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Forts and ramparts of the Ahoms : a close study.

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Abstract

Forts and ramparts played important role in the military system of medieval states. The Ahoms who reigned the Brahmaputra valley from 1228 to 1826 CE had to fight with different powers to extend and to maintain the kingdom. They constructed many forts and ramparts at strategic locations applying different techniques. Here an attempt has been made to highlight these issues with some selective examples.

Keywords: Ahom, fort, rampart

1. Introduction

The Ahoms, a branch of the Tai race migrated to the Brahmaputra valley under the leadership of Chao-lung Siu-Ka-Pha from Mong Mao-lung presently under Dehong Dai Prefecture of Yunnan province of China and established a kingdom in 1228 C.E. in the south-eastern corner of the valley. The boundary of this kingdom was, on the east the Burhi Dihing, on the west the Dikhow, on the north the Brahmaputra and on the south the Naga Hills. Gradually the boundary of the kingdom was extended to all sides to cover the entire plain area of the valley touching the northern hill range on the north, the Patkai on the east, the Manaha on the west and the Naga, Jayantia and Khasi Hills on the south. Until the occupation of the kingdom by the British in1826 C.E. after the treaty of Yandaboo they had to fight with different powers i.e. Chutias, Kacharis, Koches, Muslims of Bengal, Mughals and many hill tribes bordering the valley. Hence the Ahom rulers during their long rule of six hundred years had to wage war with different types of power as well as different kinds of weapons. So to face them the Ahom army as well as the rulers had to exploit the topography of the valley.

They fortified strategic locations in such a way so that it could resist the foreign invaders as well as other powers.

One important characteristic of the Ahom warfare was the construction of forts and ramparts. It was their age old tradition and Siu-Ka-Pha brought this tradition from his homeland. L.W. Shakespear citing reference to Ney Elias gives a description of the Shan (Burmese Tai) capital Cheila – the first definite capital the Shans possessed in Upper Burma is said to have been Cheila, now the modern Selan, on the Shweli valley to the north-west of the present Shan state… It stands on the highest part of an irregular shaped plateau 200 to 300 ft. above the Shweli, and this plateau is completely surrounded by an entrenched ditch, in many places 40 to 50 ft. deep. There is no doubt that a wall once existed, but this has long since completely mouldered away.[1] During their rule the Ahoms constructed many forts and ramparts. In spite of flood, erosion, earthquake and other natural calamities remnants are still seen.In this paper an attempt has been made to study the strategic locations and technique of construction of certain forts and ramparts which were important for defense purposes.

2. Methodology

The study is both analytical and descriptive and is carried on by collecting data from primary as well

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as secondary sources. Field survey of the strategic locations, forts and ramparts which are still in existence is done and is compared with the data collected from different sources.

3. Purpose of construction

The forts and ramparts were constructed mainly for two purposes – i. to defend the country, and ii. to meet the immediate necessity in the battle field that arose during the course of war.[2] The first category of forts and ramparts were in nature permanent but not in construction as they were made of durable materials.[3] Armies, arms and ammunitions under military officers were posted there and these were maintained properly. Of course the boundary walls of the two palaces of the capitals of Garhgaon and Rangpur were made of bricks remnants of which are still seen. On the other hand the second category of forts and ramparts were temporary and after the fulfillment of the purpose those were left aside.

4. Selection of sites

The site of the forts and ramparts of permanent in nature were selected very carefully after considering its topography and strategic locations. For exampleSiu-Seng- Pha alias PratapSingha(1603-41 CE) constructed a fort connecting Haruni-Daruni hill and bank of the Brahmaputra on the north and Simaluguri to the Diju on the south bank as he realized the strategic importance of that place after defeating the great Mughals in the Bharali War in 1616CE.[4]Most of the forts were constructed on the top of hills or at the confluence of two rivers i.e. Jogighopa fort(Jogighopa hills), Kajali fort (at the confluence of the Kalang and the Brahmaputra), Jagi fort at the confluence of the Kalang and the Kapili), Lakhow fort (at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the BurhiDihing), Samdhara fort (on the Bhumuraguri hill) etc. easily unassailable for the enemies. Some ramparts were constructed in the plains also connecting two river banks or connecting a hill range and a bank of a river to obstruct the advance of the enemy.During the reign of Siu-Jin-Pha alias Arjun Dihingia Raja II (1675-77 CE), the Chintamani *garh* was constructed connecting the hills fromTulasijan/GabharuParvat and the river Dihing.[5]Ladoi *garh* was constructed by Siu-Seng-Pha to the west of the Namdang as a line of defense having been experienced by his father Siu-Kham-Pha alias Khora Raja (1552-1603 CE) at the time of the Koch invasion under Sukladhvaj.[6]Again some forts were constructed at the foot –hills to obstruct the inroads of the hill tribes i.e. the Dafala garh[7], Miri garh[8] etc. Forts were constructed by connecting two hills also i.e. the Fulung *garh*.[9] Distance from the base of operations, communication and transportation of army and war materials were also taken into consideration. Lachit Barphukan paid greatest emphasis in building forts and ramparts in and around Guwahati considering its topography and strategic location.[10]Even the locations of the ramparts constructed to fulfill the immediate purpose were determined by the considerations of the topography of the region, position and strength of the enemy and of its own. The temporary military stations established during the course of a campaign were also defended by ramparts and palisades.

5. Materials used in construction

Different materials were used in the construction considering its availability and accessibility. Most of the ramparts were of earth. Logs of wood, trunk of plantain trees, different varieties of bamboo, thorny bushes, sand, bamboo mat, different varieties of reed and cane, straw,stone, bricks etc. were also used. Accordingly these were called as *Mati garh*(fort made of earth),[11] *Bali garh* (fort made of sand),[12] *Pani garh* (fort on the river),[13] *Kath garh* (fort made of wood)[14], *Pachala garh* (fort made plantain tree),[15] *Banh garh* (fort made of bamboo)[16] etc. It is worthy to mention that the Chutias also constructed *Pachala garh*.[17] The Koches also used to construct *Kath garh* in war.[18]

6. Technique of construction

Shehabuddin Talesh in *Tarikh-e-Aasham* gives a vivid description of the Jogighopa fort. It was a lofty and spacious one.Its western wall, that faced the victorious (Mughal) army, extended up to peak of the hill on the bank of river Brahmaputra. In front of the fort dangerous pits and holes were dug at regular intervals in such a manner that leg of a horse might get struck in it. The holes were covered with sharp pointed bamboo locally known as *Bhanj*. The same strategy was also adopted behind the fort for half a shot's distance from the ground up to the edge of the ditch. Beyond this there was a three yard wide and deep ditch adjacent to the wall of the fort. This ditch was also covered with *Bhanj*. They, fortify their forts and position like the Ganwar community (stubborn) of Hindustan who built their forts using mud by applying the same technique as they (Ganwar) applied. The river Brahmaputra surrounded the fort of Jogighopa on the south. On its eastern side a large river called Manas flew and joined the mighty Brahmaputra near above mentioned hill. On the northern side it was protected by ditch, hill and dense

jungle.[19]

The Saraighat fort was larger and higher than the Jogighopa ramparts. The walls were higher than the surrounding hills. It was also surrounded by big and deep moats. Heavy wooden posts were erected into the ground in front of the main gate closing the entry and exit point. Even the elephants of the Mughal army were unable to uproot the wooden posts quickly.[20]

Opposite to the Saraighat was the Pandu fort on the south bank of the Brahmaputra and it was just like the former one in every aspect.[21]

More imposing was the Simalugarh/ Similagarh fort. It was located to the east of the Samdhara fort on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Shehabuddin Talesh again giving a description of it lauded un-hesitatingly though seems over-flourishing. It was made of earthwork. It was so firm and solid that even a warrior like Alexander could not have overrun it. Even the planet Saturn would have to bow before its great height. The watchtowers were as high as the sky. Its turrets would have crossed the planet Saturn in height. Its moats were so deep that its bottom would have reached the back of the bull supposed to be supporting the earth. Its expansive layout was beyond measurement. The habitants of this fort were larger than the family of ants and locusts. It was full to capacity with every instruments of warfare… The tanks, cross-bows and guns were positioned close together on the walls and the defenders had taken position behind it. Deep ditches studded with bamboo spikes locally known as Bhanj protected the base of every wall. The southern wall of the fort facing a hill, was situated four Karoh away behind the fort. The wall on the northern side facing the river Brahmaputra was three Karoh away from the fort. A small stream coming out from the southern side of the fort flows towards the west after having touched the base of the southern tower.[22]Stone and bricks were also used in the construction of this fort.[23]

The Mughal captives of the Bharali war were kept in a place surrounded by palisades made of *khagari*(saccharum fuscum), a variety of reed available in Assam.[24]*Kahua*(saccharum spontaneum),another variety of reed was also used to make stockades around camps.[25]

A *Banh garh* with ten gates surrounding the capital of Garhgaon was constructed by Momai Tamuly after becoming Barbora.[26] Wooden posts and *singari,* a sharp multiple pointed iron implement were also used. Namtial Barbarua, at the order of Siu-Hit-Pang-Pha alias Gaurinath Singha (1780-95 CE) strengthened his capital Rangpur to defend against the Moamarias implanting three rows of wooden posts around the brick walls. Beyond these wooden posts, the *singari*s were scattered.[27]

Lachit Barphukan, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ahom army against the Mughals constructed many forts and ramparts in and around Guwahati. He constructed a *Bali garh* at Andharubali (sand bank of the Brahmaputra from the foot of the Nilachal hill to the Sukreswar temple). It was constructed by spreading Naga *dhari* (a kind of bamboo mat used by the Nagas) between two rows of strong Sal (shorea robusta) tree posts covered by sand.[28]

Pani garh was constructed on the water courses to obstruct the passage of the enemy's navy. Sun-Yat-Pha alias Udayaditya Singha (1670-72 CE) systematically collected and composed the technique of construction of *Bam garh* (fort on land) and *Pani garh*– e.g. the length of Sal posts and its distance from the bank according to the depth of water; use of stone and lever with iron knots at the two ends of the *Raidang* (calamusfasciculatus), a variety of cane used as rattan.[29]

A *Pachala garh* was constructed by Debera Barbarua by using the trunks of plantain trees at Mechaghar in Sivasagar.[30] The Mughals even constructed this type of fort in Assam. Though this fort was of no use after three or four days, still it was quite strong. Arrows and bullets from guns had no power to pass through this barricade.[31]

During the time of operation of war, the Ahoms used to construct many forts as deemed necessary. They selected the sites after careful observation of the topography, strength and weakness of the enemy as well as of their own and materials available in the locality. They advanced towards the enemy by constructing several rows of fort. For example, they constructed nine forts against the Mughals at Hajo close to each other in such a way that even heated elephants working without fear of opposition or danger would not be able to make any impression on the walls which were made entirely of logs of wood…[32]

At Ranihat also, instead of constructing fort in the plains in front of the Mughal's fort, they went to a hill to the right of the enemy, erected a fort close to the hill and fully strengthened it within the night. From that place they began to construct a series of forts in order to bring the enemy at bay.[33]

Normally the Ahoms constructed the forts at night. But sometimes they did it during day time also

when they felt it necessary and safe. They were very quick to change the plans and strategy as and when necessary. Their forts were lofty encircled by deep ditches and equipped with big cannons on the walls and towers.[34]Forts were raised on the roads to block the communication and transportation of arms and ammunitions and other materials of subsistence.[35] They came out from the forts generally in the last part of the night, made concerted attack on the enemy and after killing the enemy came back quickly to the fort.[36] They dug trenches and fought against the enemy concealing there.[37]

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion it is found that the forts and ramparts constructed by the Ahoms formed an inalienable part of their military system. These were constructed at strategic points after careful scrutiny of the topography along with due consideration to the strength, weakness, position of the enemy's army and of their own. The materials used were of durable in nature available in the region. They used different techniques in the construction suitable to the topography and their nature of warfare.

Endnotes

1. Shakespear, p. 166.
2. Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha, pp.65-66.
3. ibid, p.64
4. Satsari Assam Buranji henceforth SAB, p.82.
5. ibid. pp.105-106.
6. Assam Buranji obtained from Sukumar Mahanta henceforth ABSM, p.57.
7. Rajkumar, p. 535.
8. Ibid. p.550.
9. Goswamy, pp.3-4.
10. ABSM, p.93.
11. Jayantia Buranji, p.129.
12. Assam Buranji edited by N.Gogoi henceforth ABG, p.68; ABSM, p.101.
13. ABSM, p.68; Assam Buranji by Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin henceforth ABHB,p.50
14. Nathan, Vol. II, pp.577-78
15. ABSM, p. 110
16. SAB, p.26.
17. ibid. p. 13.
18. Shastri&Chaliha, p.72.
19. Talesh, pp. 19-20.
20. ibid. pp. 20-21.
21. ibid. p. 21.
22. Ibid. pp.26-27.
23. Borah, p.135.
24. ABSM, p.49.
25. ibid. p.25.
26. SAB, p.26.
27. ibid.p.155.
28. ABG, p.68; p.101, ABSM, p.101; Borboruah, p.184.
29. ABHB, p.50; ABG, p.68; Borboruah, p.192.
30. ABSM, p.110.
31. Nathan,Vol.II, p.611.
32. ibid.p.497.
33. ibid. p.572.
34. ibid. pp. 574-575.
35. ibid. pp. 578-579.
36. Nathan, Vol. I, p. 396.
37. Bhuyan, pp.65-67.

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