

JAI PRAKASH SINGH

ABDICATION AND SUICIDE IN ANCIENT KAMARUPA
A STUDY

I

The Indian religious thinking advocated salvation as the ultimate goal of human life. According to the Brahmanical ideology a man could achieve his ultimate objective by discharging duties prescribed for his *varṇa*. People particularly those of the privileged classes were theoretically supposed to pass through the four stages of life. The last two of these stages of life were to be solely devoted for the attainment of salvation. This was perhaps suggested for the common people. The sages and others more involved in religio-spiritual activity spent their whole life working for this end. All this religio-philosophical thinking led to the belief in the impermanence of the body and the permanence of the soul. The whole exercise of the individual, therefore, came to be intended to free the soul so that it could merge in the ultimate. Such thinking led to the equation of the body to a dwelling or outfit, that could be changed at will, whenever necessary. Such ideas were propounded by philosophers again and again.

The process by following which salvation was ensured was long and difficult. Perhaps everybody was not suited for this kind of long preparation. And if the mansion or the cloth had to be changed why wait for so long. The four stages of life particularly the two last stages – *Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa* – advocated a gradual voluntary termi-

nation of life. There must have been also people who may have stressed an abrupt termination of life by entering fire, water or falling from a precipice etc.

Termination of life with a religious motif was not only advocated by Brahmanism ¹ but also by Jainism ² and Buddhism ³. We are not concerned with the Jaina and Buddhist ideas of abandoning one's physical existence here, as this is not relevant to our discussion. However, a brief description of Brahmanical ideas and references to religious suicide committed by legendary and historical figures shall now be made to explain the epigraphic notices regarding abdication and suicide by kings of Kamarupa.

Manu prescribed termination of life by leaping from a height, burning and by drowning ⁴. Another method suggested by him was that a person intending termination of his life should go straight with determination in the north eastern direction taking only water and air till his body comes to rest ⁵. In *Rāmāyaṇa* there are examples of entering fire ⁶ and water ⁷ for terminating life. *Mahābhārata* extolls such termination of life by drowning ⁸, by fasting ⁹ anche in snow clad mountains ¹⁰.

Śaiva *Purāṇas* prescribe death by burning and falling from a mountain cliff after worshipping Bhairava ¹¹. The reward for termina-

1. Brahmanical idea and attitude towards religious suicide is discussed by P.V. KANE, *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol. II, Pt. II, Poona, 1974, pp. 924-28; Vol. III, Poona, 1973, pp. 939, 948-9; Vol. IV, Poona, 1973, pp. 603ff; A.B. KERTH, "Suicide (Hindu)", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York, 1922, Vol. XII, pp. 33-35.

2. The Jaina practice of termination of life is known as Sallekhaṇā. For details see P.V. KANE, *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol. II, Pt. II, Poona, 1974, pp. 927-28; S. SETTAR, *Inviting Death*, Dharwad, 1986, pp. 91ff.

3. L. DE LA VALLEE POUSSIN, "Suicide (Buddhist)", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York, 1922, Vol. XII, pp. 24-28. Cf. also U. THAKUR, *The History of Suicide in India: An Introduction*, Delhi, 1963.

4. *Manusmṛti* VI. 31; Cf. also Aparārka's commentary on *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, p. 877.

5. *Ibid.*, VI. 30.

6. Śarabhaṅga's entry into fire, *Aranyakāṇḍa* Ch. IX.

7. Rāma and his brothers and thousands of people of Ayodhyā drowned themselves in Sarayu, *Ibid.*

8. *Vanaparva* 85.83; *Śalyaparva* 39. 33-34; 81. 141-49.

9. *Anuśāsanaparva* 25. 62-4; Cf. also *Vanaparva* 85.33.

10. In *Svargārohaṇa parva*.

11. Cf. *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Laksmidhara Bhatta (Ed. K. V.R. Aiyangar, Baroda, 1942), *Tirhavivechana Kāṇḍa*, pp. 262, 262-63.

tion of life at Samgama in Prayaga is equal to that of a *yogin* and leads to salvation ¹². A person who jumps into the river from the *Vaṭa* tree at Prayaga goes to the abode of Rudra ¹³.

Most kings of Kamarupa were followers of Saivism as the available epigraphic evidence suggests. Therefore, it is possible that some of them must have followed this practice in accordance with Saiva religious prescriptions.

Some kings of ancient Kamarupa are known from the records of their successors to have abdicated and installed their sons on the throne. For instance, Gaṇendravarman, is said to have crowned his son, having called the people (*janam samāhūya*), and retired to heaven ¹⁴. Chandramukhavarman is reported to have retired to the abode of Indra after establishing his son (*sansthāpya putram kṣitau*) in the kingdom, as king ¹⁵. Vanamalavarman made over the *chhatra* and a pair of *Chāmaras*, to his son, after the latter attained youth ¹⁶. His son was Jayamalavarman alias Virabahu. This king later contracted a disease which could not be cured. Realising, therefore, the hollowness of the world (*niḥsāram samsāram*), and the life like a drop of water he placed his son on the throne ¹⁷. King Ratnapala, is said to have himself given his own kingdom to his grandson ¹⁸, and diverted his mind to the supreme self ¹⁹.

Except in the case of King Vanamalavarman, the mode of death of the remaining kings, who are specifically said to have abdicated is not mentioned. The natural assumption on the basis of available Indian literary evidence is that at least some of these kings took to

12. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

14. Dubi grant, V. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, V. 37.

16. *Chhatram śaśadhara dhavalam chāmhara yugalānvitam pradāyasmai*, Uttara-barbil grant, Vs. 16-17; Cf. also Nowgong grant, Vs. 16-17; It is also repeated in the Ulubari grant, Vs. 16-17.

17. Uttara-barbil grant, Vs. 21-23; Nowgong grant, Vs. 21-23 and Ulubari grant, Vs. 16-17.

18. *Arpitā svayamiyannija-rājyalakṣmiḥ*, Guwahati grant, V. 17, Guwakuchi grant, V. 17; Cf. also Gachatal grant, V. 19.

19. Gachatal grant, V. 19.

Vānaprastha or *Sannyāsa*, except probably Jayamalavarman, who was too sick to become a recluse.

The *varṇas* and *Āśramas* ²⁰ are mentioned in some of the Kamarupa records. *Brahmacharya* and *grihastha āśramas* are known from inscriptions but *Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa* are not mentioned. B.K. Barua opined "we have, however, definite evidence that it was normal for the Brahmanas of early Kamarupa to enter upon the life of a householder after going through their noviciate. Nevertheless, there is constant evidence of the abdication of Kings, who embraced a life of renunciation." ²¹ Writing about the *āśrama* system P.C. Choudhury observed that we do not know "whether the four stages were strictly followed at any time by any individual. A few instances of the abdication of rulers on different occasions do not give us strong ground for believing that they did so in order to live a life of renunciation, or that they entered into the life of a *vānaprastha* or a *sannyāsī*." ²² It is true that most of these references do not specify anything about the life of the kings concerned after their abdication. Taking to *Vānaprastha* or *Sannyāsa*, by some of them, therefore, is the most natural suggestion. But as the inscriptions do not refer to these stages of life, perhaps the kings concerned did not enter them. These scholars failed to provide an alternative suggestion to explain their abdication.

Abdication on their part may have been voluntary. In some cases, however, it may have been forced on them by the prospective king and his supporters. The question is what kind of life, the abdicating kings of Kamarupa lived after renouncing their throne. Since no evidence is available to suggest their life after renunciation we can only hazard some suggestions to explain their abdication. We feel that abdication and suicide by most kings of ancient Kamarupa may have followed in that order.

20. Nidhanpur grant, lines 34-35 mention that Bhaskaravarman was born (*nirmito*, literally created) for the proper organisation of *varṇa* and *āśrama*. King Vanamala is said to have gratified *samasta-varṇaśrama* (Tezpur grant, V. 30; Parbatiya grant line 32). Indrapala's Gauhati grant (V. 18) also refers to the division of the *dharma* of the four *varṇas* and *āśramas*.

21. B.K. BARUA, *A Cultural History of Assam* (Gauhati, 1969), p. 116.

22. P.C. CHOUDHURY, *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 319.

II

There are some other Kings who are not specifically mentioned to have abdicated, like the Kings of the previous section. These references indicate the way these Kings died. Samudravarma is said to have ended his life engaged in *Yoga (Yogābhirata)*²³. Balavarman is said to have terminated his life by meditation (*dhyānena*)²⁴. Narayanavarman left his physical frame by *Yoga (Yogena yātum svatanum vidhāya)*²⁵. The next King of this list is Vanamalavarman, who is listed in the previous section of this paper also. He is said to have merged in the glow of Māheśvara²⁶ by fasting. But for King Vanamalavarman, none of these Kings are said to have abdicated and then ended their lives. It will perhaps be reasonable enough to presume that they too had abdicated, before ending their lives.

The last king of this list is Bartu, but he is not mentioned in any of the extant records, therefore, we propose to take up his case in a later section of this paper.

Historians²⁷ and epigraphists have not paid much attention to the last days of these kings. This is because relevant evidence is not available. We feel that the abdication by Kings of Kamarupa and their subsequent suicides are related. On the basis of the voluntary termination of life by these Kings perhaps it can be suggested that the kings of the previous section too ended their lives probably shortly after their abdication, and in a like manner.

III

Voluntary termination of life was practiced elsewhere also in the country. It will be appropriate to cite a few historical examples from

23. Dubi grant, V. 13.

24. *Ibid.*, V. 16.

25. *Ibid.*, V. 30.

26. Uttarababil grant, Vs. 16-17, Nowgong grant Vs. 16-7.

27. P.C. CHOUDHURY, *HCPA*, p. 220, writing about Vanamala stated that "he abdicated in favour of his son ... and starved himself to death, evidently under the influence of religion."

other parts of the mainland. A later Gupta King, Kumaragupta ²⁸, is known to have entered a fire of cowdung cakes at Prayaga ²⁹. The Kalachuri King Gangeyadeva, ended his life in 1040 A.D., along with his hundred wives, by jumping from the *akṣayavāṭa* at Prayaga ³⁰. Chaudela King Dhanga, at the age of more than hundred years, drowned himself in 1001-2 A.D., "in the waters of Ganga and Yamuna and entered into beatitude, closing the eyes, fixing his thoughts on Rudra and muttering holy prayers." ³¹ Chalukya King Somesvara Ahavamalla having performed *Yoga* rites, drowned himself in the Tungabhadra river in 1068 A.D. and went to heaven ³². There are others too who ended their lives voluntarily ³³.

These notices lead us to believe that the Kings of Kamarupa like Samudravarma, Balavarman, Narayanavarman, Vanamalavarman and others, who are said to have abdicated also ended their lives either by drowning themselves or by entering fire or in some other way prescribed in religious texts.

Among Kamarupa Kings only Vanamalavarman died by fasting. Death by fasting was very popular among the Jainas, and is known as *sallekhanā* ³⁴. The Kings of Assam were not Jainas. There is no evidence that Jainism influenced the culture of Assam at any time during its history, to enable its people and Kings follow its religious practices ³⁵. It has also been associated with Buddhism ³⁶. There is,

28. J.F. FLEET, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, No. 42, p. 203, lines 7-8.

29. K.C. CHATTOPADHYAYA, *JUPHS*, X, pp. 60ff. This method of termination of life is recommended in *Matsyapurāna*, cvii.

30. *Ep. Indica*, Vol. XII, p. 211; *Ibid.*, II, pp. 1-7.

31. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 137, V. 55.

32. *Ep. Carnatica*, Vol. II, V. 136.

33. Cf. S. SETTAR, *Inviting Death*, Dharwad, 1986, pp. 91-184; U. THAKUR, *The History of Suicide in India: An Introduction*, Delhi, 1963.

34. For details see S. SETTAR, *Inviting Death*, Dharwad, 1986, p. 91 ff.

35. The only evidence of Jainism in Assam is provided by two rock cut images from Suryapahar, cf. R.D. CHOUDHURY, *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam* (Delhi, 1985), pp. 113, 212. The attribution of the images to Adinatha and Neminatha, however, is extremely doubtful.

36. "The reference to the death of Vanamala by religious suicide, and the abdication of Jayamala in favour of his son, as he considered this world to be vain and human life as a waterdrop, may indicate that they had come under the influence of later Buddhism ..." P.C. CHOUDHURY, *HCPA*, p. 405.

however, no reason to associate Vanamala's termination of life and Jayamala's abdication with Buddhism. Vanamala was a Śaiva King³⁷.

IV

Elsewhere we have shown that most kings of Kamarupa are said to have gone to *Indraloka* or heaven, after their death³⁸. In most cases, however, the mode of the death of these Kings is not known³⁹. The only known deaths of the Kings of Kamarupa are by *yoga*, meditation and fasting. The Kings who abdicated their thrones, additionally may also have adopted one of these methods or burned or drowned themselves. Since the tradition recorded in religious texts promised heaven to those dying in this fashion they are all said to have gone to heaven. The kings probably did not wait to die peacefully in bed. They also do not seem to have undertaken the long and arduous journey to secure salvation by terminating their lives at Kasi or Prayaga. At least there is no evidence to this effect.

It seems that voluntary termination of life was viewed by ancient Indian socio-religious thinkers as a personal sacrifice. It was supposed to bring the highest spiritual rewards to the person concerned – salvation, a spell of good and happy life in heaven and rebirth as the king of Jambudvipa. The Kings of Kamarupa were aware of the reward promised by tradition and may have taken resort to this practice to ensure a better life after death.

V

A king of Kamarupa is known to have drowned himself. According to later Muslim Chronicles Bartu or Britu (Prithu) was the

37. Nowgong grant Vs. 13-14.

38. We have discussed it in a paper entitled "Kings of Kamarupa and Indra".

39. Besides the kings who are specifically said to have died through Yoga, meditation or fasting the mode of the death of most kings is not known. The only exception is that of King Aratha or Arathi who is said to have died fighting his enemies. Prince Purandarapala died young. Had he died fighting it would have been mentioned. Possibly he died in course of one of his hunting expeditions. He was a *mrigayā rasika*. King Supratisthitavarman died due to complications developing from wounds sustained in his battle against the Gaudas.

king of Kamarupa at the time of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar's invasion of the region in A.D. 1205-6. The latter was defeated in battle and escaped with only a few of his men⁴⁰. Thereafter he is said to have defeated Ghiyasuddin Iwaz in 1226-27, and was finally himself defeated by Nasiruddin, son of Iltutmish, in A.D. 1228⁴¹. According to the Muslim accounts after his defeat at the hands of Nasiruddin, Bartu drowned himself. These accounts seem to suggest that the king of Kamarupa ended his life because he lost the battle. It may be true that the King of Kamarupa drowned himself. Muslim chroniclers, however, do not seem to give the full information on this point. It was possibly not even available to them.

Whatever the immediate compelling reason to drown himself, it seems that Prithu terminated his life for the same religious motives for which many of his predecessors had ended their lives. This action of King Bartu or Prithu cannot be viewed outside the socio-religious context of the time and the region. As such it has to be taken as a religious suicide by the King concerned to achieve the highest objective of life that his religion promised.

40. *Tabquat-i-Nasiri* (Raverty) Vol. I, pp. 560 ff. This is confirmed by the Kanai Barasi Bowa rock inscription, cf. *Prachya Sasanavali*, Gauhati, 1974; p. 1 text; BHATTASALI, *IHQ*, IX, pp. 49-50.

41. WOLSELEY HAIG, *Cambridge History of India*, III, pp. 50-54.