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Shri Homen Borgohain  
Ex-President, Asom Sahitya Sobha  
Guwahati  
Assam

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

Berkel en Rodenrijs,  
10-05-2006

Dear Shri Borgohain,

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.

I am from Jorhat and living in Europe for more than 43 years. I have left Assam. But Assam has never left me.

Understanding that you and the Oxom Xahityo Xobha played a major role in the decision making process of the Government of Assam in adopting a resolution, without any public discussion, to change the official name of the state from ASSAM to ASOM, I am addressing this letter to you also.

The reason given is that name ASSAM is not an indigenous one and is coined by the British. Do we have historical documents to prove that the name Assam is given by the British? If not, 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 Golf 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 is not changing its name to Bharat. If India can live with the name of India, why can't we live with the name Assam?

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.

India prides itself as a democratic country and plays a role model. The government of Assam should give the arguments for their proposal to change the name of the state. 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

*PS:* In the Internet I tried to find some information about Assam Literary Society. In these days of computers and information technology, I thought that an organisation which was founded in 1917 to promote the culture of Assam and the literature in the Assamese language would certainly have its presence in the Internet. But information of Assam Literary Society (Oxôm Xahityô Xôbha) is not available on the Internet.

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- 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](http://banglapedia.net/HT/B_0048.HTM) .
- ii Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh. [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/F\\_0039.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/F_0039.htm) .
- iii The Indian Antiquary, July 1887, pp 222-226.
- 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](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](http://www.asherbooks.com/1391_v.html)
- vii Dutch Sources on South Asia C. 1600-1825, Jos Gommans, Lennart Bes, Gijs Kruijtzer, 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.