



Women's contributions to politics during medieval Assam: Special reference to the Ahom dynasty

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Abstract : In 1228, a Tai prince named Chaolung Sukapha crossed the Patkai Mountains and established a new kingdom in Assam, which came to be known as the Ahom kingdom. The new rule not only formed a great Ahom kingdom but also reorganised socio-political-economic atmosphere of the country. This article examines the roles, influence, and constraints of women in political life in medieval Assam with special reference to the Ahom dynasty (1228-1826). Instead of treating "women" as a single homogeneous group, the paper distinguishes between royal women (Queens, Princes, Regents), aristocratic women, and influential religious women, and analyses how each category accessed political power. Dealing with carefully on a gender-sensitive various Ahom *Buranjis*, colonial histories and modern scholarship writings, the paper argues that women in the Ahom polity exercised as significant agency and management of material resources through regency, patronage, kinship, religious authority which has always been overlooked. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the culture of empowering women in the society of Ahoms with special reference to the political empowerment of women during the reign of Ahom rulers in medieval society of Assam

Keywords: Ahom dynasty, Empowerment, Equality, Medieval Assam, Politics, Women.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The political empowerment of women in medieval Assam presents a compelling area of inquiry within the broader study of gender and power in pre-modern South Asia. While contemporary discussions on women's political participation often emphasize modern legal reforms and democratic institutions, the historical landscape of Assam reveals a more nuanced and layered trajectory. Medieval Assam, shaped by the socio-political structures of the Kamrupa kingdom, the Chutia and Kachari polities, and later the Ahom state, offers multiple instances where women exercised influence- directly and indirectly- within political, diplomatic, and administrative spheres. These forms of agency, though embedded in patriarchal frameworks, demonstrate that women were not entirely absent from the political domain. Cultural and philosophical foundations also shaped the status of women in governance. Indigenous traditions, coupled with broader Indian philosophical perspectives, attributed value to the feminine principle and recognised the complementary roles of men and women in sustaining social order. Within the Ahom polity, for example, royal women played important roles in succession politics, advisory functions, and the management of estates such as *Bhandari* and *Pukhuri*. Queens and Noblewomen often acted as patrons of temples, public works, and cultural institutions, thereby wielding socio-political influence. In other medieval Assamese societies, too, women participated in community-level decision-making, religious leadership, and negotiations during times of conflict. Despite these documented forms of participation, the political agency of women in medieval Assam remains an under-researched field. Existing historiography has often privileged the deeds of kings, military leaders, and administrative elites, leaving women's contributions insufficiently explored. A systematic examination reveals that women did, in fact, occupy meaningful positions within the political fabric of the period.

2.0 Objectives:

The present paper is an attempt to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To examine the socio-political position of women in medieval Assam
- ii. To identify the forms of political participation and authority exercised by women
- iii. To assess the impact of prominent women figures in medieval Assam

3.0 Data Source and Methodology:

The present study adopts a historical-analytical methodology to investigate the political empowerment of women in medieval Assam. It relies primarily on qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources such as *Buranjis* (Ahom chronicles), royal edicts are examined to reconstruct the history women who exercised authority. Secondary sources including scholarly articles, various books, and research papers are used to supplement and interpret the primary data.

4.0 Women in the Ahom Dynasty: Structures of Power and Influence:

Women played an important role in the Assam politics since ages. In earlier kingdoms before the Ahoms like Kamrupa, Chutia and Kachari states, women engaged in temple patronage, land grants, clan-based leadership, and community negotiations. These traditions established a cultural precedent for women's involvement in governance, influencing later political structures.

4.1.0 Royal Women in Governance and Succession Politics:

The Ahom monarchy often witnessed intense succession struggles, during which royal women played central roles as mediators, advisors, and power-brokers.

- a. **Queen Mothers (*Aai Konwaris*)** wielded exceptional influence. Their approval could legitimize claims to the throne, and they frequently acted as guardians and political mentors for young princes. Senior noblewomen often mediated disputes within aristocratic families.
- b. **Principal Queens (*Bar Konwaris*)** engaged in decision-making, advising the king on court disputes and diplomatic matters.
- c. Some queens served as **regents** during transitions of power or when kings were young or incapacitated.
- d. Women in the Ahom dynasty often served diplomatic purposes through marriage alliances and served as envoy of peace, strengthening bonds between noble houses or rival factions. Their marital and kinship relations often imparted political decisions at the highest level.

5.0 Position of Women in the Medieval Period:

Women of Assam in medieval period were comparatively free than in other parts of India. There were no restrictions in their movement, like men folk they were equally educated and if component they had to participate in state affairs. Women from royal families took charge of the administration of the kingdom in absence of the king. Though they used to draw their veil in the presence of certain relatives like father-in-law, elder brothers of their husband, that was just to show their respect towards elder person. Otherwise there were no proofs of practicing of veil system. Shihabuddin Talish, a Muhammadan writer who accompanied Mir Jumla on his invasion of Assam (1662) wrote that 'wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody and they move about the market places with bare heads.' This was possible due to the practice of the principle of granting equal status to men and women by the rulers which was practiced not only in royal families but also in village areas, because in village areas women never sit at home in medieval period, they took equal part in planting and harvesting crops with the men folk. Though the marital relationships were of basically monogamous, some of the Ahom kings of medieval era were polygamous. But they maintained them respectfully. They held a position of honour in their respective quarters and had a staff of attendants with their assigned estates. From these records it is clear that women folk received same status and honour including property right like men folk.

5.1.0 Administrative Authority: Land, Estates, and Resource Management:

One of the most significant avenues for women's empowerment in the Ahom kingdom was the control and management of estates.

- a. Royal queens were often granted *Bhandari* or *Devottar* lands,
- b. These estates required oversight of revenue collection, labour organisation (particularly the Paik system), and dispute resolution.
- c. Women's management of such estates placed them in regular interaction with local officials, which strengthened their administrative presence.

This form of economic and administrative authority contributed directly to women's political visibility.

6.0 Women in Formal Political Spaces:

Administrations and politics are generally dominated by men folk in that time also. But that does not mean that women had no interest in this field, the fact is that organised society being a patriarchal one at that era, women's participation in that sphere was simply not favoured. Then also there are instances of intelligent and courageous women, who formally took the reins of government to their own hands. This is true of the women of early as well as medieval Assam.

6.1.0 Bar-Raja:- The first woman who played a direct role in administration in Assam was the Chief Queen of Ahom king Tyaokhamti (1380-89). Immediately after his accession Tyaokhamti sent an expedition against the Chutia, he had two queens and the elder was left in-Charge of the administration. But due to her oppressive acts nature she could not become the favourite of the nobles.

6.1.2 Queen Chao-Ching: Queen Chao-Ching a very accomplished consort of the Ahom king Suklenmung or Garhgayan Raja (1539-52) acted as informal advisor to the king. It was at her instance that the office of the Barpatra Gohain, the third 'Great Nobles' of the Ahom kingdom was created.

6.1.3 Mula Gabharu: Another such brave woman was Mula Gabharu, who died fighting against the Muslim General Turbak Khan of Bengal in 1532 A.D. to revenge the death of her husband at the hands of the enemy. She was a real warrior and entered in the battle field with great courage which inspired her fellow soldier to fight with courage too.

6.1.4 Phuleswari: Phuleshwari was the first queen and chief consort of the Ahom King Siba Singha (1714-44) to govern the kingdom directly. Siba Singha's wife queen Phuleswari was a great devotee of Shiva and Shakti. Her actual name was Phulmati and soon after her marriage she becomes princess Phuleshwari. It is noteworthy that she was originally a *Devadasi* (dancing girl) in a Shiva temple; she was picked up by the king for her 'beauty and artistic accomplishment.' King Siba Singha was very pious and was very much under the influence of the astrologers. In 1772 a *gyotish pandit* forecast that he was passing through a very bad time and he might lose his throne,' this frightened him very much and he decided to hand over the reins of the government to his chief queen Phuleswari and makes her the Chief King or *Bar-Raja* at the advice of the priest Parvatia Gossain. She also minted coins in the joint name of herself and her husband. Phuleshwari had a number of good qualities too. Apart from her religious zeal she was also a patron of learning and she opened a large number of tols and even one in the palace campus for teaching Sanskrit. She excavated Gaurisagar tank near the present town Sibsagar and also built three temples on its bank dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Devi. Besides, she made a number of land-grants to Brahmana preceptor

7.0 Conclusion:

Women's political empowerment in medieval Assam- especially within the Ahom dynasty was marked by a combination of opportunity, agency, and structural constraint. Royal and noblewomen played crucial yet often understated political roles, influencing governance, diplomacy, administration, and public life. Their contributions embedded themselves in the region's social memory and continue to illustrate the depth and complexity of women's historical agency. A focused examination of the Ahom dynasty thus enriches the understanding of gender and power in medieval Assam and underscores the need for further research into marginalised political actors within South Asian Historiography.

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