



Vivekananda
International
Foundation

THE AHOM-MUGHAL CONFLICT

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



SAUDIPTENDU RAY

VIF MONOGRAPH

THE AHOM-MUGHAL CONFLICT

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

SAUDIPTENDU RAY

© Vivekananda International Foundation

Published in 2024 by
Vivekananda International Foundation
3, San Martin Marg | Chanakyapuri | New Delhi - 110021
Tel: 011-24121764 | Fax: 011-66173415

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

Website: www.vifindia.org

Follow us on

Twitter | [@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)

Facebook | [/vifindia](https://facebook.com/vifindia)

ISBN: 978-93-91498-61-0

Cover image courtesy : Statue of renowned Ahom general, Veer Lachit Borphukan at Jorhat, in Assam (Press Information Bureau).

Disclaimer: The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article/paper is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/web upload elsewhere, and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed, and are believed to be correct.

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
The Ahom-Mughal Conflict	15
Ahom-Mughal wars under Jahangir (1615-1616)	15
Ahom-Mughal wars under Shah Jahan (1636-1638)	16
Ahom-Mughal wars under Aurangzeb (1662-1682)	17
Mir Jumla's campaign (1662-1663)	17
Battle of Itakhuli, 1667	21
The Chatrapati Shivaji Episode	24
Ram Singh's Campaign	25
Lachit Barphukan an astute diplomat	27
Battle of Saraighat, 1671	28
Buranjis	31
Ahom Administrative Set-up	33
The Ahom Coins	37
Prominent Stone Inscriptions	39
The Hengdang	41
The Painting Traditions of Assam	43

About the Author

Saudiptendu Ray is a Research Associate at the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi. He has completed his Master's in Modern Indian History from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi. He graduated with a degree in History from Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi. He also has a Master's in Museology from



the National Museum Institute, New Delhi. He has worked with museums of national repute for close to seven years. At the Partition Museum, he documented the oral histories of more than a hundred partition survivors. He has worked on the Prime Minister's Museum Project at NMML. At the National Museum, he has done extensive research on the evolution of firearms technology in the Indian subcontinent based on the collection of the museum. Additionally, his areas of interest are oral history, script writing and Indian military history.

Introduction

It is believed that the Tai people reached the Brahmaputra Valley as early as the 8th century, but there is no reliable evidence to back this claim. However, their arrival and existence under Sukaphaa, the founder of the Ahom kingdom (1228-68), in the 13th century is well documented. The Buranji (Ahom historical chronicles) mentions a figure of 9000 people¹ who followed him, for, in an idiomatic expression, about 3000 cooking pots were carried by the contingent; each cooking pot could cook food for three people. The Ahoms moved down the hills to the Buri Dihing River, from where they entered the Brahmaputra Valley. Sukaphaa built Charaideo (the first permanent capital of the Ahom kingdom in 1253) before his death in 1268 CE, Sukaphaa laid the foundation of a kingdom that lasted for six centuries.



The Ahom Insignia

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

1 H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Volume II, 2016, page 51.



Representation of Sukaphaa

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

The Ahoms had a highly developed sense of history. They introduced historiography into Assam through the Buranjis, which included state papers like despatches from local administrators, judicial minutes or proceedings and diplomatic records, etc. These materials were compiled by scribes and written in prose under an officer who had the title of Lekhakar

Barua (Superintendent of the Department of Writers). These works form part of Assam's political history and its social life. The initial Buranjis were written in Ahom language and in the Tai-Ahom script. The Buranjis were subsequently written in Assamese around the 16th century. From the 17th century onward, the Buranjis provide a detailed view of the Ahom-Mughal conflict. Besides the Buranjis, the other textual references were the Pothis and Vangsavalis (genealogy), which helped to construct Ahom history.



Buranjis

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

The Muslim invasion of Assam started well before the Ahom-Mughal conflict. Muslim raiders, backed by the Sultan of Bengal, Nusrat Shah, were the first to be repelled by the Ahoms in the early half of the 16th century. This was followed by the Turko-Afghan invasion of 1532–33 under Turbak and Hussain. The Ahoms decimated them and freed the kingdoms of Kamrup and Kamata from Muslim domination.² The kingdom of Koch also accepted Ahom authority during that time. Thus, the power and influence of the Ahoms reached its zenith during Suhungmung's reign in the 16th century.



Bhomoraguri Rock inscription 1616, commemorating the victory of Ahoms over the Mughals in Samdhara
Source: Geniacs/Wikipedia

Ahom was the last north-eastern kingdom after Koch Bihar and Kamrup kingdoms to feel the brunt of Mughal imperialism. Unauthorised trade by Mughals in Ahom territories became the cause of the first Ahom-Mughal conflict in 1615-16. The Mughals sent an army under Abu Bakr in 1615, which was initially successful, forcing the Ahoms to retreat further upstream of the River Brahmaputra. This success was, however, short-lived.

2 *Satsari Assam Buranji* (iv), 135; *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, 28-29; 32-34

At the Battle of Samdhara in 1616, near the confluence of the Bharali and the Brahmaputra rivers, the Ahoms caught the Mughals off guard by attacking them on a wintry night. The Mughals were completely routed and their entire naval fleet was captured. Mirza Nathan mentions the heavy Mughal casualties in detail in his 17th century chronicle, *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*, which thwarted the Mughal's maiden attempt to expand towards the east of India.



Momai Tamuli Borbarua brass relief at Sukaphaa Khestra
Source: *ComparingQuantities/Wikipedia*

The Ahoms resumed hostilities with the Mughals in 1636, and this continued throughout the 17th century. Momai Tamuli, a commoner who rose to the rank of general (Borbarua) in the Ahom Army under the reign of Pratap Simha, reorganised the Paik System in Assam, in which all able-bodied adult males called Paiks were obligated to render service to the state in the form of a militia in return for a piece of land to cultivate.³ The Paik System not only strengthened the Ahom military when wars against the

Mughals were at their peak but also strengthened the local economy.

Momai Tamuli Borbarua led the Ahom forces against the Mughal armies of Emperors Jahangir and Shahjahan. In the three-day naval battle that took place at Duimunisila near Tezpur in November 1638, the Mughals ran short of food and suffered heavy casualties. Momai Tamuli Borbarua

3 Gogoi, Jahnabi (2002), *Agrarian system of medieval Assam*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p- 29

forced the Mughals to retreat ingloriously⁴ back to Guwahati. Thus, once again, the Ahom-Mughal war ended in a resounding Ahom victory.



Site of Battle of Duimunisila, November 1638 CE

Credit: Author

The wars, however, had a debilitating financial and manpower impact for both the Ahoms and the Mughals. This led Momai Tamuli Borbarua to sign the Treaty of Asurar Ali with Mughal Faujdar (Commander) Allah Yar Khan in February 1639, wherein both sides agreed to accept the territorial integrity of the other. The boundary between the Ahoms and Mughals was fixed at Bar Nadi on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra and at Asurar Ali on the river's south bank. The Mughals acknowledged Ahom authority to the east of Bar Nadi and temporarily forsook all ambitions of territorial expansion. The Ahoms, in return, recognised Mughal supremacy over Kamrup. Guwahati came under Mughal suzerainty and became an important center of trade for two decades.

4 Sarkar, J. N. (1992). "Chapter VIII: Assam-Mughal Relations". In Barpujari, H. K. (ed.). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam.

Ahom King Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) took advantage of the Mughal war of succession after Shah Jahan's removal from the throne in 1658, throwing the Mughals out of Guwahati and expelling them beyond the Manas River. After consolidating his power in Delhi, the new Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, sent Mir Jumla II, the Viceroy of Bengal, to invade Assam in January 1662. Mir Jumla II attacked the north and south banks of the River Brahmaputra⁵ and was able to occupy Garhgaon, the Ahom capital, by March 17, 1662. King Jayadhwaj Singha had to retreat and continue his fight against the Mughals from Namrup while Mir Jumla occupied Garhgaon. The Treaty of Ghilajharighat, signed in January 1663, brought an end to the Mughal occupation of Garhgaon, giving the Ahom king tributary status.

Soon after the signing of this treaty, Ahom King Jayadhwaj died and was succeeded by Chakradhwaj Singha in 1663. He appointed Lachit Barphukan as commander-in-chief of his army. In 1667, Lachit Barphukan secured Guwahati from the Mughals, making it his defensive war strategy headquarters. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb sent Raja Ram Singh of Amber to recapture Assam. Arriving at the head of a large army, Raja Ram Singh reached the frontier garrison of Rangamati in February 1669.

Realising that any delay in an open confrontation with the numerically superior Mughals would favour the Ahoms, Raja Ram Singh sent a series of letters into the Ahom camp falsely accusing Lachit Barphukan of accepting a bribe from the Mughals. The clever plan worked. Ahom King Chakradhwaj Singha ordered Lachit Barphukan to attack the Mughals immediately, and in the bloody battle that ensued on the plains of Alaboi in 1669, the Ahoms were defeated. After this defeat, Chakradhwaj Singha fell ill and died in 1670. He was succeeded by Udayaditya Singha.

5 Gait, Edward A (1906), *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, p-128.



Battle of Alaboi Memorial, 1669 CE

Credit: Author

The Battle of Alaboi was followed by several futile attempts to restore peace between both camps. Meanwhile, an impatient Aurangzeb forced Raja Ram Singh to resume his offensive to recapture Guwahati. Lachit Barphukan led the Ahom Army at the Battle of Saraighat in March 1671, along the banks of and in the Brahmaputra River between Kamakhya, Itakhuli and Aswakranta. This stretch of the river was filled with war boats and soldiers, most of whom drowned. Ahom soldiers fired cannon balls and arrows from their boats and from the banks of the river. The Mughals suffered huge casualties and were defeated.

This was not the final battle fought between the Ahoms and Mughals in Assam. Guwahati again fell into the lap of the Mughals in 1679. It

remained with them till 1682, when the Ahoms, led by Gadadhar Singha, recovered it and permanently ended Mughal control over Kamrup. In the decisive Battle of Itakhuli, in August 1682, the Ahom forces led by Dihingia Alun Borbarua expelled Mughal Faujdar Mansur Khan and his forces from Guwahati, pushing them to the west of the River Manaha (Manas).⁶ Manas became the Ahom-Mughal boundary until the British occupation in 1826.



Lachit Barphukan leading the advance on the Brahmaputra
 Source: *Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

6 Richards, John F. (1995). *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p-247.



Statue of Lachit Barphukan and his soldiers in the Brahmaputra river

The Ahom-Mughal Conflict

The Mughal expansionist tendencies sowed seeds of animosity with the Ahoms. A desire for political supremacy and territorial expansion in the northeast appears to have been a guiding motive of the Mughals under Emperors Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. Trade rivalries and boundary disputes complicated the situation further. Following the subjugation of the Kamata Kingdom in the west of Assam, the Mughals came to regard the territory east of Barnadi up to Singri as theirs. The rich natural resources of Assam, which included ivory, musk, aloe wood, pepper, silk, tobacco, grains, etc., enhanced Mughal greed.

Between 1615 and 1682, the fortunes of both the Ahoms and the Mughals fluctuated. By the end of the 17th century, the Mughals had lost their hold over northeastern India due to persistent military defeats. The Ahoms, on the other hand, extended and consolidated their influence in Assam, right up to the Manas River, which remained the western boundary of their kingdom until the British East India Company arrived in 1826.

Ahom-Mughal wars under Jahangir (1615-1616)

Prior to 1615, the Ahoms had been rejecting Mughal claims over their territory and had prevented the latter's illegal trade inside Ahom territory. When the Ahom authority confiscated the illegal goods of Mughal trader Ratan Shah and expelled him from Assam, it gave Mughal Emperor Jahangir the pretext to invade Assam in 1615. The Mughal expeditionary

force of about ten thousand cavalry and infantry, 200 musketeers and a flotilla of 300 war boats was commanded by Sayyid Abu Bakr. By November 1615, the Mughal forces were able to take control of Barnagar (the old capital of Kamrup), Hajo, and Kajali, forcing the Ahoms to retreat. To check the further expansion of the Mughals, the Ahom king reinforced the defences of Samdhara Fort, located on the eastern side of the confluence of the Bharali and Brahmaputra rivers near Tezpur. The Mughals crossed the Bharali River, captured the Ahom stockade on the eastern bank, and inflicted significant damage on the Ahom forces.

Ahom King Pratap Singha then sent a strong reinforcement of 14000 men to the Samdhara Fort and ordered them to fight till the very end. The tide soon turned in favour of the Ahoms and they were able to recapture the stockade. The Ahoms attacked the Mughal temporary fortification in the dark of the night in January 1616. The Mughals suffered heavy casualties, and their commander, Sayyid Abu Bakr, was killed. The Ahoms captured the Mughal arsenal and its naval boats and destroyed their pride. Thus, in spite of initial military success, the Mughals failed to subjugate Assam in their maiden attempt.

Ahom-Mughal wars under Shah Jahan (1636-1638)

In the initial years of Shah Jahan's reign, the Mughals wanted to consolidate their position in Kamrup, while the Ahoms, fuelled by their recent successes, wanted to challenge Mughal authority over Kamrup with the help of rebels. The Mughals had to adopt a defensive and conciliatory policy towards the Ahoms after the Battle of Samdhara.

In March 1636, the Ahom-backed Koch King Balinarayan invaded Kamrup, sparking off a fresh conflict between both forces. The Ahoms gained preliminary success with the capture of the Nowmati, a Mughal outpost, forcing the Mughals to retreat to the strongly garrisoned Hajo, located on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. The Ahoms laid siege

to Hajo and as the standoff continued, both sides managed to get small but inconclusive victories. By the end of December 1636, the Ahoms were in retreat, allowing the Mughals to reclaim Kamrup. By the end of 1637, the Mughals had defeated the Koch King Balinarayan and the Ahoms and started recapturing lost territory.

The Mughal advance into Upper Assam was again stopped at Samdhara in October 1638. Ahom forces, under the leadership of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, had strengthened the fortification at Samdhara to help them attack both the Mughal army and naval fleet. The Ahom garrison in Samdhara put up such a strong resistance that the Mughals had to abandon their dreams of conquest, suffering heavy losses in men and resources. The Mughals retreated to Duimunisila, downstream of the river Brahmaputra. In the Battle of Duimunisila in November 1638, the Ahom navy defeated the Mughal navy in a three-day battle, forcing the latter to retreat to Guwahati. This naval victory busted the myth of Mughal naval supremacy.

Peace was reluctantly restored through the Treaty of Asurar Ali between Ahom general Momai Tamuli and Mughal commander Allah Yar Khan in February 1639. Guwahati and its surrounding areas came under the Mughals. The Ahoms acknowledged the Mughal overlordship of Kamrup, and in return, the Mughals acknowledged the independence of the Ahom king and gave up all claims to territories located east of Rivers Barnadi in the north and Kalang in the south.

Ahom-Mughal wars under Aurangzeb (1662-1682)

Mir Jumla's campaign (1662-1663)

Following his accession and consolidation of his power, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb ordered Mir Jumla II to attack Koch Bihar and Assam to restore Mughal authority in eastern India. In early 1662, Mir Jumla II invaded Assam after taking control of Koch Bihar. The weak resistance

put up by the Assamese at garrisons located between the Manas River and Guwahati led to their swift defeat. Important centers like Pandu, Guwahati and Kajali easily fell to the Mughals. The main reason for Ahom losses was internal unrest in the Ahom camp following King Jayadhwaj Singha's decision to appoint a Kayastha as the viceroy of Lower Assam and head of the Ahom army. This appointment caused bitter resentment among hereditary Ahom nobles and commanders, as up until that point, the Tai-Ahom community had exclusive rights over the office of senior commander.

This resentment and defection among Ahom nobles limited the abilities of the Ahom army to conjure up an effective defence and directly helped Mir Jumla's swift march across and through the Assam Valley. He split the Mughal land army into two parts, one marching along the north bank of the River Brahmaputra under his command and the other moving along the south bank under the leadership of Sayyid Nasiruddin Khan. The Mughal Navy, on the other hand, sailed upstream through the middle. In February 1662, the Mughals encountered some resistance in Simalugarh during their march towards Garhgaon. Mir Jumla laid siege to Simalugarh and using heavy cannon fire, defeated the Ahoms. The Ahom forces retreated from Samdhara, going further upstream in order to limit their losses. The Mughal navy, heading towards the Ahom capital, decimated the remaining Ahom navy by early March 1662. Mir Jumla entered the Ahom capital, Garhgaon, on March 17, 1662. The Ahom king, Jayadhwaj Singha, left Garhgaon and took shelter in Namrup in the east.

Though Mir Jumla conquered Assam militarily within five months, he couldn't establish a stable government or exercise complete authority over that region. He established military rule in order to extract wealth from Assam. Immense spoils fell into the hands of the Mughal Empire after the capture of Garhgaon. Mir Jumla amassed huge amounts of wealth by ravaging the Kamakhya and Dergaon temples. He also ordered the exhumation of the graves of Ahom kings and nobles to collect treasures

from them and levied hefty fines on political offenders and plunderers. The boats that reached Dacca from Assam were loaded with plundered booty.

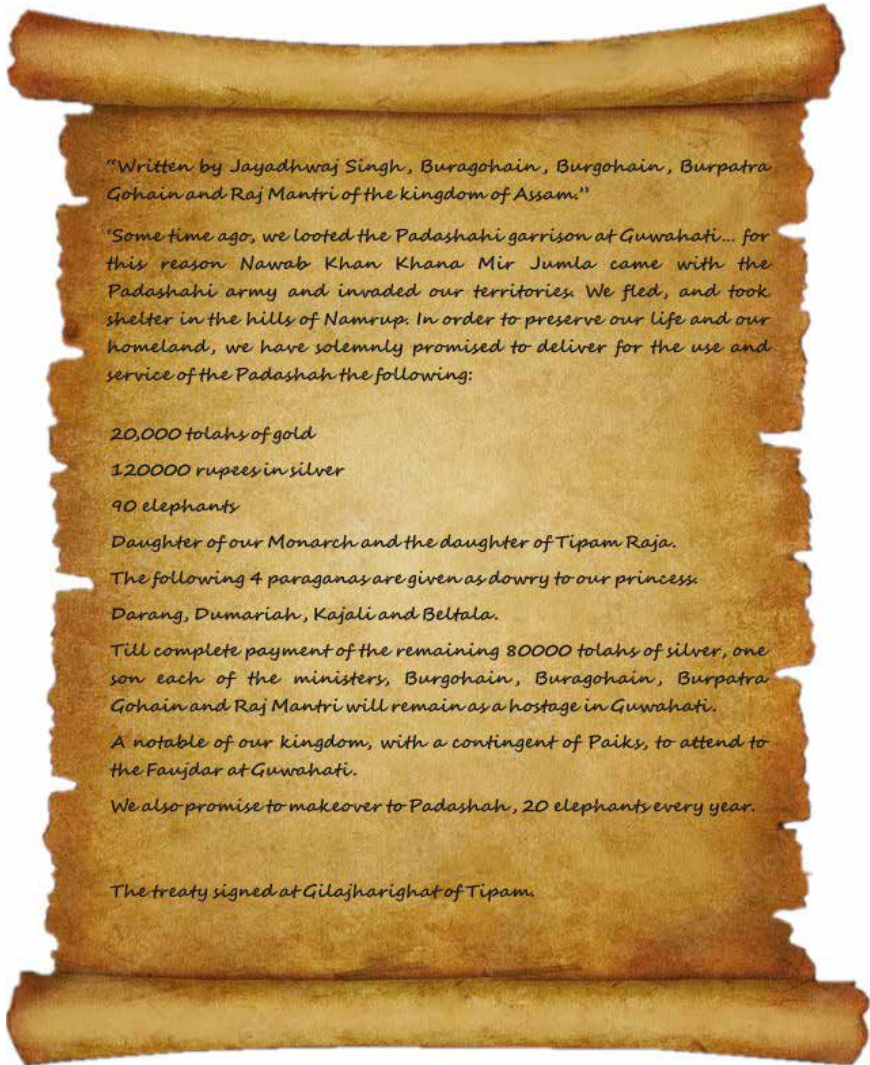
The monsoon season in Assam made it difficult for Mir Jumla to maintain the necessary communication and supply routes with Dacca. The torrential rain and the overflowing rivers disrupted the movement of the Mughal military. This gave the Ahoms the opportunity to recapture some of Assam's rural areas. In Garhgaon, the Mughals were practically boxed in by the turbulent rivers and advancing Ahom forces. They also suffered from diseases that claimed hundreds of lives. The then Ahom king ordered his generals to drive the invaders out of his kingdom. The tide, however, turned slightly in favour of the Mughals after the monsoon season in September 1662, allowing them to re-establish communication and supply routes.

At last, a treaty was concluded at Ghilajharighat in January 1663, in which Ahom King Jayadhwaj Singha ceded western Assam to the Mughals, accepted Mughal vassalage and also promised payment of a war indemnity and annual tributes. The Ahom king had to deliver his daughter, Ramani Gabharu, and his niece to the harem of the Mughal emperor, along with a hefty dowry. Prior to the signing of the treaty, Mir Jumla had already fallen ill and died on his way back to Bengal on March 30, 1663.



A crestfallen Jayadhwaj Singha watches his little daughter go away as part of the treaty agreement.

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition



Treaty of Ghilajharighat

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

The Treaty of Ghilajharighat was signed out of desperation for peace but went against the interest and pride of the Ahoms, who were reduced to tributary status. Jayadhwaj Singha's successor, Chakradhwaj Singha, stopped paying the war indemnity as soon as he came to power. He

immediately wanted to wrest Kamrup back from the Mughals and push the imperialists back from Assam, but was advised against immediate military action by his ministers because of the kingdom's fragile economic condition after Mir Jumla's plunder. The Ahoms used this brief period of peace to strengthen their strategic forts along the Brahmaputra River at Kaliabor and Samdhara.

Battle of Itakhuli, 1667

Chakradhwaj Singha had appointed Lachit as the Barphukan (councillor) and Commander-in-Chief of the Ahom army. He also presented him with the 'Hengdang', or 'Golden Sword'. Effectively, he became the head of the civil administration of Lower Assam. Born on November 24, 1622, Lachit was the youngest son of Momai Tamuli Borbarua and Kunti Moran. Apart from military strategies, he studied the Ahom scriptures, religion and economics. He also held positions like Ghora Barua (Superintendent of the Royal Horses), Dulia Barua (Superintendent of the Royal Palanquin Bearers), Dholaksharia Barua (Superintendent of the Armed Guards), etc.



Lachit becomes Barphukan

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

On August 22, 1667, Lachit sailed down the Brahmaputra with a large army and established a base at Kaliabor to conduct military operations against the Mughals ensconced in Guwahati. The Ahom army was divided into two divisions and began marching along both banks of the Brahmaputra. Along the way, it won small military posts and forts like Kajali and Sonapur. The Mughals had strongly fortified Guwahati with five watch posts on each bank of the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms faced firm resistance on the river's north bank, but after a stiff struggle, they were able to capture Manikeshwar Hill and Rangmahal.

On the river's south bank, the primary objective was to capture Itakhuli Fort. Ahom forces besieged the gateways leading to Itakhuli, capturing Pandu and Jaiduar, which were smaller Mughal Chowkis. The capture of these positions was critical, as from here, the Ahoms could target the fort with their cannons and arrows. Ahoms spies sabotaged the Mughal cannons at Itakhuli by pouring water into their muzzles.



Sabotage of Mughal cannons at Itakhuli fort
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

A night attack was launched on the fort on November 4, 1667. The walls of the fort were scaled with the help of ladders, and the fort was captured. The fall of Itakhuli forced the Mughals to flee from Guwahati and by mid-November 1667, the Ahoms recaptured it. The recapture of Guwahati under Lachit's leadership helped the Ahoms recover parts of Kamrup right up to the Manas River and this victory was recorded on three rock inscriptions: one on a stone pillar at Fatasil, near Guwahati, in Sanskrit, and two in North Guwahati in Assamese.



A night attack on the Itakhuli Fort
 Source: *Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

After the Battle of Itakhuli, the Ahoms started converting Guwahati into a strategic war base to prevent future expansionist attempts by the Mughals. Samdhara Fort was too far upstream to be an effective defensive line; therefore, the fortification of Guwahati was strengthened with the construction of twin forts on either side of Saraighat. Lachit appointed trained artillerymen to take charge of strategic batteries and guns, positioning them on hills and the ramparts of forts at regular intervals.

The Chatrapati Shivaji Episode

Emperor Aurangzeb viewed Shivaji's exploits in the Deccan with great trepidation. Shaista Khan, the Mughal governor of the Deccan, was attacked by Shivaji in Pune on April 5, 1663. Shaista Khan escaped with his thumb severed and his son killed. In September 1664, Aurangzeb asked Mirza Raja Jai Singh to lead an expedition against Shivaji. Ram Singh was also part of this expedition. Jai Singh arrived in Pune on March 3, 1665, and took charge of the Mughal Army in the Deccan.

The Marathas suffered reverses when the Purandhar Fort was captured by the Mughals in June 1665. A treaty was concluded between Shivaji and the Mughals, under which Jai Singh persuaded Shivaji to come to Agra. He told Shivaji, "As you have restored and defended Hindu religion, I am pleased with you. Ram Singh is my son and so are you." Ram Singh assured Shivaji about his safety in Agra. On the basis of these assurances, Shivaji decided to go to Agra with his son Sambhaji.



Shivaji Maharaj in the court of Aurangzeb by painter M. V. Dhurandhar
 Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

On May 12, 1666, Shivaji and his son were taken to Aurangzeb's court, where Aurangzeb ordered Ram Singh to escort Shivaji to a place reserved for commanders of 5000 Sowars (Lancers). Shivaji, who had commanded 10,000 Sowars, felt greatly insulted by this move, and in the commotion that followed, he was declared a state prisoner under Ram Singh's watch. On August 19, 1666, Shivaji escaped from Agra. Travelling as a religious mendicant, he reached Pune in December 1666. The escape had created a great sensation and Ram Singh was held responsible for it.

Aurangzeb punished Ram Singh by banning him from his court and depriving him of his rank and pay. In May 1667, Jai Singh was relieved of the governorship of the Deccan. Towards the end of 1667, Aurangzeb received reports of Guwahati's loss and the defeat of the Mughals. He appointed Ram Singh as the commander of the Mughal forces and sent him to Assam. This deputation was considered a punishment for Ram Singh's alleged support of Shivaji. Niccolao Manucci, a Venetian traveller and writer, wrote, "Aurangzeb ordered Ram Singh to proceed on the conquest of Assam simply in the hope of getting rid of him, knowing fully well what had happened there to the great Mir Jumla." According to the *Akhbar-i-Darbar-i-Muallah*, Aurangzeb was enraged over Shivaji's escape and in a Farman (royal decree) sent to Mirza Raja Jai Singh, said that ideally his son should have been skinned alive for his act of betrayal, but he was being spared and would have to forfeit his Mansabs, for which Mirza Jai Singh needed to be eternally grateful.

Ram Singh's Campaign

Ram Singh reached Rangamati in Assam at the head of a huge army in February 1669. The Mughals faced limited resistance in western Assam and advanced along the north bank of the Brahmaputra River to reach Sualkuchi, north of Guwahati, in April 1669. Aware of the military might of the Mughal cavalry in open fields, Lachit Barphukan chose the terrain for battle with care. He wanted to delay the final confrontation with the

Mughals because of the latter's numerical superiority. The Ahom forces adopted a defensive war strategy. Lachit evacuated all posts west of Hajo and concentrated on the defence of Guwahati and strategic centres around it. The Mughals were almost lured into the well-guarded Guwahati sector. A prolonged period of skirmishes, both on land and water, took place around Guwahati between the two forces.

Ram Singh sent a series of letters into the Ahom camp in the hope of reaching a peaceful settlement. He also challenged the Ahom king to take part in a duel, and if he was defeated, he should agree to withdraw from Assam with his army. King Chakradhwaj Singha became increasingly suspicious of his military commanders due to their dilatory methods. He even threatened to punish Lachit and his commanders if they continued to delay the offensive against the Mughals. It was probably the most trying moment of Lachit Barphukan's life. He knew that an attack on the Mughals near Alaboi Hills in the open plains would be suicidal for the Ahom infantry, but the king's orders superseded everything.



Maharaja Ram Singh of Amber
Source: *The Indian Portrait*

The **Battle of Alaboi** took place on August 5, 1669. Lachit decided to resort to deception and misrepresentation to minimise his losses. The Ahoms had a Brahman vanguard (archers and swordsmen were dressed as Brahmans) so that the Rajputs would desist from killing them. In the initial stages of the battle, the Ahom forces repelled the Mughal infantry, but their success was short-lived. The Mughal cavalry broke through the Ahom defences, killing over 10,000 warriors. Though the Alaboi Massacre was seen as a serious loss to the Ahoms, it did not give the Mughals a decisive advantage.



A melancholic Lachit after the Battle of Alaboi
 Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Lachit Barphukan an astute diplomat

Sporadic engagements accompanied by proposals of peace continued between 1669 and 1670. Lachit's master stroke policy was to send messengers to Ram Singh, emphasizing peaceful intent in the settlement of disputes. The Ahom-Mughal conflict was in the nature of a "tug of war, alternate gains and losses," with the same place changing hands several times. Ram Singh had observed that there was an endless coming and going of messengers but no real sign of friendship being extended. He was convinced that while Lachit Barphukan would utter words of peace, he would never abandon his war strategy. Therefore, he demanded the withdrawal of Ahom forces from Guwahati and a reversion to the status quo ante that existed in 1639.

The correspondence between the Ahoms and the Mughals gave Lachit much-needed time to complete his preparations. It allowed him to send a firm reply to Ram Singh. The reply said, "Guwahati and Kamrup did not belong to the Mughals. We lost it for a time due to ill luck. God has been pleased to give them back to us. We are prepared to fight to the last." This

bold reply was a clear manifestation of his diplomatic triumph. As part of their defensive strategy, the Ahoms supplemented their open engagements with harassing guerilla tactics. Chakradhwaj Singha died in April 1670, and he was succeeded by his brother Udayaditya Singha. In the meantime, Aurangzeb, losing patience over his desire to occupy Guwahati, ordered Ram Singh to resume his offensive.



Correspondence between the Ahoms and the Mughals
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Battle of Saraighat, 1671

Ram Singh made preparations for his final assault on Guwahati in March 1671. King Udayaditya Singha sent an army of 20,000 soldiers under the leadership of Atan Buragohain from Samdhara to Saraighat to reinforce Guwahati. Lachit Barphukan was very ill at that time and was observing the battlefield from his sickbed in the Itakhuli fort. This had already

demoralised the Ahoms, but under the leadership of Laluk Bargohain Phukan, they were able to repel the advancing Mughals on land. The larger war boats of the Mughal Navy, on the other hand, forced the Ahom Navy to momentarily retreat from Saraighat. The land forces, fearing encirclement by the enemy, also had to retreat. The battle reached a crucial phase when the Mughals were beginning to get close to Andharubali, which was a vulnerable and unprotected sandbank between the fortified positions.



Battle of Saraighat
 Source: *Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

At this crucial moment in the battle, Lachit Barphukan boarded a war boat and with six other vessels, launched a counterattack with artillery fire. The sight of their ailing general leading the attack energised the Ahom soldiers. Lachit's small flotilla soon swelled with Ahom warships coming from all sides and smashed into the Mughal warships at Amrajuli on the north bank, opposite Kamakhya Hills. The battle zone spread between Itakhuli, Kamakhya and Aswakranta in the shape of a triangle in the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms resorted to a combined front and rear attack. The Mughals suffered the loss of three top-ranking amirs and 4,000 soldiers. Aurangzeb demoted Ram Singh from his position and recalled him from Assam. Lachit Barphukan died at Kaliabar in April 1672.



Lachit Barphukan inspires Source: *Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

Aurangzeb's desire to rule over Assam did not end with the Mughal Army's defeat in Saraighat. He appointed Prince Azam as the Viceroy of Bengal in place of Shaista Khan and ordered him to recover Guwahati. Laluksola, the elder brother of Lachit Barphukan, succeeded the latter as the Barphukan of Lower Assam, and he had the desire to rule over the whole of Assam. He conspired with Prince Azam and retreated from Guwahati, allowing the Mughals to recapture Guwahati in 1679. In 1682, Ahom King Gadadhar Singha appointed Dihingia Alun Barbarua as the supreme commander of the Ahom forces and tasked him with the responsibility of recapturing Guwahati. The Ahom army moved from Kaliabor to Guwahati along

the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra River, with the naval fleet in the middle. The pivotal battle of Itakhuli took place in August 1682. The Ahoms drove out Mughal Faujdar Mansur Khan and forced the Mughals to retreat west of the Manas River. The protracted Ahom-Mughal conflict thus ended with an Ahom victory over the much more powerful Mughal Empire.

Buranjis

Buranji in Ahom literally means “a store that teaches the ignorant.” The Buranjis were written with fast-drying ink on oblong strips of the bark of the Sanchi tree or aloe wood (Agaru). The strips of bark went through an elaborate process of curing, seasoning and polishing, which gave them a glossy shine. These state archival records have been instrumental in understanding the social and cultural milieu as well as the political developments in Assam since the 13th century. The Buranjis have conserved the language, customs, institutes, official and judicial procedures, chronicles of Ahom kings and intricate details of the state machinery. Even the foul deeds of rulers were recorded in the Buranjis along with their achievements.

The **Ahom Buranji from Khunlung and Khunlai** provides a detailed account of the reigns of Ahom rulers. A significant part of it deals with Ahom-Mughal relations, highlighting the campaigns against Mughal commanders Sayyid Abu Bakr, Islam Khan, Mirza Nathula, Mir Jumla, Ram Singh and Mansur Khan. The Buranjis also provide a detailed account of the battles fought between the Ahoms and the Mughals.

The **Ahom Buranji**, written in Tai-Ahom script, covers a period from the earliest times to Purandar Simha (the end of Ahom rule). It is divided into two parts, namely Deo-Buranji and Din-Buranji. Deo-Buranji is the history of heavenly bodies and Din-Buranji is the history of the earth, from the extension of the rule of the Tais to the migration of Sukaphaa.

Purani Asam Buranji supplements the Ahom Buranji and provides additional details of the Muhammadan wars in Assam. Purari Asam Buranji places emphasis on the economic aspect of Mughal imperialism. It highlights trade and commerce as important factors in the Ahom-Mughal conflict. Other examples of Buranjis are Satsari Asam Buranji, Deodhai Asam Buranji, Tungkhungia Buranji, Assam Buranji Puthi and Asamar Padya Buranji, etc.



Buranjis

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Ahom Administrative Set-up

The Ahom King was the head of the state and his position was considered sacred. The king was not only the owner of the land but also the master of his subjects. Only a person of royal blood could ascend the throne. The king was assisted by a Council of 'Gohains' or 'Great Nobles', which included the Buragohain (Senior Noble) and the Bargohain (Great Noble). Subsequently, a new position called Barpatragohain was created during the reign of Dhingiya Raja. The Gohains had provinces assigned to them to facilitate internal administration. The Gohains provided advice to the king on matters

of general administration and relations with other powers. The king was bound to consult them on all important matters of the state and generally did not go against the resolutions passed by the three Gohains. The most competent of the Gohains served as the Ahom Prime Minister, but all three were looked upon as equal. The position of Gohains was hereditary.

In the first half of the 17th century, two more posts, Barbarua and Barphukan, were created by Ahom King Pratap Singha. The first Barbarua was Momai Tamuli, the father of Lachit Barphukan. In rank and dignity,



Ahom Administrative set-up
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

both of these officials were next to the Gohains. Their appointment was not hereditary. Members of twelve specified families could apply to fill up these positions. The Barbarua collected revenue and looked after the administration in parts of the eastern province, from Sadiya to Kolibar. He was also the commander of forces and had control over 14,000 Paiks, who were bound to serve the king.

The Barphukan had executive and judicial powers, and he looked after administration west of the Kaliabor River. The headquarters of the Barphukan shifted from Kaliabor to Guwahati after the Battle of Itakhuli in 1681. The Barphukan occupied an important position in the administration because he also had to conduct diplomatic relations with the neighbouring regions of Bengal and Bhutan and other frontier areas. The Barbarua and the Barphukan, along with the three great Gohains, formed the Council of Five Patra Mantris, something like a modern cabinet. They were consulted when important affairs in the Ahom state demanded attention.

There were local governors like the Sadiya Khowa Gohain, the Morangi Khowa Gohain and the Solal Gohain. They looked after the local administration and collected revenues from their own districts. This was a lower position than the Barphukan. Under the Gohains was a class of nobles known as the Phukans. They were heads of the royal navy, household affairs, or in charge of the waterways. They were under the direct supervision of the Barbarua. The twelve Rajkhowas were posted in different provinces, assisted by one Phukan and one Barua in every province. The treasurer was called Banbandhar Barua. Bejbarua was the palace physician. The Gandhiya Barua was in charge of the Buranjis, records, letters and despatches. Last on the list were lower-grade officers called Katakis.

The Ahoms had developed the Paik system as a unique administrative unit in which the adult and the able-bodied male population, roughly between the ages of 16 and 50, were liable to render service to the state and form its militia. In return, the king gave the Paik a plot of land (nearly 3 acres of

rice land) to cultivate. The Paik were foot soldiers of the Ahom Army. The number of Paiks rendering royal service at any given time was one-fourth of the number of Paiks in the household.

For every twenty Paiks, there was a supervising officer called Bora. Over him was a Saikia, who commanded 100 Paiks. Then there was the Hazarika, who commanded 1000 Paiks, followed by a Rajkhowa, who commanded 3000 Paiks, and then a Phukan, who commanded 6000 Paiks. The types of services that the Paiks rendered included defense management, construction of river embankments, roads, bridges, water tanks, etc. They also worked on the production of military items, which included making boats, arrows, etc. The Paik also worked as tenants on the private lands of Ahom nobles and temples. This system enabled the Ahom king to have maximum utilisation of the manpower, both in times of war and during peace.



*Ahom King's Palace also known as Kareng Ghar situated in
Garhgaon, Sivasagar, Assam
Source: Wikimedia Commons*



Talatal Ghar of the Ahom Kings
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Ahom Coins

The peculiarity of Ahom coins lay in their shape. Most Ahom coins were octagonal in shape, in accordance with a shloka in the Yogini Tantra, which describes the Ahom state as having eight sides. The earliest Ahom coin was struck by Suklenmung in 1543. Much later, in the 17th century, each new ruler issued coins bearing his name to mark his accession to the throne. During the reign of Sukhrungphaa or Rudra Singha (1696–1714), smaller coins of lesser value were minted regularly as per demand. Sutanphaa or Siva Singha (1714-1744) introduced a regular gold currency.

The legend on Suklenmung's coins was in the traditional Ahom language and characters. The silver coins minted under Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) and Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1670) bore Sanskrit legends in Bengali script. Subsequently, the use of Sanskrit became the rule during Rudra Singha's reign. Square coins with Persian legends were issued by Siva Singha to facilitate trade. The Chinese script was also used to facilitate trade with Tibet, but was extremely rare.

The obverse side of the coin had the name of the king and the date of issue. The reverse had the name of the deity the king worshipped. The deities most commonly mentioned in the Ahom coins are Indra, Siva, Radha and Krishna. The official mint was called Rajshal. The mint master was called Sonardar Barua or Sonari Bordoloi. The principal denominations of Ahom coins were— rupee (Rajmohuree), half rupee (Adhali), quarter rupee (Siki), two annas (Admahia), one anna (Charatiya) and half anna (Tiniratiya).



Ahom coins

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Prominent Stone Inscriptions

The earliest stone inscription from the Ahom period is the **Gachtal Rock Inscription**. The stone pillar was found in Gachtal, in Assam's Nagaon district and is engraved in Sanskrit. It records Sultan Skandar Shah's invasion of Assam in 1362. The **Sadiya Serpent Pillar** inscription was discovered in Sadiya, in upper Assam. It is a royal proclamation of Ahom King Suhungmung (1497–1539) depicting the terms of a treaty signed with the local Mishmi tribe after the Ahoms captured Sadiya in 1532.

The **Samdhara Rock Inscription** of 1616 talks about the victory of Ahom King Pratap Singha over Mughal forces. The Ahom-Mughal clash resulted in the naval rout of Mughal Commander Abu Bakr on the River Bharali in 1615.

The **Kanai Barsi Rock Inscriptions** in Assamese, dated 1667, were made during the time of King Chakradhwaj Singha near Manikarneshwar Hill on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra at Guwahati. It refers to the construction of an Ahom fort in November–December 1667, after



*Gachtal Rock Inscription
Source: Assam's History
India's Pride, the Exhibition*

the defeat and deaths of Syed Sana and Syed Firoz by Lachit Barphukan.

The **Rock Inscription at Fatasil**, near Guwahati, briefly records in Sanskrit the defeat of the Mughals by Lachit Barphukan in 1667.



*Victory pillar of Namjani Barphukan
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

The **Victory Pillar of Namjani Barphukan**, a stone pillar inscription, records the defeat of the Mughals and the subsequent conquest of Guwahati by the Ahoms in 1667.

The Hengdang

The Hengdang is a single-edged sword with a long handle used by the Ahoms in India. The Hengdang handle and the scabbard were designed in gold, silver or wood, according to a person's rank and position. The Hengdang was used mostly by high-ranking officials of the Ahom Kingdom, like the King, Prime Minister, Commander and Sub-Commander. Today, it is used on ceremonial occasions.



Ahom weapons

Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Ahom King Chakradhwaj Singha presented Lachit Barphukan with a golden handle

Hengdang on being appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the army and navy. The other main Ahom weapons were the 'Barchah' (spear), 'Yathi' (flat spear) and 'Baru' (shield).



An Abom soldier holding a Hengdang
Source: reddit.com

The Painting Traditions of Assam



Hastividyārṇava illustrated manuscript
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition

Assam made a distinct contribution to the late medieval art of painting in India. There are many beautiful pictures in colour illustrating the Assamese poem, 'Sankh-Chudavadh Kavya'. The 'Hastividyarnava' is another manuscript with beautiful pictures illustrative not only of different kinds of elephants but also of life in the court of the Ahom king and his nobles. This was a great period for miniature book illustrations in Assam. Written in 'Pothi' and fashioned on broad 'Sanchi' leaves, these books are unique to Assam. The above pictures reveal a separate style and have their place of honour besides Rajasthani, Kangra and other styles.

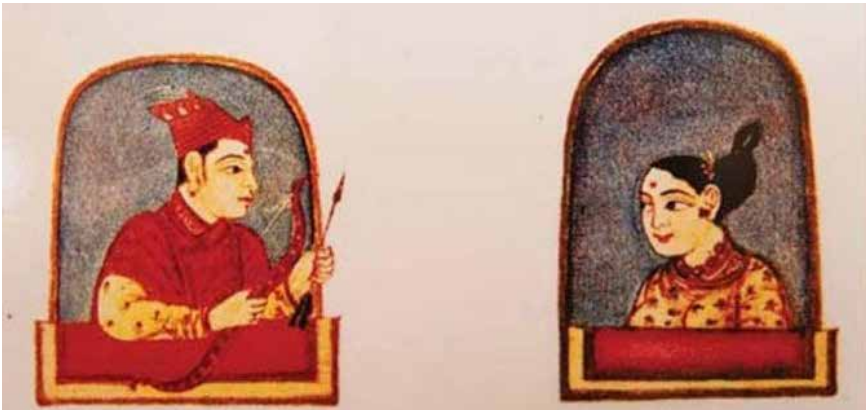
Portraits of Ahom King Shiva Singha and his beautiful Queen Ambika Devi, with her hair done in a loose knot and wearing an embroidered scarf of golden 'Muga', are gems of art.



*Hastividyārṇava illustrated manuscript
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*



*Illustration from Mahabharat in Sankh-Chudavadh Kavya
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*



*Portraits of Maharaja Siva Singha and Maharani Ambika Devi
Source: Assam's History India's Pride, the Exhibition*

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on issues of national importance.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Tel: 011-24121764, 24106698 • Fax: 011-66173415

E-mail: info@vifindia.org, Website: www.vifindia.org

Follow us on [twitter@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)