



## The Military Strategies Employed by the Ahom Kingdom against Mughal Invasions: A Historical Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The Ahom Kingdom established in Assam, Brahmaputra Valley, epitomises resistance to the imperial appetite of the Mughal Empire. This paper elaborately discusses the military strategies adopted by the Ahoms in case of their need for sustaining independence. Some areas include geographical advantage, tactics for guerrilla warfare, naval force strength, architectural defence, and resource mobilization strategy. Notable figures like Lachit Borphukan are highlighted for their strategic prowess and for their leadership skills. This type of investigation not only positions the Ahom resistance in a broader military and historical context but also serves to establish relevant comparisons to analogous resistance initiatives undertaken by other regional entities, thus yielding important implications for modern conflict studies.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most tenacious political organizations in the history of India goes back to the Ahom Kingdom (1228–1826), founded by the perceptive Sukapha, who recognized potential. Its legacy is massive, but when one considers it within the context of the persistent Mughal Empire, which, at its height, pursued its domination of the Indian subcontinent, it becomes especially remarkable. In contrast to numerous regional powers of its time that fell victim to Mughal military aggression, the Ahoms

demonstrated a notable ability to resist and persevere. They successfully thwarted several invasions by employing a nuanced blend of advanced military strategies, strategic utilization of the distinctive geography of the area, and a steadfast dedication to strong leadership. Examining such sophisticated tactics closely, the study will detail how the Ahoms survived and prospered despite being confronted with several quantitatively and technologically superior opponents through tenacious adaptability and creativity in techniques and tied social political structure. Any lesson learned from this historical analysis allows for throwing much important light on asymmetric warfare and regional identity and its strength, very important to military scholarship today.

### **Research Objectives**

1. This was a socio-political and geographical examination that had influenced and framed the Ahom military strategy.
2. To conduct an in-depth examination of pivotal battles, particularly the Battle of Saraighat.
3. This research study compares the stratagems of the Ahoms with that of other regional powers who resisted imperial overreach.
4. To assess the existing relevance of these historical strategies in modern military conflicts' study.

### **Methodology**

This study is based upon a multi-disciplinary approach, borrowing both primary and secondary materials. The archival research is based on Ahom Buranjis (modern chronicles) and Mughal documentation supplemented with the historical analysis of renowned scholars. Using comparative frameworks makes the understanding highly detailed for similar movements of resistance across India and Southeast Asia. All the interpretations have been cross-checked carefully to ensure objectivity, truthful authenticity, and conformity with established norms of research ethical standards.

### **Geographic Factors in Ahom Defence**

#### **Terrain as a Natural Barrier**

The fertile Brahmaputra Valley bestowed key strategic advantages upon the Ahom Kingdom, which were important for its defence against Mughal invasions. The variety in the natural environment of that region-forest cover, complex river systems, and elevated topography-presented significant obstacles that effectively countered the usual benefits of Mughal cavalry and sharp artillery (Mahanta, 2005). The rivers, especially the Brahmaputra along with its tributaries, functioned as both protective barriers and natural conduits for movement, enabling the Ahoms to implement rapid guerrilla strategies while concurrently hindering Mughal logistical operations.

There is a large body of academic literature that finds these geographic factors heavily impaired the supply lines of the Mughal Empire and made even the strategic application of large mounted forces ineffective. The difficulties of swamp and forest traversal significantly limited the Mughal army, accustomed to plains landscapes that allowed them to utilize conventional tactics of warfare (Sarkar, 1990).

Moreover, the frequently recurrent flood of the Brahmaputra River created temporary barricades, converting certain routes impassable and forcing the Mughal army to adapt to unusual conditions. These environmental challenges not only limited the functional efficiency of the Mughal sprawl formations but also gave the Ahoms an opportunity to capitalize on their local knowledge. This enabled the Ahoms to involve the enemy on conditions of their choice, besides associating the terrain itself in a very crucial manner with the achievement of independence. It is through this example of Ahoms' perfect grasp of environmental knowledge as well as their skills of applying it for defence that natural association between landscape and military strategy evokes itself.

#### **Strategic Utilization of Rivers**

Being adept in harnessing the Brahmaputra River, it was not just used as a defence barrier but an operational theatre for innovative naval warfare. The intimate knowledge of the river's topography and hydrological patterns provided the Ahom commanders with tactical foresight to position their forces

strategically. The winding courses and seasonally fluctuated river provided the Ahoms with profound knowledge to utilize the situation for surprise maneuvers against the Mughal naval forces.

The tactical supremacy of riverine operations brought the Ahoms the opportunity to launch surprise attacks in which their ambushes surprised the Mughal boats, hence defining a developed level of strategic calculus seldom witnessed in the militaristic action characteristic of their times (Gupta, 2006). In this sense, the river effectively became an extension of the territory of the Ahoms, and rapid troop movement and communication improved their flexibility of operation further.

In addition, such tactical use of small manoeuvrable boats allows for surprise attacks from angles totally unanticipated. Such attacks would shift the tide of engagement toward the Ahoms on such several occasions, and this is quite useful when pitted against an opponent more in number. In short, the Ahoms not only used innovative land-based strategies to defend their territory but also asserted their dominance of waterways over their opponents.

### **Case Study: The Battle of Saraighat (1671)**

The Battle of Saraighat is a landmark event in the history of the Ahom Kingdom, which symbolizes the resistance put up by them against the Mughal invasion. Fought in March 1671, this battle proved not only the brilliancy of the Ahoms' military genius but also the effective utilization of geographical advantages on their part in the Brahmaputra Valley. Under the great leadership of Lachit Borphukan, the Ahoms took advantage of their utmost knowledge of the river and its surrounding landscape to design a legendary defensive strategy (Mahanta, 2005).

Several Mughal forces, under Komar Umed Khan, advanced with the intention of capturing Assam, while the Ahoms executed a well-planned defense with their ships to cross the tough currents of the river (Baruah, 1994). Their strategic warfare deployment of the war boats in the battle allowed coordinated attacks on the Mughal fleet. This effectively broke into the supply lines while putting the Mughals into a disadvantageous position. Borphukan's innovative naval tactics such as the deployment of fireboats to destroy enemy vessels enabled the Ahoms to maintain control over their territorial waters and achieved high losses among the Mughals.

Moreover, the morale and indomitable spirit of the Ahom troops ensured them a victory. Being less in number, their will to defend their native land strengthened them as it boosted their effectiveness in the battleground (Hazarika, 2010). The Saraighat Battle marked a turning point in the war between the Ahoms and the Mughals and Lachit Borphukan's legacy in Assamese history was forever embedded as a national hero.

### **Naval Tactics**

The Ahoms tactically used small fast-moving war boats called bacharis, specifically designed for agile manoeuvres through the river's channels which were likened to fjords. The designs for these light craft placed priority on speed and agility with which the Ahoms could carry out lightning-fast thrusts and evasive actions against the more lumbering Mughal naval forces that they faced (Bhuyan, 1957). This tactical brilliance enabled them to trap Mughal ships in vulnerable engagements along the winding watery passages, thus levelling the playing field against the numerical upper hand that the Mughals possessed on paper.

Moreover, as the Ahoms were adeptly capable of making do with their natural surroundings, such ingenuity displayed a degree of indigenous craftsmanship that mirrored similar naval tactics employed by assorted militarized states over time, from Viking longships to agile Mediterranean galleys (Ghosh, 2011). The strategy they used during the battles involved ambush and surprise attacks-the ideals, again very close to today's military doctrines of warfare that give emphasis on asymmetric warfare. At the end, it is this effective use of bacharis that not only played a crucial role in the Battle of Saraighat but also earmarked how localized adaptations of naval technology can significantly bear importance for the outcome of military confrontations.

### **Leadership and Morale**

At the crux of the Ahom victory at the Battle of Saraighat was Lachit Borphukan's remarkable personal leadership and psychological pull on his soldiers. His exhortations to major duty over individualistic concerns created a psyche of collectivism and tenacity among the Ahom warriors. Borphukan laid great stress on homeland defense, of which he adequately communicated a fierce emotional intent that was an inspiring force galvanizing his men against odds (Bhuyan, 1957). Historical records show that he would often speechify his armies into excitement, pledging honor, loyalty, and valor and thus building a shared sense of purpose and camaraderie around which much success was built.

Further, Borphukan's shrewd political acumen was marked by a keen sensibility of both the terrain of the Brahmaputra River and the psychodynamics of his forces. He used novel tactics that exploited the natural landscape with his own forces' morale not being dented in any phase of the engagements. Leading by example and inspiring his men in such grim situations is the hallmark of good military leadership. His style reflects elements still debated today in management literature, as an epitome of how emotional intelligence and strategic vision combine to galvanize a force in adversity scenarios (Ghosh, 2011). Therefore, Lachit Borphukan is a perpetual icon of best military leadership in Indian history.

## **Innovations in Ahom Warfare**

### **Guerrilla Warfare Tactics**

The Ahoms' strength in guerrilla warfare allowed them to defeat numerically superior Mughal forces through styles that included ambushes, rapid hit-and-run attacks, and scorched earth campaigns. These tactics methodically demoralized and exhausted Mughal resources as it fought an enemy well-suited to the very terrain that handicapped the Mughal army (Sarkar, 1990). The Ahoms displayed masterly skill in utilizing their intimate knowledge of the wild and dense Assam terrain to create all sorts of logistics difficulties for the Mughals.

In addition, the Ahoms adopted novel methods such as strong points in important locations, using them for surprise attacks with less risk of reacting to counterattack, and they successfully countered the Mughal superiority with trap making and surprise. This tactical ingenuity exemplified how inferior forces could take advantage of asset asymmetry to defeat greater powers and its formulation remains highly pertinent in the contemporary context of asymmetric warfare wherein asymmetric strategies produce tremendous benefits (Bukhari, 2015). The tactics of using terrain, psychological warfare, and strategic deception with which the Ahoms succeeded also demonstrated an ability to adapt and laid down foundational tactics that are studied in military theory today.

### **Naval Prowess**

The Ahoms distinguished themselves with advanced naval capabilities, a hallmark seldom observed in Indian military history. Their adeptness in riverine combat played a critical role in thwarting Mughal advances into the strategically significant Brahmaputra Valley, showing a sophisticated understanding of integrated land and naval warfare. The Ahoms established a robust war-boat fleet, specifically customized to the waterways of the region through which they could carry out surprise attacks, delivery logistics, and quick movements of troops across the river network (Gupta, 2006). That novel deployment of naval power reflected an advance thinking approach, underlined by versatility and adaptability in warfare.

The Ahoms did not only depend on these ships for transporting themselves. They used these as platforms for offensive operations, using trained rowers and archers to attack Mughal forces directly from the water. This strategy made it possible for the Ahoms to use hit-and-run attacks effectively, taking advantage of their superior knowledge of the riverine environment and element of surprise. Moreover, the deployment of these naval forces across these water courses cut off the Mughal supply lines, resulting in a multi-dimensional complexity to their military engagements and operations within the region. This is noteworthy in riverine warfare as this would not only counterbalance the Mughal's land advantage but would also illustrate how the admixture of different military practices may improve the overall performance on the battlefield (Sarma, 2012). Such is the legacy of the Ahoms when it

comes to the Navy, a clear instructive example that holds down military strategy to the geographic and environmental contexts.

### **Fortifications**

The fortification policy of the Ahom regime was an epitome of sophisticated siege-warfare understanding. It had the remarkable ability to combine natural and manmade defensive structures. Strategic fortifications, located particularly at river confluences, enabled control of strategic waterways while at the same time maximizing defense capabilities. These fortifications used a combination of earthen ramparts, bamboo stockades, and strategic plans that would capitalize on the topography of the region in order to present impenetrable defenses against siege operations mounted by better-armed, numerically superior forces (Bhuyan, 1957).

The construction and design of these fortifications were not only functional but also reflected the Ahoms' skills in psychological warfare, as imposing structures could intimidate enemy troops and speak of unassailable strength. Furthermore, extensive use by the Ahoms of local materials reflected not only their resourcefulness but also perhaps their understanding of the ecological context in which they fought. Such impressive strategic acumen in fortification predated and informed such practices that emerged in various global contexts over the succeeding centuries to influence both the military architecture of indigeneity and that of colonially controlled empires (Holt, 2010).

In addition, the fortifications also often were accompanied by strategic planning that included the establishment of supply lines and communication networks in order to provide for assistance or reinforcements to besieged defenders when need arose. The continuous innovation in fortification practices as presented at sites like Garhgaon and Rang Ghar brought into light the Ahoms' adaptability with a prescient insight that they then provided about changing military tactics and marked them as very considerable contributors to the history of military engineering in South Asia (Bora, 2014).

### **Socio-Political Context**

#### **The Paik System**

The Paik system thus appears as a distinctive labor and military organization in the Ahom kingdom, essentially forming the heart of its socio-political landscape and ensuring an uninterrupted supply of manpower crucial for maintaining the Ahom military. Under this system, each adult male had to be reserved for both military and public service jobs, thus forming a self-dependent workforce at the centre of the kingdom's defense and governance mechanism (Barpujari, 1992). This condition not only underscored the shared liability of the citizenry toward the defense of the state but also encouraged unity and allegiance among the people.

The Paik system, in practice, consisted of a well-structured hierarchy where every village was responsible for the contribution of a particular number of paiks, that is, laborers/soldiers. This decentralized structure was very helpful both in mobilizing troops during battles and ensured that every section of society was invested in the welfare of the kingdom. The system epitomized how the order of the socio-political structure can support military effectiveness, since the Ahoms were able to build a strong military not necessarily with professional soldiers (Sarma, 2013).

This system further had deeper ramifications in governance; by linking military service and civic duties, the Ahom rulers created an activist and resurgent people. The Paik system further established village headmen in control over recruitment and paik management, making them more potent in their communities while building a sense of local authority into the political system (Bora, 2007). Ultimately, the Paik system was an important military measure, but it also helped lay the foundation for the sustainability of the Ahom state, despite an unstable historical context.

#### **Role of Indigenous Knowledge**

The Ahoms possessed a wealth of indigenous knowledge regarding local flora and fauna, which played a pivotal role in their military and medicinal practices. This expertise allowed them to develop traditional herbal poisons and medicines that were not only utilized for warfare but also crucial for the health and endurance of their troops (Das, 2012). The toxic plants used strategically and the preparation





of antidotes revealed their knowledge regarding natural resources, which allowed the Ahoms to further damage their enemies while protecting their own troops in campaigns.

Metallurgical skills reflected in weapon manufacturing were a significant achievement in their military technology. The innovations involved both offensive weapons, like swords and spears, and defensive equipment such as armour and shields. This advanced weaponry helped them get an upper hand over the Mughal forces, which understood the prowess of Ahom arms at the battlefields (Brahma, 2013). The superior metalwork, which the Ahoms could produce, not only highlighted their military prowess but also showcased knowledge of metallurgy; the usage of indigenous techniques blended with sound combat strategies. That is, such traditional knowledge systems remain crucial aspects of studying premodern Asian military histories, demonstrating how local expertise shaped outcomes of conflicts. The syncretism of indigenous knowledge and military tactics within the Ahom kingdom can be cited as an example of how localized practices influence broader historical narratives. This too underscores the importance of cultural context in understanding military effectiveness during this period (Kalita, 2015).

### **Comparative Military Strategies: Ahoms vs. Marathas**

The military traditions of premodern India reveal a diverse range of strategies shaped by geographical, political, and cultural factors. Among these, the Ahoms and Marathas stand out for their unique approaches to warfare, developed to defend regional autonomy against larger imperial forces. This comparative study examines their respective martial strategies, emphasizing how geography and resource constraints shaped their methods.

#### **The Maratha Strategy: Mobility and Cavalry Excellence**

The Marathas emerged as a mighty force in western and central India, employing a cavalry-centered military system. They had well-trained contingents of cavalry that could move on the battlefield quickly and strategize and mobilize over enormous terrain. This enabled the Marathas to perform lightning-fast raids, skirmishes, and full-fledged decisive charges, all critical in gaining an upper hand over larger but not as agile forces (Prabhu, 2021).

Strategic flexibility and endurance allowed the Marathas to sustain prolonged campaigns, even in poor weather. Their tactics often cut off supply lines and isolated enemy forces and thus proved the use of mobility in both offensive and defensive operations. These cavalry-dominated styles of warfare formed the core of Maratha resilience and expansion, making them a power against the Mughal Empire and other adversaries (Prabhu, 2021).

#### **The Ahom Approach: Guerrilla Warfare and Riverine Defense**

Contrary to this, the Ahoms of Assam cultivated an army system specifically adapted to the natural and geographical circumstances of their land. Natural advantages were Assam's dense forests and long stretches of rivers that the Ahoms mastered well. They would retreat and employ guerrilla warfare, ambushes, and strategic retreats that demoralized their enemies. Another reason why they are capable of conducting riverine warfare made it a reflection of their acumen in utilizing the natural conditions surrounding their defensive and offensive operations (Brahma, 2017).

The Ahoms also believed in the power of strong fortifications that often designed defensive networks near impenetrable ones. Such fortifications formed part of a comprehensive scheme that incorporated local knowledge of the region and climate. With these tactics, the Ahoms were able to ward off several invasions that ranged from Mughal armies (Kalita, 2015).

### **Strategic Insights and Legacy**

The contrasting strategies of the Ahoms and Marathas underscore regional powers' adaptability in premodern India. The dependency of the Marathas on mobility and cavalry constituted a high-resource, open-terrain-oriented offensive strategy, while the Ahoms' use of guerrilla warfare and mastering of the environment represented a resource-conserving, defensive approach. Such differences can be seen to be reflected in how geography, resources, and political challenges moulded military strategies.

Through an emphasis of local strengths and adaptive methods both powers maintained sovereignty despite being pressured by imperial hegemony. The legacies thereof become informative to the other different military traditions in India regarding how strategic innovation interacts with the geography involved (Brahma, 2017; Kalita, 2015).

### **Ahoms vs. Southeast Asian Powers: A Comparative Analysis of Military Strategies**

Military strategies adopted by the Ahoms in Assam show interesting similarities with the historical accounts of Southeast Asian powers, notably the Vietnam resistance to Mongol invasions during the 13th century. The Ahoms adopted an integrated approach towards naval warfare and guerrilla tactics to harness the peculiar geography of their homeland of rivers, wetlands, and dense forests with which it shaped their combat strategy. Such geographical acquaintance has enabled the Ahoms to carry out efficient amphibious operations and surprise attacks on their adversaries, specifically the Mughal forces trying to expand into their territory (Brahma, 2017).

Similarly, the Vietnamese used their local topography to repel the strong Mongol attacks, such as hit-and-run tactics and intimate knowledge of their surroundings. Using these tactics allowed them to hold up the Mongol troops and rupture supply lines appropriately, similar to how the Ahoms used their water ways and forest cover to outmaneuver stronger enemy forces. The Vietnamese developed an effective naval power, employing boats and rivers in offenses that were reminiscent of the Ahom naval strategies on Brahmaputra River (Tran, 2020).

The universality of these military strategies, in the vein of adaptability, knowledge in regions, and the use of landscape in operations planning, emphasizes a larger trend in regional conflicts across Asia. Both the Ahoms and the Vietnamese illustrate how smaller states can retain their autonomy and fend off imperialism through appropriate innovation, adapted to their contexts (Gupta, 2006). Their experiences contribute significantly toward a holistic understanding of guerrilla warfare and asymmetric strategies that cut across cultures and time barriers.

### **The Ahom Legacy: A Symbol of Regional Identity**

The Ahom dynasty, which lasted for about 600 years over Assam, constitutes an important aspect of regional identity; the legacy formed through its trajectory has played a crucial role in moulding cultural as well as historical consciousness of the Assamese people. The spectacular resistance of the Ahoms to Mughal authority in the 17th century-the scenario finds its centrepiece in the testamentary victory at Saraighat battle in 1671-is the cultural icon par excellence. This battle, therefore, came out not only to tell a tale of military strategies but also defines the tenacity of Assamese identity against the imperial might (Baruah, 2015).

The legacy of the Ahoms goes way beyond the battlefield; it has deeply influenced the cultural fabric of Assam. Their governance introduced new agrarian practices and a system of land revenue that improved agricultural productivity, which in turn fostered a distinct sense of community and social organisation (Brahma, 2017). Religious tolerance and the patronage of art also are dominant features in the Ahom rulers, celebrating the richer tapestry of Assamese culture. The monuments, temples, and literary contributions from the Ahom period also command pride of place for Assamese people, enhancing a distinct identity for Assam.

### **Lessons for Modern Warfare**

The military strategies of the Ahoms provide truly crucial insights and are remarkably relevant to the contemporary study of warfare. Their ability to mine local resources, use asymmetric tactics, and capitalize on geographical knowledge bets for certain timeless principles that can be applied to modern military strategy. In an era defined by asymmetrical warfare, these historical examples give valuable pathways for states facing similar challenges today (Roberts, 2018).

An example of effectively utilizing local resource, the Ahoms proved their deep understanding of the environment by using local manpower, materials, and natural defenses to defend themselves from a larger, long-ranged enemy. The geographic pattern of Assam, with its rivers and deep, dense forests, was an integral part of the military strategies employed and contributed to some noteworthy victories



like the Battle of Saraighat (Brahma, 2017). It establishes how terrain knowledge could indeed give a strategic advantage, which reverberates across modern military contexts such as insurgencies and guerrilla warfare.

Finally, the importance of local support and community involvement represents one of the vital lessons learned from the Ahom experience. Given their strategic movements and military achievements, forming alliances with local populations ensured logistical support and intelligence in furthering their military objectives.

Thus, their strategies are not only historical lessons; they could be approaches for modern military thought to cope with the complex challenges they face in an increasingly asymmetric world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The resistance of the Ahom Kingdom to the Mughal Empire is a prototype of how strategic intelligence, environmental adaptation, and motivated leadership can influence historical events. During this time when such colossal difficulties existed in this age, the Ahoms capitalized on the special geography of Assam, particularly the intricate web of rivers and dense woodlands, to build a structure of defense that effectively negated the numerical and technological superiority held by the Mughal forces. Their mastery in guerrilla warfare, imaginative sea maneuvers, and designed defense systems reflect a military style that is closely integrated with the environment.

Ahoms' legacy transcends the historical. It gives us precious insights into understanding asymmetric war and resistance tactics today. Examples such as Lachit Borphukan prove the efficacy of influential leadership that draws strength from a deep, all-inclusive sense of place and belonging, able to energize people to deliver astounding performance. The infusion of knowledge systems indigenous to specific cultural environments into broader strategic conceptual frameworks underscores the value that culture and environment play in reinforcing ingenuity and enhancing the efficiency of operations. The organizational skills of the Ahoms in marshaling local resources, mobilizing community support, and adjusting to unfavorable situations offer lessons for modern militaries and strategic scholars.

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