

Environment and Power Relations: Political Processes in the Brahmaputra Valley (from c. 1500-1770)

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1. Introduction: Understanding State, Politics and Environment in the Brahmaputra Valley (1500-1770)

I. Objectives of Study

Historical enquiries into the early modern period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in the Indian subcontinent are considerably preoccupied with the Mughal empire. There is an overwhelming tendency to locate concurrent political formations either as frontier phenomena or as spaces yet to be brought into the politico-cultural fold of the Mughal state.¹ As a result, such political formations, despite their own historical trajectories and experiences, are seen only in terms of their interactions with the Mughal State. This definitely enriches our understanding of the Mughal State and the manner it operated in, and negotiated with, areas where its political influence was only marginally felt. However, persisting with using the Mughal State as the keyhole to look into other political formations precludes historicising the specificities in their experiences.

The central attempt in this work is, therefore, to look at the political and territorial organisations in the Brahmaputra Valley from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, resulting power relations, military encounters and the wider processes of state-building in a template provided by environment and geography. This study intends to understand how the environmental context informed and necessitated particular practices of territoriality. We also try to examine political processes in the valley in terms of power relations between political entities and how

¹ See, Joss Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire 1500-1700*, Routledge, London, 2002; Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment and Empire in Mughal North India*, OUP, Delhi, 2019; Sudhindra Nath Bhattarcharya., *A History of Mughal North East Frontier Policy*, Chuckerverty Chatterjee & Co. Ltd, Calcutta, 1929

these political entities, often with overlapping claims, conceptualised and practiced territoriality.

The Brahmaputra Valley is ‘about four hundred and fifty miles in length from east to west and with an average breadth of about fifty miles from north to south.’² Furthermore, apart from the west, this valley is enveloped by hills on all sides even though communication and movement is possible by accessing several narrow passes. The valley itself ‘is crisscrossed with a large number of tributaries of Brahmaputra.’³ Navigation of these tributaries, especially the rain fed ones, depended on the volume of water during the dry season. At the same time, navigation in monsoon could be made difficult by ‘crashing banks, floating trees and difficult tracking along the jungle covered banks.’⁴

The Brahmaputra Valley constituted the central political stage for the Ahoms, Koches and several smaller chieftaincies. Furthermore, from the seventeenth century, after consolidating their presence against the Afghan chieftains in Bengal, the Mughals too began to make inroads into the valley as an extension of their presence in Bengal. However, as we will see in the course of this study, the Mughal presence in the valley was marked by uncertain political hold, loose imperial supervision. Consequently, for the Mughals the valley remained a frontier at the north eastern edge of their empire where Mughal imperial mandate and institutional practices could be realised only partially. So, the Brahmaputra Valley was simultaneously both a political heartland and a difficult frontier.

² Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 11

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11



Map 1: Map of the Brahmaputra Valley showing various political formations in the later half of eighteenth century.

Source:<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Ahom-kingdom-c1826p.png>

In this work, we study a long span of more than two centuries, from about 1500 to 1769. This period begins with administrative sophistication, territorial expansion and consolidation of the Ahom State in the eastern part of the valley during the course of sixteenth century; which is then followed in the seventeenth century by the entry of the Mughals in the valley, subsequent conflicts between the two powers and eventual retreat of the Mughals towards the end of the century. Finally, by the 1769, the Ahom state itself enters into a prolonged phase of internal disturbances ‘followed by foreign occupations.’⁵ The period under study thus seeks to

⁵ Amalendu Guha, *The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 9

encompass the manifold processes of political expansion, conflict, consolidation of the different state systems in the Valley.

The focus of this work, for most parts, is on the Ahom State, as we primarily rely on- *Buranjis* (Royal Chronicles of the Ahoms)- which are sources either written on behalf of, or through the lens of, the Ahoms. However, the very nature of enquiry, which seeks to understand ideas of territoriality and power relations between various political units for instance the Koch, means that the attempt here is not to write a history of the Ahom State alone, or in isolation, without taking into account the various formations. In its essence, then, this is a study of the range of political processes comprising various political units and systems that played out in the Brahmaputra Valley. As would be apparent, through the course of the chapters, the focus on the Ahom State, and also the Mughals (in the last chapter), is only an outcome of, and proportionate to, the extent of political influence they asserted in the complex and variegated political processes of the Valley. Therefore, apart from the discussion on the Ahom and Mughal states, we would constantly and simultaneously also refer to the other state systems of the region , particularly the Koch, but also Chutiyas, Kacharis, Jaintiyas and other smaller chieftains.

In the north eastern frontier of the Mughal empire, scholars have particularly highlighted the precarious nature of the Mughal campaigns. While trying to explain Mughal presence in these areas the primary focus has always been on military engagements and novelty in scholarship is only seen in attempts to account for the peculiarities of such engagements.⁶ Whether out of natural conditions or out of uncertain political management, this frontier has been projected in

⁶ See, Joss Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire 1500-1700*; Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment and Empire in Mughal North India*

both Mughal primary sources as well as in the present historiography as one which was unfamiliar, hostile and difficult to retain.⁷

This raises few preliminary but fundamental questions which underscores the necessity of studying the early modern experience of these state systems termed as a part of the Mughal 'northeast frontier'. Firstly, it is essential to examine how these states organised their politics and managed their administration vis a vis the contingent geographical and ecological conditions. Secondly, and related to the first, it is necessary to look at ideas of territoriality and boundaries, the manner in which they were shaped by the specific conditions and, in turn, informed the political relations amongst these states. Thirdly, it is also necessary to compare and contrast the capacity of the state systems of the valley to engage with the given environmental conditions with that of the experience of Mughals. The intention here develop a more holistic understanding of the interface between political and environmental as it played out in the region,

II. Historical Background: A Brief Survey

As pointed out by Amalendu Guha, 'the period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century saw the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations in north-east India.'⁸ They however were at a rudimentary stage of state formation with limited centralisation and existed 'alongside of a fragmented political system known as the *bhuyan raj*.'⁹ These *Bhuyans* were landholders and organised themselves 'locality wise either under

⁷ For instance see *Tarikh-e-Aasham* for Shehabuddin Talesh's account of the difficulties faced by the army of Mir Jumla due to incessant rains, floods and diseases in their expedition against the Ahoms in 1662

⁸ Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714), *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 5

⁹ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 100

the hegemony of an overlord (*bar raja*) or formed a confederacy (*bara bhuyan*) headed by a chief *bhuyan*.¹⁰ As Amalendu Guha mentions, these class of landholders continued to maintain their local domains of power even under the influence of the expanding tribal polities and were, at times, ‘absorbed into the lower echelons of the new machinery set up for corvee collection’¹¹

At the initial stage, the Ahoms constituted one of the many such tribal political formations. The fundamental unit in the political organisation of the Ahom State was that of groups of agrarian village settlements (*ban*) with each one comprising of ‘certain number of big or small families belonging to different family groups (*foid*)’¹² Clusters of such units in turn formed ‘an intermediate administrative unit or domain with one of the village settlements as the headquarters (*che*) of the noblemen governing it.’¹³ Amalendu Guha points out that, at this stage, the entire political system was decentralised and was reflected by the Tai term *mung* which could mean ‘either the kingdom as a whole or any of its constituent chiefs’ domains.’¹⁴ However, expansion in wet rice cultivation in the subsequent centuries provided the Ahoms with ‘material base for their further political and economic expansion.’¹⁵

In the sixteenth century, on the one hand, the Ahoms consolidated their presence in the eastern part of the Valley and, on the other, the Koches gradually established themselves in the western part (Kamrup). Consequent attempts at territorial expansion resulted in phases of armed conflict not only involving the Ahoms and Koch but also with other states like the Kacharis, Chutiyas and several local chieftains. By the end of the sixteenth century, some of the earlier states like that of the Chutiyas were completely integrated into the Ahom state while others maintained varied forms of tributary relationships with either the Ahoms or the Koches.

¹⁰ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 100

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 102

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102

Territoriality, however, continued to overlap, was constantly contested and , therefore, in a state of flux; a question which we will take up in details in the course of this study.

The political stage of the seventeenth century was further complicated by two factors. Firstly, in the first decade of the seventeenth century, Nar Narayan (1540-1581), the Koch king, divided the Koch territories between his son Lakshmi Narayan and his nephew Raghu Deb. In his account, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi*, Mirza Nathan, a Mughal official who served in the region in the first couple of decades of the seventeenth century, distinguished between the two by referring to them as the kings of Kamta and Kamrup respectively.¹⁶ Secondly, and related to the first, the conflict over overlapping territorial claims that followed the division of the Koch territories, also manifested itself in the diplomatic alliances that were forged. So, what is seen is that the Mughals aligned themselves with Lakshmi Narayan in his struggles against Raghu Deb who himself had come close to Isa Khan (an Afghan chief of Bengal). The Mughals at this point were engaged in a long drawn conflict with the Afghan chiefs in Bengal. Following the death of Isa Khan, Raghu Deb developed ties with the Ahom king Sukhampha (1552-1603) and, as one of the chronicles of the Ahoms (*Purani Asama Buranji*) records, 'sent an envoy to Sukhampha offering his daughter.'¹⁷ This period therefore saw the entry of the Mughals in the affairs of Koch, even though they had not, as yet, ventured into the Koch territories. Their involvement, at this point, probably was an extension of their engagement with the Afghans in Bengal. The Afghans, as we have seen developed ties with one of the Koch Rajas and considering the territorial proximity of Bengal with Koch Behar, it was expedient for the Mughals to find alternative channels to contain Afghan influence in the region. As *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions once the position of the Mughals was consolidated in Bengal, and the

¹⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1936, p. 40

¹⁷ Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharya,, *A History of Mughal North East Frontier Policy*, Chuckerverty Chatterjee & Co. Ltd, Calcutta, 1929, p. 121

Afghan authority virtually eliminated, Islam Khan, the Mughal *subahdar* of Bengal, in 1609, sent envoys to both Lakshmi Narayan and Raghu Deb's son and successor Parikshit Narayan.¹⁸ Lakshmi Narayan is supposed to have sent a *peshkash* which indicates a tributary status and also promised military assistance to the Mughals against Parikshit Narayan. In 1612, Islam Khan officially started the Mughal expedition into their north-east frontier when he sent an army and fleet against Parikshit.

At this point, it might be helpful to have a preliminary idea about the territorial setting of the Brahmaputra Valley. Stephen Cacella, a Portuguese traveller who visited the Brahmaputra Valley in 1626 describes:

‘Continuing their way by water [from Dhaka] for three weeks the two [Stephen Cacella and John Cabral] passed some sixty ‘choquis’ [chawkies], a sort of custom house, at each of which they had to pay toll. They were now at Azo [Hajo]... We passed the town and arrived at Pando [Pandu], where lives Satargit, Rajah of Busna, the pagan commander-in-chief of Mogor [Mughal] against the Assanes [Assamese] ... who border on Pando, the last district of the kingdom in that direction.’¹⁹

What we see is that, the seventeenth century political stage of the Brahmaputra Valley brought into contact the Mughals, Ahoms and the Koches whose mutual relations, at various points, were characterised by processes of conflict, cooperation and co-option. By the last decade of seventeenth century, the Mughals retreated from the valley and the Ahoms expanded their influence as far west as the river Manas.

¹⁸ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1936, p. 40

¹⁹ C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia: 1603-1721*, Low Price Publication, Delhi, 1999, p. 124

This brief outline of the political history of the region highlights a fundamental aspect that this study seeks to grapple with. The Brahmaputra valley presents us with a region where sovereignty and authority were multiple. In the previous section we have only broadly outlined three political entities, viz., Ahoms, Mughals, Koches but as we have referred earlier, there were several other political formations which asserted various degrees of local authority.

III. Historiography

In order to locate the present work in the existing historiography, I will, first, try to look at how the extant works have dealt with the specific conditions, geographical and ecological, that impinged on the political activities in this region.

Even though his primary focus was economic rather than political history, Amalendu Guha, opens up a discussion on historical geography and the physical environment of the region of the Brahmaputra Valley. His eventual attempt was to link the physical environment with material life that emerged in terms of shifting cultivation, wet rice economy and also the social organisation of labour forces. However, his discussion on physical environment - location, rainfall, relief and vegetation- would be a convenient starting point for locating the present study. While outlining the topography of the Valley, Guha in his description, divides the valley into three belts. The first, *chapari*, is a riverine belt flanking the Brahmaputra on both sides and undergoes intense flooding during monsoons. Only a few locations here, for instance Goalpara, Guwahati, Tezpur, Silghat and Biswanath, enjoy natural defence by means of ‘some scattered hills right on the banks itself.’²³ Elsewhere the banks are sandy ‘and overflows the country for several miles during the rains.’²⁴ Bordering the *chapari* belt on both sides is the *rupit* belt,

²³ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 12

²⁴ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 12

which also comprises the fertile lands. However, unless settled and cleared this belt was ‘thickly forested under natural conditions.’²⁵ Beyond this, down the foothills, and around the valley, lies the *Doars*, the sub montane belt which ‘is under scrubby forests and high grass savannahs’²⁶

Arup Jyoti Saikia’s account of the Brahmaputra River provides an interesting insight into the manifold ways in which the river and its floodplain environment had to be negotiated through the course of the human history in the region. He describes the Brahmaputra Valley as a ‘a complex agrarian landscape that demanded continuous interaction between floodplains, hills and foothills.’²⁷ While a significant portion of the work is deals with the colonial history of the river and the valley, he does include a brief background of context that the river simultaneously shaped and operated in during the pre-modern period. Political systems that developed in the region were intimately connected to and ‘were distinguished by their location within a valley surrounded by hills and rivers.’²⁸ He identified processes through which some state systems expanded into the fertile floodplains, populating them while at the same time developing strategies to adapt to the vicissitudes of the Brahmaputra and its network of tributaries. States in the valley constantly tried to develop strategies to deal with floods and improve communication through riverine networks. This can be seen in the manner embankments, bridges as well as resettlement of population were actively carried out by the states. Saikia illustrates that the during the pre-modern period the river and settlement in the floodplains, and later even in the low lands, were critical for the agrarian economy of the region. Additionally, the riverine network of the region ‘also acted as a crucial geographical medium for political

²⁵ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Anwesha Publications, Guwahati, 2015, p. 14

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14

²⁷ Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A biography of the Brahmaputra*, OUP, Delhi, 2019, p. 76

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53

power.²⁹ Control over movement in the river was crucial for a state's claim to territorial power. Saikia makes brief remarks about how both the Ahoms and the Mughals paid attention to naval power by appointing specific officers to ensure smooth control and communication along the river. For instance, the Ahoms appointed '*Pani Phukan* to oversee rivers and *Naoboicha Phukan* to take care of the state of boats in the kingdom.'³⁰ This account of the Brahmaputra is a good starting point to examine how the environmental setting engendered, facilitated or restricted specific form of territoriality and power relations among the political entities of the valley.

James C Scott has looked at the nature of state spaces in Southeast Asia in order to highlight spaces of statelessness. Putting aside statelessness, what is of our importance here is his preliminary discussion on the 'logic and dynamics behind the creation of state spaces in mainland Southeast Asia.'³¹ It is not difficult to see the similarities in geographical and environmental conditions with our area of interest. He identifies an ideal state space as one which has 'geographical concentration of the kingdom's subjects and the fields they cultivate within easy reach of the state core'³² He further comments that this was particularly important in premodern conditions of slow and restricted mobility wherein 'the friction of terrain set up sharp, relatively inflexible limits to the effective reach of the traditional agrarian state.'³³ However, factors like climate, forests, hills, marshes, limited navigation of rivers could severely hinder movement and therefore 'state-building in precolonial mainland Southeast Asia was powerfully constrained by geography.'³⁴ The effective power of central control tended to moderated by ease of access to zones a state claimed as its territory. For instance as Scott points

²⁹ Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A biography of the Brahmaputra*, OUP, Delhi, 2019, p. 78

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78

³¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, London, 2009, p. 39

³² *Ibid.*, p. 40

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 43

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50

out ‘even the most robust kingdom, however, shrank virtually to the ramparts of its palace walls once the monsoon rains began in earnest.’³⁵ Pointing out further to the precarious nature of control, he elaborates that advances and gains made in the dry season ‘was often undone by the rains and, it seems, by the diseases of the wet season as well.’³⁶ State power, political organisation and territoriality under such conditions cannot be ‘visualised as a sharply delineated, contiguous territory following the mapmaking conventions for modern states.’³⁷

It is in this light that we can link up environmental and geographical conditions to the political geography of states, development of local power nodes and their relative autonomy to make a range of strategic choices. Alliances, contestations or any other form of interactions among these nodes as well the prevailing geographical and environmental parameters are all critical to our understanding of state building in the region.

Now that we have a broad geographical idea of the region, we can look at how the concept of frontiers has been used to discuss the various areas of the Mughal Empire. Joss Gommans, while conceptualising the idea of the frontiers, referred in his essay to the eastern region, Koch, Bengal *suba* briefly. Despite this cursory reference, it is worthwhile to discuss Gommans’s idea of the frontiers for it has bearing on the understanding of the BV as the n-e frontier of the Mughals. Joss Gommans identified Mughal empire as one consisting of not well marked territories but rather as

‘open and fluid patchworks in which closely controlled areas of more or less settled agriculture alternated with uncultivated wastes and marchlands at best occupied by hard-to-administer nomadic tribes, but all tied together in networks of pastoral and

³⁵ Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A biography of the Brahmaputra*, OUP, Delhi, 2019, p. 61

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62

³⁷ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, London, 2009, p. 54

commercial roads that, through the foremost urban centres, connected to them as well as the outside world.³⁸

The empire thus comprised of, as Gommans called them, numerous inner frontiers and warfare served to ‘bridge the various inner frontiers of the empire.’³⁹ It is with this conception in mind that Gommans points out that the study of frontiers in the medieval and early modern period is to recognise that ‘the idea of the frontier as a straight line on a map is entirely modern.’⁴⁰ He further states that ‘frontiers of the Mughal Empire were never lines but always zones.’⁴¹ Frontiers embody a zone where we can witness transition in consistency of characteristic political practices and institutions as well as that of ecology. Gommans distinguishes between two kinds of frontiers in the Mughal empire- ‘first a more open inner frontier with dry savannah like marchland intersected by cultivated zones, latter a more closed, outer frontier of impenetrable forest or swamp.’⁴² It is the second category of frontiers which is of our interest here, as it referred to the one Mughals encountered in their eastern limits, specifically Bengal but also further north-east towards Assam. He came to identify this frontier as one dictated by the constraints placed by nature on imperial movement. Imperial attempts towards control of this frontier were severely affected by their capacity of navigating the numerous river systems which, however, was seasonal and further limited by an inhospitable climate. Even though he only briefly mentions the Mughal activity beyond Bengal in this frontier, he provides some important insights into the political conditions that came about because of geographical remoteness. Even though Gommans did not focus on the political formations in the north-east,

³⁸ Joss Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire 1500-1700*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 201-02

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 15

the Mughal experience highlighted by him makes it clear that the natural environment made political control in this area extremely challenging.

Pratyay Nath in his recent work has yet again stressed that the Mughals had to confront a very unfamiliar geography and difficult climatic conditions in their campaigns in Bengal. Furthermore, in the case of Assam the primary difficulty ‘was in adapting to the natural environment of the Brahmaputra basin.’⁴³ Annual rains, thick forests and the flooding of numerous rivers posed a significant problem in the army’s march. He cites a passage from seventeenth century text, *Muntakhabu’l Lubab*, where Khafi Khan, the author, describes how exigencies of environmental conditions affected the march of Mughal army into Ahom territories in 1662.

‘Though the *Khan-i Khanan* [Mir Jumla] made arrangements for capturing the [Ahom] Raja, yet it was found impossible to pursue him owing to the monsoon season when it rains continuously both night and day for five months in that territory, and water covers the whole surface of the land, and the roads are completely closed...’⁴⁴

Even though Pratyay Nath does not much get into the details in the case of Assam, he examines how seasonal floods resulted in a complete break in the communication lines of the Mughal *thanas*. He goes on to identify issues of logistics and manner in which warfare in the region depended on the capacity of the armies to negotiate with the environmental peculiarities.

Furthermore, building upon Joss Gommans’s conception of frontiers, he identified that

‘frontiers of Mughal power emerged due to the conjuncture of several processes. These included failures to control routes of communication, cope with environmental

⁴³ Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment and Empire in Mughal North India*, OUP, Delhi, 2019, p. 71

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72

conditions, negotiate the military techniques of their adversaries and co-opt local zaminders into the imperial project.⁴⁵

A Comprehensive History of Assam, edited by HK Barpujari, and SN Bhattacharya's *History of Mughal North East frontier*, focus entirely on battles fought, victories and reverses sustained by various parties and as such pays no attention to political and territorial organisation or management of state affairs. A brief section in *Comprehensive History of Assam*, however, deals with the political geography of the region by outlining its major features. The division of the valley into *Uttarkul* and *Dakhinkul*, on northern and southern banks of Brahmaputra and the distribution of various principalities and forts in the areas are mentioned. These two works also give us an idea of the range of political actors who were involved, sites for major military engagements and changing political geography. For the sake of elaboration, we can highlight a few cases. For instance, when the Koch Army went on a expedition to Ahom territories further east in 1562-63, the route for the land army passed through 'Darrang district, Sonitpurpur to Singri, across the Bharali and finally to Narayanpur.'⁴⁶ This march involved not only military engagements with local elements but also settling territorial limits and erecting forts. It is also mentioned that when Koch army finally occupied the Ahom capital of Garhgaon, the Ahom king retreated to first Nam Chen hill and later to Charaikhong on the Naga hills. Similarly, in 1581, Nar Narayan, the Koch king divided the Koch territories between his son Lakshmi Narayan and his nephew Parikshit Narayan with 'the dividing line being Sankosh river.'⁴⁷ Parikshit then came to hold control of the newly formed state of Kamrup. However, such a division did not cease hostilities between the two territories and raids and skirmishes continued at the fringes of the new states. The subsequent period saw the entry of Mughals into the politics

⁴⁵ Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment and Empire in Mughal North India*, OUP, Delhi, 2019, p. xl

⁴⁶ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 78

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95

of the region as primary ally of Lakshminarayan, the son of Nar Narayan and the heir to Koch territory. Here, it is mentioned that it was essential for 'the land and naval forces of the imperialists had necessarily to co-operate... along the hilly and jungly banks of the Brahmaputra into the core of the unknown region.'⁴⁸

While detailed information on the movements of Mughal army into Kamrup is absent in *Comprehensive History of Assam*. SN Bhattacharya's *Mughal's North-East Frontier*, provides us with some details about the movement of the fleet along the Brahmaputra. From Ghoraghat, near Jahangirnagar, the Mughal army reached Tuk, and proceeded on to Patladah. It appears that, during the period under study, a part of the imperial fleet was stationed at Patladah. The army then moved to Dhubri. Here we find the first reference to encounter of the Mughals with that of the forces under Parikshit in 1612. From there they advanced to Gilah, named Jahangirabad by the Mughals; which, for a long time served as an important political centre of the Mughals. Proceeding westwards, in their pursuit of Parikshit, they then crossed the river Manas and entered into Kamrup. After crossing the Manas, the Mughals reached Barnagar and then advanced to Hajo. Hajo remained the centre of Mughal presence in Kamrup during this period. He also provides us with an idea about the route taken by the Mughals in their expeditions into Ahom territories. For instance, the unit sent to the territories under Ahoms under the command of Abu Bakr in 1615 moved from Hajo to Kuhhata and then finally reached the mouth of Kalang River. They then advanced to the place where the rivers Brahmaputra and Bharali met, opposite to the Samdhara fort of the Ahoms.

Mughal control however remained tenuous as several local chieftains, linked to the royal family of Kamrup either through lineage or diplomatic ties, raised insurrections. We find reference to disturbances led by Sanatan in Dhamdhama, Bali Narayan in Darrang, Mamu Govinda in

⁴⁸ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 100

Beltala, Rani Raja in Ranihat, Parshuram in the Rangdan tract and numerous other hill chieftains. Some of these were encouraged by the Ahom King. We also get some idea about boundaries of domains. On the west of Ahom territories, Barnadi marked the 'eastern boundary of Kamrup.'⁴⁹ SN Bhattacharya gives a more precise opinion with regards to the western boundaries; 'Sangari was the western frontier town in Uttarkol, while Kajal, which stood at the confluence of the Kalang river with Brahmaputra, was the frontier post in Dakhinkol.'⁵⁰

What we therefore see is that the major theme for these works is to highlight the military confrontations in making of the region's history. The focus again is to describe conflict in terms of victories and defeats while interpreting them in terms of the personal qualities of the commander involved. For instance, the defeat of Abu Baqr's expedition mentioned earlier, is attributed to his 'military incompetence and personal defects- arrogance, tactlessness, self conceit, which estranged his subordinates, who did not cooperate.'⁵¹ Similar line of argument goes for Ahoms, wherein losing a fort is usually explained in terms of lack of grit and subsequent desertion of the commanders involved. No attempt is made to co-relate the conflicts and their results to the physical environment in which they took place. The importance of geography, terrain and climate in informing military preparations, strategic decisions and even diplomatic ties isn't examined. Moreover, there is no methodical attempt to consider the region's geo-political context as a whole. For instance, connect war making at different sites are narrated in isolation as insulated conflicts. *Comprehensive History Assam* does come to a conclusion that 'the Ahom Mughal conflict was in the nature of a tug of war, characterised by

⁴⁹ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 149

⁵⁰ Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharya, *A History of Mughal North East Frontier Policy*, Chuckerverty Chatterjee & Co. Ltd, Calcutta, 1929, p. 148

⁵¹ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 152

ups and downs, and alternate gains and losses of forts and their environs.’⁵² However, how this connected to ideas of territoriality, frontiers and the very nature of state affairs isn’t examined.

Now that we have some idea about the ways in which geography and environment played its part in defining political affairs of the Mughals in the region, we can proceed to look at how political organisation and management has been looked at in the context of the Ahom State. SK Bhuyan and Amalendu Guha have looked at the political organisation of the Ahom State primarily in terms of the various official positions.

SK Bhuyan refers to the Ahom state as ‘monarchical and aristocratical.’⁵³ At the top of this structure was the king, referred to as or *Swargadeo*, or *Swarga Maharaja*, who was vested with the power to make appointments and allocate lands and other perquisites. The king was chosen from the lineage of the first Ahom king, Sukapha after consultation amongst the ministers. In theory, descendants of Sukapha’s companions were to be elected to the positions of two ministers- *Buragohain* and *Bargohain*- who came to be known as *patra matris* (counsellors or ministers). Succession was meant to follow primogeniture however, in most cases, ministers played a critical role in choosing kings from princes of collateral branches.

The discussion on military and civil organisation of the Ahoms, provided by Amalendu Guha, and SK Bhuyan before him, is mostly based on a late eighteenth century account of JP Wade who visited Assam as a part of Captain Welsh’s army in 1792-94 and later again in 1798. Wade considered the military arrangement to be ‘founded on feudal tenure with respect to the tributary princes, but on a militia within the limits of the kingdom.’⁵⁴ Alongside territorial expansion, in the years between 1497-1539, the political system saw ‘an increase in the size of

⁵² HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 214

⁵³ SK Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1949, p. 9

⁵⁴ Amalendu Guha, *The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 7

the *patra matris* (counsellors or ministers) from two to three [*Barpatra Gohain* being the addition], degree of sophistication in the state machinery and a further growth of Brahmanical influence.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Amalendu Guha is of the opinion that, in the face of Mughal invasion from 1603-1648, the political organisation was further reformed in order to achieve more centralisation. New offices were created- that of *Barphukan*, in charge of areas formerly under Mughals and Koch, and *Barbarua*, who 'functioned at the capital as the chief secretary to the royal government.'⁵⁶ This brought up number of *Patra Mantris* to five. After of departure of Mughals, Guha mentions that the political system underwent a phase of 'territorial consolidation and further hinduisation under conditions of prolonged peace.'⁵⁷

Wade identified a hierarchy of command running down from five *Patra Mantris* to that of *Phukans*, military or civil in their functions, and finally *Rajkhowas* and *Baruas*. As elaborated by Amalendu Guha, the details of this chain of command is as follows,

'A *phukan* was in command of a division(*khel*) of 6000, a *Hazarika* of a thousand, a *saikia* (centurian) of hundred and a *bora* (headman) of 20 militiamen... a *rajkhowa* was ordinarily a governor of a territory and head of the levies from his jurisdiction. There were also other officers- the *baruas* for instance- with mainly civil functions.'⁵⁸

Wade mentions that the *Hazarikas* under a *Phukan* were appointed by the king, however the *phukan* had authority to appoint the *Saikias* and *Baruahs* under him. Wade therefore considered the latter two to be 'non commissioned officers.'⁵⁹ Wade further mentions that the *phukans* enjoyed equality in rank.⁶⁰ The *Phukans*, as Wade mentions, just like the *Patra Mantris* were

⁵⁵ Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714), *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 9

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁵⁹ John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. xii

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

always appointed from particular lineages. In addition to this, he points out that command in military expeditions was handed over by the monarch and often more than one detachment, under independent command of different officials, were sent out.

The militia officials commanded were termed *paiks* and comprised of ‘of all adult males in the 16-50 age groups, excepting for the members of the nobility, privileged persons of high castes, all slaves and the serfs attached to the soil.’⁶¹ *Paiks* were categorised into *khels* and as SK Bhuyan points out ‘sometimes *khels* could be made out on territorial basis and ‘was placed in charge of a *phukan* if it was an important one, and of a *rajkhowa* or a *barua* if it was of less importance.’⁶² Furthermore, frontiers with the hill tribes were placed under the command of officers who were at the initial phase ‘always selected from the families of the three *gohains* at the metropolis.’⁶³

For our study we can identify several questions that open up from these works. Firstly, even though we have a comprehensive list of state officials and also their functions in a structural set up, we do not find any references to how these officials engaged with and exercised their powers in relation to each other. The information that we receive portrays a move towards greater sophistication and more administrative centralisation. However, there is a gap in our knowledge of how this was negotiated in practice. We do not see any systematic attempt to correlate the changing political conditions to that of political and territorial organisation, essentially projecting the system as inert and static. Secondly, there is enough information on the linkages of office to lineage. However, the power dynamics, contestations and cooperation within and amongst the lineages, which themselves went to have several collateral branches over time, have not found any attention. Thirdly, and related to the first two concerns, we do

⁶¹ Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714), *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 8

⁶² SK Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1949, p. 10

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 10

not find any information about how the political class was organised territorially. Despite an attestation to a decentralised polity gradually moving towards centralisation, we do not get see how officials at various geographical locations, with their specific political and environmental conditions, exercised their powers locally. This is particularly important considering not only because of the role of environmental conditions highlighted earlier but also because over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Ahom state came in contact with and expanded to new territories and principalities with their own entrenched power networks.

IV. Methodology

An important question that concerns this study is how states conceptualised and exercised territoriality. Unlike modern states, the idea of linear and uninterrupted boundaries cannot be transposed into pre-modern states in order to identify spaces within which the authority of state is permissible and legitimate. Thongchai Winichakul's work which seeks to narrate a history of the geo- body of Thailand is particularly helpful in providing us with a framework to think about the possible ways in which pre-modern states articulated their territorial presence. He notes, in the context of Thailand, that 'a conventional historical study about Thailand always presupposes the definite presence of a political or socioeconomic "thing", a kingdom or a state since time immemorial.'⁸⁸ This often results in a tendency wherein 'many historians have demarcated the boundary of a premodern nation retrospectively.'⁸⁹

Here we will consider some of the observations that Winichakul made with regards to boundaries, sovereignty, power relations and the manner in which all of these constituted territoriality of a state. Firstly, he observes that even though pre-modern states had an awareness of boundaries as territorial limits, but that did not correspond to understanding of

⁸⁸Thongchai Winichakul , *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p.12

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*,p. 18

linear borders. Pre- modern borders in case of Thailand ‘were discontinuous and, therefore, the kingdom was nonbounded.’⁹⁰ Winichakul elaborates that instead of a unbroken border line, pre- modern states were concerned with particular points of interests. For instance, mountain passes or other such passageways were sites that the states considered ‘worth mentioning or guarding and were marked out as the furthest distance under the responsibility of certain local authorities.’⁹¹ The manner in which states managed such sites, for instance by erecting a guardhouse, indicated the territorial presence of the state and territorial limits of a state was marked the capacity of a state to control those points of interests. A kingdom like Siam then ‘was composed of political-territorial patches with a lot of blank space in between.’⁹² Secondly, he also notes that the political sphere was composed of a ‘hierarchical interstate relations.’⁹³ These power relations between various political units defined the sovereignty of a state. In such a situation ‘sovereignty and borders were not coterminous.’⁹⁴ A state could extend its sovereignty beyond areas where it had direct administrative authority by tying together a range of smaller states and local power units in varying forms of tributary relationships. Such relationships were outlined with conditions of ‘of obligations, sanctions, and allegiance.’⁹⁵ Tributary relationships were not permanent and could even take, as noted by Winichakul in the context of Thailand, ambiguous forms. Tributary relationships were strategies which enabled political entities located at different positions in a hierarchical order to preserve or extend their domains of authority. The primary focus of Winichakul was to show how the colonial experience of Thailand brought in new practices of territoriality. However, his observations for the earlier period illustrates that in the premodern period ‘the political sphere could be mapped

⁹⁰ Thongchai Winichakul , *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p.76

⁹¹ *Ibid.*,p. 75-76

⁹² *Ibid.*,p. 75

⁹³ *Ibid.*,p. 81

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*,p. 77

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*,p. 82

only by power relationships, not by territorial integrity.’⁹⁶ Winichakul’s work enables us to raise some pertinent questions with regards to the political processes in the Brahmaputra Valley where multiple political entities contested for and asserted political authority. Dominant states of the valley like the Ahoms, Mughals and the Koches maintained tributary ties with a range of local power holders and other smaller states of the region. The nature, function and changes in these relations can provide rich details about the manner in which they defined sovereignty in the region.

A related question that opens up is that how do we consider the range of political actors that were scattered with their own bases of local power. The manner in which imperial officials, local subordinates and also semi-independent chieftains associated with each other is critical in understanding the very nature of the political history of the region. Even though Farhat Hasan’s *State and Locality in Mughal India* is set in Gujarat at the other end of the subcontinent, the theoretical framework of his work is valuable for having a fresh perspective in our case. By concentrating on local forms of power, and their relationship with imperial state, Hasan’s work seeks to examine state not ‘restricted to the structure at its apex.’⁹⁷ He identifies local power units, their power relations and the manner in which imperial state participated in them in order elaborate on ‘local experience of imperial sovereignty.’⁹⁸ The political system, as conceived by him, comprises of contestations and negotiations of the structures in place with that of ‘strategies that characterised power in the localities.’⁹⁹ Thus, if we look at aspects like alliances and co-sharing of power, we can have a better picture of ‘how sovereignty came to be instituted through well entrenched networks of power relations.’¹⁰⁰ These power relations cannot be fully

⁹⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p.79

⁹⁷ Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India c. 1572-1730*, CUP, Delhi, 2006, p. 34

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12

comprehended if we focus on ideal forms of political institutions alone. State power in practice 'should also include strategies, the tactics and the struggles through which conditions of domination are realised and reproduced, contested and modified.'¹⁰¹ Farhat Hasan thus provides an alternative to looking at state power as being consolidated in, and deriving from, exclusively the person of emperor or a predetermined structure. Rather than being inert in its form, state power is mediated by 'how political actors appropriated the structures placing them in the arena of constant change and conflict.'¹⁰² It necessary to look at how political processes worked upon given structures, as much as it is to look at how such structures outlined those processes.

Additionally, as we discussed earlier, Joss Gommans and Pratyay Nath, incorporate an understanding of the environment in defining the capacity of the Mughals to conduct their warfare and thereby extend their political influence. Their conceptualisation of the eastern frontier of the Mughal Empire is a suitable starting point to take the enquiry of frontiers further towards the northeast of Bengal.

V. Sources:

The primary sources for our study falls into three categories. The first include *Buranjis*, both contemporary and later, written mostly in Assamese. The second comprises of genealogical accounts of families as well as other regional sources. The third includes Persian accounts written by the Mughals.

¹⁰¹ Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India c. 1572-1730*, CUP, Delhi, 2006, p. 4

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 5

Buranjis are historical chronicles based on ‘despatches from local administrators and commanders, diplomatic correspondence, daily court minute, judicial proceedings.’¹⁰³ They were mostly written anonymously under royal supervision but also by some nobles. The *Ahom Buranji from Khunlung to Khunlai* gives an account of events from Khunlung, the mythological ancestor of the Ahoms to that of Rudra Singha (1696-1714). While information on Koch and Kamrup regions are lacking, this contains a ‘complete account of the Ahom Mughal relations.’¹⁰⁴ Similarly, there *Ahom Buranji* is a complete account from the beginning of Ahom dynasty to its last ruler Purandar Singha (1832-38). *Purani Asom Buranji* is written in prose and narrates events from Sukapha, the first Ahom ruler, to Gadadhar Singha (1681-96). It is particularly important for the later period of Asom-Mughal relations from the departure of Mir Jumla to the fall of Gauhati in 1682. The *Satsari Asom Buranji* is a compilation of seven old Assam Buranjis. *Deodhai Asom Buranji* is another such collection which is particularly important as it also includes a chronicle written by a high ranking official Atan Buragohain (1662-79). *Kamrupar Buranji* is also a similar compilation is particularly important for highlighting the Ahom-Mughal relations. It also includes eighteen diplomatic letters exchanged between Ahoms and the Mughals after 1639. Another important *Buranji* for the later half of seventeenth and eighteenth century is *Tungkhungia Buranji* whose author, Srinath Barbarua, served in the Ahom state in the second half of the eighteenth century. *Padshah Buranji* is an account about the Mughals written in the seventeenth century. While we do not have any idea about the authors or the dates of composition of these *Buranjis*, HK Barpujari, by examining the internal evidence, dates them somewhere between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁵ There are also compilations dealing with regional accounts of like *Kachari*,

¹⁰³ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 2

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

Jaintiya and *Tripura Buranjis*. In addition to these, we have some later works from the 19th century, but based on old *Buranjis*, like those of Harakanta Barua Sadr Amin and Rai Barua Gunabhiram Barua.

We also have genealogical accounts or *Vamshavalis* which provide us with genealogical details, biographical sketches and also some narratives of events. *Darrang Raj Vamshavali* is one such account written in the last quarter of the eighteenth century under the supervision of Samudra Narayan, the *Raja* of Darrang. It provides us with information from the beginning of Mughal expedition in Koch. Another is later work, *Rajopakhyan*, on the Koch kings written by Jadunath Ghosh, a Koch Behar official under king Harendra Narayan in the first quarter of the 19th century.¹⁰⁶

Among the Persian sources, the most detailed account for this period comes from *Baharistan-i Ghyabi* written by Mirza Nathan for the years 1608 to 1624. Mirza Nathan served in Koch Behar and Kamrup in various capacities in the same period. Being a first-hand account of the Mughal expeditions in Bengal and Koch territories, this account provides a rare and thorough insight into the region for the period, otherwise not available from other sources. Similarly, though not as voluminous in details as Mirza Nathan's account, Shehabuddin Talish, a *waqai navis* (news writer) of Mir Jumla, has left his account, *Fathiyyah- i Ibriya* or *Tarikh-i Assam*, narrating events as an from the conquest of Koch Behar under Mir Jumla to that of his death in 1663. The Mughal court chronicles like *Badshanama* of Abdul Hamid Lahori written during the reign of Shah Jahan, *Alamgirnama* of Mirza Muhammad Kazim and other accounts like that of *Futuh-i Alamgiri* of Ishwari Das Nagar give only a limited synopsis of events. In fact, as HK Barpujari notes, 'after the reign of Jahangir, there is no single comprehensive

¹⁰⁶ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 9

contemporary Persian source comparable to *Baharistan* for the history of Kamrup and Assam.¹⁰⁷

Additionally, I have also used travel accounts of Stephen Cacella and Jean Baptise Chevalier who visited the region in the mid seventeenth century and the eighteenth century respectively.

VI. Chapters Outlines

In the next chapter that follows the introduction, also the second chapter of this dissertation, I attempt to map the political geography of the Brahmaputra Valley by linking it to the manner states organised territories they claimed to be under their domain. The emphasis is on how geography and the specific environmental conditions informed this organisation. I try to illustrate that state power in this region involved a precarious hold over territory. Territoriality under such conditions was represented by controlling points rather than having unbroken boundaries and contiguous areas. Authority and control emerged from and depended on the control of critical passageways which were usually networks of rivers and hill passes. Here we try to analyse the strategic choices, as informed by geographical, environmental and ecological parameters, behind such organisation. Here, attention is paid to communication routes and supply lines, both land and water; and choices of specific locations of military and administrative establishments for the purpose of defence, expansion and retreat. These choices again are not to be assumed as unchanging or frozen in time but should be instead seen as shaped by historical processes. The attempt in this chapter, therefore, is not to outline the natural history of the region. The objective is also not just to identify sites of political action and narrate merely the geography of political history. Instead, I also seek to comprehend the

¹⁰⁷. HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Medieval Period*, Vol 2, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1992, p. 12

history of political geography of the region; one constitutive of and constituted by political and environmental considerations.

While the second chapter examines the political geography of the region and looks at the spatial organisation of state, in the third chapter we connect the same to construction, operation and political effects of territoriality. In the Brahmaputra Valley authority of multiple political entities operated in close proximity and overlapped with each other. we emphasise how the political stage in the Brahmaputra valley accommodated multiple sources of authority. Major states like the Ahoms and Mughals tolerated local spheres of authority provided they acknowledged and became a part of a hierarchical order by entering into varying forms of tributary relationships. The intention is to conceptualise state power as being embodied in and communicated through a network of power relations. In this chapter, we locate the choices of alliances and contestations between states and these local power holders. We also examine the nature of private alliances made by state officials in their local settings and how that connected to state power. These relations must not be looked in isolation from each other but rather situated in the context of wider geo-political processes where sovereignty involved competition over acquisition of alliances.

The fourth chapter is on how the Mughals articulated their presence in the region which constituted the north eastern frontier of their empire. Firstly, the idea is to look at how the Mughals negotiated with and the peculiar physical environment in the region. Here I want to underline the specific difficulties that the Mughals had to confront and the manner in which they devised their strategies of adaptation. Secondly, I seek to examine how the functional hierarchy in the Mughal administrative apparatus adapted to frontier conditions. The intention is to expand the idea of conflict to include not just armed aggression against local adversaries but dissension, lobbying, negotiation and even violent confrontation within the Mughal camp. This attempt in this chapter is to highlight how in frontier conditions, consistency of political

practices of the Mughals frequently deviated from their prescribed forms and actual authority came to be negotiated locally.

Conclusion

This introductory section thus tries to locate the present study within the existing historiography while also delineating the specific areas that this study would examine in detail in the subsequent chapters. We have primarily outlined two major themes that this study will look into. The first is the idea of territoriality of the state systems in the Brahmaputra Valley and the manner it adapted to the given environmental context. The second is concerned with the range of power relations that developed amongst the different political players of the region. The next two chapters that will follow focus on the Ahom State, where we take up territoriality in the second and power relations in the third. The fourth chapter takes up the same questions but here the focus shifts to account for the experience of the Mughals in the valley.

2. State, Territoriality and Environment in the Brahmaputra Valley from c. 1500-

1770

Introduction

Recent trends in writing the history of colonial Assam highlight how colonial administrators transformed a previously fluid geographical space into a bounded state with fixed external and internal boundaries.¹⁰⁸ Emphasis is placed on how cartographic surveys, mapping and administrative policies attempted to define territorial limits of the state and regulate movement within and across the limits of this demarcated state. Such exercises enable us to understand how colonialism radically altered the political landscape that preceded the colonial state and shaped the state in its present form. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that the pre-colonial political landscape was, itself, a timeless space, worked upon only with arrival of the colonial masters. Practices of territoriality and spatial organisation were different and more fluid and contested but, nevertheless, present. This chapter, therefore, seeks to look at the territorial manifestations of the pre-colonial political formations in the Brahmaputra Valley, from the sixteenth to eighteenth century. The pre-colonial political landscape of the Brahmaputra Valley, comprising mostly of the present-day state of Assam, was dotted by the Ahom, Koch and Mughal states. In addition to these, there were numerous other chieftaincies and kingdoms, either independent or diplomatically tied to one of the states. However, the primary focus of this chapter would be to analyse the process of territorialities in the Ahom state of the Brahmaputra Valley during the period under consideration.

¹⁰⁸ See, David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, 'Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo-Body of India's Northeast, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 1, February 2011, p. 141-170; Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K. Pachuau (ed.), *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*, CUP, Delhi, 2019

Such an exercise becomes necessary as we need to historicise the practices of territoriality and in the process examine what constituted state's territorial power or, in other words, how states claimed areas as being within their authority. Even a cursory reading of the contemporary historical accounts of the pre-colonial period in the Brahmaputra Valley is enough to give us an impression that the territories comprising the state were in constant flux. The army and officials were perpetually on the move, traveling along river courses and land routes-proceeding into places under the control of a contending power and also repeatedly campaigning against encroachments on what the states claimed as their domains. There are recurring references of advances and retreats; deployment and redeployment of the army; construction and reconstruction of forts and ramparts at particular sites. In the existing historiography this has mostly been identified as contestations over territories belonging to one dynasty or the other. Incessant warfare is identified with a state's expected response to intermittent violation of its territorial boundaries by another. In these historiographical analyses, there is an underlying assumption that a given geographical area, considered as the legitimate domain of a particular state, was pre-given. This kind of political geography was considered to be ahistoric, the preservation of which depended on the efficacy of the individual king's power. Such histories, then, became narratives of successes and failures of individual kings in armed confrontations, their capacity to protect their rightful domains and to conquer what was otherwise a rival's rightful claim.

Such histories anachronistically applied the idea of fixed national borders of modern states to pre-modern polities. However, instead of presupposing modern concepts of fixed and sacrosanct boundaries in history, and then trying to explain the history of territoriality in terms of preservation or violation of the same, it is necessary to enquire into the specific territorial practices of pre modern polities. This is not to say that pre-modern polities entirely lacked a

sense of what the territorial limits of their authority was or what constituted their domain of authority.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first introductory section we will try to develop a preliminary profile of the spatial organisation of the states and the environmental context in which the states operated in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the second section we will deal specifically with how the Ahom states utilised the riverine networks of the valley in their attempt to extend their territorial control. In the third section, we will further expand the idea by highlighting how specific sites along river routes were the means to facilitate movement along rivers and, thereby, assert territorial control. In the final section we will examine some of the other ways by which state attempted to demarcate their territorial limits, for instance by means of treaties, as well as articulate a permanent presence over land by building roads, embankments and other structures.

I. Spatial organisation and Environment in the Brahmaputra Valley

Thongchai Winichakul's example of how a guardhouse exercised its authority in premodern Siam, as compared to one in a modern state highlights why it is essential to study territoriality of pre-modern polities in their own terms. He writes,

'The position of a guardhouse and the distance the guard patrolled defined the extent of space under the sovereignty of Bangkok- whereas in modern times the extent of sovereign territory marked by a boundary line delimits the space of a border patrol's authority'¹⁰⁹

Taking cue from this observation, the starting point of this enquiry is to investigate the modalities of the spatial organisation of pre-colonial polities in the Brahmaputra Valley. This

¹⁰⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p. 76

is to identify the ways, without presuming any pre-given entitlement, in which the state articulated and sustained its territorial presence in a given geographical space. We also need to examine how the specific spatial organisation of a state informed its understanding of territorial limits. The idea, therefore, is to look at territoriality not as a predetermined attribute of a state which seeks to preserve, enlarge and delimit its geographical spread but as a historically constituted process which configures the spatial incidence of a state in a given geographical area.

In absence of rigid boundaries of the modern kind to define limits of territorial control, territories claimed by pre-modern polities remained contested amongst several contenders. Even as one power strived to distinguish its area of territorial authority, it had to simultaneously contest with several other powers who had similar claims and intents. Correspondingly, territorial authority of a particular polity over an area was often not absolute; it remained disputed and fluctuating. How then do we approach the question of territoriality in pre-colonial Brahmaputra Valley? What were the practices that inscribed the presence of a state on a given geographical space?

As we will see, there were two parallel processes that constituted territorial practices of the state. Firstly, it entailed constant movement of the state machinery i.e. its army, officials and the person of the king himself across the geographical space it aspired to control. This involved mobilising army from one place to another, participation in warfare, taking control of strategic sites and participating in *kheddah* (catching elephants). Secondly, it also involved state intervening in the space in a way which generates a permanent and stable impression of its presence. As we will see this was revealed by attempts of the state building an infrastructure of roads, ramparts and forts connecting areas. Furthermore, state engaged itself with varying degrees of success in reclaiming new lands, measuring cultivated lands, clearing forests, digging tanks, settling and resettling population, and establishing markets and custom houses.

Both these processes, however, required negotiating with the environment; it was a source of both constraints and possibilities for the state's spatial aspirations.

At this point it would be pertinent to briefly look at the environmental context of the valley which presented its own peculiar concerns for a state to negotiate with. Whether out of natural conditions or out of uncertain political management, the extant historiography has presented Brahmaputra Valley as unfamiliar, remote and hostile- an area where political control was extremely challenging. Furthermore, as James Scott has pointed out, factors like climate, forest cover, hills, marshes and limited navigation of rivers could severely hinder movement and 'set up sharp, relatively inflexible limits to the effective reach of the traditional agrarian state.'¹¹⁰ Any attempt to write a spatial history of this area must consider questions of how the given physical environment was negotiated and accounted for in the state's effort to spatially organise its presence. Attention must be given to how the physical setting of a particular site informed the state's preference for building its administrative and armed presence there. We also need to look at the manner in which terrain, topography and river courses were utilised and negotiated for maintaining contact and communication across various sites. What is intended is to make environment the frame through which we understand the territorial practices of the state.

The Brahmaputra Valley is 'surrounded by the Himalayas in the north, the Mishmi Hills in the northeast, the Naga Hills in the east and southeast, and the Shillong Plateau in the south.'¹¹¹ The Brahmaputra river flows through the heart of the Valley dividing the valley into two halves, northern and southern and in both of them 'interacts with more than 100 tributaries of different

¹¹⁰ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, London, 2009, p. 53

¹¹¹ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, OUP, 2019, p. 7

sizes and physical characters.’¹¹² In fact, JP Wade who travelled to Assam in 1795 was stunned to see the numerous water bodies that envelop the entire landscape. He writes,

‘As far as my information, reading, or recollection extends, this country exceeds every other in the universe of similar extent in the number of its rivers.’¹¹³

While Brahmaputra cuts through the entire valley from east to west, navigation along the Brahmaputra was particularly challenging. Major John Butler, who travelled through the river in the mid nineteenth century noted in his account,

‘Excepting with a westerly wind during the rains, the navigation of the Burrampooter [Brahmaputra] river is tedious, uncertain, and dangerous, from falling banks, floating trees, a rapid current, and no tracking ground: the jungle extending to the edge of the river.’¹¹⁴

However, JP Wade observed that ‘during inundations, the navigation through this smaller streams is very convenient, when the Berhampooter [Brahmaputra] is an irresistible torrent.’¹¹⁵

Therefore, while navigating the Brahmaputra was difficult, its tributaries provided a vital lifeline interlacing the entire valley in a network of riverine routes. Despite flooding, navigating the various water bodies was a crucial means to sustain communication links during the monsoons. In this regard, Major John Butler describes

¹¹² Arupjyoti Saikia, *Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, OUP, 2019, p. 14

¹¹³ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 14

¹¹⁴ John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam: With Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes*, Elder and Co., 1847, p. 15

¹¹⁵ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 4

‘During the months of June, July, August and September, a great portion of Assam is inundated, and boats paddle over the country in every direction; indeed in many places..... boats form the only means by which any communication can be kept up.’¹¹⁶

In addition to the abundance of water bodies, the physical landscape of the valley was also punctuated by numerous hills, especially ‘in lower Assam the lands are broken by isolated group of hills.’¹¹⁷ Furthermore, vegetation in the landscape, particularly along the banks of the rivers is extremely dense. This was also noticed by Major John Butler who writes,

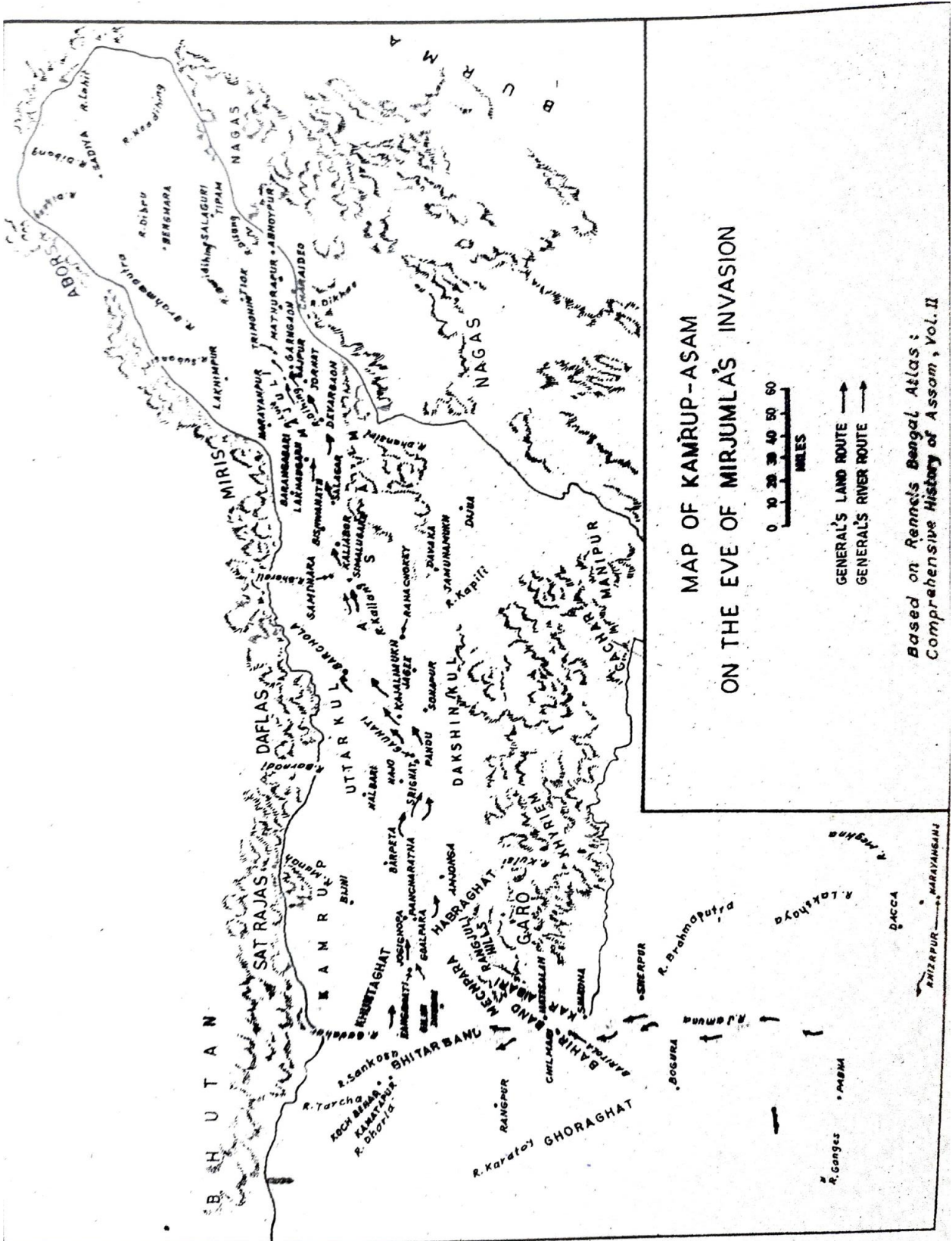
‘I was particularly struck with the immense extent of high grass jungle between the Burrampooter [Brahmaputra] river and the foot of the Bootan [Bhutan] mountains. I frequently traversed a distance of eight and ten miles through dense grass jungle twenty feet high.’¹¹⁸

What we see is that the environment of the valley is a combination of rivers, hills and a floodplains with considerable forest cover. Extensive network of rivers, intense monsoons and flooding of rivers and the adjoining floodplains represented an ecosystem that was characterised by water. The polities that operated in the region had to find ways to effectively manage an overwhelming presence of water.

¹¹⁶ John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam: With Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes*, Elder and Co., 1847, p. 23-24

¹¹⁷ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, p. 31

¹¹⁸ John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam: With Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes*, Elder and Co., 1847, p. 19



MAP 2 : Map of Brahmaputra Valley indicating key rivers and sites (c. 1662 CE)

Source: H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Volume 2 Medieval Period: Political*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, p. 172A

II. Rivers, Warfare and Territorial Pursuits of the Ahom State in the Brahmaputra Valley

In the Brahmaputra Valley, river networks formed the primary links to connect floodplains as well as hills. Therefore, effective territorial control over a given geographical area in the valley hinged on the manner and efficacy of control over specific river networks associated with the area. And as we will see through the course of this chapter, ‘control of the Brahmaputra and some of its key tributaries indicated whether a tribe was in command of the valley or not.’¹¹⁹ Likewise, the Ahom state had to compete with several other polities- the Chutiyas and Nagas in the east and south east, the Kacharis and Jaintiyas in the south, the Mughals and Koches towards the west in addition to several other chieftains at various places. In the contestations that followed ‘not only the Brahmaputra but its tributaries also acted as a crucial geographical medium for political power.’¹²⁰

Prior to the sixteenth century the Ahom polity was concentrated ‘on a tiny territory throughout the entire period from 1228 to 1497.’¹²¹ As Amalendu Guha points out, at this stage the Ahom polity was ‘a loose confederacy of several *mungs* around a dominant one on the Tai model.’¹²² The first capital of the Ahoms was set at a small hillock on the banks of Dikhow at Charaideo by Sukapha (1228-1268), the first king. Later, Sudangpha(1397-1407) shifted his capital to Sorguwa on the banks of Dihing. In fact, the Ahom territories at this stage comprised of clusters of settlements along the course of Dikhow and Dihing rivers. Bounded by the Brahmaputra on the north, Naga hills on the south-east and the Mikir hills on the west, this part of the valley formed the political heartland of the Ahom state throughout its existence. During

¹¹⁹ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, p. 78

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78

¹²¹ Amalendu Guha, *Ahom Political System*, p. 9

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 22

the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the Ahoms tried to expand their area of influence outside of this area.

The area on the southern banks of Brahmaputra, with Kalang river on the east and Dikhow river on the west, which also comprised of the valleys of Dhansiri and Doyang rivers was the an area contested between Ahoms and the Kacharis. The Ahoms control over this area primarily depended on their use of Dhansiri and Doyang rivers. The Ahom activities here were managed from Marangi which was an area ‘interspersed with small hills...[and] bounded on the north and the east by Doyung [Doyang]... and the Dunsiri [Dhansiri] river.’¹²³

In the period before the sixteenth century, during the reign of Ahom king Suteupha (1268-1281), the Kacharis were first pushed towards the west of Dikhow river to Charing.¹²⁴ Following that, the Ahoms crossed the Dikhow river and to the west of it built a fort at a place called Tengshu but, for the time being, the Kacharis successfully pushed the Ahoms back to the other side of Dikhow.¹²⁵ Kachiris then settled in Marangi and Dewargaon on the west of Dhansiri river.¹²⁶ Later, in the last part of the fifteenth century, the Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539), pushed the Kacharis further to the west of Dhansiri.

In the last decade of the fifteenth century when Kacharis and Ahoms clashed, the Ahom king stayed at Marangi while the army moved further south towards the Kachari fort of Itagarh, which was on the banks of Dhansiri. Subsequently, another Ahom detachment arrived at Dewargaon which is at a relatively raised terrain on the southern banks of Brahmaputra¹²⁷ The Ahom king then went downstream Dhansiri, and then upstream Brahmaputra, and arrived at

¹²³ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 8

¹²⁴ S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Satsari Assam Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1960, p.8

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16

¹²⁷ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 8

Dewargaon. The combined army then left their boats there and went to fight the Kacharis on land.¹²⁸ Later, in the sixteenth century, in 1531, the Ahoms started constructing a fort at Marangi on the banks of Dhansiri. Kacharis were naturally alarmed as a fort in a place well connected to both Dhansiri and Doyang rivers would help the Ahoms better coordinate their movements along the rivers. And when the Kacharis mounted an attack the latter were defeated. The Ahoms then went upstream Dhansiri, assembled at the mouth of Doyang and pursued the Kacharis further through the right bank of Dhansiri.¹²⁹ Eventually, the Kachari fort at Itagarh was captured.

While the territory still remained contested, the Ahoms had secured their route through Dhansiri and Doyang, and in the subsequent confrontations, approaching through the two rivers enabled the Ahoms to besiege the forts of Kacharis from both sides. In 1536, when troubles began in the area, one Ahom unit approached from the left along Doyang while another approached through right.¹³⁰ Following this, the Kacharis were pushed further south and had to establish a new capital at Maibong (in North Cachar Hills).

When the Kacharis shifted their capital to Maibong, in addition to Doyang and Dhansiri, the route along Kopili river became important too. The river Kopili flows, intersecting two hilly areas, viz, Kachar and Jayantia., Kopili then falls into river Kallang which was flowing below Raha Chokey, an important post from which the Ahoms controlled the areas of Jayantia and Kachar hills.¹³¹ In 1606, when the Kacharis refused to let the Ahom king bring the daughter of the Jayantiya king through another place called Satgaon, . Ahoms forces approached upstream through Kopili and built forts at the mouth of both Kopili and Doyang. The Jayantiya princess

¹²⁸S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1930, p. 17

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21

¹³⁰ S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1930, p. 27-28

¹³¹ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 30

was then brought to the fort at the mouth of Doyang and later sent to Raha Chokey.¹³² Yet again, rivers routes presented strategic advantage to the Ahoms in successfully overcoming challenges to their authority. Traversing these rivers remained critical throughout the period under consideration. Much later in 1706, when there were fresh troubles in the area, two Ahom detachments were sent, first one through Marangi while the second one through Kopili and reached the Kachari capital of Maibong.¹³³

In eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley, two areas were contested between Ahoms and Chutiyas in the first half of the sixteenth century- One, the territories lying on the east of Subansiri on the northern banks of Brahmaputra and, two, territories situated towards the east of Dihing on the southern banks of Brahmaputra. Central to the control of these two riverine areas was the command of Sadiya, a place where three rivers, viz., Dibang, Lohit and Dihang rivers met to form the Brahmaputra.¹³⁴ In the preceding period, before the sixteenth century, the Chutiyas held sway over Sadiya, while Ahoms were mostly concentrated along the Dihing and Dikhow rivers. The prime centres of conflict were the areas of confluences of various tributaries with Brahmaputra on its southern banks- Dihing, Dikhow and Dibru which were essential points to ensure movement both upstream Brahmaputra to Sadiya and along the tributaries. Hostilities began in 1513 when the Chutiyas built a fort at Dikhoumukh, which was the meeting point of the Brahmaputra and the Dikhow. When the Ahoms attacked the fort, the Chutiyas retreated. In 1520, the two armies confronted each other again at Dihingmukh (confluence of Dihing and Brahmaputra) east of Dikhowmukh. From here the Chutiyas were pushed back further eastwards to Dibrumukh (confluence of Dibru and Brahmaputra) where the

¹³² S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, p. 42-43

¹³³ S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Satsari Assam Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, p. 120-121

¹³⁴ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*, p. 4

Ahoms built a fort. The Chutiyas then retreated to Chandragiri hills and the Ahoms took over Sadiya.¹³⁵

Subsequently, the stage shifted to Sadiya. And yet again we see that the primary strategy was to controlling points which had access to river routes. In Sadiya, Ahoms stationed their armies at the mouth of Dibang and Kundil rivers. The Ahom king then sent another force through Dikari river to fight the Chutiyas who were stationed at an elevated terrain (Chandragiri hills). The Ahom king then went upstream Brahmaputra and reached Dikalumukh. The forces from Kundil tried to join him but were attacked by Chutiyas. However, the unit stationed at Dibangmukh travelled downstream and rescued the besieged forces.¹³⁶

It was in the first half of the sixteenth century, with the repeated incursions of the sultans of Bengal and also that of Koches, that Ahoms had to make determined efforts to control the stretch of Brahmaputra lying on the west of Dikhowmukh. At this stage, the primary motive of the Ahoms behind their attempts to secure this stretch of Brahmaputra was to safeguard their authority in the territories lying east of Bharali river on the northern banks and east of Kallang river on the southern banks. The primary strategy in the northern banks was to build forts on the banks of the rivers flowing into Brahmaputra so as to avert any attempt of an attacking army to cross the rivers. At the same time, whenever required, men could be mobilised and sent to support armies on the southern banks. Similarly, on the southern banks, forts were erected at strategic points.

Turbak and Hussain Khan , who are referred to in the *Buranjis* as commanders of the Bengal Sultan, advanced eastwards towards Dikhowmukh sailing through the Brahmaputra in 1531. The Ahoms however successfully pushed them back to the Buroi river. It was after this first attack that the Ahoms stationed two forces on the northern banks of Brahmaputra- the first on

¹³⁵ S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, p. 13-15

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19

eastern banks of Buroi river, where it meets the Brahmaputra and second further eastwards at Phulbari, on the banks of Pisola river.¹³⁷ To the west of Buroi was Biswanath, near the confluence of Bharali and Brahmaputra. It became an important point for coordinating the Ahom activities further west given it was a place where the ‘level of the country is very high.’¹³⁸ Another force was placed further west but on the southern bank of Brahmaputra at Retai Temani. It appears that until this point the Ahoms were not interested in venturing beyond the Bharali river on the northern banks, as the king ordered a force to cross the river only to capture men they could find on the other side.¹³⁹ In fact, soon after even the force stationed at Retai Temani was called back. Later, an official was placed in charge of the area on the northern banks of Brahmaputra east of Buroi, with his headquarters at Narayanpur, and a fort was built as well.

However subsequently the Ahoms placed a force west of Bharali at Singiri, which was a hilly area close to where the Dikrai river flows into the Brahmaputra.¹⁴⁰ On the southern side a force was placed at Sala. A force was stationed on the banks of Bharali on the northern side and with the instructions to assist two forward posts whenever the need arose. This enabled the Ahoms to dominate the stretch of Brahmaputra by coordinating activities between the three posts on both banks. So, when Turbak attacked the Ahom position at Sala, the forces from Singiri came to their aid. Furthermore, what we see is that these positions formed a network which could easily mobilise forces on either bank of the Brahmaputra whenever required. Movement along the Brahmaputra as well its tributaries could be monitored and checked by this system of successive forts. For instance, while Ahom forces were engaging with Turbak at Sala on the

¹³⁷ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 18

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18

¹⁴⁰ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 21

banks of the Brahmaputra, a reinforcement of Ahom was waiting at the station near Buroi, which subsequently was sent to Sala. The combined forces successfully fought the Bengal forces at Duimunisila, west of Sala, and the latter had to flee to the northern banks and cross the Dikrai river and retreat further west.¹⁴¹ This remained the usual means to assert control over the area till first half of the seventeenth century when the Mughals took control of the area on the west, on both banks of Brahmaputra in the area around Guwahati.

III. Controlling Strategic Sites along Rivers

Territoriality in the pre colonial period, as far as the Brahmaputra Valley is concerned, was based on attempts to control specific sites along strategic routes, mostly along Brahmaputra and its tributaries. State authority, therefore, appeared to be scattered across these points rather than being unbroken over continuous stretch of geographical area. The repeated engagements with Mughals in the seventeenth century highlight how warfare was concentrated on control of particular points on the banks of the Brahmaputra. To advance eastward or westward on either bank of the Brahmaputra, one had to control successive points. These points were strategic because of their terrain and location along the course of the river. Of particular importance was the area around Guwahati. JP Wade describes it as an

‘extent of hilly country on both banks of the great stream [Brahmaputra]; the hills on each side form a spacious amphitheatre; which has been equally well fortified by nature and by art.’¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ S K Bhuyan, (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, p. 24

¹⁴² John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 5

Control over Guwahati was vital to regulate movement along the Brahmaputra both east and west. Furthermore, Guwahati held the key to several passes through the hills on both banks of Brahmaputra.

When the conflict between the Ahoms and the Mughals began in 1615, Mughals had established themselves at Hajo, west of Guwahati on the northern banks, and took control of Singiri, on the west of Bharali and north of Brahmaputra.¹⁴³ While the Mughals were at Singiri, the Ahom king sent men who were supposed to go upto Kajali, at the confluence of Kalang and Brahmaputra to enquire into the Mughal presence. The Mughals then sent forces from Hajo along Kalang to capture Sala on the southern banks. This force went upto Aatalguri near Biswanath but failed to capture the Ahoms.¹⁴⁴ After getting information about the Mughals advance to Sala, the Ahom king set up a *thana* at Dikhounukh. The king then came to Sinatoli, at the confluence of Dikhou, Jajhi and the Brahmaputra from Garhgaon. The forces then proceeded to Samdhara, while the king stayed east of Samdhara at Aagiyabandha. Samdhara, situated on the northern banks of Brahmaputra, became the base from which Ahom activities were coordinated. The Mughals too advanced eastwards from Guwahati waited on the western banks of Bharali, on the northern banks of Brahmaputra. The Ahoms too advanced westwards and built a fort on the other side of Bharali. The Mughals then crossed the river and attacked Ahoms. Thereafter, Ahoms retreated to Samdhara.¹⁴⁵ Later, reinforcements were sent to the Ahoms to retake the fort of Bharali. The Mughals were pursued and confined in a fort in Khagari on the southern banks. The Ahom king came to Samdhara, while the forces crossed over to Kajali and built a thana there and also fort at Samdhara in 1615. The Mughals had by then retreated to the hills of Hajo on the northern banks.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ SK Bhuyan, *Kamrupar Buranji*, p. 19

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24-25

What we see in this phase of the Ahom-Mughal confrontation is that the Ahoms intended to restrict Mughal advance to the west of Bharali river. Bharali formed a natural constraint on any attempt to expand into the territories on the north bank from the west. By restricting movement across it by erecting forts on its bank and at Samdhara, further east, the Ahoms not only managed to assert control over the area but also push Mughals further back.

Control over Guwahati itself was linked to controlling Pandu on the southern banks and Saraighat and Hajo on the northern banks. And in order to approach Pandu from the east, one had to first take control of Kajalimukh. Kajalimukh, is situated at the confluence of Brahmaputra and Kallang, towards the east of Guwahati on the southern banks. The area between Guwahati and Kajalimukh is lined with several hills. The strategic importance of the place is lent by the fact that it holds access to both Kallang river which lies towards its south and the Brahmaputra which is on its north. Also, it is covered 'on the east and south east by the Sunna hills, which line the banks of the Berhampooter [Brahmaputra] from Cajullimook [Kajalimukh]. It is interspersed with hills'¹⁴⁷ In 1635, when the conflict resumed, the Ahoms advanced westwards from Kajali and captured Mughal outposts in Dakhinkul, on the southern banks of Brahmaputra. Mughals then retreated to Uttarkul, in the northern banks.¹⁴⁸ Two Ahom forces were sent to simultaneously take control over Pandu and Saraighat, on the southern and northern banks of Brahmaputra respectively. The Mughals being attacked retreated to Sualkuchi, on the northern banks of Brahmaputra, from both places. From Sualkuchi the Mughals sent their navy to attack the Ahom positions.¹⁴⁹

While the Ahoms were at Saraighat, on the northern banks of the Brahmaputra the Mughals yet again advanced, this time on land, and attacked the Ahom fort at Saraighat. Upon being

¹⁴⁷ Bhuyan, *Kamrupar Buranji*, p. 7

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35

¹⁴⁹ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Buranji*, p. 56

repulsed, they retreated to a hill adjacent to Ahom fort, and made a stockade and passed three days. After three days, the Mughals advanced with ten large boats and ten war ships along the Brahmaputra and attacked the Ahom armies. The Ahom forces had to retreat. Later, fresh Ahom reinforcements were sent to station themselves at Pandu and Saraighat.¹⁵⁰ The Ahoms then received fresh reinforcements on both land and water and thereafter laid siege to the Mughal fort at Sualkuchi.¹⁵¹

The Mughals were pursued westwards to Barpeta but successfully pushed back the Ahoms, who retreated to Pandu in 1637.¹⁵² After being defeated by the Mughals at Pandu, the Ahoms retreated to Kajali and then further eastwards to Kaliabor, on the southern banks. Kaliabor, to the east of Kajalimukh is a place where ‘the mountains incline to the great stream [Brahmaputra], and the interval of low country is occupied by the Rangulighur rampart, which runs from the Colone [Kallang], near its junction with the Berhampooter [Brahmaputra].... to the southern mountains [Mikir Hills].’¹⁵³ The entire Ahom force then assembled together at Kaliabor. Kaliabor became another important point of Ahom defence on the southern banks given its elevated terrain.

The Ahom king had earlier instructed a force to station themselves at Sala on the southern banks.¹⁵⁴ While the Mughals advanced upto Kajali in 1638, the entire Ahom army, the one from Sala and the one retreating from Kajali, assembled at Kaliabor. From Kaliabor, the Ahoms made an attempt to take over Kajali by moving along the Kallang river but had to retreat back to Kaliabor. One unit of the Ahoms then crossed the Brahmaputra and positioned themselves on the north banks after repairing the fort at Samdhara. The navy was stationed in

¹⁵⁰ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1930, p. 117

¹⁵¹ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Buranji*, p. 57

¹⁵² SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Kamrupar Buranji*, p. 39

¹⁵³ John Peter Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam 1800 A.D.* in *An Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), R Sarmah Publication, p. 8

¹⁵⁴ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Buranji* p. 60

the river. Thus, Ahoms were placed on both banks of the Brahmaputra. Later, the Mughals too crossed over to north banks and reached the mouth of Bharali, and then crossed Bharali to set their stockade in front of the Ahoms. The Mughals sent their navy to attack the Ahom positions but the Ahoms fired at the Mughal boats and managed to capture some. Having failed in the naval battle, the Mughals then advanced on land but were repulsed.¹⁵⁵ The Mughals then retreated to Guwahati. No engagements took place on the southern banks and the Ahoms took over Kajalimukh.¹⁵⁶

The sites of warfare too shifted according to the opposition's control of these key points. For instance, when the Ahoms, controlled Kaliabor, the Mughals shifted their attention to the northern banks. As described before, Kaliabor was enveloped by Brahmaputra on the north and the Mikir hills on the south making it absolutely essential to control it in order to approach further east. The strategy to control movement along the Brahmaputra was through have control over both banks and the ability to coordinate activities of the armies stationed there. The last point is particularly highlighted when Mir Jumla led a fresh expedition into Assam in 1662. Upon his advance, to Guwahati, the Ahoms retreated to Samdhara. Here in order to check further advance the Ahom king sent reinforcements and placed forces on both the banks of the Brahmaputra. The Mughals however advanced along the southern banks. There was some lack of coordination in the Ahom units and even though no engagement took place in the north, the forces stationed there were not sent to aid those in the south.¹⁵⁷ The Ahom forces were therefore defeated and the Mughals advanced into the heart of the Ahom state, to their capital at Garhgaon.

¹⁵⁵ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Buranji* p. 62

¹⁵⁶ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Kamrupar Buranji*, p. 41

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62

The above accounts of the Ahom-Kachar, Ahom-Chutiya and Ahom-Mughal conflicts make it apparent that a crucial part of exercising territoriality involved constant movement by making use of the numerous river networks and assisted by selecting certain sites along river courses. Territoriality, therefore, was related to state's access to river routes which, in turn, depended on the state's ability to control and coordinate its activities between these sites. Warfare in the period was the means to maintain authority over such sites. As we have already seen, the nature of warfare encompassed movement both along rivers and land. It is therefore essential to look at the tactics that effected mobility not only along river courses and across river banks but also synchronize naval activities with that over land. This involved negotiating with the given environmental setting as well.

This simultaneous land and river warfare is clearly visible in the encounters between the Mughal and the Ahoms, when the engagements on the land along the river banks went hand in hand with that on water. In 1635, when the Ahoms had taken control over Saraighat, the Mughals sent their navy to attack the Ahom positions from Sualkuchi.¹⁵⁸ However, the Ahoms refrained from engaging them on water and instead fired their guns from the banks. Subsequently, the Mughals advanced upstream the Brahmaputra and anchored their large boats (*Barnao*) in the middle of the river, while the war ships (*Jujharu Nao*) were positioned on the sand banks on both sides. It is here that we also see how the unpredictability of river courses impacted outcome of armed confrontations. The Hajo branch of the Brahmaputra where the boats were positioned dried up and the large boats of the Mughals stationed in the middle of the river got stuck at the place.¹⁵⁹

Such engagements over land and water were not limited to confrontations of the Mughals and Ahoms. For instance, in 1531 when the Ahoms led an expedition against the Kacharis, they

¹⁵⁸ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Buranji*, p. 56

¹⁵⁹ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 118

advanced upstream the Doyang river ‘and halted on a high sand bank. In the dead of the night a body of our [Ahom] men advanced from the sand bank and set fire to a town of the Kacharis.¹⁶⁰ In fact, ferrying armies through water courses to engage in activities on land and engaging navy from land or vice versa were fairly recurrent features and went alongside exclusively naval warfare.

As noted earlier, several tributaries of the Brahmaputra cut across the Valley on both sides of the river. They therefore form nature barriers to movement from one side to another. Navigation is possible to various extents along their courses but for entire armies to cross over, building bridges was an important. In 1615, when the Mughals and Ahoms positioned themselves on opposite banks of the Bharali, the Ahoms successfully managed to drive back the Mughals from their outpost by constructing three bridges to cross the river. Fastening boats together was a means to build bridges. In 1520, when the Ahoms were pursuing the Chutiya king, the Ahoms employed this tactic to reach the other side of Brahmaputra.

Warfare also had to take into account the terrain. Forts were very often set on elevated grounds or on hills and tactics of laying siege or defending these forts entailed manoeuvres which took advantage of or worked against altitude. In 1520, the Chutiya king ascended the Chandragiri hills on being pursued by the Ahoms. When the Ahoms attempted to move up the hills ‘the Chutiyas rolled down blocks of big stones.’¹⁶¹ The Ahoms had to retreat on being hit but later the Ahoms located a side of the hill which had an outgrowth of creepers. The Ahoms then scaled the hill by climbing up the creepers. Furthermore, we have already noted, most forts were erected on hills or on places which were enclosed by hills, thus restricting movement and assisting in defence. Kaliabor, Hajo, Samdhara, Singiri and many other sites where we see the Ahoms setting up their bases were all reflective of this choice.

¹⁶⁰ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 61

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56

From the selection of particular sites for forts, we also need to look at the construction and warfare involving forts. The nature of warfare, involving constant movement, frequent advances and retreats, necessitated quick construction of forts. An account from the seventeenth century conflict between the Mughals and the Ahoms mentioned in the *Purani Asom Buranji* illustrates how the armies were prepared to quickly raise forts. The Mughals while laying siege to a fort in Pandu dug a ditch under the fort walls, filled it with hay and set it on fire. The walls of the fort collapsed. However, the Ahoms were quick to rebuild the fort as they were already ready with the mud that went into building the fort.¹⁶² In addition to mud forts, bamboos were also used to build stockades.¹⁶³ Elephants were a part of the process of constructing forts in a peculiar way. In 1636 when the Ahoms were erecting a fort at Hajo in front of that of the Mughals, elephants were kept in front of their position until the construction of fort was completed.¹⁶⁴ Considering that, quite often forts had to be built under hostile circumstances, elephants offered the necessary protection. Elephants were, in fact, a crucial part of the army on the move. The Ahoms employed elephants in a variety of ways- fording rivers on their back, clearing forests to open routes, ascending hills and charging forward on elephants while attacking. Siege also involved elephants as they were used to break down walls of forts.

So far, we have only identified the potential of the states in realising their territoriality, notwithstanding in a contested space, by effecting constant movement. We also looked at how the given environment of the Brahmaputra Valley facilitated such movement and how the Ahom state utilised and, whenever required negotiated, with it. However, the environment also set the limits of Ahom state's territoriality inhibiting its ability to manoeuvre through it. The experience of the Ahom army on its expedition to Manipur in 1768, is particularly telling of

¹⁶²Hemchandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, p. 110

¹⁶³ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 137

¹⁶⁴ Hemchandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, p. 80

the limits of the Ahom mobility. The following extract from *Tungkhungia Buranji* narrates the incident,

‘Not being able to find out the way to Manipur, the men [Ahoms] roamed about in the forest, where for want of food their knee caps became enlarged. The juice of wild plantations served the purpose of water. The price of rice rose up to one rupee for a quantity contained in the average *temi* or lime pot. The provision suppliers could not reach the army bring killed in their march by the Nagas, The army made their march by cutting and clearing the jungle. The Nagas also refused passage to the soldiers and killed a large number of our men [Ahom], while many more died of fever and dysentery, and others by the bite of snakes and spiders.... The army returned... Two thirds of the men and provisions were lost, only a third could come back.’¹⁶⁵

Especially in the east and south-east, enclosed by hills and inhabited by different tribes, the Ahoms met with their limits of territorial authority. In these areas, the Ahoms could not accomplish the kind of movement that defined their territoriality in the rest of the valley. In 1648, the Ahoms marched against a settlement of a tribe referred to in the *Buranjis* as the Chungis, along the Dikrang river and reached a hilly terrain referred to in the *Buranjis* as the Bandar hills. However, their march was halted as they were unable to find way to the fort of the Chungis on the top of the hill and had to retreat.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, in the same year, when the Ahom army was sent to quell a Naga incursion in Khamjang, the army could not proceed further after reaching Khamteng hills because they ‘could not obtain definite information of the way to Khamjang.’¹⁶⁷ In fact, attempts to resist terms of Ahom tributes and raids into Ahom outposts remained a recurring feature of the relations of Ahoms with the tribes throughout the

¹⁶⁵ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 58-59

¹⁶⁶ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 133

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138

period under our consideration which is indicative of the inability of the Ahom state to find a permanent solution. To put it differently, the tribes in these hills successfully resisted Ahom authority and exercised their own territoriality by restricting movement of the Ahom state into the hills.

IV. Beyond Warfare: Other Strategies of Marking Territorialities in the Brahmaputra Valley

The preceding discussion presents territoriality as constantly fluctuating, expanding and retreating according to the efficacy of state's movement in the valley. By moving its army and engaging in warfare, the state exhibited its territorial presence. As we have seen, territoriality in this sense remained contested. However, in addition to the state trying to enforce its territorial authority through warfare and movement, the state also attempted to create a permanent territorial physical space that defied fluctuations. Treaties signed with the Mughals in 1639 and in 1663, which tried to demarcate territorial authority was one way to realise this. The treaty of 1639, established the river Barnadi and the stretch of a road known as Asurar Ali as boundaries in northern and southern banks of Brahmaputra respectively . The treaty of 1663, sought to establish Bharali and Kalang rivers as the boundaries between the two polities of the Ahoms and Mughals in north and south respectively. Even though such treaties were eventually violated by both sides, they reflect intent on the part of both the states to define limits of territorial power and in the process give a stable shape to their respective territories. However, it would be incorrect to assume that these attempts to physically demarcate territories resulted in creation of linear borders between neighbouring powers. Firstly, such demarcation usually followed, as was the case in 1639 and 1663, a prolonged military conflict and only serve to provide temporary respite. Secondly, rather than being linearly marked these demarcations were usually indicated by some natural body, for instance a river or a hill.

As we have already highlighted earlier, effecting mobility over river courses was essential to a political power's territorial claim. Rather than boundary lines river courses served as frontier zones over which multiple powers simultaneously tried to assert control. This control was achieved by attempts to regulate mobility. Jean Baptise Chevalier, who visited Assam in 1755, provides us with a detailed account of the operation of frontiers in the region. Chevalier mentions that

‘Foreigners there [in Assam] are looked upon with a lot of suspicion. It is a fundamental maxim of this government not to allow any outsider inside the land, without an authorisation from the king.... The governor of the province not only forbade me to enter the kingdom but also disallowed me from remaining on its edge. I was constrained to stay on the other side of the river that separates Assem [Assam] from Bengal.’¹⁶⁸

From his account, we come to know that guard station (chowkis) were erected along the river courses to monitor movement. It is apparent that traders exchanged and procured goods in the frontier zones under the protection of the chowkis. However, there were frequent altercations between the chowkis over protected traders of either side transgressing their designated areas of movement.

In addition to such overt attempts to define boundaries, the Ahom state also tried to engage in spatial practices to inscribe its permanent presence in the territories it claimed. The Ahoms were particularly active in digging tanks and constructing embankments. In the early part of sixteenth century, the Ahom king Suhungmung is said to have dug several tanks in Uttarkul after his victory over the Koches. Digging tanks appears to have been an assertion of territorial authority. In the *Satsari Buranji*, there's an instance when the Ahom king reprimanded the

¹⁶⁸ Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765) Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*, LBS Publications, New Delhi, 2008, p. 23

Kacharis for digging tanks in his territory. In any case, tanks were regularly constructed by successive Ahom kings across their entire territorial spread. In addition to kings, Ahom officials and queens also oversaw construction of such tanks. For instance, Tamuli Barbarua, an official of Suhungmung, built an embankment on the Dihing river and also excavated tanks at several places.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, in 1768, when the Manipuri princess was given in marriage to the Ahom king, she excavated a tank and established a 'village Manaimaji in the Sarucharai forest.'¹⁷⁰

In addition to the several forts that the Ahoms built on their marches, the Ahoms also built forts and ramparts in their capital cities. Suhungmung established a new capital at Garhgaon on the banks of Dikhow and enclosed the establishment by building a rampart around it along the Dikhow.¹⁷¹ The ramparts could also act as elevated passages. For instance, Suhungmung built such passages like ramparts from Daruni to the banks of Brahmaputra and from Simalaguri to Dijou.¹⁷² Similarly, in the late seventeenth century, Chakradwaj Singha [1663-1670] built a road connecting Teliadunga to the mouth of Jajhi river.¹⁷³ Furthermore, raised embankments were also constructed to serve an Hathigarh or elephant enclosures. For instance, in 1632, a hatigarh was made out of an earthen embankment at Jamirguri. Later the earthen walls of the same was raised.

The Ahom state also founded new settlements by reclaiming land and clearing forests. In the early sixteenth century, forests on both sides of Dikhow river was cleared to settle population. Similarly, new towns were founded by the state and marked by constructing houses. At the same time, the state took initiative in settling and resettling population at previously unclaimed

¹⁶⁹ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Satsari Buranji*, p. 26

¹⁷⁰ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 55

¹⁷¹ SK Bhuyan (ed.), *Satsari Buranji*, p. 20

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁷³ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 195

places. For instance in 1626, several artisans from the Koch territory were brought and settled in Bhatiyapar on the banks of Dikhow with the Namdang river to its south.¹⁷⁴ On another instance, several inhabitants previously settled in Abhoipur, Dihing and Namdang was transferred and resettled at Marangi in 1632.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

The preceding discussion on the territorial practices of the Ahom state in the Brahmaputra valley highlights how territoriality was a function of management and regulation of movement along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Territorial control over a given stretch of geographical area depended on the state controlling movement along the river networks connecting the area. This again was ensured through the state controlling particular sites, selected on the basis of their location and terrain along the river courses. Furthermore, Brahmaputra was an important link in facilitating movement all along the valley and here control entailed coordinating activities on successive points on both banks of the river. Given that territories remained contested, territoriality too wasn't absolute and had to be enforced by warfare. However, a concurrent process was in play through which the state tried to mark its enduring presence on territories by creating an infrastructural base- tanks, embankments, forts, ramparts, roads and settlements. In the next chapters we will look more closely into the details of how territoriality was embodied in and communicated through a network of relations between the entities involved.

¹⁷⁴ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 75

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111

3. Mapping Power Relations: Political Organisation and Military Conflicts in the Brahmaputra Valley

Introduction

While the previous chapter examines the political geography of the region in relation to the spatial organisation of state, this chapter seeks to analyse the operations and political effects of territoriality. It is emphasized here that state power is to be seen as constituted of and distributed in network of relations between the participants involved. It is in this light that we need to look at political organisation and the manner in which state, officials and other local power units adjusted their identities and interests at different points of time. The intention here is to address the underlying relationships between the various political formations and the participants that constituted them. Even though the Ahom state will be the focus of this chapter, the very nature of the analysis would necessarily draw out attention to the other political formations like the Mughals and numerous tribal chieftains of the region of Brahmaputra Valley.

While the Ahom Kingdom is said to have been established in the thirteenth century by Sukapha (1228-1268), the first Ahom king, the kingdom's 'peasant polity (mung), still at its rudimentary stage, was based on a tiny territory throughout the entire period from 1228 to 1497.'¹⁷⁶ In the first half of the sixteenth century, Ahom significantly enhanced their territorial limits by subduing or displacing the other tribal polities like the Chutiyas and the Kacharis. In addition to this, several political formations - for example the Koch chieftains of Kamrup, chieftaincies of Dimarua and Gobha and even states like Kachar and Jaintiya - enjoyed varying degrees of internal autonomy in functioning but had to accept the suzerainty of the Ahoms. While the

¹⁷⁶ Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714), *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No 12, Dec 1983, p. 9

status of individual states was specifically decided in terms of tribute or other obligations, they were called *thapita sanchita* (established and protected). However, instances of repeated expeditions sent by the Ahoms against them tell us that such relationships were not fixed and underwent phases of contestations and negotiations. Similarly, tributary states would often change side according to the political climate.

There was a presence of hierarchical links between the numerous political formations in the Brahmaputra valley. The states with greater resources at their disposal, which enabled them to mobilise manpower and develop sophisticated administrative order, occupied dominant position in the hierarchical order. Smaller states or local chieftains sought to retain their local hold over power by entering into varying types of tributary relationship with one or more such dominant powers. While the nature of the relationship and strength of allegiance varied, the power relations between these polities sought to retain a hierarchical form rather than a complete appropriation of authority.

In the previous chapter, we have outlined how territoriality in the Brahmaputra valley depended on the control of critical passageways which were usually networks of rivers and hill passes. Here in this chapter, we will begin with the broader political stage of the Brahmaputra Valley and look at the inter-relationships between the various political formations. In the first section, we will examine how the Brahmaputra valley witnessed the simultaneous existence of several political formations in the period under our consideration. We will see that while armed aggression or military conflict was not absent or rare, it was only one amongst the many strategies which was employed by political participants. Armed aggression seldom resulted in complete take over but rather served as a measure to maintain status quo. In the next section, range of strategies that constituted political relations and the manner they were applied under different contexts will be discussed. In the final section, we will discuss how Ahom political

system itself accommodated distribution and contestation of authority amongst various members of ruling lineage and local power holders.

I. Hierarchical Power Relations and Political Authority in the Brahmaputra Valley

In this section, by referring to the accounts of the *Buranjis*, we will explore how the political stage in the Brahmaputra valley accommodated multiple sources of authority. We will see how major states like the Ahoms and Mughals tolerated local spheres of authority provided they acknowledged and became a part of a hierarchical order. However, it would be incorrect to assume that politics operated within one singular order. Not only allegiances were constantly shifting but also one tributary state could have more than one overlord. It was the management of these alliances that constituted the political processes in the Brahmaputra valley.

The *Buranjis* mentions how Sukapha (1228-1268), the first Ahom king to establish himself in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley, obtained the allegiance of local chieftains who ‘submitted to the king [Sukapha] and paid him homage by offering tributes.’¹⁷⁷ They were, however, allowed to ‘remain peacefully in their respective places.’¹⁷⁸ Throughout the period of Ahom rule, we find tributary relationships being established between the Ahoms and neighbouring polities like that of Kacharis, Jaintiyas and Koches as well as with the neighbouring tribes in the hilly areas. While the suzerain state offered considerable degree of internal autonomy to the tributaries, it inscribed its status as a superior power by handing out authority and thereby confirming the legitimacy of local power holders. It could also intervene in matters of succession or delimitation and distribution of territories. By formally recognising

¹⁷⁷ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 26

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26

these local powers the Ahoms were able to extend and create local networks of power. For instance, after the Mughals took over Kamrup from the Koches in the first decade of the seventeenth century, but could only maintain a fragile control of the area several Koch princes from the ruling lineage, who were displaced by the Mughals approached the Ahom kings for protection and restoration of their local domains. For example, Balinarayan (1615-1637), the brother of the Koch King Parikshit, approached the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) who installed him in his local domain of Darrang promising him protection against the Mughals. Upon the succession of a new king, these tributary states usually sent envoys with gifts to acknowledge the continuity of their relationship.

Here we can also bring in the physical environment in order to differentiate the various forms of these relations. Firstly, we can categorise one group of tributaries which includes Jayantiyas and Kacharis. These polities were separated from the Ahom domains by hills and had a fairly autonomous and elaborate administration. The Ahoms asserted only nominal and occasional influence over these territories, for instance in matters of contested succession or disputed territories. The physical separation by hills made a direct intervention impractical. And at the interface between the hills and the valley we find another category of tributary states like that of Dimarua, Gobha and Nellie. These states guarded the access to the hill passes lying on the margins of two or more comparatively bigger polities, for instance Dimarua between Ahoms, Jayantiyas and Kacharis. Given that, they held access to the hill passes they were critical for the movement of people and goods from one side to another. They were also frequently a subject of disputes between bigger polities. Thirdly, we have the local Koch chieftains in Kamrup like the Darrang and Beltala Raja, control over whom was necessary to guard the passage through Brahmaputra to the upper parts of the valley. As we will see in the seventeenth century struggle between the Ahoms and Mughals, the Ahoms mostly participated in a proxy war with the Mughals by providing men, material and refuge to the Koch chieftains

to fight against the Mughals. And lastly, there were the tribesmen inhabiting the hills enveloping the valley around its the eastern part. Here, the Nagas, Mighmis, Miris and Dafalas among others occupied extremely remote locations inaccessible to the Ahoms. They frequently resorted to raiding and escaping into the hills.

For the smaller states these relationships provided them leverage against the threat of other regional powers. For instance, in 1616, after Parikshit Narayan, the king of Kamrup, formally submitted to the Mughals, the Mughals instead of reinstating him in Kamrup sought to extend their own power. Parikshit's brother Balinarayan, escaped from Kamrup and sought protection from the Ahom king.¹⁷⁹ He was subsequently allowed to establish his authority in Darrang, between Kamrup and the Ahom territories on the North banks of Brahmaputra. Soon, the sons of Parikshit too submitted to the Ahom king.

Similarly, we also see that in the case of tribes who inhabited the hills enveloping the Brahmaputra valley, the Ahoms were particularly eager to let them exercise their own internal autonomy in return for annual tributes and some other obligations. These obligations primarily entailed an assurance that the tribes would not raid and cause harm to men and property in the Ahom villages on the frontier between them. The Nagas, who had their bases in the Naga hills on the south-eastern edge of the valley, were given 'revenue free lands and fishing waters (lakes or beels) along with paiks (men).'¹⁸⁰ Such arrangements were also made with the tribes on the northern edge of the Brahmaputra- Bhots (Bhutyas), Daflas and Miris among others 'by which several villages in the duar areas [passes] were assigned to them and the paiks of these areas were made liable to meet their stipulated demand fixed for each of them separately.'¹⁸¹ In one

¹⁷⁹ S K Bhuyan(ed.), *Kamrupar Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1930, p. 19

¹⁸⁰ SL Barua, Ahom Policy towards the Neighbouring Hill Tribes, *Proceedings of the Indina History Congress*, Vol. 38, 1977, p. 252

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252

of the *Buranjis*, *Purani Assam Buranji*, we find a reference which justifies arrangements like these because of the remoteness of such areas and the difficulty that Ahoms would have to face if they were to administer these areas themselves.¹⁸²

Tributary relationships and the assurance of allegiance however was not frozen or maintained in perpetuity. These relationships were essentially mechanisms to maintain a balance of power relations in order to preserve local domains of authority. Tributary states frequently changed sides according to the circumstances. Also, the smaller chieftains had to manage their relations with multiple regional powers. Often one chieftain could be a tributary to more than one suzerain power. At the same time, being a hierarchical order, suzerain power of one could be a tributary of another. For instance, the *Kamrupar Buranji* tells us that the chieftains of Dimarua were initially tributaries of the Kacharis, but in the second half of the sixteenth century, when Koch King Narnarayan (1540-1581) marched against Dimarua and Kachari kingdom, the Dimarua chieftain shifted their allegiance from the Kacharis to the Koch king.¹⁸³ Narnarayan extended his protection to the Dimarua chief and then allowed him to continue his rule between the Koch and Jaintiya territories.¹⁸⁴ However in the first part of seventeenth century when Kamrup was taken over by the Mughals after removing the Koch king, the Jayantiya king Dhanmanik (1596-1612) captured the Dimarua chief over an alleged non-payment of some 'arears of revenue.'¹⁸⁵ However, this resulted in the Kachari king Jasanarayan entering into a conflict with the Jaintiyas and finally forcing a tributary arrangement on the Jaintiya king. However, Jasamanik (1612-1625), the son and successor of Dhanmanik offered his daughter to the Ahom king in order to build an alliance against the Kacharis. The Jaintiyas also re-

¹⁸² Hem Chandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, KAS, Gauhati, 1922, p. 15

¹⁸³ S K Bhuyan(ed.), *Kamrupar Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1930, p. 23

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁸⁵ Padmeswar Gogoi, *The Tai and Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the tai Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 332

established amicable relations with the Dimarua chief and the Dimarua chief also sought protection from the Ahom king by becoming his tributary. Allegiances could also take ambiguous forms wherein local power holders could try to balance simultaneous arrangements with more than one dominant state. Yet another instance of such shifting relations comes from Mamu Govinda who was a Koch chieftain from the family of the Parikshit Narayan. Initially, he resisted the Mughals in Kamrup, from his base at Beltala in the southern banks of Brahmaputra. However, upon being pressed hard by the Mughals he submitted to the Ahom king in 1619. However, from the accounts, it appears that he tried to assert his own independent authority and also divided his loyalties between the Mughals and the Ahoms.¹⁸⁶

Furthermore, change of allegiance could also be as consequence of the dominant state violating the established relationship and transgressing into the domain of the tributary. To see it differently, the tributary state could refuse to oblige to the demands of the dominant power. The point being violation of the arrangement of protection and obligation. Such instances opened the possibilities of conflict and the entry of other dominant states and consequent realignment of tributary relationship. For instance, we can see this when Pramatha, the grandson of the Jaintiya king Jasamanik attempted to take control of the Jaintiya state. He sent a request to the Gobha raja, a chieftain on the frontier between Ahoms, Kacharis and Jaintiyas, to come in person along with his troops to help him in his objective. The Gobha raja, however, tried to excuse himself from engaging his troops and instead proposed that Pramatha could take refuge in his territory. Pramatha then retaliated by raiding 'four villages of Gubha [Gobha] raja.'¹⁸⁷ The Gobha raja then requested the Kachari king to intervene on his behalf. However, the chief of the villages whom the Kachari king wanted to send in aid refused to comply as they had been settled there by the king of Assam previously. The Gobha raja is also said to

¹⁸⁶Hem Chandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, KAS, Gauhati, 1922, p. 93

¹⁸⁷ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 156

have considered taking help from the Koch raja but was dissuaded from doing so as the same chiefs threatened him that ‘ we [the chiefs] will not allow you to have the rule of your country and you will have to remain with constant fear.’¹⁸⁸ Finally, the Gobha raja approached the Ahom king and reaffirming his loyalty and status as a tributary. The Ahom king then instructed his officials ‘to establish Gubha [Gobha] Raja at Khagarijan fixing boundaries of the territory.’¹⁸⁹

The stronger state which served as the overlord was also expected to manage conflicts of the smaller polities and ensure that weaker powers could co-exist in their respective localised domains. We have instances where a tribal village would seek the intervention of the Ahoms against a more dominant one in their internecine feuds. For instance, in 1549, Nagas of a village named Banpha ‘unable to hold their ground sent Katakis [envoys] to the heavenly king [Ahom king] with an offer of some methons [mithuns], buffaloes and hunting dogs to request his help.’¹⁹⁰ Similarly during the reign of Suchingpha (1644-1648), the Khamjangia Nagas appealed for Ahom help when the Nagas of a few other villages had come together to against them. Conflicts between tributaries could also affect the flow of tribute to the suzerain state. So it was in the interests of the suzerain state to manage, limit and intervene in case of conflicts. For instance, during the reign of Udayaditya Simha (1670-1672), the Chutiyas made incursions into a Miri village named Dimuan. As a result the Miris were unable to pay the annual tribute of boats to the Ahoms.¹⁹¹ Subsequently the Ahoms had to send a force to enquire into and retrieve the materials seized by the Chutiyas.

On the occasion of weakness of a common overlord, the latent rivalries and contestations between powers could again come to the surface. In such cases, smaller states had to secure

¹⁸⁸ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 156-157

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225

alternate source of protection from dominant power. For instance, in 1660, the resources of the Mughals in Bengal were engaged in the conflict over succession between Shah Shuja and Aurangzeb. Prannarayan (1627-1666), the Koch king took the circumstances as a prospect to subvert Mughal authority and assert his own autonomy. According to one account, he also tried to induce Durlabhnarayan, a Koch chieftain in Kamrup, to do the same.¹⁹² Durlabhnarayan, however, snubbed the proposal and declared his loyalty towards the Mughals as 'he was given the charge of the country by the Musalmans [Mughals].'¹⁹³ Prannarayan then sent a force to seize Durlabhnarayan. According to another account, Prannarayan's actions were provoked when Durlabhnarayan, who was the son of a minor chieftain, took the title of Narayan of the Koch royal family. However, both accounts tell us that subsequently Durlabhnarayan escaped to the territory of Darrang and appealed to the Ahom king who then 'gave him the rule of a part of Beltala.'¹⁹⁴

The smaller polities mostly operated at the margins of bigger powers. This meant they acted as a buffer between the regional powers, for example Darrang between the Mughals and the Ahoms. Being a buffer while they naturally worked to keep the states from directly coming into collision. However, as we have already outlined, authority over such smaller polities were often shared and multiple. So confrontations were not, as we have seen, uncommon. Here the buffer states also served as indispensable links in the political networks. Just like a suzerain power mediated in case of conflicts between tributaries, the tributaries also worked as mediators between the bigger regional powers. For instance, in 1620, after a prolonged phase of armed conflict, the Koch king Lakshminarayan (1584- 1622), who had earlier submitted to the Mughals, offered to mediate between the Ahoms and the Mughals. Apart from occasional marches straight into the heart of kingdoms, the scene of most conflicts in the valley were these

¹⁹² GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 158

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 158

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158

marginal zones occupied by tributary states. Strategies of shifting alliances and balancing loyalties between two powers enabled these tributaries to manage their political survival. However, extended periods of conflict was detrimental for the tributary states whose territories and revenues were first to be affected. Restoration of status quo was an expedient move. Laksminarayan is therefore mentioned to have referred to the necessity of amity between the Mughals and the Ahoms so as ‘to establish hat (market) and phat (military station) as a sign of friendship.’¹⁹⁵ Mediation by tributaries was not restricted to between belligerent states. Tributaries also served as intermediaries facilitating new connections and dialogued for favours and concessions on behalf of a third party. For instance during the reign of Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769), Burmese rule made incursions in Manipur which forced the Manipuri king to take refuge in the Kachari capital. The Kachari raja then sent envoys to the Ahom king asking him to intervene on behalf of the Manipuri king. Similarly, in 1638 Sundarnarayan, the son and successor of Bali Narayan in Darrang, interceded between the Bhutanese and the Ahoms when a Ahom force was sent against the Bhutanese. The Bhutanese expected that certain territories along the foothills in Darrang be handed over to them. Sundarnarayan is supposed to have encouraged the Bhutanese to avoid an armed conflict and instead ‘suggested the expediency of presents to those officers [of the Ahoms] who might be induced to join with him [Sundarnarayan] in recommending their request to the Swurgedeo [the Ahom king].’

It is in the light of multiple and hierarchical spheres of authority that we need to examine conflicts, whether military or diplomatic. Conflict in the Brahmaputra Valley can be seen as a mechanism to initiate, manage and reaffirm tributary alliances rather than a means of outright annexation of territories. Armed aggression, then can be seen as a form of intimidation and intervention so that the terms of subordination were obeyed. The conflict between Mughals and Ahoms over the control of Kamrup is particularly revealing in this regard. During the

¹⁹⁵ G C Barua (tr.), *Ahom Buranji from the Earliest Times to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 107-108

course of the entire seventeenth century, since the Mughals displaced the Koch authority in Kamrup, they were brought in confrontation with the Ahoms. While direct military confrontation between the two constituted a critical part of this encounter, but that accounts for only a part of the narrative. In one *Buranji* account a high-ranking Mughal official is said to have expressed his surprise in front of messengers sent by the Ahom king that despite the Mughals inflicting a crushing military defeat on the Ahoms the conflict between them refused to subside. This was after Mir Jumla had occupied the Ahom capital in 1662 and the Ahom king had agreed to pay annual tributes and war indemnity. While this account cannot be verified, the reply given by the Ahom messenger encapsulates the very nature of the Ahom Mughal encounter. The messenger replied that ‘there were several frontier chieftains between the Mughals and the Ahoms who owed their allegiance to the Ahom king and nobody else.’¹⁹⁶ Irrespective of the authenticity of this account, it gives us an insightful take on how the Ahoms assessed the conflict between them and the Mughals. What is apparent that without having a certain degree of influence over local nodes of power it was difficult to extend authority in the region.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that the Mughals did not recognise this aspect of power relations and the struggle between the Mughals and the Ahom was primarily based around the strategic use of these alliances with local power holders. The armed conflicts between the Ahoms and the Mughals in the seventeenth century comprised cycles of advances and retreats repeated over and over again. It had a seasonal element attached to it as well. The Mughals advanced in the winter months and pushed the Ahoms back from Guwahati and Hajo while the Ahoms advanced during the monsoons and pushed Mughals from Guwahati and Hajo towards the west. Given the nature of seasonal retreats, overall the Ahom and Mughal spheres of influences co-existed. The Ahoms primarily exercised their power in Kamrup through Koch

¹⁹⁶ Hem Chandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, KAS, Gauhati, 1922, p. 99 translation mine

chieftains whose authority they gave their formal legitimacy. In this sense, even in the confrontation between Ahoms and Mughals, armed aggression was only a means to preserve status quo. But of course, there were exceptions to this case, for instance Mir Jumla's march into the Ahom capital in 1662 but even that concluded in a treaty which merely affirmed the previous Mughal positions in Guwahati and did not result in any permanent occupation.

So, while the Ahoms engaged their men and resources in their conflict with the Mughals, they also fostered local chieftains providing them with protection and necessary resources. There were therefore local pockets of resistance against Mughals which could rely on the assistance of the Ahoms and in case of a sustained Mughal offensive seek refuge in the Ahom territories. Throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, until his death in 1637, Balinarayan, the brother of the erstwhile Koch king Parikshit, was the chief agent of Ahom's confrontation with the Mughals. As mentioned earlier, he had established his base in Darrang under the protection of the Ahom king. Darrang was at the margin of the Ahom and Mughal spheres of influence and for the Ahoms a crucial check on potential Mughal advance into their territories. Throughout the period Balinarayan was entrusted with men and material to carry out several attacks on the Mughals posts. Balinarayan was not the only local power in the region though. The hills rajas of Dakhinkul on the southern banks, known as the Hizda Rajas were also regularly placed in the service of the Ahoms. Before launching a major offensive against the Mughals, it was customary to exchange gifts and formally articulate the tributary status of these chieftains before sending them alongside the Ahom forces.¹⁹⁷ In fact, Ahoms had limited presence in the area west of Guwahati and relied on tributary Koch chieftains of the area.

In addition to military support, these local power holders also held access to the routes of movement. In absence of their support, it was extremely difficult for an army to move across

¹⁹⁷ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 106, 114

these routes. For instance, in 1671, when Ram Singh, the Mughal general, attempted to move into the Ahom territories through Darrang, the Rani of Darrang who was a tributary of the Ahom king deliberately misled the Mughals, as a result of which they were trapped in a remote location between the two hills.¹⁹⁸ In the next chapter we will see in details, how one of the primary difficulties faced by the Mughals in Kamrup was in navigating and maintaining access to the routes of movement. *Baharistan-i- Ghyybi* recounts numerous instances in which the Mughals had to allocate significant resources only to keep the routes of communication open. The mobility of the Ahoms was also equally contingent on the manner they negotiated with the local powers who held control over routes of movement. For instance, in 1606, when the Jaintiya king Dhanmanik offered a princess to the Ahom king in order to build an alliance with him, the Kacharis refused to let the Ahoms travel through Satgaon to reach the Jaintiyas. The Kacharis felt that ‘the same road by which the Jaintiya bride would travel would be used by his antagonist, the Jayanta raja to invade his country.’¹⁹⁹ Ahoms then had to launch an offensive in order to gain access to the route. While in this case the Ahom- Jaintiya alliance itself was to offset the growing power of the Kacharis, who had earlier been tributaries of the Ahom, the reference to the use of routes is important to highlight the localised control over routes of movement. Similarly, in the case of neighbouring tribes inhabiting the hills, the Ahom army on many occasions was caught unaware about the routes of advance.²⁰⁰ This in fact was the primary reason why the Ahoms had to permit a considerable degree of autonomy and perquisites to these tribes. The Ahoms depended on middlemen to conduct their affairs. For instance, on one occasion in 1672, when the Ahoms sent a force to intimidate the Daflas to pay their tributes and hand over some men they had earlier abducted, the Ahom force operated

¹⁹⁸ Hem Chandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, KAS, Gauhati, 1922, p. 111

¹⁹⁹ Padmeswar Gogoi, *The Tai and Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the tai Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*, p. 334

²⁰⁰ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 138

through the mediation of two local middlemen. After the Daflas escaped to the hills, these two men were detained. They would be released only on the condition that they find a way to 'make the dafalas come down and return the men they captured and if they could find out a route for the army to climb up the hill.'²⁰¹

In the case of the tribes inhabiting the hills surrounding the Ahom territory, it appears throughout our period that the Ahoms had to regularly send troops to these areas. There were primarily two reasons behind this. Firstly, to act against occasional raids made by these tribes on the frontier villages. And secondly to ensure that the flow of annual tributes continued. For instance in 1672, the Daflas stopped their tribute to the Ahoms and abducted forty men from a village.²⁰² Similar offences are recorded in the case of other tribes as well. In most cases, these tribes are said have come down the hills and attacked or killed men from the village at the foothills. Upon the approach of the Ahom army, the belligerent tribesmen would flee to the hills. Ahom response also appear almost formulaic and mostly entailed burning down houses and granaries of the tribal villages. Being pressed by the Ahoms, the tribesmen would eventually surrender fearing starvation. By paying a tribute to the Ahoms they presented a guarantee that such offences would not be repeated. Occasionally, the tribesmen would also present a girl to the Ahom king or the particular official deputed for the expedition. In the entire course of the period under consideration, such conflicts never resulted in occupation of these areas. Invariably always the tribesmen would be allowed to remain in their places and exercise their own authority. The sole intent of the expeditions sent against them was to preserve the status quo and check insubordination.

²⁰¹GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 219-220

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 218

II. Inscribing Hierarchy in Power Relations: Practices and Strategies

Having looked at the manner in which the political stage was constituted and power relations played out, we can now look at the customs and strategies that highlighted the form of relationship between polities. The primary intent here is to understand how hierarchy was expressed and maintained. While flow of tributes and formal exchange of envoys, was the most visible marker of tributary status, we also need to examine how tributary relationship itself, and also shifts in it, was explained as legitimate. The long drawn-out conflict between Jayantiyas and Ahoms over Dimarua, which both claimed as their own tributary, helps us understand this process. From about 1669 we find a constant strain between the Jayantiyas and the Ahoms in the diplomatic correspondence between them. The status of Dimarua before 1669 is interesting and has been referred to above. To review it briefly, Dimarua was initially a tributary of the Kacharis in the sixteenth century but when the Koch king Narnarayan led an expedition into the Kachari kingdom, Dimarua became a tributary of the Koches. But subsequently, the Koch kingdom weakened because of the Mughal inroads and at this stage the chieftain of Dimarua submitted to the Ahoms. It seems the Jayantiyas too proclaimed their rights over Dimarua as we find references of a Jayantiya king detaining the Dimarua chieftain over unpaid arrears. In any case, in the seventeenth century when the Mughals extended their control in the region, Dimarua too came under their charge. But by 1669, the position of the Mughals had considerably weakened and the Ahoms re-established their hold over Dimarua. Now, in the correspondence, the Ahoms emphasised on their role as the guardian and protector of Dimarua against external aggression. In one letter, the Ahom king retorted to the Jayantiyas request to restore Dimarua to them by saying that if Dimarua was a tributary of the Jayantiyas then why did the Jayantiyas fail to defend it when the Mughals took control over it. The Ahom

king further wrote that it was him who defeated the Mughals and protected Dimarua.²⁰³ The Jayantiyas, on the other hand, stressed on their ancient customary rights over Dimarua. Jayantiyas claimed that they were originally the overlords of Dimarua. However, when the Mughals attacked Dimarua and took control over it, they lost their charge.²⁰⁴ We must take into account here that that Jayantiyas themselves were placed lower in the political hierarchy in the region. They were dependent on the goodwill and support of the Ahoms for a range of activities including the opening of trading markets. In fact, the Jayantiya king wrote in a letter that they had lost Dimarua when the Mughals, an ‘enemy’ had taken control. However, since a ‘friend’- the Ahoms - had retaken control of it, they expected their charge to be restored.²⁰⁵ In both the cases, both sides tried to legitimise their claims based on some customary arrangement of the past. However, the Ahoms also tried to accommodate the idea that such relationships could be altered based on the suzerain power’s capacity to meet his obligation to provide protection. What is most relevant for us, is the manner how hierarchy is expressed in such diplomatic contestations. In the correspondence, the Jayantiya position is always articulated in the form of a request, as a favour to be made by the Ahoms. While they expected Dimarua to be restored, there seems to be an underlying acknowledgment that Ahoms would be the final judge of it. It can be seen as an appeal rather than a demand.

Additionally, the hierarchical relationship was also expressed in the form of appointments and in matters of succession. The tributaries had to seek formal consent of the suzerain power in matters of succession. There are repeated references when local chieftains would submit to the Ahom king and he in turn would formally confer the charge of a territory over which the particular chieftain already had authority. For instance, after the death of Balinarayan, when

²⁰³ S K Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1937, p. 39

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49

his young son succeeded him, the matter was placed before the Ahom king who then agreed to the succession.²⁰⁶ Similarly, the Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) led an expedition to the Jayantiya territories, captured the Jayantiya king Ram Singha (1694-1708) and kept him in custody. Later, after the king died in his custody, he conferred the rule of Jayantiya upon the king's son.²⁰⁷

In most cases, such a formal consent only had ritualistic significance as the suzerain power merely confirmed the person next in line of succession. However, in certain cases, the suzerain power could intervene to appoint someone of his choice. In 1531, the Ahoms led an expedition against the Kachari king Khunkhara, forcing the king to flee from his capital. Subsequently, the Ahom king appointed the previous king Detshung to the Kachari throne. As we have outlined, rival polities competed to enforce their own tributary rights and this, at times, meant that one prospective suzerain would place his own loyalist in opposition to other party's loyalist. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Dimarua had been a matter of dispute between the Ahoms and the Jayantiyas. During the reign of Ahom king Rudra Singha, the Jayantiyas tried to place in charge a person named Bairagi Konwar in at a place named Bangaon along their frontier with Dimarua. Bairagi Konwar was proclaimed as a prince of the Dimarua chieftain's family who had earlier been captured by the Mughals. Based on his proclaimed lineage there was an attempt to restore the charge of Dimarua to him which would have enabled the Jayantiyas to make Dimarua their tributary. When this was brought to the attention of the Ahoms, who asserted their suzerainty over Dimarua, the Bairagi Konwar was removed from his place and taken to the Ahom territory.²⁰⁸ The Ahoms reiterated that because Dimarua was their tributary it was the prerogative of the Ahom king to place whosoever he wills to the charge

²⁰⁶ Benudhar Sharma (ed.), *An Account of Assam by Dr. John Peter Wade*, Madhupur Tea Estate, North Lakhimpur, Assam, p. 224

²⁰⁷ S K Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1937, p. 105

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70

of Dimarua.²⁰⁹ This move was strongly resented by the Jayantiyas and even led to a temporary breakdown of ties between Ahoms and the Jayantiyas.

Besides endorsing and settling matters of appointments and succession, hierarchy was also visible in the manner in which the suzerain power played the role of final arbitrator in all political matters. This was particularly relevant in the context of the external political relations of the tributaries. Exhibiting such control emphasised that the tributary functioned only as a representative of the suzerain power and that it did not have the authority take decisions independent of or without the sanction of the suzerain power. As referred to earlier, in 1638, Sundarnarayan, the son and successor of Balinarayan in Darrang negotiated with the Bhutanese king about ceding some territories in return of tributes.²¹⁰ However, when the Ahom king was informed of this arrangement, he refused to give his consent and instead sent a force to enforce the previous state of affairs. When the Bhutanese insisted on Sundarnarayan keeping up with their agreement he is supposed to have responded by saying ‘that he was not an independent prince.’²¹¹

Another important aspect of power relations in the valley politics was matrimonial diplomacy. Political ties were reinforced through matrimonial alliances between polities. For instance, as referred to earlier, the Jayantiya king Jasamanik, who was then a tributary of the Kacharis, offered his daughter to the Ahom king in 1606. This gesture was accepted by the Ahom king who immediately sent a force to bring the princess to the capital. The underlying politics behind this matrimonial proposal can be seen when the Ahoms chose to make the march through Satgaon which was under the control of the Kacharis. This was probably a veiled threat to the Kacharis about the new found alliance and which effectively brought the Jaintiyas under the

²⁰⁹ S K Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantia Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1937, p. 71

²¹⁰ Benudhar Sharma (ed.), *An Account of Assam by Dr. John Peter Wade*, p. 226

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 228

protection of the Ahoms. The Kacharis understood the implication of this move and refused to let the Ahoms pass through their territories which eventually resulted in the Ahoms marching upto the Kachari capital. Here, we see how offering a princess indicated the intent to enter into a tributary relationship. While formal exchange of the objective might have accompanied the move, matrimonial alliance itself was a procedural part of conveying the message. Similarly, matrimonial ties between Ahoms and the Koch also illustrate how tributary links were forged. Early in the seventeenth century when Raghudev (1581-1593), the Koch king of Kamrup, felt threatened by the growing proximity of his cousin Lakshminarayan, the king of Koch Behar, with the Mughals, he offered his daughter to the Ahom king to form a counter alliance.²¹²

Additionally, matrimonial proposals were also a signal of ending hostilities and often served to complement the intent of establishing tributary ties. What we observe is that in the process of negotiation that followed a confrontation, offering a princess of the family implied submission. For instance, in 1531 when the Ahoms marched into the Kachari territories, the Kachari king Detshung made peace overtures in order to be restored to his throne. Here again, the plea for political bargain was expressed by proposing a matrimonial alliance.²¹³ The Detshung offered his sister to the Ahom king denoted his submission. A matrimonial alliance tied down the two parties involved in an hierarchical union, wherein status was inscribed in the act of offering or demanding a bride. In the earlier example, this becomes clearer when we compare to an earlier instance in 1490 when the Ahoms suffered severe reverses in a confrontation with the Kacharis and the Ahom king offered a princess in order to cease hostilities.²¹⁴ There are other instances of matrimonial links which signal diplomatic ties on equal footing. For instance, in 1537, the Ahom king and the Manipuri king sent a bride to each

²¹² Hem Chandra Goswami (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, KAS, Gauhati, 1922, p. 55

²¹³ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 58

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53

other in order to establish terms of friendship.²¹⁵ Likewise, in the first decade of the seventeenth century, the Koch kingdom had not yet come under the grip of Mughals. We find a reference where the Ahom king demanded a princess of the Koch family but the latter is said to responded by saying that he would agree only if 'he would offer him thirty elephants.'²¹⁶ The account mentions that the Ahom king agreed to this indicates that, unlike other instances, negotiation here was done on an equal footing.

III. Ahom State: Kingship and the Imagination of Political Power

Having looked at the broader political system we can now shift our attention to the manner in which authority was imagined and executed within the political organisation of the Ahom state. By the Ahom political system, we mean the king and the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. At the outset, we see that even within the Ahom territories, certain spheres of authority followed a tributary connections like in the case of autonomous and semi-autonomous chieftains with the Ahom king. During the reign of Suhungmung (1497-1539), the princes of Ahom royal lineage were settled at Dihing, Saring, Tipam, Tungkhung and Namrup.²¹⁷ It appears that the princes had considerable degree of autonomy in governing their areas provided they continued to pay regular tribute to the Ahom king. The autonomous status of these princes was reflected in the manner *Buranjis* refer to them with the title *rajas*, for instance Tipamiya *raja* of Tipam. It seems that while these princes had to pay regular tributes to the king, there are instances recorded where one or many defaulted or refused to pay their share of tribute. For instance, in the mid seventeenth century, we have a reference where, the Ahom king sent an

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97

²¹⁷ Kasi Nath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Majumdar Press, Calcutta, 1906, p. 20

official 'to go to the Tipam and Narukia Rajas to get their tributes. The Tipam Raja did not pay his tribute.'²¹⁸

Even appointments usually were dependent on lineage. Kings, individual *Patra Mantris* (council of ministers comprising the *Buragohain*, *Barpatra gohain*, *Bargohain*, *Barphukan* and *Barbarua*) and *Phukons* were drawn from specific families with over time expanded to several branches. They were 'generally named after the places where they lived, or where their lands and establishments were situated.'²¹⁹ There were seven families from which the king could be chosen- Charingia, Namrupia, Tipamia, Tungkhungia, Dihingia, Samaguria and Parvatia. Similarly there were eight families to choose from for the post of *Buragohain* and sixteen for that of the *Bargohain*. The *Barpatra Gohain* usually was chosen from princely lineage but 'in the later period the office was held by several nobles of non royal origin.'²²⁰ The person of *Barbarua* and *Barphukan* was to be appointed from four families- Lahans, Sandikois, Duaras and Dihingias. Two other families- Lanmakharu Chetia and Lukhurakhun- also came to hold these positions, especially in the later half of seventeenth century. Similarly certain other offices like that of frontier governors- *Sadiyakhowa* and *Marangikhowa*- were occupied by the families of the *Buragohain* and *Bargohain*.²²¹ Similarly other frontier outposts like that of the outpost at Raha on the Kachari frontier was to be occupied by one from the family of the *Barbarua*, the one at Jagi on the Jayantiya frontier by one from the family of the *Buragohain*, and the one at Kajali by one from the family of the *Barpatra* and *Bargohain* each.²²² So what we see is that spheres of authority were clearly marked and divided. In fact the Tai term *mung*, which was used for the Ahom polity 'originally signified a chief's village or town (che)

²¹⁸ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 134

²¹⁹ SK Bhuyan, *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1957, p. 15

²²⁰ SK Bhuyan, *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1957, p. 16

²²¹ Amalendu Guha, *The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)*, *Social Scientist*, p. 21

²²² Kasi Nath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Majumdar Press, Calcutta, 1906, p. 34

governing the surrounding countryside.... The same term also stood for a whole kingdom, when several such chief's domains were integrally linked under a king.'²²³

In order to better understand the Ahom state's concept of political authority, it is important to analyse the nature of Ahom kingship and the manner it negotiated with the physical expression of territoriality. These two aspects can be understood through the origin myths documented in the *Buranjis*. While reading through the accounts of the origin and advent of Ahoms into the Brahmaputra valley, as we will see, the mythical elements like celestial deities and heavenly places predominate and there is little verifiable historical information available. However, the several versions of the origins myths of the Ahoms replicated in the *Buranjis* gives us critical information on how the Ahoms articulated the legitimacy of their authority. In one version of the origin accounts, 'Khun Lung and Khun Lai, the grandsons of Leng Don the lord of Heaven, were sent down from the Heaven by means of a ladder (iron or gold) to rule over the people of the earth.'²²⁴ The emphasis through the rest of the account is placed on how, prior to their arrival on earth, there was nobody from the family of the Lengdon on earth. There are references which mention the state of disorder in earth-

'wife of one is forcibly taken by another... large fields are lying fallow... people of up and down country are in constant warfare... they could not distinguish right from wrong.'²²⁵

Therefore, we are told that Lengdon, after consultation with the rest of the heavenly gods, decided that he 'should send down someone from my [his] family to be king there.'²²⁶ The process of selecting the right person from his family is elaborately described where a celestial

²²³ Amalendu Guha, *The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)*, *Social Scientist*, p. 14

²²⁴ HK Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol 2 Medieval Period: Political*, 66

²²⁵ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 10

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. p. 5

deity Jashingpha, whom Lengdon sends for advice, asks him to ‘send words to the great powerful king, Thenkham [Lengdon’s nephew] and take his advice on the matter.’²²⁷

This origin account defines two fundamental premises of Ahom Kingship. Firstly, it stresses on the divine origins of the Ahom King and, in the process, marks the necessity of maintaining the lineage of the divine order. In fact, after narrating a detailed process of consultation, Lengdon concluded that

‘if an ordinary being be sent down to the earth, he will not be able to be a worthy ruler. He whose forefathers were never rulers, can hardly be expected to be a king. He can never get homage from other. Annual tributes will not be regularly paid to him.’²²⁸

At one place, the account reflects how in a place called Khraikham, after a Naga slave usurped power, ‘the country was full of misdeeds and was in constant disorder.’²²⁹ The inhabitants, ‘being unable to endure the oppressions of the king, wished to have a king of the family of Khunlung and Khunlai.’²³⁰ The narrative repeatedly alludes to the fact that there must be a descendant of Lengdon, the divine being himself, as the ruler of earth.

Secondly, while divine descent was to be ensured, what is also amply highlighted is the notion of consultation. Lengdon called an assembly of other deities and even looked for advice from his nephew before taking an important decision. A running trope in the Buranjis is that of the king consulting with his *patra mantris* before taking any decision. We will consider the place and significance of this aspect in details later but it can be noted here that the *patra mantri* held considerable influence in political affairs including in the process of selecting the king.

²²⁷ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 6

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41

The origin account gives us a sense that the practice of dividing authority over separate realms amongst the sons was obvious and expected course to follow after the death of father. In the mythical account successive heavenly kings divided authority amongst his sons during his lifetime and the arrangement did not designate a particular hierarchy of authority. The narrative describes the relationship between Lengdon and Thenkham who are said to ‘sit on the same throne. Neither Thenkham nor Lengdon has ever trespassed on each other’s territories.’²³¹ There is no differentiation between the authority vested upon the two brothers- Khunlung and Khunlai. At one place, it is described that while the people of earth assembled around them, ‘both of them shone like two planets.’²³² Even in his parting advice Lengdon advises them that ‘when the people of the earth pay you their annual tributes, you must partake them equally.’²³³ The lineage drawn from Khunlung and Khunlai to the first Ahom king Sukapha is confusing and varying according to different accounts. Charting the exact lineage is not our concern here. Despite minor differences all the accounts mention how successive kings from Khunlung and Khunlai onwards were committed to the practice of dividing the kingdom amongst the sons. A running theme in the narrative again is the advice that is passed from father to sons where they are made to co-exist and respect each other’s authority. Such advice could take the form of aphorisms like ‘as a man quarrelling with his father in law, may incur the loss of his wife, so if you quarrel amongst yourself, you are sure to lose your royal power.’²³⁴

This illustrates the point that not only did the Ahoms not have a strict norm of primogeniture but also that all lineage members of royal family had, in theory, equal claim to royal authority. This aspect of kingship was particularly consequential as it expanded the possibilities of factionalism, courtly intrigues and rebellion in the process of succession but also legitimised

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 19

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 12

²³⁴ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 39

them in many ways. In the origin narrative itself, Khunlai conspired against his brother and became the ruler.

So far we have looked at how the mythical origins of the Ahoms articulated a specific form of kingship. Now, having this as a base we can proceed to examine how this kingship was actually expressed in practice, thereby underlying forms of authority and power relations. The absence of a clear system of succession combined with the powers vested upon the *patra mantris* to select the king meant that contested succession was the norm rather than an exception. Instead of power being concentrated in the person of the king, the Ahom kingship anticipated a greater role of the *patra mantri* and other important officials in deciding the course of political action, including succession. Successions came to be fiercely contested in the sense that incoming kings had to often indulge in armed confrontations in order to remove other contenders.

While such contestations of authority was built into the Ahom political organisation, it came to bear particular significance after 1662. A prolonged phase of warfare with the Mughals culminated in Mir Jumla's occupation of the Ahom capital in 1662. The treaty that followed imposed a heavy burden of tribute on the Ahoms. But more importantly, the Ahoms suffered significant setbacks in terms of loss of men and resources. Furthermore, what was more detrimental to the edifice of king's power was that 'a large body of followers including some distinguished nobles who all joined the side of the Mughals when Baduli [the *Barphukan*] had gone over to that side.'²³⁵ From 1662 to 1681, the authority of the king was gradually undermined by the officials and their factions. With the growing ambitions of particular officers and also declining central control, the factional nature of local politics came to be expressed in terms of factional alliances and conflicts.

²³⁵ Padmeswar Gogoi, *The Tai and Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the tai Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*, 420

For instance, if we consider the first half of seventeenth century we see that succession involved confrontations and mobilising loyalties. When the Ahom king Suchengpha (1603-1641) was on his deathbed, the ‘youngest prince [Chao Shai] was ready with his men armed with spears, swords and guns to seize both the brothers.[other two princes].’²³⁶ However, with the support of the *patra mantris* and other officials the eldest prince Surampha (1641- 1644) succeeded in isolating the youngest prince and became the king. Within a year, the officials lost confidence in the new king and now sided with the other brother Suchingpha (1644- 1648), to make him the king. Surampha was ‘first banished to the hills and interned and later he was put to death at Tipam.’²³⁷ Next the accounts mention it brought to the knowledge of the king by his wife, who was also the sister of the *Buragohain*, that Suchingpha’s eldest son Laplup had colluded with the *Barpatra* in order to overthrow him.²³⁸ Subsequently, Laplup as well as the *Barpatra* were captured and put to death. It seems that the *Buragohain*’s daughter wanted to secure the throne for her own son. Khahua Gohain [Sutamla or Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663)] , the brother of the dead prince was removed from the capital on the insistence of the sister of the *Buragohain*. However, the son of the *Buragohain*’s daughter became extremely unpopular because of his abuse of power and therefore when the king became bed ridden, Sutamla with the support of some of the officials took over the throne. He poisoned the king and also killed the *Buragohain*, his daughter and her son.²³⁹ Similarly, Udayditya Singha could rule only for two years from 1670 to 1672. A group of officials along with the younger brother of Udayditya deposed and killed him.

²³⁶GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 126

²³⁷ Padmeswar Gogoi, *The Tai and Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the tai Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*, 386

²³⁸ S K Bhuyan (ed.), *Deodhai Assam Buranji: A Collection of Old Chronicles*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1930, p. 66

²³⁹ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 142-143

This brief period between 1641 to 1672 episode clearly highlights the precarious nature of succession and the role played by nobility in deciding the outcome. Even though a scale of confrontation limited to factionalism and lobbying at this stage, this was perhaps the antecedent to violent conflicts that characterised subsequent successions. The events related to succession in this phase is decisive in the sense that a legitimately appointed king was not only forcibly removed but also put to death, which set a worrying precedent for the future course of politics in the region. The next phase which is often regarded by historians as the period of ministerial ascendancy. However we must bear in mind that such an ascendancy was not an abrupt development. The groundwork for the same was already in the making in the manner successions came to be contested and ridden with factionalism. It is with this background that we can see the subsequent development of intense factional politics, where the authority of the king was undermined. The next phase between 1670 to 1681, is appropriately summarised by Edward Gait when he says that ‘in the short span of eleven years, there had been no less than seven kings, not one of them had died a natural death.’²⁴⁰

Our intention here is not to outline the political history of succession and courtly intrigues but rather to present how power relations were managed and negotiated. This would provide us with a better understanding of how power was constituted in the period.

We can see that in order to strengthen his position after a contested succession the Ahom king made corresponding changes in the various official positions wherein each king tried to establish his authority by creating his own networks of loyalty. In each of the above mentioned instances of succession between 1671-1642, we see largescale changes in the official positions after succession. In fact, in one account, it has been mentioned that the outgoing king advised Jayadhvaj Singha that he could preserve his authority only if he removes the previous set of

²⁴⁰ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1906, p. 166

officials with new ones.²⁴¹ Whether or not, this account is true, Jayadhwaj Singha did replace the *Buragohain*, *Bargohain*, *Barpatragohain*, *Barbarua* and *Barphukan*. From now on, offices came to be concentrated within familial or such loyal networks and largescale changes in subordinate positions became the norm with change in the person of the king. Matrimonial alliances between the family of the *patra mantris* and the king was another way to secure loyalty. Similarly when Gadadhar Singha ascended the throne in 1681 after a period of bloodied succession, he replaced all major official positions with his loyalists.²⁴²

In fact, the period between 1770 and 1781, the loss of king's authority can be attributed to the failure of the king in managing these factions. While until now, and after this period, the king or the prospective successor attempted to offset the existing networks of loyalty by building new ones, at this stage it one influential noble and his faction undercut the king's position. For instance Sujinpha was placed on the throne by Atan Buragohain. In one account his sons remarked that the king and his family 'will not be able to rule the country till you [the king] make the buragohain, the barbarua, the dihingia phukan and the gauhatia phukan [Barphukan] to take an oath of fidelity.'²⁴³ Their subsequent failed attempt to detain the Buragohain makes it apparent that they were trying to offset the influence of the Buragohain. However, the *Buragohain* was effective in mobilising the officials into his side.

We witness that the appointments made to the highest positions were now either in the form of an influential noble exercising his power in obtaining the post for himself or a person of his choice or as attempts to conciliate and compensate other important nobles. For instance, after Ramdhwaj Singha (1673-1675) deposed Udayditya Singha with the help of an official named Debera, he promoted Debera to the position of *Barbarua* from that of a *Hazarika*. But it was

²⁴¹ Kasi Nath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Majumdar Press, Calcutta, 1906, p. 37

²⁴² S K Bhuyan(ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1933, p. 14

²⁴³ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 243

Debera who then removed the got his loyalists appointed to the other important positions. When Ramadhvaj Singha got bedridden, Debera took the initiative in executing all possible direct successors.²⁴⁴ After Debera, prominent officials like Atan Buragohain and after him Laluk Barphukan continued with the same policy of one influential noble removing the existing officials loyal to the previous one.

By concentrating important offices in their person or within factions and successfully created semi-independent local authority. Officials serving in particular locations came to enjoy more autonomous role in their domains and also more influential role in imperial politics. For instance, the constant tussle for appointments and control over the person of the king between the establishment at Gauhati and that of Gargaon in the period after the death of Chakradwaj Simha in 1670 is a case in point. Imperial sanction alone from now on was not enough to assume charge as the king. While, at the surface, these events highlight the confusion that was prevalent in provincial politics, they also reflect the imperial centre's inability to control appointments in the province any longer. For instance, when Atan Buragohain made changes to official positions in Guwahati, the *Barphukan* at Guwahati appointed his own set of officials to those positions. The dismissed officers then took refuge in Guwahati under the *Barphukan*.²⁴⁵ The *Barphukan* himself was removed from his office but it had little effect on his power base who instead marched to the capital to take control from the *Buragohain*. The next Ahom king Gadadhar Singha's (1681-1696) success in reversing this trend of ministerial ascendancy can be attributed to him building an alternate network of loyalist officials whom he then promoted to the high positions of the state.

²⁴⁴ S K Bhuyan(ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1933, p. 5

²⁴⁵ GC Barua(tr. & ed.), *Ahom Buranji From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, p. 252

Conclusion

Be it the Ahom court or the Brahmaputra Valley, the very idea of authority was not meant to be concentrated in one centralised figure or source. Such distribution was not seen as a sign of weakness of the state but rather as its expected manifestation. This is attested by the origin story of the Ahoms and also the manner in which the *patra mantris* were entrusted with the task of selecting the king. Hierarchy however was inevitable and necessary part of this order. This can be seen even in the case of succession when twice Atan Buragohain, citing his non royal lineage, refused to become the king after playing a central role in deposing the existing king. That hierarchy however acknowledged shared and multiple sources of authority. This discussion on contested succession and factionalism in Ahom state suggests the imprint of the wider politics of the valley wherein power was distributed in local nodes. Management of factions within the official hierarchy was the most critical part of preserving the authority of the king just like managing tributaries was essential for extending Ahom authority in the valley. What we can see is power and authority was conceived as distributed in a network and amongst several actors.

4. Political Configurations in the Brahmaputra Valley and Making of the Mughal North East Frontier: Conflict, Cooperation and Co-option

Introduction

In the previous chapters we have primarily considered the how the Ahom State operated in the Brahmaputra Valley. In this chapter we will try to extend our focus to the Mughal State and the manner they functioned in the Brahmaputra Valley. Geographically, the Brahmaputra Valley constituted the northeastern edge of the Mughal empire and, for all practical purposes, the activities of the Mughals in the valley were coordinated from Bengal. Here in the Valley, as we will see through the course of this chapter, the Mughals could maintain only a fragile political authority. Despite repeated attempts of the Mughals to secure their control over the region, both environmental factors and administrative weaknesses severely curtailed their ambitions. It is in this sense that we can see a frontier in making where a space for frequent transgression of imperial will existed and, therefore, Mughal presence in such conditions remained disordered.

In order to highlight the manner in which the Brahmaputra Valley presented a frontier of Mughal operations this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section we will consider the how the environmental context of the Brahmaputra Valley placed restrictions on Mughal activities and how the Mughals tried to negotiate with the same. In the second section we will further look in the political manifestations of personal rivalries, lobbying and factionalism within the Mughals that came to characterise Mughal presence in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the third section, we will briefly try to highlight how the Mughals were dependent on cooperation and co-option of local power holders and resources while furthering their imperial ambitions in the valley.

I. Negotiating the Environment: The Mughal Expeditions in the Brahmaputra Valley

In the winter of 1612, the Mughals began their campaign into the Koch territories. The army comprised the men, horses and elephants of the *mansabdars* and officials deputed for the expedition. Mirza Nathan, who was a part of the campaign tells us in his account *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* that ‘in addition to the elephants of the nobles, five thousand matchlock-men, and three hundred elephants were also sent to the expedition.’²⁴⁶ Furthermore, the fleet that accompanied the army included hundred boats of the Bengal *zaminders* and ‘four hundred (imperial) war boars fully equipped with big cannon.’²⁴⁷

Here in the northeastern frontier of the Mughal empire, they were presented with a peculiar environment, one that was both unfamiliar and unpleasant for them. The landscape was marked by abundant water bodies, an overwhelming cover of forests, scattered hills and a prolonged monsoon resulting in recurrent floods. Expansion, control and management of military and administrative tasks would require them to closely interact with the given environmental setting. Not only their strategies had to adapt to the given conditions but also, when required and possible, modify the same conditions.

The land army marched along the banks of river in order to coordinate with the fleet. However, before the land army could march, the roads had to be cleared of jungles and overgrowth. Shehabuddin Talesh in his *Tarikh-i-Assam* mentions that one of the routes to Koch Behar was ‘flanked on both sides by dense and thorny jungle’ while another ‘by wild growth of thin and

²⁴⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1936, p. 223

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223

light canes.’²⁴⁸ He also mentions about a type of overgrowth- *khakhar*- which was ‘so thick and strong like bamboo, even elephants were unable to move past the stems.’²⁴⁹ The practice of clearing the route must have been indispensable. Talesh describes the hazards of traveling through such jungles and how the men and animals could injure themselves. For instance he mentions that ‘when the sharp point of broken *Khakhar* (Khagri) which was just like the tip of spear, pricked the feet of any living being it appeared as if it has pierced the heart.’²⁵⁰ These experiences were however not new or peculiar to Shehabuddin’s time. He remarks that he was aware of rumours that the route was rather inconvenient and ‘difficult because of dense jungles.’²⁵¹ In fact, Mirza Nathan who had served in the territory from 1612 to 1624 also remarked that boatmen had to be sent before the marching army to clear the road of jungles.²⁵² Boatmen were usually put to the task of clearing the path. At one place, Mirza Nathan mentions that he sent ‘boatmen in the van and began to proceed by clearing the thick jungles, and making a way, fifty yards wide for the easy passage of the army’²⁵³ At times difficult stretches had to be cleared with the help of elephants. While pursuing Jadu Nayak, a local chieftain, in November 1619, Mirza Nathan’s forces crossed a river named Dhaknabuyi. However, soon they realized that there was no road further ahead. Therefore, elephants were sent in first ‘in batches of ten and these [elephants] were employed in clearing the jungles of *Kukrajhar* [reeds] by trampling upon them three times in succession.’²⁵⁴

Given that the landscape was crisscrossed by several rivers and rivulets, the land army required the fleet to assist their movement. The land army had to cross several rivers on their march.

²⁴⁸ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, Guwahati, 2009, p. 10

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18

²⁵¹²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

²⁵² Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 229

²⁵³ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 655-656

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 610

While crossing unaided crossing was possible when the army could locate shallow part of a river, it was difficult to cross the bigger rivers without the help of the fleet. When the Mughal army was pursuing Parikshit, the *raja* of Kamrup in the winter of 1612, the fleet happened to advance ahead while the land army trailed behind. Upon reaching the river Manas, it became so difficult for the army to cross over that they had to bring boats from the nearby villages.²⁵⁵ It was not only the land army that required help. While advancing towards Kamrup in the 1615, Abdul Baqi, the commander of the Mughal forces in Koch territories, had travelled with his fleet without waiting for the land army to arrive. Upon reaching a ‘narrow part of the river (Brahmaputra), the rebels of Kamrup came from either side and wounded a large number of his followers by a shower of arrows.’²⁵⁶ Mutual cooperation between the fleet and the land army was essential for advancing, and lack of the same, either deliberate or accidental, could delay movement or even make the army and the fleet vulnerable. However, human error alone was not accountable for creating situations where the fleet and the land army was separated, and either could not come to the aid of the other. In 1662, when the Mughal army was on its way to Kaliabor, when the fleet was attacked the land army could not come to its aid because it ‘was obstructed by jungles and swamps... [and] was unable to locate the royal fleet due to darkness of night and nonexistence of any village or proper route.’²⁵⁷ Similarly, in the same year when the army marched to Garhgaon, at the banks of Dikhow river, the fleet stayed back at a place called Lakhogarh, on the banks of Brahmaputra, as the shallow bed of Dikhow made it ‘very difficult for big boats to negotiate it.’²⁵⁸

In addition to ferrying men and animals across, boats could also be used as bridges to cross over. There are several instances in the *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* about bridges built by connecting

²⁵⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 251

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 361

²⁵⁷ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 35

²⁵⁸ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 38

several boats. The practice was prevalent in Bengal as well. Before the expedition to Bhati, Mirza Nathan put up a display of a floating bridge by putting together ‘*katari, maniki* and *bathila* boats.’²⁵⁹ During the campaign against the Mags (Arakanese), subedar Qasim Khan ‘ordered that all the rivers from Khizrpur to Bhalwa should be bridged with big cargo boats like *Bhadia* and *Patila*.’²⁶⁰ That this practice was not limited to Bengal can be seen when the Mughal commander Abu Bakr during his expedition to Assam in 1615, tried to build a similar floating bridge over the Bharali river. In addition to men, animals had to be also transported across rivers. Mirza Nathan describes that in order to transport animals, it was required ‘to fit up mands of the boats (i.e., two or more boats tied together with a platform over them).’²⁶¹ Mirza Nathan describes one of the typical instances of river crossing wherein seven *gondolas* were arranged and Mirza Nathan ‘ordered four of these to be tied into two mand boats in order to transport the horses on them; two boats were used for carrying the soldiers, and one was given to the camp followers.’²⁶²

Traversing the hills, especially in Dakhinkul, on the south banks of Brahmaputra, was yet another task for the Mughals. From the account of Mirza Nathan it appears that the army was usually divided into detachments and sent along different hill passes. In one of the descriptions of the imperial army’s march through hills Mirza Nathan mentions that the army was divided into two groups- one sent up the hill while the other was to advance along the foot of the hill.²⁶³ Furthermore, he ordered his men to

‘prepare fifty *Larakcha* i.e a kind of palanquin made of green bamboos and carried by men on shoulders like a Duli (litter). One hundred and fifty strong Kuches [koches] were appointed with instructions that if any of the noble officers of the army failed to climb the hills, they

²⁵⁹ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 48

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329-330

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 422

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 362

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 684

should carry him in one of these *Larakchas*, so that in time of need he might come out of it and join his comrades in battle.²⁶⁴

Crossing rivers, and traversing through hill passes and forested routes was only a part of the process. What was more important for an expeditionary army as well as for administrative management was to maintain communication and supply lines. Such concerns are visible in the manner the army marched forward. In 1612 when the army was pursuing Parikshit, the *raja* of Kamrup, Mirza Nathan mentions that, 'in every station they used to halt for a short time and reconnoitre their next halting stage a day previous(to their march to that stage).'²⁶⁵ The standard practice during a march, or after gaining control over a place, was to secure the hold over the particular area by creating a *thana* and placing it under the charge of an official. In 1615, the imperial army was marching towards Khuntaghat to suppress an uprising. Once Rangamati, a *thana* which was besieged by the rebels, was occupied, the official entrusted with the task of recapturing the place was ordered to leave a small force there while 'the other auxiliary forces of his company should be sent to join the victorious army.'²⁶⁶ Similarly, further ahead on the march, at a place called Guma, an official was stationed in order to set up 'a *thana* for the purpose of settling that region and also for the satisfactory transport of rations.'²⁶⁷ Such *thanas* also ensured that passage for reinforcements, or subsequent movement of the army, remained accessible and secured.

It was necessary to build a mechanism which could guarantee unhindered flow of rations. In 1619, Mirza Nathan was laying siege to the fort of Rangjuli, and had sent a detachment in pursuit of Baldev [Balinarayan], another adversary of the Mughals. In order to pacify the concerns of the detachment, Mirza Nathan suggested that the detachment should leave a part

²⁶⁴ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 684

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318-319

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321

of the force behind to ‘serve as an intermediary guide to supply rations from us [main force at Ranjuli] to you [the detachment]’²⁶⁸ These supply lines also needed to be connected with the fleet. A fort further inland would be connected to the fleet by a string of forts. In 1619, when Mirza Nathan was engaged with the hill chiefs and in Dakhinkul, he raised a fort on the banks of Brahmaputra and another midway between his main fort and the one on the banks. The fleet would bring supplies to the bank which would then be sent to the intermediary fort and from there forwarded to Nathan’s fort.

As already indicated, constructing stockades and forts was yet another critical aspect of controlling a territory. During a march, or during a siege, forts and stockades had to be quickly built both for offensive and defensive purpose. At one place, Mirza Nathan mentioned that a fort of fifteen hundred yards was completed ‘within two days and nights.’²⁶⁹ Forts and stockades enabled the Mughals to enclose an area which then served as a base for the defense of men and equipment such as artillery. For example, marching through the hills of Rangdan on his campaign to wrest control over Dakhinkul in 1619, Mirza Nathan arrived at a place called Tashpur. He found the place ‘as this place was centrally situated and surrounded by dense forests of the hilly region, so in order to protect themselves from the enemy’s night attack, he ordered the construction of a stockade covering an area of 500 yards.’²⁷⁰ The usual practice was to place a force to defend a fort while send a detachment to face an attack. There are several instances when Mirza Nathan tells us about the untoward consequences of not constructing a stockade for defense. In one of those instances, a Mughal official Allama Beg who was sent to suppress an uprising in Khuntaghat in 1614, crossed a river named Gaurang and halted at its banks. However, he failed to complete his stockade before it grew dark and,

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 548

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 567

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 513

as a consequence, had no place to fall back when attacked and was killed along with his entire force.²⁷¹

It is visible from *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* that usually there was a main fort and a few other redoubts around it. As the landscape was interspersed with dense forests, it was important to clear out jungles around the fort to avoid possibilities of surprise attacks as well as to create space for mounting a charge, if required. Forts were generally constructed out of earthworks or wooden logs. Stockades and other such barriers to fence an area were made out of grass or wood plastered with mud as well as of bamboo. Mirza Nathan mentions about building temporary stockade out of plantain trees which would be of ‘no use after three or four days, still it was quite strong for these three or four days. Arrows and bullets from guns had no power to pass through this barricade.’²⁷² Boatmen and native *paiks* were put to the task of constructing forts and stockades. While grass and wood was readily available, at times, after taking over an enemy’s fort, the building material such as logs of wood could even be reused to construct new forts.²⁷³

The selection of sites for forts and stockades gives us an idea about how the Mughals sought to achieve advantage by controlling strategic points in the physical landscape. Furthermore, selection of sites also reveals the range of objectives that such constructions were expected to execute. Forts were built to guard the banks of rivers, confluence of two rivers and hill passes. For instance, the fort of Rangamati at the mouth of the river Gadadhar, confluence of the Gadhadhar and Brahmaputra, was ‘the passage of ingress and egress of people from Jahangir nagar and Qasim Khan[the subedar]; and it was also the way of transit of rations from different parts.’²⁷⁴ And its strategic significance can be seen in the manner it repeatedly came under

²⁷¹ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 301

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 611

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 578

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301

attack and how the Mughals prioritized having control over it. In 1612, when Parikshit, the *raja* of Kamrup, launched an all-out attack on the Mughals, he sent his entire fleet to capture the mouth of Gadadhar. Similarly, in 1614, when a rebellion had broken out at Khuntaghat, further west of Rangamati, and the force sent by the Mughals was routed, Mughals promptly stepped up the defense of Rangamati. Similarly, about hill passes, Mirza Nathan on one occasion, while pursuing Shumarayed Kayeth, a Koch chieftain, remarked that if they fail to secure a hill pass there ‘would be no other means left to the army but to take a roundabout route covering a journey of six days.’²⁷⁵ Stockades were built to protect other locations crucial for uninterrupted movement such as narrow and fordable stretches of a rivers, as well as bridges. Additionally, basic necessities like water sources also had to be defended. Mirza Nathan describes how a stream, which flowed by the Mughal fort at Ranihat, and was the source of water for the inhabitants, had to be guarded against cannon fire from an overlooking hill. He therefore, ‘ordered the construction of a stockade in such a way as to cover half the portion of the river on this side [Mirza’s side] and half on the other side [enemy’s side], with the stream running in between them.’²⁷⁶ Forts were also built at places which, by their locations, could keep watch over territories which served as refuges for rebels. For example when in 1616, Kamrup witnessed repeated rebellions which used areas of Darrang and Sahurabari as safe havens, a fort was built ‘between Baksa Duwar [where a Mughal garrison was already present], Darrang and Sahurabari to keep a vigilant eye on the adjacent places.’²⁷⁷

A characteristic feature of the entire Brahmaputra Valley is the intense rainy season. Shehabuddin Talesh remarked that ‘rain continues incessantly for eight months. It rains occasionally even during the four winter months.’²⁷⁸ Heavy rains caused the rivers and other

²⁷⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 556

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 578

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 411

²⁷⁸ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 49

water bodies to overflow and as Talesh describes in the monsoons ‘the entire region was submerged in water.’²⁷⁹ It resulted in a set of inescapable difficulties and compelled the Mughals to adopt specific strategies. Flooding meant that the land routes were mostly submerged making it difficult for men and horses to move about. Given that the Mughals relied on their cavalry to a great extent, it could impose serious limitations on their military potential. Mirza Nathan describes how once while pursuing a retreating enemy force, he had to turn his horses because ‘a pool of water had collected during the rains in the vicinity of the enemy’s fort.’²⁸⁰ Similarly Shehabuddin Talesh also describes the inconveniencies caused when, on one occasion the cavalry and the rest of the army was separated as the ‘land was full of mud and slime.’²⁸¹ During monsoons, boats were the only means for transporting men and material. In absence of regular boats, animals could also be transferred through makeshift arrangements like ‘on the *Biras* i.e a kind of raft made of woods and plantain trees tied together.’²⁸²

Crossing and navigating overflowing rivers was hazardous and therefore it further restricted mobility across rivers. In 1615, Abu Bakr had led the expedition into the territory of the Ahoms and stationed himself at the banks of Bharali during the rains. Some of the camp followers had crossed the river while the rest of the army had to delay their crossing. The bridge of boats which was supposed to facilitate the crossing collapsed ‘by the rapid rise of the water of the aforesaid river.’²⁸³ So when the small group of people who had crossed over earlier were attacked ‘no body could render any assistance to them.’²⁸⁴ Similarly, in the monsoon of 1662, Mir Jumla’s main naval fleet could not come to his assistance because of ‘the intensity of

²⁷⁹ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 69

²⁸⁰ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 590

²⁸¹ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 90

²⁸² Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 358

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 395

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 395

Dhing's [a branch of Brahmaputra] current increased.'²⁸⁵ Problems could persist even after water receded. Banks would be filled with silt making movement of cavalry a challenging task.

In addition to hindering movement, rains could also get into the way of constructing forts and stockades which, as discussed earlier, was crucial for the purpose of defense. Mirza Nathan mentions how once, because of untimely rains, 'the part of the stockade which was raised came down and all attempts made to preserve it went for nothing.'²⁸⁶ On yet another occasion the construction of a fort has to be delayed because of waterlogging.²⁸⁷ Also, existing forts could be washed away, especially those on the banks of rivers. Therefore, it was expedient to evacuate certain forts during the rainy season and this practice has been well attested by both Mirza Nathan and Shehabuddin Talesh. Evacuating forts away from water bodies could present yet another difficulty. In 1620, after Mirza Nathan evacuated from the fort of Ranihat because of the rains and shifted to a place named Haligaon, the residents of the fort were faced with a shortage of drinking water. Finally, 'water was brought to the fort by digging a canal from the river which was flowing by Ranihat.'²⁸⁸

Here, it would be appropriate to mention that in addition to actual floods there was an added danger of artificial floods. We have quite a few references when areas were deliberately flooded by either cutting banks of river or by linking other smaller water bodies together. For instance, in January 1620, Shumaruyed Kayeth, a dissident chieftain, 'cut down the banks of some hill-streams in such a way that within the night the environs of the Mirza's fort [Mirza Nathan's] were submerged in water, and no place except an elevation within the fort was left dry.'²⁸⁹ Similarly, Shehabuddin Talesh mentions that in May 1662, the route of a Mughal contingent

²⁸⁵ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 72

²⁸⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 549-550

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 551

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 625

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 611

was flooded when the Ahoms, ‘by drilling deep canals and widening the brook, connected the route with the turbulent river of Dhing [Dihing, a branch of Brahmaputra].’²⁹⁰ However, it would be incorrect to assume that such acts of deliberate flooding always worked against the interests of Mughals. In fact, the Mughals themselves employed the same tactic to operate their fleet in places where other modes of mobility were restricted. In 1616, Mirza Nathan was on his march to Ranihat. However, the rains had turned the route muddy making it difficult for his army to advance. So he sent back his men and animals to Pandu, on the banks of Brahmaputra, ‘to cut open the bank of Brahmaputra so that the plains and jungles might be overflowed with its water.’²⁹¹ This enabled him to bring in his fleet and proceed onwards to Ranihat.

During monsoons transporting rations became a grueling task. Though floods meant that boats could operate further inland, however, as Mirza Nathan describes, it also ‘blocked all the ways of transport by bullocks.’²⁹² Elephants, then, had to be sent out of forts to bring ration from the fleet. Shehabuddin Talesh’s account gives us a very detailed picture of the disruptions caused by monsoons. Immediately after the monsoon rains began in 1662, the entire area of Assam was flooded. And because, as indicated before, the main naval fleet was stationed behind at Lakhogarh, all supply lines were threatened. The intermediate *thanas* between the fleet and the *thana* of Mir Jumla which served as transit points were cut off from each other. Given the enforced isolation, some *thanas* were even attacked by the Ahoms. On one occasion when a force was sent to take back control of one such *thana* for restoring supply lines, it had to return midway because it became impossible to proceed further without the assistance of boats. Subsequent attempts failed as well because the routes disappeared and as Talesh describes ‘the countryside has been converted into a rushing river.’²⁹³ The situation became so dire that even

²⁹⁰ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 76

²⁹¹ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 417

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 579

²⁹³ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 76

communication links amongst *thanas* and between *thanas* and the fleet became tenuous. There are repeated references in Talesh's account where he remarks that even sending messages became impossible. Apart from the rains and floods, the native Ahoms also interrupted these communication networks.

The obvious and immediate consequence of such disruption was scarcity of rations. The supply of food for men as well as fodder for animals suffered. Shehabuddin Talesh mentions that in 1662, the rains, flood and raids by the natives damaged a substantial amount of the grains that they had acquired. Talesh says that 'one hundred and seventy three granaries of paddy heaps had been captured but after the flood and uprising of the non believers [Ahoms] only sixteen of them were left with us [Mughals].'²⁹⁴ Even during the process of transporting grains, which was obstructed and delayed the Mughals complained that 'the foodstuff of the troops were getting damaged.'²⁹⁵ In addition to this, insufficient means of transport, particularly boats in the rainy season, seriously impact the capacity of rations that could be sent to the required places. For instance when Mir Jumla decided to evacuate Mathurapur and move to Garhgaon in August 1662, he 'could not transport even one fourth of paddy stored in Mathurapur due to non availability of carriers.'²⁹⁶

Such shortages did not just affect immobile *thanas*, isolated from each other, but also the army on the march. Continuous marching could overstretch the supply lines making it difficult for rations to reach the army on move. For instance, in first half of 1613, when the Mughals were pursuing Parikshit into Kamrup, and had marched for six days, 'they had to live upon coarse rice and beef they could procure from some of the adjacent villages. The situation became very critical; many of the people had to remain in hunger.'²⁹⁷ Furthermore, prolonged marched

²⁹⁴ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 110

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114

²⁹⁷ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 250

through difficult terrains and forested areas, which was not uncommon, could result in severe scarcity of rations for the army. Also, as highlighted earlier, maintaining contact with the fleet was important for the army on the move. Advancing without arranging for enough protection of the fleet could result in putting supply lines at risk. A case in point is Mirza Nathan's advance from Pandu, where his fleet was stationed, to Ranihat in the monsoon of 1616. Mirza Nathan marched to Ranihat against the Hizda Rajas, the hill chieftains of Dakhinkul, 'leaving his fort [at Pandu] and his rear not strongly guarded.'²⁹⁸ The hill chieftains then immediately attacked the fleet in order to cut supply lines and force Mirza Nathan to retreat.

Here it would be useful to consider the various ways in which rations and other essentials were procured at the first place. It appears from the account of Mirza Nathan that *beparis* (traders) were present in Mughal forts in the area. Some of these *beparis* also accompanied the marching army. For instance, Mirza Nathan refers to an incident where 'a company of traders, who went to the villages for the purpose of trade in order to bring rations for the imperial army, were attacked and plundered.'²⁹⁹ So, the Mughals were, to an extent, dependent on traders for their stock of food stuff. And obstacles faced by these traders had a direct bearing on the availability of rations for the Mughals. We find references of prices of essential food stuff going up because of raids by local chieftains.³⁰⁰ In addition to this we also have instances when the Mughals themselves had to resort to plundering nearby areas for rations when their supply lines were obstructed.

Another characteristic of the valley with extremely debilitating consequences was widespread potential for epidemics, especially in the monsoons. Shehabuddin Talesh repeatedly describes the range of diseases afflicted the Mughals during their campaign. He constantly remarks how

²⁹⁸ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 414

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 336

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 505

the air was ‘prone to diseases and injurious to health.’³⁰¹ His descriptions appear less exaggerated when we consider the following numbers,

‘There were around one thousand and five hundred cavalymen with Deleer Khan in this expedition. On the termination of the rainy season and in course of their march towards Namroop only four to five hundred cavalry men survived.’³⁰²

Similar accounts have been left by Mirza Nathan as well. In one of those references he describes how ‘owing to the peculiar climate of that place and a kind of insect called *Gandhi* the soldiers suffered from a sort of sore... [and] every one of them suffered from four to five months.’³⁰³

Our discussion on the human and non-human aspects of the environment, would be lacking if we do not incorporate animals in the narrative. It has already been indicated earlier how certain tasks executed with the assistance of animals- elephants, horses and cattle- were integral to logistical and military operations. The combat roles of horses and elephants have been well illustrated in the various histories of the Mughals. In the Brahmaputra Valley, like elsewhere, elephants were primarily used in siege warfare. Elephants were usually placed in the front while charging into a fort. Because the walls of forts and stockades were made of plastered mud, wooden logs or bamboo, elephants were particularly effective in breaking through such barriers. Moreover, elephants were also employed to clear routes for the advancing army, carry artillery and other heavy equipment, and transport rations during monsoons, especially when other means had failed. Similarly, bullocks were employed as beasts of burden in transporting supplies.

³⁰¹ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 110

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 111

³⁰³ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 686

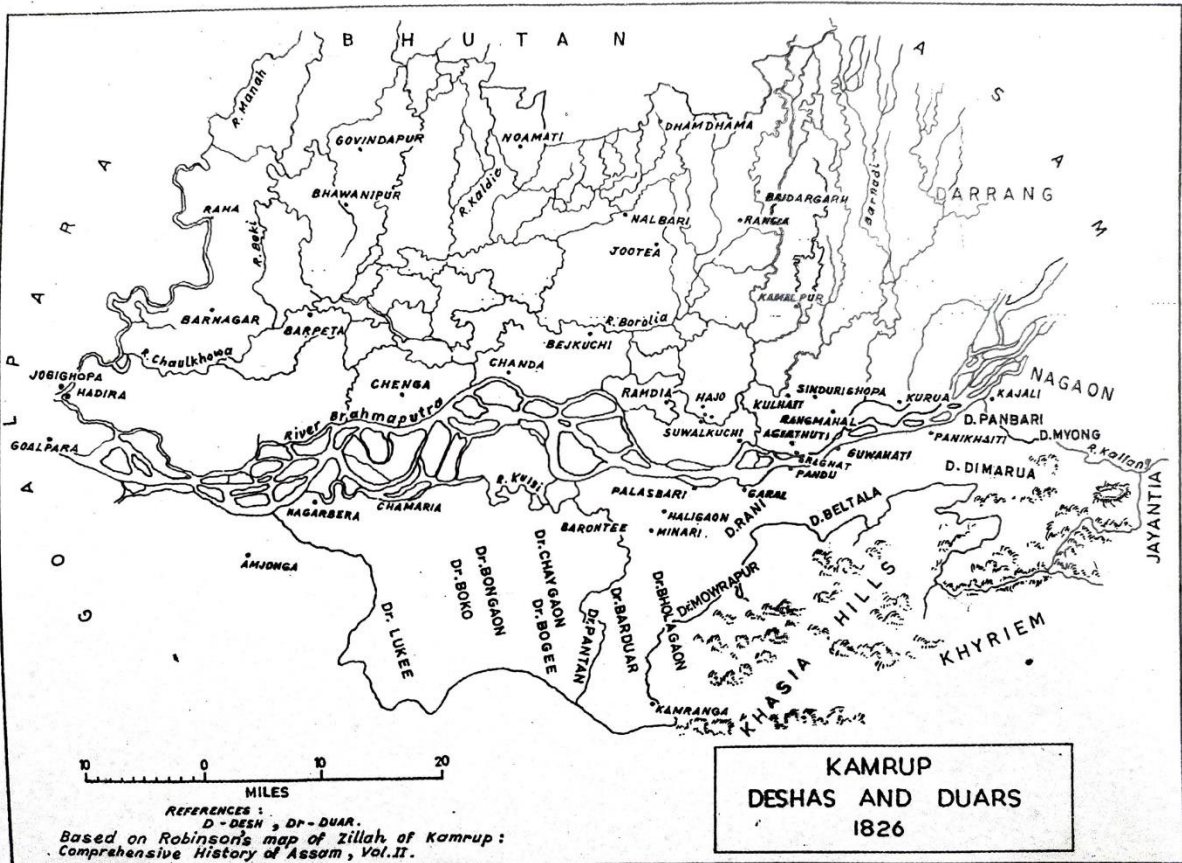
While considering the range of roles these animals perform, often their functional roles are emphasized while their biological essence is overlooked. However, the demanding environmental setting of the Brahmaputra Valley, we also need to consider how the environment impacted the capacity of these animals in discharging their assigned tasks. This would, in turn, reveal how biological limits and possibilities of animals influenced Mughal affairs in the Brahmaputra Valley. In addition to several other factors, the distance and pace at which an army could march also depended on the extent horses and elephants could move without exhausting themselves. For instance in July 1662, after an attack by the Ahoms was repulsed, a pursuit had to be given up because ‘the horses would have to undertake a very long journey... [after] which the horses might not cross the river due to exhaustion.’³⁰⁴ We have plenty of such references where the army had to make forced stops because of the exhaustion of animals. Similarly, we have already underlined that rains and floods made it difficult for horses and bullocks to move. Shehabuddin Talesh describes an incident when a contingent of the army remained stranded on its route during heavy rains as ‘some of the bullock carts carrying the royal artillery became unpliant due to the weakness of the bullocks and deep mud.’ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, blocked supply lines could affect the availability of fodder for animals. Moreover, we have instances when prolonged continuous marches resulted in lack of grazing time and resulted in limited fodder for animals. So, when in 1613 Mughals were pursuing Parikshit into Kamrup, in addition to food shortages for the men, ‘no food could be procured for the elephants nor could they halt during the day to procure grass for them.’³⁰⁵

So the picture that emerges from the above discussion is that the Mughal affairs in the Brahmaputra Valley had to constantly navigate the limitations placed by the environment. All aspects of the movement of the army and the fleet, maintaining and securing communication

³⁰⁴ Shehabuddin Talesh, *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Mazhar Asif (tr.), p. 100

³⁰⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 250

and supply lines as well as other aspects of warfare and defense had to account for the environment. The attempt of the above discussion was not just to highlight the perilous conditions under which the Mughals operated in the valley but also to explore the range of strategies they incorporated to negotiate with the same.



Map 3 : Map of Kamrup. Source : H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam Volume 2 Medieval Period: Political*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, p. 109A

II. Personal Interests, Mutual Rivalries and Problems of Authority

The environmental context of the Brahmaputra Valley engendered a distinctive kind of political relations. The remoteness of the landscape and restricted mobility created a dispersed sense of political control wherein personal interests, loyalties and rivalries became a distinctive marker

of the Mughal politics in the region. Ideally speaking, military activities and political changes were sought to be imperially coordinated. However, owing to the territorial distance and geographical remoteness, communication of imperial commands were slow, irregular and at times, as we will see, also incoherent. This is not to say that imperial supervision was entirely absent. The officials continued to draw legitimacy of their operations from Mughal imperial orders as did important appointments required imperial sanction. The extent to which imperial apparatus could be transplanted was driven by the tendencies of the men and actual conditions on ground. Given difficult environmental conditions, the official authority was often restricted to limited area and this often isolated individual *thanas* from each. On the one hand while this necessitated a greater degree of coordination and mutual assistance, on the other this also opened up the latent possibilities of discord by creating isolated spheres of power.

In fact, in order to comprehend the inter-personal relationships and resulting problems of authority amongst the Mughal officials serving in the north-east frontier, we need to constantly refer to the corresponding situation in Bengal. The political culture of Bengal had a definite imprint in the Koch territories. This was so because, firstly, Mughal affairs in the Koch territories were coordinated from Bengal. Secondly, both these areas presented similar problems of lax central supervision. Thirdly, and most importantly, officials serving in Koch either had earlier served in Bengal or had close links with those serving in Bengal. The Mughal presence in the Koch territories was, therefore, for all practical purposes, an extension of that in Bengal. The manner in which officials conducted themselves and their authority in Bengal and Koch territories, in the period under consideration, present a comparable pattern varying only in degree. Here it would be pertinent to reiterate that we will sparingly also use the 'north eastern frontier' of the Mughals to refer to the Mughal operations in the Brahmaputra Valley. This is to capture the geographical location of the political stage at the north-eastern edge of the empire.

The formal hierarchy of command amongst the men serving in the Brahmaputra Valley was sanctioned by the *subedar* stationed at Bengal. However, in reality, the hierarchy did not always work out in an ordered fashion nor was the coordination amongst the imperial officials always cordial. As can be gleaned from Mirza Nathan's account, the Mughal force that was involved in valley consisted of both imperial officials and followers of these officials. The imperial officials followed the mandate given to them by the *subedar*, the followers took orders from their respective leaders. Considering the frontier conditions, where rebellions were frequent and could spring unexpectedly, the army was constantly kept engaged. The army was spread out over the subdued territories and stationed at the *thanas* under the command of imperial officials. As and when required regiments could be mobilized and one regiment could be sent in to support another. Also within the fortresses the available force could comprise of more than one imperial official and their followers. The following excerpt, where Mirza Nathan sends instructions to Mir Ghiyasu'd-Din Mahmud, upon being handed over the charge of fort of Shaykh Ibrahim, following the defeat of the rebellious Shaykh, is indicative of the composition and division of the army:

'If the Mir asks, with which regiment he is to protect it, tell him to get together Raja Satrajit, Suna Ghazi, Adil Khal and other admirals of Musa Khans so that their regiments and followers cannot abscond or desert . In addition, those who possess unreliable following gathered together from a hundred places, should also be made to guard it'³⁰⁶

Baharistan-i Ghaybi opens with Islam Khan being handed the post of *subedar* of Bengal in 1608. The previous phase of Mughal presence in Bengal was characterised by a *subedar* whose

³⁰⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1936, p. 475

power was ‘paralysed by inadequacy of his forces and the disobedience, greed and mutual jealousies of his subordinates.’³⁰⁷ However, this still remained a concern for the emperor even after the appointment of a new *subedar*. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that right after Islam Khan’s appointment the emperor issued a *farman* to call back all such official who out of their inability or personal interests were hindering the extension of Mughal domination in Bengal. The *farman* specifically directed that ‘Wazir Khan, the former *diwan* of the province, the sons of Ma’sum Khan, and Lachi Khan Qaqshal who were the leaders of the mischief in that country are to be taken into custody and sent to the imperial court.’³⁰⁸

Furthermore, that the emperor was suspicious of the conduct of other officials as well, and that previous practices of officials disregarding the authority of the *subedar*, could still be a problem is attested by his instruction to the new *subedar*. The emperor mentions in the same *farman* that

‘Any one of these old officers who takes recourse to his old habits and courses of action against your [*subedar*’s] orders and advice, should be discharged from service. Whoever is wanted by you from the court, we shall appoint him in that place’³⁰⁹

However, as we can see, for the period under consideration, the eastern frontier was often marked by *subedar* in Bengal himself flouting imperial regulations. Islam Khan was accused of conducting meetings with him standing on a *jharuka*, a prerogative reserved for the emperor. Despite admonitions from the emperor, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that Islam Khan continued with the practice ‘with plea of holding a meeting with the high and the low by standing there on foot.’³¹⁰ Similarly, officials criticised Islam Khan for not being personally present with the army. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that ‘the *mansab* of Islam Khan was

³⁰⁷ Jadunath Sarkar ed., *The History of Bengal*, Vol II, BR Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1943, p. 193

³⁰⁸ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 4

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215

reduced by 2000 personal and horse for his fault of not accompanying the expedition against Usman [an Afghan chief].³¹¹ However, the problem of *subedar* not personally leading expeditions possibly continued. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that during the expedition against the Mags (Arakanese) in 1616, Mukhlis Khan, the *diwan*, confronted Qasim Khan, the *subedar*, for not leading the expedition. The *diwan* was of the opinion that ‘it [the expedition] would not be accomplished unless you [Qasim Khan] personally go.’³¹² He further added that seven hundred thousand rupees had already been spent but because of the *subedar*’s reluctance to lead the campaign, all of it bore no result.

At the same time, the *subedar* exercised disproportionate power over his subordinates because of the absence of other high ranking officials and also slack imperial supervision. This often placed the *subedar* in a favourable position to override the authority of other officials and also compel them to function according to his own will. After the death of Islam Khan in 1617 when Qasim Khan was appointed the *subedar*, a discord erupted between Mirza Husayn Beg, the *diwan* and the *kotwal* of Qasim Khan. The death of Islam Khan and the departure of his son Shaykh Hunshang for the imperial capital resulted in the Mirza Husayn Beg, the *diwan* and the *kotwal* of the new *subedar* fighting to take control over the possessions of the deceased *subedar*. Matters soon went out of hand and the two parties clashed, many were killed and the records of the *diwan* were destroyed by Qasim Khan’s men. Qasim Khan, however, succeeded in imprisoning the *diwan* and his associates by making the other officials sign a memorandum putting the entire blame on the *diwan*.

The powerlessness of the subordinate officials is soon apparent when the *waqai navis* was to send a report of the events. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions in this context that ‘Qasim Khan has such control over the frontier that even a bird cannot fly from this side to Upper India

³¹¹ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 214

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 409

(Hindustan) without his knowledge and orders. Eventually, the reports had to be sent discreetly by means of two persons in the guise of *jogis* (monks). The imperial court received the reports and Sadat Khan was sent to Bengal for investigating into the matter.

The *subedar* exercising his discretion without any restraint and in contravention to imperial mandate and must have posed a serious problem. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that after repeated complaints, it was decided in 1616 that ‘ for the posts of the *Diwan*, the *Bakhshi* and the *Waqai Navis* of Bengal such a type of man of high rank should be sent and appointed from the court who was of equal rank with Qasim Khan, and who would be able to meet the whimsical Khan and overpower him in questions and replies.’³¹³

The problem of divided authority was even more acute in the Koch territories of the Brahmaputra Valley where direct control of the *subedar* was lacking while that of the imperial court entirely absent. Even though hierarchy of command over army was marked out by the *subedar*, local officials often disagreed over claims to authority. For instance, when the imperial army was sent to Koch territories under Mukarram Khan 1612, he was displeased with Mirza Nathan for beating his kettle drum before marching. He sent the following message to the Mirza

‘Has this army one commander or two? As the present arrangements hold (i.e , when the army is under one leader who is in command) why did you (in the first place) sound your kettle drum and start marching? Secondly, this is the privilege of Mukarram Khan and not of others.’³¹⁴

³¹³ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 377

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225

However, Mirza Nathan was not deterred and he continued with the practice, which he claimed was his privilege for being an imperial officer. This resulted in further confrontation between the two to the point that reports were sent to the *subedar* for his intervention.

At the same time, sending in reinforcements presented a peculiar problem of authority in the frontiers. Successive dispatch of forces under the command of different imperial officials for the task of meeting specific objectives like suppression of a particular insurrection could add to the confusion in political order. Following the removal of Qasim Khan from the post of *subedar* of Bengal in 1617, Ibrahim Khan was appointed the new *subedar* while Qulij Khan was appointed as the *sardar* of Koch. However, Ibrahim Khan later on sent a fleet and large artillery under the chief command of Chisti Khan and Shaykh Kamal. Given that these officials and their armies were engaged in the same areas, their mandates overlapped and this must have been puzzling for those who lay lower in the chain of command as to whose line of command to follow. This can be seen in the following conversation which Mirza Nathan describes.

‘Now when you are here, I have become your officer. In accordance with the regulations of Jahangir, it is obligatory that the administration of affairs should be discharged according to your advice... The Khan [Qulij Khan] replied:-Although I have been appointed to this office by the imperial government, now when the Khan Fath-jang [Ibrahim Khan, *subedar* of Bengal] has given chief command to Chisti Khan and the generalship to Shaykh Kamal and has sent them to this region after sending a representation to the imperial court, how can I take upon myself the management of these affairs? Who will support me?’³¹⁵

Even when authority was clearly marked out, discords between the officials were fairly regular. For instance, Shaykh Kamal, who was appointed the *sardar* of the Koch territories under Ibrahim Khan had frequent disputes with Mir Safi, the *diwan*, *Bakhshi* and *Waqi Navis*, over

³¹⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 484

the Shaykh not handing over the record of his revenues. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that 'each of them reported to Ibrahim Khan Fath jang against the other.'³¹⁶ Finally Ibrahim Khan had to send Mir Shams to enquire into the matter even though nothing came out of it.

Such problems of authority were further complicated by the fact that, despite having one imperial cause, personal interests took precedence and loyalties were divided and were, as we will see, often put in confrontation.

These problems were visible right after Jahangir ordered a total overhaul of the important positions under Islam Khan. Mu'taqid Khan was then appointed the *diwan* while Ihtimam Khan, the father of Mirza Nathan, was appointed the *Mir Bahr* (admiral) of the imperial fleet. Despite a change in the officials, we soon get to see differences arising between Islam Khan and Ihtimam Khan. The agent of Ihtimam Khan, Muhammad Murad, was unsatisfied with the land assignments given to Ihtimam Khan by the *diwan* Mu'taqid Khan who, according to *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* was acting on the advice of Islam Khan. On later occasion, Ihtimam Khan and Mu'taqid Khan had altercations about rations of the navy. Furthermore, while the fleet was on it's way to suppress rebellions in Bhati, 'all the sailors of the fleet fled away on account of their distressed condition, because, neither the *diwan* Mu'taqid Khan had settled their dues, nor had Islam Khan made him do so.'³¹⁷ When Ihtimam Khan confronted Islam Khan about the *diwan's* negligence, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that Islam Khan conspired to hand over Shahzadapur, one of the assignments of Ihtimam Khan, to Baz Bahadur Qalmaq if the latter could get hold of enough boats for the imperial fleet. The author of *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* claims that Islam Khan held past malice against Ihtimam Khan which explains his attempts to oust Ihtimam Khan from his position. However, the author also mentions that Islam Khan was displeased over the fact that Baz Bahadur proposed to manage the fleet at the rate of Rs 400

³¹⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 668-69

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29

per boat while Ihtimam Khan demanded Rs 1200 for the same. Given that Ihtimam Khan later agreed to maintain the fleet at rate expected by Islam Khan, it is possible that Ihtimam Khan was trying to extract a greater gain for his services. Whatever be the intent of Ihtimam Khan and Islam Khan, differences between the two officials remained a constant feature in their relationship which, at times, impacted the conduct of imperial affairs as well. For instance, on the march to Balia in 1609, where Islam Khan was supposed to arrive by land while Ihtimam Khan was to reach with the fleet and the artillery, both yet again had a conflict. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that Ihtimam Khan got delayed ‘owing to many zig zag course of the river.’³¹⁸ However, Islam Khan thinking that the delay was deliberate

‘wrote to his own superintendents of boats saying :- Ihtimam Khan, being an imperial officer always shows his wiles in his march; you do come with my personal fleet with the greatest possible swiftness and I hope you will cover the journey in one manzil (stage)’³¹⁹

Such conflicts provides us instances of serious breach in an imperial official’s authority over his subordinates while on march. The officials who served in the province included those who were imperially appointed and also others who were personal followers of such imperial appointees. While commands were clearly marked out for every force, the actual authority that the commander had over personal followers of other officials was contingent on the inter personal relationship between the particular imperial officials. For instance, in the occasion mentioned above ‘the superintendents of the fleet of Islam Khan proceeded on their way without the permission of Ihtimam Khan.’³²⁰

On the other hand, imperial officials too, as we will see, refused to serve under the command of personal followers of other officials. The *subedar* was mindful about the possible

³¹⁸ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 51

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51

disagreements that could result from giving command to his personal officials. For instance, an expedition was sent against Usman, an Afghan chieftain, in 1611 under Shaykh Kamal and Abdul Wahid who were both personal followers of Islam Khan. However, at the same time, Ghiyas Khan, an imperial official, was specifically instructed by Islam Khan to ‘march from his *thana* of Alapsingh to join this army at Shah Bandar, and to take the chief command of the army.’³²¹ Shaykh Kamal and Abdul Wahid were to be given subordinate commands ‘so that the great nobles might not raise any objection to follow Shaykh Kamal.’³²²

However, despite the apparent conflict in authority, the *subedar* did not always desist from resorting to sending expeditions under his own officials. This must have eventually become a serious point of contention amongst the imperial officials and the *subedar*. In fact, several imperial officials complained to the emperor on the pretext that, by extending peace terms to the Raja of Kachar in 1612, Shaykh Kamal did not do enough in the expedition he led against the Raja. The emperor, on his part, issued a *farman* instructing Islam Khan ‘to recall his own officer Shaykh Kamal and not to sent the imperial officers hereafter to serve under his [Islam Khan’s] own officers.’³²³

Regardless of imperial condemnation, this practice continued under subsequent *subedars* resulting in similar conflicts over authority. Under Qasim Khan, Sarhad Khan and Shaykh Kamal, who had then become an imperial official himself, were upset because they were made to serve under Abdun Nabi, a follower of Qasim Khan, in an expedition against the Mags in 1616. As *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions they deliberately delayed the siege of the fort of Katghar by refusing to coordinate with Abdun Nabi.

³²¹ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 102

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 102

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 221

Such lapse in authority was especially prevalent in the Koch territories and could have direct consequences on the outcome of Mughal expeditions. When Qasim Khan was removed from his post in 1616, he ordered Abdul Baqi, who was then holding the chief command of the Koch territories to ‘join me [Qasim Khan] with all the elephants, boats and artillery of that frontier.’³²⁴ Abdul Baqi was prevented from taking with him all the elephants and equipment after a protracted struggle which involved lobbying within the Mughal camp. However, the entire episode created a situation where Mughal officials took different sides, thereby, weakening the Mughal position. It also enabled Shaykh Ibrahim Karori, a Mughal official serving in Kamrup, to cultivate designs of independent authority which ultimately resulted in him rebelling against the remaining Mughals.

In addition to this, officials were also deeply distrustful of other officials over credits of success. This could play out after a task was completed. For instance, after the occupation of Dakchara in 1610, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that

‘all the Khans crowding out of the trenches, began to quarrel among themselves, each claiming to himself the credit of victory. The army of Iftikar Khan particularly, came to the verge of fighting with the army of Mirza Nathan.’³²⁵

The officials were also perennially suspicious of the *subedar* attributing success to his own officials and his relatives. When Iftikhar Khan and Shaikh Habibullah, brother of Islam Khan was sent against Ali Akbar, an Afghan chief, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that Iftikhar Khan was apprehensive that despite him labouring in the expedition ‘the credit of this campaign will be given to the brother of Islam Khan, who is also going to take part in it.’³²⁶ Therefore, he schemed to make Shaykh Habibullah return to Ghoraghat while he proceeded against Ali

³²⁴ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, p. 422

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95

Akbar. Similarly, when Islam Khan instructed Mirza Nathan to join the campaign against the Mags in 1611 the Mirza refused saying,

‘The fact is that I have been insulted on every occasion by you [Islam Khan] inspite of my devoted services and victories achieved by the strength of my arms. You went so far as to report the meritorious services rendered by me in war in the name of your brothers.’³²⁷

The situation escalated to the point that Mirza Nathan turned into a mendicant and was arrested by the *subedar* along with his followers. Other officials too must have held similar grudge against the *subedar* as *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions that, in the petition sent to the emperor by the imperial officials after the Kachar expedition, the officials complained that ‘up to this time every victory achieved by the Mughals has been attributed by Islam Khan to his own people.’³²⁸

Similarly, Qasim Khan too, as *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* alleges, wrongfully credited the victory over the Mags in 1614 to his son Shaykh Farid and was later reprimanded by the emperor for the same.

Disappointment over adequate rewards could result in unwillingness to commit towards the imperial cause. In 1615, when Sanatan raised a rebellion in Kamrup and Shaykh Ibrahim Karori stationed there asked Abdul Baqi for help, Abdul Baqi ‘wrote to his brother Abdun Nabi to get him excused from undertaking this work.’³²⁹ But when the *subedar*, Qasim Khan, declined to agree Abdul Baqi met Mirza Nathan for his opinion whose response provides us with a reason for their apparent reluctance. Mirza Nathan responded saying,

³²⁷ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 151

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 354

‘I have always received and have been receiving letters from the Khan and your brother Abdun Nabi that they were reporting to the imperial court about the various kinds of creditable services I have rendered and either today or tomorrow I would receive a reward. But nothing has come out of it. Up till now, when no recoupment has been allowed for expenses (already incurred) how can we agree to undertake expedition after expedition and incur expenses after expenses.’³³⁰

Even though, both the officials eventually undertook the expedition and helped Ibrahim Karori to defeat Sanatan, Mirza Nathan was unenthusiastic about continuing to commit himself beyond that.

Disputes over claiming credits of success could also result in flaring up tensions amongst officials to the extent of direct confrontation. After the victory over the Ahom forces at Hajo, Shaykh Kamal had reported that Mirza Nathan played no part in the victory. Mirza Nathan was distressed that ‘inspite of his devoted and loyal service, the Khan Fath-jang [Ibrahim Khan] had appointed Chishti Khan to take the chief command in the Kuch [Koch] territory.’³³¹ When he decided to leave for Jahangirnagar to give his own version of the episode to the *subedar*, Shaykh Kamal became hostile. *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* mentions:

‘The fleet sent by the Shaykh used to fire guns and cannon from far and near.... When the Mirza saw the violence of the naval officers, he sent this message to them- “Proceeding for three nights and days under the showers of bullets, we have reached the limit of showing regard to the imperial regulations. Now it is all right if you go back; otherwise you cannot imagine what will be its consequences’ He told his own men- if this message turns them back it is well and good; otherwise you launch an attack’³³²

³³⁰ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 357

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 497

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 499-500

Such a relationship between officials compounded the distrust amongst officials. Especially in the Koch territories where direct supervision was seriously lacking, a pattern of intense rivalry between the officials can be seen. This would often result in a deliberate lack of coordination amongst officials. This can be seen in the way reinforcements were purposefully delayed or previously worked out strategies were abruptly changed without notifying the other parties involved. Despite impending threat of enemies around, personal interests could take precedence and result in unwelcome circumstances.

During the siege of Dhubri fort in 1617 Shaykh Kamal, according to Mirza Nathan, deliberately did not send in reinforcements as that would have led to Mirza's success in capturing the fort. In a similar vein, Abdul Baqi, after agreeing to place in charge of Mirza Nathan a force, which was previously sent under Mir Abdur Razzaq to capture the fort of Rangamati and faced severe reverses, apparently also directed the regiment 'that whoever would leave the company of the Mir and join Mirza Nathan would be considered as his enemy and as showing disrespect to Qasim Khan.'³³³

The officials were not only reluctant to extend help to other officers but also sceptical about taking help thus resulting in weakened Mughal opposition. In 1617 when Shaykh Ibrahim Karori rebelled in Kamrup and Shaykh Kamal was sent by the *subedar* as reinforcement for the army, Mirza Nathan was sceptical of taking the Shaykh help as he feared that the Shaykh would take the credit of victory for himself. Instead the Mirza proposed that

'As up till now no reinforcement has reached Shaykh Ibrahim, and our attempts and endeavors have not yet been contaminated by partnership with others, it is better for us to fight now whatever battle is to be fought.'³³⁴

³³³ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 305

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 465

As a result of Mirza Nathan's individual attempt to suppress the rebellion, the task was needlessly extended to the point that Shaykh Ibrahim got his reinforcements and the Mughals found themselves in a situation they could have avoided.

Given that authority was indecisive and the disposition of the officials was to accrue more gains, the officials found a space to compete and conspire against other officials for better assignments and positions. This also involved lobbying and formation of groups amongst officials. Also, conflicts amongst officials constantly shaped inter-personal rivalries. In fact, Mirza Nathan's account is riddled with intrigues and conspiracies involving officials. It is here that the divisions and dissensions among Mughals is most visible.

Imam Quli Beg was sent with the chief command to suppress the Koch rebellion in Khuntaghat in 1614. Earlier, Abdul Baqi, harboured ambitions to be appointed the *sardar*, was sent to the Koch territory by the *subedar* to inspect the army. Mirza Nathan and Abdul Baqi, then, came together to conspire against Imam Quli Beg. They schemed that when Imam Quli Beg arrives they would 'act according to his orders and pleasure up to a distance of two stages. After that we [Mirza Nathan and Abdul Baqi] will act as the situation demands.'³³⁵

The implications of these rivalries and resultant disunity amongst Mughals had a say in the manner Koch expedition was conducted. When the Mughals were besieging the fort at Dalgaon

'Mirza Nathan was of the opinion that if a little effort was put forth by the enemy of the rear, the conquest of this [Dalgaon] fort could be easily achieved.... Imam Quli Beg took the appearance of the night to be a plea for suspension of activities and did not allow even Abdul Baqi to go the aid of the regiment which was engaged in the battle.'³³⁶

³³⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 315

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 317

Subsequently, on their pursuit of the rebels from Dalgaon to Jaypur Imam Quli Beg left the company of the army and returned to Gilahnay. Meanwhile, both Mirza Nathan and Abdul Baqi sent continuous favourable reports to the *subedar* about each other and, eventually, Abdul Baqi was placed in charge of the army in the Koch territories.

Later, in 1615 when Mirza Salih was besieged by Koch rebels at the fort of Putamari, he repeatedly sent letters to Abdul Baqi for reinforcements. Abdul Baqi in turn sought help from Mirza Imam Quli Beg and his associate Mirza Mirak Najafi who refused saying ‘We have not come to this place as your [Abdul Baqi’s] followers and companions’ and ‘at that very moment they despatched their equipage towards Jahangirnagar.’³³⁷

Mirza Nathan and Shaykh Kamal, as we have already seen, shared a hostile relationship. So, in 1619 when the Mirza Nathan asked Shaykh Kamal for help in fighting enemies in Dakhinkul, Mirza alleged that the Shaykh ‘showed indifference and did neither send any help nor any clear reply, so that the Mirza might raise an army on his own account.’³³⁸ Later, when the Shaykh did send help he asked the reinforcements to proceed with their own discretion as the Mirza might not be able to hold his position and, as a result, only a small group of Afghans came to Mirza Nathan’s aid.

Even the intervention of the *subedar*, at times, was not enough to make the officials coordinate with each other. For instance, when Mirza Nathan was in Dakhinkul fighting the rebels, and required reinforcement of the fleet and even managed to make Ibrahim Khan send a letter to the *Bakhshi* Mir Ghiyasu’d-Din Mahmud to send the fleet stationed at the *thana* of Chandankuth under Islam Quli, the Mir ‘detained Islam Quli by some pretext and sent fourteen ill-equipped boats to the Mirza.’³³⁹

³³⁷ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 338

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 585

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 505

In fact, the *subedar* himself could be a party to stretching the already present rivalries amongst the officials. Just before Islam Khan passed away, Mukarram Khan had brought Parikshit to be presented to the *subedar* promising his terms of peace. However, the new *subedar*, Qasim Khan, was unwilling to stick to the old terms and wanted to imprison Parikshit. This led to a confrontation between the two officials eventually resulting in Parikshit being forcibly seized from Mukarram Khan. The mutual animosity between the two officials continued thereafter. This bitterness also manifested in the rivalries that were created in the Koch territories. Mukarram Khan's brother Abdus Salam who was placed in charge of Koch territories was replaced by Abdul Baqi whose brother Abdun Nabi, according to *Baharistan-i Ghaybi*, was close to Qasim Khan. Soon after, at the middle of an expedition, Abdus Salam left the Koch territories to return to his brother. Later, Mukarram Khan was appointed as the sardar of Syllat and Taraf, but was replaced by Mirak Bahadur Jalair on the instruction of Qasim Khan. That Mukarram Khan was particularly displeased can be seen when he left Jahangirnagar without any orders and sent his brother Abdus Salam to the imperial court to report the matters.

The lands which the officials received as their *jagirs* could be transferred. And this many a times became the pretext for settling scores amongst officials. Through the *subedar's* assistance, an official could assign for himself the area already assigned to his rival. Shaykh Kamal is alleged to have paid a *peshkash* of Rs 80000 to Ibrahim Khan, the *subedar*, in order to obtain some of the parganas which were earlier in possession of Mirza Nathan. He also managed to have Mirza Nathan placed under his command. Later, when Koch rebels occupied the city of Gilah, the *subedar*, Ibrahim Khan, yet again is alleged to have conspired against Mirza Nathan on the advice of Shaykh Kamal. Mirza Nathan was initially given the chief command to suppress the rebellion but soon after the Mirza started on his task, he was replaced by Shaykh Kamal.

Such instances did not go without retaliation. When Shaykh Kamal assigned for himself the *pargana* of Sambhur, which was earlier allocated to Mirza Nathan, the Mirza hatched out a plan to deny the Shaykh his share of revenue:

‘When the Shaykh will come by this way, there is no other route for his soldiers but to pass through the fort of Balijana. With the plea that our families are within the fort we will not allow any of them to pass through it. They will have to pass by striking out a route of their own. When the ryots will know that they had not the power to pass by the straight way, will they be able to collect revenues? In short the ryots will have no sympathy for the Shaykh, they will turn their attention towards you and pay you the revenues.’³⁴⁰

The assignment of occupied areas as *jagirs* served as the primary incentive for the officials to march further into unfamiliar territories. When Mirza Nathan approached Ibrahim Khan and expressed his displeasure at Chishti Khan being given the chief command Ibrahim Khan pacified by asking Mirza Nathan to proceed to Dakhinkul with the following promise:

‘as since the time of the conquest of the Koch territory the Sarkar of the Dakhinkul was not taken possession of by any one on whom it was settled in lieu of his salary, the Mirza should go along with his own regiment and an auxiliary force ... in order to sweep away all the disturbing elements there and after occupying a secure position in that region he should take it as his assignment.’³⁴¹

While this might well be the Mirza’s attempt to justify his right over the territories he had conquered. Such references wherein officials asserted their personal rights over the territories they conquered, and sought to have those officially sanctioned to them as their *jagirs*, are abundant throughout the account of Mirza Nathan.

³⁴⁰ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 523

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 502

In absence of other sources for the period, the veracity of these incidences cannot be separately ascertained. However, the repeated emphasis that is put throughout *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* on intensity of rivalry and cynicism that ran through the minds of the officials, which threatened their coordination even in the face of danger, points to the perception of frontier areas in the minds of Mughal officials. The frontier presented swathes of territories up for grab. In a situation where individual accomplishments could become the means for obtaining promotions and rewards, and the communication of the information could easily be manipulated to suit needs owing to the absence of immediate supervision, the personal interests of the officials took precedence over larger imperial cause.

III. Cooperation and Co-option on the Frontier

Frontier zones are generally perceived as unfamiliar territories inhabited by a population which is hostile to the occupying force. The perception of other is derived from the strangeness involved, and contact is often expressed not just as unwelcoming but also as a threat. The mutual antagonism is not unfounded, considering the fact that both the advance of the occupying force and the resistance of the occupied invariably articulate the other as intimidating and aggressive. Subjugation, therefore, involves a fair amount of violence. However, it would be wrong to assume that, as we will see, invasion is exclusively realized through forceful takeover, or so to say through a complete elimination of local networks of authority. Invasion and the subsequent creation of new structure, at least in our case, drew on local power holders and resources in addition to armed compulsion. The cooption of local holders of power and the use of localized resources played a critical role in the creation of the Mughal North-East frontier.

Since the Mughals had taken possession of territories which were previously governed by the Koch Rajas their intention initially, as mentioned before, was to make the Rajas subservient. Once that had been achieved, which is to say the Rajas were reduced to tributary status, further expansion and consolidation incorporated their service. In addition to asserting their authority, the Mughals also had to pacify the power holders for carrying out certain specific tasks. For instance, in the Khuntaghat region, where the Mughals carried out Kheda operations in the forests at the foothills for catching elephants, they had to pacify the Bhutiyas by exchanging gifts and allowing them their trading activities.

Furthermore, in addition to periods of conflict there were also periods of relative stability. Here, the Mughals tried to maintain diplomatic connections with the Ahoms and other local chieftains in order to facilitate trade, commerce and movement of men. The entire period between 1639 and 1658, we have a rich record of diplomatic exchange of letters which highlight how traders functioned in the margins of the two powers. While there are references of disputes over violation of territoriality, these letters also indicate that the relationship between the Ahoms and Mughals involved negotiations to establish trading networks with population and in local produce.

The service of the local population was not limited to that of the rajas. Even their commanders and other small chieftains were assimilated in the Mughal army. Govind Lashkar, who was sent by Baldev, the *Raja* of Darrang, joined Mughal service and played a critical role in many of their military excursions. The capture of Baldev who had for a long time evaded the Mughals and also the fort of Rangjuli have been particularly attributed to the assistance provided by Govind Lashkar. His acquaintance with the routes of advance for the Mughals and escape for those pursued offset the relative unfamiliarity of the Mughals with regards to the territory. The process of occupation went hand in hand with that of conciliation and accommodation of previously belligerent local chieftains. When Akra Raja, a hill chief in Dakhinkul surrendered,

he was promised by Mirza Nathan that ‘In consideration of the fact that you have submitted before any other raja, I [Mirza Nathan] will make you the Sardar over all the Eighteen [hill] Rajas.’³⁴² With this assurance he was sent after Baldev, the Koch rebel. Similarly, Bamun and Kanwal Raja, who were other hill chiefs of the region received horses and robes of honour upon submission. Dangar Dev too, was recognized as the Raja of Khatribhag, and upon his death his share of assigned villages were placed into the hands of his son. The same policy of conciliation was extended to Shumaruyed Kayeth, who had for a long time troubled the Mughal army in Dakhinkul. 20 *mauzas* of Dakhinkul were placed in his charge as a reward. While the list of such instances of pacification of local power holders, and their subsequent incorporation into Mughal service with tributary status, is exhaustive, what is of our importance is the point that the Mughal occupation was executed with the total exclusion of existing power structures. Instead, the Mughals acknowledged the authority held by local chieftains, and allowed them to continue their rule, after extracting guarantees of subservience.

Even though reinforcements were supposed to be regularly sent to the invading army, as claimed by Mirza Nathan, there are instances when the Mughals recruited for their army from the local inhabitants. References to *paiks* serving in the regiments of various imperial officers are abundant. Mirza Nathan mentions the recruitment of 4000 Garos into the army which proceeded to conquer the fort of Rangjuli. In the same expedition, there is a reference of a group of Rabhas who deserted the army of Nathan. While the numbers cannot be verified, the fact that the armies of the Mughals had significant number of soldiers recruited from amongst the local population is clear. Also it appears that, a military labour market existed in the frontier zone from where personnel could be bought to serve in the army. In one instance, during the expedition against the Assamese, Mirza Nathan sent his officials with a sum of ten thousand to

³⁴² Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), p. 559

Hajo 'to recruit a large number of experienced horsemen, infantry, musketeers and archers.'³⁴³ As has been indicated earlier, owing to dissensions within the Mughal camp, reinforcements could be withheld or sent after a deliberate delay. In such a situation, it became necessary for the army on the move to augment their numbers by filling in fresh recruits from locally available sources. For instance, in the expedition against Shumaruyed Kayeth, a Koch chieftain sent to fight the Mughals in Dakhinkul, after the Mughals got trapped in Ranihat and because Shaykh Kamal refused to send reinforcements Mirza Nathan had to recruit a fresh army and then proceed.

Conclusion

The Mughal presence in the northeastern frontier of their empire involved much more than out and out armed hostility. Firstly, the idea was to look at how the Mughals negotiated with and the peculiar physical environment in the region. Here we underlined the specific difficulties that the Mughals had to confront and the manner in which they devised their strategies of adaptation. Secondly, we looked at the functional hierarchy in the Mughal administrative apparatus that was put in place, the institutional arrangement, and the forms that it took to adapt to frontier conditions. The picture of confrontation was expanded to include not just those which involved armed aggression against local adversaries but also those which involved dissension, lobbying, negotiation and even violent confrontation within the Mughal camp. The intention was to link up the manner in which Mughal institutions and officials functioned to the way hierarchy and order was constituted in the region. What we could see was that the systematic and extremely centralized understanding of Mughal state could not be extended to frontier areas. In such a situation Mughal presence, as we have seen through the course of the

³⁴³ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi Vol I & II*, M I Borah (tr.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, Assam, 1936, p. 542

paper, remained disordered and dependent on personal predilection of the officials posted. Thirdly, and lastly, we looked at how the Mughal advance into the frontier territories also involved co-option of local power holders and resources. The idea was to shift from an overwhelming focus on an antagonistic relationship between the locals and the Mughals. This is to say the creation of the Mughal north east frontier has to be seen not just as process of conflict but also that of cooperation and co-option.

Conclusion

Sometime in April 1755, Jean Baptise Chevalier, an official of the French East India Company set off from Chandernagore on a journey to Assam. Apart some unconfirmed accounts about the resources of Assam, he barely had much information about this territory at the edge of Bengal. As he wrote in his memoir, Chevalier's assignment 'was to go and discover this new source of riches.'³⁴⁴ In addition to his brief memoir, Chevalier also maintained a journal in which he where noting day to day progress of his journey.

After leaving Dhaka, Chevalier travelled north along the course of Brahmaputra and, in the month of July, reached Dhubri where the river bends its course towards the east. Chevalier describes that 'within a gun's range of the *choqui* [chowki] of Doubary [Dhubri], there is a part of the river [Brahmaputra] that is extremely difficult to cross.'³⁴⁵ A shallow and rocky river bed coupled with very fast currents particularly impeded the movement of the boats. After several attempts Chevalier was able to proceed further and, then, halted in 'a small village called Ganamary, only three leagues away to the north- northeast from Doubary [Dhubri].'³⁴⁶ Here he tried to arrange for a *dustak* [permit] from the *fauzdar* of Rangamaty, one of the last major *chowki* of Bengal along the Brahmaputra. Chevalier notes in his journal that Rangamati was placed on an elevated terrain with small river skirting though its west. After obtaining the required permissions, Chevalier departed from Rangamati sailed east to reach the *chowki* of Jogighopa, 'located in a plain that is hidden by four surrounding mountains.'³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765) Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*, LBS Publications, New Delhi, 2008, p. 23

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134

Three months since he started his journey, Chevalier was finally about to reach Kandhar [Hadira] *chowki*, the first frontier outpost of Assam, flanked by the Manas river on the west and the Brahmaputra on its south. However, it was here that Chevalier learnt that the Ahoms did not permit ‘any outsider inside the land, without an authorisation from the king [Ahom king].’³⁴⁸ It took him another three months to get the approval of the Ahom king.

In the meantime, while waiting at Jogighopa, Chevalier had to face the afflictions that came with the monsoon rains. His men were infected with some unknown disease. He presumed that the air and water of Jogighopa were insalubrious and that it would be expedient for him to proceed from there immediately. Despite his attempt to cross the Manas, the Ahom official stationed at Hadira did not permit him to advance any further. He was made to ‘stay on the other side of the river [Manas] that separates Assem [Assam] from Bengal. At this stage the condition of his camp was rather grim. In one of his journal entry, Chevalier describes how ‘every day, seven to eight of my [his] people, both blacks and Europeans, were attacked by a fever so violent that by the second bout they lost their strength even to move.’³⁴⁹ Consequently, despite the opposition of violent currents, he and his fleet crossed over to the southern banks of Brahmaputra in order to find a safer place to halt. At last, in the month of August, he got a response from the Ahom king but it was not until November that Chevalier finally started his journey into the territories of the Ahoms.

This elaborate account of Chevalier’s entry into the Ahom territories captures how a contemporary probably experienced and encountered the territorial presence of states in the Brahmaputra Valley. Of course, Chevalier visited the region at a time of relative stability when the Ahoms had consolidated their own internal politics while the Mughals had, for all practical

³⁴⁸ Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765)*, p. 23

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146

purposes, relinquished their territorial interests in Kamrup. Consequently, for a prolonged period since the last decade of the seventeenth century, territoriality of respective state systems in the Brahmaputra Valley remained settled and secured. In the subsequent parts of this conclusion, we will consider the implications of the earlier phase of political relations which we have discussed in details in the last three chapters. But for the time being, it would be enough to keep in mind that the territorial demarcations that Chevalier witnessed were constantly changing in the earlier period. Having said that, Chevalier's account lets us identify some of the ways in which states articulated their territorial presence over the landscape in the region.

One of the foremost concern of states in the region was to regulate movement along passageways, mostly river networks but also hill passes. It is here that we also see how environmental context necessitated specific and combat strategies. Given the prominence of water bodies, a long monsoon and consequent flooding, rivers were critical for movement of men and material. Additionally, a heavy forest cover meant that land routes were either lacking or required significant investment of manpower to be made functional. Chevalier himself, on a later expedition against the local chieftaincy of Bijni in 1760, writes in his memoirs that his men 'found no other paths but the ones cleared by elephants, buffaloes, and other wild animals; our [their] visibility was limited to no further than ten feet around us [them].'³⁵⁰ Chevalier was not the only one who had noted the difficulty of finding and using land routes. As we had seen in the earlier chapters first-hand accounts of Mughals serving in the region, such as Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan-i Ghaybi*, repeatedly refers to the strain that was placed on his men in the process of discovering and clearing routes through the heavily forested plains and hills. Even the Ahom *Buranjis* narrate instances when an army on the move would be put to dire straits

³⁵⁰ Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765)*, p. 66

because of their inability to find their way through land. It is, therefore, not surprising that river networks were critically important for any political entity for the purpose of facilitating movement across their territories. Chevalier's accounts give us a comprehensive picture of how states in the region tried to control these passageways. Passing like an artery along the entire length of the Valley, the Brahmaputra formed the most important link in this network. Along the entire length of the Brahmaputra, at strategically defensive sites, mostly on elevated terrains, political powers maintained outposts. These outposts not only ensured that the states could attempt to impose certain regulations on mobility but also enabled them to tie together disparate points in coherent territorial state. On his journey from Hadira *Chowki* to the capital of the Ahoms, Chevalier remarks on the presence of a number of such *chowkis*. He mentions that he could count as many six on a single day's journey and nine on the next.³⁵¹

The second chapter of this study elaborates on this aspect of the territorial organisation of the state systems of the Brahmaputra Valley. The attempt was to map and historicise the political geography over the period between 1500 and 1769. By drawing on a narrative of conflicts between a range of state systems, which at least till the very end of the seventeenth century was a recurring feature of the politics in the valley, we indicated that territorial control was constantly shifting. The intention, however, was not to emphasise on the outcome of such conflicts, which has been thoroughly examined in the extant historiography of the region. Instead, the argument made was that state power in this region invariably entailed a precarious hold over territory. Warfare, then, becomes the outcome rather than the underlying cause of uncertain territoriality. The given environmental context of the valley constricted the state's ability to maintain unbroken control by curtailing mobility. Under such conditions, periodic advances and retreats as well as extending authority through tributaries became a strategic

³⁵¹ Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765)*, p. 163-64

choice for the states. This point was more fully developed in the subsequent chapters, but in this chapter we examined how, then, the states negotiated specifically with the environmental context. We argued that territoriality was represented by the ability of a state to control points along the available routes of movement. Authority and control emerged from and depended on the control of networks of rivers and hill passes. Warfare itself both contingent on and was a means to ensuring control and movement along these networks. This chapter therefore looked into how the Ahom state's war efforts on various fronts with other contemporary political powers relied on their capacity to coordinate movement along particular rivers. Additionally we also identified how in the process rivers served to demarcate territorial authority. These demarcations were not fixed or linear like modern day boundaries but were constantly shifting according to the efficacy of state's control of specific points along its course. The state's consolidated hold over these points by building fortresses and concentrating armed power. The *chowkis* that Chevalier came across in his journey were these strategic points. While they characterised they type of spatial organisation of territorial power in the valley, control over them constantly changed hands in the period under our control.

Building on the second chapter we get a picture where authority of multiple political entities operated in close proximity, intersected and overlapped with each other. In the third chapter, I emphasised how the political stage in the Brahmaputra valley accommodated multiple sources of authority. In this chapter, we primarily linked the specific form of territorial organisation and the kind of power relations it generated. The entire political stage of the Brahmaputra valley, as we illustrated in this chapter, was organised in an hierarchical order dominated by major state systems like the Ahoms, Mughals and, to an extent the Koches as well. Actual control, nevertheless, was exercised through a range of dependent tributaries who maintained local bases of power while acknowledging the suzerainty of one or more dominant states. For the dominant powers these relationships enabled them to extend their authority to distant areas

by integrating local power units into the state apparatus while for the tributaries allegiance ensured protection and internal autonomy. Naturally, these relationships underwent regular phases of realignments according to the given political circumstances. Territorial ambitions of both the dominant states and local power units dependent on negotiating favourable terms of relationship. The dominant states also competed with each other to obtain allegiances of the local power units. We therefore also looked at numerous strategies that political powers employed to reaffirm and articulate such relationships. These ranged from matrimonial alliances to intervening in matters of successions to resolving internecine conflicts between tributaries. Occasionally armed aggression was also called for but such hostility was more often only to reassert suzerain power rather than an attempt at territorial expansion. Furthermore, we also highlighted how the seventeenth century conflicts between the Mughals and the Ahoms was primarily played out through the means of providing armed assistance to one or more such dependencies. Yet another aspect that we looked into was how the wider political processes of distributed power found expression even in the internal politics of the Ahoms by allowing for the formulation of local bases of power based on familial ties and lineages. In this chapter, we tried to conceptualise state power and territoriality as being embodied in and communicated through a network of relations which were produced in the manner political entities claimed, challenged or adjusted their mutual interests, obligations and allegiances.

While the two chapters discussed above concentrate mostly on the Ahom state, the fourth chapter shifts the narrative to draw out the experience of the Mughals in the region. Through the period of Delhi Sultanate, especially under the Afghans, and later under the Mughals, Bengal was gradually brought close to the political and cultural milieu of the rest of the subcontinent; albeit this process remained tenuous till the end of the Mughal hold over Bengal. For all practical purposes, however, Bengal remained the eastern limit of the institutional framework that came to be identified with the Mughals. Beyond this, towards the north-eastern

boundary, in the Brahmaputra Valley, lay a zone which had only sparsely come in contact with the heartland of the subcontinent. We can witness a frontier in making here. Throughout the period under study we can witness creation of new territorial interests; and attempts to secure them by embodying them in an institutional apparatus. The historiography of the Mughal presence in their North-East frontier is overwhelmingly occupied with their military activities. References to the working of Mughal apparatus are largely missing, as are discussions on the course of creation of a frontier zone. This chapter sought to fill in the gap. We discussed the specific difficulties that the Mughals encountered here because of the unfamiliar environmental context and how the Mughals negotiated with it. We discussed strategies that the Mughals devised in matters of defence and movement of the army to cope with an environmental context of harsh monsoons, flooding and dense overgrowth. We see that the Mughals developed a pattern of seasonal advances during the drier seasons and strategic retreats during the rains. This chapter also looked at the manner Mughal administrative hierarchy functioned under frontier conditions of limited imperial supervision. By highlighting the competition and confrontation within the Mughal camp for power and perquisites, we presented a picture of intense lobbying and faction driven politics that characterised the presence of the Mughals in the region. Furthermore, we also illustrated how the creation of the frontier here involved more than armed aggression against local adversaries but included strategies of co-option of the local powers and resources as well. This attempt in this chapter was to highlight how argue that in the making of this frontier, the consistency of political practices of the Mughals frequently deviated from their prescribed forms and actual authority came to be negotiated locally.

Through the course of three chapters this study sought to examine two simultaneous concerns. The first concern was to understand how specific physical landscape and environmental context interrelate to the manner in which states exercised their territoriality. The second was to consider the political processes of the valley in terms of power relations. Taken together, these

two lines of investigation allowed us to comprehend the actual practices of authority and control in the pre-modern political space that are often missed in the details of pre-determined structures. Excessive emphasis on sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus, army and on centralised control precludes us from grasping the spaces of contradiction, conflict and also negotiation that insinuate themselves in the working of a political system. It was with this intention of looking for these spaces that we highlighted, in the second chapter, how in valley dominant states tolerated, fostered and even created local power bases. Similarly, in the third chapter, we tried to explore the multifarious ways in which power was practiced by the men who constituted the presence of a state. It enabled us to see those men negotiated their personal predilections and aspirations with that of the interests of the state, thus shaping expressions of power that transgressed their pre-conceived forms. These power relations and political processes were however intimately linked to the environmental context in which the states operated. It was the distance from the imperial centres which was only amplified by the constrained conditions of mobility that not only necessitated certain forms of power relations but also allowed considerable degree of local autonomy.

At one level the purpose of this study was also to add to the historiography of medieval India by moving away from the heartland of the Mughal Empire. The tendency to associate medieval Indian history with the Mughal Empire. By examining the political processes in the context of a region which had only marginally interacted with the political and cultural milieu of the Mughals, we sought to reconcile the occurrence of wide-ranging regional variations with the understanding of medieval state in India. Nevertheless, it would be pertinent to briefly comment on the perennial question of the degree of centralisation of the Mughal state. It has been well established that the Mughal state operated with a robust administrative and fiscal apparatus which, to a great extent, at least till the eighteenth century, was centrally coordinated. However, as we outlined in the fourth chapter, in their frontier in the north-east, the political

and institutional forms that were placed in practice had to be modified according to the constraints placed by frontier conditions. And as a consequence, the Mughals had to confront serious shortcomings in the process of extending their centralised imperial set up in the region. While this does not seriously put into question the working of the Mughal state elsewhere, it certainly opens up two aspects worth considering. The first is the extent to which the Mughal institutional apparatus and personal subversion of official power negotiated with each other. It would be an oversimplification to presume that the medieval state operated as an entity in itself exercising impersonal power as much as it would to overemphasise the oversight of a power structure with the emperor at the top. The second is to develop a comparative picture of the specific forms of power relations that Mughal state engendered in its different frontiers. This study takes a preliminary step towards that direction by examining the north-eastern frontier, but further research would significantly supplement our understanding of the working of the Mughal empire at its margins.

This study stops at the end of 1769, after which a period of political instability ensued in the state systems of the Brahmaputra Valley. Mughals had withdrawn their presence from the valley and the Bengal Nawab only maintained an outpost at the frontier to manage commercial interests. Factional politics and prolonged phases of popular insurrections not just confronted the authority of the Ahom and Cooch Behar kingdoms but also mounted alternative sources of authority. For instance, the Moamoria uprising, led by a popular religious sect, forced the Ahom king to flee from his own capital and seek refuge with the factors of the East India Company. So, while other areas of the erstwhile Mughal Empire, like Bengal or Awadh, witnessed considerable regional consolidation in the eighteenth century, the political space in the Brahmaputra Valley was characterised by multiple power units which not only confronted the shrinking influence of the older state systems but also mounted alternate sources of

authority. At the same time, the men of the East India Company, who were themselves a divided group at this stage, attempted to find stakes in this political economy by linking together the disparate power units in an expanding network of alliances and commercial ties.

The present study however can be seen as a groundwork for opening up fresh investigations to add to the expanding historiography of borderlands in South Asia. Borderland history which has become an emerging lens to study the north-eastern region, however, tends to focus entirely on how nineteenth century cartographic surveys, mapping and colonial administrative policies created a bounded state. Consequently, such accounts have overlooked the manner frontiers were imagined and constructed in the eighteenth century context of greater localisation of power and an expanding commercial economy. Furthermore, we need to expand our understanding to the medieval and early modern period in terms of ideas territoriality and practices that let us identify spaces where authority of an entity was seen as permissible and legitimate. The question which then arises is what constituted the presence and set apart the frontiers of political units. A neatly delimited physical space is incapable of accounting for a context where a singular state-system did not coherently tie together the constituent units of power in a hierarchical order. As we saw in our study, in the Brahmaputra Valley authority of multiple state-systems coincided and competed form their own hierarchical orders. Such an examination must then be linked to how the late eighteenth century realignments in the political economy reworked the meanings and functions frontiers in the Brahmaputra Valley.

As a preliminary observation frontiers in the early modern Brahmaputra Valley represented more than territorial division. They embodied an interface of conflict, contact and interaction involving movement of men, material and ideas across the cultural and political zones. New political actors in the late eighteenth century began to derive their power and identity by facilitating movement of merchants, mercenaries, capital and commodities. Given the expansion of monetization, power relationships, which were earlier based on customary rights

and obligations, were now given a more contractual framework. Further research into how these new conditions of mobility and exchange readjusted the existing frontiers and produced new ones can vastly enrich our understanding of the region.

Going back to where we started from, after leaving from Hadira *chowki*, it took Chevalier almost two months to reach Garhgaon, the capital of the Ahoms. On 7th of February 1756, as he writes in his journal, amidst great festivities he was received by the Ahom king.³⁵² Though his primary objective of opening a settlement for trade was rejected, Chevalier spent almost three months in the capital and, later, also made to accompany the king on his tour to Guwahati. Finally, in May 1757, Chevalier recounts in his memoir that he ‘judged it was time to live a country where my[his] almost forced stay had held me [him] back for nearly fifteen months.’³⁵³ From his memoir and certain sources of the East India Company, we get to know that between 1758 and 1762, Chevalier based himself in Goalpara, at the western frontier of Assam, and ‘used to trade in salt with Assam for an English friend.’³⁵⁴ Chevalier was one of the first Europeans to have endeavoured to open up commercial ties with Assam. Within the next half a century, officials of the East India Company obtained a firm influence over the political stage of Brahmaputra Valley and with it unfolded a different phase in the history of the valley.

³⁵² Caroline Dutta Barua & Jean Deloche (tr.), *Adventures of Jean- Baptise Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765)*, p. 195

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 41

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7

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