

The Ahoms Rise to Power : Matrimonial Alliances as a Factor

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Abstract

Every kingdom needed political allies to survive and when they could not find them they tend to create them by using different political tools like Kanyopayana [1] (presentation of a maiden), Santanasandhi [2] (marriage of Santans) and others. Daughters of royal families were usually married off to an enemy king turned an ally for the peace keeping of the kingdom. The royal women were often used as a political tool. This paper will look into such matrimonial alliances and the role of the queens and princesses in the state formation with special reference to Ahoms who managed to rule Assam for almost six hundred years. While looking at their role, the paper will also try to analyze status of women in such alliances.

Discussion

The powerful states in ancient and medieval times used all means, fair and foul, at their disposal to enlarge their kingdom and strengthen their status. Besides conquest and aggression, marriage alliances formed a very important part of their diplomatic policies which helped them to expand and defend their territories. No doubt, women formed an important part of such policies; they were often used, exchange, exploited and carried off for the benefit of the state. An example of the simple form of such alliances is where a woman is exchanged for another woman. This is seen in the case of the king

of Kosala, Prasenajit and Magadhan King Bimbisara, both of them had married each other's sister. The wedding of Bimbisara with Kosaladevi and Prasenajit's marriage with Varsika, not only established friendly relations between the two rival powers but also increased their power, prestige and sphere of influence [3]. The marriage was politically motivated and it had a great impact on the politics of the contemporary period. The importance of matrimonial alliances was such that even Arthasastra [4] (an ancient Indian work on statecraft, economic policies and military strategy by Kautilya) while mentioning seven essential components needed by a state for expansion, talks about the need of 'presentation of maiden' for political benefits.

The Ahoms

The Ahoms belonged to the Shan branch of great Tai or Thai family of South-East Asia. They ruled the Ahom kingdom in present day Assam for 598 years. The dynasty was established by Sukaphaa, a Shan prince of Maulung who came to Assam after crossing the Patkai Mountain. As Sukhapaa moved to Patkai via Hukong valley, he reduced to submission the local tribes found along the road. He reached the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 and had been moving from place to place till he settled at Charaideo in 1253. Several factors combined to bring about the acceptance of the overlordship of Shan invaders with

feeble or no resistance at all on the part of the tribes' men in the Brahmaputra valley. One of such factors is that he married the daughters of the local chiefs. It is not clear if Sukaphaa was married before he arrived, as chronicles are silent about it. However, interesting it is to note that the 'the Ahoms had not brought their wives when they first came from the Nara country and they accepted wives only when they came to the Brahmaputra Valley' [5]. Such inter-marriage contributed significantly to their assimilation process, thereby, strengthening the control of the Ahom chiefs. In the Shan scheme, a woman was considered an appropriate subject of tribute from an inferior to a superior. Polygamy practiced by a Shan ruler was an important part of the political system in that it gave the king personal ties with a large number of different groups both within and outside the court which was one of the many causes for the Ahoms to rule for almost six hundred years.

In the Ahom state, women were used as an instrument to cement political alliance. Whenever a treaty was concluded between two states the vanquished offered his daughter to the victor. Examples are too numerous to be mentioned. Ramai Gabaru and Mohini Aideo were offered to the Mughal harem by King Jaydhaj Singha. Kuranganayani was received from the Manipuri king by Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha and Harmati and Darmati were received from the Kamata king by Suhungmung, the Dihingia Raja [6]. The Weissalisa informs us that Badan Chandra Barphukon offered his daughter Hem-Chang-Shao (Rangili) to the Burmese monarch Badawpaya to get his assistance against Purnananda Buragohain.

The Ahom government was monarchical

in nature. As there was no representative system of government, the question of enjoying equal political rights by men or women did not arise. However, the life and achievements of a number of queens and court ladies shows that there were women who played important role in politics either behind the curtain or outside it. Instances of an Ahom woman saving the kingdom from external threat are many. One can talk of Ramai Gabaru, daughter of Jayadhaj Singha who was sent to the Mughal harem according to the terms of the treaty of Ghilajarihat (1663 A.D.). She was later married to prince Azam alias Azamtara, the third son of Emperor Aurangzeb. When she came to know that her maternal uncle, Laliksola Borphukon, had conspired to surrender Gauhati to the Mughals, she secretly sent a letter to her uncle warning him of the treacherous and unpatriotic deed. She even managed to send Moina Ligiri to Assam to tell her uncle in detail about the evil effects of surrendering Gauhati to the Mughals. However, there are some matrimonial alliances which led to the downfall of the kingdom. Princess Rangili, daughter of an Ahom noble, was first offered to a Singpho leader Bichanong by Puranananda Buragohain, who presented her to the Burmese king Bodowpaya (1782-1819) to tighten the friendship with him. Rangili who later became one of the favorite queens of the Burmese king entreated to help Badan Chandra Barphukon by giving him armed help. Her request was compiled with and six thousand soldiers were sent. The presentation of Rangili to the Burmese King hastened the coming of the Burmese to Assam, who over threw the Ahom rule for a brief period of time.

The broad study of such matrimonial

relations shows that they were very much guided by the maha-sabha as it was a general belief that the honor of men rests in woman and could be violated by their conduct. History is the proof that it was always the women who had to burn to prove their chastity: to protect the honor of their husband, call it either sati or jauhar. This led to a direct control by men over the sexual and martial norms relating to women. Thus, marriage was not considered as primarily an affair of the man and the woman who were married but as an event which involved the entire kin groups of both spouses. Nur Yalman, an anthropologist, has argued that women are literally seen as points of entrance, 'gateways' of the caste/class groups. [7] If men of the ritually low status were to get access to them, then it was not only the purity of the women but that of the whole caste/class of the group was threatened. Thus, for the protection of the ritual purity of the group it was virtually necessary to guard the sexuality of women but not that of men. This may be the reason the maha-sabha closely guided and sometimes even manipulated the matrimonial alliances between the two houses. There are instances of the princesses not getting married as they could not find suitable prince who matched their social status.

No doubt the literature on the various aspects of Ahom kingdom is immense but such works have brushed aside the role of marriage and family ties. The political history of Assam has deliberated upon the rise and growth of the kingdom and success and failure of individual rulers. Mentions about queens, princesses and other groups of women are made only while referring to the powerful men. Women are mentioned either because they are wife of a powerful

king, daughter of a powerful father, sister of a powerful brother or mother of a powerful son. In gender-based societies of India, women have been treated as inferior to men, thus subjugated and exploited. Attention can be drawn towards the legal text Dhama-Sastra and in similar literature in which the status of women as a whole is clearly defined, for they are unambiguously equated with sudras [8]. Even Gita, places women, vaisyas and sudras in the same category and described them as being of sinful birth. According to another text the punishment of killing either a woman or a sudra is identical.

Thus, in order to write women back to history, what is needed therefore is a new consciousness, sensitivity about the great injustice which has been done to almost half of the society by patriarchal values of the society. This consciousness will bring into the forefront the sacrifices and the heroic deeds of the brave queens who sacrificed their body, their ambitions and their lives for the interest of the state which is seen in the case of the Ahom kingdom.

End Notes

1. Radha Govinda Basak, The History of North-Eastern India: Extending from the Foundation of the Gupta Empire to the Rise of the Pala Dynasty of Bengal, Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1995, p. 7.
2. It is generally effected when the conquered king offers his daughter in marriage to the adversary. For details, V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, The Gupta Polity, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Delhi, 1993, p. 197.

3. Preeti Prabhat, *Matrimonial Alliances and Ancient Indian Polity*, D.K.PrintWorld, New Delhi, 2007, p. 27.
4. R. Shamasastri trans., *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Bottom of the Hill Publishing, New Delhi, 2010 (Reprint), p. 550.
5. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1932, p.99.
6. Bibha Bora, 'Society in Medieval Assam with Special reference to Women', Unpublished Thesis in Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, 1993, pp. 178-198.
7. Mitoo Das quoted NurYalman in "Performing the 'Other' in the 'Self': Reading Gender and Menstruation through Auto ethnography" in *Indian Anthropologist*, Vol. 44, No.2, p. 55.
8. Janet Chawla, 'Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 43, 1994, p. 2819.
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