Chapter III

Sonaram R. Sangma, His Early Career And Death

Birth of Sonaram R. Sangma and His Early Career.

In the north eastern corner of the Garo hills, there lies a beautiful and legendary hills called Koasi which is a constitution of the three most important hills known by their legendary names as Koasi Nokmong, the Koasi Ronggitchak and the Koasi Nokpante. The hills are situated at a distance of about 10 kilometer from the National Highway No. 37 under Goalpara District of Assam. It is on the north of the Papira hills studded with big boulders and trees with a meandering small streams down below. The height of this hill is 797 metres. It is a plateau of rolling grasslands, gently slopping towards the plains and valleys. It has a unique and fascinating beauty, typical and natural in its own way. This plateau is believed to be the abode of the goddess Susime, the protector of human lives and the land in Garo Mythology. The Garos used to offer sacrifice at this place during drought and invoke the goddess of rain. This sacrificial offering to rain god is known by the Garos as Salgrua, Salrak Tata or Sal pang Simma.

The Koasi Nokpante is another important hillock which is behind to have been the meeting place of the tigers. It is believed that at the time of the bitter struggles between the Ahoms and the Mohamadhans, two Garo sisters possibly Aje and Gilje, the legendary Garo women stood on this bachelor’s house and watched the grim battle. Another important place is the Koasi Ronggitchak or the red stone of the Koasi Hill. It is a very huge rock and is always inscribed by the hawks. It is believed by the Garos that the rock contains Muni or the root of the plant that possessed hypnothesing power brought by Niba Jonja, a Garo legendary figure, which was carried off by hawk and was dropped at this place. The Garos believed that a python is still guarding this Muni even today by coiling round it.2

At the foothills of this legend bound hill, there lies a small lake called Na’chirongdik or the pot of the mud fish where abound plenty of mud fish in the ancient days. Na’chirongdik, the tiny spotted Garo village has become the proud place to host the birth of the first politician and a non violent agitator among the Garo community. Sonaram Rongrokgre Sangma, a determined and intrepid man of high order, a leader with undaunted courage and sacrifice was born at this sleepy and a historic place. His exact date and year of birth are not known. But as per the record of his marriage certificate, he was stated to have been born sometime in the year 1867.3

Sonaram R. Sangma was the second son of Klang Gabil Momin and Chamre Rongrokgre Sangma and including himself, his family consists of three

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3 Marriage certificate of Sonaram R. Sangma and Tokje Gabil Momin.
sons and three daughters. In order of birth they were Wilne R. Sangma, Sonaram R. Sangma, Medini R. Sangma, Matrang R. Sangma, Roche R. Sangma, Somorsing R. Sangma. In 1905, Sonaram R. Sangma noted down the social status and economic background of his family in his diary in Bengali script of which we can have a glimpse. It was described that he was the child of an independent Garo tribe and nephew of Bokrin, Sando, Reran and Chegan. He was the child of Pakrama Gisolma who was once a very rich and influential woman in her locality. The people called her in their own dialect as “Krong Bududma Nokkol Anema” because of he wielding power of influence upon her people. He further stated that the persons named Tou Basanpa, Katta Nangrepa, Jap Resoppa, Siram Jamdapa, Koron Dal’gipa, Gonna Dingbimma, Miksim Manda and later Abra Simnotdal, Jana Gune, Chondol Nasanpa and Garo Chief Someswar were the successive Garo kings of the Habraghat. According to Sonaram R. Sangma, his grandmother Pakrama Gisolma lived on the border between Assam and Khasi hills.

While Sonaram was still a child, his parents moved to Amguri village, situated at a distance of about 8 kilometers from Dupdhara under Goalpara district, where they took up plain cultivation as their main means of livelihood. Soon Sonaram’s parents became very popular among the people of their village for their sincerity, kindness, generosity, cooperation and simplicity and above all for their meek and gentle character. His father Klang Gabil Momin was revered by all people in his locality who in turn had a great influence upon them while his mother

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6 Interview with Shri. Poresh Sangma, Village Bombrapather, Goalpara, Assam. date 16.03.1999.
Chamre Rongrokgre Sangma was known for her piety and devotion to her animistic religion.\textsuperscript{7}

Having been at Amguri for some years the parents of Sonaram brought him at the age of about 12 years to Nishangram as there was no school at that time at Amguri. He was admitted in a Lower Primary school which was implanted by Rev. Ramke W. Momin. The school was a Bengali Minor\textsuperscript{8} school and hence the medium of instruction was through Bengali character. After studying for some years at Nishangram, he went to Tura and studied in the American Baptist Mission school in the Upper Primary classes and read upto Class IV. This was the highest class that could be provided at that time within the Garo Hills.\textsuperscript{9}

As a young student at Nishangram and at Tura Mission School, Sonaram always projected himself as a leader among his youth groups and students community. He has a stubborn mentality for a rightful cause and without waiting for the elder’s decision, he would try to solve the problems by his own.\textsuperscript{10} In the village he acted as the leader and a judge when a quarrel broke out among his friends and the matters would be settled. His judgment was on the basis of facts found and true to the cause. His verdict was therefore, appreciated by all.\textsuperscript{11} Yet he had the rare quality of not being able to tolerate any sort of injustices that may be meted out to him and to any people.\textsuperscript{12} But for redressing any injustice or grievances he always employed free, fair and lawful means. He had a commanding voice

\textsuperscript{7} Mihir N. Sangma, Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs, p 28.
\textsuperscript{9} Interview with Shri. Mihir N. Sangma, Tura, dated 11.06.1999; Methoral G. Momin, Village Bakrapur, Goalpara, Assam. Date 16.09.1999.
\textsuperscript{10} Interview with Smt. Ruponi R. Sangma, Village Bakrapur, Goalpara, Assam. date 13.09.1999.
\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Shri. Beharu G. Momin, Village Moshkuli, Goalpara, Assam, Date 13.12.2002.
\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Shri. Poresh Sangma, Village Bombrapather, Goalpara, Assam. date 16.03.1999.
and a gift of tongue to express clearly about the matter that he takes up.\textsuperscript{13} He was not a very studious man but has a convincing speech power by which the people could be attracted for the common cause. He had a great observing power and every action of both the people and the Government were closely watched and examined by him. When anything happened in the society, he was ready to lend a helping hand to it and never remained a silent spectator to the cause and something would be done by him.\textsuperscript{14} He was very co-operative among his people and a friend to many and helpless. He had a sharing qualities of head and hearts and was characterised with the capability of intermingling with any kind of people high or low.\textsuperscript{15} He had a good tolerable virtue towards his people and an intolerable mind to any sort of exploitations. He was a determined leader with a quick mind for making decisions.\textsuperscript{16} It is to be noted that all that Sonaram employed to further his movement are legal, constitutional and democratic means which the world community accepts and based their democratic principles for nation building. He is as such, can rightly be called a non violent revolutionary, a pioneer in popularising the non violent method of struggle and movement in the North East India in particular and in India in general.

Other heroes of the freedom struggle from the North East India are famous for their undaunted courage and stubborn resistance through bloody encounters and historic battles. Sonaram, may be remembered and carved a niche in the history of North East India and in the Indian History as a leader who dreamt first and practiced, furthered and popularised the non violent method of struggle amongst the people.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Shri. Haron Momin, Village Amjonga, Goalpara, Assam. Date 03.01.1999.
\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Shri. Methoral G. Momin, Date 16.09.1999.
\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Shri. Gillin Momin, Village Amjonga, Goalpara, Assam. Date 12.07.1998.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Shri. Grohonsing A. Marak, Tura, West Garo Hills. Date 13.09.1999.
In appearance, Sonaram R. Sangma was dark and of short stature but strong and well built. He had a shrill voice\textsuperscript{17} and a pungent eyes by which he looked very much dignified. Above all, he had that rare virtue of being honest in spending public money. He was the first among the Garo community who first conceived and spread the idea of a separate Garo nationality.\textsuperscript{18}

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 Mohurer. I left the PWD in 1899. I got a certificate from Major Howell, Deputy commissioner. I used to get Rupees 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 PWD. There may have been false reports against me. I have the certificate. I got from Major Howell and can produce it. Although the PWD dismissed me, Captain Halliday, Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills took me as an inspector of vaccination. I got Rupees 20/- as pay and Rupees 15/- as T.A under Dr. Bancroft. I was not dismissed by Dr. Bancroft. In April 1900 I left this service and went to live with wife at Salpara Rohumari.\textsuperscript{19}

While working as a Mohurer, Sonaram could go to every nook and corner of the entire Garo hills and Goalpara and thus enabled himself to have wide contacts with his own people. As he was in the PWD, Sonaram was a pioneer of constructing roads in the district in favour of Government. He constructed a road from Tura to Rongrenggiri along the bank of Simsang river via Rombagiri, Chokagiri, Rangmalgiri and Dolwagiri and this road

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Shri. Hembonath Sangma, Village Meakgre, Goalpara, Assam. Date 14.01.1999.
\textsuperscript{18} Mihir N. Sangma, Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs, p 28.
\textsuperscript{19} Inquiry Report of J.C. Arbuthnott, Deposition of Sonaram R. Sangma.
was known by the people of that localities as Sonaram Sorok or Sonaram road. He also constructed a road to Damra from Tura via Gondanggiri, Tongbonggiri, Me’gagiri, Samin and Cheran villages.20

Sonaram married Tokje Gabil Momin on the 7th June 188921 at Tura and their marriage was ordained by Rev. E. G. Phillips of the American Baptist Mission stationed at Tura, Garo Hills. Tokje was a student in the American Baptist Mission School, Tura. Sonaram was the nephew of Tokje’s father22 and hence she knew Sonaram very well before she came to Tura for study. When they were at Tura, they met each other and thus led for their marriage. Tokje hailed from the Salpara Rohumari village, situated at the Goalpara and Garo Hills border in the south eastern portion of the Goalpara district. She was the daughter of Shamsing and Alimi of Amjonga.23

Shamsing and Alimmi had five children of which four were girls and a boy. They were Theme, Khangse, Lazim, Khanjani and Tokje. During her deposition before the enquiry Commissioner Mr. J.C. Arbuthnott, Tokje told that she never saw her father Shamsing. From this statement we can guess that her father had died when Tokje was still a small child or she might have not yet born. Shamsing died during Captain Peet’s time and Tokje as barely 10 years old when her mother Alimi died at Amjonga after which they went to live at Rohumari, with her brother Lazim who became blind following his mother’s death. Kanjani who lived at her maternal uncle’s house at Rohumari married Nangre and their marriage was ordained at Rajasimla at the house of her husband’s mother.

20 Mihir N.Sangma, Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs, p 29.
21 Marriage Certificate of Sonaram R. Sangma and Thokje Gabil Momin.
23 Ibid.
After their marriage they again came back to Salpara. While staying with Lazim at Salpara for three years, Tokje was taken to Tura by Rev. Phillips. After a year’s of stay, she was married to Sonaram. After marriage both of them stayed at Tura for four years and came back to Rohumari Salpara, Tokje’s village to stay there. Nomi, their eldest daughter was born three years after their marriage at Tura. They stayed at Tura upto the year 1893.

Shamsing, Tokje’s father had two wives. They were Alimi and Chire. Chire had a daughter named Chirme who married Baneswar. By Tokje Shamsing had five children mentioned earlier. After the death of Shamsing at Amjonga, Alimi moved to Salpara Rohumari along with her children. Three years later of her husband’s death Alimi also died, after which her property of Habraghat was looked after by Gansing, Achallang, Harka and Olbin. Alimi in turn had two husbands. They were Shamsing and Rupiram. Tokje’s parents were rich and possessed number of servants under them. They had two elephants of which one died and the other one was taken by the Bijni Raja. Tokje and Sonaram were blessed with six children. They were Nomi G. Momin, Silman G. Momin, Roton G. Momin, Sunalsing G. Momin, Premi G. Momin and Eme G. Momin. The youngest daughter of Sonaram and Tokje, Eme G. Momin studied at the Tura Girls Middle English School and later married Jabin Sangma. One of the nieces of Sonaram named Wanbe R. Sangma lived at Anguri village under Goalpara district and she was very rich. Her husband was a businessman and he often goes to Mymensingh now under Bangladesh for trade. Wanbe was the daughter of Wilne who looked after Sonaram’s mother till her death. Another niece of Sonaram lived at Bakrapur village under Goalpara district. Her name was Sere R. Sangma who married Hori K. Marak. Very often, Sonaram in course of his movement, took shelter in his niece’s
house at Bakrapur and had his office there with Singgan Shira as his secretary.\textsuperscript{24}

Sonaram R. Sangma was a strong believer of self abnegation\textsuperscript{25} and was devoted to the political work and social services as a part of his life. A robust and ardent patriotism\textsuperscript{26} bordering upon deep, trenchant antagonism to Bijni rule in the Garo dominated areas was the essence of his personality.\textsuperscript{27} He had intense capacity for suffering and an uncompromising and defiant in his attitude. He was an agitator, a non violent revolutionary and a great propagandist. He was a great orator and his speeches are characterized by force and simplicity. He had a keen analytical mind.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Death of Sonaram R. Sangma.}

In the later part of his life Sonaram R. Sangma stayed at Goalpara in a rented house as his wife and her relatives were also no longer gave him moral support in his movement as he rarely visited them and spent most of his times outside. One day while coming back from Calcutta, he suddenly fell ill about which his niece and relatives at Bakrapur were informed. They went to Goalpara and brought Sonaram in a bullock cart to Bakrapur where he was treated and looked after at the house of his niece Sere R. Sangma. He was offered good medical treatment by his niece and relatives but could not be recovered. His wife, his children and his wife’s relatives did not come to meet him nor offered help in his sickness.\textsuperscript{29} After

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Shri. Methoral G. Momin, Village Bakrapur, Goalpara, Assam. Date 16.09.1999.
\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Shri. Llewelyn Marak, Tura, West Garo Hills, Date 17.10.2002.
\textsuperscript{26} Interview with Shri. Laditson K. Sangma, Village Pangsangre, Goalpara, Assam. Date 04.09.1999.
\textsuperscript{27} Interview with Smt. Opeswari B. Sangma, Village Amjonga, Goalpara, Assam. Date 16.04.1998.
\textsuperscript{28} Interview with Shri. Stephenson R. Sangma, Tura, Garo Hills. Date 17.10.2002.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Shri. Methoral G. Momin, Village Bakrapur, Goalpara, Assam. Date 24.07.1998.
prolonged illness, Sonaram R. Sangma finally died at Bakrapur on 27th August 1916. He was buried at the Bakrapur cemetery.  

The death of Sonaram R. Sangma was published in the A’chik Ku’rang in its November issue, 1916 in which the editor said.

"Sonaram R. Sangma who called himself the king of the Garos, has died on 27th August last. For some months he has been suffering for certain disease at Bakrapur and there he died at last. He said that the way the Missionaries were helping the Garo people, I am too, helping the Garos. But how the Missionaries are spending thousands of money for the Garo people, has Sonaram done like that? How he desired a lot for earthly materials and fame, has he not asked money from the Garo people? I would be pleased if someone could tell the good things that he had done. I do not wish to blame the dead as he has been judged by God. But I wish to make the Garo people aware so that like before they would not put on their trust upon such person, lose much of their wealth and shall not spiritually lead astray."  

Thus the great, intrepid, and patriotic Garo leader is lost forever without fulfilling his dream. After him, though some of his followers continued his unfinished works could not organise the Garo people as he could and thereby could not draw the attention of the concerned authorities towards their cause. Yet, they can not be totally underestimated as they also had been able to keep the spirit of the movement alive untill it has assumed a new dimension with India’s attainment of independence.

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30 A’chikni Ripeng, November, 1916, p 97.
31 A’chikni Ripeng, November 1916, p 97.
Sonaram Rongrokgre Sangma was a very intelligent\textsuperscript{32} and educated man. He studied in a Bengali medium and thus can speak Bengali well.\textsuperscript{33} Munsiff Court judge of Goalpara Mr. J.E.F. Pereira once in his verdict remarked

“Sonaram is a very intelligent man and even well educated. It appears he is a dangerous character”

He was never afraid to talk to or speak with any kind of people and had the gift of tongue to converse very fluently on any matters of common importance. Quick and to the point answers to the queries at the time of his deposition by the Inquiry Commissioner Mr.J.C.Arbuthnott testifies his brilliance, sharp, quick mindedness and bravery.

He was very honest in his services to his people and in spending public money\textsuperscript{34} through subscriptions or contributions. His honesty in this regard can be known from the fact that he, in most of the times, did not spend the public money by his own hand: instead he very often took with him a person whom he used as his helper and the required amount of expenses would be paid through his services. This fact is evident from the statements of Mangdin and Jontha\textsuperscript{35} at the time of their deposition as witnesses in the court on Sonaram’s case.

Sonaram R.Sangma was a courageous man of sufficient tact and intelligence and was well acquainted with land revenue affairs. He traveled extensively over Assam and Bengal and knew Calcutta well. Although he belonged to a Christian family, the reports of the American Baptist Mission and of the Government indicated that “his connection with Christianity is but slight”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{32} Interview with Shri. Solen Sangma, Nokma of Damash A’king, Village Damash, East Garo Hills. Date 12.09.1998.
\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Shri. Sarat Sangma, Village Meakgre, Goalpara, Assam. Date 14.11.1999.
\textsuperscript{34} Interview with Shri. Withold D. Sangma, Village Masatha, Kamrup District, Assam. Date 17.06.2002.
\textsuperscript{35} Deposition of Mangdin, Jontha and others on Sonaram’s Case.
\textsuperscript{36} Minute Recorded by J.B.Fuller dated 26th February 1905.
Sonaram had a great organizing capacity\textsuperscript{37} to spearhead a movement involving mass people. As mentioned earlier he had his own secretary at Bakrapur to run the office of the movement and see and supervise that the activities of the movement were in order and systematic. Besides this, he had altogether four clerks at different places. They were Thomal of Salpara Rohumari in Goalpara district, Ramding of Na’rongkol in the Garo Hills near Bajengdoba or Nibari, Batiram of Balijana in Mechpara \textit{pargana}, Modhunath of Tura in Garo Hills. The Garo \textit{Nokmas} paid money to them and they kept accounts. These people would in turn deposit the money to Jontha who was the treasurer. Jontha would send or pay the money to Sonaram’s expenses by himself when asked. Sonaram during his deposition before the enquiry Commissioner stated that he had collected the money amounting to rupees 1 Lac.\textsuperscript{38} By 1902–03, an amount of Rupees 310 a day was paid to his barrister, who had already received a total amount of Rupees 14,000/- (Fourteen thousand) from the Garo people through Sonaram for his service.\textsuperscript{39} The Garo people thus contributed a lot for their own case which had been possible because of the organizing capability and a great leadership strategy of Sonaram R.Sangma.

Sonaram R.Sangma never lost his temper\textsuperscript{40} even though he suffered much and humiliated at the hands of the government authorities and did not go for violent means to further his movement. He stick to his own principle of non violent, just and democratic ways through prayers and petitions.

Tough Sonaram could not succeed in all his claims, he was successful in retaining the \textit{Nazarana Mahals} to the Garo \textit{Nokmas}; in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Interview with Shri. Orindro S.Sangma, Village Songsak Agalgre, East Garo Hills. Date 18.09.1999.
\item \textsuperscript{38} J.C. Arbuthnott’s Inquiry Report: Deposition of Sonaram R.Sangma.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p 8.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Interview with Shri. Tinath K. Sangma, Village Meakgre, Goalpara, Assam. Date 14.01.1999.
\end{itemize}
stopping of the further reservation of forest and in abolition of forced labour prevalent and practice in the Garo areas. In the case of the claim for Habraghat, he could not succeed for want of clear evidences in support of the claim. However, he has imprinted indelibly on the minds of every Garos with a deep sense of belief that the Habraghat pargana once belonged to the Garos, which has still been greatly cherished by almost every Garo people till today.

Sonaram may therefore, be regarded as the first politician from among the Garo people for his undaunted courage, sacrifice and work for the Garo community.