

On the date of some 18th Century Asamiya works

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Kaviraj Chakravarti was a celebrated Assamese poet of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. He is known to have composed several works. Here, however, we are concerned mainly with the date of his Assamese renderings of *Krishnajanmakhanda* and *Sankhāschūḍavaadha*. Both these works are the translations of two sections of the Sanskrit *Brahmavaivarttapurāṇa*. The author has not given the date of these works. Hence we propose to fix the date of these works tentatively in this short paper.

1. *Krishnajanmakhanda*

H.C. Goswami fixed the date of this work between 1714 and 1744 on the basis of the poet's contemporaneity with King Siva Simha (1714-44). Dimbesvar Neog not finding any reference to Phulesvari in this work thought that it was "written after Fulesvari's death in 1717" and "may be assigned to 1718 approximately"². Goswami provides a long thirty year period, during which this work may have been completed. The absence of any evidence to narrow down the period during which it may have been written led Goswami to observe the way he did. He is followed by most scholars writing on the history of Assamese literature subsequently. It has to be admitted though that Dimbesvar Neog's date of the work is more or less correct even though his suggestion about Phulesvari's death in 1717 is apparently wrong.

The poet says that he rendered this work in Asamiya verse on the orders of king Siva Simha and his Queen Ratnakanti. Siva Simha ruled for almost thirty years. Hence his reference in this work is not of much use in fixing the date of this work. The reference to his Queen Ratnakanti, therefore, is more useful from this view point. Ratnakanti is not known from any other evidence.

Unlike Ratnakanti some other Queens of the king-Phulesvari *alias* Pramathesvari, Ambika and Sarvesvari- are known from coins, inscriptions and literature.

H.C.³ Goswami identified Ratnakanti with Phulesvari³. He has not given any evidence, however, to support this identity. Hence, we do not accept the identity of Ratnakanti with Phulesvari. Kaviraj Chakravarti mentions Ratnakanti as the *prathamaiśvari* (first Queen) of Siva Simha. She is also called *namataprathamesvari* suggesting thereby that she was popularly known as the first Queen. And this was the position when the work was composed. It also suggests that the king had other Queens too at the time. We have no idea, however, as to who were these other Queens of the King. Ratna Kanti had a pure and slender (*Suddhasuksma*) figure. She is compared with the wives of Indra (i.e. *Sachi*) and *Āditya* (i.e. *Chhāyā*). She is also mentioned as *Kamalalochanī*, best of women (*barabālā*), and *Chandramukhī*. Later she is also referred to as *mahasatī* who had an extremely graceful body (*ati sulalita Kāyā*). None of these expressions used for the Queen lead us any where. The only expression that may help us narrow down the period of the composition of this work is *Prathama iśvari* or *prathamesvari*⁴.

It is possible that H.C. Goswami was influenced by the adjective *prathamesvari* used for Ratnakanti to identify her with Phulesvari who was later renamed as *Pramathesvari*. This mistake has also been committed by some of the Chroniclers⁵. The two expressions used for the two Queens are totally different. The first expression denotes the status of Ratnakanti as Chief or the First Queen, whereas the latter is the second name of Phulesvari given to her in A.D. 1726. Hence, the two Queens are different from each other. This suggestion finds some confirmation in a tradition recorded by S.K. Bhuyan according to which Phulesvari and her young sister, were brought to Queen Ratnakanti, by Rupachandra Barbarua, to serve her as *ligiris*⁶.

Hence *Krishṇajanakhaṇḍa* can be assigned to the initial period of the reign of King Siva Simha, particularly to the period before the rise of Phulesvari as his Queen. As such this work may be placed between 1714 and 1718.

2. *Śankhachūḍavadha*

This long Asamiya poem of Kaviraj Chakravarti is also the rendering of a part of *Brahmavaivarttapurāṇa*. It was also placed between 1717 and 1744. Neog placed it in the early years of the 18th century. This is apparently wrong as Rudra Simha ruled during the early years of the eighteenth century, till his death in 1714. Besides, the colophon clearly shows that the work was written on the orders of Siva Simha and his Queen Phulesvari. Siva Simha is mentioned as the *adhipati* of Saumārapīṭha and hence the work has to be placed during some part of his reign.

The date of this work can be fixed more or less accurately on the basis of the descriptions of Phulesvari. In this work she is mentioned as *jāyā* named Phulesvari. She is also mentioned as *śreṣṭha* among the wives of the King, suggesting perhaps that she was more beautiful than the other royal consorts. Thereafter, she is styled as *priyatama-jāyā*. It is also said that being of the colour of the *Keteki* flower she was named Phulesvari. The poet also says that being satisfied with her devotion (*bhaktita santuṣṭa huyā*) the king gave her the position (*pada*) of *pradhānabhāryā*. This adjective used for the Queen indirectly also suggests that she is not identical with Ratnakanti otherwise the expression *prathamaiśvarī* may have been repeated.

The statement that she was the best of the kings wives shows that he had many queens when this work was written. Another important expression is that the king made her his *pradhānabhāryā* or principal wife. The use of this expression is not clear. She is not mentioned here as *prathamaiśvarī* like Ratnakanti, but is simply mentioned as

wife. This shows that she was well on her way to surpass all other Queens of the King in importance but was not yet raised to the status of the Chief Queen.

Her name figures on the coins of Siva Simha from 1724, and she is also mentioned as *mahisi* now. This means that she may have been made the Chief Queen sometime before this year, and as she is not spoken of specifically as Chief Queen in *Sankhchudavadha*, the work may be assigned to a period before her rise to the status of Chief Queen—preferably between 1718 to 1723¹⁰.

3. *Sakuntala*

Sakuntala is another long descriptive poem in Asamiya verse by Kaviraj Chakravarti. It was also rendered by him in Asamiya¹¹ verse at the suggestion of Siva Simha and Phulesvari. Here also the Queen is mentioned as *jaya* named Phulesvari, and also as Chief Queen (*pradhana mahisi*). The use of the expression *pradhana mahisi* for her as against the expression *pradhana bharya* found in *Sakhachudavadha* clearly shows that the poet in this work, was giving expression to the change in the status of the Queen. This work also does not contain the second name of the Queen—Pramathesvari, given to her in A.D., 1726, as such it should have been completed before 1726. The name Phulesvari of the Queen appears on the coins of King Siva Simha from 1724. Some of which also mention her as *mahisi*. Her name would not have been placed on the coins in 1724, had she not been raised to the status of the Chief Queen before that year. Another type issued in 1726 bears her new name—Pramathesvari¹², which figures on coins till her death. Thus, *Sakuntala*, in all probability was composed by Kaviraj Chakravarti sometime between 1723-24, and the early part of 1726¹³.

Notes & References:

1. H.C. Goswami, **Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts** (University of Calcutta, 1930) pp. 34-35.
2. Dimbesvar Neog, **New Light on History of Asamiya Literature**, pp 295.
3. H.C. Goswami, **DCAM**, p. 35. It was this identification that influenced him to regard Phulesvari as the "first Queen" of Siva Simha.
4. For the description of the Queen in **Krishñajankhaṇḍa** see H.C. Goswami, **Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki**, pp. 1016-18.
5. Harakanta Barua Sadaramin in his **Asam Buranji** (Ed. by S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1962, p. 71) writing about Phulesvari says **eijanā Kuvarīr nāma Phulesvari aru Prathamesvari**. It is wrong. Her name as evidenced by coins and inscriptions was Pramathesvari.
6. S.K. Bhuyan, **An Assamese Nurjehan (or a Sketch of the Life of Queen Phulesvari Devi)**, 1926, p.24. Jai Prakash Singh, 'Phulesvari as viewed by contemporary Poets' in **NEHU Journal of Social Science and Humanities**, vol.
7. Goswami (DCAM, pp. 34-35) seems to suggest this date. It could not have been composed in **Sāka** 1648 (A.D.1726) as suggested by the editors of **Anandalahiri** (KAS, Gauhati, 1983, p. XX, preface).
8. Dimbesvar Neog, says that "this work must have been written by the middle of the first decade of the eighteenth century". Middle of the first decade of the eighteenth century is 1705. Rudra Simha ruled during this period.
9. For descriptions of Phulesvari in **Śankhachūḍavadha**, see H.C. Goswami, **Asamiya Sahityar chaneki**, pp.1146-7; For a discussion on other aspects

- of this passage see Jai Prakash Singh, 'Phulesvari as viewed by Contemporary Poets' in **NEHU Journal of Social Science and Humanities**, vol. VI.
10. Elsewhere we have separately discussed the date of **Sankhachūvadha** in a paper entitled 'on the date of **Sankhachūdava-dha** by Kaviraj Chakravarti' suggesting this date for the work. This work could not have been composed after 1723-24 when Phulesvari was made the Chief Queen. Had the work really been composed anytime after this date she must have been referred to as she is in **Śakuntalā**.
11. For a description of the Queen in this work see Kiran Chandra Sarma (ed.), **Śakuntalā** (Gauhati, 1969), p.4; Cf. Also Jai Prakash Singh, 'Phulesvari as viewed by contemporary Poets' in **NEHU Journal of Social Science and Humanities**, vol.VI, and also Jai Prakash Singh, 'On the Date of Sakuntala by Kaviraj Chakravarti in QJIHS (Calcutta)Vol.
12. Jai Prakash Singh, 'On 1648 coins of Siva Simha and Phulesvari', being published in **NIB**, Dallas, USA; Cf. also Jai Prakash Singh, Phulesvari-Observations on her Kingship.'
13. We have fixed this date for the work elsewhere, in a paper entitled 'On the Date of Sakuntala by Kaviraja Chakravarti, in QJIHS, vol.