

Ecology and Diplomacy in Medieval Assam: The Environmental Foundations of Interstate Relations in the Brahmaputra Valley

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Abstract

Environmental history developed from growing recognition that forests, rivers, animals, climate, land, and other natural resources are central to human survival and historical change. In this perspective, nature is not merely a background to political events; environmental conditions can shape movement, settlement, administration, warfare, and political relationships. This paper examines the Brahmaputra Valley and argues that its ecological and geographical features played an active role in the political and diplomatic history of medieval Assam. Rivers structured communication, administration, military movement, and territorial boundaries. Forests, hills, marshes, heavy rainfall, and difficult terrain created barriers that restricted invading forces while giving local forces strategic advantages. Natural resources such as bamboo, timber, gold, agar wood, and elephants strengthened the economic and military position of the Ahom state and influenced relations with neighbouring powers. The paper also examines forest clearance and settlement expansion as part of frontier security, the role of ecological knowledge in guerrilla warfare, and the importance of elephants in administration, warfare, and political relations. The central argument is that diplomacy in medieval Assam cannot be understood separately from the environment in which it operated. Ecological conditions created both opportunities and constraints, shaping communication, alliances, military practices, territorial ideas, and the bargaining position of the Ahom kingdom.

Keywords: Environmental History; Brahmaputra Valley, Medieval Assam; Ahom Kingdom; Ecology and Diplomacy, Military Strategy, Natural Resources, Inter-state Relations.

1. Introduction

The study of environment and nature gradually became an important field of historical inquiry as people recognized the significance of forests, rivers, plants, animals, and other natural resources to human life. From the 1960s and 1970s, concerns about pollution, deforestation, and resource depletion also helped make the environment an important political issue. Environmental history emerged in this context as a way of studying the relationship between human societies and nature over time. Its concern is not only with the effects of human actions on the natural world but also with the ways environmental change and geographical conditions shape societies and historical developments. Nature can therefore be treated as an active historical force rather than as a passive setting for human action.ⁱ

The Brahmaputra Valley provides an important setting for examining this relationship in medieval Assam. The valley served as a major route of communication and transport, and its rivers linked

settlements and political centres. Contemporary descriptions mention cultivated land, gardens, bamboo groves, inhabited routes, and roads leading towards the Ahom capital. These facilities supported the movement of envoys, traders, officials, soldiers, and supplies and therefore had a direct connection with political and diplomatic activity.ⁱⁱ Control of river routes also gave Assam strategic importance in regional politics.

The geographical setting of the valley influenced the growth of the Ahom kingdom from an early period. The Ahom state tradition describes the arrival of Sukapha in a region with extensive forest and uncultivated land and with different communities living across the landscape.ⁱⁱⁱ The Brahmaputra Valley was surrounded by hills and mountains on most sides except the west. Different hill communities interacted with the Ahom kingdom through trade, diplomacy, and warfare, while the surrounding ranges offered natural protection and affected political and military strategy.

At the height of Ahom power, the kingdom extended eastwards towards the Patkai Hills and westwards towards the Manas River, while the southern and northern limits reached towards the Meghalaya Plateau and the Himalayan foothills. The territory contained rivers, hills, forests, and fertile plains that supported agriculture, communication, trade, and military activity.^{iv} These conditions helped the kingdom preserve political independence for a long period.

The importance of geography was also visible in administration. Assam was commonly understood through the division of Uttarkol and Dakhinkol, referring to the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra. The course of the river therefore influenced administrative organization and political control.^v The river system also created distinct regions, including Majuli, the large island in the middle of the Brahmaputra.^{vi}

This paper examines the relationship between these ecological conditions and diplomatic activity. It focuses on rivers, forests and terrain, natural resources, elephants, forest clearance, settlement, and guerrilla warfare. The purpose is to show how environmental conditions affected communication, strategic calculation, military practices, territorial control, cooperation, and negotiation. The political history of medieval Assam is thus closely connected with the geographical environment of the Brahmaputra Valley.

2. Literature Review

The article draws on historical geography, Assamese chronicles, Persian narratives, travel accounts, and modern historical works. Stephen Mosley's *The Environment in World History* provides the broad environmental-history perspective used at the beginning of the study. Nityananda Gogoi's *Historical Geography of Medieval Assam* is important for understanding the geographical structure of the valley and the relationship between the river system and political organization.

Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* is used for observations on the relationship between geography, climate, and the history of Assam. His discussion of the fertile but damp Brahmaputra Valley draws attention to the historical importance of environment, even though the article notes that modern historians do not fully agree with his conclusions.

Assamese chronicles form a major part of the source base. Deodhai Asam Buranji is used for the geographical setting of early Ahom expansion, Sukapha's movement, and forest clearance and settlement. Tungkhungia Buranji supplies the account of the 1765 military expedition connected with Manipur and the ecological difficulties that contributed to its failure. The Satsari Assam Buranji is used for the significance of the Karatoya as a traditional boundary. Assam Buranji, edited by Suryya Kumar

Bhuyan, is used for information on elephants, elephant management, and the relationship between the Ahom state and communities involved in forest work.

Persian accounts are especially important for descriptions of the environment and the experience of invading armies. Shihabuddin Talesh's *Tarikh-e-Aasham* is repeatedly used for roads, forests, military movement, natural resources, elephant forests, and the difficulties faced by outside forces. Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* provides evidence on bamboo, elephants, rivers and streams, water, and methods of managing forest resources.

Jean-Baptiste Chevalier's travel account contributes a detailed description of the royal hunt in 1756 and the treatment of wild animals in the forest. H. K. Barpujari's *The Comprehensive History of Assam* is used for the geographical and military background, including river warfare, elephants, guerrilla practices, and the relationship between environmental conditions and resistance to invasion. Jahnabi Gogoi (Nath), through *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*, is cited in relation to the value of agar wood and elephants and the interest of Mughal raiders in these resources.

Taken together, the works used in the article provide the basis for studying ecology and diplomacy from several directions. Historical geography explains the regional setting; chronicles provide narratives of movement, settlement, and war; Persian and European accounts provide descriptions of the environment and its uses; and modern histories help interpret the connection between geography and political development.

3. Methodology

The study follows the historical and interpretive approach already present in the article. It examines the relationship between ecology and diplomacy by reading geographical descriptions, chronicles, historical narratives, and travel accounts in connection with records of administration and warfare. Environmental features are treated as part of historical action rather than as a fixed setting.

The evidence used in the article comes from several kinds of sources. Assamese chronicles are consulted for the movement of rulers, settlement, military activities, and administrative practices. Persian accounts are used for descriptions of the physical environment and for observations on invasions, roads, forests, elephants, rivers, and military difficulties. Travel writing adds observations about forest landscapes, wild animals, and royal practices. Modern historical works provide geographical and historical interpretation. The analysis is organised thematically. It first considers the river system and its relationship with administration, communication, military movement, and territorial boundaries. It then examines forests, hills, marshes, rainfall, and terrain as barriers and strategic resources. A third theme is ecological wealth—especially bamboo, timber, gold, agar wood, and elephants—and its connection with economic and political strength. The study next considers settlement and forest clearance as part of frontier control. Finally, it connects ecological knowledge with guerrilla warfare and resistance to stronger invading forces.

This approach stays within the evidence cited in the article. Its purpose is to trace how environmental conditions entered political decisions, military practices, territorial management, and relations with neighbouring powers.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The River System and Political Communication

Rivers were among the most important foundations of political life in medieval Assam. The Brahmaput

ra and its tributaries provided water, transport, communication, settlement space, and routes for military movement. Roads and waterways linked important centres, while the inhabited and cultivated routes described between Kaliabar and Gargaon show how communication networks supported movement through the kingdom. These facilities helped diplomatic contacts by making it possible for envoys, traders, officials, troops, and supplies to move between regions.^{vii}

Because waterways were central to movement, the Ahom state developed organised naval capacity and a separate arrangement for civil communication through rivers. Boat-making centres known as naosali produced boats for military and civilian purposes. The same riverine system that carried goods and people could therefore support both administration and rapid military response.^{viii} The location of forts along the Brahmaputra also reflected the defensive value of the river. Since outside forces commonly approached through this route, control of the riverbanks meant control over access to the kingdom.^{ix}

The Battle of Saraighat in 1671 demonstrates the importance of local geographical knowledge. The Ahom forces positioned themselves on elevated ground along the Brahmaputra, which allowed them to watch the movement of the Mughal force and organize their defence. The river itself created further difficulties for the invaders. Strong currents and changing river conditions affected the movement and coordination of large Mughal vessels, while the Ahoms used smaller and faster boats suited to local waterways.^x The example shows how the river could lessen the advantage of a larger military force.

Rivers also helped define political territory. The Karatoya was regarded as the western boundary of Kamarupa and retained importance as a traditional frontier in the historical understanding of the Ahom kingdom.^{xi} Suhungmung's order to advance to the Karatoya after defeating Turbak's forces in 1532 therefore has a geographical as well as military meaning. The river represented an established territorial limit. Rivers could consequently reduce uncertainty over boundaries, support negotiation, and provide a visible basis for territorial claims. At the same time, control of important river frontiers could become a source of political competition. The river system thus linked communication, administration, war, and diplomacy in a single geographical framework.

4.2 Forests, Hills, Climate, and Natural Barriers

The natural environment of Assam repeatedly limited the movement of invading forces. Dense forests, rivers, marshes, hills, heavy rainfall, and difficult ground made long-distance military movement slow and exhausting. The movement of Sukapha provides an early example. After crossing the Patkai region, he encountered forests so dense that land travel became difficult. He therefore relied on the Dihing River as a principal route into the Brahmaputra Valley and established temporary settlements along the way.^{xii}

The difficulties became especially serious for the Mughal armies. Talesh describes muddy ground, thick forest, cane, and sharp plants that injured soldiers and animals. Cavalry could become trapped, while infantry and archers struggled to move through the dense vegetation. The slow progress of the army reduced the effectiveness of its military strength and created additional strain on supplies and morale.^{xiii} The environment therefore changed the practical balance between an invading army and the defenders who knew the terrain.

Local inhabitants could use these conditions deliberately. When enemy forces entered Assam, people could launch attacks at night and then withdraw with the population into the hills, leaving the plains without food or signs of habitation. The invaders were forced to advance through difficult rivers and forests while facing rain, cold, floods, and poor communication. Local knowledge allowed the inhabitants to choose when and where to attack, making the natural landscape part of a broader strategy of resistance.^{xiv}

Forests also contained numerous wild animals, including elephants, buffaloes, tigers, and rhinoceroses. These animals were a danger to inhabitants and crops, but the same environment could create fear and difficulty for enemy armies. Chevalier's account of a large royal hunt in 1756 records the scale of animal life in the forest and the organised methods used to control it.^{xv} Thus the forest could be a source of resources, a threat to human life, and a natural defensive space at the same time.

The failed Lata-kata Ran or Creeper-Cutting Expedition of 1765 provides another example. The Ahom kingdom agreed to assist the exiled Manipuri king Jai Singh against the Burmese and sent a large army. The route through the Charaideo Hills brought the troops into thick forest, where they lost their way, faced shortages of food and water, and suffered disease. Resistance from the Nagas added to the difficulties, and nearly two-thirds of the soldiers and provisions were lost before the retreat.^{xvi} The episode demonstrates that diplomatic cooperation could not remove ecological limitations. Forest, terrain, disease, logistics, and local resistance directly shaped the result of a military action undertaken in support of an ally.

4.3 Ecological Resources and Economic-Diplomatic Power

The environment of Assam was also rich in resources that strengthened the economic and strategic importance of the region. Forests supplied timber, bamboo, cane, thatching grass, lac, pepper, animals, and other products. Contemporary descriptions cited in the article stress the size and quality of the forests and the abundance of valuable timber and agar wood.^{xvii} These resources supported everyday life while also increasing the value of Assam in regional politics.

Bamboo illustrates the practical use of local ecological knowledge. Mirza Nathan describes bamboo-based arrangements for controlling elephants. Bamboo piles, fire, and the loud cracking of burning bamboo were used to frighten elephants and prevent them from escaping. Other bamboo instruments, including Taka and Dank-Danka, produced signals used for communication, warning, and elephant management.^{xviii} The examples show that the state and local people converted an abundant natural material into practical administrative and military tools.

Gold from the sand of the Brahmaputra provided another economic resource. The article records the involvement of around ten to twelve thousand people in gold washing and notes that each worker supplied a quantity of gold annually to the Raja's treasury.^{xix} Local knowledge was important because the people of Assam knew the places where gold could be found. This connection between river resources, labour, and the treasury strengthened the economic base of the state and supported administration and military activity.

The unusual hydrology of Assam also affected movement. Mirza Nathan's account of the stream called Lupani describes major changes in water level during a single day.^{xx} Such conditions could make the region difficult for outsiders to navigate, while local people familiar with the changing environment could use their knowledge to their advantage. The availability of clear drinking water from particular forest trees also supported travellers moving through remote areas.^{xxi} The environment could therefore facilitate friendly travel while creating uncertainty for hostile forces.

Assam's resources could simultaneously attract foreign attention. The article notes the importance of agar wood and elephants and connects the value of these products with repeated Mughal interest and poaching.^{xxii} At the same time, the climate, forests, and marshes were poorly suited to the extensive use of camels and horses, which reduced the effectiveness of the cavalry methods on which Mughal warfare depended.^{xxiii} The natural environment therefore increased the attraction of Assam while also limiting the military advantages of outside powers. This combination strengthened the strategic importance of the

Ahom kingdom and made political and diplomatic measures more significant alongside direct military action.

4.4 Elephants, Forest Communities, and State Power

Elephants occupied a special place in the environmental and political history of medieval Assam. The climate and forests of the region favoured elephant breeding, while the same conditions were less suitable for horses. Assam consequently developed a large and well-trained elephant force, and elephants were important in both peace and war.

In warfare, elephants could charge enemy formations, create fear, disrupt cavalry and infantry, assist in attacking forts and walls, and provide elevated positions from which commanders could observe the battlefield. They could also carry heavy artillery and provide mobile protection. Their military usefulness was therefore directly tied to the ecological conditions that made Assam a major elephant-producing region.

Elephants also mattered in royal prestige and diplomacy. Possession of elephants represented wealth and authority, and elephants could be exchanged as prestigious gifts between rulers in order to support friendly relations and alliances. The resource therefore moved between environmental, economic, military, and diplomatic spheres.

The capture and training of elephants required specialized knowledge of forests and animal behaviour. The Morans were described as highly skilled in this work, and the Ahom state organised elephant management through the Hatichungi guild. This activity became closely associated with the Moran community.^{xxiv} The relationship between the state and the Morans illustrates how a resource drawn from forest ecology could produce an organised occupational role and a political relationship. The state gained military and administrative value from the elephants, while the community received recognition and an important place within the state system.

The process of elephant management also required institutional arrangements. Accounts cited in the article describe enclosures, trained female elephants used to attract wild males, skilled mahouts, and guards stationed at watch posts.^{xxv} These practices reflect a developed system for controlling and training animals taken from the forest.

The connection between ecology and administration is especially clear here. The state did not simply possess a natural resource; it organised knowledge, labour, institutions, and communities around it. The forests supplied elephants, forest communities supplied specialised skills, and the state incorporated both into its political and military structure. The resulting relationship shows how ecological resources could become a basis of state power and political cooperation.

4.5 Forest Clearance, Settlement, and Frontier Control

The Ahom state also altered the environment in order to strengthen territorial control. Newly acquired or newly cleared regions were brought into the political and agricultural system through settlement. The article connects this policy with ghar phala, the redistribution of peasant households into new villages. The aim was to increase population in frontier areas and bring more land under cultivation.^{xxvi}

Momai Tamuli Borbarua strengthened this settlement policy during a period of conflict with Mughal expansion. New villages were established in places such as Bacha and Dayang, where dense bamboo and cane forests first had to be cleared. The work continued for months, and after clearance military outposts were established in strategic locations, including near the mouth of the Kapili River. These activities show that clearing the forest was tied to military and political objectives.

Forest clearance converted difficult territory into settled agricultural space. This gave the Ahom state a stronger presence on its frontiers, created cultivated land, increased settled population, and supported the establishment of military positions. Land development thus became part of territorial security. The state used the transformation of the environment to respond to the pressure created by expanding outside powers.

The policy also reveals the importance of population as a political resource. Newly settled peasant households helped maintain administrative control and regular agricultural production. Forest land that was not yet cultivated could be incorporated into the state through labour, settlement, and organization. Political authority and environmental transformation therefore developed together.

Talesh's description of the landscape from Kaliabar to Gargaon provides evidence of the results of such change. He describes continuous houses and orchards, bamboo groves along roads, cultivated fields, gardens, fruit trees, and a settled landscape extending towards the foothills.^{xxvii} The account demonstrates that areas once marked by dense forest had been transformed into productive and inhabited territory. The resulting landscape itself became part of the material foundation of Ahom political authority.

4.6 Guerrilla Warfare and Environmental Knowledge

The ecological geography of Assam strongly influenced the form of warfare used against invading powers. Dense forests, rivers, marshes, hills, and heavy rainfall created conditions in which forces familiar with the region could avoid direct confrontation and instead rely on surprise and mobility. Assamese forces developed *daga yuddha* or guerrilla warfare, withdrawing into hills and forests and returning at favourable moments to attack from several directions.^{xxviii}

These tactics included cutting roads, interrupting communication, and attacking supply lines. Before withdrawing, Assamese forces could destroy grain stores, boats, villages, and buildings, leaving invading armies short of food and transportation. Forests and hills provided concealment for archers and fighters, while night raids and ambushes allowed sudden attacks against vulnerable troops and artillerymen.

The invasion under Mir Jumla between 1661 and 1663 demonstrates this approach. The Assamese avoided large open engagements with the stronger Mughal army and concentrated instead on surprise attacks, disruption of transport, night raids, and interference with supplies. The Brahmaputra and its tributaries allowed the Assamese to obstruct the movement of provisions between Mughal military posts.^{xxix} The river system was therefore integrated into the wider strategy of guerrilla resistance.

Environmental advantage alone, however, was not enough. The article emphasizes that successful partisan warfare depended on the combination of natural conditions with military organisation, local knowledge, and indigenous technology. The *paik* system supplied trained men who knew local routes and waterways. Small boats provided river mobility, while bows, poisoned arrows, and other locally adapted weapons supported surprise attacks. Intelligence from local inhabitants and scorched-earth methods further strengthened resistance.^{xxx}

The environment thus worked through human knowledge and institutions. Forests gave concealment, but it was local familiarity that made concealment useful. Rivers created routes and obstacles, but it was knowledge of their changing conditions that made them strategically valuable. The Ahom military system turned these ecological characteristics into practical advantages against larger imperial forces.

The repeated inability of powerful invaders to convert military superiority into lasting control also affected political relations. The costs imposed by the Assamese environment increased the prestige and

bargaining capacity of the Ahom kingdom. Ecology therefore had a diplomatic effect even when the immediate action was military: it changed the relative strength of the parties and increased the importance of negotiation, alliance, and political accommodation.

4.7 Ecology as a Foundation of Diplomacy

The evidence considered above demonstrates that interstate relations in medieval Assam operated within a geographical framework that could not be separated from politics. Rivers supported communication, administration, military movement, and territorial definition. Forests and hills created barriers to invasion while giving local forces spaces for concealment. Climate and rainfall influenced the timing, movement, and logistical cost of campaigns. Natural resources strengthened state capacity but also attracted outside attention.

The relationship between diplomacy and military geography is clear in the Ahom response to the appeal of the Manipuri king in 1765. The Ahom state acted as an ally, yet the expedition was severely limited by forest, disease, shortages, terrain, and resistance by local groups.^{xxxix} The episode shows that diplomatic agreement was translated into action through an environment that could support or frustrate policy.

Relations with the Mughals also reveal the importance of geography. The difficulties created by rivers, forests, marshes, climate, and local knowledge reduced the value of conventional military superiority. These conditions contributed to the long preservation of Ahom political independence and affected the balance between conquest and negotiation. When conquest became costly and uncertain, diplomacy gained greater significance.

Resources also entered diplomatic relations. Elephants could be offered as valuable gifts,^{xxxix} while gold, agar wood, timber, and other products contributed to economic strength. At the same time, the attraction of valuable resources brought Mughal attention and conflict. The environmental wealth of Assam was therefore both a foundation of power and a reason for competition.

Territorial understanding was similarly environmental. The Karatoya served as a traditional frontier, while the Brahmaputra organised the valley into major regions.^{xxxix} Geographical features provided rulers with visible reference points through which they understood territory and political boundaries.

The broader pattern is one of reciprocal influence. Political institutions transformed the environment through settlement, forest clearance, river administration, and resource management. Environmental conditions, in turn, limited military choices, structured communication, altered the cost of invasion, and shaped the possibilities of cooperation and negotiation. Diplomacy in medieval Assam was therefore carried out within an environment that actively influenced what rulers and armies could do.

5. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this study shows that the ecology and geography of the Brahmaputra Valley were active forces in the political and diplomatic history of medieval Assam. Rivers were central to communication, administration, territorial organisation, military movement, and defence. The Brahmaputra and its tributaries supported movement in peace and war, while river frontiers helped shape ideas of political territory. The Battle of Saraighat demonstrates how local knowledge of river conditions, combined with suitable positions and boats, could reduce the advantage of a much larger invading force.

Forests, hills, marshes, difficult terrain, and heavy rainfall repeatedly limited invading armies. The movement of Sukapha, the difficulties of Mughal forces, and the failure of the 1765 expedition towards

Manipur all show that ecological conditions could influence the outcome of military action. The environment did not act by itself. Its strategic value depended on local knowledge, military organisation, technology, and the ability of people to adapt to the landscape.

The ecological wealth of Assam also strengthened the Ahom state. Bamboo, timber, gold, agar wood, and elephants supported economic activity, administration, and military power. At the same time, valuable resources attracted outside interest and contributed to conflict. Elephants were especially important because they connected forest ecology with warfare, state administration, royal prestige, and diplomacy. Their capture and training also produced a political relationship between the state and forest communities such as the Morans

The Ahom state further changed its environment through forest clearance and settlement expansion. The establishment of villages, cultivation of cleared land, and construction of military outposts strengthened frontier control during periods of external pressure. Talesh's description of the settled landscape from Kaliabar to Gargaon demonstrates the scale of this transformation.³⁵

Guerrilla warfare offers the clearest example of the combined importance of ecology and human action. Forests, hills, rivers, marshes, and rainfall gave opportunities for concealment, mobility, surprise, and the disruption of enemy supply lines, while the paik system, local knowledge, and indigenous weapons made these opportunities usable in practice. The repeated difficulties faced by larger invading armies improved the strategic and bargaining position of the Ahom kingdom.

The central conclusion is that interstate relations in medieval Assam cannot be fully understood without considering the ecological foundations of political life. Rivers, forests, climate, terrain, and natural resources created both opportunities and constraints. They shaped communication, territorial ideas, warfare, resource competition, alliances, and the choices available to rulers. Ecology was therefore not simply the setting of diplomacy in the Brahmaputra Valley; it was one of the forces through which diplomacy, military resistance, and political independence were shaped.

Endnotes

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