

## Women in Ahom Court Politics

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**Abstract:** Women had always been a subject of sexual prejudice in India in the past. 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 belong to the Shan branch of mighty Tai or Thais of the South-East Asia, ruled over a major part of Assam from 1228 A.D. up to 1826 A.D. During this period of their political authority women did play significant role in different aspects of Ahom political life from regency to political conspiracies and even fighting wars.

**Keywords :** Barpatragohain, Borgohain, Buragohain, Borboruah, Patriot, Consciousness.

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### WOMEN IN AHOM COURT POLITICS

In the medieval period the Ahom rulers followed a liberal policy towards women which allowed the assamese women to come forward and enjoy a privileged position. Women in the Ahom period enjoyed enough freedom which provided her with the opportunities to develop her skill and intelligence. The women in the Ahom period 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. In a way women during this period with their skill and intelligence could contribute tremendously in the social construction as well as development of culture in the state. During this period of Ahom political authority women did play significant role in different aspects of Ahom political life from regency to political conspiracies and even fighting wars.

#### **Objectives:**

This study seeks to bring out the contribution of the women in the Ahom politics through highlighting the women in different aspects of the political life.

#### **Methodology and sources:**

To enquire in to the contribution of women in different aspects of political life in Ahom court historical method is used by taking contemporary Ahom chronicles called Buranjis as primary sources. In secondary sources several books written by established writers on Ahom history were used.

#### **Political regency**

The Ahom chronicles provide a lot of information that along with the king, nobles and other officers, women also actively participated in the statecraft and policy making. The women in the Ahom period showed their character in almost every aspect of political life. They contributed in different ways from acting as advisers, and even ruling the state. First to catch the attraction of this study is Queen Chao Shin Kunwari, consort of Ahom king Suklenmung who was also known as Gargaya raja. She was a Nara princess and a daughter of Magaung chief. She was intelligent and a learned lady. As has been observed by Baruah S.L. (1995) she exercised tremendous influence upon the king in the matters of statecraft. She emerged as one of the principal adviser of the king Suklenmung providing certain significant contribution to the Ahom politics. King Suklenmung had shifted his capital to Gargaon. Now observing the security concern of this new capital queen Chao Shin had advised the king to erect a rampart for the protection of the capital city. The king accepted the advice 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. It is true that that the queens sometimes exercised tremendous influence upon the kings and participated although indirectly in the political state of affairs. Chao Shin by making the king to erect fortifications in th Gargaon had provided the Ahoms with a strong capital which had come to stay for a few centuries to come. This capital city with its royal palace was brought about to a grandeur by the queen during Suklenmung's rule. In the administration also Chao Shin made her presence felt. As has been mentioned by Bhunyan S.K. (2010) she suggested the king to introduce a new office to ease out the pressure of administering the growing extent of the Ahom territories. As a result the post of patra created during the rule of Suhungmung was upgraded to Barpatra Gohain. In the later times to come the position of Barpatra Gohain emerged as one among the prominent pillars of the Ahom administration.

The second lady to excel herself in almost all the aspects of political life was Phuleswari Kunwari. She was the queen of Ahom king Shiva Singha. 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. So 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. Gait. E.A.Sir (2013) has observed that the coming of Phuleswari Kunwari to the power greatly diminished the prestige of the Ahom crown in the eyes of the people. 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. She belonged to the Nati Caste, daughter of Chinatalia nat and a temple dancer. She was a devotee of Hindu Sakata 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. Bhunyan S.K. (210) has observed that she immediately after taking the reins of the state made her brother the Barpatra Gohain, her paternal uncle to Tipamia Phukon and her nephew Dhakial Baruah. It was an art of an intelligent politician to encircle herself with supporters and the favourites so as to make her position strong. Phuleswari showed much of her political maturity and understanding to stand like a strong political figure. 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 Mayamora sect vowed revenge against this religious autocracy against the Ahom monarchy in the near future to come. Gohain Baruah, P (2004) has observed that this incident the anger, anguish and the will to avenge the insult of their Mahanta culminated into Mayamora rebellion which was one among the main factors to bring about the downfall of the Ahom Rule. She even brought about certain changes in the age old Ahom customs. She abandoned the age old custom of the Ahoms of burying the dead. She influenced the people to adopt the Hindu cremation rituals for the dead. Phuleswari along with her religious activities pursued the public works too. For the interest of the people she excavated the Gaurisagar tank. As has been observed by Buragohain, D.K. (1993) it took around five months for its excavation after which it was donated by the Phuleswari for public use. The tank is now one of the largest in Assam. She also built three temples on the banks of this tank. These were Bordol, Gokhain dol and Debi dol. Bordol was constructed on the northern bank of the tank dedicated to lord Shiva. On the western side of the Bordol, Gosain dol was constructed dedicated to lord Vishnu, also known as Vishnu dol. A third temple was constructed known as Debi dol. 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. She was also a patron of Sanskrit learning. She established numerous Sanskrit tols (schools) within the boundaries of the Ahom state. In the capital city of Rangpur she established a Sanskrit tol known as Bar Rajar Parhahali. At her instance Ahom state witnessed the growth of Sanskrit literature also. Ananta Acharya composed Ananda Lahiri and Kabi Chandra Dvij composed Kam Kumar Haran and the Dharma Purana. Phuleswari ruled over the Ahom state as Bar Raja from 1722 A.D. to 1731 till her death. On 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 as mentioned by Baruah. S.L.(1995). In a way she continued to make feel the presence of women in Ahom politics. She also excavated a large tank in the capital city of the Ahoms. This Tank is the sccond largest in Assam came to be known as Sibasagar. On the southern bank of Sibasagar three temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Debi were constructed at her instance. Shiva temple is the highest in Assam with its gold plated Kalash on the top of the temple dome. During her rule under her patronage a famous work on veterinary sciences Hastividyaranya was written by Sukumar Borkaith. This work was a remarkable achievement in the field of veterinary science in relation to the Elephants. It is known that the Ahoms maintained Elephants and this work provided a systematic method of upkeepment of the elephants. Ambika kunwari died in 1738 A.D. 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. The reign of Shiva singha especially of both Phuleswari and Ambika under the influence of sakta religion brought about significant changes in the field of religion and culture. The period also marked a development in the field of art and architecture along with the growth of literature. Though these policies were opposed by the Deodhais and the Bailungs, the priestly class of the Ahoms, but were suppressed.

### **Court Intrigues and conspiracies**

Court intrigues and conspiracies were a common feature in the royal politics. So Ahom rule was no exception. Women even did not keep themselves away from political conspiracies another aspect of political life. It was during the rule of Ahom king Tyo Khampti, that his chief queen hatched a conspiracy because of jealousy which even affected the smooth running of the administration so much so that the Ahom state was put into a period of interregnum when the ministers ruled the state for nine years without a king. Tyo Khampti married a princess of Kamata state. She was beautiful and became the favourite queen of the king as has been observed by Dutta D (1986). This king had another wife who had a great influence upon the king. She even made her son the Raja of Charing. He was also declared as the heir apparent to the Ahom throne. But still seeing the growing relationship of the king and the new queen she became jealous of their relationship. When Tyo Khampti had to go away in an expedition against the Chutiyas leaving the state of affairs in the chief queen's hands, she thought of taking advantage of this to eliminate the younger queen. She brought charges of adultery against the younger queen and ordered the ministers to take her away for execution of the death sentence. When the officers were about to carry on the orders of her pregnancy they spared her life by setting her drift on the river Brahmaputra. Tyo Khampti when returned victorious from the expedition and coming to know of the state of affairs ordered an enquiry in to the matter. The charges brought against the younger queen proved to be false but he could do nothing against his chief queen. This resulted in the continuity of the tyrannical behavior of the queen. She became more and more tyrannical and started committing atrocities upon the people. Even the king under her influence failed to put a check upon her. The royal ministers and nobles later became so much irritated of the queen's behavior and the king's weakness that they conspired and assassinated the king. This was a fine example of women's interest in the politics and intrigues which brought about an end to a king's rule.

### **Patriots, Warriors and Political Consciousness**

During the rule of Dihingia Raja Suhungmung Turbak khan invaded Assam at the head of a strong army. Phrensenmung was the Ahom commander who was entrusted with the responsibility to moved forward to stop Turbak. Initially Ahoms achieved success but later in a battle fought in Kapili they had to suffer heavy losses including Phrensenmung and eight other generals who achieved martyrdom. Tamuli.L (2005) has observed that the wife of Phrensenmung, Mula Gabharu on hearing the valiant death of her husband moved to the battle field and inspired the Ahom soldiers by fighting against the invading forces. 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.

In 1663 A.D. the invasion of Mughal general Mir Jumla came to an end with the signing of the treaty of Ghilazharighat. Since the Ahoms had to suffer a defeat at the hands of Mughals the terms of the treaty were in favour of the Mughals. According to one of the provisions of the treaty the Ahom king Jaydhwaj Singha had to offer his only daughter princess Ramani Gabharu to the Mughal Haram, who was only six years old. Acharya N.N. (1987) has observed that later Ramani Gabharu was renamed as Rahmat Bano Begum and was married to the Mughal prince Azamtara the elder son of Mughal Badshah Aurangzeb. She was a true patriot and in spite of this unfortunate fate of her she could not forget her motherland. Bhunyan S.K. (1957) has mentioned that during the period of political instability (1673A.D.-1681A.D.) when Ramani's maternal uncle Luluksola 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 Luluksola 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.

The next lady in setting up a rare example of patriotism and political consciousness was Jaymati Kunwari. Since she belonged to a noble family and was wife of Prince Gadapani of Tungkhungia clan she had a well understanding of the Ahom state of affairs Gogoi A. (2009). When the Ahom kingdom was in a state of turmoil during the period of King Makers and political instability (1673A.D.-1681A.D.) Luluksola emerged as the powerful political authority among the nobles who had his own selfish designs of becoming the king. He started to eliminate the Ahom princess through a reign of terror by killing the contender princes of the Ahom family. His prominent opponent was prince Gadapani. Gadapani had to leave his household and live as fugitive. To find Gadapani and bring him down under pressure Luluksola arrested his wife Jaymati Kunwari and inflicted upon her heavy atrocities. But still she remained adamant of telling Gadapani's whereabouts. She later died of the brutalities committed by Luluksola. Later Luluk was killed by the Supporter fraction of Gadapani who became king by assuming the name Gadadhar Singha in 1681 A.D. Jaymati knew well that to end the tyranny in the Ahom state and for a secure future for the people the life of her husband was important so she sacrificed her life for the cause. Her sacrifice became fruitful and the Ahom state witnessed great development

during Gadahar Singha and her son Rudra Singha's reign. Another lady of whom mention is found in the Ahom chronicles Kuranganayani. She was a Manipuri princess married to Ahom king Rajeshwar Singha. When the Mayamoras broke into a revolt and captured the Ahom capital Garhgaon keeping the king Lakhmi Singha in captivity Kuranganayani along with the loyalist brought down the mayamoras freeing the Ahom capital. This was yet again an example of political consciousness and responsibility which as women she shouldered along with the men.

### Spying

Bhunyan.S.K. (1957) has observed that there are instances of women being employed as spies in the Ahom period. During the period of King Makers and political instability (1673A.D.-1681A.D.) Debera Barbarua employed three women as consorts of King Suhung whom he had placed upon the throne so as to constantly being aware of the king's intentions. One of the consorts was Pakhari Gabharu who was also being asked by Debera to educate the king. But she instead tried to make aware the king of the Debera's designs. Coming to know of the same Debera put both Pakhari and the King Suhung to death. The second lady to catch the attraction of this study was Pijou Gabharu who although was not employed as a spy but with her acts changed the course of Ahom history. Pijou Gabharu was the daughter of Badan Chandra Barphukon and was the daughter in law of Purnananda Buragohain. It was during the period of Moamariya rebellion that a political feud arose between Badan Chandra Barphukon and Purnananda Buragohain. Conspiracies were formed so as to degrade one another and increase their own political authority. Badan Chandra was the commander of Gauhati and as observed by Rajkumar S (2000) was planning and preparing to increase his political authority. Moreover he committed a lot of atrocities upon the people of Gauhati. On receiving the information on Badan Chandra's acts Purnananda Buragohain with consultations with the king Chandrakanta Singha sent a party to arrest Badan Chandra. But, as has been observed by Bhunyan.S.K. (1964) that Pijou Gabharu to save her father sent an express message about the king's and the Purnananda Buragohain's actions. On receiving the news Badan Chandra first fled to Bengal to seek British East India Company's help which was refused. Later he went to Burma to seek help of Burmese king Badawpaya (1781-1819) who got an welcome opportunity to pursue the policy of imperialism. It resulted into Burmese invasion of Ahom state finally weakening and bringing the downfall of Ahom rule. Had Pijou Gabharu with her political consciousness stopped herself of the action she committed there would have been a different course to the Ahom history. But she weighed much upon her relations then her country in a land where women had set examples sacrificing their self to their country.

### Conclusion

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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