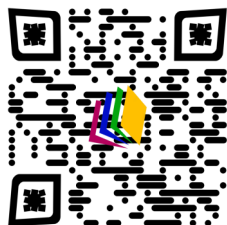




e-ISSN: 2582-502X

Asiatic Society for Social Science
Research. 2(1): June 2020, 68-74.

Research Article



www.asssr.in
(Peer Reviewed)

*Corresponding Author

Ms. Arnisha Ashraf

Assistant Professor, School of
Liberal Arts, IMS Unison
University, Dehradun

Email: arnisha.ashraf26@gmail.com

Received on 11.06.2020

Modified on 15.06.2020

Accepted on 26.06.2020

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Tarikh-e-Aasham: A Study of Ahom-Mughal Conflict in the 17th Century

Ms. Arnisha Ashraf

Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts, IMS Unison University, Dehradun

ABSTRACT:

Fateha-e-Ibreyia or Tarikh-e-Assam is the one of the most important work dealing with socio-political history of Assam. Based on 17th century Medieval period of Assam, this chronicle gives a vivid description of the Mughal- Ahom conflicts. It describes the violent wars that took place between Nawab Mir Jumla and the ruler of Assam and Cooch Bihar during the reign of emperor Aurangzeb between 1661-1663.

KEY WORDS: Mughal, Ahom, Assam, Assamese, Medieval

1.1. Introduction

Fateha-e-Ibreyia (victory with a lesson) or Tarikh-e-Assam is a Persian chronicle on the history of the Mughals in Assam. Written by Shihabuddin Talish, this chronicle gives a brilliant depiction of Mughal invasion of Assam under Nawab Mir Jumla, governor of Bengal and the ruler of Assam and Cooch Bihar during the reign of Aurangzeb. Ibne Mohammad Wali Ahmed, popularly known as Shihabuddin Talish was one of the mansabdars of a tiny state of Bengal. He accompanied Mir Jumla in his campaign to invade Cooch Bihar and Assam by the order of emperor Aurangzeb between 1661-1663. This Persian chronicle, completed in 47 days narrates violent conflicts that took place between the Mughals and Ahoms and the difficulties and hardship faced by the former's army. This is possibly the first book where almost all aspects of Assam have been depicted lucidly. The geographical terrain, climatic conditions, flora, fauna, the people and their dresses and food, the crops grown, etc. have been portrayed clearly. The author has taken good care to record the events exactly as it happened without any exaggeration or underestimation.

The following paper is not just a meagre review of the above mentioned chronicle. It attempts to study the socio- political scenario of medieval Assam and the way the Mughals portrayed the region and its people in their Indo Persian chronicle.

As noted by Sir Edward Albert Gait in his book *A History of Assam*, Assam is a region of exceptional interest.¹⁷ This exceptionality which makes this region distinct and exclusive from the rest of the Indian terrain becomes prominent through its unique languages, people, customs and geographical setting. Assam is the gateway to the North-East of India which comprises of eight states, commonly referred to as the seven sisters and one brother and includes the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim along with Assam.

Assam is a land of variety of cultures and traditions because of the different communities that have lived in Assam from time immemorial and all these ethnic customs, traditions; ways of life formed a peerless Assamese culture and society. However, it isn't a monolithic and static entity and has undergone many changes over centuries under different politico-economic system and under the influence of Hinduism and Vaishnavism. Each had its cultural distinctiveness and variation of its own which is reflected in their culture and tradition.

Assam in the medieval period was a mixture of varied ethnic groups and communities with their own dialects, manners and customs. Historically, this period starts with the arrival of the Ahoms in the early part of the thirteenth century and continued until the termination of their rule in 1838.¹⁸ There are many theories regarding the origin of Tai people in the forms of legends and oral folk tales. It is believed that the kingdom established by king Sukapha, is supposed to be the first kingdom of the Tai-Ahom in Assam.

During this period a good number of principalities under various ethnic groups or independent tribes like Chutiyas, the Morans, the Barahis and the

Kacharis were ruling in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley.¹⁹ In the process of cultural assimilation these communities contribute their share in the formation of great Assamese society who are at present numerically predominant not only in Assam but whole of Northeast India.

In the western part which retained the old name of the kingdom of Kamarupa, and later came to be known as Kamata, a line of Hindu kings were ruling with their capital at Kamatapur.²⁰ Further, in both banks of the Brahmaputra, there were a class of landlords called Bhuyan, who exercised independent or autonomous power in their respective areas. Another powerful tribe called Koch established their kingdom in the western Brahmaputra valley, on the ruins of the kingdom of Kamata in the sixteenth century.²¹

One of the most significant eras in the history of Assam is the advent of the Mughal army in the late 17th century and the subsequent Mughal-Ahom conflict. This conflict was the direct outcome of the imperial ambition of the Mughal emperors to extend their territorial domains to further East, beyond Bengal and also to have command over larger part of Hindustan. The first conflict between Mughals and Ahom took place in 1614 at Kaliabar in the present district of Nagaon during the reign of Jahangir and the final battle between the two forces was at Itakhuli in 1682.

For more clarity and better understanding, it is very important for us to deal with historical sources and historiography of Medieval Assam. Historiography means the study of historical writings. These historical writings or sources can be of any form documents, coins, inscriptions etc. It gives us an insight of the past and history of a said dynasty or a kingdom or any event of the past. There are two

types of historical sources- Primary and Secondary. There are further subdivisions of the aforesaid types of historical sources such as contemporary and post contemporary, indigenous and foreign, records and finds and so on. For a better understanding, these are further grouped into Literary, Foreign Accounts and Archaeological evidences.²² The earliest Assamese literature consists of pastoral ballads sung by cowherds, boatmen, folk songs such as *Bihu Nam, Ai Nam and Dehabicharar Git*.²³ According to Nagendra Nath Acharyya, the sources for the history of Medieval Assam have not been properly cultivated. The most important ones are the Buranjis, the book of chronicles of the Ahoms. The word 'Buranji' is derived from the Ahom language which means 'a store that teaches the ignorant'.²⁴ It gives us an insight of their cultural beliefs and rituals but do not deal much with the materials of history of other people of the period.

Further, the Buranjis are mostly used for the study of early medieval period of Assam. It does not have much information on the later part of the period dealing with the Mughals. Thus, for the study of the later medieval period of Assam one has to depend mostly on the foreign accounts or the Indo-Persian chronicles and the secondary literatures written by different historians.

One of the most important contributions of the Persian language to India is the compilation of different 'Tazkeras' (historical literature). During the early period of medieval India, the Persian scholars wrote detailed and reliable chronicles concerning political, social and cultural history of India.²⁵ For the study of the history of Assam in the medieval period, its society, economy, polity etc too the Indo Persian chronicles are of great help.

These chronicles provide dependable and valuable sources of history. Persian chronicles on political

and social history of Assam are many and most of them are indispensable for the study of the history of Assam. One of the most important ones among them is Tarikh-e-Assam.

Assam came into contact with Islam for the first time in 1206, when a Turkish army led by Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar made an expedition to Tibet through the region. He was followed by other Muslim invaders. In 1532, a Muslim army under Turbak invaded Assam. The forces of the local Ahom kin defeated the Muslims, and those who were taken prisoners were settled in different parts of the states.²⁶ The direct and indirect outcome of the intermittent wars and conflicts between the rulers of Assam and the Muslim power was really fruitful for the political and socio-cultural life of Assam in many ways. It helped to strengthen the Muslims population in Assam.

1.2. The Period of Ahom-Mughal Conflict

The history of the Ahoms during the 17th century was mainly the history of the Ahom -Mughal conflict. As discussed earlier, with the imperial ambition of the Mughal emperors to extend their territorial domains to further east beyond Bengal and also to have domination over larger part of Hindustan; certain articles such as gold dusts, long pepper, elephant teeth, musk, lack, etc., obtained in Assam were valued greatly by the royalty and nobility in the Mughal courts.²⁷

The reign of *Sutamala*, better known by his Sanskrit title Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-63) was marked by a major invasion of Assam by the Mughal army headed by Nawab Mir Jumla, governor of Bengal and the ruler of Assam and Cooch Bihar during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb at Delhi. This episode of Ahom Mughal conflict has been well portrayed in the Persian

chronicle, *Fateha-e-Ibreyā* or *Tarikh-e- Aashaam*. Talish mentioned in his work the problems and difficulties faced by the Mughals in 'Assam'.²⁸ The major reason behind this was the geographical setting of this region which is very different from rest of the country. Swampy forests, moist climate, hilly terrain, heavy monsoon resulting flood and inability to understand the foreign language of the 'assamese'²⁹ added to their misery. Talish mentioned about clearing of the plants, trees, forests for setting out their camp and tents. Apart from the geography of Assam, Talish also has to say a lot more about the people of Assam, its ruler the Ahoms, their society, architecture etc. He mentioned about the Ahom royal palaces which consisted of *Ghosol Khane*, *Jharoka*, *Heram* etc. *Tarikh e Assam* also gives us detailed information about the Ahom military tactics and weapons. The main weapons of the Ahoms were *swords, gun and arrow*. The arrowhead were speared with poison and the remedy of this was to eat *Gero*(red soil) or plaster the wound with it. Talish further commented on the physical appearances of the Assamese by mentioning about the less growth of hair on face and body of both men and women.

Another important thing as mentioned in *Tarikh e Assam* was the end number of raids and attacks made by the Ahom soldier. For instance- after the Mughals left *Koliabor*, the imperial flotilla set (Ibne Hussain, a high ranking officer was commanding the flotilla) took a break from their journey as they were unable to disembark the river Brahmaputra as it flows right along the foot of the hill. When Hussain was away from the fleet, the people of Assam took this as an opportunity and attacks the flotilla set with no less than one hundred boats spearheaded by seven or eight hundred well equipped boats. Howsoever the Mughals crushed their enemies. Talish writes that these war tactics of

the assamese of attacking or raiding was based on deceit and trickery.

Another significant thing that needs mention here is the treatment made by the Mughal army and officer towards the subjugated people. Once they conquered any region or fort, say here, the fort of *Simalgarh*. This fort was captured by the Mughals on 26th February 1662. As soon it was captured, a farman was issued by Mir Jumla not to plunder any property or harm the women and children of the local inhabitants. If any officer was found to be guilty he was humiliated and punished severely without any discrimination. This might be one of the important reasons for the Mughal successful invasion of Assam.

Talish regarded Assam as 'a dangerous, horrible, self confined gloomy country inhabited by the people on both sides of the river Brahmaputra'. This was the way how the indigenous people of Assam were viewed by the people of other part of the country. According to translated version of *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh*(written by Sujan Rai) by Sir Jadunath Sarkar the people of Kamrupa practiced black magic and their houses were build by the forces of magic and black art This was in contrast to the view by Mulla Darweesh Harvi who was a poet and companion of Talish. Talish mentioned about Mulla's *Qasida* on the conquest of Assam in his chronicle. In the *Qasida*, Assam was described as a different world and its people and geography was very different. He further called the people of the land very dignified having superior qualities. Talish mentions in his work about the various kinds of diseases, flora and fruits, animals and birds, natural resources, currency of Assam, tribes, the revenue and tax collection system, the Ahom rajas, the Assamese society, its food and customs, the male and female members, art and crafts, variety of

boats, skilled soldiers, Assamese houses, burial ceremony and also commented on the origin of Assamese Muslims and its increasing population.

Another significant thing that needs mention here is way the women were treated by the Mughal officers and the role and status of the Assamese women in Ahom politics. For instance here, when Makhardhwaj, the Raja of *Darrang* died at Mathurapur, his mother approached Mir Jumla to restore their lost kingdom to the son of her late son. Apart from this she had hold reigns of the Government during her son's absence, helped the faujdar to establish law and order there during the rainy seasons and etc. The Nawab agreed to her request and issued farman in this regard. Here two things can be seen. first, the way the Mughals respected the women, even of their enemies with respect and honour is worth mentioning. Second, the comparative high status and role played by the Assamese women. Not only in the politics but women played an indispensable role in demonstrating economy by actively participating in cultivation in every stage except ploughing. The cultivation of paddy, cultivation of cereals, vegetables, fruits, tobacco, sugar-cane etc. were also done by women. It was for such roles of women in the family that male domination could not go to the extent of reducing them to the status of mere chattels. It was also for this reason, as well as, for the tribal base of the society, that social evils like seclusion of women, child marriage, sati practice, ban on widow remarriage, etc could not gain ground in Assam.³⁰

One of the most important events recorded in *Tarikh e Assam* was Jumla's occupation of Gargaon. Mir Jumla was able to occupy Garhgaon, the Ahom capital, before the beginning of the rainy season, but he and his army were confined mostly to Garhgaon and Madhupur during that period. The

Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha had to take flight and hide in Namrup during Mir Jumla's occupation of the capital. The defection of *Baduli Phukan*, a high ranking Ahom commander, precipitated the 'Treaty of Ghilajharighat' in January 1663, with the Ahom king accepting tributary status. The treaty of Ghiladharighat at Tipam on the Buri Dihing was drawn up on Jan.9, 1663 by which Jayadhwaj became a tributary of the Mughal Emperor. He agreed to pay a huge war indemnity, the cessation of all territory west of the Bharali on the north bank on the state of 'Dimarua', Beltola west of the Kallong on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Jayadhwaj Singha's daughter accompanied by the daughter of Tipam Raja was sent to Delhi and the sons of the ministers were sent as hostage with the Mughal till full payment was made. Mir Jumla and his army left Assam. Soon after his return to Bakotha, as Garhgaon was tarnished by the Mughals, Jayadhwaj Singha passed away in 1663. He was the first Ahom king to embrace Hinduism by receiving initiation from a Vaishnava priest. He made large revenue free land grants with paiks to several Hindu satras (monasteries). One of the notable achievements of Jayadhwaj Singha's reign was the planned settlement of villages in certain tracts of the country. However, Mir Jumla's invasion caused devastation of the economic and social condition of the kingdom. Talish ends his chronicle with the arrival of Jumla at *Lakhogarh* by the flotilla, his departure to *Baritalli* for his onward journey to *Khizrpur*. Mir Jumla died on his way back before he could reach Dhaka.

Jayadhwaj Singha was succeeded by his cousin *Supangmung* or *Chakradhwaj Singha* (1663-70). He declined to abide by the orders of the Mughal to put on the gown (*siropa*) sent by the Mughal court to him as a tributary king. The people of Kamrupa saw one of the most important episodes of victory

under him. The main reason being the reorganization of strong Ahom navy, and infantry under the Command of Lachit Barphukan in 1667. It was under him that Kamrup was recovered and the Mughal army were overpowered. *Annals of the Delhi Badshahate* explained the reasons why the foreign powers could not have a permanent footing in Assam. This has been taken from 'History of the Great Mughals' by Pringle Kennedy who made reference to Assam being unaffected by the Muhammadan invasion. He mentioned that "its unexpected floods, its pestilential airs, its rugged hills proved a serious handicap to soldiers accustomed to fighting in the plains of Northern India". Thus, apart from the assumed Ashamese black art and magic, the natural disadvantages added to the dismay of the Mughals.

Tarikh e Assam, written in 'Khate Shekaste', is not a sheer chronicle that has record of the battles and wars fought between the Mughals and the Ahoms. The minute information of all the occurrences and incidents by Shihabuddin Talish opens up an first hand treasured facts and details about the medieval society of Assam and its people, the Assamese. Written in a simple and easy style, the 'Persian is flowing and pure, and free from Indian style of Persian prose known as Sabk-e- Hindi' as said by the translator. The book is free of ornate and rhetorical languages, long sentences, unnecessary use of metaphor and alien words.

Sir Edward Gait in his book 'A History of Assam' wrote that Assam was one of the regions of India who managed to beat the tide of the Mughal conquest and maintained its supremacy and independency despite repeated invasion by the Mughals. He mentioned about both the Ahom and Persian sources dealing with this region and its people. He summed up that in spite of old methods

of warfare, less advanced technologies, inferior arms as compared to Mughals, the Ahoms emerged victorious against the super power. Gait also wrote that in the writings of Indian historiography, Assam has been barely mentioned. The first attempt to write a connected history of Assam in English was made by W. Robinson in his 43 pages work 'A descriptive account of Assam' published in 1841.

Tarikh-e-Assam can be considered to be one of the earliest chronicles that deals with the socio-political condition of Assam so clearly and extensively. There are several other Persian chronicles like Riyazus Salatin by Ghulam Hussain Salim, Tarikhe Farishta by Mohammad Qasim Shah Farishta, Abdul Hamid Lahori's 'Padshah Namah', Mirza Mohammad Kazem's 'Alamgir Namah' and etc. which throw light on the socio-political history of Assam.³¹ These aforementioned chronicles describes various events of Mughal-Ahom conflict but not as extensive and lucid as Tarikh-e-Assam. Tarikh-e-Assam not just represent the Ahom-Mughal conflict, it describes the overall aspects of Assam and its people.

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