UNIT 4: DOWNFALL OF THE AHOMS

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4.1 LEARNINGOBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the Moamariya uprising in Assam,
- Describe the revolt of Burkandazes,
- Describe the expedition of Captain Welsh to Assam,
- Discuss the internal dissension and conspiracies in the Ahom kingdom,
- Discuss the Burmese invasions of Assam.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

After the end of the reign of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 A.D.), there started a decline in the Ahom dynasty. There were various forces and factors that led to the decline of the Ahom power in Assam. To have a better understanding of these forces and factors, we are going to discuss them in details in different sub-sections. The main factors responsible for the downfall of the Ahoms were namely, Moamariya uprising, revolt of Burkandazes, expedition of Captain Welsh, internal dissension and conspiracies and the

Burmese invasions. The Anglo-Burmese Wars will be discussed in details in Unit 5. As a background of the Anglo-Burmese War, the Burmese invasions of Assam will again be discussed.

4.3 MOAMARIYA UPRISING

The Ahom rule began to decline with the death of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 A.D.) and the Moamariya uprisings gave a death blow to the already weak government. The Moamariyas rose in revolt not for a single cause, but as a result of various factors. The inherent weakness of the Ahom polity was that it was a government based on force. Therefore, so long as the force was maintained the stability of the kingdom was maintained. With the decline in power the stability of the kingdom was jeopardized. It failed to meet the challenges created by the Moamariyas.

The Moamariyas were a group of disciples of the Mayamara Satra, who had been suffering for a long time under the oppression of the Ahom government. Though the movement started due to religious dissension, soon it assumed great political dimensions and affected the entire Brahmaputra Valley. The first challenge to Ahom monarchy was organized by a group of disciple of the Mayamara Satra during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780 A.D.) in 1769. It rapidly developed into a series of civil wars, and paved the way for foreign intervention that ultimately resulted in its annexation by the British East India Company.

Discrimination against Vaishnavism started during the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 A.D.). He regarded Vaishnavism as a menace not only to the state but also as an obstacle to military and internal development. He followed a liberal policy to those Satras that had sheltered him during his exile, otherwise he persecuted the Vaishnavas. Gadadhar Singha tried to crush the growing influence of the Vaishnava Satras. These Satras had become very powerful under royal patronage since the days of Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663 A.D). The Neo- Vaishnavite movement under Sankardeva had attained such remarkable dimensions that the Ahom kings had to accept the Satra institutions as a *fait accompli* and had to mould the

religious policy of the state for the benefit of the Satras as many Ahom subjects were disciples of the Satras.

Fait accompli-

A thing that has been done and cannot now be altered.

At that time, a great number of Satras were established at different places of the kingdom namely, Mayamara, Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, etc. These Satras under the royal patronage soon grew prosperous. The economic prosperity of some Satras became a matter of concern for the king. Gadadhar Singha adopted the policy of persecuting the Vaishnava priests. Many Satras were plundered and their heads were either killed or banished to other places. Rudra Singha reversed the intolerant policy of his father towards the Vaishnava Satras. He rehabilitated most of the displaced *Satradhikars* in their original Satras. Inspite of his religious toleration, Rudra Singha challenged the propriety of Sudra Mahantas initiating Brahmanas. By the *Synod of Garhgaon* Rudra Singh created differences between the Brahmana Mahantas and Sudra Mahantas.

The reign of Siva Singha (1714-1744 A.D.) reign saw the predominance of Saktism. Phuleswari, queen of Siva Singha was more under the influence of the Brahmanas, particularly the Parvatiya Gossain, than her husband. She wanted to establish Saktism as a state religion. She launched a campaign against the Vaishnavites, particularly the influential Moamariya Mahantas. She ordered the Moamariya and several other Gossains to be brought to a Sakta shrine where sacrifices were being offered and the blood of the sacrificial animal was smeared upon their foreheads. The Moamariyas became very angry at this insult to their spiritual leaders and broke out in open rebellion. The queen was an arch-enemy of the Vaishnavites. Her reign was marked by ruthless oppression on the followers of the Vaishnava sect.

Kirti Chandra Barbarua, regarded as a 'king-maker', during the reign of Lakshmi Singha played a major role in further antagonising the Moamariyas against the Ahom kings. In order to counteracting the growing influence of the Mayamara Mahanta, the Barbarua himself became a disciple of the Dihing Satra. He then used to find fault with the Moamariyas in every

matter. This matter came to an extreme level when Barbarua cut off the ears and hairs of Ragha Moran, the leader of the Morans and an enthusiastic leader of the Moamariyas. The Moamariyas could not tolerate this insult to their leader. For the first time, in October 1769, they raised a revolt after collecting an army of about 7,000. They successfully defeated the royal army in a number of small conflicts. They declared Ramakanta, a Moran chief, as a king and Ragha as a Barbarua. All the high offices were occupied only by the Morans. The new king struck coins in his name. But, unfortunately, Ragha was assassinated in a coup engineered by the Manipuri princess, Kuranganayani, (wife of earlier Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 A.D.) whom he had taken to his harem. This incident was followed by the re-occupation of the capital by the Ahom royal forces on 11 April 1770.

On September 1780, Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795 A.D.), son of Lakshmi Singha ascended the throne. He was a follower of Saktism and a bitter enemy of the Moamariyas. He made simultaneous attacks on the Moamariyas and massacred many of them. A few of them took asylum in the territories of the Kacharis, Jayantias and even in the Dafala hills. As a result, the country was depopulated. But, the Moamariyas did not bow down before the Ahom power. They were only waiting for an opportune moment to renew their struggle. Early in 1786, the Moamariyas renewed their struggle with renewed vigour.

Burkandazes- Burkandazes are mercenary soldiers.

In the meantime, Purnananda succeeded as the Burhagohain. It became extremely difficult for him to check the Moamariyas. The Moamariyas defeated the royal army under the Burhagohain at Sagunmari and proceeded to the Capital, Rangpur. On 20th January 1788, the Moamariyas occupied the capital and placed Bharat Simha, a relative of the Moamariya Mahanta, on the throne. Pitambar Gossain, his spiritual leader, was made his adviser. The cities of Garhgaon and Charaideo were burnt and destroyed by the Moamariyas. Pat Konwar, a son of Rajeswar Singha was executed. The Burhagohain having failed to resist the revolutionary movement, advised the king to seek help from a foreign power. At first, Gaurinath Singha did not agree with him. Instead he called upon the Rajas of Cachar, Jayantia and Manipur

for assistance. However, they were still unable to suppress the Moamariyas. Finally, the Ahom king decided to take help from the Burkandazes.

4.4 REVOLT OF BURKANDAZES

Medhi Barphukan, on behalf of King Gaurinath Singha appealed to Hugh Baillie, the Company's Resident at Goalpara for military assistance. Accordingly, Baillie sent some Burkandazes. But, the Koch prince of Darrang, Krishna Narayan, tried to create problems as he did not have a good relationship with Gaurinath Singha. Daniel Raush (a British merchant) also sent 700 Burkandazes. Gaurinath Singha also took help from the Rajas of Cachar, Jayantia and Manipur. But, they had failed to recover Rangpur. A few months later, there was a second attack on the royal camp at Khutarmur. One Bairagi, with the help of a large organized force defeated the Moamariyas at several places and declared himself as the Raja. The king left Nagaon and returned to Gauhati, but, was confronted with many problems.

At Gauhati, Haradatta Buzarbarua, the Choudhury of Jikeri, who disliked the Ahom officers, planned secretly to overthrow the Ahom rule in Kamrup. He also instigated the Rajas of Darrang, Hansa Narayan I and Hansa Narayan II, against the Ahom king. But the rebellious allies were utterly defeated at Mangaldoi. Krishna Narayan II, son of Hansa Narayan II, was deprived of his legitimate right over the kingdom, which would later create further problems for the Ahom king. Bishnu Narayan his nephew was made the Raja of Darrang. Krishna Narayan approached Daniel Raush for assisting him to reinstate him to his hereditary possession. In 1791, Krishna Narayan appealed to Henry Douglas, the Commissioner of Koch Bihar, for military assistance. Finally, Krishna Narayan was able to recruit mercenaries from Rangpur and Koch Bihar consisting of Burkandazes, Sanyasi and Fakirs.



LET US KNOW

The Burkandazes were subjects of the British Indian Government consisted of the Sikhs of Punjab and Hindustanis from

Bundelkhand. The Sanyasis were hoards of pilgrims of 'all castes of Gentoos (Hindus) who overran Bengal and committed depredations. Fakirs were Muslim saints.

In December 1791, Krishna Narayan and Haradatta along with a force of 3000 attacked Darrang. Bijay Narayan was expelled and negotiations were opened with Gaurinath Singha. The victorious party also occupied North Gauhati and the Burkandazes started atrocities on the inhabitants there. The Duaria Baruas and others who had been suffering from the atrocities of Burkandazes, appealed to Lumsden, the Collector of Rangpur. Medhi Barphukan also asked the Government of Bengal to provide aid. The Collector was accordingly authorized to issue a *Parwanah* (order) to the Burkandazes to quit Assamese territories immediately. But, they disregarded the orders of the Collector. Then, Raush tried to negotiate between Gaurinath and Krishna Narayan at Gauhati. Unfortunately, Krishna Narayan was prevented by the Burkandazes from doing so. Therefore, Gaurinath Singha appealed for military aid to the British Governor General for expulsion of Burkandazes from Assam. Henry Douglas, Commissioner of Koch Bihar, also informed the Government of Bengal that the considerable trade of Bengal with Assam was suffering due to the disturbances. Lumsden also urged the Governor-General to dispatch a battalion of troops to control the Burkandazes.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Fill in the blanks:

a) The Moamariyas were a group of disciples of the …….. Satra.

b) …….. tried to crush the growing influence of the Vaishnava Satras.

c) Pat Konwar, a son of ……..…….. was executed.

d) Hugh Baillie was the Company's Resident at ……..……..

e) ……..…… Douglas was the Commissioner of Koch Bihar.

f) Lumsden was the ……..…….. of Rangpur.

4.5 EXPEDITION OF CAPTAIN WELSH

Captain Welsh was sent to Assam by the Governor General Lord Cornwallis in September, 1792 at the request of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha. He reached the outskirts of Gauhati by November 25, 1792. He came to know about the internal condition of the Ahom kingdom from Raush and decided to free Gauhati from Krishna Narayan and the Burkandazes. Thus, for the first time, an authorized body of Englishmen equipped with modern methods of exploration and investigation entered into the territories of the Ahom kingdom, and thereby broke the barriers that had secluded Assam for centuries.

With the help of the British sepoys, Captain Welsh successfully expulsed the Burkandazes from the Ahom kingdom. Most of them took shelter in Bhutan and later on made sporadic invasions into the plains of Assam. Next Welsh defeated Krishna Narayan and ended the rebellion in Kamrup and Darrang. Welsh tried to make a peaceful negotiation, as his main motive was to secure trade relationship with Assam. A peaceful and cordial relationship was established between Krishna Narayan and Gaurinath Singha. Then Captain Welsh marched to Upper Assam, subdued the Moamariya rebellion and reinstated Gaurinath Singha to his lawful authority. In the meantime on 28 February, 1793 Captain Welsh also successfully entered into a commercial agreement on behalf of the Company Government with the Ahom king. Towards the end of October, 1793, Lord Cornwallis retired and Sir John Shore became the new Governor General. He followed a policy of non-intervention and immediately recalled Captain Welsh. So, Captain Welsh after completing his work in Upper Assam hurriedly returned to Bengal with huge quantities of ornaments, gold and silver coins, clothes, other metals, boats and guns.

With the withdrawal of the British troops there was recurrence of disorders in most part of the Ahom kingdom. The very next day after the departure of Captain Welsh from Upper Assam, Gaurinath Singha along with Purnananda Burhagohain left Rangpur for Dichai (Jorhat) which thenceforth became the capital of Assam. The Moamariyas soon reoccupied

Rangpur. The Burkandazes renewed their depredations in Darrang and Kamrup. Even the Barphukan Sivadatta Chetia supported the Burkandazes and defied the authority of the king. In the North-East of the kingdom, the Khamtis declared independence and carved out a small principality around Sadiya. Gaurinath Singha died in August, 1795 without leaving any male issue.

4.6 INTERNAL DISSENSION AND CONSPIRACIES



LET US KNOW

Seven Ahom kings who ruled Assam during ministerial ascendancy (1670 – 1681)

- Sunyatpha (1670-1672 A.D.)
- Suklampha (1672-1674 A.D.)
- Suhung (1674-75 A.D.)
- Sujinpha (1675-1677 A.D.)
- Sudaipha (1677-1679 A.D.)
- Sulikpha (1679-1681 A.D.)

Already we have mentioned that the Barphukan Sivadatta Chetia by supporting the Burkandazes had defied the authority of the king Gaurinath Singha. Now the death of Gaurinath Singha left the field open for internal dissension and conspiracies in the Ahom kingdom. Every time when the central authority became weak, the ministers or *Dangarias* became de facto rulers. After the death of Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1670 A.D.) in 1670 till 1681, seven kings ascended the Ahom throne and none of them had died a natural death. During this period of eleven years the kings had been weak and had remained sub-ordinate to the ministers. Hence, this period was known as the 'period of ministerial ascendancy'. However, with the accession of a strong ruler on the throne, the ministerial ascendancy had declined. But the death of Gaurinath Singha paved the way for another period of ministerial rule.

The Burhagohain Purnananda installed on the Ahom throne one Kinaram, a minor son of the Charing Raja with the Hindu name Kamaleswar Singha and Ahom name Suklingpha. As Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810 A.D.) was a minor, Purnananda Burhagohain became the defacto ruler of the Ahom kingdom. He tied to restore peace and order in the kingdom. He appointed Kalia Bhomora as the new Barphukan, who after prolonged fighting expelled the Burkandazes from Assam and established peace and order in Kamrup. With the newly organised army, Purnananda Burhagohain also tried to subdue the Moamariyas, but failed. Hence he won over the most turbulent faction of the Moamariyas, the Marans who had their headquarters at Bengamara. Purnananda Burhagohain entered into an agreement with Sarbananda Singha, the leaders of the Moamariyas at Bengamara. By this agreement Sarbananda Singha was given the territory between the river Brahmaputra and Buri Dihing to rule autonomously. His title as *Barsenapati* was recognised. In return Sarbananda Singha agreed to pay the Ahom Government an annual tribute consisting of ivory, Muga silk and other articles produced in his territory. After this agreement the Moamariyas ceased to give any trouble to the Ahom kingdom.

Purnananda Burhagohain by his sincere efforts established peace and prosperity in the Ahom kingdom and ensured Kamaleswar Singha a safe reign. But in 1810 Kamaleswar Singha died. At his death, Purnananda Burhagohain nominated Chandrakanta Singha (1810-1818 A.D.), brother of the late king as the Ahom ruler. He too being young, the actual power remained in the hands of Purnananda Burhagohain. This increase in power of Purnananda Burhagohain was not liked by his son-in-law Badan Chandra, who had become the Barphukan, after the death of Kalia Bhomora. The new king Chandrakanta Singha also wanted to get rid of the influence of Purnananda Burhagohain as he was very much fond of power. One of his friends Satram instigated the king to get rid of the authority of Purnananda Burhagohain. Satram even made a plot to murder the Burhagohain, but the plot was detected and Satram was banished to Namrup. Chandrakanta Singha also won over Badan Chandra Barphukan to his side and asked him to make secret negotiations with the British for aid in order to get rid of the Burhagohain.

But the shrewd Purnananda Burhagohain got information of the secret plan and sent troops to arrest Badan Chandra Barphukan, who escaped to Bengal. There the latter tried to persuade the Governor General to despatch army for the aid of the Ahom king alleging that Purnananda Burhagohain was subverting the government and ruining the Ahom kingdom. But the Governor General refused to accede to the request of Badan Chandra Barphukan. On the refusal of the British, he opened negotiations with the Calcutta Agent of the Burmese Government. With the help of the Agent he reached the court of Ava and successfully persuaded the Burmese king Badawpaya to intervene in Assam. This led to the Burmese invasions of Assam.

4.7 BURMESE INVASIONS OF ASSAM

The Burmese king Badawpaya under Badan Chandra sent an army of 8,000 to Assam which reached Namrup in early 1817. On hearing the news of arrival of The Burmese army under Badan Chandra, Purnananda Burhagohain made efforts to resist, failing which he committed suicide. His son Ruchinath became the new Burhagohain. The Burmese by defeating the Ahom royal forces advanced rapidly and by middle of March, 1817 reached Jorhat. Ruchinath fled to Gauhati. Badan Chandra allowed Chandrakanta Singha to continue as king, but himself became the defacto ruler with the new title of *Mantri-Phukan*. The Burmese army returned home with a heavy war indemnity.

But after the departure of the troops, Badan Chandra was assassinated. With his death Ruchinath was recalled to Jorhat. Ruchinath suspected the king's motives and collected some mercenary soldiers and advanced upto Jorhat. He considered Chandrakanta Singha responsible for his father's death and the Burmese invasion of Assam. Chandrakanta Singha fled away to Rangpur, but was caught and imprisoned at Jorhat. Purandar Singha (1818-1819 A.D.) was made the new Ahom king. The Burmese inspite of their return had their coveted eyes on Assam. Taking advantage of the political instability in the Ahom kingdom, the Burmese king

sent a strong contingent to Assam under Alamingi. The Burmese contingent was guided by an Assamese named Patalang.

In a deadly encounter, the Ahom soldiers defeated the Burmese, but the Ahom army did not pursue the Burmese army. As a result, the Ahom king Purandar Singha and even the common masses felt that the Ahom soldiers were defeated in the encounter. Along with Ruchinath Burhagohain, Purandar Singha fled away to Gauhati. The Burmese now advanced to Jorhat, released Chandrakanta Singha and placed him on the Ahom throne for the second time (1819-1821 A.D.) as a puppet ruler. The real authority remained in the hands of the Burmese commanders who made many changes in the administration and appointed new officers. Troops were sent to Gauhati to arrest Purandar Singha who fled away to Bengal. Ruchinath tried to save Gauhati, but failed and fled away to Bengal. After establishing the Burmese authority fully in Assam, Alamingi left Assam in April, 1819 keeping Mingimaha Tilwa in charge of Assam.

After the departure of Alamingi, Chandrakanta Singha along with Patalang tried to shake off Burmese allegiance. But Mingimaha Tilwa killed Patalang and Chandrakanta Singha fled to Bengal in fear of his life. From there he tried to drive away the Burmese, but failed. With the flight of Chandrakanta Singha, Jogeswar Singha (1821-1824 A.D.) was placed on the Ahom throne as a puppet ruler. To further strengthen the Burmese position in Assam, 20,000 soldiers were sent to Assam under veteran general Mingimaha Bandula. Emboldened by the reinforcement, the Burmese began to make frequent inroads into Bengal. By November, 1823 the Burmese occupied the Shahpuri Island and marched to Bhutan which alarmed the British that the Burmese were going to invade British territory. The contemporary political situation of Manipur, Cachar and Tripura aggravated the situation and British interference became necessary. Hence, the British declared war against the Burmese. The British defeated the Burmese and by the Treaty of Yandaboo (24 February, 1826) became the master of Assam. Thus, the Ahom rule formally ended in Assam, though British for a period of 5 years from 1833-1838 allowed Purandar Singha to rule Upper Assam as a tributary ruler of the British.