

The Kheroni Seal of King Ratnapala

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Place and History

Towards the close of the month of April last I got myself introduced to Bijoy Sarma, an assistant engineer with the P.H.E. Department who came to my house on my request in connection with boring of a deep tube well. In course of conversation Sarma informed me that his family had a very old image of Lord Ganesha with a trunk and some letters inscribed on it. Placed in the *thapana* (altar), they worship the deity daily.

As invited by Sarma I visited his house on 3rd May last and examined the relic in question. I could immediately apprehend that it is not at all an image of Lord Ganesha but an inscribed seal of pre-Ahom king of Assam, probably that of king Ratnapala of the Pala Dynasty. For further reading I managed to procure two pencil impressions of the seal. He was also informed that I would try to decipher the text accurately and like to publish it in some newspaper or journal if he accords permission for it. Sarma in return said that he would discuss the matter later on with his family as well as his younger brother Arun Sarma, MP, whether they would allow me to make public a private property.

When asked about the place the seal was found Sarma informed me that while he was serving in Nagaon district in the year 1987, he had obtained it from Sukur Ali, a labour leader who found it in course of digging earth in the village Kheroni in Karbi Anglong district. Ali, as stated by Sarma, presumed it to be an idol of Hindu pantheon for which he handed over the same to Bijoy Sarma. Sarma's family has been worshipping it as Lord Ganesha since then.

Description

The laddle shaped seal, like others of the kind inscriptions of ancient Assam, is made of bell metal which weighs nearly one and a half kilogram. This kind of seal is generally fixed tightly to a ring made of copper and the ring holds together the copper folios of the inscription. The whole edict which normally consists of three folios weighing about 4 kilograms can be carried by catching hold of the seal.

In the present case, somehow or other the seal got separated from the ring and the folios i.e. inscription proper as a result of which scholars and researchers have been deprived of a lot of information that a royal charter usually provides. The owner of the present seal was repeatedly questioned about possibility of finding out the folios but no information in this regard could be gathered from him. He disclosed further that Sukur Ali, the person responsible for obtaining the seal, had already left Kheroni.

In conformity with other seals of edict of the period under review, this item, too, is divided by a raised margin into two equal parts : upper portion being engraved with the impression of an elephant and the lower with the text composed in three lines.

Text

Swasti Srimangpragjyotisadhipanva
Yo maharahadhiraj Sri Ratna
Pala varmadevah

Though the actual inscription is missing, from of the seal it was evident to us that Ratnapala, was a descendent of the Lord of Pragjyotisha and he was a maharajadhiraj i.e. king of the great kings.

It is to be noted that king Ratnapala was the son and immediate successor of king Brahmapala (A.D. 900-920) who founded the Pala dynasty of Kamrupa i.e. ancient Assam. The Pala kings, with a view to showing their relationship with the Bhauma-Naraka rulers continued writing 'Varmana' or 'Varma' titles.¹

Historians are not of the same opinion about the date of king Ratnapala. It is a fact that prior to the discovery of the present seal we have as many as 3 inscriptions of the monarch in question viz. the Bargaon Copper Plates & the Soratbari Copper Plates but nowhere the date of administration of Ratnapala is found. Therefore, this is a question yet to be answered. P.C. Choudhury opines that the said monarch reigned in ancient Kamarupa during the period 1010-1040 A.D.² In his anthology of inscriptions of ancient Assam M.M. Sarma has fixed the tentative date of his rule as "last part of the 11th century A.D."³ On the other hand *The Comprehensive History of Assam* finds reasons to believe that "Ratnapala of Assam must have flourished about the first half of the 10th century A.D."⁴

Under the present circumstances though it is not possible to talk definitely about the time of his government, his Sualkuchi Grant speaks clearly that it was issued on his 26th year of administration. The relevant line declares :

Maya data dvijayasmai raiye sadavingshadabdike.⁵

It is a pointer to the fact that king Ratnapala reigned for a sufficiently long time, might be 30 years as stated by P.C. Choudhury.⁶

Had there been the inscription proper, this document, too, like other three of the same ruler would have thrown much light into the history and civilization of ancient Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa.

Language and script

As cited above the text has been composed in Sanskrit prose which is almost common to all the royal seals of pre-Ahom period. The three lines of short magnitude have 28 letters, both simple and combined (*yuktakshra*) - eleven number of letters in the first line, again the same in second line and six in the third line. From orthographical point of view one aspect needs particular mention. In the word '*Sriman*' of first line we notice '*Srimang*' i.e., 'ng' has been used instead of 'n'. This seems to be an uncommon use in Sanskrit. However, as shown by M.M. Sarma, the use of same orthography can be observed in the Guwahati Copper Plates of king Indrapala,⁷

Script used in the seal is of the Gupta variety, a later day development of the Brahmi script. The Gupta script has been rightly termed as the origin of Assamese script and most of the edicts of ancient Kamrupa falls in this category. Therefore, the present seal is important from the paleographic point as well.

Before we conclude, the auspicious sign '*anji*' used at the very beginning of the text needs some elaboration. In most of the eastern Indian edicts the sign 'is used just before the text starts. Earlier some scholars did not realise the difference between the '*anji*' and '*omkara*'. But Pandit Padmanath Bhattacharyya has categorically explained the significance of the symbol shown above.⁸ Even in some medieval inscription of Assam this symbol can be seen at the beginning. Therefore, the seal of King Ratnapala has retained it in the proper perspective.

Notes and References

1. H.K. Barpujari (ed) : *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, (1990), Vol. I, p. 141.
2. P.C. Choudhury *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, (1966), p. 232.
3. M.M. Sarma *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, (1978), p. 0.35.
4. H.K. Barpujari *op. cit.*, p. 144.
5. P. Bhattacharyya *Kamarupa Sasanavali*, 1338 BS, p. 112. Sarma M.M. *op. cit.*, page-175.; D. Sarma *Kamarupa Sasanavali*, (1981), p. 90.
6. P.C. Choudhury *op. cit.*, p. 232.
7. M.M. Sarma *op. cit.*, p. 193.
8. P. Bhattacharyya *op. cit.*, p. 55-56.