

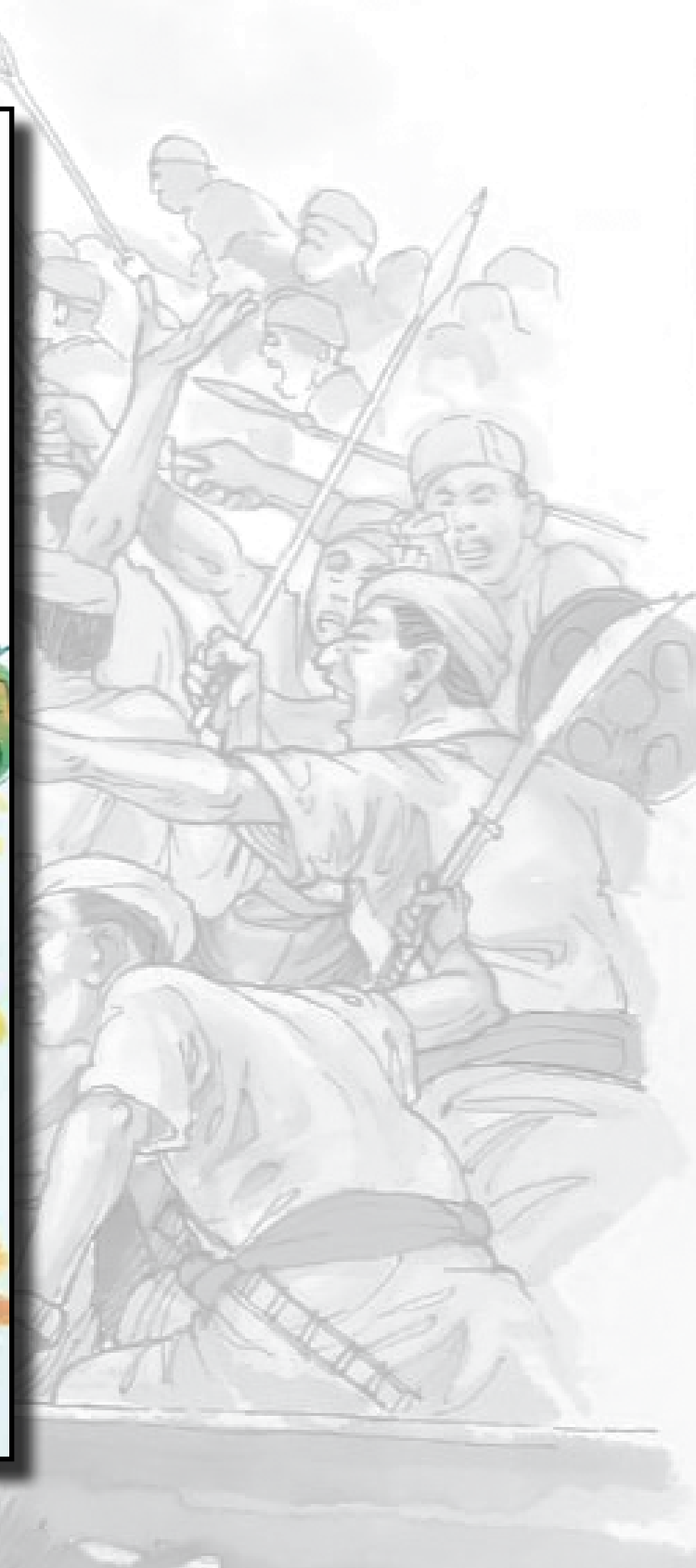
LACHIT BARPHUKAN

ASSAM'S HERO WHO HALTED THE MUGHALS



edited by
RAJIB HANDIQUE
WASBIR HUSSAIN







JANASANYOG ASSAM
Directorate of Information & Public Relations
Government of Assam
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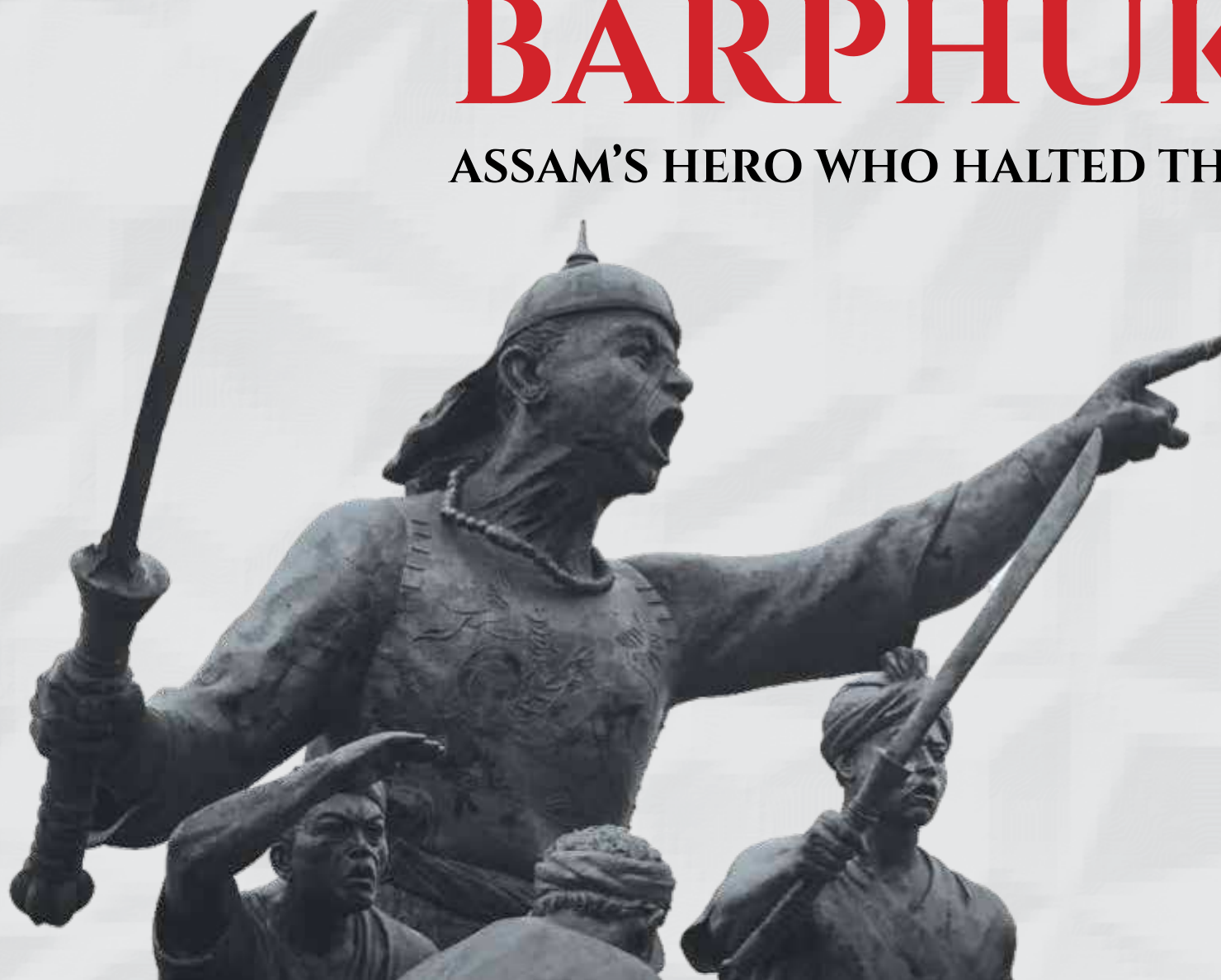
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Foreword

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

*L*achit Barphukan, the great general of the Ahom kingdom of Assam, is the legendary figure who defeated the Mughals and successfully halted their expansion into Assam in the second half of the 17th century. The victory over the Mughals in the battle of Saraighat in 1671 A.D. in the face of overwhelming odds, is a landmark event. It is even more remarkable when we consider that Lachit Barphukan was quite ill during the battle.

At a time, when large parts of our country were under the yoke of the Mughals, the bravery of Lachit Barphukan ensured that Assam was able to resist the imperialist designs of Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. His unflagging determination ensured that our civilization and culture remained intact. His





patriotism and love for his motherland is a shining example for all of us, particularly the younger generation.

The year 2022 marks the 400th birth anniversary of the great General. It is indeed, an apt occasion to highlight the magnificent achievements of this great son of the nation, before a wide audience.

The Government of Assam, in a humble endeavour, to pay homage to the great nationalist, has organised a series of commemorative programmes culminating in grand events to be held at New Delhi which will showcase the life and times of Lachit Barphukan, to whom we owe so much.

Dispur
14 Kati, 1429 Bhaskarabda
1st November, 2022

As part of our efforts to commemorate the life of the legendary hero, we have brought out this volume for popular reading titled, *Lachit Barphukan - Assam's Hero Who Halted the Mughals*, which is a collection of essays on the various aspects of his life written by renowned historians and writers. This book will shed light on a very critical period of our history and the struggles and triumphs of our forefathers to defend our motherland from external aggressors.

I hope that all citizens of Assam and the rest of the country, will find the essays on the patriotism of Lachit Barphukan engrossing and be inspired by his legacy to further contribute to the glory of our great nation.



(Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma)

Preface & Acknowledgement

We deem it a privilege to bring out this volume, titled *Lachit Barphukan – Assam's Hero Who Halted The Mughals*, to mark the 400th birth anniversary of one of India's greatest military generals. This book is a humble tribute to this Ahom military hero, who, through his tact, bravery, love for the Assamese homeland, and sheer determination managed to defeat and chase away the Mughal invaders led by Ram Singh I, sent to annex Assam by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

The historic Battle of Saraighat (1671), a largely naval war that Lachit Barphukan and his army won on the Brahmaputra, near present-day Guwahati, is significant because it stopped the Mughal advance not just to Assam, but the rest of today's Northeast India. There has been an effort to let the nation and the countrymen know about this great nationalist of the 17th century and this book is a small part of that effort. In fact, the heroics of Lachit Barphukan and its historiographical interpretations over the years have enabled generations of Assamese to soak in the fervour of nationalism and nationalist sentiments.

The idea of a collection of essays on Lachit Barphukan with writings by well-known historians and writers came from the Assam Government itself. By deciding to observe the 400th birth anniversary of Lachit Barphukan in New Delhi in November 2022, in presence of the country's top leaders, the Assam Government under the leadership of Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma

has made yet another serious effort in creating mass awareness across the nation on this iconic personality from Assam's history.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr Sarma, a writer himself and a thinker, for leading the way in promoting and preserving the legacy of Lachit Barphukan. The dynamic minister for Information & Public Relations, Water Resources etc, Shri Pijus Hazarika, deserves credit for being fully involved in the putting together of this book, besides constantly enquiring about the progress as we raced against time.

We thank ace photographer Anupam Nath for travelling across the State to capture on camera historical places associated with Lachit Barphukan and the Ahom royalty in general. Thanks are also due to well-known illustrator Durlabh Bhattacharjee for creating some amazing sketches for this book. Thanks also to young illustrator Rinku Daimary for the sketches which are, of course, a product of his imagination and popular images on already published books or based on the work of various sculptors. Above all, the book would not have become a reality without the illuminating essays on various aspects of Lachit Barphukan's life contributed by the writers, whose brief bio sketches are featured towards the end of the book. We also appreciate and thank senior journalist Oineetom Ojah and researcher Arunav Goswami for their support and coordination in putting this book together.

This volume is meant for popular reading and all facts are drawn by the writers from books and material already published or in the public domain.

Guwahati
November 2022

Dr. Rajib Handique
Wasbir Hussain

Introduction


Lachit Barphukan: Icon & A Symbol Of Indian Nationalism

Rajib Handique & Wasbir Hussain

The year is 2022, and we, as a nation, are celebrating the 400th birth anniversary of Lachit Barphukan (pronounced Borphukan). But who is Lachit Barphukan? Of course, he is the iconic military general of Assam who won a resounding victory against the invading Mughal army and halted an alien imperialist regime from ruling this far-eastern part of our great nation, India. Yes, we are talking about Ahom army general Lachit Barphukan and his victory over Aurangzeb's military led by Ram Singh in the historic Battle of Saraighat (1671), near Guwahati.

Now, if Shivaji, Lachit's contemporary, was battling the Mughals in western India, expanded the Maratha empire, built forts and established a Maratha Navy, in eastern India, the Barphukan was giving the Mughals a torrid time, eventually leading to their retreat from this part of India. And yes, Lachit Barphukan, we would say, lent steam to the Ahom Navy in much the same way as Shivaji built the





Maratha Navy. After all, the Battle of Saraighat was primarily a naval battle which Lachit led and won. The master tactician that Lachit was, he made a makeshift bridge of sorts with boats so as to keep the ammunition supplies from his bases on land flowing to the Ahom soldiers on boats in the river while the Mughals ran out of fire-power after prolonged duels on the mighty Brahmaputra.

The Ahom dynasty (started 1228) continued to rule Assam for more than 150 years after the Battle of Saraighat. Had Lachit Barphukan not succeeded in resisting the Mughal assault and forced the invaders out of this far-eastern Indian frontier, who knows the Ahom rule may not have lasted till 1826. Therefore, it is understandable what Lachit Barphukan means to the Assamese people, and how he continues to symbolise the spirit of nationalism in this part of the country.

But it would be more than unfair to keep Lachit Barphukan or his legacy confined to Assam or Northeast India. Lachit Barphukan is most certainly a national icon, someone who fought for his country, his motherland and has succeeded in imbibing nationalist fervour and a spirit of nationalism among the generations of people that followed.

This national hero needs to be celebrated across the length and breadth of India. At a time now, when India is forging ahead on course to become one of the strongest nations in the world, militarily, economically and diplomatically, there is need to remember our

national heroes who risked or gave their lives for our freedom and independence. One such hero, of course, is Lachit Barphukan, whose saying that 'My uncle is not more important than my nation' goes to prove his love and loyalty towards his motherland.

Historical accounts say at a critical time during the Battle of Saraighat, Lachit Barphukan fell very ill and was advised not to venture to the battlefield. But, Lachit realised his absence would break the spirit of his Army. He was then quoted as saying: "When my countrymen are suffering from invasion, and when my army is fighting and sacrificing its life, how can I think about resting my body due to a mere illness? How can I think about going home to my wife and children when my entire country is in trouble?" This was Lachit Barphukan.

True, the National Defence Academy at Khadakwasla, near Pune, has instituted a Gold Medal in the name of Lachit Barphukan for the overall best Army Cadet each year. But, our countrymen need to know more about this great hero who defended the nation in its easternmost corner.

The chapters which follow delve into various aspects of the life of this iconic personality and his relevance in contemporary times where the spirit of nationalism and patriotic fervour is soaring once again.



The Kareng Ghar, a grand Ahom palace near Sivasagar.
Photograph used as a representation of an Ahom palace.

Lachit Barphukan

A Warrior Is Born



গাপ অসম

চলিছে যোঁপা অসম

1

Lachit Barphukan

A Warrior Is Born

Nilutpal Gohain

*A*ssam, though not mentioned enough in the annals of Indian history, is a land of great antiquity. Right from the mythological period to the modern day, Assam has witnessed a vibrant, interesting and adventurous history. Yet, the Ahom period finds a special mention. It was the Ahoms who changed the course of history and to some extent, the political-geography of Assam.

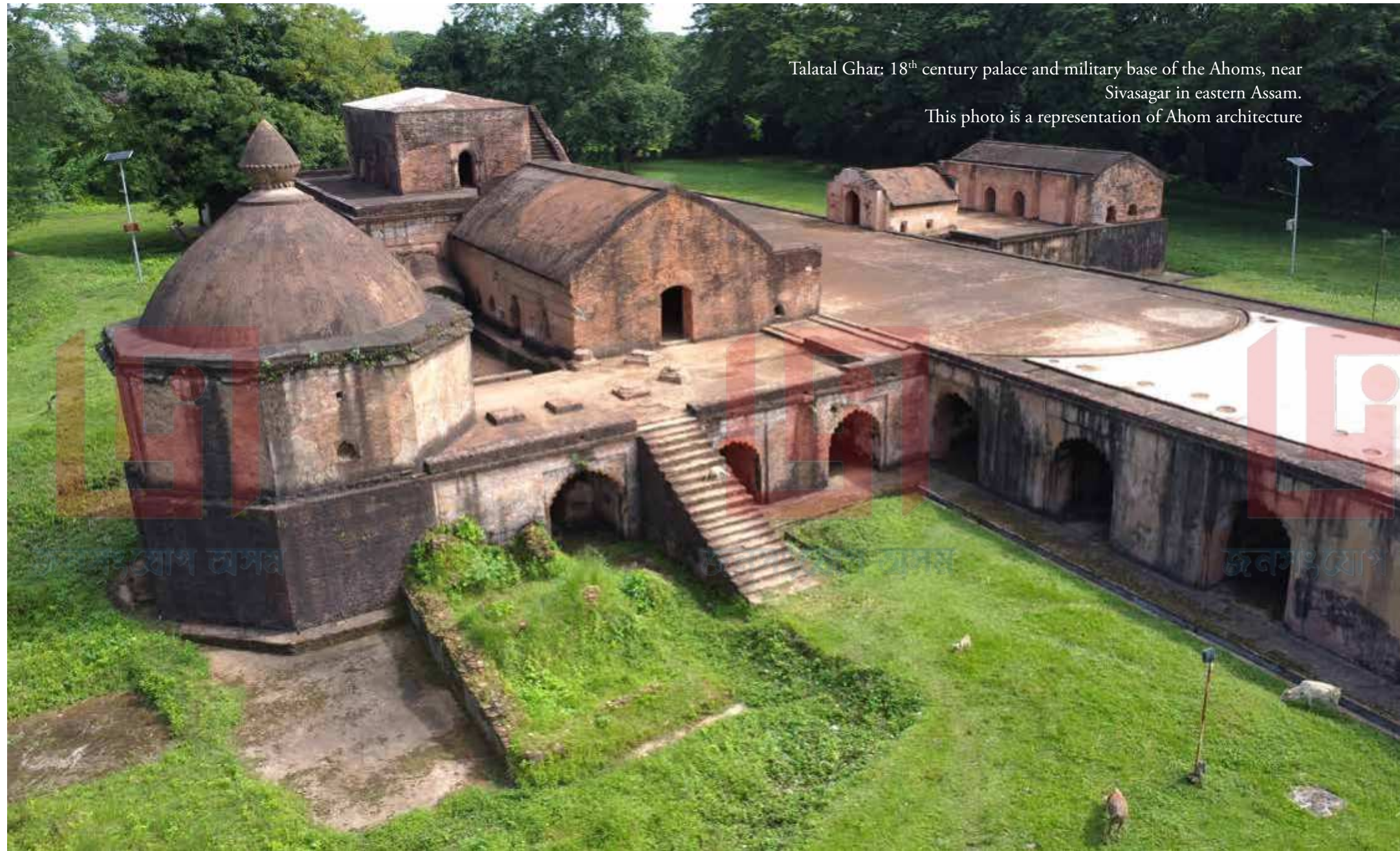
It started in 1228 AD, when a young prince wearing a golden headgear entered the Brahmaputra Valley with a band of ardent followers after wandering in the Patkai hill ranges for thirteen years. He was Siu-Ka-Pha, the first Ahom king. Though he subdued the tribal states of Morans, Barahis and Chutias easily, he had a cordial approach towards the conquered, and hence, he was accepted by them. No one thought that the nascent state he established at Charaideo then, would eventually rule the Brahmaputra valley for the next six hundred years.





In their eventful rule spanning six centuries, the Ahoms fought numerous wars with countless enemies. In fact, the Ahoms were the only dynasty who could thwart seventeen attempts of the Mughals to overthrow them. The Ahom *Swargadeos* (Kings) and commanders who stood their ground during the annexation attempts showed untamable courage and unflinching dedication and their names have been written in golden words in the *buranjis* of Assam. Yet, a name stands out as extra special among them. Lachit Barphukan.

Lachit was the son of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the first Barbarua appointed after the creation of the post in the Ahom Administrative structure. The post was equivalent to Chief Justice, having administrative powers as well. Though some historians prefer to say it otherwise, the widely accepted fact is that he was born on 24th November, 1622 at



Talatal Ghar: 18th century palace and military base of the Ahoms, near Sivasagar in eastern Assam.
This photo is a representation of Ahom architecture



Charaideo. Lachit belonged to the ancient Lukhurakhun clan. Some say members of the clan had allotted duties connected with the funeral of Ahom monarchs.

Right from his childhood, Lachit was trained to be a commander. When the Ahom progeny attained the age for training, it was customary to appoint efficient teachers for them. The Ahom nobles made sure that their sons got the best of education to prepare them for high appointments in the administration. Learned pundits and *bailungs* imparted education to the noble sons under thatched sheds. Such sheds were a privilege and hence, few in numbers. They were trained in statecraft based on Ahom classics, Hindu *Dandanities* and Arthashastras. It was believed that happenings of the past narrated in Ahom *Buranjis* helped nobles to solve intricate problems and inculcate the inherent quality of judgement using common sense.

In addition, Lachit also had the privilege to witness the proceedings of his father's courtroom at his residence. As Barbarua, Momai Tamuli had his usual establishment of subordinate officials and clerks to transact day-

to-day business related to administration and judiciary. He had to decide on judicial complaints, discuss problems of statecraft and diplomacy, receive foreign envoys and keep a check on revenue collection. Though he had duties and responsibilities at the king's tribunal and household, there was plenty of business at his own house, the results of which were placed before the cabinet for discussion and confirmation. Young Lachit witnessed and listened to all that happened in his father's office at the residence. In a way, he was attuned from a very early age to become an able administrator in the future.

The Ahom administrative machinery didn't have any clear demarcation between civil and military duties and every officer, be it a priest or a judge, was directed to take up arms if demanded by the exigency of the situation. Therefore, military training was not excluded from the education of noblemen's sons. Practical training in archery, shooting, swordsmanship and so on were invariably given to them. Raja Ram Singh's words praising the Ahom warriors clearly substantiate this fact, "*Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows,*

in digging trenches, and in wielding guns and cannons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India.”

Lachit's first appointment after attaining adulthood, was his father's *Hasotidhora Tamuli*, the scarf bearer of the premier. In the modern world, it would have been equivalent to a private secretary. The prime duty of the scarf bearer was to carry the betel nut case of his master and be the custodian of important documents that his master might need while attending a meeting. The posting granted Lachit the opportunity of being admitted to the royal audience and to attend cabinet meetings, a matter of special prerogative. He got a chance to supplement his learning at his father's court with the knowledge of more important matters transacted by the Barbarua and his colleagues.

Lachit, the greatest hero of Assam, the generalissimo who led the Ahoms in the greatest war ever fought against the Mughals, had shown from childhood, the acumen and sense of responsibility of a leader. Though he had the advantage of attending closed court proceedings at his father's office, it would not have been possible to acquire such privileged knowledge if he wasn't intelligent enough to understand the intricacies of the work and perceptive enough to absorb the expertise. The keen eyes of *Swargadeo* Chakradhwaj Singha was just in identifying his capabilities to appoint him as the Barphukan of his army in the most important expedition ever undertaken by the Ahom dynasty.

(Based largely on Bhuyan, S.K., *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1947.)

Representative photo. A view of the Talatal Ghar





আপ অসম



An Ahom monument. Representative photo.



জনসংযোগ অসম

জনসংযোগ

Momai Tamuli Barbarua & Lachit Barphukan

How Father Inspired Son



আপ অসম




জনসংযোগ অসম

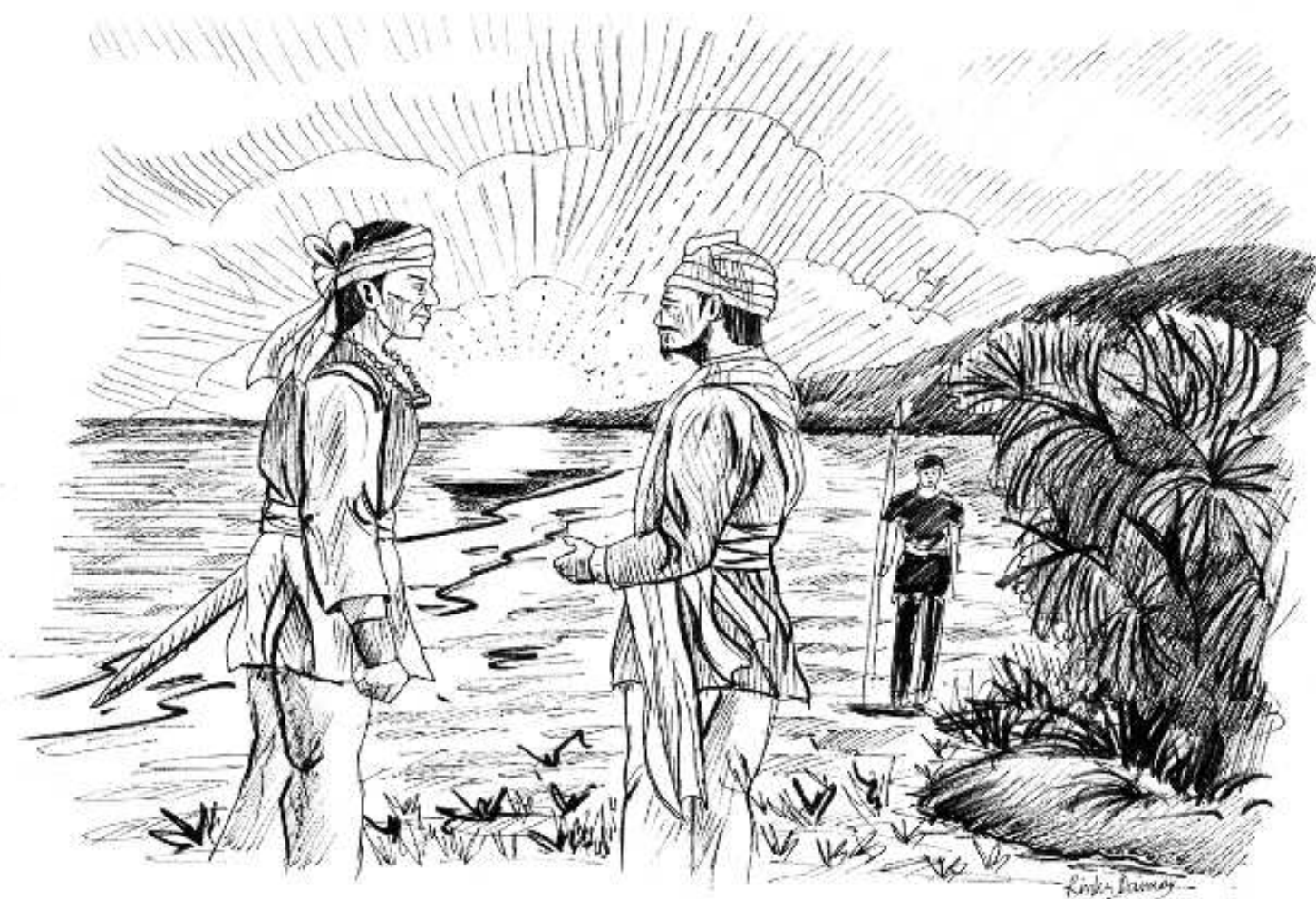
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Momai Tamuli Barbarua & Lachit Barphukan

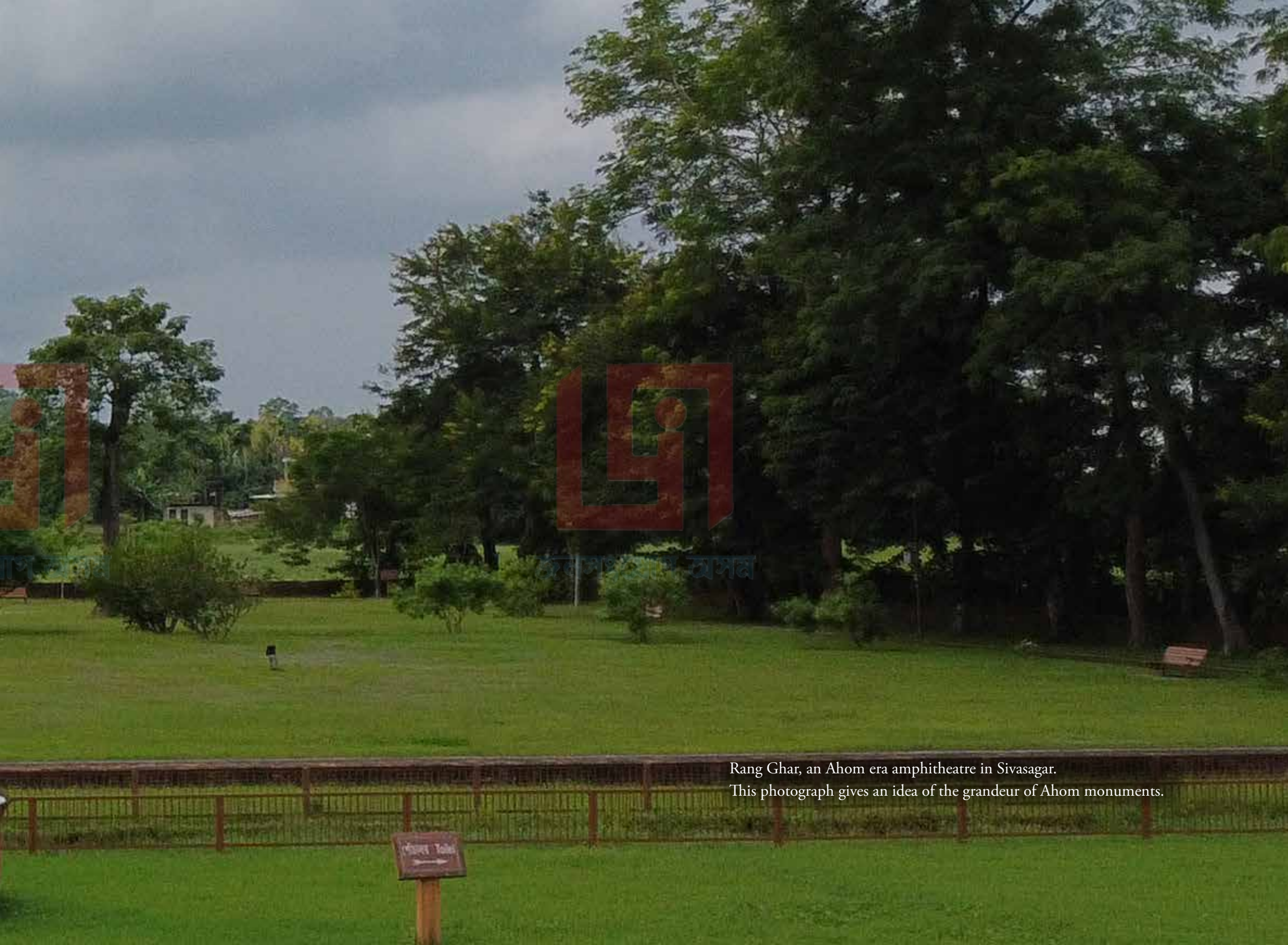
How Father Inspired Son

Nilutpal Gohain

he bravery and sacrifice of Lachit Barphukan has greatly inspired the Assamese society at large because even in modern times when an Assamese wants to signify his daring, he says, '*Mur gaat Lachitor tez ase* (Lachit's blood runs in my veins).' However, the daring personality, the popular authority and the unflinching leadership which Lachit Barphukan had demonstrated in his lifetime had, in turn, been inspired by various events and teachings he had encountered in his formative years. It was his father Momai Tamuli Barbarua who influenced him the most. As rightly said by the famous historian, Surya Kumar Bhuyan, if Lachit Barphukan would have had written his autobiography, he would have admitted: "From my father I learnt to be dutiful and love my work, and forget myself in the ecstasy derived from a faithful and conscientious discharge of trust imposed on me."







Rang Ghar, an Ahom era amphitheatre in Sivasagar.
This photograph gives an idea of the grandeur of Ahom monuments.

Momai Tamuli was the first Barbarua of the Ahom army, the man behind all the successful campaigns against the Mughals during the reigns of Emperor Jahangir and Shahjahan. The saga of his appointment to the rank of Barbarua from an ordinary Bondsman is quite unique and interesting.

The creation of the post of Barbarua is attributed to *Swargadeo* Pratap Singha (1603-1641) who was also known as Buddhi Swarganarayan due to his intelligence. He had the discerning ability to identify, judge and acknowledge efficiency and quality. Once while traveling to the Ahom necropolis, Charaideo, he saw a man working with a spade in a field by the side of the road. *Swargadeo* observed him with a keen eye. He was amazed by the meticulous and innovative procedure in which the man was raising bunds for storing rainwater. He immediately enquired about the man.

He was told that the man's name was Sukuti, a bondsman serving under his nephew for a meager sum of four rupees. The nephew called him 'Momai'- the Assamese word for maternal uncle. However, it became his sobriquet—the Momai of the entire locality. *Swargadeo*, pleased with his trimness in work, released Sukuti from his debt and appointed him first at the Tipamia Rajkhowa and later as the 'Bar-Tamuli', the Superintendent of the Royal Gardens. Due to his competence, Momai Tamuli rose from one office to the other and eventually he was appointed as the first Barbarua of Ahom dynasty.

Barbarua was the Chief Judge of the Ahom administration and just next to the three Gohains in hierarchy. The privilege of employing 14000 *paiks* was bestowed on him and out of every 100 *paiks*, 7 of them were reserved for his

personal use. The office at his residence comprised six Phukans, collectively called the Chorua Phukans, who helped him in deciding the cases brought to him. However, during the war with the Mughals in his tenure, Momai Tamuli was additionally appointed as the commander-in-chief of the Ahom forces. He was also instrumental in signing the famous treaty with Allah Yar Khan in 1639 which became a basis of the Ahom-Mughal relations in the future.

His relationship with *Swargadeo* Pratap Singha can be ascertained from the fact that once a Mughal envoy, while reporting to his master, had said, "O Saheb, what do you say of Assam? The king is a veritable Mahadeva, and Momai Tamuli is Mahadeva's chief henchman or Nandi. As long as these two wield the affairs of Assam, it is impossible to turn your face to that country."

Momai Tamuli's measures in reforming the Ahom administration of that time and in reconstructing Assamese village life are still appreciated by the masses. In 1608 AD, he reorganised the functions of Assamese officers and fixed the quota attached to each. Various posts like Bora, Saikia, Hajorika (Hazarika), Barua, Rajkhowa and Phukan were created on the lines of the Mughal mansabdari system. Villages were grouped into units for convenience in administration, and each village was made an encompassing set up by providing the usual quota of artisans, priests and other functionaries. Spinning and weaving was made compulsory by the women folk of the villages. Probably, it is because of this revolutionary step, every woman in Assam in the present day, irrespective of caste, creed, or social status, is adept at weaving.

Momai Tamuli rose to fame and eminence due to his extreme sense

of duty and unfaltering loyalty. The chronicles have many recorded episodes where his moral sense and allegiance has been depicted. Once, during his appointment as the governor of lower Assam, he received a letter from the Kachari Raja Indrabal Narayan in which he was addressed as “Namjani Raja” or the king of lower Assam. According to Momai Tamuli, it was a great insult to *Swargadeo* Pratap Singha and he couldn’t help but report it to the king at Gargaon. *Swargadeo* wrote back, “The Kachari Raja has designated my officer, the Barbarua as Raja. It only shows the high regard which he entertains towards me, the paramount sovereign. He certainly doesn’t mean any offence. Please dismiss his envoys with rich presents.”

The study of the life of Lachit Barphukan, specially with reference to his conflicts with the Mughals, will not be complete without understanding the impact of his father’s personality on him. Lachit Barphukan brought the Assamese army to the highest possible level of efficiency and nowhere in Indian history is a record of such an organised, disciplined and combined action against the enemy is really found. However, everyone would agree to the fact that Lachit learnt discipline, organisational skills, determination, and the belongingness to his land from his father. Every minute spent in his father’s court and as his father’s personal assistant had shaped Lachit Barphukan into what he was—the most successful Ahom general and a shining star of Assam’s rich history.



Ahom coins from the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696)

Courtesy: coinindia.com

Reference: Rhodes and Bose E4.1

Preparing for Leadership

The Early Career Of Lachit Barphukan



জনসংযোগ অসম





3

Preparing for Leadership

The Early Career Of Lachit Barphukan

Rajib Handique

One of the greatest military generals of medieval India, Lachit Barphukan has been addressed by several authors as ‘generalissimo’ (Barpujari, Bhuyan, Sinha). Generalissimo is a commander of a combined military force consisting of army, navy, etc., and is a military rank of the highest degree, superior to field marshal and other five-star ranks in the states where they are used. Lachit Barphukan was made the commander-in-chief of the Ahom forces that included both the infantry and navy. The position of Barphukan was that of a Viceroy that was bestowed with civil, judicial, diplomatic (to receive and engage with foreign envoys) and military powers. There is evidence of executions under Lachit Barphukan during the Battle of Saraighat, which clearly indicated the use of a power (of capital punishment) generally vested with the king only.





The wide-ranging powers of the Barphukan, including the military responsibilities, required the incumbent to be a skilful person with wide knowledge and wisdom. Moreover, if the incumbent is holding office in the atmosphere of an impending military conflict with a powerful foe like the imperial Mughals, the call is even greater. Under the circumstances, it would be interesting to know and understand the early life of Lachit Barphukan, as that formed the foundation of his unparalleled career that followed.

Though direct sources relating exclusively to Lachit Barphukan's early life is scanty, circumstantial and logical inferences can be made

based on the trajectory of his career. It is a fact that, being the son of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a very high ranking official of the Ahom administration, there were significant opportunities that came Lachit's way to learn and grow. At a time when no formal education system was in place, lived experience, training and skilling oneself were the only ways available to get elevated, and generalissimo Lachit Barphukan had made the best use of the circumstances.

Lachit's father Momai Tamuli was the first 'Barbarua', a new office created during the rule of the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641). The office of the Barbarua combined the function of the Chief Executive Officer and those of the Lord Chief Justice. Momai Tamuli Barbarua was an able administrator and the commander-in-chief of the Ahom army that fought the Mughals during the reign of Pratap Singha. He had





Kareng Ghar, in Gargaon near Sivsagar,
is one of the grandest examples of Ahom architecture.

risen from a humble position to become the *Tipamia Rajkhowa* and later the *Bor Tamuli* or superintendent of the royal gardens before being appointed as the Barbarua. It is also noteworthy that Momai Tamuli Barbarua undertook a census and reorganized the villages and the *paik* system. Lachit Barphukan might have been a direct witness to the various activities and proceedings taking place under his father. Besides, the secret of Momai Tamuli's rise to power and eminence was his deep sense of duty and supreme loyalty to the king and the kingdom. He drew inspiration from his urge for perfection without any consideration of personal gain or advantage. Lachit Barphukan appears to have inherited from his father this supreme sense of duty and sacrifice.

About Lachit's early education, historian S.K. Bhuyan writes, "... his father's court-room in his metropolitan residence supplied a regular training camp and university. As Barbarua, Momai Tamuli had his usual establishment of subordinate officials and clerks who helped him in the transaction of state business at his own house, in deciding upon revenue and judicial complaints, receiving foreign envoys and discussing problems of statecraft and diplomacy... The

young Lachit saw and listened to all that passed in his father's official residence" (Bhuyan, p.20).

Moreover, it was customary for Ahom nobles to appoint efficient teachers for the education of their wards to beget high-ranking appointments in the family. Learned pundits were attached to all the great families who imparted knowledge of statecraft based on Ahom history and classics as well as Hindu policies and customs. Military training was part of the education of the sons of nobility. (Bhuyan, p.20-21)

Apart from the unique socialisation in his early life, Lachit also served the kingdom in various capacities before he became the Barphukan. It is recorded that Lachit was made the scarf bearer of the Premier. This position was considered equivalent to Private Secretary. The scarf-bearer's first duty was to carry the bundle of betel nuts and important documents of his master, and as such he had admission to royal audience and cabinet sittings, a matter of special prerogative. Lachit therefore had the privilege of supplementing his learnings at his father's court-room with that of the more important affairs of the premier and his colleagues. (Bhuyan, p.21)



There were several military offices held by Lachit before he was put at the supreme command of the Ahom army. His first appointment was as Ghora Barua, or Superintendent of the Royal Horses. In that capacity, Lachit was known to have had tamed all the turbulent ponies, "... till he made the king's riding expeditions as tame an affair as sitting in his own household chair" (Bhuyan, p.22). Thence, he was appointed as Dulia Barua and as Simaluguria Phukan or commander of the levy stationed at Simaluguri, very near to the capital Gargaon.

At the time of his appointment as Barphukan, Lachit was holding the office of Dolakasharia Barua. Lachit's appointment as Dolakasharia Barua or Superintendent of the Guards accompanying the king when he travelled sitting on his sedan, increased his visibility as well as his importance. It also brought him in contact with the king himself. The Dolakasharias served as police constables, and their Baruas's position was equivalent to that of present-day Inspector-General of Police. Lachit also fought against the Mughals at Dikhowmukh during the



invasion of Mir Jumla and achieved considerable success (Bhuyan, p.22).

Family background was considered an important criterion for consideration of appointments to high offices especially in the medieval times. Lachit Barphukan's ancestors of the Lan-phi-ma clan came with Siu-Ka-Pha during his march to Assam (Gogoi). Later, circumstances forced them to become Lukhurakhon, which was changed to the old Lan-phi-ma order before Lachit's appointment as Barphukan. The lineage of Ahom nobility coupled with his genius helped Lachit become the Barphukan.

Personality and appearance of a person are considered important in career progression. There is no available portrait of Lachit Barphukan that could help in reconstructing his physiognomy. However, there is a chronicle that gives a pen-picture of the Barphukan along with some of his commanders. The chronicler mentioned that the face of Lachit Barphukan was broad, and resembled the full moon (*Purnima*) and that it was not possible to stare at his face (Bhuyan, p. 22).

The description of Lachit Barphukan creates the impression of a very bright-looking persona and the same might have helped in his career prospects.

There are two important facts relating to the circumstances leading to the appointment of Lachit as the Barphukan. Firstly, there is no doubt that there was a look-out for a capable person for the post of Barphukan and that the king and councillors were involved in the search. Secondly, there was mention of no other name in the sources, excepting Lachit, that was considered for appointment as the Barphukan. In other words, it appears that Lachit was the unanimous choice for the post of Barphukan, and his superlative capabilities and performance in earlier assignments ensured that.

Lachit's efficiency, confidence and sense of self-respect were evaluated by the king himself before his appointment. For example, on one occasion the king made Lachit instruct the Dulias or sedan-bearers about the

performance of their duties, to which Lachit responded very well. Before formally announcing the appointment, the king subjected Lachit to an ordeal by having his headgear removed by an attendant when he was paying respect to the king. This extreme provocation made Lachit react immediately as he brought out his sword (*hengdang*) and went after the attendant in the royal presence. The attendant was saved only by the king's direct intervention. Lachit was thereafter installed as the Barphukan and commander-in-chief.

Therefore, the early life and career of Lachit Barphukan prepared him adequately for the huge responsibilities that he discharged during the Battle of Saraighat. Even in the moments of crisis during the struggle against the imperial Mughal forces, Lachit Barphukan was not found wanting on any count. In fact, Lachit Barphukan's military prowess, patriotism, and leadership qualities earned praise even from his vanquished antagonist Ram Singh.

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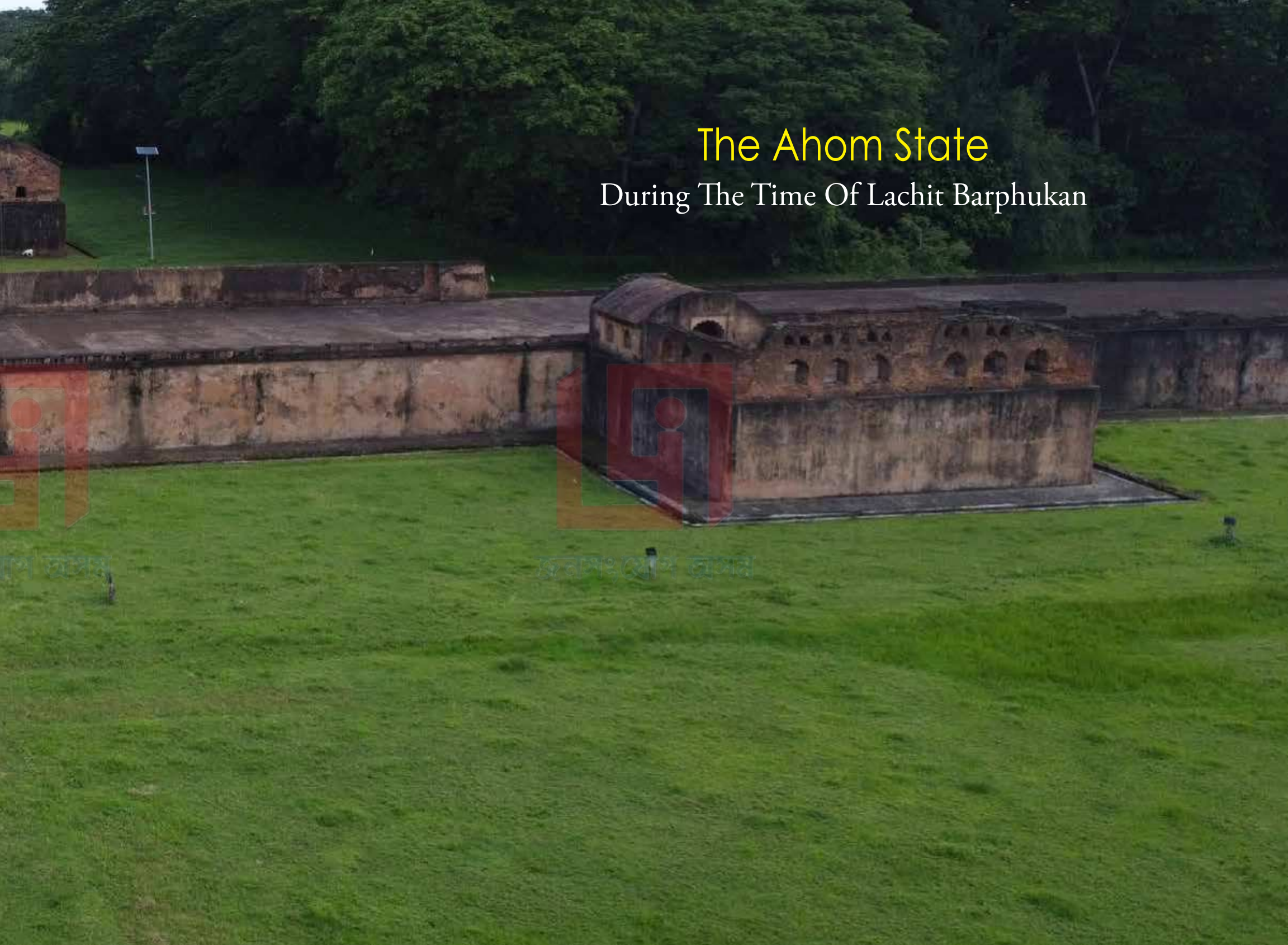
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An aerial view of the Talatal Ghar, near Sivasagar. Ahom king Rudra Singha shifted the capital of the Ahom kingdom from Gargaon to Rangpur in 1702-03. The earliest constructions of this palace was said to have been commissioned in 1698.

The Ahom State

During The Time Of Lachit Barphukan



আপ অসম

অসম সংযোগ অসম

4

The Ahom State

During The Time Of Lachit Barphukan

Kuldeep Patowary

With the establishment of the Ahom kingdom in 1228 CE, the Brahmaputra Valley witnessed a remarkable state formation process. Within a few centuries, the Ahom kingdom was able to expand on all sides, and the monarchy became more powerful. Like most other kingdoms, the Ahom kingdom too had a political and administrative structure with the king as its head. Stories about the origin of the Ahoms, recorded in the *Buranjis*, attach divinity to the Ahoms by tracing their lineage to God *Lengdon*, and as such, the Ahom kings had immense control over many aspects of the State and its people. The Ahoms went on to become the third longest ruling dynasty in India after the Cholas and Pandyas.

The 17th century was a dynamic century for the Ahom State. It was a period that





The Ahom insignia

was marked with diverse changes in the political, social, and economic spheres of the kingdom. As many as fifteen kings ruled the Ahom kingdom during this period, with some ruling only for twenty days. However, there were others who ruled for a longer duration, and oversaw the State's affairs through much turbulent times.

Seventeenth century is also a period when the Ahom kingdom faced some of its worst political-military crises. It was during this crisis period that one witnessed the emergence of Lachit Barphukan to centre-stage. During his lifetime, Lachit served in various capacities under different Ahom kings, culminating with his elevation to the post of Barphukan and his subsequent demise after the Battle of Saraighat. This chapter would look at some of the rulers under whom Lachit Barphukan served in various capacities, as well as look at the prevailing polity and administrative structure.

Lachit was born during the reign of *Swargadeo*¹ Susengpha, also known as Pratap Singha, who ruled from 1603 to 1641 CE. He was popularly known as *Buddhi Swarganarayan* owing to his wit and intellect, as well as *Burha Raja*, as he became the ruler at a considerably senior age. The initial period of his reign saw the Ahom kingdom engage in warfare with the Kachari kingdom, but displaying his wit, Pratap Singha managed to establish cordial relations with the Kachari kings as the threat of Mughal invasion loomed large. He also had cordial political and economic relations with the ruler of the Jayantia kingdom, strengthened through matrimonial alliances.

Pratap Singha's reign also saw major administrative and socio-economic reforms. It is imperative to understand that the political structure of the Ahom kingdom was a very hierarchical one. At the top was the king, also known as *Chao Pha* or *Swargadeo*. The king was assisted and advised by a council of ministers, *patramantris*. The foremost among them, known as the Great Gohains, were the Buragohain, Borgohain and Barpatragohain.² With the expansion of the Ahom kingdom and increase in economic activities during his predecessor's as well as his own rule, Pratap Singha found it necessary to reorganise

the administrative structure. Towards this end, he created the two new posts of Barbarua and Barphukan, who were also seen as a part of the council of ministers. Momai Tamuli was appointed as the first Barbarua and Langi Panisiya was appointed as the first Barphukan.

Another important development during his reign was the restructuring and rejuvenation of the *Paik* system³. The Ahom state primarily collected revenue through a system of labour service, known as the *Paik* system. The *paik* system was more than just a revenue extraction method. It was in essence a way of structuring the population and the society in groups based on community, ethnicity, family, and work specializations. As such, Pratap Singha was well aware that an efficient revenue administration was possible only when the *Paik* system would be made efficient, which effectively meant that a major reorganisation of the society was necessary. For this, he tasked none other than Momai Tamuli Barbarua, father of Lachit Barphukan.⁴

His reign also witnessed major conflicts with Mughal forces between 1616-1639 CE, and eventually, the conflict was kept in abeyance through the Treaty of Asurar Ali, through which the river Barnadi in the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley and Asurar Ali in the south bank of Brahmaputra valley were designated as boundaries between the Ahoms and the Mughals.

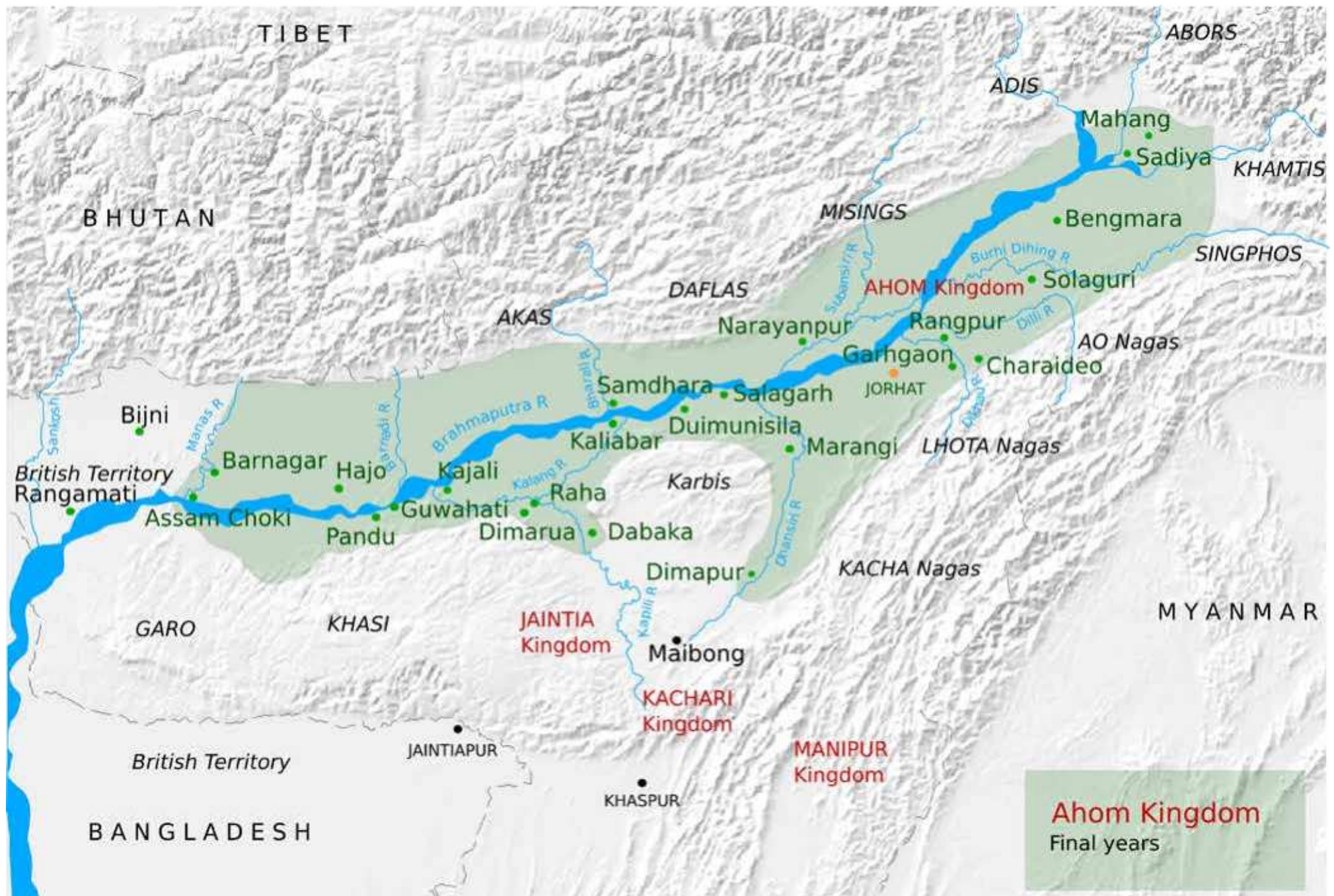
Pratap Singha's rule was followed by two short stints of Surampha (alias Jayaditya Singha, Bhaga Raja; 1641-44)⁵ and Sutinpha (Naria Raja, Kekura Raja; 1644-48 CE)⁶.

The next to ascend the throne was Sutamlā, known as Jayadhwaj Singha,

who ruled from 1648 to 1663 CE. His rule witnessed a tumultuous period in Ahom political history as military conflicts with the Mughals reared its ugly head after a period of relative calm following the Treaty of Asurar Ali.

In 1658 CE, Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan fell ill, and subsequently, a bloody War of Succession unfolded among his four sons. Shah Jahan's second son, Shuja, was the Governor of Bengal at the time, and his participation in the War of Succession opened up the avenues of rebellion by Pran Narayan, who was king of Koch Behar under Mughal suzerainty. Subsequently, he declared independence. The Ahoms, spurred on by the opportunity to take advantage of the prevailing political scenario, moved against the Mughals and defeated the Mughal Faujdar at Guwahati. Further, Jayadhwaj Singha rejected an alliance proposal by Pran Narayan, and instead defeated the Koch king too. Not satisfied with this, Jayadhwaj pushed further. As chronicled in *Alamgirnāmāh* and *Riyāz-us-Salātīn*, the Ahoms not only brought almost the entirety of Brahmaputra valley under their control, but also plundered the areas almost up to Dhaka.⁷

However, this success subsequently gave way to a devastating defeat. Eventually, Aurangzeb emerged victorious in the War of Succession and assumed the throne as the next Mughal Emperor. In this, he was aided by Mir Jumla, whom he rewarded with the Governorship of Bengal, and also tasked him with military campaigns against Assam and Arracan. Mir Jumla's Assam campaign is well documented and for the first time, the Mughals were able to advance as far as Gargaon. Eventually the Treaty of Ghilajhari Ghat was signed between the two sides. The Treaty required the Ahoms to pay a huge war indemnity, shifting of the boundary demarcation from Manah (Manas) river to Guwahati, amongst others.



The Ahom Dynasty (1228-1826). The map depicts the Kingdom in its final years.

Source: Wikipedia

Supungmung, also known as Chakradhwaj Singha, ascended the throne after Jayadhwaj Singha. He ruled from 1663-1670 CE. Although a short reign compared to some other successful Ahom monarchs, Chakradhwaj Singha is immortalized in Assam's history and memory as a wise and noble king who took necessary decisions required to bring the Ahom kingdom out of its subjugation. It is under the rule of Chakradhwaj Singha that we see Lachit being appointed as Barphukan, and subsequently get sealed in the annals of history as one of the most brave, valiant, noble and intelligent military generals.

Chakradhwaj Singha is generally regarded as a wise ruler, and he displayed many of the qualities that was visible in Pratap Singha. He repaired and fostered Ahom relations with the Koch ruler as well as the Jayantia ruler, and maintained friendly relations with other tribes inhabiting the border areas and hills surrounding the Ahom kingdom. He believed in regional solidarity against an external force and worked towards achieving it.⁸ Unfortunately, he passed away in 1670, before he could witness the stunning victory of his military general Lachit Barphukan in the Battle of Saraighat(1671).

The last ruler, under whom Lachit Barphukan served was Sunyatpha (Udayaditya Singha) who ruled from 1670-1672. His short reign did not provide him much opportunity for bringing wide ranging changes in the polity, economy and society. However, it remains a bright episode in the annals of Assam history due to glorious victory of the Ahoms in the Battle of Saraighat, that brought the curtains down on Mughal campaigns in the Brahmaputra Valley.

As mentioned earlier, the Ahom State, which was a monarchy, had the king



*Hengdang. The sword Ahoms use.
Courtesy: barakbulletin.com*

or *Swargadeo* as its head. Next in rank were the Great Gohains—*Buragohain*, *Borgohain*, *Barpatragohain*, who along with the *Barbarua* and *Barphukan* were the *Patra Mantris*, or the Council of Ministers. Each of these positions had their own assigned duty, dignity, perks and privileges. The Ahom political structure also took care not to concentrate too much power in one office only. So, although the king was the head of the state, yet the three Great Gohains had tremendous influence over the appointment as well as removal of kings. Moreover, the Ahoms had very well-defined lineage rules, which ensured that the families (royal lineages) from which a king could be appointed was not the same as the ones from where the three Great Gohains were to be appointed. This ensured that the Great Gohains could not secretly conspire to install one of them as the king. The appointment of the Great Gohains was generally hereditary whereas the positions of *Barbarua* and *Barphukan* were not strictly hereditary. For example, even though Momai Tamuli was made the *Barbarua*, his son Lachit was made the *Barphukan*.

Apart from the above, the Ahom State had a slew of other titles and official positions that were assigned to people belonging to nobility (and/or aristocracy) from time to time. There were other Gohains (local governors) who were appointed, such as the Sadiyakhwa Gohain (Governor of Sadiya region). Other high-ranking posts of varying degree were the positions of *Phukan*, *Rajkhwa* and *Barua*. Apart from these, there were also officials such as *Hazarika*, *Saikia*, *Bora* who commanded thousand, hundred and twenty numbers of *paiks* respectively.

As is evident, the Ahom State was a highly bureaucratic state that had a complex, hierarchical, structured, and layered form of governance and administration. At times, this was beneficial to the state and at times, it became cumbersome. In the hands of able rulers like Chakradhwaj Singha and capable generals like Lachit Barphukan, the Ahom State shows us a glimpse of its grandeur.

Notes & References:

- 1 *Swargadeo* as a title for the Ahom kings was adopted from the time of Suhungmung alias Dihingia Raja who ruled from 1497-1539 and adopted the title *Swarganarayana*.
- 2 The positions of *Buragohain* and *Borgohain* have existed since the time of Siu-Ka-Pha. The position of *Barpatragohain* was created in 1527 during the reign of Suhungmung (Dihingia Raja; 1497-1539).
- 3 In the Ahom kingdom, the State usually collected revenue or tax in the form of physical labour. This was extracted from adult males who were termed as *paik*. It is generally assumed that the *paik* system has been in force since the time of the first ruler Siu-Ka-Pha.
- 4 S. L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985.
- 5 He was known as Bhaga Raja for his predilection towards material pleasure.
- 6 He was known as Naria Raja or Kekura Raja as he was ill and had a crooked body due to spinal problems.
- 7 S. L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985.
- 8 Ibid.



Lachit Barphukan & Atan Buragohain


Lessons In Statecraft

5

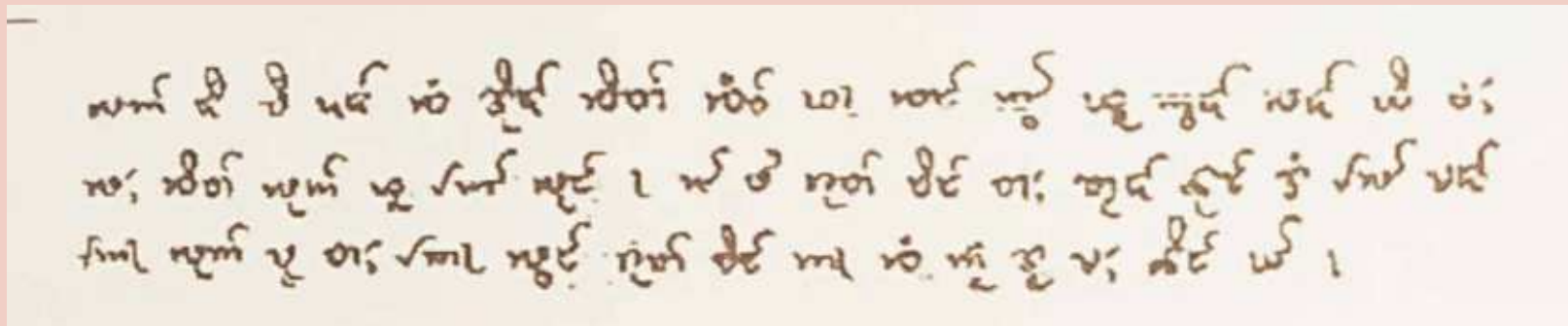
Lachit Barphukan & Atan Buragohain

Lessons In Statecraft

I.S. Mumtaza Khatun

 Lachit Barphukan was commander-in-chief of the Ahom army from 1665 to 1671 CE. The post, Barphukan (Phu-kan-lung in Tai language), was created by Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE). The jurisdiction of Barphukan included the tract to the west of Kaliabar, in central Assam, as far as the river Manaha (Manas). He was also the viceroy of the king and stayed initially at Kaliabar before shifting to Guwahati, the headquarters of the province.

Atan Buragohain (also written as Burhagohain) was appointed by Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663 CE) as prime minister, a post he held till the reign of Siu-jin-pha, (1675-1677 CE). Atan Buragohain was prime minister roughly between 1654 and 1674 CE. The post, Buragohain, (chao-phrang-mong-lung in Tai language) came along with the founder of the Ahom dynasty, Siu-ka-pha, who reached Assam in the 13th century from Mong Mao-lung (Great Mao Kingdom), located in the Taping and the Shweli basins (Nam Mao to the Tai people) in south-western Yunnan. He (Atan Buragohain) was one of the three highest officers in the Ahom administration, with a position next to the king.



“In that year in the month of Duon Chit, the Swargadeo sent the son of Barbarua, Lachit Barphukan belonging to the Lan-phi-ma family, to Kaliabor to construct a fort. He went there and built a fort at Putakalang in Udumaring”. (Raj Buranji, Folio 179)

The Buragohain was administrator of the people under him, adviser to the king in military activities and acted as commander whenever the situation demanded, and led the army in wars. Atan Buragohain witnessed the invasion of Mir Jumla, fought with the Mughal army as “divisional commander” and by the king’s order, he initiated negotiations with Mir Jumla. He represented king Jayadhwaj Singha in the Treaty of Ghilajhari Ghat in 1663 CE.

The history of Assam in the 17th century was dominated by the Ahom-Mughal conflict. It occupies an important chapter in the history, not only for the Brahmaputra valley but also that of the Barak, in the south of Assam. After the occupation and consolidation of their position in Bengal, the Mughals tried to push their eastern frontier further east in search of a natural boundary as well as to control the natural resources, like elephants, ivory, aloe wood, black pepper, certain sugandhi etc. which were very much in demand among the Mughal aristocracy and available in the forests of Assam.

The Ahoms continuously obstructed and halted the Mughal advances. The Delhi sultanate got the opportunity when Lakshminarayan, the ruler of Koch

Behar, sought Mughal interference in his family feud with Parikshit, ruler of Koch Hajo. By 1612 CE Koch Hajo kingdom was annexed to the Mughal domain which made their eastern boundary contiguous to that of the Ahom kingdom on the west. The conflict started soon after, and continued intermittently up to 1682 CE.

In an invasion in 1662, the Mughal army under Mir Jumla entered the Brahmaputra valley, occupied the Ahom capital, made the Ahom kingdom an extension of the Mughal empire, and then returned back hastily (as he fell seriously ill) after concluding a treaty (Treaty of Ghilajhari Ghat, 1663 CE). The Treaty was most humiliating—politically, socially, and economically—for the Ahom government. According to the terms of the Treaty, the Ahom ruler had to cede the western province, from Manaha to Guwahati, to the Mughals.

After the departure of Mir Jumla, the next Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1669 CE) ascended the throne and resolved to shake off the tutelary status. The new king was determined to recover the western province from the Mughals. Accordingly, he adopted vigorous steps to gather materials for production of

arms and ammunitions, and the navy was reorganized to confront that of the Mughal fleet which consisted of European navel fighters. Simultaneously, to make the frontier province strong, Chakradhwaj Singha ordered construction of a number of new ramparts at different strategic points, as well as repair the existing ones. It may be noted here that the Ahoms till then followed a defensive policy against the Mughals. Now, they were preparing for an offensive strategy. After a careful survey, Lachit, in 1665, was appointed as Barphukan and sent to Kaliabar. He was made the Senapati or commander-in-chief with the order to march against the Mughals and oust them from the western province. Lachit was given a host of subordinate military officers—naval and infantry soldiers of different ranks.

In addition, Atan Buragohain accompanied him to assist him in the mission. The Ahom army advanced from Kaliabar, chased the Mughals and recaptured Banhbari, Tatimari, Kajali and then Guwahati, the Mughal headquarter-cum-capital in the Brahmaputra valley. Guwahati, extended on both banks of the Brahmaputra, was fortified with several outposts by the Mughals, notable among them being Shahburuj, Rangmahal on the north, Latastil pani chuki and Jayduar on the south bank. The Ahom army defeated the Mughals, in both land and water, in several engagements and recovered the whole area in November, 1667. "It was the first round in turning (the) tide against the Mughals... the Ahoms regained the prestige lost in 1663." Soon after, Atan Buragohain and others chased the Mughals beyond Manaha and returned after making a frontier outpost at Manahamukh. After an in-depth survey and thorough discussion on the strategic importance of Guwahati, the Barphukan selected it as the base of defense for the Ahom army as well as

the headquarters of the Barphukan. Atan Buragohain was entrusted with the fortification of Guwahati. Taking note of the Mughal army strategies under Mir Jumla, Atan Buragohain realized that ramparts need to be made very high with wide and deep ditches filled with lot of spikes so that horses could not jump over and cross it. The raised ramparts were built in such a way that from one hill to another, the whole area became impenetrable for the outsiders. These ramparts were guarded by a number of soldiers at different points.

On receiving news of the Mughals' defeat in the eastern frontier and the reoccupation of Guwahati by the Ahom army, Aurangzeb decided to send a huge army under Raja Ram Singh of Amber to put down the enemy. Ram Singh advanced successfully along the north bank of the Brahmaputra, crossed Manahamukh to reach Sualkuchi and ultimately occupied Hajo without a fight. At the advance of Ram Singh, Lachit Barphukan and Atan Buragohain reviewed the defensive measures around Guwahati. The whole area (Guwahati) was divided into two zones – the charge of the northern zone was given to Atan Buragohain and southern zone was under Lachit Barphukan. Each zone was again subdivided into a number of sectors and was placed under palis (commanders). Each commander was provided with a contingent of fighting men and the requisite quantity of weapons. Further, each commander was given a number of soldiers known as *chor-bachas* or spies. In addition to collecting information about the movements of the enemy, their job was to look after the measures connected with the security. The Buragohain introduced a new technique in the formation of his phalanxes which provided an impenetrable wall of defense.

The Ahoms could not complete their preparation for resisting the

advance of Ram Singh, and, therefore, they began negotiations in order gain time. In consultation with Atan Buragohain, the Barphukan sent his envoys to enquire from Ram Singh the purpose of his advance towards the frontier. The meeting was followed by several visits of envoys between the two sides which continued for a few months. In this way, the Ahoms gained some time for their full preparation. As soon as preparations were complete, the war started.

Unable to recapture Guwahati by means of military expedition, Ram Singh started negotiations with Barphukan with a view to getting control of Guwahati through other means. In one of his letters to the Barphukan, Ram Singh promised to offer him three lakhs of rupees besides a good present to Atan Buragohain. In another letter, he proposed a duel, "I wish that we Rajas (Raja Ram Singh and the Ahom king) should have a duel..." The proposal was considered very derogatory as he (Ram Singh) was a mere servant and had no umbrella over his head. The Ahom reply was one of defiance. "Ram Singh wishes to fight a duel with our king, but we are ready to meet him in the field," the Ahom reply stated. This led to war again, and the enemy was routed and many of them were captured. In the face of this reverse, Ram Singh himself came up with his Rajput forces and defeated the Ahom infantrymen in the battle of Alaboi. An estimated 10,000 soldiers on the Ahom side fell, but even after this, Ram Singh failed to get Guwahati.

Lachit Barphukan was very upset after the Alaboi setback. Atan Buragohain wisely counselled him, "Well, general, ... eventualities of this character are normal in a protracted warfare. When you agitate the water of a pond for catching large fishes, the fish-catchers will be pricked by the thorny

scales of the small fries. You should judge your success by the number of large catches." (S.K. Bhuyan, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, p. 69-70)

This reflects the camaraderie between Atan Buragohain and Lachit Barphukan. On an earlier occasion, when the Barphukan came under a cloud of suspicion because of a letter planted by Ram Singh stating payment of rupees one lakh to him, it was Atan Buragohain who pointed out the mischief and vouched for the absolute loyalty of Lachit Barphukan.

Meanwhile, Ram Singh continued with his efforts to persuade the Barphukan and Buragohain to vacate Guwahati. In 1669, in another letter, Ram Singh proposed that the old boundary that was settled between Allah Yar Khan and the Barbarua (Momai Tamuli Barbarua) in 1639 CE should be restored. In his reply, the Barphukan ignored the proposal and asked Ram Singh to maintain good relations between them. When all the attempts failed, Ram Singh became desperate to wrest Guwahati by any means. This led to the battles at Pandu and Saraighat in March 1671 CE. The Ahoms repulsed the Mughals in battles, both at land and water. The defeated Mughal army, pursued by the Ahom soldiers, retreated to Rangamati, and the territory up to the river Manaha was occupied by the Ahoms.

In all these military and diplomatic activities and exchanges, Atan Buragohain gave his wise counsel to Lachit Barphukan, helping him in giving replies to communications from the Mughals, verbal or written, in tackling complex situations, and in fighting the battles that ultimately halted the Mughal advance not just to Assam but to India's present Northeast.



জয়সাগর যোগেশ্বর মন্দির

জয়সাগর

Gola-Ghar or Magazine/
Cannon House at Joysagar, near
Sivasagar, built during the reign
of Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-
1669 CE)

Lachit Barphukan & Chakradhwaj Singha

The King-General Relations

শ্রী

স্বপ্ন অঙ্গন

শ্রী


জনসংযোগ অঙ্গন

6

Lachit Barphukan & Chakradhwaj Singha

The King-General Relations

Sangeeta Gogoi

 The history of Medieval Assam is inextricably linked to the rise and fall of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley from 1228 to 1826 CE. Assam was the last state that faced the rage of Mughal imperialism after the conquest of Koch Behar and Kamrup (Sarkar 2003: 148). The reign of Chakradhwaj Singha, also known as Suo-Pung-Mung (1663-1669 CE), who succeeded Jayadhwaj Singha alias Suo-Tam-La, witnessed the renewal of the Ahom-Mughal conflict that was settled by the humiliating Treaty of Ghilajhari-ghat in January, 1663. In fact, the root cause of the war lies in the Treaty of 1663.

As the proud descendants of the Tai, meaning 'Free' or 'Free Men' (Cochrane 1915: 15; Milne 2001: 208), the Ahoms always consider "freedom of their state" as the core of their diplomatic approach. 'Freedom' was too dearer a term for the Ahoms for which they could go to any extent. Both Jayadhwaj

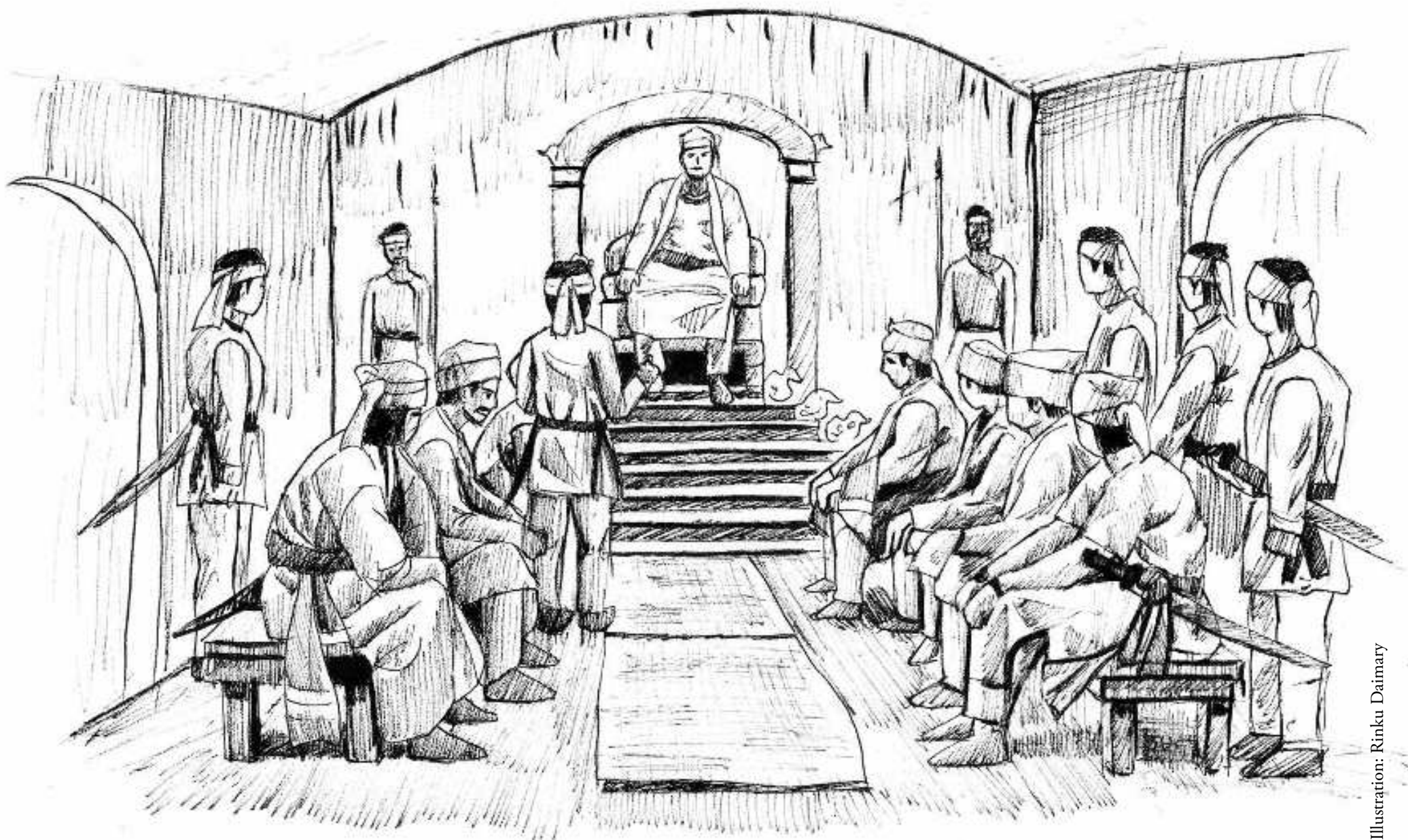


Illustration: Rinku Daimary

Singha and Chakradhwaj Singh refused to remain as vassals of Mughals or accept their tributary status. Chakradhwaj Singha, a highly spirited and intensely patriotic monarch, declined to wear the Mughal imperial *khilat* (robe), a symbol of Mughal vassalage. The striking illustration of this spirit for freedom can be found in his words, “Death is preferable to a life of subordination of foreigners. I will not surrender my independence for a suit of sewn garments!” (Bhuyan 1994: 12).

Energetic, efficient and ambitious, Chakradhwaj Singha was bent on retrieving the national honour lost by the humiliating treaty of Ghilajhari-ghat and recover Kamrup from the Mughals. Different course of events led to the subsequent violation of the terms of the Treaty by both the signatories which resulted in the resumption of war in 1667. However, it was the unprecedented and undignified demand for Assamese girls by the Mughal Faujdar Firoz Khan that supplied the ultimate spark to ignite the fury of Chakradhwaj Singha and transcend the limits of his patience (Bhuyan 1992: 55-56). This official demand was a grave insult to the royal dignity and state honour. Highly enraged by the arrogance of the Mughal Faujdar, the king resolved to liberate his kingdom from the invaders at the earliest. After consultation with his great council (*patramantri*) and the Ahom priests, Chakradhwaj Singha ordered for an immediate offensive against the Mughals. Premier Atan Buragohain carried on the war preparation, both for land and water, on a war footing. Every effort was made to win the friendship and co-operation of the rulers of neighbouring territories, hill chiefs and

tributary kings of the Ahoms.

After considerable search, Lachit (*La-chet* = seventh son), the youngest son of Momai Tamuli Barbarua (*Na Chao Mak-mu*) and the acting Dolakasharia Barua (Superintendent of royal guards) was appointed as the new Barphukan (*Phu Kon Lung*) and the commander-in-chief of the whole army (Barua 1985: 196) for his great potentialities and proven ability (Bhuyan 2009: 101). He successfully appeared all the necessary tests of gallantry, patriotism and self-confidence and won the goodwill of the king. Lachit’s extreme sense of duty towards his state and his loyalty and devotion to his monarchs was clearly depicted in his saying, “*Could it be that there is no fit man in your Majesty’s realm? What are the Bangals, if not ordinary mortals? Are not such men in our kingdom? Your Majesty should only confer the dust of your feet, the man suited to the occasion would surely be found*” (Bhuyan 2010: 109). Attracted by his great sense of patriotism and potentialities, Chakradhwaj Singha immediately declared Lachit as the new Barphukan and the commander-in-chief of this expeditionary force. Moreover, the king was happy to find that Lachit’s family ancestry belonged to the original Phi-Ma clan that accompanied Siu-Ka-Pha (Barua 1985: 192). After performing all the customary religious rites, Lachit Barphukan proceeded in two divisions on August 20, 1667 with a strong army under a number of best selected commanders to realise the sole objective of their expedition, to expel the invaders (*phang*), the Mughals. King Chakradhwaj Singha’s order was either to fight to achieve victory or to die in fighting. According to





Lachit Bhawan, Jorhat District

their plan, a ferocious night attack was made on the fort of Itakhuli, applying guerrilla tactics on November 4, 1667. After a decisive encounter, the Ahoms laid siege of the fort of Itakhuli, the strongest hold of the Mughals. Thus, after nearly two months, Lachit Barphukan, by his efficient leadership, indomitable courage and tactful policies, succeeded in recovering Guwahati from the Mughals as per his commitment to his king. A huge war booty was captured from the fleeing Mughals (Barua 1985: 200). King Chakradhwaj Singha was so delighted at the restoration of the lost glory and prestige of his kingdom that in great excitement he cried out, *"It is now that I can eat my morsel of food with ease and pleasure"* (Bhuyan 1992: 61). With this triumphant victory, the Ahoms recovered Kamrup, extended the western boundary of their kingdom up to the river Manaha (Manas) and regained their prestige, lost in 1663.

Aurangzeb never expected such sudden political changes. He immediately directed Raja Ram Singh, son of the distinguished general Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber as the commander of the imperial army to Assam to re-establish the Mughal suzerainty. After his arrival at Hajo, Ram Singh demanded the immediate restoration of the limits fixed by the Treaty of Asurar Ali (1639 CE). The arrogance of the Rajput general unnerved Lachit Barphukan. As a true leader, considering the superior military strength of Ram Singh, Lachit Barphukan resorted to their traditional tactics of delay to complete the necessary war preparations with utmost perfection. In consultation with Atan Buragohain, Lachit chalked out a defensive strategy and avoided an open encounter with the army under Ram Singh, who were experts in cavalry charges. The Assamese army tried to supplement the open encounters by guerrilla fighting

(*dogayudha*). It is to be noted that the Mughals had concentrated near Alaboi hill on the outskirts of a vast plain which touched the Brahmaputra on one side and the Sesa River on the other. Following a well-planned war strategy, Ram Singh tried to incite the Assamese force to challenge their enemies in a plain field (*maidan yudha*). As decided by the war-council, Lachit Barphukan always avoided an open encounter with the Rajput cavalry because he knew very well about the possible disaster of his own army who greatly dreaded the cavalry forces. Therefore, he did not accept the challenge of Ram Singh to go for an open encounter but tried to induce the Mughals for a naval fight. But Chakradhwaj Singha was so impatient to free the state from foreign domination that he even ordered to punish the commanders for not going on an offensive. Lachit's loyalty compelled him to submit before the royal orders sanctioned by king Chakradhwaj Singha for an offensive war. Caught by his patriotism and loyalty, Lachit said, "*The Rajputs have concentrated their forces at Alaboi. It will be difficult for us to escape unscathed if we fling a stone into a revengeful nest of immature hornets. At the same time, I cannot but obey the command of His Majesty*" (Bhuyan 2010: 208-209).

In the ill-fated battle of Alaboi (1669 CE), thousands of Ahom soldiers made their ultimate sacrifices fighting for the freedom of their nation. The defeat at Alaboi exposed the weakness of the Assamese army. Undue political interference by the supreme authority in military affairs cost them dearly. It was perhaps the impatience of king Chakradhwaj Singha that was responsible for the massacre of large number of soldiers. Unable to save his men from this grim disaster, the Barphukan lamented, "*Each of our soldiers is a pillar of strength and we have lost today ten thousand such stalwarts*" (Bhuyan 1992: 74). However, this serious loss of the Ahoms did not confer any decisive victory to the Mughal camp. It has been rightly said, "*It was a mere isolated triumph won against a fraction of the Ahom army*" (Bhuyan: 70)).

Lachit could not tolerate any humiliation of his king. To Ram Singh's reaction, "*Look at the rashness of the Assamese, they venture to fight on the plains with Amber horsemen!*", Lachit Barphukan gave a fitting reply, "*Numerous chieftains of the neighbouring territories have joined our ranks. Some of them sought a diversion without consulting us. A detachment has*



been lost: we have many more still fully prepared for action”
(Bhuyan 2010: 116-117).

His respect and supreme loyalty for the heavenly king, his *Swargadeo*, was exceptional. It was Lachit Barphukan's highest sense of duty and patriotism coupled with the undoubted faith of Chakradhwaj Singha on his loyalty and efficiency that inspired Lachit to lead his army and to fight with the motto of 'do or

die' for the defense of his motherland. The Ahoms might have lost a number of battles but they finally won the decisive Battle of Saraighat (1671 CE) that forever freed Assam from foreign domination, greatly enhancing their power and prestige in the world. It was this rare combination of dogged determination of the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha and the unprecedented patriotism of his commander Lachit Barphukan that decided the ultimate victory of the Assamese.

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জনসংযোগ লসান

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The Battles of Lachit Barphukan



আপ অসম




জনসংযোগ অসম

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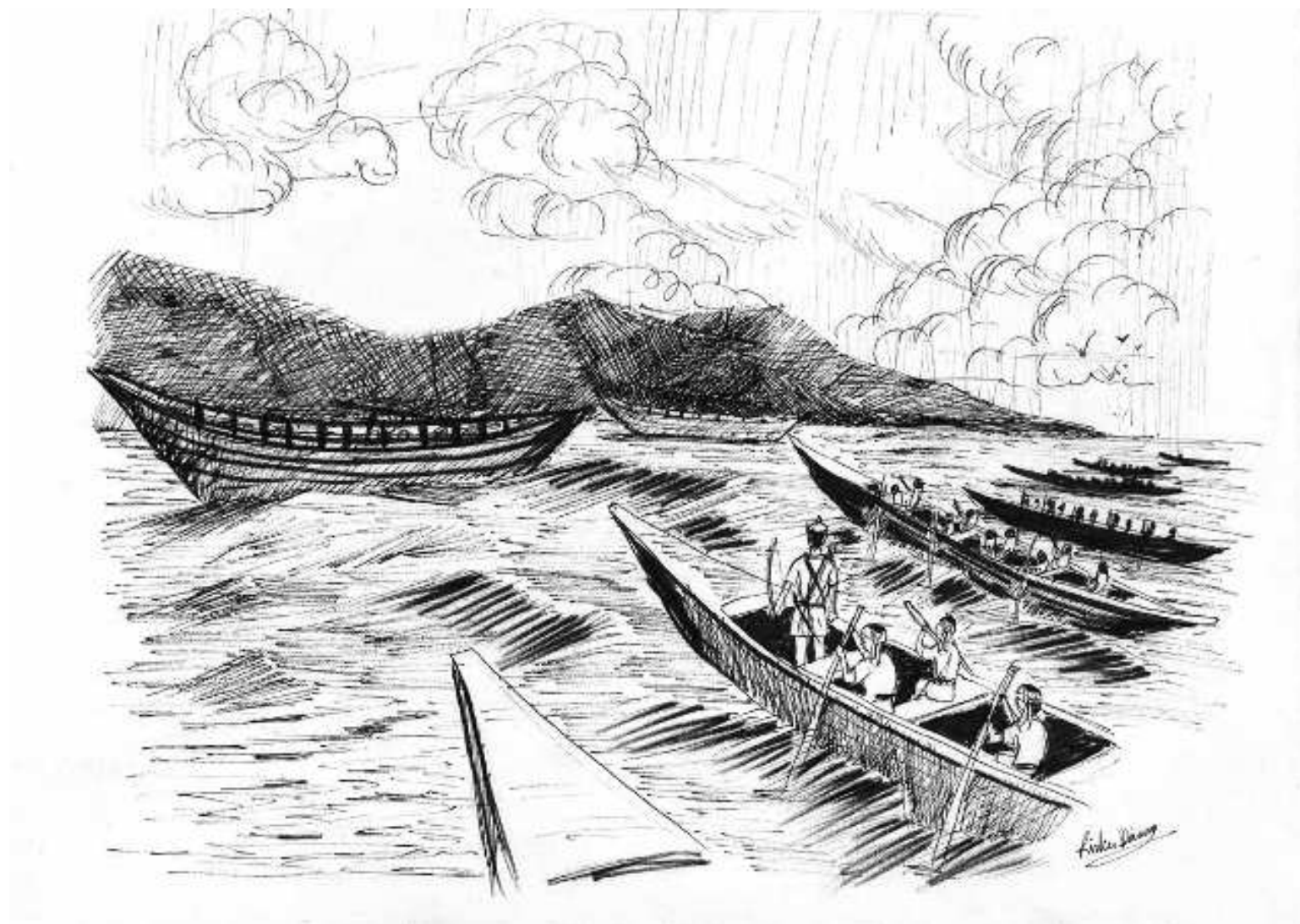
The Battles of Lachit Barphukan

Kuldeep Patowary

hen the discussion is on the battles of Lachit Barphukan, the crown jewel is of course the Battle of Saraighat. As the saying goes, ‘Rome was not built in a day’, and with Lachit, too, the Barphukan who won the Battle of Saraighat was not made in a day. Lachit had previous experience of fighting the Mughals when he fought against Mir Jumla’s forces at Dikhaumukh¹ at the side of the river Tilao (Lohit).² However, it was a different ball game altogether once he was appointed as the Barphukan. He was no longer an ordinary official of the kingdom, but a member of the *patra mantris* (Council of Ministers), and as a Barphukan, he was the top general of the Ahom army.

Lachit Barphukan had a long and illustrious career in the administration of the Ahom kingdom. Since his childhood, when young Lachit was being trained and educated to later on join the state service,





he was at an advantageous position of watching the inner mechanisms of statecraft at work. As his father Momai Tamuli was the Barbarua, he not only saw the workings of the Barbarua's office up close, but also got opportunities of attending and watching the activities at the royal court when he accompanied his father.³

An interesting feature of the Ahom kingdom's administrative structure was that there were no clear demarcations of civil, military and judicial functions carried out by the various ministers and officials. This gave the senior ministers and officials a wide experience of dealing with multiple and varied issues in their official capacities. For Lachit too, his bureaucratic career started as a mere *Sola Dhora* (literally a scarf bearer), but in essence, someone equivalent to a private secretary, and with time his dedication and utmost loyalty to his duty and king, saw him rise up the ranks.⁴

Before becoming the Barphukan, he served in other positions, such as, *Ghora Barua* (Superintendent of the Royal Horses), *Dulia Barua* (Superintendent of the *Dola* or Royal Palanquin, where he was in charge of the palanquin bearers of the King), *Simaluguria Phukan* (Commandant of a Levy at Simaluguri, which was in close proximity to the Ahom capital Gargaon) and finally, as the *Dolakasharia Barua* (Superintendent of the armed guards on royal duties and accompanying

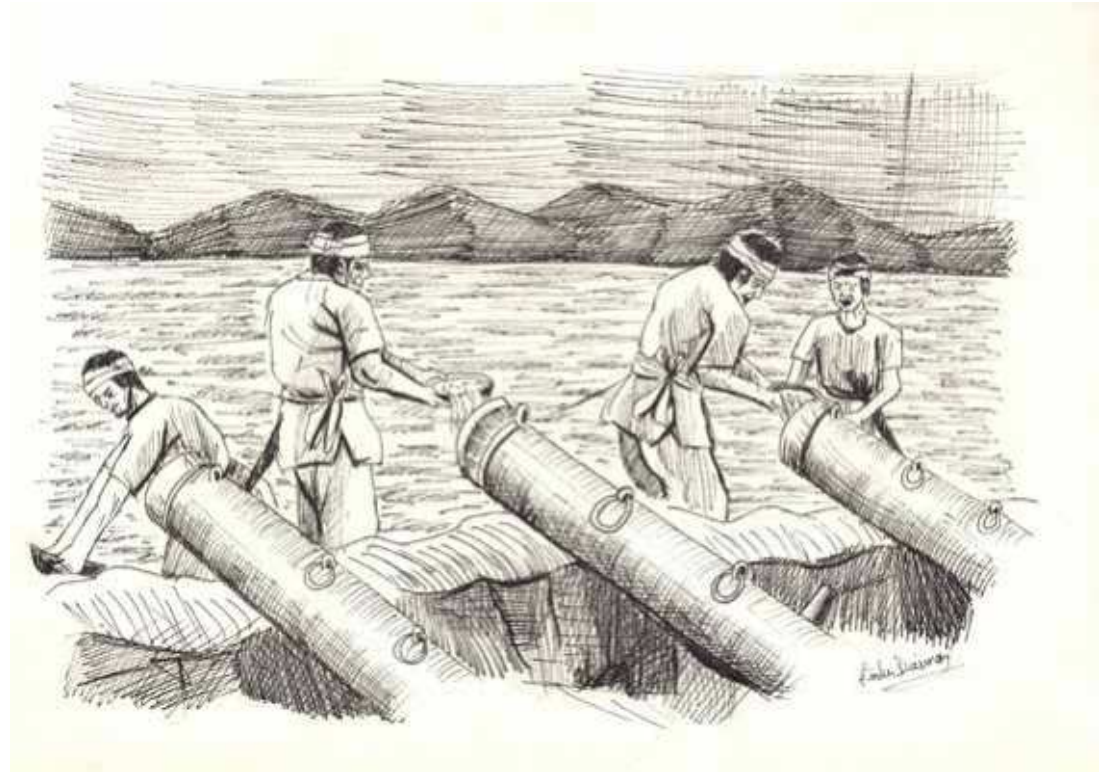
the king; *Dolakasharia* literally means someone who is close or next to the *Dola* – the royal palanquin). The nature of his appointments provided Lachit with proximity to the Ahom royal court as well as the king himself, and Lachit had the opportunity to show his capabilities and gained the trust of the king.⁵ Although these appointments were not directly military in nature, yet these gave Lachit an opportunity to showcase his natural talent at being a capable leader.

Once he became the Barphukan, one of the first military expeditions that Lachit undertook was to bring back Guwahati under Ahom control. In August 1667, Lachit sailed down the Brahmaputra from the Ahom capital (in eastern Assam) and set up a base at Kaliabor on the south bank of the Brahmaputra (central Assam). His military acumen is reflected from the fact that he understood that taking on the Mughals only through roads was not going to be fruitful, and using the river as a mode of advancing the attack would be ideal. His strategy paid off as the Ahom forces were victorious as their surprise attack caught the Mughals unaware and at the same time, the invaders were unable to bring reinforcements from Mughal garrisons at Rangamati and Dhaka. On the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, the Mughal forces were pushed back from Bahbari to as far as the east of Barnadi river, and on the southern bank, one after another, the forts fell.

The forts at Kajali, Sonapur, Panikhaiti, and Tatimara were wrested back from the Mughals. These early victories bolstered Lachit Barphukan and the Ahom army, and they made preparations to win Guwahati, which was still under Mughal control with fortifications and good security arrangements to withstand Ahom attack.⁶

To recapture Guwahati, it was crucial to capture the fort of Itakhuli (Sukreswar Hill near Paltan Bazar of modern-day Guwahati). This fort gave a panoramic view of the river Brahmaputra at Guwahati and all commercial and military activities taking place could be strictly monitored.⁷ After the initial successes, the Ahom forces camped at Latasil, which was a couple of kilometers upstream of Itakhuli. They faced stiff resistance from the Mughal forces stationed at the garrison in and around Itakhuli fort, and subsequently, the Ahom forces concentrated on gaining access to Guwahati through an eastern entrance at a place called Jaiduar. The Ahom commanders led by Lachit Barphukan came up with different strategies to tackle the Mughals. One such strategy was to use spies to enter the Mughal camp undetected and render their cannons ineffective by putting water in the muzzles.

In November 1667, the Ahom army also laid siege to the fort of Itakhuli at night, taking advantage of the darkness and inflicted heavy damage on the Mughal forces. The fort's defenses failed due to the action of the spies, and the troops were overrun by the Ahom soldiers. The Mughal forces tried to defend the fort from the river but had to retreat in their boats as the Ahoms carried out continuous bombardment with



their cannons. This defeat of the Mughals was further intensified as the Mughal *faujdar* of Guwahati and the *Mir Bakshi* Sayyid Salar Khan both fled, with whatever forces, towards the river Manah (Manas), which was the old boundary between the Ahoms and the Mughals.⁸

The recapture of Guwahati proved to be a turning point in the Ahom-Mughal rivalry as the Ahoms gained an advantageous position. Intermittent skirmishes took place between the Ahoms and the Mughals after the recapture of Guwahati, but the Ahom forces, under the able command of Lachit Barphukan, were successful in keeping the Mughal forces at bay. This crucial victory rejuvenated the morale of the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha as well as the Ahom army and the people of the kingdom in general. Preparations were made to reinforce the Ahom position at Guwahati and at the same time, efforts were also on to prepare for future offensive actions. As a reaction to the loss of Itakhuli and subsequent loss of territory up to Manah river, in December 1667, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb deputed Ram Singh of Amber to lead an invasion to Assam.

For one-and-a half-year, what followed was a period of intense diplomatic exchanges between the two sides interspersed with skirmishes and military showdown. It was evident that a battle was imminent, but diplomatic channels were being employed to carry out negotiations as both sides wanted to arrive at a favourable outcome for themselves. The Mughal forces which had earlier retreated to river Manah, were now slowly and steadily creeping back to Guwahati. Many skirmishes took place between the frontier forces of the Ahoms and the approaching forces of the Mughals, and the Ahom army adopted an approach of ‘strategic retreat’⁹ whereby territories beyond Hajo on north bank (30 kms from Guwahati) were let go, and energy and resources were concentrated in the defense of Guwahati instead. Subsequent military confrontations between the two sides remained inconclusive, with neither side gaining any major victory.

In between, constant diplomatic exchanges took place as well as clever ploys were employed by Ram Singh to create confusion and disagreement among the senior officials of the Ahoms through misinformation and bribery. However, these did not work out well. The



Ahom Cannons and other weapons preserved at the Talatal Ghar, near Sivasagar, eastern Assam.



Ahom forces, on their part, resorted to guerilla warfare, attacking the enemy camps at night, and were successful in being an immense thorn in their enemy's flesh.

By August 1669, the Mughal Emperor was growing impatient at the slow progress of the invading army under Ram Singh. Aurangzeb made it imperative that Mughal forces should reconquer Guwahati as soon as possible and provided

additional forces for the same. On the other hand, the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha was also getting impatient with the diplomatic negotiations that were not bearing any fruit and at the same time, by the slow and steady advancement of the Mughal forces up to Agyathuri (on the north bank, near Guwahati). He too implored his generals and ministers to engage in an all-out offensive against the invading forces.



The Mughals under Ram Singh were encamped near Alaboi hill in the north bank near Guwahati, and they had a favourable position with the vast, open, plain battlefield under their constant monitoring. Lachit Barphukan knew well that an all-out attack on the Mughals in a plain field would be disastrous as the Mughals would be able to use their strong cavalry (horse mounted soldiers) to their advantage in an open field, whereas the Ahom soldiers were not very familiar with tackling cavalry, and were more adept at fighting as infantry on land

or on water. Lachit Barphukan, despite his inhibitions, could not refuse the order of the Ahom king, as doing so would have tantamounted to treason.

On that fateful day in August 1669, the forces met each other in what has been known to posterity as the Battle of Alaboi. Lachit Barphukan employed a clever strategy which had been earlier used in battles against the Koch kingdom in the 16th century. Soldiers dressed as Brahmins were placed in front of the



A plaque at the Saraighat War Memorial Park, near Guwahati

Ahom army, with the assumption that the Rajput general and Rajput soldiers of the Mughal army would desist from taking the life of Brahmins. However, the strategy failed to bear fruit as the Mughal army began its attack. The first wave of attack saw the Ahoms losing many soldiers, but they were able to turn the tide in their favour. They cleverly used trenches to mount surprise attacks on the Mughal army, and were able to inflict heavy damage and they captured Mir Nawab, under whose command Ram Singh had dispatched 10,000 Mughal soldiers. Confident that they were able to defeat the Mughal forces, the Ahom army was on its way back with captives and spoils of war, when Ram Singh ordered his army to pursue the Ahoms. With advanced weapons and the element of surprise, the second wave of Mughal attack on that day routed the Ahom forces.

The Battle of Alaboi had a detrimental effect on the psyche of the Ahom army, particularly its general, Lachit Barphukan. However, the Mughals did not

make any particular gain in the war, as the Battle did not lead to their capture of Guwahati, and merely resulted in the loss of a huge number of soldiers of the Ahom army. It also highlighted how the imposition of the royal order from the capital was detrimental to the battlefield as the practical aspects of the battlefield were being negotiated by the officers in the field. This was a crucial lesson to the Ahom king as well as the high-ranking officials, including the military commanders.

Subsequently, another round of diplomatic negotiations ensued between the two sides. Along with material and monetary compensations, the Mughals wanted the evacuation of Guwahati by Ahom forces whereas the Ahoms wanted the Mughals to retreat to the area beyond river Manah and recognition of river Manah as the border between the two polities. As neither side backed down from their demands, we eventually witness the historic Battle of Saraighat in 1671.

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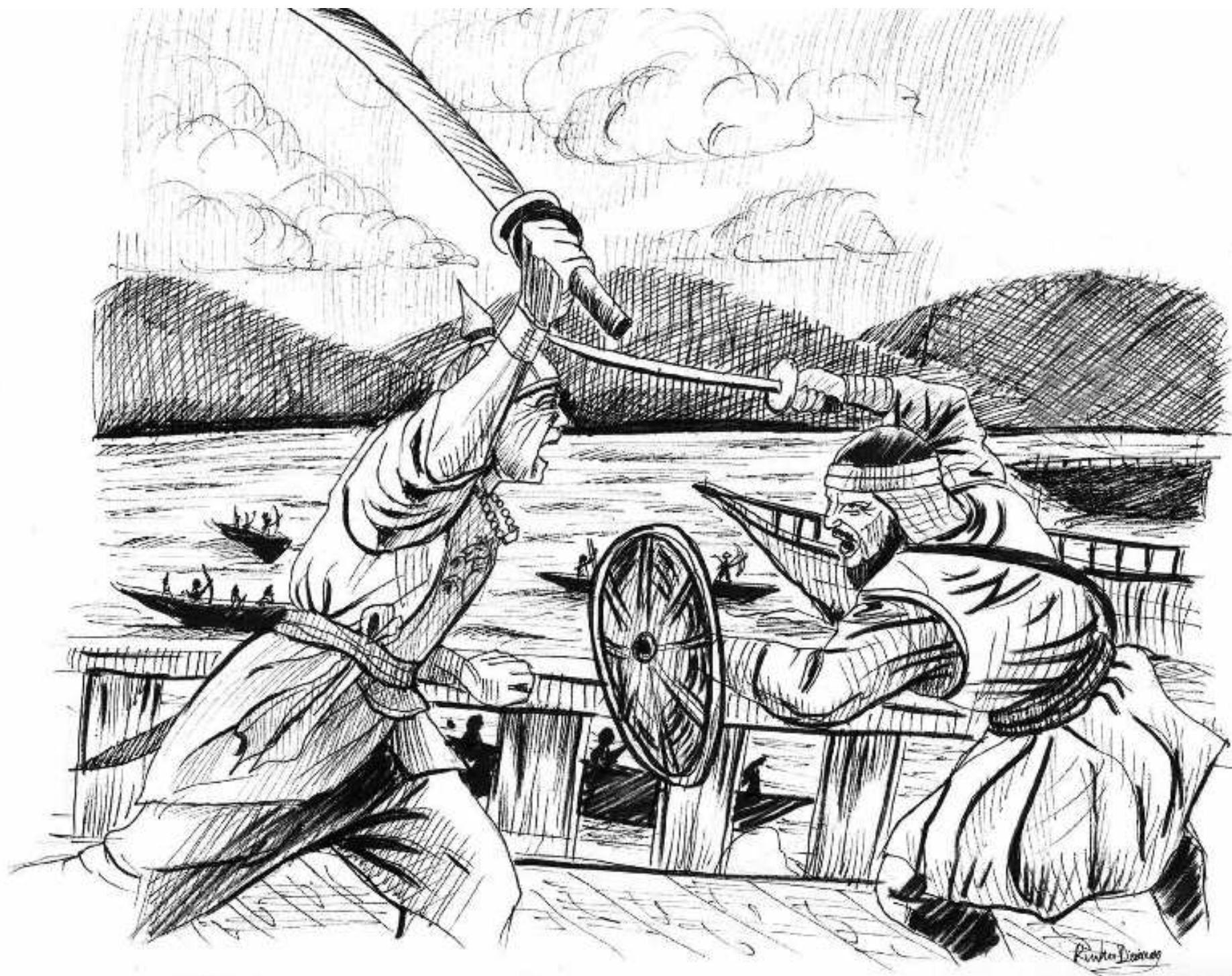


A Lachit Statue in front of Lachit Barphukan
Boys' Hall, Gauhati University



Lachit Barphukan and Raja Ram Singh

The Battle of Nerves




8

Lachit Barphukan and Raja Ram Singh

The Battle of Nerves

Rajib Handique

 The Battle of Saraighat (1671) was a military contest of sorts. It was also a battle of nerves, not uncommon in warfare in medieval India. The diplomatic exchanges between Lachit Barphukan and Ram Singh (Ram Singh I) revealed the intense psychological battle that was on between the two generals. Perceptions and propaganda have been an integral part of warfare and the Ahom-Mughal conflict was not bereft of the same.

The Battle of Saraighat also witnessed a contest between the personalities of the two commanders of the fighting armies - Ram Singh of the Mughals and Lachit Barphukan of the Ahoms. Both the commanders had similar backgrounds as they belonged to the ruling aristocracy and were sons of top-ranking officials of the respective kingdoms.

Ram Singh's father Jai Singh (Jai Singh I), was a senior general designated as *Mirza Raja* of the Mughal

Empire and the Raja of the Kingdom of Amber. Jai Singh had successfully commanded Mughal forces in different campaigns in the Indian sub-continent and Afghanistan and was astute in psychological warfare. He was the only Mughal general who forced Shivaji to come to terms at Purandar, and go to Aurangzeb's court at Agra, escorted by his son Ram Singh. On the other hand, Lachit Barphukan's father Momai Tamuli Barbarua, besides being a councillor, was the commander-in-chief of the Ahom army that fought the Mughals during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-1641). The post of Barbarua was bestowed with both executive and judicial powers. Lachit had fought in the Ahom army against Mir Jumla's Mughals forces. Thus, both the adversaries were more or less evenly poised for the struggle that was to follow.

In August 1667, Lachit Barphukan started his advance towards Guwahati. By the end of the year, the Mughals were defeated and expelled from Kamrup and the Ahoms took over territories till the Manaha (Manas River). In December 1667, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb learnt of the defeat and soon appointed Ram Singh as Commander of the imperial Mughal army. Ram Singh gathered his forces and arrived in Assam heading a huge army that included 18,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry, 15,000 archers, 5,000 gunners with over 1,000 canons and a significant navy. The Mughal army reached Rangamati in February 1669. Lachit Barphukan kept himself informed of the Mughal advance, and, realising the futility of opposing the army at the outlying forts on the frontier, ordered gradual withdrawal of Ahom forces from Manaha in a planned manner. The three Rajkhowas overlooking the planned retreat kept themselves outside the bounds of Mughal canon shots. At night, they used to encamp on the river





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banks and placed trunks of plantain with a torch on each. Early in the morning, they boarded their boats and kept sailing in advance of Ram Singh's army. The perception created by the retreat of a vast army made Ram Singh consider himself as fortunate as his predecessor Mir Jumla, who had an easy advance up the Brahmaputra in 1662. On the sixth day, two attendees left behind in their camp asleep by the Dihingia Rajkhowa, were captured by the Mughal forces and produced before their general. Ram Singh ordered their release and told them to go back to the Barphukan and ask him to fight the Mughals for an hour.

Lachit Barphukan was already sizing up his adversary as he was building up an impregnable defence system at Guwahati. To gain the necessary time, he also opened up tactful negotiations with the Mughals. The Barphukan released Firoz Khan, ex-Faujadar of Guwahati, from captivity and through him sent the following reply to Ram Singh, "Tell Ram Singh that we want to know why he has come to our country. Besides, war is not the only method of settling issues. One proves to be a knowing man if he can tune his measures to the exigency of the situation" (Bhuyan, 1947). Ram Singh demanded restoration of the territories as per the 1639 Treaty and release of the Mughal commanders captured by the Ahoms in the last war. In the face of non-compliance, Ram Singh challenged Lachit Barphukan to have "a fight for an hour". Ram Singh also offered to supply war-materials to the Ahom commanders, if there was shortage in their camp (Bhuyan, Baruah).

Lachit Barphukan replied to Ram Singh stating that Guwahati and Kamrup did not belong to the Mughals and that it fell to the Mughals for a few seasons by mere chance. He further added, "Now God has been pleased to give it back

to us. When He pleases to give it to our brother sovereign the Mogul Emperor, he will get Gauhati, but not before that. As for his request to give him fight for an hour, I would like to say that we are prepared to fight as long as there remains a drop of blood in our veins. He has also expressed his willingness to give us war materials...Our Majesty the Heavenly King has nothing unavailable to him. If the Rajput Raja falls short of materials, let him ask me and I shall try to oblige him." (Bhuyan, p. 49).

The diplomatic exchanges continued as part of the psychological warfare. By March 1669, Ram Singh reached Hajo, at a distance of about 25 kms. to the north-west of Guwahati and stationed there with his forces. Ram Singh sent an astute messenger to Lachit Barphukan from Hajo with a bag of poppy-seeds along with the message – "The Barphukan should evacuate Guwahati. Our army is as numerous as the poppy-seeds in this bag." To this, the Barphukan sent a counter-reply with a tube filled with sand, saying, "The poppy-seeds if pounded down will become a thin paste. Our army is as numerous and indissoluble as the sands in the tube despatched herewith." (Bhuyan, 1947, p. 50)

Between 1669 and 1670, there were sporadic clashes between the Ahom and Mughal forces with losses on both sides. With the onset of monsoons and the start of flooding season, the discomfiture of the Mughal army increased as their forces got detached from one another. Lachit Barphukan waited for the exhaustion of the enemy provisions and the possible outbreak of disease. The Ahoms soon launched guerrilla attacks "with unabated vigour" (Bhuyan, p.56). They would come out of their forts and fall upon the enemy causing casualty and get back to their forts if there is a counter attack. Ram Singh considered these

attacks as “thieves’ affairs” and remarked, “I have now obtained evidence of the courage and valour of my brother Nawab. Being unable to match us in strength, he is adopting tricks employed only by thieves, just as jackals contrive the death of wild elephants. No honour accrues in fighting with such dotards...” To this Lachit Barphukan replied, “We wanted to test whether Ram Singh possesses stamina to fight on land. It must be remembered that lions alone fight at night, while others fight during the daytime whether in land or water”. Ram Singh stuck to his opinion that night engagements were not permissible. The Ahom envoys replied, “The Ahoms cannot but fight at night as they have in their army a force of one hundred thousand *Rakshsas* or demons who are all man-eaters and night-rovers. (Bhuyan, p. 59). Ram Singh could not believe this, but the Ahoms convinced him through deception by a ruse, after which Ram Singh is said to have accepted the presence of demons and cannibals in the Ahom army. Such matters were considered seriously and given importance during those days. It is on record that Ram Singh requested Guru Tegh Bahadur to accompany him in his expedition to Assam to fend off such magical forces. All this could also imply that Ram Singh came to develop an inferiority complex. (Barpujari, p.231)

Having failed to obtain evacuation of Guwahati by war or negotiations,

Ram Singh tried to create dissension among the Ahom commanders. He tied a letter to an arrow and had it shot into the Ahom camp with a message addressed to Lachit Barphukan stating, “...yesterday you accepted from us a reward of one lakh of rupees and you signed a written agreement to desist from fighting against us. But it appears you have not yet abandoned your war-array. May I know the reason?” The letter found its way to Gargaon and Lachit Barphukan was under a cloud of suspicion for sometimes. Atan Buragohain, the Chief Councillor, made the Ahom king understand the diplomatic ruse, and somehow, the crisis was averted.

Diplomatic exchanges between the adversaries form an important part of the Battle of Saraighat. The relations between Ram Singh and Lachit Barphukan was of mutual respect and regard though in diplomatic exchanges they tried to outwit one another. Ultimately Ram Singh lost the Battle of Saraighat. But even in defeat, he was full of praise for the heroism of Lachit Barphukan. “...Glory to the King, Glory to the Councillors...Glory to the Commanders, Glory to the country. One single individual leads all the forces... Even I, Ram Singh, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loophole and an opportunity,” (Sinha, 1999).

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জনসংযোগ অসম্ভব



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The Battle of Saraighat

Iconic General's Great Victory Over Invaders



আপ অসম



জনসংযোগ অসম

The Battle of Saraighat

Iconic General's Great Victory Over Invaders

Nilutpal Gohain

*K*amakhya, Sukleshwar and Aswaklanta—the three revered temples on the banks of the Brahmaputra, if connected in straight lines, form a triangle between them. In the middle of March 1671, this whole triangle was littered with boats carrying men, horses, and war materials as it witnessed the most fierce, extraordinary and unique battle in the history of India. This war, known as the Battle of Saraighat, turned out to be the Waterloo for the foreign Mughal conquerors in the east. It was the last major engagement in which the Mughal invaders attempted to extend their empire into Northeast India but failed. Many historians believe that it was one of the most iconic and spectacular naval warfare ever documented in the annals of Indian history.

The modern day Amingaon, in the Brahmaputra's North bank in Kamrup, was a small village named Sarai during Ahom days and it is believed that the name Saraighat originated from it. However,



A mural depicting the Battle of Saraighat at the Saraighat War Memorial Park, near Guwahati



as history has witnessed, the battle was equally bloody on both the banks as well as on the river. A stretch of pristine sandbank was located between the hills of Kamakhya in the west and Itakhuli in the east called Andharubali. During the fortification of the entire Guwahati after its recapture by the Ahoms following their victory over the Mughal Subedar, a huge sand rampart was also erected in this particular area. But, a breach appeared on the rampart. Raja Ram Singh planned to enter Guwahati through that breach and siege the Barphukan's headquarters at the fort of Itakhuli.

Lachit Barphukan was extremely sick at that time. He was not in a position to personally command the Ahom army and it caused a sense of despair among the Ahom soldiers. A universal feeling of retreating from Guwahati was prevalent among the soldiers. On the other hand, Ram Singh, after realising that the peace negotiations have proved futile and ineffective, wanted to resume the offensive operations and decided to give a final blow to the retreating army after the massacre at Alaboi. The possibility of entering Guwahati through the breach at Andarubali and the illness of the Barphukan encouraged Ram Singh. Moreover, after receiving reinforcements from Delhi, Ram Singh had by his side, Raship Khan,

nephew of the 'Cruising Admiral' Manowar Khan, who was also an able naval commander. A combined attack, both on land and water, was imminent.

The attack commenced when five Mughal captains fired their guns and shot their arrows from boats. The Ahoms retreated further. The Mughals became more confident of entering Guwahati through Andharubali. Lachit Barphukan was watching the whole situation from his sick bed at his archery store. He witnessed the advance of the Mughal fleet and the flight of the Ahom boats. If something was not done now, the Ahom forces were sure to be annihilated. He ordered his men to move his bed to the gate house from where he could obtain a clear view of the happenings.

In the meantime, a Hazarika came to Lachit and informed him that his men were deserting their ranks. Lachit thundered, "Tell your men I am going to die on this spot, and I have never thought of abandoning my charge. I have bought a slice of earth on the top of Chilla Hill which will provide sufficient accommodation for my remains. If I survive, I shall go after all the people who have left this place."

The commander rushed back to his position at Aswaklanta and knelt down before the retreating soldiers, shouting, "Oh my countrymen, do please flee if you want to pour poison on

this platter of gold!" The Barphukan instantly placed a force of 2000 men at the disposal of the Hazarika.

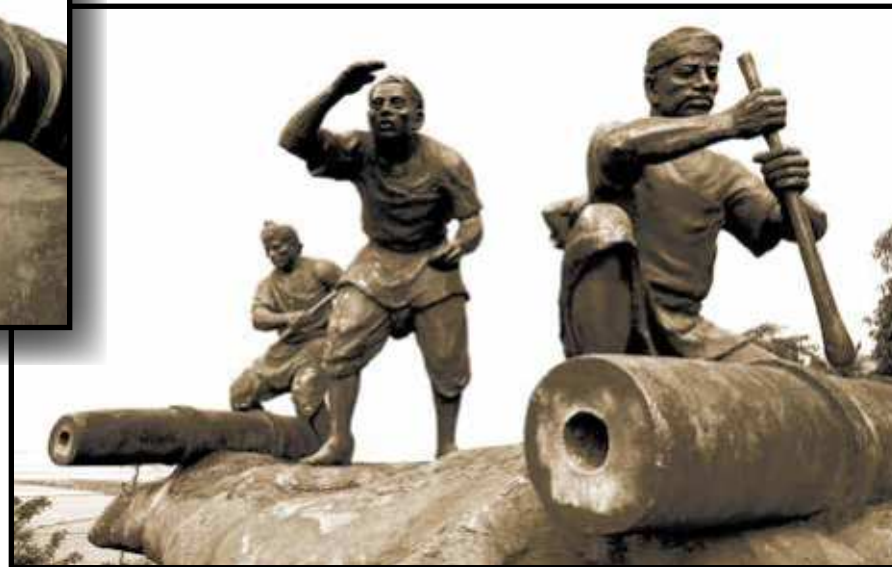
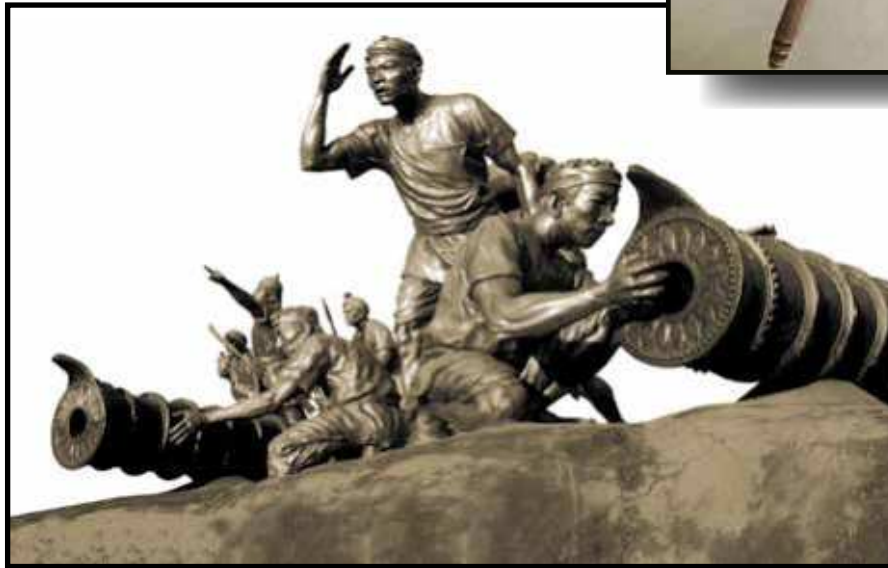
However, Lachit witnessed that the craze for flight was universal, and even the boats belonging to the Buragohain and the Barphukan were loaded for departure. He could take it no more. He decided to rush upon the enemy without losing a moment. Though weak, he got up, holding his *hengdang* (sword) high. But the ordeal was not over yet. The astrologer Achutanada Doloi dissuaded the general from an attack as the time was not auspicious for an assault. In fact, the astrologer had himself promulgated an order that no one should fire a gun or shoot an arrow before hearing the signal from the general's Fort.

It was the usual practice of the Ahoms to attach expert astrologers with the leading commanders and there were orders from the king that astrologers must be consulted before initiating a campaign or commencing an attack. There were elaborate treatises on how to use astrology for political gain. Lachit Barphukan, a high ranking official, conversant with laws and traditions of the land, could not supersede the views of the astrologers. However, suffering under extreme physical agony, and mental torture, he cried out, "Oh astrologer, I shall take off your head without waiting for His Majesty's order." Achyutananda, confident of his calculations, silently replied, "Please do so."



*Credit: Ajarn Issara Suwanabol,
Courtesy: FB*

*Hengdang or Ahom sword (above) and
weapons used during the war*



Lachit did not have any other option other than following his advice. But, he was receiving information about the Battle every minute. He could not hold any longer. He shouted at the top of his voice, “The Mughals are almost reaching Amrajuri. O astrologer, you have paved the way for your annihilation, brought about my disgrace, and destroyed my bread.”

After a few seconds, the Doloi announced, “I have found in my Swaradoi treatise that this is an auspicious moment for attack. It was at this time that Ramchandra attacked Ravana.”

The Barphukan came down the steps of the gate house, supported by his helper Nadai and boarded his boat, accompanied by six other war vessels. Witnessing the retreating Ahom soldiers, the oarsmen of the commander’s boat thought that even the Barphukan had boarded his boat to flee the scene. They started rowing the boat upstream.

It enraged the generalissimo. He exclaimed, “His Majesty has made me the supreme commander of the army here, and placed at my disposal vast stores of provisions, so that I may fight with the enemy. Should I now desert the fight and revert to the embraces of my wives and children? How dare these serfs of boatmen venture to row up the boats without my orders.”

He hammered four oarsmen off his boat with the blunt edge of his sword. When they prayed for his mercy, he allowed them to be rescued. However, this prompt action produced a terror in the hearts of his army. A rumour spread like wildfire that the general was killing men indiscriminately, whoever was trying to escape the war and throwing them into water. Moreover, knowing that the

general had appeared at the thick of the war zone personally, it brought a new lease of hope within the army and they started turning their boats back towards the battle.

The Barphukan fired volleys from his guns and rushed towards the enemy fleet with his seven boats. The Assamese fleet on both banks of the river, having seen the Barphukan approaching the fleet of the enemy, steered their barges towards those of the general. The soldiers who were placed on the banks, also started firing their guns and shooting their arrows towards the enemy. Raship Khan, confident now of entering Guwahati through the opening at Andharubali, was enjoying his hookah on his boat with his back towards the riverbank. He was killed by a hostile bullet.

The Assamese warships rushed towards the Mughal fleet. An intense conflict ensued between the two armies. The whole Brahmaputra, and the triangle between Kamakhya, Itakhuli and Aswaklanta was littered with boats and men. They were fighting each other and many struggling to stay afloat after they plummeted into the water. It is said that the water of the Brahmaputra turned red that day as thousands of Mughals, slashed by Ahom *hengdangs*, fell into the river.

The Barphukan immediately ordered the Ahoms to place one boat after another in a single line to erect an improvised bridge across the entire breadth of the river Brahmaputra. This ensured that the supply of ammunition for the Ahoms did not stop whereas the Mughal fleet was running extremely low on ammunition. There was intense firing from the Assamese side and the Mughals started losing their ground. The Invaders were fighting for the mere luxury of





a triumph, and territorial expansion, whereas the sons of the land were fighting for their life and liberty. They utilised every ounce of strength in their body to save their motherland.

There were a large number of casualties on the side of the enemy. They had no other way than to retreat. The few of them who survived were chased down to Pandu, about five kilometers from the scene of the contest. The Ahoms emerged victorious.

The Ahoms remained prepared for action suspecting that Ram Singh might re-attack the next day as the intruders were known for such surprises. However, the spies informed the Barphukan, “There is no question of attack. The Mughals have folded up their tents and put them in the boats. They are preparing to sail down the river.”

Lachit issued orders to pursue the enemy from a distance and desist from harassing them. Once they crossed the old limit of the Manas River, an outpost was erected to guard the frontier.

It was on 23rd Chaitra, 1592 Saka, or 5th April, 1671 AD, Ram Singh commenced his retreat. He visited the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo on his way and while speaking to the Brahmin officiating at the

temple, he said, “The Barnawab (Barphukan) is not a hero of an ordinary caliber; the fortifications are complex and intricate; I couldn’t therefore obtain any loophole for attack.”

The news of the victory, was communicated to the king Udayaditya, at Gargaon. He was so pleased that he dispatched valuable presents to the victorious commanders. He gave the title of Samudrakhari to Achyutananda Doloi, gave him land with servitors, and got him married to a girl from Kamrup. Nara Hazarika, who had persuaded the soldiers at Aswaklanta not to retreat, was given a purse of one thousand rupees.

This battle, known in history as the Battle of Saraighat, dashed the hopes of Ram Singh to capture a proud independent country and get into the fold of favour of the Mughal emperor. But, even after adopting all the art of warfare, friendly negotiations and belligerent measures, he could not realise his dream. Perhaps Ram Singh learnt his lesson well. That’s why while praising his adversaries, he said, “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 Singh, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loopholes and opportunities.”

(Based on Bhuyan, S.K, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1947.)





Lachit Barphukan's Military Strategy

10

Lachit Barphukan's Military Strategy

Rajib Handique

Lachit Barphukan was one of India's outstanding military generals with a very rare combination of expertise in both land and naval warfare. An astute strategist, Lachit Barphukan's military prowess helped Assam defeat the Mughal forces at Saraighat in March, 1671, thereby putting an end to their imperial ambitions in Northeast India. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) S. K. Sinha, PVSM, who was the Governor of Assam, had stated, "Lachit Barphukan was a military leader in the mould of Rana Pratap and Shivaji. All the three fought against the Mughals. They fought for the freedom of their region against Mughal imperialism. They did not engage in communal conflicts as such. At Haldighat, Rana Pratap fought a Mughal army led by Raja Man Singh, at Purandar, Shivaji fought a Mughal army led by Mirza Raja Jai Singh. Whereas Rana Pratap's forte was burning patriotism and tremendous sacrifice, Shivaji and Lachit Barphukan demonstrated outstanding military skill" (Sinha, p.55). Besides, Lachit Barphukan was heading the civil and judicial administration apart from being the commander-in-chief of the Ahom army.



Cannon used during the Saraighat War

ফু কং লুং লখিত

Phu-Kan-Lung Lachit.

ফু কং লুং লখিত

Phu Kon Lung = Barphukan.

Courtesy: Medini Mohan Gogoi

When Lachit Barphukan proceeded from the Ahom capital, Gargaon, in August 1667 with his army to recover Guwahati from the *Bongals* (as the Mughals were referred to in the *Buranjis*), he took the offensive and slowly drove out the Mughal garrisons from the strategic positions. The Mughal forts of Banhbari on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and of Kajali on the south were taken over by the native forces followed by Sonapur, Panikhaiti and Tantimara. The headquarters of the Mughal Governor at Sukreswar Hill (Itakhuli), overlooking the Brahmaputra, was taken by the Ahom commandos who managed to infiltrate inside the fort and neutralise the cannons by pouring water through their mouths and also on the gunpowder on November 4, 1667 (Sinha, p.57). Soon afterwards, though Mughal reinforcement did come in from Bengal, Lachit Barphukan was

able to drive out the Mughals beyond the Manaha (Manas river). The only reversal faced by the native army was at a newly constructed fort on the southern bank of the Barnadi (Baruah, 270-271). Overall, the Ahom offensive was swift and relentless and there were no negotiations with the Mughals during the operation.

After liberating Guwahati and Ahom territory up to Manas in November, 1667, Lachit realised that the Mughal Emperor was bound to send a large army to avenge this defeat. He, therefore, set about organising the defence of Guwahati to deal with the anticipated Mughal invasion.

The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb learnt of the setback in Assam, and sent a large army under the command of Ram Singh to avenge the defeat. Ram Singh

gathered his forces and arrived in Assam heading a huge army that included 18,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry, 15,000 archers, 5,000 gunners with over 1,000 canons and a significant navy manned by Portuguese and other European experts. Lachit Barphukan's spies kept him informed of the Mughal advance.

The Barphukan was very much aware of the challenges before him and especially about superiority of the Mughal cavalry over the ponies of the native army. He decided on a defensive strategy based on Guwahati as the focal point. Guwahati had great strategic advantage and importance. The Brahmaputra river between Kamakhya and Saraighat is the narrowest in Guwahati and there are hills on both the banks of the river in this area. The area was densely forested and road communication was very poor. A large army moving in this region had no other option than use of Brahmaputra waterway. (Sinha, p.57)

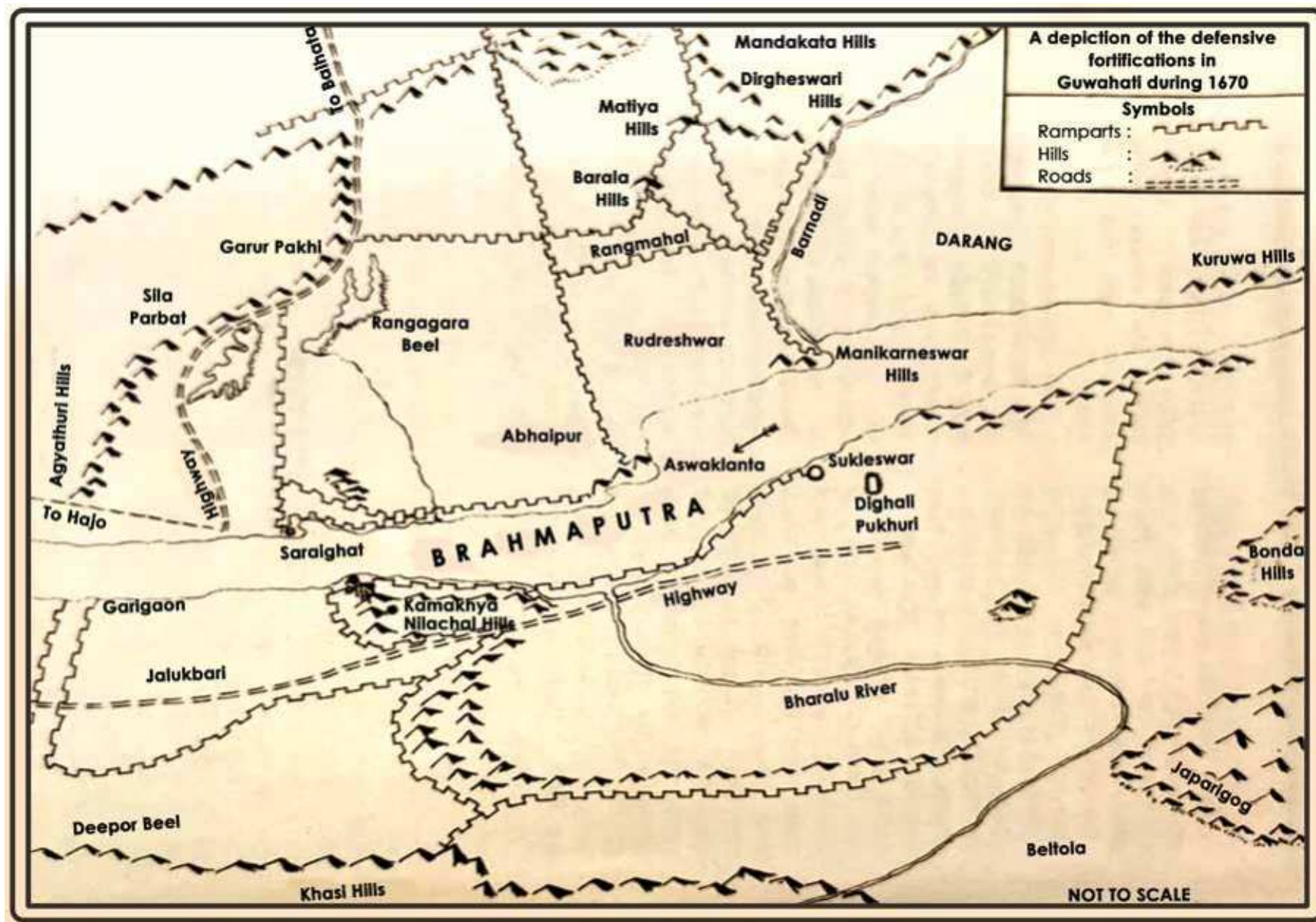
Lachit Barphukan therefore organised an impregnable defensive system on both banks of the river at Guwahati connecting the hills from Kamakhya and Saraighat in the west to Navagraha and beyond with ramparts and other fortifications. The ramparts built during the Saraighat battle have survived till date, though many of them have been encroached upon, defaced and destroyed. The former Governor of Assam Lt. Gen. (Retd.) S.K. Sinha, a very accomplished military general of independent India, expressed, "I have studied the defensive layout of Lachit on the ground from different viewpoints around Guwahati and have marvelled at his tactical insight". (Sinha, p. 58)

Lachit Barphukan kept a strict vigil on the defence build-up. Guns were mounted at appropriate intervals on the bastions in the ramparts and also on the

hills, hill-slopes and valleys, each under the charge of trained personnel. The art of erecting improvised walls on the banks of the rivers, and stockades in the midst of waters, and bridges of boats across Brahmaputra was brought to perfection during the period. These were used especially in naval front when their sudden withdrawal made water gush to sweep away the foe. Commanders were posted to cover the whole area from Pandu to the extremity of Asurar Ali on the South bank, and from Sarai to Karua on the north. The Barphukan remained in charge of the headquarters of Itakhuli, while the Buragohain remained at the Lathia fort in charge of the army on the north bank. The Ahoms had built about 40 kms. of ramparts, converting Guwahati into an impregnable fortress. (Barpujari, p.209).


The Mughal forces under Ram Singh reached Hajo in 1669, while the final battle took place at Saraighat in 1671. During this intervening period, both the Ahom and Mughal forces continued their aggressive activities. The Mughals tried hard to breach the defence at Guwahati from different sides but failed. The Ahom forces launched retaliatory strikes, but the most effective were the surprise attacks on the Mughals causing casualty as well as harassment. The surprise night attacks on the Mughal camps demoralised them to the extent that Ram Singh expressed his displeasure by considering the guerrilla attacks as thieves' affair and stated his unwillingness to fight any longer if the same were not stopped.

Overall, Lachit Barphukan had adopted a defensive strategy to defeat the Mughals. However, when king Chakradhwaj Singha directed Lachit Barphukan to launch a frontal attack, he did not hesitate in spite of his apprehensions on the outcome, to take the offensive at Alaboi. Though the Ahoms made some gains initially and even captured a Mughal commander, it was finally overrun by the



Taken from the map drawn by Dr. Nityananda Gogoi (Retired Principal, Bishwanath Chariali College) for the Souvenir published by the Greater Guwahati Veer Lachit Divas Udjapon Samiti, November, 1992. The original map is in Assamese.





might of the Mughal cavalry with an estimated loss of 10,000 Ahom soldiers. This setback led to some decrease in hostilities and an increase in negotiations. Later, the Mughals having received reinforcement from Bengal went on the offensive and with the help of the navy, tried hard to break the Ahom defences. They did not succeed, but the hostilities led to a fierce naval engagement at Saraighat in March, 1671. Lachit Barphukan was very ill and the Ahom forces were on the verge of retreating, when the general plunged into the thick of action and 'snatched victory from the jaws of defeat', forcing the return of the decisively defeated Mughal army to Bengal in ignominy.

Thus, Lachit Barphukan's successful military strategy can be considered as hybrid, as both offensive and defensive strategies were combined along with guerrilla tactics to defeat the Mughals. The offensive strategy was quite evident during 1667, when the Ahom army swiftly recovered their territory till the Manaha. Thereafter, considering the potential of the Mughal forces, Lachit Barphukan took a defensive

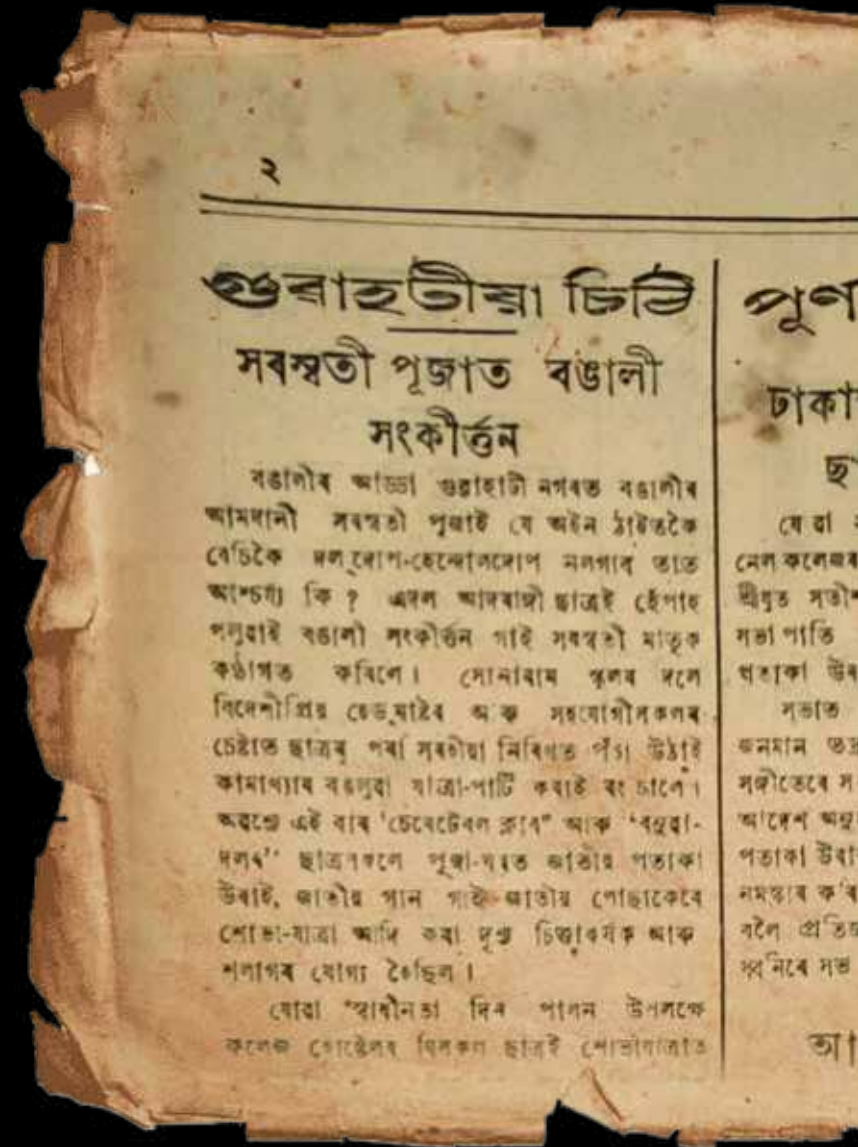
strategy focussing on Guwahati, which he had developed into an impregnable fortress. Psychological warfare was part of the struggle as diplomacy was also used to brow beat one another. Lachit Barphukan used negotiations as a time gaining tactic, which he required to build up defences. He successfully used his emissaries to create fear and worry in the minds of his enemies by passing on made-up information.

Lachit Barphukan was truly a brilliant military strategist who successfully weaponised all available means at his disposal, including the terrain, to successfully withstand and defeat his enemy. He played to his strength and intervened at crucial moments to turn the tide of war in his favour. In a certain way, even Lachit Barphukan's illness became a reason of defeat of the Mughals, as his critical participation totally changed the course of the Battle of Saraighat, a feat which immortalised his name in the annals of history. A military general as versatile and astute as Lachit Barphukan is truly rare in the history of India.

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Lachit Barphukan In History & Literature



তিনিদিনীয়া অসমীয়া ১২ ফেব্ৰুৱাৰী ১৯৩০ সন

অসমীয়া দিন

তথকা অসমীয়া ত্ৰিসকলৰ উদ্ভৱ

১৬ জানুৱাৰী তাৰিখে চাকৰি নেপ্ত-
অসমীয়া ছাত্ৰ কেইজনে প্ৰিণ্টিং প্ৰেছ
সংগঠনৰ সভাপতিত্বত এখন
আগামি ব্ৰেভেকেল মেছত জাতীয়
এই স্বাধীনতা দিন পালন কৰে।
ছপমানি বঙালী ছাত্ৰ আৰু কেই-
লোকেও যোগ দিয়ে। এটি জাতীয়
আবহু হোৱাৰ পাছত সভাপতিৰ
দ্বাৰা এখন অসমীয়া জাতীয় জাতীয়
সকলোৰে জাতীয় পতাকা
সেই পতাকাৰ সন্মান অৰ্জুৰ বাধি-
তা কৰে। তাৰ পাছত বন্দে মাতৰম
গায় কৰা হয়।

স্বাধীন জাতীয় দল

লাচিত উৎসৱ

গুৱাহাটীত যথানিয়মে পালন

গোৱা ১২ ফেব্ৰুৱাৰী তাৰিখে গুৱাহাটীত
জাতীয়তাকে লাচিত বহুতল উৎসৱ যথানিয়মে
পালন কৰিলে। পুৱা অৰ্দ্ধ-ভিহুত জাতীয়তাকে
গোটে খাই জাতীয় পতাকা লৈ বীৰ লাচিত
উদ্দেশ্যে বহুতল গীত গাই গাই নগৰ গুৰে।
আগেলি চুইমান বজাৰি লৰা লৰাবা, পিৰা,
বুৰা বৰা বনিয়া, মাগুৰ, ছাত্ৰীকোলা চলোৱা,
চকু সাঁজ লৰা, এণ্টৰ্টেনৈ লৈ লুৱা, লাঠিখেলা
ঐতিহ্য দেখা হয়। মালভূমিত দুখন দুখনমান
জাতীয় সন্মেলনকো মোহিত কৰে। তাৰ ভিতৰত
কমকদিন আগৰ দুই দিনৰ অসমীয়া
এই জাতীয় বন্দেৰ জাতীয় নিতিনা টাইট
বি বৰে লগিছিল বেনে বৰে নোচোৱাটো
উপৰ বিয়া।

সম্পাদকলৈ ডি

কংগ্ৰেছৰ কাৰ্য্য-পদ্ধতি আৰু তাৰ প্ৰচাৰ-কাৰ্য্য

সম্পাদক জগদীশ,

অসমীয়াৰ কাৰ্য্য-পদ্ধতিটো বৈধতা
লাভ কৰিবৰ কাৰণে আমাৰ বৰ্তমান
ভুক্তিভাৱ কাৰ্য্য-পদ্ধতি। অসমীয়াৰ
এই কাৰ্য্য-পদ্ধতি প্ৰচাৰ আৰু
তোলাই দিছে সন্মতা। আমাৰ
সভা-সমিতিৰ বাবাই যে আমাৰ
এই কিছু অকল সভা-সমিতিৰ বাবাই
পাৰ হোৱাৰি বেনে অসমীয়া
মাগৰ আছে তেওঁলোককো জানি
নগৰে, কিছু সভা-সমিতিৰ
বুজাৰ নগৰ। বৰ্তমান উপস্থিত
গোৱা কথা মনোপৰে বুজান
কোৱাৰে বুজা বুজ। সভা-
পৰা হয়।

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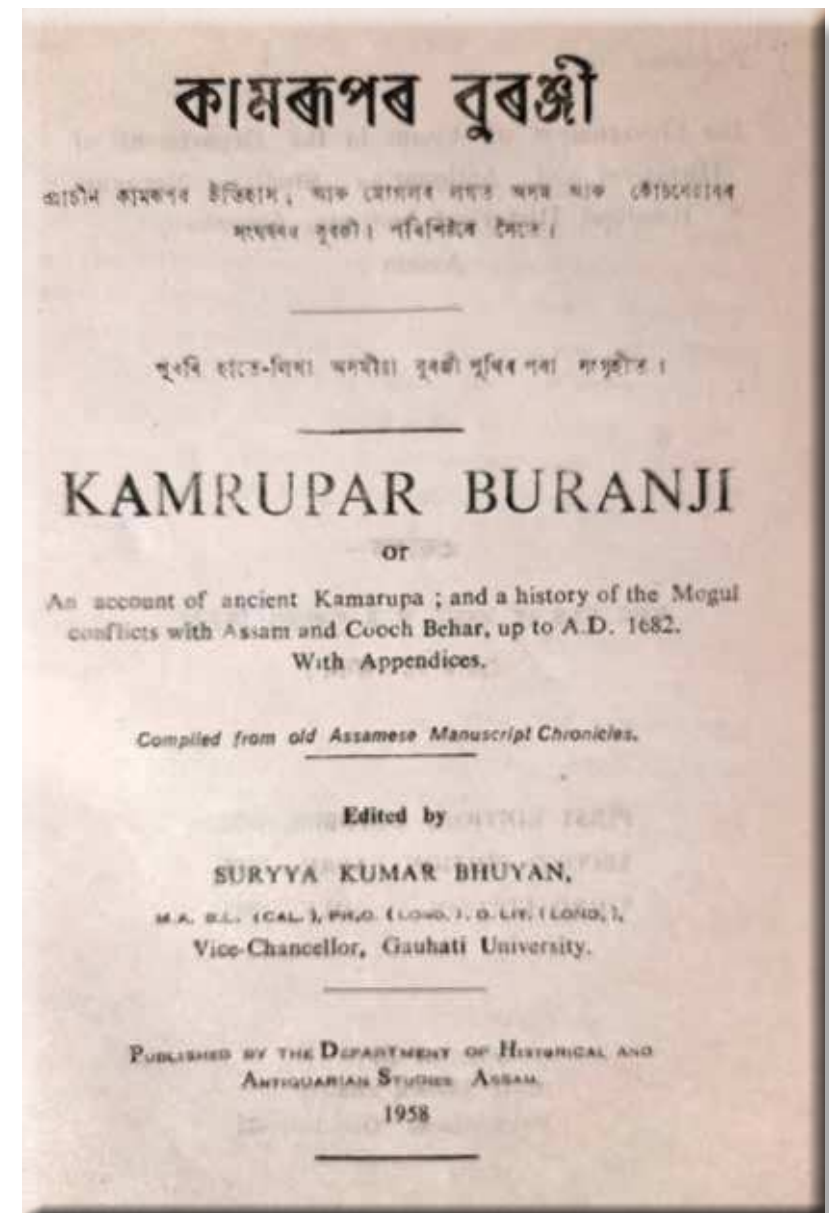
বিষয়

A news report (center) in *Tindinia Asomiya* of 12 February 1930 mentioning the celebration of Lachit Utsav in Guwahati

Lachit Barphukan In History & Literature

Chandan Kumar Sarma

Colonial historiography which was developed mostly by colonial administrator-historians was very critical about India's past and its traditions. Colonizers refused to concede that the Indians can be 'subjects of their own history' and by denying this, the political identity of the Indian people was also denied. Though the British developed and invested in the production of historical knowledge, the same was mostly used for legitimacy of the colonial rule. Indian nationalist historiography since the late 19th century challenged the colonial prejudices produced through colonial historiography and tried to create a new nationalist narrative for the promotion of the Indian identity and nationalism. Resorting to historical analysis and interpretation became a part of public culture in modern India. As India went through the process of colonial modernity, nationalist historiography provided the much-needed space for imagination of modern identities. The arrival of nationalist historiography also

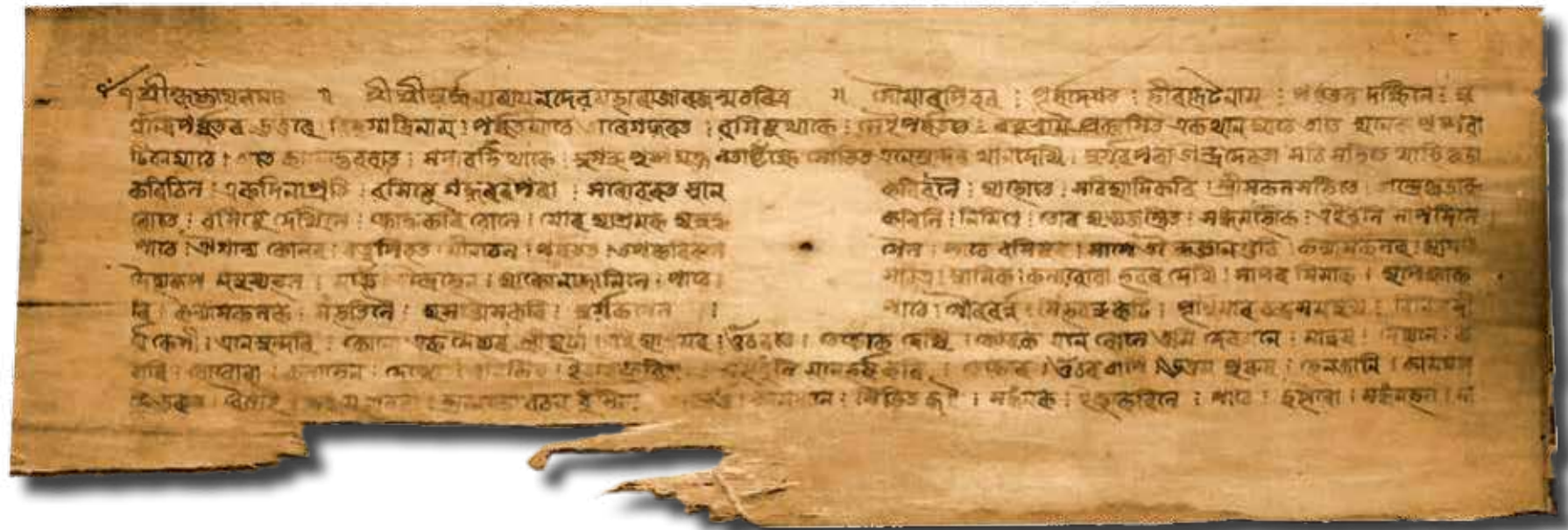


promoted regional historical consciousness through which the regional historical traditions were recovered and reoriented. In Assam as well, the educated Assamese middle class delved into recovering the glorious historical tradition known as the *Buranji* tradition which developed during the 600 years of Ahom rule.

In this process, pre-colonial political success stories and leading political personalities from the medieval period were being invoked to instil confidence among the middle class, suffering from the psyche of marginalization in their own homeland. Obviously, the most inspiring figure to galvanise the spirit of the new generation to fight for Assamese identity and for anti-British mobilization was Lachit Barphukan who saved Assam from Mughal imperialism in the 17th

century. In this context, the inspiring historical stories of Lachit Barphukan and the Battle of Saraighat was rediscovered by the nationalist Assamese and a new memory was created through a new nationalist narrative which was obviously inspired by the written sources available in the *Buranjis*. The new memory of Lachit and Saraighat provided the psychological sustenance and spirit to the Assamese middle class and to Assamese nationalism in this new struggle for retaining regional linguistic and cultural identity within a broader Indian identity.

Colonial historiography made the usual accusation that India did not have a strong historical tradition or proper historical consciousness. In the context of pre-colonial historical tradition in India, the *Buranji* tradition of Assam was



A page from the *Buranji* (From earlier times upto invasion of Mir Jumla - 1662 A.D.) preserved at DHAS (No. 1085), Guwahati

one notable exception which was acknowledged even by the colonial scholars. Documentation of the important events and the changing administrative structure was one of the important hallmarks of the *Buranji* tradition which developed during the 600 years of Ahom rule in Assam (1228-1826). Dr. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* highly appreciated the *Buranji* tradition of Assam which has remained one of the inspiring comments for Assamese regional historians. According to Grierson, “the Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a whole, is curiously deficient. The historical works, or the *Buranjis*, as they are styled by the Assamese are numerous and voluminous. According to the custom of the country, a knowledge of the *Buranjis* was an indispensable qualification to an Assamese gentleman” (*Linguistic Survey of India*, Volume I, Part I, Intro. P 156).

The *Buranji* tradition was obviously informed and influenced by the historical traditions of Southeast Asia. The contest between the Ahoms and the Mughals which continued throughout the 17th century has been immensely documented and preserved in multiple *Buranjis* of Assam. The *Ahom Buranji* which was translated by Rai Sahib Golapchandra Baruah is an English translation from the original Tai script (1930). This particular *Buranji* deals in detail on the Ahom-Mughal conflict and specially the glorious episode of Lachit Barphukan who defeated the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat. This *Buranji* chronicles details of the war, the strategies, the conspiracies, and the consequences relating to the Battle of Saraighat. The naval warfare on the Brahmaputra in which the Mughals were vanquished have found graphic details in this *Buranji*. Again, *Assam Buranji*

(1663-1712) edited by Dr. Nityananda Gogoi (2000) deals in detail about the Ahom-Mughal conflict. Apart from the details about the Saraighat War and the accomplishments of Lachit Barphukan, this particular *Buranji* also contains 41 correspondences between the Ahom administration and the other regional kings and the Mughal officials belonging to this particular period. According to Dr. Nityananda Gogoi, eighteen of these diplomatic letters which are included in this particular *Buranji* have not been found in other *Buranjis*. These diplomatic correspondences are testimonials to the diplomatic relationship established by the Ahom kings and its administration with its neighbours to make a solid alliance against the invading Mughals. The Ahom kings established diplomatic relations with Koch Behar, Jayantia, and also its vassals like Darrang and Cachar. Chakradhwaj Singha made an alliance with Pran Narayan, king of Koch Behar for a joint attack on the Mughals. The Jayantia king Jasamanta Rai also assured full cooperation in the offensive against the Mughals. Manik Singha of Nartiang and the Koch Raja of Darrang also joined this wider alliance. The *Satsaris Asom Buranji* (1960) which is a collection of 7 old Assamese *Buranjis*, edited by Dr. S.K. Bhuyan also deals in detail about the eventful years of the 17th century with details of the protracted warfare between the Ahoms and the Mughals, leading to the defeat of the mighty Mughals under the generalship of Ram Singh. The *Kamrupar Buranji* edited by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan also deals with the Mughal invasion led by Ram Singh (1930). The *Assam Buranji* edited by Surjya Kumar Bhuyan (1945), which is a chronicle of Assam from the earliest Ahom kings to *Swargadeo* Godadhor Singha, deals specifically with the appointment of Lachit Barphukan, the defeat of the Mughals, the arrival of Ram Singh as a general of the Mughal Army, the diplomatic correspondences between the Ahoms and the Mughals,

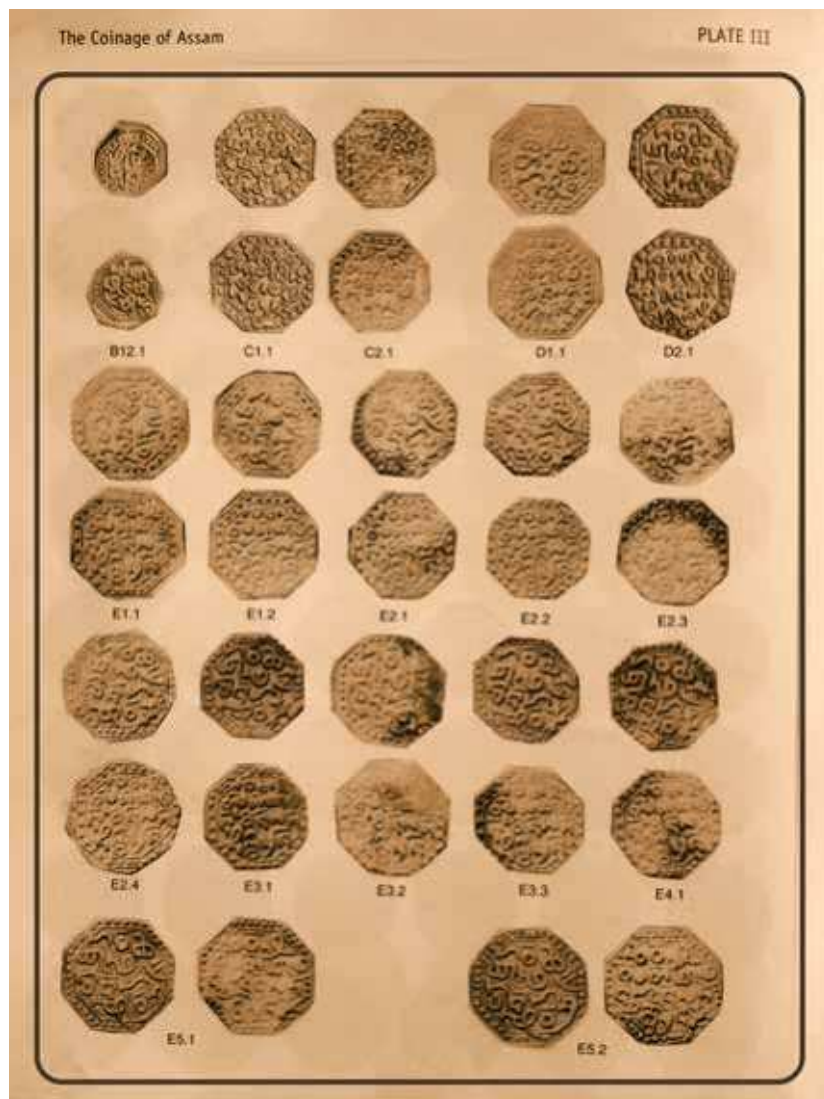


Photo taken from the *The Coinage of Assam*, authored by N.G. Roads and S.K. Bose (2004), Vol-II, Ahom Period

the defeat of the Ahoms in the Battle of Alaboi, the naval warfare and the final victory of the Ahoms under the guidance of Lachit Barphukan.

One of the important documentation which deals with detailed description of the events leading to the Battle of Saraighat, the war strategies, the military installations, duties assigned to the different Ahom officials and the consequences, is the *Buranji* which was titled *Raja Ram Singhar Yuddhar Katha* (*Saraighatar Yuddhar Katha*, 1977). This particular *Buranji* is an eye witness account of the tumultuous events leading to the Battle of Saraighat and it was written by Samudra Suramoni Doloi who was one of the royal astrologers appointed by Lachit Barphukan.

The tradition of history writing which continued since the pre-colonial period obviously came to be influenced by the modern historical writing practices after the coming of the British and specially after the annexation of Assam in 1826. The educated Assamese elite became attracted to the personality and the heroic achievements of Lachit Barphukan towards the last quarter of the 19th century. But Lachit and the Battle of Saraighat emerged as a new emblem for the struggle of the Assamese middle class, and, Assamese nationalism at large, in the initial period of the 20th century. A critical study of the historical literature in Assam since the advent of colonialism in the State helps us to understand the gradual development of the new nationalist narrative of Lachit Barphukan and the Battle of Saraighat along with the rise and growth of Assamese nationalism. The chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, first published in 1844 by the Sibsagar Branch of the American Baptist Mission includes a small paragraph on the battle against Ram Singh and his defeat by Lachit Barphukan, and the site of the battle is mentioned as 'Sachai Ghat'. Harakanta Baruah, who with more information collated from other *Buranjis* and oral reports from influential persons, enlarged the chronicle written by Tamuly Phukan in and around 1870 and added just one sentence to the earlier

version of the battle by Tamuly Phukan. In the *Assam Buranji* published by Gunabhiram Baruah in 1884, the Battle of Saraighat finds its space but it is not flavored by the nationalist idiom of the later period. In a small book on the biography of important personalities of Assam published by Nilkumud Baruah in 1888-89, a small sketch of the life and achievements of Lachit Barphukan was included along with those of Momai Tamuly Barbarua and Kirtichandra Barbaruah. The *Assam Buranji* written by Padma Nath Gohain Baruah in 1899 gives a better picture of the Battle of Saraighat but here also the story of the supposed death penalty given by Lachit to his maternal uncle for dereliction of duty for the country and the most popular quotation of the 20th century Assam ascribed to Lachit, 'My uncle is not greater than my country' is absent.

Hemchandra Goswami, a staunch supporter of Assamese linguistic nationalism, was one of the pioneers in reshaping and transforming the career and achievements of Lachit Barphukan in nationalist rhetoric. His article on the Battle of Saraighat published in the Assamese journal *Usha* in two episodes in 1906 was instrumental in projecting Lachit and the Saraighat battle as the icon of Assamese nationalism. This nationalist rhetoric was further continued by Sarveswar Sharma Kataki who in his article on 'Our National Decline' published in *Usha* emphasized on the problems created by the coming of the Hindustani mercantile class and the effeminateness and lack of masculinity in the new generation of the Assamese people. He urged the young generation to be inspired by the strong personalities of medieval Assam to face the crisis. In his article titled Lachit Barphukan, Sharma Kataki used the quotation 'My uncle is not greater than my country' and ascribed it to Lachit Barphukan who according to popular

belief killed his own maternal uncle for dereliction of duty during the battle. He further used it in his patriotic poem 'Rajar Agat Lachit Barphukan' which is included in his collection *Murali* published in 1921. This highly patriotic quotation which was not included in any of the *Buranjis* became a part of a new nationalist political orality and an integral part of nationalist folklore in the early 20th century.

Edward Gait's *History of Assam* published in 1905 included the Battle of Saraighat but he did not mention the name of Lachit Barphukan in narrating the battle. This omission by Gait was indicated by Benudhar Sharma in his article *Bangal Boiri Lachit Barphukan* published in *Awahan* in 1939. He stated that



foreign historians can never fulfill the aspirations of the Assamese people. This article, full of literary motifs and nationalist rhetoric, was included in the text book *Prabeshika Katha Chaneki* under Calcutta University. It became very popular among the Assamese students and inspired them to join the Quit India movement. Surjya Kumar Bhuyan, eminent historian and one of the pioneers of nationalist historiography in Assam, presented a paper on Lachit Barphukan in the Pune session of the Indian History Congress in 1935 and it was subsequently published as a monograph titled *Lachit Barphukan and his Times* in 1947. This monograph which projects the Battle of Saraighat as a battle for securing the Assamese identity can be seen as the epitome of the entire mission of the nationalist reconstruction of the experience of Lachit. He writes, “Nowhere in recorded history had the Assamese nation shown such capacity for organization, discipline and combined action as in Lachit Barphukan’s war against the Mughals. For four long years, the whole nation acted like one man...”

In the construction of a new political orality of Lachit and Saraighat as the icon of Assamese nationalism, the historical and patriotic dramas and the songs and poems written subsequently had the highest impact on the Assamese people. The performance of patriotic drama written around the ‘national heroes’ helped in the growth of a collective memory of a strong and indomitable past of the Assamese people that promoted the sense of nationalist assertion, a sense of identity and self respect among both literate and illiterate sections of the people in the pre-independence period.

Assamese writers, after being imbibed by the spirit of nationalism and self-assertion, wrote a large number of historical dramas centering on the personalities

of Joymoti, Gadadhar Singha, Sati Sadhani, Chakradhwaj Singha, Mula Gabharu, Radha-Rukmini etc. in the first half of 20th century. The first dramatical work on Lachit Barphukan was written by Padma Nath Gohain Baruah and it was published in 1915. This drama written by Gohain Baruah was very well received by the readers and the audience and was performed for several times in the Ban Theatre of Tezpur. Gohain Baruah acknowledges the articles written by Hem Chandra Goswami and Sharma Kataki in preparation of the script of Lachit Barphukan. Lachit in this work is no longer the army general of a medieval battle—he is projected as a modern astute political leader who gives spirited lectures to inspire the people. Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s *Chakradhwaj Singha* where Lachit is the chief protagonist was also written around the same time. In 1936, Chandradhar Baruah composed another drama on the same subject titled *Mughal Vijay* where he tried to propagate the need of a broader democratic national culture by forgetting the social divisions and mutual distrust among the communities of Assam with the help of the dramatic and glorified presentation of the Battle of Saraighat. In 1937, Binanda Chandra Baruah published another drama on the same topic titled *Saraighat* and here the dramatist emphasizes the secular character of Assamese nationalism and the need for better understanding between the Hindu and Muslim communities at the hour of crisis.

Thus, the memory of Lachit Barphukan, recreated and transformed with nationalist fervour, provided the sanjivani mantra to the Assamese middle class to rejuvenate Assamese nationalism and to expand its social base and to articulate the new dynamics of relationship between Assamese nationalism and the broader Indian nationalism.



A depiction of Lachit Barphukan and his soldiers at Jaya Udyan,
Bhutiapar near Sivasagar. Photo: Debajit Gogoi
Courtesy: Kamrup: Mirror Of Assam's Past And Present. Wordweaves India, 2013/2017

Lachit Barphukan, Nationalism & Indian Freedom Struggle



গণ অসম



জনসংযোগ অসম

Lachit Barphukan, Nationalism & Indian Freedom Struggle

Chandan Kumar Sarma

In terms of ideologies which determined the modern contours of historical consciousness, the most powerful and durable, in view of its association with the nation states, is the ideology of nationalism. The construction of national identity through recreation of a nationalist past has been adequately dealt with by the theorists of nationalism. The nation was imagined to have existed from time immemorial and the nationalist version of history in India also projected the Indian nation to have existed throughout the centuries. According to Antony Smith, “The relationship of the pasts, especially of the ethnic past or pasts, to the national present is crucial.” Anthony Smith states that the past influences the national present in three different ways--recurrence, continuity and appropriation. Smith states, “The power of nationalism is not only a matter of ideology. Perhaps even more potent than nationalist principles have been nationalist symbols. These give concrete meaning and visibility to the abstractions of visibility to the abstractions of nationalism” (Smith, the Nation in



History, p.73).

In medieval Indian historiography, the tales of gallantry of leaders such as Maharana Pratap and Shivaji, which are recounted with great depth and fervor, are used to ignite nationalistic passion among all Indians. Among such intrepid leaders of medieval India was Lachit Barphukan of Assam, who, with his dexterous military skill, passionate zeal for his motherland and unbounded tenacity, warded off the mighty Mughals with a small yet ardent band of warriors. His unparalleled heroism and virtuous deeds during the Battle of Saraighat serves as a remarkable account of nationalistic zeal and as an outstanding illustration of heroism in the chronicles of India's past. In the creation of nationalistic consciousness of Indians, Lachit Barphukan has a special place alongside other heroes of India's past hailing from different regional locales.

The exigency of spreading nationalist consciousness across the common population in different parts of India compelled the leaders of the movement to resort to the creation and propagation of 'national heroes' from medieval historical characters. In the Indian Freedom Struggle, every region was inspired by its own glorious history and the historical characters were recast as modern nationalist heroes to galvanise the popular support against the British Raj. Since the late 19th century, new popular historical literature in the form of novels, drama, poems and articles recreated the glorified history of every region to instill hope and nationalist passion among the Indian people. According to Bipan Chandra, "As nationalism emerged in the second half of the 19th century and the task of spreading nationalist consciousness was undertaken by the nationalist leadership, it was felt that the task would be immensely facilitated if 'national

heroes' could be held up as examples. The national heroes could also serve as foci for emotional attraction in case of people who could not intellectualize their nationalist commitment. The national heroes were to serve as emotional symbols, a purpose for which they are still used on a wide scale... and so it came to be that many historical personages, and particularly Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Guru Govind Singh, emerged on the platform, in newspapers and pamphlets, in stories, poems, and dramas, in schools and on All India Radio as national heroes" (Chandra, 2003, pp. 140-144). The saga of the Battle of Saraighat and the leadership of Lachit Barphukan who in his unparalleled and unprecedented victory brought the Mughal juggernaut to a grinding halt in eastern India became emotional sustenance to fight for the nation and freedom from colonial rule in this part of the country.

The heroic struggle of Lachit Barphukan to defend Assam from Mughal imperialism, to protect her independent political, cultural and religious identity, became the most potent national symbol for protecting Assamese identity, culture and language from the threats of homogeneity brought by British colonial administrative measures which led to massive demographic changes in the 19th and early 20th century. During the Indian freedom struggle, dissemination of nationalist ideas and aspirations became possible due to the massive popularization of the heroic accomplishments of Lachit against the Mughal invaders through public meetings, fairs and celebration of Lachit Utshav. The recurrence of threat to national identity posed by new colonial contradictions, the threat to Assamese language and culture and the apprehension of Assam being included in Pakistan through the grouping formula of the Cabinet Mission in 1946 provided

the sense of *Déjà vu* to the Battle of Saraighat and the logic of continuity of its spirit. Hence, there arose the need for appropriation of the values and valour of Lachit Barphukan for nationalist mobilisation.

The colonial period in Assam led to the emergence of multiple contradictions. The apprehension of the Assamese people regarding the future of Assamese identity and the large scale influx of people from the neighboring states led to the emergence and articulation of Assamese nationalism from the latter half of 19th century.

The opening up of education and development of connectivity brought the educated elite of Assam in the 19th century within the ambit of an all-India feeling and this relationship of local nationalism and Indian identity remained as two sides of the same coin. From the non-cooperation movement, Assam came under the sway of the Indian National Congress and the Gandhian movements. In Assam also, pre-existing historical icons were discovered, recreated and popularized to expand the popular base of the incipient linguistic nationalism and to propagate the apprehensions of the community across the people. The complex and complementary relationship between Assamese nationalism which was oriented more towards securing the regional space for linguistic and cultural exclusiveness and larger composite Indian Nationalism had an ambivalent impact on the selection of pre-existing local-regional icons. A nationality with a rich heritage can never be lost. This was the common thread in most of the articulations of the Assamese middle class in the first three decades of the 20th century and there was a proliferation of popular historical articles in the journals of this period. To increase and strengthen the horizontal space of Assamese

identity, the rich heritage of Sankardeva and the neo-Vaishnavite movement was explored and emphasized. The heroic accomplishments and wins of the medieval heroes and heroines were propagated to redeem the lost prestige of the great nationality and provide a sense of masculinity to the 'effeminate' new generation. The memory of the great Ahom state provided a sense of pride and confidence to strive to redeem the great past and the lost glory and to fight against the British.

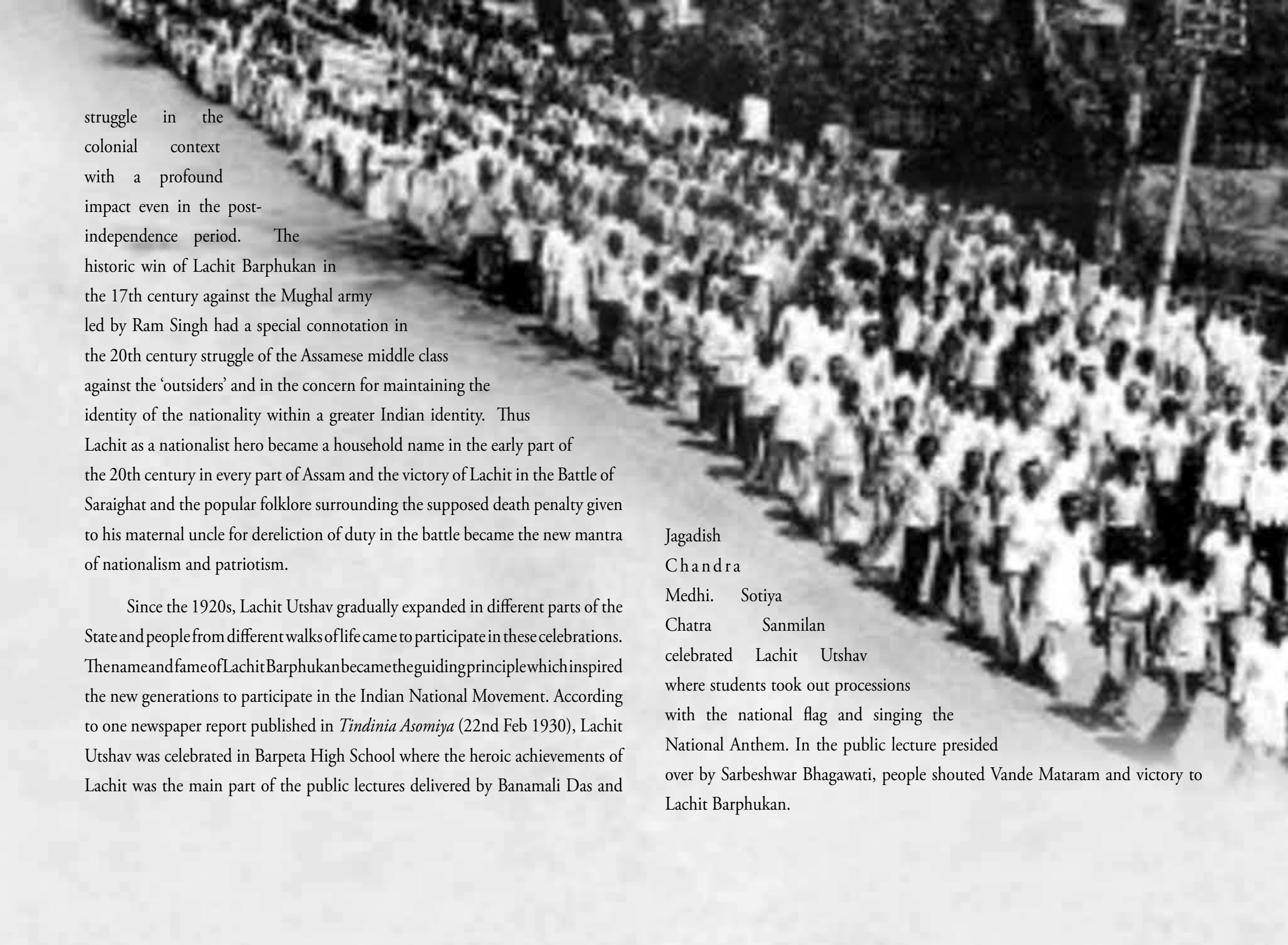
The hero-worship, medieval heroes as modern nationalist heroes, which already became popular in Maharashtra and Bengal, were also organized in Assam from the 2nd decade of the 20th century. As in Bengal, the Assamese middle class did not imitate the Shivaji cult in Assam and all the medieval heroes whose memories were reconstructed here were from the region itself. Lachit Barphukan, Joymoti, Mula Gabharu, Chilarai, and Radha-Rukmini were chosen from the medieval history of Assam whose new nationalist narratives were created and popularized through popular articles, drama, poems and songs and they became part of a new nationalist folklore in pre-independent period. The hero worship cult was initiated by the student organizations in Assam in the 2nd decade of the 20th century which constituted the main driving force of the nationalist movement in Assam. In the eighth convention of the Assam Chatra Sanmilani, it was decided to organize Lachit Utshav, Chilarai Utshav and Joymoti Utshav in every local body of the student organization.

Obviously, in this anti-colonial struggle to maintain the regional distinctive cultural, social and linguistic identity, the experience of Lachit Barphukan who defeated the mighty Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in the 17th century was recreated with nationalistic fervor and Lachit became the icon of the new

struggle in the colonial context with a profound impact even in the post-independence period. The historic win of Lachit Barphukan in the 17th century against the Mughal army led by Ram Singh had a special connotation in the 20th century struggle of the Assamese middle class against the 'outsiders' and in the concern for maintaining the identity of the nationality within a greater Indian identity. Thus Lachit as a nationalist hero became a household name in the early part of the 20th century in every part of Assam and the victory of Lachit in the Battle of Saraighat and the popular folklore surrounding the supposed death penalty given to his maternal uncle for dereliction of duty in the battle became the new mantra of nationalism and patriotism.

Since the 1920s, Lachit Utshav gradually expanded in different parts of the State and people from different walks of life came to participate in these celebrations. The name and fame of Lachit Barphukan became the guiding principle which inspired the new generations to participate in the Indian National Movement. According to one newspaper report published in *Tindinia Asomiya* (22nd Feb 1930), Lachit Utshav was celebrated in Barpeta High School where the heroic achievements of Lachit was the main part of the public lectures delivered by Banamali Das and

Jagadish
Chandra
Medhi. Sotiya
Chatra Sanmilan
celebrated Lachit Utshav
where students took out processions
with the national flag and singing the
National Anthem. In the public lecture presided
over by Sarbeshwar Bhagawati, people shouted Vande Mataram and victory to
Lachit Barphukan.



In the same year, Lachit Utshav was also organised in Namti, Meleng and Teok. According to newspaper reports, Lachit Utshav was also celebrated in Dibrugarh on 19th Feb 1930. A huge procession with a poster of Lachit Barphukan moved around the main lanes of the town. The Lachit Utshav held in North Lakhimpur was presided over by Durgadhar Borkotoky. Similar celebrations was also organised in Golaghat. Maulavi Khalilur Rahman presided over the public meeting related with Lachit Utshav in Kakojan School field. According to *Tindiniya Asomiya*, 12th Feb 1930, Lachit Utshav was celebrated in the Judges' Field in Guwahati on 9th February 1930. The students who participated in these celebrations moved around the town with the National Flag and singing songs in praise of Lachit Barphukan.

In an editorial published in *Tindiniya Asomiya* (8th Feb 1930), the younger generation was urged upon to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The editorial specifically appealed to the younger generation to be inspired by the ideals of Lachit Barphukan to selflessly fight for the Indian National Movement to make India independent. It also stated that it would be shameful for the descendants of Lachit to remain satisfied with foreign occupation and celebrate his heroic achievements. The editorial requested everyone to imbibe the spirit of dedication and restraint to make the Civil Disobedience Movement successful. It also stated that Lachit Utshav is synonymous with the celebration of independence and every Assamese must strive hard to maintain the sanctity and the spirit of Lachit.

Celebration of Lachit Utshav was not only confined to Assam as

students who were educated in different parts of India also started celebrating the Day in their educational institutions. According to one report published in the *Asomiya*, 22nd January 1930, Lachit Utshav was celebrated in Kashi on 14th January 1931 by the students of Kashi Hindu University. This particular celebration was presided over by Prof. Gurmogh Nihal Singh. In this congregation, Shri Nagendranath Baruah, Shri Jagannath Bhattacharya, Shri Janardan Acharya and Mrs Ushalata Bhattacharya delivered lectures on Lachit Barphukan. In his presidential remark, Prof. Gurmogh Nihal Singh thanked the Assam Student's Association of Kashi. He appreciated students from Assam for organizing Lachit Utshav as hero worship was becoming popular all over India due to the impact of the national movement. He stated that, "...I warmly appreciate your endeavor to celebrate Lachit Utshav in Kashi though you are presently situated far away from your home." Amidst applause from the audience, he also stated that if Lachit were alive he would have definitely fought for the Indian National Movement.

The memory of Lachit Barphukan also remained the most inspiring story during the events of the Quit India Movement in Assam. Since the provincial elections of 1937 and the formation of the provincial ministry in Assam under the Act of 1935, the issue of immigration and the changed demographic pattern became entwined with electoral politics. Among the immigrant Muslim peasantry, the Muslim League started having its activities and gradually the contest between the Assamese people and the immigrant Muslim community also came to be highly politicized. The line system controversy and the massive change of demography due to the active policy

of the Sadullah ministry (supported by Muslim League) for the colonization of agrarian agricultural areas by Bengali Muslim peasantry dominated the political discussions both inside and outside the Assembly. Since the early part of the 1940s, as the demand for Pakistan came to be vociferously articulated by the Muslim League, the anxiety and apprehension of the Assamese people became more acute. The Cabinet Mission plan which put Assam in group C along with Bengal led to an emphatic protest by the Assam Provincial Congress Committee. This grouping controversy which accentuated the apprehension among the Assamese people of becoming a part of Pakistan led to huge public demonstrations all over Assam. Gopinath Bordoloi in this hour of crisis sent his emissaries to consult Mahatma Gandhi. Reacting to the Cabinet Mission proposal of grouping, Gandhi told Bijioy Chandra Bhagawati and Mahendra Mohan Choudhuri, the two emissaries of Bordoloi, "If Assam keeps quite it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do." According to Nirode K Barooah, the revolt of the Assam Congress backed by popular agitation against the Cabinet Mission plan compelled the Muslim League and the British government to accept that they cannot move ahead according to the Cabinet Mission plan. In this popular agitation, once again the story of Saraighat and the heroic achievement of Lachit Barphukan remained the most important motif of Assamese nationalism to save Assam

from becoming a part of Pakistan (*Dainik Asomiya* 4th June 1946). In public demonstrations against the Grouping controversy, the memory of Saraighat was continuously proclaimed by the leaders of the movement.

Thus, the memory of Lachit Barphukan, recreated and transformed with nationalist fervour, provided the sanjivani mantra to the Indian Freedom Struggle in this part of the country. Even in the post-colonial period, Lachit Barphukan remained the emblem of nationalism and nationalist spirit. During the Assam movement, the memory of Lachit was the rallying cry for protection of the State from Bangladeshi infiltrators. The powerful imagery of Lachit Barphukan and the Battle of Saraighat is thus invoked in Assam even in the current times to instill in people a sense of emotion and nationhood on issues of immense political and cultural significance.

The saga of Lachit Barphukan, given its intrepidity, has an appeal beyond regional bounds and bears significant connotations for the growth and generation of pan-Indian national identity and consciousness. The harnessing of Lachit Barphukan's memory by leaders across the country to inspire the masses to rise against all odds to defend their motherland, points to the timeless traction of his deeds, that have provided a benchmark in nationalistic aspiration, for future generations to emulate, defend and preserve.

Notes & References:

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Lachit Barphukan & Chhatrapati Shivaji

Battling The Mughals




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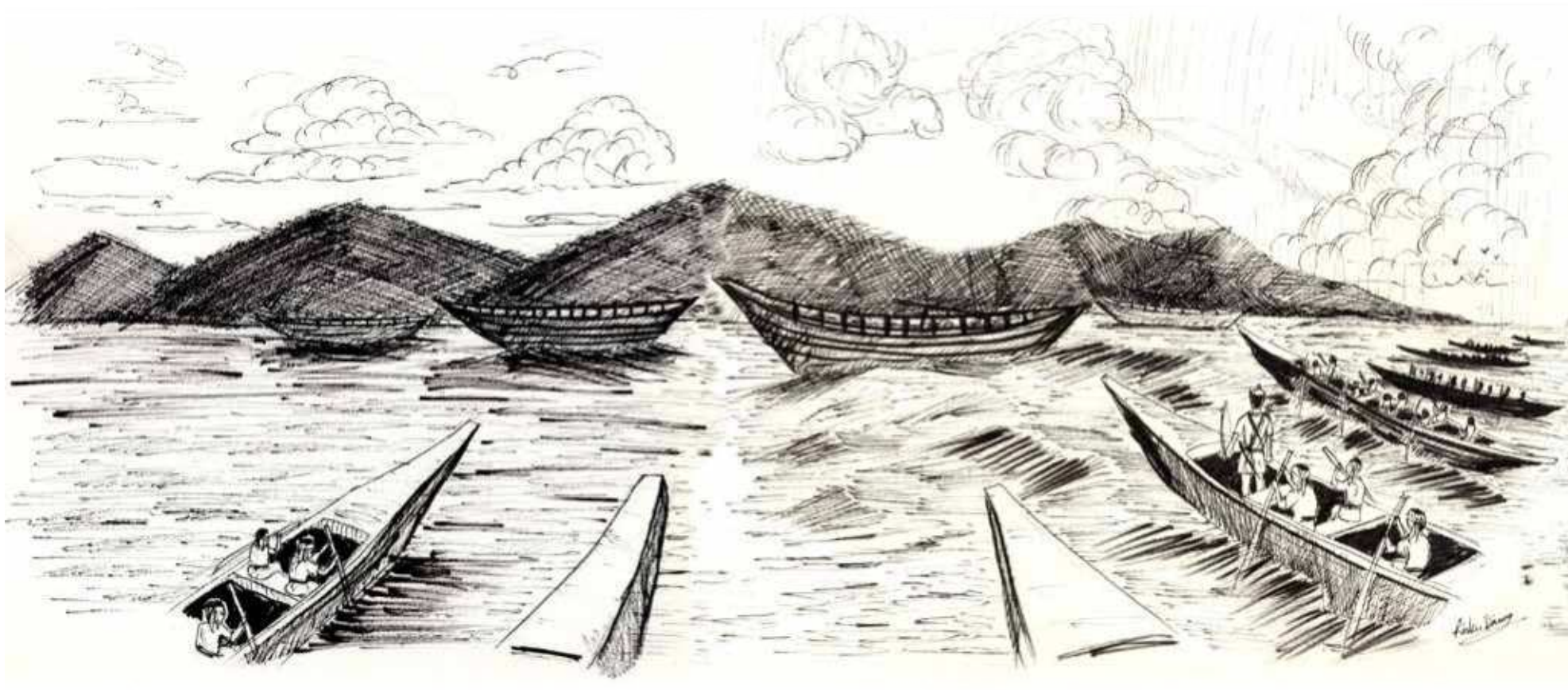
Lachit Barphukan & Chhatrapati Shivaji

Battling The Mughals

Kuldeep Patowary

 Chhatrapati Shivaji – a name that hardly requires an introduction in India. A discussion on the Ahom-Mughal conflicts of the 17th century (1616-1682 CE) in eastern India, and, Lachit Barphukan's crucial role in it during 1667-1671 CE, inevitably draws up a comparison between the two.

Lachit Barphukan (1622-1672 CE) and Shivaji (1630-1680 CE) were not mere contemporaries but shared a lot of similar traits. Lachit's father was Momai Tamuli Barbarua, one of the highest ranking nobleman of the Ahom court, whereas Shivaji's father was Shahaji, a skilled military commander who served the Ahmednagar Sultanate, Bijapur Sultanate, and the Mughal empire at different points in his life. However, both of them emerged out of the shadows of their fathers, and were successful in carving out unique positions for themselves in Indian history through their bravery, wit, and military acumen. A fight for the survival of the Ahom kingdom in





eastern India, and a fight for the establishment and expansion of the Maratha kingdom in western India, had one thing in common – the Mughals as opponent, and in this, both Lachit and Shivaji left their indelible mark. As such, it is only imperative, that a book on Lachit Barphukan, also carries a sketch of Chatrapati Shivaji and provides us with a glimpse of his successes.

Shivaji mostly grew up without his father as the latter was frequently engaged in conflicts and was posted at various places in Southern India. He was thus brought up primarily under the care and influence of his mother Jijabai. Historians believe that he was made to undergo similar trainings in literary and military education as would have been expected from the son of a military commander and leader like Shahaji.

From an early period in his life, Shivaji exhibited astute military capabilities and by dint of his leadership, was able to raise an army that was loyal to him. While his father and he himself was under the employment of the

Sultan of Bijapur, he took advantage of the weakening situation of the Sultanate of Bijapur, and brought several hill forts between 1646-1647 CE under his control. In 1647, Shivaji took charge of his father's *jagir* at Pune, and with that he began an expansionist campaign, where he cleverly, through force as well as ruse, took various hill forts around Pune under his control. In particular, his reliance on carrying out devastating raids on enemies became a thorn in his opponents' flesh.

Once he secured his backyard, Shivaji then concentrated his efforts towards annexing Konkan. The Konkan region had been a fiercely contested area between the Sultanates of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, and Shivaji utilised the opportunity presented by the weak control of Bijapur over Konkan to his advantage. By 1648, Shivaji had successfully brought Konkan under his control, and not only captured towns and existing forts, but also built new forts, and appointed a viceroy, Abaji Sondev. In a bid to contain Shivaji, his father was arrested by Bijapur Sultanate. From 1649-1655, one sees a lull in the expansionist activities of Shivaji, and he turned his attention towards strengthening the control and administration of his existing territories.

However, this lull did not last long. Once his father was released, Shivaji resumed his military activities. On one hand, he carried out extensive raids, which only defeated and demoralised his opponents, but also helped in acquiring wealth from the treasuries of the vanquished. This helped him in administering his rule. On the other hand, he also tactfully dealt with different aristocratic families through matrimonial

alliances, but also with force whenever necessary. Further, his success against Bijapur in the Battle of Pratapgarh (1659), and brave stand in the Battle of Pavan Khind (1660), saw his influence and power grow.

Shivaji initially did not have an acrimonious relation with the Mughals, and for that matter, when Aurangzeb was the Governor of Deccan (while Shah Jahan was the Mughal Emperor), Shivaji even proposed to ally with the Mughals in order to defeat the Sultanate of Bijapur. However, he did not receive an adequate response. His raids, which were earlier focused on Bijapur and Ahmadnagar territories, now brought him into direct confrontation with the Mughals, as the Mughals acquired new territories and brought Ahmadnagar under its control. At the same time, the Mughals also entered into an alliance with the Sultanate of Bijapur. Aurangzeb prepared his forces to take on Shivaji, but much like his forces in eastern India under Ram Singh, he was interrupted by the rainy season and subsequently, by the War of Succession that broke out among the four sons of Shah Jahan.

Once Aurangzeb came out victorious and became the Mughal emperor, he renewed his interest in pursuing Shivaji. A huge contingent of Mughal army under the command of Shaista Khan was sent to subdue Shivaji, and it achieved initial success as Pune was captured. However, Shivaji retaliated by carrying out a daring night attack on the Mughal camp, and eventually defeated the Mughal forces under Shaista Khan. Further, as retaliation to this Mughal attack, he carried out a devastating raid on Surat in 1664. Surat was one of the richest cities under Mughal

control at the time, and as result, Shivaji was able to replenish his treasury.

Subsequently, Aurangzeb deputed Mirza Raja Jai Singh (father of Ram Singh) to defeat and capture Shivaji. Jai Singh and Shivaji were engaged in a prolonged conflict for almost half of 1665, with Jai Singh being able to make considerable gains. When the threat of defeat loomed large, Shivaji had no other option but to enter into a treaty with Jai Singh, known as the Treaty of Purandar in 1665. This resulted in Shivaji losing almost two-thirds of his forts to the Mughals, and more importantly, it saw him become a vassal of the Mughals and his son as a mansabdar¹ of the Mughals. Shivaji and his son were later summoned in 1666 by Aurangzeb to the Mughal court. However, once they reached there, Shivaji felt insulted as he was made to stand with lower ranked Mughal nobility, some of whom he had defeated in battles. He expressed his displeasure and exited the royal court, which resulted in his house arrest along with that of his son under Ram Singh, who had not been sent to Assam yet.

Whereas a debate ensued among Aurangzeb and his courtiers, on whether to kill or keep them in service, Shivaji hatched a clever plan to escape. He asked to be removed from house arrest and surrendered to the Mughal forces. From prison, feigning ill health, he started sending out large baskets with mangoes (some say sweets) for distribution among Brahmins and poor in his name. Eventually, Shivaji and his son hid themselves in one of those baskets and made good their escape. Aurangzeb did not pursue an aggressive policy after this incident, for the most

¹ Any person in the service of the Mughal emperor was called a mansabdar. There were different ranks of Mansabars demarcated by their salary as well as the number of soldiers they commanded.





part of 1666-1670, and the Marathas under Shivaji and the Mughals stayed in relative calm and avoided conflicts. In 1670, taking advantage of Aurangzeb's distracted forces which were fighting the Afghans in the west, and the Ahoms in the east, Shivaji again sacked the city of Surat. The Mughals, angered by this, sent an expedition under Danish Khan, which resulted in defeat.

By 1673, Shivaji had expanded his control over a large area and also amassed a lot of wealth. However, he was still technically not a sovereign, independent ruler. He was still under Mughal suzerainty and this bothered him greatly. A coronation was seen as a way to establish his identity as an independent ruler befitting his stature and wealth. Preparations began to crown him king, and he had to negotiate with Brahmins to arrive at a suitable process. Finally, he was coronated at a grand ceremony in 1674 at Raigad fort where he was given the title of *Chhatrapati* or sovereign, signifying his independence.

Suggested Readings:

Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times*. Longman, 1920.

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জাতীয় বীর লাচিত বৰফুকনৰ মৈদাম

জাতীয় বীর লাচিত বৰফুকনৰ মৈদাম

জাতীয় বীর লাচিত বৰফুকনৰ মৈদাম

জাতীয় বীর লাচিত বৰফুকনৰ মৈদাম

Lachit Barphukan Maidam or
burial site near Jorhat

The Legacy Of Lachit Barphukan



The Legacy Of Lachit Barphukan

Chandan Kumar Sarma

*T*he legacy of Lachit Barphukan's heroic feat achieved in the Battle of Saraighat (1671) where he successfully defended Assam against the invading Mughals serves as an inspiration to Indians across the country. India's braveheart Lachit Barphukan's accomplishments with a small yet effective army, bolstered by his military acumen and strategic foresight, successfully prevented the Mughal juggernaut from conquering Assam. Such extraordinary zeal and valour of Lachit Barphukan, despite the odds in the face of the Mughal onslaught, makes him an Indian national hero akin to others such as Shivaji and Maharana Pratap.

Lachit Barphukan's steadfast and resolute and defiant resolve to face the enemy shines bright in the national annals of India's history that continues to offer courage and pride to the people of India. His unyielding grit and determination will forever serve as an example of bravery and sacrifice for Indians across the country.





জলসংযোগ প্রদান

জলসংযোগ প্রদান



জনসংযোগ অসম



জনসংযোগ অসম



জনসংযোগ অসম

The making of regional traditions in Assam has been characterized by the impact of 600 years of Ahom rule and the Neo-Vaishnavite movement introduced by Sankardeva. In the growth and development of the anti-colonial movement and nationalism, the memory of the strong Ahom state and the egalitarian ethos of Sankardeva were the determining factors in this part of the country. The trajectory of the Assamese people, its nationalism and identity, is heavily inspired by its rich and glorious history which provides it with a sense of continuous national identity throughout the centuries. Obviously, in this process, the memory of Lachit Barphukan and the Battle of Saraighat provide the Assamese people with the perennial sense of inspiration to perceive, preserve and protect its distinct socio-cultural and linguistic identity. In the difficult junctures of history when the indigenous people apprehended the threat to their sense of identity and unity, the ethos and spirit of Lachit Barphukan and the gallant struggle at the Battle of Saraighat are always invoked to restore confidence among the younger generation.

The personality of Lachit Barphukan embodies the qualities of grit and determination, resolute resolve to fight and a sense of selfless duty towards the country. The eyewitness accounts of the Battle of Saraighat narrated these qualities of Lachit Barphukan in evocative and lucid ways which were later incorporated in the *Buranjis*. *Ramsinghar Yuddha Katha*, one of the important documentations about the Battle of Saraighat narrates one eyewitness account about the reaction of Lachit at the time, of crisis—“Tears rolled down the Barphukan’s cheeks,” writes a contemporary eyewitness, “and he said to himself -- “It is a tragedy that my country has to face

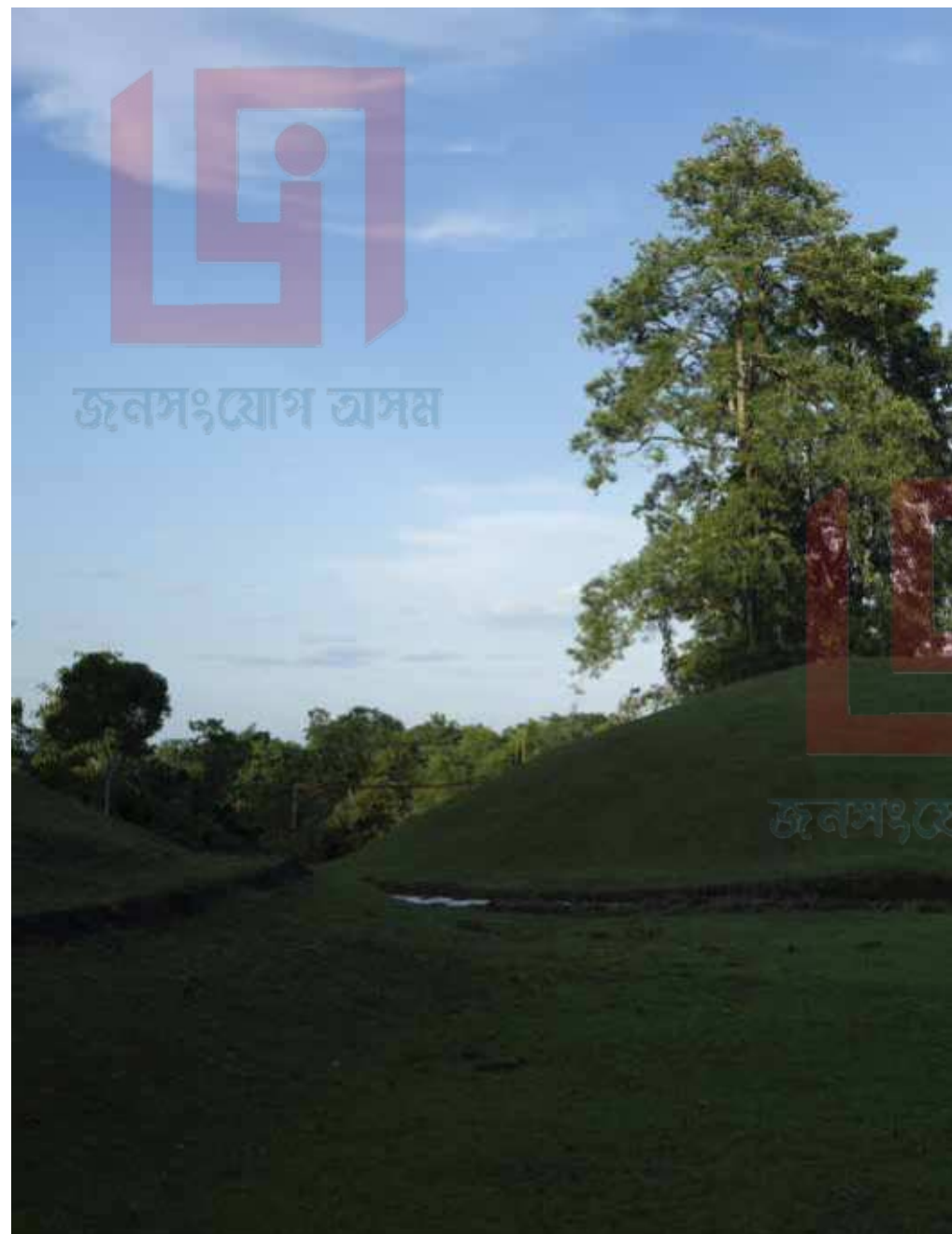
this dire catastrophe during my Phukanship. How will my king be saved? How will my people be saved? How will my posterity be saved?” As he mused on the situation, he became more and more agitated and restless. By great mental effort, he, however, was soon able to come back to himself (sic). The Barphukan then went round the different camps and units on a visit of inspection, and returned to his base a little later (sic). Shortly afterwards he issued a command directing all his men to fall upon the enemy, (S.K. Bhuyan, 1947).

The Battle of Saraighat, which was instrumental in resisting the Mughal imperialism to protect Assam’s socio-cultural and political identity, created such a long lasting public impression that the core group of gallant fighters came to be termed as the *Saraighatia Dol* (Saraighat Veterans). In the *Buranji* literature, Lachit Barphukan, Atan Buragohain, Nara Hazarika, Chapama Paniphukan and few others were included in this *Saraighatia Dol*. The Saraighat veterans who were inspired by selfless zeal to fight incessantly for the national cause again became united to salvage the Ahom state from the political intrigues and conspiracies which plagued the state just after the Battle of Saraighat. The rise of Debera Borbarua after the death of king Udayaditya Singha in 1673 was marked by court intrigues and political instability. The members of this *Saraighatia Dol* made the vow to rescue and restore the state from the conspiracies of Debera Borboruah. This highly esteemed epithet *Saraighatia Dol* was used by Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the eminent historian from Assam, to suggest the group of litterateurs of Assam comprising of Lakshminath Bezboruah, Padmanath Gohain Boruah, Hemchandra Goswami, Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Chandra Kumar Agarwala,

Sonaram Choudhury, Satyanath Bora, Bhulanath Das and Lakshminath Sharma who struggled for the preservation of Assamese language and culture.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Assamese language and culture was threatened due to massive demographic change and other policies introduced by the colonial state. It is due to the eminent group of litterateurs and their struggle that the preservation and promotion of Assamese language and culture became possible and Assamese identity got a new lease of life and confidence in the early 20th century. The memory and legacy of the Battle of Saraighat made such a permanent impression in the psyche of the Assamese people that this *Saraighatia* veteran epithet was again invoked to celebrate the importance of the struggle of the eminent litterateurs who fought for Assamese identity in the early 20th century.

During the course of the freedom struggle in Assam, Lachit Barphukan and the Battle of Saraighat were regularly invoked in the process of mass mobilization in the different phases of the movements. In the post-independence period, the Battle of Saraighat again came to be commemorated as the first bridge over the Brahmaputra constructed in Guwahati was named as the Saraighat Bridge. This was formally opened on 7th June 1963. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, on this occasion commented, “A great event took place at the site of the bridge. Assam had been invaded and the people defended themselves. The final battle took place at this very site where the Assamese fought bravely on boats. This is a glorious chapter in the history of Assam” (S.K. Bhuyan, 1968). Due to the strong imprint of the Battle of Saraighat on the psyche of the Assamese, a collection of great sayings related with this event were gathered and collated from the numerous *Buranjis* by Surya Kumar Bhuyan. This was published by the Government of Assam to instill a sense of patriotism and devotion to the country





following the Chinese invasion in 1662. This booklet comprised of 73 great sayings and was titled as *Saraighatar Subachani* or the 'Sayings of Saraighat'. According to S.K. Bhuyan, "The name Saraighat implies more than the specific locality where the great battle was fought in the year 1671. It enshrines the spirit of resistance inherent in the character of the Assamese people which enabled them to thwart the imperialistic designs of the Moguls in the seventeenth century. The utterances incorporated in the book illustrate different phases of that indomitable and invincible spirit" (S.K. Bhuyan, 1968). Regarding the perennial importance of the Battle of Saraighat while facing any major national crisis, S.K. Bhuyan commented, "The events of the period under review, 1662 to 1682, represent a series of crises in the national life of the Assamese people. There were crises also in the lives of individuals. What was done in the storm and stress of the times can now on reflected upon with poise and dispassion. The results of such scrutiny constitute the abiding lessons of history; and in this light the actors of the past events appear before us as eternal contemporaries, in as much as the problems which our predecessors faced, and which we are facing day-to-day, and which our posterity will face, are the same in spirit and substance" (S.K. Bhuyan 1968).

After the defeat in the Battle of Saraighat, Ram Singh, the Mughal general also acclaimed the heroic resistance and the fortitude of the Assamese people and commented, "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches and in welding guns and cannons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India" (S.K. Bhuyan, 1947). The indomitable spirit and passion for political independence of the Ahom monarchs was also mentioned by the author of the *Alamgir-Namah* who stated, "The rajas of Assam have never bowed the head of submission and obedience, nor have they paid tributes or revenue to the most powerful monarch, but they have curbed the ambition and checked the conquests of the most victorious princes of Hindustan. The solution of a war



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জৈনসংযোগ অসম
JAIN SANGYOG ASSAM



against them has baffled the penetration of heroes who have been styled Conquerors of the World” (S.K. Bhuyan, 1947).

The message and legacy of the Battle of Saraighat will definitely have contemporary relevance even in the 21st century for the Indian people across the country and the people of Northeast India specifically as continuous demographic change has threatened the political existence and the rights of the indigenous people. The sense of unity and fraternity that was exercised by the Ahom kings to engineer a cooperative approach with the neighboring states through diplomatic correspondences to fight against Mughal imperialism will always remain an important strategy even in the future. The moral of Lachit Barphukan and his passion for defending his own country from Mughal imperialism is still important for the younger generation as Northeast India and other parts of the country continuously faces challenges and threats from neighboring countries having ramifications for national security. Duty, devotion and patriotism to defend the country as exemplified in the life and struggle of Lachit Barphukan will always inspire the countrymen all over India even in the 21st century. Along with Shivaji and

Maharana Pratap, the legacy of Lachit Barphukan, through his illustrious carrier and struggle, will obviously make the people more nationalistic and confident across India. Since 1999, the best passing out cadet of the National Defence Academy of India is conferred the “Lachit Barphukan Gold Medal Award” every year. Lachit Barphukan who embodies the ideals of nationalism deserves to be elevated as a national hero of modern India.

For composite Indian nationalism, the heroic achievements during the Battle of Saraighat have always provided sublime sustenance which has continuously nourished the sense of nationhood. Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in times of crisis and threat, the powerful imagery of Lachit Barphukan and the heroic Battle of Saraighat has emerged as a strong historical memory which has nurtured the continuity of the indomitable national spirit. The legacy of Lachit Barphukan will obviously inspire and resonate in the 21st century as the ‘eternal contemporary’ to determine the public discourse in the context of strengthening India’s civilizational glory, national security, and devotion to the national cause.

Notes & References

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The Saraighat Bridge on the Brahmaputra that connects Assam with the rest of India. This steel bridge was opened in 1962, and a new bridge has come up now. This bridge conjures up an image of the general area where the Battle of Saraighat was fought.



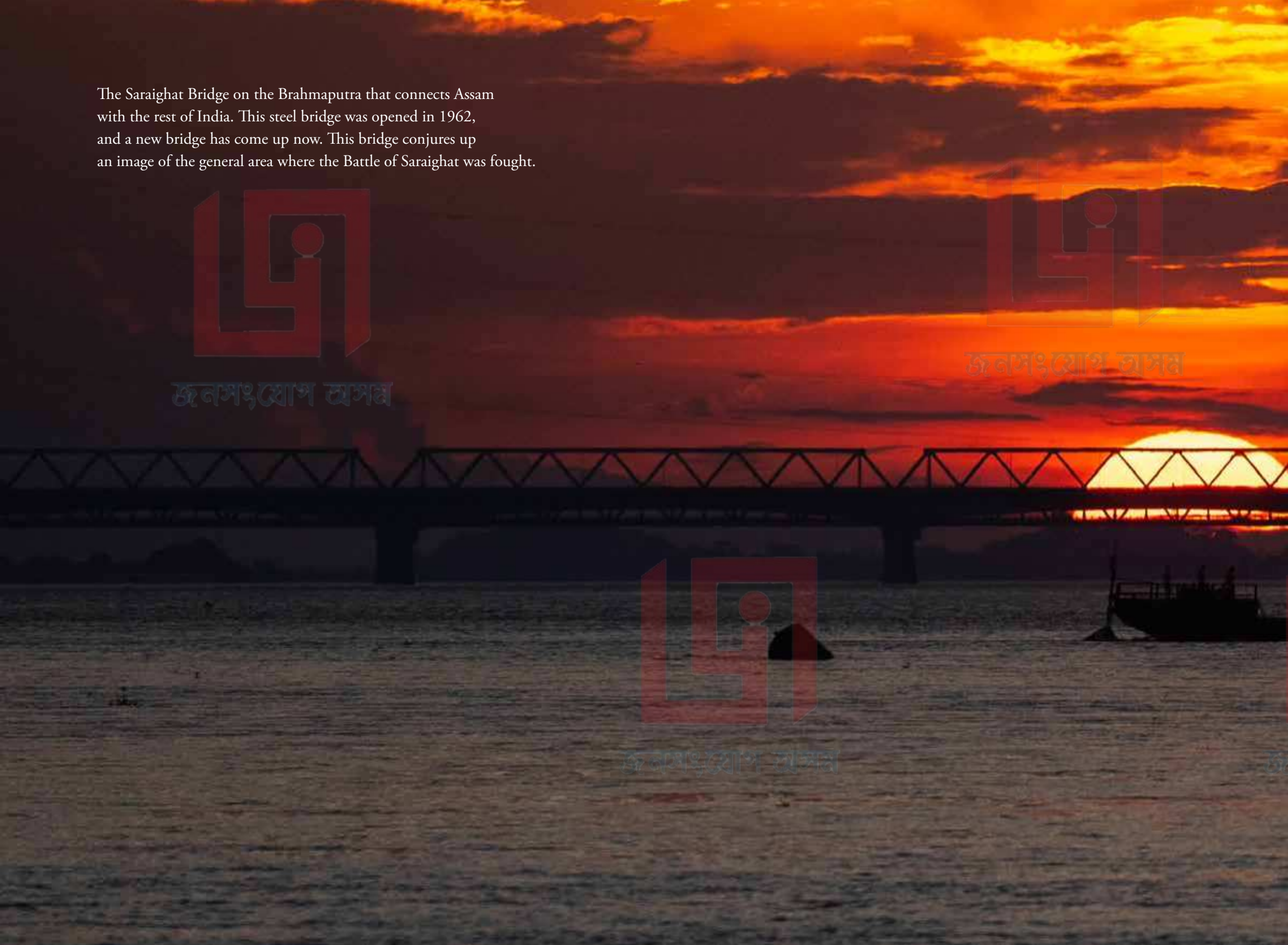
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জনসংযোগ অঙ্গন

Lachit Barphukan – Assam's Hero Who Halted *The Mughals* is a fascinating collection of essays on the 17th century fiery Ahom general who beat the invading Mughals and saved Assam from an alien foreign rule. He was clearly the hero of the famous Battle of Saraighat (1671) on the Brahmaputra, near Guwahati, for he managed to make Aurangzeb's general Ram Singh I to retreat. Edited by historian **Rajib Handique** and journalist **Wasbir Hussain**, the chapters in the book, authored by well-known historians and writers, brings out various facets of Lachit Barphukan's life, right from his birth, to obtaining military training to emerging as a hugely successful Ahom general to someone who is remembered today for being one of the prominent protagonists of Indian nationalism.



JANASANYOG ASSAM

