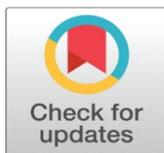


WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND ADMINISTRATION IN THE AHOM DYNASTY: A BRIEF STUDY

Gitalee Changmai¹

¹Research Scholar, Nagaland University



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3666](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3666)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The history of Assam is rich with inspiring examples of brave and noble women of the Ahom Dynasty. These women assumed power during times of crisis, displayed remarkable bravery on the battlefield, and made sacrifices for their country. In the medieval period, some Ahom queens asserted their political rights, took on significant responsibilities, and became actively involved in the kingdom's politics. While a few exceptional women contributed to political and administrative matters, the majority of society remained unaware of political rights, with many losing their identities under the dominance of patriarchy. This article examines the political roles and contributions of these noble women in medieval Assam.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Medieval Assam, Ahom Dynasty, Queens, Battlefield.

Objectives:

- 1.To investigate how women took on political and administrative responsibilities in the Ahom dynasty.
- 2.To explore the political roles and contributions of Ahom noblewomen.

Methodology:

This article is based on secondary sources, primarily collected from books, journals, research articles, and other relevant publications

1. INTRODUCTION

Many noble women of the Ahom dynasty are remembered in history for their virtues, breaking free from the constraints of the patriarchal society of medieval Assam. Queens, Rajmao (king's mothers), Princesses, and other noblewomen played a crucial role in shaping Assamese society. During the times of crisis, some Ahom queens assumed ruling responsibilities, while many others served as principal advisers to the Ahom king, showcasing their abilities without holding the ruling power.

2. DISCUSSION

In medieval Ahom society, several women held significant roles in governance, showcasing exceptional skill and authority. The first to be mentioned is Barkonwari, the wife of the Ahom king Tyaokhamti, who was actively involved in the politics of the Ahom kingdom. When King Tyaokhamti went on an expedition against the Chutia king, who had killed his brother, Sutupha, he entrusted the responsibility of the kingdom to his chief queen, Barkunwari. However, she was unable to manage the state affairs effectively and, driven by jealousy due to her own childlessness, ordered the execution of the pregnant younger queen (Haru konwari). Later Chaochaithum Buragohain saved Horukonwari's life, and she later gave birth to a son in a Brahmin house in Habung, who was named Chudangpha allies Bamuni Konwar (Barbaruah, 1997, Baruah, n.d.). After returning from the expedition, he learned the heartbreaking news of Horukonwari's murder; despite

this, he did not punish Barkunwari. In 1389, the frustrated nobles, irritated by Barkunwari's increasing harassment, assassinated Tyaokhamti, bringing an end to her rule (Basu, 1970).

Nangbakla Gabharu, the wife of Taomung Bargohain, one of the Ahom ministers, was a shining example of unwavering courage and resistance. In 1562, the Ahom king Sukhampha (1552–1603) was defeated in a battle with the Koch and was forced to sign a treaty in which each Ahom minister agreed to send one son as a hostage to the Koch kingdom (Baruah, n.d.). However, after hearing this Nangbakla Gabharu refused to send her son to the Koch court and addressed the king and the ministers in the royal assembly with the utmost ridicule: Why did you become a king if you lost the battle with the Koch? "Why should he regain when he was unable to save his subjects from the enemies. 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"(Baruah, 1930. pp. 87-88). She also said that "who can give my son, if the course of the Dikhaw river can be diverted upwards to the hill by putting a dam across, then my son may be given (Baruah, 1930. p. 88). The king could not respond to anything against this brave woman and had to send his brother to the Koch court. This stands as a testament to the courage of the Nangbakla Gabharu, who boldly challenged the so-called patriarchal society and the king's rule, ultimately bringing her son back from the royal court.

Another significant figure in the rule of the medieval Ahom dynasty was queen Chao Ching Konwari, the wife of King Chuklengmung (1539–1552). It is noteworthy that, on her advice, Chuklengmung built Garh (Rampart) around the kingdom to protect it from external attack, which is why the capital was named Gargaon. Moreover, the creation of the third ministerial post, Barpatra Gohain, for administration convenience, was also the result of her ingenuity (Baruah, 2005-2006).

Among the notable figures of the medieval Ahom dynasty, Bar Raja Phuleswari, Ambika, and Sarveswari ascended the throne and played significant roles in the governance of the state. In 1722, during the eighth regnal year of King Shiva Singha, astrologers predicted that he was under the influence of the 'Satra Bhang Yuga', a period considered inauspicious. Consequently, on the advice of Parbatia Gosai, the governance of the kingdom was entrusted to the king's chief queen, Phuleswari. Phuleswari assumed control of the kingdom under the name of Pramatheshwari, with the title of Bar Raja (chief queen), and minted coins bearing the joint names of her husband, Siva Singha, and herself (Baruah, 2013). After assuming power, Phuleswari, a staunch Shakta, attempted to establish Shaktism as the state religion under the influence of the Parvatia Gosai. Consequently, the Vaishnava Mahants were invited to the Durga Puja held in the court campus, where they were forced to bow their heads before the idol of Gosani and have their foreheads besmeared with the blood of sacrificial animals. These actions of Bar Raja Phuleswari Konwari later became the primary cause of the Moammar Rebellion, which ultimately contributed to the downfall of the Ahom kingdom.

However, Bar Raja Phuleswari was also involved in various public welfare initiatives. She had a deep interest in learning and established a school called 'Bar Rajar Padhahali' in the capital, Rangpur, to promote Sanskrit education. Additionally, she constructed the Gauri Sagar tank near the capital and built three Dauls (temples) on its banks, dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi respectively (Baruah, 2013). After the death of Bar Raja Phuleswari, her sister Draupadi adopted the name Ambika and became the ruler. Following her sister's example, Bar Raja Ambika carried out many public welfare initiatives. She dug the Shivsagar tank in the capital, Rangpur, and built temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi on its banks (Baruah, 2013). Under her patronage Sukumar Barkaith wrote *Hastividyanarva*, a significant work on elephantology. The last Bar Raja, Enadari, also known as Sarveswari, built the Kerry Rajmao Daul in Sivasagar (Baruah, n.d.). During the Chatrabhanga Yuga of King Siva Singha, his three wives took on the responsibility of Bar Rajas and showcased their expertise.

Another prominent woman involved in medieval Assam politics was Ramani Gabharu, the daughter of King Jayadhvaj Singha. According to the terms of the Treaty of Ghilajharighat in 1663, Jayadhvaj Singha had to send his daughter to the Mughal harem. Later, Ramani Gabharu married Azam Tara, the third son of Aurangzeb, and after converting to Islam, she became Rahmat Banu Begum. Notably, while Azamtara served as the Governor of Bengal, Ramani's ambitious uncle, Luluksola Barphukan, the Ahom governor of Lower Assam, agreed to release Azamtara to Guwahati in exchange for his support in securing the Ahom throne. When she learned of the conspiracy, Ramani wrote to Luluksola, warning him against committing such treasonous acts for petty gain (Baruah, 2005-2006, Baruah, n.d.).

Jaymati, the wife of Ahom King Gadadhar singha (Gadapani) is a true symbol of devotion and bravery. To secure the throne of Sulikpha, or Lararaja, Luluksola Barphukan ordered the maiming of all rival claimants to the Ahom throne. According to Swarnalata Barua's *History of Assam*, Luluksola's main target was Godapani, the son of the Gobar Raja (Baruah, 2013). After learning of the conspiracy, Gadapani fled to Nagapahar, leaving his wife and two sons at home. In his absence, Jaymoti was brought to court and subjected to interrogation. Aware that only Gadapani had the power to resolve the crisis and restore stability to the kingdom, Jaymoti refused to disclose any information about her husband.

She bore intense torture, remaining silent even unto death (Baruah, 2013). Jaymoti's sacrifice altered the course of the Ahom dynasty's history. In its aftermath, Gadapani seized power, ended the period of crisis, and established the Tunkhungia dynasty

Pizou Gabharu, another woman indirectly involved in the politics of the Ahom era, was the daughter of Badan Chandra Barphukan and the daughter-in-law of Purnananda Buragohain. The political landscape at the time was marked by a power struggle between Rajamantri Purnananda Buragohain and Badan Chandra Barphukan, a conflict that intensified during the reign of Chandakant Singh. Purnananda Buragohain had already noticed that Badan Chandra Barphukan, in charge of lower Assam's administration was involved in numerous misdeeds. Later, when King Chandrakant Singh, along with Barpatragohain and Badan Chandra Barphukan, was caught conspiring to kill him, Buragohain lost patience. He then dispatched Maheshwar Parbatia Phukan to Guwahati to arrest Badan. However, king Chandra Kanta Singha somehow managed to avoid the charges by pretending to be innocent (Baruah, 2013). In 1815, after receiving news from his daughter and Buragohain's daughter-in-law Pijou that Buragohain's soldiers were coming to arrest him, Badan fled to Bengal (Barpujari, 2003). From there, he first sought the help of the British but failed. He then turned to the Burmese king for assistance and planned to invade Assam with the help of Burmese army. In Burma, Badan fortunately met his sister Rangili, the Assamese queen of king Badawpaya. Rangili was the daughter of an aristocrat Ahom family. In 1805, Purnananda Buragohain had selfishly given her to Singpho leader Bichanang for the sake of an alliance (Sharma, 1987, Baruah, 2013). Surprisingly, Bichanang did not keep the girl for himself but instead gave her to Bodawpaya as a gift to strengthen his friendship with the Burmese king (Baruah, 2013). Rangili, who later became the queen of the Burmese king Bodawpaya, harbored deep hatred for Purnananda. However, upon unexpectedly meeting her brother and learning of his intentions, she urged King Bodawpaya to help him. With the Burmese army, Badan invaded Assam, marking the beginning of the bloody days of the Burmese invasion (Sharma, 1987). Her actions ultimately altered the course of Assam's history, leading to the loss of its independence—a consequence she could not have foreseen.

Women were not only involved in state politics but also displayed great bravery, with many sacrificing their lives on the battlefield during the Ahom dynasty of medieval Assam. One notable example is Mulagavru, the wife of the Ahom general Frasengmung Borgohain. It is mentionable that in 1532, during the reign of Suhungmung Dehingia Raja, Turbak Khan, a Muslim general from Bengal invaded Assam (Baruah, 2013). Unable to withstand the devastating attack of Turbak, Frasengmung Borgohain including eight Ahom commanders died on the battlefield (Baruah, 2013). Saddened by the news of her husband's death, Mulagavru, along with five other women, set out for the battlefield on the back of an elephant to avenge him and ultimately died fighting against Turbak's forces. The Muslim army of Bengal was astonished by Mulagavru's bravery and tactics. Witnessing her courage, the Assamese soldiers were inspired and fought under the leadership of Konseng Borpatragohain. Consequently, they managed to kill Turbak and defeat the Muslim army (Gohain Borooah, 1921).

In 1769, during the reign of King Lakshmi Singh, the Moamorias, followers of the Mayamara Satra, rebelled against the Ahom monarchy, which led to the weakening of the kingdom. They had long suffered mistreatment under the Ahom government (Baruah, 2013). However, during the Moamoria rebellion, Radha and Rukmini (Futuki and Bhavuli), the two wives of the Maran commander Nahar Khura fought fiercely and managed to defeat the royal troops (Baruah, 2013). According to the 'Assam Buranji' by Raisahab Padmanath Gohain Barua, both Radha and Rukmini were clever women, skilled in tactics to such an extent that the enemy could not strike them with bullets. Therefore, rumors were spread among the royal army that Radha and Rukmini were not human, claiming that they could catch the enemy's bullets with the corners of their chadars (Gohain Borooah, 1921). The rumors caused terror among the royal soldiers, causing them to flee the battlefield in fear for their lives. Notably, after the first Moamoria rebellion, the rebels captured the Ahom capital of Rangpur, seized King Lakshmi Singh, and proclaimed Ramakant, the son of Naharkhora, as king. While Radha remained in the capital, Rukmini was sent to lead the rebellion in Guwahati and take over the title of Barphukan for the Moamoria rebels (Baruah, 2005-2006). Meanwhile, Raghav, a leader of the rebellion, married Kuranganayani, the widow of the late Rajeshwar Singh, which proved to be a great misfortune for the Ahom royal family. However, Raghav soon faced the repercussions. Kuranganayani, the Manipuri queen of Rajeshwar Singha, conspired and killed Raghav Maran. The royal army then killed Ramakant and other rebel leaders, reclaiming control of the capital. They also killed two heroines of the first Moammar rebellion—Radha at the Har-Gauri temple in Rangpur and Rukmini in Guwahati (Baruah, 2005-2006). Thus, the lives of these two courageous women were tragically cut short.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, many women were directly or indirectly involved in the politics of the state, challenging the patriarchal norms of medieval Ahom society. Remarkable figures like Mula Gabharu set the ultimate example of patriotism by sacrificing their lives on the battlefield. Their active participation in state affairs reflects their courage, intelligence, and determination. The sacrifices and contributions of these extraordinary women will remain immortalized in the annals of history.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

None.

REFERENCES

- Barbaruah, H. (1997). *আহোমৰ দিন*. অসম প্ৰকাশন পৰিষদ.
- Barpujari, H. K. (Ed.). (2003). *The Comprehensive History of Assam* (2nd ed., Vol. 2). Publication Board Assam.
- Baruah, S.L. (1985). *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (5th reprint, 2013). Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Baruah, S. L. (2005-2006). State, patriarchy and women in medieval Assam. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 66, 264-295. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44145845>
- Baruah, S. L. (n.d.). Women's role in administration and politics in early Assam. *Indian Review*. <https://indianreview.in/nonfiction/womens-role-in-administration-and-politics-in-early-assam/>
- Barua, G. C. (1930). *Ahom Buranji*. Authority of the Assam Administration.
- Basu, N. K. (1970). *Assam in the Ahom age* (1228-1825). Shyamapada Bhattacharjee.
- Bhuyan, S.K. (1965). *Studies in the History of Assam*. Srimati Laksheswari Bhuyan.
- Sharma, B. (1987). Rangili Konwari. In *Buranjir Safura* (pp. 25- 30). Benudhar Sharma Swamarak Nesh.