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Emergence of feudatory states in coastal Orissa: Its ritual linkage with the Sri Jagannath Temple in Puri

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Abstract

Emergence of the feudatory states during seventeenth and eighteenth century is one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of Orissa. Consolidation of their autonomous states and contestation of supremacy of Gajapati kingship have remained the dominant political manoeuvres throughout the period under review. Nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of Garhjat states into feudatory states, because of Subsidiary Alliance adopted by the British. Located on the north-eastern coastline of the Bay of Bengal, Orissa occupies a premier position. Along with its fertile coastal region and the adjoining semi-circular segments of the forest, Orissa constitutes the region which was geographically exceptional and vibrant in political well as in cultural sphere. Since the early medieval period, the emergence of regional kingdoms along with their own distinct culture has been witnessed as a major key feature in the Indian history which was also followed by regional politics. The eighteenth century India witnessed the emergence of the feudatory states which were later converted into princely states and Orissa was also no exception to it. Originally known as Garhjat (fort born) mahals, these regions also came to be known as Zamindaris during the Mughal period. It was under the British, these were termed as Tributary Mahals, Feudatory states and finally as princely states/Native states. The work analyzes the growth and development of these states and their ritual connection with the Sri Jagannath temple in Puri.

Keywords: Feudatory States, garjat, tributary mahal, social setting, autonomous states

Introduction

The rise and growth of the feudatory states of Orissa and their contribution in political and religious sphere has been a subject of debate and discussion among the scholars of history. Though diversity has been clearly noticed in the social setting, a dynamic interaction also existed between divergent ethnic groups where the reflexion in the crystallization of 'Jagannath Cult' has been clearly observed in the cultural synthesis of Brahmanism and tribal heritage ^[1]. The history of the Feudatory states of Orissa can be traced back to the early part of the medieval period when a large number of Mandala or Samanta states surrounded the coastal regions of Orissa ^[2]. Among them the most prominent were Bhanjas of Khijingas, Khinjali Mandala and Sulkies of Kodalaka Mandala states situated in the present districts of Mayurbhanj, Baud and Dhenkanal. Though their political status was identified with strong autonomous power, they were different in the religious sphere as they were devoted to the promotion of powerful tribal goddesses. Thakuranis were the direct connection between the Garhjat Rajas and their respective tribes. The promotion of these powerful goddesses assured the Rajas the support of the tribe as well as the safety and the security of their states. The best examples were goddess Stambheswari of the Bhanjas and Sulkis in Sonapur. The Raja Tustikara, a great devotee of the goddess Stambeswari (Lady of the Wooden pillar) was well-known as Stambeswari-pada-bhakta, Devi Bhattarika in Baramba-the Great Mother (badaamba), Charchika at Banki, Hingula at Talcher, Samlai at Sambalpur and Devi Maninageswari of Ranpur state ^[3]. The concept of Astamatrika (Eight mothers) was closely related to the emergence of these goddesses. Among them the goddess Maninageswari was considered as the oldest one as the Raja Lokavighraha worshipped Maninageswari (Lady of the Jewel Serpent) in the appearance of a plain round shaped stone (Chata pathara) at the peak of the Manigaga hill adjacent to Ranpur since mid-first century ^[4]. It should be noted that these thakuranis (goddesses) were generally worshipped on a piece of stone with no definite shape and were decorated with silver eyes and a small sadhi (saree). Surprisingly, these goddesses were discovered by their founders under supernatural circumstances far from their capitals and were recognized as their 'ista' devta (state deity). Usually, they were

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worshipped by low caste priests or tribal priests commonly called as *mali* or gardener in their original location but as they were considered as 'Chalanti pratima' (mobile images), their bronze idols were kept in the palaces of the feudatory chiefs in the shape of Durga- Mahisasuramardini and their worship was performed by the Rajguru (royal priest). In case of Baramba, during the annual festival of Durga puja, which was the most significant royal festival, the mobile images were shifted to their original place accompanied by the Raja and the Rajguru to be offered with special offering. There were also powerful local goddesses residing on the border of these states which were authorised to be a part of certain royal celebration, as during Durga puja these goddesses were brought to the royal palace where they were well treated and returned to their original place with presents. The best instances are Khila Munda of Ranpur^[5] and Mahakali in Baramba. The emergence of goddess Tarini situated in the wild region of Ghatagaon in the state of Keonjhar is another example which later on was developed into a pilgrim centre as well as a local market.

The feudatory states of Orissa which were commonly known as the Garjat states played a vital role in the reconstruction of the history of Orissa since the ancient period. Geographically and strategically situated on the borders of Orissa and connected with each other, the feudatory states proved to a grand protective ring for the safety and security of Orissa. These states were bounded by Jashpur (Central Provinces), the districts of Ranchi, Singhbhum and Midnapur in the north; the districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore in the east; the districts of Ganjam and Vizagpatnam in the Madras Presidency and Angul in the south and the districts of Raipur and Raigarh (Central Province) and the district of Sambhalpur in the Bengal Presidency and Vizagpatnam in the Madras Presidency. These tributary states lie between 22 34' and 19 2' N., and 82 32' and 87 11' E^[6]. The total area of Orissa in the nineteenth century was 23907 square miles out of which 16184 square miles belonged to the feudatory states. While the state of Mayurbhanj comprised a landscape of highest 4,243 square miles, the state of Tigiria contained only 46 square miles.⁷The feudatory states in coastal Orissa comprised of Athagada (1250 square miles), Banki (750sqm), Daspalla (568sqm), Kanika 439sqm), Khandpara (244sqm), Kujang (370sqm), Narsinghpur (199 sqm), Nayagarh (588 sqm), Nilagiri (278 sqm), Ranpur (203 sqm) and Tigiria 46 sqm^[8].

These states were mainly comprising of the wild and isolated forest regions along with hilly tracts were regarded as the abode of a large number of primitive tribes. These tribal chiefs were styled as Raja and ruled their localities according to their own will. Being segregated from the main-stream of the culture and civilization of the coastal regions of Orissa due to inaccessibility of these primitive regions, their socio-economic life was quite different from the other places of Orissa. The society of these regions was full of several rituals with different superficial ideas. Despite this, these states occupied a premier position in the history as well as in the geography of Orissa.

Under the Imperial Gangas, a number of feudatory states were noticed in Orissa. Narrating about the commanding role of the Gangas over the tributary chiefs, Herman Kulke opines, "the Gangas spread over their power on the various kingdoms and principalities which had peopled the political map of Orissa as the Imperial Gangas overspread their

sovereign authority on the various small kingdoms as well as some native territories and with the passage of time, the areas became populated"^[9].

An organised process started when the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri significantly became the centre of royal authority from the period of the Gangas. With the passage of time the temple became a political as well as great religious centre in the eastern coast of India. From the period of the Gangas, the Raja had been closely connected to the temple especially since the Ganga king Anangabhima Deva who regarded his kingdom as the empire of Jagaannath (Jagannath Samarjya) and proclaimed himself as the 'rauta' (deputy) of the Lord Jagannath in the thirteenth century^[10]. This link was more reinforced by the Gajapati rulers of Khurda especially from the time of Gajapati Purushottam Deva who was a great devotee of the Lord Jagannath and the tradition of Chhera Panhara (ritual sweeping) of the rathas (cars) established by him became the most significant ritual of the Rath Yatra (Car Festival) till date. He was regarded as the first servant of the Sri Jagannath designated as the Adya Sevak (the first servant). He was also the beneficiary of the first bhog or Prasad in any ceremonial functions related to the temple. The Bhoi rulers of Khurda had also the primary intention to maintain a supreme position among the Garjat Rajas on the basis of their connection related to the temple.

It is evident from "Gangavamsanucharitam" composed by Vasudeva Rath that Kapilendra Deva (1435-1468) usurped the throne and declared himself as the next ruler of Orissa with the assistance given by feudatory chiefs when the last king Bhanu Deva IV was far from the capital^[11]. After his accession to the throne, a number of feudatory states such as Ranpur, Kujang, Kanika, Dompura and Khalikot raised their voice against his authority but were duly brought under submission as they were strictly warned that if anyone of them tried to engage themselves against the central authority, they were to be deported from the kingdom and all of his property would be confiscated^[12]. These states got automatically connected with the Gajapati Raja and the Jagannath temple politically as well as culturally. It has also been noticed that these feudatory chiefs, with the passage of time were in the service of the Gajapati rulers and provided military assistance for the suppression of the enemies.

The spread of the Jagannath cult in Garhjat states and exclusively the construction of a number of Jagannath temples were the direct outcome of the disintegration of the central authority and the independence achieved by the subordinate Rajas in the Garhjat states who started the construction of Jagannath temple in their new capitals. Under the suzerainty of the Ganga and Suryavamshi rulers, the cult had developed into a symbol of Hindu sovereignty and monarchical dominance in Orissa. Thus, the construction of a Jagannath temple and the royal palace in the central position of the capital of the feudatory states has been accepted as an indicative declaration of independence from the central authority. Most of the surviving Jagannath temples located in the capitals of these Garhjat states were constructed during the British period in the nineteenth century. Those states were Daspalla, Khandpara, Baramba, Tigiria and Athagarh.

A chain of network which connected the Gajapati with the feudatory states was based not only on the military ground but also in the economic and ritual purposes. It was a clear-cut combination of all though it is really difficult to

distinguish and define the inter-connection. It is evident from the Ranapur Rajavamshavali that Jagannath Patnaik of Ranapur assisted the Maharaja of Puri against the Nawab. As a consequence, the Maharaja of Puri instructed the temple official concerned to honour the Raja Narendra Mahapatra of Ranapur with a gift with a white umbrella and bugle ^[13]. This traditional gift granted to Ranapur symbolised both the support and obligation to the Gajapati and also the commencement of his status as an independent ruler. It should be noted that a large number of special benefits were granted to the Rajas of Ranapur in the temple during their annual pilgrimage which were bestowed by the Gajapati as a symbol of service.

The socio-economic and revenue structure of the feudatory states were activated within the domain of the temple as these connections were sanctioned through the channel of the Gajapati Rajas. The 'Chhamu Chitau' or the royal letters declared by the Gajapati were primarily issued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which illustrated the goods as well as services related to ritual practices. According to Herman Kulke, it was the effort of Virakeshari Deva to organise material resources as well as to establish his supremacy over the Garjat Rajas which he executed through the temple ^[14]. In the year 1741, a letter was issued by the Gajapati Virakesari Deva to the temple Parichha (Rajaguru) regarding the concession of the Ranapur Rajas on the 22nd day of the month of Mesa in the seventh anka (year) of the king, "You should give sadhi (Saree) and Mahaprasad from the temple to the king Narendra of Ranapur in the traditional manner for supplying ropes (simuli)" ^[15]. In another letter issued by the same Gajapati in 1750 a request was made to the Raja of Dhenkanal to provide iron for the construction of Rathas for the Car Festival and in return also to confer the usual traditional honour of sadhi (saree) and chandan (sandal) ^[16]. The Raja of Daspalla was given the primacy for contributing wood for the annual Rath Yatra while iron and ropes were supplied by the feudatory Rajas of Talcher and Ranapur ^[17]. A special privilege was granted by the Gajapati Virakesari in the twelfth anka (year) and in the fourteenth of Mithuna to the Raja of Banki which permitted darshan (visit Lord Jagannath) at night. He was also appointed to the post of Parichha, the highest temple official and was permitted to serve 'chamara seba' or fanning to the Lord with a silk fan connected with a golden hand as a symbol of honour. It was instructed in the letter that the Mahaprasad should be provided to him in the similar manner as the Parichhas of the temple ^[18]. It is evident from a manuscript belonging to the previous Rajaguru (Royal priest) of Keonjhar that the Raja of Keonjhar engaged the Bhuiyans and the Juangs (the semi tribal landed groups of his territory) in the service of Lord Jagannath under the instruction of the Raja of Khurda ^[19]. The state of Keonjhar had its own Jagannath temple where the Car festival (Rath Yatra) was annually celebrated and it was the responsibility of the Bhuiyans and the Juangs to arrange ropes to be used in the pulling the rathas (cars). On the very day they appeared with the holy ropes shouting 'Hari Gola' and those ropes were used to tie the chariots wheels. For this act of service, they were rewarded with a sadhi (Saree) and an honorarium which were gifted by the temple ^[20]. Paluka, a land tax was paid by them in kind on the rent free lands granted to them earlier as the basis of their status. The re-distribution of the ritual service among the feudatory chiefs was indirectly connected with the

special status inherited from their contribution in the ceremonial structure which was publicly confirmed in the grand annual festival. Secondly, their commitment to pay the tax re-affirmed their dignity and social status and helped them to retain distinctive position in the service of Lord Jagannath. The tax was paid in kind of oil seeds which being treated as food (the prime source of reciprocity with the deities) also symbolized its ritual significance. The temple lands prominently designated as "amrit manohi" constantly supplied the aromatic products in the service of the Lord ^[21].

During the reign of the Marathas, Orissa was divided into two political divisions- the Mughalbandi and the Garjhat. The Garhjats were ruled by twenty-four chieftains. These tributary states commonly known as the Garhjats and were twenty-four in number such as Khurda, Kanika with Kirwa and Koel Dip, Nikhuria, Dashpalla with Mohanpur, Khandapara, Narsinghpur, Dhenkanal, Ranapur, Bunapur, Talcher, Baramba, Mayurbhanj, Nilagiri, Anugul, Hindol, Athagarh, Marichpur, Harishpur, Bishenpur, Kujang and Patia ^[22]. During the rule of the Marathas, the Garjat chiefs administered their own territories under their jurisdiction, managed their own forces and paid to the Maratha Government either in cash or in kind ^[23]. Though the tributary chiefs enjoyed their autonomy in the internal affairs of their respective territories, the Maratha Government interfered in it if necessary.

In order to enhance their own miserable position and to secure assistance and obligation of the other feudatory chieftains, the Raja of Khurda granted specific ritual benefit associated with the darshan (visit) of the Sri Jagannath temple in Puri to the feudatory Rajas. About 160 'Chhamu chitau' or royal letters drafted by the Deula Karanas (temple scribes) of the Jagannath temple in Puri have been collected from the Researches of German Orissa Research Project in 1971. These royal letters carrying messages of ritual services were addressed to the feudatory chiefs by the Raja of Khurda. Most of these were dispatched to 32 Rajas, princes and zamindars of Orissa in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Those were: Ranapur (13 letters), Athagarh (12), Khandpara (10), Dhenkanal (10), Tigiria (9), Nayagarh (6), Baramba (5), Banpur, Khalikote, Sambalpur, Tekkari and Sukinda (each 4), Jeypore, Parlakhemundi and Vijayanagar (each 3), Kanika, Mahuri, Narsinghpur and Patia (each 2) and Angul, Badakhemundi, Banki, Khemundi, Baudh, Kujang, Madhupur, Mayurbhanj, Parikud and Sonapur (each 1) ^[24].

On the eve of the occupation of Orissa in 1803, the British found 30 chiefs of the hilly regions of Orissa. Due to a rebellion against the Maratha Government, Khurda was confiscated and was annexed to the Mughalbandi. Consequently, the remaining 29 Garjhat territories came to be known as the 'Tributary Mahals' ^[25]. The tributary states in the coastal Orissa were Athagarh, Banki, Baramba, Narsinghpur, Nilagiri, Nayagarh, Khandpara, Tigiria, Ranapur, Khandpara and Daspalla.

Conclusion

The Sixteenth and Seventeenth century Orissa witnessed the rise of a number of feudatory states and their evolution and development was one of the fascinating chapters in the history of Orissa. The political authority of the Raja of Khurda was indirectly connected with the ritual obligation of the Feudatory Rajas who were to be engaged in the

service of Lord Jagannath. A chain of network which linked the Gajapati with these states was not only based on the military ground but also in the economic and ritual motive. Though it was really difficult to define the exact connection, but it was a clear-cut combination of political authority, economic coordination and ritual arrangement. In order to gain the support and obligation, the Raja of Khurda granted special ritual benefits associated with darshan of the Lord Jagannath along with the ritual duties to the Rajas of the feudatory states related to the temple.

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