

## **Wahid Saleh**

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Shri Tanka Bahadur Rai  
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Assam Legislative Assembly  
Janta Bhawan  
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Assam

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

Berkel en Rodenrijs,  
14-09-2006

Dear Mr Rai,

I would like to address 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.

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](http://www.indiawijzer.nl) under the link '[about Wahid](#)'. I have left Assam. But Assam has never left me.

On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2006 the Assam State cabinet adopted a resolution to change the official name of the state from ASSAM to ASOM. According to the news item published on 28-02-2006 in The Hindu and other newspapers the Minister of State for Planning and Development Shri Himanta Biswa Sarma informed the media that the cabinet decision was based on suggestions from several quarters, including former Asam Sahitya Sabha president Chandra Prasad Saikia. "The government has decided to revert back to the name used by the locals. 'Assam' was the corrupt version of 'Asom', left behind by the British. We have effected the change in deference to local sentiments."

As far as I know there are no historical documents to prove that the name Assam is given by the British. But then what is the reason to change the name?

In search for an answer to this question I came across the following historical documents and publications which inform that the name Asham, Ascham, Acham, Asám and Assam in one form or the other existed before the British came in contact with Assam.

The Dutch are famous for keeping records. A quick search of the word Assam in the Dutch archives gave the following results:

1. A map of *Kingdom of Bengale* was published around 1662. The map was drawn by a Dutchman, Joh. van Leenen, who was in “Bengale” in 1661. This map was ordered by Mattheus van den Broucke (1620-1685) and was inserted in the collection of François Valentijn's '*Oud en nieuw Oost-Indien*' (Dordrecht, 1724). The documents are in the Maritime museum, Rotterdam. The name *Assam* appears on the map.
2. A letter sent by Joan Maertsuyker, Governor-General of the Dutch Batavia who congratulated Mirjumala on 29 August 1663 addressing him as “...Grooten Mogol in *Assam*”.
3. Another Dutch publication '*Vervarelyke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch jacht Ter Schelling*', based on a diary kept by a Dutchman who in 1662 was forced to fight with the army of Mirjumla published in 1675, mentions the names *Assam* and *Assamer*, as the names of the region and its inhabitants respectively.
4. *The story of 'Travelling with Clara'* mentions that " a baby rhino was captured in 1738 in *Assam in the kingdom of the Great Mogol*. The rhino named Clara arrived in Rotterdam on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1741 and was exhibited all over Europe. Even today different paintings and statues of Clara can be found in different museums of the world.

Moreover, before the British arrived in Assam different Mughal historians used the names *Assam*, *Asham*, *Ascham*, *Acham* and *Ásám* in their writings." *Asom*" with an “o” in between was **unknown** to them. *In particular the word Assam* or a word similar to *Assam* is mentioned in the following publications:

1. Abul Fazal Allámi in his compilation of *Akbarnama*, a biographical account of Akbar (1542 -1605) mentioned “Rajah of *Asham*”.
2. Abd al-Hamid Lāhūri is known solely for his official history of the reign of Mughal Emperor Sahjahan entitled *Padshah-namah*, (1627-1647). He wrote about the Rebellion in Kūch-Hājū, which lies on the banks of the Brahmaputra, a large river, two *kos* in width, which flows from the country of *Áshám (Assam)* into Bengal.
3. *Alamgir-Namah*, The Book of Aurangzeb by Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin (1657-1667), Aurangzeb’s secretary mentions *Asham*
4. *Assam* is also mentioned in Shahábuddin Tálásh’s work, *Tarikh-I Mulk-I Áshám*. This is an account of the expedition to Assam undertaken in the fourth year of the reign of Aurangzeb.
5. *Adāb-i-Ālamgiri*, written by Sayhkh Abu al-Fath Qabil Han (1662), compiled by Sayh Muhammad Sadiq of Ambala (1703 ) which is a collection of letters, state papers and documents written in the name of Aurangzeb also mentions *Assam*

6. Also the name Assam is mentioned in the book *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* written by Alauddin Isfahan alias Mirza Nathan. It is a history of the Mughal wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan. Translated from the original Persian by M. I. Borah, Gauhati, 1936.
7. Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605 - 89), a French jeweller and traveller in his work "Travels in India", published in 1676 uses the spelling "Assen" for Assam in the French original.
8. Impero Del Gran Mogol. (India) by Giovanni Albrizzi published in Venice in 1740. "Acham" is mentioned in this map of India from Atlante Novissimo Che Contiene Tutte Le Parti Del Mondo ... This atlas was published in Venice and was based mainly on the work of Isaak Tirion.
9. *Acham* is mentioned in French cartographer Rigobert Bonne's Carte de la Partie Superieure de l' Inde en deça du Gange, published around 1770. His maps are found in Atlas Moderne (1762) and Raynal's Histoire Philos du Commerce des Indes (1774).

The British arrived in Assam after the demise of the Mughals. The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826 and Assam came under British Administration. The British changed original names of places in India only when they had a problem pronouncing the indigenous names properly. Assam was not that kind of word.

From the above it can be safely concluded that the British did not coin the name Assam; it existed well before the British.

India has not changed its name from India to Bharat, at least in English. If India can live with the name of India, why can't the Assamese live with the name Assam? Do they have any valid reason to change the name from Assam to Asom?

Moreover Assam is a 'Brand name'. Assam is known all over the world for its finest teas besides having 820 species of birds (highest for any Indian state). Assam is an established name amongst the ornithologist. Changing the name of Assam may only marginalize whatever little name recognition the Assamese have in the world today.

According to *Raijor Batori* published by the Government of Assam, the change of the name from Assam to Asom is still in a resolution form and is not yet official. It still has to get central government's approval (Postal Reggn.no. RNP/GH-06/04-06).

Respected and prestigious English language newspapers like The Assam Tribune and Sentinel, instead of *conducting a debate to decide if* the right spelling of the word ASOM or ASSAM have simply started using the name Asom. It seems 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. I understand that the *Sahityo Sobha 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 on an important non crisis issue like this without any public debate *and* to pass a hasty resolution for the use of the spelling ASOM, for political purposes. It would be appreciated by all concerned if the Government of Assam states openly the arguments in support of their proposal to change the name of the state. It seems in Assam *at least on this issue* those who speak don't know, and those who know, don't speak.

In an important issue like changing the historical identity of a region and its people sufficient time and scope should be given for discussion and debate. Based on the historical evidence produced above the writer of this letter feels that this evidence should be brought to the notice of all concerned and the proposal to change the name of Assam to Asom should be withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wahid Saleh', written in a cursive style.

Wahid Saleh