



The Dresses and Ornaments of the Ahom Dynasty in the Medieval Assam: A review

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Abstract:

The **Ahom Dynasty** (1228–1826) ruled the Ahom kingdom in present-day Assam for nearly 600 years, who were actually came from Mang Mao of South Western Yunan. The dynasty was established by Siu-ka-pha. The capital of Ahom Kingdom was established at Charaideo, which lies close to the present-day Sivasagar and eventually initiated the mission of building a state. Though Siu-ka-pha came from different cultures, different atmospheres, he had observed the climate as well as the socio-economic life of the people of Assam and their cultural traditions very carefully. Out of his various prominent contribution to Assam and its peoples, history writing (*Buranji*) was glorious contribution of Siu-ka-pha towards Assamese literature as well as Indian historiography. From these *Buranji*'s, we had come to know about the socio and cultural history of Ahom's and Assam. Through this paper, we are attempting to describe the dresses and ornaments of the Ahoms in the medieval Assam. This paper is based on both primary and secondary source. While *Buranji* serve as the primary source, the materials collected from various articles both web and print serve as the secondary source.

Key Words: Ahom Dynastry, Dresses, Ornaments, Assam

0.0 Introduction:

The **Ahom Dynasty** (1228–1826) ruled the Ahom kingdom in present-day Assam for nearly 600 years. The dynasty was established by Siu-ka-pha, who was the prince of Mang Mao, in South Western Yunan had a dispute with his maternal uncle's son and left Mang Mao in 1215 AD and along with 9000 soldiers armed with superior weapons conquered the Nagas and other hill tribes along the routes. It took him 13 years to reach Assam through the known routes of the Hukwang Valley and the hilly Patkai pass and many people from the Tai community of the Hukwang Valley joined him on the way. The advent of the highly Tai Ahoms under Siu-ka-pha in the year 1228 A.D changed the whole history of the state and led to the unification of the entire state of Brahmaputra Valley and create Assam. Finally, in the year 1253, the capital of Ahom Kingdom was established at Charaideo, which lies close to the present-day Sivasagar and eventually initiated the mission of building a state.

Though Siu-ka-pha came from different cultures, different atmospheres, he had observed the climate as well as the socio-economic life of the people and their cultural traditions very carefully. With an extra ordinary power of understanding things and people of the Brahmaputra Valley and by adopting conciliatory measures towards the indigenous peoples of the valley by showing respect to their sentiments and culture, Siu-ka-pha established the permanent kingdom in the region. Out of his various prominent contribution to Assam and its peoples, history writing (*Buranji*) was glorious contribution of Siu-ka-pha towards Assamese literature as well as Indian historiography.

Buranji are a class of historical chronicles written initially in the Ahom period, first in the Tai language and after wards in Assamese language. They serve as primary source of Ahom history. *Buranji* says, “**Jimore jaak pau, pondite likhi rakhibo**”¹. It means that the records of every birth, death and achievements would be kept. Literally, *Buranji* means—a store that teaches the ignorant, “**Buranji hol murkhar sikshar varaal**”². The buranjis not only describe the Ahom kingdom, but also the neighbors like Chutiya, Kachari, Tripura etc. The Assamese language entered the Ahom court and co- existed with the Tai language during the 17th Century before finally replacing it as the official language. From the *Buranjis* we come to know about the socio-cultural history of medieval Assam. In this paper we attempt to describe the dresses and ornaments of the Ahoms in the medieval Assam.

0.1 Source

The paper is based on both primary and secondary source. While *Buranji* serve as the primary source. The materials collected from various articles both web and print serve as the secondary source. Moreover, the pictures are collected from Tai Museum, Sivasagar.

0.2 Scope, Methodology and Objectives

The scope of this paper is limited to describing the attires of Ahom, mainly the dresses and ornaments prevalent during the time. A descriptive method has been made to described the contents of this paper. The main objective of the study is to give an idea about dresses and ornaments used in Ahom era.

1.0 Main topic

The Ahom age is the age of ornaments and attires of several types. Every class had their particular dresses and jewelries. Through the dresses and ornaments, one could easily identify the people and their class. Different varieties of dresses were available for both male and female.

Now let's have a look at the particular type of dresses that were used by Ahoms.

1.1 Dresses of male----- The *Buranjis*, composed in the middle-ages give an idea about the dresses used by male folks during the Ahom reign. The royalty wore chapkon, pakroi, jama, pagijar, cheleng, ijar, gomseng, mejangkori, etc. H.K. Borpujari says that Gomseng and Majanhkori were the finest varieties of silk which were mainly used by the gentry and members of the royal family³.

Even the aristocrats and noblemen had their distinct dresses. They wore garments like chola, cheleng, tongali, paguri, dhoti, paat suria etc and also used borjaapi and walking stick decorated with gold and silver designs. The buranji says, “**Banat orea uthi dia bor jaapi, rupor sulare paani jaapi.....rupor beri dia lakhutiloi**”⁴

The common people wore tangali, cheleng, paguri, kopahi suria, etc. the length of their suria could not extend beyond their knees. The cheleng too was wrapped in the left shoulder. Tassuduk Amanul Hussain writes, **Teuluke Athur tololoi suria pindhibo nuarisil aru teu luke bau kandhot he cheleng bachadar lobo parisil**”⁵.

1.2 Dresses of women: Like their male counterparts, the Ahom women folk too had their specific dresses. In fact, it was the dresses that helped to identify whether a particular woman belonged to the aristocracy or the common folk.

The royal Ahom lady wore paat gomseng or mekhela with beautiful design. ghuri, riha were also exclusive to royal ahom women. Apart from these, those women who belonged to aristocratic class wore kingkhap, gomseng, mejang kori muga riha etc. Besides this the common people wore hand woven riha mekhela sadar. During winter they used to wear khania kapoor, borkapoor.

Now let us describe the dresses in details.

- I. Churiaor dhuti—this is the main piece of cloth worn round the waist by male person hanging down the knee or below it. In the medieval period the churia was made of silk muga or cotton. The churia were allowed to be worn by the high officials, the head of satras and high-class Brahmins. To work in the religious function or to the worship of God coloured dhutis specially of the red colour or made of silk are mostly preferred.
- II. Chapkon- a kind of surcoat or rob reaching to knee used by the officers only
- III. Chula—this is the one kind shirts which is used by male person. From the reign of Ahom king, Rudra Singha, ministers and other high officials began to put on shirts known as chuga and chapkon which were in the style of the Mughals.
- IV. Ijar--- this is the kind of dress which was introduced by the Ahom king Rudra Singha. Ijar were used among the higher officials and king.
- V. Paijar--paijar were made by leather, specially decorated with golden and silver threads. The ahom kings specifically used this and others were not allowed to put on paijar. H. K. Borpujari says, “**The common people were not entitled to put on paijar. They used khadam, and Phanati when necessary**”⁶.
- VI. Cheleng and khania--- there were two varieties of wrappers, one called cheleng and other called khania. The cheleng is a plain cloth, generally 6 cubits in length, and 3 cubits in breadth.the two ends of this cloth were embroidered with muga thread, (golden thread) or other coloured thread.

The khania is double folded i.e. altogether 12 cubits in length and 3 cubits in breadth. It has also decorative work at the two ends of it. The officials and nobleman both male and female generally used the khania.

These two cloths were used to wrap round the upper part of the body.

VII. Paguri--- paguri or turban is an important headgear of the Assamese people. This is only used among the common people. The turbans are made of all varieties of silks and cotton.

VIII. Phasau—the Ahom king up to the reign of Gadhador Singha used a very simple form of turban which was called phasau. Instead of phasau, Rudra Singha introduced jama, a head dress put on by the Mughalempereors. In those days the bride grooms also used to put on jama. The sutradhar of bhaona and a number of band of singers and players of instruments called ‘gayan bayan’ put on this jama in some part of Assam.

The Buranjis also mention the use of other dresses like Hasoti, tongali, etc. According to *Deudhai Assam Buranji*: “**Tongali, basuai and hasoti were adopted by Dihingia Roja**”⁷.

IX. Mekhela--mekhela is the lower garment worn by women. This is the main piece of garment worn round the waist by women covering down to the ankle joints. This is garment like modern petticoat. Mekhelas were also made of cotton, muga, edi silk. In this periodonly the high ranking families and the wives of higher officials were allowed to ware mekhelamade of silk and muga. It was during the reign of Rudra Singha, it became a tradition for the women to wear mekhela⁸.

X. Riha—this cloth worn by women in the Ahom period. This piece of cloth is generally wrapped round the body with one end kept suspended after fixing it under the waist cloth called mekhela at navel point and then the other part of cloth is used in upper part of of body specially covering the breasts from the right hand side to the left. Riha made of silk, muga, cotton and eri. In the first only the royal and noble families are used riha. But letter on there was no restriction in wearing riha.

The Ahom queen also used ghuri, gomseng, chola, etc⁹.

The common ladies during the Ahom period wore khania kapoor and borkapoor. The tribal ladies tied the 'methoni' in their chests¹⁰.

2.0 Ornaments during the Ahom rule:

Just like dresses, ornaments, too played a significant role in the attire of Ahom personality. The *buranjis* have detailed accounts of the ornaments worn by Ahom royalty, aristocrats and common folk.

2.1 Ornaments of men: It is recorded that during the coronation ceremony the Ahom king was adorned with jewels. Buranji says- Aru Raja deo mukhye poteswari sohit bidhi mote sthano purbok bosta lonkar sohit bibhuhito hoi¹¹. The king wore jewels made of gold, diamond, and various precious metals. The ornaments included golden karnavusha, makor kundal, kiriti, lokapar, mukut, nohorihar, nepoor, gaamkharu, bajubandhan, various ring, bracelets headgear etc¹².

The aristocrats too had their own ornaments. They used to wear golden lokapar, kundal, keru etc. They too wore precious jewels. However, the common men wore long keru and lotamoni¹³.

2.2 Ornaments worn by women: The Buranjis record the ornaments worn by Ahom ladies, both royalty and common. The royalty wore gezera, madoli, biri, dugdugi, bala, gamkharo etc. Their ornaments were made of gold, diamond, etc¹⁴.

The common ladies wore keru, thuria, golpata, gezera, dugdugi, muthikharu etc.

The buranjis highlight the prevalence of various ornaments, especially those made of gold during the Ahom reign. However not all were allowed to wear precious jewels made of gold. According to the Satsori Assam Buranji, Bhagaraja passed prohibitive order not to use gold ornaments by the commoners¹⁵.

3.00 Conclusion: The Buranjis record in extensive details the prevalence of various dresses and ornaments during the Ahom reign. However, it can be said that the diversity in the class were reflected in the dresses and ornaments of the Ahoms. In other words, the dresses and ornaments served as identifiers that differentiated the royalty from the commoners. This paper leaves ample scope for further research in this topic.

Various dresses used by Ahom Dynasty



Pha-su (Top) and Pha-sin (Mekhela)

Kingkhaap Mekhela and MugaRiha



Churia or Dhuti

Chapkon



Pakhru Tong



Kingkhaap Mekhela

Various ornaments used by Ahom Dynasty



Some assamese old ornaments



Dhoobiri



Silver ornaments and Coins



Keru

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