

Wahid Saleh

Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau

Member of the Board of Directors, Europe India Chamber of Commerce, Brussels, Belgium
Adviser, The Netherlands Foundation for Business Process Innovation, The Hague, Netherlands
Moderator, IndiansinNL Yahoo Group
Editor, www.indiawijzer.nl



**Chrysantenhof 33
2651 XJ Berkel en Rodenrijs
The Netherlands
Tel: 010 - 511 4400
Fax: 010 - 512 1123
E-mail: w.saleh@indiawijzer.nl
Web: www.indiawijzer.nl**

Shri Samujjal Bhattacharyya
Honorary Adviser to AASU
Guwahati-781001
Assam

Subject: Change of name from Assam to Asom - a letter from an Assamese living in the Netherlands.

Berkel en Rodenrijs,
28-06-2006

Dear Shri Bhattacharyya,

This letter I am addressing to you on an issue which according to many of us is of paramount importance. It is the changing of the name of Assam to Asom. In this regard I sent a letter to the Chief Minister of Assam and also to Shri Brindban Goswami, President, AGP.

I am from Jorhat and living in Europe for more than 43 years. Some information about my background and activities, you will find at www.indiawijzer.nl under the link about the author. I have left Assam. But Assam has never left me.

As AASU plays a major role in the political arena of Assam I am sure AASU is in a position to start a discussion before changing the name of our province from Assam to Asom. This is one of the reasons for writing this letter to you.

Based on a proposal from the former President of Oxom Xahityo Xobha, the Government of Assam without any public discussion adopted a resolution to change the official name of the state from ASSAM to ASOM. The reason given is that the name ASSAM is not an indigenous one and is coined by the British. It is only an educated guess by a few that the name of Assam is given by the British. As far as I know there are no historical documents to prove that the name Assam is given by the British. But than what is the reason to change the name?

We have various records to show that before the British came to India several publications mentioned the name Assam.

1. The name Assam is mentioned in the book *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* written by Alauddin Isfahan alias Mirza Nathan. It is an important primary source for the reconstruction of the history of Bengal in the reign of Jahangir (1605-

1627). A manuscript of the book is in the *Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris* which Mr. M. I. Borah, the then Professor of Persian in the Dhaka University translated it into English. The government of Assam published it in 1936. The Mughal conquest of Kamarupa, the campaigns to Kachhar and *Assam* were known only briefly through the local chronicles, but in the Baharistan we get a detailed account.^[i]

2. Assam is also mentioned in the works of *Fathiya-i-Ibriyya* also known as *Tarikh-i-Assam*. It was written by Ibn Muhammad Wali Ahmad, better known as Shihabuddin Talish, which was his poetical name. He was in the service of Mir Jumla (1660 -1663 AD) who spent a major part of his tenure in Bengal in fighting against the rebels in Kuch Bihar, Kamarupa and against the king of *Assam*. Shihabuddin, the Muslim historian who accompanied Mir Jumla in his 11th invasion to Assam in 1662, left an extensive account of Assam of that period. There are two parts of the book, the first part called *Fathiyya* was known from long before and one copy was preserved in the Asiatic Society Library, Calcutta and two were preserved in the Oriental Public Library at Bankipur, Bihar. This part deals with Mir Jumla's conquest of Assam, and for that it was also known as *Tarikh-i-Assam*.^[ii]
3. Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605–89) was a French traveller in Asia. His *Six Voyages en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (1676–77) contains a wealth of information and has been frequently reprinted. It has been translated into English by Valentine Ball as *Travels in India*. Tavernier's "Travels in India", published in 1676 uses the spelling "*Assen*" for *Assam* in the French original. The official chronicler of Mir Jumla too calls the place "*Asam*".^[iii]
4. A relation of an unfortunate voyage to the kingdom of Bengala describing the deplorable condition and dismal accidents attending those therein concerned, how that after the loss of their ship they were forced to abide in a desert and barren island, ... together with choice observations touching that monarch's government, laws, customs, and armies, and especially his late war against the kinds of Azo and *Assam*, with several other remarkable particulars. The book was published in 1688.^[iv]
5. It would be interesting to do some research to establish Dutch connections with Assam before the British. The following are some of the Dutch sources where the name Assam is mentioned.
 - As far back as 1698, Assam is mentioned in the early Dutch publications. It is an account of the story of the East Indiaman "Ter Schelling," which was wrecked off the coast of Bengal. The author, Frans Jansz. van der Heiden, a member of the crew, kept a journal of his experiences. *Assam* and "*Assammers*" is mentioned here. ^[v]
 - ----- By chance they reached mainland Bengal in the middle of the region's greatest war (1660-1662), so once ashore they were conscripted into the enormous Mogul army to fight against the kingdom of *Assam*, said to be cannibals.^[vi]
 - In the publication of Heiden, Frans Janszoon van der, and Willem Kunst , *Vervarelijke schipbreuk van 't oost-indisch jacht Ter schelling, onder het landt Bengale – en voorts in 't velt-leger van den Grooten Mogol, tot in 't koninkrijk van Assam landewaerts opgevoert zijn....*(Amsterdam, 1675).^[vii]
 - In another publication 'Travelling with Clara' the name *Assam* is also mentioned.In the kingdom of the Great Mogol, which covered almost

whole of India, a baby rhino was captured by net in the year 1738 in [Assam](#) (the area above the Gulf of Bengal...). The baby rhino presented to the then director of Dutch East India Company sailed to Batavia on 12-10-1739 and arrived in Rotterdam on 22-07-1741. The Rhino named Clara was a big hit. It was shown all over Europe. Even today different paintings and statues of Carla can be found in different museums of the world.[viii]

- Reference of Assam is also made in the publication *Mughal Warfare: Mirjumla* – He contributed tremendously to Aurangzeb’s early success in the Deccan and was of crucial assistance during the latter’s succession struggle against his brothers. *From 1660 to his death in 1663*, he was sent to the highly lucrative province of Bengal, where he staged large-scale military expeditions into the eastern parts of that province as well as into [Assam](#)..... [ix]

As a school student I remember reading that after their defeat at Sarighat the Mughal commander wrote: “Every [Assamese](#) soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches and in wielding guns and cannons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India!”

The British arrived in Assam after the Mughal. The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826 and Assam came under British Administration.

From the above it can be safely concluded that the name Assam existed before the British and they did not coin this name.

India has not changed its name from India to Bharat, West Bengal can live happily with a British name. If India can live with the name of India, why can't we live with the name Assam? Do we have sufficient reason to change the name from Assam to Asom? I think in Assam at present there are more pressing issues than spending time, energy and money in changing the name of the state.

Moreover Assam is a “Brand name”. Assam is known all over the world. Can any one think of Asom tea? It will remain as Assam tea. As Assam has 820 species of birds (highest for any Indian state) Assam is an established name amongst the ornithologist. Changing name for Assam may only marginalize whatever little name recognition we have in the world today.

Mr Rajen Baruah, a member of the Friends of Assam and the Seven Sisters, a think tank with members from the North East living all over the world is also actively supporting this cause. He has done research on this subject and has published different articles on this issue. In one his articles he has shown that the word Oxom was derived from Acham only in the 18th century. Till then the people of Assam called our land Asam. The phonetic name Asam came when the Tai-Ahoms came who were actually the Syam people. People used to call them Asyam, Acham or Asam from the start in 13th century. Assam is a local Tai-Ahom word. The Shan history shows that. Enclosed please find two copies of his publications.

According to Rajor Batori published by the Government of Assam, the change of name from Assam to Asom is still a resolution and is not yet official. It still has to get central governments approval (Postal [Reggn.no](#). RNP/GH-06/04-06).

Respected and prestigious English language news papers like The Assam Tribune and Sentinel, instead of playing a leadership role in the debate for the right spelling

of the word ASOM or ASSAM have started using the name Asom. By this blind adoption, The Assam Tribune and Sentinel are trying to make it a fait accompli.

Local newspapers like Amar Oxom etc are asking for an open debate on the issue. Recently the joint Xahityo Xobha Monso of Assam also took a resolution against the spelling ASOM. The Tai-Ahom and the Buddhist organizations in Assam and a few other organisations are sending petitions to Government of India against the spelling ASOM.

India prides itself as a democratic country and plays a role model. In a democracy there is no room for a hasty decision without any public debate to pass a political resolution for the use of the spelling ASOM. The government of Assam should give the arguments for their proposal to change the name of the state. It seems in Assam those who speak, they don't know, and those who know, they don't speak.

In an important issue like changing the name sufficient time and scope should be given for discussion and debate. The proposal to change the name of Assam to Asom should be withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,



Wahid Saleh

ⁱ Bibliography Mirza Nathan, Baharistan-i-Ghaibi, Eng. tr. by MI Borah, Gauhati, 1936; A Karim, History of Bengal, Mughal Period, I, Rajshahi, 1992. http://banglapedia.net/HT/B_0048.HTM

ⁱⁱ Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/F_0039.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ The Indian Antiquary, July 1887, pp222-226

^{iv} Glanius, W. ; London, Printed for Henry Bonwick..., 1682. (7), 184p. (Early English books, 1641-1700 : 1688:12), Asian Collections Section, National Library of Australia, Canberra ACT 2600 <http://www.nla.gov.au/asian/indo/nedbib.html>

^v VOC shipwrecks, VOYAGE NR: 0844.2, NAME OF VESSEL: Terschelling
Warnsinck-Delprat, C.E. Vervarelyke Schipbreuk van 't Oostindisch Jacht Ter Schelling onder het Landt van Bengale. Utrecht, 1944.
http://www.vocshipwrecks.nl/out_voyages4/terschelling.html

^{vi} First woodcut-illustrated edition of a popular shipwreck story. 1698 edition. Two editions are available. One of them at the Scheepvaart Museum in Amsterdam. http://www.asherbooks.com/1391_v.html

^{vii} Dutch Sources on South Asia C. 1600-1825, Jos Gommans, Lennart Bes, Gijs Kruijtzter, ISBN 81-7304-384-1, Manohar, 2001. Bibliography, Page 77, ref 771

^{viii} Op reis met Clara, de geschiedenis van een bezienswaardige neushoorn, Natuurmuseum, Rotterdam, 1992, page 9/10.

^{ix} Mughal Warfare, Jos Gommans, Routledge, 2002, Page 78.