428), 1850 (397), 1851 (469), 1852 (477),
1853 (436) and 1854 (440). But in later years, the number
of annual subscribers rose steadily up to 800. Most
subscribers were from Gauhati. In 1848, of the total
545 subscribers, 136 were from Gauhati while 90 from
Nowgong, 73 from Sibsagar, 36 from Jaipur, 10 from
Choikhowa, 75 from Tepur, 23 from Dibrugarh, 28 from
Lakhimpur, 52 from Mangaldai, 6 from Goalpara, 15 from
Golaghat and one from Hazira. (1)

(1) Orunodoi Dhalpat(Bata) Assamese. Barua.
The Orunodoi did not enjoy any revenue from the government and as such financially it had to depend solely on the revenue received from its sale proceeds. In the sixth issue of the 12th year of its publication, the editor, the late Mr S.M. Whiting had to express his sad feelings in his editorial thus: "The monthly expenditure on production of The Orunodoi is 50 and as such the annual expenditure is 600; but we receive from our subscribers only 400 per annum". Thus from 1857 till 1882, the publishers of the paper had to suffer from the recurring deficit of 200 annually. The Orunodoi was printed in tabloid form with pages varying from 8 to 16. Each page had only two columns which carried sometimes illustrations from hand-made blocks.

This was the general position of the newspaper industry in Assam during the last part of the 19th century and the situation almost remained the same till our country achieved freedom in 1947. After The Orunodoi, newspapers of different periodicity came out in Assamese and English during the last century.
the years both before and after Independence; but almost all of them had lost their way in the labyrinth of cool response from the readers \( \ldots \) and also due to mismanagement.

Of the total 1,95,83,000 population (1971 census) in the entire north-eastern region with its five States of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura and two Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, only 18,47,000 people live in the so-called urban areas, while the rest 17,73,6,000 still live in the villages, some of which are still too remote to be reached by any newspapers.

A study of the Press Institute of India has revealed that only two per cent of India's rural population of 436,256,000 read newspapers. (2) This is a statistical average and does not reveal fully the deplorably low percentage of the newspaper reading population in the far-flung, under-developed north-eastern region.

That newspapers in the north-eastern region are more often than not born to die an untimely death has been the result of

(1) Statistical Handbooks of State Governments/Union Territories.

become a plain but grim fact. And that is why some have felt tempted to term the region as the "graveyard of newspapers"—hundreds of newspapers of different shapes, colors, and periodicity came to light since 1846 and died soon after.

The second newspaper in Assamese, 'Asam Bilashini' (Glamour of Assam), a monthly mainly to propagate the Vaishnava religion, was published in 1871 from Majuli, the biggest river island of the world, under the auspices of the then Satradhikar of Auniati Dattadev Goswami. The newspaper ceased to appear in 1883; but again appeared in 1913 from Jorhat town as a weekly newsmagazine under the editorship of the late Mr Krishnakanta Bhattacharyya. After six years, the publication of it was again discontinued. The first Assamese weekly newsmagazine, 'Asam Mihir' (Assam's Sun) came out in 1872 and it lived only for a year. The 'Asam News (1882-85) edited by the late Mr Hemchandra Barua and the 'Asam Bandhu'(Friend of Assam) (1885-86) edited by the late Mr Gunabhiram Barua did good service on standardizing the

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(1) Journalism in Assam (article in English) by Mr Hemchandra Kumar Bhattacharyya, published in the Souvenir of the Gauhati Working Journalists' Association, 1968.
Assamese language. Both of these two editors were basically writers in Assamese. The former even compiled the first dictionary in Assamese.

Close on the heel of The Orunodoi, a few more journals in Assamese came to light. These included 'Asam Darpan' (Mirror of Assam) (1874-75), 'Asam Tora' (Star of Assam) (1888-89), 'Asam Dwipak' (Light of Assam) (1876-77), 'Asam News' (1882-85), 'Asam Bandhu' (1885-86), 'Lora Bandhu' (Friend of Children) (1888-89), 'Mow' (Honey) (1886-87), 'Jonaki' (Moonlight) (1889-1901), 'Bijuli' (Lightning) (1890-94), 'Asam' (1894-95), 'Banhi' (Flute) (1909-34), 'Usha' (Dawn), Banti (Light) and Alochan (Magazine) (1910-17), Times of Assam (1895-1947), etc.

The Times of Assam first edited by the late Mr Radhanath Chankakati, was an English weekly which served the region for a long period of 52 years. According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India, there were only nine journals in Assam in 1903-4. Of these, three were in English, two in Bengali, one in Assamese and three in Khasi language. The three English weeklies were the Times of Assam, The Eastern Herald edited by Basambad Mitra and Citizen edited by...
The first Christian monthly in Khasi language, U Nongmil Khubor, came to light probably in 1891 and its publication was discontinued by 1894-95. According to Dr Hamlet Bareh, the second monthly in Khasi, U Khasi Mynta, the first cultural journal, was started in 1895 under the editorship of U Homma Rai Diengdoh. (1) Then came the Ka Pateng Khristan, the second Presbyterian monthly in October, 1896, initiated by Idonkha Lyngdoh Nonglait and T. Jibon Roy. The monthly stopped its publication in 1902-03. Another missionary, C. Evans started his Christian monthly, U Nongialam Khristan in 1903 when the first Catholic monthly in Khasi, U Nongphira : was published. In the same year, two more Khasi journals, U Nongialam Katha and U Lurhsai also came to light. Soso Then, the great Khasi poet, was the first editor of U Lurhsai. The paper sought to elevate the status of Khasi Statehood under the reforms of 1935-36 and stirred political consciousness among the masses for better civic conditions. (2)

Today there are a number of newspapers in Khasi language.

(1) A Short History of Khasi Literature, 1969, page.
(2) Ibid, p. 47.
but their circulation is, by and large, not encouraging. The advertisement revenue they get is also not so promising. Even then, two papers, viz. Ka Pyrta U Riewlum (Voice of the Hillman) and the U Nongsain Hima (The Nation Builder) have been in circulation since 1956 and 1958 respectively. A number of English weeklies like The Shillong Times, The Shillong Observer, Young India, Shillong Herald, Implanter, Democratic Review, etc., are being published from Shillong, capital of Meghalaya. A few Garo language weeklies like Achik Sangbad (Garo News), Chadembani Kurang (Voice of the Youth) and Do Amek (Bird that brings News) are still in circulation from the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. In Nagaland, two English weeklies are being published from Dimapur. They are: The Nagaland Times and The Ura Mail. While the former is supporting the cause of the Congress party in Nagaland, the latter is the official mouthpiece of the United Democratic Front. In Arunachal Pradesh, there is yet to be any newspaper although the readers in the Union Territory used to read newspapers from Assam and other parts of the country. In Mizoram, few English newspapers, mostly weeklies, are still surviving. In Manipur there are
number of newspapers, both in English and in Manipuri language. These are three dailies, viz., Eastern Standard, Anouba Samaj and Leissemba. Among the English weeklies published from Imphal, capital of Manipur, the Resistance, edited by Mr Tarun Kumar, is the most respected and widely circulated weekly. But the financial condition of these newspapers is very poor and their circulation is also discouraging. Hence these newspapers are yet to make any impact among the public in their respective regions.

What is more striking is that not a single newspaper of the entire north-eastern region, whether a daily, weekly or of any other periodicity, has hitherto been able to command a circulation totalling beyond 50,000 copies per issue. While this makes a sad commentary on the part of our overall readership, an accusing finger is often seen pointing towards the poor, ill-clad, ill-fed and un-intelligently edited journals which have, for obvious reasons, failed to draw adequate response from the readers. It is quite natural that the need varies from reader to reader; but anyone who ventures to bring out any newspaper must know what the general readers do expect and what, as editor, he wants to communicate through his venture.
It is interesting to note that most editors of various small-sized newspapers in the north-eastern region are self-appointed, some of them certainly having their own axes to grind. These one-man organisations run in a particular manner; the editor himself being the financier, advertisement collector, contributor, printer and publisher, all rolled into one. Most of such editors are often young men, sometimes women, who cannot claim to have had any previous experience in any established newspaper organisation or possessing any sort of practical training in the field of journalism. Some have their fascination for entering the so-called glamorous world of newspapers without taking the usual pains that are entailed in the initial years of any professional journalist. Some of them do not have even the minimum educational background and as such what they dish out as editors are generally certain literary pieces which are often badly edited and printed, making them all the more insipid and colourless.

A number of cogent arguments have often been put forward as to why newspapers in the north-eastern region are, by and large, born to die. One of the major factors may be the pitifully slow growth of literacy in the region. Next comes the peculiar geographical...
location of the region, then poor availability of required
printing materials at cheaper rates and of trained man-power,
system of and condition for distribution of newspapers, financial
backing from monopoly houses, Government patronage, motive behind
publication, response from the readers, etc.

The present newspaper crisis accentuated by the spiralling
prices of all printing materials has been a severe blow to the
growth of the newspaper industry in this region. But prior to this
unprecedented phenomenon also newspapers were born to die in the
region not only in the hill areas but also in the plains of Assam
During the last three decades of post-Independence, the noted
Assamese daily, the Natun Asamiya, the Assamese bi-weekly, the
Asom Batori, monthlies like the Ramdhenu, Prahari, Awahan, Navayug,
Mameedep, Sangam, Natun Pratinidhi, Children magazines like
the Kanchijome, the Zonebai, the Rodali and others had to die
because their publishers had failed to get any profit out of them.
Some publishers had even to bear losses. Two magazines, 'Asamiya',
a literary monthly edited by Mr Chandra Prakash Saikia and the
Rodali(Sun-shine), a children's monthly edited by Mr S.C. Rajkhowa,
although both them were of high standard in editing and overall
production, had failed to command a readership beyond three thousand each. Not that they failed to attract their readers with their contents and get-up, but simply the readers did not like to buy them and read. This reflects a sense of indolent attitude on the part of readers of Assamese journals and other newspapers. Sometimes the highhandedness of the proprietors was also said to be a cause of premature death of some newspapers in Assam.

In the following chapters, it will be attempted to make an in-depth study of the history of the newspaper industry in Assam.