

A New Reading of Biswanath Rock Inscriptions.

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About nine Kilometres to the south of Biswanath Chariali town, on the bank of the Brahmaputra in Sonitpur discript, lies Biswanath, a pilgrim centre with rich traditions and glorious history. At this holy place there is a small rocky island extending over half a kilometre in length and is called Umatumani. At the north-west corner of this island is a flatinclining rock known locally as 'Chakreswar Sila', which measures 5.62 metres in length and breadth, from half metre to three metres in height. This rock bears three epigraphs. Of these one is completely obliterated by natural forces. Of the remaining two one is incised in two lines and the other in three lines. For the purpose of this paper, the first is called No. A and the second No. B. A measures 40 X 22 centimetres, and B 70 X 33 centimetres. The size of the letters is in average 6 centimetres. The execution of the writing is good, the letters are almost uniform and distinct except one or two Letters present Sankrit language with Assamese script.

Interestingly this rock also contains a good number of pictures which from their nature can be divided into three categories-geometrical drawings, animal figures, and floral carvings. Fourtypes of geometric carvings are seen here, of which three types are parallelogram in outline or a kind of board meant for playing chese or *Pasa-Satarancha*, and remaining type is semi-circular layout of labyrinth which may be called as *ckahra-behu*. Between the two epigraphs is a lion portrait. Certain pictures that were engraved however, are drawn along with the inscription as this fact has clearly been mentioned in the first of these plates. Unfortunately, the inscriptions are not dated, nor is there any reference to the regnal year of the rule in which it was recorded. However it can

be said that the two inscriptions are complimentary to each other and were out, it appears, by the same engraver.

In 1904, W.N. Edward said about these inscriptions only the following words- "Close to the shrine Uma (Sati's arm fell) there is a rock on which the following inscriptions has been deciphered, 'Written by Holedhar son of Laksmidhar Sarma, commander of the army of the king of Pratappur'. There is no date; There are other inscriptions on the rocks in the island; but they have not been deciphered".

I have tried here to read the epigraphs as follows:-

Inscription A - (1) **Pratapa p (u) radhikari dala-**
(2) **Pati Citra Lakshminah**

(Meaning - These pictures (**citra**) drawn here belong to Lakshmi, the lord (**adhihari**) cum chieftain (**dalapati**) of Pratapapura

Inscription B - (1) **Pratapapura balvadhikari**
(2) **dalapati lokabasya putra**
hala-
(3) **dharena likhanang-Karihong**

(Meaning- The coronation ceremony (**Likhana-Karya**) has been performed by Haladhar who is the son of the benevolent (**lokabasya**) chieftain (**dalapati**) and commander-in-chief (**balvadhikari**) of Pratapapura)

My opinion as to the decipherment of these inscriptions differs from what Edward did because according to him *Likhana-Karya* means the work of writing, but According to me *likhana-Karya* was a coronation ceremony which was prevalent in the medieval period in Assam². In the original scripts the name of Lakshmidhar Sarma is never to be found and hence it is a matter of great astonishment how the scholar Edward could find his name in these. Further, Edward did not decipher the two scripts separately, made no effort to identify the author of the epigraphs or about his time.

He failed to find out the real meaning, what they actually stand for, and therefore, he made only a superficial reading of the epigraphs. The administration connected to these epigraphs had a good knowledge.

It is evident from the epigraphs that the person, Lakshmi was declared not as a king but as the lord-cum-general-cum-chieftain of the town Pratapapura. We have not come across any reference to the epithets like *adhi-kari*, *balvadhikari* and *dala pati* in any of the early epigraphs of Assam so far discovered. However, *baladhykasha* is mentioned in the Tezpur rock₃ inscription of Harjjarvarman (G.E.510-830) A.D.). In the Maurya Period, *baladhykshas* were evidently in-charge of military affairs of whom Kautilya in his Arthasastra refers. *Mahabaladhikritas* of the Gupta era hold probably both civil and military powers. *Sri-Guru carita* of Ramananda Dviija mentions one Satananda dalapati who was an uncle of Sankardeva, the Vaisnava reformer of Assam, who ruled at Bardowa for eleven years during the absence₆ of Sankardeva who left for the first pilgrimage. So we may however presume about the original idea of office *balvadhikari* of Biswanath rock inscription traced from Arthasastra's *baladhykshas* about whom the administration connected to these epigraphs had a good knowledge.

Regarding the historicity of Biswanath inscriptions I want to place it to be the period of the Bhuyans or fuedal lords who ruled independently in the central part of Assam between thirteen and fifteen centuries A.D. when there was no dominant power in the Brahmaputra valley. Lakshmi in the inscription A was probably no other than the daughter of Monahar, and Haladhar in the inscription B may be identified as Santanu, the elder son of Lakshmi. *Adi-carita* mentions that Manohar became an independent minister who ruled from Biswanath after the death of Arimatta. Moreover,

this work clearly says about the rule of Santanu in the life time of Lakshmi who inherited father's territory extending from the Bharali river to the Disang river'. *Bara-Bhuyar Buranji* states distinctly about the Bhuyans who ruled from 1352-1505. A.D. often from Pratapapura as their capital where Lakshmi after possession of her father Manohars' territory in 1437 A.D. installed her first son Santanu on the throne of the town Pratapapura and herself remained as the regent during the minority of her two sons Santanu and Samanta. According to this *Buranji* she resided in Pratapapura only for one year then she shifted her headquarters to Lakhimpur, the place from which the modern district of Lakhimpur takes its name. It was during the time of her twelve grandsons i.e. Bara Bhuyans in 1427 *Saka* (1505 A.D.), that the Ahom King Su-hum-mong defeated and imprisoned then and annexed their territory. *Satsari Asam Buranji* also says about the subjugation of the Bhuyans of the north of the Brahmaputra by Su-hum-mong. From this time some of the articles commonly used by the Bara-Bhuyans constituted part and parcel of the Ahom apparel. The extinction of the Bhuyan's rule in 1505 A.D. has been accepted by the historians¹⁰. Thus considering all these points, the Biswanath inscriptions may be suitably placed around 1436 A.D. or in the fourth decade of the fifteenth century A.D.

It is most significant feature both the inscriptions mentioned above, is the name of an old town Pratapapura of which ancient remains are still in existence only eleven kilometres north-west of Biswanath. Present Pratapagarh Tea-estate which lies only two kilometres west of Biswanath-Chariali town covers at least two-thirds area of old Pratapapura nagar which has so prominently been mentioned in *Kamrupar Buranji*¹¹. *Raja vamsavali*¹² and *An Account of Assam*¹³ as the capital of the Jitari dynasty and in the *Bara-Bhuyar Buranji* as the capital of the Bhuyans.

The location of the epigraphs signifies the importance of Biswanath during the Bhuyan's rule, which was then connected by a straight road along a canal issued from the south-eastern corner of old Pratapaura ramparts, the remains of which can be seen even now inside the campus of Biswanath Agriculture College and is popular as 'Bharati Khawoi'.

A C. Agarwala noticed this Biswanath rock in 1931, though he did not decipher the inscriptions he remarked about the pictures engraved on this rock by following words-'In this place (Umatumoni), during the reign of the king Pratapsingha alias Bhalukpang, his sons were taught politics, religion and military education by employing competent teachers'¹⁴. We have already examined about the absence of word like king Pratapa Singha in the original texts of the epigraphs. But if we take Lakshmi in place of Pratapa Singha of Agarwala, then the pictures that are on Biswanath rock, had been drawn (though not all) most probably for the purpose of play and to teach some kind of education for the sons of Lakshmi, who was then the lord or chieftain of the town Pratapapura. So the drawings at Chakreswar Sila preserves a living testimony of the various games and sports that were prevalent among the people of Biswanath at least in the 15th century A.D.

The inscriptions constitute a most important and reliable source of history and culture of Biswanath and throw a new light upon the related period of Assam history. Hitherto we have not possessed even a single contemporary source relating to the town Pratapaura which was once a splendid town, except these epigraphs. The account of the *Buramjis* and *vamsavalis* which refer to this town are of later date and therefore they are engulfed with legends. Hence the importance of Biswanath rock inscriptions lies here.

Notes & References

1. W. N. Edward, 'On some archaeological remains in Biswanath' ,**J.A.S.B.**, Extra No. 1904,p.16.
2. **Likhna-Karya** or '**Likhan Kara**' ceremony, in otherwords for **abhisekha-Uttsav** or coronation ceremony which was also performed by the Ahom Kings. Hiteswar BarBarua; **Ahomar din**, Gauhati 1981, p.414; see **Srinath BarBarua; Tungkhunia Buranji**,
3. D.Sarma (ed.), **Kamrupa sasanavali**, Guwahati, 1981,p.193.
4. H.C.Roy Chaudhuri, **Political History of Ancient India**, Calcutta, 1959,p.285.
5. R.C. Majumder,**Ancient India**, London, 1955,p.193.
6. Ramananda Dvija, **Sri-Guru Carita**. edited by M.Neog, Gauhati University, 1959,p.17.
7. MS.Adi-Chrita, verse 223-228, D.H.A.S.Gauhati.
3. Dharmeswar Bhuyan and Manpur Datta Bhuyan, **Bare-Bhuyar Buranji**, edited and published by P.R.Barua, Sonari, 1963, Part -II.
9. S.K.Bhuyan (ed.), **Satsari Asam Buranji** (chronicle No.4.) Gauhati University, 1969, p. 135.
10. S. Rajkumar, **Itihashe Soaura Chashata Bachar**, Jorhat, 1980,p.728.
P.Gogoi writes, Su-hum-mong suppressed the revolt of Bhuyans in 1512 A.D.,
The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, Gauhati University, 1968,p.284.
11. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), **Kamrupar Buranji**, D.H.A.S., Guwahati, 1958,p.4.
- 12.H.N. Datta Barua, 'Prachin Kamrup rajyar andhajugar raja aru rajvamsa', **Avhan**, 6th year 2nd ed. p.148n.
- 13.J.P. Wade, **An Account of Assam**, Written in 1800, Second ed. 1972, Gauhati pp.194,195.
- 14.A.C.Agarwala, 'Tezpur Purabritta', **Avahan**, 3rd year 4th issue. 1853 Saka.