



The Military Strategy and Geographical Vision of Bir Lachit Borphukan: An Analytical Study.

Mr. Simanta Borah

Assistant Professor

Department of Geography

Borholla College, Jorhat

Abstract:

“The example of Lachit Barphukan and his selfless contributions for the Ahom dynasty and for his own people will be a source of inspiration not only to the countrymen in Assam but also to my friends in the rest of India.”, thus wrote S. K. Bhuyan in his book “Lachit Barphukan and his Times”. Indeed, the name of Lachit Barphukan has long been revered and epitomized for his self-less love for motherland, dauntless courage, geographical vision, military ingenuity and leadership. The history Assam from 1662 CE to 1671 CE comprises mostly of the conflicts and battles between the Ahom and the Mughal. The Ahom kingdom was established in the Brahmaputra valley by Siu-ka-pha in the year 1253 CE with the first capital at Charaideo after thirty-eight years of their journey from Mong Mao. And very soon the name, fame and might of the Ahom kingdom had established itself as a major political power in the entire region of the North-East India. The rise of the Ahom kingdom caught the attention of the Mughal emperor in Delhi which resulted in the wish of the Mughal emperors to extend their territorial domains to further East, beyond Bengal and also to have command over larger part of Hindustan and move farther ahead to reach Tibet. Besides, they also wanted to possess the rich mineral and natural resources of Assam by this invasion. But, the patriotism of Lachit Borphukan resisted them to conquer this part of India.

Key Words: *Bir Lachit Borphukan, Ahom Kingdom, Military Strategy, Geographical Vision.*

1. Introduction:

The concept of Empire or a state during the pre industrial period was totally physical and geographic. Empire means control over a territorial unit bound by territorial or maritime (sea) boundaries. Expansion of an empire, thus, meant inclusion of more territory in the state and shifting of boundaries outwardly. That's the reason why the early rulers gave importance to conquering land and expanding an empire. Warfare and treaties were the chief modes of expanding the state. In warfare, importance was given to numerical strength of arms, soldiers, horses, elephants, etc. and the location of enemy troop's vis-à-vis the location of the ruler. But usually the nature of the terrain, where the war was fought, was given relatively less significance. Further, in the context of ancient and medieval India, most of the kingdoms were basically land-based units, i.e. the rulers ruled over a piece of land. This led to a rigid definition of kingdom where expanding and defending land boundaries was given greatest importance. It is true that till the beginning of industrialization and colonialism, territorial expansion was not seen much with a resource approach. 'Land is a container of resources. So if ruler occupies more land, he subsequently owns more resources.' This kind of a resource approach was not very prominent earlier as we were not aware of the diversity, extracting and utility of the resources. It strongly came during the era of industrialization. Strength of an empire is linked with its stability. Ancient and medieval rulers gave a lot of importance to defending boundaries, enforcing a strict legal-administrative system, and systematic collection of revenue, for keeping their state stable. But taking concrete steps to create the feeling of 'integrity', 'loyalty', 'love' for the state in the mind of the subjects was not a part of maintaining stability of the state. Creating such feelings among the subject's acts

as a binding force and it becomes necessary for bringing territorial unity. Possessing such visionary feelings in the administration really needed a geographical vision of the ruler. The Ahom Kings were not different from that. The Ahom General Bir Lachit Borphukan carried over that geographical vision and fought bravely to defend the expansion of Mughal invasion in Assam.

2. Statement of the Problem:

The Ahom General Bir Lachit Borphukan was a visionary leader who fought bravely to defend the Mughal aggression and sacrificed his life for the noble cause. He was a visionary military strategist and geographer. His approach during the wars against the Mughal invasion shows it very clearly.

3. Significance of the Study:

Bir Lachit Borphukan the greatest General of Ahom Royal Army occupies a very distinct place in the history of Assam. He is regarded as the greatest military hero not only of Assam but of India. Like his contemporary Shivaji, the Maratha hero in Maharashtra, Lachit Borphukan also fought relentlessly to resist the expansion of the Mughal Empire in Assam. Had Lachit Borphukan not been there and had he not resisted the aggression of the Mughals with his military strategies and geographical vision, the cultural and demographic pattern and the history of Assam would have been different. To study the military strategies and geographical vision of this visionary figure has immense importance in the present day context.

4. Methodology:

This paper is descriptive one and completely based on secondary data. The required data for the purpose of the study was collected through the extensive study of relevant literature on the life and works of Bir Lachit Borphukan, the greatest General of Ahom Royal Army. Moreover, different documents, reports, publications, articles, websites etc are consulted for acquiring relevant data.

5. Discussion on Findings:

5.1 Life Sketch of the Great Hero:

Lachit Borphukan was the son of Momai Tamuli Borbarua, who served as Prataap Singha's first Borbarua (Governor of Upper Assam and Commander-in-Chief of the Ahom army). Lachit Borphukan received training in the humanities, the Scriptures, and military techniques. He was granted positions of importance as the scarf-bearer (Soladhara Barua) of the Ahom Swargadeo, which was regarded as the first step in the career of an aspiring diplomat and politician. This post was similar to a private secretaryship. In addition to his position as Borphukan, Lachit previously served as Commander of the Simulgarh Fort, Superintendent of the Royal Household Guards, and Superintendent of the Royal Horse Stables for Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha.

The spirit that drove the Hindu Ahom resistance's struggle for independence is symbolised by an event in their history when Lachit Borphukan, the army general of Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha, beheaded his maternal uncle for neglect of duty as they prepared to battle the Mughals. He didn't only act impulsively when he killed his own uncle for not contributing enough to the war effort; he also wanted to teach his warriors that it is impossible to use different standards of judgement when serving one's Dharma.

King Chakradhwaj Singha chose Lachit Borphukan to command the army during the fight against the Mughals who were trying to capture Guwahati. The King gave Lachit a sword (Hengdang) with a gold hilt as well as other traditional accoutrements of distinction. By the summer of 1667, Lachit had raised the army and finished the necessary preparations. During the Battle of Saraighat, Lachit liberated Guwahati from the Mughals and effectively repelled their armies. When the Mughals launched their final assault on Saraighat along the river, the Assamese troops started to lose the motivation to fight. Lachit embarked in a boat despite being in critical condition and proceeded with seven boats against the Mughal fleet. He stated, "If you (the soldiers) want to flee, flee. The king has given me a task here, and I will do it well. Let the Mughals take me away. You report to the king that his general fought well following his orders". On the Brahmaputra River, his forces united, and a frantic combat ensued. Victory went to Lachit Borphukan. From Guwahati, the Mughals were forced to flee. The Mughal commander-in-chief confessed that he had been defeated by the Ahom troops and their commander-in-chief, Lachit Borphukan, in a letter that read: "Glory to the king! Glory to the counselors! Glory to the commanders! Glory to the country! All of the forces are

led by a single person! Even I, Ram Singh, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loophole or an opportunity!"

5.2 Military Strategy and Geographical Vision of Bir Lachit Borphukon:

The history Assam from 1662 CE to 1671 CE comprises mostly of the conflicts and battles between the Ahom and the Mughal. The Ahom kingdom was established in the Brahmaputra valley by Siu-ka-pha in the year 1253 CE with the first capital at Charaideo after thirty-eight years of their journey from Mong Mao. And very soon the name, fame and might of the Ahom kingdom had established itself as a major political power in the entire region of the North-East India. In the 17th century the Ahom kingdom was spread up to the river Manah on the west and to the hills of Sadiya on the east where there were several passes leading to Tibet. The rise of the Ahom kingdom caught the attention of the Mughal emperor in Delhi which resulted in the wish of the Mughal emperors to extend their territorial domains to further East, beyond Bengal and also to have command over larger part of Hindustan and move farther ahead to reach Tibet. Besides, they also wanted to possess the rich mineral and natural resources of Assam by this invasion.

The Mughal-Ahom conflict continued over a period of 67 years (1615-1682) during the reigns of the Mughal Emperors Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. There were altogether 18 major conflicts between the Ahom and Mughal. Except the invasion by the Mughal General Mir Jumla in 1662 in most other conflicts, the Ahoms either resisted the Mughals' aggression or sent them back, or even if the Mughals won, they could not hold their occupied land for long. Defeating all resistance by the Ahom in 1662, Mir Jumla occupied the Ahom capital Garhgaon. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha retreated to Namrup. However, after a stay for eleven months in Garhgaon Mir Jumla signed Ghiladhari Ghat treaty with the Ahoms. This treaty was a matter of much indignity and humiliation for the Ahom kingdom. As per the treaty the Ahom had to hand over Kamrup, which was in the eastern part of the Ahom state, to the Mughal. Even Swargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha had to give his six years old daughter to them to save his country. After a few months Jayadhwaj Singha died.

After the demise of Jayadhwaj Singha, Chakradhwaj Singha ascended the throne (1663-1670), and he wanted to drive away the Mughals from the territories occupied by them during reign of Jayadhwaj Singha. He ordered for a war against the Mughals so that the lost honour and glory of the Ahom could be redeemed. He appointed Lachit Borphukan the Commander-in-chief of the Ahom forces and entrusted with the task of overthrowing the Mughal domination over the Ahom Empire. Lachit was the youngest son of Momaitamuli Barbarua, the Ahom general in the Mughal aggressions during the reigns of Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

In 1667, under the command of Lachit Borphukan, the Ahom soldiers moved downstream the river Brahmaputra and attacked the Mughal soldiers at Koliabor and captured the Mughal posts at Bahbari, at Kajali, Sonapur and Tatimara. Lachit charged along farther ahead towards Itakhuli of Guwahati, the strong hold of the Mughal and freed Itakhuli from the enemy. He chased the Mughal up to the Manah river, the western frontier of the Ahom kingdom before the invasion by Mir Jumla.

Being aware of the might of the Ahom soldiers, Aurangzeb sent a huge army under the command of Raja Ram Singh to win back Guwahati. It was a huge army of 21 Rajput Chiefs, 30,000 infantry, 18,000 Turkish cavalry, 15,000 archers, 5,000 gunners, 500 artillery personnel. In this challenging military situation Lachit showed his brilliance as a Commander-in-chief. He knew it very well that the Ahoms could not challenge the Mughals in the open field battle. So, he and his soldiers took position in the mountainous terrain in Guwahati. Besides, he knew it well that his soldiers were more expert in naval fight than those of the Mughals, and the narrow width of the river Brahmaputra at Saraighat was the right place for the Ahom to resist the Mughals. Lachit built a number of gar or ramparts in and around Guwahati, to force the Mughals to take the river route. As a part of the total war plan Lachit wanted to build a Gar or rampart in the northern bank of Brahmaputra near Amingaon. It was to be completed overnight only and the responsibility to oversee the construction was given to his maternal uncle. But at mid-night when Lachit saw that the workers were sound asleep and the building work of the rampart was not finished he lost his composure. Holding his uncle responsible for the dereliction of duty and breach of trust at an hour so crucial for his country's security, Lachit beheaded him declaring, "Dexatkoi Momai danger nahai" (My maternal uncle is not greater than my country). Such was Lachit's selfless commitment towards duty and his country which is above all personal relations.

In the meantime there was a huge loss for the Ahom soldiers at the battle of Alaboi, where 10,000 Ahom soldiers were massacred as they could not face the might of the Mughal army in the open field. But this set back could not break the resolve of Lachit Borphukan. His ability to withstand such a war calamity of losing 10,000 fellow soldiers in one battle shows the undeterred spirit of a real hero, a true patriot.

Ram Singha along with his soldiers started moving towards Guwahati through Andharubali for the decisive battle at Saraighat. After the loss at Alboi, the Ahom had to overcome another challenge when Lachit himself was seriously ill during that time. The battle started on both land and water. With the Mughals getting close to Andharubali, Lachit Borphukan stood up disregarding his illness. Lachit Borphukan showed the power of his leadership in the final naval engagement in Saraighat. With his ailing body, Lachit led the Ahom soldiers from the front. As S.K.Bhuyan wrote “he hammered two recalcitrant oarsmen and threw them into water, and the report of this incident restored the flagging zeal of his soldiers, and they fought with all their might. His brief utterances at this moment speak of his passionate anxiety for his country’s independence, and his own honour. He said to Miri Sandikal Hazarika at Aswakranta,— “Tell your men, I am going to die on this spot, and I never think of abandoning my charge.” After a fierce battle the Mughals were forced to retreat. Lachit forced them to retreat across the Manah river, the then western border of Assam.

Lachit Barphukan had retrieved the glory of the Ahom kingdom and protected the land, its people and culture from being demolished by an outside inimical force. However, Lachit did not live long after the battle of Saraighat. He died in 1672. Lachit’s patriotism, his military acumen was even praised by Ram Singha. “The Barnabab (Lachit Barphukan) is not a hero of an ordinary caliber; the fortifications are complex and intricate; and I could not therefore obtain any loophole for attack.” Lachit Barphukan lived a relatively short life of about 50 years, but his Himalayan role in protecting Assam’s sovereignty, culture and civilization will live forever. Mughal’s defeat at the hands of Lachit ensured further consolidation of the greater Assam and Assamese society raised by the Ahom. Had Lachit not resisted the aggression of the Mughals, the history of Assam would have been different; the cultural and demographic pattern and mores would have been different from what we have today. Lachit was born about four hundred years ago from now, but still he runs in the mind, spirit and the consciousness of every Assamese as the most revered patriot of all time.

Conclusion:

Lachit Borphukan is a legendary brave heart of medieval Assam who remains in the heart of every Assamese. His military strategies and geographical vision are always enshrined in the history of Assam. On 24 November each year Lachit Divas is celebrated state wide in Assam to commemorate the heroism of Lachit Barphukan and the victory of the Assamese army in the Battle of Saraighat. Now he has become a national hero with his name and fame spread all over India. On 25th Feb.2022, Ram Nath Kovind, the President of India launched the 400th birth anniversary celebrations of Ahom general Lachit Borphukan and laid the foundations for an Alaboi war memorial and a 150-foot bronze statue of the legendary commander. Also, in commemoration of this brave heart of Assam, the Lachit Barphukan gold medal is awarded every year to the best cadet from the National Defence Academy. It was instituted in 1999 to inspire defense personnel to emulate Barphukan's heroism and sacrifices. He will always remain as an example of patriotism, utmost love and sacrifice for motherland for all the times to come. His heroism still inspires the people of this country to fight off all the anti-national forces trying to disturb the national integration and communal harmony of Assam and India.

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