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WOMEN IN AHOM SOCIETY: BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Ahom kingdom has traditionally been narrated through political events, royal succession, warfare, administration and military resistance to the Mughals. Within this predominantly political narrative, women have generally appeared as exceptional figures—queens, warriors, martyrs or symbols of sacrifice. Joymoti Kunwari and Mula Gabharu, for instance, occupy an important place in Assamese historical memory, but their prominence can also obscure the experiences of ordinary women who sustained households, agricultural production, weaving, religious institutions and community life. This paper attempts to move beyond such a heroic and exceptionalist representation of women in Ahom society. It examines women's economic contributions, domestic and productive labour, marriage and family relations, political participation, religious roles, and experiences of social hierarchy. It also critically examines the limitations of the Buranji tradition as a source for women's history. The paper argues that women in Ahom society possessed meaningful spaces of economic and social agency, but such agency existed within a hierarchical social order and cannot be equated with gender equality. A gender-sensitive reading of Ahom history therefore requires attention not only to exceptional women who entered political narratives but also to the largely anonymous women whose everyday labour helped sustain the Ahom state.

Keywords: Ahom Kingdom, women, Gender history, Buranji, weaving, Paik system, Medieval Assam, Joymoti, Mula Gabharu, Women's labour

1 INTRODUCTION

The Ahom kingdom, established in the Brahmaputra Valley in the thirteenth century, developed into one of the most durable political formations of pre-colonial Northeast India. Its history has traditionally been reconstructed around kings, ministers, military commanders, wars and administrative institutions. The Buranjis, the chronicles associated with the Ahom historical tradition, are particularly important for reconstructing this political history. However, their emphasis on state affairs also creates a methodological problem: people who did not directly participate in formal political institutions often remain comparatively invisible.

Women constitute one of the most important groups affected by this imbalance. Historical accounts frequently mention women when they became politically exceptional. Joymoti Kunwari is remembered for refusing to reveal the hiding place of her husband Gadapani despite torture, while Mula Gabharu is remembered for her participation in resistance against the Turbak invasion. Ahom queens such as Phuleswari, Ambika and Sarbeswari also entered the political narrative. Such examples demonstrate that women could occupy important positions, but they cannot by themselves represent the condition of women as a whole. Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the tendency to treat women merely as symbols of sacrifice or as exceptional personalities. The conventional positive portrayal of Ahom women needs to be examined alongside evidence of patriarchy, polygamy and social inequality.

This paper therefore asks a broader question: What can we understand about women in Ahom society if we move beyond the stories of famous queens and heroines?

The paper argues that women were neither completely powerless nor uniformly emancipated. Their position was contradictory. They exercised agency through productive labour, household management, weaving, religious activity, marriage networks and, in exceptional circumstances, political and military action. At the same time, their agency operated within patriarchal institutions and unequal structures of property, status and authority.

2 SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Writing the history of women in medieval Assam presents a particular source problem. The Buranjis are indispensable but were not written as gender histories. Their principal concern was often the affairs of rulers, wars, succession, diplomacy and administration. Consequently, the historian must read these sources not only for what they explicitly say about women but also for what they reveal indirectly about women's lives.

The Buranji tradition itself needs critical treatment. Modern scholarship has pointed out that the surviving Buranjis underwent processes of compilation, editing and publication, particularly during the colonial and early modern periods. The historical journey of the Buranji tradition is therefore itself a subject of historiographical investigation.

This study uses a combination of published Buranjis, historical works on Assam, studies of the Ahom political system and gender-oriented scholarship. Works such as Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*, S.L. Baruah's *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Amalendu Guha's study of the Ahom political system and S.K. Bhuyan's edition of the *Tungkhungia Buranji* provide the broader political and socio-economic framework.

The methodology adopted here is interpretive rather than merely descriptive. The objective is to place women within the larger structures of economy, family, state and religion rather than treating them as isolated historical personalities.

3 WOMEN AND THE PROBLEM OF THE TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The conventional narrative of Ahom history tends to be great-men-centered. Kings such as Sukapha, Suhungmung, Rudra Singha and Pramatta Singha, military commanders such as Lachit Barphukan, and major wars occupy considerable historical space. Women's appearance is comparatively episodic.

This produces two opposite problems. First, women may become invisible when they do not occupy formal political offices. A woman working in a household, producing textiles, participating in agricultural work or maintaining a religious institution may have been economically significant without leaving an identifiable name in the chronicles. Second, women may become over-symbolised when they do enter historical memory. Joymoti, for example, is remembered primarily through sacrifice and loyalty. Such narratives are important, but if women's history is constructed only from heroic examples, ordinary experiences disappear.

The problem is therefore not simply the absence of women from historical sources. It is also the way in which available evidence has traditionally been interpreted. A gender-sensitive history must distinguish between visibility and importance. A person may be historically important without being prominent in the written record. This distinction is especially relevant to women's history. The Buranji tradition's relative silence about women does not prove that women played an insignificant role. Rather, it reflects the priorities of the historical record itself.

4 WOMEN AS PRODUCERS: LABOUR, AGRICULTURE AND WEAVING

One of the most important ways of moving beyond the traditional narrative is to examine women's productive labour. The Ahom economy was based substantially on agriculture, and the Paik system provided the state with an organised

mechanism for mobilising labour. The political system cannot therefore be understood separately from the productive activities of households. Guha's analysis of the Ahom political system places state formation and social organisation at the centre of understanding Ahom rule.

Women participated in the economic life of the household in multiple ways. Their work included food processing, childcare, domestic production, agricultural assistance and textile manufacture. Among these activities, weaving deserves particular attention.

Weaving was not simply a cultural accomplishment. It was a form of productive labour. Scholarship on women and textile production in medieval Assam has argued that women's weaving was connected with household subsistence, exchange, royal consumption, tribute, social reproduction and cultural identity. The household loom can therefore be understood as a decentralised productive institution through which women's labour was converted into material and social value. This perspective changes our understanding of economic history. Instead of treating women primarily as dependants within households, we can recognise them as contributors to household production.

However, productive contribution should not automatically be equated with economic independence. A woman could perform economically valuable labour without necessarily controlling the product or its surplus. Thus, the existence of substantial female labour does not itself demonstrate gender equality. This distinction is important because romantic interpretations of traditional Assamese society sometimes equate women's participation in weaving and household production with empowerment. A more cautious interpretation recognises both dimensions: women possessed productive agency, but the distribution of authority and property remained unequal.

5 MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND PROPERTY

The family constituted another major institution shaping women's lives. Medieval Assamese society was not socially uniform. The Brahmaputra Valley contained different ethnic, religious and social communities, and their customs could differ considerably. Therefore, it would be misleading to speak of a single status of women applicable to every community. Among sections of the settled Assamese society, patriarchal family structures influenced inheritance and property relations. Historical studies of medieval Assam indicate that women generally did not enjoy equal rights in ancestral immovable property under the prevailing inheritance practices. The Dayabhaga tradition, which had particular importance in Assam and Bengal, needs to be considered when examining property relations. Marriage could therefore be an important mechanism through which family alliances, property and social status were reproduced. Polygamy was also present among sections of the Ahom-era elite and wider society. Recent scholarship has emphasised that idealised accounts of the status of Ahom women should be balanced against evidence of polygamy and other forms of gender inequality.

At the same time, marriage should not be viewed exclusively as an institution of female subordination. Women could exercise influence within kinship networks and households. Royal women, in particular, could become important nodes connecting different political and social groups. Thus, the family was both a site of patriarchy and a space in which women exercised negotiated forms of agency.

6 WOMEN, RELIGION AND SOCIAL SPACE

Religion created another important arena of women's participation. Assam possessed strong traditions of Shakta, Shaiva and Vaishnava practices. The religious landscape was therefore diverse. The importance of female divinity, particularly in the Shakta tradition associated with Kamakhya, provides an important cultural context for understanding perceptions of femininity and sacred power in Assam.

The emergence and expansion of Neo-Vaishnavism also transformed social and cultural relations. Satras and Namghars became important institutions of religious and community life. Women participated in the wider social world surrounding these institutions, although their access to institutional authority was not necessarily equivalent to that of men. Religion therefore produced a complicated picture. On one hand, female divinity could be associated with extraordinary sacred power. On the other hand, actual women could remain subject to patriarchal family and social structures. This distinction between the symbolic power of the feminine and the actual power of women is crucial. Worship of a goddess does not automatically translate into equality for women. Similarly, the presence of women in religious activities should not automatically be interpreted as institutional equality.

7 WOMEN AND POLITICAL POWER

Women did sometimes enter the formal political history of the Ahom kingdom. The best-known examples include royal women and women associated with military resistance. Queens could influence court politics, dynastic relationships and religious policy. Phuleswari, Ambika and Sarbeswari are particularly significant examples because they exercised authority as queens during the reign of Siva Singha. Their cases demonstrate that the political system could create limited avenues through which women associated with the royal household exercised power. However, these examples should not be generalised to the entire female population. Political authority was strongly connected with royal status, kinship and proximity to the monarch. Consequently, the existence of powerful queens does not demonstrate that ordinary women possessed political equality. This distinction becomes clearer when examining the stories of Joymoti and Mula Gabharu. Joymoti's story represents an extraordinary form of individual courage. Her decision to withstand torture rather than disclose the location of her husband has made her one of the most powerful female figures in Assamese historical memory. Mula Gabharu represents another dimension: the participation of women in military resistance. Her story challenges the assumption that warfare was exclusively a male domain.

Yet these stories should be read critically. The celebration of sacrifice can unintentionally turn women into symbols rather than historical subjects. The more useful question is not simply how brave these women were, but under what social and political circumstances women could enter the sphere of warfare and political action.

8 BEYOND THE HEROINE: RECOVERING THE ORDINARY WOMAN

The greatest challenge for women's history in Ahom Assam is recovering the ordinary woman. The historical record is much more likely to preserve the name of a queen than that of a woman who spent decades producing cloth, raising children, processing food, participating in agricultural work or maintaining household economic activity. Yet states are sustained not only by kings and soldiers but also by the productive capacity of households. The Ahom state depended upon agricultural production, labour mobilisation and social organisation. Women's contribution to these systems therefore deserves to be considered part of the history of state formation.

This does not mean that every woman enjoyed the same degree of agency. Class, caste, ethnicity, occupation and proximity to political power mattered greatly. A royal woman and a peasant woman did not experience the Ahom state in the same manner. The category Ahom woman itself can therefore be misleading if it is treated as homogeneous. A more appropriate framework would examine royal women, elite women, agricultural and artisan women, religious women, and women from subordinated social groups. Such differentiation allows historians to move beyond both extremes: the romantic image of the exceptionally empowered Ahom woman and the equally simplistic image of women as completely powerless.

9 RETHINKING THE BURANJI THROUGH A GENDER LENS

The Buranjis remain indispensable to the study of Ahom history, but they should not be treated as transparent windows into the past. Their political focus means that women's everyday experiences are under-recorded. Moreover, the survival, compilation, editing and publication of Buranjis introduce additional layers between the original historical event and the modern historian.

The historian should therefore ask three questions when using Buranjis for women's history: What does the source explicitly say about women? What does it reveal indirectly about women's work, marriage, kinship and social position? What kinds of women and experiences does the source systematically fail to record? The third question is particularly important. Silence in a source should not automatically be interpreted as absence in society.

For example, the limited appearance of women as individual economic actors does not mean women were economically inactive. The extensive importance of textile production suggests precisely the opposite. Similarly, the appearance of only a few women in military narratives does not necessarily mean women never participated in wartime activities. A gender history must therefore combine textual evidence with social and economic reconstruction.

10 CONCLUSION

Women in Ahom society cannot be adequately understood through a simple narrative of either oppression or empowerment. The evidence reveals a more complicated picture. Women participated substantially in household and productive activities, particularly agriculture-related work and weaving. They contributed to the economic

reproduction of society and indirectly to the functioning of the Ahom state. Women also participated in religious and community life and, in exceptional circumstances, entered political and military arenas.

At the same time, their agency existed within structures of patriarchy. Property and inheritance were not uniformly favourable to women, marriage institutions could reinforce male authority, and exceptional female political power was largely connected to royal status. The existence of celebrated queens and heroines therefore cannot be used to represent the experience of all women. The most important historiographical shift is consequently from women who became famous to women who made society function. Joymoti, Mula Gabharu and the Ahom queens remain important. But they should be placed within a much wider history of unnamed women whose labour sustained families, agriculture, textile production, religious institutions and social networks.

The study of women in Ahom society therefore requires a movement from heroic biography towards gendered social history. It requires historians to read Buranjis critically, supplement textual sources with economic and cultural evidence, and pay attention to the silences of the archive. Ultimately, the history of the Ahom kingdom becomes richer when women are not treated merely as symbols of sacrifice, honour or tradition, but as historical actors whose labour, choices, constraints and negotiations formed an essential part of medieval Assam.

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