

Mutha Head System in Kondhmals and in Agency Tracts of Ganjam under Madras Presidency

Sanjay Kumar Habada

In the Kondh Hills, the Kui-speaking people were having separated village life and culture, but were under three separate authorities : (i) The Kondhmals sub-division in the north was administered by Angul, across the Mahanadi in Bengal presidency; (ii) the Baligurha sub-division, three times the size of the Khondmals, was administered by an Indian Civil Collector (i.e British); and (iii) that part of Ghumsur which was in the hill tracts locally known as Maliah, was administered by an Indian Deputy- Collector. These last two areas were within the Ganjam District and therefore part of Madras Presidency. The whole Kondh region, however, was commonly known as the Hill-Tracts Agency and these Collectors exercised special power as Agents to the Governor under the provisions of the Ganjam-Vizagapatnam Act 1839. The ordinary courts had no jurisdiction in them. The Agent and his Assistants administering both civil and criminal justice and much of the ordinary law of the land was not in force. The Collectors were themselves both the civil and criminal tribunal, with further appeal possible to the High Court and Governor-in-Council. By special grant, Zamindars (Odia Chiefs) acted under the Collectors.

There was traditional organisation of Kondhs in the Hills contained features, such as

effective group control, welfare of the group and the system of extra-group relations. It was more a traditional political organisation, was an institution to unite together a number of individuals of the tribes, who had originally settled over a contiguous area, called the Mutha (meaning control over the area and hence ownership right) for common interests; but at a later stage some non-tribals came to be associated with it having become residents of the Mutha. The association of non-tribals in the traditional political organisation of the Kondhs has its own peculiar history and their association did not circumvent its smooth functioning because of the historical reason.

Prior to the British occupation of Khond hills, that is before 1836, Kondhs were the subjects of the Rajas of Ghumsar and Raja of Pratapgiri (Sanakhimendi). During the rule of Rajas some non-tribals, mainly Hindu caste had started penetrating into Kondh land and established trade and commerce, including money-lending. They purchased various types of agricultural and forest products from the Kondhs and supplied them in return grocery, tobacco, narcotic, clothes and other articles, gradually acquired arable lands from the Kondhs and settled down in the Kondh land. Until then the Kondh

lands, had been occupied by Kondhs, with Panas known as Hill tribes and some artisans such as potters, and blacksmiths who were associated with them in their way of life. Consequently, the non-tribal Odia Hindus acquired an important, intimate and somewhat indispensable position among the Kondhs, which however provided a basis for their subsequent involvement in the Kondh political organisation.

Towards the beginning of Eighteenth century the Raja of Ghumsar appointed some of the local Odias who were living among the Kondhs as his local official in the Kondh area. The Kondhs welcome this move since the new officials were their neighbours. The Raja, for administrative convenience, divided the entire Khondmals into several areas, each being called a Mutha. To Kondhs, these forms of administration were, and are, of course imposed from outside. Their traditional system was centres on the clan or "Gossi". These are exogamous groups, for the members of each 'gossi' believe that they are descended from a common ancestor (Barbara.M.Boal,). The clan or gochhi (gossi) head was representative of the common ancestor by the succession might pass to whichever member of his house appeared the most competent, which gradually comes into general acceptance. The head of the Gochhi had his dignity on every ritual or public occasion. In the old days he led in war, and was generally responsible for the relationship of his clan to other clan and to the Odia zamindars. Behind these lineage heads there is also a distinct organisation within every village, with a Kondh headman, a lay ritual officiant (dami keeper), possibly a priest, and a local council made up of the head of each family in the village or hamlet.

In the Muthas, the adjacent hill villages were arranged into groups contained Kondh population belonging to a single clan or gochhi or several fraternal clans; because of this the practice of Mutha exogamy prevailed.

The chief or head of the Muthas were appointed from among the member of the Paik Caste (a quasi military and agricultural caste who mainly constituted the militia of the local rulers of south Odisha during pre-British period), who claim themselves to be Kshatriyas. They were known as the Patra or Bissoyi who had number of Paiks or guards under him. They were also designated as Mutha-head and Muthadar was to represent the Kondhs under his jurisdiction at the petty court of the Raja when ever called upon to do so, and to attend on him there on all occasion on their behalf. And further he acted as recognised official intermediary and channel of communication between the Kondhs and the Raja. So concurrently he became the Raja's representative and the chief of the Kondhs. He performed an important sacerdotal duty for the Kondhs and consequently became the hub of their society. This was the state of the affairs of the Kondhamals before the British occupation of the area.

In the year 1836, the Britishers penetrated into Kondhamal with the view to capturing the rebel Raja of Ghumsar, who had taken refuge in this jungle infested Agency tract. They conquered this area and took over the administration of the Kondhamals and instituted appropriate measures to stop human sacrifice (Meriah) which the Kondhas were carrying on with a blind belief to restore the fertility in the soil.

The Britishers did not disturb the Mutha-head system; instead, they tried to establish more

effective control over the Kondhs through them. Between the years 1874 and 1881, Sanads were issued in respect of the hill zamindars, namely Badakhemindi, Badagada, Kattinga, Mandasa, Jalantar, Budarsing, Jarada, Karada, and Ranaba, designated them as Muthadar and stipulating that they were to hold their hill zamindari as service tenure on payment of a fixed Nazarana to Govt. They (Britishers) allowed the old Mutha order to continue but reorganised it for better administrative efficiency. In recognition of the pre-exist Mutha-head as the hereditary local chief of his Mutha, they (Britisher) vested with him powers of administering justice in conformity with the Kondha tradition in lieu of annual payment of Nazarana or a lump gift and supply of Bethi of free labour to the British Political Agent as and when required. As a corollary to this, Mutha-head started levying regular annual mamul or nominal gift in cash or kind from each Kondh family. Following this, the British administration created a few posts of assistants to the Mutha-head, viz. the Karjee or judicial clerk, the Bevari or the revenue clerk-cum- accountant and the Dandia or constables. All these posts were hereditary and some amount of arable land was attached to each of them in lieu of service. The Karjee was preferably a Brahmin or Karan, the Bevari, a Karan (writer caste), and Dandia, a Paik. Furthermore, the Mutha was divided into several Sub-Mutha, each comprised a few villages. Each Sub-Mutha, was kept under the direct supervision of a Kondha hereditary official known as Mutha-mallick or Patamajhi. And at the village level, in each village a Pradhan or Headman and Chatia or Chaukidar were also appointed on hereditary basis from among the Kondhas and Pana (a scheduled caste-drummer and basket, cane-maker by profession) respectively. They were also allotted agriculture land for their service. All these

Mutha, Sub-Mutha and village functionaries were answerable to the Mutha-head.

Mutha Functionaries :

The function of Mutha-heads and Muthadars were primarily to maintain law and order, to report crimes and to accompany touring officers during tours in the Agency area. They were also directly responsible for the revenue and tax collection.

Mutha-Head as the chief of the Mutha, looked after the general administration, ensured proper execution of civil agency works and collect land revenue in cash or kind and Mamuls through the Bevari. He maintained the customary laws of the Kondh tribes and maintained order which ensured safety of life and security of property. He settled all sorts of disputes that were brought to him, domestic or otherwise. He heard the complaints and delivered judgment on them. He inflicted punishment and impose fines on a miscreant or culprit, redressed the grievances of an aggrieved in consonance with the Kondh traditional rule.

In all types of cases, before the Mutha-head sits on judgment, both parties, the complainant and the respondent, are required to pay a deferential allowance in cash or kind called Mahat (meaning honour) to him as a mark of respect. Besides, a small portion of the fines collected from the accused is also appropriated by the Mutha-head and his assistants, and the rest goes to the aggrieved.

The Mutha-head used to supervise personally the collection of Mamul from all residents of the Mutha who owned land, either homestead or agricultural. All residents paid Mamul or nominal gift, in recognition of their ownership and to establish hereditary right over

the land they possessed and to avoid any possible eviction or encroachment. Thus the Mamul system was a feudal in character and the object of the system was to keep the Adivasis under check and control through the Agency of the non-Adivasi chiefs appointed as Mutha-heads, who hailed from the princely families of the plains of the Ganjam district. Besides this individual mamul, the Mutha-head levied Mutha-Nazarana consisted of an assorted presentation of rural agricultural produce to the Raja who acknowledged its receipt by offering a silk saree to the Mutha-head. Offer of the saree by the Raja to the Mutha-head signified the former's approval of the latter's continuance as Mutha-head. But this Nazarana or the presentation transformed in to regular revenue to the British administration. Since British time the Mutha-head started collecting one rupee and ten measures (one measure is equivalent to one seer) of rice from each village every year irrespective of size towards the Mutha revenue; but actually he paid twelve rupees annually out of the total collection of sixty seven rupees and six hundred and seventy measures of rice. The rest he appropriated.

The British Political Agent discontinued the royal practice of presentation of saree to the Mutha-head against the payment of the annual revenue of the Mutha; but instead initiated the practice of issuing written receipt for that.

Apart from the above income, the Mutha-head had other types of customary receipts from the Kondh residents of his Mutha, viz

- (1) Saree-Mamul – The Mutha-head used to collect Rs.5 to 10 for a saree from the villagers through Mutha Mallicks, on visiting a village.
- (2) Butta-Mamul and Madha- Mamul — when a head of the Kondh family dies and Mutha-

head is called on to offer condolence, these Mamul was being collected from the eldest son or brother or any consanguineous of the deceased. Madha was paid 3 or 4 days after the death @ Re.1, if he had heir and @ Rs.2, if he had no heir. Bhuta Mamul was paid in shape of kinds i.e 20 khondis of paddy and a bullock worth Rs.10 by the heirs of the deceased. If the deceased left no heir except the widow, half of the property was collected as Mamul. In case of the deceased leaving no heir, the entire property was divided between Mutha-head and the concerned villagers at the ratio of 50:50.

- (3) Sanja-Mamul - The Sanja (share) Mamul and Sistu had some relationship with the lands; was collected on the occasion of first harvest of the crop.

- (4) Kedu-Mamul – It was associated with the sacrifice of buffalo to satisfy the deities. This was an assortment of various agriculture produces and may be of any quantity. The organisers of the Kedu paid Rs.2 to the Patra, Rs.22 to the Peshenia and Rs.2 to the Dolo. When the sacrifice was made on a new land, the Patra used to get Rs.6, one brass 'lota' and a new cloth from a Kondh village and Rs.2 from an Odia village.

Bethi – The Mamuls were payable both in cash and kind and also included free labour (Bethi). There was two type of Bethi viz. Raj- Bethi for construction of public works i.e to maintain roads, construction of buildings, repair of rest-shed etc. The second type of Bethi included obligation for catering to the personal needs and for agriculture operations and all other household activities of the Mutha-head or Patra and his establishment. On receipt of order from Mutha-head, it was the duty of the village Headman to collect persons for Bethi, one from every family excepting those of the office-bearers of the Mutha organisation,

and send for Bethi out of turn; and failure, under any circumstance, to comply with meant immediate payment of one day's wage to Headman to engage a person as a substitute thereto. The duty of the village Headman was to supervise the work where the Bethies were engaged. They were to make their own eating arrangement.

The unpaid labour (free labour) or Bethi was rendered to Mutha-heads and the period of such labour varied from one day to ten days.

In addition to the Mamuls which had a bearing upon the land, the Muthadars and their subordinates were also collecting Mamuls in different forms and under different names. Those Mamuls have been recorded in appendix XVI of Taylor's memoirs. To mention a few important of them are:

Dali Mamul i.e presentation of parched split pulses (dal - hill red gram) and pumpkin to the Mutha-head during Dusahara;

Sikar Mamul – Under this system the killer of the animal had to give a fixed share of flesh to the Patra, Hoddadar and Paik.

Jatra Mamul – The tribals used to pay the Muthadar Re.1 on the occasions of celebrations of Dushara, Rathajatra, with or without goat.

Baghakhai – When there was a death by tiger kill, the Mutha-head used to accompany the police officer for investigation. For this purpose, Mamul was payable to the Mutha-head and party, in shape of goat and rice. In absence of goat and rice, cash payment was made.

Bagada-Mamul was a share of the second crop grown on the hill slopes was collected in shape of red-gram, jhudanga, castor, kangu etc. by the Muthadars.

The quantum of these Mamuls were varying from one Mutha to another.

According to Taylor's Mamoirs, Mamuls were liable to alternation or adjustment from time to time at the direction of the Govt. The Agent was competent to revise or resettle the Mamuls. The Civil courts had no power to decide any question as to the rate of Mamul payable.

The Karjee – He was the judicial clerk of the Mutha and was responsible to the Mutha-head or Patra. He was to maintain all case records, placed before the Mutha-head for adjudication on any dispute. He summoned the parties to the place of hearing, and recorded the judgment of the Mutha-head. Apart from this, whenever any instruction received from British Govt. to the Mutha, with the approval of Mutha-head he passed it on to the Mutha-Mallicks for compliance.

Bevari – He was the Revenue clerk- cum accountant of the Mutha, was responsible to collect various Mamuls or taxes from all over the Mutha under direct supervision of Mutha-head. He supervised new patches of shifting-cultivation for revenue assessment. He maintained all records of Mutha administration.

Dandia – They were the constables called as Dandia, appointed on hereditary basis from the Paik caste (Paiks formed the local militia in south Orissa in those days) to constitute the constabulary of the Mutha with a view to helping the Mutha-head in maintaining law and order within the Mutha and ensure administrative control over the Kondhs. They worked as official messengers of the Mutha administration. Apart from carrying out errands, they searched required persons and brought them to Mutha headquarters and attend to such duties as were assigned to them.

Mutha-Mallick – The Mutha, was divided into several Sub-Mutha, each comprised of a few villages. Each Sub-Mutha was kept under direct supervision of a Kondha hereditary official known as Muthamallick or Pattmajhi. They looked after the immediate law and order of their respective area. They settled minor interpersonal and interfamilial disputes and brought to the notice of the Mutha-head complicated cases and law and order problems. They assisted the Mutha administration in the collection of tax, in the organisation of Bethi work and in such other works. As potential and indispensable incumbents of the Mutha organisation, although subordinate to the Mutha-head, they were invariably consulted by the former in every important affair. They were also to adjudicate and settle dispute on any other socio-cultural problems if required.

Village Headman – In every village there was a village Headman, known as Pradhan, who looked after the immediate law and order problems of his village and brought dispute and other cases which he failed to settle to the Muthamallick for necessary action. As village level representative of Mutha organisation he attended to various instructions from the administration. He was respected in the village, assisted the Mutha administration in collecting revenue and in arranging persons for Bethi works from his village.

Chhatia — There was a Chawkidar in every village called 'Chhatia'. They were also appointed on hereditary basis from among the Kondha or Pana. He was the messenger and bearer of the village headman as well as those of other Mutha functionaries. He was at the back and call of the village headman. He reported each case of birth or death in the village to the Karjee who maintained the record.

Besides the above functionaries, the Mutha-heads were surrounded themselves with various other subordinate officers i.e sub-ordinate agents, Peshnia (Akin to Paik), the Deshipatra, the Padar and the kothadalei, who were utilised by the Mutha-heads in enforcing demands on the people in Agency Tracts. These agents were the personal servants of the Mutha-heads and Muthadars remunerated them either by the enjoyment of free of all levies, of relatively larger holdings or by the appropriation under private arrangement with their employer, of a portion of the total Mamul collection.

The Mutha-heads and Mutha officials were appointed by the Agent subject to the power of revision by the Revenue Commissioner, Orissa.

The Sub-Mutha-heads and their Mutha officials were also appointed by Agent and the village head and other subordinates were appointed by the Special Assistant Agents. As the Mutha-head system was ideal to the conditions existing then, a well defined system of appointment of Mutha-heads and Mutha officials, grant of leave, punishment etc. was prescribed by the Agent for effective control over Mutha officials. The Agent had powers to punish a Mutha-head and the Special Assistant Agent had powers to fine Mutha-heads up to Rs.15. The Agent had powers to dismiss a Mutha-head and a Sub-Mutha-head including their subordinate officers.

Sanjay Kumar Habada, Former Director of Handloom & Textiles, Odisha, Bhubaneswar.