

# Battle of Saraighat

The battle of Saraighat was a naval engagement fought on the Brahmaputra River near Sairaghat between the Mughal Empire and the Ahom Kingdom in 1671.

The battle was the last major engagement in which the Mughals attempted to extend their empire into Assam.

This article will further give details about the battle of Saraighat within the context of the IAS Exam

## Events preceding the battle of Saraighat

The Koch Kingdom was a state situated between the Mughal Empire and the Ahom Kingdom. For the Ahom Kingdom, it was an important buffer state for keeping Mughal imperialist expansions at bay. Things began to change when the erstwhile ruler of the Koch Kingdom, Nara Narayana died in 1587. As a result, the Koch kingdom was divided into two - the western Koch Bihar rule by his son Lakshmi Narayan and the eastern Koch Hajo rule by his nephew, Raghudev

Lakshmi Narayan formed an alliance with the Mughal Empire, following which the governor of Bengal, assistance attacked Parikshit Narayan, son of Raghudev at Dhubri in 1602. Following a series of battles, Parikshit Narayan was defeated but his brother Bali Narayana took refuge in the Ahom Kingdom.

The Mughals would use it as a pretext to invade the kingdom. The first battle between them would take place in 1615 leading to a series of engagements in the following years that would see different fortunes between the two parties until the treaty of Asurar Ali in 1639 which fixed Barnadi river in the north bank and Asurar Ali in the south bank of the Brahmaputra as the boundary between the Ahoms and the Mughals. This would result in the Mughal administration of at Kamrup.

Upon the ascension of Aurangzeb on the Mughal throne on in July 31st 1658, he tasked Mir Jhumla II with the conquest of the entire region of Assam in 1660. Marching in 1661, he defeated the Ahoms in several battles that eventually culminated in the occupation of the Ahom capital of Garhgaon. But the incessant guerilla warfare and the torrential rains welling up the rivers meant that Mir Jhumla could not consolidate his rule and was pondering to whether abandon his recent gains. Unfortunately, Jayadhwaj Singha - ruler of the Ahom Kingdom - was unaware of this and sued for peace. Mir Jhumla seized on this opportunity and the result was the Treaty of Ghilajharighat in 1663. But the terms of the treaty were harsh enough for the

Ahoms to become determined in their resolve to permanently end Mughal presence in the region.

## Escalation of the Mughal-Ahom Conflict

Jayadhvaj Singha would die of despair after signing the treaty, but he would extol his cousin and successor, Chakradhwaj Singha to avenge the humiliation of defeat. Upon becoming king Chakradhwaj Singha set about in reforming the Ahom army, making alliances with other kingdoms in the region and constructing new forts in the strategic corners of the kingdom in order to prepare for another war with the Mughals. The man he chose to lead his new army would be Lachit Borphukan.

Mughals made diplomatic overtures to the kingdom to accept vassalage under their empire but they were rebuffed. Lachit soon marched with a reformed Ahom army towards Guhawati. By taking over the five *choukies* that defended Guhawati, Lachit wrested control of the entire region from the Mughals.

The Mughals marched on the Ahoms once again after receiving reinforcements but repeated Ahom attacks on their positions at the Manas river forced them to surrender. The Ahom Kingdom once again controlled their old border at the Manas river

Emperor Aurangzeb, upon being informed of the defeat at Guhawati sent a massive army of 30,000 infantry and 18,000 cavalry under Raja Ram Singh to conquer Guhawati.

Well aware that his forces faced insurmountable odds against a large professionally equipped army with guns and cavalry, Lachit decided to use the hilly terrains of Guwahati to his advantage as the lack of open fields were ideals for hit and run tactics and negated Mughal cavalry strength.

An eastern advancement was only possible through the Brahmaputra river passing through Saraighat, where its narrow points were ideal for defensive action. Lachit prepared a system of mud embankments which would force the Mughals to rely on their weakest asset- the navy

Soon the war devolved into a set of see-saw battles that saw many forts change hands but saw no advances made by either party. Although Ram Singh did win a decisive engagement at Alaboi in 1669 the Ahoms continued to fight on. Ram Singh even had to resort to subterfuge to remove Lachit Borphukan but to little avail. With the long drawn out war tearing the patience of both the Mughal and Ahom sovereigns to shreds, they both told their respective commanders to end the war with a decisive battle - that battle would be fought at Saraighat in 1671.

## The final battle at Saraighat

Exhausting all avenues of diplomacy, Ram Singh launched a massive naval attack on the Ahom forces at Saraighat. The attack was led by his admiral Munnawar Khan. The Ahoms were in a

desperate situation as they were yet to recover from their losses at Alaboi and Lachit had fallen seriously ill.

The engagement, in which the Mughals had technological and numerical superiority, the Ahom army began to retreat. Seeking to rally his wavering troops, Lachit asked to be transported on to a boat despite his condition. Loudly proclaiming that he would rather perish while performing his duty instead of running away, Lachit pushed forward towards the Mughal forces. Seeing their leader surge towards the enemy had an inspiring effect on the Ahom troops who joined en masse to fight the battle.

The small boats of the Ahom forces proved decisive in close-quarter engagements as the bigger Mughal boats could not manoeuvres quickly enough with their cannons to engage them. Soon a melee ensued between the two parties in which Munnawar Khan was killed. This and the loss of other prominent officers forced the Mughals to beat a hasty retreat. The land forces under Ram Singh were forced to retreat as the Mughals had lost the cream of their forces during the river engagement. The Mughals were pursued all the way to the Manas river, where Lachit halted his forces in order to consolidate their gains. Ram Singh would leave for Delhi later his campaign against the Ahoms at an end.

## The aftermath of the Battle of Saraighat

Lachit Borphukan would pass away from natural causes in 1672, a year after the battle of Saraighat. Although the engagement was a decisive one, it did not end the Ahom-Mughal conflicts. Guwahati would be taken by the Mughals when it was abandoned in 1679 by Lachit's successor Laluk Sola. But it would fall back into the hands of the Ahom Kingdom once again when the Ahom Army under Dihingia Alun Borbarua would defeat the Mughals at the battle of Itakhuli in 1682. This battle would permanently end Mughal presence in Assam and no further campaigns would be undertaken by them against the Ahom Kingdom.

