

## **A study into the Ahom Military System in Medieval Assam**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

#### ***A study into the Ahom Military System in Medieval Assam***

Assam since the coming of the Ahoms and the establishment of the state in the north eastern region of India experienced a number of invasions sponsored by the Muslim rulers of Bengal and in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Mughals a numerous times in their six hundred years of political existence. In almost all the invasions the Ahoms forces could stand before the invading forces with much strength except one that of Mir Jumla. This generates a general interest into the military system and organization of the Ahoms. Interestingly during the medieval period the Mughals could easily brought about a political unification of India conquering a vast section of the Indian subcontinent. Ahoms remarkably could manage to keep a separate political identity thwarting all such attempts of the Mughals to invade and subjugate the region. This generates an enquiry into the Ahom military administration, its discipline, ways of recruitment, weapons and method of maintaining arsenals and war strategy.

**Keywords:** Paik, Gohains, Buragohain, Phukons, Hazarika, Saikia, Bora, Hilioi

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### **I. A STUDY INTO THE AHOM MILITARY SYSTEM IN THE MEDIEVAL TIMES**

Assam since the coming of the Ahoms and the establishment of the state in the north eastern region of India experienced a number of invasions sponsored by the Muslim rulers of Bengal and in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Mughals a numerous times in their six hundred years of political existence. In almost all the invasions the Ahoms forces could stand before the invading forces with much strength except one that of Mir Jumla. This generates a general interest into the military system and organization of the Ahoms. Interestingly during the medieval period the Mughals could easily brought about a political unification of India conquering a vast section of the Indian subcontinent. Ahoms remarkably could manage to keep a separate political identity thwarting all such attempts of the Mughals to invade and subjugate the region.

#### **Objectives:**

This study seeks to understand the Ahom military administration, its discipline, ways of recruitment, weapons and method of maintaining arsenals and war strategy.

#### **Methodology and sources:**

To enquire in to the different aspects of Ahom Army historical method is used by taking contemporary Ahom chronicles called Buranjis as primary sources. In secondary sources several books written by established writers on Ahom history were used.

#### **A standing army and commander in chief**

The Ahoms achieved a remarkable success by stopping the tide of Muslim invasions of Bengal and those sponsored by the Mughals by keeping the state from the external occupation. In leading such a mighty army J.N. Sarkar (1994) has answered a pertinent question on the existence of a standing army and a commander in chief that, in theory the King himself was the commander in chief of the army. Since because of the political and administrative affairs of the country most of the times the king could not lead the armies in the battlefield, so the responsibility was entrusted on the patra mantris or the subordinate officers. Moreover the territorial governors were to act as the commandrs under their jurisdiction. Initially there were two ministers Bargohain and the Burhagohain to help the king in the political and the administrative works. In 1532 with the expansion of the Ahom territories the post of Barpatra gohain was created and from that time onwards the three Gohains had to shoulder the responsibility of commanding the army. Later with the further expansion of the Ahom boundaries two more posts of the officers were created which were subordinate of the three Gohains. These were Barbruah entrusted with the responsibility of supervising and governing the territories of upper Assam and the post of Barphukan entrusted with the responsibility of lower Assam with his administrative headquarters at Gauhati. These two ranks were permanent commanders in their respective jurisdictions. In times of the war or in an emergency the king selects the commander among the three gohains in consultation with the council of Gohains called Barmel summoned by the king.

In general practice H. Barbaruah(2006) the land forces were placed under Neog Phukons and the navy was to be commanded by Pani Phukon. These posts could be considered as the General or chief of the Army and the Admiral of the navy of the modern times. In these posts the appointments were made from the Ahoms only although the army was heterogeneous in character. S.K.Bhunyan (1957) had recorded the desertion and defection of the Ahom officers and soldiers as the king Jaydhwaj singha appointed one Manthir Bezdoloi Bharali Baruah a Kayastha store keeper as the commander of Ahom Flotila with the rank of Parbatiya Phukon against the Mughal general Mir Jumla. The decision costed greatly to the king as the invading forces easily occupied the forts of Gauhati.

### **Junior officers, Recruitment of the Soldiers and Paik System**

The Ahoms followed a very organized form of military recruitment process. For this the ahoms had applied a method which they had carried from their homeland or prevalent among the Thais. This system was known as the Paik system. Although it underwent changes with the passage of time. Momai Tamuli Barbaruah had organized it in a systematic way. The Paik system should not be taken as the institution within the army. It was in fact a socio political organization under which the medieval Assamese society was organized with both civil and military functions. Even today the modern armies perform both civil and military duties in war and peace times. It was a system which helped the Ahoms to muster all the men in times of war necessity. That is why Paik system is to be understood to comprehend the military organization of the Ahoms. Paik system was a system through which compulsory services were to be rendered by the men folks of the state to the king. Under this system every adult male between the age group 16 to 50 was registered as a paik for state services both civil and military. During peacetime they were to perform different crafts like making bows, arrows, boats, houses, construction of roads, embankments, tanks etc.. During war same men were to perform the military services as soldiers. The men were organized in to smaller units called gots. Each got had four men later reduced to three. Each man in the got was to perform his state responsibilities for a period of three later four months in a year in rotation. Some times in times of emergency two or three men from the got could be called for the service. The first person in accordance to the seniority was called as mul, the second as dewal and the third as tewal. Further the paiks were organized into Khels on professional or functional basis like Naosaliya Khel and Dhenu Chosa khel.

The khels which functioned purely for the military purpose like that of Dhenu Chosa and Boat Makers and rowers could be compared to the modern regiments of the army with specialized functions. The larger Khels were supervised by Phukans and the smaller Khels were supervised by the Baruas. The control of the state on the system was rigid. The discipline was rigorously maintained. The khels were provided with the regular gradation of officers. Over every twenty paiks there was an officer called Bora, over every hundred there was an officer called Saikia, a thousand paiks were commanded by the Hazarikas, Three thousand paiks were commanded by the Rajkhowas, and six thousand paiks were commanded by the Phukons. S.L. Baruah (1985) is of the view that the non serving or off duty paiks form a standing militia ready to be mobilized in times of necessity during war on a short notice by the Kheldar with the help of his subordinate officers. This helped the Ahom rulers to maintain as pointed out by J.N.Sarkar (1994) who refers to the system as it fulfills the need of a regular but unsalaried army which did not have any financial pressure on the state purse. But it seems to be partially true as each paik was offered with the best arable land called ga mati free of any revenue. The land belonged to the Khel and the paiks did not have any hereditary right upon it. In case a paik dies or his services were over the land was forfeited by the Khel. In this respect in the medieval period payment to the soldiers in kind instead of cash was not an exceptional practice followed by many monarchies however the Ahom had a better control of the system as they did not have to face any problem as faced by their contemporaries in Delhi Sultanate. A.L. Srivastava (1995) Balban faced revenue problems because of the granting of fiefs to Turkish soldiers in lieu of their military services by his predecessors. More over land was abundant in Assam. The men as paiks under the paik system formed the main branch or regiments of the army. This army was further supported by the smaller contingents of the tributary rulers, hill tribal chiefs, feudatory states etc. The Ahom army can be divided into six divisions or branches. These are Infantry, Cavalry, Navy, Artillery, and Supporting Corps.

### **Cavalry**

In the Ahom army Cavalry occupied an important place. The Ahom Cavalry can be divided into two divisions Elephant cavalry and the Horse Cavalry. Elephants were abundantly available in the hills and jungles of Assam. According to Shihabuddin Talish the official writer who visited Assam with the great Mughal general Mir Jumla had also written about its availability in Assam. The Ahom rulers took personal interest in elephant rearing. Hastividyanava a treatise on elephant was written under the patronage of Ahom king Siva Singha and his queen Phuleswari Kunwari by Sukumar Barkaith. They had established Khels for catching and supplying elephants. A part of the Moran tribe was organized in to Hati Chungi Khel to maintain the supply of the

elephants to the state or the royal house. Elephants were used for both war and peace time works. The elephant cavalry was in charge of Hati Baruah. Elephants were trained for both war and peace time duties. S.L. Baruah (1985) was of the view that since the department was in charge of Baruah a junior rank than that of the Phukon, it might have less importance. But J.N. Sarkar (1994) refers to that Elephants were used to clear the dense forest for the army to pass on, break through the forts, and a massive charge of a squadron could scare and drive the enemy away has got an indispensable place in the army. Moreover the elephants could also be used by the commanders as the observation posts to supervise the battle. Elephants were also mounted with light artillery serving the purpose of modern tanks.

Traditionally Ahoms also maintained Horses. E.A.Gait(1969) is of the view that Sukapha the first King of Ahoms entered Assam with about 3000 horses, which is a evidence of their equestrian skills and the use of Horse cavalry. H.Barbaruah (2006) refers to the post of Ghora Baruas in charge of the royal stables. Ghora Barbora was appointed to assist his superior Barua. They were to rear, maintain and provide fodder to the horses of the royal stables. They were also to train the sawars of the cavalry in the battle. Ahom Buranjis refer to few occasions when horses were used in the battle. Sukapha used horse cavalry to subjugate the Nagas. Ahom king Sudangpha had used horses against the Naras in the war. However Persian chronicles does not refer to the use of horses in the battle field. Shihabuddin Talish records that an Assamese soldier was more than a match to a Mughal sepoy as he was equal to ten Mughal men. But, not in front of cavalry. A single trooper with his charge could drive away hundreds of Assames soldiers. It can be summarized that the importance of horse cavalry might have declined later in the Ahom Kingdom. This was because of geographical and topographical and climatic condition of Assam, that maintaining a horse cavalry was difficult since the supply of horses across the Patkai stopped. Moreover the dense forests rivers, monsoonal heavy rains and the floody conditions prevented horse movement. So in the later period ahoms maintained the horse cavalry more for ornamental purpose.

### **Ahom Navy**

Geographically Assam had a large network of rivers with the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. These were fast flowing and with monsoonal rainfall were full of water. Navigation facility with the help of bats through rivers was a fast and easy mode of troop mobilization. This provided the Ahoms with an opportunity to maintain a vast navy. The naval institution too just like the infantry was well organized and disciplined supervised by a set of officers for the service. H.Barbaruah (2006) is of the view that initially the Ahoms maintained a smaller contingent of the Navy for civil purposes only under Naoboicha Phukon. But with the passage of time in the light of Ahom-Mughal conflict particularly in the region of Kamrup a separate department of military navy was created under the post of Pani Phukon to supervise the military units of navy. The naval units or Khels were created as naval combatants. Charingia, Hezari, Kathania, Maral, Katugusia were the naval regiments of Ahom army. In times of War and emergency Pani Phukan was to command the Ahom Navy. Further smaller units were to be commanded by Bar Neogs.

Assam on the banks of river Brahmaputra as well as its tributaries maintained riverine naval dockyards called Naoghulis. In these dockyards there were naval units or Khels appointed for boat building activities. These units were supervised by the officers called Naosoliya Phukan and Nausaliya Baruah. J.N.Sarkar (1994) provides a list of such boat building centers which are Hadira Chowki, Pandu in Gauhati, Ramdia, Suwalkuchi, Kajalimukh, Kaliabor, Biswanath, Samdharah, Sadiya and Dikhomukh. Among these Gauhati seemed to be important as it was also the headquarter of Barphukan Commander of Gauhati and lower Assam. Apart from these there were five royal dockyards called Barnaohats, which were Sakbari nausal at Garhgaon. Saraibari at Majuli, Negheri at Dergaon, Dighalighat at Jaipur and Barnausal at Rangpur, the Ahom state Capital. The Boat built in these nausals were of different shapes and sizes which were made up of a special kind of wood called Chambal wood. The heavy war boats were called as Bacharies. Apart from these Chara Nao, Magari Nao, Tulunga Nao, Panchoi, Kapikal, Haikali, Jap Nao were some other variants of the boats used by the Ahom Navy. Shihabuddin Talish records naval atillery fitted boats in the Ahom navy. He also admits the effectiveness of the Ahom Navy.

### **Weapons, Arsenals and Artillery (Hiloi and Bortop)**

The traditional weapons of the Ahoms can be categorized into two categories, defensive and offensive. The defensive equipments of the Ahom soldiers include a Cap(tupi) for the head, a thick skin Jacket (gati) for the upper body and two kind of revolving shields smaller one called Dhal and the bigger one called Baru made up of buffalo, rhino and deer skin. The primary offensive weapons include bows and arrows, spears or barchah, swords of different kind, shields, flat spears called Yathi, dagger (da) and Hangdang. Handangs were mainly used by the commanders. J.N.Sarkar (1994) has classified the offensive weapons in two categories. First the missiles for the long distance attack which included the bows and the arrows, with or without iron heads called Karpai dhenu. Later in addition to that Chutiya dhenu acquired from the Chutiyas after the annexation of the Chutiya territory and Bardhenu from the Bhunyas were adopted in the Ahom arsenal.

The archers of Kamrup were famous for their accuracy and sharp shooting ability. The arrows were of different shapes and sizes and poisoned at the tip. Secondly flat spears and needle headed spears were used for close quarter battles along with daggers and swords of different types. According to L. Gogoi (1985) The variety of daggers used by the Ahom soldiers were Mitda, Nakoi da, Kopi da, Mesi da, and Axe was also used for close combat. The Ahom soldiers were skilled in using these weapons and accurate in their strikes. Although these weapons were somewhat inferior to those of the Mughal soldiers, still moral strength could fill the void up against the enemy. The Ahoms were also known to the use of gunpowder in the wars. Both light and heavy artillery were used in the war. However Assam Buranjs are not unanimous in regard to the date of introduction of artillery in the Ahom army. Indian history records that the Babur was the first to introduce artillery in India in the first battle of Panipat against Ibrahim Lodi in 1526 A.D. Contrary to this fact certain sources such as Tavernier is of the view Ahoms were the inventor of the Gunpowder and artillery. From them the art of making gunpowder was passed unto Pegu and from there it went to China. L. Gogoi (1985) records that the Tais were aware of the both light and heavy artillery from the ancient times. It has been recorded in the Buranjis that Ahoms had captured a piece of heavy Artillery gun or Bortop called Mithaholong from the Chutiyas who were also known to the use of gunpowder. S.K. Bhunyan (1969) in the war against the Chutiyas the Ahoms had also captured seventy nine pieces of matchlocks called Hiloi.. However Ajit Bora (2007) records that Assam Buranji does not record the use of gunpowder by the Chutiyas against the Ahoms and they might have stopped the production of gunpowder by that time. Now in the light of this evidence it is hard to believe that the Chutiyas maintained Bortop and Hilois merely for decorations. If they had used it then an obvious belief emerges, an army using matchlocks, artillery gun and gunpowder defeated by the Ahoms could also have used the same to defeat them. If it is true then the first use of gunpowder, matchlocks and artillery gun would be in North East India. J.N. Sarkar believes that around 1505 A.D. during the rule of Ahom king Suhungmung dehingia raja the use of heavy artillery began in Assam and reached its peak in the reign of Rudra Singha.

The matchlocks and the big artillery guns casted by the Ahoms were of different types. They showed great skill in making the artillery guns.. 16. L.gogoi (1985) records different types of matchlocks and artillery guns. Among the matchlocks Gathiyani, Pahulangi, Ramchengi, Hat Hiloi, Patheer Kalai, Kamayan, Jamur, Kesai, Toubha, Khoka and Basadari. Big artillery guns were of five types. These were Biyagom, Hatimuria, Turbaki, Mitha Hulung and Baghmuria. All these guns were made in the specialized Khels or military ordinance units these hilois and the bortops were made by Assamese ironsmiths or Kanhars using locally produced iron.. Such as Gendhela Gariya casted the famous bortop of Gauhati called Ripunjoy and his name is engraved on the gun which was a practice among the producers. Cannon balls were made by the Hilakuti Khanikars. Generally tight stones were used to make such balls. Gunpowder was also produced by the Ahoms in the Kharkariya khel which were ordinance units of the army. Further the gunpowder was stocked in the ordinance depots. The production of Gunpowder and its storage was supervised by officers Kharghariya Phukon and Kharghariya Baruah. Such ordinance depots were placed in certain strategic places like Kharghuli in Gauhati which seemed to be a ready ordinance depot against the Mughals. In the capital Rangpur at present district of Sibsagar Hilakuti Bhajani Gaon was an important ordinance depot. Artillery combatants were specially trained personals of the army organized in to separate Khels or Units . J.N.Sarkar (1994) presents the view gunnery and cannonry were not open to all. Soldiers for the artillery were recruited from the royal blood only. L. Gogoi(1985) suggests that there were two Khels of the musketeers Konwar Khel and Nara Khel. H. Barbaruah(2006) records there were two Konwar Khels . These units were created by the Ahom King Sukhapha also known as Khora Raja. One was known as Bajua Hiloidhari Konwars or Bajua Burha Hazar under Hiloidhari Phukon consisting of elder princes of Ahom royal blood and the second one was the Bhitariyal Hiloidhari Konwars or Bhitariyal Deka Hazar under Bhitariyal Baruah consisting of younger princes. The third party was known as Nara Hiloidaris. In this organized structure the musketeers and cannons proved to be important in the Ahom army.

### **Military Training and Discipline**

The men or the paiks in the army had to undergo rigorous training in warfare, specially the guerilla warfare which had been a common war strategy for the Ahoms. The men generally had to train up in their respective units or khels under their supervising officers. Training was imparted on different war weapons used in the battle field like Bows arrows spears and even Firearms. The commanders and the officers also had to go for training which was a compulsion. They also had to train in fire arms. S.K. Bhunyan (1969) records that the kings themselves took personal interest in the training camps and made sure that they be present in the camps. They supervise the military training and the preparations. During the war with Mughals, King Chandrakanta Singha himself was present in the camp to encourage the soldiers. Generally after the training tests and competitions were organized and with the best rewarded. Archeologists of the archeological department, Assam had discovered a place around twenty seven bighas in area which was believed to be a training facility of the Ahom soldiers in the present district of Sibsagar. The area contains earthen mounds which might have been used for guerilla training.

An army no matter what may be the strength in numbers if undisciplined could hold not a single inch in the battle ground. Realizing the same the Ahoms maintained strict discipline among its ranks in the army. Under the paik system both officers and men were enforced with strict discipline. Non obedience to royal commands and orders, insubordination, unbecoming a soldier was penal offences. For cowardice the Ahoms prescribe female attire to the convict and then the body was cut into pieces and thrown in to the open to be feasted by the crows and vultures. Even for such offences high ranking officials and members of the royalty were not spared. Buranjis note that in 1638 A.D. king Pratap Singha put to death several officers including two Hazarikas for inactiveness in the battlefield. Chandrakanta singha warned his commanders and officers against their activeness which could affect their family members. In order to recover Gauhati from the Mughals the commander Lachit Barphukan made in activeness a capital offence. S.K. Bhunyan (2006) have recorded that Lachit Barphukan have ordered the construction of Amingaon rampart and entrusted the responsibility upon his uncle. But as his uncle failed to fulfill his duties he killed him in one strike of his sword. Such means of bringing discipline in the Ahom army was common and had deep impact upon the soldiers.

### **Supply and supporting corps**

Every army maintains its supply and supporting staff for the combatants who can be termed as non combatants. The non combatants in the Ahom army can be categorized into four types which were astrologers, medics, food suppliers and spies. In the initial period the Ahom army was accompanied by the Bailungs, Deodhais and the Ahom priests. Later with the influence of Hindu religion Daivajnas and Ganaks were also employed. Their basic function was to forecast the victory of the Ahoms and calculate the auspicious moment to start the war and make moves in the war to ensure victory and perhaps to perform last rites of those fallen in the battle. The second group was that of the Bezbaruas to nurse the wounded in the battle. The third group was that of the food suppliers who were to maintain the supply the food materials to the soldiers. These include Komal Chaul( boiled and dried sticky rice) Handah ( Rice flour of half boiled rice) Chira ( rice flakes). The steam boiled rice was also served whenever possible. The fourth group was that of the spies. The Ahoms understood the importance of the intelligence and so developed a very effective system of espionage system. It was of immense help for military planning as depending upon such information war strategy was designed. The Ahoms employed several agencies to collect information from the enemy camps. The spies were known as churangchowas. King Rudra Singha created the posts of Bairagis who were also employed for collecting information.

### **War strategy**

The topography, natural hills, rivers dense forests provided the Ahom forces with natural defense potentials. In general the Ahoms adopted defensive strategies rather offences. However there were instances when offensive strategies were also adopted by them. Fortifications or ramparts known as Garhs were constructed by the Ahoms to strengthen their position usually at strategic places. These ramparts were constructed with mud bamboo etc. these were not to be compared with the pucca forts of the other parts of India. The ramparts were of two types. One constructed on land and the second constructed on rivers called Panigarh. J.N. Sarkar (1994) It is interesting that Ahoms could erect ramparts on deep water for naval defense. It was a unique style of defense The Ahoms erected the rampart inaccessible to the enemy by interposing impediments of different varieties like hedges of trees, bamboos and sharp prickly thorns. Bamboo spikes were also implanted facing the enemy to stop the easy advance of the cavalry charge. Along the walls of the ramparts ditches were dugout which was sometimes full of crocodiles. The ramparts were built high. The area of the forts was divided into number of sectors guarded by commanders. They were well garrisoned and well provided with provisions. During the Ahom-Mughal wars the Mughal army resorted to siege craft to capture the ramparts. The Ahoms were expert in anti siege strategy also. For these tunnels were dug out to the ditches along the walls. The Assam buranjis does not contain much detail upon the battle order of Ahom soldiers. S.K. Bhunyan (2009) refers to that Assamese army did no grouped themselves together in a place for the battle. They remain scattered in different places in smaller units and also keeping close contact with the other units. Occasionally they assumed offensive strategies. Ahoms were expert in the guerrilla warfare called daga juddha. Night attacks in a shock were a common strategy of the Ahoms. Ahoms were expert guerrilla fighters. Apart from these blockades were another strategy adopted by the Ahoms. The Ahoms managed to blockade the ways of communication and other provisions to the enemy by cutting the supply lines leaving the enemy without any reinforcements and confusion. Deception method was also used by the Ahoms. Realizing the superior strength of the enemy forces the Ahoms open negotiations with them to gain time for preparations and luring them further inland. Once the enemy gets further inland the ahoms cut of their supply lines and dislocate their communication of escape and attack them in full capacity destroying them completely.

## II. Conclusion

In the light of above discussion it can be concluded that Ahoms possessed an exceptional military organization as fighting machine which was even praised by their contemporaries. The Ahoms were expert fighters and ready to show their martial skills in war emergency. Moreover through their socio political organization the Paik system, in state emergencies like foreign invasions they could mobilize a large number of troops in a short notice mustered by their Kheldars which reflect the modern regimentation system of the modern armies. Paik system was the principle mode of recruitment into the army. The troops were organized in to different Khels in according to their professional skills to be used as an expertise for both war preparations and fighting battles. This provided with an exceptional control of kings and commanders over their troops. Strict discipline was also maintained throughout the ranks of the army and indiscipline was not tolerated and punished with death. Ahoms could also manage to keep vast navy at their disposal. Navy was also organized into strict military style units or Khels. Dockyards were maintained at strategic places for the purpose uniquely fortified even beyond the imagination of the foreign invaders. Variety of boats were made and used for different purposes in the battle field. Some of the bigger boats were fitted with artillery guns making them formidable fortresses of war on water. Ahoms seemed to be confident of their naval strength that they tried most of the times to bring the war on the water front. Ahoms were also known to the use of gunpowder which was locally produced. Ordnance depots were erected to stock the production of gunpowder to be used in times of war under expert officials. Military training was also a compulsion for each and every rank in the army. The kings took personal interest in such camps and supervised the training by visiting the training facilities. Coming to the war strategies Ahoms were fond of guerrilla tactics in the war. But still a mix of other strategies as necessitated was followed by them making them a formidable force. Their war strategies were also supported by the geographical and natural features of the region. But unfortunately this sharpness and the strength of the Ahom army started to decline in the later part of the eighteenth century as evident from the breaking of the Paik system, internal revolts and the Burmese invasions of the early nineteenth century.

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