

**Research Article**

# The Role of Elephant in Assam in the Medieval and Late Medieval Period

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**Abstract:** The Elephant is a large plant-eating animal which have trunk, long curved ivory tusk and a large ear, four footed with largest living land mammal. It is a common largest mammal animal in Assam. This animal is known by the people since the early times. It was known as a symbol of power and peace in the Assamese society and Ahom administration. However, this research article related to elephant in the history and the role of elephant in Assam in the medieval and late medieval period. The proposed articles will aim at these objectives of the study, to know the role of elephant and its significance in the medieval period in Assam, to study the role of elephant in Assam and its significance. In the proposed study, the research article will be conducted by using historical methodology and literary survey method. The intensive study include: Introduction, , the role of elephant in the period of Ahom period in Assam during the medieval and late medieval period, conclusion. The study will help in disseminating information about the elephant particularly Ahom period in Assam history, its requirements, if any needed in future.

**Keywords:** Elephant, in Assam, Ahom, medieval period and late medieval period.

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## INTRODUCTION

Assam is situated in the North-Eastern Part of India and Assam was known as Kamrupa in ancient period and the capitl of Assam was Pragjyotishpur at that period. During the period from 10<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE especially up 1826 CE, Assam was ruled by various rulers and the known as medieval and late period of Assam. At the outset of 10<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century was remarkable. Ahom Rule in Assam the Ahoms had started their rule over Assam in the 13th century which continued till (1228-1826) CE when under the clauses of the Treaty of Yandaboo, the state was annexed to the British Empire of India after the First Anglo-Burmese War as though upper Assam continued to be under the Ahom kings until 1839.

Because there were some changes brought into Assam history through the political development, development of literature, progress in society, awareness of the peoples as well as the rulers who ruled long period near about 600 years in Assam and the elephant played an important role. The position of elephant and its depicted role was a unique position. The status of elephant in the political and socio-economic condition in Assam at that period was impact in every aspect in the field of Ahom society.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The chief objectives of the study of this research are to find about the role of elephant in Assam and to highlight, the historical role of the medieval period on elephant. Beside this to study the role of elephant and its significance in the medieval period in Assam and also to narrate in the different field in Assam history related to elephant.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The research article is conducted by using historical methods and literary survey method. There are so many book, has been taken as a secondary sources. Besides these, some archaeological objects, copper plates, terracotta craft, arts, historical monuments also has been taken as a sources includes with internet archives, e-book, online journal.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The word elephant has derived from the Greek word 'elephas'. In Sanskrit elephant is known as *Gaza*. In Assamese and Bengali elephant is known as, 'Hati'.

The buildings of the Ahoms, arts, and monuments, literatures were the historical account which provides the Brahmaputra valley in Assam for

around 600 years during the medieval period, ruled by the Ahom king. Some of the architectures are secular and even depict faunal life in the form of elephants, cattle and other animals.

There are some historical sources on elephant in Assam which are related with elephant like literary sources, manuscripts, Ahom buranjis, archaeological sources, coins, copper plates, art, and sculpture. Elephant mentioned in the literary sources like Buranji like Tungkhungia Buranji, Assam Buranji, Deodhai Ahom Buranji, and Hastividyanava etc.

Kalikapuarana is an ancient literature and there's mentioned that the elephant originated from the Brahma. The epic Mahabharata mentioned at Dranaparva that elephant used in the battle of Kurukshetra.

History of elephant and its evolution was about millions of years old. According to scientists, elephants have been living since 6.50 million years old and elephants were found in Asia, Africa, Europe and other parts in the world. (Talukdar, Bhupendranath: 2001: p:1-33).

The first three historical dynasties, the Varman 350-650, the Salasthamba 655- c900, and the Pala c900-c1100 of ancient Assam contained seals having an embossed head or standing figure of elephant.

Hiuen Tsang (632-646 CE) mentioned in his account, Chi-U-Ki, a plenty of elephants were found in Assam and he was a Chinese traveller who visited in Kamrupa (Assam) during the reigned of Kumar Bhaskar Varman.

Harshacharita was another historical account under the authorship of Bana which speaks about a little bit of the Assam and The goods which were exported by the traders comprised of silk, cloth, bay leave, buffalo, elephant, elephant tusk, ivory materials, aloe wood, oil, musk, black and white chowries, gold and iron 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the year of 1256-1257 CE, Tughril Khan, the commander of Lakhnauti of Bengal, invaded Assam, then the Kamrupa king Saindhya was defeated by him. Kamata king paid many elephants as the war compensation to Tughril Khan. The Ahom king, Suhungmung Dhingia Raja (1497-1539 CE) successfully resisted the invasions to his kingdom sent by the rulers of Bengal and made the strength of the Ahom power felt as far as Gauda and Oriissa.

Sukumar Barkath has composed this Hastividyanava Sarasamgraha in saka 1656, taking on his head the garland of gems-like orders of the said two personages. Dilbar and Dosai, the two painters,

were given orders to draw pictures therein Choudhury: 2013: pp202-203).

The author of the manuscript, Hastividyanava described in his manuscript that the procedure to be followed in training up an wild elephants- the story of Ahom King Dihingia Raja who gave the elephant-lore to the person-the name of the main elephant in that person and from the place where the princely god took hold of the elephant - the eleven king elephant, who gave elephants a parrot - a wild tool trained Follow the method of giving. Female elephants - Details about the hand-held medicines while mounting an elephant - the Mantras there of- Mantra will be called by riders for handing over.

The Hastividyanava, the treatise on elephants written by Sukumar Barkath under the patronage of the Ahom king Siva Singha (1714-1744) and his queen Ambika Devi provides us with interesting information on the elephants found in Assam . The treatise informs us about the nature, characteristics, and types of elephants found in the region, the elephant catching operations, construction of stables, ailments and longevity of elephants, medical treatment for ailing elephants, its role in wars and battles and training of elephants etc. Elephants were used for a number of purposes in the battle field. While proceeding to a battle, the Ahom kings used elephants to lead the soldiers, in pursuit of enemies, for determining the elevation and depression in battlefields situated in hills, for making tracks across forests, for carrying water for the soldiers, for spoiling the concentration of enemies, for fortification and for protecting the plunder after battles. The Ahom kings attached success in battles.

In the year of 1563 CE the treaty of Majuli was signed between the Koch king Naranarayana and Ahom king Sukapha, in this treaty elephants were paid by Ahom king to Koch king as the war compensation, Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE) founded a city named, 'Gazapur' near Jorhat and he kept many elephants for the purpose of war, training and management.

The Ahom kings presented gifts made of ivory to the rulers of Delhi. The Ahom ruler King Rudra Singh (1696-1714 AD) presented mats, fans and chessmen made of ivory to a ruler of Delhi (Gogoi 1991:90-91). The Ahom Buranji mentions that regular supply of elephants from Assam to Bengal formed an important clause of the treaty concluded between the Ahoms and the Mughals after Mirjumla's invasion over Assam (Barua 1930:185). The annual contribution of 20 elephants to the Mughal Emperor was an essential clause in the agreement concluded between the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) and the Mughal general Mirjumla on 22nd January 1663. Under the treaty, the Ahom king presented 20,000 tolas of gold,

40,000 tolas of silver and 90 elephants to the Mughal Emperor (Bhuyan 1947: 191). Surya Kumar Bhuyan observed that access over the forests of Assam teeming with elephants and agar wood was an important motive behind Mughal invasion over the region in 1662 (Bhuyan 1949:26).

**Mirjumla was thus compelled to listen to the Raja's repeated overtures and peace was agreed to on the following terms:-**

1. Jayadhvaj Singha to send a daughter to the imperial herem under Mughal,
2. Twenty tolas of gold, six times quantity of silver and **forty(40) elephants** to be made over at once,
3. Their hundred thousand tolas of silver and **ninety (90) elephants** to be supplied within twelve months,
4. Six sons of chief nobles to be made over as hostages pending compliance with the last mentioned condition.
5. **Twenty (20) elephants** to be supplied annually,
6. A country west of the Bharali River on the bank of the Brahmaputra and of the Kalang on the south, to be ceded to the Emperor of Delhi.
7. All prisoners and the family of Baduli Phukan to be given up, A treaty was concluded accordingly and on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1663, to the intense joy of his army Mirjumla order to return to Bengal.(Gait, Edward:, p-142)

The Ahom military organisation was consist of well-equipped elephant cavalry. The was known as the Khel system that was composed of Paiks engaged in various segments of Ahom administration. Khels were associated with different aspects of forest use and management in the Ahom state as for example hatidhara (elephant capturing) khel.

Elephant were regarded as an important part of warfare and transportation. The Ahom monarchs maintained a separate department of elephant army under the supervision of 'Hati Barua'. Elephants were used for war and peace in Assam during the medieval period. The elephant cavalry was in charge of Hati Barua. Elephant was the natural symbol of Kamrupa Assam. During the medieval period also Tai-Ahom or Assamese had used elephant.

They had four fold divisions of the Army at that time including elephant and horse. Hati chungu and Hati chungu were the name of the post of officers who supplied elephants to the Ahom kings. They also collected a large number of elephant and they deed well trained of those elephants for the use of different purposes of the Ahom state.

Royal use and Conservation of Elephants formed one of the important forest produce of Assam and since the mythological times, elephants occupied a

significant place in the royal households and played a major role in the formulation of royal policies in the region.

Another department was called, 'Hati Chunga', consist of some Moran tribes who were appointed to catch elephant from the forest and supply elephant to the Ahom state. Hatichungi Khel was known as elephant game preservers. The tribe was adjacent to the Bhutan frontier area of western Assam also supplied wild elephant to the Ahom state. An officer designated as Hati Barua was the master of elephants who looked after their well-being and had about 125 elephants under his charge. An officer designated as Habiyal Barua was in overall charge of forests and forest revenues. Products like elephants, ivory, and timbers like aloes and agar wood fetched handsome revenue to the royal government.

The details provided in the commercial treaty concluded in February 1793 between Captain Welsh, the representative of the British government in Assam and the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795), a pair of elephant teeth fetched around Rs 50.00 as export from Assam.

The catching and detention of elephants by the Mughals from the forest of Assam was responsible for breaking of relationship between the Ahom and the Mughals. The Ahom kings presented gifts made of ivory to the rulers of Delhi. The Ahom ruler King Rudra Singh (1696-1714 AD) presented mats, fans and chessmen made of ivory to a ruler of Delhi (Gogoi 1991:90-91).

In the purpose of marriage ceremony of royal families of the Ahom period (1228-1828 CE) the elephants were used by them. At that time, elephants were used for some purposes like, clearing forest, to making new roads, attacking the enemy's army.

**The system of Capturing Elephants in Assam**

There are five methods that, Kunkuti, Kheda, Mela Shikar, Hunting and Digging method. Prevalent for elephant capturing, out of three methods were prevalent in Assam.

Under the Ahoms, elephant catching operations in Assam achieved new heights. The Ahom rulers adopted steps to develop the techniques of elephant catching and training in the country. Measures were undertaken for the efficient functioning of Khedda and Mela shikar operations. The officer Hati Barua supervised the Khedda operation. The Paiks in two batches after every hundred cubits were engaged to keep a watch on the movement of elephants. Chowkies (watch towers) within forested areas were constructed to keep a constant vigilance over the movement of the animal. Elephants were used for riding, hunting, for

carrying loads and dragging woods and for wars and battles. They were also caught for tusks and hides.

Digging and capturing elephants is one of the good practice and method and system of elephant capture in Assam. Used of Ropes and arrange and tie up through ropes is another methods which is popular methods of the capturing of elephants in Assam (Chetri and Chetri: 2015, pp-64-67).

The khedda practice and other methods of capturing elephants had been continued until independence (Kalita, Prabin: 2009).

Melo shikor guidance to the elephants into the forest being necessary suffocated surrounding, which was favorable that which form of death was instantaneous for the reason of the arrangement of the elephant's wind-pipe. This was totally by chosen that which generally targeted cautiously practiced that selected elephants, preferably the younger, more pliable ones. The ratio of death was low, since relatively elephants were trapped at one time with enough manpower had taken care of the worn. Fatality during mahutship and parade was low, the main reason was all personnel involved and they were totally expert for doing so (Kalita, Prabin: 2009).

The people who were related to the trapping of elephants were known as Mahut or Fandi in Assam. During the time of Ahom days, this type of permission gave to the people who were engaged for capturing elephant into the forest. Generally the Fandi was the person who used to catch elephant and taming the wild elephant. Parbati Barua was known as the Queen of elephant in Assam. She described about Fandi and how she had been working with elephant since when her age was in 13 years. The Fandis were going to the forest for collecting and capturing elephants as it was the post of the job and occupation in Assamese society. The fandis were lost their job in Assam during the colonial British period as well as after the independence of India (Kalita, Prabin: 2009).

There is mentioned in the Tungkhungia Buranji (A History of Assam) that generally other tribal chiefs, tribal kings etc were sent some materials as a gift to the Ahom kings for their respect. Sometimes they sent elephants, elephant cavalry, ivory materials, weapon of elephant ivory, ivory pearls to the Ahom state. (Bhuyan, Surya Kumar: 1933: p-60-62) The elephant became infuriated and rolled down from the rampart, head downwards into ditch. The Buragohain of the Pukhuriparia family was serving as the Mahut or elephant driver, he also rolled down but he firmly clung himself to the head of the animal and managed not to have a fall. "The king placed **two elephants** and a few men in charge of the **mad elephant** and forbade

them to lift him till he came to sense. Thus, saying the way (Bhuyan, Surya Kumar: 1933: p-37-38).

The place, Jorhat having assumed the position of a full-fledged metropolis several approach roads were constructing connecting the city with the interior villages. "New buildings were erected at Jorhat operation for catching elephants was instituted in at a distance of six miles east of Jorhat, 120 elephants were captured and the village was thence forth known as **Hatigar**" (Bhuyan, Surya Kumar: 1933: p- 180-183).

## CONCLUSION

Through all of the above discussion, it has clear some aspects from elephant in Assam that the elephants related with deep bond with history in medieval arts, literature, in culture, society, religion, monuments, occupation of the people, traditional folklore, elephant-lore, in the field of political condition, administrative system, social amusements, games and sports, hunting from the human civilization in the region not only Assam but also entire North-eastern areas Indian state states etc. Through this study help us to know about the use of elephant in many purposes. It helps us to increase our knowledge. The study on elephant in Assam are the preservation knowledge which helps us to know that how the peoples dependable on elephants and wildlife, forest and the impact and influence on the society in these regions. The use of elephant at that period in the purposes of as war-machine, like a modern tank in the warfare or battle field, carried the war materials during the time of warfare, vehicles for the purpose of communication, the traveling of the king and the royal nobles, making new roads and path, purpose of war compensation etc various aspects of society in the history of Assam, during the Medieval Period in Assam and Up to 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

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