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‘Subaltern’ or the ‘Sovereign’: Revisiting the History of Tribal State Formation in India

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Abstract

History of subalterns, especially tribals has been viewed in India as an anthropological and ethnic construct. Stereotypes of backwardness, nudity and isolation of tribes have generally been the main argument of these studies. In a sense they have been the unfortunate victims of the ‘politics of knowledge-making’, practiced by the dominant groups against marginalised people. The essay explores in detail the reasons behind these constructs and in this process revisits the glorious past of three tribal dynasties namely the Cheros, the Gonds and the Ahoms to establish firmly that tribal life in India since ages has a deep rooted notion of state and sovereignty. In this process wide range of texts, from the Vedas and Mahabharata to Persian texts and folk tales and songs have been explored. During post- colonial period there has been a natural aversion of the mainstream to give recognition and respectful position to the subalterns. However, emergence of women history, Dalit history and tribal history tends to challenge these narratives and misconceptions. Colonial mindset of racial supremacy has found support from the caste politics in India which derisively looks upon the tribes with a sense of ‘otherness’. The essay asserts that it is high time for historians to construct and foreground the real narrative of these subalterns, in which they may be visualized as sovereigns, and not subalterns in their regions.

Introduction

Though history writing conventionally involves the process of recording the events of the past in chronological order, yet this definition is incomplete and does not incorporate the entire gamut and scope of history writing. In addition to the essentials of ‘whats’, ‘wheres’, and ‘whens’, the process of history writing involves intricacies of ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ also. A simple chronological order may give answers to the ‘whats’, ‘wheres’, and ‘whens’, but ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ call for deeper understanding of the events and their far-reaching impact on the course and shape of history. These inquiries when put in a chronological order by the historian through his training of the craft leads to creation of scientific histories that forms a part of mainstream history. We have a plethora of evidence of mainstream history, i.e. the administrative history that deals with the rulers and the ruled that includes numerous battles, wars and victories; cultural history that deals with the development in arts, science and

technology, music, literature and philosophy, social history that deals with different strata of society and their interrelations and many more strands of history that are studied under this broad categorisation. In a sense, they constitute the study of the elites or the more dominant sections. Marginalised people have hardly been represented in these dominant narratives. Take for instance, their representation as 'subaltern' in the scientific history genre, despite the fact that they often had a parallel system of administration that was worth representation in the pages of old records. The uniqueness and novelties in their tradition, customs and rituals provides sufficient reasons for their inclusion in the category of 'mainstream history'.

I propose to begin with by discussing anthropological studies. Here the distinctiveness of the tribal community has been the focal point wherein their nomadic life, hunting acumen, and food gathering, which finds its crescendo in the *Jhum* (slash and burn agriculture/ shifting agriculture) farming and among some in systematic agriculture, sets the tone and tenor of the discussion. The empirical description about them gives us a very limited understanding. In their fieldwork and academic deliberations, scholars like Sarat Chandra Roy, Verrier Elwin, Ranajit Guha, L.P Vidyarthi, among others, have used tribal society and anthropology as synonyms. Their works have etched a strong impression in the minds of academics and policy makers. These anthropological studies have build an image of skimpy clad tribal youths that stays in the subconscious mind of the readers. Verrier Elwin, who was the Deputy Director of Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) and had an important role to play in the framing of tribal policies in the post-independence period gave an erotic depiction of the social institutions of learning and education of tribes such as '*Ghotul* of the Murias *and Dhumkuria* of the Oraons. These have painted the tribes in 'blue' hue, that has created an impression of them being backward and laden with sexual desire. We find here a continuity of colonial ethnographic tradition which E.T Dalton's (1973) famous pictorial depiction of the tribes of India had created. The culture of portraying the tribal girls in colourful short, revealing dresses in the Bollywood films has further deepened this erotic imagery. This portrayal has been disjoined by the imagery of subaltern studies. In my career as an administrative officer who has been keenly interested in understanding the different facets of tribal life I have come across numerous possibilities of looking at the tribal life differently. This is reinforced by the availability of the literature that explores the possibility of writing the history of tribal regional state-making processes. Therefore, the mainstream understanding of the tribe as the subaltern stands challenged in the light of new evidences I discuss in this essay.

Divided into sections the difficulties and challenges in the field of tribal studies are brought to fore and an attempt is made to look at possible solutions. The first section focuses on how tribals have been projected in subaltern studies; the second section examines what difficulty the available sources may create if the historical reconstruction is attempted; the third seeks to hisroicise tribal sovereignty to argue that despite apparent problems the need of the hour is to take a fresh look so that tribals are accorded their rightful place in history.

Section I: Tribe as the subaltern 'Other'

Thankfully, the efforts of the subaltern school of historians sets the ball rolling in a different direction by stapling the flipping and flying pages of tribal history together. Though they have thus been able to bring tribal studies to the centre-stage of history,

their writing showed a clear bias that prevailed in our society in general. This created difficulties of different nature, which I shall elaborate below.

I would like to elaborate on the historical probing of the tribes. The Warlis of Maharashtra are known to be adept at various methods of farming. Still, their identity as a nomadic tribe is of a community which keeps on shifting its base from one place to another in its bid to practice *Jhoom* (shifting agriculture). This identification of the Warlis has been so deeply connected to their character that their efforts in some other regions where they have established state structures and established themselves as sovereign power groups has been grossly overlooked. Subaltern historian David Hardiman (1987) portrays quite different picture of the life and historical development of the Warli tribal community of coastal Maharashtra. The history of the Warli community is as complex as that of the rulers of the mainstream, whose acts have found pride of place in the ballads and chronicles of the middle age (Heredia 2000: 15-23). The above stated facts arrived at by Hardiman do affirm that while mainstream historians have ignored this till recently subaltern historians have started the work of documenting sovereign and state making histories of the tribes. Subaltern school of historians generally portrayed tribals as the subaltern other, necessary victims of colonial subordination and exploitation. It is not surprising therefore that though they claimed to have been espousing the cause of documenting the dreams, aspirations, pains, pleasures and thoughts of the marginalised communities in the pages of history, their tribal history mainly remained nothing but 'a series of revolts' for the mainstream historians.[1]

However, the fact cannot be denied that this was the central project of the nationalist school of history as well. To promote their purpose of highlighting decolonizing trends in colonial period they gave larger emphasis to tribal revolts. Furthermore, though their avowed objective was the construction of objective history, they considered 'only the government documents' as 'the true evidence'. They, therefore, presented a series of works on anti-British revolutions/*ulgulan*/revolts that underlined their understanding of tribal history writing. In the context of Bihar-Jharkhand, it began with the studies by K.K. Datta (1940)[2] and later by his student Jagdish Chandra Jha on Kol Insurrection (1964) and Bhumij Revolt (1967).[3] Some other prominent works were done by Suresh Prasad Sinha in 1964, Kumar Suresh Singh[4] and Purshottam Kumar.[5]

There has been a perceptible aversion that at times seems to be natural among the patriarchal and stratified *Savarna* (high caste Hindus) society towards the physical labour loving and egalitarian tribal society. While the latter comfortably derived

[1] David Arnold, 'Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudema-Rampa Risings 1839-1929', *Subaltern Studies I*; David Hardiman, 'Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922-23', *Subaltern Studies II*; Tanika Sarkar, 'Jeetu Santal's Movement in Maladah, 1924-1932: A Study of Tribal Protest', *Subaltern Studies III*; Gautam Bhadra, 'Four rebels of Eighteen Fifty-Seven: (Gonu Ho and others); R.Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, OUP, 1983. This is rather the general trend. I would like to refer such studies and publications as *Bastar Ke Vidroh Ka Itihas* (History of Bastar Revolt)', *'Gunda Dhur Ki Talash Mein* (In Search of Gunda Dhur)'.

[2] *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57*, University of Calcutta Press, Calcutta, 1940.

[3] J.C. Jha, *Kol Insurrection in Chotanagpur*, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co. 1964.

[4] *Dust-storm and Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and his Movement in Chotanagpur 1874-1901*, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966.

[5] *Mutinies and Rebellions in Chotanagpur* (1831-1857), Patna, Janaki Prakashan, 1991.

sustenance from physical labour, the former finds pride in shunning it. The prejudiced behavior of the so-called mainstream society towards the tribal community has a bearing of this tendency. As a consequence, the tribal community slowly but surely got cast away with a stamp of 'otherness', this distinction has been so profound that they are still struggling to be a part of the 'WE' of the preamble of the Constitution– 'WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA'. We should not forget that this concept of 'otherness' of the tribal community derives sustenance from colonial history as well as the indigenous identity politics which anchors on this concept of the marginalised 'other' (Sen 2018: 50-6). It should not be forgotten in this context that anthropology, more specifically ethnography besides being a branch of the academic discipline, has also been a handy tool in the hands of imperialists that aimed at rupturing the unity of the people by way of erasing their identity. Is this not one of the purposes of the 'identity politics'?

Problematising reconstruction of tribal history

Consequently, in the context of Jharkhand today, when someone initiates the discourse on tribal society, he/she is left with Hobson's choice. He/she may choose to begin with the minor tribal communities like Birhor-Birijia, but must finally end up with either of the major tribes (Santhal, Munda, Oraon or Ho) or more popular theme like Birsa Munda Movement (1899-1900). This biased and preconceived approach serves only a small purpose. In a large number of cases, academic discourses fail to put the focus on the complexities of tribal societies. They generally fail to visualize that the tribal world constitutes of different small and large groups representing different cultural development levels. Like the Warlis mentioned above, the land of Jharkhand is inhabited by a wide and dissimilar group of tribal communities. While nomadic Birhor-Parahia tribes, who have cohabited with the Birijia-Paharia tribes practice *Jhoom* farming, there are tribes such as Santal, Munda, Ho, Kharia, Oraon and Bedia, who are developed peasantised communities. The other category of tribes residing in Jharkhand as the Chero, Kherwar and the Bhumij have been known since ages to be communities that have created states and followed the principle of dynastic rule. This complexity of tribal history seldom attracts the attention of mainstream historians.

In addition to this complex situation lies the more significant problem of recording the tribal past through scattered and scant sources that have large gaps. This can be equated to rivulets crisscrossing the main course now and then, waiting perhaps for sensible scholars[6] to piece them into a coherent and composite whole. This leads us to developing a proper understanding of the mindset of mainstream ethnographers and historians. The core idea that underlined their approaches was that the tribal communities are communities sans history. This largely defines the imperialist attitude and the concept of 'others' for the tribes. The same approach also argued that since tribal societies were without literary traditions, available oral information relating to their past can be used as sources. This raised eyebrows of scientific historians who believed that these oral sources are intertwined with myths and legends and locating truth from these imaginative and exaggerated accounts is difficult. Recreating tribal histories therefore becomes challenging. It is a pity that only tribals

[6] I mean the production of histories both from within and without.

are accused of recreating their histories on myths and legends, and the larger part of ancient Indian history that is reconstructed on the basis of religious texts as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and other such books, that were written hundreds of years after they were conceptualized are trusted upon as authentic accounts. The reading of these religious texts is further complicated by the fact that the story of the present is told in the future tense in these texts. Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that Kalhan's *Rajtarangini*, considered to the official history of Kashmiri rulers, *Buranji* (or history writing) by Ahoms' priests and such accounts are unquestioned as they have been documented. There was virtually no tradition of history writing in India till the advent of Turko-Afghans. In totality, the entire Indian society, especially the socially marginalised strata like the tribal and the Dalit communities, lacked the tradition of preserving their stories and struggles in their oral tradition or literary traditions for the posterity. History, therefore, has to necessarily peep through the veil of these songs-myths-stories-customs-traditions humdrum, like the moon throwing its beam through the gaps in the carpet of clouds.

This exists from the colonial period, when the Western literary tradition and scientific view of history, entered into a collision with the oriental oral traditions. Sociologist Rudolf C. Heredia (2000) wrote about the above collision while underlining the uniqueness and limitations of the oral history. He observed:

> When the colonialists first discovered oral cultures, they rather patronizingly assumed that if language distinguished men from beasts, it was writing that distinguished the civilized from the savages. In the ultimate analysis, writing as a representational technology was a decided advantage in such an encounter…And when these pre-literate people did begin writing it was often the 'others' who wrote about them and seldom in their own language. This could not but alienate them further from an authentic self-representative.[7]

Enamoured by racial supremacy and superiority complex, the colonial powers considered it their right to educate and civilise the so-called 'uneducated-uncivilized-barbarous' people in their respective colonies. But then, their 'philanthropic' bid had a political motive and was never shorn of the feeling of 'others'. The way the concept of otherness and colonial attitude fashioned, shaped and twisted the culture, history, sociology and anthropology of the colonies and imposed their tradition of slanted representation on the colonized selective erasure of tribals unfolded in the historical accounts. The history of the tribal societies has by and large been recorded by 'scholars' of the other communities, and that too is a reflection of the prejudices of scholars. This resulted in a great cultural divide, wherein the social memory of the tribes was more often than not overlooked and the very existence and glory of tribal society was ignored by mainstream societies. Thus depriving the tribal societies of an important cultural resource, that otherwise could have acted as a source of inspiration for revivalist tendencies among them.

Fortunately, a section of scholars reiterates[8] that deployment of the oral history of tribal societies is an important step towards redressing though only in a little way 'the (epistemic) injustice' that spawned from the history constructed with the tinge of 'otherness'. Needless to say that the tribal societies have often preserved a rich oral

[7] 'Tribal History: Living Word and Dead Letter', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 29-May 5, Vol XXXV, No. 18, 2000, pp. 1522-1525.

[8] See (Sen 2018: 7-8) for elaboration.

tradition in which their collective memories have been recorded and which is a living and changing tradition. And thus it is imperative to take into account the same while recording tribal history. Fortunately, the subalternist group of historians significantly brought the benighted tribals and their way of recording the past in epistemic limelight.[9]

The subalternists believe that no society consists of elite class alone neither does it have the history of only these elite classes. Unfortunately, history has so far given importance to the sorrows, pain and pleasures, habits and hobbies, creativity and decadence of these elites. Antonio Gramsci is of the opinion that, about the common men, referred to as marginalised, oppressed and exploited especially the peasants, Dalits, tribals, housewives or a women, our knowledge is equal to nothing. These common people are remembered every now and then either as part of a rally or some revolution or as part of the crowd and as victims of natural disasters such as plague or droughts, as if they have no identities and stories of their own. This happens mainly because mainstream historians rely on the government documents preserved in the archives as the primary sources of history writing. Whose voice is heard in these documents? And in whose words, do we listen to that voice; what is the rhythm and beat of that voice? How was a particular incident reported? And who reported it? What was his interest or intention? What type of relationship was there between the doer, the event and documents? Such questions remain unanswered, when they engage in history writing. It will be a mistake if we discard the government and written documents on the pretext of their being that of the rulers and the elite and they have little to do with the subaltern history. The need of the hour is to read each new/old source with a renewed view. However, subalternists as Shahid Amin and Gyanendra Pandey seek to strike a balance.

Likewise, Asoka Kumar Sen, who has been working on the history of the Ho and other major Adivasi communities of Bihar/Jharkhand for decades, also mentions these problems (Sen 2018: Introduction). He points to several lacunae prevailing in 'tribal' historiography, mainly the dominance of other representation and archival sources. He emphasises the need to reconstruct an intimate Adivasi history, as told by Adivasis themselves. He argues that the best way to do so is to juxtapose archival and oral sources. While on the one hand, this will grapple with the charges of fragmentariness and distortions leveled against the former, on the other hand it would successfully deal with several limitations of oral source like achronologicality, instability, narrow spatial coverage, fragmentariness and cultural bias (Ibid: 3-9).

This is largely the methodology suggested in this essay. The author also argues that 'oral traditions' should be read in their context and carefully crosschecked with the archival documents. This will serve the purpose of delving deep into pre-feudal-colonial history of the Adivasis to provide evidence when they were the makers of their destinies. This facilitated their emergence as the sovereigns rather than subalterns. Unfortunately, these crucial facets of Indian history have not found a place in mainstream history. This raises the inevitable question, have tribal communities been the unfortunate victims of the 'politics of knowledge-making', which the dominant groups practised against marginalised people? The next section, therefore, unfolds a different story that may help resolve this epistemic issue considerably.

[9] I have in mind particularly the works of Gyan Prakash (1990) and Ajay Skaria (1999).

Section II: Tribe as sovereign: tribal models of state

This different story sheds light on the creative past of the tribal communities in India. We learn about the process of state making that placed them at the centre rather than in the margins of history. This had happened during ancient and medieval periods in Indian history. Tribal republican polity was the first model known in the ancient period. The other is the dynastic polities they carved out as significant political elements in the pre-colonial phase. Noted historian R.S. Sharma establishes this fact with his description of the existence of the early Vedic tribal councils. To quote him:

> In one of the early *Richas* (verse) of the Rigveda, Indra has been applauded for destroying the councils of the disruptive Asuras with his *vajra* (weapon) (*Vivajren parishadon jaghan*: Rigveda, III, 33.7). Convincingly, in the leadership of Indra, the Aryans fought with the organized groups of early inhabitants. In one of the later Brahmana text, along with Sabha and Samiti it is mentioned that a 'Daiviya Parishad' (divine council) also existed. The form of the *parishad* that finds mention in the *Mahabharata* and Puranas appears not only as tribal but also as military and partially matriarchal institutions. But in the Mahabharata, Skanda (popularly known as Kartikeya), the son of Shiva has at many places been portrayed as being associated with the *parishads* (in this sense with the members of the Parishad). Shiva, who is described as *ganadhyaksha* (Chief of ganas or tribes) has also been referred to as *parishadpriya* or as the one who loves the company of the parishad members. (Mahabharata, X, 7-8, if not cited otherwise, references in this chapter should be considered to be from the Kumbkonam edition of Mahabharata). There are shreds of evidence which suggest that the parishad members were also the relatives of Skanda. These 'terrifying' and 'weird' friends and companions of Skanda or ganas were said to have been born from the blow of his vajra (Mahabharata, Chitrashaala Press, III, 228.1). This implies that Skanda and his followers were from the same clan. Skanda was related to the parishad in the same way as the *Marudraganas* (they are referred to as sons of Rudra) were with their *Rudra* (A powerful god mentioned in Rigveda, generally referred to as Shiva). That these councils had a tribal form was evident from the fact that the council members donned different types of leather wears and spoke different languages and regional dialects (Mahabharata, Kolkata, IX, 45-102). Thus, they can be compared to the primitive people, of whom each tribe had its own dialect. Besides, the tribal form of these parishads has also been confirmed by the fact that their countenance has been compared to that of cocks, dogs, wolves, rabbits, camels, sheep, jackals among others(Ibid., IX, 46, 79-88). Furthermore, these parishads' relationship with the animals is indicative of the fact that they might be customary totemism prevalent among the tribes. It should be noted that in the long list of animals, we do not find the mention of the horse which is generally considered to be part of the Aryan life (Sharma 1968: 170-72). These facts clearly indicate that early parishads were partially patriarchal and partially matriarchal military bodies (Ibid 174).

Devi Prasad Chattopadhyaya (1982) in his celebrated book 'Lokayat' discusses at long length the concept of 'gana' and 'ganapati'. According to him, India witnessed the advent of state institution five thousand years ago in the Indus valley. This must have been based on the remnants of the tribal organisations. The historians, however, have yet to ascertain this theory as a fact. Unfortunately, our historians as a matter of habit have spared inadequate space or thought for the tribals.

In the sixth century, Ganpati was also called *Gananayak* and *Varahmihira* (the chief of a community or organization of elites).[10] The word Ganapati is not used in Rigveda or Vajsaneya Samhita as a divine person. Monier Williams is of the opinion that in these texts, he is either a military commander or head of a community. He further elaborates that ganas are looked upon as protectors. '*Ganannam Ganarupen Palakam'* (who protects military troops as Ganas) also indicates that ganas were leaders and not divine figures.

Chattopadhyaya (1982) has explored the tribal roots of the word 'gana'. He observes that the word 'gana' has mainly been described as synonym of group or organization whose principal meaning is public gathering or congregation'. He further adds, 'I, however, do not think that under any circumstance the word 'gana' could not mean anything other than the administrative institution of a tribe' (Ibid.: 120). According to him, the empires were founded on the ruins of the tribal ganas-ganpatis. The Magadhan empire under the leadership of Ajatshatru had destroyed the big organisation of the tribal unions '*Vajji Mahasangha'*. The biggest of the tribal unions–the Lichchhavis of Vaishali were pushed to Nepal. What Chattopadhyaya seeks to underline is the prevalent political rivalry and the hatred of the monarchic empires towards tribal unions. This derives support from Kautilya's preference for destruction of collective life of the tribal societies, rather than their assimilation after the defeat (Ibid). Kosambi (1962) observes that generally such unions were very powerful and could not be defeated or destroyed militarily. This is confirmed by the Alexander's campaign of Punjab where his advances were strongly resisted by the tribals. Thus, it was no exaggeration in the *Arthshastra* of Kautilya, where it was stated that these tribal unions could not be defeated by direct attack (Chattopadhyaya, 1982: 136).

Chattopadhyaya further specifies why the disintegration of well-organised collective democratic tribal societies was deemed necessary:

> The tribals had inhabited larger parts of India as they have today. These tribal areas must have been more comprehensive and dominant in the earlier times. Generally, the state power was limited locally to some regions. And there were some bigger empires, whose state power extended to larger areas. But then tribal populace lived therein as well. Thus these tribals often posed problems before the state administrators.

Thus, the question that arose before state powers was 'what was to be done with these tribals?' One thing was obvious, tribal unions and their unity was to be broken, and they were to be subjugated. But they could not be completely obliterated; therefore, a way out for their rehabilitation under a new system was the need of the hour. The way to solve the problem came from Kautilya, the renowned *Mahamatya* (Prime minister) of Magadha, who gave two-pronged solutions of the tribal problem. First, their unity was to be broken; for if they were even defeated in the battles; they would get reunited and reaffirm their unity and rise in revolt in their concerted bid to get their freedom back. Therefore, solution to the tribal problem lay in their disunity and disintegration. Second, they had to be resettled or rehabilitated in clusters of five to ten families, one distanced from the other, isolated by disrupting channel of communication and engaged in peaceful vocations like agriculture work (*panchkulim*

[10] Monier Williams defined *ganpati* to mean the leader of some group or a military force or a society (Williams 99: 343).

daskulimya krishyayamnivesayet) (Ibid.). It is interesting to note this was the sustained policy followed year after year (Ibid.: 140-41).

Tribal dynasties

History informs us that tribal attempt to shape their polity did not end with the above formation. The next and no less remarkable was the setting up of tribal dynasties, about which we have several instances across India. At the advent of British rule, the Cheros of Palamau, the Bhumij of Barabhum, Rajgonds of Chanda and Ahoms of Assam were the rulers in their respective regions. After the fall of the Pala dynasty in Bihar-Bengal, Gurjara-Pratihara in north and north-west India and Rashtrakutas in central and south central India close to tenth century, most of these tribal dynasties came into power. Remarkably the Chero, Rajgonda and Ahom dynasties ruled for nearly 400 years over a large part of the country. But they are still waiting for their inclusion in the pages of history with the pride of place they naturally deserve.

D.D. Kosambi believed that transition of tribal system into a state system was a continuous process in Indian history. He propounded a twin-theory of development of feudal states in India wherein one state occupied the top rung, while the other developed at the lower rung. The former represented powerful authority that collected taxes and refrained from interfering in the normal life of people till they remitted taxes to it. The lower rung functioned as the mediatory authority between the state and the people (Kosambi 1956: 295-96).[11]

But a different process was visible in Rajasthan, where powerful Rajput houses established their dominance in the tribal region by pushing them out of power. At times, these houses also entered into treaty with the tribal societies by giving them token respect, like giving the privilege of anointing *tilak*a (symbol of respect and recognition) at the time of coronation (Chattopadhyaya 1982: 131-33).

Scholars have formulated different models of tribal state formation. We begin with Surajit Sinha's (1962) famous Rajputisation model of the tribes. While studying the state formation process of Bhumij of Barabhuma in Purulia district of West Bengal, he formulated his famous theory of 'Rajputisation'. He informed that being attracted by higher lifestyle of the Hindu dynasties, Bhumij *pradhan*/ *sardars* (chiefs) emulated the symbols and elements of that lifestyle. Though this led to certain divisions in the tribal rank, it gave rise to feudalism wherein the elite among the Bhumij took pride in calling themselves Rajput, but denied the same status for the common populace. (Sinha 1962: 42, 74, 77).

Suranjit K. Saha (1996: 824-34) has elaborated the process of state formation in the forest and mountain regions from 450 to 1320 CE. Though this was modeled on the Gupta empire of north India, this was characterised by the role of the tribal leadership in paving the way for a political structure from bottom to top. These states in the forest-mountain regions played a significant historical role in turning the system based on the *gotra-rakta* (clan-blood) of the tribal societies into a sub-continental Indian society. Interesting fact was that Suranjit Saha did field work in the mountainous-plateau regions of east central India, which served as catchment areas

[11] R. S. Sharma has also endorsed Kosambi's twin-theory in his *Indian Feudalism*.

for rivers Godavari, Mahanadi, Sone, Subarnrekha and Narmada. The area included half of the Madhya Pradesh, a part of the Vidarbha region of the eastern Maharashtra and the whole of Orissa outside the Mahanadi delta. The area spreading about 3,79,000 square km is larger than the whole of Germany. The study was conducted over the area, which served as a central buffer zone surrounded by reputed Hindu dynasties. But the region turned into a battlefield wherein the Pushyabhutis of Kanauj in north India, Shashanka, his contemporary in Gauda of Bengal in the east and Chalukyas of Badami in south were powerful. At the same time in southern and western India struggle for domination began in the seventh century which was known as tripartite struggle. This continued from the beginning of the eighth century to the end of the tenth century. This time the three warring factions were the Palas of Bengal in the east, Gurjara-Pratiharas of north-western India and Rashtrakutas of the south-central India. This struggle that continued for over three centuries ushered in a political vacuum in this buffer zone, from whose womb were born the tribal dynasties (Saha 1996: 824-34). Saha underlined the following conceptions of tribal state formation:

> First, the formation and fructification of early states including nations of primary, secondary and segmentary status.
>
> Second, early capitalist system of production and particularly adulteration of tribalism to feudalism.
>
> Third, advent of later states in the tribal regions where reputed Hindu rulers of the plains were accepted as role models.
>
> Fourth, mobility of inter-relations between local tribal societies and mainstream Hindu societies (Saha 1996: 824).

The reputed dynasties of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab* region have played important role in the rise of tribal states. Saha has studied this factor in the context of Gupta period (320 to 5th century CE). The southern edge of the Gupta empire had reached up to the forest-mountain regions of tribal populace. The *Manusmriti* of the second century CE and the Kautilya's *Arthashastra* of the third century CE were the guiding texts for the Guptas. According to Saha, the base of the state formation of Gupta dynasty was the seven-pronged structure of an ideal state *or Saptanga theory* proposed by Kautilya; the king (*swamin*), bureaucracy (*amatya*), land/territory (*janapada*), forts (*durg*), treasury (*kosh*), army based power to use force (*danda*) and allies from outside the state (*mitra*).

Land grants to the Brahmins was a handy tool for the newly emerging kings and their successors, who upheld the former as role model and whose support would give them much needed recognition due to their superior position of Brahmins in the caste hierarchy of Hindu societies. The pliant technique of imposing the Brahmins was used by them to impose their nobility on the tribal society where equality ruled the roost. The Brahmins, who received land grants from the kings through royal orders, played significant role in bringing the tribals in the fold of mainstream Indian society divided or based on *varna* and caste lines.

The support of Brahmins played significant role in strengthening the reputation and legality of the new dynasties. They adopted a definite strategy. First, they cooked up imaginary and impressive genealogy, wrote poems and organized pompous religious rites around these newly emerging dynasties. Second, having incorporated

the elements of tribal traditions, the devotional practices were propagated and encouraged among the tribals so that they remained loyal to these elite classes. Third, knowledge of agriculture and livestock management was spread among the tribals to base agriculture on *hal-jot* (tilling with plough) and to take economy from self-reliance status to that of surplus production. This helped in the rise of the elite classes and in building superstructure of the tribal states in the tribal societies that followed the set pattern of the mainstream political states (Saha 1996: 826).

Suranjit K. Saha concluded that Tung, Bhanj and Nal had evolved as dynasties from the tribal societies of higher forest and mountain regions. These examples of Nal-Tung-Bhanj show the process of evolution from society (*gotra*) to state formation. Local states slowly grew into regional states or got absorbed into them. This is how 'National Character' somewhat acquired its form and nature. It is also proved that these tribal states having evolved from the models of mainstream societies played their pivotal role in making the common culture of Indian nation (Ibid.: 833).

Suresh Mishra[12] in his book *Gadhaka Gond Rajya* (2008) explains the probable reasons behind the rise of the tribal states, that came into existence largely because of economic reasons, more specifically surplus production in agriculture. He observes 'The factor behind the rise of Gonds as an organized and standard tribal society is not only the permanent agriculture, but a developed commercial system too must have been the reason'. The Gonds, were known for the habit of saving things for future, which is an uncommon habit for the tribal communities. According to Abul Fazl, unmindful of the lower social pedestal of Sangram Shah the Chandel Rajputs forged marital relations with him as he was a wealthy person.

The question however, remains, how the coins, which were moulded from the gold looted by the Khiljis from the southern states, reached Chauragarh without an incident of loot or defeat of the mighty Khijis. Some gold coins issued by the Gond king Sangram Shah have been obtained in the excavation carried by archaeologists from Madan Mahal in the first decade of twentieth century. It is also claimed by the Gonds that the number of gold coins issued by Sangram Shah were thrice more than the neighbouring powerful state of Mewar. This constrained the historians to look into the issue of economic status of the Gonds. A forest dwelling community which commands such wealth is unparalleled in the history of India. This leads to several questions that are related to it as; Can this gold reserve be attributed to defeat of Khilji army at the hands of the Gonds, what sources of income were there for the Gonds, can availability of such large gold coins be attributed to Gonds finding access to hidden resources of powerful Rajput rulers and such related inquiries. K.S. Lal (1995) explains that the wealth must have been hidden at the time of king Dalpati Shah or queen Durgawati somewhere in the forest to which Gonds got access as the last of the coin dates to 1533 CE. Stockpile of coins issued by the Muslim rulers of Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat, Malwa, Bahmani state and Jaunpur dated from 1311 to 1533 CE. It is presumed that this region must have had business relations with the rest of the India; and more importantly the region must have had more export than import. This brings us to the larger question that what constituted major items for trade and commerce with these forest dwelling communities?

[12] Mishra was inspired by the reading on *Akbarnama*, *Numismatic Chronicle and the Journal of Numismatic Society*, Fifth Series, 17 (1937) and K.S. Lal's *The Twilight of the Sultanate*, 1962.

The region had two important resources–forests and fertile valley. According to Abul Fazl, elephants captured from the forests were sent to other regions in large number. As is known, elephants were as important in warfare those days as the fighter jets and mechanized tanks are important in modern warfare. Abul Fazl informs that the agricultural production of the region was enough to meet the needs of the state of Deccan and Gujarat. Besides, availability of other forest produce must have bolstered the trade from the region. Thus one thing is clear, common men of the tribal society must have participated in and benefited from the business activities. The entire process must have impacted the socio-political structure of the tribal society. This is strengthened by the fact that Sangram Shah had tried to set up a three-metal currency system, wherein gold, silver and coppers coins were in vogue. This system was put in place in the Delhi sultanate but owing to the paucity of gold and silver it was relaxed. The system was later resumed by Sher Shah in the 16th century, who had built a strong regional empire in Eastern India and who was instrumental in capturing power briefly from the Mughals. Coincidentally, this experiment was carried out by Sangram Shah at the same time. Introduction of system of three-metal currency by Sangram Shah meant that there was healthy flow of gold and silver in his state, the practice of currency based exchange was common among the people and that is why even the copper coins came into practice (Mishra 2008: 225-26).

Sumit Guha (1999) has added the ecological model in tribal state formation. He refers to the coastal region near the Kambhat valley; important ports such as Surat and Bharauch, triangular mountains in the southern part of the above valley, large tracts of dense forests with significant presence of the tribal societies there, rivers like Narmada and Tapti, which fall into the valley after crossing this treacherous region added to the strength of the state. Having added into this description the states with extended towards plains in the east of the mountain range and their advanced agriculture, Guha further outlined the essentiality of secured transmission through mountain forests for taking the agro products to the ports. While these mountains were great impediments for the smooth functioning of the business in the region, they provided an umbrella protection to the Ahmednagar-Khandesh sultanates, for their strong forts, for the check-posts that collected taxes from the businessmen. Besides, these forests were a great source of timber that was used in the construction of ships and ports.

This led to a series of changes in the area that included; searching religious sites in the caves; donating villages to the Brahmins; beginning of struggle for power among well established rulers and their intensification due to the interest of Alauddin Khilji in the region. In these circumstances, tribal states such as that of Bargi-Hatkar, Koli and Bhil came into existence in central and western India. The triangular mountain ranges drained by Narmada and Tapti rivers led to the good production of high quality rice and grapes. When the central power weakened, tribal societies formed Bargi-Hatkar state, while the Kolis made Bagalan, Ramnagar and Jawar states (Guha 1999: 63).

C. Meenakshi (1938) has put forth ‘Nag Kanya Model’ of tribal state formation in the Southern India in the ancient period. In this she takes up the issue of the emergence of the Pallavas and suggests that, a male youth who might have been a Brahmin, Kshatriya, sage or a prince solemnized his love marriage with a tribal girl who was generally referred to as a Nag Kanya(serpent girl). The offspring of this

marriage established a new dynasty the Palllavas . This is not an isolated story, but such kinds of stories are found commonly in many ruling dynasties of southeast India (Meenakshi 1938: 41-42, 363-73). This model has also been witnessed in the myth of establishment of the Gond state of Gadha, wherein a Gond girl married an extraordinary Naga youth. The great grandson of this Gond-Naga couple Yadav Rai became the first Gond king of Gadha in Gondawana (Mishra 2008: 228). The story of Nagavanshi rulers of Jharkhand is somewhat akin to this model. In this myth, a youth named Pundarik Nag, who was a serpent who fled the Yajna of legendary king Janmejaya organized to kill serpents, and took refuge in Varanasi in the house of a Brahmin priest in disguise of a student. He later married his daughter who gave birth to his son Phani Mukut Rai. The last Munda king Madra Munda adopted and raised Phanimukut Rai, the son of this couple as his own. Phani Mukut Rai became the founder of the Nagvanshi dynasty among the Munda tribes of Jharkhand (Sinha 1962: 35-80).

Following conclusions may be drawn from the analysis of these myths around regional state formations. First, the elitist psyche was not ready to accept that an elite group from the tribal societies gradually evolved from gana-ganpati to a ruler class. The argument of establishment of dynastic rule amongst the tribes and state formation processes were unacceptable to the mainstream. This ethnocentric bias created the myth of the primacy of exogenous influence. Second, according to R.S. Sharma and K.M.Shrimali (2008: 435-437), these myths pointed to the internal changes in the tribal societies as a result of their liaison with the foreign elements, which in turn gave birth to the new state structure in place of the established tribal traditions. Third, in a tribal system, the head of the society or other members were generally tied to the traditions, rituals and customs of that society. So wherever an exigency for ushering a new traditions came, an exogenous element (real or imaginary), not tied to their custom or tradition, had been deployed as the catalyst (Mishra 2008: 218). Last facet of this model avers that once a faction from the tribal societies got fused into the royalty, they preferred to delink from their background. This heterogeneous element presumably invoked the services of the Brahmins to evolve the glamorous genealogy like that of *Suryavanshi-Chandravanshi*(clan of sun-clan of moon) for them as had been the practice of ruling dynasties in Hindu India. While they might have been arguments developed to justify and legitimize the newly emerging ruling dynasties with the already established dynasties in the past, the present era demands that their roots are explored and examined.

Adivasis as elites

It may be argued that tribal communities made conscious endeavours to articulate their distinct socio-political identity. Some scholars are however of the view that these were directed at promoting them in socio-political scale by merging their societies into mainstream Hindu society. This may equally be interpreted as efforts made by the mainstream society to strengthen its ranks by absorbing tribal communities in the Hindu fold.[13] Nirmal Kumar Bose famously propounded this as Hindu mode of absorption. By this he wanted to explain how the tribal societies adopted elements of

[13] This was how despite their original tribal background, some of the dynasties succeeded in getting recognised as pure Kshatriya clan in medieval Rajasthan.

Indian elite class in the past and became part of the mainstream. But we have also to admit that there have been instances of tribal acculturation to mainstream practices when they were assured that their own traditions would not be meddled with; an assurance that played a pivotal role in the process of assimilation of the tribal societies in the mainstream. In later years, however, there are instances of struggle for securing higher position in the caste ladder and at places, they succeeded in securing their desired place. It is a well-known fact that M.N. Srinivas has sought to explain as the process of 'Sanskritisation', while Surajit Sinha termed this as 'theory of Rajputisation of tribes'. I would like to particularly mention three tribal dynasties which played significant roles in the politico-cultural history of medieval India. These were the Chero, Rajgond and Ahom kingdoms.

The Cheros

In his path breaking works on the Cheros, K.S. Singh (1982) informs that after the fall of the Palas in Bengal, many tribal states were established in eastern India which includes Bhar of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Central Bihar, Kherwars in the valley of Sone river in Bihar and the Cheros of the south Bihar.[14] Out of these three Cheros established the strongest empire. They exercised their control over parts of Saran, Shahabad, Champaran, Muzaffarpur and Palamau for almost three hundred years (1150 to 1450 CE). In the twelfth century, the rule of this tribal dynasty of Dravidian origin extended till Benaras in the east, Biharsharif in the west, banks of Ganga in the South and Kaimur mountain range in the east. With their rule swaying over the whole of *Kikat* (Magadh) region, Bhojpur was the centre of administration (*Tawarikh-e-Ujjainia)*. In the folksongs of Bhojpur, Bihia was the capital of the unforgettable Chero ruler Ghughulia. The capital of the second clan of Chero rulers was at 'Tirwan' about 12 miles off Bhojpur's heartland Dumraon. King Sita Rai, son of king Ramchandra Rai, was the ruler of this region in 12th century. The third dynasty of the Chero community had its capital at Chainpur, where king Salabaheem was the ruler. In the Dinara Pargana of Sasaram, ruled Dev Markande of the fourth branch of Chero dynasty. With the entry of Ujjania Rajputs the power of the Cheros was challenged and their power declined between fourteenth and sixteenth century (Ibid. 32-33). Cheros continued to be a political force till the Mughal period.

The documents of the medieval period as *Tarikh-i-Shershahi*, Khwaja Niyamatullah's *Tarikh-i- Khan-Jahani*, Ahmad Yaadgaar Khan's *Tarikh-i-Shahi* and even the Gazateers of L.S.O Malley of colonial period mentioned about the Chero rulers of Palamau and their struggle with the Ujjanias of Bhojpur. According to Abul Fazl, Palamau was 71 miles south of Patna, but Chero's rule extended as far north as Daudnagar and Arwal, where they had their forts. While discussing important landlords of Chai-Champa (Ramgarh) of north-east and Pundag (Palamau), Abul Fazl mentioned about Chero rulers (*Ain-i-Akbari*, 1856: 418), also include in the reference section. Anant Chero had fought with the Mughal Subedar of Bihar Afzal Khan. The fight resulted in Chero king's defeat and the latter's acceptance of Mughal

[14] Others were the Bhar of eastern Uttar Pradesh and central Bihar and Kherwar of the Sone river valley. For details see. Askari, S.H and Q. Ahmad eds.1982, *A Comprehensive History of Bihar*, Volume 2, Part II, Patna, K.P Jaiswal Institute of Research, p.259.

subordination. The folktales of Palamau region were appreciative about the good governance of Chero king Medini Rai, who was a contemporary of Jahangir. Till the advent of the British, Cheros maintained their power in the Palamau region. While some work has been done on the Cheros the regional states of Kherwars and Rajbhars needs to be researched.

Rajgond

At the time when the established dynasties of the central and south India were disintegrating owing to the expansionist policy of the Khiljis and the Tughlaqs, rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, the Gond dynasty rose to fill the vacuum in South central India. The Gond kings ruled over a large area of north, central and south India. Abul Fazl named this region as Gondvana. Historians hold that different branches of Gond dynasty ruled in the abovementioned region with their capitals at Chanda, Garh–Mandala, Devagarh and Kherla. Of these capitals, Chanda alone was in the plains, which was fortified by the first Gond ruler Khandkia Balal Shah in 1450 CE. These Gond states mostly extended to large areas of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa (Adilabad, Chandrapur, Bastar and Koraput districts).

The most important of these Gond dynasties was that of Gada/Mandala, where Gond rule was established by Raja Jadurai. This rule reached its pinnacle in 1480 CE under the rule of Sangram Shah. Gond ruler Dalpat Shah was married to Rajput princess of Chandela dynasty queen Durgawati. The branch of the Gonds that ruled central India from their capital at Devgarha was established by Raja Jataba or Kokshah. Second branch of Gonds that ruled central Indian was established by Raja Narsingh Rai with its capital at Kherla. Since Kherla was close to the road that connected north and south India, Mughal officials (mansabdar) of Berar and Mandu were in constant state of conflict with them (Thusu 1980: 215-221). Above descriptions make it clear that there is no dearth of historical sources (primary and secondary) related to Gond kings who ruled over large areas of central and north India before the advent of the Mughals. However, the apathy of the mainstream historians has deprived them of their rightful place in history.

Ahom

The third tribal kingdom of Ahom dynasty belonged to the north-eastern region of India. Reconstructing the history of this dynasty is comparatively easy, owing to the practice and tradition of systematic history (*Buranji*) writing and maintenance of manuscripts and genealogy by *Devdhais* (the priests of the Ahom rulers). The most remarkable feature of this source is that they not only documented the day-to-day account of the governance, but also updated them at definite intervals. Written on the barks of the tree, Buranji was cautiously handed from one generation to another. But for immediate purpose, we can draw on E.A. Gait, a British-day bureaucrat's book on the history of Assam (Gait 1906).

In the preface of his book, Gait elucidates that historicity and chronology of the accounts given by the Devdhais were satisfactorily corroborated with other contemporary sources including primary sources such as 70 coins issued by the Ahom rulers, 48 tamrapatra inscriptions, inscriptions on six cannonballs, nine stone epigraphs and 28 temple epigraphs in addition to the important Muslims sources.

Buranjis claim that Ahoms were the offspring of king Langden of heavens and so people called their king *swargdev* (the god of heavens). Though they claim an earlier origin of the dynasty in 568 AD, Gait informed that Sukafa became the first Ahom in 1228 CE (Gait 1906: I-VII). In the thirteenth century, the central powers of the Kamrupa(Assam) state had weakened owing division of the state into smaller units. King Prithu had circumvented the attacks on Assam by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar in 1206 CE and Giyasuddin in 1226 CE. However, while fighting Altamash in 1228 CE, the king died. In Shyan state of Burma (Myanmar), Malolung of Tie tribe was the ruler. The Ahom belonged to the same Tie tribe of the Shyan state. Sukafa, who laid the foundation of Ahom rule in Assam, was the son of king Malolung. In 1253 CE, Sukafa had made Cheraidaya area his capital, as it was fit for agriculture and did not fall into the flood line of the Brahmaputra river. Thus the foundation of the Ahom tribal dynasty that ruled the Brahmaputra valley for over 600 years was laid. (Sanganeria 2006: 196-97).

Conclusion

The brief historical overview of the three tribal dynasties in three different parts of India reveals that there is much scope for creating regional histories in which these tribal states can be properly represented on the basis of available sources. It may seem palpable that in the attempt to create 'national histories' these regional tribal ruling dynasties have been overlooked. It is the right time that historical writings takes us beyond the realm of dominant mainstream narrative and introduces us to these tribal sovereign states. Lack of sources or evidences cannot act as hindrance in creation of their history. This also evidences that the prevailing erasure of tribal sovereignty was the result of the lack of interest of the mainstream. Conspicuous absence of these important tribal dynasties from the text books is largely due to the apathy of dominant mainstream. Due to this non-ethnocentric attitude, the academic world had turned a deaf ear to the cause of research on tribal dynasties. The need of the hour is to break this apathy and create a new tradition of history writing where subalterns were also the sovereigns.

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