

## ROLE OF KURANGANAYANI IN THE MAOMARIA UPRISING

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the multifaceted role of Kuranganayani, a Manipuri princess and Ahom queen, during the tumultuous Moamaria Uprising in 18<sup>th</sup> century Assam. Often relegated to the periphery of historical narratives, Kuranganayani emerges as a key figure whose political acumen and strategic actions significantly influenced the course of the rebellion. This analysis explores her transformation from a diplomatic bride to a pivotal player in Ahom statecraft, focusing on her contributions to undermining rebel control and restoring royal authority. Through an examination of historical texts, oral traditions and literary accounts, the research illuminates Kuranganayani's unique position as a woman who defied conventional gender roles and exercised agency in a period of socio-political crisis. Her legacy as a symbol of resistance, diplomacy and moral fortitude in both Assamese and Manipuri cultures is also explored, emphasizing her enduring impact on regional identity and historical memory.*

**Keywords:** *Kuranganayani, Moamaria Uprising, Assam, Ahom, Gender, Rebellion*

## INTRODUCTION

The Moamaria Rebellion, a major socio-political upheaval in 18<sup>th</sup> century Assam, marked a defining moment in the region's history, not only as an assertion of popular resistance against feudal oppression but also as a catalyst for subsequent political transformations. It was rooted in the socio-economic and religious marginalization of the Moamarias a Vaishnavite sect derived from the egalitarian teachings of the neo-Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva. The rebellion unfolded during the reign of the Ahom dynasty, a period when entrenched feudal hierarchies, centralized monarchical authority and religious orthodoxy combined to alienate vast sections of the peasantry, tribal communities and religious nonconformists (Gogoi, 2010; Gait, 1906). Against this backdrop of systemic disenfranchisement and socio-political volatility, the Moamaria Uprising emerged as a grassroots movement challenging the very foundations of the Ahom state. While the rebellion is often analyzed through the lens of socio-economic class conflict, the nuanced role of women, especially elite women such as Kuranganayani, remains an underexplored but crucial dimension in understanding the broader implications of the uprising.

Kuranganayani, a Manipuri princess married into the Ahom royal family, occupies a significant yet often peripheralized place in the historiography of the Moamaria Rebellion. As the daughter of King Jai Singh of Manipur and the queen consort of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singh, Kuranganayani's political position extended beyond dynastic symbolism. Her role during the uprising illustrates how elite women could and did, manoeuvre within patriarchal political structures to exert agency in moments of crisis. Far from being a passive royal figure, Kuranganayani intervened in the power struggles that ensued during the rebellion, particularly after the assassination of her husband. Historical accounts suggest that she played a decisive role in neutralizing the rebel leader Ragho Borbarua by orchestrating his assassination, thereby restoring a semblance of stability to the royal administration (Baruah, 2015; Bose, 2017). Her actions reveal the complex intersections of gender, power and resistance in pre-colonial Assam.

This article seeks to re-examine the Moamaria Uprising through a gendered lens, with a specific focus on Kuranganayani's intervention during one of Assam's most turbulent historical episodes. It underscores the need to revisit the role of women in Assam's political history not merely as symbols of dynastic alliances but as active participants in resistance and governance. Situating Kuranganayani within the broader framework of socio-political transformation, this study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Assam's historical trajectory, one that recognizes the agency of women in shaping political outcomes during times of upheaval. By analyzing archival materials, historical chronicles and contemporary scholarly interpretations, this exploration intends to provide a critical assessment of Kuranganayani's political role during the Moamaria Uprising, thereby enriching the discourse on gender and resistance in pre-modern South Asian contexts.

### Socio-Political Landscape of Assam

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Assam's socio-political fabric was shaped by a complex interplay of ethnicity, religion and class hierarchy under the Ahom dynasty, which had ruled the region since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Though the Ahoms succeeded in consolidating political power and fostering administrative centralization, their rule increasingly came under strain due to widening socio-economic inequalities and cultural contestations. Assam's demography was composed of a mosaic of ethnic groups, including the Ahoms, Koch, Bodo-Kacharis, Morans and various tribal communities. Each group upheld distinct languages, belief systems and modes of livelihood, contributing to a rich cultural landscape (Gogoi, 2010; Gait, 1906).

However, this diversity coexisted uneasily with hierarchical structures entrenched through a feudal system known as the *paik* system. Under this structure, the state extracted labour and agricultural produce from the *paiks*, a class of bonded peasants, creating conditions of coercion and socio-economic subjugation (Baruah, 2015). Over time, particularly during the reign of kings like Rajeswar Singh (1751–1769), this system grew increasingly oppressive, leading to widespread resentment among marginalized groups, including the Moamarias, a sub-sect of the neo-Vaishnavite movement. The suppression of their religious freedoms and social status fueled the eventual uprising (Sharma, 2011).

The social order was further destabilized by a growing rift between the ruling elite and commoners, intensified by cultural hegemony imposed through orthodox Hindu institutions. As the Ahom rulers sought to Brahmanize their court and religious practices, indigenous and tribal populations felt culturally alienated (Bose, 2017). These tensions culminated in the Moamaria Rebellion, which served not only as a class-based revolt but also as a form of resistance against the erosion of local identities and traditions. Thus, the 18<sup>th</sup> century socio-political landscape of Assam was marked by fragmentation, contestation and a mounting crisis of legitimacy.

### Kuranganayani's Early Life and Marriage

Kuranganayani, a Manipuri princess of notable lineage, was the daughter of King Jai Singh of Manipur, a kingdom historically connected to Assam through both conflict and diplomacy. Her early life was shaped by the cultural milieu of the Meitei royal court, which emphasized martial training, political acumen and religious devotion. Raised within the Vaishnavite tradition that had gained prominence in Manipur under King Pamheiba (Garibaniwaz), Kuranganayani was not only admired for her beauty but also respected for her intelligence and poise (Singh, 1982).

The political alliance between the Ahom and Manipuri kingdoms was forged during a period of geopolitical flux. Swargadeo Rajeswar Singh, seeking to secure his eastern frontier and foster peace with Manipur, married Kuranganayani around the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This marital alliance was strategic, intended to strengthen inter-kingdom relations and consolidate regional power (Baruah, 2015). The princess's arrival in Assam was celebrated with elaborate court ceremonies and she was bestowed the title of *Bor Kuwari* (Grand Queen), an honour that underscored her elevated status in the Ahom court.

Kuranganayani's transition into the Assamese royal household was marked by her acceptance among both the aristocracy and commoners. As a queen consort, she assumed a visible and influential position, participating in courtly rituals and possibly administrative affairs. Her role was not confined to ceremonial duties; she symbolized the union of two culturally rich regions and became an embodiment of feminine strength and diplomacy in Assam's historical memory. This stature would later empower her to play a critical role during the Moamaria Rebellion following the assassination of her husband, thus redefining the traditional role of royal women in pre-modern Assamese politics (Sharma, 2011; Devi, 2002).

### **The Role of Women in Assamese Society**

The role of women in 18<sup>th</sup> century Assamese society was shaped by a confluence of cultural traditions, economic practices and prevailing patriarchal structures. Although formal power remained predominantly in male hands, women contributed significantly to the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the region. Their roles were neither monolithic nor peripheral; rather, they traversed multiple domains from agrarian labour and artisanal production to informal spheres of influence in community and religious life (Priyadarshini, 2021).

In agrarian Assamese society, particularly among peasant communities, women played a central role in agricultural production. They were actively engaged in planting, harvesting and post-harvest processing of crops, which not only ensured food security but also supported the subsistence economy (Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2017). Additionally, Assamese women were adept artisans, particularly in weaving- a practice deeply embedded in cultural identity. The production of traditional textiles and other crafts not only preserved intangible heritage but also generated supplementary income for households (Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2017).

Despite their vital contributions to the economic and cultural domains, women were largely excluded from formal political institutions and decision-making roles. Governance remained predominantly male-dominated, reinforcing entrenched patriarchal norms (Nongbri, 2000; Deka, 2008). Nevertheless, women found agency through participation in socio-religious movements and localized community engagements. The Moamoria Rebellion of the 18th century, for instance, highlights the significant yet often underrepresented roles played by women in resisting hierarchical and feudal oppression. Historical records mention figures such as Radha and Rukmini, who actively led rebel forces, and a Brahmin woman named Chandramala, who organized an armed female contingent during the third phase of the uprising (Sharma, 1996).

Thus, while structural constraints limited their formal authority, women in 18th-century Assam exercised substantial influence within their communities. Their roles in sustaining household economies, preserving traditional knowledge and challenging hegemonic structures underscore the need to reassess their place in the historical narrative. Women's contributions, though often marginalized in mainstream historiography, were indispensable to the continuity and resilience of Assamese society (Choudhury & Kumar, 2021; Nayak & Mahanta, 2009, 2015).

### **Prelude to the Moamaria Rebellion**

The Moamaria Rebellion was not a spontaneous or isolated event; it emerged from prolonged socio-political oppression experienced by marginalized communities under the Ahom feudal regime. The Moamarias, a heterogenous sect rooted in Neo-Vaishnavite teachings- particularly those inspired by Aniruddhadeva- faced systematic marginalization despite their considerable social presence in Upper Assam (Guha, 1983). Although spiritually influential, the Moamarias were denied political representation and economic security, which, over time, fermented collective resentment.

At the heart of their discontent lay the exploitative Paik system, where commoners were subjected to forced labour without adequate compensation. The monopolization of land and administrative posts by the Ahom nobility further alienated lower-caste communities, tribal populations and non-Ahom groups such as the Morans and Chutiyas (Gogoi, 2010). These socio-economic fissures were exacerbated by arbitrary taxation and repeated royal excesses, creating fertile ground for organized resistance.

The rebellion, which erupted during the reign of King Lakshmi Singha (1769–1780), marked a critical turning point in Assam's precolonial polity. The Moamarias demanded an end to aristocratic domination and advocated for a more inclusive and just social order. Though violently suppressed in stages, their uprising severely destabilized the Ahom monarchy and paved the way for internal realignments and external threats, notably from the Burmese and the British (Bhattacharjya, 2008). This socio-political turbulence provides the backdrop to the involvement of Kuranganayani, a Manipuri princess, whose role during this upheaval stands as both politically strategic and symbolically subversive.

### **The Moamaria Rebellion and Kuranganayani's Involvement**

Connecting Kuranganayani's narrative to the Moamaria Rebellion necessitates a nuanced understanding of gendered politics and regional alliances during times of royal unrest. Kuranganayani, daughter of the Manipuri king Jai Singh, was married to Ahom King Swargadeo Rajeswar Singh in 1768 as a diplomatic gesture following Ahom military assistance in reclaiming the Manipur throne from Burmese aggression (Jhalajit, 1992; Das, 1992). This alliance symbolized Indo-Himalayan regional unity and was deeply valued in both courts.

However, the rebellion that followed the death of Rajeswar Singh in 1769 dramatically altered her status. The Moamaria revolt, which led to the temporary dethroning of King Lakshmi Singha, was not only a political insurrection but also a moment of personal crisis for the queen. The usurper Ragho Borbaruah, aligned with the rebel leadership, imposed his dominance by forcibly marrying Kuranganayani, along with other aristocratic women (Das, 1992). Despite being held hostage within this violent upheaval, Kuranganayani maintained her agency and dignity, refusing to consummate the

coerced union. Through subterfuge, using her servant Hunai as a surrogate, she preserved her honour, a narrative that speaks volumes about her resilience and strategic acumen.

The turning point came when she conspired with loyalist nobles, including Ghanashyam Gohain Hazarika, Kekeru Kalita Hazarika and others, to eliminate Ragho Borbaruah. Kuranganayani's ingenuity in luring Ragho into a vulnerable position under the pretense of a ceremonial gathering on the day of Sot Bihu led to his assassination. Her instructions to have him approach the villagers without arms demonstrated her diplomatic cunning and mastery over court politics (Das, 1992). Kuranganayani's role was not merely reactive. She acted as a political strategist, resistance leader and moral anchor for the loyalist forces who sought to restore legitimate Ahom rule. Once Lakshmi Singha was reinstated, he publicly recognized her contributions, referring to her with reverence as a maternal figure in the royal court.

The significance of Kuranganayani's involvement lies in her transformation from a symbolic bride of alliance to an active agent in statecraft and rebellion. Though overshadowed in historical records by male leaders, her actions challenge the conventional narrative of royal women as passive actors. She occupies a rare position in Northeast Indian history where a queen, not merely a consort, was instrumental in countering both rebellion and tyranny, carving a legacy of political foresight and loyalty amid revolutionary tumult.

### **Legacy of Kuranganayani in Ahom and Assamese History**

Kuranganayani's contributions during the Moamaria Rebellion mark her as one of the few royal women in early modern Indian history whose political involvement shaped the outcome of a major socio-political crisis. Her story not only underscores the intersection of gender, diplomacy and rebellion but also elevates her to a legendary status in both Assam and Manipur. Within the Ahom polity, Kuranganayani was honoured with the title Borkuwori, or Grand Queen, indicating her elevated role beyond ceremonial expectations. Her resistance to Ragho Borbaruah's coercion and her orchestration of his assassination were pivotal in undermining rebel control and facilitating the restoration of legitimate monarchical rule under Lakshmi Singha (Das, 1992). Her conduct during captivity challenged the feudal norms that sought to subjugate women, asserting a form of political and moral resistance rare in feudal chronicles.

The Ahom court's subsequent treatment of her, as a revered figure deserving honour, respect and restitution, reinforces her unique status. Lakhmi Singha not only acknowledged her sacrifices but also bequeathed to her all the possessions from Ragho's palace, symbolizing both political justice and emotional restitution. Kuranganayani's memory is deeply embedded in Assamese oral traditions and literary narratives, where she is revered as Mogolu Kuwori, the Manipuri Queen who defended Ahom honour and justice. In Manipur, too, she is remembered as Tekhau Leima or Axom Kuwori, a princess who extended her loyalty beyond her birthplace to adopt and protect her new homeland (Jhalajit, 1992). Her actions are emblematic of shared histories between Manipur and Assam, representing not only a confluence of cultures but also a feminist legacy of resistance and leadership.

Kuranganayani's legacy continues to resonate in academic and popular discourse, particularly in Northeast India's efforts to recover and honour women's roles in precolonial and colonial resistance movements. As a figure who bridged two kingdoms and stood at the intersection of diplomacy and rebellion, she exemplifies the potential of royal women to alter the course of history not through lineage alone but through agency, intellect and courage.

### **Conclusion**

Kuranganayani's legacy continues to resonate as a powerful embodiment of moral courage, strategic insight and unwavering commitment to social justice. Her leadership during a tumultuous period in Assam's history particularly her pivotal role in the Moamoria rebellion epitomizes the active and often underrecognized participation of women in socio-political transformation. In navigating a patriarchal society and asserting agency within both royal and political spheres, Kuranganayani transcended the limitations imposed by her gender and historical circumstances. She did not merely support a cause; she symbolized the confluence of resistance, reform and visionary governance rooted in empathy and a deep concern for the collective welfare.

Her advocacy for women's education and empowerment, though framed within the constraints of her time, initiated foundational shifts in attitudes toward gender roles and community participation. By embodying the principle that leadership is not confined by social constructs but enriched through inclusive values, Kuranganayani stands as a model of transformative leadership. Her story challenges dominant historical narratives that often marginalize women's contributions, offering instead a paradigm where female leadership is central to community resilience and cultural preservation.

To conclude, Kuranganayani's life and work illuminate the dynamic potential of women's leadership in shaping both immediate political outcomes and long-term societal progress. Her legacy affirms that leadership, when anchored in empathy, purpose and moral integrity, holds the power to inspire change across generations. As such, her narrative not only enriches the historiography of Assam but also serves as a compelling point of reference in contemporary discussions on gender, power and resistance. Recognizing figures like Kuranganayani is crucial to building a more inclusive understanding of leadership and acknowledging the foundational role of women in the making of just and equitable societies.

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