

ASSAM
FROM
AGITATION
TO
ACCORD

H.N. RAFIABADI

About The Book

When Shri Rajiv Gandhi signed the Assam Accord, the nation believed the stormy days of the agitation were over. Unfortunately, this was not so. This only provided a new basis for the turmoil to continue.

In "Assam : From Agitation to Accord", Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi has done a signal service by presenting the lesser known side of the Assam Agitation; the disastrous implications of the Accord on the state's minorities, especially the Muslims.

The first half of this investigation details the background to the Agitation, makes an introduction to the Muslim predicament in Assam and discusses the implications of the Accord. The fourth chapter presents specific instances of the misuse of the provisions of the Accord.

In the second half of the book are reproduced the actual documents concerning the Assam Accord, including the Accord itself and the various reactions to its implementation.

Rafiabadi's study and analysis must make the discerning reader wonder where we as Indians are heading for.

About the Author

Rafiabadi was born in Doabgah Rafiabad, Kashmir in 1958. He completed his early education in his home State. Later, he secured M.A.'s in Philosophy and Theology from the Aligarh Muslim University winning gold medal for his academic brilliance. Rafiabadi is now a research scholar at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi at the department of Philosophy .

Apart from his formal academic achievements, Rafiabadi has won the admiration of his peers with his brilliant debating, oratory and contributions to reputed research publications. He is on the editorial boards of a number of journals and news magazines. Rafiabadi also has two books to his credit.

Harnid Naseem Rafiabadi is the pseudonym of Hamidullah Marazi.

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H.N. Rafiabadi

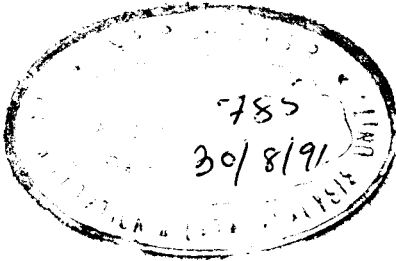


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INTRODUCTION

Assam is one of the most beautiful regions of India with blue hills, green valleys and the majestic river Brahmaputra. Assam stands virtually unrivalled in respect of the variety of her natural resources and the diversity of her population. Assam is situated in the North-East corner of India, the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas. The present state of Assam is situated between twenty-four and twenty-eight degrees north latitude and eighty-nine and ninety-seven degrees east longitude. The long alluvium of the Brahmaputra or Assam proper, extended at the beginning of our period from the river Minati Manah, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra to the foot of the Himalayas close to the frontier of China. On the north, it was bounded by the hills inhabited by the Bhutas, the Akas, the Duflas and the Abors. The hills occupied by Mishmis, the Khamtis and the Singhpos separate Assam from China and Burma. To the South-East lay the states of Cachar and Manipur. From the Palkai hills, which form the natural boundary with Burma, runs the irregular chain of mountains commonly known as the Assam Range, occupied by the Nagas, the Jayantis, the Khasis and the Goras, westward in succession. Girded on almost all sides by mountains, Assam remained practically isolated, for very long. Although the river Brahmaputra formed the highway of communication, navigation along the river before the age of steam was always uncertain and at times extremely hazardous. Geography had imposed a formidable barrier on her contact with the rest of the world although Assam was accessible to the dwellers of the neighbouring hills through numerous passes and river routes and in fact, for ages the fortunes of the hills and plains, were closely related and inextricably interwoven.

Assam proper means the Brahmaputra Valley. The great river Brahmaputra enters Assam from the North-East frontier and flows through the state east to west traversing a distance of 805 kilometres. It is said that what the Gangetic valley is to the history of North India, the Brahmaputra valley is to the history of Assam. Assam's culture and civilization flourished in the plains on both sides of this river. All ancient kingdoms of Assam arose in this valley.

The Brahmaputra valley has witnessed a variety of historical upheavals. There is a large concentration of Muslim population on both sides of the Brahmaputra. In Nalbhadi district, for instance there are places where Muslim concentrations of population have suffered the worst type of inhuman eviction during the past three years.

There is a net-work of rivers flowing into the Brahmaputra both from the north and the south. Most of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra become furious during the rainy season as the rainfall is very heavy in the months of May, June and July. Floods are commonplace in the Brahmaputra valley and have contributed to the creation of riverine areas known as "Chars". These areas take shape after the floods are over and the water has flowed away; with later floods these areas are sometimes absorbed and submerged into the body of the river, and the houses and huts are washed away by the forceful waters, resulting in the helpless inhabitants of the banks of the river being rendered homeless.

The name "Assam" was derived from the Sanskrit word *Asama* which means peerless. The name 'Assam' is, in fact, peerless, judged by her exquisite natural beauty, cultural richness and human wealth. For example, Assam is remarkable for the number of its languages. It is a paradise for philologists. A number of vernaculars are spoken in Assam which are indigenous to the province. There are even seven languages of Asiatic origin outside India whose speakers figure among the Assamese, while no less than 11 European languages were spoken in Assam by its European settlers.

The history of Assam is as colourful as the land itself. It dates back to the Vedic period. Assam was known as "Prag Jyotisha" or the place of eastern astronomy in the earliest days and was mentioned frequently in Indian scriptures, mythologies and poetical works as "Kamrupa". In a later period after the mighty Ahoms took over the administration of the land in 1228 this eastern-most state came to be known as "Assam". The state forms the core of the North-Eastern region of the country and Guwahati, the biggest city of Assam is the gateway to the North-East. The North-Eastern states comprise Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The temporary state capital, Dispur, stands towards the South-East of Guwahati. The geographical area of Assam is 78,523 sq. kilometres; there are 18 districts in Assam; the number of inhabited villages is 21,995, and the number of uninhabited villages is 1,106; there are 72 towns and 31 Muhkuma parishads, 135

development blocks and 717 Gaon panchayats. The major rivers of Assam are known as the Brahmaputra, Kopili, Barak, Manah, and Aie. The total population of Assam is 1,46,25,152 consisting of 77,14,240 males and 69,10,912 females. The percentage of literacy is approximately 27 and the density of population is 27 per sq.km.

The Composition of Assam's Population

There are Assamese caste Hindus, Harijans and Muslims, and Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims who speak Indo-Aryan languages such as Assamese and Bengali. There are also Tibetan-Chinese ethnic groups consisting of Bodo, Nago-bodo, Upper Assam Tribals and Tais, among the Bodo ethnic group there are the following groups:

Bodo-Cacharis of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang,

Metches of Goalpara,

Ravas of Goalpara and Kamrup,

Lalungs of Nagong and Karbianslong (This tribal group took active part in the Nellie massacre, in which thousands of Muslims were killed,

Sonowals of Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh,

Chutias of Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh,

Mishings of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar,

Manipuris of Cachar,

Karbis Tribals of Karbianslong, and

Dimachas of North Cachar Hills.

It is for this reason that Assam is described as a land of remarkable variety, from the point of view of ethnology. The appellation, an "anthropological museum" is, therefore, justly applicable to this land of *variegated racial and cultural patterns*.

The other classification of the Assam tribals is made as follows:

Hill Tribals consisting of: Karbis, Dimacha-Kacharis, Rengma Nagas, Zemi Nagas, Kukis, Hmars and Garos.

Plains Tribals consisting of: Bodo Kacharis,

Mishings, Barmans, Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Ha

Jongs and Maches.

These tribals speak languages peculiar to their own groups. There is a variation in their linguistic accents as well.

The Assamese language is a language of Sanskritic origin, directly connected with "Pracya-Magadli Apabhramsha". The language developed through centuries of cultural fusion with various tribes and races. The influence of the Astro-Asiatic, Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman dialects is very marked in the Assamese language. There is a significant impact of Persian also on the Assamese language.

The earliest specimen of Assamese literature is found in the Buddhistic 'Gan-o-Doha'. Minanath, a Kamrupi fisherman by caste, composed several Buddhist hymns. Bengali Hindus and Muslims have also contributed a lot to enrich Assamese. Unwritten Assamese literature is discernible in the aphorisms of Dak, and the songs and ballads pertaining to episodes of Behula-Lakimdar, Phool Konwar and Main Konwar. Thousands of boatman-songs, marriage songs, and lullabies have also been handed down from generation to generation, through word of mouth. Dak aphorisms are supposed to have been composed prior to the 18th century A.D. It was at the beginning of 13th century A.D., during the reign of Durlabh Narayan of Kamatapur, (present-day Goalpara district), that literature in the modern sense came to be written in Assamese, by writers like Hema Saraswati. According to the noted Indologist, Dr. Grierson, "Assamese literature is essentially a natural product. It always has been national and it is so still".

The principal agricultural products of Assam are rice, jute, cotton, tea, oranges and other fruits. The tea industry is one of the main foreign exchange earners. At this point, it is worth noting that the immigration from Bihar and Bengal was encouraged by the British mainly for the cultivation of tea. In this sense Assam is purely an agricultural state. Its largest and most important industry, namely cultivation of tea, is mainly agricultural and tea gardens do not make for urban communities. In the forties, when Assam had 17 municipalities and 8 small towns, including the Shillong cantonment, 97 per cent of its total population lived in villages and tea gardens. Before the forties, for 25 years the total number of immigrants from Eastern Bengal brought to Assam for cultivation of tea, reached 5 lakhs. Nowadays, along with tea industry, the oil industry has also progressed and plays a vital role in the country's total oil production. The Digboi oil refinery of A.O.C. Ltd., the Gauhati Refinery and the Bongaigaon Refinery and Petro-Chemical Complex are the prominent oil refineries. Yet, despite the growth of the oil industry, agriculture accounts for the livelihood of about four-fifths of the state's population and is the key to the Assam's economic growth.

In modern times, Assam tops the list of the tea producing states in India. The state contributes about one quarter of the world's entire tea production.

The Muslims of Assam, especially its Bengali Muslims have been largely engaged in the agricultural growth of Assam from the very beginning and are still contributing to the largest quantity of agricultural products, such as rice, wheat and tea.

The special festivals of the Assamese are the three Bihus: the Rongali Bihu, which marks the advent of the cropping season, the Bhogali Bihu or the harvest festival, and the Kongali Bihu or Bihu of the lean period. The Bihus are popular for the indigenous dances of Assam. Besides, a large variety of tribal dances are prevalent in the state. The Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings and other tribes have ten distinctive rich and colourful dances.

Guwahati is Assam's biggest city. It houses the State's present capital Dispur, and had been the capital of many past kings. It is located on the south bank of the Brahmaputra.

Sibsagar is another well-known city of Assam. Nearby are the Rongghar and Tatalal Ghuar sites (at a distance of 13 km from Sibsaagar) famous for their tanks and massive temples.

Assam is a land of diverse cultures. It has been so from pre-historic times. People of different races entered Assam and settled there. The earliest people of Assam, of whom we know, belonged to the Negrito race. No relics of such people have yet been discovered. Scholars such as J.H. Hulton have noticed Negrito characteristics in the Angami Nagas living in Nagaland. Traces of proto-Austroloid stock are also evident. They have close kinship to the Australian tribes, and so are called 'Proto-Austroloid'. The Khasis and Syntenges appear to belong to this stock. Next came the Dravidians, who entered India through Baluchistan in pre-historic times. The Dravidian elements in Assam's population are yet to be studied.

After the Dravidians the Mongolians entered Assam from the north and the north-east. The larger section of the Mongoloid people came from China and Tibet; some, however, had come from Burma. Of the Mongolians, the great Boro tribe appeared and established itself in the valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early. This tribe entered north and east Bengal and North Bihar as well. Other branches of this great tribe are the Kacharis, Garos, Meches, Rabhas and Tipras. The north Assam tribes of the Abors, Akas, Daflas, Misis and Mishmis were all Mongolians and

appear to have come later and established themselves to the north of the Brahmaputra plains. Other groups of the same stock are the Nagas, Kukis, Mikirs and Mizos. The date of the first Mongolian migration in to Assam is still a matter of speculation. It has been estimated by some that the Mongolian migration took place long before 1000 B.C.

The Mongolians were followed by the Aryans. In early Vedic literature eastern India is mentioned as the 'melecchi country'. In later Vedic literature, during the Brahmic period, i.e., the 6th or 7th century B.C., we find the tradition mentioned of the migration of the Aryans to the east of the river. Sadanira, i.e., the Karotoya, was the western boundary of Assam in ancient times. The Aryans could not increase very greatly in number in Assam. Racially, Assam has continued to be the home of non-Aryans.

Assam became the meeting ground of diverse types of people and cultures. The Aryans established their cultural supremacy in this area which spread through a process of Aryanization of the non-Aryans. Yet, Aryanization was never completely established. Many of non-Aryans took shelter in accessible hills and mountains and lived there preserving their culture and pattern of life. The history of Assam can be broadly divided into four periods: These are (1) pre-historic period; (2) early historic period; (3) The Ahom period; and (4) the Modern period.

No history of Assam is complete without mention of the Ahom rule., The Ahoms ruled Assam for about 600 years before the British. In 1215, a new tribe known as the Ahom left upper Burma and moved towards India. The Ahoms were an offshoot of the great Tai or Shan race which lived in Upper Burma. The leader under whom the Ahoms marched towards India was Sukapha. After breaking through the Naga obstruction, in 1228 A.D., he arrived in Khamjang. He reached Charaideo in about 1254 A.D. and he built a city there amid general rejoicing. Sukapha established friendly relations with tribes like the Morans and Borahis after defeating them. He treated them as equals and encouraged inter-marriage between the Ahoms and the conquered tribes. By this policy of statesmanship he wedded them all into one nation. He made friends with his brother rulers in Upper Burma and sent presents to them. He died in 1268 A.D. This was the beginning of the Ahom rule in Assam.

A succession of Ahom rulers in Assam followed Sukapha, Sutapha, Sukapha's son, ruled for 13 years (1268-1281). The reign of the next king Subinpha was uneventful. He ruled from 1281 to 1293. Next came Sukhangpha (1293-1332), followed by Sukhrangpha (1332-

1364). There were periods of ministerial rule also. Sukhrangpha was succeeded by his brother Sutupha (1363-1376). When this king was treacherously murdered by the Chutiya King, there was no worthy prince fit for the throne. So, two ministers carried on the administration themselves from 1376 to 1380. In 1389-98, in absence of a suitable successor, the ministers again ruled nine years without a king.

Sudangpha became the king in 1398. As he was brought up in a Brahmin's house he came to be known as Brahmin prince. During his reign there was the growth of Brahminical influence among the Ahoms. He appointed Brahmins to high posts and many Hindu rites and ceremonies were then introduced in the royal palace. We can very well imagine how these actions were very resented by the Ahom priests. Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi has explained this Hinduization process of Ahoms in Assam as follows:

The twentieth Ahom monarch, Cheoftpa Hso-Tam-La (1648-1663), who assumed the Hindu name of Jayadhvaj Singha, was the first in the dynasty to receive initiation (Saran) with all formality from a Vaisnav abbot named Niranjan Bapu in the year A.D. 1654, which was the sixth regional year. Niranjan Bapu was the first Satradhikar (abbot) of the Aumati Satra (Vaisnava monastery) in Majuli in the district of Sibsagar and Jayadhvaj Singha made a grant of land of paiks (workers) to the maintenance of the Satra. That was the beginning of the Hindu period of the Ahom rule in Assam and since then every Ahom king officially assumed a Hindu name in addition to his Tai-Ahom name on accession to the throne. The coronation ceremony was also held both according to the Ahom and Hindu form.

During the reign of Tao-Kham-Thi (1380-1389), the seventh king, the influence of Hinduism, if any, was negligible both in the royal court and among the Tai people of the kingdom. But an unhappy affair in the family of Tao-Kham created a situation which made it possible for the Brahminical influence to penetrate into the royal court and enjoy a privileged position in the kingdom. In a military campaign against the Chutiyas, Tao-Kham-Thi was temporarily absent from the capital. He had placed the elder of his two wives in charge during his absence with power to manage the affairs of the state. Having no issue, she was envious of the younger wife who was then pregnant. The queen ordered her execution on a false charge, but the Bura Gohain enabled her to escape on a raft. She was rescued and given shelter by a Brahmin in Habung (now district

Lakhimpur). There, in due course, she delivered a male child who was later brought to the capital by the nobles and placed on the throne after Tao-Kham-Thi's death left no other descendant. In gratitude for the care taken of him in his early life this young king, who assumed the name of Hso-Dang-Hpa, brought and settled the Brahman family in the capital at Charagua in Dihing.

King Hso-Hum-Mong's reign (1497-1539) marked a new *turn* in the progress of Hinduism in the Ahom kingdom, for during this period the Brahminical influence considerably increased in the Ahom court and kingdom and the title of Svarga Narayan was conferred on the king, probably at the coronation, by the Brahmin priests. Gait points out that this new title of Svarga Narayan was henceforth affixed by the Ahom Kings to their official documents. Hso-Hum-manig was also the first Ahom king to use the Saka era as the official calendar.

The Hinduization of the Ahoms was a very important event in the history of Assam because this resulted in the beginning of a new era in the history of Assam which culminated in the creation of sectarian divisions. The other aspect of this shift, is very important, that the Tai-Ahom religion was changed by the Hindu religious beliefs concerning God. The Tai-Ahom religion was based on certain fundamental beliefs in supernatural powers. The people believed in an omnipotent God (Pha-Tu-Ching). They also believed in an hierarchy of Gods which owed their origin to the Great God. They were not atheists in any sense of the term. They worshipped these various gods with elaborate ceremony and they also worshipped their ancestors with great devotion. The violence and intolerance which later became evident in Assam, is attributed to this development by some writers. Dr.Gogoi writes, "the Ahom rulers, before accepting Hinduism as their religion were tolerant of all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and tribal cults". "They allowed", he continues, "all communities to enjoy their freedom of conscience. There was no religious persecution nor religious riots between communities in the Ahom kingdom". It is said that, it was only the Phuteswaris' secretarian policy that alienated the Marasis and Malaks and also created conditions for a civil war for the first time in the long history of Ahom rule in Assam. According to Dr.Gogoi, the Ahom kings patronised the Hindus with liberal grants of land and labour for the maintenance of Hindu religious institutions such as temples and satras. They also welcomed Muslim pirs and granted them maintenance lands called pirpat grants, a precedent first set by Mir Jumla.

This does not imply that the Ahoms accepted Hinduism without any resentment. They opposed this process. Dr. Gogoi writes,

“The Ahom priesthood (Mo-Sham, Mo-Hung, Mo-Plangor in Assamese ‘Deadhais’, Mohans and Bailungs) resisted the change over to Hinduism and even cursed the kings who initiated this revolutionary change in religious policy. The priests predicted ill of the future and subsequent misfortunes into which the country had fallen, since as the temporary conquest of Assam by Mir Jumla, chaos from Udayadilyas’ reign to the accession of Hso-Pat-Hpa, Jay Matis’ torture and death and Moamaria rebellion, were ascribed to the adoption of an alien religion at its decadent and degenerate stage with all its inherent disintegrating elements and superstitions like sectarianism, casteism, taboos and untouchability”.

This resentment was shown by the Ahoms several times. Dr. Gogoi continues:

“As a reaction to the introduction of cremation among the Ahoms by the order of Phuteswari, the Ahom priests made an effigy of the deceased king, Hso-Rem-Hpa or Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) in clay, and having performed the Rikkhvan ceremony (Rik:Call, Khvan: :life) buried it according to Ahom custom. Chakradhvaj Singha ascribed Jayadhvaja’s misfortune to the neglect of Ahom religion. Rajeswar’s successor, Hso-Nyeu-Hpa or Laksmi Singha (1769-1780), who had been overthrown by the Maran rebels who set up their own rulers at the capital, began to realize, it is said, the unwisdom of adopting Hinduism and the correctness of the prognostications of the Ahom priests. And when a Hindu goddess Tara, popular in Bengal was worshipped with elaborate ceremony and immense amount of money was distributed to the Brahmins, the Ahom priests refused to take part in this worship”.

Dr. Gogoi says further that, “the sectarian development of Hinduism with its caste-ridden social system became the breeding ground of sectarian divisions among the Hindus themselves which, by destroying the strong and unitary foundation of the Ahom kingdom, made it prey to external enemies”. He continues:

“The period of Ahom religion as the religion of the race upto the reign of Hso-Hsang-Hpa (1603-1641) or Pratap Singha, which means more than 400 years out of 600 years of Ahom rule, was also the period of glorious victories, and expansion of the kingdom, but

the subsequent change of religion on the part of the rulers beginning with Hso-Tain-La or Jeyadhraj Singha generated socio-religious forces quite unsuited to a virile and caste-free race like the Ahoms and the result was that by stages the kingdom began to shake and shrink in strength till the advent of the British in the third decade of the 19th century".

About the present day condition of the Tai-Ahoms, Dr. Gogoi says, "The present-day Tai-Ahoms have racial unity but are socially and religiously disintegrated by sectarian Hinduism".

The Hinduization of the Ahoms changed the political and social spectrum of Assam. Prior to the advent of the East India Company the valley of Brahmaputra was ruled by these Ahoms.

The emergence of the Kaches in the early sixteenth century called a halt to the forward policy of the Ahoms, but their authority was challenged by the Mughals in the West. The Ahom Mughal conflict continued with occasional breaks for the greater part of the seventeenth century. The Mughals under the command of Nawab Mir Jumla advanced in 1662 as far as Gargaon, the capital of the kingdom, and compelled its ruler Jayadhraj Singha (1648-1663) to cede western Assam to Mughals. King Gadadhar Singha (1681-96) finally expelled the Mughals in 1682, reoccupied Guwahati and extended the boundary of the kingdom as far as the river Manah.

From the middle of the eighteenth century the Ahom monarchy was on the decline.

It was in 1794 that the British troops were withdrawn and Assam once again relapsed to her former state of anarchy and misrule. During the reigns of Kamaleshwar (1795-1811) and Chandra Kanta (1811-18), the successors of Gaurinath, the feeble Ahom monarchy showed little of its earlier vitality and strength.

In 1817 the Burmese appeared on the scene. They crushed all opposition and installed Raja Chandrakanta in full power and returned with a huge indemnity and an Ahom princess as a present to the Burmese monarch. The Burmese king despatched Ala Minigi at the head of another Burmese force which entered Assam in February 1819, as certain developments took place when Chandrakanta was deposed and Purandar was raised to the throne. After a period of resistance, Purandar fled to Gauhati and took refuge in the company's territory. Though reinstated Chandrakanta found the Burmese to be dangerous allies; for they were determined to rule over Assam themselves. He too entered into the

Company's territory in utter disgust. Assam thus came under the rule of the Burmese, who placed a puppet Jogeswar Singha on the throne.

Assam was annexed by the British in 1826. The Assamese people rose in revolt against the British two years later. The message of freedom from the rest of the country further ignited Assam's spirit of freedom, and her people, both Hindus and Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the Indian Nation. The early British occupation was followed by a period of administrative confusion. In less than half a century the greater part of the hill tracks came under the effective control or sphere of influence of the British. It was this period which marked the start of the problems which face Assam till today. The interests of the British were merely of economic exploitation rather than of improving the lot of the masses or redressing their grievances. The immigration problem and the foreigner's issue is also closely related to the British policies of this period of Assam's history.