



UNDERSTANDING TRIBES DURING MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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Abstract:

The study of Tribe is new theme of study where the historians are taking interest in the contemporary period. I have made an attempt to develop an understanding about tribes in medieval India particularly during Mughal period. My study is related to the tribal chiefs who were powerful in their respective locality and sharing the economic resources of the state and also maintained army. The Medieval rulers faced a lot of difficulties to subjugate them, because they were having a large area under their influence and large followers of their clans or kins. Although we come to know that tribes could unite and form stabilized political institutions, the chiefdoms and kingdoms. But it is fact that some of them could develop into higher political orders, while several others failed to move beyond village or lineage headman ship. In a sense this unevenness was but natural under then prevailing levels of economy of restricted exchange, and also for its social reproduction. The kings and the Mughal emperors could articulate their interests through politically structured tribal societies. Nevertheless the process of articulation remained by and large incomplete.

KEY WORDS:

Medieval Period , historians , economic resources , stabilized political .

INTRODUCTION-

Shihabuddin Talish has given quite handsome account of Assam and mentioned the different tribal communities like Miri, Majami (*Mishmis*), and the *Nagas* who lived to the hills on the north- south of the Brahmaputra River. According to him, in the southern range of hills of Assam resided the Khasi, Cachar and the Karbi people and their hills adjoined the Naga hill in the east. The southern part of Assam was stretched from Guwahati to the home of *Miri* community. The custom and tradition of *Miri* and *Mishmis* tribes were similar to the Assamese (Ahoms). But the women of these tribes were more beautiful and attractive than the Assamese women. If we believe, according to Talish, the people of Assam feared the gun very much as they were under the impression that the gun was a very dangerous thing. It made noise without moving from its place. A child coming out from the stomach of the gun killed the human being.

The majority of the hill tribes did not pay any tribute to the Ahom Raja of Assam, but they acknowledged the suzerainty of the Raja and carry out some of his orders. However, the Naga tribe did not submit to his rule and they made raids into the territory of the Raja. The Nagas had fair and radish complexion. Outwardly they were very good but very different inwardly. They were very strong and in hardiness and physical strength they were like the *Aad* tribe of (one of the tribal communities of Arab). They had bulky figure and strong physical structure. Some of the chiefs of this community employed in the

service of Nawab Mir Jumla, wore black *lungi*, ornamented with the Kori and their faces pierced with the tusk of boar. They had black and white hair falling on their neck. The main weapon of this community was *Zhopin*. The Ahom Raja was not allowed to enter to their kingdom.

The Rajas of this country were proud of their numerical followers, large areas under their sphere of influence, properties, treasure and a large army. They maintained brave soldiers and gigantic elephants. Talish mentions about the Ahom Raja Jayadhawaj Singha titled *Sakri* (Swargadeo). The Ahom Raja did not allow the foreigners to enter Assam and at the same time he did not permit his own subjects to go out of his kingdom. Before the conflict between the Ahoms and the Mughals, the Ahoms used to come near the border of Guwahati once in a year, with the permission of their Raja to carry out business. They brought products like gold, musk, aloe-wood, pepper, *sazaj* and silk clothes and bartered them for salt, sulphur, brimstone and some other Indian goods imported by the traders of Guwahati.

Talish has also mentioned about the two tribal communities in Cooch Bihar i.e. Mech and Koch. The Raja of this area belonged to Mech community. He further describes that the *zamindars* of other part of Hindustan paid respect to these Mech Rajas as they were considered the descendents of those powerful and celebrated Rajas who ruled over this region from early time.

The Kard tribe was residing in the Kard hill near the province of Nakirani. The Kard was a tribal community having all qualities of a panther. They were fond of the flesh of dog. The hill of this tribal community was attached to the Karibari range (west Garo Hills). The Karibari was the part of the protected country.

After Northeast, I am incorporating brief accounts of the tribes of other regions in India. In Chotanagpur, the villages were confederated into several *parahas* administered under the chiefs, which, in turn, joined together and formed a kingdom. It is found that at the end of the 17th century, as many as 62 kings belonged to a single Munda family, and hence, the king of that family was chosen to rule the whole of Chotanagpur as Maharaja. The Bhumiji Mundas had a hierarchical feudal state with a king at the top, followed by various orders of chiefs.

The Gonds of Madhya Pradesh had established four kingdoms called Gondwana till they were overthrown by the Marathas. Walled towns, forts, and great irrigation works still remain a witness of Gond power and civilization. So did the Bhuiyas and Binjhals. Indeed, in the later medieval period, there were formations of several tribal states, extending from the Brahmaputra valley to Satpuras and Godavari. In the north-east, the Chutiyas and Kacharis had their kingdoms sometime before 13th century. In the 16th century, there was the unique Jaintia State that stretched to the plains. The Khasi kings had established relationship with about 15 neighbouring States in the plateau.

The salient features of these states may be mentioned here. We find continuous warfare amongst the chiefs which gave military victory to some of them who established chieftaincies. The subjects however neither completely belonged to a particular tribe nor all the members of the tribe belonged to a single state. For instance, the chieftaincy of Bhils never covered all the Bhils, whereas they contained Varlis, Minas and also non-tribals in their territory.

The stability of these states depended primarily on economic prosperity, and only secondarily on the military strength. Therefore the early kingdoms disintegrated within a century or even within decades, and the later kingdoms pursued the policy of reclamation and extension of cultivation, development and adoption of new technology, and of extensive irrigation. In other words, their stability depended on the amount of surplus they could generate from agriculture. As long as that was possible, other institutions were allowed to persist with a little or no modification. Matrilineage was no obstacle to the Khasi kingdoms; and shifting cultivation and communal control of land did not hamper state formation among the Kachari and the Ahom. The communal labour was profitably mobilized to build massive embankments and consequent extension of wet land cultivation. But these illustrated kingdoms had also participated transit trade and built up artisan and cottage industry. For instance, Khasis had cotton and silk textiles and agricultural surplus with which they traded with the neighbouring hills and plains. In contrast, the kingdoms in peninsular India were, more or less, totally dependent on agriculture. Hence private ownership was very much common to their stability.

Between the 15th and 17th centuries in particular, in order to centralise their powers, several of the kings married among the Rajputs. The Brahmins accorded them Kshatriya status. In fact some of the Rajputs like Candella, Rathors, Bundelas and others were certainly aboriginal in origin. They welcomed the Brahmins and officiating castes to serve them and to reinforce their claim to Kshatriya status. The courts of *Gondwana*, *Nagbansi*, Jaintia, *Chero*, and Tripuri had quite a few Brahmins and others. They were granted proprietary rights over large areas of land.

In early Mughal period, there was a shortage of labour for agriculture throughout the country. Peasants who felt that the overlord's exactions exceeded customary rights could and did desert *en masse* and move on to a frontier area, where their services were welcomed. Thus there was a mixture of cajolery,

economic inducements as well as terror to keep the tillers in the land and at work. Under such circumstances, it was not land, but labour, skill and technology which were of primary significance for the economy and society.

Along with these chieftaincies, there were numerous small tribal chiefdoms, spread all over the country. Several of these relied heavily on shifting cultivation. The chiefs either received a small tribute from the village or lineage headmen, in return for 'protection', or took a share in the produce. In either case, it does not appear to have constituted a serious burden for the producers. The aristocratic minority interfered little in the conditions of productions and often exploited less their own people than the neighbouring tribes. There was of course extra-economic coercion, but the obligations were so diffused that it could make regulated reproduction, without ever being challenged. Simultaneously, the conquest of weaker tribes, clans or villages yielded not only wealth but also slaves for the production process. Cutting across tribal boundaries, slavery was, in one or other form, almost universal in most of the chiefdoms. The chiefs also derived substantial wealth from the transit trade through their territory.

Most tribes produced at least one of the crops having a commercial value like turmeric, ginger, cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, jute, castor seeds etc. The Kandha, for instance, produced turmeric in large quantities, and also pulses of a special variety which prized by their neighbours, tribes and non tribes alike. Some of the tribes, especially those living in international boundaries, acted as "bridge" role between the *Abor* tribes of Arunachal and the Ahom kings; the Kuki tribes played a "buffer" role for the dominant Meitei of Manipur in relation to the militant Naga tribes in the north. Some participated in long distance trade. The Apa Tanis, for instance, who after migrating from Tibetan highlands developed terraced rice fields and liberally used slave labour, had both local and long distance trade. Most chieftains had their economic exchanges; however they broadly preserved their tradition and cultural integrity.

Even when the non-tribal like the *Badaga* migrated to Nilgiris or Panas to Kandhaland to save them from feudal oppression, there was no perceptible change in their systems. The immigrants accepted a socially inferior position in the prevailing set up. Also the few attempts of the Hindu kings to settle non-tribals in the tribal regions so as to facilitate or open strategic routes had little immediate effect on the chiefdoms. The immigrants to Kandhaland, for example, notwithstanding their claim of superiority in terms of religion and language, "were fully committed in Khond ritual of human sacrifice. Even today, many rites in Oriya village (s) are in essence Khond rites". In short, unlike in the kingdoms, it was very difficult for the Hindu culture and society to penetrate into the chiefdoms. And with regard to the smaller units of hunters and gatherers, external articulation was almost impossible.

Then we find another aspect related to external forces as the Mughals penetrated into the different tribal communities like the *Cheros* of Palamau and the *Ngbansi* of Kokhra. These chieftaincies were having their sphere of influence over a large area during the 15th and the 16th century in south Bihar.

The Kokhra chieftaincy of Chotanagpur is also one of the chieftaincies of Munda tribe and they were adopted into Nagbansi tribe by their head Madra Munda. Phani Mukut Rai was the first chief of the Kokhra Raj. He is said to have ruled over Bathua, Hazen, Kherswan, Badin, Ramgarh, Changuriah, Gola Palani, Tori to Mankeri and Burmay. We hardly get any reference of Kokhras during the period of the sultans of Delhi. During the Afghan rule also Kokhras are not referred in any of the contemporary Persian chronicles. Sher Shah Suri who had close relations with many of the local chiefs of Bihar also seems to have no contact with the Kokhra's chiefs. Apparently the main reason of their complete isolation from the authorities who ruled over Bihar was the remoteness of their principality. None of the ruling dynasties have reached to those areas.

During Akbar period, Shahbaz Khan, the Mughal commander defeated Madhukar Rai, the Kokhra chief and conquered the chieftaincy in 1585. Madhukar Rai agreed to pay *malguzari* (land revenue). In 1590-91 the Raja Madhukar Rai was asked to serve along with his retainers in the imperial army. Madhukar Rai played very important role in one of the expeditions against the Afghans. Bairisal succeeded to the throne after the death of Madhukar Rai in 1599. Bairisal visited Delhi and accompanied Emperor Akbar in many of his expeditions. The emperor was pleased with his heroic deeds and rewarded him with a dress of honour and other valuable gifts. According to *Baharistan i-Ghaybi*, it appears that the campaign was launched against Bairisal he failed to fulfil the demand of the payment of a diamond weighing thirty *misqals in peshkash*. Sometimes in 1614 Bairisal died after a rule of fourteen years. He was succeeded by Durjan Sal who also continued to defy imperial authority and had not paid the arrears of *peshkash*. Ibrahim Khan the governor of Bihar invaded Kokhra to recover arrears of tribute. As it was a surprise attack, Durjan Sal was not able to make preparations to defend himself. He was not only defeated completely but also taken prisoner by the imperial army and his chieftaincy was annexed in the empire (1615). All the diamonds found at Kokhra were sent to the Mughal Court. Raja Durjan Sal was taken to Delhi and then to Gawalior fort where he remained imprisoned for several years. Sometimes afterwards Raja Durjan Sal was freed. Durjan Sal returned to Kokhra but he struggled to recapture his chieftaincy as one of his relatives had

captured the chieftaincy during his absence. Afterwards the *Nagbanshi* rulers maintained cordial relations with the Mughals. But it is really surprising that after Durjan Sal we practically get no reference of any other *Kokhra* chief in any of the contemporary or later sources. In the whole period of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb *Kokhras* are not referred.

However in a local source there is a reference of a *Kokhra* chief named Raja Raghunath ruling in 1665-66. His name also figures in a temple inscription at Chutia as a 50th descendant from Raja Phani Mukut.

The *Cheros* chiefs of Palamau appear to have been descendants of Raja Salabahim of Chainpur. It is believed that a *Chero* chief of Shahabad, Bhagwant Rai took service under the Raksel Rajput chief, Man Singh of Palamau, and after murdering him founded his own kingdom in around 1572. In the contemporary Persian historical works, Anant *Chero* is referred during 1590-91, when Raja Man Singh the governor of Bihar launched an attack against refractory chiefs of Bihar. Man Singh attacked Anant *Chero* of Palamau. Anant *Chero* made a desperate attempt to check the advance of Raja Man Singh by blocking his path, but he miserably failed to do so. However the *Cheros* offered strong resistance to the invading army but they were outnumbered; a large number of them were killed and many of them were taken prisoners. Raja Man Singh captured valuable booty including fifty four elephants which were dispatched to the imperial court and apparently Palamau was brought under Mughal administration. However from *Akbarnama* and other contemporary accounts it is not very clear as to what sort of understanding was reached between the Mughals and Anant *Chero*. Generally in the terms of understanding reached between a chieftain and the Mughal imperial authority, besides accepting overlordship of the imperial authority, the chieftains also used to agree to pay either *Peshkash* or paid *malguzari* or offer military service. In the case of the *Cheros* we do not get any reference to indicate that Anant *Chero* formally accepted any of these conditions. However, the *Cheros* did not create any problem against Akbar till his death. But soon after his death Anant *Chero* drove out the imperial troops from Palamau and declared his independence.

In 1607 Afzal Khan the governor of Bihar and Iradat Khan were ordered to lead an expedition against the rebels but, Afzal Khan suffered from an incurable disease and died within two weeks of the launching of the offensive. The campaign therefore was given up. But soon afterwards the Mughal officers launched repeated attacks on the *Cheros* and inflicted heavy losses on them. The situation became so bad that the *Chero* chief shifted his capital deep into his territory to protect them.

Then we find a struggle between the *Cheros* and the *Ujjainias* for almost four years (1607-1611). It was a struggle of the *Cheros* to regain their lost position as they had been expelled from Bhojpur region by the *Ujjainias*. Ultimately the outcome of the battle, *Ujjainias* under Raja Narayan Mal with the help of the Mughals defeated the *Cheros* and their attempt to recapture Bhojpur failed. Surprisingly we don't find any reference of Anant *Chero* in this war with *Ujjainias*. Anant *Chero* died in 1619 and was succeeded by his son Bhupat Rai who also died within a year.

Raja Bhupat Rai was succeeded by Medini Rai (1620-34), the greatest *Chero* ruler whose period of reign had been described as the age of the peace and prosperity. After consolidating his position Medini Rai started making efforts to expand his chieftaincy. He invaded *Kokhra* in Chotanagpur region, defeated Durjan Sal its chief and ransacked his capital. He also extended his sway over south Gaya and set up posts at Kothi (Pargana Sherghat in Gaya), Kunda (Chatra subdivision of Hazaribagh), and Deogan (Palamau). Medina Rai also conquered some of the Rajas of smaller kingdoms who paid him tributes. These kingdoms were Belounja Siris, Jupla, Kutumba and Sherghati in Gaya, Kunda Karnapura and Ramgarh in Hazaribagh and portion of Surguja.

Medina Rai is considered one of the greatest rulers of *Cheros*. He founded villages, constructed irrigation works, encouraged reclamation of lands and settled tribals like the *Paharias*. Medina Rai also distributed lands to the landless people. In a popular folklore it has been mentioned that in his time, every household was provided with bread and butter (*Raja Medina ghar ghar baje bathania*). The most remarkable building constructed by him was a fort built on a hill overlooking the river Auranga. It was more elegantly constructed than the old fort and was essentially a military fort. The structure was completed according to a bilingual inscription (in Persian and Devnagiri) which addressed Medini Rai as 'Maharaja' and begins with a salutation to both Allah the great and Ramchandrajai in February 1634. Medina Rai died towards the end of 1634. He was succeeded by his son Raja Pratap Rai (Singh).

The next reference of Mughal invasion on *Cheros* took place during 1641-43 which has been described in details in *Badshahnama*.

The Mughals had promoted their interests through the remaining chiefs. They protected the interest of the local chiefs even at the cost of the royal revenue. Gondwana, Deogarh, Kherla, and *Nagbansi* dynasties were given independent ruling status. Though they paid a tribute, they were only loosely politically integrated with the centralized paramount politics. Between the 16th to 18th centuries, within the Mughal dynasty, the local chieftains enjoyed substantial autonomy and even controlled their own armies,

while they had also their own taxation and judicial systems. In the Bhil region, the Mughals tried to ensure the loyalty of the chiefs and others by granting land rights. They recruited Bhils for their armies, and moderately succeeded in installing minor Rajput lineages over Bhil territory. They too encouraged reclamation of waste and forest lands with offers of incentives to both tribals and non tribals. Thus the Bhils remained law abiding and hard working peasants under the Mughals for which Abul Fazl has admired in *Ain-i Akbari*.

The Marathas rulers, on the contrary, derecognized tribal chiefs and kings whenever possible and thereby had conflicts with the tribals. For instance, O' Malley writes, in 1804, a Maratha governor killed some 7,000 Bhills and another in 1806 "boasted that he put 15,000 to death in 15 months". In a counter reaction the Bhils fought back with similar atrocities, and pillage the low land villages, killed their inhabitants, lifted their castles, and as a consequence, cultivation near the Bhil habitat was abandoned, roads became impassable and security could only be had by paying blackmails. A more or less similar picture prevailed in Gondwana and other places.

1. *Shihabuddin Talish, Fat-e Ibriya or Tarikh-i-Assam, (Persian version), p. 56. This is the Persian chronicle which gives the details account of Assam during the second half of the seventeen century. Mir Jumla invaded Assam in 1663 and conquered it. Talesh accompanied the Mughals forces; therefore he has recorded the contemporary struggle between the Mughals and the Ahom forces. He also describes about the geography, climate, society, tribes, fauna and flora, diseases and the various other aspects of Assam.*

2. *Ibid. pp. 62-63.*

3. *Ibid. p.59.*

4. *Ibid. pp. 76-77*

5. *Ibid. p. 77*

6. "The Sarki is a Hindi word, which means sky (heaven). There is corrupt and mystified belief in this regard that one of the forefathers of this Raja was the sovereign ruler of the angels. He descended from the sky by a golden ladder and got engaged in organizing important affairs of this country. As he found this land so beautiful and prosperous that he declined to return to his regional abode. In short, this idiotic and hopeless Raja surpassed his forefathers in pride, hypocrisy and influence. For a small mistake committed by the people, he renders the community helpless. And a petty fault he begins a series of cruelty on them. As a result his wife did not give birth to a male baby. He considered himself very unfortunate for not having any successor in the form of a son like his forefathers. He became distinctively notorious being unable to produce a son. Perhaps he has forgotten the proverb, "this kingdom after my death belongs to anyone who will capture it by sword". Though he a follower of Hinduism yet he does not bow down before any idol. He considered himself as the greatest manifestation of the Divine Creator". (*Fat-e Ibriya, p. 66.*)

7. *Ibid. pp. 63-64*

8. *S.C. Roy, "The Effects on the Aborigines of Chotanagpur of the Contact with Western Civilization", Man in India, 1982, 62(1): 65-80.*

9. *Sinha, Surajit. 1962. "State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India", Man in India. 42: 35-80.*

10. *O' Malley, L.S.S., India's Social Heritage. New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1976. p. 80.*

11. *Suresh K. Singh, "Transformation of Tribal Society: Integration vs. Assimilation", Economic and Political Weekly, 1982, 17(33): 1318-1325; and 17(34): 1376-1384.*

12. *Percival Spear, A History of India, 1977, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd. p. 17*

13. *H.C.L. Merillat, Land and the Constitution of India, 1970, Bombay, N.M. Tripathy Pvt. Ltd, pp. 21-22.*

14. *Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707, London, Oxford University Press, 1963, pp-115-118.*

15. *Jaganath Pathy, "Political Economy of Kandhaland", Man in India, 1976, 56(1): 1-36.*

16. *B.K. Roy Burman, "Some Dimensions of Transformation Tribal Society in India", Journal of Social Research, II(1), 1969, pp.29-94*

17. *C. Von. Furer. Haimendorf, A Himalayan Tribe: From Cattle to Cash, Delhi, 1980, Vikas.*

18. *Paul Hockings, Ancient Hindu Refugees: Badaga Social History, New Delhi, Vikas, 1980.*

19. *Jaganath Pathy, "Political Economy of Kandhaland", Man in India, 1976, 56(1): 1-36.*

20. *F.G. Bailey, "An Oriya Hill Village: II", in M.N. Srinivas (ed.), India's Villages. Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1969, p. 132.*

21. *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers, Ranchi, 1917, Patna, pp. 24-25.*

22. *In his fifth Report, Grant writes that in 1781 Chotanagpur Raj was an elevated region which formed the part of South Bihar containing nearly 18,000 square miles (Firminger's Fifth Report, II, p. 433).*

23. Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama III*, pp. 479-80.
24. *Akbarnama III*, p. 611.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Raja Bairisal showed his bravery by breaking the chain of an elephant.
27. Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i- Ghaybi*, tr. M.I. Bohra, Guwahati, pp. 257-58
28. H. Blochmann, “ Notes from Muhammadan Historians on Chuti Nagpur, Pachet and Palamau”, *JASB*, 1871, p. 115
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, tr. M.I. Borah, Guwahati, vol. I, p. 419.
31. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, vol. II, pt. I, p. 282.
32. H. Blochmann, *op.cit.* p. 117.
33. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Accounts of Bengal*, 20 vols. London, 1876, pp. 455-56.
34. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, *op.cit.*, p. 269
35. *Akbarnama III*, p. 576.
36. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, *op. cit.* p. 268.
37. Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i- Ghaybi*, vol. I, tr. M.I. Borah, Guwahati, 1936, p. 12.
38. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-69.
39. *Tawarikh-i-Ujjainia*, II, pp. 28-33.
40. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, *op.cit.* p. 270.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
43. *The Comprehensive History of Bihar*, *op. cit.* p. 271. He has been called by Medieval Historians son of Balbhadra which was one of titles of Medini Rai.
44. *Badshahnama II*, *op.*
45. O’Malley, L.S.S. 1976. *India’s Social Heritage*. New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, p.79.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.



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