



From Saraighat to Itakhuli: Assam's Struggle for Sovereignty under the Mughals

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Abstract—This paper examines the Ahom-Mughal conflicts (1615-1682) that shaped Assam's frontier politics and preserved the sovereignty of the Ahom kingdom. Tracing the initial Mughal incursions under Qasim Khan Chishti, the rise of Pratap Singha's military reforms, Lachit Borphukan's riverine mastery at Saraighat (1671), and the decisive Battle of Itakhuli (1682), it reveals how terrain, naval innovation, and decentralized command thwarted Mughal imperial designs. By integrating military history with subaltern and diplomatic perspectives, the study illustrates the Ahoms' adaptive strategies and assesses their long-term impact on Mughal ambitions in northeastern India.

Keywords—Ahom–Mughal Wars, Lachit Borphukan, Saraighat (1671), Battle of Itakhuli (1682), Buranji Chronicles, Riverine warfare, Frontier Diplomacy, Assam Sovereignty

Introduction

- In November 1615, Mughal general Qasim Khan crossed the Barnadi River, capturing Pandu and pressing east toward Guwahati territory the Ahom kingdom regarded as its own.
- What followed was nearly seven decades of intermittent warfare during which Ahom rulers from Pratap Singha to Udayaditya Singha marshaled frontier coalitions, perfected riverine tactics, and fortified hill-stocked forts.
- This paper explores how the Ahoms resisted Mughal incursions, eventually ousting imperial forces at the Battle of Itakhuli in August 1682, thereby safeguarding Assam's political autonomy.

Historiographical Context

- Early colonial writers largely overlooked the Ahoms' military sophistication, dismissing Assam as a remote "tribal backwater" and portraying Mughal campaigns as unilateral conquests rather than hard-fought border wars.
- Nationalist historiography in the early 20th century reclaimed Assam's past, celebrating Lachit Borphukan's victory at Saraighat and framing Ahom resistance as part of a pan-Indian struggle against foreign rule.
- From the 1970s onward, subaltern scholars have foregrounded local Buranji (court chronicles) and tribal auxiliaries-Bihiya, Kachari, and Naga contingents, highlighting how peasant and ethnic networks underpinned sustained guerrilla campaigns and riverine defenses.
- Recent memory-studies work examines how modern Assam commemorates these events through Lachit Diwas (December 24) and museum exhibits at Talatal Ghar, ensuring that the Ahoms' victories over the Mughals remain central to regional identity.

Political and Geographical Context

- The Ahom state, founded in 1228 by Sukapha and based on the Brahmaputra valley's river islands, combined Tai administrative schemes with local tribal alliances.

• Mughal interest in Assam grew after the fall of the Koch Hajo state, which had served as a buffer. When Mughal Bengal annexed Koch Bihar (1612), frontier disputes over ferry dues and zamindari rights precipitated armed clashes with the Ahoms.

Phases of Conflict

Early Mughal Invasions (1615-1637)

- Qasim Khan's 1615 campaign captured Guwahati, but supply shortages and Ahom guerrilla raids forced a Mughal withdrawal by 1616.
- Subsequent expeditions under Mir Jumla (1662) penetrated deeper—sacking Garhgaon—but logistical overreach and monsoon floods compelled yet another retreat.

Military Reforms under Pratap Singha (1603-1641)

- Pratap Singha reorganized the Ahom army into paid paiks (infantry corps) and established the Borbarua office to coordinate frontier defense.
- He constructed hill forts at Kajali and Barnadi, and developed a small but effective naval flotilla of dhows (salia and kharma crafts), laying foundations for later riverine victories.

The Battle of Saraighat (1671)

- On April 17, 1671, Lachit Borphukan (appointed in 1667) deployed war canoes and floating stockades at Saraighat narrows near modern Guwahati.
- By exploiting Brahmaputra currents and launching nighttime boarding actions, Ahom forces annihilated the Mughal fleet under Raja Ramsingh I.
- This engagement decisively halted Mughal naval advances and became emblematic of indigenous riverine warfare superiority.

The Battle of Itakhuli (1682)

- In June 1682, Udayaditya Singha mustered a reinforced army and flotilla to besiege Mughal garrisons at Itakhuli and Shah Buruz east of the Manas River.
- After a two-month blockade, combined land and naval attacks overwhelmed Mughal defenses on August 16, 1682, restoring the entire Kamarupa region to Ahom control and marking the end of sustained Mughal ambitions north of the Manas.

Military Strategies and Frontier Diplomacy

- Guerrilla Warfare and Scouts: Ahom paiks and tribal auxiliaries conducted ambushes in the dense floodplain forests, disrupting Mughal supply convoys.
- Riverine Innovation: Indigenous boat designs—light, flat-bottomed crafts armed with swivel guns outmatched Mughal barges on swift currents.
- Decentralized Command: Offices like the Borbarua and Borphukan empowered local commanders to respond rapidly to flanking threats.
- Negotiated Frontiers: Periodic treaties allowing Mughal zamindars east of Barnadi in exchange for tribute, reflected pragmatic diplomacy that paused open hostilities when advantageous.

Conclusion

- The Ahom-Mughal wars demonstrate how a regional power leveraged environmental mastery, organizational reform, and hybrid warfare to resist one of the subcontinent's most formidable empires.
- By 1682, the Ahoms not only expelled Mughal forces from Assam but also secured a model of frontier sovereignty that lasted until British annexation in 1826.
- Their legacy endures in Assam's cultural memory, commemorated annually on Lachit Diwas and in broader studies of subaltern resilience against early modern imperialism.

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