



Socio- Economic Evolution of the Bundelkhand during the Chandel Period

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the socio-economic organization of Bundelkhand under the Chandela dynasty (ninth–twelfth centuries CE) by analysing epigraphic sources. The investigation is primarily based on inscriptions, copper-plate charters, and sculptural inscriptions, which constitute the principal body of primary evidence for the study. More than fifty significant inscriptions discovered at Khajuraho, Kalinjar, Deogarh, Mahoba, Ajaygarh, Nanyaura, Icchawar, and Semra have been critically examined to reconstruct the historical landscape of the period. These records span the reigns of Chandela rulers from Harshadeva to Hammiravarmana, thereby providing a continuous account of the dynasty's administrative and socio-economic development. The social order largely followed the traditional *varna* framework comprising the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Alongside these principal social categories, the inscriptions also mention several occupational and community groups, including the Kayasthas, Rawats, and Mahajans, reflecting a complex and diversified social structure.

Methodology: Art-historical approach.

- Iconographic and iconological analysis.
- Use of archaeological, epigraphic, and secondary sources.

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Introduction

Inscriptions engraved on stone slabs, copper plates, temple walls, and other durable materials preserve authentic records of the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions of their age. The scientific study of Indian inscriptions was initiated during the nineteenth century through the pioneering efforts of James Prinsep, inscriptions themselves have served as vital historical documents since antiquity.

Bundelkhand was referred to as *Jejakabhukti*. Extending across parts of present-day Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, this territory lay between the Vindhyan highlands and the Yamuna River, providing it with considerable strategic and geographical importance. Between the ninth and twelfth centuries CE, the Chandela rulers transformed Jejakabhukti into a flourishing political, economic, and cultural centre. Their reign is particularly remembered for its achievements in temple architecture, administrative organization, artistic excellence, and religious patronage. The study demonstrates that epigraphic evidence offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the socio-economic organization of Bundelkhand during the Chandela period.

Socio-Economic Structure of Bundelkhand Region through Inscriptions:

Social Structure: Epigraphic Evidence The social system of Chandela-period Bundelkhand was fundamentally based on the varna order. The four varnas — Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra — were the pillars of the social order. The Khajuraho rock inscription of Dhangadeva explicitly states that the king protected the varnashrama dharma. The Mahoba copper plate of Paramardideva contains phrases such as 'varnashramdharmam pratishthapayam', which make clear that the Chandela kings presented themselves as protectors of the varnashrama system. The Brahmana class enjoyed the highest social status. The Khajuraho rock inscription and the Nanyaura Donation Inscription provide complete introductions to many Brahmanas — their gotra, pravara, shakha, and educational qualifications.

The Khajuraho rock inscription mentions the grant of 'Brahmana-graha', in which Brahmanas were given land for residence and livelihood. The Chandela royal dynasty considered itself Kshatriya. In the inscriptions they are described as 'noble royal sons'. The royal titles of the rulers — 'Paramabhattacharaka', 'Maharajadhiraja', 'Parameshvara', and 'Paramadeva' — denote their Kshatriya identity and supreme ruler status. The Garaj Donation Inscription mentions 'Rawat Savant of the Bharadvaja gotra', whose father 'Rawat Pape' had died fighting enemies in the battle of Kidaha, evidence of the tradition of granting land in exchange for military service.

The emergence of the Kayastha community, served in state administration as writers, accountants, and record keepers. The Ajaygarh rock inscription from the period of Bhojavarman reveals that Subhatta, who was a minister, actually belonged to the Kayastha lineage. The Khajuraho inscription mentions the Gauda Kayastha lineage. Officials responsible for the safeguarding of land-related documents 'Mahakshapataladhikari' and 'Karanika' were generally from the Kayastha community. The position of women in Chandela society presents a contradictory picture. On one hand, the sculptures of Khajuraho temples present a free, lively, and honoured image of woman; on the other, social restrictions were also becoming more rigid. The mention of land donation by Devaviman 'on the occasion of the annual shraddha of Queen Mother Bhuvanadevi' in the Nanyaura Copper Plate 'B' (Vikrama Samvat 1107) is proof of reverence towards the mother and the honoured position of women. During this period, the practice of child marriage¹⁴ was on the rise; there was a social prohibition on widow remarriage; and the devadasi system also existed.

The Bamhani Sati mentions the erection of a stone in memory of a woman who committed sati. The Ajaygarh Sati Inscription presents direct epigraphic proof of the existence of the sati practice in the Chandela territory. Craftsmen, artisans, and architects held a special place in Chandela society. The inscriptions mention the 'sutradhar' (master architect). The Khajuraho inscription mentions the construction of the Shambhu temple by 'Sutradhar Tachchhan'. The Kalinjara inscription mentions the construction of a mandapa under the supervision of 'Sutradhar Ram' and the creation of an image of Nilakantha by his son 'Rupakara Lahad', proving that craftsmen families were engaged in this profession for generations. In the inscriptions, titles such as 'Mahajan' and 'Shreshti' were used for people of the Vaishya or merchant class. The Khajuraho Jain Inscription mentions 'Pahil, son of Kayastha Sadhu-Saleh of the Grihapati lineage', and his sons 'Mahajan, Mahichanda, Shrichanda, Jinachanda, and Udayachanda' — each of whom is honoured with the title 'Mahajan'.

Economic Structure: Epigraphic Analysis For understanding the economic system of the Chandela period. These inscriptions make it clear that the economy of Chandela-period Bundelkhand was primarily agriculture-based. Both 'rabi' (winter crops) and 'kharif' (rainy season crops) were cultivated. Wheat, rice, barley, gram, arhar, mustard, sesame, and cotton were the principal crops.

The Augasi Donation Inscription of Madanavarman mentions units of land measurement such as 'hala' and 'nivartana'. This makes it clear that the system of land measurement was well-planned and held an important place in the determination of state revenue. The Mahoba donation inscription of Paramardideva shows a division into 'sir-bhumi' (state land cultivated directly by the state), 'nija bhumi' (personal ownership), and

'dana-bhumi' (granted to religious institutions). In the field of water management, the Chandela rulers made notable contributions. Vast reservoirs and tanks were constructed on the orders of kings. The prominent water sources were Khajur-Sagar, ShivaSagar, Madan-Sagar, Kirti-Sagar, Rahil-Sagar, Vijaya-Sagar, and the main tanks of Kalinjar.

The Chandela inscriptions present an extremely detailed and complex picture of the revenue system. The Ajaygarh Rock Inscription, which belongs to the period of Chandela king Kirtivarman, contains a long list of taxes: 'bhaga' (the state's share of produce, generally one-sixth), 'bhoga' (the share given to service personnel), 'kara' (cash tax), 'hiranya' (tax paid in gold coins), 'kripti' (a fixed amount), 'pratyaya' (special cess), and 'vatabhuta' (tax related to wind and ghost rituals). Scholar D.D. Kosambi has commented on the Mau Inscription that this inscription describes the privileges of merchants and their taxes — including mentions of customs duties on 53–59 commercial commodities. One Epigraphia Indica inscription mentions 'veshmakar' (house tax), 'gochara' (pasture tax), and 'adana' (special levies). Special officers — 'Rajasthaniya', 'Mahapratihara', 'Dandanayaka' — were appointed for tax collection.

Through land grants, kings rewarded Brahmanas, religious institutions, and feudatories, thereby ensuring their political loyalty. The 'Chandavat Inscription of Chandadeva' is an excellent example of a land grant, in which a large tract of land was donated to Brahmanas as an agrahara. Under the 'agrahara' system, the donated village was provided with 'sarvakar-parihara' (exemption from all taxes). According to R.S. Sharma, this system consolidated the feudal structure. The situation of trade and commerce in Chandela-period Bundelkhand is partially known from inscriptions. Mercantile titles such as 'Mahajan' and 'Shreshti' and the mention of Jain merchant families indicate a developed state of commerce. The geographical location of Bundelkhand — situated between North India and South India — made it an important commercial centre. The Yamuna, Chambal, and Vindhya passes served as important trade routes.

The Mahoba Merchants' Guild Inscription shows that organised trade guilds (shrenis) existed in this region. These guilds regulated internal and external trade. The inscriptions describe 'hatta' (market) and 'hattika' (small market), which make it clear that permanent markets were established during the Chandela period. Routes from Kalinjar to Varanasi, Khajuraho to Gwalior, and Mahoba to Ujjayini were used not only for trade but also for pilgrimage. Chandela-period inscriptions mention a monetary system. During this period, the 'dramma' (silver coin), 'dinar' (gold coin), and 'pana' (copper coin) were in circulation. The rock inscription of Dhangadeva recovered from Khajuraho mentions the word 'dramma', which was the prevalent silver coin of that era. A copper plate inscription from Khajuraho gives the ratio 'one suvarna = sixteen drammās', which reflects the traditional Indian sexadecimal system. The word 'dramma' is the Sanskritised

form of the Arabic 'dirham', which came to India with Arab traders. Copper coins recovered from Khajuraho and Mahoba in excavations bear legends such as 'Shri' and 'Chandela'. Chandela-period inscriptions mention various craftsmen and artisans. During the Chandela period, the 'sutradhar' (chief architect), 'takshana' (sculptor), 'svarnakar' (goldsmith), 'tamrakar' (coppersmith), and 'vastrakar' (weaver) were highly skilled.³² The Madanpur Inscription is considered most important from the perspective of craft industries. It contains details of silk weavers (kausheya), cotton-cloth manufacturers (karpasika), and dyers (ranjaka). According to R.C. Majumdar, Chandela feudatories provided tax, army, and services to the king. Surplus was collected from peasants by the feudatories through 'bhoga' and 'bhaga', as a result of which cultivators lived under the greatest economic pressure. The Jain merchant community made an important economic contribution to temple construction, dharmashalas, and water-tank construction. Jain merchants' guilds developed a commercial network that connected Bundelkhand with other trading centres of North India. For the Khajuraho temple complex, not only land grants but also 'devottara' (property of the deity) were received, enabling its autonomous functioning.

Conclusion

After studying in-depth socio-economic structure the following important conclusions emerge: **First**, the social system of Chandela-period Bundelkhand was fundamentally varna-based, but within this system, social sub-groups such as the Kayastha community, the craftsmen class, and Jain traders also held an important place. **Second**, the backbone of this period's economy was agriculture. A well-planned system of land measurement, the construction of vast reservoirs for irrigation, and the practice of multi-crop farming. **Third**, the revenue system was extremely complex and well-organised. The series of various taxes mentioned in the inscriptions — bhaga, bhoga, hiranya, udranga, uparikara — and the chain of special officers appointed for tax collection indicate a mature revenue administration. **Fourth**, from the standpoint of trade and commerce, Bundelkhand held an important position on the north-south trade route. Evidence such as the Mahoba Merchants' Guild Inscription proves the organised existence and role of guilds (shrenis). The circulation of coins in all three metals — gold, silver, and copper. **fifth**, the economic role of religious institutions ie. Land grants, devadana, property, and religious donations by the merchant class . These are living proof of the economic prosperity and capacity for social organisation of the Chandela period. This world of inscriptions tells us that history is not merely a story of kings and wars, but also the story of the millions of farmers, traders, craftsmen, and women who together built this great civilisation.

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