

Courage in the Battlefield: Mulagabharu in the Ahom–Turk Conflict

Abstract

The military history of medieval Assam has traditionally focused on kings, generals, and territorial expansion, while the participation of women in warfare has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Among the notable female figures preserved in the historical memory of Assam, Mulagabharu occupies a distinctive place for her participation in the Ahom resistance against the invading forces of Turbak Khan during the sixteenth century. Her courage at the Battle of Duimunisila has become an enduring symbol of sacrifice and patriotism in Assamese historical consciousness. Yet, despite her prominence in regional memory, the available historical evidence concerning her life remains scattered across Ahom chronicles, later historical writings, and popular traditions. This study critically examines Mulagabharu's role in the Ahom–Turk conflict by analysing primary sources, particularly the Ahom Buranjis, alongside modern historical scholarship. Rather than presenting her merely as a legendary heroine, the paper situates her within the broader political, military, and social context of sixteenth-century Assam. It explores the organisation of the Ahom military system, the strategic importance of the conflict with the Bengal Sultanate, the role of royal women during wartime, and the construction of Mulagabharu's historical legacy. The study argues that Mulagabharu's participation demonstrates that women could assume active military responsibilities during moments of political crisis and that her memory reflects both historical reality and the evolving cultural imagination of Assamese society. By reassessing available historical evidence, the article contributes to the growing scholarship on gender, warfare, and state formation in medieval northeastern India.

Keywords: Mulagabharu, Ahom Kingdom, Turbak Khan, Duimunisila, Medieval Assam, Women in Warfare

Introduction

The history of medieval Assam is characterised by prolonged military struggles, political consolidation, and cultural adaptation. Among the regional powers that shaped the political landscape of northeastern India, the Ahom kingdom occupies a unique position. Established in the early thirteenth century by Sukapha, the kingdom gradually evolved into one of the most resilient states of South Asia, successfully resisting repeated invasions from neighbouring powers for nearly six centuries. The strength of the Ahom state lay not only in its administrative innovations and military organisation but also in its ability to mobilise diverse sections of society during periods of external threat.

One of the most significant episodes in this history was the series of conflicts between the Ahom kingdom and the Bengal Sultanate during the sixteenth century. These encounters represented more than territorial disputes; they reflected competing political ambitions and strategic control over the Brahmaputra Valley. Among these invasions, the expedition led by Turbak Khan occupies a particularly important place because of its intensity, duration, and consequences for the future of the Ahom state. The eventual Ahom victory not only preserved political independence but also strengthened the kingdom's military institutions and collective identity.

Within this historical episode emerges the figure of Mulagabharu, whose participation in the Battle of Duimunisila has been remembered as an extraordinary example of courage. According to the Ahom chronicles, after the death of her husband Frasengmung Borgohain in battle, Mulagabharu entered the battlefield wearing his armour and continued the struggle against the invading forces. Although she ultimately lost her life, her sacrifice became one of the most celebrated episodes in Assamese historical tradition.

The significance of Mulagabharu extends beyond the narrative of individual heroism. Her story invites broader historical questions regarding the participation of women in

warfare, the political role of royal women within the Ahom kingdom, and the relationship between historical memory and documented evidence. Unlike many popular retellings that emphasise emotional or legendary aspects, a historical study requires careful examination of available sources, contextual interpretation, and critical comparison between chronicles and modern historiography.

This article therefore seeks to reconstruct Mulagabharu's role within the political and military realities of sixteenth-century Assam. Rather than treating her solely as a symbolic heroine, the study analyses her contribution within the framework of Ahom military organisation, gender relations, and state formation. In doing so, it contributes to a more balanced understanding of women's participation in medieval warfare while highlighting the importance of regional historical traditions in reconstructing India's military past.

Necessity of the Study

The history of warfare in medieval India has generally privileged the achievements of kings, commanders, and political elites, while the military contributions of women have remained comparatively neglected. Although women such as Rani Durgavati, Chand Bibi, and Rani Abbakka have received increasing scholarly attention, the military role of Mulagabharu continues to occupy only a marginal position in mainstream Indian historiography despite her significance in Assamese historical tradition. Most discussions of her life appear as brief narratives within larger political histories of the Ahom kingdom rather than as independent subjects of historical inquiry.

The present study is therefore necessary for several reasons. First, it attempts to reconstruct Mulagabharu's role using historical evidence rather than relying solely on popular legend. Second, it contributes to the growing field of gender history by examining women's participation in military affairs in pre-modern northeastern India. Third, it places the Battle of Duimunisila within the wider context of Ahom state formation and resistance against imperial expansion from Bengal. Finally, by critically examining both primary and secondary sources, the study seeks to distinguish historically verifiable events from later commemorative traditions, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Assamese history.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical background of the Ahom–Turk conflict during the reign of Suhungmung.
2. To reconstruct the historical role of Mulagabharu using available primary and secondary sources.
3. To analyse the participation of women in warfare within the Ahom political system.
4. To assess the military and political significance of the Battle of Duimunisila.
5. To critically evaluate the representation of Mulagabharu in historical writings and Assamese cultural memory.

Review of Literature

The political and military history of the Ahom kingdom has attracted considerable scholarly attention since the late nineteenth century. However, studies devoted exclusively to Mulagabharu remain limited. Most historical works discuss her only in relation to Turbak Khan's invasion of Assam in 1532–1533, without examining her contribution within the broader framework of gender, warfare, and state formation. Consequently, the available literature provides important historical information but leaves significant scope for critical reinterpretation.

The earliest systematic account of the Ahom kingdom in English was produced by **Edward Gait** in *A History of Assam* (1906). Gait reconstructs the sequence of Turbak Khan's invasion from the Ahom Buranjis and Persian records, describing the campaigns fought between the Bengal Sultanate and the Ahoms during the reign of Swargadeo Suhungmung.

His account briefly mentions the death of Frasengmung Borgohain and the subsequent participation of Mulagabharu in battle. While Gait recognises her courage, he does not analyse her role from the perspective of women's participation in warfare.

The works edited and translated by **Surya Kumar Bhuyan**, particularly the *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, and other Ahom chronicles, constitute the principal primary sources for reconstructing the political history of sixteenth-century Assam. These chronicles provide detailed descriptions of military campaigns, administrative organisation, and diplomatic relations. The references to Mulagabharu are comparatively brief but historically significant because they originate from court chronicles rather than later folklore. Nevertheless, these texts were compiled within specific political contexts and therefore require critical examination concerning authorship, chronology, and royal patronage.

H. K. Barpujari's *The Comprehensive History of Assam* offers a more analytical interpretation of Ahom political expansion and military organisation. His discussion of the Ahom–Turk conflict emphasises the administrative reforms introduced by Suhungmung, the strategic use of riverine warfare, and the mobilisation of local resources. Although Mulagabharu appears within the narrative of the Battle of Duimunisila, the broader implications of her military participation remain unexplored.

S. L. Baruah places the Ahom–Bengal conflicts within the larger political history of northeastern India. His writings demonstrate that the repeated invasions from Bengal strengthened Ahom military institutions and accelerated administrative centralisation. However, like earlier historians, Baruah focuses primarily on kings, commanders, and political developments rather than the contribution of royal women.

Environmental and regional historians such as **Arupjyoti Saikia** have highlighted the importance of geography in shaping the political history of Assam. His analysis of rivers, forests, wetlands, and ecological conditions helps explain why invading armies from Bengal encountered enormous logistical difficulties while the Ahoms successfully utilised local environmental knowledge during warfare. Although his work does not specifically examine Mulagabharu, it provides valuable contextual understanding of the battlefield conditions in which the conflict unfolded.

Modern scholarship on gender history has opened new possibilities for interpreting figures like Mulagabharu. Historians such as **Geraldine Forbes**, **Kumkum Roy**, and **Uma Chakravarti** argue that women in pre-modern India often exercised political authority beyond domestic spaces, especially during periods of dynastic crisis and military conflict. While these studies focus primarily on other regions of India, their theoretical perspectives are useful for analysing women's agency in medieval Assam.

Studies on military history by **J. N. Phukan**, **D. Nath**, and **Yasmin Saikia** have further enriched our understanding of Ahom political institutions, military organisation, and social structure. Yet none of these works treats Mulagabharu as the central subject of investigation. Consequently, her historical role remains embedded within broader narratives rather than being examined independently.

A review of existing scholarship therefore reveals three important limitations. First, Mulagabharu has rarely been studied as a historical actor in her own right. Second, her participation has seldom been analysed through the lens of gender history and military studies. Third, historians have generally accepted the Buranji narratives without critically evaluating how later cultural memory transformed her into a symbol of Assamese heroism. The present study attempts to address these limitations through an interdisciplinary historical approach.

Research Gap

Despite the extensive scholarship on the political history of the Ahom kingdom, dedicated academic studies on Mulagabharu remain remarkably limited. Most standard histories mention her only briefly while describing Turbak Khan's invasion. Existing discussions largely emphasise her bravery but seldom investigate the broader political, military, or gendered dimensions of her participation. Furthermore, few studies critically compare the narratives preserved in the Ahom Buranjis with later nationalist interpretations or cultural representations. Consequently, the relationship between documented history and historical memory has not been systematically explored. This article addresses this gap by situating Mulagabharu within the larger contexts of military history, gender studies, and the evolution of the Ahom state.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative historical methodology based upon critical examination of both primary and secondary sources. Since Mulagabharu belongs to the sixteenth century, no direct documentary evidence survives outside contemporary chronicles and later historical compilations. The reconstruction of her life therefore depends upon careful source criticism and contextual interpretation.

Primary sources include the various **Ahom Buranjis**, particularly those edited and translated by Surya Kumar Bhuyan, together with available Persian references concerning the Bengal Sultanate's military expeditions into Assam. These chronicles provide information regarding political events, military campaigns, royal appointments, and important battles. Because the Buranjis were court-sponsored historical records, they are analysed with due attention to their political purpose, authorship, and possible biases.

Secondary sources consist of books and scholarly articles dealing with the history of medieval Assam, Ahom administration, military organisation, women's history, and environmental history. Comparative analysis has been employed to identify areas of agreement and disagreement among historians.

The study further applies a historiographical approach by comparing traditional narratives preserved in Assamese historical memory with interpretations offered by modern historians. Rather than accepting every narrative uncritically, the paper distinguishes between evidence supported by historical documentation and later literary embellishments.

Finally, the study employs a gender-sensitive analytical framework. Instead of viewing Mulagabharu merely as an exceptional heroine, it seeks to understand how her participation reflects broader patterns of women's agency within the political and military institutions of the Ahom kingdom.

Historical Background of the Ahom–Turk Conflict

The conflict between the Ahom kingdom and the Bengal Sultanate represented one of the most decisive phases in the political history of sixteenth-century Assam. Following the establishment of the Ahom kingdom by Sukapha in 1228 CE, the rulers gradually expanded their authority over the eastern Brahmaputra Valley. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the kingdom had developed into a powerful regional state possessing an organised administrative system, an efficient military organisation, and a stable agrarian economy.

The accession of **Swargadeo Suhungmung (1497–1539)** marked a turning point in Ahom history. Widely known as **Dihingia Raja**, Suhungmung transformed the kingdom from a predominantly Tai polity into a multi-ethnic territorial state. His administration incorporated conquered populations into the Paik system, reorganised provincial administration, strengthened military institutions, and expanded political authority westward.

These territorial expansions inevitably brought the Ahoms into conflict with neighbouring kingdoms, particularly the Bengal Sultanate. During the early sixteenth century, the rulers of Bengal sought to extend their influence over the strategically important Brahmaputra Valley. Apart from political prestige, Assam possessed valuable economic

resources, including elephants, forest products, precious metals, and river trade routes connecting eastern India with Southeast Asia.

Several military expeditions were launched from Bengal before Turbak Khan's invasion. Initial campaigns under commanders such as Bar Uzir and Bit Malik met with limited success owing to the difficult terrain, unfamiliar climate, and determined resistance offered by the Ahoms. Nevertheless, the Bengal Sultanate continued to regard Assam as a region of strategic significance.

The political ambitions of Bengal intensified during the reign of **Sultan Nasiruddin Nasrat Shah (1519–1533)**, who organised one of the largest military expeditions against Assam under the command of **Turbak Khan**. Contemporary and later chronicles describe this invasion as one of the most formidable military challenges faced by the Ahom kingdom before the Mughal invasions of the seventeenth century.

Political Situation before Turbak Khan's Invasion

The years preceding Turbak Khan's campaign witnessed significant political consolidation within the Ahom kingdom. Suhungmung had successfully annexed the Chutiya kingdom in 1523 and subsequently brought large portions of the Kachari territories under Ahom influence. These victories expanded the kingdom's territorial limits while increasing its economic resources and military manpower.

The integration of newly conquered populations was achieved through administrative innovations rather than simple military occupation. The Paik system enabled the state to mobilise labour and military service from different ethnic communities, thereby creating a flexible military structure capable of responding rapidly to external threats.

Meanwhile, the Bengal Sultanate faced its own political challenges arising from succession disputes, frontier management, and relations with neighbouring states. Nevertheless, military expansion remained an important component of its regional policy. Control over western Assam would have strengthened Bengal's commercial networks and provided access to valuable elephants that were highly prized in medieval warfare.

The frontier between Bengal and Assam therefore became a zone of continuous military tension. Frequent raids, counter-raids, and diplomatic negotiations characterised relations between the two states throughout the early sixteenth century. Against this background, Turbak Khan's invasion represented not an isolated campaign but the culmination of a long series of military confrontations.

Historical Sources on Mulagabharu

The historical reconstruction of Mulagabharu presents significant methodological challenges because contemporary references to her are limited. Unlike kings and high-ranking officials, whose administrative activities were regularly documented, women generally appear in medieval chronicles only when they played extraordinary political or military roles.

The principal source for Mulagabharu is the **Ahom Buranjis**, which record that after the death of her husband **Frasengmung Borgohain**, she entered the battlefield wearing his armour and continued fighting against Turbak Khan's forces. The chronicles portray this act as one of exceptional courage and loyalty to the Ahom kingdom.

Later historians such as Edward Gait and Surya Kumar Bhuyan accepted the essential outline of this narrative while recognising that many details cannot be independently verified. Modern historians generally agree that Mulagabharu's participation formed part of the broader mobilisation undertaken during the crisis created by Turbak Khan's invasion.

At the same time, later Assamese literature, school textbooks, dramas, and popular narratives have elevated Mulagabharu into one of the foremost symbols of patriotism and sacrifice. These cultural representations have undoubtedly strengthened public memory but occasionally introduce details that cannot be corroborated by historical evidence.

For this reason, the present study distinguishes carefully between documented historical facts preserved in the Buranjis and later commemorative traditions. Such source criticism is essential for producing a balanced reconstruction of Mulagabharu's historical role rather than merely repeating legendary narratives.

The Battle of Duimunisila and Mulagabharu's Heroic Resistance

The Military Campaign of Turbak Khan

The invasion led by **Turbak Khan** during the reign of Swargadeo Suhungmung represents one of the most formidable military expeditions launched by the Bengal Sultanate against the Ahom kingdom. Earlier incursions into Assam had demonstrated the military capabilities of the Ahoms, yet the Bengal court continued to perceive the Brahmaputra Valley as strategically important owing to its control over trade routes, elephants, and agricultural resources. Consequently, Sultan Nasiruddin Nasrat Shah entrusted Turbak Khan, an experienced military commander, with leading a well-equipped expedition into Assam.

Unlike previous invasions, Turbak Khan's force appears to have been organised with greater military preparation. Contemporary chronicles describe a large contingent consisting of cavalry, infantry, elephant corps, artillery, and skilled archers. The invading army also carried firearms, matchlocks, and heavy war equipment, reflecting the increasing influence of gunpowder technology in the military organisation of the Bengal Sultanate.

The route of invasion followed the Brahmaputra valley, enabling the invading army to utilise navigable waterways while simultaneously advancing by land. However, the geographical conditions of Assam differed considerably from those of Bengal. Dense forests, marshes, seasonal flooding, numerous tributaries, and humid climatic conditions severely restricted the movement of cavalry and heavy artillery. The Ahoms, being thoroughly familiar with local geography, converted these environmental conditions into strategic advantages.

Initially, Turbak Khan's forces achieved limited success and advanced into Ahom territory. Several frontier positions changed hands, and the Ahom army was compelled to reorganise its defensive strategy. Rather than risking immediate decisive confrontation, Ahom commanders adopted flexible military tactics involving gradual withdrawal, disruption of enemy supply lines, and carefully selected counter-attacks.

This strategy reflected the maturity of Ahom military organisation under Suhungmung. Instead of relying exclusively upon numerical superiority, the Ahoms employed mobility, intelligence gathering, riverine operations, and knowledge of local terrain to weaken the invading army before engaging in decisive combat.

Frasengmung Borgohain and the Ahom Counter-Offensive

Among the distinguished commanders entrusted with the defence of the kingdom was **Frasengmung Borgohain**, one of the highest-ranking nobles of the Ahom administration. The office of Borgohain occupied an important constitutional position within the Ahom political system, combining administrative responsibility with military leadership. Frasengmung was therefore not merely a battlefield commander but one of the principal architects of the kingdom's defence.

The Ahom military organisation differed significantly from many contemporary Indian states. Instead of maintaining a large standing army throughout the year, the kingdom relied upon the **Paik system**, under which adult male subjects rendered compulsory military and labour service to the state. During emergencies, thousands of Paiks could be mobilised within a relatively short period. This arrangement ensured that military manpower remained closely integrated with the agrarian economy.

Frasengmung Borgohain successfully organised resistance against Turbak Khan through coordinated attacks conducted across multiple fronts. Small detachments harassed enemy movements, destroyed communication routes, and launched surprise attacks against

isolated units. Such operations gradually reduced the operational effectiveness of the invading forces.

Nevertheless, the conflict proved exceptionally fierce. During one of the major engagements preceding the Battle of Duimunisila, Frasengmung Borgohain was mortally wounded while leading his troops. His death represented a severe psychological blow to the Ahom army because he had commanded considerable respect among soldiers and administrators alike.

In many medieval armies, the death of a principal commander often resulted in confusion, declining morale, and military retreat. The Ahom army therefore faced a critical moment. It was at this juncture that Mulagabharu emerged as one of the most remarkable figures in Assamese history.

Mulagabharu's Entry into the Battlefield

According to the **Ahom Buranjis**, Mulagabharu, the wife of Frasengmung Borgohain, refused to allow the death of her husband to weaken the defence of the kingdom. Instead of withdrawing into mourning, she is said to have donned her husband's armour, mounted his war elephant (or horse according to some later traditions), and entered the battlefield to encourage the Ahom soldiers.

This episode occupies a unique position in Assamese historical literature because it represents one of the earliest recorded instances of direct female participation in organised warfare in the region. The Buranjis describe her action not as an impulsive emotional response but as an expression of loyalty towards the Ahom state and determination to continue the struggle against foreign invasion.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the historical core of this narrative and later literary embellishments. The contemporary chronicles confirm Mulagabharu's participation in battle but provide comparatively limited details regarding speeches, dramatic episodes, or symbolic gestures that appear in modern retellings. Many such elements entered Assamese literature during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of regional nationalist interpretations.

From a historical perspective, the essential fact remains that Mulagabharu assumed an active military role after the death of Frasengmung Borgohain. This itself was extraordinary within the political culture of medieval South Asia.

The Battle of Duimunisila

The decisive engagement occurred at **Duimunisila**, a strategically important location that became the turning point of the Ahom–Turk conflict. Although the precise geographical identification of the battlefield remains debated among historians, there is broad agreement that the battle constituted the final major confrontation between the Ahom forces and Turbak Khan's army.

The Ahom commanders deliberately selected terrain favourable to their own military strengths. The battlefield contained rivers, marshes, dense vegetation, and narrow approaches that restricted the movement of Bengal's cavalry and artillery. Instead of confronting the enemy on open plains, the Ahoms utilised natural obstacles to fragment the invading army into smaller units.

During the battle, Ahom infantry launched coordinated attacks supported by elephants and archers. River flotillas disrupted enemy communications while mobile detachments attacked vulnerable sections of the invading force. The prolonged campaign had already exhausted Turbak Khan's soldiers through disease, difficult climate, shortages of supplies, and continuous guerrilla-style harassment.

Mulagabharu's presence appears to have had considerable symbolic importance. Leading soldiers after the death of one of the kingdom's principal commanders demonstrated

that the struggle transcended individual leadership and represented the collective defence of the Ahom state.

Although the chronicles indicate that Mulagabharu fought courageously, they also record that she was eventually killed during the conflict. Her death transformed her into one of the earliest martyrs of Assamese military history.

The Death of Turbak Khan and the Ahom Victory

The Battle of Duimunisila ultimately ended in a decisive Ahom victory. During the course of the fighting, **Turbak Khan was killed**, an event that fundamentally altered the course of the campaign. The loss of the commander created confusion within the invading army, whose organisational structure depended heavily upon centralised leadership.

The Ahom forces immediately exploited this opportunity by launching vigorous attacks against the retreating enemy. Many Bengal soldiers were captured, while others attempted to escape through the difficult terrain of the Brahmaputra Valley. Contemporary chronicles indicate that large quantities of military equipment, elephants, horses, and firearms fell into Ahom hands.

The victory had consequences extending far beyond the immediate battlefield. Politically, it secured the western frontier of the Ahom kingdom and demonstrated that external invasions could be successfully resisted. Militarily, the conflict encouraged further improvements in fortifications, intelligence networks, and military administration. Psychologically, the victory strengthened collective confidence and reinforced loyalty towards the Ahom monarchy.

Historians generally regard the defeat of Turbak Khan as one of the major milestones in the consolidation of the Ahom kingdom during the reign of Suhungmung. Without this victory, the later political expansion and institutional development of the Ahom state might have followed a very different trajectory.

Mulagabharu and Women's Participation in Ahom Warfare

Mulagabharu's participation raises important questions concerning the position of women within Ahom society. Traditional interpretations often portray medieval warfare as an exclusively male domain. However, the Ahom political system presents a more complex picture.

Royal women participated in diplomatic marriages, religious patronage, economic administration, and occasionally political decision-making. Although military command generally remained a male responsibility, exceptional circumstances created opportunities for women to assume leadership roles. Mulagabharu's intervention during the crisis following Frasengmung Borgohain's death demonstrates that political necessity could override conventional gender expectations.

It would nevertheless be inaccurate to argue that women regularly served as military commanders within the Ahom kingdom. The available historical evidence suggests that Mulagabharu's participation was exceptional rather than representative. Her significance therefore lies not in proving widespread female military service but in illustrating the flexibility of Ahom political institutions during periods of existential crisis.

Her actions also reveal that concepts of loyalty and patriotism within the Ahom state were not confined exclusively to male warriors. The defence of the kingdom was understood as a collective responsibility involving members of the royal family, administrative elites, military officers, and, under extraordinary circumstances, royal women.

Historical Analysis

The historical importance of Mulagabharu should be assessed on three interconnected levels.

First, her participation demonstrates the resilience of the Ahom military system. The death of a senior commander did not lead to organisational collapse because leadership could be symbolically and practically reconstituted during the battle.

Second, Mulagabharu represents an important example of female political agency in medieval northeastern India. Rather than remaining a passive observer of military events, she actively intervened at a decisive historical moment. This challenges simplistic assumptions regarding the complete exclusion of women from political and military affairs in medieval South Asia.

Third, the evolution of Mulagabharu's memory illustrates the interaction between history and cultural identity. While the *Buranjis* record her participation succinctly, later generations transformed her into an enduring symbol of Assamese courage, sacrifice, and resistance against external aggression. Historians must therefore appreciate both dimensions: the documented historical event and the subsequent construction of collective memory.

Historiographical Debate: History, Heroism and Collective Memory

The figure of Mulagabharu occupies an important place in the historical consciousness of Assam, yet her representation has undergone significant transformation over time. While the **Ahom Buranjis** present a relatively concise account of her participation in the battle against Turbak Khan, nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary works, school textbooks, popular histories, dramas, and commemorative writings have expanded her story into one of the most celebrated narratives of female heroism in Assamese history. This evolution raises important historiographical questions concerning the relationship between documented history and collective memory.

The *Buranjis* were official chronicles prepared under royal patronage. Their principal objective was to record political events, royal succession, military campaigns, diplomatic relations, and administrative developments. Consequently, they generally describe Mulagabharu only in connection with the death of Frasingmung Borgohain and the subsequent continuation of the battle. Unlike modern narratives, the chronicles do not provide elaborate descriptions of emotional speeches, patriotic declarations, or detailed battlefield episodes.

Colonial historians such as **Edward Gait** largely accepted the *Buranji* account while integrating it into a broader political history of Assam. Gait regarded Mulagabharu as an example of exceptional courage but did not analyse her within a wider framework of gender or military history. His emphasis remained on political chronology rather than social interpretation.

During the twentieth century, Assamese historians and literary figures increasingly interpreted Mulagabharu as a symbol of regional identity and patriotic resistance. This development coincided with the emergence of modern Assamese nationalism, when historical figures were frequently invoked to strengthen cultural pride and regional identity. In this process, the historical personality of Mulagabharu acquired symbolic meanings that extended beyond the available documentary evidence.

From a historiographical perspective, neither the historical record nor the cultural memory should be dismissed. Rather, both represent different forms of historical knowledge. The *Buranjis* preserve contemporary political memory, whereas later literary traditions reveal how successive generations understood and celebrated the past. A critical historian must therefore distinguish between documented facts and symbolic interpretation without diminishing the cultural significance of either.

Critical Evaluation of the Historical Sources

The reconstruction of Mulagabharu's life presents several methodological challenges arising from the limited availability of contemporary documentation. Unlike major political

figures such as Suhungmung or Turbak Khan, whose activities are recorded across multiple sources, references to Mulagabharu remain comparatively brief.

The **Ahom Buranjis** constitute the most important primary source. Their proximity to the events enhances their historical value; however, they were official court chronicles produced under royal supervision. As with many pre-modern chronicles, their purpose was not merely to record events but also to legitimise royal authority and celebrate political achievements. Consequently, they require careful source criticism.

Another limitation concerns chronology. The surviving Buranjis were copied and recopied over several centuries. Variations among manuscripts occasionally create difficulties regarding names, dates, and sequences of events. Historians such as Surya Kumar Bhuyan devoted considerable effort to comparing different manuscript traditions, yet certain uncertainties inevitably remain.

Persian chronicles relating to the Bengal Sultanate provide valuable information regarding military expeditions into Assam but contain relatively little detail concerning Ahom internal affairs. Moreover, these sources naturally present the conflict from the perspective of the invading power. Their silence regarding Mulagabharu should therefore not be interpreted as evidence against her participation, since court historians frequently focused upon rulers and commanders rather than individual opponents.

Modern historical works depend largely upon these earlier sources. Consequently, the available evidence permits reconstruction of Mulagabharu's historical role but does not support every detail that appears in later popular narratives. Historians must therefore avoid both extremes: uncritical acceptance of legendary embellishment and excessive scepticism that dismisses regional historical traditions without adequate justification.

Mulagabharu's Legacy in Modern Assam

Although nearly five centuries have passed since the Battle of Duimunisila, Mulagabharu continues to occupy an important place in the cultural and historical landscape of Assam. Her memory survives not merely through historical texts but also through literature, educational curricula, public commemorations, theatrical performances, and popular culture.

In Assamese literature, Mulagabharu represents courage, sacrifice, and unwavering loyalty towards the homeland. Writers frequently compare her with other celebrated women warriors of Indian history, thereby situating Assamese historical experience within the wider national narrative of resistance and heroism.

Educational institutions across Assam introduce students to Mulagabharu as one of the outstanding female personalities of medieval Assamese history. Such representation has contributed significantly to public awareness regarding women's participation in historical processes that have traditionally been narrated through predominantly male perspectives. The story of Mulagabharu also possesses contemporary relevance for gender studies. Modern scholarship increasingly recognises that women in pre-modern societies exercised political agency in multiple forms, including diplomacy, administration, patronage, religious leadership, and, under exceptional circumstances, military action. Mulagabharu exemplifies this broader historical reality while simultaneously illustrating the limitations imposed by patriarchal social structures.

Her legacy therefore extends beyond military history. She represents the capacity of historical memory to preserve examples of courage that transcend conventional social boundaries. For contemporary Assam, Mulagabharu remains an enduring reminder that the defence of political independence involved the collective efforts of diverse sections of society.

Conclusion

The history of the Ahom–Turk conflict occupies a crucial position in the political evolution of medieval Assam. The successful resistance against Turbak Khan not only preserved the territorial integrity of the Ahom kingdom but also strengthened institutions that enabled the state to remain one of the longest surviving indigenous kingdoms in South Asia. Within this broader historical context, Mulagabharu emerges as one of the most remarkable personalities associated with the defence of the kingdom.

A critical examination of the available evidence demonstrates that Mulagabharu's historical importance rests not solely upon the dramatic circumstances of her death but also upon what her participation reveals about the political culture of the Ahom state. Her decision to enter the battlefield following the death of Frasengmung Borgohain reflected extraordinary personal courage while simultaneously reinforcing the collective determination of the Ahom forces during a moment of profound military crisis.

The study further indicates that women in medieval Assam were not invariably confined to domestic or ceremonial roles. Although direct military participation remained exceptional, political necessity created opportunities for women to assume active responsibilities in defending the kingdom. Mulagabharu therefore represents an important example of female agency within the military history of northeastern India.

Historiographically, the paper highlights the need to distinguish between contemporary documentation and later commemorative traditions. The Ahom Buranjis provide the essential historical framework, whereas subsequent literary and cultural representations transformed Mulagabharu into an enduring symbol of Assamese identity and patriotism. Both dimensions contribute to understanding her legacy, provided that historians remain attentive to the different purposes served by historical chronicles and cultural memory.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the story of Mulagabharu deserves greater attention within the broader historiography of medieval India. Her contribution challenges conventional narratives that overlook women's participation in warfare and expands our understanding of military leadership, political resilience, and state formation in the eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent. Future research based upon comparative studies of regional chronicles, archaeology, military landscapes, and gender history may further illuminate the historical significance of Mulagabharu and other overlooked women who shaped the history of medieval Assam.

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