Political Economy of Medieval West Orissa As Reflected in Oral Tradition

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The Ganga royal power of Orissa became weak in the 14th century AD. In 1361 AD, Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq invaded Orissa and forced the Ganga king Bhanu Deva III to pay tribute. From that time onwards the Ganga power declined steadily (Senapati and Kuanr, 1977:88). It was about this time that the Ganga rule in Balangir Patna-Sonepur region of west Orissa came to an end and was supplanted by a new form of oligarchical administration of Asta-Mallik or eight chiefs, which lingered for some time till the advent of the Chauhans who started monarchical system of government in Patna/Patnagarh (Senapati and Sahu, 1968:48). After the disintegration of Ganga Empire of Orissa, ancient South Kosala or roughly the present west Orissa became an uncertain frontier zone between Orissa and Ratanpur. In this uncertainty, the pull for decentralization and political fragmentation came mainly from the partition of ruling families and from grants of villages by the rulers to indigenous tribal chiefs who ended up as independent potentates. In this context, we may refer to the Chauhan Kingdom established in Patnagarh which recognized the overlordship of the Gajapati Maharaja of Orissa and became a Samanta or feudatory. Successful campaigns by the successors of Raja Ramai Dev gradually encroached on nearby areas and expanded the Chauhan Kingdom. By the end of the fifteenth century AD it became a vast kingdom (Deo, 2003:98).

In the beginning of the sixteenth century AD, Patna rajya was divided into two kingdoms namely Patna and Sambalpur. Balaram Dev, the younger brother of Patna Raja Narasingha Dev (1570-1577 AD), became the raja or king of Sambalpur Kingdom. He was an ambitious and war-like prince who established a new line of Chauhan dynasty in Sambalpur. He was a contemporary of Gajapati Maharaja Rama Chandra Dev I, The Raja of Khurda and helped him against the invasion of Yavanas or Muslims (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:61). Patnagarh was again divided into Patna and Khariar in the first half of the seventeenth Century AD. Gopal Rai, the younger brother of Patna Raja Vikramaditya Dev was given the estate of Khariar where a new branch of Chauhan family was established (Senapati and Sahu, 1968:53). Thereafter, Sambalpur was divided into two kingdoms namely Sambalpur and Sonepur/Suvarnapur in the second half of the seventeenth century AD. Madan Gopal Dev, was assigned to administer Sonepur where he thus established a new line of Chauhan dynasty (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:62).

Thus the original Chauhan Kingdom or Patna rajya was divided into four kingdoms due to partition of the Chauhan Raj families in West Orissa. In all probability, the defeat of Mukunda Dev, the Gajapati Maharaja of Orissa by the Sultan of Bengal in 1568 helped these feudatory
rulers to declare their independence. In other words, this helped the local chiefs to extend their political suzerainty in their respective zones. In order to sustain their Kingdoms, these rulers had to depend upon the bhogas and bhagas. They had to persuade the tribal people and the indigenous people to become settled agriculturists, so that production would increase; because a tribal economy based on shifting cultivation and hunting cannot sustain an emerging Kingdom (Senapati and Sahu, 1968; 86-88; Deo, 2003:96-101; Pasayat, 2004: 90-96; Pasayat, 2004: 83-89). In the present paper, our endeavour is to study the role and importance of some indigenous Aghrias, Sudhs and Dumal who have substantially contributed to changing the agrarian situation during the medieval period in west Orissa. What it tells us is that the climate, the atmosphere of west Orissa then was dramatically different and perhaps conducive to tribal life only. Understanding why that changed may well provide a whole new perspective of changing socio-economic and political scenario in West Orissa. Our analysis is based with special reference to oral tradition, substantiated by the historical facts. The observations made in this paper are not conclusive but suggestive in nature.

There is an interesting oral narrative regarding the origin of the three agriculturist castes of West Orissa namely Sudh, Dumal and Kulta. It is said that during banabasa (exile), Ramachandra was wandering in the forests of Sambalpur region. Once, he met three brothers and asked them for water. Out of these brothers, one brought water in a clean brass pot and as such was called Sudh, meaning pure. The second brother made a dana (cup of leaves) and drew water from a well with a rope. Hence, he was known as Dumal. This name Dumal is derived from the words Dori-mal meaning a coil or the chord of rope. The third brother is said to have brought water in a hollow gourd. So, he was named Kulta, which is derived from the word Kurita. This narrative does not seem to be quite old and it suggests that these three are connected jatis in west Orissa (Senapati and Sahu, 1968; 101). Further, this story serves to show that the Kultas, Sudhs and Dumals have some connection. Reportedly, they take food together at festivals in Sambalpur areas (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:115).

It would not be out of place to mention that the Sudhs or Suds are also found in the ex-Garhjat areas like Ranpur, Nayagarh, Daspalla, Khandapara and Khurda. Agriculture is the principal occupation of this social group. They believe that in the days of yore, their ancestors were working as soldiers. They worship a deity called Pancha-Khanda i.e. the five swords with offering of goats and fowls. Their tutelary goddess Khambeswari represents in the form of akhamba (wooden pole). The Sudhs are divided into four sub-castes namely Bara or high Sudhs, the Deheri or the priest/worshipper, the Kabat-Konia and the Butka. Among them the Bara Sudha rank highest (Senapati and Kuanr, 1977:137). In the context, it may be noted here that the Sudhs are a community with tradition of having formerly been the dominant power in Boudh, with whose chief they claim to have relationship. Though now mostly chasis (cultivators), earlier they used to serve as soldiers or paikas and worship the gun and other war weapons in their houses (Senapati and Kuanr, 1983:63).

In Boudh, there are Dumals who also belong to the agriculturist community. Most of them identify themselves as Nanda Gauras. There is oral tradition about their origin. It is said that they have come out from dimba (egg) and thus known as Dumals. Others are of opinion that they were the Gauras/Gaudas of Puri. Everyday, they
used to supply milk, curd and ghee for performance of daily *niti* or rituals in the Shree Jagannath Temple, Puri. Once, a vulture was found sitting on the Neelachakra of the temple. The Pujapanda(priest) had a bad dream. The priest came to know that the ghee served to Lord Jagannath was impure. For this, Lord Jagannath was dissatisfied and the vulture appeared on the temple immediately. This news was communicated to the Gajapati Maharaja who was annoyed with this and decision of Gajapati Maharaja. As a result, those who had supplied ghee to the temple left the place at night with family and fled towards west. After many days, they arrived at Dumbagarh in the Athmallik region of Boudh and settled there. In course of time, these cowherds of Dumbagarh came to be known as Dumal Gauras. Thus, Boudh is their main centre of habitation. Threfrom, they have spread to other parts of west Orissa. Due to heavy concentration of this *Jati* in Boudh, once upon a time, the Raja of Boudh was known as *Dedha-Lakhya Dumbadhipati* or the king of one and a half lakhs of Dumals. The Raja employed many of the Dumals in responsible posts (Senapati and Kuanr, 1983:62; Das, 1969:13).

According to the tradition, the Raja of Boudh gave one family of Dumal and four families of Kultas to the Raja of Patnagarh during the marriage of his daughter. Dumals and Kultas belong to the agricultural community. Perhaps, they played a significant role in agricultural development of Patna Kingdom. In other words the Raja of Boudh provides a group of agriculturists who helped to alleviate the agricultural situation and brought food relief to Patnagarh. In the past, Patnagarh was one of the famous eighteen *garhs* of west Orissa as mentioned in note 1. Patna Kingdom was situated on the valley of Ang, Tel and Swarnarekha and their tributaries. This area was suitable for both extensive and intensive agricultural operation. In this context, significant observations made by learned scholar P.K.Singh may be mentioned here. He views that water sources were a vital and contributing factor for urban upsurge in earlier days. Most of the early urban centres in west Orissa were located generally on the confluence or bank of rivers (Singh, 2004:51).

In view of the above narrative, ex-state of Boudh is regarded as the ancestral home of the Kultas. Significantly, Boudh was also one of the eighteen *garhs* or *Atharagarhs* of west Orissa as mentioned in note 1. But according to another oral tradition, the Kultas migrated from Ayodhya to Boudh. Their ancestors were employed in the royal house-hold of Raja Dasaratha. They accompanied Ramachandra, Lakshmana and Sita in their *banabasa* (exile) and settled in Boudh during their wandering. Sarsara and Jagati of Boudh are considered to be the main centres of the Kultas. Threfrom, they migrated and settled in different parts of west Orissa. This may be corroborated by the claim of the Kultas of Sambalpur who say that their ancestors lived in Boudh. Also, some of them identify themselves as the Sarsara Kultas and Jagati Kultas. Writing of Cobden Ramsay about the Kultas also substantiates this contention. He writes that the Kultas worship the goddess Ramachandi, whose principal shrine is situated at Sarsara (quoted in Senapati and Sahu, 1968:101).

Kultas belong to a great socio-economic group because Jagati and Sarsara have been a seat of Vaishnavism and Saivism from hoary past. There is one shrine at Sarsara dedicated to Lord Baidyanath. Near the village Jagati at Gandharadi is situated the famous twin temples of Lord Nilamadhaba and Lord Siddheswara exactly similar to each other. Such type of twin temples constructed on a common platform are seen nowhere in the medieval period. Nilamadhaba
temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu whereas Siddheswara temple is dedicated to Lord Siva. These twin temples exhibit a harmonious co-existence of Saivism along with Vaishnavism. On the basis of the detailed analysis of structural and sculptural features, it becomes clear that these temples may be dated back to the later half of the eighth or first half of the ninth century AD (Senapati and Kuanr, 1983:379-80; Panda, 2004:22). What we want to suggest here is that Kultas belong to a glorious tradition.

The famous twin-temples of Gandharadi, otherwise called Hari-Hara temple and the archaeological remains found in its vicinity speak of the past glory of the region. The significance of the Gandharadi temples lies in the fact that they represent the co-existence of the two major religious faiths of west Orissa during that period. Religious synthesis between Saivism and Vaishnavism achieved a noteworthy success in this place during the eighth-ninth century AD. Thus, historically speaking, Kultas have been associated with a glorious religion-cultural tradition although their principal deity is Ramachandi. It was the period when Lord Vishnu elicited great reverence like Lord Siva in Jagati. The above analysis suggests that in Jagati a great civilization flourished since at least eighth century AD (Sahu and others, 1981:131; Senapati and Kuanr, 1983:33, 134, 379-80; Behera, 1991:310-11; Panda, 2004:22).

The surname of four Kulta families given as dowry to patna Raja were Pradhan, Sahu, Naik and Biswal. Besides that Bhoi title is also found among the Kultas (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:115; Senapati and Kunar, 1983:63). In the present state of our knowledge, we cannot say convincingly the precise time and the regime when and by whom these Kultas families were offered to the Raja of Patnagarh, who gave enough boasting to the Kultas and Dumals so that the agricultural situation of Patnagarh could be improved and enriched.

There were Agharias in Balangir-Patna which the other class of industrious cultivators. The Agharias are said to be the descendents of Bidura of the Mahabharata fame. They claimed to have belonged originally to Kshatriya caste; but later on they adopted agriculture as their profession. They are called Agharias as they came to Patna-rajya from the Agra region of Uttar Pradesh (Senapati and Sahu, 1968:97) when Adil Shah was the Sultan of Delhi. Thus, Agharias, Kultas and Dumals were entrusted with the responsibility of agricultural development in different periods of time in the state of Patna and thereby, the Agharias, Kultas and the Dumals also flourished in Patnagarh. In course of development, the Agharias and Kultas became economically very powerful. Later on, Kultas were divided into a number of sections bearing surnames Barik, Bhoi, Biswal, Naik, Pradhan, Sahu and the like. Though, the chasas found in other parts of Orissa have some similarities with the Kultas, marital relationship between the two groups was not common. In other words, Chasas and Kultas are two different endogamous groups/jatis. So, it is not possible to say precisely, whether the Kultas are the same as the Chasas found in other districts of Orissa.

Raja Hrudesh Dev (1678-1685) of Patnagarh died leaving behind two young sons. The eldest son Raisingh Dev was brought up by his uncle Vatsaraj Singh who had an evil intention of usurping the Gadi (throne). He murdered the widow Rani (queen) and also hatched plans to kill the two young princes; but these two boys were secretly carried away by their Mamu (maternal uncle) to Phuljhar, where they were provided with all they needed i.e. shelter, security and education. Raisingh Dev (1685-1762) after
being grown up sought the assistance Dev (1685-1762) after being grown up sought the assistance and co-operation of the Marathas of Nagpur, killed his uncle and thereby succeeded in occupying his father's throne. He had three wives and three sons. The first Rani was issueless, the second had two sons and the third was blessed with only one son. The son of the third Rani was the eldest and also the favourite of Raja Raisingh Dev (Senapati and Sahu, 1968:54).

The second Rani apprehended that the claim of her two sons would be set aside by the Raja. Apparently, she mobilized and incited the people to support her cause. Being instigated, the people rose to the occasion and thereby paved the way for a rebellious atmosphere in Patnagarh. The magnitude of reaction owing to this event perhaps stirred the mind of the people and created a far-reaching situation. State machinery was paralysed. Raja Rai Singh was too old to control the internal disturbance. It was in a complete state of insurrection and thereby Patnagarh suffered from severe mal-administration. The king was thoroughly demoralized and finally he fled away to Sonepur/Suvarnapur out of fear. Confusion engulfed Patnagarh which remained in almost anarchical condition for about three years. During this period, the three queens, their sons and partisans quarreled among themselves on the most contentious issue of succession. The situation was so intense that many responsible persons of Patnagarh felt their life and property to be insecure and fled to Sonepur panic-stricken (Senapati and Mahanti, 1968:54) and perhaps to other nearby areas like Bargarh also.

In view of the above facts, it may be inferred here that all these developments had far-reaching effect on the socio-economic and political condition of Patnagarh. Apparently, during this period of general disturbance and lawlessness the Chauhan hold on Patnagarh was weakened which later on paved the way for the interference from outside too. It will be reasonable to say that amidst chaos and confusion which prevailed in Patnagarh, probably one Kulta gauntia (village headman) of Patnagarh also fled away with his men and property, crossed the border i.e. the river Ang/Ong and entered into the territory of Sambalpur kingdom. Thereafter, they marched further and crossed another river, the Jira and reached Gaisama, situated 13 kms south-east of Bargarh and settled there. Bargarh, also situated on the bank of the river Jira, was than an important seat of power and one of the eighteen garhas (fort) of west Orissa. It was a flourishing centre of trade and commerce. It is known from history that these Kultas have been living in large numbers in Bargarh area in the basins of the rivers namely the Mahanadi, the Jira, the Ang/Ong and Tel. The original name of Bargarh was Baghar Kota as known from an inscription of the eleventh century A.D. It was known as Bargarh most probably from the time of Raja Balaram Dev, the first Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur, who made it for some time his headquarters and constructed a big fort for its protection (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:510, 522-23 : Pasayat, 2004 : 235-40).

Thus, some Kultas might have migrated from the ex-state of Patnagarh to Bargarh-Gaisama area during the last phase of the reign of Raja Ajit Singh of Sambalpur; but it may also be suggested here that some of them migrated to this part much earlier, in around the first half of the sixteenth century A.D during the reign of Raja Balaram Dev who constructed a fort in Bargarh and made it for some time his headquarters. This may be substantiated by the following facts. There is a Kulta dominated village namely Kamgaon, situated 13 kms. north of Bargarh town. This village is a very old one and is said to have been established by the Kultas, when they migrated to
this part of Bargarh from Boudh in around the first part of the sixteenth century A.D. It contains a temple of Ramachandi, which is held in great veneration by the Kultas. Their chief families the Bhois and the Pradhans are its priests. The temple is maintained by *maufi* lands in the village (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971: 528). However, as per the tradition, the Aghrias also migrated from the kingdom of Patna and settled in the Sambalpur kingdom during the rule of Raja Madhukar Sai (1630-1660 AD), the fourth Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. They made their first settlement in the village Laira/Laida and later spread over different parts of Sambalpur and the ex-state of Gangpur, Bamra and the neighbouring region of Chhattisgarh too. Notably, Laida is still regarded by the Aghrias as their place of early settlement in the district (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971: 113-114). What we want to suggest here is that both the Kultas and the Aghrias, who migrated to Sambalpur kingdom, have played a significant role in agricultural development of Bargarh-Sambalpur area.

Later on, some Kultas migrated to Kalahandi from Sambalpur kingdom, most probably from Bargarh area near about the year 1867 for agricultural development in Kalahandi. In this context, it would not be unwise to mention about the significant contribution of Raja Udit Pratap Deo (1853-1881 AD) of Kalahandi for the improvement of agriculture in his state. He married to Asha Kumari Devi, the only issue of Maharaja Narayan Singh, the last ruler of Sambalpur. She had taken some Kulta families probably from Bargarh area to Kalahandi near about the year 1867. This was a great step for development of agriculture in Kalahandi. Reportedly, Raja Udit Pratap Deo was the most illustrious among the Nagavamsi rulers of Kalahandi. He abolished various levies and declared his state open to trade and commerce. As a result of this, merchants from outside his state began to flock there. His rule was peaceful except that the Kandhs in Rampur-Madanpur *zamindari* rebelled for sometime; but the Kandhs were firmly suppressed by the ruler (Senapati and Kuanr, 1980: 60-61,86).

In view of the above analysis, it may be suggested here that agricultural development in Kalahandi by the Kultas had negative side too. The great Kandh rebellion of Kalahandi in 1882 was associated with the Kultas. The Kandhs had great grievance against the Kulta *chasis* or cultivators who received the benevolent patronage of the royal household of Kalahandi. The Kultas exploited the poor and simple-minded Kandhs and deprived them of the best of their lands. Perhaps, they had taken away illegally the most valuable lands from the possession of the aborigines (Senapati and Kuanr, 1980: 59-61,86).

Most probably, the continuous exploitation, harassment and oppression of the Kultas of Kalahandi had made aborigines socio-economically degraded to an extent, which could not be imagined in any civilized society. The socio-economic condition of the aborigines were in a very bad shape. Perhaps, the royal authority remained callous in this matter. In other words, the royal court was also in favour of the Kultas during the rule of Raja Udit Pratap Deo. This speaks of the liberal patronage and tolerant outlook of the ruler towards the Kultas. So, after the death of Raja Udit Pratap Deo, the Kandhs took advantage of the weak rule of the old queen Asha Kumari and decided to take revenge on the Kulta cultivators. Large number of Kultas were killed in cold blood. However, the rising was suppressed with the help of the British troops (Senapati and Kuanr, 1980:61). What we want to emphasize here is that the Kultas as a group is the shining example of dominant agriculturist *jati* in west Orissa.
Regarding migration of Kultas to Gaisama/Gaisima we find an interesting narrative. As per the tradition, there was a Kulta gauntia family in Patnagarh in the reign of Raja Raisingh Dev as mentioned earlier. The surname of this family was Sahu. The *gauntia* had two sons named Kuvera Sahu and Amar Sahu and also a beautiful daughter. An influential noble of the royal family of Patnagarh was smitten with surpassing beauty of his only daughter and wanted her hand; but the proposal was not readily acceptable to the reigning beauty and her family. Apprehending trouble, one night the old gauntia left the territory of Patnagarh with his family and belongings loaded in one hundred carts and a thousand cows and bullocks. When exactly they left is difficult to say due to want of evidence. However, the Sahu family marched relentlessly throughout the whole night and crossed the river Ang/Ong. Reaching the territory of Sambalpur kingdom early in the morning, they heaved a sigh of relief. The old gauntia stood there and pointing his right hand towards the rising sun, took an oath that in future he or his descendant would never cross the river Ang/Ong. Thereafter, they proceeded further north, passed through Barpali, crossed the river Jira and spent the night on the northern bank of the river Jira (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:522-23; Pasayat, 2004:235).

At that time, Sambalpur was also passing through a phase of political turmoil. Raja Ajit Singh (1725-1766) the ruler of Sambalpur was an indolent and weak ruler. He was completely under the evil influence of his Dewan who was virtually ruling over Sambalpur kingdom. The ruler was taking very little interest in the administration of Sambalpur and his authority was grossly misused by the wicked and corrupt Dewan whose integrity was always doubted (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:65). From this, it can be inferred that the Kultas did not want to proceed further and finally decided to settle down there on the northern bank of the river Jira. In order to justify and legitimize their decision and for the concurrence of their ideas and opinions, probably the Kultas manufactured a myth which may be narrated in the following manner.

At night, the old gauntia had a strange dream. A female deity appeared and told him not to proceed further. She told the old *gauntia* to settle down there with the lands as far as his cows and bullocks were then taking rest. Consequently, a new human settlement started at that place. Since the limits of this settlement were determined by the presence of the cows it was popularly called *Gai-sima* - *Gai* means cow and *sima* refers to boundary. Later on, Gaisama came to be known as Gaisama (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971: 522-23). The place Gaisama was named either after the creation of the myth or the myth might have been created so after the name of this place Gaisima/Gaisama. Subsequently, other sections of Kultas probably migrated to Bargarh area. Thus, it is known from history that the Kultas have been living in large number in Bargarh areas. The myth, however, is most important one and throws significant light on the socio-economic and political history as well as culture of west Orissa during the eighteenth century AD.

As per the narrative, a year-long efforts and struggle of the Kultas brought in dramatic changes in Gaisama. They excavated some thirteen tanks round about their settlement. Digging of tanks was obviously meant for conservation of water for multiple purpose; but the Kultas utilized these tanks mainly for agricultural purpose during scanty rainfall and thereby cultivated the fertile lands of Gaisama successfully (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:522-23). There is no denying that water is a far more important factor than soil to cultivators. Artificial irrigation is absolutely necessary and is a matter of vital importance when the amount of
rainfall is insufficient. The-then British Political Agent of the Feudatory states, Cobden Ramsay also writes that the Kultas are excellent cultivators, very industrious and are very skillful in irrigation (quoted in Senapati and Mahanti, 1971: 101). All these attest the fact that the Kultas had realized the importance of water. In this context, mention may be made of learned scholar P.K. Singh who has rightly observed that the rise and fall of various civilizations during the past days rested on the proper management and mis-management of the water resources. Those who had effective control on this precious natural resource, particularly in the agrarian societies did enjoy considerable social, economic and political power (Singh, 2004: 50-51).

In view of the above analysis, we can say this much that the Kultas have assumed the reputation of very good cultivators (chasi) in west Orissa. In the past, irrigation was done mostly by tanks called kata, munda, bandh etc. It is not improper to say that the very existence of villages over a large portion of the area is dependent on the tanks, which have been constructed near them. There is no denying the fact that accumulated agricultural acumen of Kultas over the years appeared to have had significant contribution to the agricultural development of the region wherever they have settled down. Their contribution to the west Orissan society has to be recognized. Today, agriculture is the key sector of this region's economy and bulk of its population primarily depend on agriculture for occupation and livelihood.

As discussed above, Sambalpur suffered from misrule during the reign of Raja Ajit Singh (1725-1766) of Sambalpur royal house. He did not pay any heed to the welfare of the people. He was an inactive and weak ruler. The administration of his kingdom was completely under the influence of Dewan Dakshin Ray who rose to power of dominance and prominence. The Dewan enjoyed full freedom in the internal administration and managed the administration according to his whims and acquired much wealth. Subsequently, Dewan Dakshin Ray was killed and one Piloo Ray was appointed as the new Dewan. Unfortunately, Raja Ajit Singh soon came under the notorious influence of Dewan Piloo Ray too; but Dewan Piloo Ray was also murdered by one Akbar Ray who thereafter became the new Dewan. His corruption surpassed people's expectations. In the midst of such internal disturbance and chaotic condition Raja Ajit Singh died in May 1766 (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971: 65).

After the death of Raja Ajit Singh, his son Abhaya Singh (1766-1778 AD) became the king of Sambalpur when he was a young boy of only sixteen years old. Reciprocal suspicion and bitterness between the young Raja and Dewan Akbar Ray developed into open hostility and resentment. So, Raja Abhaya Singh appointed one Krishna Badmallick as his new Dewan with a clear intention to fight against injustice and wrong of Akbar Ray and also to suppress him by military force. Significantly, Akbar Ray was prepared to encounter such situation as he himself was also commanding some armed forces. Consequently, the whole town was divided into two hostile groups. There was complete absence of law and order in Sambalpur town. At the time of this civil war British agent T. Motte visited Sambalpur and was an eye witness to the chaotic condition of Sambalpur town. Motte was requested to help Raja Abhaya Singh in capturing and suppressing Akbar Ray and other miscreants; but Motte did not co-operate with the Raja as he was not interested to be involved in the civil war. For a short spell, confusion engulfed Sambalpur town where state administration vanished for few days.
Matters came to a crisis at night on the 17th June, 1766. Akbar Ray surpassed all in his cruelty. He collected and organised his group who were well equipped with crude implements. He led them march to the palace, secured the persons of the Raja and murdered every one who resisted him. A spree of massacre followed in Sambalpur town where about three hundred trusted and dependant persons of Krishna Badmallick were mercilessly put to death. Thereafter, Krishna Badmallick was confined in a dungeon and Akbar Ray was appointed Dewan who probably took possession of treasury, armoury and everything else. The whole structure of Chauhan administration collapsed from top to bottom and thereby Akbar Ray became the de facto ruler of Sambalpur; but he had to face rebellions inside and he suspected one of the widow queens of Ajit Singh to be involved in a plot against him. He murdered the old Rani and soon after that in 1778 Raja Abhaya Singh died in the prison (Mallick, 192: Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:66). In view of this, it may be said that Raja Ajit Singh and Raja Abhaya Singh could not exercise their royal authority for the welfare of the people. Perhaps, Raja Ajit Singh indulged himself in luxurious way of life. Notably, he had eight queens. Taking the advantage of this situation, his Dewans squandered the treasury, which continued during the regime of Raja Abhaya Singh also. Though sometimes the Dewans had to face weak resistance from the rulers of Sambalpur, to their great astonishment the Dewans faced virtually no obstacles and hindrances while running the state. It is quite probable that applying socio-economic and political conditions prevailed in Sambalpur during the period of Raja Ajit Singh and his successor Raja Abhaya Singh.

Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to believe in the patronage given to various temples by the Dewan Akbar Ray to integrate the Sambalpur kingdom, to legitimise his new status of Raja and thereby his authority over Sambalpur kingdom. In the erstwhile Sambalpur kingdom a large number of Siva temples were built during the Chauhan period. The most important among them were those of the Asta-Sambhus. The Bimaleswara Siva temple at Huma on the confluence of the river Mahanadi and the Jamli, the tributary of the Mahanadi, which is at present found in leaning position was built by Maharaja Baliar singh (1660-1690 A.D.) The rest of the temples were constructed during the reign of Raja Ajit Singh (1725-1766) and his son Abhaya Singh (1766-1778) (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 51). The temple at Gaisama was built by Dakshin Ray, the Dewan of Raja Ajit Singh, although the tradition assigns it to Raja Abhaya Singh (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 522).

In view of the political circumstances of Sambalpur narrated earlier, it would not be unwise to suggest here that Dewan Dakshin Ray and Dewan Akbar Ray extended royal patronage and constructed or renovated the existing temples of the Asta Sambhus situated in various parts of the Sambalpur kingdom in order to appease the local subjects to legitimise their authority over the Sambalpur kingdom. Most probably, these places were located strategically with forest background. These may be understood to be important seats of local power and acquired much economic significance also. For example, Ambabhona where Kedarnath Siva temple is situated was a fortified place in the days of Chauhan Rajas of Sambalpur and the remains of the old fort are still in existence. As per the tradition, the Kedarnath temple was built by Dewan Dakshin Ray (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 508).

Nonetheless, from surface observation it appears that the site of Ambabhona has been a
seat of worship from hoary past and it has still greater remote antiquity. In the context, mention may be made of some interesting observations of the learned scholar S.S. Panda. He has discovered a round stone piece (mastaka) kept in the north-east side of the Kedarnath temple. Four single-hooded Nagas (serpents) in the theriomorphic form are carved in all four corners in the lower portion of this round mastaka of an early temple. This architectural fragment can be dated back to the 11th-12th century A.D. (Panda, 2004: 19). In view of this, it may be suggested that Siva temples were built or existing Saiva shrines in dilapidated condition were repaired and renovated by the Dewans. Most probably, these temples were given numerous grants of villages and lands rent-free for regular worship and maintenance.

To sum up, when Kultas of Balangir-Patna fled to Gaisama sometimes in the first half of the 18th century, at that time Raja Raisingh Dev was the ruler of Balangir-Patna and Raja Ajit Singh was the ruler of Sambalpur. It was a period of political turmoil resulting into weak central authority in both the kingdoms. Taking the advantage of this chaotic situation Kultas settled down in Gaisama, an uncertain frontier area between the Balangir-Patna and Sambalpur kingdoms. They became settled agriculturists so that production would increase. Very soon, they emerged as a socio-economically prosperous and politically 'dominant caste' group in the area. Due to weak central authority, Dewan Dakshin Ray tried to legitimise his new status and position of Raja. He appeased the local subjects in various parts of the kingdom by extending royal patronage to the temples so that he could establish himself. The Dewan or new Raja had to persuade and mobilise the people in different pockets of Sambalpur kingdom in order to maintain and sustain the integration of the Sambalpur kingdom.

Given also the need to legitimise his claim to his newly acquired position or status of Raja and to his share of the produce (bhaga) it would not be wrong to suggest that the granting of lands to Brahmns and temples during this period contributed to changing the agrarian situation. In such a scenario, the emergence of Kultas in Gaisama and Bargah area as a 'dominant caste' induced changes in the society and economy. Moreover, the agriculturist jatis like Agharias, Dumals, Kultas and Sudhs have played significant role and contributed substantially to changing the agrarian situation during the medieval period in west Orissa and thus contributed richly for state formation.

Notes:

1. In this context, it may be clarified here that when we come across the term garh or pur, earlier on, these terms were commonly used and referred all a fort or a stronghold and also an urban centre. Learned scholar P.K. Singh (2004: 49-54) has elaborately discussed the meaning of these terms in his paper.

2. Earlier, the river Ang/Ong was regarded as the boundary line between Patna rajya and Sambalpur rajya. As per the oral narrative, there was a quarrel between the two brothers Raja Narasingha Dev (king of Patnagarh) and Raja Balaram Dev (king of Sambalpur) regarding the extent of their respective territories. It was amicably and peacefully resolved by the intervention of the queen mother. The Dowager queen took her sons to the bed of the river Surangi and asked the elder and the younger to sit on her right and the left laps...
respectively. Thereafter, she told them that the river Surangi should be considered as her own limbs (Anga), the elder brother should possess the territory to the right of the river and the younger one to the left of it.

The decision of the mother was accepted by both the brothers without any hesitation. Thereafter, the river was known as the boundary line between Patna and Sambalpur kingdoms.

3. In 1766, T. Motte was sent by Lord Clive to Sambalpur for negotiating with him for trade in diamond. On the eve of the death of Raja Ajit Singh in 1766, Motte was probably present in Sambalpur town. His accounts reveals the chaotic condition of Sambalpur towards the end of the reign of Ajit singh and beginning of the reign of Abhaya Singh. He was an eye-witness to the chaotic condition of the town (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 66).

4. Asta-Sambhus refer to Bimaleswara of Huma, Kedarnath of Ambabhona, Maneswara of Maneswar, Biswanath of Deogaon, Balukeshwara of Gaisama, Swapneswara of Sorna, Bisweswara of Soranda and Nilakantheswara of Niljee. These Saiva shrines were in the erstwhile Sambalpur rajya.

Reference:


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