

A Study of the Military Strategy and Leadership of *Ahom* Commander Lachit Barphukan

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Abstract

Lachit Barphukan, a military leader and strategist from the kingdom of Ahom, is one of India's most important military leaders and strategists. After a series of raids in mediaeval India, the Mughals were able to force Ahoms (governing in modern-day Assam) to sign a humiliating treaty in 1661. When the Ahom commander Lachit Barphukan pushed the Mughal Governor out of Gauhati in 1667, he restored the Ahoms' glory. As a result, a huge troop of the Mughal army was dispatched to destroy the Ahoms under the command of Raja Ram Singh. However, the Ahom Commander, Lachit Barphukan, not only repelled the Mughal invasion, but also drove the Mughal army away, thanks to clever military preparation, properly calibrated military strategy, superb military leadership, and incomparable bravery. In recent years, the state government of Assam has attempted to honour this hero. In his honour, numerous memorials and monuments are being constructed. The Government of Assam has declared November 24th as Lachit Diwas. Despite the government's attempts, little research on this military officer and his time has been conducted. In general, descriptions of India's military history or strategic culture neglect to mention the Ahoms, one of mediaeval India's most successful military defence systems. It is critical to emphasise the Ahom military's greatness through its most known military leader, Lachit Borphukan.

Keywords: Lachit Barphukan, Ahoms, Mughals, Islamic Invasion.

Introduction

From time immemorial, the geography of the Indian nation has witnessed an uncountable number of wars and battles. A number of military leaders and war heroes have exhibited exemplary valour and leadership. Any war requires military strategy. There are strategic

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thinkers and military leaders, who formulate military strategies. The Indian history from ancient times is replete with examples of various types of military strategies formulated and executed by strategic thinkers and military leaders. The military strategies mentioned in the epic of *Mahabharata* is well known. The '*Rajmandala*' theory propounded by the great ancient thinker *Chanakya* is widely studied till now. However, the study and research about the evolution of military strategy and thinking is very limited in scope and variety in India. Therefore, there is a lack of proper study and research about the evolution of various military strategies in different parts of India. And the most unfortunate part is the fact, that many military strategists and leaders from the north-eastern part of India are unknown to the people of India. This has happened either by chance or by design. One of the most important military leaders and military strategists of India from the kingdom of *Ahom* is Lachit Barphukan. In medieval India, after successive attacks, the Mughals were able to force a humiliating treaty on *Ahoms* (ruling in present-day Assam) in 1661. However, the *Ahom* commander Lachit Barphukan restored the glory of the *Ahoms*, when he drove away the Mughal Governor from Gauhati in 1667. As a result of this, a very large contingent of the Mughal army was sent under the commandship of Raja Ram Singh to defeat the *Ahoms*. But with the astute military planning, clearly calibrated military strategy, exemplary military leadership, and unmatched bravery the *Ahom* Commander, Lachit Barphukan not only repelled the Mughal attack but drove the Mughal army away. In recent times, the state government of Assam has tried to give this hero his due place. Many memorials and monuments are being built in his memory. 24th November has been declared as *Lachit Diwas* by the Government of Assam. Despite the efforts from the government, the research activity about this military leader and his times remains negligible. In general, the discussions about India's military history or India's strategic culture do not take into account one of the most successful military defence system of medieval India; the *Ahoms*. It is important to highlight the glory of the *Ahom* military through its most renowned military leader; Lachit Borphukan. This paper intends to explore the qualities of his military leadership and highlight the salient features of his military strategy.

The Ahoms and Their Military System

The *Ahoms* established themselves as the rulers of Assam in the 13th century. The *Ahoms* ruled over Assam for around six centuries. They are amongst the longest-ruling dynasties in India. With the treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the British took over Assam. So, the *Ahoms* ruled over Assam for around six centuries. In the history of six centuries, the *Ahoms* had faced many attacks from various quarters. And in all these wars, the leadership skills, organising capabilities and the military acumen adopted by the *Ahoms* have been commended even by their opponents. Lord William Bentinck observed that 'The fact that the ancient Government (of the *Ahoms*) continued for six centuries indicated that there must be something intrinsically good in the constitution' (Bhuyan, 1965, p.143). Shihabuddin Talish wrote -"Every army that entered the limits of this country made its exit from the realm of Life; every caravan that set foot on this land deposited its baggage of residence in the halting place of Death" (Bhuyan, 1965, p.149). The six centuries of *Ahom's* rule in Assam is not only a history of dominance over the small neighbouring states but also of their struggles against one of the toughest invaders – the Mughals. The Mughals had desperately tried to invade and acquire these lands. All these resistances are the reflection of not only the military strategies and skill of the leaders but also of the coordination between the people and the rulers in times of crises. J.N Sarkar argues; For a modern observer, the fact that the *Ahoms* in Assam under Sukapha and his successors not only conquered an unknown land, carving out an independent vast and invincible kingdom until the mid-17th century, but also fought for their independence for another thirty years without any formal and exclusive military department separate from the civil administration, and without a standing army, a regularly paid soldiery under military personnel is a striking fact. This would not have been feasible if their military system had not been well-organized and efficient, and if their leaders had lacked military comprehension and organisational skills (Sarkar, 2007, p.64).

The capital of the *Ahom* kingdom in the 16th century was situated in *Gargaon*, in eastern Assam. The length of the *Ahom* kingdom was almost 600 miles, with an average breadth of 50 to 60 miles (Bhuyan,

1947, p.4). In the *Ahom* system of government, the Barphukan was the nomenclature for the Governor of the lower Assam.

The *Ahom* military system evolved due to practical requirements. The military system was loosely organised at various levels. In this loosely organised system, the *got* was the lowest fighting unit. And the highest-ranking officer was *Phukan*. Despite the fact that conscription was not enforced, every able-bodied male was required to give his services to the king's defence needs (Sen, 1979). The system of military organization that developed during the *Ahoms* is known as *Paik* system. *Paik* system was not merely a system of military organization. Rather it was broadly a socio-political organization. Both the civil and military functions within the society were organized with this system. It was a system that helped the *Ahoms* to muster all the men in times of war necessity (Hazarika, 2015).

Soldiers were given military training based on their needs. There was also a reward and punishment system in place for soldiers. In theory, the King was the army's Commander-in-Chief. In addition, the king took part in the training of soldiers himself. In general, ground forces were assigned to *NeogPhukons*, while the navy was assigned to *PaniPhukon* (Barbaruah, 2006).

The Battle of Saraighat

The battle of Saraighat is the most well-known battle in *Ahom* history. The Battle was fought in 1671. The Mughal army was led Raja Ram Singh I. The *Ahom* army was led by Atan Burghaohain (North bank) and Lachit Barphukan (South bank).

The seeds of this battle lay in the Mughal attempts to annex the *Ahom* territories. There were seventeen attempts of invasion of the *Ahom* Kingdom by the Mughals. However, only one attempt was successful. In 1661, Mir Jumla, the Mughal Viceroy at Dhaka marched with a large army and defeated the *Ahom* king Jayadhwaj Singha. The *Ahom* King agreed to a humiliating treaty (Treaty of Ghilajharighat in 1663). According to the pact, two *Ahom* Royal princesses were taken for the Mughal imperial harem, and the *Ahoms* were required to pay a war indemnity of 3 lakhs and a 20-elephant annual tribute. They also had to

relinquish control of the western half of their kingdom, from Gauhati to the Manas River (Sinha, 2001). The humiliating treaty was never fully accepted by the Ahoms and they resolved to take back their land. Therefore the next *Ahom* King Chakradhwaj Singhachose Lachit Barphukanas the commander to lead the mission of recovering the lost territories. Lachit captured Gauhati from Mughals in 1667. The Commander of the *Ahom* army, Lachit, attacked Gauhati swiftly and the imperial Governor, Syed Firoz Khan was not prepared for this attack. The swiftness of the attack did not provide any time for the Mughal reinforcements from Rangamati and Dacca to protect Gauhati. Thus within a short space of two months the *Ahoms* succeeded in recovering their lost possessions and along with it their lost prestige and glory (Bhuyan, 1947, p.28).The attack on the fort of Itakhuli, which was the base for the Moghul military men and war provisions, was executed in latter half of the night with the successful pre-attack strategy of putting water in the muzzles of the guns by the *Ahom* spies. Henceforth the incessant *Ahom* soldiers, seething under the humiliation of defeat and memories of disgraceful treatment meted out to their king Chakradhwaj Singha, became unstoppable and at midnight of November 2, 1667 Itakuli and the garrison of Gauhati were seized by the *Ahom* army under the skilful leadership of Lachit Barphukan.

After the Mughal defeat, it was expected that the Mughal emperor will send an army to defeat the *Ahoms*. The Rajput king –Mirza Raja Ram Singh of Amer was deputed by Aurangzeb to attack *Ahoms*. Both the Mughal army and the *Ahom* army fought between 1669-1671.This period of war was full of ups and downs for the *Ahom* army. The *Ahoms* had faced a major reversal at Alaboli. Around 10,000 *Ahom* soldiers were massacred by the Mughal horsemen. After this massacre, the Mughals proposed that the status quo prevailing at the time of Treaty of Asurar Ali (1639) could be agreed upon to be maintained. However, the *Ahoms* totally rejected this proposal. And this led to the final phase of the battle. In 1671, near the Brahmaputra River at a place called Saraighat the decisive battle took place between these two armies. This place is at the triangle in to the river between the area of Itakhuli, Kamakhya and Aswakranta. In this decisive battle the Mughals were defeated by the *Ahoms* and driven away. The Mughals were pursued all the way to Goalpara's Manas River. Meanwhile, in March 1671, Raja

Ram Singha returned to Rangamati, where he remained until 1676 in the hopes of conquering Assam for the second time. But, Aurangzeb summoned him to Delhi and thus ended any more attempts by the Mughals to conquer Assam.

Military Strategy and Military Leadership of Lachit Barphukan

Military strategy is the process of reducing an adversary's physical capabilities and motivation to fight and continuing to do so until the goal is achieved. It can occur in both times of war and peace, and it can involve the use of force as a threat, either directly or indirectly. The four components of military strategy are ends (objectives), ways (courses of action), means (resources), and risk (Echevarria, 2017).

Lachit Barphukan was instrumental in not only in the taking over of Gauhati from the Mughals in 1667 but he was also the hero who defeated the mighty Mughal Commander Raja Ram Singh. In this period Lachit had shown exemplary knowledge of military strategy and shown extraordinary military leadership. The strategic move of bringing the adversary to fight in the narrow stretch of Saraighat was important to reduce the physical capacity of the enemy. Lachit used his limited resource with great effectiveness in this war. He was very clear about the objectives and was well prepared to cover the risks. Some of the important highlights of his strategic thinking and military leadership is explained below:

1. Creation of defence structures: Natural hills, rivers, and dense forests provided natural defence capabilities for the *Ahom* troops. In general, the *Ahoms* used defensive tactics rather than offensive ones (Hazarika, 2015, p.20). The *Ahom* rulers have created a fortification ring. These fortifications were known as *garhs*. These *garhs* were not only erected on land but in water too. Unlike the northern part of India, the *Ahoms* built fortification, which was more suitable to their geographical area. Hence use of bamboo and mud was common for these *garhs*. The hilly terrain of Assam provided natural planks to erect forts. Low hills on each bank of the river enabled Lachit organise formidable defences in the Gauhati area. He set up prepared defences with 9-foot gaps on the plains and 13.5-foot gaps on the hills. The river line was reinforced on both

sides of the defensive perimeter, and stockades were erected on the river's sand banks to prevent the usage of the waterway. Defense in depth and all-around defence were guaranteed (Sinha, 2001) The use of forts as an important defensive mechanism for war strategy by Lachit Barphukan is also mentioned in the book by Kautilya ('The Arthashastra' by Kautilya). Kautilya regards the fort to be more important for the defence of kingdom, since it allows the kingdom to survive during the period of the siege. Kautilya in Arthashastra has mentioned mainly four type of forts- *Parvatadurg* (hill fort), *audakadurg* (water fort), *dhanvandurg* (desert fort) and *Vandurg* (forest fort). Lachit Barphukan had mainly used two types of forts according to the terrains of the *Ahom* Kingdom.

When a traveller Hangalbhanga Laskar, who had stayed in the camp of Ram Singha prior to the battle of Saraighat, fell into the hands of *Ahoms* and was asked to opine on the impression that the Mughals have about the preparedness of Assam, he narrated the conversation between Ram Singha and his commander Rashid Khan: The *Ahoms* have built forts on the tops of the hills, and the outer plains are too narrow for an open combat. The Assamese have proven unbeatable in their conflicts against foreigners because of this. The fortifications are complicated and complex, with three corridors leading to each fort. Our powerful weaponry cannot reach the enemy, and we have no choice but to battle with arrows and guns. Their ministers, commanders, and infantry should all be commended for erecting such a formidable defence wall.

2. Importance of Preparedness: As in the battle to capture the fort of Itakhuli, the spies played an important role in sealing the preparedness of the *Ahom* army. Assamese spies were deputed to follow the footsteps of Moghul army right from the time they departed from Delhi. The departure of Ram Singha from Dacca was also promptly communicated to the *Ahom* Commander in Chief Lachit Barphukan who made numerous efforts to thwart the enemy's march towards Gauhati which, though did not succeed in defeating the army there and then, created an edge over the Mughals thus sending them a message that the *Ahoms* are better prepared and intensely watchful of their march.

When Ram Singha approached the fort at Sarai and initiated an attack, he once again experienced the farsightedness of the *Ahom* commander. He reached near the fort through an underground passage and used heavy artillery to fire at the fort causing considerable damage to the fort. But the *Ahoms* had ready with them a number of men with material to repair any such breach caused by the enemy. Despite this being a surprise attack, he and his army could not sustain for long in front of the counter attack from the Assamese side and retreated.

3. Understanding the weakness and strengths: Lachit was well aware of the military might of the Mughal forces. However, he wanted to assess the accurate strength of the Mughal army. For this, Lachit personally surveyed the position of the Mughals from the top of his fort. The Mughals had professional cavalry and mounted forces. On the other hand, the *Ahom* military was less in numbers and was very ill-equipped and trained to fight in open fields against the Mughal army. Therefore the strategy that Lachit Barphukan adopted was to deny the Mughals to use their strength. He decided to choose the terrain of Gauhati, which was hilly, for the battle. In the hilly terrain, the large Mughal army with its mighty cavalry will not get enough open space to manoeuvre. This will impede the mobility of the Mughal forces. To avoid the hilly terrain and attack the *Ahom* forces, Mughals had only one option to move via Brahmaputra River. And the Brahmaputra at Saraighat, at its narrowest 1 km width, was ideal for naval defence. In the preparation for war, Lachit had created a system of naval defence in this zone. The *Ahoms*, having realised the futility of open warfare, tried everything they could to exploit the physiography, heavy rainfall, and floods in the summer to their advantage, and resorted to indirect warfare, employing tactics such as scorched earth, hit-and-run, harassment, and so on (Gogoi, 2017).
4. Time and Place of battle: Kautilya has highlighted the importance of time and place in any battle; "In the daytime, the crow kills the owl and at night the owl kills the crow". Similarly, "a dog on land drags a crocodile and a crocodile in water drags a dog" (Singh, 2013). In his military strategy, Lachit Barphukan has understood the importance of time and place and acted accordingly. When Mughal army

reached closer and the *Ahoms* were not fully prepared, Lachit started a sham negotiation with the Mughals. The negotiation was done through the captured Mughal Governor, Firoz Khan. Lachit Barphukan even called the Mughal emperor the “Bhai Raja” (brother sovereign) of the *Ahom* Kings. This clearly sent a signal to the Mughals that the *Ahoms* were thinking of negotiation. However when the *Ahom* army was fully ready for the Mughal attacks, then Lachit Barphukan sent a clear message to Raja Ram Singh that Gauhati and Kamrup belong to the *Ahoms* and they will fight to the last to defend it. Similarly, the *Ahom* commander, Lachit Barphukan was aware of the fact that in the open land the Mughals can crush the *Ahoms* anytime, but in narrow stretches of land and river, the *Ahoms* will have an upper hand due to the capability to fight in such areas and the knowledge of the terrain and river. Therefore the Mughal army was provided deliberate openings to reach Saraighat. And the strategic location of this place of battle proved harmful to the Mughal army and beneficial to the *Ahoms*.

5. Personal valour and leadership– Lachit was able to use the *Ahom* army to its maximum possible effectiveness. This was possible due to his determination and leadership. The maximum effective utilization of manpower was done by using many psychological tools. The use of national sentiment, religion and superstition was important. Interestingly, Kautilya has also specifically mentioned the use of religion, and superstition to bolster the morale of the soldiers. For example, the services of astrologers were taken to interpret the dream and predict the victory of *Ahoms*. At the same time, the use of fear was also important. The leader tends to instil a sense of fear amongst his troops about failures and laxness. Before the war “ Lachit Barphukan gave an order that every man must fulfil his duty by holding true to his charge, and that if any commander or soldier was found to be negligent, his head would be taken off immediately, with the potential of royal intervention following.” (Bhuyan, 1947, p.37). It is interesting to note that it is believed (however not verified) that Lachit killed his uncle due to his negligent behaviour. It is highly possible that this rumour was spread for the purpose of psychologically preparing the manpower to fight till the end. Leadership also involves leading from the front

by showing exemplary courage and selflessness. During the final phase of the war, Lachit Barphukan was seriously ill. The Mughal army had an upper hand and the *Ahom* soldiers were demoralised. Lachit was observing the unfolding of events from the *Itakhulifort*. Finally, Lachit ordered his men to carry him on a boat towards the theatre of war. He shouted- "The King has put all the people in my hands to fight Bongal. Shall I go back to my wife and children?" (Sarkar, 1992, p.226). This was an important turning point in the battle for *Ahoms*. Lachit's brave entry in to the battle boosted the morale of the *Ahom* soldiers and now all of them were ready to fight till the end.

6. Psychological warfare: Psychological warfare is a strategy for demoralising an opponent and ensuring success in warfare. The primary aim of any Psychological warfare is to instil fear amongst the enemy. The Psychological warfare also uses the pre-existing anxieties of the enemy fighters. The tactics of psychological warfare were astutely employed by the *Ahom* commanders. Lachit and other military commanders adopted a strategy of intentional delay and frustration. They tried to postpone the battle with sham negotiations, so that the enemy soldiers become morally and physically frustrated and tired. The *Ahom* fortification was another method to frustrate the Mughal soldiers. The fortification looked impregnable and impenetrable. Even before the beginning of the battle Ram Singh also tried to use the psychological warfare method, but clearly Lachit outsmarted him in the method of psychological warfare. "Ram Singh is also said to have sent a package of seeds to Lachit, implying that the Mughal army was as large as the seeds and that the *Ahoms* would be crushed. Lachit retaliated by sending back a box of sand, implying that the *Ahom* army was as numerous as sand grains and so impossible to crush" (Sharma, 2015). One of the most important means to create fear and anxiety amongst the Mughal soldiers, was the tactics of guerrilla warfare. It is said that the Lachit had tried to spread a rumour that there are *Rakshasas* in the *Ahom* army and these *Rakshasas* go to fight in the night time. The Barphukan devised a strategy to prove the *Rakshas*' assertions. The *Ahom* soldiers, clad in black and carrying a severed human leg in one hand and roasted fish in the

other, travelled from camp to camp at night, hoisting the severed legs towards the Mughal camps and devouring the roasted fish as if it were human flesh (Gogoi, 2017). This method of attacking in the night, demoralised the Mughal soldiers. On the other hand to boost the morale of Ahom warriors, Lachit said that Lions go to hunt in the night too. The use of guerrilla tactics was critical in this battle, as Lachit was aware that Mughal army was stronger and had more men than the Ahoms.

Importance in Indian History

For a long period of time, the north-eastern part of India remained untouched from the Islamic invasion. The first Islamic invasion of Assam was by Bakhtiyar Khalji. He was a Turko-Afghan military general of the Ghurid Empire. Bakhtiyar Khalji is infamous for the destruction of Nalanda University. He also attacked Lakshman Sena at his capital, Nabadwip, in 1203-1204 AD and captured most of Bengal. After the victory of Bengal, he was emboldened to attack *Kamrupa* in a desire to invade Tibet. From Devkot, Khalji proceeded with 12000 Turkish cavalry to assault Assam and Tibet (West Bengal). At that time, the kingdom of *Kamrupa* (Assam) was ruled by the King Vishwasunder Dev (also known as Maharaja Prithu). Maharaja Prithu annihilated Bakhtiyar Khalji in the famous battle of *Kamrupa* in 1205. This defeat halted the insidious march of this infamous invader and he died in 1206.

After Bakhtiyar Khalji, Assam was attacked by many Islamic invaders (Ali, 2002); Ghiyasuddin Khalji (1226), Nasiruddin Mahmud (1228), Malik Tughril Khan (1257), Ghiyasuddin Babur Shah (1323), Mohammed Tughlaq (1332), Sikandar Shah (1357), Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1394), Ruknuddin Barbak (1474), Allaudin Hussain Shah (1493), Tarbuk (1533), Sayyad Abu Baqr (1615), Shah Jahan / Islam Khan (1636), Aurangzeb/Mir Jumla (1661), 1669 Aurangzeb / Ram Singh (1669), Aurangzeb / Mansur Khan (1671).

The Islamic invaders repeatedly attacked Assam. In most cases, they were defeated. And in no case, any Islamic invader was able to control or hold Assam for a long period of time. The Battle of Saraighat marked the end of any major Islamic invasion attempts. The Mughals had by now accepted the fact that they will never be able to conquer Assam,

and hence they stopped making any more attempts. The heroic resistance started by Maharaja Prithu, which culminated in the commandership of Lachit Barphukan, has major implications for the history of India. The Islamic invaders had planned to move towards Tibet after the conquest of Assam. The resistance and reversals in the hands of *Ahoms* and other rulers, quashed the hopes of Islamic invaders. This has also worked as a bulwark against the Islamic cultural aggrandizement in the north-eastern part of India. It can also be argued that the resistance of the Assamese people has also protected Tibet from any kind of Islamic invasion or rule. Further, a successful campaign in the northeast of India would have opened the doors of Southeast Asia for these invaders too.

In the modern times, the resistance of the people of Assam is becoming a rallying point for the Assamese pride and glory. It is interesting to note that the battle of Saraighat and its hero, has become symbols to unite the people of Assam through a commonly shared history of bravery and resistance.

Conclusion

For a long time, the name of Lachit Barphukan was unknown and unheard in larger parts of India. However, in recent decade, with the political efforts and social awakening, the valour, bravery and military genius of *Ahom* commander is now being recognized. The battle of Saraighat is of immense importance to Indian history. Due to the distorted look at Indian history, many episodes and heroes were sidelined and kept out of the mainstream Indian history. With the growing research about these episodes and heroes of Indian history, gradually the heroes like Lachit will get their due place in the annals of Indian history. The announcement by the famous movie star, Mr. Vivek Oberoi in early 2021, to make a movie on Lachit is an evidence to the growing acknowledgement of the legend of this military hero. In the era of the internet, some small documentaries and plays are also available about lachit on the Internet. Despite, the growing recognition of this medieval war hero of India amongst common masses, the research and study about Lachit is still lacking. The myopic history writing about medieval India, has left many episodes and personalities of Indian history in dark. The study and research of history about medieval India

is mainly Delhi centric. Now, it's the duty of the academic community to explore and highlight the role of unsung heroes in Indian history. The role of military strategists, like Lachit should also be studied in the departments of military and security studies. The inclusion of these excluded sections and heroes in school and college syllabuses will not only educate the students about the history of India. But it will also play an important role in national integration and national unity.

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