

Ahom Royal Families in the Writings of American Baptist Missionaries (1836-1857)

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Introduction:

The coming of the American Baptist Missionaries is an important event in the socio-religious and cultural history of Assam. The history of the Baptist Missionaries in Assam started after the arrival of Nathan Brown and O.T. Cutter at Sadiya with their families on March 23, 1836. Their main object was to preach Christianity at Sadiya with a hope to go to North Burma and South China. Thereafter Miles Bronson and Jacob Thomas came to Assam from America. Unfortunately Thomas died on the river just before reaching Sadiya. Bronson arrived at Sadiya on July 17, 1837. Thereafter different missionaries came to Assam from time to time. The prime object of the missionaries was to spread Christianity. The missionaries did a lot of activities to achieve their goal including learning of local languages, translation and writing of books related to the Christian literature, publication of books, establishment of schools, etc. Most of the experiences and activities of the early missionaries worked in Assam were published in the Baptist Missionary Magazine published in America which writings were referred as Journals. Besides journals, their personal letters, their books and the Orunudois are very important to know about early mission activities in Assam. All the sources throw light not only on their activities but also on the contemporary Assam – the land and its people.

During the time of missionaries coming, Assam was on new crossroads. The British already occupied the land and introduced new system of governance. So, the period witnessed the ruin of old ruling class and administration. The missionaries witnessed this transformation of the society. The writings of the missionaries sometimes refer this transmission of administration as well as ruling class. The reference of Ahom royal families is also found in the works of missionaries.

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Ahom Royal Families:

(a) Purandar Singha : Purandar Singha was the last Ahom king. He became the king during Burmese invasions for a very short period (1818-1819). The Ahom rule came end after the Treaty of Yandaboo signed in 1826 and thereafter the British occupied Assam. After the attempts of restoration of Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam, the Company Government restored Purandar Singha as a tributary ruler in Upper Assam in 1833. He was again removed from the post in September 1838. After losing his throne, Purandar Singha was in Jorhat which was the last capital of the Ahom. Nathan Brown called on this king on January 21, 1842. To quote Brown -

This afternoon I had the privilege of bearing witness for Christ before the old raja and his attendants, and also his son - with each of whom I had an interview of about half an hour. The raja seemed at first to smile at the idea of the foreign padres coming to change his religion, and that of the country. He at length, however, appeared more interested, and made many minute inquiries respecting our doctrines, and regarding the two disciples who have embraced Christianity. The raja and his son are the last remnant of the Ahom race of kings, who entered Assam about A.D. 1228.¹

The Orunudo, the first Assamese Magazine, published by the Baptist Missionaries from Sivasagar also gives information about the last Ahom king. In the August issue, 1846, the magazine provided the news of the theft at the house of an ex-Ahom king, Purandar Singha. This news indicates the position and condition of an ex king. Again in October issue, 1846, the Orunudo provided the news of death of Purandar Singha at Jorhat on October 1, 1846, Thursday at 2 PM due to suffering from diabetes.

(b) Kameswar Singha : He was the son of Purandar Singha. He took the title of "Maharaja" conferred on him by the Company Government. The Government offered him a monthly pension of Rs. 1,000; but he refused to take it. Nathan Brown met him on January 21, 1842 together with his father. To quote Brown

The son, whom I called upon first, is a very interesting young man of twenty five or thirty. He was very inquisitive respecting our theories of geography and astronomy, and urged me very hard to come and set up a school at Jorhat. He was very anxious to learn English as well as the sciences. May the Lord give him light and grace to forsake the religion of his fathers.²

Kameswar Singha died in 1852. Regarding the death of Kameswar Singha, S. M. Whiting, another Baptist Missionary, wrote on January 12, 1852

The father of the present "king", as this boy is called, died a few months ago, it is said, from the effects of excessive drinking. At the burning of the body an incredible amount of money was distributed to the brahmins, who gathered together from all quarters.³

(c) Kandarpeswar Singha : When his father died, Kandarpeswar was a boy. The writings of the missionaries throw light on Kandarpeswar. Whiting in his Journal dated January 13, 1853 mentioned about this person of the Ahom royal family –

The door opened, and in the arms of a sepoy appeared a bright looking boy about six years old. He was seated opposite me in a chair. His elder brother, thirteen years of age, being the representative of the royal family, considered it beneath his dignity to call, but intimated through the servants that he would like to have me visit him. The one that came was evidently a spoilt boy. Our interview had one agreeable feather, - it was short.⁴

S. M. Whiting wrote on January 14, 1852 –

Daroga called again this morning, and had a little conversation respecting our religion, but his chief object was to show me the certificate of approbation he had received from the government officers and to draw forth a little flattery. He seems to be exceedingly vain and fond of praise. I expressed a desire to learn about the Hindoo religion. He appeared surprised when I told him I had a copy of shaster called *Kirton*, and that it was laying on the floor. He said it was his custom to keep that book very choicely, and always to bathe his body before reading it.⁵

The reference of name of Kandarpeswar Singha during the period of the uprising of 1857 is found in the writings of the missionaries. In his letter to S. Peck dated 20, 1857, Whiting wrote –

For sometime we do not fear its influence in this (part of the country), but within a few days the magistrate has got a plan, now brewing among the sepoys to rise at the coming *Durga Puja* and place the young prince at Jurhath on his grandfather's throne.⁶

The British government soon detected the activities of Moniram Dewan and others in Assam. The message of arrest of Kandarpeswar Singha is also found in the writing of the missionaries. Whiting wrote on September 21, 1857

that Capt. Holroyd, in connection with an officer from Dibrugarh and few Sipahis passed down the river to Jorhat-ghat, entered that city by night, seized the young rajah, and sent him off as a state prisoner for treasonable correspondence to Guwahati.

After his arrest, he was sent to the Alipur jail of Bengal. Whiting wrote on October 6, 1857 that the young rajah had been sent to Calcutta.

(d) Lakshipriya Konwari : The references of the ladies of the Ahom royal families are also found in the writings of the missionaries. Lakshipriya was the wife of Kameswar Singha. Whiting wrote on January 14, 1853 about this lady -

Mrs. Whiting called today on the widow of the late king's son. I was not invited as her ladyship is not accustomed to see a man's face. Mrs. Whiting was received in royal state. The queen - as she is called by the natives - having arrayed herself in a magnificent dress embroidered with gold, was surrounded by a retinue of kneeling women, prepared to utter what she had previously dictated to them. Mrs. Whiting, on her entrance, was anointed on the eyebrows and lips with a very fragrant oil, and led by the hand to a chair. The princes surveyed every article of her dress and had a thousand and one questions to ask. She hoped the *mem-sahil* would always be her friend. She was the first white lady she had ever seen. She thought the *mem* must be very sad, far away from her home and friends.⁷

(e) Another Princess : When O.T. Cutter was in Sivasagar establishing the printing press, different people visited the mission compound only to see the printing press. He wrote on February 13, 1845 that an Assamese princess visited the press. To quote him -

An Assamese princess called today, with her retinue, to see the press. I embraced the opportunity to tell her of Christ and the only way of salvation, and eternal life. She listened with attention, and as she could read, she asked for some books. I gave her a copy of nearly all our publications, and distributed some of those of her attendants who could read.⁸

(f) Daughter of an ex-King : When E. W. Brown, wife of Nathan Brown, was in Sivasagar, she described an event of visiting of a lady of ex-royal family in 1852. The event goes thus -

After Mrs. Brown moved with her school from the tank down to the river, a messenger arrived one day to announce the coming of a visitor of rank. Some days

later the curiosity of the children was gratified by seeing a boat filled up with unusual elegance touch at the landing and an Assamese lady dressed in silk and real jewels come up the verandah steps assisted by obsequious attendants. She was the daughter of ex-*raja* and wife of a chief *gohain*, maintaining - as far as practicable in those degenerate days when *rajas* were no more, and the foreign infested the land - the rank and state of a native princess. She had heard of the wonders of the white women's house and came on a tour of investigation, possibly a faint hope that she might find something to brighten a dreary existence entered her mind. Secluded as she had been, all her life, within monotonous surroundings and weary, perhaps of the barriers of rank which kept her from knowledge of the great world outside, she had made up her mind to take one step, at least, into wonderland. Mrs. Brown found her intelligent, gentle and respectful. Everything surprised and interested her dress, furniture, mirrors, watch - above all, the beautiful books. The visit was an exceedingly pleasant one, and when the princes returned to her boat, it was carry home thoughts that would throw at least some light into a shadowy life.⁹

(g) Other Royal Family : When Whiting was in Jorhat on January, 1853, he met another royal family there. Whiting wrote on January 15, 1853 -

A descendant from another branch of the royal family called this evening. We conversed very freely on the Christian religion. Some time had passed, when a servant came to inform him that the "queen" had a dance all ready, and called him. Soon after he took leave, one of the queens *sepoys* came running in, and saying, "the queen does not want the *Sahib* to come tonight, he may come some other time". It appears that the man who had just left me told that the princes that "the *Sahib* was all ready to come and see the dance", which seemed to have thrown them into considerable confusion. We went back word that it was not our custom to see such exhibitions.¹⁰

Whiting again wrote on January 19, 1853 -

Mrs. Whiting sent a bound volume of the New Testament to the princes.Some of the *brahmins* said to the princess, "True, this is a good looking book, but it is all about the *mem-Sahib's* religion. It should have been well if the *mem* had sent you a geography or a book of pictures." Her money supports so many *brahmins*, she is watched very jealousy, and every obstacle will be put in her way should she wish to make any inquiries about our religion.¹¹

Royal Insignia :

The ex-royal family members were still bearing some feathers in dress, ornaments, uses and customs. Sometimes missionaries mentioned about them. Whiting wrote about a son of Kameswar Singha whose age was about six years old. To quote Whiting –

He wore a short pair of green silk trousers, a flannel waistcoat, a silk jacket and a yellow silk velvet hood.

Whiting again wrote –

Called on the kings son. Waited at the entrance gate for the young man to dress and to prepare a place for my reception. When I entered he was seated in a chair over which was thrown a richly embroidered cloth. A sword rested between his knees and a pipe was clenched firmly in his hand. He smoked continually, seldom spoke. The conversation was carried on by the attendants who crouched around him. The whole aspect of the scene reminded me of the mock shows got up by boys at home. I could not help feeling sad, as I contemplated the fallen condition of the family. They are proud and arrogant, too haughty to take part in the government as subjects of the Company. One after another, sinking under the influence of sensuality and vice, departs to that world where greatness of the kings is very little importance.¹²

Conclusion :

Thus, the missionaries kept the eye witness records of the members of ex-royal family members and their usage and customs. But the missionaries observed all the things from their stand points. So it is very necessary to examine all those writings on the light of other contemporary records.

References:

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3. Ibid., p.187.
4. Ibid., p.185.
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