

# A Historical Analysis Of The Defense Strategies Of The Ahom Kingdom During The Medieval Period In Assam

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## Abstract

*In medieval Assam, the Ahom dynasty demonstrated a notably strong defense strategy. The Swargadeos (the Ahom kings) implemented effective defensive measures to safeguard the kingdom from external invasions. Since the establishment of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra Valley, the kingdom has faced numerous external threats from neighbouring tribes and other formidable powers. To counter these threats and potentially expand the kingdom, the Ahom kings took strategic steps to strengthen the defense department. Their defense system was uniquely organized, featuring the construction of forts, ramparts and stockades to hinder the enemy; the excavation of deep canals around these forts; well-organized troops; deployment of spies to monitor enemy movements; and the utilization of guerrilla warfare tactics. Moreover, the distinctive geographic location of the state prompted the Ahom kings to adopt specific measures for defense. The mighty Brahmaputra and other waterways created a favourable environment for naval warfare. As a result, Ahom soldiers developed skillful navigation, forming an impenetrable army. This paper attempts to study the defense strategies of Ahom dynasty during the medieval period in Assam.*

**Keywords:** Ahom dynasty, Defense system, Mughal power, Warfare, Medieval period.

## Introduction:

Swargadeo Chaolung Sukapha laid the foundation of the Ahom dynasty in 1228 A.D., and his successors maintained<sup>1</sup> that legacy for an extensive period of 600 years. Throughout their long reign, the Ahom kingdom faced challenges from neighbouring kingdoms, hill tribes and formidable mughal power at different junctures in history. In addition, the Ahom kingdom frequently engaged in conflicts with other powers as part of its expansion efforts. These battles and conflicts necessitated a strong and impenetrable defense system to ensure the invincibility of the Ahom forces. A glimpse into the history of medieval Assam reveals how the Ahom kings dedicated themselves to fortifying the kingdom's defense system. Lachit Barphukan's execution of his uncle, who neglected to construct a rampart overnight reflects the Ahom dynasty's strong dedication to removing obstacles and strengthening the state defense. By implementing these strategies, the Ahom dynasty displayed exceptional courage in resisting frequent assaults from the powerful Mughal forces, which had previously conquered a substantial part of India.

## Objectives:

The main objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To analyse the defensive measures utilized by the Ahom dynasty during the medieval Assam.
2. To examine the warfare tactics and strategic decisions employed by the Ahom kings in defense of their kingdom.
3. To explore historical accounts in order to understand the context and utilization of the defense strategies employed by the Ahom dynasty.

### **Methodology:**

The present paper employs a descriptive and historical approach, drawing primarily from secondary sources such as books, journals, chronicles etc. to explore the defensive measures utilized by the Ahom dynasty during medieval Assam.

### **Discussion and Results:**

Swargadeo Chaolung Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty, initially understood the necessity of a strong defense system to govern over a newly established kingdom. Subsequently, his successors also prioritized fortifying the kingdom's defenses to safeguard against potential threats.

### **Impregnable Fortifications:**

During the medieval period, the Ahom dynasty's impregnable fortifications including forts, ramparts, and stockades, showcased the kingdom's strategic brilliance. These structures played a crucial role in safeguarding the kingdom's defense, effectively shielding it from external threats and forming a formidable protective barrier. The Assamese army, highly skilled in constructing these defenses, established an intricate defensive structure to safeguard its subjects and promptly neutralize enemy forces. These measures not only ensured the security of the kingdom against external threats, but also introduced a new dimension to Ahom defense capabilities. In his 'A History of Assam' Gait (2023) mentioned that, "During this period the assamese perfected the art of constructing improvised walls and stockades on river banks and in midstream and also constructing bridges of boats across the river Brahmaputra (Gait, 2023, p. 283).

The construction methods utilized for these fortifications were impressively unique. From defensive point of view, these fortifications were generally impenetrable; their construction style was complex and the security system was so tight that even powerful enemies found it challenging to breach them and attack the capital. Deep moats were excavated around the kingdom, and ramparts (locally known as 'Garh') were erected to a considerable height. These moats were generally of such depth and width that crossing them without boats posed an extremely dangerous challenge for the enemy. In the ramparts, 'kutuha', a type of thorny bamboo, was strategically planted, serving as practical alternatives to fencing or barbed wire. Even if the deep moats were accidentally crossed, it remained impossible for the enemy to breach the bamboo perimeter. Despite the tight security measures, Assamese soldiers strategically positioned cannons at certain intervals of the ramparts to hinder the enemy penetration. They were well-armed and ready for battle, also monitoring the enemy movements from the secret forts. Consequently, even if the enemy managed to enter these irresistible ramparts, they couldn't withstand the attack of the Ahom soldiers hiding in the secret forts

armed with cannon, muskets, guns and arrows (Rajkumar, 1968, as cited in Saikia, 2019, p.377).

Suhungmung, also known as Dehingia Raja erected a rampart named 'Pachala Garh' at Dikhowmukh to resist Chutia king Dhirnarayan ( Rajkumar, 1968 ). Significantly, the majority of the ramparts in the Ahom kingdom were constructed during the reign of Suklengmung Garhgayan Raja. His capital, Gargaon, derived its name from the imposing ramparts or 'garh', that encircle it, serving as a formidable defense against potential threats. He erected 'Dafalagarh' to prevent the frequent attacks by the Dafalas. In his article 'Barbaruah Momai Tamuli', Benudhar Sharma (1987) notes that the swargadeo proceeded with the construction of the Dafalagarh on the north bank without consulting the council of ministers. However, During the construction, the Dafalas violently attacked the labourers who were engaged in constructive work, ruthlessly cutting down half of them. Later, following the advice of Tamuli Barbaruah and Changmai Baruah, the king strategically established fortresses at certain intervals within the rampart and stationing the Army outside it. Throughout the day, they diligently conducted fortification work, entering the fortresses at night fully prepared for a counterattack. Additionally, arrangements were made to repel the Dafalas with gunfire as they approached the ramparts (Sharma, 1987, pp. 40-41).

Swargadeo Suklengmung also erected invincible ramparts, exemplified by structures such as Samadharagarh and Simalugarh. These two forts, strategically constructed in a geographically advantageous location, were rendered impenetrable primarily due to the skill and tactics employed by the Ahom soldiers. From a military standpoint, these two forts, symbolic of the valor of Ahom soldiers, held significant importance in safeguarding the kingdom's defense. In Moidul Islam Bora's article on 'Assamese War Strategy in the 17th Century' (1929-30) (17 satikat akhomiya ronobol), it is noted that Samdharagarh was fortified with robust walls on three sides, while the mighty Brahmaputra served as a natural barrier on another. Moreover, deep ditches surrounded the fort, to hinder the enemy advances. On the other hand, behind simalugarh, there was a mountain, and a stockade extended approximately eight miles up to this mountain, strategically positioned to thwart any advances by the enemy. Another stockade, about six miles in length, extended to the Brahmaputra river, and these stockades housed guns, ammunitions, muskets, cannons, and other military equipment. Around 3,00,000 Ahom soldiers were on alert to counter any potential enemy threats. (Bora, 1929-30, pp. 213-214).

Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, in his book 'The Life of Mirjumla: The General of Aurangzeb,' discusses the impregnability of Simalugarh, highlighting that "The strong, spacious and sky-high fort of Simalugarh was protected on two sides by high walls with battlements, mounted with cannon. A ditch and the pits with bamboo spikes (phanjis) made access to the difficult. Its defender, 'as numerous as ants and locusts' had kept the materials of the defence in a perfect manner. Indeed it was made impregnable both by nature and man" ( Sarkar, 1951, p. 299). It was unfortunate for the Ahom forces, that Mir Jumla gained control of such a formidable fort. However, capturing control of this stronghold posed a considerable challenge for Mir Jumla. It is worth mentioning that the walls of Simalugarh were so strong that even the cannon-balls of the Mughal army could not easily penetrate them (Baruah,2013). After successfully capturing it, Mirjumla was personally amazed to witness the irresistible strength of Ahom fort at simalugarh. Despite such an impenetrable defense, the defeat of the Ahom army by Mirjumla at Simalugarh is attributed to the absence of an efficient leader, as outlined in Edward Gait's 'A History of Assam' (Gait, 2023). However, it is worth mentioning that the news of the fall of the irresistible Simalugarh instigated panic among the Ahom troops, leading to their rapid retreat

rather than attempting to resist the advancing enemy. Exploiting this opportunity, Mirjumla effortlessly seized control of the Ahom fort at Samadhara also ( Bora, 1929-30, p. 214). Undoubtedly, despite the strength of both Simalugarh and Samadharagarh forts, the Assamese army was indeed defeated by Mir Jumla, largely due to the absence of proper leadership.

During the battle of Saraighat, the Mughal commander Ram Singha, was amazed at the war tactics, bravery, and strong military skills displayed by the Assamese forces. Additionally, he acknowledged their prowess in constructing forts, a skill instrumental in securing victory over the enemy. In this regard, Ram Singha told Lieutenant Rasid Khan as follows:

"Forts have been constructed by the Ahoms on top of hills, and the outlying plains are also too narrow for the purpose of an open engagement. It is for this reason that the Assamese had proved invincible in their wars against foreigners. The fortifications are intricate and complex, and to each fort there are three passages. The enemy is beyond the reach of our heavy artillery and there is no opportunity for fighting with arrows and guns. There ministers, commanders and infantry are all to be admired for having constructed such an impregnable wall of defence" ( Bhuyan, 1947, pp. 50-51)

In response to a letter from Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, commanding him to engage in battle and refrain from making any treaties or friendship with the Ahom, he wrote - "I have not refrained for fighting; but it has proved useless. As there are no fields, fighting by spears, shields and guns is an impossible affair. The Assamese have erected an impenetrable wall of defence on both the banks. There is possibility of one naval fight only" (Bhuyan, 1947, p. 77).

In his work 'Lachit Barphukan and his times,' Dr. Surjya Kumar Bhuyan explores the significance of fortifications in the defense strategy employed by the Ahom Army. According to his findings, the fortifications surrounding Guwahati played a pivotal role in defense, serving as strong wall. Specific locations, including the summits and slopes of the hills, as well as earthen ramparts, were organized into pali (units of command), and armed forces were strategically stationed there, with each pali under the command of designated officer. The movements of the enemy were vigilantly monitored at all times. The Assamese were skilled at promptly reconstructing any section of the fort that suffered damage ( Bhuyan, 1947, pp. 156-157).

### **Espionage System of Ahom:**

The contribution of the espionage system to the field of Ahom defense is undeniable. The Ahom kings placed strong emphasis on recruiting spies to safeguard the kingdom. The primary duty of the spies was to travel within and outside the kingdom, issuing advance warnings of potential external threats, monitoring enemy movements, and consistently reporting all significant incidents to the Ahom Kings. They ensured prompt delivery of all this information to the Ahom capital within a short timeframe. In Assamese society, there existed a proverb : "Iyate marile tipa, Garhgaon palegoi sipa, Signifying that a squeeze was just given upon a plant, but, instantly, it struck roots as far as Garhgaon : Whatever had happened in and around the kingdom, capital Garhgaon was kept informed then there"( Rajkumar, 1968, as cited in Saikia, 2019, p. 383). This proverb reflects the emphasis of the espionage department on carrying out its duties efficiently and expeditiously. The spies were highly active, enabling the Ahom army to successfully counter external enemy attacks based on their information. The effectiveness of

this intelligence network played a crucial role in the Ahom army's triumph over the Mughals at the Battle of Saraighat (Rajguru, 1962, p. 115).

The Ahom king employed a class of officials known as Kakati. Their responsibility involved entering the enemy camp and acting as messengers, facilitating communication between the opposing side. Indeed, the Kakati had to be very clever and skilled diplomats, as they needed to acquire confidential information from the enemy through their ingenuity. Additionally, these Kakatis were often responsible for entering enemy camps and engaging in negotiations to deceive their adversaries for a few days, especially when the preparations for battle were incomplete (Rajguru, 1962).

Generally, well trained Brahmanas from selected families were appointed as Katak ( Bhuyan, 1957). Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, in his book 'Studies In The History of Assam' explores the role of Katak, stating, "The Ahom appointed very astute and intelligent Brahmanas as emissaries, and their representations, consisting of half truths and exaggerations, mystified the Mogul commanders, with the result that in many cases they became dispirited and entertained dubious hopes of success against Assam" ( Bhuyan, 1965, p.146). When Ram Singha criticized the Assamese 'daga yuddha' or guerilla warfare tactics as not permissible, comparing them to thievery, the Brahmin Rani Katak and Kalia Katak cleverly replied that-"The Ahoms cannot but fight at night, as they have in their army a force of one hundred thousands rakshasas or demons who are all men eaters and night rovers" ( Bhuyan, 1947, p. 59). Initially, Ram Singha found it difficult to believe; however, the cunning Katak consistently assured him that the Brahmanas never lie. To establish the existence of a demon force among the Assamese army, later, Barphukan attired the warriors in black. He instructed them to dance in the guise of demons, carrying human legs in one hand and burnt fish in the other, and advanced towards the Mughal outpost at night. Witnessing this, Ram Singha accepted Kakatis briefing on Rakshasas forces. In a relatively new place, these occurrences naturally stirred alarm among the Ram Singh's soldiers ( Bhuyan, 1947). Thus, the Ahom Katak adeptly navigated the wartime situation with great intelligence.

In the 'Purani Akhom Buranji' (The Ancient Chronicles of Assam), there is mention of another class of spies known as chorbachas. According to the mentioned Buranji, during the battle of Agiathuti, the Ahom army launched an early morning assault on the Mughal camp, based on the information provided by chorbachas, which ultimately led to their victory ( Goswami, 1922, p. 79).

During the reign of Ahom dynasty, another group of spies known as baragi or lengta baragi existed. Swargadeo Pratap Singha created this group of spies. The primary mission assigned to these Baragis was to journey to foreign countries in disguise. Their objective was to gather and transmit a wide range of information to the Swargadeo, including details about customs, attire, ornamentation, interrogation methods, travel regulations and more ( Sadar-Amin, 1930, p. 330).

Thus the Ahom kings received advance information from these spies regarding enemy movements, upcoming attacks, and other critical events, all of which significantly contributed to the defense of the country.

### **The Role of Military Strength in the Field of Ahom defense:**

The military department stood as the pivotal element in the Ahom defense system. The Ahom kings meticulously organized the military department, assuming the responsibility to protect

their subjects from potential external threats. Consequently, they were able to defeat the powerful Mughals. The military department mainly consisted of Infantry, Cavalry, Elephant, Navy, Artillery, and spies, with each department having its own responsible officers. Each of these forces played a vital role in the military domain. Furthermore, the Paik system provided a systematic structure to the Ahom military field. According to this system, the persons aged from 16 to 50 years old were required to serve the state as paik ( Baruah, 2013). The paiks in the Ahom administration were skilled in almost every field. In times of peace they played a crucial role in various constructive tasks such as the construction of roads, forts, buildings, and temples. During wartime, the Paik seamlessly transitioned to performing military duties, which included sailing boats, shooting arrows, and using firearms. This indicated that, along with having soldiers from all divisions, the paiks exhibited equal proficiency on the battlefield whenever necessary ( Rajguru, 1968, pp. 107-108). During the battle of Saraighat, Ram Singha himself was surprised to witness the proficiency of the Assamese army, which was mainly constituted by a synthesis of both civil and military qualities. He praised them as: "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches, and in wielding guns and cannon. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India" (as cited in Bhuyan, 1947, p.83).

#### **Ahom Naval defense:**

The navy constituted the most important and powerful force within the Ahom military system. The strategic waterways, including the significant Brahmaputra River and various smaller and larger rivers, along with their tributaries, naturally fostered an advantageous environment for naval warfare in the state. Additionally, timber suitable for boat building was readily accessible in Assam. The Assamese Army strategically positioned naval bases at key locations convenient for warfare, such as Jogighopa, Pandu, Guwahati, Kajalimukh, Samadhara, Dikhowmukh and others. In these bases numerous warships, under the leadership of Paniphukan, were armed with guns, cannons and muskets, ever prepared to thwart any potential enemy threat (Rajguru, 1962).

Two specific Khels, Naoboisa and Naosalia, were exclusively associated with boat rowing and boat building. In his account of Assam, the celebrated writer Sihabuddin Talish, who accompanied Mirjumla during the invasion, wrote about the Assamese naval forces as follows - "so numerous are the boats, large and small, in this country that on one occasion the news writer of Gauhati reported in the month of Ramzan that up to the date of his writing 32000 bachari and kosah boats had reached that place or passed it" (Gait, 1926, p.147). Significantly, the naval strength proved instrumental in securing the Assamese triumph over the Mughals at the battle of Saraighat. In his book 'Lachit Barphukan and his times', Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan mentions about this thrilling naval battle as "The whole Brahmaputra at the triangle between Kamakhya, Itakhuli and Aswakranta became littered with boats, and men struggling to escape drowning. The Ahom erected an improvised bridge across the Brahmaputra by placing one boat after another over the whole breadth of the river"( Bhuyan, 1947, p.83). The historic victory of Saraighat serves as a testament to the strength of the Assamese navy and its indispensable contribution to the state defense.

#### **Role of Cavalry and Elephant troops:**

During his advent to Assam, Sukapha brought along a contingent of 300 horses with him. Employing this force he successfully subdued the Nagas and the tribes in the Southeastern regions of the valley. However, his successors failed to maintain the use of cavalry effectively. ( Baruah, 2013). As mentioned in the S.L. Baruah's book 'A Comprehensive History of Assam' (2013), the Ahom monarchy, after conquering Kamrup, made it possible to import horses from

Bhutan in the mid -17th century. Inevitably, the inclusion of the cavalry department under an officer named 'Ghorabaruah' is therefore a much later addition ( Baruah, 2013, p.398). It is noteworthy that contemporary Persian sources, lack details about the Ahom cavalry ( Baruah, 2013). In contrast, Sihabuddin Talish mentions in his account that Assamese soldiers frightened by horse and fled in fear, when they encountered the Mughal cavalry. He records that upon encountering a lone Mughal cavalry, a hundred Ahom armed soldiers threw down their weapons and fled. In instances where escape was impossible, they raised their hands in surrender. Talish also recounts that, a lone Assamese soldier bravely took on ten Mughal infantry men single-handedly and emerged victorious ( Bhuyan, 1971).

The military division of the Ahom kingdom included a well- equipped and well- trained elephant cavalry, commanded by an officer named Hatibaruah ( Rajkumar, 1968). Traditionally, elephants were supplied to the Ahom kingdom by a group of the Moran tribe known as 'Hatisungi'. The Ahom warriors rode into battle mounted on elephants, which played a crucial role in their military strategy. Throughout Assam's history, numerous instances have highlighted the importance of elephants in warfare. For example, in 1532 during Turbak's invasion after the death of her husband Phrasenmung, Mulagabharu along with five other women, bravely rode elephants into battle against the enemy and perished on the battlefield ( Baruah, 2013).

Elephants sometimes caused terror on the battlefield. In his book 'Itihase Sounwara Shasata Bachar', Sarbananda Rajkumar mentions that "before taking out the elephant to the battle field he was heated by administering a dose of medicine. In such a case, the effect was just the reverse, the elephant had created. On many occasions, in the battle ground, the elephant got frightened and trampling down his own soldiers ran back away at a fast speed"( Rajkonwar, 1968, as cited in Saikia, 2019, p.371). Elephants were frequently employed not just in battle but also for tasks such as clearing paths through dense jungles to facilitate infantry passage and dismantling enemy forts. On the other hand, Baharistan-i-Ghaibi mentions a type of chariot called 'Thatari' or 'Gardun', with which the Assamese elephantry is said to have attacked the Mughal forts (Baruah, 2013).

### **Guerrilla warfare tactics:**

Another crucial element of Ahom defense system involved the utilization of guerrilla warfare tactics. In the Ahom Buranjis, this method is termed as 'daga yuddha'. The Ahom troops took advantage of darkness of the night and launched sudden attacks on the enemy, creating a terrifying atmosphere among them. These tactics struck fear into Mir Jumla's forces, ultimately compelling him to engage in negotiations and forge a treaty with the Ahom ( Rajguru, 1962, p.124). The Ahom army took full advantage of the disastrous monsoon weather conditions to completely shut down communications and disrupt food supplies. Additionally, they weakened Mir Jumla's forces by conducting frequent night attacks ( Gait, 2023). It is worth mentioning that, Mir Jumla's army consumed the meat of camels and war horses to endure food scarcity ( Baruah, 2013). The problems faced by Mir Jumla in Assam can be compared to challenges encountered by Napoleon during his expedition against the Czar of Russia, where heavy snows presented significant obstacles ( Bhattacharyya, as cited in Baruah, 2013).

Even during Ram Singha's invasion, the Assamese army employed guerrilla warfare tactics to successfully defeat the enemy. Ram Singha expressed profound dissatisfaction with this strategy, denouncing it as a thieves' affair. In his correspondence to Lachit Barphukan, he conveyed his discontent, stating that he discovered proof of the Assamese bravery as they fought with cunning tactics. The actions of the Assamese are akin to the fox's approach in

subduing the wild elephants. However, this behaviour only reflects cowardice. In response to the letter Lachit Barphukan wrote that lions are the ones who fight at night, other animals engage in battle on the land and water in the daylight ( Bhuyan, 1971, pp. 55- 56).

### Conclusion:-

In light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the defensive measures taken by the Ahom monarchs for the security of their country, in medieval Assam, protected the kingdom from external attacks; on the other hand, the strategic implementation of these measures also showcased their intelligence, vision, and innovative capabilities. The Ahom established a strong system of governance in medieval Assam with a rigorous defense structure in a relatively unknown location. This enduring system lasted for over 600 years, marking a rare phenomenon in world history.

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