

The Leadership Quality Exhibited by Bir Lachit Borphukan, the Great Ahom General of Medieval Assam against Islamic Forces: A Critical Analysis

Mrs. Mridusmrita Phukan

Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese, Borholla College, Jorhat, Assam

Abstract:

Assam, the North Eastern province of India had to face Islamic invasion since 13th century onwards. But this province has never surrendered to the invading Islamic forces. The history of Assam is loaded with stories of various mighty heroes. Bir Lachit Borphukan is among them who defeated the Mughals with his acute military strategy and leadership qualities. He is a living legend and his bravery and tales of patriotism are no longer confined to Assam only, it has become a national saga. His military acumen and war strategy have become an inspiring lesson for the nation's millions of youths. He was the Commander-in-Chief of Ahom army who brought the Ahom army to the highest possible level of efficiency through his acute military strategy, dedication, leadership qualities and patriotism.

Keywords: Lachit Borphukan, the Ahoms, Islamic invasion, Leadership Quality.

Introduction:

Assam, the north eastern province of India had to face Islamic invasion since 13th century onwards. But this province has never surrendered to the invading Islamic forces. In early 13th century Muhammad Bakhtyar Khilji tried to subdue Assam only to face a crushing defeat at the hands of Koch king. Bakhtyar Khilji's armies were killed and along with a handful of lieutenants Khilji was lucky to save his life while beating a retreat to the safety of Bengal plain. History repeated itself when Mughal General Mir Jhumla invaded Assam in 1663 only to face the fate of Khilji. Mir Jumla not only faced a crushing defeat at the hands of the Ahom King Jayadvaj Singh but also forced to sign a humiliating treaty with the Ahom king. Mir Jumla's official historian wrote that 'A similar case had never happened before in the history of Delhi'. Assam remained out of bound for the invading Islamic forces. The province was closely affiliated with the core of ancient India and defied the 'surrendering and subjugating tendencies of mainland India at the hands of a handful of invading Islamic rulers.

Bir Lachit Borphukan was the mighty Ahom General who defeated the Mughals with his acute military strategy and leadership qualities. He was the youngest son of Ahom General Momaitamuli Barbarua. In Ahom Buranji Lachit Barphukan is mentioned as Phukan Lung Lachit, and his physical appearance is described as "He had a wide face resembling a full moon, and nobody could look at his eyes". Assam's history of 17th century is mostly occupied by the fights and tussles between the Ahom and the Mughal. Lachit Barphukan put up a very tough formidable resistance against the Mughal's aggression into the

land of Assam. He led the military charges against the Mughal enemies from the front for a long period of four years (from 1667 to 1671) and exhibited dauntless courage and die hard love for the country.

Objective of the Study:

The prime objective of the study is to focus on the leadership qualities exhibited by Bir Lachit Borphukan against the Islamic invasion during the 17th century Assam. He was the Commander-in-Chief of Ahom army who brought the Ahom army to the highest possible level of efficiency through his acute military strategy, dedication and patriotism. It is worth mentioning that nowhere in Indian history is a record of such an organized, disciplined and combined action against the enemy is really found.

Significance of the Study:

Seldom in military history has a Commander distinguished himself in engagements both on land and on water as Lachit Barphukan did at Guwahati in the battle field. Shivaji introduced a new concept of insurgency warfare which was refined in the Twentieth Century by Mao-tse-tung and Ho-Chi-Min. Lachit Barphukan demonstrated how through elaborate preparation and use of terrain, a weaker Army can defeat a superior army. He also showed exemplary loyalty to his King and outstanding leadership in battle. Study on his life and works will surely encourage the new generation. More effort should be made to know about him and let the mainstream Indians know about him. His valor, determination, love for the mother nation, and perseverance is something that every Indians should know. This unsung hero of India will surely be an inspiration for generations of Indians.

Methodology:

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

The Historical Background:

The history of Assam from 1662 CE to 1671 CE comprises mostly of the conflicts and battles between the Ahom and the Mughal. The Ahom kingdom was established in the Brahmaputra valley by Siu-ka-pha in the year 1253 CE with the first capital at Charaideo after thirty-eight years of their journey from Mong Mao. And very soon the name, fame and might of the Ahom kingdom had established itself as a major political power in the entire region of the North-East India. In the 17th century the Ahom kingdom was spread up to the river Manah on the west and to the hills of Sadiya on the east where there were several passes leading to Tibet. The rise of the Ahom kingdom caught the attention of the Mughal emperor in Delhi which resulted in the wish of the Mughal emperors to extend their territorial domains to further East, beyond Bengal and also to have command over larger part of Hindustan and move farther ahead to reach Tibet. Besides, they also wanted to possess the rich mineral and natural resources of Assam by this invasion.

The Mughal-Ahom conflict continued over a period of 67 years (1615-1682) during the reigns of the Mughal Emperors Jahangir, Sah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. There were altogether 18 major conflicts between the Ahom and Mughal. Except the invasion by the Mughal General Mir Jumla in 1662 in most

other conflicts, the Ahoms either resisted the Mughals' aggression or sent them back, or even if the Mughals won, they could not hold their occupied land for long. Defeating all resistance by the Ahom in 1662, Mir Jumla occupied the Ahom capital Garhgaon. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha retreated to Namrup. However, after a stay for eleven months in Garhgaon Mir Jumla signed Ghiladhari Ghat treaty with the Ahoms. This treaty was a matter of much indignity and humiliation for the Ahom kingdom. As per the treaty the Ahom had to hand over Kamrup, which was in the eastern part of the Ahom state, to the Mughal. Even Swargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha had to give his six years old daughter to them to save his country. After a few months Jayadhwaj Singha died and Chakradhwaj Singha ascended the throne. He wanted to drive away the Mughals from the territories occupied by them during reign of Jayadhwaj Singha. He ordered for a war against the Mughals so that the lost honour and glory of the Ahom could be redeemed. He appointed Lachit Barphukan the Commander-in-chief of the Ahom forces and entrusted with the task of over throwing the Mughal domination over the Ahom Empire. Lachit was the youngest son of Momaitamuli Barbarua, the Ahom general in the Moghul aggressions during the reigns of Emperors Jahangir and Sha Jahan. Being the son of the Ahom General he was accustomed to the Ahom Mughal conflict and witnessed the invasive attitude of the Mughals from the forefront.

The Leadership Qualities of Bir Lachit Borphukan:

Following the command of the King, General Lachit Borphukan moved downstream the river Brahmaputra in 1667 and attacked the Mughal soldiers at Koliabor. His army captured the Mughal posts at Bahbari, at Kajali, Sonapur and Tatimara. Lachit charged along farther ahead towards Itakhuli of Guwahati, the strong hold of the Mughal and freed Itakhuli from the enemy. He chased the Mughal up to the Manah River, the western frontier of the Ahom kingdom before the invasion by Mir Jumla. 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. The Mughal army reached Rangamati in February 1669. Lachit Barphukan kept himself informed of the Mughal advance, and, realizing the futility of opposing the army at the outlying forts on the frontier, ordered gradual withdrawal of Ahom forces from Manah in a planned manner. He showed his brilliance as the Commander-in-chief.

He knew it very well that the Ahoms could not challenge the Mughals in the open field battle. So, he and his soldiers took position in the mountainous terrain in Guwahati. Besides, he knew it well that his soldiers were more expert in naval fight than those of the Mughals, and the narrow width of the river Brahmaputra at Saraighat was the right place for the Ahom to resist the Mughals. Lachit built a number of gar or ramparts in and around Guwahati, to force the Mughals to take the river rout. As a part of the total war plan Lachit wanted to build a Gar or rampart in the northern bank of Brahmaputra near Amingaon. It was to be completed overnight only and the responsibility to oversee the construction was given to his maternal uncle. But at mid-night when Lachit saw that the workers were sound asleep and the building work of the rampart was not finished he lost his composure. Holding his uncle responsible for the dereliction of duty and breach of trust at an hour so crucial for the country's security, Lachit beheaded him declaring, "Dexatkoi Momai danger nahai" (My maternal uncle is not greater than my country). Such was Lachit's selfless commitment towards duty and his country which is above all personal relations.

In the meantime there was a huge loss for the Ahom soldiers at the battle of Alaboi, where 10,000 Ahom soldiers were massacred as they could not face the might of the Mughal army in the open field. But this

set back could not break the resolve of Lachit Borphukan. His ability to withstand such a war calamity of losing 10,000 fellow soldiers in one battle shows the undeterred spirit of a real hero, a true patriot and a real leader. Ram Singha along with his soldiers started moving towards Guwahati through Andharubali for the decisive battle at Saraighat. After the loss at Alboi, the Ahom had to overcome another challenge when Lachit himself was seriously ill during that time. The battle started on both land and water. With the Mughals getting close to Andharubali, Lachit Borphukan stood up disregarding his illness. Lachit Barphukan showed the power of his leadership in the final naval engagement in Saraighat. With his ailing body, Lachit led the Ahom soldiers from the front. As S.K.Bhuyan wrote “he hammered two recalcitrant oarsmen and threw them into water, and the report of this incident restored the flagging zeal of his soldiers, and they fought with all their might. His brief utterances at this moment speak of his passionate anxiety for his country’s independence, and his own honor. He said to Miri Sandikal Hazarika at Aswakranta, — "Tell your men, I am going to die on this spot, and I never think of abandoning my charge.” After a fierce battle the Mughals were forced to retreat. Lachit forced them to retreat across the Manah River, the then western border of Assam.

Lachit Barphukan had retrieved the glory of the Ahom kingdom and protected the land, its people and culture from being demolished by an outside inimical force. However, Lachit did not live long after the battle of Saraighat. He died in 1672. Lachit’s patriotism, his military acumen was praised by his enemy Ram Singha. “The Barnabab (Lachit Barphukan) is not a hero of an ordinary caliber; the fortifications are complex and intricate; and I could not therefore obtain any loophole for attack.” Lachit Barphukan lived a relatively short life of about 50 years, but his Himalayan role in protecting Assam’s sovereignty, culture and civilization will live forever. Mughal’s defeat at the hands of Lachit ensured further consolidation of the greater Assam and Assamese society raised by the Ahom. Had Lachit not resisted the aggression of the Mughals from the forefront, the history of Assam would have been different; the cultural and demographic pattern and mores would have been different from what we have today.

Conclusion:

Today, Lachit Barphukan is revered as the greatest military hero not only of Assam but of India. Like his contemporary Shivaji, the Maratha hero in Maharashtra, Lachit Barphukan also fought relentlessly to resist the expansion of the Mughal Empire in Assam. Had Lachit Barphukan not been there and had he not resisted the aggression of the Mughals, the history of Assam would have been different; the cultural and demographic pattern and mores would have been different from what we have today. He should be regarded as a national icon, an epitome of patriotism, heroism, and has become an immortal figure in the pages of history. His bravery and tales of patriotism are no longer confined to Assam only; it has become a national saga. His military acumen and war strategy have become an inspiring lesson for the nation’s millions of youths. To commemorate this great soul of India various initiatives are taken at present days by different government agencies. On 24 November each year Lachit Divas is celebrated statewide in Assam to commemorate the heroism of Lachit Barphukan and the victory of the Ahom army in the Battle of Saraighat. It is a recent development that the 400th birth anniversary of this great soul is celebrating throughout the country this year. On 25th Feb.2022, Ram Nath Kovind, the then President of India launched the 400th birth anniversary celebrations of Ahom General Lachit Borphukan and laid the foundations for an Alboi war memorial and a 150-foot bronze statue of the legendary commander. Before that in 1999, the then Chief of Army General V. P. Malik, instituted the annual Lachit Barphukan Gold Medal Award for the best cadet of National Defence Academy. Showing great

reverence to Lachit his statue was unveiled at the National Defence Academy ,Pune in Maharashtra by late Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha , the then Governor of Assam in November 14, 2000. The 35-feet-tall statue of this legendary figure was inaugurated in the middle of the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati by former Chief Minister of Assam Late Tarun Gogoi in 2016. He will always remain an emblem of national pride for all the times to come. He is among those war heroes of the world who puts love for country above all. Lachit Barphukan's patriotic zeal and spirit has got great relevance in the present time. His heroic tales can be a befitting reply to all the divisive forces trying to threaten the national integrity of the country.

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