

Military Successes of the Ahoms against the Mughals in the 17th Century

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An attempt has been made in this paper to show the causes of the success of the Ahoms, a small force of Mongoloid migration, in expelling the Mughals who were so powerful in India of that period. Moreover, I have preferred to use the word 'Assamese' in place of "Ahom" in some cases because any reader of history of north east knows how the Ahoms, an alien people to this land soon got themselves completely assimilated with the indigenous population, intermarrying with them, adopting their manner and customs, speaking their language and bettered the growth of Assamese nationality. Such an assimilation between the conquerer and the conquered is very rare in the pages of world history.

The long drawn conflict of Ahoms with the Mughals in India in the 17th century ended in dismal failure. The power of the mighty Mughals began to wane since the closing years of Aurangzeb's reign and the great Mughal emperor, being heavily pre-occupied with problems in other parts of India, could not resume the undertaking of an expedition to Assam to counter his defeat in the battle of Saraighat. So an attempt has been made to show that whereas, the Turke-Afghans pursued an aggressive policy in regard to the north-east, the Mughals on the other hand, proceeded at first with a defensive attitude. This is evident from Emperor Akbar's defensive alliance with the Koch king Nara Narayan. But subsequently Koch ruler submitted to the Mughals, which eventually led to the latter's conquest of Kamrup. This whetted the ambition of the Mughals to extend their arms not only to the kingdom of Assam, but if possible to the distant countries of Burma, China etc.

However, the Ahoms succeeded in curbing this imperial ambition and denying to the imperialists a trade-route to South-East Asia through their Kingdom. This was really significant in the history of Medieval India.

The Mughals in India in the 17th Century often entrusted the task of leading an expedition to Assam to the best of their military

commanders huge with arms, and ammunitions. But despite this, nothing permanent could be achieved.

The Mughal conquest of Kamrup was not permanent and the Assamese could, at last, triumphantly "wash their swords", in the Manaha, driving away the imperialists from their possessions in Kamrup, at the time, when the latter were at the height of their power. What is also notable is that, some four decades after the battle of Saraighat, Assam could undertake an ambitious project of liberating the whole of north-east India from the yoke of the Mughals, but as ill-luck would have it, the plan could not be materialised due to the sudden death of King Rudra Singha (1696-1714), the master architect of the plan.

All this, therefore, makes it clear that there was something extra-ordinary in the governmental machinery particularly, in the military organisation and also in the socio-economic structure of Assam, which enabled its kings to harness the strength of the people against the mighty invaders for such a long time.

"The military system of the Ahoms derived its efficiency from the maximum utilisation of all the resources of the country- its strategic advantage, the religious sentiment of the people and even their superstitions". As the Ahom state was based on the famous *Paik* system, it was marked by the absence of a regular standing army, as a result of which, the economy of the villages remained undisturbed. A ready militia was always available for speedy mobilisation and the *Paiks* with their graded commanders marched to the training centres or directly to the battle field at a short notice. There was never a shortage of food supply, though under certain emergent situations, the home keeping *Paiks* were required to shoulder very heavy burdens.

To meet the requirements of an war emergency, the whole energy of the nation was utilised for one single purpose. The productions of materials, equipments and food provisions was carried on a more vigorous footing. The dockyards and arsenals became more active; and smithies were established even in the palace enclosures where muskets, cannon, swords, spears and arrow-heads were made under the direct supervision of the king; who also directed the recruits. To meet an emergent situation, cultivation of crops was carried on under rigorous pressure from the government.

The Assamese soldiers received all inspiration from the commanders as well as from the kings. Pratap Singha, the Ahom king (1603-1641 A.D) could harness the strength of his

whole subject population and also of the neighbouring hill men against the common enemy - the Mughals. On several occasions, he personally led the soldiers to the battle field. A fleeing king Jayadhvaj Singha, also from his place of resort, had tried his best to take all possible measures to recover the country from Mughal occupation. Chakradhavj Singh's (1663-1670 A.D.) epic utterances "Death is preferable to a life of subordination to foreigners" infused a sacred spirit of patriotism into the heart of every countryman. This king personally supervised the war-preparations of various departments and attended the parade-grounds and military training centres, giving his personal demonstration of archery and gun-firing to the trainees. He also supplied the trainees with free rations of rice, fish, salt and milk and gave them clothes and money.³ Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 A.D.), soon after his accession to the throne mobilised the strength of the people to drive away the Mughals from Gauhati. Along with kings, efficient and patriotic nobles contributed immensely to the military success of the state. It is true that nobles like Baduli Phukan during the time of Mir Jumla's expedition to this Kingdom in 1662-63 A.D. despised the cause of the country but there were other nobles who worked heart and soul to defend the country from the attack of the Mughals. Of them, special mention may be made of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, Lachit Bar Phukan and Atan Burhagohain. Momai Tamuli, the first Barbaruah was the chief architect of the paik system, who had worked it out in such an effective way that the kingdom never faced any problem in recruiting as many soldiers as required by it in times of emergency without affecting at the same time, the village economy. Further this efficient Barbaruah successfully conducted all diplomatic relations of Assam with the Mughal India after the treaty of 1637 that was concluded between Allah Yar Khan, the Mughal Faujdar and Momai Tamuli Barbarua as a result of which the river Barnadi on the north and Asurar Ali on the south became the boundary between these two power till his death in 1650. Lachit Bar Phukan, the hero of the Battle of Sarai-ghat created a legacy of supreme devotedness to the cause of the country, whose good name is still remembered in every nook and corner of Assam. Atan Burhagohain, the wise counsellor, played a significant role in organising resistance against the Mughals during the years 1667 and 1671. Impressed by his prudence and dexterity in all matters, Raja Ram Singha, the Rajput general of Emperor Aurangzeb exclaimed that "Pride should be heritage of the land where such a counsellor has taken its birth".⁴ That the Ahoms

paid great importance to the personality of the Kings and the efficiency and discipline of the nobles is evident from the following words of suggestion forwarded by a minister in the war-council of Rudra Singh (1696-1714), the Ahom king : "In the reign of Jayadhavj Singha there was an abundance of provisions and men ; and still he acquired the title of 'the deserting king'. Arms and ammunition, materials and supplies are torpid and important ; the followers and subordinates of the king are symbols of life and animation ; they alone can infuse into the immobile war-provisions a dynamic force."⁵

The Ahoms studied Mughal strategy very carefully, including the details of Mughal engagements in other parts of India. Assam's spirit of enquiry about the Mughals resulted in the writing of the famous *Padshah Buranji*, which discusses the history of the rise and progress of the Muhamadan power in India. The Ahoms used to send their spies to the Mughal camp, who collected all necessary information about the plans and resources of the enemy. Fully aware of their weakness in cavalry, the Ahoms avoided open encounters in the plains and applied guerilla tactics consisting of ambushes and sudden attacks, specially at night, and also resorted to various means to demoralise or demolish the enemy. They divided their army into batches and stationed them in all possible points covering the paths and retreats of the invaders. At times, when the Mughals remained care-free in their camps, perfectly satisfied that no enemy was lurking nearby, the Ahoms would fall upon them and create disaster. The quarters from where the Ahoms came or directed their operations, could never be guessed or spotted. Often, they cut off the supplies of the enemy and thus placed the latter into serious straits. Often, they despatched emissaries to the invading generals. Those emissaries used to exaggerate the strength of their army, which in many cases, demoralised the invaders. Another device to create a demoralising effect on the invaders was the resort to magic and sorcery. The *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* gives a vivid description of black art practised in Kamrup with particular reference to the Khunta-ghat *Pargana*.⁶ The *Alamgirnamah* observes that 'whoever happens to step into the land, becomes enchanted and can not find his way to come out of it. The idol temple of Kamakhya, Lunachumari and Ismail Jogi are notorious for magic and sorcery.'⁷ This had such a demoralising effect on the Mughals that Raja Ram Singha took with him the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur to counter the effect of Kamrupi black art.⁸ In case, the Assamese were not ready to face

the enemy, they would make peace overtures in order to gain time but would flatly reject them, as soon as, their preparations were, complete.

The natural fortifications and the topography of the land greatly helped the Assamese in achieving success in military operations. The hills offered ready made sites for fortifications. The hills on both banks of the Brahmaputra near Tezpur were capped with forts which caused wonder even to the veteran general Mir Jumla. The hills in the neighbourhood of Gauhati were similarly fortified and linked with each other by ramparts erected in the intervening plains. To quote the words of Lachit Barphukan, "The Assamese army could fight within the Gauhati enclosures as if sitting in their own homes"

Another factor that deserves mention in this connection is the sturdiness and efficiency of the Assamese soldiers. The *menu* of an Assamese soldier was extremely simple consisting of a special kind of raw rice soaked in water, called *komal chaul* in Assamese. They also used a kind of peripatetic oven.¹⁰ This simplicity in cooking and taking food was in marked contrast with the elaborate paraphernalia of the Mughals. Further, the Assamese soldier had proficiency in varied activities, which he acquired as a cultivator and householder. This versatility amazed Raja Ram Singha, who made the following comment at the conclusion of the hostilities in 1671 A.D. : "Every Assamese soldier is an expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches and wielding muskets and guns. I have not seen such specimen of versatility in any other part of India".

Credit also goes to the Ahom monarchs for their ability to gain the support of the neighbouring hill people and the local Muslim population, in general, in fighting the great invaders. This harnessing the total strength and resources of the country, "Assamese kings stopped the Muslim flood from penetrating into Burma and beyond on a wave of aggressive warfare and conquest. Colonisation, proselytisation and then conquest of Arab merchants and their religious teachers in Indonesia led to the final Islamisation of Indonesia. The Arabs and then later on the Indian Muslim merchants from western India found a direct line of access by sea to Malaya and Indonesia, but a land route for aggressive advance was denied to the Indian Muslims by the Ahoms of Assam. Otherwise, the history of Burma and Siam and Indo-China might have been different".¹²

Notes & References

1. S. K. Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam*, (Gauhati, 1962), p. 143.
2. *Ibid.* p. 145.
3. H. C. Goswami (ed), *Purani Asam Buranji*, (Gauhati, 1922), p. 134.
4. S. K. Bhuyan, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times* (Gauhati, 1947), p. 127.
5. S. K. Bhuyan (ed), *Tungkhungia Buranji* (Gauhati, 1963), p. 37 ; Bhuyan, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
6. *Vol. I*, p. 273 ff.
7. A Muhamad Gazim Ferishta, *Alamgirnamah*, p. 697.
8. Max Arthur Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion, Vol. IV*, (Oxford, 1909), pp. 348-52.
9. Bhuyan, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
10. A kind of cooking vessel was suspended from a bamboo pole, and appointed men while running or walking fast held a constant fire beneath to boil the contents. See, Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam*, p. 148.
11. Bhuyan, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
12. S. K. Chatterjee, *The place of Assam in the history and civilization of India* (Gauhati University, 1970), p. 455.