

Status of Women as Gleaned Through Coins in the Medieval Northeast

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Abstract: Coins are generally used as a tool for unraveling the economic history particularly trade and monetization. It is now being considered as an important ancillary source in political history not only to reconstruct the chronology but to understand the nature of the state also. Not much attention has been paid to study the coins in context of social and cultural history. Symbols, figures, decorative designs and not least, the inscriptions found on different series of Indian coins help us to form an idea of the society. Hence certain coinages if studied minutely may play the role of cultural document as they reflect the socio-cultural aspects of a people at some length. Coins of the northeast India fall under this genre of document. In the present paper I have tried to use the coins as a source for the study of the position of the women in the northeast society.

Key words: Women, Status, Matriarchal, Depiction.

1. Introduction

Society is a dynamic process. In this changing system, every man and woman has to play his or her distinguished role. In the two different forms of societies, viz., patriarchal and matriarchal society, the status of human beings varies according to their sex. In the former, it is the male member who dominate the society and in the latter, it is the female member. Moreover, it is clearly observed that the status of men and woman and their system of values changes in the process of evolution from time to time. However it is very interesting to note that, in any form of society, whether it is male dominated patriarchal or female dominated matriarchal society, the women were able to capture a unique position and this has been reflected in the different available sources.

In the traditional rural northeast society, despite a subservient status, the women of various castes suffered less from social disabilities than their counterparts in some other regions of India. Some of the strict social customs, like child marriage, Sati dah did not affect the women of northeast like the women of other parts of India. This was because of the influence of the Mongoloid Culture on the Assamese Society. As among the Mongoloid tribes, women had far greater freedom in marriage, divorce and other matters than we find in orthodox Hindu society'. It is a known factor that socio cultural elements of northeast were different from other parts of Indian society.

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strict social customs, like child marriage, sati- dah etc. did not affect the women like the women of other parts of India. This was because of the influence of the Mongoloid culture on the society. As Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji comments: Among the mongoloid tribes, women had far greater freedom in marriage, divorce, and other matters than we find in orthodox Hindu society". The study of the pre—historic and other remains prove that the socio-culture life of the northeast was different from that of Indian society. In fact northeast was the homeland of heterogeneous racial elements traveling to this land at different periods of its history? These heterogeneous racial elements were forced to sandwich together to form a strong homogeneous society. Since the society had a fusing culture composed of Negrito, Austro—Asiatic, Alpine, Aryan, Mongolian and other elements, therefore, the socio-culture life in this region was influenced by both, Aryan and non-Aryan elements.

2. Position of Women

Women in tribal society always had an influential role. Some tribal society in India has been matriarchal. In such society the role of women folk within the domain of family and its outside is rather active. This hints us towards a process of empowerment of women though in a limited sense. Northeast Indian tribal society was a living example of this. The tribal royal house was the epitome of power. The tribal chiefs who had assumed power and become kings in their respective regions gave high status to their women folk. The state power was such a sort of thing that the king did not like to share with the others but in tribal society the power was not treated as a domain of male members of the clan only. The women folk were given equal status.

The tribal society was increasingly influenced by the Vaishnavism and Brahmanism. It may be noted that in Brahmin cult of north India the female did not have such a high status as we find in the tribal culture. Giving equally high status to the women folk shows that the tribal society had been coming under the influence of the Vaishnavism and Brahmanism but they did not become conservative in their outlook and treatment towards the female members of the clan. This is well reflected through the coins of the northeast.

3. Depiction of Queens name on the coins of North east

It is indeed a unique feature of the coins of the northeast India that we find the names of the queens inscribed along with the names of the ruling kings on the coins. One may argue that it was not a unique or novel practice as the inclusion of the name of the queen in the coins is found in other series of coins also. In some coins of the Indo-Greeks, Imperial Guptas and the Mughals coins the name of the queen is included along with the name of the ruling king. On the coins of Jahangir we find the name of Nurjahan. But it may be noted that these cases of inclusion of the names of queens are just sporadic and do not help us reach a broader conclusion regarding the general status of the women in the then contemporary society at large.

In the coins of the northeast this was a general practice of the rulers. Not only the rulers of one territory but the rulers representing three different tribal societies like those of Tripura, Kachar and Ahoms struck their coins with inscribing the names of their queens respectively.

Ratna Manikya (AD 1464-1489) of Tripura was the first ruler of the northeast India to put the name of his queen on some of his coins. The practice was followed by some of his successors.

Coin of Ratna Manikya with his Queen's name

Obverse

*Sri Lakshmi/Mahadevi /Sri Sri Ratna/
manikya in double octagon.*

Reverse

*Parvati Pa/ramesvara Cha/rana parah
1386 in arched circle.*



It is interesting to note here that the name of the queen Lakshmi Mahadevi is inscribed first and the name of the ruling king follows on the same side of the coin. Mukut Manikya (AD1489-1490) also struck coins wherein his queen's name occurred first. His coin dated Saka 1411(AD 1489) reads:

Coins of Mukut Manikya with his Queen's Name Coming First

Obverse

Figure of bird deity, Nowi, standing
Facing right, in circle. Legend reading
Clock wise around *Nara Narayana Sri Sri
Mukut Manikya Deva, Saka 1411.*

Reverse

Legend in four lines **Sri Machtri/
Mahadevi/ Sri Sri Mukut/Manikyau**



More interestingly some kings placed the name of two or more queens on their coins. Such examples are well depicted in the coins of Yaso Manikya (2nd reign 1600-18 AD) of Tripura. The reason for the use of the name of the queens on the coins and their regularity of occurrence on coins suggests that the women folk of the royal house were great significance. Thus this is a very unique example of putting the name of two or more queens at a time on the coins. Rajamala does not supply any such information regarding the status of women in the tribal society. We get this picture only by coins. The coins with the name of more than one queens suggests that the rulers had given equal status and respect to all his queens.

Coin of Yaso Manikya with his Queens

Obverse

Krishna standing on a line facing left,
Playing flute. Two gopis, one on each
Side of Krishna.



Reverse

Sri Sri Yuta Yaso/ Manikya Deva Sri/
Lakshmi Gauri Ja/ya Maha Devyah,
in four lines within normal square.



Not only the rulers of Tripura but the rulers of Ahom and Kachar also struck such coins. Shiva Simha (AD 1714-44), the Ahom ruler and Darpa Bhima Narayan (c1611-28), Kachar ruler struck their coins with the name of the queens like Gunavati, Gedema etc. Coins with the name of Phulesvari, Pramathesvari, Ambika, Sarvvesvari etc are well depicted on the Ahom coins. On the coins of Kachar we find the name of Gunavati, Lakshmi etc. Apart from this we find the name of Queen Purnavati on the coins of Jaya Singha (AD 1764-98). Below is the coin with the queen's name of Kachar:

Darpa Bhima Narayan's coin with Gunavati cha Lakshmi

Obverse

*Sri Sri Hara Gauri charan Para Hachenga-
sa Padshah Bala Jaya.*



Reverse

Sri Sri Yuta Darpa Bhima Narayana Sri
Sri Gunavati cha Lakshmi.



Coins with Queen's name of Manipur, Jaya Singh's coin with Purnavati Rani

Obverse

Jesri Jaya Singha Manipouresvara
Sri Purnavati Rani.



Reverse

Vaishakh Sudhi Terakhavada 1 Samvat
1689.



Coins with the Queen's name of Ahom ruler
Shiva Simha's coin with the name of Phulesvari

Obverse*Sri Sri Hara Gauri Pada Parayana***Reverse**

Sri Sri Shiva Simha Nrpa mahisi
Sri Phulesvari Devyah Saka 1646.

**Shiva Simha's coin with Parmathesvari****Obverse**

Sri Sri Hara Gauri Pada Parayana
Saka 1650

**Reverse**

Sri Sri Shiva Simha Nrpa mahisi
Sri Parmathesvari Devyah.



The chart given below display the names of the kings of northeast who struck such coins wherein we find the names of their queens:

Coins depicting Queens's name

Rulers name	Queens name found on the coins (Tripura)
Ratna Manikya	Sri Lakshmi Mahadevi.
Mukuta Manikya	Srimat Sri Machtri Devayau.
Dhanya Manikya	Sri Kamala.
Deva Manikya	Sri Padmavati. Gunavati.
Vijaya Manikya	Sri Vijaya Devi. Sri Lakshmi & Sri Lakshmirani. Sri Saraswati, Vijaya., Vama.
Ananta Manikya	Ratnavati.
Udaya Manikya	Hira.
Jaya Manikya.	Subhadra.
Amara Manikya	Sri Amaravatidevi.
Rajadhara Manikya	Sri Satyavati.
Isvara Manikya	Sri Isvaridevi.
Yaso Manikya	Jaya. Sri Lakshmi, Gauri.
Dharma Manikya	Dharmavatidevi.
Kalyana Manikya	Kalavati.
Govinda Manikya	Gunavati.

Rama Manikya	Ratnamala.
Ratna Manikya	Sri Satyavati, Bhagyavati.
Dharma Manikya	Dharmashila.
Jaya Manikya	Sri Yasovati.
Indra Manikya	Sri Lakshmiavati.
Krishna Manikya	Sri Jahnavi.
Rama Ganga Manikya	Srimati Tara.
Durga Manikya	Srimati Sumitra.
Ram Ganga Manikya	Sri Srimati Chandratara.
Kashi Chandra Manikya.	Sri Chandrarekha.
Krishna Kishor Manikya	Ratnamala, Sri Srimati Sudakshina., Sri Srimati Bidhulekha, Sri Srimati Bidhumukhi, Sri Srimati Purnakala, Akhilesvari.
Rulers name	Queens name found on the coins (Kachar)
Nirbhaya Narayan	Gedema Vamsaja
Darpa Bhima Narayan	Gunavati cha Lakshmi.
Rulers name	Queens name found on the coins (Manipur)
Jaya Singha	Purnavati Rani
Rulers name	Queens name found on the coins (Ahoms)
Shiva Simha	Phulesvari, Parmathesvari, Sarvvesvari, Ambika

Queens name were inscribed variously on the coins. Some queens were named after certain names of Goddesses. Some were named after 'Moon' that symbolized their facial beauty. Names of the queens associated with *dharma* might indicate their good conduct and character. Some such names were Sri Dharmavati, Sri Dharmasila etc. Some queens had names that are suggestive of variants of fame like- Sri Yasovati, Kirttimani etc. Some of the queens are indicative of qualities, perhaps the qualities of head and heart like – Gunavati, Kalavati etc. The rulers of Tripura held the title of Manikya meaning 'jewel'. Some of their queens too were given the title of 'jewel' like Ratnavati who was the queen of Ananta Manikya.

Coin of Ananta Manikya with His Queen Ratnavati

Obverse

Lion left, date below saka 1487, with outer border of cusped arcs.



Reverse

Sri Sri Yutananta Manikya Deva Sri Ratnavati Maha Devyau in square area with ornamentation outside.



Coin of Govinda Manikya with his queen Gunavati

Obverse

Lion left, Date Saka 1582 below.



Reverse

Sri Sri Yuta Govinda Manikya Deva

Sri Gunavati Maha Devyau.



These coins sharing with the names of the queens may also indicate the matriarchal form of society in some of the tribes of the northeast. One interesting anecdote in this connection is the *Jamai-Khata* system. Under this system the groom had to work at the bride's house for one or more years before marriage. This practice prevailed in the Tipra tribe to which belonged the Tripura royal house.

The name of the royal family (*Hachensa-vamsa*) is alluded to in certain coin-legends of Yaso Narayan (AD 1583-1601), and Nirbhaya Narayan (AD 1610-11). The legend on the coin type of Nirbhaya Narayan, a Kachari ruler, refers to him as *G'edama-vmsaja* and thereby assigns him to the family of his mother Garama Kuwari.

Coin of Nirbhaya Narayana with Queen mother

Obverse

*Hara Gauri charana Parayana Gedema
Vamsaja.*



Reverse

*Sri Sri Nirbhaya Narayana Devasya
Saka 1481.*



4. Conclusion

From the above study, we can come to this conclusion that coins were immensely significant in shaping out the religio-cultural sensibilities of the kingdoms of medieval Northeast India. In view of the advantages of coins as a source material for the reconstruction of cultural history, we can easily assess the cultural plurality of the medieval Northeast Indian kingdoms. These coins provide us a sort of brilliant information by which we can reconstruct the contemporary social vicissitudes and aesthetic sensibilities of the people of the region. But on the whole, the position of women in Assam was relatively better than elsewhere in India. As such, the British did not have to adopt such measures as prevention of Sati and infanticide as they had to do in many parts of the country. Besides, with their own patriarchal outlook, they found the existing situation regarding position of women in northeast were acceptable to them. As a result, during the early years of British rule, the position of northeast women did not radically change. But with the introduction of female education

in the mid 19th century, the situation gradually changed. Women grew conscious of their rights, duties and potentialities, which enabled them to play a remarkable role in the country's struggle for freedom and gradually inspired them to examine their role in the country's struggle for freedom and gradually inspired them to examine their role as actors and agents of history equally with men.

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