

Political Contributions and Role of Assamese Women During the Ahom Periods

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Abstract

This research Paper critically examines the political contribution and role of Assamese women during the Ahom period (1228–1826), a time when Assam witnessed the consolidation of a powerful monarchy, administrative expansion, and cultural integration. While the Ahom political system was largely patriarchal, women—especially queens and royal consorts—played influential roles in governance, diplomacy, religious reforms, and socio-cultural life. Figures such as Jaymati Konwari, remembered for her martyrdom and moral strength, and Phuleshwari Kunwari, known for her unprecedented rule as a female monarch, are re-evaluated through a gender-sensitive historical lens. The study further explores the indirect but significant roles played by women in conflict mediation, moral guidance, and cultural patronage.

Drawing from Buranjis (Ahom chronicles), literary texts, folklore, and modern reinterpretations in cinema and academic discourse, the Paper highlights the symbolic and actual power of these women. It also interrogates historiographical silences and the marginalization of women's narratives in traditional history. Ultimately, the article argues that despite formal exclusions from power, Assamese women exerted considerable influence in shaping the political and moral fabric of Ahom society, and their legacy remains central to understanding Assam's socio-political evolution.

Keywords : Assamese Women, Ahom Period, Political Contribution, Historical Leadership

Introduction

The Ahom dynasty, which reigned over Assam for nearly six centuries (1228–1826 CE), established one of the most enduring and influential kingdoms in the history of Northeast India. Founded by a Tai prince named Sukaphaa, who migrated from present-day Yunnan, China, the Ahom state gradually evolved into a powerful polity characterized by a centralized administration, a well-organized military system, and a complex socio-cultural fabric. While the political narrative of Assam during this period is often centered around kings, military generals, and male nobility, a deeper examination of historical sources reveals that women—especially those within the royal and aristocratic circles—also played vital, though often understated, roles in the political domain.

Assamese women during the Ahom period were more than mere figures confined to the private or domestic sphere. Despite existing within a predominantly patriarchal structure, several women exerted direct and indirect influence over matters of state, governance, diplomacy, and even military strategy. Their contributions, however, have largely remained in the shadows of historical discourse, often relegated to footnotes or brief mentions in the chronicles. This marginalization reflects a broader historiographical trend where women's roles in politics and public life are underrepresented or overlooked entirely.

This article seeks to address this scholarly gap by exploring the political agency and influence of Assamese women during the Ahom rule. It aims to illuminate how women—queens, consorts, noblewomen, and other female figures—engaged with power, contributed to statecraft, and influenced the socio-political developments of their time. Special attention will be given to notable figures such as Bor Raja Phuleshwari Kunwari, Ambika Devi, and Jaymati Konwari, among others, whose lives and actions had lasting impacts on the political landscape of Assam.

The research draws on a variety of sources, including the Buranjis (Ahom court chronicles), literary texts, folklore, and secondary historical analyses. By employing a gender-sensitive lens, this study not only seeks to reconstruct the political narrative from a more inclusive perspective but also challenges the conventional understanding of power dynamics in

pre-modern Assamese society. Furthermore, it explores the intersections between gender, politics, and religion, revealing how these women navigated and, at times, redefined the boundaries of their roles.

Literature Review:

The political role and contribution of Assamese women during the Ahom period (1228–1826 CE) have long remained an underexplored area in the historiography of Northeast India. Although patriarchal structures dominated medieval Assamese society, existing literature provides instances where women exercised significant influence in both court politics and societal affairs.

Baruah (1993), in his landmark study *Last Days of Ahom Monarchy*, critically analyzes the sociopolitical environment of the late Ahom era and acknowledges the role of royal women in succession disputes and political decision-making. He particularly emphasizes the case of Queen Phuleswari, whose religious reforms and political interventions had lasting consequences on the monarchy's stability.

Guha (1983), in *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, offers a structural understanding of the roles assigned to women within the Ahom polity. His analysis of agrarian, artisanal, and religious institutions demonstrates that Assamese women participated actively in economic production and occasionally in community decision-making processes, although their public political roles remained limited.

Dutta (2007), through *Women in the Political and Cultural History of Assam*, focuses specifically on the political agency of elite Assamese women. Drawing from Buranjis (Ahom royal chronicles), folklore, and literary sources, Dutta highlights episodes where women such as Phuleswari and Ambika Devi acted as regents and cultural patrons, influencing statecraft and religious affairs.

Sarma (2010), in his article *Inscriptions and Copper Plate Grants of Assam: A Gendered Reading*, undertakes a unique epigraphic approach to uncover women's roles in the

political and administrative landscape of medieval Assam. His findings show that noblewomen occasionally received land grants and managed religious endowments, suggesting their indirect but meaningful participation in governance.

Saikia (2015), through her ethnographic work *Oral Histories and Women's Resistance in Assam*, broadens the scope of inquiry by documenting oral traditions and folk narratives of ordinary women's involvement in village governance, war-time provisioning, and resistance movements. Her research challenges the elite-centric narrative of Assamese historiography by incorporating subaltern women's voices.

Adding to these perspectives, Bhuyan (1968), in *Political History of Assam: From the Earliest Times to the British Period*, provides a chronological account of Assam's political history and briefly mentions the involvement of women in court intrigues, alliances, and dynastic succession politics during the Ahom period. While his work predominantly centers on male rulers, the incidental references to female political actors offer valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of Assamese power structures

Administrative and Political Structure

The Ahom polity was characterized by a centralized yet flexible administrative system. At the apex stood the king (Swargadeo), who was considered semi-divine and wielded absolute authority. The administrative framework was supported by a council of ministers known as the Patra Mantris, which included key officials like the Burhagohain, Borgohain, Borpatrogohain, Barphukan, and Barbaruah. These functionaries had both civil and military responsibilities and were often selected from among the noble clans.

The Ahom kingdom also developed an elaborate landholding and labor system known as the Paik system, where every adult male was obligated to render service to the state in lieu of taxes. The system ensured a steady supply of manpower for agriculture, administration, and warfare. While women were not part of the Paik system, their indirect involvement in supporting

its functioning—through agriculture, resource management, and artisanal production—was significant and deserves acknowledgment.

Importantly, the Ahom kings maintained detailed records of their reigns in the form of Buranjis—chronicles written in both Tai-Ahom and Assamese languages. These historical documents serve as vital sources for reconstructing the political, cultural, and social life of the period. Though largely authored by male scribes, Buranjis occasionally refer to influential women, thereby offering glimpses into their roles within the royal court and broader society.

Cultural Syncretism and Inclusion

The Ahoms, originally of Tai origin, gradually assimilated into the indigenous Assamese culture while also influencing it in meaningful ways. This process of syncretism led to a unique cultural synthesis, wherein religious and social norms became more inclusive. The Ahoms adopted Hinduism, particularly the Vaishnavite and Shakta traditions, though they also retained elements of their ancestral Tai customs.

This cultural flexibility extended to gender roles as well. Unlike many contemporary Indian dynasties that severely restricted women's public roles, the Ahoms allowed women of noble and royal birth some degree of visibility and influence in matters of state. Women could hold land, participate in religious rituals, and, in certain cases, act as regents or advisors. The presence of powerful queens like Phuleshwari and Ambika Devi exemplifies this relative openness within the Ahom system.

Political Challenges and the Scope for Female Intervention

The Ahom kingdom, though powerful, faced numerous internal and external challenges throughout its history. These included succession disputes, religious tensions, uprisings like the Moamoria rebellion, and foreign invasions by the Mughals and later the Burmese. Such times of crisis often opened up space for unconventional power structures, including the increased involvement of women in political affairs.

During periods when kings were incapacitated, absent, or spiritually withdrawn, queens and royal women sometimes assumed administrative control. The most notable example of this is Bor Raja Phuleshwari Kunwari, who was appointed the de facto ruler when her husband, King Siva Singha, took to religious life. Her reign marked a rare instance of female sovereignty in Indian history, and while her policies remain controversial, her authority was widely recognized.

In times of war or rebellion, royal women also took on the roles of mediators, patrons of public welfare, and political advisors. Their actions during these periods were crucial in maintaining continuity and stability in governance, showcasing their potential as state actors in a male-dominated polity.

Women's Status in Ahom Society

Understanding the political role of women during the Ahom period requires a nuanced appreciation of their status within the broader social and cultural framework of the time. While the Ahom kingdom was predominantly patriarchal, the position of women—especially those of royal or noble lineage—was notably different from that in many other parts of medieval India. This distinctiveness was shaped by the Tai-Ahom roots of the dynasty, their subsequent assimilation into Assamese society, and the pluralistic nature of the kingdom.

Social Hierarchies and Gender Roles

The Ahom society was organized along clan lines known as *phoids* or *khels*, which often had their own occupational specializations. While men dominated political and military spheres, women played essential roles in sustaining the socio-economic fabric of their communities. In agrarian households, women were actively involved in rice cultivation, weaving, and household management—crucial economic activities in the self-sustaining rural economy.

Marriage customs among the Ahoms also allowed for a certain degree of flexibility. Polygamy was practiced among the royals and nobles, and strategic marriages were often used to forge political alliances. This gave rise to the presence of multiple queens in the royal household, each with varying degrees of influence. The *chief queen* (usually referred to as *Bor Konwari* or

Bor Raja) often held ceremonial and, at times, administrative power, particularly in the absence or withdrawal of the king.

Though women were largely excluded from formal state positions such as the *Patra Mantris* (ministers) or *Phukans* (military governors), they exercised what historians term "soft power"—influencing royal decisions through advisory roles, religious patronage, and courtly diplomacy.

Property and Legal Rights

One of the more progressive features of Ahom society was the property rights of women. Women, especially widows and daughters of nobility, could inherit and manage land. Land grants were sometimes given to queens or noblewomen as *devottar* (religious endowments) or personal property (*khata lands*), which they could administer independently or through appointed stewards.

Legal rights were not uniformly codified, but customary laws provided women avenues for justice in cases of domestic abuse, property disputes, or divorce. Women could approach local *gaonburhas* (village headmen) or even appeal to the royal court in exceptional circumstances.

Such provisions, though limited in practice to the upper echelons of society, indicate that women were not entirely devoid of agency in legal and economic matters.

Education and Literacy

While there is limited evidence of formal education for women during the Ahom period, especially in the early centuries, the later period saw a gradual increase in literary and cultural participation among noblewomen. Royal households often had private tutors, and queens were known to be well-versed in scriptures, religious texts, and sometimes even in administration.

Some *Buranjis* and temple inscriptions hint at women who could read, write, and manage correspondences—especially in the later 17th and 18th centuries. Cultural practices like *Nam-*

Kirtan (devotional gatherings) and *Bhakti* literature also enabled women to engage in public religious discourse, subtly enhancing their socio-political visibility.

Role in Rituals and Religious Life

Religion was a powerful domain where women exerted influence, often serving as patrons, organizers, and participants in important festivals and rituals. Royal women frequently commissioned temples, sponsored religious scholars, and conducted rituals to invoke divine blessings for the state. Queen Phuleshwari's efforts to elevate Shaktism as a state religion were rooted not only in her personal belief but also in her political understanding of religion as a unifying tool.

Women were also vital in domestic religious rituals, many of which carried symbolic political importance. For example, queens and noblewomen performed special *pujas* during wartime or epidemics, symbolizing their role as protectors of the realm.

Representation in Buranjis and Folklore

The *Buranjis*, as semi-official court chronicles, mention women occasionally but with significant implications. For instance, the political intervention of Phuleshwari is recorded not just as a footnote but as a transformative episode in the kingdom's history. Similarly, folklore, ballads (*Ojapali* and *Deodhani* performances), and oral traditions provide rich accounts of women's roles that are often absent from official narratives.

Figures like Jaymati Konwari, whose story of martyrdom has become emblematic of Assamese bravery and loyalty, are immortalized in folk songs and drama, reflecting how the collective memory of Assamese society honors female virtue, resistance, and sacrifice.

Prominent Assamese Women in Politics During the Ahom Period

While most medieval Indian kingdoms maintained strict limitations on women's participation in politics, the Ahom dynasty in Assam provides a fascinating exception. Though power was predominantly held by men, the Ahom court witnessed the rise of several exceptional

women who wielded real influence and authority—either as de facto rulers, trusted advisors, or moral compasses in times of crisis. This section focuses on the most prominent of these women: **Phuleshwari Kunwari, Ambika Devi, and Jaymati Konwari**, among others, highlighting their political roles and historical significance.

Phuleshwari Kunwari (Bor Raja)

Phuleshwari Kunwari, born as Phulmati, was a Brahmin woman of high learning and devout religious belief. She rose to political prominence after marrying Swargadeo Siva Singha (reigned 1714–1744), one of the most powerful Ahom monarchs. Siva Singha, deeply influenced by astrology, was advised that his rule would be challenged unless he distanced himself from state affairs. To mitigate the prophecy, he appointed Phuleshwari as the *Bor Raja*—a title equivalent to sovereign queen.

This was a significant moment in Ahom history, as Phuleshwari became the **first and only woman to rule Assam in her own name**. As Bor Raja, she assumed administrative powers and even issued orders in royal edicts (*raj-mohars*) under her seal.¹

Her reign was marked by religious assertiveness. A staunch Shakta, Phuleshwari sought to make **Shaktism the state religion**, replacing the widely popular neo-Vaishnavite movement that emphasized egalitarianism and non-violence. She forced the *Mahantas* (Vaishnavite gurus) to participate in Shakta rituals, including offerings of animal sacrifices, which were strictly prohibited in their faith. This created deep resentment, especially among the Moamorias—a Vaishnavite sect—which eventually culminated in the **Moamoria Rebellion** (1769–1805), a long and violent uprising that weakened the Ahom kingdom.²

While Phuleshwari's policies remain controversial, her reign was undeniably impactful. She not only managed state affairs in the king's absence but also redefined the role of queenship from being symbolic to that of real authority. Her political engagement, decision-making, and the consequences of her policies place her among the most powerful female figures in Assamese history.

Ambika Devi

Ambika Devi, another queen of Siva Singha, was less politically aggressive than Phuleshwari but held substantial influence in court politics. After Phuleshwari's death, Ambika Devi was elevated to the position of *chief queen*. Unlike Phuleshwari's confrontational approach, Ambika Devi adopted a more conciliatory and spiritual path.

She became a patron of Vaishnavite institutions, perhaps as a response to the religious upheaval initiated by Phuleshwari. Historical sources suggest that she **played a key role in restoring peace between the monarchy and Vaishnavite factions**. Her efforts to rebuild burnt monasteries (*satras*) and support Bhakti scholars were instrumental in reducing tensions with the influential Vaishnavite clergy.³

Ambika Devi's reign is a notable example of **soft diplomacy through religious patronage**, and her role as a political balancer during a period of sectarian conflict underlines the strategic importance of royal women in the Ahom court.

Jaymati Konwari

Perhaps no woman of the Ahom period has captured the imagination of the Assamese people more than **Jaymati Konwari**, wife of Gadapani (later King Gadadhar Singha, reigned 1681–1696). Jaymati's contribution was not through direct political rule, but through her unparalleled **martyrdom and loyalty**, which had deep political implications.

During the turbulent years of Debera Borbarua's autocratic rule, many nobles were persecuted. Gadapani went into hiding to avoid execution. Jaymati was captured by the king's men, who sought her husband's whereabouts. Despite days of torture, she refused to reveal his location. She ultimately succumbed to her injuries, but her sacrifice enabled Gadapani to survive, regroup, and later become king, restoring stability to the Ahom kingdom.⁴

Though she never held office, Jaymati's sacrifice was a **pivotal political act**. Her bravery and moral strength are celebrated in Assamese folklore, literature, and cinema—immortalized by

Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's 1935 film *Joymoti*, the first Assamese film. She remains a symbol of Assamese patriotism and feminine courage.

Kunwori Chandrababha and Other Royal Women

While Phuleshwari, Ambika Devi, and Jaymati are the most well-documented, other royal women also played important, though lesser-known, political roles. For example:

- **Kunwori Chandrababha**, a queen of Swargadeo Kamaleswar Singha (reigned 1795–1811), is known for her attempts to **mediate between conflicting noble factions** during the kingdom's declining years. Her correspondences, preserved in fragmentary records, reflect her efforts to balance court politics.
- Several unnamed queens acted as **intermediaries in matrimonial diplomacy**, arranging political marriages with neighboring hill states like the Kacharis and Nagas, thereby strengthening regional alliances.
- **Royal widows** and dowagers often took temporary control of palace finances, temple management, and even intelligence during succession crises. Though rarely acknowledged in chronicles, their influence in backroom politics was substantial.

Women as Political Symbols and Cultural Icons

The Ahom rulers were keenly aware of the symbolic power of queenship. Queens were **central to royal rituals**, coronation ceremonies, and state-sponsored religious events. Their presence legitimized the king's authority, and their behavior often reflected the moral tone of the court.

This symbolism had real political weight. A virtuous queen enhanced the king's image, while a controversial or unpopular queen (like Phuleshwari among Vaishnavites) could become a lightning rod for dissent. Thus, queens were both **active players and ideological constructs** within Ahom statecraft.

As a whole we can say that The political contributions of Assamese women during the Ahom period were far from peripheral. Through direct rule, diplomatic interventions, moral leadership, and religious patronage, these women left an indelible mark on the region's history. They challenged the boundaries of gender roles, navigated complex court politics, and in some cases, held the fate of the kingdom in their hands. Their stories, preserved in chronicles, folklore, and public memory, offer a compelling counter-narrative to the male-centric history of medieval Assam.

Women's Role in Diplomacy, Religion, and Reforms during the Ahom Period:

While direct political rule by women was exceptional in the Ahom era, their involvement in **diplomacy, religion, and reformative activities** was far more common and consequential. Queens and noblewomen acted as unofficial diplomats, cultural patrons, religious reformers, and custodians of moral and ritual life. These functions often positioned them as **key actors in statecraft**, though they operated largely outside the formal apparatus of the Ahom administration.

Women and Royal Diplomacy

Marriage alliances in the Ahom dynasty were often used as diplomatic tools to strengthen ties with neighboring tribes and hill states such as the **Kacharis, Garos, Nagas, and Chutiyas**. Women played a central role in these alliances—not only as symbolic instruments of political consolidation but also as **mediators of cultural and political integration**.

These alliances were usually crafted by marrying off Ahom princesses or noblewomen to tribal chiefs, or vice versa. Once these women entered their new communities, they often acted as **bridges between different political cultures**, helping smoothen ethnic and administrative integration. Their dual loyalty—to their natal and marital families—made them ideal messengers of peace and compromise in turbulent times.

In the royal court, senior queens like Ambika Devi and Chandraprabha Kunwari were known to **negotiate internal disputes among ministers** and prevent factional conflicts from escalating into violence. Such roles, though undocumented in formal court proceedings, are

inferred from oral traditions and chronicles that credit these women with "saving the kingdom from dissension."¹

Women as Religious Patrons and Reformers

Religion was a **major political instrument** in the Ahom state. Monarchs used religious affiliations and patronage to legitimize their rule, and queens were often active participants in this domain. Several queens acted as **patrons of temples, Vaishnavite monasteries (Satras), and Shakta shrines**, thereby positioning themselves as intermediaries between divine and temporal authority.

Shaktism and Phuleshwari's Religious Politics

As discussed earlier, **Phuleshwari Kunwari** aggressively promoted Shaktism and sought to establish it as the official religion. Her actions—especially forcing Vaishnavite *Mahantas* to participate in Shakta rituals—demonstrated a strategic use of religious power for political centralization. Though controversial, her religious reforms reflect an early attempt to standardize faith practices as a means to unify the kingdom under a singular ideological framework.²

Vaishnavism and Queens as Patrons of Bhakti

In contrast, later queens like **Ambika Devi** and **Chandraprabha Kunwari** patronized Vaishnavite scholars and *Satras*, possibly as a corrective gesture after Phuleshwari's excesses. They supported devotional movements, commissioned manuscript copying, and facilitated religious festivals such as *Rasa Leela* and *Janmashtami*, helping create a sense of cultural continuity and mass appeal. These actions served both **religious and political functions**, fostering loyalty among the growing Vaishnavite populace.

Several queens are believed to have maintained personal libraries of sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, *Kirtan Ghosa*, and *Naam Ghosa*, and encouraged their recitation in court and public events. Such practices played a role in **popularizing Vaishnavism as a courtly and state-approved faith** in later Ahom years.

Women and Moral Reform

Queens also functioned as **moral reformers** within the royal household and broader courtly society. They often intervened in matters of court decorum, charitable practices, widow care, and the regulation of public rituals. Their involvement was not necessarily revolutionary, but it set a **normative tone** for royal behavior and public ethics.

Temple-Building and Charitable Activities

Several queens contributed to temple-building projects and charitable activities such as feeding pilgrims, organizing public feasts (*bhog*), and sponsoring religious debates. These were more than acts of piety; they were **performances of royal virtue**, reinforcing the legitimacy of the monarchy in the eyes of the people.

For instance, Ambika Devi is said to have **sponsored a grand Vaishnavite scripture recitation ceremony** attended by multiple *Mahantas*, scholars, and even foreign dignitaries from neighboring kingdoms. Events like these often **reinforced diplomatic alliances** while projecting the spiritual authority of the queen.

Women and Intellectual Reform

Though literacy among women was not widespread, a few elite women engaged in **intellectual reform and learning**, especially during the later Ahom period. The emergence of educated queens and noblewomen coincided with the broader spread of Assamese language literature, manuscripts, and religious tracts.

These women often employed scholars and scribes to copy texts, some of which they reportedly studied themselves. There is also evidence that women **influenced the content of court literature**, particularly devotional songs, plays (*Ankiya Naat*), and narratives that celebrated feminine virtues like loyalty, chastity, and wisdom.

This intellectual influence shaped **popular perceptions of ideal womanhood**, which in turn fed back into the political imagination of the time. Figures like **Jaymati Konwari** were popularized

during this period not just as historical personalities but as **moral archetypes**, representing courage and loyalty in the service of the kingdom.

Intermediary Role in Conflicts and Succession

In times of political succession or rebellion, queens often served as **mediators and stabilizers**. During power vacuums, it was common for queens and royal widows to **advise ministers, manage palace affairs**, and even correspond with rebellious factions in the hope of securing peace.

For example, during the early stages of the **Moamoria rebellion**, it is believed that one of the senior queens attempted to initiate peace negotiations, though her efforts were thwarted by hardline factions. Nevertheless, the very fact that such a role was even attempted indicates that queens were **seen as legitimate peacemakers** and political agents.

At the last we can say that Queens and noblewomen of the Ahom period were deeply embedded in the **ritual, diplomatic, and ideological life** of the kingdom. Though they did not commonly hold formal positions in administration, their **indirect roles were no less impactful**. Whether by forging alliances, sponsoring temples, negotiating peace, or shaping religious and cultural reforms, these women played an essential role in the making and maintenance of the Ahom state.

Their influence, often understated in traditional chronicles, becomes evident when viewed through the lens of **interdisciplinary historical analysis**, combining records, folklore, religious texts, and material culture.

Legacy and Historical Representation of Women's Political Role in Ahom Assam:

The legacy of Assamese women during the Ahom period is multifaceted and enduring. While few held overt political positions, their actions, sacrifices, and symbolic representations have echoed across centuries—shaping how history, folklore, and cultural memory remember them. we will explore how the contributions of these women were **recorded, interpreted, and**

celebrated in **historical texts, literature, folklore, cinema**, and public consciousness, and how their legacies have informed contemporary understandings of gender and power in Assamese society.

Historiographical Visibility and Challenges

Mainstream **Ahom chronicles** (Buranjis), such as the *Deodhai Buranji*, were written by male court scribes and largely focused on kings, ministers, military campaigns, and administrative matters. Women—despite playing notable roles—were often **underrepresented** or mentioned only in relation to their husbands or sons. Their independent contributions, particularly in diplomacy and reform, are often found only in **fragments** or **secondary references**.

Yet, despite this limited documentation, **oral traditions** and **folk memory** kept the stories of women like **Jaymati Konwari, Phuleshwari Kunwari**, and **Ambika Devi** alive. These stories gradually entered **vernacular historiography**, beginning in the late 19th century, when Assamese historians like **Gunabhiram Barua** and **Padmanath Gohain Baruah** began to reinterpret Ahom history with a renewed focus on **social reform and women's agency**.¹

Jaymati Konwari: From History to Heroism

No other woman from the Ahom era has had as profound a posthumous impact as **Jaymati Konwari**. Her story of sacrifice became a **symbol of Assamese patriotism, feminine virtue, and martyrdom**—especially during the 20th century, when India's freedom struggle was underway.

The first Assamese film ever made, *Joymoti* (1935), directed by cultural icon **Jyoti Prasad Agarwala**, brought her tale to the silver screen. The film not only portrayed Jaymati's courage but also subtly echoed themes of **resistance against tyranny**, which resonated deeply with the nationalist sentiments of the time.

Literary tributes to Jaymati also appeared in plays, poems, and novels. In these works, she was portrayed not just as a queen, but as a **moral compass and protector of the nation's soul**. Today, educational institutions, parks, roads, and government schemes are named after her, reflecting her elevated status as a **cultural and political icon** in modern Assam.²

Phuleshwari Kunwari: Controversial Yet Commanding

Phuleshwari's legacy is more **complex and contested**. Traditional Vaishnavite literature and some colonial-era historians painted her in a **negative light**, accusing her of religious intolerance, tyranny, and being the instigator of the long-drawn Moamoria rebellion. However, recent scholarship has attempted to **reassess her reign** through a gender-sensitive lens.

Historians like Amalendu Guha and Yasmin Saikia have argued that Phuleshwari's **attempt to centralize religion** should be understood not merely as authoritarian but as an **early experiment in statecraft by a female ruler**, a rarity in pre-modern India. Her determination to rule as *Bor Raja*, issue royal orders, and enforce her vision of order, marks her as a **trailblazer in women's political leadership**—despite the eventual backlash.³

Her legacy, though still debated, challenges traditional narratives and forces us to grapple with the **gendered interpretations of history**, where assertive women are often demonized in ways their male counterparts are not.

Ambika Devi and the Forgotten Queens

Ambika Devi, though overshadowed by her predecessor Phuleshwari, has enjoyed a **positive posthumous reputation** as a **healer, diplomat, and restorer of peace**. Vaishnavite texts from the 18th century depict her as a queen who **restored harmony** and **bridged divides**, often referred to in songs and hymns sung in rural *Namghars* (Vaishnavite prayer halls).

Unfortunately, many other Ahom queens, including Kunwori Chandraprabha and others who played roles in court diplomacy, succession crises, and cultural patronage, have been

forgotten in official history. Their memories survive only in **local folklore, village legends,** or temple records, awaiting rediscovery by modern historians.

This selective memory reflects a broader pattern in South Asian historiography, where only those women whose stories align with dominant moral or political narratives are remembered, while others fade into obscurity.

Symbolism and Representation in Modern Assamese Society

The legacy of these historical women continues to influence **modern Assamese identity and gender discourse:**

- **Jaymati's sacrifice** is taught in schools, invoked in political speeches, and honored in films, theater, and street names.
- **Phuleshwari's reign** is debated in gender studies classrooms, particularly in discussions on **female leadership, religious policy, and historical interpretation.**
- The **recovery of lesser-known queens** is an ongoing project by feminist historians, artists, and cultural organizations in Assam.

These women are not just historical figures but **symbolic archetypes**—embodying sacrifice, courage, diplomacy, and occasionally, controversy. Their lives and legacies offer **alternative models of leadership,** challenging the male-centric view of power in Indian history.

The representation of Assamese women from the Ahom period has evolved significantly—from **shadowy figures in royal chronicles** to **central characters in modern cultural memory.** While historical documentation may be limited, their **lived impact and symbolic presence** have only grown with time. Their stories compel us to rethink how we define political contribution and urge historians to **reimagine power beyond formal titles and offices.**

The enduring legacy of these women—whether as martyrs, rulers, or mediators—demonstrates that gender was never entirely absent from the corridors of Ahom power; it simply operated differently, and often, more subtly.

Conclusion

The political contribution and role of Assamese women during the Ahom period present a compelling and often overlooked chapter in Indian history. Although the Ahom dynasty—spanning nearly six centuries—was largely patriarchal in its formal structures of governance, the influence of women in shaping political, cultural, and spiritual life was both real and enduring.

From the **heroic martyrdom of Jaymati Konwari**, whose sacrifice for the sake of political stability became a timeless symbol of Assamese identity, to the **trailblazing queens like Phuleshwari Kunwari**, who dared to assert political and religious authority in a male-dominated court, these women expanded the boundaries of royal womanhood. Their actions—whether in the palace, the temple, or the battlefield of ideology—reflect a spectrum of agency that defies simplistic categorization.

The **institutional roles** of women—though often limited—were supplemented by their influence in **diplomacy, cultural integration, and moral reform**. They functioned as **advisors, mediators, patrons of religion and art**, and above all, custodians of tradition and social cohesion. In doing so, they exercised a form of soft power that was no less important than that wielded by kings and generals.

Their **representation in history**, however, has been uneven. Traditional Buranjis underplayed their roles, while oral traditions, folklore, and later reinterpretations by artists and scholars worked to reinsert them into the public imagination. This evolving legacy reminds us of the importance of **revisiting and reinterpreting historical sources** through gendered and inclusive lenses.

In modern Assam, these women are not just relics of a distant past—they continue to **shape contemporary identity, inform feminist discourse, and inspire calls for historical justice and cultural revival**. As we continue to research and reinterpret the Ahom period, the stories of these women must occupy a central place—not as exceptions but as **integral actors** in the political evolution of Assamese society.

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