

## **Importance of the Oriental Letters as Sources for the History of Meghalaya**

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The State of Meghalaya was formed in 1972 with the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts of Assam. Its north and eastern boundary is surrounded by the Assam districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Newgong, North Cachar Hills and Cachar. The territory of the present Bangladesh lies on its west and south. The State is now inhabited by the Garos of the Bodo stock and the Khasi-Syntengs of the great Mongoloid race and unites many smaller confederated units. The most important of these principalities are the Garo Hills, a land of the hills and valleys, the state of Ossimlee, the chieftain of which was known as the Nunklow Raja. The next is the principality of Khyram having authority over seventy villages. Bordering upon this domain there is the territory of the chieftain Barmanik holding authority over twenty-eight villages. The Raja of Churra is another principality exercising control upon twenty-five villages. Nartiang or Nongkrem is also a similar state. The principality of Nuspung, which contains twenty villages; of Muriow, containing twenty-five; of Mahram, containing twenty-four villages; and that of Ramrye, are the only others meriting notice.<sup>1</sup>

The sources for the history of Meghalaya before the advent of the British are very meagre.<sup>2</sup> However, we are in possession of a few Ahom and Assamese Buranjis which throw important light on the history of Meghalaya during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries A.D.

The history of the Garo people is narrated in the various Buranjis. The Deodhai Asom Buranji mentions that there was a bachelor in the village of the Nartangia Garos. He once trapped a fish which he preserved. The Garo once remained unseen in some corner of the house. A divine maiden came out of the fish and began to apply herself to the usual routine of a matron's work. The Garo caught hold of her and asked her who she was. She said she was a Deva-kanya or a daughter of the gods and

predicted the birth of a powerful sovereign as the result of their union.

After sometime a son was born of the pair and he gradually grew up to be an expert hunter. One in a hunting expedition his dog left his company and went through the forest to the territory of Jayanti Devi. She at once knew that the dog belonged to her sister. A letter with some quantity of salt was tied down to the neck of the dog and it was then allowed to go back to from where it came. The letter contained a simple written message,—"I am well". The son of the Garo easily guessed that there was a territory beyond the outskirts of the forest. He marched at the head of his army to conquer that kingdom and eventually arrived at the territory of Jayanti Devi. She ordered her ministers and nobles to escort her valiant nephew. The two having met Jayanti Devi offered the crown of succession to her nephew who then assumed the title of Bargohain.<sup>3</sup>

A similar story of the Suttanga Garo is narrated in the Jayantia Buranji. Landhabar, son of Chandibar, the royal priest married Jayanti Devi, Queen Regnant of Jayantipur. Landhabar was exiled for his profligacy and resided with Suttanga Garo. Here he married Matsyodari, a divine damsel sprung from a Barali fish. Next a son named Bargohain was born out of their union. Bargohain marched against Jayantia when Jayanti Devi renounced her throne in favour of Bargohain, grand-son of Suttanga Garo<sup>4</sup>.

Dr. J. P. Wade, who visited Assam in 1792 A.D. wrote an account of Assam on the basis of available Buranjis (chronicles). He wrote that a Brahman named Sundabhurr, husband of Zointee alias Raneesingh wandered in the Garrow mountains and took refuge under the roof of a Garoese named Khootungah (or Suto-onga). The Garoese and his wife gave shelter to him. Shundabhurr fought with Muhamad, Governor of Sulehtawnpoor, killed him and became Governor of Sulehtawnpoor. His son Burro Gohain destroyed Zeheerbeg and ultimately became prince of Zointapoor<sup>5</sup>.

In the middle of the sixteenth century A. D., the Koch king Nara Narayan (1540-86 A.D.) invaded Assam and various other states of north-eastern India. These events are recorded in the Kamarupar Buranji which mentions that the king Nara Narayan invaded the kingdom of the Garos. This kingdom of the Garos at that time was under a king who submitted<sup>6</sup>. The Ahom Buranji refers to the participation of the Garo soldiers with the Ahoms to fight against the Mughal army under the command of

Ram Singh in 1671 A.D. <sup>7</sup> It is mentioned in the Kachari Buranji and the Deodhai Asom Buranji that in the reign of the Ahom king Rudra Singh (1696-1714 A.D.) one Ahom officer was punished for his undue intrusion upon a Garo village<sup>8</sup>. The Jayantia Buranji refers on several occasions the services rendered by the Garos to the Jayantias at the time of war as well as peace<sup>9</sup>.

By far the largest quantity of information for the history and culture of Meghalaya are available in the diplomatic letters exchanged between the contemporary administrative heads such as the kings, ministers and other dignitaries.

In 1662 A.D. Jayadhvaj Singh, the Ahom king wrote a letter to the Lalta Sultan, the King of Jayantia. He stated that Assam had been invaded by the Mughals and two Jayantia messengers were killed by them near Garhgaon, the Capital of Assam. He conveyed his heart-felt regret for the loss of Jayantia. The Ahom king desired good relations with Jayantia. The letter was dated in the Saka era and it included a list of presents sent through the messenger of Assam.<sup>10</sup> Jayadhvaj Singh also sent another letter of the same date to Man Singh, the Nartiang king. It was requested that Man Singh should take necessary care for the safe escort of the Assamese mission. The letters give the idea that the kingdom of Nartiang was the same as Khyram or Khasi Hills. It appears to be a vassal kingdom under Jayantia.<sup>11</sup> In 1663 A.D. Lalta Sultan of Jayantia wrote a letter to the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singh. He suggested that both of them should prepare themselves to take revenge against the Mughals. The letter was dated in the Saka era and accompanied with presents.<sup>12</sup> In 1663 A.D. Man Singh, the Nartiang king sent his reply to Jayadhvaj Singh, the Ahom king. He also informed his willingness to help the Ahom king in the future occasions of clash between the Assamese and the Mughals.<sup>13</sup> In 1665 A.D. four letters were sent from Jayantia to the Ahom court at Garhgaon. In 1666 A.D. in reply to the above other four letters were sent from the Ahom court to the Jayantia. All these letters were meant to enhance the friendship between the two countries and these accompanied valuable presents.<sup>14</sup>

On May 29, 1663 A.D. Jasamatta Rai, the Jayantia king wrote a letter to Jayadhvaj Singh of Assam informing him his concern about the Mughal invasion of Assam. He stated that the Mughals were also his enemies. He promised help in case of further such political calamities.<sup>15</sup> This letter also proves

that in 1663 A.D. the king of Jayantia was Jasamatta Rai and not Ban Singh as stated by Sir Edward Gait<sup>16</sup>. In the same year Manik Singh, the chief of Nartiang, a vassal state under Jayantia wrote a letter to the Assam king Jayadhvaj Singh informing him that he will supply 20,000 soldiers to the king of Assam to fight against the Mughals<sup>17</sup>. On October 26, 1667 A.D. Jasamatta Rai, the king of Jayantia sent a letter to Chakradhwaj Singh, king of Assam. In this letter he informed that he had made ready a contingent of Jayantia soldiers to be despatched through the Dimarua route to fight against the Mughals, the common enemy of Assam and Jayantia<sup>18</sup>. On December 20, 1668 A.D. Jasamatta Rai received a letter from the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singh. The Ahom king requested for a Jayantia force of 30,000 men for construction of forts and ramparts in Assam. This letter also proves that in 1668 A.D. Jasamatta Rai was the ruler of Jayantia and his reign did not end in 1660 A.D. as recorded by Sir Edward Gait.<sup>19</sup> The Deodhai Asom Buranji records a letter in which a Jayantia princess was offered to the Ahom king Rudra Singh (1696-1714 A.D.) by a contemporary Jayantia ruler<sup>20</sup>. The Account of Assam by Dr. J. P. Wade incorporates three letters exchanged between the courts of Assam and Jayantia during the seventies of the seventeenth century A.D. These letters describe various presents exchanged between the two countries. These also testify to the friendly relations that existed between them<sup>21</sup>. The Tungkhungia Buranji contains two letters of which the first one was written by Ram Singh, the Jayantia ruler to the Ahom king Kamaleswar Singh (1795-1811 A.D.) and the second one was addressed by the Duara Barbarua to the Jayantia king Ram Singh. Both the letters describe the impact of the Moamaria rebellion in Assam over the bordering territories between Assam and Jayantia.<sup>22</sup>

The Jayantia Buranji produces sixty-four letters dated between A.D. 1662 and 1707. In the reign of the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singh (1648-63 A.D.) there were exchanged five letters. The first two dated 1662 A.D. were sent by the Ahom king to the Jayantia king Jasamatta Rai and the Nartangia king Manik Singh. The other three dated 1662-63 A.D. were in the form of replies in which the Jayantia king and Nartangia king expressed sympathy for the invasion of Assam by the Mughals under Nawab Mir Jumla and voiced pleasure at the Ahom king's success in concluding peace with the Mughals. A list of valuable presents was enclosed with each of the letters.<sup>23</sup> The period of the Ahom

king Chakradhwaj Singh's reign (1663-69 A.D.) witnessed exchange of fifteen letters. It is recorded that the Jayantia king Jasamatta Rai offered his daughter in marriage to the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singh and as many as 30,000 Jayantia soldiers were sent for helping the Ahom king to fight against the Mughals. King Jasamatta Rai died in the meantime and his grandson Man Singh ascended the Jayantia throne.<sup>24</sup> Six letters were exchanged during the reign of the Ahom king Udayaditya Singh (1669-73 A.D.). These communications record important contemporary events of the Jayantia kingdom such as deposition of the Jayantia king Man Singh by Pratap Singh, despatching of the Jayantia messenger named Ramai (Ramrai) to the Ahom court praying for the return of Dimarua, ascending the throne of Jayantia by Lakshmi Singh by killing Pratap Singh and the proposal of the marriage of Lakshmi Singh's daughter with the Ahom king Udayaditya Singh.<sup>25</sup> In 1674 A.D. the Jayantia king Lakshmi Singh wrote a letter to the Ahom king Ramadhwaj Singh (1673-75 A.D.) praying again for the cession of Dimarua.<sup>26</sup> During the period from 1675 to 1678 A.D. five letters were exchanged between the royal courts of Jayantia and Garhgaon in which also the cession of Dimarua was discussed.<sup>27</sup>

From 1683 to 1696 A.D. seven letters and their replies were inter-changed between the Jayantia king Lakshmi Singh (1669-97 A.D.) and the Ahom Governor Gargaya Handique Barphukan emphasising that the friendly relations between the two countries should not be destroyed.<sup>28</sup> From 1696 to 1707 A.D. other seven letters and their replies were communicated between the Jayantia kings Lakshmi Singh (1669-97 A.D.), Ram Singh I (1697-1708 A.D.) and Barkonwar (1708 A.D. —) on the one hand and the Ahom Governor Duara Barphukan on the other. These documents record Ram Singh I's accession to the Jayantia throne, imprisonment of Kachari king Tamradhwaj by the Jayantia king, the Ahom king Rudra Singh's (1696-1714 A.D.) expedition against the kingdom of Jayantia, defeat of the Jayantia king at the battle of Barpani fort, Jayantia king Ram Singh I as prisoner at Biswanath and the Ahom Governor Duara Barphukan's conciliatory overture with the Jayantia prince Barkonwar for restoring age-old Ahom-Jayantia amity.<sup>29</sup>

We have discussed here altogether eighty-six diplomatic epistles found in the Buranji literatures of Assam. These contain very important source materials for the history and culture of Meghalaya during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries A.D. The correspondences present at the end list of valuable articles as gifts and these account for very useful testimony for the study of contemporary economy. There are also narratives of political events, social customs, linguistic expressions and religious beliefs of the time. The contents of these documents reveal contemporary geography, dynastic genealogy, administrative system, military tactics, diplomatic norms, matrimonial alliances, foreign invasions, agricultural and industrial products, trade-routes and means of communication. Independent entity of the people of Meghalaya was upheld till 1835 A.D. but their past history is yet an unexplored and uninvestigated field of study. In this context our present study supplementing the other available sources like the traditions, numismatics and epigraphs<sup>30</sup> may provide a background for preparation of a comprehensive work on it. The preparation of such a work on its historicity has long been felt due and a sincere venture on the line may soon be undertaken.

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