

## **A Historical Study on Ahom Warfare: Offensive and Defensive Weapons**

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### **Abstract:**

The Ahoms, under the leadership of Sukapha, entered Assam in 1228 and established a formidable kingdom that endured for nearly six centuries, primarily due to their robust and well-organized military system. Their military forces comprised infantry, navy, artillery, cavalry, elephantry, and a proficient network of spies, enabling them to effectively resist Mughal invasions and subjugate neighboring kingdoms. Their extensive understanding of Assam's geography, particularly its river systems, conferred a strategic advantage in both terrestrial and fluvial warfare. The Ahoms employed a diverse array of weaponry, broadly classified into offensive and defensive categories. Offensive armaments included swords (dao), spears (jathi), bows and arrows, daggers, cannons, matchlocks, and catapults, while defensive equipment encompassed shields (dhal), helmets, and protective armor crafted from iron, leather, or hide. They also constructed fortified structures known as garhs and utilized elephants both as offensive units and as protective barriers in battle formations. Their prowess was not solely reliant on weaponry but also on astute strategies, such as guerrilla tactics, river flooding, and obstructing enemy routes to ensnare invaders. This potent amalgamation of armament, organization, and strategy enabled the Ahoms to sustain their independence and dominance in Northeast India for centuries.

### **Keywords:**

Ahoms, Mughals, Offensive, Defensive.

## 1.0: Introduction

Sukapha, the progenitor of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, was affiliated with the Shan branch of the extensive Tai family of Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The kingdom established by Sukapha governed Assam for six centuries, from 1228 until the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826.<sup>2</sup> Through their proficient military organization, they safeguarded Assam from external incursions and sustained peace within the kingdom.<sup>3</sup> The comprehensive composition of an Ahom army included infantry, navy, artillery, elephants, cavalry, and intelligence operatives.<sup>4</sup> The technical prowess and overall excellence of the Ahom infantry received considerable acclaim in Persian chronicles.<sup>5</sup> Shihabud-din-Talish noted that one Ahom soldier was more than a match for ten Muslim soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Even Ram Singh remarked on the Ahom soldier, stating, "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting around, in digging trenches and in wielding gun and cannons. I have not seen such specimen of versatility in any part of India."<sup>7</sup> Due to the remarkable efficiency of the Ahom soldiers, they were credited as "One of the few races in India, who could stem the tide of Mughal Conquest."<sup>8</sup> The text describes Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, who was part of the Shan group within the larger Tai family from Southeast Asia. The Ahom kingdom ruled Assam for 600 years, from 1228 to 1826. They were known for their strong military, which protected Assam from outside attacks and kept peace within the kingdom.

The Ahom army was well-rounded, including foot soldiers, ships, cannons, elephants, horses, and spies. Their infantry was particularly praised in Persian writings. One account mentioned that a single Ahom soldier was as strong as ten Muslim soldiers. Another observer, Ram Singh, noted that Ahom soldiers were skilled in many areas, including boat handling, shooting, digging trenches, and using guns and cannons. Because of their military strength, the Ahom were considered one of the few groups in India that could resist the Mughal Empire's expansion.

## **2.0: Objectives**

The aim of this paper is to study the military strength of the Ahom kingdom and analyze how their efficient organization, advanced weaponry, and innovative battle strategies helped them defend Assam from external invasions and maintain political stability for nearly six centuries. Following are the objectives of the study-

1. To examine the historical background of the Ahom kingdom and its military setup.
2. To identify and categorize the offensive and defensive weapons used by the Ahoms.
3. To highlight the technological skills and craftsmanship involved in manufacturing weapons, artillery, and gunpowder.
4. To analyze the battle strategies and defensive techniques, including fortifications, guerrilla warfare, and naval strength.
5. To showcase the significance of the Ahom military system in resisting Mughal conquest and uniting Assam.

## **3.0: Methodology**

This study is exclusively grounded in secondary data derived from an extensive array of historical and scholarly sources. A thorough review of books, research articles, historical records, and regional studies on medieval Assam was conducted to elucidate the military organization, weaponry, and strategies of the Ahoms. The works of eminent historians such as S.K. Bhuyan, B.K. Baruah, and H.K. Barpujari were utilized to obtain detailed descriptions of the Ahom army, its armaments, and its combat techniques.

The information was systematically categorized into themes, including offensive and defensive weaponry, naval warfare, fortifications, guerrilla tactics, and the production of arms and gunpowder. These themes were analyzed to underscore the technological expertise and military innovations of the Ahoms, as well as their capacity to resist Mughal invasions and subjugate neighboring kingdoms.

By exclusively relying on secondary data, this study offers a synthesized and comprehensive perspective on Ahom military power, drawing from well-documented historical evidence and expert analyses rather than primary field research.

#### 4.0: Data Analysis

##### 1. Weapons used in the wars:

The main weapons of war consisted of bows and arrows, spears, swords, discus, guns, cannons, matchlocks, shields, daggers, and hangdang.<sup>9</sup> In naval engagements, war boats termed as bachalis were used. The main animals used in land battles were elephants and horses.<sup>10</sup>

##### 2. The Offensive Weapon:

The offensive weapons were bows and arrows, spears (barchah), different kinds of swords, flat spears called Jathi, and daggers (Mitda, Kaida, Mesi da), hangdangs, and axes.<sup>11</sup> In close or hand-to-hand combat, swords, daggers, and axes were used. Bows, arrows, and spears were used to neutralize enemies at a distance or delay their advances. The bows and arrows were made of bamboo, and the arrows had pointed iron tips, often poisoned.<sup>12</sup> The sharpest arrow was known as Singimuki Kar. There were also different kinds of bows known as Bordhenu, Chutiadhenu, and Karpai Dhenu.<sup>13</sup>

Another important weapon used in close combat was the Heng-dang, a single-edged sword with a long handle, often designed with gold, silver, or wood scabbards based on rank.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the Japanese samurai sword, the Heng-dang was a mark of high officials. Guns, matchlocks, artillery, and cannons were other offensive weapons.<sup>15</sup> Khargharia Phukan oversaw firearms and gunpowder, while the artillery officer was called Hiladari Konwar.<sup>16</sup> There were five types of artillery: Biagom, Baghura, Hatimuria, Tubuki, and Mithalotong.<sup>17</sup> Cannons were called Bortop in Assamese, meaning big guns, and were classified into Dumukhiya, Singhamukhia, Tinichari Mukhia, and Juriamara.<sup>18</sup> Matchlocks, or Hillois, were small portable guns similar to modern bazookas, with eleven varieties.<sup>19</sup> Cannons were first made and used under Swargadeo Swarganarayan (Dihingia Raja).<sup>20</sup>

Blacksmiths in Assam manufactured cannons and matchlocks.<sup>21</sup> Gandhela Garia from North Guwahati made the famous cannon Ripunjoy in 1693.<sup>22</sup> Banamali Saikia of Teok and artisans called Silakuti Khanikars produced cannonballs, stored in special structures called Golaghar.<sup>23</sup> Gunpowder (Khar) was made using cow urine, collected over six



months, and refined into a white layer for explosives.<sup>24</sup> Officers called Khargharia Phukan and Khargharia Borua supervised gunpowder production.<sup>25</sup>

The Thatari or Gardun, mentioned in Baharistan-i-Ghaibi, was a massive wheel used by the elephant corps against Mughal forts.<sup>26</sup> Elephants, supervised by Hati Borua and supplied by the Moran tribe (Hati-Chaungi), were an integral offensive weapon.<sup>27</sup> War-boats (Bacharis), under Naohaliya Phukon, were critical to defeating the Mughals.<sup>28</sup> Built at Barnaosai (Garhgaon, Rangpur) and smaller Naosals (Majuli, Jaipur, Dergaon), they carried 70–80 men and were equipped with cannons.<sup>29</sup>

Flooding and blockades were tactical weapons used effectively against Mughal forces, especially Mir Jumla in 1662.<sup>30</sup> Guerrilla warfare allowed surprise attacks at night, while diplomacy was used to deceive enemies, forcing them into peace treaties before breaking them strategically.<sup>31</sup> This approach is praised as “a masterpiece of casuistry and subterfuge.”<sup>32</sup>

### **3. Defensive Weapons and Strategies:**

Defensive gear included head caps (tupi), thick jackets, small (dhal) and large (basu) shields made from buffalo, rhino, or deer skin, and full-body shields (phar).<sup>33</sup> Purnananda Buragohain introduced improved defensive clothing, including coats and girdles.<sup>34</sup> Forts, built with bamboo, mud, and wood, had wooden walls, cannon turrets, moats, and bamboo palisades.<sup>35</sup> Strategically located forts used rivers, jungles, and hills as natural defenses.<sup>36</sup> Atan Burhagohain's Daga-judha warfare (similar to modern guerrilla tactics) prolonged Mir Jumla's invasion for nine months, exhausting the Mughal forces.<sup>37</sup>

## **5.0: Findings**

1. This study highlights that the Ahom kingdom's long-lasting rule over Assam, spanning nearly 600 years, was made possible by their exceptional military organization and advanced warfare techniques. The Ahoms maintained a well-structured army consisting of infantry, cavalry, elephantry, navy, artillery, and an effective spy network, which provided them with a strong defensive and offensive edge. Their weaponry system was highly developed, featuring bows, arrows, spears, swords, matchlocks, cannons, and war boats, many of which were locally manufactured with remarkable craftsmanship by Assamese blacksmiths. Gunpowder

production was a unique expertise of the Ahoms, showcasing their advanced technical skills.

2. The study also finds that the Ahoms excelled in strategic warfare, using guerrilla tactics, flooding of battlefields, blockades, and diplomacy to weaken and trap enemies, particularly the Mughals. Their defensive infrastructure, including forts, stockades, and shields, further strengthened their ability to withstand invasions. Naval power played a critical role in their success, enabling them to dominate riverine warfare in Assam's challenging terrain.
3. Overall, the findings emphasize that the Ahoms were not only skilled warriors but also innovative strategists who combined military strength, advanced weapons, and environmental knowledge to maintain control over Assam. Their military excellence ensured that they were one of the few kingdoms in India capable of halting Mughal expansion, preserving the sovereignty and cultural identity of the region for centuries.

## 6.0: Conclusion

The Ahoms came to Assam from a foreign land but able to established kingdom that survived for 600 years. With their able administrative setups and well organised military system they are able defend the country from the mighty Mughals and subdue other kingdom and brought unity of Assam. With their advance knowledge of weaponry system and battle strategies they were able to subdue their enemies and kept the unity of the country intact. Then ore it is rightly said by S.K. Bhuyan that, the Assamese soldiers was the master of variety of activities which he acquired as a cultivator and householder, erection of hedge fencing, rowing, swimming, drilling and house construction constituted the normal occupation of an Assamese cultivation and these valid knowledge was brought to bear upon his military carrier.

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