

EUROPEAN SOURCES ON MIR JUMLA'S INVASION OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

European travel accounts provide valuable external perspectives on Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam (1661–63). Writers such as Fransz Jansz Van der Heiden, François Bernier, Niccolao Manucci and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier describe the Mughal campaign, its military scale, riverine warfare, and the severe geographical and climatic challenges of Assam. Van der Heiden offers a vivid eyewitness narrative of the Mughal army, naval battles on the Brahmaputra and the devastation caused by monsoon floods. Bernier and Manucci emphasise Aurangzeb's political motives, Ahom resistance, guerrilla tactics, and the decisive role of the rainy season in forcing Mughal withdrawal. Tavernier adds observations on Assam's resources and firearms, though his account contains exaggerations and factual errors. Collectively, these European sources, despite biases and inaccuracies, complement indigenous chronicles and enrich the historiography of Mir Jumla's Assam expedition.

KEYWORDS: *Mir Jumla, Assam Invasion, European Travellers, Mughal–Ahom Conflict, Monsoon Warfare, Brahmaputra.*

INTRODUCTION:

The European sources on Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam are many. From the 2nd half of the 17th century, we have many accounts of European travellers on Assam. *Vervarelyke Schip-break van 'T Ost-IndischJacht Ter Scelling* (Eng. Ver. *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the kingdom of Bengal*) of Fransz Jansz Van Der Heiden, *Travels in Mogul Empire* (A.D. 1656-1668) of Francois Bernier, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India* (1653-1708) of Nicolao Manucci and *Travels in India* of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, are the important sources on the history and culture of Medieval Assam, particularly during the Assam invasion of Mir Jumla.

Literature Review:

The invasion of Assam by Mir Jumla has attracted the attention of historians mainly through indigenous sources such as the Ahom *Buranjis* and Persian chronicles, while European travel accounts have long remained supplementary yet significant materials. Early scholars of Mughal and Assam history, including Jadunath Sarkar, relied primarily on Persian records and Assamese chronicles to reconstruct the political and military narrative of the invasion. These works established the broad framework of the campaign, its chronology, and its consequences for the Ahom kingdom.

In recent historiography, greater emphasis has been placed on European travellers' accounts to gain an external and comparative perspective. The writings of Fransz Jansz Van der Heiden, François Bernier, Niccolao Manucci and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier have been used to supplement indigenous narratives, particularly in understanding the Mughal military organisation, riverine warfare, logistical challenges, and the impact of Assam's climate and geography. Scholars have noted that Van der Heiden's account is especially valuable as an eyewitness narrative, while those of Bernier, Manucci and Tavernier are based largely on information gathered from contemporaries at Dhaka or other parts of Bengal.

At the same time, historians have critically pointed out the limitations of these European sources, highlighting exaggerations, factual inaccuracies and personal biases. Comparative studies have shown that while these writers often agree on major issues such as the causes of the invasion, the richness of Assam, and the decisive role of the monsoon, they differ in details relating to troop strength, routes of invasion and motives of Mir Jumla. Despite such shortcomings, modern scholarship recognises that when read critically and corroborated with indigenous sources, European travel literature makes a substantial contribution to the reconstruction of the history and culture of medieval Assam and the understanding of Mir Jumla's Assam expedition.

Methodology

The present study follows a historical and analytical methodology based mainly on qualitative analysis of primary European travel accounts related to Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam (1661–63). The principal sources used are the works of Fransz Jansz Van der Heiden, François Bernier, Niccolao Manucci and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who were either direct participants or near-contemporary observers of the events. These narratives are critically examined to identify their descriptions of military operations, political motives, geographical conditions and the impact of climate on the Mughal campaign.

A comparative approach has been adopted to assess similarities and differences among these European accounts, particularly in relation to troop strength, routes of invasion, Ahom resistance and reasons for Mughal withdrawal. To minimize biases and factual errors inherent in travel literature, the European sources are cross-checked with indigenous materials, especially the Ahom Buranjis and relevant Persian chronicles, as well as modern historical interpretations.

Special attention has been given to the context, background and position of each writer, distinguishing between eyewitness accounts and second-hand information collected at Dhaka or elsewhere in Bengal. This critical reading allows a balanced reconstruction of events and helps in understanding both the value and limitations of European sources in writing the history of medieval Assam.

Fransz Jansz Van Der Heiden:

Fransz Jansz Van Der Heiden(1638-81), a ship-wrecked Dutch sailor of Mir Jumla's troop in the Assam campaign, whose account of the event appears in Glanius' English rendering *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengal of Vervarelyke Schip-break van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Scelling*, is the original work of the 17th century Dutch travelogue authored by Frans Jansz Van der Heiden. He was among the first group of Europeans to advance as far as the Ahom capital or its neighbourhood and left the account of his own experiences in Assam. *Vervarelyke Schip-break van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Scelling* is a seventeenth-century Dutch travelogue authored by Frans Jansz van der Heiden.

Koch Bihar and Assam campaign of Mir Jumla began on November 1, 1661. Regarding the causes of sending Mir Jumla by Aurangzeb to the campaign of Assam, the author states, "These two great Men were jealous of one another, and being in a manner equally powerful, they mutually plied each other with kindnesses, whilst both secretly endeavoured to strengthen their parties. The year being passed over in Reciprocal dissimulations, Aurangzeb plainly perceived the Emir (Mir Jumla) was not a man to rely still. He judged then, it was better to employ him abroad than to give him time to trouble his government; and therefore proposed to the Emir, the undertaking of that great expedition of which this latter had sometimes heretofore discoursed to him."¹

The author Van der Heiden along with other shipwrecked friends were forced to undertake their voyage from Dhaka to join the Mughal army. The author states that despite the old age of Mir Jumla, he had the strength and wisdom which took himself to lead the army. The huge and stout Mughal army consisted mostly of Persian, Bengali, English, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian and Armenian soldiers on naval, cavalry, artillery and foot. Comparatively the strongest, the Mughal navy included numerous kinds of *Gourapes* or *Ghurabs* i.e., war vessels (floating batteries) in charge of the Dutch of whom the author was also a member, supplemented by *Kosses* or *Kusahsi* i.e., supply boats.² Regarding cavalry and infantry, the author got the opportunity "of an exact observation of the Army, which consisted of near three hundred thousand Horse, and five hundred thousand Foot. The General rode in the midst of the Cavalry; and before him marched several Trumpeters, and Kettle-Drummers, mounted on Elephants. He was followed by twenty of these Animals, each of them carrying two small pieces of Cannon, two Gunners, with as many chargers. After these came three or four thousand Moscovites, all extraordinarily well mounted. Several thousands of Camels, laden with Baggage, were followed by all sorts of Merchants, Artisans and Courtesans; some mounted-on Camels, others on Horses. 'Twas told us, that this great Body stood the Mogol, in every day, above five Million; the greatest part of which, were paid by the Courtesans, and Merchants, that followed the Army."³ But the figures mentioned by the author have been exaggerated. Actually the army of Mir Jumla consisted of 12,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry, powerful artillery and a huge navy of war boats numbering at least 323.⁴

As per the author, after a long march, the Mughals under Mir Jumla entered Koch Bihar and conquered it. Then, they reached Hajo. Hajo was captured and its king was taken prisoner. Though Niccolao Manucci and Francois Bernier narrate the capture of Hajo by the Mughals, but they do not mention about the king and his arrest.⁵ Other historical literature was silent about the seizure of Hajo by Mir Jumla. Mir Jumla then marched towards Chamdhara, occupying it advanced to the Ahom capital Garhgaon. Leaving behind the treasures, the king fled to the mountains which were inaccessible by the army of Mir Jumla. Gradually rainy season arrived.

Regarding the rainy season of Assam which creates havoc for strangers, the author states, "the season of rains came; during which, the whole country is overflowed, excepting the villages, which stand upon hills. This season, which lasted three months, hindered the Emir's designs, the waters keeping him from marching either backwards or forwards. Moreover, the Raja had carried away all kinds of provision, and reduced by this means the Emir into a strange extremity. This weather, and the incommodiousness of the place, having near ruined his whole army."⁶ The catastrophe of the summer rain of Assam and its consequences have also been corroborated and supplemented by other chroniclers.

Held in high esteem about the Brahmaputra, the author remarks “The River is of very unequal breadth, being in some places a League, in others a League and an half wide; so that when the Wind is high, this River abounds with Waves and Billows, no ways inferior to those of the Sea.”⁷ The author, as a soldier, finds it strange to believe that though the Assamese force has the great advantage of the force of the currents of the Brahmaputra, but “From that time their heat abated, and they began to shift their station, and were so closely plied, that they left their Vessels, and ran to shore.....We took three hundred of their Vessels”⁸ The Assamese too abandoned the fort Salagarh, which was built on a steep Rock and difficult to access.⁹

Francois Bernier:

Francois Bernier (1620-1688) was a French physician and a traveller, who became personal physician to Mughal prince Dara Shikoh and Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, subsequently placed his observations in his *Travels in Mogul Empire (A.D. 1656-1668)*. Though he makes a critical observation in his book, which throws light on the political, social and economic life of the Mughals, but he briefly describes the Assam war of Mir Jumla.

Regarding the events in Assam, Bernier states the king of Assam at that time was rich as well as powerful. Aurangzeb realised that Mir Jumla could be dangerous for the state if he could not involve him in war or gave him rest and hence Mir Jumla was offered the management of a war against the king of Assam. To become a memorable celebrity, Mir Jumla himself was thinking about this mission, which he expected that he would conquer the boundaries of China. Hence the message of Aurangzeb initiates him perfectly prepared for the task.¹⁰ Describing the proceeding, Bernier states that a powerful army of Mir Jumla was soon boarded at Dacca on the river Padma in the north-east direction. They reached a fort named Hajo and less than a fortnight Hajo was occupied. It took Mir Jumla twenty-eight days to reach Chamdhara, the strategic fort of the Ahoms, from Hajo. The Ahom king retreated to his capital city Garhgaon after his loss in the battle of Chamdhara. Because of the continuous pushing from Mir Jumla, the Ahom king did not find time to reinforce himself and therefore had to escape to the mountains. Chamdhara and Garhgaon were plundered and an infinite booty was collected from Garhgaon.¹¹

Bernier reveals that the army of Mir Jumla found very hardship due to the rainy season in Assam. Taking advantage of the situation the king of Assam cut the land around the position of Mir Jumla and their belongings so that before time rains reduced the army to a great extent with urgent suffering. Hence it was difficult for Mir Jumla either to advance or retreat. Advancement was not possible due to the mountains which are unviabable barriers. Receding to Chamdhara was also difficult not only due to water and deep mud on roads but also cutting off the dikes by the king. Hence Mir Jumla, during the whole rainy season, encamped in his camp. Though the dry weather returned, but the incessant exhaustion and long hardships led the soldiers of Mir Jumla to be pessimistic which forced Mir Jumla to cancel the idea of conquering Assam. The rations were in scarcity, the muds were still thick which greatly obstructed the movement of the army and the Ahom king was vigorous and untiring in his hunt against them. Hence Bernier remarks that the Mughals were fortunate to have Mir Jumla, otherwise it was not possible for the soldiers to return safely to Bengal under a commander of low profile. With his typical talent and by his splendid departure, the army, loaded with wealth, returned without harm.¹²

After reaching Hajo, Mir Jumla upgraded its defences and left a group of troops with the aim that in the following year he would again resume the war against the Ahom king. But after his arrival in Bengal, he along with the army suffered from dysentery, which led to his death.¹³

Niccolao Manucci:

Niccolao Manucci (1639-1717), born in Italy but devoted entire life in India in the later half of the 18th century, experienced his feelings in his works *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India (1653-1708)*, the first-hand account of the Mughal history and life. Considered as the most detailed account of the Mughal court, it is an important account of the time of the later reign of Shah Jahan and of the reign of Aurangzeb. In this work, a valuable but small glimpse of Mir Jumla's Assam expedition as well as Ahom's military administration has been traced during Manucci's travel to Bengal sometime during the period 1662-63.

Regarding the events of Mir Jumla in Assam, Manucci never came to Assam but was told by the eyewitnesses when he was in Dhaka. He states that before the departure of Aurangzeb to Kashmir, he sent the order to Mir Jumla to conquer Assam. At the initial stage there was confusion regarding the order, but Mir Jumla, after leaving behind the cause of the order, decided to conquer the new kingdom with a view to enter China. Mir Jumla and his loyal follower Dilir Khan left Dhaka with forty thousand horsemen, along with infantry and a naval force commanded by the Portuguese. Capturing Hajo from the Ahoms, Mir Jumla entered the Ahom territory in twenty-eight days. But the Assamese planned that if the Mughal fleet could destroy, then due to the advantage of the mountains and narrow paths of Assam they would easily block the supplies for the Mughal in the land. Accordingly, a powerful Assamese fleet was deployed and hence a naval battle took place where the Assamese boats were overwhelmed by the Portuguese naval force.¹⁴

Manucci states that through this victory Mir Jumla thought he seized the whole Assam. Fortunate for this victory, Mir Jumla then continued to advance toward the Ahom capital. Could not resist the Mughals, the Ahoms planned guerilla tactics of warfare like hindered the supplies, killing wandering individuals and waiting for the rainy season in which floodwater submerged the lands. But fighting bravely, Mir Jumla and his soldiers reached Garhgaon, the Ahom capital. The Ahom king fled to the mountain. Mir Jumla captured Garhgaon but was unable to capture the Ahom king from the hills. But the Ahom king continued to block all the supplies, setting fire to everything and posting soldiers so that no food from outside could find its way into the capital. He continued the hostilities till the beginning of the rainy season. All these obstacles along with the coming of the rainy season created a shortage of food and hence the soldiers of Mir Jumla were forced to eat the flesh of horses and camel. Seeing his soldiers dying, Mir Jumla was forced to leave Assam.¹⁵

Manucci opines that it was easy to enter Assam, but due to flood and obstacles created by the natives, it is equally difficult to exit from Assam and because of his skills, Mir Jumla could avert a disaster. Praising Mir Jumla, Manucci also argues that "it was not for want of courage nor of determination that he left to the Assamese their indigenous king, but because the mountains of the interior cannot be overcome, and the seasons were against him." With great difficulties, Manucci informs that Mir Jumla arrived at the fort of Hajo and strengthened the defence of Hajo. But it should be 'Pandu' of Guwahati instead of 'Hajo' as indicated by Manucci.¹⁶ Mir Jumla then went back to Dhaka but Manucci placed it wrong that Mir Jumla arrived at Dhaka. Actually, before reaching Dhaka, Mir Jumla died on board and his tomb is located on a small hillock at Mankachar, Assam, which is near Garo Hills of Meghalaya.¹⁷

Jean Baptiste Tavernier:

Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) was a French explorer and gem merchant, who undertook six voyages to the East during his lengthy as well as eventful career. Though he did not accompany Mir Jumla to Assam, but his account of Mir Jumla was that of an eye-witness and his observations on the invasion and description of Assam are highly interesting, recorded in his work *Travels in India*.

Tavernier's account of Mir Jumla, conqueror of Assam, was that of an eyewitness. Though he did not accompany the Mughal General to Assam, but some of his observations on the conquest and description of the country are highly interesting and are corroborated by the *Buranjis* and the Persian chronicles.¹⁸ Tavernier pointed out that Assam was not properly known till its invasion by Mir Jumla. He attributes the invention of gun and gunpowder to Assam from where they possibly went to Pegu and China for which it was credited to the Chinese. Mir Jumla brought back numerous iron guns. Assam produced excellent gunpowder whose grain was not long and was much more effective than the other powder, as said by Tavernier.¹⁹

But there are certain distortions in the writing of Tavernier on the history and culture of Assam. According to Tavernier “he (Mir Jumla) concluded, that when the war was finished (i.e., war of succession that led to the victory of Aurangzeb amongst his brothers), he would be no longer esteemed at Court of as highly as he had been when Commander-in-Chief of the armies of Aurangzeb, and all powerful in the Kingdom where he had a great number of supporters. In order, therefore, to retain for himself the command of the troops, he resolve to undertake the conquest of the kingdom of Assam, where he knew he would not meet with much resistance, the country having no war for 500 or 600 years, and the people being without experience in arms.”²⁰ Firstly, Bernier states that Mir Jumla was sent to Assam because “Aurangzeb justly apprehended that an ambitious soldier could not long remain in a state of repose, and that, if disengaged from foreign war, he would seek occasion to excite internal commotions.”²¹ Apparently, he was appointed viceroy of Bengal to punish the lawless zamindars of the province, especially those of Assam and Mag (Arracan).²² Secondly regarding Tavernier’s claim that the country had no war for 500 or 600 years, it is noteworthy to mention here that Assam was engaged in occasional war fares with the Turko-Afghan rulers of Bengal and continuous warfare with the Mughals since 1615. Thirdly, since Assam had been involved with various warfare with different enemies, both external and internal, so it is difficult to accept the view of Tavernier that “the people being without experience in arms.”

Tavernier wrote that accordingly, Mir Jumla left Dacca with a powerful army for the conquest of Assam. Here Tavernier’s description is haphazard as how Mir Jumla entered Assam. In this context, the text of Tavernier cannot be reconciled with the actual facts as the Mir Jumla’s route to Assam is fully given by Jadunath Sarkar. The principal cause of the return of Mir Jumla from Assam as written by Tavernier also went wrong. Instead of “rainy” he wrote “cold” season had commenced.

CONCLUSION

The European travel accounts of Fransz Jansz Van der Heiden, François Bernier, Niccolao Manucci and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier together provide an important external view of Mir Jumla’s invasion of Assam. Although written from different standpoints and with varying degrees of accuracy, these narratives help to reconstruct the course of the campaign, the strength and

organisation of the Mughal forces, and the nature of Ahom resistance. A common theme in all the accounts is the decisive role played by Assam's geography and climate, especially the monsoon floods, rivers, forests and hills, which severely restricted Mughal movement and supply lines. They also highlight the effectiveness of Ahom guerrilla tactics and scorched-earth policies. At the same time, these sources contain exaggerations, factual errors and personal biases, particularly regarding troop strength, motives and routes of invasion.

Again, out of the four writers, except Heiden who himself accompanied Mir Jumla to Assam as a gunner, the other three travellers did not cross Dhaka and took information from eye-witnessed by sitting in Dhaka or somewhere else in Bengal. Since these three writers did not visit Assam, it is obvious that some information taken by them based on the other persons, though eye-witnessed, might be wrong, which is reflected in their writings. But it is quite strange to believe that Heiden, who himself came to Assam along with Mir Jumla, given us few distortive writings as explained. Amidst the misinterpretations, the literary labour of these four writers contributed an absolute supply towards retrieving our understanding of Mir Jumla's Assam expedition and its historical significance.

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