



## Short Article

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# The Ahoms and the Marathas: A Comparative Analysis of their Defence Strategy

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**Abstract:** The paper proceeds to explain as to how two kingdoms, one from the northeastern part and another from the Deccan region of the Indian subcontinent had operated in order to challenge dynasties like that of the Mughals, through their shrewd and competent military prowess. However, as unambiguous as it seems, the paper has a few more important points of observations to offer. The two kingdoms that are talked about here are the Ahoms and the Marathas. They had much in common, especially in terms of their warfare techniques. If we delve deeper into the pages of history, we can perceive a common manner through which, both the Ahoms and the Marathas could defeat a large number of soldiers despite, at times, being in a smaller ratio. The paper, therefore, attempts to focus on the various strikingly similar tactics of warfare of the Ahoms and the Marathas and will try to collate the defence strategies of the two kingdoms to bring out their similarities.

**Keywords:** Ahoms, Marathas, Military Techniques, Comparison.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Ahoms rose to prominence in and around the areas of the North East in 1228 CE and much later, the Marathas grew prominent in the Deccan area in 1674 CE. The Ahoms ruled for around six centuries until the British took the charge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The region that was under the Ahoms, mostly corroborates to the majority parts of the modern-day Brahmaputra valley (Rajguru, 2023), falling between the geographical dimensions of 26° 55'-35.39" N, 94° 44'-31.79" E and in case of the Marathas, the region that they had a hold over for about two centuries, initially, included roughly the modern state of Maharashtra (19.7515° N, 75.7139° E) but later on, under the Peshwas, extended up till parts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Malwa, and areas in and around the Gangetic plains (Dilip, 2022).

While the timelines of the origin of both the empires differ to a great extent, the former taking birth in the early medieval times and the latter gaining might in the later medieval times, there are still some aspects of these two powers which make them alike. The similar aspects that this paper talks about are regarding the defence strategies of the two kingdoms.

**Guerilla Warfare:** The first and foremost military strategy that can be highlighted here is the guerilla warfare technique. It is one of the most successful and widely known warfare techniques used both by the Marathas (Singh, 2016) and the Ahoms (Changmai, 2024), especially against the Mughals. This statement now, definitely pushes forward the question – what is this guerilla warfare technique? As per “The Rise and Warfare Methods of Marathas” by Jagdeep Singh, guerilla warfare is “a form of irregular warfare in which

a small group of fighters, armed civilians use military tactics to fight a larger enemy.” (Singh, 2016) Now, the guerilla war methods of both the Ahoms and the Marathas can be talked about separately. The Ahoms had a name for their guerilla warfare technique. It was called *daga judho*, literally meaning a technique by which a small group of people could face a larger army (Baruah, 2012). The *paiks* or foot soldiers of the Ahoms had to train themselves a lot more in guerilla strategies than in any other form of warfare (Hazarika, 2015). In fact, a 27 bigha land has been excavated at Sibasagar having earthen mounds, which are believed to have been used for guerilla training (Hazarika, 2015). The Ahom kings played an active role in promoting such warfare strategies by personally attending the trainings. For instance, the Ahom king Chandrakanta Singha was present in the military camp to uplift the morale of the soldiers during a war with the Mughals. In case of the Marathas, Duff writes in his book that Shivaji, the founder of the Maratha empire, inaugurated the *Shiva Sutra* or *Ganimi Kava*, corresponding to the present-day guerilla warfare tactics, in order to defeat the larger army of the Mughals (Duff, 2014). Quite interestingly, it can be seen that even the enemy of the Ahoms and the Marathas were, at one time, the same – the Mughals.

**Fortification:** The next similarity that can be witnessed in the defense mechanisms of both the Ahoms and the Marathas is the construction of forts. Assam or rather the Brahmaputra valley, had been donned with a number of forts, constructed by various Ahom rulers at various times. For example, Suhungmung erected a fort called *Pachala Garh* at a place called Dikhowmukh to deal with the Chutia king Dhirnarayan. There are innumerable evidences and scholarly discussions regarding the fortification system of the Ahoms. For instance, in

attempt to emphasize the importance that the Ahoms attached to their fortification activity, Gitalee Changmai in her article titled “A Historical Analysis of the Defense Strategies of the Ahom Kingdom during the Medieval Period in Assam” says that Lachit Barphukan executed his own uncle as he had “neglected to construct a rampart overnight” (Changmai, 2024). It has been argued that the forts of the Ahoms were usually impenetrable and to talk about their architecture, it can be said that these forts (also known as *Garh*) were constructed all across the kingdom. But what was a clever work of defence was that a type of thorny bamboo plants called *kutuha* was planted as a form of natural fencing in and around the forts. In addition, there were soldiers stationed at various parts of the forts and cannons were positioned at different intervals within those forts to target the enemy (Changmai, 2024).

Regarding the Marathas, it can be said that fortification played an important role in their defence strategies as well. Shivaji either captured already constructed forts or built new ones for defensive reasons. The Maratha forts like Raigad and Lohagad were generally in “well selected sites” (Sen, 1928). Regarding the architecture of their forts, it has been examined that the Maratha forts were protected by strong walls and quite similar to the Ahom technique, the forts were made difficult to trespass by the availability of thorny cactus plants. The Maratha forts were also well provided with food and water and in order to boost the spirit of the soldiers, there were even temples and mosques within the forts. Just like the Ahom forts, the Maratha forts were also extremely difficult to penetrate and this can be understood by the statement of S.N. Sen that each of the Maratha forts cost the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb “an enormous loss of men, money and time” (Sen, 1928).

**Geographical Awareness:** Again, interestingly enough, there is yet another military feature which appears quite homogenous between the two empires. This feature, which was perhaps one of the most powerful weapons of both the Ahoms and the Marathas against their rivals, was the advantage of geographical awareness. The Ahoms knew that their kingdom was surrounded by a vast waterbody – the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Therefore, they decided to pay a great attention to the structuring of their naval forces. Moreover, the Ahoms had it in their knowledge that the wood required to build boats of their naval forces were quite easily available within the premises of their kingdom and hence, it became easier for them to arrange their defensive measures on waterbodies too. In fact, there was even a naval officer called *Paniphukan* who took care of the positioning of the naval warships in geographically advantageous areas such as Jogighopa, Pandu, Guwahati, Kajalimukh, Samadhara, Dikhowmukh etc (Changmai, 2024). Ultimately, it was this usage of geographical awareness and naval strength that made the Ahoms emerge as victorious against the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671.

Similarly, the Maratha empire also drew its defensive strength from its geographical positioning. The kingdom of Shivaji was based on the Deccan plateau, where mountain ranges such as the Vindhyas and the Satpura, and the rivers Tapti and Narmada offered natural protection to them against intruders. In fact, the *Ganimi Kava* of Shivaji was evolved keeping in notice the hilly landscapes, which made the Maratha forces swift and a source of threat to the forces adept to fighting in the plains. Even Shivaji himself realized the importance of the mountainous geography and therefore, “regularly refused a decisive plains battle, which tactics of the day demanded.” (Karmakar, 2013).

It is, thus, clear that if we place both the Ahoms and the Marathas together to delve into their military strategies, we would be able to see quite similar patterns in their ways of dealing with their enemies. While the Mughals have been, undoubtedly, one of the sturdiest forces of the medieval times, the Ahoms and the Marathas also portrayed it on several occasions that to win against a pompous and well-equipped large army, not might but wit and cleverly planned defence strategies were ample most of the times.

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