

# The All Assam Ahom Association and Ahom Politics of Surendranath Buragohain

*Romesh Buragohain*

As a young college student Surendranath Buragohain was not in favour of the aims and objectives of the All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA). In fact, he and his associates vehemently objected to the demands of the AAAA at that time. He was then an active member of the All Assam Students' Association. They felt that while the Congress was there, organization like the AAAA was uncalled for.<sup>1</sup> He was completely overwhelmed by the Congress movement of the times and he showed no interest in the demands of the AAAA, and the national interest was at the forefront of his political mind. Therefore, perhaps, he was constantly opposing the AAAA demands for providing separate representation for the Ahoms in the Assam Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

As such, it is interesting to study as to what compelled him to give up his national outlook and jumped into the regional perspectives of ethnic politics represented by various tribes and races including the Ahoms, and then a nationalist once again, becoming the first Union Deputy Minister from Assam (undivided). These can be studied under three perspectives. These are (i) it was difficult for the Ahoms to forget their past glory of political heritage and hegemony of long six hundred years (ii) The Ahoms, lost their independence in the hands of the British imperialists in 1826 while Bengal lost it in 1757. Thus in terms of the contact with the western civilization and in the wake of the nineteenth century neo socio-political movements, the Ahoms were lagging behind by hundred years socially, politically, economically, educationally and above all in the field of science and technology too (iii) From 1826 to independence and even after that to a considerable extent, the history of the Ahoms was one of utter neglect and apathy in the hands of the colonial rulers. The Ahoms too, would not accept any job under the British considering it as a slavery under the *Baga-Bangals* (white skinned foreigners). As such, many of the Ahoms maintained a silent non-cooperation with the British rulers. Besides, the caste-Hindu educated eliteshipped upon the Ahoms with the most derogatory unpalatable remarks.<sup>3</sup> They began making a mountain out of mole hills on every Ahom issue.<sup>4</sup> The Ahom politics of the times under Buragohain's leadership was rooted in such socio-political milieu.

How Buragohain's mind was working in the changing socio-political scenario of Assam as well as that of India, might lead us to an understanding of the rationale of Ahom politics of the times.

After completing his education with a Law degree, he formally joined the Congress Party and continued his political activities as an ardent and devoted member up to 1941. This was the year when the Kenduguri (Sibsagarh) Session of the AAAA was held in April 5-6, 1941. This session of the AAAA was an important one on several counts. Firstly, it decided to give up its non-political character so long continued since its inception in 1893. Secondly, it realized that nothing could be expected from the Caste Hindu dominated Assam Congress with regard to the Ahom demands. Thirdly, without acquiring political power, the Ahoms believed, their identity as a glorious ruling race in the past history of Assam would jeopardize its very existence, under the Congress political hegemony.

At the beginning, there was no such hard and fast rule in the AAAA., as many Ahoms happened to have been the members of both the Congress and in the AAAA. In 1919, the AAAA, under the leadership of Bhuban Chandra Gogoi, then a Congress M.L.A., led a delegation to the working committee of the APCC. The delegation consisted of Jogesh Chandra Gohain, Surendranath Buragohain, Thanuram Gogoi, Durganath Gogoi, Purnananda Chetia, Priyanath Barua and Rameswar Bora. The delegation was assured that the Ahom demands shall be certainly met if the Congress would come to power.<sup>5</sup> This assurance was taken in good faith and the Ahom feelings were assuaged to a great extent.

Meanwhile, the Sibsagarh Assembly Constituency fell vacant due to death of Bhuban Chandra Gogoi and the AAAA sincerely hoped that the Congress would nominate an Ahom candidate as assured earlier. But in the election that followed, the Congress nominated one Sonaram Dutta, a caste Hindu candidate ignoring flatly the demand of the AAAA for an Ahom candidate. This was the painful realization of the Ahoms that the Congress was least concerned with the Ahom demands and discontentment was brewing up among the Ahoms against the Congress. A love-hate attitude became the mark of their relationship. This came into sharp focus in the Kenduguri (Sibsagarh) Session and the AAAA finally decided to do away with its non political character.<sup>6</sup> The political resolution adopted by this session was as follows:

*I This Association firmly believes that considering the erstwhile glorious rule of the Ahoms, it would be in the fitness of things that*

*they be treated as a minority community and the right to this privilege be provided in the proposed constitution of India.*

II *Following this right of minority status of the Ahoms, in the Ahom dominated areas, a separate electorate be provided to the Ahoms.*

The 1943 by elections to the Assam Assembly was a shot in the arm for the AAAA. All the nominated Ahom candidates won the elections including Surendranath Buragohain who became the leader of the opposition and later became a minister in the Sadullah cabinet in charge of Local Self Government, Excise etc.

Onward 1943, Buragohain emerged as the sole and undisputed leader of the Ahoms. He took up the issue of minority status to the Ahoms in Assam Assembly on Nov.20,1943. He said in the House with courage and conviction,

*Sir, I rise to discharge a highly important task of asking the House on behalf of the Ahom Community of this Province to which I have the privilege to belong with two other members of this House, Mr. Jogesh Chandra Gohain and Raisahib Daulat Chandra Gohain, to accept the plea of the community to be recognized as a minority in the future free Indian Constitution*

The resolution he moved was

*This Assembly is of the opinion that the Ahom Community, of this Province be included among the recognized minorities for the future Indian Constitution and that the Government of Assam do move the Government of India and His Majesty's Government for consideration and acceptance of the community as such a minority*

This very resolution was overwhelmingly endorsed by the AAAA in its Golden Jubilee Session held at Sibsagarh in February 12-13,1944 and it requested the different political parties in the Assembly to support this resolution.<sup>7</sup> This did create a problem in the politics of Assam but Buragohain remained unperturbed.

He became the President of the AAAA and presided over the Bhojo and Dibrugarh Sessions in 1946 and 1948 respectively. His Presidential Addresses in the said two Sessions reflect the nature and character of the Ahom politics of the times. The Bhojo Session clearly spelled out its aims and objectives in its resolution No. 3 which once again made demands for providing the rights of a separate electorate for the Ahom people in the new administrative set up of free India. It further emphasized

that the governance of India must be based on such principles by which the different tribes, races and other minor communities could exercise their rights of self determination. Further it demanded the right to form a separate independent state with necessary changes in the existing boundaries for which a separate Constituent Assembly be formed for Assam which would have elected members on separate electoral basis from the different races, tribes and minority communities of Assam.<sup>8</sup>

Laying bare his global perceptions, in his Presidential Address, Buragohain referred to the end of the very destructive World War, the aftermath of which had raised the hopes and aspirations of the subjugated and exploited people of the world for a decent and dignified life and living which must have to be ensured. He observed,

*Or else, it will lead to more violence and bloodshed. The rule of trampling over one nation by another, by one class over the other, under any pretext, must come to an end. The atrocities and mal- treatments meted out to the weak minorities by the strong majority should be no more. Only then, peace can prevail in this world.*<sup>9</sup>

Buragohain's words were prophetic judging by the fact that India witnessed abominable violence between the Hindus and Muslims on the eve of independence. Currently, the world is witnessing ethnic strife in a stupendous scale with unabated terrorism killing innocent men, women and children. Perhaps, this is more particularly true in case of this cursed state of Assam, as one might say so.

Buragohain also spoke of the reasons for not joining the Quit India movement of 1942. He had faith in the British government and took the British announcement as gentleman's word. So he argued.

*It was a happy occasion for India that the British government as promised earlier is undertaking measures to hand over power to the Indian hands. The Ahoms had no reason to disbelieve it. This was further affirmed by the British in the spring of 1942. Hence, there was no question of browbeating the British by the Ahoms. Rather they should continue their agitation to secure a rightful place in the ensuing free India.*<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, Buragohain was very critical of the role of Congress and was very vocal against the caste-Hindu perception of Indian unity and said.

*Basically, there is no difference in what is being offered by the British Cabinet Mission now and what was offered by the Cripp 's Mission three years ago. Yet the Congress now finds it satisfactory and acceptable. But in 1942, they vehemently objected to the Cripp's Mission proposals and launched the Quit India movement. The motive behind this was to draw the attention of the docile Indian masses to prove the fact that the Congress alone represents India and the future Constitution of India should be framed by the caste-Hindu dominated Congress.<sup>11</sup>*

By this time, Buragohain was mature in his political thoughts and was unambiguous in his utterances. His concern was for the down-trodden, exploited, ignorant and illiterate vast masses of different Indian minority communities who would need full protection in the future Constitution of India. His address was mainly to the 'power that be' in free India. He was against over centralization but for voluntary participation in the proposed Union of India. He was candid in his statements and said,

*The aim and objective of the AAAA is to attain complete independence for India. But our free India must ensure the rightful claims of the different participating minority communities. Therefore, if the Congress adopts the western democratic model, it will lead to absolute majority of the Hindus where the minority communities will be always under its feet... Hence, the AAAA believes that the only way to attain real peace and freedom in independent India is to adopt a progressive democratic model.<sup>12</sup>*

His demands for minority status and separate electorate for the Ahom's a sovereign and independent status for the Assam plains including hills, created ripples in the Assam politics. But to him, political power meant serving the people irrespective of caste, creed and community. He was always for the deprived and the down-trodden. He was more concerned for these peoples as to their fate in free India without any specific provisions in the constitution to preserve their rights of self rule and cultural heritage.

Surendranath Buragohain was again the President of the AAAA and he delivered his Presidential Address at the Dibrugarh Session in

March.27-28,1948. His address was significant, one in all India context and the other relating to Assam.He said,

Henceforth, the main aim of the Ahom Sabha would be to secure a rightful place in the governance of free India in keeping with their past glory and fame, and the possible shift in free India's foreign policy after the creation of Pakistan.

*The makers of independent India must know that after the creation of Pakistan, India would have no scope of establishing her influence with the West Asian countries. Hence, she would have to look to the East to establish relations with the independent countries of East Asia. This is an important aspect in Indian foreign relations. Again, out of the East Asian countries, the North East Asia is already under the influence of Russia and America. Therefore, the only area left for India is South East Asia where India can establish her influence. ... India is fortunate to have the Ahom people who are the offshoots of the great Tai race of South East Asia. As such, the Ahom people can play a great role in promoting good relationship with the South East Asian countries. Hence, it would be the abundant duty of the makers of modern India to take care of the problems faced by the Ahom in its entirety.*<sup>13</sup>

The current 'Look East' policy of India would suggest that Buragohain had a rare foresight in his political thoughts. Indeed, he was a man of foresight. He lucidly explained the problems that Assam shall have to face after the creation of Pakistan and the consequent influx of foreigners from East Bengal. He said

*The proposed constitution of the Indian Union is known to all. One of its provisions, might take Assam to a serious danger. By this provision, all the foreigners coming into Assam prior to one month before coming into effect of the Indian Union, would be given rights of citizenship. The media has already reported that more than two lakhs of refugees have already entered Assam. There is still several months to give effect to the Indian Constitution. As such, nobody can say as to how much of more foreigners would come to Assam during these several months. If this current is not arrested and the Congress Government under Bordoloi 's leadership at the direction of the Center, settles them permanently by giving them land, the loss that Assam shall have to suffer would be simply unthinkable.*<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, how prophetic Buragohain was in his political thoughts when one thinks of the problems of foreigners in Assam as Assam is reeling under foreign (Bangladeshi) influx at the present times.

Even though, Buragohain did not object to the Group 'C Plan and was willing to accept it, he did it with the specific condition of 'right to secede' at any moment. He might be misunderstood in this respect. But the North East mirror was clear to him. At his initiative and drive, 'Assam Tribes and Races Conference' was held in March 21-23, 1945, at Shillong and took a significant resolution in accordance with the political views of Buragohain. It resolved.

*This Committee of the delegates of the Tribal Plains and the Tribal Hills, Manipuris, the Ahoms, the Matakas and the Chutias of Assam resolves that a Central organization to be named provisionally 'The Central Organisation of Assam Tribes' be formed and that its object shall be the securing of political, economic, social and general welfare and advancement of the various tribes of Assam by promoting active co-operation and social solidarity and unity among them.<sup>15</sup>*

This Organization also resolved that -

*In view of the fact that historically Assam proper, with its Hills, was never a part or province of India, and that its people, particularly the tribes and races inhabiting it are ethnically and culturally different from the peoples of rest of India, this Convention is emphatically opposed of Assam proper with its Hills, being included into any proposed division of India - Pakistan or Hindustan and demands that it should be constituted into a separate free State into which the hill districts bordering Assam be incorporated.<sup>16</sup>*

No doubt, Surendranath Buragohain was radical in his political thoughts not in consonance with the all India politics represented by the dominant Congress Party. This was more due to his concern for the people of the North East of India who were mostly illiterate, deprived and exploited. He was the man of the masses but his radical political views overshadowed the man in flesh and blood. He had to be radical in view of the impending division of the country into Hindustan and Pakistan, as he had the apprehensions about the fate of the people of this region in the hands of the 'power that be'. His hobnobbing with the Muslim League leader Sadullah, the Premier of Assam was a strategy to achieve such goals by whatever means possible.

Surendranath Buragohain, immediately after becoming the Minister in the Assam government, gave civil rights to the Tea tribes. So long the Tea tribes were mere commodities in the hands of the British colonialists. For the first time, Buragohain provided them with separate seats in the Local and Municipal Boards of Assam.<sup>17</sup> As Minister at the center, he was instrumental in keeping the oil prices down in Assam.<sup>18</sup> Buragohain was a man of boundless spirit. He never acted against the interests of the country.<sup>19</sup>

Born on Oct, 4, 1904 and died on Nov. 17, 1953, Buragohain had a very short span of life of 49 years only. Out of this, he could hardly have 12 years in active politics. Even after leaving the AAAA, he continued to have overwhelming influence over the Ahoms. Though the Ahoms received it with a grain of salt for Buragohain's going over to the Congress camp again, at the same time, the Ahoms felt that their political heritage and hegemony had been redeemed to a considerable extent by his inclusion in the Union government. That he could cut a niche for himself among the politicians of India and that he could bear and supercede many veterans of the Assam Congress in the political competition, itself, speaks of his versatile political personality. Perhaps he was influenced by political luminaries of India like Jinnah and Ambedkar. In this respect, he was neither political opportunist, nor a communalist, nor the father of regionalism as some politicians failed to read between the lines.

But considering the crucial and trying times of the pre-independence days, his political views were pragmatic when the nation was making a 'tryst with destiny'. If there was any inconsistency in him, it was rather a strategy of flexibility in all India context. It was, in fact, the *zeit-gist* of the times. The lesson he has left for us is that struggle for rights of self determination should be from within and not from without

### *Notes and References*

- 1 He and his associates were Sashi Chandra Barbaruah, Alok Chandra Rajkhowa, Anandaram Gohain and others. They were instrumental in turning the two sessions of the AAAA into a fiasco: one held at Nowgong in Dec, 1926 under the Presidentship of Hiteswar Barbarua and the other at Guwahati in Dec, 1928, under the Presidentship of Padmanath Gohain Barua. See, Rameswar Bora, *Ahom Sabhar Buranji* (in Assamese language), Prbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha Dhemaji, 1994, p. 10 and Devabrata Shanmi, ed. *Anyatam Asomiya Jatiya Neta*

*Surendranath Buragohain*, (in Assamese and English language)  
Jorhat, 2005, p. 95

2. The AAAA had reasons to believe that it was due to their vociferous objections that the Ahoms could not get the separate representation in the Assam Assembly in the Gov. of India Act, 1935. See, Devabrata Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
3. See, *Ripunjoy Smriti*, Dhalar Satra and *Sarbagyan Manjuri* Auniati & Dhalar Satra, Jorhat, 1935.
4. A caste-Hindu M.P. from Assam remarked in the Indian Parliament that "Fortunately Assam's capital is not Bankok" referring to Buragohain's visit to Burma and Thailand in 1948 which caused sharp reaction among the caste-Hindu Congress leaders of Assam accusing him of scheming to regain political power with the help of Burma and Thailand. See, Rameswar Bora, *op.cit.*, p. 38.
5. Rameswar Bora, *op. cit*, p.18.
6. *Ibid*, p. 19
7. *Ibid.*, p. 28
8. Devabrata Sharma, *op.cit.*, pp.163-164
9. *Ibid.*, p. 166
10. *Ibid*.
11. *Ibid*.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Rameswar Bora, *op.cit.*, p. 38
14. *Ibid.*, p. 39
15. *Ibid.*, p. 30
16. Devabrata Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 99
17. Rameswar Bora, *op.cit*, p. 28
18. S.K.Bhuyan, in: *The Assam Tribune*, dt5-10-1953. The credit for this oil policy is usually given to Malaviya, the then Union Minister but one Shrivastava contested this in the Delhi edition of the Statesman sometime between 1962-64, giving all the credit to Surendranath Buragohain. This needs to be investigated as suggested by Dr. Hiren Gohain, Retd. Prof, of Gauhati University.
19. Nilamani Phukan, *Ibid*.