

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE NAMES 'OXOM' AND 'ASSAM'

Rajen Barua, Houston.

It seems there is an urgent need to explore and explain the origins of the names of the state: OXOM and ASSAM thoroughly one more time. The Government of Assam hurriedly adopted a resolution, in a very undemocratic manner to change the name of the state to ASOM, based on a suggestion by Mr Chandra Prasad Saikia.. These state of affairs indicate that we have several serious problems at hand in Assam. On one hand, it shows that we have serious laps in proper functioning of the democratic process, and on the other it reveals that there are grave misconceptions even among the educated leaders in Assam regarding the origins of the names of the state: OXOM and ASSAM. What is even more discouraging is to see the role being played by the media on the issue. While there were hardly any opposing voice in any major newspaper questioning the government's decision, some news papers in fact have shown their over eagerness to comply with the Government, and have already started to adopt the proposed change of the name even without any proper government directive. All these are really very sad and disappointing news for the people of Assam and its future.

So far as the name ASSAM goes, records show that when the Europeans first used the name of the country Assam, sometimes in the sixteenth century, they used the spelling ASHAM. This was later on changed to ASAM by the British who eventually adopted the final spelling as ASSAM for the name. Irrespective of the spelling however, they pronounced the name of the country as *Asam*. The British did not coin those spellings for their own convenience because they could not pronounce the Assamese words *Oxom* or *Axam*, but they did it because that phonetic pronunciation *Asam* was the name of the country in vogue at that time. Records in fact show that the phonetic name *Asam* is much older than the Assamese name *Oxom* which is a later derivation. The facts are as follows.

When the Shan invaders first came to Assam from upper Burma in the thirteenth century, they used to call themselves as Tai (glorious), the race they belong to which also include the present Thai (Siam) and the Laotians. However when these Tai people settled in Assam, eventually they became known as *Ahom* while the name of the country became known as *Oxom*, with the typical Assamese guttural X pronunciation. We believe that the following may be offered as the most logical, and phonetically acceptable explanation of the derivations of these names.

First, we must note the important point that when these Tai people came to conquer Kamrup in the thirteenth century, they were given the name of *Acham*, *Asam* or *Asyam* by the local tribes in Assam. Mr. Debanada Bharali, an Assamese scholar, offers the simple explanation that the term (*A+Syam*) is used simply to denote the plural of the word Syam; or may be the prefix 'a' is being used, like many typical Assamese words, simply to give accent on the sound 'ch'. He also narrated an event when he met a man in one *Phakial* village in Margherita, and when asked, the man replied that he was an 'Accham' man. Mr Bharali also refers to Mr Ananda Chandra Agarwala, the Assamese writer, whom he quoted as writing that the Shans in Upper Burma call themselves '*Ashwam*' or '*Ashyam*'. (*Awahon* 3rd yr vol 5th). According to Ms. Sao Noan Oo, a Shan author who now lives in UK, on the other hand, the term '*Asam*' is in fact a much older term, and all these three terms: *Shan*, *Siam* and *Asam* were derived from the word "*Sian*" (*Hsian*, *Sein*), which designates the Tai group of mountainous people who originally migrated down from Yunnan province in the 6th. Century AD to the Shan state.

Thus it seems clear that the origin of the term '*Acham*' or '*Asam*', is from the Tai (Shyam) people and that these Tai newcomers were called *Acham*, *Asyam* or *Asam* by the local tribes in Assam. Very soon the name *Acham* or *Asam* was used to designate not only the ruler but also the country itself, and since then the country had been known by the name *Asam* by all the people outside Assam.

Inside Assam however, the term *Acham* or *Asam* took further developments with some twists and turns. When these terms *Asam*, *Asyam* or *Acham* eventually got written down in Assamese writings, these were written as *Axam* or *Axom* or *Oxom* with the Assamese letter '*dontiyo xo*'. Probably *Sri Xongkordev* was the first to record the name in the Assamese '*Bhagovot Puran*'. There he recorded the name as *Oxom* (*oxomo muluko*), using the term *Oxom* to refer these Tai people. The '*Dorongiya Bongxawoli*' written later also records these

people as *Oxom*. In the book titled “*Xongkordev-Madhovdev Soritto*” written by Doitari Thakur much later, these people were called by various names such as *Axam*, *Axom* or *Oxom*.

Because of the Assamese pronunciation of the sibilants as guttural X, the names used to be pronounced as *Oxom*, *Axam* or *Axom* by the Assamese, dropping the S pronunciation from the original name *Asam*. And that was how these Tai people were eventually become known as *Oxom* or *Axom* to the local Assamese people. The name *Oxom* however got further phonetic transformation to *Ohom* and finally to *Ahom* most likely due to difficulty in pronouncing the Assamese XO sound by the Tai newcomers.

So far as the name of the country, inside Assam also, the names *Acham* or *Asam* continued for a long time as the name of the country. There are several proofs to show that. One such proof is to be found in the following example. In the book, “*Kamrupor Buronji*”, which is a history of the Ahoms upto 1682 written in the seventeenth century, the name of the country was mostly written as *Acham* in Assamese. Various diplomatic letters were inserted in the chronicle written in Assamese but the language of which, as pointed out by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, was a “curious medley of Persian, Hindi and Assamese”. A typical letter from Joydhwaj Xingho to Mogul Patsah reads as “*Sri Srijut Joydhwaj Xingho Raja ACHAM... etc*”. Writing on this *ACHAM* spelling, Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, the editor, commented in his introduction, “In the *Buronji*, the name of the country had been spelled either as *AXAM* or *ACHAM*, *OXOM*. However, whether it was spelled with CH or X, it seems certain that in the past the pronunciation for the name of the country was always made as CH, and not as X”

From the above, it is clearly seen that probably upto the seventeenth century the name of Assam was known as *Asam* or *Acham* even inside Assam and not as *Oxom*. The phonetic shift from *Acham* to *Axam* or *Oxom* happened later. This gradual change in pronunciation of the country, is evident from the following. We find in a later *Buronji*, titled “*Harakanta Baruah Xodoraminor Oxom Buronji*”, written in early nineteenth century by Harakanta Xodoramin Baruah, that the name of the country was invariably written as *Oxom* and nowhere as *Acham*. This means that the phonetic transformation of the name of the country from *Acham* to *Oxom* happened during the eighteenth century. Thus we see that the original indigenous name *Acham* or *Asam* used for the people was gradually transformed into local Assamese word *Axam* and *Oxom* for the land, and to *AHOM* for the Tai people.

Outside Assam however, especially in the political and commercial circles, the name of the country remained as *Acham* or *Asam*. One of the first unambiguous references come from Thomas Bowrey’s writing in 1663 about Mir Jhumla’s death: “They lost the best of Nabobs, the Kingdome of *ACHAM*, and, by consequence, many large priviledges” (*Bowrey, Thomas, A Geographical Account of Countries around Bay of Bengal, ed Temple, R. C., Hakluyt Society’s Publications*). Again Tavernier’s “*Travels in India*”, published in 1676 uses the spelling “*Assen*” for Assam in the French original. That this *Acham* pronunciation was in vogue outside Assam, was also known from the various treaties made by the Ahoms with the Moguls where they used the spellings as *Acham*, *Asam* or *Ashyam*. The British simply followed these Moguls and others and took this indigenous pronunciation *Acham*, and used the English phoneme SS as used in the English words ‘issue’ or ‘tissue’ to settle on the present word *ASSAM*.

And that is how we got both the names *OXOM* as pronounced and written in the Assamese language, and *ASSAM* as pronounced by outsiders and finally written in English by the British. This shows that the phonetic name *Asam* or *Acham* came first which eventually gave rise the words *OXOM* and *AHOM*. Thus the dual names for the state as *OXOM* as well as *ASSAM* developed in parallel, and phonetically, both the names are indigenous Assamese names. We think these dual names for the state makes perfect sense; the word *OXOM* carry the Assamese Aryan *Xongkori* ethos, and the word *ASSAM* carry the original local name and pronunciation for the Shan (Syam) invaders and thus carry the ethos of the Tai-Ahom Assamese culture.

Case for Retaining the name ‘Assam’: Thus we see that the British did not coin the word *ASSAM* overnight for their convenience. It is an indigenous Assamese word which was in vogue for a long time before the British, and the proposal to change the existing name does not have any merit. To eliminate the original Tai-Ahom phonetic name *Acham*, will be a major historical blunder in judgment and grave injustice to these Tai-Ahom people who ruled Assam for six hundred years and brought glory to the Assamese people. It may further be mentioned that the word *Acham* has another possible derivation from Bodo word

Ha+Com, meaning low or level country (Baden Powell). That way ASSAM is also connected to these original Mongloid people of the state. The word ASSAM also is a more secular and universal word with greater general appeal to unite the different ethnic groups in Assam than the word OXOM. This word ASSAM also has a wider international recognition for the state from such names as 'Assam Tea', 'Assam Oil', Assam Silk' as well as because of the role Assam played during the Second World War.

Thus we see that the phonetic name ASSAM has been in use as the name our state for more than eight hundred years considering the time when the Tai people first came to Assam. In the mythical past, our land was known as '*Pragjyotishpur*' during the Ramayana age while during the later Mahabharata age, our land was known as '*Kamrup*'. Today we have two names: the official English name ASSAM and the Assamese local name OXOM. Like us, our country India also has two names: official English name INDIA and local name BHARAT. These double names have not created any conflicts and frankly speaking we do not see any reason to change these existing names.

Case Against the Spelling ASOM: On the other hand the proposed new spelling ASOM does not have any rational nor it is phonetically correct. In fact, if the intention of the name change was to retain the Assamese ethnic pronunciation with guttural X in Roman script, then ASOM is a wrong spelling which has however been used by many organizations in Assam starting with *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, *Asom Gana Parishad* and others for quite some time. One can understand and excuse the use of wrong spelling for the name of an organization due to general ignorance. However, to propose that wrong spelling for the official name of the state of Assam is inexcusable specially when it comes from an eminent ex President of *Asom Sahitya Sabha*.

Let us now analyze the Roman spelling ASOM against the proper Assamese phonetics. The 'A' in ASOM was apparently adopted following the various Roman transliteration of Hindi and Sanskrit terms without much thought and in fact ignoring proper Assamese phonetics. In Hindi and Sanskrit, the letter 'A' is generally used to represent the Hosro-O which is however pronounced as U as in 'but' in Hindi and Sanskrit. But the 'A' in ASOM is not supposed to sound like U as in 'but', but rather like O as in 'boy' which is the pronunciation of the Assamese Hosro-O. Secondly the spelling ASOM does not have the Assamese guttural X sound. In no language in the world, the letter S represents the Assamese guttural X sound. The letter S is always used for the sounds S as in 'sun' or Z as in 'casual'. Thus people will not pronounce the S as X, and ASOM will be pronounced as USOM at best.. Thus ASOM is a wrong spelling, and the fact *Asom Sahitya Sabha* has been using the wrong spelling for many years, does not make it right. We believe that the ex President of *Asom Sahitya Sabha* simply failed to see the obvious error in the spelling of the ASOM while suggesting the word.

In addition to the above problem, we find that the use the spelling ASOM will have in fact another serious and damaging affect for the Assamese language. Writing ASOM for the Assamese phonetic name *Oxom*, will force people to say *Osom* instead of *Oxom* and this will eventually kill the Assamese guttural X sound in the word *Oxom*. This will be similar to the cases in such words as *Saikia*, *Sarma*, *Satriya*, *Sankardev*, *Sivasagar*, *Satriya*, *Das* etc where we have either lost or are fast loosing the Assamese X sound because of our use of the S instead of X in these words. So far we do not have this problem, except some organizations like *Asom Sahitya Sabha* etc writing the wrong spelling for *Oxom*. However, once we make it official, we will eventually kill the X sound in the word *Oxom*. This will be the greatest dis-service that a Government can do to its own culture.

Conclusion: Normally the name of a country is either given by the outsiders or the name is formed by spontaneous use by the people of the country over time. The names such as India, America, Assam and Oxom were formed in such process. The name of a country is connected to its past history. We strongly feel that to try to change the name of a country suddenly and simply by taking cabinet level political decision without even discussing the merits of the issue with its people, is not only grossly unethical but is also a very undemocratic proposition

We now hope that the government of Assam would urgently revoke its decision to change the name of the state from ASSAM to ASOM. We also request the learned editor of '*Gariyashi*' magazine, ex President of *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, Mr Chandra Prasad Saikia, to kindly retrieve the proposal to change the name to ASOM, and issue a clarification of his position for the sake of the Assamese culture. We also request *Asom Sahitya Sabha* to revise

the spelling of its name to correct Assamese phonetic Roman spelling in order to preserve the phonetics of the Assamese language. We also hope that if in the future, the issue of changing the name of our land arises, the people of Assam would stand up and ask themselves the million dollar question first: What exactly is the reason that we want to change our eight hundred years old name ASSAM in the first place by spending crores of rupees?”

References:

1. 'Kamrupor Buronji' – Ed. Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan
2. 'Harakanta Xodoramin Baruar Oxomor Buronji' – Ed Dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan
3. 'Tung-Khungiya Buronji' – Ed dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan.
4. 'Xatxori Oxom Buronji' – Ed Dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan.
5. 'kamrupor Buronji' – Kanaklal barua
6. Axi Buronji – Gunabhiram Barua
7. 'oxomor Xong.skriti' – Dr Lila Gogoi.
8. 'Oxomiya Bhaxar Moulik Bisar- Debanand Bharali
9. 'Oxomiya Jati Aru Bhaxar Jonmo Kotha' – Bap Chandra Mahanta
10. 'Oxomiya Bhaxa-Tatta' – Sharma Aru Choudhury.
11. The Tai Race – William C Dodd
12. Assamese-Its Formation and Development – Dr Bani kanta Kakoty
13. History of Asamiya Literature – Dimbeswar Neog.
14. An Account of Assam – Dr. John Peter Wade.
15. Anglo Assamese Relations(1771-1826) – Dr. S. K. Bhuyan
16. Assam in the Days of Company – H. K. Borpujari.
17. A Statistical Account of Assam – W. W. Hinter.
18. A History of Assam – Sir Edward Gait.
19. A Cultural History of Assam – Birinchi Kumar Barua
20. Assam in the Eighteenth Century – Ramesh Ch Kalita.
21. Military Activities in Medieval Assam – B. C. Kalita
22. A Socio-Economic & Kuktural History of Medieval Assam – S. N. Sarma

(Note to pronunciation: X is a typical Assamese guttural kh sound, a velar fricative, and is pronounced as the 'ch' in the Scottish word 'Loch' or the German word 'Bach, as well as in the word 'Zurich' etc.)

Contact : For any questions or criticism, please contact or write to the author at the following address :
Rajen Barua, 22506 Stormcroft Lane, Katy, TX 77450: Tel: 281-701-3267(Mobile) email:
rajen.barua@gmail.com