



Role of Women in Agriculture in Medieval Assam

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Abstract

The Ahom kingdom, established by Tai prince Siu-Ka-Pha in 1228 CE, remained the central power of medieval Assam for nearly six centuries until 1826 CE. Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers introduced a sophisticated political structure, organized polity and advanced agricultural techniques, notably wet-rice cultivation, enabling surplus production. This laid the foundation for a prosperous kingdom. Siu-Ka-Pha and his successors prioritized agriculture, making it the economic backbone of medieval Assam. In medieval Assam, men and women both involved in agricultural work. Women played a crucial role in transplanting, harvesting, and post-harvest tasks like husking and grinding.

Key-words: agriculture, wet-rice cultivation, women.

Siu-Ka-Pha, a Tai prince of Mao-Lung, founded the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley in the early 13th century. Gradually, the Ahom kingdom became the central power of medieval Assam which lasted about 600 years. Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers brought with them a distinct and advanced political structure, organized polity, improved agricultural techniques of wet rice cultivation and the ability for surplus production which laying the foundation for a prosperous and enduring kingdom. The Ahom came to the Brahmaputra valley with a well-planned farming system and a rich culture¹. A Tai legend says the Ahom were sent to earth to cultivate². Siu-Ka-Pha and his successors made agriculture the base of the economy of medieval Assam.

During medieval period, villages in the Ahom kingdom were self-sufficient. The villagers primarily producing for personal consumption rather than trade. The Ahom rulers implemented a system called *paik* system where all able-bodied males between 16 and 50 years old were required to render compulsory service to the state³.

Known as *paiks*, these individuals were engaged in various activities, including agriculture, road construction,

palace building, boat making and other constructive tasks. In times of war, *paiks* were mobilized as soldiers, demonstrating the dual purpose of the system of promoting economic productivity and military preparedness. This unique system ensured the stability and development of the kingdom.

During medieval Assam the agricultural sector was remarkably self-sufficient, fulfilling both local and state requirements through innovative farming practices and crop diversification. The introduction of wet rice cultivation (*sali kheti*) by the Ahom rulers marked a significant milestone, facilitated by the use of iron plough shares, swords, axes and other tools for cultivation and extensive forest clearance. The region's paddy varieties were categorized into *Salidhan*, *Lahidhan*, *Ahudhan* and *Bao*, each suited to specific climatic conditions. Beyond rice, medieval Assam's agricultural bounty included mustard seeds, pulses (*matimah*, *mug*, *masur*, *kola mah*, *barkola mah*), areca nut, betel leaves, sugarcane, cotton, indigo and an array of fruits (jackfruit, mango, banana, plums, coconuts, orange, lemon, elephant apple etc.) and vegetables (gourds, pumpkins, leafy greens, ginger, turmeric, garlic, onion). Notably, black pepper was produced on a large scale and emerged as a vital export commodity to Bengal. The Ahom rulers played a pivotal role in introducing exotic crops, including the Ahom plum, Ahom *sali* rice and Nora plum, which complemented the existing agricultural landscape.

In medieval Assam, the Ahom exercised sophisticated agricultural techniques for *sali* rice cultivation, necessitating collaborative labor from both men and women. The intricate process involved selecting fields capable of retaining water, levelling and creating crisscross ridges to divide the land into rectangular plots. Agricultural implements utilized included wooden ploughs (*nangal*) with iron-tipped shares (*phal*), wooden rakes (*jabaka*), mallets (*dalimari*), bamboo harrows (*moi*), yokes (*juwali*), sickles (*kachi*) and various bamboo baskets. Notably, the Ahom introduced ploughing with buffaloes which made their kingdom prosperous⁴. The cultivated land was divided into many types such as *rupit*, *pharingati*, *kathiyatali* and *baotali*.

Introduction of an advanced method of agriculture by the Ahom increased the rice production in medieval Assam. The Ahom kings adopted flood control and irrigation measures in the kingdom. To control flood, they constructed spurs and embankments along the rivers such as the large embankment on the Dihing river was built during the reign of Ahom King Siu-Hung-Mung. King Pratap Singha also took extensive embankment projects during his rule. Additionally, the kingdom employed irrigation techniques like dam-building across hill streams, storing water that flowed into fields through well-constructed channels. The rulers also promoted agricultural

expansion by developing large paddy fields (*pathar* in Assamese) such as Mechlou *pathar*, Rupohi *pathar*, Jakaichuk *pathar*, Raja *pathar*, Bosa *pathar* and Gabharu *pathar*.

The women of the kingdom played a pivotal role in agricultural activities. Their participation was essential to the sustenance of the primarily agrarian and subsistence-based economy. As entire households relied on collective labor for economic survival, women actively participated in various stages of cultivation, excluding ploughing. Under the Ahom rule, women remained integral to the production process, particularly in paddy cultivation, which formed the backbone of the economy. Their diverse involvement in agricultural fields included transplanting seedlings, reaping, husking paddy, weeding, thrashing and winnowing crops. Moreover, while men fulfilled the obligations of the state under the *paik* system and compelled to go to the warfare during war time and engaged in production during normal days, women managed the domestic work like fetching water, collecting firewood and other household responsibilities.

In medieval Assam, the collaborative efforts of men and women in agricultural fields exemplified a harmonious division of labor, with women playing a pivotal role in supplementing men's endeavours during transplanting and harvesting crops. Beyond their physical labor, women assumed critical logistical responsibilities, ensuring the timely provision of sustenance and refreshments to workers. Following the harvest, women undertook meticulous tasks such as husking and grinding crops. The cultural significance of women's contributions is poignantly captured in many of the songs of festival, which eloquently express the essence of their role in planting, reaping and harvesting paddy. Furthermore, women actively participated in agricultural ceremonies and rituals, including *Gus luwa*, *Hal utha* and *Na-Khowa*, which marked critical stages in the agricultural cycle, from the commencement of cultivation to the conclusion of ploughing and the harvest. The comprehensive involvement of women emphasized their integral role in agriculture in medieval Assam.

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- ⁴ Gogoi (Nath), J., p. 68.

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