CHAPTER - V

TAI AHOM SYSTEM OF EDUCATION :

When the Ahoms came first from their homeland they brought with them their canonical classics which consist of worship manuals, astrological treatises, chronicles and romances. They carried on the tradition and culture of their home-land and tried to sustain and develop their own language and literature in the early stages. The story of Ramavarna was translated in the Ahom language. Lexicons from Ahom to Assamese and Assamese to Ahom were compiled. Min-Mang-phura-lang is their greatest work. It elaborates the gospel of Ahoms in the form of a simple story.¹ The Ahoms produced manuscripts on diverse subjects. It was considered essential for the members of the royal family and the nobility to learn history; and the priests carried on the tradition of imparting education in scriptures and Buranjis from generation to generation.²

(1) Elementary Education :

The Ahom rulers gave a great importance to the elementary education in Ahom language and they employed the

¹ Bhuyan, S.K., SHA, p.9.
² a)MSS-NOS, 2,39 and 40 respectively deposited in the Library of Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, Guwahati.
pundits to teach Ahom. Regarding the teaching of Ahom, N.K. Basu writes, "The chief pundit for service to the state was granted 7,000 puras of land and 20 attendants; the pali-pundits or subordinate pundits were also allowed 6 puras of land and 2 paiks each. There were two officers Chiring phukan and Bar chirina Barua, who had the charge of subjects like teaching of the Ahom language, promotion of study of Buranjis and writing of books in Ahom and their preservation etc. After learning the Ahom alphabets, the students had to learn grammar and commit the same to memory before passing on to the reading of books and ultimately to the study of Ahom religious lore and Buranjis. Sons of almost all respectable Ahoms and particularly of Deodhais, Mohans and Bailungs of the Ahom priestly class used to be trained in the Ahom language."  

(II) Education in History:

The most significant aspect of the Tai-Ahom system of education is the great importance attached to the education in history. The knowledge of Buranjis was considered essential for the Ahom nobility. It was considered a sacred duty of every Ahom

of the royal family and aristocracy to write and preserve Buranjis. Since it was not possible to learn history without the knowledge of the language, the study of the language was also considered a sacred duty. There was the practice of reciting Buranjis during the Ahom marriage ceremonies.

In fact, in the early stages the Ahom kings tried to make the Ahom as language of the court, culture and Buranjis, and initially the Buranjis and other court documents were written in Ahom. But the subjects could not understand the alien language. Therefore, the practice developed to write Buranjis both in Ahom and Assamese. In course of time when the rulers adopted Assamese, the practice was given up and Buranjis were written only in Assamese.¹

Regarding the Buranji education of the Ahoms, G.A., Grierson writes, "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India as a rule is curiously deficient. The historical works are numerous and voluminous.

A knowledge of Buranji was indispensable qualification to an Assamese gentleman.¹

(III) Female Education:

Education was very much limited among women. We have however few instances of enlightened and erudite women in the Ahom Age. Foremost among them is Chauching Kunwari. It was she who advised to build up the 'garh' of Garhgaon. According to her suggestion the post of Barpatra Gohain was created. It is said in the Buranjis that she had superiority both in quality and beauty and she could write Ahom even with the help of her toes. Some of the Ahom queens and princesses attained extraordinary proficiency in the art of administration of the country; and the three queens of Siva Singha are bearing examples here. The name of Phuleswari Kunwari will be written in golden letters in the history of Assam for she is the first woman to set up a school in the capital to teach ladies spinning and weaving. Rani Ambika and Pramoda Kunwari made significant contribution to the spread of education by giving encouragement of literary production.²

In the field of vocations education the contribution

1. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.V, p.396. We are using this lines of Grierson here for emphasising educational value of the Buranji's.
2. a) Basu, N.K., AAA, pp.254-255.
of the women of the Ahom Age is memorable. It was considered a sacred duty of every Assamese woman to learn the art of weaving; and lack of knowledge in this was considered a disqualification. Because of this the knowledge in weaving was passed on from one generation to another through an informal system of education that existed almost in every home.¹

(IV) Technical Education:

The formal Tai Ahom education system was confined to a few. However there was the vast informal sector of people's education in which the traditional skill in arts and crafts was handed over from generation to generation. Momai Tamuli Barbarua, during the reign of Pratap Singha reorganised the villages and set up separate classes of potters, black-smith, gold-smiths, silver-smiths etc. This made the knowledge in these arts hereditary. As N.K. Basu has said, "The Khel (Guild) system with diverse Khels or Guilds pfPaiks, e.g. Japisajiya, Jathipatiya, Dhenuchocha, Shilakuti, Khamikar, and so on, also made professional skill in different cottage industries hereditary amongst the members of the respective guilds and their

¹ Barbarua, H., Ahomar Din, Guwahati, 1981, pp.474-76.
successors. Channrung phukan was in-charge of architectural work, e.g. planning and making of temples, palaces, 'Maidams' (Burial vaults or Mounds), bridges, etc. Not book knowledge but knowledge through work and practice was mostly emphasised for artisans' efficiency and skill.\(^1\)

(V) Spiritual Education :-

The Ahom kings understood the importance of spiritual education. The priests were encouraged to impart instruction in ethics and religion. Deodhais, Mohans and Nailungs preached Ahom codes of conduct. The mother of king Kamaleswar Singha translated 'Hitopadesa' into Assamese by a Brahmin poet called Bagis to facilitate knowledge and practice of moral codes.\(^2\) The Ahom rulers patronised Sanskrit learning and Vaisnava Satras for propagation of spiritual education in the kingdom.

(VI) Education of Common People :-

In the Tai-Ahom system of education the formal education was limited to a select few; and in the Brahminical system also the formal education was limited in character. There

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was an informal sector of popular education; and the principal informal agencies of education were namqhars, bhawan as, dances, music, painting, art, architecture, sculpture, folk-literature, folk-music, folk-dances, vachanabal is of Dak Mahapurasa, proverbs, khel system, cottage industries etc, and the tradition continued unabated outside the Tai-Ahom system.  

Before the battle of Saraighat, king Chakradhvaj Singha attended the training camp set up for preparatory training for the armed forces and personally supervised and directed the training. This is an instance of elaborate training arrangement of army personnel in the days of Ahom. The Hiloidari Konwars (i.e the Musketeer princes) were imparted training in musketry, cannoery and use of gun-powder and ammunition.  

The one most important task for a high born Ahom Chamua was to go to war for the defence of the country. Proficiency in warfare was followed by royal recognition and rewards in the form of grants of lands and office. This royal

    b) Bhuyan, S.K., Lachit Barphukan and His Times, pp. 15 ff.
3. Ibid., 15 ff.
practice served as a great incentive to the Ahom youth to acquire proficiency in swordsmanship and handling of spears, and every home in absence of formal military academy became the training centre. It was compulsory for the young man of the royal family to take military training. In fact, in the Ahom administrative system there was no branch that was purely civilian and non-military. All officers and 'paiks' were bound to go war and therefore, they had to undergo a course of military training, and always remain prepared to fight for the country.

In guerilla fighting the Ahoms had unique dexterity. The fighting technique was to come out of the forts in the darkness of the night and fall on the enemies all on a sudden, inflict them if they could with defeat in the event of their retreats. By these tactics they nearly succeeded in thwarting the activities of Mir Jumla's army.

Sukapha undertook a series of campaigns to the kingdoms of the Chutiyas, the Morans, the Borahis, the Nagas and

1. (a) Bhuyan, S.K., Lachit Barphukan and His Times, pp.15 ff
2. (a) Gait, E., HA, p.130 ff.
   (b) Barbarua, H., Ahomar Din, pp.449-449.
the Kacharis. The policy of incessant warfare against the hardy hill-neighbours on the north, the south and the east also speaks highly of the efficiency of the Ahom military organisation.

The original strength of the Ahom army was in later days reinforced by means of forced capture and new recruitment. This vast army was not of the nature of militia or citizens army but a regular standing army duly paid by the king. The cash payment was insignificant all being remunerated either in land or labour.¹

The Ahoms in their wars and conquests and in their task of guarding the frontier summoned the services of feudal militia. The battalions supplied by the Bhuyan and the other chiefs which fought on behalf of the over-lord, acted possibly on the basis of feudal obligation. On account of the close conformity between the system of Ahom-feudal militia and the Mughal mansabdari system it is likely for the Ahoms to have attained the original idea from the Mughals with whom they maintained political contact.²

2. Bhuyan, S.K., AAR, p.11.
The full complement of an Ahom army comprised of infantry, cavalry, elephants, navy, Artillery and spies.\textsuperscript{1}

The infantry was the backbone of the Ahom military system. The local chronicles focus the importance of infantry in the Ahom Age. In fact, the strength of the Ahom rulers lay in the excellence of the infantry expert in taking up arms and military exercises on all weathers dry or wet. The great technical skill and general excellence of the Ahom foot-soldiers is usually testified to by the Persian writers. It is mentioned in the Fathiyah-\textit{i}-ibryah that "a very small number of their soldiers often checkmates thousands in battle."\textsuperscript{2} The Alamgir-Namah goes so far as to say that "one of them was more than a match for ten Muslim soldiers."\textsuperscript{3}

In the Ahom army there was regular system of gradation of officers. The paiks were supervised by the Borahs and the Hazarikas who were commanded by the higher military officials such as the Baruas, the Rajkhowas and the Phukans.\textsuperscript{4} The Phukans

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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\item Acharyya, N.N., HMA, p.118.
\item Quoted by S.N. Bhattacharyya in his 'A history of Mughal North East Frontier Policy,' Calcutta, 1929, p.36.
\item Acharyya, N.N., HMA, p.118.
\end{thebibliography}
were the commanders of 6000, the Rajkhowas 3000, the Haraus 2000, the Hazarikas 1000, and the Borahs of 20 soldiers.¹

The cavalry in Ahom army played the key-role, and it can be realised from the fact that the original army of prince Sukapha included 300 horses.²

The Ahoms used to import horses from Bhutan.³

The special work of Ahom cavalry in battle was the supervision of the discipline, protection of its sides, first attack, turning the movement of the army, pursuit and the like. Horses were so necessary and important for Ahom army that there was a department of Government to look after their recruitment and proper training. The Ghora Barua was in charge of the horses and he had to maintain a stock register of horses. The horses were classified according to their breed, age, colour and size. It was also

1. (a) Bhuyan, S.K., AAR, p. 10
   (b) Barpujari, H.K., Assam in the days of Company, 1964, p. 2.

2. (a) Barua, H.K., AB, DHAS, Guwahati, 1962, p. 11.
   (b) Barua, G.C., Ahom Buranji, Calcutta, 1930, p. 47.

3. Acharyya, N.N., HMA, p. 118.
the duty of Ghora Barua to lead the Ahom cavalry in battle.¹

Next to horse soldiers, the elephant force occupied position of eminence in the Ahom military system. The tireless conquest and expansion depended much on elephants which were used in front line for operation at a place without roads. These were used for protecting the planks for crossing the rivers. Penetrating into inaccessible places, destroying of ramparts, gates, towers and the rooms over them and carrying treasures. For these reasons prince Sukapha's army was led by a group of elephants.² The training and efficiency of elephants as a fighting force were looked after by a special branch of the war-office. The department was presided over by an official called Hati Barua assisted by a regular staff of subordinate officers who attended to the manifold duties and operations necessary for rearing up of an adequate elephant force for the state.³

1. (a) Barbarua, H., Ahomar Din, p. 558.
   (b) Bhuyan, S.K., Atan Buragohain and His Times, Guwahati, 1957, pp. 64-65

2. (a) Barua, G.C., AB, p. 47.
   (b) Bhuyan, S.K., (ed), Satsari Asam Buranji, G.U., 1974, p. 2

In times of peace and war, deployment of spies was a regular practice of the Ahom army. Spies formed an essential part of military system, and the strength of Ahom rule was based on military capability.¹

The weapons of war were swords, spears, axes, maces, daggers, slings, bows and arrows with which the Ahom soldiers were trained to stand firm on the battle field. Besides their numerical strength, physical vigour, courage and endurance of the Ahoms were some of the decisive factors for military superiority of the Ahoms, and such excellence must have been attained after a thorough training.²

The Ahom army organisation observed strict discipline and this can be known from the Persian Historian Shihabuddin Talish who informs us that the soldiers are beheaded for any charge in the battle-field.³

   b) Acharyya, N.N., MHA, p.121.
The main interesting characteristic of Ahom military organisation was the existence of the army Medical service. The physicians or Bez Baruas accompanied by compounders formed part of the army. These medical men were provided with medicines and surgical instruments. There were also veterinary doctors. Their duty was not only to cure the diseases of the horses, elephants and other animals but also to see that physical growth of them was matching.  

The Assamese soldier was the master of a variety of activities which he achieved as a cultivator and a householder. Erection of boundary fencing, rowing, swimming, digging and house construction constituted the normal occupation of an Assamese cultivator and this varied knowledge was brought to bear upon his military career. This versatility shocked the Mughal general Raja Ram Singha of Amber.  

A Muslim historian Mohammad Kazim admitted that "the Rajas of Assam had curbed the ambition and checked the conquest of the most victorious princes of Hindustan, the solution

1. (a) Barua, G., AB, pp.286-87.  
   (b) Basu, N.K., AAA, p.253.  
of a war against them has baffled the penetration of heroes who have been styled conquerers of the world."1

Such a high degree of military skill as betrayed by the armed forces of Assam during the Ahom rule could not have been achieved without a skilful arrangement of military training. But little is known about that system of training and the training centres of the armed forces because of dearth of sources; we are to depend at best on intelligent guesswork and logical deduction.

(VII) Naval Training :-

There are references to royal navy of the Ahom Age in many inscriptions. The Apsahed inscription refers to a naval engagement which took place between Susthita Varman of Kamrup and the later Gupta king Mahasena Gupta.2 The Nidhanpur Grant also mentions a naval battle which was probably fought between Bhaskaravarman and Sasanka, king of Bengal3. The Kamauli Grants record a glorious naval victory which Vaidyadeva won over his enemy of South Vanga, near the mouth of the Ganges.4

3. Ibid., p. 292.
The accounts of Hiuen Tsiang throw some light on the naval activities. Bhaskaravarman had a flotilla of 30,000 ships. The king became frightened at having enraged Harsa by refusing to part with Hiuen Tsiang. Then "embarking with the Master of the Law they passed up the Ganges together in order to reach the place where Siladitya-Raja was residing." When Bhaskaravarman arrived at the country of the Kie-shu-ho-ki-lo (kajurgira, Rajmahal) from Kamrup, he held a discussion there and first ordered some men to build on the north bank of the Ganges a pavilion of travel, and then on a particular day he crossed over the river and coming to the pavilion, there placed the Master of the Law, after which he with his ministers went to meet Siladitya Raja on the north bank of the river. When Harsa called the great Assembly to accept gift at Prayaga, "on the narrow the military followers of Siladitva Raja and Kumara Raja (Bhaskar Varman) embarked in ships and the attendants of Dhruvabhata Raja mounted their elephants, and so arranged in an imposing order, they proceeded to the place of the appointed

(b) Watters, T. (Tr.) On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India, I, p. 348.
assembly, Bhaskaravarm's flotilla of boats not only sailed in the Ganges, but had access to the 'southern sea' is also evident.

Vanamala's inscription provides a fine description of the royal ships that were tied on both banks of the river near the capital city of Harupesvara. The boats were well carved and provided with various devices to make their movements fast and swift. The officers in charge of them were the nauvan-dhaka, officers responsible for mooring, and Nau-rajjaka, which occurs in the Rock inscription of Harjjarā may mean a class of officers who were responsible for tying the boats by means of rope from the bank.

The naval power of Assam flourished under the Ahoms, who in several naval encounters brought utter disaster to the Mughal army. Shihabuddin gives a specific account of Assam's flotilla. There is no other difference between the two than this that the prow and stern of the Kosah have two horns while the head and base of the bachari comprise of only one levelled

2. Ibid. p. 188.
4. Ibid, pp. 84-85.
plank; and as aiming at strength they build these boats with the heart of the timber, they are slower than kosaha. So many are the boats, large and small in the country that on one occasion the news writer of Gauhati reported in the month of Ramzan that up to the date of his writing, 32,000 kachar and kesah had reached that place or passed it. Further he says "that the people build most of their boats with the combat wood, and such vessels, however heavily they may be loaded, on being swamped do not sink in the water". Moreover this account Muhammadan historians have left to us extensive materials concerning the naval power maintained by the Ahom and Koch kings in later time.  

The naval attainment of the Assamese achieved a high pitch of efficiency under the Ahom rulers. They possessed an efficient navy is borne out by the references of their naval encounters, particularly with the Muhammadan invaders. The naval fights that took place at Koliabar and Saraighat are really memorable. Although the Ahoms were defeated in the first encounter, they fought valiantly. But at Saraighat the Assamese


warships routed the Mughal fleet. At the end of the battle even the great Ram Singha had to admit the valour and skill of his redoubtable opponents. "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches and in wielding guns and cannon any other part of India have not seen." 1

The navy troupe was most powerful; at Garhgaon and Guwahati there were a number of 'Naoshals' or naval establishments where there were numerous boats and training in naval warfare used to be accorded. The victory at the naval battle of Saraighat could be possible because of basic training. 2

(VIII) Training in medicine science:

The Ahom Age is remarkable for its progress in medical science. There were many 'Bej' who were remunerated by the king by grant of land, attendants etc. These 'Bej' could treat patients in the royal palace as well as in the households of the subjects. Herbal medicines, chemicals Tantra-Mantras

2. a) Bhuyan, S.K., Lachit Barphukan and His Times, p. 15 ff.
   b) Hazarika, N., Ahomar rananiti, Guwahati, 1990, pp.31 ff.
(charms and incantations) were used for treatment, and the training in the manufacture of drugs could be had only at the residence of the 'Bej' or 'Cja'. Those who were interested in medicine had to go to the 'Bej' for learning in medicine and had to pay high fees for the same. Initially the students had to learn how to identify and collect medicinal herbs from jungles and bushes. Then they were taught how to combine and prepare medicines. Finally the apprentices were given training for diagnosis of various diseases. The training continued for a long time during which the student had to read the medical treatises and obtain mastery over the subject. That medical science was well developed can be appreciated from the numerous medical treatises of the period still extant. Only very trustworthy 'Bej's were attached to the royal household. The Bej Barua was the royal physician.¹

IX Training in Veterinary Science:

In medieval period there were huge number of horses and elephants in army. These were indispensable for maintaining the efficiency of the army. The care of these animals

1. (a) Bhuyan, S.K., Lachit Barphukan and His Times, p. 15 ff.
   (b) Chatterji, S.K., PAHCI, pp. 73-75.
formed the vital part of the military administration. Medical care and proper treatment of these animals were essential for the utilisation of their services in the warfare. Special books were written on the diseases of horses and elephants and their care.

In the Mahabharata there is the mention of Nakula and Sahadeva as possessing skill in the treatment of animals, and Kautilya recommends the employment of horse-doctors and elephant-doctors in the army. In the Ahom Age, however, we have no record, of the existence of special colleges where veterinary science was studied. It seems obvious that there must have been some arrangements for the training of veterinary doctors, possibly by apprenticeship with those who were already skilled practitioners.

As S.K. Bhuyan in his book "Lachit Barphukan and His Times" has said that the elephants, horses and hawks etc were scientifically treated for various ailments. Treatises on treatment of diseases of hawks, elephants (Hastividyarnava) and horses (Qhoranidan) are illuminating in this connection.

1. Keay, F.E. and Mitra, Sukumar, A History of Education in India, p.63
Assamese Paintings (Photostat from Hastividyarnava of Sukumar Barkath during Siva Singha's reign)
Assamese multi-coloured Paintings
(Reproduced from Ananda Lahiri by Ramanarayana Kaviraj Chakravarti)
PLATE VIII

'Siv Dol' one of the finest pieces of Ahom architecture

PLATE IX

'Talatal-Ghar' also one of the finest pieces of Ahom architecture