



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-X, Issue-III, April 2022, Page No.129-134

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Re-Locating the Position of Women and Their Role during the Ahom Period

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Abstract

Throughout the world Women still remained backward, suppressed and treated as subordinate, not as equal to men in various spheres of activity. Although in certain tribal societies of North East India women enjoyed substantial amount of freedom than their counter parts of other parts of the country, this makes the women participation in politics an important field for research studies. The Ahoms have occupied an important place in the history of Assam. They are an offshoot of the branch of the Shan branch of the Tais of South East Asia. Historically, they have been inhabited in Assam from the early part of the 13th century A.D. to the middle of the 19th century and rule in Assam for six hundred years. During this period, though the status of women subordinate to men, she enjoyed great freedom in socio- economic, religious and political life. They were able to reveal and felt her presence in almost all aspects of human life from agriculture to weaving, dancing to singing and significantly court politics to battle fields. Therefore, in this work an attempt has been made to study the role of Assamese women in socio-political and economic life of Assamese society during the medieval period.

Key Words: *Assamese Women, Position, Barphukan, Neo-Vaishnavism, Satradhikar, Vaishnava mahanta.*

Introduction: Assam is a state situated in the North-East Frontier of India in between 28⁰ and 24⁰ North latitudes and 89⁰ and 96⁰ East longitudes. The period of Ahom rule from the early part of the 13th century to the establishment of British regime to this land may know as the Medieval Assam. Medieval Assam covered roughly the region from Sadiya in the East to the river Manah in present Kamrup district in the West on both banks of the Brahmaputra, excluding of course, the surrounding hill tract.¹ The Ahoms, during their long rule of six hundred years in Assam, not only brought political unity to the valley but also social integration. It was for the Ahoms that the Brahmaputra valley came to be known as Assam or Asam and then their kingdom known as the *Assam Desh* or *Asam Rajya*.² They built a society through a process of assimilation of different tribes and communities which came to be identified as Assamese. The rulers of this period especially the Ahom rulers followed a liberal policy towards women which allowed the Assamese women to come forward and enjoy an honored position. Women in the Ahom period enjoyed enough freedom which provided her with the opportunities to develop her skill and intelligence. They were able to demonstrate and felt her presence in almost all aspects of human life from agriculture to weaving, dancing to singing and significantly court politics to battle

fields. Therefore, the study set up to explore the role of Assamese women in socio-political and economic field in the medieval period of Assam.

Objectives:

- To bring out the contribution of the Assamese women in the Ahom politics through highlighting the women in different aspects of the political life.
- To examine the role of Assamese women in Socio-economic life of Assamese society during the medieval period.

Methodology: To enquire in to the contributions of women in different aspects of socio-political and economic life in the Ahom period historical method is used by taking contemporary Ahom chronicles called Buranjis as primary sources. The paper is prepared with the help of secondary sources also i.e., several books written by established writers on Ahom history, journals, articles, newspapers and website. All the sources of data are critically analyzed before using.

Body of the Text: The Ahom chronicles provide a lot of information about the medieval Assamese society. According to the chronicles, the Ahoms were patriarchal but had respect for learned women.³ There was a deep consciousness among the women about their identity for making society. Though on the basis of the records and sources it is said that the educational institutions were very poor in number and the number of female persons were very poor for getting education during the period of our study but it cannot be denied that some Assamese women got opportunity to take education. It is mentioned in the “*Brhat Rajvamsavali*” that the ladies of the Bhuyan families were comparatively well educated. One Bhanumati, a daughter of Pratap Bhuyan and a relative of Sankardeva was married to the Koch king Naranarayana. After marriage Bhanumati became the chief Queen and took the name Ratnamala. It was by her order that, great Sanskrit scholar Purushottam Bhattacharya wrote the Grammar called “*Proyag Ratnamala*”.⁴ It is also to be noted that, Chao Shin Kunwari, the Queen of the Ahom king Suklengmung alias Gargayan Raja who hailed from neighboring Nara country was a skillful scholar in the Ahom language. Moreover, she exercised tremendous influence upon the king in the matters of statecraft.⁵ On the other hand, many of the Ahom queens had also patronized the intellectual personalities. By the permission of Ambika, the queen of the Ahom king Siva Singha, Sukumar Barkaith wrote the famous book “*Hastividyanarva*”. It is mentions in the medieval biographical works that, Chanderi, the nurse of Srimanta Sankardeva was a great intellect woman who quite familiar with the teaching of the Gita and the art of painting and could take part in religious discussion.

Regarding the status of women in the religious field during the period of our study, some of the women got opportunity to take part in the religious institutions or religious rituals. But women are not allowed to enter in the main religious prayer hall called “*Manikut*” in the neo-vaishnava fold. Even today, in some of the religious institutions of Assam women are not allowed to enter in the Prayer hall and prohibited to take part in “*Nam Prasanga*”

However, women participated in the religious activities of the satra institutions. The *Satras* are a resourceful outcome of the neo-vaishnava religion. They are the repositories of

socio-cultural and religious verve of the Assamese Vaishnava community. It was Śaṅkaradeva who showed special concern for the socially depressed and deprived where women took an important stand. Śaṅkaradeva and a few of his apostles however showed a special concern for the women and allowed a good amount of freedom and equality to them. Though the resources citing women in the *Satras* are meager yet there are a few instances in the history of the *Satras* where women have been located and admired for their contributions. One of the distinguishing features of a *Satra* is the creation of an ascetic *kevaliya* (a celibate devotee) order of monks, which has to a great extent superseded the women folks. As such there is no any order of nuns in these *Satras* and the women are not allowed to mingle with the religious affairs nor do they mix with the men in congregations.

Women too are considered for salvation. In practice however, women have not had any priestly role in the *Sattas*. Even now there are no such instances of a lady taking hold of a *Satra*; all are administered and executed by men at the top-notch level. Yet to no name one of such instance in the history of the *Satras* where women took an active part in managing and administering the affairs of the *Satras*. Sankardeva's grand-daughter-in-law Kanaklata alias Lakshmi Ai became the head of the *satra* and she herself appointed twelve *satradhikars* to set up and organize more *satras*.⁶ Harideva, the vaishnava *Guru*, and contemporary to Sankardeva conferred the *headship* of his learned daughter Bhubenewari of his Maneri *Satra*.⁷ She was the first women to become the head of such a religious institution of Assam. From this it is known that women took active part in the religious affairs of the *satra* during the time of the great saint. But in course of time the position of women within the male dominated society appears to be downgraded and treated women as inferior to men. Still, it will have to be said that most of the vaishnava preceptors did not support women's freedom and had an attitude of contempt towards them. They did not allow men and women to sit together in *namghars* to recite prayers and did not appoint women to any post of in the administration of *satras* and *namghars*. Following this tradition, women are still not allowed admission to the famous Barpeta *namghar* in the district of Barpeta. But if we look at the history of vaishnavism in Assam it cannot be denied that Śaṅkaradeva contributed a lot towards the upliftment of women and he was in full consideration for the spiritual wellbeing of the women.

The women in the Ahom period showed their character in almost every aspect of political life. They played an important role as an administrator or as heroic soldier in the battlefield. From the evidence of historical source it is found that, Tao-Khamti (1380-1389) was the first women who played a direct role in the administration when the king out of war. But she failed to manage the administration because she did not get any help and cooperation from the ministers of the Ahom kingdom. Another lady of the Ahom period who played a vital role in the state affairs was Queen Chao Shin Kunwari, consort of Ahom king Suklenmung (1539-1552). She was a Nara princess and a daughter of Magaung chief. She was intelligent and a learned lady. She emerged as one of the principal adviser of the king Suklenmung providing certain significant contribution to the Ahom politics. At the advised of the queen King Suklenmung had shifted his capital to Gargaon and erected a rampart round the capital city. In Assamese rampart fortification means *gar*, since than King Suklenmung came to be

known as *Gargaya* raja. In the administration also Chao Shin made her presence felt. Prominent historian S.K. mentioned in his book that, she suggested the king to introduce a new office to ease out the pressure of administering the growing extent of the Ahom territories.⁸

Other ladies of this period who had excelled themselves in almost all aspects of the political life were Phuleswari Konwari, Ambika Konwari and Sarbeswari. They played a significant role in the Ahom politics when their husband, king Siva Singha hand-over the charge of the administration to them. Shiva Singha became the King in the Ahom state in 1714 A.D. He was under the influence of Brahmin priests who predicted or declared the end of his rule in 1722 A.D. Therefore, in order to save his rule he declared his chief queen Phuleswari Kunwari the Bar Raja or the chief queen to run the state of affairs on his behalf. The coming of Phuleswari Kunwari to the power greatly diminished the prestige of the Ahom crown in the eyes of the people.⁹ However, on the basis of her policy it cannot be denied that coming of Phuleswari kunwari to power ushered a new beginning in the Ahom Statecraft at least in the field of religion. After receiving the title of Bar Raja she was given the name of Pramathaswari, another name of goddess Durga. So her rise to power brought the Sakta religion into prominence. During her rule in a zeal to establish the Sakta religion as a state religion she started the persecution of the popular Vaishnava sect. she started the celebration of the Durga Puja under the royal patronage with much pomp and show. When she came to know that the Vaishnava Mahantas had refused to worship Goddess Durga, she ordered the Vaishnava Mahantas to be brought to the sakta shrine where the Durga puja was celebrated and forced them to bow down in front of the idol. Moreover she forced the Vaishnava Mahantas to be smeared with the blood of the sacrificial victims on their fore head. It was against the religious custom of the Vaishnava Mahantas. This unfortunate incident was taken as an insult by the Vaishnava Mahantas and their disciples. The Vaishnava disciples of particularly the Mayamara sect vowed revenge against this religious autocracy against the Ahom monarchy which ultimately led to the decline of the Ahom kingdom.

But Phuleswari had a number of good merit and qualities. She inspired the scholars to create literary work. Ananta Acharya composed *Ananda Lahiri* and Kabi Chandra Dvij composed *Kam Kumar Haran* and the *Dharma Purana* under patronage of her. At her instance Ahom state witnessed the growth of Sanskrit literature also. In the capital city of Rangpur she established a Sanskrit tol known as *Bar Rajar Parhahali*. She constructed the *Gaurisagar* tank near the present district of *Sivsagar*. She also built the three famous temples which were dedicated to Lord Shiva, Vishnu and Devi. These temples stand as the remarkable form of architecture of the Ahom period which was an outcome of a lady who made felt her presence in the Ahom politics. Phuleswari ruled over the Ahom state as Bar Raja from 1722 A.D. to 1731 till her death. After the death of Phuleswari Kunwari Shiva Singha married her sister *Deopadi* and named her *Ambika kunwari* and placed her as Bar Raja in 1731 A.D. She was no different than her sister Phuleswari and followed her footsteps.¹⁰ Queen Ambika was a great patron of education and learning. She patronized many scholars and poet. During her rule under her patronage a famous work on veterinary

sciences Hastividyanarva was written by Sukumar Borikaith. During her regime, the famous large Sivsagar Tank excavated in the capital city of the Ahoms. On the southern bank of Sivasagar tank three temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Debi were constructed at her instance. After her death Shiva Singha placed another of his queen Anadori as Bar Raja. She was given the name Sarbeshwari. However her reign was not much elaborate as that of Phuleswari and Ambika.

During the reign of Suhungmung, Mulagabharu, the wife of Phresengmung Borgohain who died in war with Turbak. Mula Gabharu on hearing the valiant death of her husband mobilized a women force and took the leadership of it and moved to the battle field and inspired the Ahom soldiers by fighting against the invading forces of Turbak.¹¹ Mula gabharu died fighting the enemy forces but the example of patriotism, valour, bravery and courage inspired the Ahoms who finally defeated the Ahoms. Turbak was killed and his head was buried on the top of Charaideo hill. Kuranganayani, the wife of the king Jayadhvaja Singha played a vital role in the Ahom politics. It may be noted that Ramani Gabhoru, a daughter of Jayadvaja Singha was handed over to Mughal general Mirjumla in according to the terms between the Mughal and the Ahom king. Later Ramani Gabharu was renamed as Rahmat Bano Begum and was married to the Mughal prince Azamtara the elder son of Mughal Badshah Aurangzeb.¹² She was a true patriot and in spite of this unfortunate fate of her she could not forget her motherland. During the period of political instability (1673A.D.-1681A.D.) when Ramani's maternal uncle Laluksola Barphukan commander of Gauhati conspired against the king and was ready to surrender Gauhati to the Mughal subedar Azamtara then the governor of Bengal in lieu of his help to usurp the throne, she boldly wrote a letter to her uncle Laluksola not to betray motherland and take to the friendship of Mughals which could have serious consequence. Ramani Gabharu's this act of boldness and her concern for her motherland is an example of her passion for her country.¹³ The next lady in setting up a rare example of patriotism and political consciousness was Jaymati Kunwari, wife of the king Gadadhar Singha. She was one of the great women crusaders during the period of our study. She raised her voice against the patriarchal hegemony of the Ahom king.

In the economic field the status of women was efficient in the art of spinning, weaving, and embroidery and dying. In this period women were interested in weaving. Sarbeswari Konwari, queen of the king Siva Singha, herself taught young girls of different communities, batch by batch, the art of spinning, weaving and singing and dancing within the royal harem under her own supervision.¹⁴ S.K.Bhuyan mentioned that, in those days Assamese women supplied a piece of cloth known as *Kavach-Kapor* to their warrior husbands which they had to spin and weave within a night.¹⁵

In the social context, the position of Assamese women considered to be better than that of the women of other parts of the country. The wives of the Kings and peasants never veiled their faces before any male person and they moved about in the market places with bare heads.¹⁶ The institution of marriage was performed in accordance of the Hindu rites and rituals. In regarding to the sati system, there were many incidents of sati during the period of our study. In the biographical works of of that period, it is found that at the death of

Kusumbara, the father of Sankardeva, his wife Satyasandhya became a sati at her husband's funeral pyre.¹⁷ However, above all it can be said that, the identity status of the Assamese women were better than the women of the other parts of Indian society.

Conclusion: From the above discussion it is seen that the position of women was not so bad in the medieval age. They acquired lots of rights in matters of education, marriage, social and political field. Women in the Ahom period had remarkably excelled in their position and could make a mark in the political life and society. In respect of political consciousness some of their names have become examples for comparison today. However the study also finds certain darker shades of acts of women which had serious consequences and even the downfall of the Ahom monarchy. But it cannot be denied that women they could make feel their active presence in the Ahom political scene.

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