

## The Agony of "Charing Raja" Kandarpeswar Singha

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Kandarpeswar Singha alias the "Charing Raja" whom the rebels of Assam in 1857 wanted to raise to the throne of Assam was the son of Kameswar Singha and grandson of Purandar Singha whose territories were unjustly resumed by the British imperialists in 1838. In the normal circumstances the "Charing Raja" or the heir-apparent like the Prince of Wales in England would have succeeded to the throne after the death of his father, but destiny made him a "tragic emblem of fading royalty-roi feinant in grief"<sup>1</sup>. In this paper an attempt has been made to describe the long agony of the Prince who was arrested on 9 September, 1857 at Jorhat for his complicity in the revolt of 1857 in Assam, his detention in Ali-pur Central Jail and subsequent internment first at Burdwan and then at Gauhati with a meagre pension granted to him. The paper is based on certain new materials found in the State Archives of West Bengal along with other official records in the State Archives of Assam at Dispur besides secondary works on the subject like the biography of Harakanta Sadaramin who was a contemporary of Kandarpeswar.

In June 1851 Kameswar Singha died leaving behind three widows and Kandarpeswar the "Charing Raja", a boy of eleven "burdened with a huge debt".<sup>2</sup> In this connection, it may be pointed out that Purandar and his son resided at Jorhat in a penurious condition with a big family and a large number of dependents while refusing at the same time to accept any pension from the British.<sup>3</sup> Unable to bear the responsibilities of a big family and a large establishment Kandarpeswar represented to the Government for a suitable pension or the charge of the Sibsagar division either on a rent free or *lalbundee* tenure. He even waited upon A. J. Moffat Mills in June 1853 at Sibsagar and urged him in a petition to hand over Upper Assam to him.<sup>4</sup> The Prince also personally came to Gauhati to meet Major Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam in this regard, but he failed to get even an appointment.<sup>5</sup> Seeing no hope of recovering the territories unjustly taken

from his grandfather, he relied on Maniram Dewan who had been promising him help to get back the country to his management. As promised Maniram even went to Calcutta to take up the cause of Kandarpeswar with the Supreme Government but to no avail.<sup>1</sup> When 1857 came, a section of the Assamese aristocracy led by Maniram and assisted by the Hindusthanee Sepoys stationed at Dibrugarh and Gauhati planned to overthrow the British rule and instal Kandarpeswar on the throne of Assam. According to the advice of Maniram contacts were made with the leaders of the sepoys and some of them even used to meet the Prince at Jorhat assuring him their support.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately before the plot could be translated into action, the local authorities promptly arrested the officers and sepoys; and Capt. Holroyd, Principal Assistant of Sibsagar with a detachment of Gurkhas under Capt. Lowther surprised Kandarpeswar's residence at Jorhat on 9 September and arrested the Prince.<sup>8</sup> He was detained as a State prisoner in the Alipur Central Jail. Maniram who was arrested in Calcutta was sent to Jorhat to face his trial there in the Court of Capt. Holroyd. While Maniram and Peali Barua were sentenced to death, several others were given transportation for life and various terms of imprisonment along with confiscation of their properties. In consideration of his tender age and being "not a voluntary agent in the conspiracy" Kandarpeswar was released from jail but kept as an internee at Burdwan till December 1860.<sup>9</sup> To defray the cost of his maintenance a part of his personal property seized at Jorhat at the time of his arrest was sold at Sibsagar by public auction and after deducting the auctioneer's commission and other expenses, the balance was remitted to him.<sup>10</sup>

After Kandarpeswar's arrest and deportation from Assam, his family members being "unable to withstand the oppression of the Local Authorities" left Jorhat and "having bought land and houses" settled at Gauhati.<sup>11</sup> At the time of his arrest all his properties movable and immovable were seized by the Government from the custody of his mother and were kept under attachment. Kandarpeswar was reported to possess at that time three elephants, one pony, several swords and guns. Col. Hannay estimated that his gold ornaments and jewellery were of considerable value aggregating an worth of two lakhs of rupees. In several mouzas of Jorhat, he had landed property of about two hundred puras.<sup>12</sup> The young Prince who was confined in the Alipur jail and whose future was yet to be decided was greatly apprehensive about the

safety and security of his properties both movable and immovable. Pending their final restoration to him, he even preferred these to be retained in the custody of the Government. In one of his petitions, he stated that if the properties were handed over to his mother it would be difficult for her to keep them safe, because he had 'several great enemies' and even from "robbers and dacoits." He only prayed that he be allowed any money which he might occasionally require for paying his legal advisers and other expenses as well as the cost of maintenance of his family from out of the properties.<sup>13</sup>

Kandarpeswar who was allowed to stay at Burdwan after his release from jail expressed in his petition his desire to return to Upper Assam. But acting on the advice of Maj. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, the Government of Bengal allowed him to return to Assam and reside only at Goalpara and "no further East."<sup>14</sup> So Kandarpeswar's expectation to return to his ancestral home in Upper Assam met with a rebuff. The Government's order of 11th July 1860 permitting him conditionally to return to Goalpara amounted to the same thing for him as staying at Burdwan or any other city of Bengal "cut-off from his relatives or any of his kinsmen" Meanwhile his only brother died of Cholera at Gauhati which made the condition of his old mother pitiable in the extreme. This led the Prince once again to appeal to the Government for his immediate return to Gauhati, if it was not at all prepared to allow him to do so to Upper Assam.<sup>15</sup> While urging the Government to revise its order of 11 July 1860, Kandarpeswar states :

*I shall be most thankful to the Government if I be permitted to live in peace and tranquillity with my family at Gowhatty where I shall escape from several inconveniences of buying lands and houses,, and thus save myself from unnecessary expenses in my present limited and decaying conditions. Besides the climate of Gowhatty is more agreeable to me than that of Goalparah.<sup>16</sup>*

On receipt of the petition mentioned above, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal sought the opinion of the Commissioner of Assam whether he had any objection to the compliance with the petitioner's prayer. To add to the agony of the Prince his second wife also died of Cholera and acute economic crisis hit the family.<sup>17</sup> The unusual delay in getting any favourable reply from the Government led Kandarpeswar to make another representation to the Lieutenant Governor through the Commissioner of Burdwan which inter alia states ;

*I have already stated in my last petition that untimely death of my only brother made a great shock on my poor mother. To crown my misfortune, my second wife has also died of cholera at Gowhatty on the 8th instant, thus being left alone amidst perfect strangers in a foreign country. I have been kept in confinement and doomed to receive these shocks. Now more than three years have elapsed, still no final order whatever has been issued to my lot.*<sup>18</sup>

As regards his economic plight Kandarpeswar adds :—

*Since the Government has snatched the Government of Assam from my grandfather, we (‘i.e. my grand father, my father, and myself in succession’) declined to take any pension from the Government though the Government was ready to offer and we had been, till before my arrest, living in a tolerable manner on our accumulated stores. But on my arrest, having been deprived of most of my movables, I am obliged to depend solely on the contents of the two chests returned by the Government to me, now and then selling my gold and jewels. So it is necessary, previous to my making away with my little and limited stocks, that I must settle myself in some place, and provide for my and my successors future livelihood.*<sup>19</sup>

After the receipt of the reply from Col. Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam that he had no objection in allowing Kandarpeswar to reside at Gauhati, the Government granted his prayer for return to Assam, but not beyond Gauhati.<sup>20</sup> On 8 April 1861, the Prince was allowed to leave Burdwan without surveillance provided he presented himself to the Governor General’s Agent at Gauhati within two months time from the date on which he left Burdwan.<sup>21</sup> Thus after four years’ stay in Bengal Kandarpeswar was released from the state of surveillance and allowed to return to his native province and settle at Gauhati. On 4 May, 1861, he left Burdwan and came down to Calcutta for his departure on board. The Government Steamer bound for Gauhati. But severe illness compelled him to stay in Calcutta for a few months where he placed himself under the medical treatment of Babu Neelmadhab Mukerjee, Demonstrator of Anatomy at the Calcutta Medical College.<sup>22</sup> The medical certificate which was attached to the petition of the Prince to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal dated 12 July 1861 showed that Kandarpeswar was suffering from “some bad ulcers in the rectum and eruptions on the surface of the body”. He was extremely emaciated and debilitated from his broken health which necessitated a “course of appropriate treat-

ment for three or four months in order to bring back his health to the normal standard."<sup>23</sup>

Thus after four years' exile in a neighbouring province amidst solitude, penury, personal misfortunes, physical and mental hardship Kandarpeswar the 'Charing Raja' returned to Gauhati. Whether he found tranquillity and peace in the company of his living family members in the new environment is difficult to say, but his desire to return to his ancestral royal residence at Jorhat remained a cry in the wilderness. Bemoaning the loss of his former position, dignity and family possessions, Kandarpeswar appealed to the Government in February 1863 "to make a settlement of the mouzas of Rangpur and Gorgaon in the district of Sibsagar besides the pension of Rs. 1000 per month with the arrears which was offered to his father."<sup>24</sup> Although the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal recommended a pension of Rs. 500 per month to Kandarpeswar, the Government of India was not prepared to grant it as in its opinion he had forfeited all claims to pension on the ground that his predecessors refused to accept them. However, on the strong recommendation and convincing argument of the Government of Bengal that the "impoverished condition of the Rajah is a reproach to the British Government", a pension at the rate of Rs. 500 per month was sanctioned by the Governor General in Council with effect from 27th February 1863.<sup>25</sup>

Kandarpeswar's claim for the arrears of pension with effect from 11 June 1851 (i.e. the date of the death of his father) was not recommended by Col. Hopkinson, the new Commissioner of Assam on the plea that the "Rajah has been treated with sufficient consideration."<sup>26</sup> Kandarpeswar's another prayer for an increase of his pension "either directly in specie or by restoration of lands" in the Sibsagar division was negated by the local authorities. While refusing to recommend any further consideration to his return to Upper Assam or restoration of his ancestral properties, Hopkinson remarked that as Kandarpeswar "is the descendant of an effete and unworthy dynasty which was put to an end by the Burmese", if the British Government left him alone he would be "speedily forgotten".<sup>27</sup>

Evidently shattered in mind and body Kandarpeswar remained at Gauhati reconciling himself to his destiny. In *Sadaraminor Atmajivani* it is mentioned that Kandarpeswar went to Calcutta to see the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) who arrived at the Indian Capital on 23 December 1875.<sup>28</sup> In the same work it is stated that Kandarpeswar's mother died at Gauhati in May

1881 and he himself was not keeping on good health at the time. Kandarpeswar was treated by Dinanath Bez Barua an eminent *Rabiraj* of Upper Assam.<sup>29</sup>

After prolonged illness the "Charing Raja" Kandarpeswar breathed his last in the early morning of Saturday 12 August 1882 leaving his wife Ratneswari and son Kumudeswar.<sup>30</sup>

#### References

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4. H. K., Barpujari, op. cit., p. 175.
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22. Ibid, July 1861, No. 341.
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27. Ibid. 28. K. Bardalai, *Sadaraminor Atmajivani*, p. 203.
29. Ibid, p. 225. 30. Ibid, pp. 228-30.