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A Study Of Socio-Political Status Of Women In Medieval Assam

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Abstract : The development of a state or society is depending on the status of its women. The medieval society of Assam is an assimilation of many aryan and non-aryan societies. The present study tries to evaluate the socio-political status of women in medieval Assam. On the basis of secondary sources, the present study analysis about the role, participation and position enjoyed by women in Assam during medieval period.

KeyWords: Women, Medieval Assam, Economy, Polity, Education, Status.

Introduction : Women have constituted half of the human dominion throughout the annals of history. The participation of women in household activities, social reforms and political events is the factors that exhibit the status of women of a country or a society.

The medieval period in Assam history is generally defined as the period from the arrival of the Ahoms in 1228

A.D. to the end of their rule by the British in 1826 A.D. The medieval period was essentially marked by establishment of Koch dynasty, Kamata kingdom, Kachari and Chutiya kingdom and mainly rise and consolidation of Ahom kingdom. During medieval Assam women enjoyed very dignified status and played very important role in political, social, economic, religious and cultural affairs in the state.

Role of women in the politics of medieval Assam:

The history of Assam was not different from that of Indian history. The status of women reflected during the Ahom rule when women received golden opportunity to become the chief ruler of the country. Queen Sarbeswari, the consorts of Ahom king Siva Singha ruled the kingdom successfully.

The king Siva Singha at the instruction of the parvatiya Gosain Krishnaram Bhattacharya, resolute to bestow the supreme vest of his kingdom to his chief queen Phuleswari and she assumed the title 'Bar-Raja' and minted coins in the joint name of her and her husband. She changed the age-old burial-system of the Ahoms and introduced the system of burning the dead.

Queen Ambika was a great sponsor of learning and education. The Sivasagar tank at Rangpur was excavated by Queen Ambika. On its bank she erected the three temples dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi. After her death, another wife of Siva Singha Sarveswari replaced in the place of Ambika,

Some of the women in this period were very courageous and heroic and they could have performed many adventurous and heroic deeds with perfect accomplishment. During the reign of Shuhungmung, Mula Gabharu the wife of Frachengmung Bargohain

, who died in the war with Turbak, mobilized a women fought a

Terrible fight against the army of Turbak. In the same way

, mention can be made of two wives of Nahar-Khora, named Radha and Rukmini, who fought against the

royal forces of the Ahom king in the revolution called Moamaria rebellion. During the reign of Khora Raja, the Ahoms being unable to defeat the Kochs, made a treaty with them. According to the terms of which the Ahom king agreed to send his son and the Thaumunglung's Bargohain's son along with the sons of some other nobles to the Koch king to stay as hostages, at his capital. When Thaumunglung's Bargohain's wife Chaochao Nangbu heard this, she made a fiery protest to her husband refusing to send her son to the Koch capital.

Matrimonial alliances were also used by the Ahoms to establish friendly relations with neighbouring states. Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha married Kuranganayani, the daughter of King Joy Singha and a Manipuri Princess. Rajmao Dangariyani was another important woman involved in royal affairs. She was King Chandrakanta Singha's mother. She held Badan Barphukan responsible for the Moamoria uprisings. The queen mother played a special role to assist the king in court matters.

Social condition of women in medieval Assam:

Women have always been an important part of society, dating back to the dawn of time. Womenfolk of Assam were comparatively freer than their counterparts in other parts of India in the middle ages. The evil custom of dowry was not prevalent in Assamese society. The purdah system was practically unknown. According to Shihabuddin Talish the wives of the Rajah and the peasants alike never veiled their faces before anybody and they moved about in the market places with bare heads.

Spinners and weavers were skilled by all women from queens to peasants. Women of the well-to-do families engaged their leisure hours in knitting embroidery and household decorations. A part from doing the domestic duties, women of the peasant and working class shared their husbands' toil in cultivation work by sorting of seeds, harvesting etc.

The Assamese women could weave all sorts of cotton and silk clothes, but they had to maintain the distinction according to their higher or lower status in the society. The dress and garment made of muga and silk were exclusively for the higher class people.

Evidence of taking part in dancing and music by women in the medieval period are available. In the royal harem of the Ahom kings there was a large number of women dancers. Dancing girls were also employed as spies in the Ahom courts. There was in vogue a kind of dance called Deodhani Nitrya, where an unmarried girl danced in the worship of goddess Manasa or in the festival of Ambubaci.

Polygamy was a common occurrence among the Ahom rulers. Queens were divided into several categories, including Boruwari, Parbatiya kuwari and Tamuli kuwari, Chamua Kuwari etc. The queen had the privilege of looking after and administering the land that had been assigned to them. As regards prevalence of prostitution in the medieval period, according to Gunabhiram Baruah, the system of prostitution was absent, it entered Assam only after the Burmese invasion.

In the intelligence department of the Ahom king, many attendant girls known as Ligeri living in the royal harem were appointed to collect secret information from the opposite party.

In spite of their best contributions towards the family and social life, except some they were always considered as subordinate to male persons and they had been confined to the household chores only.

Role of women in Education Sector:

In medieval Assam educated and learned women were not rare. Some of the women during the period, rose to such a height of learning and devotion. Bhubaneswari, the daughter of Harideva was the first woman to become the head of a religious institution 'Satra' in Assam. All the queens of King Lakshmi Narayan used to learn the reading of the holy books of Vaisnavite religion such as Ghosa, Kirttana, Bhagavata etc.

In the Ahom period Queen Phuleswari was a great patron of education. She was the first person who established a pathshala at the palace campus. King Siva Singha's queen Sarveswari taught young girls of different communities, batch by batch the art of spinning, weaving and singing dancing within the royal harem under her own supervision.

Aside from the Ahom queens Bhanumati the wife of Koch king Naranarayan commissioned Purusottam Gajapati to write Ratnamala Byakaran, a grammar book. Chaoching kuwari a queen from the Nara community, is known for transferring the Ahom capital to Gargaon. She was Suklengmung's wife.

Swarnalata Baruah described Chao Ching Kuwari as a beautiful, intelligent and competent woman in her book "A Comprehensive History of Assam" and Dambarudhar Nath described her in his book 'Asom

Buranji'. ChaoChing Kuwari made a Significant contribution to the royal duties and the state's defence.

Dress, Ornaments used by Assamese women:

Epigraphs, sculpture and literature throw light on the type of dress and ornaments used by the women. Though as Assamese women could weave all sorts of Cotton and Silk cloths, but she could not all the dress. They had to maintain the distinction according to higher or lower status in the society.

The dress and garments made to muga and silk (pat) were exclusively for the higher class people. The dress of upper class women in earlier days comprised of three garments. They were i) mekhela, a girdle worn round the waist, ii) riha, worn round the waist and chest and iii) Sadar, one end of which was coiled round the waist just over the riha and the other end placed across the chest and shoulder behind. The literary works of the medieval period mention the names of different metals used for making ornaments such as gold, silver and other metals used by women from head to foot. The ornaments such as Gala Kantha, Chandrahar, Galpata, Gajamatihar and Bagh-dat were put on as necklace by women.

The long and dark cluster of hair remained always a matter of pride for the Assamese women. Chilarai married Kamalapriya just being charmed at her cluster of hair. Sarvaswar Rajguru comments that the hairstyles of Assamese women of medieval period were most probably influenced by the hairstyle of women of non-aryan communities, especially the Khamti women. Coiffures or khopa of various designs were prevalent among the women and they were known by different names such as Negheri Khopa, Ghilakhopa, Kaldilia-khopa etc.

It was the custom of the Assamese women in medieval period to present a piece of cloth to their husbands at the time of going to the battle field which she had to prepare with in one night. This cloth was known as 'Kavach Kapor'. It is said that Mula Gabharu could not give general phrasengmung, her husband the kavach kapor while he was going to the battlefield and so he meet a tragic end.

Women in medieval Assam : reflections from biographical work : In the pages of the Guru Charit katha there were two pictures of women in medieval Assam. On one hand a submissive chaste wife devoted to her husband. There are many examples of such patibrata women in the pages of the Gurucharitkatha who aspired to be an ideal wife and symbol of wifely fidelity. One of chaste and patibrata wives was the wife of Harihara Ata, a disciple of Madhavadeva.

On the contrary, there were many women as narrated in Guru Charit Katha, who were free and self-dependent and active participant in social production. The reference to women traders called pohari in Charit puthis speak to the fact that not only the widows had to maintain their families themselves, but also some families depended on women traders. As narrated in the Katha Guru Charit, the mother of Gopaldeva alias Gopal Ata, one of the great preachers of post-sankaradeva times, Barangi-Ai earned her living by selling goods at Nazira hat in the capital of the Ahom state. In the mid 17th century Shihabuddin Talish the official chronicler accompanying general Mir Jumla to Assam in the year 1662 has mentioned about women traders at the Ahom capital at Gargaon.

In the biography of Sankaradeva, it is found that Chandari, the nurse of Sanaradeva, pointed out to him the right place of placing the divine Kalpataru Brksa. During the Vaishnavite era, almost every woman acquired some sort of efficiency in the art singing celestial songs called Bargeet, Bhatima etc.

Conclusion: Civilization come through the combined contribution of both men and women. Women in general were looked down upon in the society which was male oriented. It should be pointed out that no society can move forward without the active participation of both men and women can never be obliterated from the pages of the history. To conclude this paper throws light on about the roles, position of women in medieval era of Assam.

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