

MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

B.C. KALITA

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This book is a fascinating account of the military history of Assam. Assam has always had a strategic part in Indian history, primarily because of its geographical position. The author has brought out how internal tensions disintegrate a region. After giving an account of the geographical identity of Assam, he has traced its political history from 1200 A.D. to 1675 A.D. giving prominence to the Ahoms - one of the most dynamic tribes of the region. The Mughals had an important role in shaping the history of Assam from 1612 A.D. when Islam Khan, the Bengal Governor, sent a powerful expedition in 1671-1672 A.D. at the time great Mughals were finally defeated in the battle of Saraighat.

Using the Buronji records of Ahom history and a lot of other source material and his own research, the author has written an immensely readable book on Assam. The book has revealed some interesting features in the field of strategy, tactics, diplomatic skill of contending parties, the Assamese guerrilla type of warfare, their naval superiority, and their high sense of patriotism.

B.C. Kalita (born in 1937) has a Doctorate Degree in History with a flair for Military History and Defence Studies. He has presented several research papers on military history at the Indian History Congress. He edited the *Dakhinkol*, a monograph on history and culture published by the Assam Sahitya Sabha. At present, he is an officiating Reader in History in the National Defence Academy, Pune.

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To
The Officers of the Three Services who passed out from
The National Defence Academy

Foreword

The military history of India has not received its due attention from reserach scholars of Indian History. Dr B.C. Kalita has broken fresh ground in historical research by attempting a study in the military activities of medieval Assam (A.D. 1200-1675). The relevance of a study of the various aspects of the history of Assam, particularly because of its strategic situation as the North-East frontier of India, can hardly be exaggerated. Its in-depth study from ancient to modern times will alone emphasize its integrity with the Indian subcontinent since antiquity. The geographical factors might have caused some physical isolation from the rest of the country, but historical factors, particularly its cultural aspects, have always promoted national integration.

The history of military activities of this period of Assam's history teaches one important lessons on how infighting, internal feuds and dissensions disintegrate a region, and provide opportunities to outsiders to conquer it. Dr Kalita has brought home this fact by tracing the military activities of Assam from A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1675. His researches in this field have revealed some interesting features in the field of strategy, tactics, diplomatic skill of contending parties, the Assamese guerilla type of warfare, their naval superiority, their high sense of patriotism, etc.

Dr Kalita deserves congratulations for bringing out such an important monograph on Medieval Assam.

A.R. KULKARNI

Preface

Several books on military history are available in the Western countries. Most of these works are investigative works on wars and campaigns that took place in the past in these regions. It has been claimed by great military leaders that the lessons learnt from these wars are lessons for a preparation for future wars. Ten principles of warfare, and the basic guidelines as regards strategy and tactics for the fighting forces are the result of the experiences in these earlier wars.

In the defence institutions of our country we talk about various campaigns and biographies of military leaders to the future leaders of our armed forces. We have to select all these campaigns from the Western world. It is not that their methods and skills are superior to ours, but mainly because there is an acute dearth in India of investigative and scientific accounts of military history. The total number of campaigns and battles fought in the Indian subcontinent in the past is much more than in Europe. Even the nature and characteristics of these campaigns like manpower and resources, distance and duration, and arms and ammunitions have a larger and wider horizon than in the case of European wars except World Wars I and II. When Lord Wellington, the hero of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, was posted in Maharashtra as a Captain in the East India Company's army, he studied the campaigns of Shivaji and used the latter's tactics against Napoleon's *Grande Armée* in Spain. This is only one example of the unacknowledged military skill of India.

In the course of my discussions with Dr A.R. Kulkarni, Professor and Head of the Department of History, University of Poona, he suggested that I select a topic which could throw light on some interesting military activities in India. Perhaps before making the suggestion, he took into consideration my experiences of teaching military history in one of the most pro-

minent defence academies in the world. This appealed to me very much and the result is this book.

I am extremely grateful to Dr A.R. Kulkarni without whose guidance this book would not have been possible.

It is my pleasant duty to record my gratefulness to Dr N.N. Acharya and Dr S.K. Barpujari of Guwahati University and Prof. Syed Abdul Ohid of B. Barooah College, Guwahati, for their inspiration and valuable suggestions.

My thanks are also due to Mr Sachin Nath of Poona for his painstaking work in the preparation of the sketch maps.

I must record my thanks to my wife, Lila, daughters, Juri and Jumi, sister-in-law, Padmini, and my friend and colleague, Prof. Deepti Satputhe, for their help and co-operation in completing the book.

I visited a number of libraries and archives in various parts of the country to collect material for the work. I must express my appreciation to the staff concened for their cooperation at all levels.

B.C. KALITA

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Abbreviations

ASB	: (Royal) Asiatic Society of Bengal
ASL	: Asiatic Society Library, Calcutta
Atan Buragohain	: Atan Buragohain and His Times
B.I.	: Bibliotheca Indica
CSSS	: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
DHAS	: Department of Historical and Antiqua- rian Studies, Guwahati
G.I.L.	: Gokhale Institute Library, Pune
I.C.	: Islamic Culture, Hyderabad
I.H.R.	: Indian Historical Review
JBORS	: Journal of Bihar and Orissa Society
J.I.H.	: Journal of Indian History
Lachit Barphukan	: Lachit Barphukan and His Times
SKM	: Sukumar Mahanta

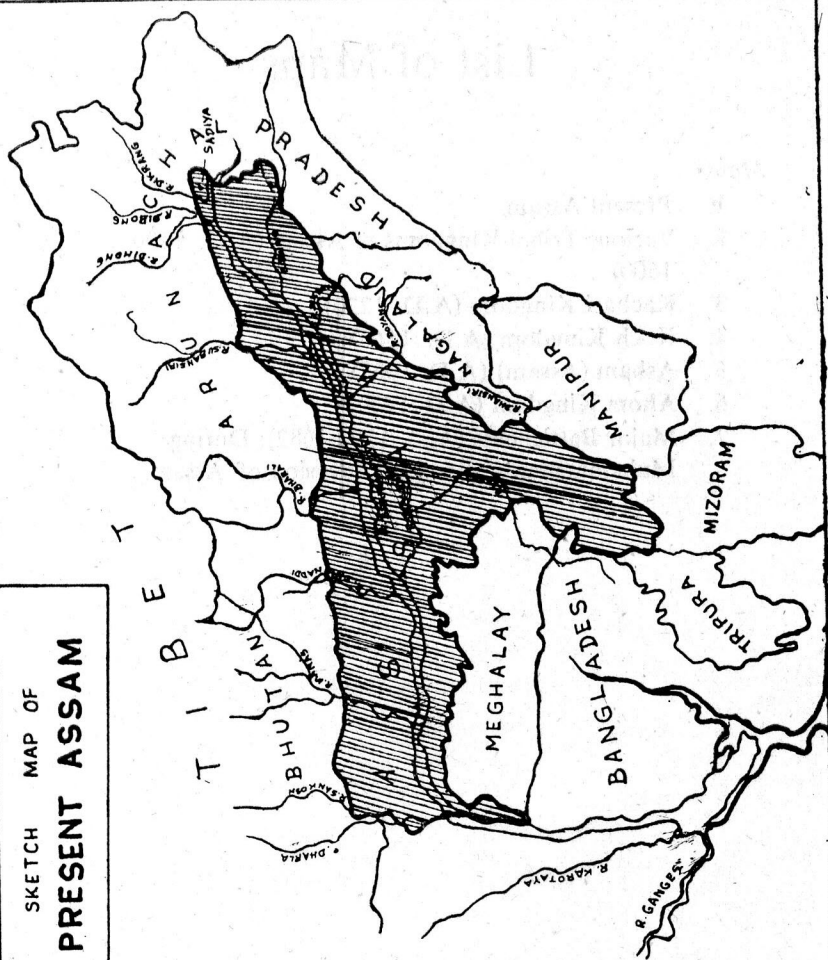
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SKETCH MAP OF

PRESENT ASSAM



Introduction

The political history of medieval Assam has not so far received its due attention from historians. The period under review, i.e. A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1675 witnessed many political upheavals in Assam. The people who were leading a peaceful life during the ancient times suddenly came under attack by foreign powers which were trying to conquer and settle in this subcontinent. How and to what extent Assam defended itself during this critical period of its history deserves special attention. An attempt, therefore, has been made in the present work to study the military activities of medieval Assam.

Scope and Nature of the Work

This work covers mainly the military and politico-strategic aspects of medieval Assam. A few attempts have been made in the past to study the history of Assam but no serious work has been done on the military and politico-strategic aspects which led to several ups and downs in the battlefields with consequent repercussion on internal and regional political and social development. It is true as said by John Buchanan (*The Causal and Casual in History*, p. 17) that our knowledge of the past is only fragmentary, and this is not only because of the paucity of sources in giving proper interpretation of facts. It is more because all events in history cannot be explained with a reference to cause and effect, apparent or real.

Assam, a remote part of India, has been little known in other parts of India. The contention that "Assam is a country, which at most periods of its history, has remained outside the Indian civilisation" (*Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I, pp. 11-12) will be disputed if the history of Assam is traced from

pre-historical and histotrical events. In the epic ages, Assam's contact with the rest of India has been found in many accounts. In the historical period the whole of India was not held together by one political or administrative thread all the time. There are other factors through which Indianness has been asserted and generated throughout the land. These are: migration of people, expeditions, trade and commerce, cultural influence and religious customs and practices. By examining these factors, Assam's relationship with the rest of the country can be properly gauged. Through this work of military contacts with Muslim rulers, Assam's close links with the rest of India will be established besides highlighting the political, social and economic ramifications of Assam during the medieval period.

Abstract of the Work

The military activities of Assam in the medieval period were manifold. Before the arrival of the Ahoms, the entire land was divided into tribal states or principalities. Frequent conflicts and rivalries used to crop up between them. The Brahmaputra Valley in the lower part was under Kamarupa ruled by several lines of Aryan dynasties of which King Niladhwaj in this period earned prominence. With the establishment of the Koch dynasty, Kamarupa, a part of Assam, joined Bengal to form a separate kingdom called Koch Bihar for a certain period of history. When Koch Bihar got split into two parts, Koch Bihar and Koch Hajo, the prominence of the Ahoms in Assam as the ruling dynasty increased.

The Ahoms fought a series of battles against the other ruling principalities like the Naras, Nagas, Chutias, Kacharis, Dimasas, Boros, Jayantias to overpower them. The Ahoms also exercised aggressive diplomacy backed by armed support, whenever necessary, against a number of border feudal lords who had autonomous powers. Amongst them the ten rajas of Lower Assam, Baro Bhuyans, and the Koch are worth mentioning. Finally by the middle of the sixteenth century, the Ahoms attained supremacy over Assam, and became the truly ruling house; the rest of the tribes also slowly came into the Assamese fold with a common culture and tradition. Soon after, the Ahoms also forgot their foreign identity and got absorbed in the process of Assamitization. The repeated on-

slaughts on Assam by external powers could be repulsed only with the Ahoms' skill of warfare and their shrewdness.

Expeditions to Assam started from the Sultanate period. Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, the Turkish General of Sultan Kutubuddin, in the guise of Chinese expeditions entered Kamarupa in A.D. 1205. The Raja of Kamarupa, Niladhwaj, by laying a clever trap destroyed the entire force of Bakhtiyar. After that as many as eight powerful expeditions followed till A.D. 1529. Some of these were protracted and costly. A few of them achieved success for a short duration at a heavy cost, but finally they had to withdraw or perish. The last expedition of this period was badly mauled in the naval engagement of Timeni and the battle of Singri. During this period a considerable number of voluntary Muslim soldiers were rehabilitated in Assam, thereby marking the beginning of Muslim settlements on the North-East frontier of India.

The Mughal expedition to Assam started from A.D. 1612 onwards and continued till A.D. 1682. But the battle of Saraighat in A.D. 1671-2 finally decided the Assamese superiority over the great Mughals. The Bengal Governor, Islam Khan, sent a powerful expedition in A.D. 1612 equipped with cavalry, artillery, and navy with a large number of Mansabdars and Hindu Zamindars under the command of Mukarram Khan. This Mughal force achieved success in the battle of Dhubri and proceeded to Pandu near Guwahati fighting a number of critical wars on land and water. The great Mughal General, Mir Jumla (A.D. 1662-3), even captured the Ahom capital, Gargaon, forcing the Ahom king to flee. But this initial success was doomed by both predictable and unpredictable events ultimately resulting in the untimely death of Mir Jumla. The next important attempt was made by Emperor Aurangzeb by sending Raja Ram Singh for capturing Assam but that ended with a miserable defeat in the battle of Saraighat in A.D. 1671-2. The Assamese policy of appeasement and conciliation to subsidize their armed strength, their ruse and feint and diplomatic manoeuvrability ultimately yielded fruits of success in spite of adversities.

That no imperialist force during any period of Indian history could subdue Assam despite repeated attacks is a mystery. The organizational skill, the efficient navy the shrewd intelligence

system, the exploitation of terrain, the skilful handling of critical situations, and over and above the passionate love of the Assamese people for the independence of their country was the main factor in their success. A nation-in-arms was the prevailing order and hence a vast army could be raised at a short notice to defend against the invaders.

Sources

Historical material for the period from A.D. 1200 to the beginning of the Mughal expeditions to Assam is scarce and occasionally confusing as a result of ornamentalization in the writings. Treaty agreements, edicts, correspondence, and numismatics which are taken to be important sources for the assimilation of history are extremely limited for the period from A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1500. Records of events left by Muslims of eminence and persons who accompanied the expeditions besides the official recordings of the imperialists from important sources to build up the military history of the period under study. Perhaps the Ahom Kings of Assam were the first to introduce the system of writing history systematically in India by engaging official and unofficial persons. More than a hundred of these records of Ahom history called Buranji* have been discovered from various places. These Buranjis are the most valuable records for authentic information about the period. The account of foreign travellers and the geographical investigation made by the East India Company officials in the process of their expansion also supply information which needs to be properly scrutinized before acceptance.

The sources used for making up the geographical identity of Assam in the period of study are the Epics, the Puranas, the Tantras and other mythological literature. These literary works refer to Assam as Kamarupa and Pragjyotishpura. The area and boundary as referred to in these works are found to be identical to that in *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* of the first century A.D., and in the accounts of the Chinese visitor Hiuen Tsang of seventh century A.D. The prevalent traditions of Assam, the existing remnants of roads and bridges, the great Brahmaputra river and

*This is an Ahom word which means treasure house of knowledge.

many other rivers as mentioned in early literary and historical records make it easy to ascertain its geographical identity. Though tradition cannot always be considered as an accurate source yet its comparative and analytical assessment helps in sorting out several problems which one confronts in research works.

Persian and Muslim Sources

Persian writings of the Muslim historians, travellers and Generals are important sources for geographical as well as strategic and military knowledge. Minhajuddin Siraj who wrote *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* during the middle of thirteenth century A.D. gives valuable information about Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khilji's Assam invasion in A.D. 1205-6. Ghiasuddin's invasion in A.D. 1226, Nasiruddin's in A.D. 1228 and about Yuzback's invasion in A.D. 1256-7. The author was at Lakhnauti (near Dhaka) when the expeditions took place. *Riyaz-us-Salatin* of Ghulam Hussayan Salim of the later part of thirteenth century A.D. presents the accounts of Bakhtiyar's and Hussayan's expeditions to Assam. *Akbar-namah* by Shaikh Abul Fazl refers to Mughal intervention in Koch Bihar when there was a rivalry between Lakshmi Narayan and Raghu Narayan, the rulers of Koch Bihar and Koch Hajo. *Ain-i-Akbari* by the same author describes the manners and habits of the inhabitants of Assam. *Padshah-namah* by Alla Yar Khan, *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah* or *Tarikh-i-Asham* by Muhammad Wali Ahmed surnamed Shihabuddin Talish gives a detailed account of Mir Jumla's Assam invasion. *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* by Mirza Nathan alias Shitab Khan narrates the history of conflicts of the Mughals with Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reign of Jehangir and Shahjahan. Mirza Nathan himself took part in the Assam campaign and later on he was made Mughal Fouzdar at Guwahati for some time. This account was first discovered by Sir Jadunath Sarkar and translated into English. Dr. M.I. Borah of Dhaka University (before partition) obtained the original Persian copy from Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris and translated it into English. This was published in two volumes by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam in 1936. I have consulted these two volumes quite often.

Muntakhab-ul-Lubab or *Tarikh-i-Khafi Khan* by Muhammad Hashim Ali Khan surnamed Khafi Khan is an eyewitness account of Mughal invasion of Koch Bihar and Assam. This was the work of six officers of the period of Mir Jumla's Assam expedition. All of them happened to be eyewitnesses and observers of the events. All the six officers are said to have contributed to this account. But with the exception of Khafi Khan, the others decided to be anonymous and used the names Sadiq Khan and Mamurari to conceal their identity. I used the translation of this account by Prof. Anes Jehan Syed.

Maasiri-i-Alamgiri by Mohammed Sadiq Mustaid Khan describes Assam-Mughal conflicts of Ram Singh and in the post Ram Singh period.

Ahom and Assamese Sources

An anonymous chronicle (Buranji) in the Ahom language was restored by a British East India Company officer from a Deodhai Pandit in the Sibsagar district of Assam in A.D. 1894. This chronicle covers the history of Assam from the earliest time to the end of the Ahom rule. Sir Edward Gait, Honorary Director of Ethnography in Assam, got the manuscript translated by Rai Bahadur Gopal Chandra Baruah. Late Baruah had to learn the Ahom language with Deodhai Pandit spending over three years before he undertook the translation work. The book was first published in 1930 in Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, along with the Ahom text in Ahom script parallel to its English translation. This is one of the most valuable accounts to study the different aspects of Assam history. The title of the book is *Ahom Buranji*.

The Ahom Buranjis which recorded the Ahom administration describing the events of the regime were written in Ahom language and in old Assamese language and Assamese script. Even the Ahom aristocrats mentioned in their family Buranjis their association with the country and events of importance in political, social and military fields. Records in old Assamese language are also equally important and reliable since the Ahoms had adopted the Assamese language for official and non-official use. Hundreds of Buranjis have been restored from individual possession by curious British administrative officers and by Dr

Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the great scholar of Assam history and the founder of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam. Dr Bhuyan has made invaluable contributions in the field of Assam history like Sir Edward Gait who had made a painstaking effort to present the history of Assam in a scientific manner. About 200 manuscripts of Buranji are preserved with transcriptions in the archives of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam, Guwahati. Dr Bhuyan devoted practically his whole life to these manuscripts and compiled and edited forty books to make it easy for future scholars. Some of the books of Dr Bhuyan are : *Deodhai Assam Buranji* (1932), *Assam Buranji from the Text from Sukumar Mahanta, Tungkhugia Buranji* (1932). *Atan Burangohain and his Times* (1957), *Lachit Barphukan and his Times, Kamrupar Buranji* (1930), *Padshah Buranji* (1935), *Asamar Padya Buranji* (1932) *Mir Jumlar Asom Akraman, Sharaighatar Subachaini* and many more. Many of his works have been translated into English. Dr Bhuyan's contribution is indispensable for the study of Assam history.

Asamar Buranji by Padmanath Gohain Baruah, a great Ahom scholar and writer, poet and administrator, is a valuable book for an introduction to Assam history from the earliest times to the contemporary period. This book was first published in 1899 and since then several reprints have been brought out. Besides giving information about Assam, the author has taken care to mention the contemporary events of India simultaneously with those of Assam. Though I found some of his information to be controversial, it must be admitted that late Baruah's work certainly stimulates the subsequent generations to work on Assam history.

Another *Assam Buranji* compiled and edited by S.K. Dutta from an old manuscript (original author unknown) covers the period upto A.D. 1681. This was published in 1938 and was a reliable source.

English Sources

Accounts of the European travellers who visited Assam and who had recorded their findings and observations in their travelogues are important sources used for this work. Francis Bernier who visited during A.D. 1656-68 gives a lot of authentic infor-

mation on Mughal Assam contacts. His travel account was first published in London in A.D. 1891 (reprint, Delhi, 1968). The first translation into English was by Irvin Brooke and later by Archibald Constable.

Another contemporary French account of J.B. Tavernier was rendered into English by V. Ball. Volume II of this travelogue supplies useful information. Tavernier made his voyage to the East in 1630, 1638, 1643 and 1651 and visited different parts of India. The first English translation of this book appeared in 1889.

Francis Hamilton, a British officer under the East India Company, under the instructions of the Company and at the instance of the Governor-in-Council conducted a survey in Assam during A.D. 1808-14. This account was compiled and edited by Dr S.K. Bhuyan and was published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam under the title *An Account of Assam*.

An account of Assam by Dr John Peter Wade who accompanied the East India Company Officers as physician covers the history of Assam from the earliest times to A.D. 1780. The original text of the account was restored by late Benudhar Sharma and edited and published as *An Account of Assam or History of Assam*. This book supplies factual information on the Ahom-Assam confrontation, the Ahoms' conflict with the Nagas, Koch-Ahom hostility, and the Ahom-Kachari conflict.

The History of Assam by Sir Edward Gait is a monumental work. This history was first published in the year 1906. Sir Gait did some pivotal work on Assam history and became a real boon for scholars who craved to trace the little-known history of Assam. *The History of Kamrup* by Kanaklal Baruah, and *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam* by Dr P.C. Choudhary are treasure houses of materials for Assam history.

Sir Jadunath Sarkar has brought many things to light which focus on the shady part of Assam history. His *History of Aurangzeb* in five volumes, *The History of Bengal* during the Mughal period and other works pertaining to the Mughals and their contacts with the North-East have been freely consulted.

Forts and Battlefields Visited

Several forts and battlefields which have found mention both in Persian and Assamese records help in assessing the military and strategic importance of the events. I have personally visited the following places in Assam to assess their historic importance and significance : Dhubri, Barnagar, Hajo, Ranihat, Sualkuchi, Srihat, Sesa, Saraighat, Pandu, Kajalimukh, Shilsako, Guwahati, Shimalugarah, Gargaon, Garal, Kaliabar, and Haligaon. Except for their names and geographical locations no other remanats can be found. However their geographical locations certainly prove their importance. Neighbouring to these places there are Muslim settlements which claim that they came with the expeditions which fought battles in these specific regions. These Muslim settlements have become completely Assamese from all points of view except their religion. Another Sikh village at Lanka in the district of Nowgoan raises interest when found that its inhabitants have become Assamese Sikh in respect of language and culture. They still follow Sikhism and feel pride in the fact that they once belonged to the Punjab. The ancestors of these people came to conquer Assam under the Mughal Generals but the disaster they met with compelled them to forget their homeland; later they settled down happily in Assam. Their intermarriages with Assamese Hindus helped in their integration with Assamese culture. Most of the villagers pursue agriculture as their main profession. Several aged and learned persons were interviewed to know about things of the past and tally them with the historical records.

Inscriptions

Rock inscriptions at North Guwahati, inscriptions on cannons at different places as mentioned by E.A. Gait in his *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, Shillong (1897), supply information on Assamese contacts with the Muslim invaders.

OTHER BOOKS OF INTERESTS

- Bhagawan Parashuram and Evolution of Culture in North-East India/*Swami Bangovinda Parampanthi*
- Local Self-Government in British Orissa 1869-1935/*Kartik Chandra Rout*
- The Patkoi Nagas/*Maj. Gen. S.C. Sardeshpande*

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