

Sonaram R. Sangma
(A Study of his Life and Works as a Garo Nationalist)

M. S. Sangma

Sonaram R. Sangma is a household name today among the Garos. He occupies an important chapter in the history of the Garos. It was he, who, for the first time, created a national consciousness among his people. From time immemorial, the Garos were in constant conflicts with the plainsmen living at the foot of their hills. During the Moghul days, they were in intermittent struggles with the zamindars. They also came into conflicts with the British when the latter came into contact with them. But all these struggles were carried by the Garos of that area where the trouble occurred. There was no united effort then. It was Sonaram, who for the first time brought the whole Garo tribe together living both in the hills and plains and mobilised combined efforts by taking up the old but common and vital issues. It was to these national causes that Sonaram dedicated his whole life and energy and fought fearlessly against the injustice and oppression that the Garos suffered at the hands of the zamindars and the British. It must however be noted that in all these attempts to get their grievances redressed, Sonaram approached through legal and constitutional means.

His parentage

The exact date of birth of Sonaram is not known but the extract from the Register of Marriage recorded his age as 22 years on 7th June, 1889.¹ He was born at a small hamlet called Rongrokgre situated by the side of Nachirongdik or the pool of mud-fish lying at the north-eastern corner of Garo Hills.² While he was still young, his parents moved to another village called Amguri which falls within the district of Goalpara, Assam, where he spent his childhood days. His father's name was Klang G. Momin and his mother's name was Chamre R. Sangma. He was the second son of three sons and three daughters. They are - (1) Wilne R. Sangma, (2) Sonaram R. Sangma, (3) Medini R. Sangma, (4) Mat-

rang R. Sangma, (5) Roche R. Sangma, and (6) Somorsing R. Sangma.³

His Education and Government Service

When he grew up, he went to study in another village called Nishangram which was about 25 kms. away. After he completed his studies there in the L. P. School, he prosecuted his studies in the American Baptist Mission School at Tura in the Upper Primary class and read up to class IV. This was the highest class that could be provided at that time and was known as the Graduation Class.⁴

After completing his studies, he joined the Government Service about which we have the information from Sonaram himself. He says, "I took up Service in the Public Works Department Office as a Mohirrer. I left the Public Works Department in 1899. I have got a Certificate from Major Howell, Deputy Commissioner. I used to get Rs. 25/-. I was ordered to go to Kaunia by the Executive Engineer, Mr. Jewett, and was dismissed because I did not care to go. I served for about ten years in the Public Works Department. There may have been false reports against me. I have the Certificate. I got from Major Howell and can produce it. Although, the public works Department dismissed me, Capt. Halleday, Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills, took me as an Inspector of vaccination. I got Rs. 20/- pay and Rs. 15/- Travelling Allowances under Dr. Bancroff. I was not dismissed by Dr. Bancroff. In April, 1900 I left this service and went to live with my wife at Rohumari."⁵

He married Thokje G. Momin who also studied in the American Baptist Mission Girls' School at Tura in 1889 whose marriage ceremony was conducted by the Reverend E. G. Phillips. After their marriage, they stayed at Tura for four years, that is, up to 1893 after which, they had shifted to Thokje's village at Salpara.⁶ They were blessed with six children : (i) Nome G. Momin, (ii) Silman G. Momin, (iii) Roton G. Momin, (iv) Sunalsing G. Momin, (v) Premi G. Momin, (vi) Erne G. Momin.⁷

Work and activities

Regarding the way in which he was drawn into the national struggles, Sonaram said, "The people of Bijni came to ascertain the boundaries of Dilma and Resu. That was in 1900. On that occasion, the Garos beat and drove away the persons who were putting pillars to the south of Beckett's boundary. This was near Dilma village. The Garos came to me about this to my village

Rohumari. After a year Bijni made another attempt and began to put pillars in the Rohumari village.....Bijni owned the lands to the north of Rohumari, but they were not satisfied and encroached on our lands..... In 1901, the Garos broke some of the 'dhips' at Khanchikol village. There was no Criminal Case about this. A year after the dhips were broken at Dilma, there was a case and some of the Garos were punished by the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills. I was not present at this. Bijni made various attempts to encroach and obtain my village of Rohumari. They came to measure the lands, but the Salpara people beat them and drove them away. We got no Notice or intimation that the boundary was to be surveyed or relaid in 1899-1900. There was not notice given when Beckett surveyed the boundary in 1873-74. I have heard this from the Nokmas. There were also disturbances at that time."⁸

It was under these compelling circumstances that Sonaram was drawn into the vortex of national struggles against the zamindars and the British. The Nokmas, Laskars and other Garo leaders whose lands were encroached upon by the zamindars approached him for his advice, guidance and to head the agitation to demand for justice from the British Government.⁹ Besides, Sonaram on his own, while working as a Mohurrer for ten years had travelled widely all over the Garo Hills and saw to himself the way how the Begar system was imposed on the Garos and how the Garo families were evicted to make room for the reservation of forests for the colonial interests. After resigning from the Government service, Sonaram started a private business of supplying cow hides to Calcutta which enabled him to contact legal experts in Calcutta.¹⁰ Thus all these factors combined together have brought him forward to the forefront of the Garo national struggles for the redresses of their grievances on the question of (1) The Nazarana lands and the Habraghat Pargana, (2) Restoration of the reserved forests to the Garos, and (3) Abolition of the Begar system or Impressment of labour.

The first sign of protest came when in 1899-1900, the Survey party deputed to the Garo Hills surveyed the two lines as laid down by Beckett and Kelso respectively and cut new lines and placed dhips showing the two lines.¹¹ Phongpong Laskar and six others submitted a Petition dated the 11th April, 1900 to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, and approached Sonaram for his advice and guidance:

The Petition stated that "The old boundary line, which is a

true and genuine one, has been removed to create a new boundary line, so that it has materially encroached on the estates of your petitioners. These estates were formerly in the district of Garo Hills, but the new boundary line passing through their estates is to deprive them partly of their estates, which are attempted to be taken away by the Bijni estates by showing and making a new boundary line".¹² Another Memorandum was submitted by Jontha Laskar and 14 others of the Garo Hills and Goalpara dated 27th August, 1902 to His Excellency the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, complaining of the manner in which Srimati Rani Abhoyeswari Debi, Bijni estate, had been encroaching on the lands of the Garos.¹³ Another memorial was submitted to the Chief Commissioner of Assam J. B. Fuller, dated 8th July, 1904, requesting the Chief Commissioner for an amicable settlement with the Bijni estate and to enquire in the circumstances under which Sonaram was sent the jail, and to cancel the order passed to find two Sureties of Rs. 500. each.¹⁴ Again memorials were submitted by Sonaram and others on the 23rd August, 1905¹⁵, 3rd October, 1905¹⁶ and 23rd November, 1905 to Viceroy and Governor General of India¹⁷ and on the 9th February, 1906,¹⁸ complaining about the encroachments of the Bijni zamindar on their Nazarana lands and on the Habraghat pargana which they claimed to have been granted by David Scott in 1831 as valid Lakheraj lands. They also demanded for an impartial enquiry to go into all these aspects of their grievances.

In the matter of the Reserved Forests in the Garo Hills, Sonaram and about one lakh Garos signed and submitted a Memorial dated 9th February, 1906 and addressed to the Viceroy and Governor General of India stating that the Garos and their ancestors had enjoyed the great privilege of living in the forests in the Garo Hills and make use of the forest products and sold the same for their benefit besides cultivating and having rights of pasturage but by the Passing of the Indian Forest Act VII of 1878 as amended by subsequent Regulation of 1891 and other enactments, they have been deprived of these privileges and advantages without having been compensated or rewarded. Therefore, the Memorialists prayed that some of the reserved forests may be restored to them and some permanent compensation may be given to some others in lieu of the loss that they have sustained.¹⁹

In the matter of Forced Labour in the Garo Hills Sonaram and about one lakh Garos signed and submitted a Memorial dated 9th February, 1906 and addressed to the Viceroy and Gover-

nor General of India stating that the memorialists for years past have been compelled to work for and to find coolies for the Military and Forest Departments, as well as for other Government Departments, and also for other Government servants in their official and private capacity. The Memorialists further stated that the practice is an act of injustice on the memorialists and is against all the principles upon which civilised nations are governed. Therefore, they prayed that the order exempting the memorialists from compulsory doing forced labour may be passed.²⁰

The Government of India accordingly in their letter No. 1840-102-5, dated the 29th October, 1906 appointed Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott, Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Districts to enquire into all the aspects mentioned in the memorial's of Sonaram Sangma and other Garos. Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott made over charge of the Commissioner of the Surma Valley and Hill Districts on the 21st November, 1906 and under subsequent orders remained at Silchar until December 3rd to receive instructions and discuss the case with His Honour Lieutenant Governor. From December 6th to December 20th (inclusive) was spent in obtaining and studying the voluminous records and correspondence on the subject at Shillong. Damra, which may be regarded as the headquarters of the Movement was reached on the 23rd December, 1906. The interval pending the arrival of the Counsel engaged by Sonaram and his adherents was spent in visiting the border villages to the west and east of Damra. Mr. Jacob, Barrister at Law with Babu Surendra Nath Ghosal, Vakil of the High Court, Calcutta, arrived at Damra on the 3rd January, 1907. The hearing to the Habraghat Pargana and Nazarana Claims was fixed for 7th January and continued till January 22nd, when Jacob left. The Bijni estate was represented by the Superintendent and Counsel from Calcutta. Sonaram himself and 70 witnesses were produced for the Nazarana and Habraghat Case, 47 witnesses were produced for Begar Case and 47 witnesses for Forest case, who were examined and cross-examined.²¹

J. C. Arbuthnott's Reports

1. *The Habraghat and Nazarana Case* : Habraghat pargana is, and always has been the property of the Bijni Raj. It cannot be said, for there are no records to show this exactly when it was permanently settled, but that it has been so settled has been admitted, and the settlement presumably took place before the passing of the Resolution of the 25th July, 1822, and of Regulation X of

1822. The boundaries of the Pargana Habraghat seem to have been very ill-defined, and in particular, the southern boundary appears to have been simply, "The Garo Hills". To keep the Garos from raiding down the plains, the zamindars appear to have made some sort of arrangement with the Garos of the foot hills, who in return for keeping out the highland Garos behind them, used to levy various tolls, more or less of the nature of blackmail, upon the villagers of the plains. But this arrangement had altogether broken down before 1816, when David Scott was deputed to enquire into the grievances of the Garos, in consequence of persistent and violent raids by the hillmen.

There is no question that the exactions and oppression of the Zamindars and their agents at the frontier hats were as much as anything else responsible for the Garo raids and trouble along the border. Scott's proceedings were interrupted by the Burmese invasion, but in 1831 he turned his attention again to the Garos and effected the Bibhagnama settlement under which the Bijni Raja made over 21 plots of land in the Duars to the Maharis (Clans) concerned through certain named Laskars. These Laskars in return executed recognisance bonds, in which they undertook to defend the passes against any Garo inroads. But the essence of the Bibhagnama patra was a settlement of the claims to the lands and the undertaking to defend the passes a subsidiary agreement, and on this ground the Civil Court in 1877 refused to allow the zamindar to resume the lands on the ground that the service was no longer rendered.

At the same time that Scott effected the Bibhagnama settlement, he brought the north-eastern Garos of the border villages under the influence of the British Government. These "Nazarana" or Tributary Garos thereafter paid "nazar" to the political Agent at Goalpara who exercised a political control over them and settled their disputes with one another and with the Bijni people. The real security of the plains was that under Scott's settlement and by virtue of Regulation X of 1822, the zamindars were excluded from the hills, including the foot hills, and Government administered the Garos living therein direct, receiving from them in return a tribute or nazar of Rs. 3 for each Nokpante or Bachelors' Dormitory in a village, hence the Nazarana. It therefore follows that Habraghat pargana is purely zamindari and "Nazarana" land is purely Government.

Phongpong Laskar and six others submitted a Memorial to the Chief Commissioner of Assam dated 12th April, 1900 claim-

ing the nazarana lands. In April, 1901 occurred the incident of the destruction of one of the boundary marks. On the 6th February, 1902 the Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills, convicted Phongpong Laskar under Section 143 and 434 Indian Penal Code and sentenced him to one month rigorous imprisonment under Section 434, and to a fine of Rs. 50 under Section 143, Indian Penal Code. Jantha Laskar and three others were fined Rs. 50 each under Sect. 143, I.P.C. All five accused were bound down to keep the peace for one year. In February, 1902 Sonaram, Bosin Sirdar and Solaman were prosecuted under Section 107(1), Criminal Procedure Code, and bound down to keep the peace for one year. On the 27th August, 1902 another Memorial was submitted to the Viceroy of India complaining about the encroachment of Bijni on the Garo lands. In December, 1902 the Dolguma disturbances occurred. Seven hundred Garos marched from the hills across paragana Habraghat to Dolguma on the Brahmaputra, and notices were posted by their leaders ordering tenants not to pay rent to the Bijni zamindar. But the ring-leaders were arrested and prosecuted under the Orders of the Chief Commissioner. Six men were convicted under Section 143, Indian Penal Code and sentenced to terms varying from two months to one year. Sonaram was sentenced to one year and called on to furnish heavy security under Section 110, Criminal Procedure Code, and in default committed to jail where he remained till April, 1904. The agitation was at once renewed. In November, 1903, a compromise was arrived at by which the 14 Nokmas agreed to accept 25 per cent of the ordinary land revenue of the nazarana lands included in the Bijni A Mahal in satisfaction of their claims. But this was rejected by the Nokmas at the instance of Sonaram. This was followed by a series of Memorials submitted by the Garos. At last the Government of India sent Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott to enquire into all the aspects of their demands. After a full enquiry, Arbuthnott made the following recommendations with reference to Habraghat and nazarana claims :-

(1) That the boundary of jurisdiction - Beckett's line be retained, but a settlement be made with the Garo villages in pargana Habraghat through their headmen on the Mauzadari system, the appointment of Mauzadars be made by the Government.

(2) That the Bibhagnama Grants in Habraghat be surveyed and demarcated.

(3) That the propriety of the purchase by Government of the Bijni A Mahal might receive consideration.

(4) That should Government still consider the grant of any

concession in respect of the nazarana lands, a settlement with the nazarana Nokmas on the line of Scott's settlement of the Bibhag-nama grants would be a preferable arrangement to an assignment of a share in the revenues such as was contemplated by the abortive compromise of 1903.

But Arbuthnott hastens to add that as regards the nazarana lands, the wisdom of granting any concession at this stage is at least open to question nor is it by any means certain that any terms short of complete surrender will now satisfy the claimants or contribute to abate an agitation which is kept alive by unscrupulous adventurers to serve their own ends.

In conclusion, it may be stated that should the not unlikely contingency arise for placing the Bijni estate under the Court of Wards, the simplest and most obvious solution of the troubles with regard to the Garo tenantry of the estate in pargana Habraghat would *ipso facto* take effect, in which case, it would probably be unnecessary to consider, the question of purchasing A Mahal estate from unwilling Vendor.

2. *Restoration of Reserved Forests in Garo Hills* : In this connection Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott had taken the statements from 47 witnesses and visited some of the Reserved Forests in Garo Hills. In his report he has also dealt with the subject quite exhaustively and they will only be summarised here.

The land on which the forests stood was the property of the Government. This was true only in so far that Government had annexed the Garo Hills and with it all the rights of the State. Therefore, the Government has the right to reserve the forests, if it thinks necessary, to regulate the cutting of wood wherein, and to impose revenue, but that these rights are subject to the extinction by purchase of existing rights of the village communities represented by the Nokmas, and these were not sufficiently considered even by giving Rs. 15 for the cost of removing each of the houses that had to be demolished for the reservation.

The Deputy Commissioner and a Forest Officer should be associated to examine carefully the existing reserved forests to exclude and give back to the villagers all areas manifestly unfit for the purpose, and to consider anew the arguments for and against the further reservations or surrender to cultivation of those blocks of forests which though otherwise suitable for reservation are so remote and inaccessible or of such doubtful value as to make it an open question whether they are worth retaining in the interest of revenue. Failing surrender, various privileges might be given

to them. It is, therefore, simply a question of examining each case carefully on its merit. When it was decided what must be reserved, the Government should give the villagers concerned a fair sum of money in compensation, representing roughly the approximate value of the land so lost.

B. Abolition of Begar System or Forced Labour : The Memorial submitted by Sonaram and other Garos on 9th February, 1906 related to the abolition of Impressment of Labour in the Garo Hills. In this connection, Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott examined about 47 witnesses and submitted the following points in his report :

There is no reason why the system of begar for road-making except in exceptional emergencies, should not be superseded by a system of contracts with professional contractors. This system would be slightly more costly but the advantages to be derived therefrom would amply compensate for the extra outlay.

As regards the carriage of Officers' baggage, it seems that for the present, it is impossible to devise any other system than that of carriage by the village people. Therefore, the daily wages of the labourers may be increased to a minimum of six annas and a careful regulation of the stages over which baggage has to be carried may be determined ; it may be possible to arrange with the Nokmas or with those of the Garos who have worked as deffadars on Tea gardens in the plains to find the men without having recourse to quasi-criminal process.

With regard to the up-keep of the bridle-paths, a contract system through local Garo daffadar contractors be substituted for the existing arrangements.²²

Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott submitted his findings and recommendations to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam on the 11th May, 1907.²³ The Officiating Chief Secretary in turn submitted the same with the recommendations of the Lieutenant Governor, to the Secretary to the Government of India on the 26th November, 1907.²⁴

Mr. R. W. Carlyle, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, in his letter No. 358-507-2, dated 20th March, 1908, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, communicated the Orders of the Government of India. The following are the abstracts :

It appears that the dispute between the Garos and the Bijni zamindar has been going on for over a century, and that the Garos object to any part of their rents being paid to the zamindar. In their memorial of 1904 the Garos asked for a rectification of the

boundary between the zamindari and nazarana lands and the exclusion of certain tracts from the zamindari area. In their memorial in 1906 they have however gone beyond and set up a claim to the whole of Habraghat pargana. The decision of this claim is a matter for the Civil Courts, but Arbuthnott has examined the evidence brought forward in support of it, and the Government of India see no reason to differ from the opinion which the Lieutenant-Governor has formed, that the Garos have failed to establish any title whatever to this area.

It is hoped that another source of dispute between the Bijni zamindar and the Garos will be removed by the completion of the survey and record-of-rights for the areas covered by the Bibhagnama grants, for the remaining blocks of the Bijni A Mahal between Beckett's and Kelso's lines and for the Government nazarana lands south of Kelso's line cultivated by the Garos and non-Garos.

The position in respect of the nazarana lands has been complicated by a claim by the Nokmas and Laskars to full proprietary rights in this area. The Government of India considers it an untenable claim but feels that the derivation of the half allotment of land revenue which the Nokmas and Laskars previously enjoyed has evidently left them with a sense of grievance for which there appears to be some foundation. Therefore, the Government of India would be prepared to agree to any reasonable concession which the Lieutenant-Governor may consider it advisable to make

Regarding the complaint against the formation of forests, the Government of India proposed that a careful examination of the existing reserves should be made, and that any area which is is not found worthwhile to retain should be surrendered to the villagers, and compensation representing roughly the approximate value of the land should be paid as an act of grace.

As regard the system of begar, the Government of India agree that time has come to abolish impressment of labour for road-making, replacing it by a contract system, and this change should be given effect to at once. Regarding the impressment of labour for the carriage of Officers' baggage the Government of India will not object, but the Lieutenant-Governor should see that impressment of labour for this purpose is strictly regulated so as to cause as little hardship as possible, and that full payment is made for the labour. They leave it to the Lieutenant-Governor to decide what rates of payment should be fixed from time to time.²⁵

From the final Orders of the Government of India, it was plain that except the claim over the Habraghat pargana, Sonaram's and

other Garos' claim over other two issues has been successful. But the subsequent events showed that the local authorities did not implement those orders. The people evicted from the forest reserves were not paid compensation and the local officers continued to exact free labour from the people. Neither the Bibhagnama grants of David Scott were surveyed and record-of-rights given to the Clans. All these events and the non-fulfillment of their demand for the whole of Habraghat pargana left the whole Garo nation in a deep sense of grief and disappointment that it even affected the popularity of Sonaram Sangma.

In 1910, Geloram Sangma and other Nokmas submitted Petition to Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, asking for the allotment to the Garo Nokmas of Goalpara and Garo Hills by demarcation of portions of nazarana mahals and Reserved Forests, independently of Sonaram Sangma and saying that they have dispensed with the service of Sonaram Sangma.²⁶ But the fact remains that Sonaram continued to be the leader of and a terror to the Garos and registered a Civil Suit again for declaration of their title to and recovery of possession with profits of pargana Habraghat against the Rani of Bijni as defendant before the Subordinate Judge of Dhubri as Suit No.5 of 1910.

Sonaram rented a house in Goalpara town and busied himself in shuttling between Dhubri and Calcutta for consultations with his Lawyers²⁸ until his own death on the 27th August, 1916.²⁹

Thus passed away a man and a patriot without fulfilling his dream of integration of the Garo inhabited areas under one administration. But his works continued in different forms. After his death, his work was carried on by Singgan Shira, and Bronson Momin under the name of "Prajā Satya", claiming the rights of the tenants during the nineteen twenties and thirties.³⁰ After the independence of India till today, the movement assumed the struggles for the merger of the contiguous areas of Goalpara and Kamrup Districts of Assam predominantly inhabited by the scheduled tribes with Garo Hills district and then with Meghalaya.³¹

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