

## War Ethics of the Ahoms

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Since the establishment of their small kingdom in the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early thirteenth century A.D., the Ahoms had to engage themselves in many wars against the neighbouring powers both for further expansion of territory as well as protection of their kingdom. Besides, wars were also considered necessary for the enhancement of prosperity and prestige of the rulers.

A question naturally arises as to whether the Ahoms had observed any moral or ethical principles in conducting wars since we do not have any work of containing such principles. But a closer examination of the many wars that the Ahoms waged against their enemies reveals that they always observed certain moral principles or ethics in wars. This paper is an attempt to discuss such principle on basis of a study of the wars. The subject is divided into two broad sections- (i) rules and principles followed in regard to their own people, (ii) those followed in regard to their enemy.

A soldier killed, in the battle was considered to have performed the highest duty to the state. Even the members of his family took pride in it. The widows of soldiers killed in battlefield were provided with the means of livelihood. Occasionally a religious ceremony called *rik khwan* was performed for the honour of the dead which encouraged other soldiers to keep their moral high and this act appealed to their sense of bravery. It was also the custom of the ahoms to propitiate their gods and spirits before sending the army to the battle-field. It was, however, their sense of duty to the state that appealed them most to fight the enemy.

Whenever a soldier deserted the battle-field or acted against the order of his commander was subsequently tried and punished in accordance with the prevailing rules<sup>2</sup>. A commander who did not act according to the order of the monarch was, too, tried and punished. In some cases, he was humiliated by forcing him to put on<sup>3</sup> female dress, and often removed from his post. Even a monarch was also not free from blame whenever he failed to protect the kingdom. Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-63) who fled away leaving his capital to the enemy, was nicknamed *Bhaganja Raja* (meaning 'a king who fled away'), a not too respectable term.

The wounded and the dead soldiers in the battle were carried back to the camp. The wounded were treated and the dead were disposed in accordance with their custom. It was only in extreme situation that the wounded or the dead soldiers were left to their fate.

The killing of enemy in the battle-field was never thought to be a sin, rather considered to be an act of bravery and glory. Such act of bravery was rewarded by honour and presents, and also promotion.

Whenever an enemy soldier was wounded and left by their comrades or one who was without any weapon was arrested but not killed; and whenever an enemy surrendered and sought mercy was also not attacked<sup>4</sup>. The enemies, when defeated, were asked to handover their weapons and to submit for arrest by raising both hands up holding grass in the mouth. Whenever a large section of the enemy was defeated and surrounded they were first ordered to deposit all their weapons at one place and thereafter<sup>5</sup> to surrender so that their life could be spared. Instance of this can be cited of the battle of Salā (1533) where a large section of the Mughal army led by Saiyid Aba Bakar was defeated and surrounded by the Ahom army led

by *Hati Barua*, the commander of the Ahom army. The defeated enemy were asked to deliver their arms "big or small, collected and packed together in one place, without keeping any of them. The enemy did accordingly". After that (the) *Hati Barua* ordered then to twenty persons to be bound with one and entrusted ten to each one of his chiefs", and then, "took the captives" to the Ahom monarch<sup>6</sup>.

Killing of war-prisoners without the royal permission was considered an offence punishable by death. During the reign of *Pratap Singh* (1601-43) three *Neogs* ( a rank of commander) and a prince named *Saring Raja* were executed by the monarch for killing, without the royal permission, a large number of unarmed Mughal prisoners, who were captured in the battle of *Bharali* (1617).

The enemy captured in battle were normally rehabilitated within the kingdom. And those who were skilled in different technical professions were given employment accordingly<sup>8</sup>.

The poisoned weapons were widely used and their use was never considered as a war crime unlike present day. *Mirza Nathan* informs us that the Ahom army used poisoned darts and arrows like shower in the battle of *Sala* (1533).

In the earlier period of the Ahom rule, we come across several instances of cutting off heads of the enemy soldiers killed in the battlefield, and of collecting them. The heads were then taken to a particular place of worship called *deosāl* and were made into garland and kept there<sup>10</sup>. This is perhaps the remnant of a custom prevalent among the early Ahoms, although in modern times it appears to be a barbarous act. Such instances continued till the seventeenth century. During the reign of *Pratap Singha* (1601-43), after vanquishing the Mughals in the battle of *Āgiābandhā* (1616), the heads of the enemy soldiers, were brought

and made into a garland<sup>11</sup>. It frightened the enemy and encouraged the soldiers.

The envoys and the messengers sent by the enemy received escorts and protection even in<sup>12</sup> times of war. This has been a long-standing custom.

It was also the principle to demand war indemnity from defeated enemy<sup>13</sup>. During the reign of Suhunmong (1497-1539) when the Kacharis sued for peace, the Ahom monarch demanded an indemnity of 1500 silver pieces (rup), two elephants and the younger sister of the Kachari King<sup>14</sup>.

But the above mentioned principles were not observed in case of reprisal, when men, women and children were arrested, often killed, granaries were burned and properties were seized. There were also several instances of burning and destroying of towns and villages of the enemy in which the military and civil population alike suffered<sup>15</sup>. During the reign of Sukhāmpa (1552-1601), the Nagas of Aiton who refused to submit were punished severely, their women and children were made captives and their villages plundered. Gadādhara Singha (1681-96) also severely dealt with the Miris, as they raided the Ahom territory. Some of their villages were burnt and their granaries were seized<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the Ahom army also plundered the enemy camp, whenever the latter refused to submit. In Pratap Singha's reign, a Mughal commander named Miran, who encamped at Hajo refused to submit, was killed and plundered; his two camps were seized with 2560 guns, 4920 swords, 700 *jamadar* (a kind of sword), 700 knives and *Khabuwa* (a kind of dagger) and a large number of golden silver utensils and ornaments<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, in case of reprisal the Ahoms also captured the rulers, whom were brought to the royal ser-aglio. In 1536 the Ahom army after defeating Kacharis killed their ruler dershungpha, and his mother. The three queens of the deceased ruler were brought to the Ahom seraglio<sup>18</sup>.

As a measure of precaution, the Ahom government followed the principle of uprooting and transplanting the population of a conquered territory. After the conquest of the Chutiya territory in 1523, the palace of the Chutiya king was plundered and a large number of people consisting of astrologers, Brahmins, weavers, goldsmiths, iron-smiths, oilmen, garland makers cobblers and other artisans were transferred and settled in the other parts of the Ahom kingdom<sup>19</sup>. In 1623, Pratap Singha after annexing the territory of the Bhuyans of the north bank, transferred the leading Bhuyans to the<sup>20</sup> south bank of the Brahmaputra and settled there.

There were also instances of the use of strategem by the Ahoms to acquire the part of the enemy territory in the reign of Suhummung, the Ahom army exploited the simplicity and superstitious beliefs of the Kacharis on two occasions in order to occupy certain areas of the territory of the latter.

However, temples and other religious buildings and their properties were left untouched. Rather these were respected, supported and patronised.

The war ethics of the Ahoms, thus appeared to be not savagery of biolent by its nature. The brutal treatment was meted out to the enemy. Whenever the latter made raids, refused to accept overlordship and violated the terms of the peace treaty. For instance, King Sukapha made indiscriminate slaughter of the Nagas on his way to Assam, as the latter strongly resisted and refused to submit.

From the above discussion it is thus evident that the Ahoms followed certain ethical principles in warfare.

## Notes & References

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3. Ibid., p. 122
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5. Bhuyan, S.K. (ed): **Deodhai Assam Buranji**, Gauhati, 1962, p. 61.
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11. Ibid., p.100
12. Ibid., pp. 375-6
13. Ibid., p.55
14. Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.): **Deodhai Assam Buranji**, Gauhati, 1962, p.27.
15. Ibid., p.62
16. Ibid., pp.43-4
17. Ibid., pp.67 & 69
18. Ibid., pp. 9 & 37
19. Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.) : **Satsari Asam Buranji**, Gauhati University, 1960, 2nd ed. 1964, p.14.
20. Bhuyan S.K. (ed.): **Assam Buranji** (Obtained in the family of the late Sukumar Mahanta), Gauhati, 1945, 2nd ed., Gauhati, 1960, --. 76-7.
21. Ibid., p. 61