

## Research Article

# Elephant in the History of Assam During the Medieval Period Up to 1826 CE

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**Abstract:** Elephant is the largest plant-eating animal with trunk, long curved ivory tusk and large ears. It is not only a common largest mammal in Assam but also common in India as well as world. People knew about elephant since the time immemorial. It was known as a symbol of power, peace, prosperity, that represents respect in society. This research articles deals with elephant in history during the medieval period in Assam (1000-1826 CE) during the Ahom period. The proposed research article aims at the study of the role of elephant and its significance in the medieval period in Assam and analyzes the historical account of elephant. The proposed study is based on historical methodology and extensive survey of literaturay sources. The study includes historical accounts on elephant during the Ahom period and its significane in warfare that was considered as the most important element of military power. The study explores the importance of elephants socio-political life of Assam during Ahom period.

**Keywords:** *Elephant, Mahut, Ahom*

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## INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam is situated in the North-Eastern Part of India. It was a land characterized by the presence of dense forest and ideal habitat for Asiatic elephant. The land was known as Kamrupa in ancient period. During the period from 12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE specially up 1826 CE, Assam was ruled by Ahom dynasties. Assam came under British as a consequence of the conclusion of Anglo-Burmese war as per the provision of the treaty of Yeandaboo in Feb. 1826. During the Medieval Period in Assam, the elephant played a very important role in social, economic as well as political life. It was a symbol of Royal authority and element of military power. Therefore, the status of elephant in the political and socio-economic life in Assam was significant in different point of view.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this paper are to explore the historical literature about elephant in Assam during Ahom period and to examine them from the historical point of view. Besides, the proposed study examine the role of elephant and its significance in the socio-economic as well as political-military medieval period in Assam highlight and also to focus in the different field in Assam history related to elephant.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The research paper will be both descriptive and analytical based on historical methods and literary survey method. The datas are mainly collected from the primary as well as secondary sources such as archaeological objects, copper plates, terracotta craft, arts, historical monuments. Besides valuable information has been collected many sources that includes internet archives, e-book, online journal etc. The secondary souces mainly comprises of the litrary works of the times that provides valuable information about elephant during the Ahom period as well as published and unpublished works.

## ORIGINS, DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The word elephant has been derived from the Greek word '*elephas*'. In Sanskrit elephant was known as *Gaza*. In Assamese including other regional languages, it was known as, '*Hati*'.

Palkapya (d.CE) was a great sage who lived in Brahmaputra valley who composed the book on elephant known as "Hasthi-Ayurveda" in Sanskrit. Hathijuj (elephant,s fight) was one of the most important game/khel among the games and sports in Assam during the Ahom period. Elephants were also

used in lower Assam during the festivals and elephant crafts in Assam were a good trade and commerce from the very beginning. Kalikapuranas and Joginitantra described about elephants used in Assam. Goalparia traditional elephant folklore/ songs help us to study about the elephant history and culture in lower Assam,(Chetri and Chetri:2015,pp.100-120).

There is a mythical origin of the present treatise said to have been first compiled by Vasumati herself, on the origin of the world, found on the mount Meru by a righteous person, called Changjasi, who have handed it over to the king of Khe, from whom the king of Mantara got it.it appears probable that, originally compiled in Tai-Ahom language, may be without the pictures of the elephants, the treatise was re-composed by Sukumar Barkayastha under orders of the Ahom King Siva Singha and his Queen consort Ambika Devi with materials drawn from Gajendra cintamani.(Choudhury: 2013: pp-iv)The elephant that has sprung from the Cheng pond, is without cannot raise its private parts. Such an elephant conquers all.- Folio Script No. 10 (Choudhury: 2013: pp- 14-15).

Sukumar Barkath has composed this HastividyanavaSarasamgraha 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).

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. They told that elephants were there at first like Hippopotamus which were known as 'Moeritherium' and from fossils they took an idea about the elephants and its origins. (Talukdar, Bhupendranath: 2001: p:1-33)It is easy to see how the taming of elephant eventually putting it to the service of humans became a reality in the course of history (Sukumar,Raman: 2011:33).

There were quite in keeping with a very old tradition of the special privilege in which an elephant, the vahana of Indra, was placed among the pre-Ahom royal families of Assam, the elephant royal seal, attached to every copper plate inscription of these families signifies two facts: and elephant is a symbol of royalty and sovereignty, of intellectual attainments and of supreme valour, being the vahana of the said Lord of Devas, and it represents as well as Ganesa (Choudhury: 2013: pp-v)

In the epic, Mahabharata at '*Drona Parba*' mentioned about the word 'Gaza' known as 'Ashwatthama' elephant used in the battle of Kurukshetra. Kalika Purana (9<sup>th</sup> century) one of the

earliest texts mentioned as '*Hasti*', (a dialogue between Markandeya-Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, in the chapter 1, 7, 18, 42, pp-8-20) about the origin of the elephant from part of the body of Brahma.This text has also mentioned existence of elephant in the forest of Assam.From the earliest period, Assam was famous for elephant and the elephants were available in the forest of Assam. During the age of the epic the Mahabharata, the King Bhagadatta used elephant in the battle of Kurukshetra and He himself was sitting on the elephant.

The first three historical dynasties, the Varman 350-650, the Salasthamba 655- c900, and the Palac900-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 reign of Kumar Bhaskar Varman.'Nidhanppur' copperplate inscription, mentioned that elephants were used as a unit of army in the reign of Banamal Varman (8<sup>th</sup> century). There's mentioned of Balvarman (829-830 CE) king of Salstambha dynasty of Kamrupa that, the king came with riding on a decorated elephant.

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).There was another Terracotta plaque found near the Da-Parvatiagaon (village) at Sonitpur District of Assam. This terracotta plaque was made in the period from 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. This terracotta plaque recorded with two elephants where two peoples mounted on the elephants which means the people of Assam at that period knew about the use of elephant since the early ages.

There were some objects like terracotta, elephant crafts discovered from the Barpeta. Among of those objects there are some ivory Caskets made from bone of the elephant. Some ivory sandle were there who's made from the elephant bone and teeth. Among of those terracotta toys one was elephant terracotta toys which collected from Asharikandi at Gauripur of Dhubri District in Lower Assam. These materials are now preserved inside the Assam Satate Museum under the authority of the Museum in Guwahati.Gajapathara Motif/Hatir Mur (Heads of Elephant) discovered near Numaligarh at Golaghat. According to Timeline of history of Assam these Gajathara Motif had made in the period from 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, there were the kings of Pala dynasty ruled in Assam.

The inscription of Kanai Barasi Boa rock-1, 2 and 3 near Manikarneswar hill Temple in north Guwahati, describes about the conflict between Turbak and king of Kamrupa and Ahom king. The rock inscription -1 narates and records about the destruction of the Turks who invaded Assam (Kamrupa) with an army of 12000 horsemen with elephant cavalry in 1206, Bakhtiyar khilji the Turko-Afgan leader fought with a handful army and at that time Prithu was thakamrupa king.

In the year of 1256-1257 CE, Tughril Khan, who was the commander of Lakhnauti of Bengal, invaded Assam, then the Kamrupa king Saindhya was defeated by him, and for the first time. Kamata king paid many elephants as the war compensation to Tughril Khan.

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.

Shihabuddin Talish, (1660-1663 CE) quoted in his account 'Fatiyya-i-Ibriyya', the king of Assam mentioned vast bodies of fighting men and ferocious-looking elephant and he also mentioned about the large number of elephant abounding in hilly regions and forest in Assam.

He also described that how Mirjumla (the Mughal army) invaded into Assam and the treaty, 'Ghiladharighat' (1663 CE, was signed between Mirjumla and Jaydhwaj Singha and elephants were paid as the royal tribute by Ahom king Swargadeo Jaydhwaj Singha to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

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

1. Jayadhawaj Singha to sent 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 BaduliPhukan 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)

In Ahom literature, TungkhungiaBurranji( a chronicle of Ahom dynasty, (1681-1826 CE) in this book, author Srinath DuaraBarua mentioned about a member of a unit of officer employed for catching and training elephant, who provided their quota of elephant to the Ahom government in any time. These officers were known as 'Hati Chunga'. The stable of elephant was known as, 'Hatisal'. The unit of retainers (who work under the officers) who allotted elephant to the Ahom king was known as, 'Hatimur.

The Ahom military organisation was consist of well-equipped elephantry. 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 'HatiBarua'. 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. The tribe was adjacent to the Bhutan frontier area of western Assam also supplied wild elephant to the Ahom state.

The catching and detention of elephants by the Mughals from the forest of Assam was responsible for weakening of relationship between the Ahom and the Mughals. Elephants were used in the purpose of marriage ceremony of royal families of the Ahom period (1228-1828 CE). At that time, elephants were used for many purposes like, clearing forest, to making new roads. The Ahom rulers ordered mahout and some peoples like, Moran community for capturing elephant and they also trained them for the purposes war, travelling to the forest, for hunting. Besides these, for the purpose of constructing activities, for moving king, saving chariots and attacking enemies' chariots, breaking fort, walls, supplier of war materials, for passing infantry. Elephant trade was a remarkable economic trade in the period of Ahom rulers (1228-1826 CE). The traders exported and imported elephants to other places. They also imported elephants which had good qualities from Bengal, Burma, Srilanka, China.

Elephant trade, ivory craft, bone of elephants were used as a material for trade and commerce. Elephant took a unique in the purpose of game and sports like, 'Hatijuj'. Lilterary work on elephant like 'Hastividyardyarnava' composed by the author Sukumar Barkath.

Elephants were collected by some peoples, as for examples from the subjects, tribal chiefs, and tribal chiefs as revenue purpose by the Ahom rulers. Elephant

had always been a source of revenue for the Ahom rulers. It also played the sources of Ahom state revenue, rural economy and income. Elephant was the object of worship, a target of hunters, a beast of burden to the people, gentle in captivity, dangerous in the wild, the pride of kings during the time from early to medieval period in Assam.

### **Methods of Capturing Elephants**

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. In the medieval times, elephants always had a source of revenue for Assamese governments which was a political decision to increase revenue for Ahom royal treasury. From the beginning of the Ahom's administration, Kheddah (elephant expedition) was run by the Ahom rulers.

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).

The manuscript copy of Hastividyanava composed under the patronage of Ahom king Siva Singha, only for the elephant and belongs to that glorious chapter of Assam history when this easternmost kingdom of India was enjoying political freedom as well as witnessing an era of peace and all round prosperity. It plays a key role in Assam History. Its influence on human in Assamese archaeology, arts, architecture, paintings, in Ahom administration, social life of Assam, economical benefit, in the Assamese tradition, in culture of Assam and also on environment during the medieval period in Assam. Elephant also play an important role in history of Ahom period. It also provides services in trade and commerce, hunting, in the field of communication, goods carrier.

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. Some times 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).

### **Works of the Public Utility-**

The period of stability of Kamaleswar Singha and peace allowed the king and his ministers to turn their attention towards, the fulfilling of the evening and religious obligations of the the state. Temples were erected at Charakara and Kamakhya at Guwahati with the usual endowments of lands and paiks for their perpetual maintenance. Jorhat having now 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).

Only royal families will have to travel around this elephant, because it is only suitable for them. After hitting the eyes, the body should be surrounded with rock-water and dose and it was hit to hit it. Its rear part is penetrated when it enters its stable. Good results on an evil day if it falls ill should be changed so that the stable.

The elephant, which has a relatively strong provocation and big tusks, whose throat is shown, the ears roar like a tiger, a little short, step by step. The rider with small eyes should be mounted on such an elephant, planting red and black thread and spread (elephant body) and chant a mantra of a Tai-Ahom Style. So doing, it gets tamed, does not make big noise and roar, and move it. If you are sick, you will have to worship chumung deity. If it suffers from fever, then a torch will be given to make chumung ding doi bung well results. (Choudhury: 2013, p-20)

## 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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