

Taming the Tempest

ASSAM SINCE 1983

Rekha Bakshi



In this book the author traces the efforts of Assam Chief Minister Hiteshwar Saikia to tackle the agitation in the State revolving around the foreign nationals' issue. The agitation was at its violent worst when he took the reins of the state in his hands. When he became the Chief Minister, the situation was unnerving, and putting Assam back on the rails was a daunting task. The road to normalcy was complex as well as uphill. Besides the immediate need of containing the flames of violence the state was required to set about the task of relief and rehabilitation for the three lakh displaced persons; of providing hope and faith to an Assam torn apart by violence; of building up confidence and trust; and of rejuvenating a shattered economy. At the same time, the administration and the development agencies had to be revitalised.

This book gives an insight into the multi-pronged strategy adopted by the Assam Government to tame the raging tempest in the State and to bring peace back to Assam. The case of Assam is unique, for never before have a people reached the brink of such a precipice from which they have been pulled back to development and progress in such a short span of time. The book gives an appraisal of this recovery and of the man who brought it about.

Cover transparency of the Chief Minister:
N.K. Sarin

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After obtaining her Master's degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi she started her journalistic career in the Indian Express chain of newspapers—first in Chandigarh and then in New Delhi. She has been the Editor-in-charge of the Sunday Magazine of the National Herald between 1981-1983, before she took charge of the Special Publications Division.

She was inspired to write this book when she extensively toured Assam in connexion with the publication 'Spotlight on Assam' she brought out in April last year. This book—her second work on Assam—is the result of her coverage of the State and the dozen interview sessions she had with the Assam Chief Minister, Mr. Hiteshwar Saikia.

TAMING THE TEMPEST

Assam Since 1983

REKHA BAKSHI



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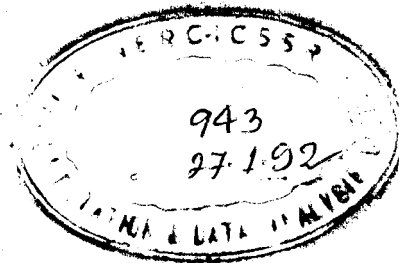
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“No Regrets”, Says Hiteshwar Saikia

During the course of writing this book I met the Chief Minister over a dozen times. But every time I left him, a feeling lingered that some questions still remained unanswered and that the picture I had was not a complete one. However, the comprehensive interview I had with him at his Secretariat on 16 January 1985, made this picture sharper and fuller. All through the three and a half-hour question-answer session that day, the Chief Minister was candid, almost brutally frank. We talked on diverse topics ranging from politics to films, from the agitation to his future vision of Assam.

Mr. Saikia told me how he tackled the foreign nationals' issue. And how he had been able to befriend the people of Assam who had been so hostile to his ministry earlier.

When I referred to the talk of his having a 'deal' with the All Assam Students Union so that the electoral enumeration in the State could be done smoothly, he said with animation, 'I have had no deal with AASU'. There was another flash of anger when I reminded him about allegations of his involvement in the split in the AASU. He said emphatically, 'I had no hand in their split'.

In contrast, he grew emotional when he talked of his plans

for Assam's development and his dreams for the State. 'I want to see to it that not a single person in the State remains below the poverty line,' he said with feeling.

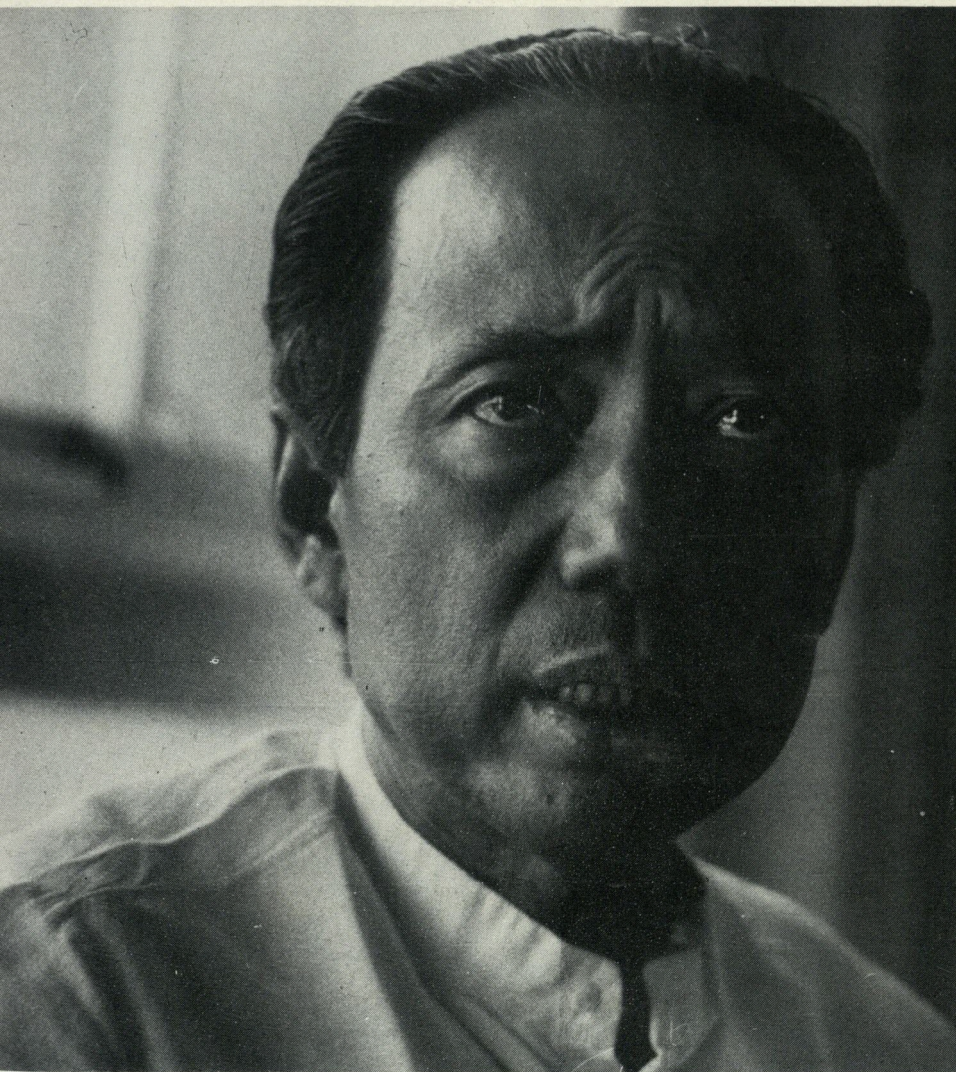
Talking about the solution to the crisis in Assam he asserted that any solution should look after the interests of all genuine Indians and that he too did not like the presence of foreigners in the State.

When I had met Hiteshwar Saikia the previous day at his residence, he had offered me the traditional *bihu peetha* (sweetmeat), coconut *laddus* and *kheer*—all so delectably prepared by his wife Hemo Prava. When I pinned him down at the Secretariat for the interview, he offered me the same traditional sweets. Like every Assamese, Saikia was enjoying his *Bihu* and I felt a pang of guilt for taking him back to the grim world of Assam politics where the State was battling with the extremists and a host of other problems. I present here excerpts from that interview and from a series of interviews I had with the Chief Minister over January 1985.

Rekha Bakshi: When you became the Chief Minister of the State, the agitation was at its violent worst. How did you tame the agitators?

Hiteshwar Saikia: It was a very difficult task. The day I was elected the leader of the party, newsmen asked me, 'What would be your first job?' I told them that *rehabilitating the people made homeless and bringing back normalcy would receive top priority*. I knew that many in Assam who supported the agitation, and were determined to drive out the foreign nationals, did not support violence. The Assamese are a peace-loving people with a tradition of assimilation through which they have grown and gathered strength.

Even during the partition of the country, Assam did not see any violence. So, I was confident that the people of Assam would be one with me in tackling these twin jobs that were so



"Poverty touches me most. I have worked among the poor since I can remember."



"I read Indiraji's biography in which it is said that she was so weak earlier that doctors advised her not to get married. But, not merely did she defy the doctors on this count but she lived a full life in which she achieved more than any other person in this country for centuries. Her example gave me tremendous strength during my illness."

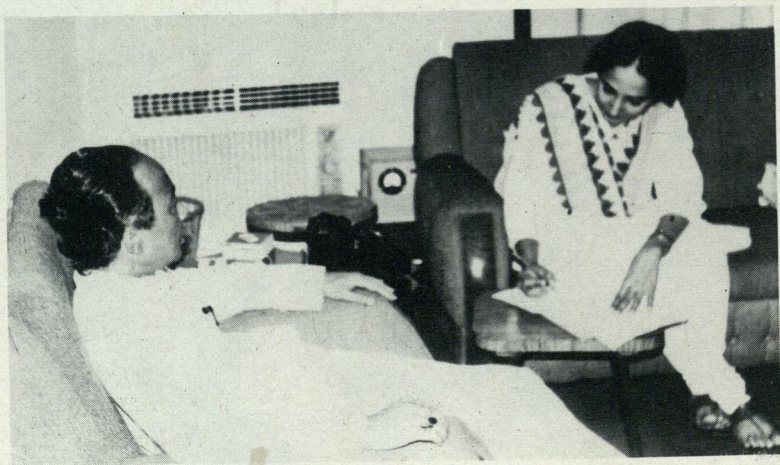


"I am confident that our new Prime Minister will restore to politics its true meaning—that of serving the people—and will cleanse it of all that is opportunistic."





"I have struck no deal with AASU. I am fighting for a genuine cause. If they oppose me on this issue (electoral enumeration) they will be digging their own graves." Below: With the author during the interview.



urgent. Unlike some other peoples, the Assamese have still retained their traditional hospitality and the guest is an honoured person in every household here.

Next in my priority list was the economic rehabilitation of the affected people as well as the upliftment of the downtrodden. Assam consists of 21,995 villages and 62 towns. I, myself, hail from a village. My father is a cultivator. I know the plight of the poor farmer. I saw that during these four years of turmoil, the worst sufferers were the students and the peasants.

Many well-to-do people living in the towns were with the agitators and provided them monetary and other assistance. Their children's studies did not suffer either, for, they generally studied in public schools outside the State. In contrast, the children of the peasants were forced to forego their classes. The agitation also deprived the villagers of their jobs and livelihood.

To help these suffering sections, we drew up an economic plan based on the 20-Point Programme of Indiraji. We took a decision to incur 72 per cent of the Plan expenditure on the 20-Point Programme. In the 1983-84 financial year, economic assistance was given to 70,469 people under the IRDP and over 50 lakh mandays of work were created under the NREP. Besides this, old-age pension was introduced and unemployment doles were sanctioned. Widows were helped to set up duck units. I made it my aim to provide economic assistance to at least one person in every poor family in every village and I was determined to do this no matter what happened.

The result of this economic programme was very heartening and encouraging. We were able to disseminate benefits to the bulk of the people and they in turn realised that the Government was for them and had every intention to lift the State out of the morass. The students, the villagers and the

tea-garden workers realised what a costly mistake the agitation had been. My Government received spontaneous sympathy and cooperation.

I told the Government servants, who had earlier backed the agitation, that they were Government employees and drew a wage. If they wished to take part in politics, they should give up Government service. I promised to pardon their past follies if they had learnt a lesson and would no longer compromise on their loyalty to the Government they served. I explained that though political parties made their bids to come to power in a democratic country, the employees were not expected to take to the path of disruption. Thereafter I had complete cooperation from them as they saw wisdom in what I was saying.

I formulated and implemented schemes for the welfare of the women and the intellectuals. I know that these sections are generally not interested in day-to-day politics. They are the silent masses. Once these silent masses realised that my Government meant constructive business, unlike the agitationist who only believed in disruption, they gave me their whole-hearted support.

R.B.: What would you say about the gradual weakening of the agitating organisations and your contribution to it?

H.S.: Soon after the elections I perceived a sense of frustration and disillusionment among the youth. The Assamese Muslims and some of the ethnic groups who had supported the movement realised that the agitation had not been against the 'foreigners' but in actuality it had been against some genuine Indians who happened to be non-Hindus. Then, there were some differences among the agitation leadership. These differences were only natural in an agitation that had dragged on for four long years without delivering to the people anything concrete.

Because of these factors, the movement's strength waned. Many youth who had taken part in the movement with the genuine desire to see Assam progress, realised that there was no need for an agitation any more, since the Government itself was looking after their interests.

R.B.: It is said that you had a hand in hastening the split in the All Assam Students Union. What do you have to say about that?

H.S.: I have had no hand in it. It came about due to their own clashes and because of their parochial and regional approach to the basic issues.

R.B.: There has been tremendous suffering due to the long-drawn agitation that the State has seen. But, have there been any positive gains from the agitation?

H.S.: I have not seen any gain from the movement. This problem of foreigners is not a new problem for Assam. Even before the birth of AASU and AAGSP, sincere efforts were made by the Government to drive out the foreigners. Though the movement started only in 1979, the Government had deported from the State about three lakh foreigners between 1961 and 1978. In actuality, the movement was a hindrance in deporting foreigners since for four years the law and order machinery was fully engaged in tackling the situation created by the movement.

R.B.: What would you say of the Centre's role in weakening the movement?

H.S.: I do not think the Centre has had a hand in weakening the movement which has lost its hold among the people because of its own faults.

R.B.: There has been some talk about fresh negotiations

between the Government and the AASU/AAGSP leaders. The chances of a solution to the Assam problem seem bright in this context. To your mind, what should be the shape of such a solution?

H.S.: To me the solution should be such as protects the interests of the Assamese as well as those of genuine Indians. I welcome a solution, not because I am weak. I am strong enough to deal with the agitationists. But, I too do not want any foreigner to live in my State.

R.B.: Your comments on your Council of Ministers. Their competence, sincerity and spirit of sacrifice.

H.S.: Some people say that I have too many ministers. I have expanded my ministry because of two basic reasons. A bigger Council means greater efficiency, so also representation of all sections of the people. Like the country, Assam too has unity in great diversity. We have many castes, creeds and tribes—both in the hills and in the plains. Then we have sub-castes, sub-creeds and sub-tribes. Different people speak different languages with the accompanying host of dialects. They have their own problems some of which are unique to them. For their effective solutions, they need representation in the Assembly. This has made the expansion of the Council inevitable. I am happy with the performance of my colleagues. They are sincere, honest, hard-working and work for the upliftment of the downtrodden in the State.

R.B.: From the boycott of your ministry to its acceptance by the people of Assam—how did it come about?

H.S.: In reply to your earlier question I had said that I have won the confidence of the people through my work, sincerity, and by doing whatever was good for the State. It is because of these reasons that we have been able to carry the people with us. Today, the boycotts of yesterday have no meaning. Those

who use to call for our boycott are now busy with their studies in schools and colleges.

R.B.: You are the Chairman of the North-eastern Congress(I) Committee. What are you doing towards bringing the States of the North-east into the mainstream of national life?

H.S.: The North-eastern States are called the seven sisters. Not very long ago, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Assam were all one State. Then, due to some misunderstanding and because of the feeling of some hill people that we were exploiting them by taking advantage of their ignorance and backwardness, movements were started for their separation. I must say that we made some mistakes for which we had to submit to the separation.

The North-eastern Council and the North-eastern Congress(I) Coordination Committee are two platforms that have given me the opportunity to work with the hill people. Initially, I attended the meetings of these fora as a backbencher. I had first refused the Chairmanship of the North-eastern Coordination Committee in 1983 when Captain Sangma approached me to head it. The people of the hill States feel that the Assamese are domineering and socially ill-treat the others. They think that we consider ourselves to be superior and have denied them their economic rights.

I told the leaders that I did not want any more disintegration, because of me, an Assamese, being appointed the Chairman. As a result of our petty squabbles, the Assam so lovingly built by our ancestors was once broken up. I told Captain Sangma that I would accept the job only if all the States jointly proposed my name. In the subsequent session of the Committee at Mizoram, my name was proposed jointly by all the States and I accepted.

I am trying to settle the disputes in the region that affect

more than one State through mutual discussions. I am happy that I have been able to help the neighbouring States sort out their problems. The atmosphere of the meetings we have is of frank friendliness and cooperation which is conducive to sorting out the points of dispute. This forum also helps the States towards cooperation on the economic front and I have had the privilege to help these States in their elections too.

R.B.: What was your role in the polls to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies in the North-east recently?

H.S.: I was asked to look after the polls in the North-eastern region. I consider it a measure of the confidence Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has in me. There were many problems, including the infighting in the Party, as well as the regional, parochial and communal atmosphere prevailing in the region. The presence of extremists created more problems.

Many factors led to our victory at the hustings. The economic progress the region has seen under the leadership of late Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the promise our people see in the leadership of our new Prime Minister coupled with our urge to be in the mainstream gave us such an encouraging popular response.

R.B.: The process of enumeration of voters in the State has gone very smoothly. Reading into this some people say that you have struck a deal with the AASU, since, otherwise the enumeration may not have been so smooth. What do you say to that?

H.S.: I have struck no deal with the AASU. Long before the Supreme Court judgement, I told Indiraji on the 9th of September that Assam should go in for the intensive revision of electoral rolls. The Supreme Court judgement came only on the 28th of September. I think the AASU leaders have realised that I am fighting for a genuine cause. If they oppose

me on this issue, they will only be digging their own graves. This is why they did not hinder the enumeration process.

R.B.: How do you read the poll prospects for the Lok Sabha elections that will probably be held in your State in some months' time?

H.S.: I think that just like in the other North-east States, we will sweep the polls in this State also. Even when the Janata wave was at its peak in 1977, we kept ten of the fourteen seats in this State. We lost the 1978 Assembly elections because of rift in our ranks. I am sure we will sweep this time.

R.B.: How do you defend your election on the basis of a mere 23 per cent voting?

H.S.: If there had been no coercion from the AASU and the AAGSP, a large number of people would have come out to vote. I represent a purely Assamese constituency (Nazira) where not a single voter is an immigrant. It is predominantly inhabited by people who have lived in Assam for centuries. They are conscious and educated. They would have voted for me had there not been any obstruction. The Constitution of India does not put any ceiling on the number or percentage of votes a victorious candidate must poll. So, this 23 per cent can not debar me from becoming the Chief Minister of the State.

R.B.: What do you think of the floor-crossing politician of today?

H.S.: We do not believe in floor crossing. Politics has been vitiated by some of those who have no following of their own and who have not put in work among the people. I am confident that our new Prime Minister will restore to politics its true meaning of serving the people and will in the process cleanse it of all that is opportunistic.

R.B.: How do you react to the massive mandate given by the people of India in the December Lok Sabha elections to the Congress(I). Was it due to a sympathy wave?

H.S.: This mandate has been given by the people to Rajiv Gandhi. The Indian people have tremendous confidence in the Nehru family. Before independence, Motilal Nehru was a leader in his own right. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru steered the destiny of the nation for seventeen years. Indiraji led us for an equal period. They did not ever compromise on the interests of the country or the masses. The present Prime Minister has proved his mettle in a short time. The mandate has sprung from the confidence the Nehrus enjoy in the country. Their love and sacrifice for the nation and her people have given us this unprecedented victory. The masses rightly believe that the future of the country is safe in our new Prime Minister's hands and he will protect the unity and integrity of the country.

R.B.: Mr. Saikia, what do you think has been your greatest success in the last two years?

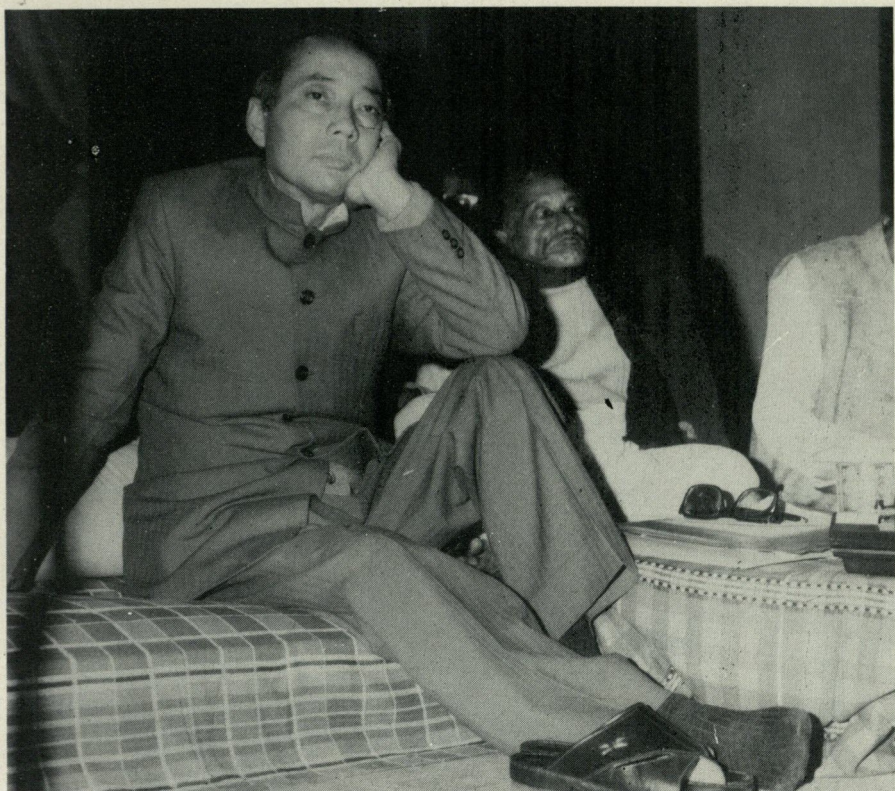
H.S.: My main aim in life has been to work for the poor and the downtrodden. To an extent I have been able to do this through the IRDP, NREP and the RLEGP programmes as well as the overall 20-Point Economic Programme for the upliftment of the poor.

R.B.: And, what do you consider your failure over the last two years?

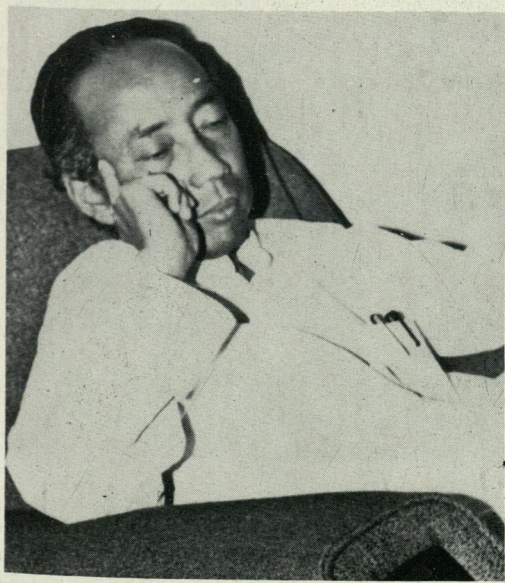
H.S.: I have not been able to carry my colleagues with me in works that I have envisaged. Plans and schemes are there but I am not able to implement them at the pace I want to.

R.B.: How do you visualise the Assam of the coming days?

H.S.: I want to see Assam self-sufficient. My aim is that by

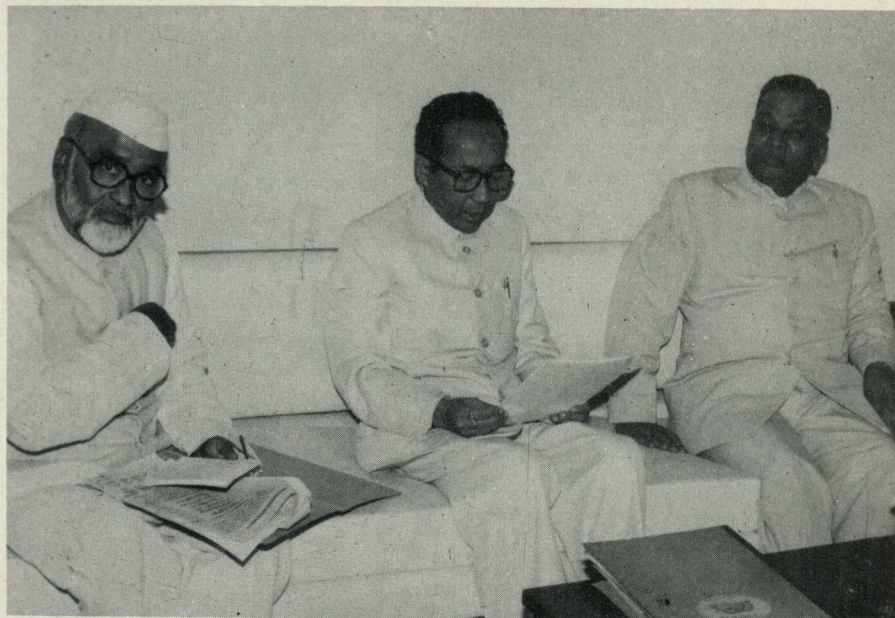


"My motto in life is to be happy with my share. I am not ambitious. Only the ambitious have regrets."



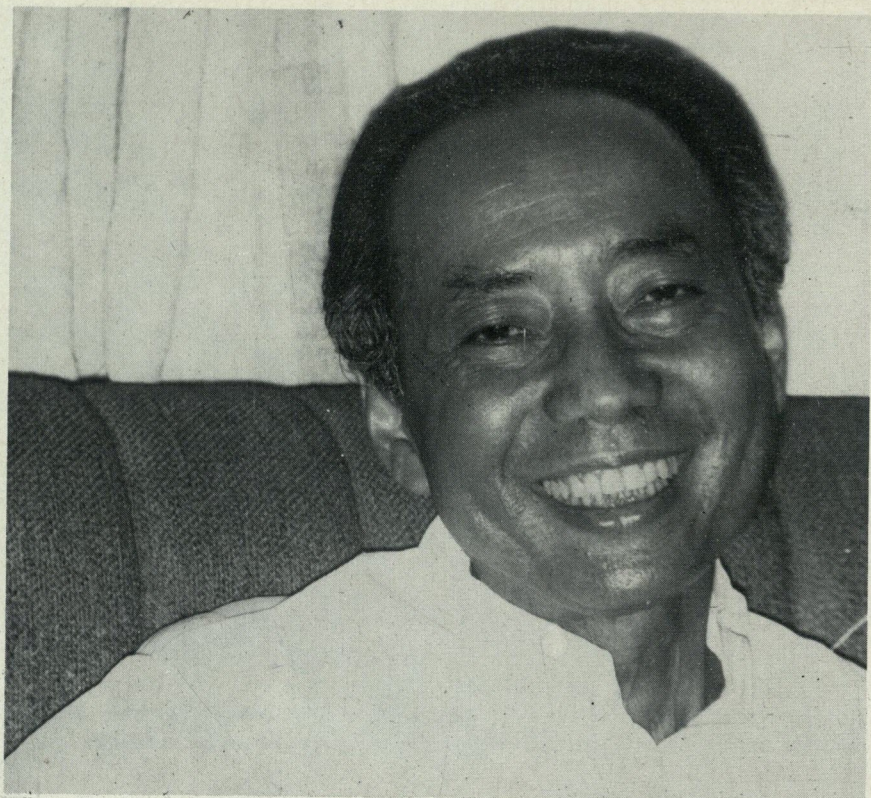


"I want that by 2000 AD there should not be a single person below the poverty line in Assam."



Mr. Saikia finalising the State's annual plans (above current year's and below last year's) with Planning Minister S B Chavan. These plans brought the State larger outlays and major projects. "I am determined to make Assam economically strong."





"I would like my children to be professionals... lawyers, doctors and engineers."



2000 AD there should not be a single person below the poverty line in my State. I want to reach electricity, potable water, PWD roads, education and health centres to every village. At this moment I am formulating plans to achieve these aims and I am determined to grapple with this task in right earnest.

R.B.: And, what do you say to corruption?

H.S.: I hate corruption. We should have no mercy for the corrupt. But, you know, corruption is in our blood and in our society. Incidents of corruption are there even in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. They are also present in Kautilya's Arthashastra. This affliction has been with us since time immemorial and will take some time to eliminate.

R.B.: Which character out of history do you admire the most?

H.S.: Akbar, the Moghul king. He is my hero because he tried to bring the Hindus and the Muslims together through his new faith called Din-e-Illahi which incorporated the good points of both Hinduism and Islam.

R.B.: Mr. Saikia, while you were the Education Minister in the Taimur ministry, you were taken seriously ill with kidney trouble. You underwent treatment in hospitals and clinics in Calcutta, Bombay and Boston. What were your fears during your illness and what gave you the strength to not merely pull through but to bounce back with such vigour on the State's political scene?

H.S.: I was hopeful even during my adverse days of illness that I would survive. It was a struggle, but I have fought many a political battle and have always come out on top. I told myself that this was also another battle in my life which I would win. I believe that God was on my side.

R.B.: You have been so close to death during your illness. You also had a brush with her when two attempts were made on your life. How do you view the prospect of dying?

H.S.: To me death is unavoidable. I do not fear death. I tell my friends that my life and my death are in the hands of God. He will decide my longevity. In spite of taking the utmost care, many people die in minor accidents in their bathrooms. Nobody thought that I would pull through my kidney problem in 1980. People believe that a man in my state of health cannot work hard. I have very few years of life left. But I do not mind that.

I read Indiraji's biography in which it is said that she was so weak earlier that the doctors advised her not to get married. But not merely did she defy her doctors on this count, but she lived a full life in which she achieved more than any other person has done in this country for centuries. Nobody can predict death. So, I do not think about it. Even after the attempts on my life, I did not get nervous. I would just shrug off the incident and continue with my work.

R.B.: Let me ask you your opinion about some people in the news today. What do you think of Amitabh Bachchan?

H.S.: Amitabh is a very popular artist. There is no ban on artists taking part in politics. History tells us about great kings and emperors who patronised artistic and literary talent.

R.B.: And what about N.T. Ramarao?

H.S.: I do not support NTR because he believes in regionalism. My fight is against regionalism and as far as this fight is considered I regard him as my enemy.

R.B.: And Laldenga?

H.S.: It is good that he has realized his mistakes and has

agreed to bring peace back to Mizoram.

R.B.: Arun Shourie?

H.S.: It would be interesting to investigate who is behind him.

R.B.: What will you say about the value of punctuality?

H.S.: I am very particular about time. I do not tolerate people who do not keep time. My father always told me that juniors should be in office five or ten minutes before the boss comes. He worked in a tea garden and always reached the office before time. In fact, the only difference I have with my wife is over her not getting ready on time.

R.B.: What do you think about the films as a medium of education?

H.S.: Films can play a very important role in moulding our society. Because of the mass appeal, a well produced educative film can work wonders. Even the illiterates can be educated through this medium. So, I need theatres in rural areas too so that the light of learning can be spread even to the villages.

R.B.: What are your views on religion?

H.S.: Though I am a Vaishnavite, I believe in the Hindu Dharma. I also worship Gods and Goddesses. I believe in the theory of Karma. I think that honesty pays and that sinners suffer. Religion, however, is a personal thing at the individual's level and we should not make a public show of it.

R.B.: What do you think of good food, alcohol...?

H.S.: I do not take alcoholic drinks so I cannot say much about it. I believe everybody should be provided with good food. Personally, I believe that individuals should own no

property and everything should belong to the State. In turn it should be the State's responsibility to provide food, clothing and education to the citizens while the citizens work for the State.

R.B.: What, Mr. Saikia, do you believe is your strongest point?

H.S.: I can be very firm and ruthless with anybody who either deliberately commits a wrong or betrays a cause.

R.B.: And, your weak point?

H.S.: If a wrongdoer comes to me and confesses, I become soft and lenient. I think this is my weakness.

R.B.: What touches you most?

H.S.: Poverty. I have worked among the poor since I can remember. Their plight moves me. When I was young, I was deeply impressed by the biography of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar so much so that emulating him, I distributed blankets among the poor. Gandhiji's philosophy has impressed me and I try to follow the Gandhian path.

R.B.: What would you like your children to be?

H.S.: Professionals. Lawyers, doctors and engineers . . .

R.B.: What gives you happiness?

H.S.: I am pleased when I accomplish something. I am happy when I complete the task assigned to me by my superiors.

R.B.: What would you say is the key to your success?

H.S.: I am being immodest, but, I would attribute what little success I have achieved to my hard work, honesty and the will of God.

R.B.: One last question. Do you have any regrets? Anything you wanted to do but could not accomplish?

H.S.: I have no regrets. I am satisfied with my lot. I have adapted myself to circumstances. My motto in life is to be contented with my share. I am not ambitious. Only the ambitious have regrets.