

Lachit Barphukan of Assam – the Hero of Saraighat Battle

Rashmi Sarmah*

=====

Lachit Barphukan was a great general and among the greatest Assamese warriors, who defeated the Mughals in the historic battle of Saraighat in April 1672. Like Shivaji, his contemporary in the Deccan, Lachit also fought relentlessly to curb the expansion of the Mughal Empire in Assam. It is unfortunate, however, that the saga of this great son of India, who stands on an equal footing with brave hearts like Rana Pratap and Shivaji, is little known outside his native Assam. In 1639 AD, the Mughal commander, Allah Yar Khan, concluded a treaty with the Assamese general, Momai-Tamuli Barbaruah, under which Western Assam passed into the hands of the Mughals. A few years later, King Jayadhwaja Singha, taking advantage of Shah Jahan's illness, expelled the Mughals from this region. When Aurangzeb ascended the Mughal throne, he sent his able general, Mir Jumla, to subjugate the Assamese. Mir Jumla occupied the capital at Gargaon in 1662. Mughal occupation hurt the pride of the Assamese, and King Jayadhwaja Singha resolved to drive out the Mughals. But when death intervened, his successor, Chakradhwaja Singha, took the task upon himself. In his search for the man who could lead his people to victory, he found Assam's man of destiny – Lachit Barphukan, who bravely liberated Western Assam from the Mughals. We are pleased to present this article by Rashmi Sarmah, a young Assamese lady journalist. She narrates some facts related to Lachit's exploits and also how recently he has been honoured by the National Defence Academy at Khadakvasla, near Pune in Maharashtra.

A.A

=====



Author

“My Uncle is not greater than my country.” Uttered by Lachit Barphukan, one of the greatest Army generals that Assam has ever had, these words still echo in the Brahmaputra valley, reminding all of this brave son of the soil who saved Assam from the Mughal invaders.

Lachit Barphukan was born to Momai Tamuli, who later rose to become the first Borbarua (Governor of Upper Assam and Commander-in-Chief of the Ahom army). This enabled Lachit Barphukan to enjoy a comfortable upbringing. His father arranged for his education in humanities, scriptures and military science, and as he grew up he was given positions of responsibility.

It is recorded that Lachit was made the scarf-bearer (Soladhara Barua) of the Ahom Swargadeo or king, a position equivalent to a Private Secretaryship. This was regarded as the first step in the career of an ambitious diplomat and politician. After he had held various other offices, Lachit was finally appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army under the Ahom King, Chakradhwaj Singha.

The king summoned Lachit to his presence, and in order to test the efficiency of the general-elect, he said to Lachit, "The enemies are in our immediate neighbourhood. How will it be possible to capture their leaders Syed Firoz and Syed Sana? The man whom I am going to appoint as general must be endowed with unusual grit, stamina and depth of judgment."

To this Lachit replied, “Could it be that there is no man fit enough in Your Majesty's realm? What are the enemies? They are after all ordinary mortals. Shall we not find similar men in our country? Your Majesty should only give the dust of your feet, and the man equal to the occasion will be readily found.” The king immediately resolved to put

Lachit at the head of the expedition. The king's selection was confirmed by his ministers and advisers.

The King Chakradhwaj Singha presented Lachit a sword with a golden handle called Hengdang, and the customary paraphernalia of distinction, and appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the Ahom Army, which had been raised specifically to drive out the imperial Mughal rulers. Lachit actively participated in raising of the Army and the preparations were completed by the summer of 1667. Lachit at first recovered Guwahati from the Mughals and successfully defended it against the Mughal forces during the Battle of Saraighat. He died about a year later.

Herein it may be mentioned that Assam was the only State in India, which defeated successive attempts at invasion by the Delhi Sultans and the Mughal Emperors. The State survived 17 such invasions.

Lachit's patriotism and devotion to his land is best described by the battle of Saraighat where he even went to the extent of beheading his own uncle for the sake of his land. During the preparations for the battle he ordered an earthen wall for fortification to be constructed within one night and employed his maternal uncle as the supervisor.

Late in the night when Lachit came for inspection, he found that the work was not progressing satisfactorily. When asked for an explanation, his uncle tried to cite tiredness, at which negligence of duty, Lachit became so furious that he beheaded his uncle on the spot, saying "My uncle is not greater than my country." The barrier was completed within that night and the remains of this fortification are still known as "Momai-kota Garh" or "The fortification where the uncle was beheaded."

The Mughal Army slowly sailed up from Dhaka towards Assam led by Raja Ram Singh. During the last stage of the battle, when the Mughal Army attacked through the river at Saraighat, the sight of the massive Mughal fleet unnerved the Assamese Army and the Assamese soldiers began to lose their will to fight. Lachit was seriously ill and was observing this development from his sickbed.

In spite of his illness, Lachit had himself carried on a boat and with seven boats accompanying him advanced headlong against the Mughal fleet. He shouted, "If you (the soldiers) want to flee, flee. The king has given me a task here and I will do it well. Let the Mughals take me away. You report to the king that his general fought well following his orders." This had an electrifying effect on his soldiers. They rallied behind him and a desperate battle ensued on the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms in their small boats encircled the bigger but less maneuverable Mughal boats. The river got littered with clashing boats and drowning soldiers.

Lachit Barphukan finally emerged the winner along with his Ahom fleet at the battle and the Mughal fleet retreated in shame. The Mughal Commander-in-Chief acknowledging his defeat had a special word of praise for the Ahom soldiers and the Ahom Commander-in-Chief. About Lachit Barphukan he wrote, "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 loophole or an opportunity!"

But this great general of the Ahom Army was finally defeated by illness that killed him very soon after the victory at the battle of Saraighat. Lachit Barphukan's last remains lies in rest at the Lachit Maidam built in 1672 by Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha at Hoolungapara 16 km from Jorhat. On 24th November each year Lachit Divas is celebrated in Assam as a State holiday to commemorate the heroism of the great general Lachit Barphukan and the victory of the Assamese Army at the battle of Saraighat.

Lachit Barphukan's bravery and tales of patriotism remained confined to the State of Assam for almost three centuries until the nation was introduced to the great general on November 14, 2000, when his statue was unveiled at the National Defense Academy in Khadakvasla, near Pune in Maharashtra by Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha (Retd) PVSM, the then Governor of Assam. Sinha is responsible for initiating the process of getting Lachit Barphukan his due from the Nation.

"Maharashtra and Assam may be at two opposite ends of our vast and great country but they stand united by a common history, a common heritage and a common spirit. During the medieval period they produced two great military leaders, Chhatrapati Shivaji in Maharashtra and Lachit Barphukan in Assam. It is in the fitness of things that our National Defense Academy, the cradle for military leadership is located at the home of the great Shivaji. It is also very appropriate that the statue of Lachit Barphukan is being installed at this Academy," Sinha said while unveiling the statue of Lachit Barphukan.

He further shared, "From my young days, I have been greatly fascinated by Shivaji's military genius and his devotion to moral values. On being commissioned from Belgaum in 1944, I joined my battalion, and was then located on the banks of the Brahmaputra at Guwahati. There, I learnt about the military exploits of Lachit. This caught my fascination and admiration."

More than half a century after his posting to Guwahati, Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha took over as Governor of Assam and took the fame of Lachit Barphukan to other parts of the country. A cassette of a documentary film on this Ahom General was also presented to the NDA along with the institution of a gold medal named after Lachit Barphukan for the best cadet among the officers, apart from installation of his statue. The creator of the Statue is sculptor Pranabendu Bikash Dhar, a renowned sculptor of Assam.

** A journalist by profession and having varied experience including working with Doordarshan, Rashmi Sarmah is for the past two-and-a-half years working as a regular stringer with The Times of India and covering women issues, children issues, art and culture, cinema, entertainment and celebrity profiles. Knowing over six languages and having varied interests, Rashmi can be contacted at rashmisun@yahoo.co.in or over her mobile 98642 06061.*

Afghan Professor Writing First Pashto Book on Gandhi*

Devirupa Mitra

Talking about Mahatma Gandhi in war-torn Afghanistan is not as absurd as it seems, says a 50-year-old Afghan professor who teaches here and is writing the 'first ever book in Pashto' on the great Indian proponent of non-violence.

A.K. Rashid witnessed the worst of civil war in Afghanistan, something that turned his city, Kabul, into blackened ruin, tore apart families - including his own - and drove its citizens into refugee camps. That is why he wants to reintroduce Gandhi to his people.

'I want to reintroduce Gandhiji to my people. We need him now,' Rashid, a visiting Professor of Pashto at Jawaharlal Nehru University here, told IANS.

Rashid has been busy researching various sources on Gandhiji's life - be it in Hindi, Gujarati or Bengali - for his book, tentatively titled, 'Gandhi - Azwant Au Fikar' (Gandhi: Life And Ideals).

Rashid recently presented a paper titled 'Gandhian Approach of Resolving the Afghan Conflict' at a workshop here.

Rashid says: 'Non-violence is an ancient idea of our region. It is also the main basis in the holy *Quran*. A Muslim has to be non-violent, as it is said so in the holy book.'

He says the 'first and only army of non-violence' was formed among the Pashtuns, referring to the Khudai Khidmatgar movement founded by freedom fighter Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan against British rule in India. The Pashtuns are one of the dominant tribes of Afghanistan.

Rashid says Gandhi's teachings were compatible with Islam. 'I believe, in more than 60 per cent of his beliefs he is following Islamic law.'

'We learnt about Gandhiji in our school textbooks... He is extremely well known. In fact, when (late Indian Prime Minister) Indira Gandhi came to Kabul (in 1976), people lined up in droves along the motorcade route, as they thought that Gandhi's daughter had come,' Rashid says.

Rashid had first come to India in 1996 as a visiting professor and stayed on for four years - during which he completed a doctorate from Jamia Millia Islamia. He had also done a translation of Kalidasa's 'Meghadootam' from Sanskrit to Pashto during that period.

In 2004, he returned to his fifth floor Kabul apartment to find his beloved library - which had over 2,000 rare books in Pashto and Dari - riddled with bullet-marks.

'I found six bullets embedded inside pages. My books had become the latest victims of terror,' says Rashid, with a chuckle. 'I removed the books from their shelves and put them into sacks. That's how they still remain in my locked flat,' he says.

Within two years of returning to Kabul, he was back in India in 2006 for his current stint as a visiting Professor with JNU's Centre for Persian and Central Asian Studies.

His family remains scattered across the world, with some members in Kabul and the rest, including his three children, outside its borders. 'We are a typical Afghan family,' he says with a sad smile.

Interestingly, after his presentation at the workshop, an Indian listener came up to him. 'The man said nobody believes in Gandhi here (in India). I told him that you may not believe in him, but we need him in Afghanistan,' says Rashid.

Source: http://www.gandhiserve.org/message_board/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=35&t=620

** Received by e-mail from [info@mkgandhi.org] on Wednesday, September 03, 2008.*