
Bar Raja Phuleswari Kunwari: The Centre or the Periphery in Case of Moamoaria Rebellion- a Study from Gender Perspective, and Some Issues.

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ABSTRACT

Women question involving her status in the society came up in India centuries back when the colonial thinkers, both progressive and traditionalist, debated women's relationship to modernity. But History of women in Indian society was not attempted till 1930s. However as Gerda Lerner opinies: "like men, women also always have been actors and agents of History, and women have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization." Therefore, understanding of the past is enriched and expanded when gender is included as a category of analysis.

The Ahoms are the shan branch of Great Tai or Thai family of South East Asia. Sukafa(1228-1268)A.D. the founder of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley entered from Maolung on the bank of the Sheuli river in upper Burma. The Ahoms ruled for six hundred years in the Brahmaputra valley(1228-1826)A.D. and during this period they had to fight with various tribes, outsiders, had to make numerous treaty. They had followed both diplomacy and other tactics of politics and as a result of which they became most powerful political power of the Brahmaputra valley. In the making of the kingdom, many kings, queens, ministers, generals, soldiers etc. played an epoch making role. But with the treaty of Yandabo(1826)A.D. the Ahom empire came to an end. Before the treaty of Yandabo there were three Moamaria rebellions (1769,1780,1790) that broke the backbone of the Ahom Kingdom. Historians criticized the role of Bar Raja Phuleswari Kunwari (first queen of Siva Simha) for the causes of the Moamoria rebellion and made her responsible for the uprisings. In this paper, we effort to highlight the role of king Siva Singha and the role of Bar raja Phuleswar kunari for the gnesis of the Revolt and how the Historian are not giving proper importance to the contributions of Bar Raja Phuleswari Kunwari.

INTRODUCTION

Woman question involving her status in the society came up in India centuries back when the colonial thinkers, both progressive and traditionalist, debated women's relationship to modernity. But History of women in Indian society was not attempted till 1930s. However as Gerda Lerner opinies, "like men, women also always have been actors and agents of History, and women have been central not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization." Therefore, understanding of the past is enriched and expanded when gender is included as a category of analysis.

OBJECTIVES :

In this paper we will try

- (i) to highlight the fact that in the main stream history there remains always a gender discrimination. The position of women are often underestimated.
- (ii) to find out the relevant factors that created deep resentment among the Moamoria Mahatas against the Monarchy.

METHODOLOGY:

To prepare this paper we are mainly dealing with secondary sources.

DISCUSSION:

Raja Siva Singha (Sutanpha) during his reign peace prevailed; he constructed numerous temples and was a great patron of literature and music married, Bar Raja Phuleswari Devi, died in 1731 A.D., married Bor raja (Ambika alies Drupadi) died about 1738 A.D., married Sarbaswari Devi (Anadari Kunwari).(2)

Phuleswari , the chief consort of the Ahom king Siva Singha(1714-1744) was the first queen of Assam to govern the Kingdom directly.(3)The King was predicted by the astrologers that he was under the evil influence of the stars(Chatra-Bhanga-Yoga), as a result of which he might have lost his throne.(4) At the advice of the chief priest, the king therefore handed over the reign of the government to his queen Phuleswari .She was originally a dancer attached to the siva temple at Dergaon. Her original name was “Phulmati”.she was very beautiful and after seeing her King Siva Singha married her(5). Though it was not the personal decision of Phuleswari kunwari to sit in the throne of the Ahom kingdom ,but king Siva Singha saw good qualities and decided to make her the queen.(6) The latter on assuming the charge of the kingdom took the name Prametheswari and the title”Bar Raja” or “ Great King” and minted coins in the joint name of herself and her husband.(7) Phuleswari Kunwari had a number of good qualities .She inspired the translation of the Sakuntala into Assamese verse and established a school in the palace campus for teaching Sanskrit. She also excavated the Famous Gaurisagar tank at present of Sibsagar town of Assam and built three temples dedicated to Siva,Vishnu and Devi on its side. (8)Besides, she made a number of land grants to Brahmana preceptor and temple.BarRaja Phuleswari Kunwari were personally in charge of training the young girls on the art of weaving,as well as looking after the activities of the royal looms in the palace.(9)

Phuleswari Kunwari was devout sakta ,and wanted to make ‘saktism’ the state religion and took every step to realize this to an end.(10)Historines had opined that this policy was mainly responsible for the outbreak of the Moamoria rebellion.(11).

The Moaries were the pioneers in a series of revolt against the kingdom. The mymara satra was founded by Aniruddha Bhuyan, popularly called Aniruddhadeva,towards the end of the 16th century. It was a member of the kala Sanhati.one of the four samhatis or groups of satras of Assam.(12)The term’ Mayamara’ denotes the satra,whose disciples are called’Mayamarias’ or’ Moarias’.(13) The Moamarias were extremists in their reverence to their Guru and very strict in

observing the rites of their sect. Their Mahanta was not only their spiritual head, but also their virtual sovereign.(14)

But if we look into the policy of Former Ahom king Gadadhar Singha(1681-1696), it seems that there was a total shift of religious policy of the Ahom kings. He had a great sentiment for the saktism and because of what he adopted Saktism. Gadadhar's acceptance of saktism became turning point in the religious policy of the Ahoms.(15) Being an Orthodox Sakta, he built the Siva temple Umananda in Guwahati and granted revenue free lands to Brahmanas. Gadadhar Singha persecuted the Vaisnavas, and thereby fought the rising power of the Vaishnava Gosains who in their satra establishments had been upbringing a feudal structure that resembled a state within a state. So, Gadadhar Singha's policy towards the great vaishnava monasteries was one of pillaging and plundering their wealth and squeezing of the devotees(12). But seeing the serious consequences, Sukhrunghpa alias Rudra Singha(1696-1714), the son as well as successor of Gadadhar Singha, reversed the policy of his father. Rudra Singha patronized the three principal religious sects-Vaishnavism, saivaism and Saktism, with a clear intention of appeasing them all. But this led to contest for power and place among the preachers of these sects in the centuries of Ahom rule that followed (16).

Rudra Singha wanted to Indianize his court in line with the Hindu Emperors and the Mughal Badshahs. Because of this reason he imported costumes of royal dignity from Mughal India. More so, he wanted to be chakravarty king. (14) In this connection he invited a sakta priest from Bengal called Krishnaram Bhattacharya for getting initiation from him so that he did not have to be initiated by a subject priest. In the latter part of his rule, he showed inclination towards saktism and saivaism. It was since then saktism became the major creed of the Ahom Monarchs and of their principal nobles and officers. This however, he had done at a time when many sudra Mahantas were heading their Vaishnava Monastries in the state and were Hinduising the local tribes.(15)

The reign of Sutanpha alias Siva Singha(1714-1744), successor and son of Rudra Singha, was a period of land mark in the History of the growth of Saktism in Ahom court. It was due to the influence of his chief queen Phuleswari, who was earlier a non-Ahom dancing girl belonging to Nat Family, that Orthodox Hindu rites and sakta rituals entered the Ahom court. It was she who with the zeal of a neophyte to Saktism and with her personal whims and incompetence for the noble job of the throne, had tried to impose Saktism over the vaishnava Mahantas over whom she also committed much atrocities. Such act of sectarian fanaticism on part of the queen, injured the position and prestige of the sudra Mahantas including the most powerful Moamoria Mahanta, an event which consequently led to direct clashes between the king and the Moamoria Vaishnavas that took the form of the civil war or Moamoria rebellion in the year 1769A.D. (17) But here lies the something that is neglected by the Historians. That Phuleswari Kunwari as a queen followed the instructions of her Guru who was incidently "Krishnaram Bhattacharya" a sakta priest from Bengal invited by king Rudra Singha to get initiation.(18) During the reign of King Rudra singha when Krishnaram Bhattacharya arrived, king declined to become his disciples and asked him to leave. When the priest returned a severe earth quake took place. King thought that it was happened due to the curse of the priest(19). Krishanaram was then called backed, but king Rudra singha died before having his initiation from that priest. However, he instructed his sons to accept the Bengali priest as their religious preceptor and establish him on the Nilachal Hill, for which the latter came to be known as the 'Parvatiya Gosain'. (20) This

factor had a great significance in the history of Assam, which in the long run led to dissensions among the priestly class in the kingdom. It shows that it was the King Rudra Sigha who brought the sakta priest from Bengal and forced his sons to accept the priest as their religious preceptor,(21)and therefore it is wrong for the Historians to say that it was Bar Raja Phuleswari Kunwari who for the first time brought Sakta religion into the Ahom royal court.

Siva Singha, the son and successor of Rudra singha was greatly influenced by Brahmana priests and astrologers. Following the advice of his father, he accepted initiation from the Parbatiya Gosain and put him in charge of the Kamkhya temple with extensive grants of land for its maintenance (22). In 1722, on prediction of his spiritual guides and astrologers that his rule soon terminate, the credulous king got terribly alarmed and in the hope of averting the crisis that would have termed as the “Chatra-bhanga-yoga”, at the suggestion of the Parbatiya Gosain, declared queen Phuleswari the “Bar Raja” or the “chief King” and surrendered to her the insignia of royalty, the royal umbrella, and caused coins struck jointly in his name and her name.(23).Historians not excluding E.A. Gait held that with the characteristic fanaticism of a neophyte, the queen determined upon establishing Saktism as a state religion and launched upon a drive against the vaishnavites, particularly the influential Moamoria mahantas.(24). It was not phuleswari’s decision to become the Queen of the Ahom kingdom, but that decision was taken by king Siva singha for his personal protection. It shows how the male chauvinist historians try to manipulate the history from their point of view. After hearing the resolution of the queen Phuleswari Kunwari, Historian writes, ‘the sudra mahanta of the vaishnava persuasion refused to worship Durga, she ordered the Moamoria and several other Gosains to be brought to a sakta shrine where sacrifices were being offered, and caused the distinguishing marks of the sakta sect to be smeared with the blood of the victims upon their foreheads. The moamorias never forgot this insult to their spiritual leader, and after half a century they broke out to open rebellion(25). Those historians who try to put forward the allegation against Bar Raja Phuleswari kunwari was basically based from a buranji ‘Assam buranji puthi’ by a later writer kashnath Tamuli Phukan but one of his contemporary historian Dutiram Hazarika in his material article, though he was a strong believer of Vaishnavism, was quiet about the atrocities made by queen Phuleswari although he refers to some of her wrong done to the Mahantas.(26). Besides them Rajanikanta Bordoloi, a literateur of repute, also blamed queen phuleswari for the religious intolerance and fanaticism on the basis of a “vansayali” by Cidananda Goswami, ‘Mayamara satrar Vamsavali’. On the other hand he almost ignored the contemporary Report of Captain welsh(1794) and J.P.Wades Account of Assam(1794-1800).(27). Captain welsh in his report in 1784, made no mention of the religious factor or the guilt of Phuleswari kunwari in the whole Moamoria rebellion and he analysed the causes of the revolt and examined the facts of allegations about Phuleswari Kunwari from Purnanda Buragohain the Premier of the Ahom kingdom.(28).Phuleswari was undoubtedly Saktist, but that did not preclude her being a pro-Vaishnavite.(29). Her court poet Kaviraj Chakravarti in his book “Samkhochur Badh”(30) mentioned that she was very much devoted to the feet of Krishna. Another court poet Ananta Acharya, also says in the tune of Kaviraj chakravarti. He says “They(king and queen)are earnestly devoted to Hari, Durga and never omit the observance of any daily ritual.(31) Dr.Sk.Bhuyan, in his “The Assamese Nurjahan”, mentions that Vaishnava preceptors attended the Durga puja festival under the invitation of the queen when they were received at the court, they received a warm welcome. Queen Phuleswari Kunwari was particularly charmed by the

politeness and courtesy of the Moamoria Mahanta. At night the Mahanta, by torch and trumpet and fast strayed and attended by his disciples' marched to his camp through the streets. The Barbaruah of the Kingdom Rupchandra, could not tolerate this display of princely pomp; he dispatched a few messengers seized the person of Gosain, produced before the Barbaruah and subsequently murdered without the knowledge of the queen. She however regretted at the individual act of Barbaruah when the fact was revealed to her. She took the minister severely to task.(32). It shows that on her part she was not totally responsible for the suffering of the vaishnavas in her hands.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, as a queen, Phuleswari Kunwari had left no stone unturned to the cause of the running of the kingdom properly. In fact, it was not her desire and decision to become the queen of the Kingdom, but was a policy of the former Ahom Kings to let her act so. King Pratap Singha(1497-1539), King Gadadhar Singha(1681-1714), Rudra Singha (1714-1744) : all of them followed the policy of subduing the Vaishnavas, particularly the Moamarias, as a result of which with the passage of time, a rebellion came into the surface. Thus it would not be justified to criticize and blame Phuleswari Kunwari for the unrest among the Vaishnavas that came in the guise of Moamoria Rebellion. Her husband King Siva Singha was not trustworthy at all, because as Phuleswari Kunwari died in the year 1731, he married her sister Drupadi and made her the Bar Raja.

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