

Status of Women in Assam During the Ahom Dynasty: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract: Assamese women of the Ahom era were portrayed by Assamese historians in a highly positive light. Women at that period held a very high social status in their eyes. However, in reality, very negative things are observed. During that period, polygamy was prevalent in both royal and common families. One feature of that culture was slavery. Women were viewed as goods to be bought and sold. They were likened to inanimate objects and animals. The presence of three female rulers of the Ahom period—Phulesvari, Ambika, and Sarbesvari—is the most important aspect of this era. However, they were all the wives of King Sib Shing, who, as a result of his circumstances, had to abdicate his crown. Thus, discussing the political status of Assamese women at that time is pointless. Assamese women continue to be captivated by the historical account of Joymoti Kunwari and Mula Gabhoru's gallantry and sacrifice.

Keywords: Ahom Dynasty, Social Status, Political Status, Gender, Gender Relations.

Introduction

The world's population is comprised of both men and women. However, women are given very little space in the writings of world historians. Histories of Assam are likewise not unusual. Women are not given much space by the Assamese historians. The primary sources for this paper are the various documents on women found throughout Assam History. The paper is an attempt to understand history of Assam, especially the Ahom period, from a gender perspective that provides equal space for men and women.

The Ahoms were an offshoot of the powerful Tai or Shan race (Gait 71). The Ahom dynasty, which refers to the kingdom founded by Sukapha, ruled the region of Assam for about 600 years from the 13th to the 19th century. This dynasty ended as a result of the annexation of Assam by the British East India Company in 1826.

As defined in the report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India (Towards Equality 1975), status refers to a position in a social system or sub-system which is distinguishable from and at the same time related to other positions through its designated rights and obligations. The social status of women is determined by their freedom and movement outside the home. Additionally, it encompasses the ability to engage and form relationships with others, particularly men, as well as the freedom to travel outside for a multitude of reasons, the establishment of women's associations and friend societies or groups, and participation in their activities etc. Political status of women, on the other hand, may be known through their freedom and equal opportunities of selecting representatives by voting as well as getting selected themselves as representatives and, the importance, given by society, to their contribution in determining the form of government (Mishra 133).

The sociocultural definition of men and women, as well as how cultures classify and assign social responsibilities to them, are all included in the broadest definition of gender. To quote Ann Oakley,

“gender is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (Oakley). In common understanding, relation based on gender is called gender relation. It refers to the relationships of power between men and women that are manifested in a variety of practices, such as ideas, representations, and the allocation of roles, responsibilities, and resources between men and women, as well as the attribution of various abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, and behavioural patterns to them. Gender relations are both constituted by and help constitute these practices and ideologies in interaction with other structures of social hierarchy such as class, caste and race. They may be seen as largely socially constructed and varying over time and place (Agarwal).

The positive portrait

Hiteswer Barbaroah portrayed a very positive picture of women in Assam during the period of the Ahom. For him, women enjoyed a very high status in that society. The Ahom had great respect for women. There was no system of pardah. Child marriage was also unknown among the Ahoms whereas widow remarriage was legally permitted. Women were intelligent, courageous and of good character. Mulagabharu, Jaymoti and Chamma kunwari exemplify the fearlessness, tolerance and sacrifice of the Ahom women. The Ahom queens played significant roles in the administration of state affairs at the presence or absence of their husbands. Besides, the Rajmaos (the mother of king) also had significant say over the administration (Barborooah 441-442).

The reality

The actual picture and the one that Barbaroah portrayed were not very comparable. The king had a number of queens namely, Bar kunwari, Parbatia Kunwari, Raidingia Kunwari, Barmahi Kunwari and Sarumahi kunwari. Besides, the king had many other queens known as Chamua kunwari. The king had every right to select his Chamua kunwaris from the beautiful female servants of the royal household. The Bar kunwari was the main life partner of the king. The other queens were settled separately and the king visited them in regular intervals. Moreover, the king had free access to common women. During the period of king Shupim, the wife of Chaomung used to come to the king for his sexual pleasure (Barborooah 61). This suggests that Ahom royal families practiced a specific type of institutionalised prostitution in addition to polygamy. However, the kings had to marry for many times mostly for political reasons. When the Ahom king defeated the Koch king or the Naga king or the Chutia king, the latter offered the former a girl for peace. The Ahom kings could not refuse such offers for the sake of their tradition and ultimately they had to receive the girl for marriage. Sometimes, this resulted in a big age gap between the king and the queen.

The Ahom kings had a practice of keeping the wives of the deceased (brother) kings as their own wives. Udayaditya made the chief queen of his deceased brother king Chakradhwaj Simha, his own queen (Barua 212). After demise of Chao Shuklangpha, his successor Chao Khamjang also made one of the queens of the late king, his chief queen (Barua 236). King Chaopha Shurampha lived with his step mother as husband and wife (Barua 127). King Sib Singh married Phulesvari (Pramatesvari), who was later made the Bar Raja (Chief king) of Ahoms. But after the death of Phulesvari, Sib Singh married her sister Deopadi, a married woman and made her Bar Raja with the name Ambika (Gait 189). Salal Gohain was her husband. It is quite confusing that after the demise of Ambika, Sib Singh married Enadari, the daughter of Salal Gohain (Barborooah 246-247). Enadari, was also declared Bar Raja with the new name, Sarbesvari (Gait 189). This is an illustration of a very particular kind of power dynamic between men and women featuring a patriarchal gender relationship that is pre-civilized and devoid of any democratic emotion.

Regardless of their status, women were not safe during the Ahoms' time. When the Ahom king was defeated by the king of other neighboring provinces, the former had to offer his queen or sister or daughter or other girls to the latter for truce. Men were also offered for this purpose but women were sent mainly for serving the sexual desire of the king and other male members of the royal family. Women had no right to mix up with men other than her husband, otherwise severe punishment was recommended. King Shuhenpha punished his Nagini Kunweri (queen) for her relationship with a

young man of a non-royal family (Barborooah 43). Supimpha also sent his wife with a Naga khunbaw (a young man of Naga tribe) for appreciating him (Barborooah 44). Common families were also no exception; the husband may be old, but the young wife could not have a close relationship with men other than him (Barborooah 27). Women's mobility was thus strictly restricted both in royal and common families.

The female members of the Ahom families irrespective of their status did not have the right to inherit the property of their expired husband or father. They were somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, somebody's wife and somebody's mother.

Female bodies were used as saleable and exchangeable commodities during the Ahom era. Sometimes the defeated Ahom king offered a number of girls as a condition for truce. During the tenure of Chaopha Shuhan, he had to give a girl named Jekhring to the Kachari Raja with a male elephant, a female elephant and twelve female slaves as a result of his defeat against the Kachari Raja (Barua 53). Moreover, King Jayadhwaj Simha was bound to offer her daughter, Ramani to the son of Mughal King (Barua 154-158). Mention of slavery is found in the histories of Assam. In the need of money, people sold their daughters along with sons. Women were purchased mostly for sexual purposes. Histories of Assam have a number of examples of offering slaves by the king for the purpose of establishing peace with enemy. Women were the most vulnerable to enemies in the time of war. During the attack of Moamoria, the Moamoria leader Raghab Maran captured the king Laksmisinha and took away the Monipuria kunweri (one of the queens) and one of the wives of Ghanshyam Burhagohain. Moreover, he captured Kirti Chandra Bakatia Borua with his sons and kept his wife as his own wife and divided the daughter in laws and granddaughter in laws between the Moamorias and the Chungis (Barua 302). At the time of Burmese invasion also, women of Assam had to have the worst experiences. The Burmese soldiers tortured women and girls in unbelievable ways and killed them. They took away a number of beautiful Assamese women. Besides, they demanded a beautiful daughter of king Chandra Kanta Simha for marriage. Resultantly, the Ahom King had to offer his daughter, Hemo with a number of her friends and relatives to the Burmese king. Thus, during the time of foreign invasion women were the worst sufferers. It is important to note that the status of women is the gauge of a race's standard. A nation cannot claim to be democratic and just if women don't have enough security to defend their privacy and must compromise their purity.

Women, sometimes, were used as items of gift. The king had the habit of offering their queens or other girls as a gift for the sake of friendship. King Supimpha had a Naga friend who once helped the king save his life while he was hunting. The king gave him one of his queens in exchange (Barborooah 44). With a view to encouraging the lower- grade officials of his administration, the Ahom kings offered them women along with other non-living objects like gold, silver, clothes, rice, milk, salt, etc. *The heavenly king offered a girl to Shenglung and rewards to the rest according to their services* (Barua 68).

Gender justice in those days is nothing but a paradox. Most of the husbands did not have emotional attachment with their wives, fathers were also not much conscious about the future of their daughters. After the murder of Raghab Moran, the Moamoria Cornel, the Monipuria Kunweri and the wife of Ghanshyam Buragohain (whom he took away) were brought back. But Ghanshyam Buragohain refused to receive his wife for her pregnancy from the side of Raghab Moran (Barua 261). Again, when King, Chandra Kanta Simha had to offer his daughter Hemo to the Burmese King, her elder brother was also sent with her. But the point to mention here is that Bihuram, the elder brother of Hemo, was a married person, and he did not take his wife with him while leaving Assam for Burma.

The Ahom kings did not value the sacrifice of women. Gadadhar Simha's wife, Joymati, gave her life to ensure her husband's well-being. But Gadadhar Simha could not spend the remaining part of his life with the sweet memories of Joymoti. He got married many times even after having Shiva and Rudra from the side of Joymoti.

The Ahom Kings had the habit of punishing the top officials by making them bound to wear the dresses of women at public places. To quote Rai Sahip Golap Chandra Borua, "*The king ordered the*

Buragohain, the Borpatragohain and all others to remain at Dikhaumukh by fortifying the passages near the river, Tilao (Lohit). They did not act as desired by the king. Then the Dangarias came back leaving the place. At this, the king being infuriated with rage deposed both Buragohain and Borpatragohain. The king made them put on women's dress in presence of all" (Barua 133). The society of the Ahoms was thus a society of patriarchs where all sorts of emotions of women were kept buried. A civilized society can never go to that extent to punish a man ignoring the sentiments of a woman. Incidents of this type make everyone to question about the social status of women during the Ahom period.

At the time of marriage of the king, the bride was advised by the priest to love, to obey and not to dishonour the king. Moreover, she was told to take care of her husband more than her own and to think him like God. In the marriage of the Ahom subjects also, the bride was told that the groom was her owner and God and therefore she should obey and never disrespect him (Barborooah 440- 441). In this way, the culture of Ahoms promoted an achievement-oriented masculinity for men with the objective of making them providers and protectors of females.

Historians make women responsible for the Burmese invasion in Assam. According to Barborua, Lori Gohain, the son of Purnananda Buragohain (a minister of king, Chandrakanta Simha) happened to marry Pijou, the daughter of Badan Barphukan. Getting the news of the decision of the king to capture her father, Pijou immediately sent her father a letter informing the matter which made him approach the Burmese king. For Barborua, if not Pijou, she might be either the sister of Chandrakanta Simha or the daughter of Gaurinath Simha who sent the letter to Badan Barphukan (Barborooah 298). Whosoever might be the sender of the letter, Barborua is confirmed that a woman was responsible for the Burmese invasion. But the authenticity of this argument forwarded by Barborua is yet to be proved.

Bar Raja Phulesvari became the first woman ruler of the Ahoms. She introduced herself as a skilled administrator. The history of Ahom witnessed an epoch-making event during her period that she established a school at Rongpur for spreading education (Barborooah 244-245). However, women's education was unknown to that society. Bar Raja was very much superstitious for which she was misled by the Brahmin priests against the religion pioneered by Sankardeva. As a result, she punished the followers of sankardeva (Barborooah 244-245). The scholars think that this incident was the starting point of Moamoria Rebellion. However, it was not the sole reason behind this revolt.

Ambika and Sarbesvari occupied the throne of the Ahom kingdom after the demise of Phulesvari (Gait: 189). But it is important to note that all three female incumbents of the Ahom throne were the wives of King Sib Singh. Moreover, the mother of King Chandra Kanta Simha also played the role of adviser to the King and his administrators (Barborooah 289). The execution of Badan Borphukan was also based on the advice of this Rajmao (Barborooah 308). A conclusion may, therefore, be drawn that women could ascend to the top of the Ahom administrative hierarchy only for their strong attachment to the royal Ahom patriarchy.

Mula Gabharu put her name in the pages of history by fighting along with a few Ahom women against the Mughal (Gohainbarua 114). The Ahom king, Chaopha Sukham, being defeated with Koch king initiated the peace process by preparing to send the son of Thaomunglung, (the Buragohain) and two other Ahom youths. This infuriated Chaoshao Nangbu, the wife of Thaomungleng and she refused to give her son. Chaoshao Nangbu said to Thaomunglung ,---"I won't allow my son to be sent to Koch country... Why should he reign when he is unable to save his subjects from the enemies". Further she told, "Let me have your head dress, griddle, belt and sword. Though I am a female, I shall fight with the Koch king and let him know how a female can fight with the male" (Barua 91). These reflected the political consciousness and patriotism as well as the bravery (Sarma 8-10) of Ahom women. It should be emphasised once again that all the eminent women of the Ahom era came from royal families and were only given the chance to achieve prominence because of their close relationships with the male members of the highest strata of the Ahom administrative hierarchy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it needs to be noted that Assamese women's status was at its lowest level during the Ahom period. In a society and culture where polygamy was common and women were seen as commodities to be bought and sold, the question of social position of women is paradoxical. Not only in the common families; women belonging to the royal families also did not enjoy any high social status. Although the period of the Ahom dynasty witnessed the three women rulers, it was due to their proximity to the person holding the highest position of royal administrative hierarchy. Therefore, there is no need to talk about the issue of women's political status during that time. Nonetheless, Assamese women will always be inspired in all facets of their lives by the bravery and selflessness of heroines such as Joymoti, Mula Gabharu, and Chaoshao Nangbu.

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