



The Duars as a Significant Region in Ahom-Bhutanese Political Relations : A Historical Study with Special Reference to the Koriapar Duar.

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Abstract :“Duars,” literally meaning “doors or gateways,” is a geographically descriptive term that held great importance as a region of political activity, trade route, revenue generation, and as a vital geographical corridor between Assam and Bhutan. The area below Bhutan hills, a part of India extending an average of 30 kilometres in breadth and 350 kilometres in length across West Bengal and Assam came to be known as the Duars. Geographically the Assam Duars lay between the River Barnadi in the east and Manas in the west. The Ahoms realised the importance of the Duars in terms of its Political strategy, economic potential and Geographical significance. Koriapar Duar was one such important Duar that held strategic and political significance in the frontier Duar region between the Ahoms and Bhutanese. This study aims to examine the strategic importance of the Duars region during the Ahom period, with a particular focus on its role in political affairs.

Key Words: Duars, Ahoms, Bhutanese, Frontier administration, Political relations, Koriapar Duar

Introduction

The term ‘Duars’ refers to the areas below the Bhutan foothills, traditionally considered border mart at the foot of mountain passes and their immediate vicinity. Duars, therefore means the passes and valley that connect the plains to the hills. It is well known that social relations and economic interdependence between the hills and the plains of Northeast India have existed since ancient times. It is through these Duars that the people of Bhutan have interacted with the plains people at the foot of the hills since time immemorial. There are eighteen such Duars or passes, along Indo- Bhutan border. The Duars on the frontier of Bengal and Coch Behar are called “Western Duars” and whereas the remaining Duars on the Assam frontier are collectively referred to as the “Eastern Duars”. The Duars of eastern region were also categorised into Eastern Duars, Kamrup Duars and Darrang Duars. The five Duars of the Kamrup Duars were Bijni, Chapakhamar, Chapaguri, Banska and Gurkola, were situated between the river Banadi in the east and the Manas in the west. Another five Duars of the Eastern Duars were Bagh Duar, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu and Guma, were situated between the river Manas in the east and the Sonkosh in the west. The remaining three Duars namely Killing, Buriguma and Koriapar, known as Darrang Duars were situated between the Dhansiri in the east and the Barnadi in the west.

Thus, there were thirteen known Duars on the Assam frontier of Bhutan. However, the authority of the Dev-Dharma Rajas of Bhutan, with their capital at Punakha, did not extend to the easternmost part of their territory. The Bhutanese of Koriapar Duar considered themselves subordinate of the Tawang Raja, a tributary of Lahsa, whereas those of Charduar considered themselves as completely independent. The administrative systems of these two Duar regions also differed from that of the Bhutanese government based in Punakha. Each of them was divided into seven subdivisions, administered by seven respective chiefs known as the Sath Raja or Sat Raja (seven kings), although their number was not always exactly seven. These two Duars were of great importance in facilitating Assam's trade with Bhutan and Tibet.

The entire tract collectively known as the 'Eastern Duars' is the only connecting link between the Northeastern region the rest of the country. The Duars held a strategic position for Bhutanese as they maintained their interactions with the southern plains through these traditional routes. All these Duars occupy a significance place in both the history of Assam and Indian History due to their unique geographical position.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive cum analytical. The study is based on secondary sources of material and data has been collected from books, articles, journal and other published materials.

Objectives

This paper emphasizes the significant political events that occurred in the Duars frontier region during the Ahom period. The main objective of the study is to examine political relations between Ahom and Bhutan, as well as the administrative structures that existed in these regions.

The Political Relationship Between the Ahoms and Bhutanese

The Ahoms came into close contact with the Bhutan frontier during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603–1641), following the Battle of Bharali in 1616, when Bali Narayan was installed at Darrang as a tributary under the Ahom king, bearing the title 'Dharma Narayan'. Since then, Bhutia encroachment on the frontiers of the province of Darrang which came under the possession of the Ahoms, was temporarily checked by the united forces of the Ahoms and the Koches. As a result, the two important Duars on the Darrang frontier- Buriguma and Killing remained under the control of the Ahom government. On the other hand, it is said that during the Ahom-Mughal wars in the middle of 17th century, the Bhutias tried to take over the entire stretch of the fertile plains south of their hills, reaching as far as Gohain Kamal Ali but did not succeed.

After that, during the reign of Jayadvaj Singh (1648-1663 A.D.), the kings of Bhutan requested the transfer of the Duars to Bhutan. Consequently, an agreement was made with the usual formalities between the Ahoms and the Bhutias. According to the agreement, possession of the Darrang Duars passed into the hands of the Bhutias. In return, the Bhutias agreed to pay an annual tribute for the granted territory up to a boundary marked by the Gohain Kamal Ali. The Raja of Darrang was given the responsibility to collect the tribute and also manage all dealings with the Bhutias. The agreement also provided that the annually the Darrang Duars were to be surrendered to the Ahom government annually for four months, from Ashar to Aswin (i.e., from the 15th of June to the 15th of October).

It was in 1658-59, the Ahom king Jayadvaj Singha recaptured Kamrup from the Mughals. However in 1662, it was reconquered by the Mughals. During this short period of duration, the Ahoms were unable to pay attention to the Bhutan Duars. It was only after battle of Itakhuli in 1681 A.D. that the Manas River was marked as the boundary between the territories of the Ahoms and the Mughals

The Ahom government now found the Bhutias in possession of the Kamrup Duars, including the plain district up to the Gohain Kamal Ali. In return the Bhutias paid to the Ahoms a tribute consisting of 24 tolas of gold dust, 36 ponies, 24 pieces of musk, 24 cow tails, 24 daggers, 24 blankets and 2400 rupees in cash, the value of which was estimated at Rs. 4785-1 narayani rupees. However, the Bhutias were irregular in paying this tribute and, on the contrary, the later Ahom government was too weak to enforce either regular or full payment of tribute.

Administration of the Frontier Duar Region under the Ahom Government

Regarding administration of the Duars region by the Ahoms, it is found that after 1615, when Darrang came under Ahoms control, the two important Duars- Buriguma and Killing remained under the direct administration of the Ahom government. The Ahom government administered the Duars through officials known as Duaries appointed by the Ahom government. The Darrang Duars were jointly administered by the Ahoms and the Bhutias. The overall responsibility for revenue administration of Lower Assam was entrusted to the Barphukan with headquarters at Guwahati. From the reign of Gadadhar Singha, the Barphukan's jurisdiction was extended to include both Kamrup and Darrang districts. The Ahom government appointed both revenue collectors and police officers to administer the Darrang Duars for four months each year. Additionally, Katakis were appointed to maintain the Duars who were very careful to see that tax collected from the ryots did not exceed more than their fixed dues. The Bhutias coming through one Duar were not allowed to pass into another Duar without prior permission from the Katakis. Besides certain individuals in the Duars were also entrusted with police duties, who were operated under the order of the Barphukan only and were entirely exempted from Bhutias exactions.

To check the frequent Bhutanese inroads, Gadadhar Singha constructed a series of forts on the Darrang frontier and kept strict vigilance over the Bhutanese movements into the Duars. These measures subdued the Bhutanese for a short period, however, taking advantage of the turmoil during the Moamariya Rebellions, they soon encroached the Ahom territory and carried away a large number of subjects as slaves. Many Assamese fugitives also fled to Bhutan seeking protection. Since then the Bhutan Duars began to play a significant role in the political affairs of Assam. Princes and potentates who rebelled against the Ahom government took shelter in these areas. Additionally, robbers and freebooters from Bengal also used the Duars as their base and started plundering the Assamese villages from there.

The Ahom monarchy had objected the defiant attitude of the Bhutanese. However, Purnananda Buragohain, avoiding revengeful measures, adopted a policy of appeasement and sent an embassy to Bhutan in 1802, it was the first mission of its kind. The Dev-Dharma Rajas of Bhutan happily responded to the peace mission and sent two Jinkaps (or Zinkoffs, meaning Bhutanese priests or nobles) with presents and letters to the Assam king Kamaleswar Singha. The Bhutanese envoys complained to the king that, despite paying the stipulated tribute, his officers on the Bhutan frontier were oppressing the people in the border areas. In response, the Barphukan instituted an enquiry, which showed that it was the Bhutanese who were guilty of encroachment and raided the border people. The Darrang Raja, Samudranarayan, was then instructed to take action against the Bhutanese and he successfully pushed them back to their original limit.

After this, the Bhutanese did not cause any more trouble to the Ahom government. In 1821, Purandar Singha and Ruchin Burhagohain recruited soldiers from Bhutan, and nearby regions to fight against the Burmese. They were helped by Robert Bruce and this marked the beginning of British contact with Bhutan.

Koriapar Duar

Koriapar Duar was situated to the east of Bhutan, extending from the Doisam river to the Rowta river. It was bounded on the north by Tawang, on the south by the Gohain Kamal Ali, on the east bounded by Duar Chariduar and west by Buriguma Duar. This Duar is now forms part of the Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. In the days of the Ahoms, this Duar was part of Satgharia domain and was administered by the Sat Rajas, a group of chief. The Monpas were

the inhabitants of the Koriapar Duar. They were generally known as Bhutias and considered themselves subjects of the Tawang Deb Raja.

Koriapar Duar came under the possession of the Ahoms after the western part of Assam was captured from the Koches. After successful victory against the Mughals, the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) compelled the Sat Rajas of Koriapar Duar to enter into an agreement under which they were allowed hold the Duar for eight months of the year and the Ahom government retained their control for remaining four months. This system remained in practice until the year 1839–1840

In 1688, Parbatrai, an Ahom officer went to the region to collect the taxes from the Kachari Moholias (i.e., traders in betel nuts), but he was prevented from collecting the taxes. After receiving the report, the Barphukan sent a group of soldiers. The Bhutias suddenly attacked the fort at night at a place called Ghoramara Choramar, where they had encamped and killed several Ahoms soldiers and also took away four men from the outpost of Darrang Rajas. Finally the dispute was settled after the Bhutias paid Rs. 2000 to the Ahom king and Rs. 1000 to the Barphukan.

In 1690, the Bhutias killed Baidyanath Choudhury, the Ahom tax collector, when he went to collect taxes from the Kachari Maholias. Later the Duaria was able to capture the culprits and handed over them to the Barphukan. The Bhutias admitted their guilt and paid Rs. 1000 as compensation.

In 1691, the Bhutias of Koriapar once again prevented the collector from collecting the taxes from the Kachari Maholias. The Barphukan suspected involvement of the Darrang Raja with these Bhutias, and accordingly charged him with paying the amount due to the Ahom king.

The Darrang Raja obeyed the directive and paid the outstanding amount and informed the Bargohain and the Barphukan that the Bhutias did not allow to collect the taxes and also violated their former boundary and taken the possession of the territory upto the middle of the Gohain Kamal Ali, which they claimed as their rightful boundary.

To prevent the unlawful activities of the Bhutias, king Gadadhar Singha ordered the Darrang Raja to construct a fort. The Bhutias killed several men of the Darrang Raja during the progress of the construction work. But the Bhutia fled, when the reinforcement arrived and the tax was exacted. With this, the controversy over the collection of taxes from the frontier Darrang Duar areas was resolved in the reign of Gadadhar Singha.

Conclusion

This study shows that the Duars played significant role in the political affairs of the western part of the kingdom during the Ahom period. The Duars were important frontier areas especially in Darrang and Kamrup region and played key role in the political, military and economic affairs. Of these Duars Koriapar Duar became the focal point of political conflict between the Ahoms and Bhutanese, where the Ahoms ultimately benefitted. The Duars served as entry and exit points and acted as a frontier mart between Assam and Bhutan. An administrator named Barphukan was placed in overall incharge of the frontier areas, along with official called Duaries and Katakis, who were assigned for various specific duties. Sometime, the Duars areas became easy ground for the rebels, fugitives and also for criminal activities. Thus, the Ahom- Bhutan political relationship was shaped by a combination of mutual conflict, territorial dispute, diplomacy, tribute based politics.

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