'Assam, not Asom'

By Wahid Saleh

n February, the Assam Cabinet 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 was coined by the British. Are there any historical documents to prove that the name Assam was given by the British?

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

A map of the 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 name Assam appears on the map.

A letter sent by Joan Maertsuyker, Governor-General of the Dutch Batavia, congratulated Mirjumala on 29 August, 1663 addressing him as "..Grooten Mogol in Assam".

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.

The story of Travelling with Clara mentions that a rhino calf was captured in 1738 in Assam in the kingdom of the Great Mogol. The rhino named Clara arrived in Rotterdam on 22-07-1741 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 is mentioned in the following publications: Abul Fazal Allámi in his compilation Akbarnama, a biographical account of Akbar (1542 -1605) mentioned "Rajah of

Asham'

Abd al-Hamid Lahuri is known solely for his official history of the reign of Emperor Mughal Sahjahan, entitled Padshah namah(1627-1647). He wrote about the rebellion in Kúch-Hájú, which lies on the banks of the Brahmaputra, a large river, two kos in width, which flows from the country of Áshám into Bengal. Alamgir-Namah,

The Book of Aurangzeb by Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin (1657-1667), Aurangzeb's secretary mentions Asham. 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 Adab*i`Alamgiri*, 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" is mentioned in the



Novissimo Che Contiene Tutte Le Parti Del Mondo ... This atlas was published in Venice and based mainly on the work of Isaak Tirion.

> Acham is mentioned in French cartographer Rigobert Bonne's Carte de la Partie Superieure de l' Inde en deça du published Gange, around 1770.

The British arrived in Assam well after the Mughals went into decline and the reign of the Ahoms had weakened. The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826, under which Burma ceded all claims to Assam and other parts of what is the North-east today, and Assam came **British** under administration.

British changed the original names of places in India only when they a problem had pronouncing

indigenous names properly. Assam was not that kind of word. From the above, it can be 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 tea besides having 820 species of birds (highest for any Indian state). Assam is an established name amongst the ornithologists. Changing the name of Assam may only marginalise whatever little name recognition the Assamese have in the world today.

According to *Raijor Batori* published by the Assam government, the change of name from Assam to Asom is still in a resolution form and is not yet official. It still has to get the Central government's approval. Respected and prestigious English language newspapers like *The Assam* Tribune, 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 print media is trying to make it a fait accompli.

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 such as 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 Assam government 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

For 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 author 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.

(The writer, an Assamese from Jorhat, lives in the Netherlands.)





Naga reality checks and of phone calls and hugs

The leadership of the largest militant organisation in the North-east, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, is reported to be deeply concerned about corruption and moral decay in the ranks of the group. And, one would remark, it is high time for such a realisation to sink in, as any one who has travelled in the region and especially in Nagaland state, knows.

One does not expect a few media pundits sitting in Delhi, Kolkata and Guwahati to know anything about ground realities. Such pundits are misled on the situation because they do not know it and only depend on second or third hand information. In the process, they mislead others, wittingly or unwittingly. But there are a few checks which help bring a sense of reality to the situation.

Reality check one: Dimapur is the bustling, crowded commercial plains town which is Nagaland's business hub and its lifeline to Assam: the only railhead in Nagaland is here and goods and people flow in and out of here from other parts of the North-east and are regularly taxed by the not so underground groups in the state. A business figure who has extensive trade connections in other parts of the country and abroad speaks of visits from "the Mama Papa" party whose cadres come calling when they learn of shipments or it's time to collect the monthly pay packet. The visitor's mystification is written all over his face. The riddle is solved by a smiling business person: the NSCN (I-M) is known as the party of the "uncles", the general manner of reference to Isak Chisi Swu and Th Muivah, the principal flag bearers of the Naga movement. Hence Mama or uncle.

Reality check two: when the Khaplang faction of the NSCN issued an ill-conceived and hasty diktat demanding the departure of all Tangkhuls from Nagaland, there was a sharp denunciation not just from groups supportive of the NSCN (I-M), which is dominated by Tangkhuls such as Mr Muivah and his trusted aides but also from independent church leaders and civil society groups. In fact, several prominent citizens of the state met with the Tangkhul community in Kohima recently and urged

They even indicated that there were faults on all sides, including on the part of other tribes. This took the Tangkhul group by surprise and speakers said it was the first time they were hearing such openness and honesty. As a result, many Tangkhuls have stayed on. Without understanding and reconciliation among the Nagas and with their neighbours, there cannot be an enduring agreement between NSCN and Indian negotiators. The two are interlinked, umbilically. None of this is, of course, reported in the metro media. Hardly surprising: those who do not live in the region cannot understand this basic fact.

Reality check three: The discussions between the Government of India and the NSCN are not structured to an early settlement. Right now, the focus is to develop the legal and constitutional mechanisms that will enable both sides to accept change with honour and dignity. Oscar Fernandes, the principal Indian negotiator for the talks with the NSCN is an old North-east hand. In addition, he has the distinct advantage of not being burdened by any ideological baggage: he's a loyal Congressman, plain and simple, and is deeply engaged in politics for the party at his offices.

He also has the knowledge of moving about across Nagaland and other states of the region and has a clear understanding of the enormous pitfalls and pressures that await those who want a quick fix. Leaders like him need to meet all groups in the states and elsewhere in the North-east who have a view on the Naga imbroglio. And they need to travel as extensively as possible to get a sense of what is happening, instead of depending on the views of a few.

Time of solace, friendships

The messages of support, condolence and sympathy have poured into us from all across the country and the world. From people who knew Ma well, and those who didn't. From her school and college friends to members of her social circle in Shillong, from poets and writers to the devotional singers of naam and kirtan at the naam ghar (prayer hall) in Shillong to diplomats, professionals, political leaders and students.

They help, all of them do. The phone calls and the hugs, the unspoken words and those spoken, the good memories and the pain of remembered arguments and raised voices. Hundreds have come to the home in Motinagar, which she named Meghashree, to be with us. It's been a time of solace and renewed friendships, of remembering good times and difficult days. There have been tears and laughter. And if there is one thing to be grateful for in life, it is the grace of old friendships, from school days that continue unhesitatingly and which help

Over 200 close friends and relatives as well as neighbours came to the final feast which closed the overcome.

SHORT TAKE

Guwahati film festival

The 2nd Continental TRI Festival in Guwahati will screen the finest human rights cinema from the global south. Initiated in Latin America in 2002, South Africa in 2003 and India in 2004, the TRI Continental Film Festival has become an annual platform for narrative, documentary, feature and short-length films in the three continents.

This January-February, the festival travels to Delhi. Mumbai. Bangalore, Chennai and Kolkata over a fortnight, after which outreach screenings continue

through the year. The 16 documentaries and the four features selected have accolades all over the world. The festival will be organised by

Breakthrough in collaboration with the North East Network from 19-20 September, at Vivekananda Kendra, Uzan Bazar from 3 pm to 8 pm on both the days. Entry is free. The schedule for Guwahati is as follows:

On Tuesday, 19 September ~ 3pm - 3.15 pm: Inauguration; 3.15 pm - 4.07 pm: Bride Kidnapping in



Kyrgyzstan; 4.07 pm - 4.12 pm: Maati; 4.15 pm - 5.42 pm: The Take; 5.45 pm - 6.00 pm: Break; 6pm; Breakthrough's What Kind of Man Are You Video #1: 6pm-7.47pm; Sancharram ~ Journey.

On Wednesday, 20 September ~ 3pm - 4.02 pm: *Thirst*; 4.10 pm -4.31 pm: West Bank Story; 4.31 pm - 4.31pm: Breakthrough's What Kind of Man Are You Video #2; 4.31 pm - 4.50pm; Break; 4.50 pm - 6.36 pm: Sisters in Law; 6.40 pm - 8pm: No More Tears Sister.

Drought stalks Assam

By Bijay Sankar Bora

book Baharistan-i-Ghaibi written

by Alauddin Isfahan alias Mirza

Nathan, a history of the Mughal

wars in Assam, Cooch Behar,

Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during

the reigns of Jahangir and Shah

Jahan, translated from the original

Persian by MI Borah, Gauhati,

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

Impero Del Gran Mogol (India)

by Giovanni Albrizzi published in

Venice in 1740 mentions "Acham"

in this map of India from Atlante

original.

prolonged dry spell in 22 of the total 27 districts in Assam and a 30 per cent rain deficit has hit some 10 lakh rural families, confronting them with unprecedented hardship. The state has been hit hard by drought as a result of the most erratic monsoon in over 100 years. The state agriculture department says that over 4.95 lakh hectares of Sali crop ~ the principal kharif paddy grown in Assam ~ has been severely affected. This year's target of producing 40 lakh tons of rice looks a chimera.

The life of the Sali crop is till December and even if there is sufficient rain in the coming days, it will not be possible to make up the projected production deficit.

Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Nalbari and Kamrup are the worst-hit districts. Efforts by the state government to provide 10 litres of diesel free to every farming family to help run pump sets to lift water from rivers and underground sources have hardly made any impact.

As part of its crisis management strategy, the government also Assam announced a Rs 50 crore special package to help farmers affected by the "drought-like" situation. The package is meant for

providing free rabi crop seeds, fertilizer and cost of tilling the land with the use of tractors. The state government is planning to introduce a food-for-work programme to provide relief.

The state government has promised free rabi crop seeds, free fuel and power tillers for the turns out remains to be seen. The irrigation projects in the state are in poor condition since they were hardly used in previous years when the state was struck by floods.

Farmers warn of famine and suicides if the government fails to act fast. Nizamuddin Khan, head of the Assam Rajyik Krishak Sabha (ARKS), the apex body of farmers here, says: "Contrary to what the government has been saying, there is real drought in the state and not just a drought-like situation.'

Mr Khan says that the government should declare a drought in all the 22 affected districts.

Over 12 lakh landless agricultural workers in Assam have been worst affected by the drought and the ARKS wants the government to create alternative livelihoods for them. Dispur has urged the Central government to guide it in tackling the unprecedented situation.

The state hardly has a proper irrigation system in place to cope with the crisis and Mr Khan, the ARKS chief, says that because of this gap, the rabi or spring crop would also be harmed.

Preliminary estimates by the state government indicate that drought-hit. How effective this the agriculture sector in Assam has lost crop worth Rs 1,200 crore so far this year because of the dry spell.

Rice production slumped from 39.15 lakh tons last year to less than 27.43 lakh tons.

Politics and politicians, of course, as in every human tragedy or calamity, are never too far away. The BJP's Assam unit has

demanded a special package of Rs 2,000 crore from the Central government to tide over the crisis and the distribution of free rice among drought-hit farmers.

The chief minister, Mr Tarun Gogoi, announced that efforts were being made to create jobs for drought-hit farmers to help them survive the difficult period. All state government departments have been instructed to create avenues to facilitate temporary employment of drought-hit farmers.

(The author is The Statesman's Special Guwahati-based Representative)

Education in tribal languages

ontinuing our series on the proposed proposed National Tribal Policy. Excerpts from Part V

To comprehend lessons taught, tribal children will be taught in their mother tongue at least till classes I to III. This step will be adopted particularly in case of unilingual tribes. Text books will be prepared in tribal languages and acknowledge the role of tribal leaders and tribes people in the struggle for Indian Independence and their contribution in other areas.

The portrayal of tribes people in the text books will be imbued with human dignity and empathy. This will be completed by the end of the Eleventh Plan period.... A normative network of primary, primary, secondary and high schools equipped with proper school buildings, hostels other requisite infrastructure facilities will be worked out for all tribal areas.

The norms would generally be one residential high school for ST boys and one residential high school for ST girls in each block in the tribal areas, and at least one primary school and one primary girls' hostel in every gram panchayat. About 10 per cent to 25 per cent nontribal students from the neighbourhood will be admitted in these schools for encouraging integration

and competition. The target of completing



and operationalising 100 Eklavya Model Residential Schools with classes VI to XII as per the the tribal affairs ministry's scheme will be achieved and all schools will have a high standard of education by the end of the

11th Plan period. Teacher absenteeism is high in schools in tribal areas, primarily because when appointments are made at the district level, the candidates selected are normally from in and the district around headquarters and do not

want to go to interior areas. teacher prevent

absenteeism in tribal areas, Plan; opening primary local and tribal teachers from panchayats will be given preference in employment, and the teaching and non-teaching staff of primary schools will be placed under the control of the village management committee appointed by the gram sabha or gram panchayat.

The government will take steps to improve education, sports and employment opportunities for STs by ensuring: annual increase of 3 per cent in literacy growth rate, for both male and female; 100 per cent enrolment of tribal children and reduction in drop-out rates, especially tribal girls, to bring at par with others by the end of the 11th Five Year schools for boys and girls within a radius of one kilometre of tribal villages; opening residential facilities for primary sections at the panchayat level: development of primers in

major tribal languages for students up to Class III; making a residential high school or hostel facilities available in every block in tribal areas with the provision for food and other consumables and to provide 10 per cent ~ 25 per cent of seats for non-tribal students from the neighbourhood below poverty line families inter-mixing for competition and introducing appropriate incentives for parents to

send their daughters to

13 days of mourning, when we ended the days of eating a meal of boiled rice, brinjal and potatoes with pulao, mutton, fish tenga and kalia, dal and paneer, mixed vegetables and sweet curd, rosogollas and cream. The fish came from Nogaon, the cream and rosogollas from Jagiroad and Guwahati, respectively. A friend supplied gas cylinders for the cooking, another offered the deep freezers in his family restaurants to store the sweets and fish. These are kindness we value deeply. The tented canopy that closed the house in all these days was dismantled today. The Shillong sun pours down on Meghashree again. There are difficult days ahead but they can, with her strength of will, determination and generosity as icons, be