



Military Strategy of Bir Lachit Borphukan, the Legendary Ahom General of Medieval Assam

Mr. Dilip Kumar Khound

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Borholla College, Jorhat

Abstract:

Bir Lachit Borphukan from medieval Assam history is known for his valor, patriotism and self sacrifice for the noble cause of defending his people from the Mughal invasion. He was a brave heart of Assam who fought insistently against the Mughal Empire and was successful in stopping them from taking control of the entire Ahom Kingdom. It is worth mentioning that a few notable studies have been done in recent years by the historians and others focusing on the life and works of the great General from medieval Assam. The military strategy adopted by him in the battle of Saraighat where he resisted the Islamic invasion in the region and his greatness as a military leader have not gained lots focus in the national level. It is fact that if Lachit Barphukan would not have been there and had he not resisted the aggression of the Mughals, the history of Assam would have been different. In the same way, the cultural and demographic pattern would have been different from what we have today.

Key Words: *Bir Lachit, Ahom, Mughals, Military Strategy, Patriotism*

I. Introduction:

Bir Lachit Borphukan from medieval Assam history is known for his valor, patriotism and self sacrifice for the noble cause of defending his people from the Mughal invasion. He was a brave heart of Assam who fought insistently against the Mughal Empire and was successful in stopping them from taking control of the entire Ahom Kingdom. He was born on 24th November 1622 and died on 25th April 1672.

There are lots of tales about the great military strategies of Mughals Emperors. Aurangzeb is the ruler who is most talked in present India for its role on expansion of Islam through brutal ways and his role in demolition of temples of other religions, different historians and scholars have different opinion about this but one thing all the scholars agree on is his brilliant strategic thinking of expanding his territory through military strategy. Aurangzeb ruled nearly over all the parts of Indian Subcontinent. His military strategy resulted him the greatest of Empire which none of the early Mughal Emperor had, his expansion to Southern India is one of the best example of his strategic thoughts. But, the military strategy of Bir Lachit Borphukan was more apt and perfect in comparison with the military strategy of then Mughal Emperor Aurngazebe. The battle of Saraighat, where Lachit Borphukan resisted the Mughal army and reinstated the boundary of Ahom Kingdom is a perfect example of this fact. Regarding the greatness and valor of mighty Ahoms, Raja Ram Singha, upon which the responsibility of the invasion of Assam was laid, uttered the following words-

“Glory to the King! Glory to the Counsellors! Glory to the commanders! Glory to the country! One single individual leads all the forces! Even I, Ram Singha, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loophole and opportunity!” This shows the greatness of Bir Lachit Borphukan as a perfect military strategist, acute soldier and substantial visionary leader.

In this way there are lots of heroic narratives about the heroism and dedication of this legendary General of Ahom Army. Compiling all these Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the noted historian published an

English biography titled “Lachit Borphukan and His Times”. His work gave the gallant warrior and legendary figure of Assam a new dimension.

II. Objectives:

This research paper contributes to develop the existing information about the military strategy of Bir Lachit Borphukan. The research addresses the following objectives:

1. The contribution of Bir Lachit Borphukan for resisting the Islamic invasion in Assam.
2. To study the military strategy adopted by Bir Lachit Borphukan in the final battle of Saraighat.

III. Significance of the Study:

It is worth mentioning that a few notable studies have been done in recent years by the historians and others focusing on the life and works of the great General from medieval Assam. But the military strategy adopted by him in the battle of Saraighat where he resisted the Islamic invasion in the region and his greatness as a military leader have not gained lots focus in the national level. In this study attempt has been made to discuss the superior military strategy adopted by him against the Mughal aggression.

IV. Methodology:

Research methodology is the most important aspect of any study. It facilitates the materials and provides reliability and validity to it. The information collected for the purpose of the study is based on secondary data only. Secondary data have been collected from various published and unpublished sources like relevant literature, writings of historians, news papers, journals, scholarly articles, related websites, social media and others. It is analytical and descriptive in nature.

V. Discussion on Findings:

The mighty Ahom Dynasty was founded in 1228 in Assam’s Brahmaputra valley. The first Ahom King was Chaolung Su-Ka Pha, who crossed the Patkai mountainous region to reach the Brahmaputra valley. In 1615, the Ahom Dynasty engaged in its first significant conflict with the Mughal Empire. The conflict continued afterwards and in this backdrop Bir Lachit Borphukan grew up. By the time of Lachit’s appointment as the commander of Ahom army, the Mughals had occupied Guwahati. But, finally during the battle of Saraighat in 1671, the Ahom army led by Bir Lachit Borphukan successfully defeated the Mughals. He succeeded in that endeavor with his leadership skill, dedication, patriotism and advanced military strategies.

In early 1600s, Mughals realized the strategic importance of Brahmaputra Valley. They tried very hard to capture this province of India and fought many battles with the mighty Ahom rulers. But they failed and signed a treaty called Asurar Ali in 1639. This treaty marked the Barnadi River in the north bank of Brahmaputra and Asurar Ali in the south bank of Brahmaputra River as the boundary of Ahom Kingdom and Mughal Empire. When Aurangzeb took the charge of Mughal Empire after the fall of Shahjahan, Mir Jhumla was the Mughal Viceroy at Dhaka. He was asked by Aurangzeb to recapture Assam. In 1661, he marched with a huge army and defeated Ahom King and captured the capital of Ahom Kingdom situated at Gargaon. Even though Mughals won the battle, they had to face strong monsoon and diseases like malaria and dysentery. A defeated Ahom King Jayadhwaj Singha did not have the intelligence about Mughals’ plight and signed a humiliating treaty called Ghilajarighat in January, 1663. According to the treaty Ahom gave the territory from Guwahati to the Manas River. The Mughals retreated and Mir Jhumla died of illness. Jayadhwaj Singha, the ahom King who signed the humiliating treaty died a natural death. Before dying he asked his successor, King Chakradhwaj Singha to take a pledge to rethink about the damage committed by him. The new King accepted the challenge and started making preparation to recover the lost territories. He appointed Bir Lachit Borphukan as the new Commander-in Chief of the Ahom army. In 1667, the Ahom army under the leadership of Bir Lachit Borphukan advanced from Gargaon to Guwahati.

Lachit Borphukan with his military strategy captured north and south sides of Guwahti. The Mughal canons were big obstacles. Lachit asked one of his subordinate to infiltrate to the Mughal Camp in the night and pour water into their cannons. This helped him to win the battle and his army captured Mughal

Governor Firoz Khan and other soldiers. Mughal had to vacate Guwahati. Lachit did not stop at this. He expected a retaliatory attack on Guwahati by the Mughals and planned very wisely. He did not waste time and started bolstering Guwahati defense by erecting sand walls and planting obstacles. It is also worth mentioning that at that time Guwahati had excellent natural barriers as it was surrounded by hillocks and the Brahmaputra River. Lachit was focused in ensuring the full safety of Guwahati and planned everything very carefully. As expected, in 1669, the Mughals under Raja Ram Singha reached upto Manas River with a huge army. Lachit's spies had kept him informed about Raja Ram Singha's progress. But, the size of the army forced Lachit to buy time with the help of false negotiations. The Mughals laid siege to Guwahati for around a year. During that time Lachit prepared his army for guerilla warfare. He knew it very well that his army would not be able to fight the Mughals in an open-ground battle. In the mean time Ram Singha became frustrated because of the failed negotiations and planned to attack the Ahom Army. He also started the diplomacy and tried to insert doubt in the mind of the Ahom King that Lachit had defected to Mughal side and therefore not fighting a proper battle. Ram Singha was little bit successful in his plan and the Ahom King became suspicious about Lachit's behavior and ordered an open attack upon the Mughals. Lachit tried his best to convince the king regarding his strategy. But he could not convince him. As a result and to prove his innocence he had to follow the order of the king. Though he was reluctant, he attacked the Mughals in the battle of Allaboi. At first instance Ahom Army gained some success. But later the Mughals started to destroy the Ahom Army. Lachit did a great job of building a precautionary defense system by digging a trench in the rear of his army. That helped him from total destruction and he pulled the remaining troops of his army to a safer position.

The Mughals wanted that the Ahom should honor the earlier treaty of 1639. They were even prepared to compensate Ahom well. But, Ahom could anticipate that giving the western part of their kingdom would have a very negative impact for the security of their land and people. Giving Guwahati to them would mean giving them a launching pad for attacks on the eastern part of the kingdom. The Mughals could not wait longer but knew that land attack was unlikely to work. So, they launched a massive naval attack on the river at Saraighat. The Ahom soldiers had not recovered from the earlier defeat and Lachit Borphukan was severely ill. The soldiers were losing the will power to fight. Lachit was observing all these development from his sickbed. He ordered his troops to carry him on a boat. Seven boats advanced against the Mughal fleet. Seeing their commander entering the war despite his illness, the Ahom soldiers got the inner energy. A large number of soldiers with small boats entered the river quickly. Mughal's large boats could not maneuver deftly against the attack from the small boats. Many Mughal soldiers were killed and Ahom recaptured the land up to Manas River. Lachit died a year later. After a few years later, the Mughals briefly recaptured Guwahati, but in 1682 Ahom won it back. Since then the Brahmaputra valley never became a part of the Mughal Empire.

Though Lachit could not enjoy his victory for long but his bravery in the battle of Saraighat made him a legend for all the ages to come. His heroism, his combat plans, patriotism and military preparedness is worth mentioning, which should be celebrated by all. He defeated the mighty Mughal army through a combination of determination, hard work, military strategy, guerrilla warfare and intelligence as a commander. The battle of Saraighat was one of the worst defeats the Mughal would ever face. Because of the defeat they could not extend their empire into the North Eastern part of India. There is no doubt that the expansion of Mughal Empire in this part of the country could not happen because of the relentless endeavor put forwarded by Bir Lachit Borphukan. Had Lachit Borphukan not been there and had he not resisted the aggression of the Mughals with his acute military strategy, the history as well as the cultural and the demographic pattern of Assam and North East would have been different from what we have seen today.

Conclusion:

Today, Lachit Barphukan is revered as the greatest military hero not only of Assam but of India. Like his contemporary Shivaji, the Maratha hero in Maharashtra, Lachit Barphukan also fought relentlessly to resist the expansion of the Mughal Empire in Assam. Had Lachit Barphukan not been there and had he not resisted the aggression of the Mughals, the history of Assam would have been different; the cultural and demographic pattern and many mores would have been different from what we have today. His bravery and tales of patriotism are no longer confined to Assam only; it has become a national saga. His military acumen and war strategy have become an inspiring lesson for the nation's millions of youths. Showing great reverence to Lachit his statue was unveiled at the National Defence Academy, Pune in Maharashtra by late Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha, the then Governor of Assam in November 14, 2000. Again in 1999, the then Chief of Army General V. P. Malik, instituted the annual Lachit Barphukan Gold Medal Award for the best cadet of

National Defence Academy. On 24th November each year Lachit Divas is celebrated statewide in Assam to commemorate the heroism of Lachit Barphukan and the victory of the Ahom Army in the Battle of Saraighat. Lachit will always remain as an emblem of national pride for all the times to come. He is among those war heroes of the world who puts love for country above all. Lachit Barphukan's patriotic zeal and spirit has got great relevance in the present time. His heroic tales can be a befitting reply to all the divisive forces trying to threaten the national integrity of the country.

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