

Ahom Espionage

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Abstract :

Espionage, though do not form a branch of the army, it is considered the basis of war plans and operations and its use as a tool of strategy is very important. The Ahoms, who ruled the Brahmaputra valley from the early thirteenth century, i.e. 1228 to the early nineteenth century, i.e. 1826 laid great emphasis on espionage and tried to organise it according to the need of the hour. In this article an attempt has been made to analyse the development of Ahom espionage system.

Key word : Ahom, Pat-Kai, chronicle

Introduction :

The Ahoms, a group of the Shan branch of the Tai race, ruled the Brahmaputra valley from the early thirteenth century, *i.e.* 1228 to the early nineteenth century when the English East India Company came in after the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. They came to the Brahmaputra valley under the leadership of Siu-Ka-Pha from Mong-Mao, a Tai state, situated in South-Western Yunnan of China. The Chinese now call it Ruili and is situated in the Dehong Dai-Singpho Autonomous Prefecture. In 1228, Siu-Ka-Pha and his associates, crossing the Pat-Kai range descended on the Brahmaputra plain and founded a kingdom in the north-eastern corner

of the valley. The boundary of the kingdom, when Siu-Ka-Pha established it, was the Buri Dihing on the east, the Dikhow on the west, the Brahmaputra on the north and the Naga hills on the south. In the succeeding years this Tai-Ahom kingdom was expanded by his successors in all directions extending from the foot of the Pat-Kai Hills in the east to the river Manah on the north bank and the Nagarbera hill on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the west; from the foot of the northern hill ranges in the north to the foot of the Naga, Mikir, Khasi and the Garo hills in the south. During the period of their rule, in order to expand and to maintain the kingdom, the Ahoms had to fight many wars with powers of different communities and tribes. Like any other kingdom, war had been an important tool for the Ahom state in its foundation, expansion and survival. For this purpose they had to organize and maintain a powerful army along with an effective espionage system.

Intelligence is considered the basis of war plans and operations and its use as a tool of strategy is very important. The ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu regarded it a fundamental tool of the strategists. Knowledge about the enemy and its dispositions is very essential for the strategists which can be gathered only through spies. So spies are one of the most important element in war, because on them, depends an army's ability to move. To him, "An army without spies is like a man without ears or eyes" and that "to neglect the use of spies is nothing less than a crime against humanity." He classified the spies into five categories, viz. local spies who were the inhabitants of a district employed in this service; inward spies comprising the officials, degraded workmen, criminals, favourite concubines, men aggrieved at being in insubordinate positions etc.; converted spies, those who had been caught and used; doomed spies, those who did certain things openly for deception; and lastly the surviving spies, who brought news from the enemy camps. (Tzu 95-98 & 102) The famous Indian statesman Kautilya also put great emphasis on espionage. To him, "Miraculous results can be achieved by practising the method of subversion" and "A single assassin can achieve, without weapons, fire or poison, more than a fully mobilized army." (Rangarajan(Ed.) 462) Ninteenth century German General Carl Von Clausewitz also regarded intelligence as the basis of plans and operations.

Every sort of information about the enemy and his country could be considered as intelligence. (Clausewitz 65)

The Ahoms laid great emphasis on strategic intelligence and their stress on espionage can be traced to the time of Siu-Ka-Pha who certainly collected sufficient information before leaving Mong-Mao to the Brahmaputra valley. Moreover, before his march from one place to another, it is apparent that he sent informers to collect information and commanders along with soldiers to build camps on the route. After arriving the Brahmaputra valley he went to several places and stayed for a number of years. It is mentioned in the chronicles that during his stay at Simaluguri he sent spies all around to survey who found three thousand *ghats* on the banks of the river Nam-dang. (Phukan, et.al. 25) After establishing his capital at Che-Rai-Doi, he sent envoys to three Tai and three non-Tai kingdoms to establish friendship as well as to collect information about those kingdoms because an envoy, besides performing assigned duty was supposed to collect information about the country, court affairs, strength of the army, the nature of fortifications, the treasury and the relation between the king and his subjects. (Bhuyan (5) 57) In the succeeding years his successors developed a well-knit espionage system according the need of the hour. The Ahom government engaged several public as well as secret agencies to collect information about other kingdoms. The public agencies were envoys or *katakis*, wardens and officers. Relation with foreign countries was carried on through the *katakis* or *phu-chous*. Till the reign of Siu-Seng-Pha (1603-41), only the Ahom *katakis* were sent as royal envoys. From his time they started to employ Brahmins too. The *katakis* employed to maintain relations with Mung-Kang were known as *Tsai kau*. (Gohain 6) They were Ahoms who were well conversed in Tai language. There were eight Ahom *kataki* families, viz. Chiring, Chengeli, Naga, Bantalia, Bakatial, Baghchowal, Ramu and Laipengia. (Chetia 45) There were three ranks of *katakis*, viz. *bar-kataki* (senior grade), *maju-kataki* (middle grade) and *saru-kataki* (junior grade). (Bhuyan (2)129) On the eve or in the course of war envoys were deputed to gain time or to deceive the enemy. Secret letters also were sent through the envoys. Such letters were hidden in the handles of spears, *jharis* etc. so that they would not pass into the hands of the enemies as in the case of the mission to Nara kingdom sent

by Siu-Dang-Pha (1397-1407) (Barua 51; Bhuyan (3) 10; Bhuyan (4) 53) Instead of regular routes, hilly routes unknown to the enemies were used by the envoys carrying secret letters and messages. (Gogoi 46) Sometimes *Udasin Vaisnav Bhakats* were sent as *kataki* to allay suspicion in the enemies. (Gogoi 49) Siu-Khrung-Pha alias Rudra Singha (1696-1714) created a new *khel* called *khound* by some select *sanyashis*. Though their chief duty was the emersion of the ashes of the kings in the Ganges, they too, were employed as spies. (Borboruah 572)

They employed a number of secret agencies called *bhikshuk*, *boragi*, *chorangchowa*, *choria*, *ripua*, *chorbacha*, *lehetia* and *abhisarika*. Siu-Hum-Mong (1497-1539) sent *bhikshuks* or beggars as spies to the Kachari kingdom. (Bhuyan (4) 64) The *boragis* or hermits were employed to travel in foreign countries for collecting secret information. (Borboruah 572) Siu-Seng-Pha created a new category of spies known as *langta boragis* or naked hermits. (Choudhury 26; Bhuyan (2) 39) The Ahom commanders employed spies called *chorangchowas*, *chorias*, *ripuas* and *chengdharas* who carefully observed the movements of the enemy's army and reported accordingly at every moment. (Bhuyan (4) 97; Nathan, Vol. I, p. 395) The Ahom spies in the time of Siu-Seng-Pha, made such a close watch on the jungle clearing forces of the Mughals at Rani that as soon as their commander Mirza Nathan went to his fort, they informed about it and the Ahom army immediately attacked the Mughals. (Nathan, Vol. II. 573-74) They were able to collect secret information that the Mughals were short of ammunitions and reinforcements were coming forth for their succor. The Ahom commander, without delay sent a force to Garal to block the route and defeated them. The *chorbachas* were expert thieves selected to enter the enemy camps at night to bring news. They stole valuable items of the enemy, confused them and were able to create a sense of panic in their minds. In 1636, the Ahom commanders sent *chorbachas* to the Mughal camps when they had failed to defeat them at Agiathuti. Relying on their reports, the Ahoms attacked the Mughals early in the morning and defeated them. (Goswami 78-80) In 1667, they were able to storm the Mughal headquarter at Itakhuli after the *chorbachas* had poured water into the matchlocks. (Bhuyan (4) 170) *Lehetias* or eunuchs were another class of spies who, in the guise female slaves, worked as

servants or established relations with powerful officers and influential ladies for a few years and came back with valuable information. (Saikia(Ed.) 2255) Beautiful *abhisarikas* or concubines also were employed for collecting secret information. Aghoni, Langkali, Rangdoi, Suagi and Sasita worked as informer to the king during the time of Konwar Bidroh. (Saikia(Ed.) 2285)

Beside those agencies, they collected information from other sources also, e.g. the captured enemy's spies, disgruntled officers of the enemy, native fugitives, local people etc. The captured enemy's spies were not killed immediately. Attempts were made to extract secrets from them. However, after collecting the secrets they were seldom released. (Bhuyan 860) In 1616, the Ahoms were able to defeat the Mughals at Bharali by a surprise attack at dawn according to the information supplied by Akhek Gohain, the Ahom fugitive who had been in the enemy camp. (Bhuyan (1) 49; Bhuyan (3) 83) Lachit Barphukan, the Ahom commander, collected information about the army of Ram Singh, the Mughal commander encamped at Hajo from a local person named Hengerabaria Thakur who had come to Guwahati to meet Rajendra Thakur. (Bhuyan (3) 109) Information about the movements of the Mughal army was also collected from the local Rajas and the people. The Mughal attempt to capture Pandu fort by digging trenches and putting gun-powder there was informed by the local people to the Barphukan. The Raja of Rani also cautioned the Barphukan in advance about the march of a Mughal contingent to enter North Guwahati through Darrang. (Goswami 111) Information was collected even from *kundars* (workers at lathes). (Borboruah 185) Mis-informers were also sent to lure the enemy to such places where they could be vanquished. (Talesh 28-29)

The Ahoms were very suspicious about foreigners. They did not allow any outsider inside the land without an authorization from the king. (Dutta-Baruah & Deloche 23) Foreign nationals who had been employed in the Ahom kingdom were under strict surveillance. Ghanashyam, the artisan from Bengal employed to construct the Ranghar and the Kareng of Rangpur city, was put to death after being caught red handed with a map of the city concealed between two layers of a water pot. (Barua (1) 808-09) The Assamese proverb, '*Eyate marile tipa Garhgaon palegoi sipa*' meaning whatever happens in any part of the

kingdom immediately reaches the capital, expresses the effectiveness of Ahom espionage. However, when the kingdom was at its zenith and witnessed peace and prosperity from the beginning of the 17th century, the efficiency of this branch deteriorated and the Ahom kings were unable to sense the gravity of discontent of the Moamarias. Three Moamaria uprisings in the reigns of Siu-Nyeu-Pha alias Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) and Siu-Hit-Pong-Pha alias Gaurinath Singha (1780-95) had far-reaching effects on the Ahom kingdom. The pride and divinity of the Ahom monarchy, its economy and the administrative and military set up deteriorated to a great extent. The trust upon the king and the integrity among the high officers of the aristocracy was affected to the core. The effectiveness of the Ahom espionage was by that time no more. Due to this fact, the Ahom government could not sense the gravity of the Burmese imperial design and did not adopt adequate measures against their invasions in the second and third decade of the 19th century which ultimately led to the British occupation of the kingdom.

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