



Cultural Confluence: The Chauhan Era And Its Socio-Religious Impacts In Sambalpur

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Abstract

This research article delves into the historical epoch of the Chauhan dynasty and its profound socio-religious impacts on the region of Sambalpur. The Chauhan rulers, known for their military prowess and cultural patronage, left an indelible mark on the socio-religious fabric of Sambalpur. This study explores the intersections of politics, culture, and religion during the Chauhan era, shedding light on the confluence of diverse cultural elements that shaped the identity of Sambalpur.

Keywords: Chauhan dynasty, Sambalpur, socio-religious impacts, cultural confluence, religious syncretism, military prowess, cultural patronage, legacy.

Introduction:

The Chauhan dynasty, renowned for its significant contributions to Indian history, held sway over various regions, including Sambalpur. This article focuses on the socio-religious transformations that occurred in Sambalpur under Chauhan rule, emphasizing the cultural confluence that ensued. The history of Sambalpur, a region with the rich cultural confluence that characterized by the rule of the Chauhan dynasty played significant socio-religious transformations that left an indelible imprint on the ethos of Sambalpur. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, the Chauhan rulers not only shaped the political landscape but also fostered an environment where diverse cultural traditions and religious practices flourished and intermingled.

This study endeavours to explore the profound socio-religious impacts of the Chauhan era in Sambalpur, throw light on the dynamic interactions between different communities, faiths, and artistic expressions during this transformative period. By examining the interplay of Hindu, tribal, and folk traditions against the backdrop of Chauhan rule, the article aim to unravel the cultural exchange that defined Sambalpur's identity during this epoch. Through a multidisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, cultural studies, and religious exploration, this research work seeks to find out beliefs, rituals, and artistic innovations that emerged from the blending of indigenous practices with influences from neighbouring regions.

This paper not only serves as a testament to the Sambalpur's past but also underscores the significance of cultural confluence as a catalyst for social cohesion and artistic creativity. An attempt has been made to identify specific aspects of this socio-religious transformation, examining the role of patronage, the fusion of artistic styles, and the syncretism of religious beliefs that characterized Sambalpur under Chauhan rule. Through this

exploration, it is aim to provide a comprehensive account of how the Chauhan era reshaped the cultural contours of Sambalpur, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to resonate in the region's traditions and collective memory.

Historical Context:

The present province of Odisha, which emerged as an organic administrative unit on 1st January 1948, as a result of the integration of Garhjat States constitutes nothing but the territorial nucleus of ancient Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala. The territory of Odisha extended from the Ganges on the North to the Godavari on the South and Amarkantak hills on the West to the Bay of Bengal on the east in medieval period. But when Odisha was annexed to the Mughal empire in 1592, for the efficient revenue administration, Raja Todar Mall, revenue minister of Akbar, divided Odisha into two parts, viz. (1) the 'Mughalbandi' comprising the plain and fertile high yielding coastal region (chiefly the district of Balasore, Cuttack and Puri) under the direct administration of the emperor and (2) the 'Garjats' comprising the hilly, low yielding tribal regions under the local chiefs who used to pay fixed annual tributaries to the emperor and in return were recognised as the Feudatories of the Imperial Mughals.

Sambalpur in ancient period was a part of South Kosala whose larger territorial extent roughly comprised the Raipur and Bilaspur districts in Madhya Pradesh and Sambalpur, Bolangir and Sundergarh district of Odisha. The Rishabha Tirtha and Kala Tirtha which can be identified in the region are described in the Aranyaka Parva of Mahabharata. The town of Sambalpur is known to be much older than the time of Balaram Dev who became the ruler of Sambalpur kingdom about the middle of the 16th century. In his book "Geographika" of Ptolemy refers to a town 'Sambalaka' on the bank of 'Manada'. 'Sambalaka' and 'Manada' may be identified with modern Sambalpur and the river Mahanadi respectively.

The confederacy of Sambalpur Garjats came into political existence in the 14th century A.D. as the dependencies of the Chauhan Maharaja of Patna. The territory of Sambalpur ceded by Balaram dev the brother of Narasingha dev the ruler of patina in the middle of sixteenth century who later built a kingdom which was independent from Patna. Balaram Dev consolidated the Chauhan rule in Sambalpur region and after the death of his brother Narasingh Dev, he also attempted to reduce the kingdom of patna.

Balaram Dev was succeeded by his son Hrudayanarayan Dev, who ruled Sambalpur for a brief period of five years (1600-1605). His son Balabhadra Dev was a powerful king who ruled for a long period of about 25 years (1605 – 1630). The most important event of his administration was the war against Baudh, a neighbouring state, lying to the east of the Chauhan kingdom. Baudh was restored to him when he promised to pay tribute to Sambalpur.

The most powerful Chauhan ruler of Sambalpur was Baliar Singh, son of Madhukar Dev. The political authority of Baliar Singh thus extended over a vast territory comprising the present Sambaalpur, Sundergarh, Bolangir and a portion of Phulbani, Kalahandi and of Raipur and Bilaspur districts of Madhya Pradesh. It almost corresponds to the South Kosala kingdom of ancient time. After the death of Baliar Singh, for sometimes Sambalpur was ruled by the Prime-Minister who was known as the Dewan. However, in 1690 Chhatra Sai, grandson of Baliar Singh came out successful in crowning himself as the king of Sambalpur.

Sambalpur was witnessed civil war for sometimes, however Jayant Singh younger brother of Raja Abhaya Raya who escaped from Sambalpur during the civil war marched against Akkbar Raya with the help of the ruler of Sarangarh name Dewan Viswanath Sai. Akbar Raya was defeated and killed. The small boy balabhadra Sai was also put to death. After that, in 17th June 1781 the coronation ceremony of Jayant Singh was performed.

No doubt Sambalpur and her dependencies came under the Maratha possessions in 1800 A.D. But in 1803 the British conquered coastal Odisha (Mughalbandi) after breaking the feeble Maratha resistance. In January 1804 Sambalpur was conquered as the Maratha governor Tantia Pharnavis was defeated. But the occupation of Sambalpur created problem, because it could not be included in the provisions of the Treaty of Deogaon that was signed on 17th December 1803. Ultimately in 1806, G.H. Barlow, the Governor-General restored Sambalpur and Patna to the Marathas. But in 1818 Appa Saheb Madhoji Bhonsla in a provisional agreement ceded the Sambalpur group of states to the British suzerainty. Again from 1818 to 1849 the Chauhan rule witnessed series of succession disputes on account of the failure to provide a natural heir. With the death of Narayan Singh, the last raja of Sambalpur, Dalhousie applied the Doctrine of Lapse due to the absence of natural heir and Sambalpur became a British administered territory.

After occupying the Sambalpur Garjat states, the company continued the traditional policy of keeping the Mughalbandi separate from the Garjats because under the ring-fence scheme the company attempted to create a series of buffer states along the frontiers all over India. The states thus were brought under the political control of the company and the British authority became “paramount in effect”. The company remained defecto supreme and could effectively impose its will on the states regardless of the terms of the treaties. But the Mutiny of 1857 put an end to the expansionist policy of the British Government and the administration of the states was left to the discretion of their respective Chiefs. The Oriya-speaking states may be divided into three groups in accordance with the nature of their relations with the British Government; viz. (i) Tributary Mahals (ii) the Sambalpur Garjat and (iii) Singhbum States.

Military Prowess and Political Administration:

The Chauhan glory reached to its zenith during the Baliaradeva (Cir. 1650-1688) the eldest son of Madhukaradeva. He conquered Bonai and Yamagarta Mandala.¹ He bore the proud title of ‘Hirakhand Chhatrapati’ and ‘Atharagarha Maudamani’. He was the undisputed master of eighteen garhas (forts).² The political authority of Baliaradeva extended over a vast territory comprising present Sambalpur, Deogarh, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bolangir, Sonapur and portion of Phulbani, Nawapara and Kalahandi districts of Orissa and Raipur and Bilaspur districts of Madhya Pradesh. Besides, he created the estates of Barpali and Saria and bestowed on his sons Vikram Singh and Fateh Singh respectively. During his rule Sambalpur was a prosperous town and notable centre of learning temple of Huma is said to have been built during his reign. Poet Gangadhar Mishra composed ‘Kosalananda Kavya’ a historical Kavya in Sanskrit.

Ratan Singh who became the king after Baliaradeva fell a victim in the hands of the powerful and ambitious Dewans who usurped the throne. During the that time Chhatra Sai, the eldest son of Ratan Singh who was at Chandrapur could not venture to come to Sambalpur immediately and fled to Sarangarh. Being helped by the ruler of Sarangarh he later on recovered Sambalpur in 1690. He renovated the fort of Sambalpur and excavated a tank named 'Chhatra Sagar'. He built the present temple of Samalai and repaired many others.³ The temple of 'Burharaja' on the top of a hill near Sambalpur stands as the example of violent court intrigues and plots during his reign. Chhatra Sai executed one of his queens and her son Burha Raya as he suspected the Rani to be involved in a conspiracy against his life for securing the throne in favour of her son. Later on, the repented for it and built the above temple in memory of the prince.

The bad sign of political conspiracy and treachery that was initiated during Chhatra Sai culminated under Ajit Singh, the weak and luxurious successor of Chhatra Sai. The power of the Dewans crossed all limits who very often made the king as a puppet in their hands. The tragedy was that nobody would give a peaceful and strong rule to the people. The most notorious of such Dewans was Akbar Raya who captured the 'Gadi' by killing Ajit Singh to establish his personal rule. The next king Abhaya Singh tried to suppress Akbar but being imprisoned by the later lost his life in 1778 A.D.⁴ Jayanta Singh, the brother of Abhaya Singh, however, could able to oust and kill Akbar Raya with the help of the feudatory chief of Sarangarh and became the king in 1791 A.D.

No doubt Sambalpur was recovered by Jayanta Singh but he could not rule it peacefully because of the Marathas of Nagpur who became enemies of Sambalpur owing to the past activities of Akbar Raya.⁵ In 1794 Jayanta Singh purchased peace by agreeing to pay annual tribute of 32,000 in cutcha coins. But again, conflict broke out between the two in 1797.⁶ As a result Bhup Singh, the Maratha general sent to Sambalpur who succeeded in capturing Jayanta Singh and his son Maharaja Sai to be detained at Chanda fort as prisoners. Bhup Singh was appointed as the governor of Sambalpur. Bhup Singh, who was appointed as the governor of Sambalpur. Elated by this success he joined hands with Rani Ratan Kumari and disregarded the orders from Nagpur. He was therefore ousted and Tantia Pharnavis was appointed as new governor.

Bhup Singh and Rani Ratan Kumari fled to the British camp with whose help General Broughton occupied Sambalpur on 2nd January 1804 from the Marathas.⁷ But the Britishers had to transfer it again to the Marathas as per the treaty of Deogaon signed on 17th December 1803, between Raghuji Bhonsla and Lord Wellesley. The Marathas, however, failed to enter to Sambalpur due to the stiff opposition from Rani Ratan Kumari. In November 1808 the Marathas played a treachery and took possession of Sambalpur by force. Sambalpur remained under the Marathas for 9 years. Raghuji Bhonsla died on 22nd March 1816 and

Sambalpur was again occupied by the Britishers. Jayanta Singh and Maharaja Sai were released from the fort of Chanda before Rani Ratan Kumari had died in 1816.

Jayanta Singh was placed on the Gadi but died after a new month and succeeded by Maharaja Sai. He remained as the king of Samblapur only in name and was controlled by the first British Political Agent of Sambalpur named Rousedge.

Maharaja Sai died in 1827 and his Rani Mohan Kumari was placed on the throne which resulted in a widespread violence in Sambalpur because the people resented the rule of the Rani. It was, however, suppressed by the Britishers and the Rani was deposed in 1833 after which an old and feeble man Narayan Singh, an uncle of Chauhan Zamindar Bhawani Singh of Barpali was made the king on 11th October 1833. This impolitic decision again roused great public fury and discontent which was exhibited through widespread arson, loot, murder and revolts. The relatives of Maharaja Sai whose claim to the throne was more justified and stronger rose into revolts. Among them Balarama Sai and Surendra Sai were most prominent. Surendra Sai undertook a fierce struggle against the Britishers for more than a decade which became a constant headache for the British authority. But being prey to a treachery he was arrested and sent to Hazaribag jail as life prisoner.

Narayan Singh on the other hand after a gloomy and insignificant rule died on 10th September 1849 leaving to male issue. Sambalpur, then lapsed to the British dominion on the basis of the Doctrine of Lapse and the kingdom was converted into a mere district. Thus the empire which had a glorious start met a tragic end. But during their good days the Chauhan have valuable contributions in different felids which are worth appreciating leaving thereby their imperishable mark in the socio-cultural life of the region.

Cultural Patronage:

The Chauhan's rule in Western Orissa was a phase of interaction between the tribal and Aryan culture. Out of this new customs and tradition concept emerged in the society gradually. Among them a lot of customs and tradition still prevailing in this Western Orissa region point to the synthetization of tribals and Aryan culture. Among them example of example of the Car Festival is prominent one where Savaras took part prominently in Puri. In Sambalpur of Western Orissa through the Savaras do not play important role in the cart festival, tribals along with Hindus observes it with cordiality.

The fusion of tribalism and Hinduism can also be revealed from the establishment of the tribal gods and Hinduism like Samalai, Patneswari, Khambeswari, Mauli etc. by the Chauhan ruler as their presiding the tutelary goddess. The charms and spells of the tribals are respected and being practiced by the Brahmins till today. The appointment of the tribals and lower caste people like Gonds, the Kondhs, the Dumals and the Malis, the Jhankars as priest in religious places of tribal goddess by the Chauhan kings point out the fusion of

tribal and Hindu culture their region. The Gonds and Kondhs, the Jhankars are still worshipping the village deities like Mauli, Kandhei, Budhi etc. The Thanapati Malis worship the Saivite and Shakta temple whereas Dumbal worship Khambeswari.

Human Sacrifice:

The tribal custom of Mariah (Human Sacrifice) was prevalent in different Shakta temple during the Chauhans rule. After the abolition of Mariah (Human Sacrifices), the animal sacrifice still continuing in some temples and festival today. Animals and birds like sheep, goats, buffalos and fowls are still being sacrificed on the occasion of different tribal and Hindu festivals.

Political Tradition:

In the sphere of political there was also a tradition of Tika Ceremony in Padampur Division of Sambalpur during Chauhan's which was performed by the Binjhals, Zamindar's of Patna on the occasion of accession of the King of Patna. There was another tradition that the new chief of Kalahandi used to sit on the lap of Kondhs Sardar of Patna.⁸

The Pilgrimage:

The pilgrimage to Narsinghnath of Paikmal was also popular tradition of Sambalpur people their belief was that all the sins were washed away after bathing in the Narsinghnath's holy water. And a great fair in the month of Baisakh Purnima and people came from far place to visit this place.

Religious Tradition:

There is a tradition in the Huma (Sambalpur) how in every Shivaratri a Brahmin (Hota) of Papanga is worshipped first and by the used garland of the Hota, God Mahadeva of Huma is worshipped later on it shows the privileged position of Brahmanas in society.⁹

Marriage Customs:

The customs related to marriage are marriage of girls after attaining puberty, marriage under the regulation of clan exogamy, present of monogamy and polygamy, child marriage not allowed, marriage under blood relationship also not allowed and widow marriage was also not prevalent.

These customs and tradition not only depicted the cultural relationship between tribals and Hindus, but also shows that in spite of all differences the tribals and Hindus cannot observe any fairs and festivals without each other's involvement to it.

Social Structure:

Society was primarily divided into four sections namely:- 1) Brahmins, 2) Kshatriyas, 3) Vaishyas and 4) Sudras. Gopinath Sarangi writer of Chikitsa Manjari the court physician of Raja Chhatra Sai (1691-1723) A.D. of Sambalpur writes that:

“Nagar nama Sambalpur codiya sahastra basanti ghar!
Brahman adi kari charibarna sakal bidhama yahi purna”¹⁰

These castes were further divided into sub-caste. No doubt, the Brahmins were at the apex of all social caste pyramid enjoyed predominant position in the society pyramid but they were also divided into two groups namely: the Aryankas means (Jhadua) and the Utkaliyas means (Udia). And they both are patronized by the Chauhan rulers as evident from the verses of ‘Sambala Manasa’ 1923 of Swapneswar Das.

The Chauhans and the Rajputs were the dominating and ruling class among the Kshatriya caste. The Rajputs were the close and relatives of the Chauhan chiefs who entitled themselves as ‘Singh Deo, and Singh Baboo’ and held as different Gotras and Zamindars the ruling Gonds and Binjhal chief also elevated to the rank of the Kshatriyas during the Chauhan rule they were entitled as ‘Singh’, ‘Sai’ and ‘Singh Barihas’ like the Kshatriya Chauhans due to their impression on the Chauhans ruler these Zamindar helped the Chauhan rule at their critical time and their long association with the Chauhan they were given the status of Kshatriyas, B.C. Mazumdar writes:-

“The Zamindar of Borasambar himself is the author of the book ‘Nrsimha Mahamatmya’ and he has claimed in his book a Rajput origin for the Binjhals.”¹¹

The Vaishyas and the Sudra constituted the other caste of the society besides these were 36 major caste and tribes (Chhattish jati and Janajati) in the Chauhans state.¹²

The principal tribes of Sambalpur at that time were the Savaras, the Mundas, the Jharas, the Gonds and Binjhal, the Konds, the Bhuiyas, the Kudas, the Karmis, the Kishans and the Oraons. The Gonds and Binjhal as above were predominating tribals among them. They were Hinduised during the Chauhan rule besides them there were other tribes which are partially Hinduised tribals like the Chasas, the Santalas, the Panas, the Doms, the Gauras, the Telis, the Keutas, the Kumbharas, the Malis, the Dumals and the Kultas.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Chauhan epoch in Sambalpur marked a significant period of cultural confluence and socio-religious transformation. The rule of the Chauhan dynasty not only shaped the political landscape but also left an indelible imprint on the region's social and religious fabric.

During this era, Sambalpur experienced a rich blend of cultures, with influences from Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous tribal traditions. This confluence contributed to the development of a unique cultural synthesis characterized by a harmonious coexistence of diverse beliefs and practices.

The patronage of the Chauhan rulers towards art, architecture, and literature further enriched Sambalpur's cultural heritage. The construction of temples and monuments reflected not only religious fervour but also architectural innovation and artistic brilliance.

Moreover, the Chauhan epoch witnessed the emergence of new social norms and practices that shaped everyday life. The intermingling of different communities fostered a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect, laying the groundwork for a pluralistic society.

Religiously, the era was marked by the proliferation of devotional movements and the rise of religious leaders who sought to reform and reinterpret existing traditions. This led to the evolution of new religious practices and rituals, which had a lasting impact on the religious landscape of Sambalpur.

In summary, the Chauhan epoch in Sambalpur stands out as a transformative period characterized by cultural confluence and socio-religious dynamism. Its legacy continues to resonate in the region's customs, traditions, and architectural marvels, underscoring the enduring influence of this remarkable era on the identity and ethos of Sambalpur.

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