

The Political Force in the Socio-Cultural Upheaval of the Bundela Rajputs in Medieval India

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ABSTRACT

Beginning from a humble position the Bundelas successfully established a large independent kingdom in Central India. They in due course of time emerged as a powerful political factor whose strength was fully recognized by the mighty Mughals and the regional powers as well. Simultaneously they also succeeded in forming a separate identity called Bundela community and Bundelkhand as a region having its own socio-cultural peculiarities. The Bundelas belonged to the Gaharwal tribe of Rajputs.¹ They hailed from a small village called Gaura, near Vindhachal. One of their ancestors joined the service of Raja of Panna, an independent principality situated between Banda and Jabalpur. The Raja died without leaving any heir to succeed him. The Gaharwal adventure took the advantage of the opportunity and occupied the fort of the deceased Raja.² Sohan Pal, one of the successors of Pancham, the founder of Bundela dynasty, in course of the territorial expansion, defeated the reigning Khangar Raja Hurmat Singh with the support of other feudatories of the region like Panwars and Dhanderas. He finally occupied the fort of Garhkurar, the seat of Khangars power in 1228.³

Key Words : Political Force, Kachwahas, Bundelas, Suryavanshi, Paterfamilias, Braj

INTRODUCTION

It is very significant here to mention that soon after the *Bundelas* succeeded over the *Khangars* they started treating them socially inferior, called them non-*Kshtriyas* and also imposed a number of social restrictions upon them obviously to portray themselves as superior in the society.⁴ From this we may also infer that the social position in the medieval times coincided with the rise of political power.

We have scanty information for the period between the conquest of *Garhkurar* by the *Bundelas* and the foundation of *Orchha* as the *Bundela* capital by Rudra Pratap in 1530.⁵ From *Akbarnama* and *Masirul Umara* we come to know that Raja Madhukar Shah Bundela (1554-92), the contemporary of Akbar, became so powerful in terms of territory and wealth that he challenged the imperial authority openly.⁶ The period of

Bir Singh Deo (1605-27) witnessed the highest limit of *Bundela* territorial expansion and influence at the Mughal court.⁷ In the opening years of emperor Aurangzeb the *Bundela* superseded the other Rajputs so far as the *mansab* and numerical strength as noble were concerned.⁸

From the above details it is evident that the *Bundelas* had a large territory under their command and in the times of the Mughals had become a power to be reckoned. But from the very beginning of their rule they were faced with acute identity crisis in the social set up of medieval times. This is fully demonstrated by the refusal of the leading *Kachchwaha* Rajput clan to extend help to the *Bundelas* against the *Khangars* at the time of the conquest of *Garhkurar* on the ground of social inferiority of the latter.⁹ The *Bundelas* despite constituting one of the thirty six clans of Rajputs held an inferior position and were spotted of impure blood among the other

traditional Rajputs.¹⁰ The leading Rajputs like *Sisodias*, *Rathors*, *Kachchwahas* and so forth regarded them as hilly (*Kohi*) men.¹¹ Because of these reasons we find no reference of matrimonial alliance between the Rajputs of Rajasthan and that of Bundelkhand.¹²

The main reasons for the *Bundelas* being looked down as inferior by their counterparts were most probable the absence of glorious history at the disposal of the former during the early medieval period (650-1200). They came into prominence rather late in the second half of the sixteenth century. Moreover, they did not figure as a Rajput clan in the early sacred literatures such as *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavat Gita*, *Puranas*, *Kumarpala Charitra* and *Varnaratnakara*.¹³

As mentioned above the *Bundelas* who had emerged as a powerful force specially during the Mughal period wanted to place themselves at par with the other influential Rajput ruling clans and to find a respectable position in the society. In their efforts to overcome the inferior character of their origin they fully utilized their political ascendancy. They started fabricating their genealogical links to mythological figures to which the high-class Rajput clans claimed their origin.

Thus, to elevate their social position and put themselves within the orbit of top ranking Rajputs they linked their lineage to the line of *Suryavanshi* (solar origin). The first *Bundela* Raja, who claimed himself to be a *Suryavansha* and a *Kshtriya* was Madhukar Shah Bundela.¹⁴ The long genealogy of the mythical beginning of the royal *Bundelas* begins with Lord Vishnu. According to this genealogy, after many generations Vir Bhadra, one of the descendants of Surya became the Raja of Kashi. He was succeeded by his younger son *Pancham* to whom the *Bundelas* descended.¹⁵ This practice of associating royalty with sacred locales was exploited by genealogist to insert fiction of glory to their *Bundela* patrons.

In this regard a good example is an early 17th century poetic biography of *Bundela* ruler of *Orchha*, Bir Singh Deo, composed by his Brahmin priest and poet, Keshav Das. The poet constantly refers to his *Bundela* royal patron by honorific 'Kashi Raja (ruler of 16 Kashi)'.¹⁶ As a matter of fact Kashi never constituted a part of *Orchha* kingdom. The point here is not that *Keshav* was fabricating *Bundela* history, rather on account of its sacredness in Hindu ideas, *Kashi* like *Ayodhya*, is a good place to think of as a seat of royalty.

The question of royal legitimacy was not only

confined to the creation of a glorious genealogy and linking it with holy place but we find other attempts by the *Bundelas* to gain wider acceptance. One such theory refers to the emergence of *Bundelas* from *Vindhyavasani* Devi, a sacred and popular mountain goddess of *Orchha* during the period under discussion.¹⁷ Such invention also shows the close connection between religion and ruling power in the context of an emerging state structure.

It is very interesting to note that so long as the *Bundelas* dominated in and around *Orchha* they kept popularizing *Vindhyavasini* Devi, the goddess of the place. But when the political boundary of *Orchha* kingdom expanded in other parts specially in times of Raja Madhukar and Bir Singh Deo they started popularizing *Visnuization*. This is illustrated by the construction of *Ramji* temple at *Orchha* by *Madhukar* Shah in 1554¹⁸ and the temple of *Keshao* devoted to Lord Krishna by Bir Singh Deo in 1618 at *Mathura*. According to *Masirul-Umara*, Bir Singh Deo spent about thirty-three lakhs of rupees on the construction and beautification of this temple.¹⁹ *Travernier* who visited the temple have left a detailed description.²⁰ He also built many temples at *Orchha* and *Datiya* and constructed the gateway of *Davarka* temple. This attempt of the *Bundela* Rajas to construct temples dedicated to Rama and Krishna could well explain this process of *Vinsuization* because the acceptance of mountain goddess was less as compared to Ram and Krishna in areas where they expanded and the gods had large followings.

In the series of *Visnuization* and gaining wider acceptance in parts other than *Orchha* the attempt made by *Keshav* Das through literary activities is worth mentioning. He used *Braj* as his language of expression. He associated the rulers of *Orchha* with Lord Rama so deeply that the entire reign of the ruler was declared as that of the God. All of the royal seals bore the name of that God, thus legitimizing the claim of *Ram Rajya*.²²

The above attempts of the *Bundelas* for raising their social status appear to have been greatly successful. This kind of assumption is fully corroborated by the fact that the *Bundelas* started treating the Rajput clans belonging to *Sakuri* group as inferior which comprised the *Baghelas*, *Dars*, *Gaur*, *Umath* or *Sengar*.²³ The *Bundelas* established matrimonial alliance only with other Rajput clans named *Panwas* and *Dhanderas* whom they treated equal to them socially.²⁴ Moreover, emperor *Jahangir* married the daughter of *Ram Shah Bundela* in

1609.²⁵ Like leading Rajputs of *suba* Ajmer the title of *Maharaja* was awarded to Bir Singh by Jahangir.²⁶

Together with gaining wider social acceptance in central India the *Bundelas* like the Rajputs of Rajasthan succeeded a lot in shaping *Bundelkhand* as a region with its rich cultural identity. In this regard reference may be made of the introduction of distinct monoculture of their political officials. Munshi Shyam Lal mentions a number of them. They also invented their own mode of succession; the princes were called *Kunwar* and *Raja Saheb* during the lifetime of their father. After the death of paterfamilias, they were called *Diwan* while the elder and successor of the king was called *Diwan Saheb*. It is significant to note that the *Panwars* and *Dhanderas* proudly followed the nomenclature of the *Bundelas*.²⁷ It also indicates that the *Bundelas* had upgraded their position in the state and society with the passage of time.

Another factor which strengthened *Bundelas* and *Bundelkhand* as a community and a region respectively was the invention of a separate language called *Bundeli*. It is a typical *apbharansa* of *Hindi* and synthesis of *Braj* and *Kanauji* languages.²⁸ In its fundamental characteristics, *Bundeli* appears to be one of the four forms of Western Hindi. The others being *Kari Boli* (*Hindustani*), *Braj Kanauji*. Its phonological distinction from other forms of Hindi is a well-established fact. For example, words like *Kahna* (to say) and *rahna* (to live) take the forms of *Kaibo* and *raibo* in *Bundeli*.²⁹

From the point of view of art and architecture too, the *Bundelas* elevated themselves and enriched their region. Percy Brown is of the view that during 16th and 17th centuries a distinct style developed in architecture and art which may be referred to as *Bundela* style.³⁰ The palaces of the *Bundelas* are distinguished from the other buildings of *Bundelkhand* on various architectural characteristics. All the palaces of *Bundelas* consist of courtyard surrounded by ranges which are protected by sheer wall. According to Tilloston, the *Bundeli* palaces are in short courtyard buildings.³¹ The so-called *Ramji Mandir*, originally a palace, constructed by Bharti Chand at Orchha seems to be an archetype building from which all the *Bundeli* palaces were developed.³² Briefly speaking, the peculiar features which may be attributed to the *Bundela* palaces are square in plan, the exterior enclosed by a square courtyard or *patio* having a wide cave and overwhelming balcony and *planquin* arch. All these features are visible in the palaces and other civic buildings at *Orchha*, *Kalinjar*, *Datiya*, *Chanderi* and

Jhansi (Pancham Mahal).³³ Among other features may be included the construction of *garh* palaces in series and absence of well-defined *Zanana* (female) area.³⁴

Similarly, though the Buddha painting which flourished at *Orchha* and *Datiya* was influenced by Rajput school of Painting of Rajasthan include many specialities in its essence.³⁵ In its stylistic distinction most of the *Bundela* painting have been done on a special paper called *Chhatrapuri* or *Tharra* paper. The important features of this school include the artists emphasis on the painting of only the frontal view of a building. Patrons, inattentive towards nature, human being as the main theme and one-dimensional sketch of men and women.³⁶

Conclusion:

From the above details, we can safely argue that in case of the *Bundelas* the colonization of new areas led to the upward mobility to the *Kshtriya* status. In other words, there was a definite correlation between the political eminence and movement towards a corresponding social status. The cultural identity of *Bundelas* was obviously defined in term of their association with a particular geography. The origin myth of the *Bundelas* thus became both, a tool for the invention of the cultural as well as political self. It continued to be expressed through distinct modes of inheritance and succession, social customs, religious particularities and a distinct dialect. As a consequence of these, the *Bundelas* emerged as a historical force much before other regional powers of medieval period like the Marathas and the Sikhs.

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2. Sir Herbert Risley and N.S. Mayer (ed.), *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, IX, pp.69-70; Crooke, W., *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Delhi, 1974, p.163.

3. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, part-I, 1881, pp.44-45; *Orchha Gazetteer*, Lucknow, 1907, pp.9-15; *Jhansi Gazetteer*, XXIV. p.187; Jain R.K. *Between History and Legend: Status and Power in Bundelkhand*, Delhi, 2000, p.19.
4. Jain, R.K., p.130. The defeated Khangars were not permitted to wear red turban, to touch Kathris (swords), drink liquor, to put red lead on their hair parting etc.
5. According to *Bir Charitra* (p.486) and *Chhatra Prakash* (p.05) the successors of Pancham fought many battles against the officers of the Delhi Sultans including Lodi Sultans but the details are so obscure that any conclusion can hardly be made of it. But during Sultanate period the Bundelas succeeded in bringing places like Mohoni, Jaitpur, Jhansi, Orchha, Sinhora and Mohoba under their control. This is testified by the later sources of the Mughal period.
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