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Evolution of Tribal Chieftdom in Bastar: From Ancient Republics to Princely State

Yudhveer Parihar

Research scholar, SOS Ancient Indian History culture and Archeology, Pt Ravishankar Shukla
University Raipur Chhattisgarh
Email - yudhveer.parihar1990@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of tribal chieftdom and political organization in the Bastar region of present-day Chhattisgarh, tracing its development from ancient republican systems to the formation of a princely state and its eventual integration into modern India. Bastar represents a unique case study in political anthropology, where indigenous tribal governance structures interacted with, absorbed, and were ultimately transformed by external dynastic influences over nearly two millennia. Drawing upon historical records, archaeological evidence, anthropological studies, and administrative documents, this paper argues that the political evolution of Bastar is characterized by a continuous dialectic between indigenous tribal institutions and external state formations. The paper traces this evolution through five distinct phases: the pre-state tribal republican period (600 BCE - 350 CE), the emergence of early state structures under the Nala and Naga dynasties (350-1324 CE), the consolidation of the Kakatiya-Bastar state under the Chalukya dynasty (1324-1777 CE), the period of Maratha and British indirect rule (1777-1947), and the post-independence transition to democratic governance. Central to this political evolution is the role of the Danteshwari cult, which served as a mechanism for integrating tribal and non-tribal political structures under a unified symbolic framework. The paper concludes by examining the contemporary relevance of these historical political formations for understanding the region's current conflicts and governance challenges.

Keywords: Ancient Republics, Tribal Chieftdom in Bastar, Maratha and British

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bastar region, located in the southern part of present-day Chhattisgarh, represents one of India's most distinctive political landscapes. For over two millennia, this forested territory has been home to diverse tribal communities, including the Gonds, Marias, Murias, Bhatras, and Halbas, each with their own systems of governance, social organization, and cultural practices (Ram & Ram, 2012). Yet Bastar was also the site of continuous state formation, from the ancient Nala and Naga dynasties to the Kakatiya-Bastar princely state that endured for over six centuries (Khute, 2020).



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The evolution of political organization in Bastar challenges conventional narratives that view tribal societies as either "stateless" or as passively absorbing external political structures. Instead, the region's history reveals a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and synthesis between indigenous political forms and external state systems. As Sundar (2016) observes in her seminal work *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, the pre-colonial economy and polity of Bastar exhibited "a degree of social and political fluidity" that dispels notions of the region as "untouched and isolated prior to colonialism" (p. 27).

This paper traces the evolution of tribal chiefdom in Bastar through five historical phases. The first section examines the pre-state period, when tribal republican systems provided the foundation for political organization. The second section analyzes the emergence of early state structures under the Nala and Naga dynasties, which established the first centralized kingdoms in the region. The third section focuses on the founding of the Bastar state by Annam Deo in the 14th century and the consolidation of Kakatiya rule, examining how the new dynasty co-opted indigenous political and religious institutions. The fourth section explores the period of Maratha and British indirect rule, when the princely state was incorporated into colonial administrative structures. The final section considers the post-independence transition and the contemporary significance of Bastar's political heritage.

Throughout this analysis, particular attention is paid to the role of the Danteshwari cult as a mechanism for political integration. The goddess Danteshwari, who served as the tutelary deity of the Bastar royal family, represents a synthesis of indigenous tribal goddess traditions with Brahmanical Hindu concepts, embodying the fusion of political and religious authority that characterized Bastar's governance (Elwin, 1943; Sundar, 2016).

2. PRE-STATE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION: TRIBAL REPUBLICS AND EARLY GOVERNANCE

2.1 Early Tribal Governance Systems

The earliest political formations in the Bastar region were characterized by decentralized, republican systems of governance among indigenous tribal communities. Archaeological evidence suggests continuous human habitation in the region dating back to prehistoric times, with the development of complex social and political structures long before the emergence of centralized state systems (Singh, 2002).

According to historical records, tribal republican systems flourished in the Bastar region from approximately 600 BCE to 1324 CE (Padel & Das, 2010). These systems were characterized by:

- Village-level governance through councils of elders
- Clan-based territorial organization
- Collective decision-making processes
- Customary laws governing resource access and conflict resolution



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- Religious authority vested in local deities and spiritual leaders

The Gonds, who constitute the largest tribal group in central India, developed sophisticated political institutions that combined village autonomy with broader clan confederacies. The ghotul system, which served as both a youth dormitory and a site for social and political education, represented a distinctive institution of Gond governance (Elwin, 1947). Through the ghotul, young men and women were prepared for adult responsibilities, including participation in community decision-making. Elwin (1947) documented that the ghotul served as "the heart of Muria life" and functioned as "a training ground for citizenship" where young people learned the values of cooperation and collective responsibility (p. 94).

2.2 The Naga Confederacy and Early State Formation

The first significant move toward centralized state structures in Bastar occurred with the emergence of the Naga dynasty, which ruled from approximately 760 to 1324 CE (Khute, 2020). The Nagas, who established their capital at Barsur, represented a transitional form of political organization that combined tribal confederacy structures with emerging state institutions.

The Naga rulers, described in ancient Sanskrit literature as "Chhindak Nagas," were considered ancestors of the modern Gonds (Sharma, 2005). Their political system maintained strong connections to tribal social structures while introducing elements of centralized authority, including:

- A hereditary ruling lineage
- Territorial administration through subordinate chiefs
- Patronage of religious institutions
- Collection of tribute and taxes
- Maintenance of military forces

The Naga period also witnessed significant cultural developments, including the construction of temples and the patronage of religious institutions. The goddess Manikeswari, worshipped by the Naga rulers, appears to have been an avatar of a local tribal deity known as Mawli (meaning Mother), whose non-anthropomorphized shrines can still be found across the region (Elwin, 1943). This integration of indigenous and Sanskritic religious traditions established a pattern that would characterize Bastar's political culture for centuries.

2.3 The Nala Dynasty: Early State Structures

Prior to the Naga dynasty, the Bastar region was ruled by the Nala dynasty from approximately 350 to 760 CE (Mirashi, 1960). The Nalas, whose capital was at Pushkari (modern Podagarh), represent the earliest documented state formation in the region. Inscriptions from the reign of King Bhavadatta Varman record his invasion of the neighboring Vakataka kingdom around 450 CE, demonstrating that Bastar was not an isolated backwater but a politically significant region with connections to major powers of the Deccan (Khute, 2020).



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The Nala period established several precedents that would influence subsequent political formations:

- The concept of territorial sovereignty
- Dynastic succession
- State patronage of religious institutions
- Military organization for territorial expansion and defense
- Administrative structures for resource extraction and redistribution

However, the Nala and Naga state structures coexisted with, rather than replaced, indigenous tribal governance systems. As Sundar (2016) notes, even during periods of centralized rule, "the search for the adivasi or original inhabitant becomes highly problematic with the influences of Sanskritic Gods and multi-caste territorial assemblies preceding animistic worship and tribal clan divisions" (p. 34). This coexistence of multiple political and social structures would remain a defining characteristic of Bastar's political evolution.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF THE BASTAR STATE: KAKATIYA FOUNDATION AND CONSOLIDATION

3.1 Annam Deo and the Founding of Bastar State

The establishment of the Bastar state in 1324 CE marks a watershed in the region's political evolution. According to the genealogies preserved by the Bastar royal family, the state was founded by Annam Deo (also known as Annamaraja), a brother of Prataparudra II, the last ruler of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal (Glasfurd, 1862). Following the fall of Warangal to the Delhi Sultanate, Annam Deo migrated southward with his followers and established a new kingdom in the forested region of Dandakaranya.

While scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of this genealogy, noting that the documents claiming this connection date only from 1703 and that they record only eight generations spanning nearly four centuries, the Kakatiya connection remains central to Bastar's self-understanding (Sundar, 2016). As Glasfurd (1862) noted in his report to the British government, "the Raja of Bastar claims descent from the ancient Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal, and the tradition is universally accepted throughout the region" (p. 12).

The founding of Bastar state represents a significant moment in the evolution of tribal chiefdom, as it introduced a centralized political structure that would endure for over six centuries. Annam Deo's establishment of the state involved:

- The integration of tribal chiefs into a hierarchical political system
- The introduction of Brahmanical religious institutions alongside indigenous practices
- The establishment of a capital at the town of Bastar
- The creation of administrative structures for revenue collection and governance



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3.2 The Danteshwari Cult and Political Integration

Central to the political consolidation of the Bastar state was the establishment of the Danteshwari cult. According to tradition, Annam Deo was directed by the goddess Danteshwari to establish his capital at the site of the Danteshwari Temple in Dantewada, where the goddess's danta (tooth) had fallen (Elwin, 1943). The goddess became the kuladevi (family deity) of the Bastar royal family, and her worship served as a mechanism for integrating tribal and non-tribal populations under a unified political and religious framework.

The Danteshwari cult represents a synthesis of indigenous tribal goddess traditions with Brahmanical Hindu concepts. As Elwin (1943) observed, the goddess is worshipped "in a form that combines the ancient tribal mother goddess with the Sanskritic Devi" (p. 45). The temple at Dantewada became one of the shaktipeeth shrines, associated with the myth of Sati's dismemberment, establishing Bastar's place within the broader Hindu sacred geography.

The political significance of the Danteshwari cult extended beyond religious practice. The Dussehra festival, celebrated annually at the Danteshwari Temple, served as a mechanism for political integration. During this festival, the Raja would receive tribute and expressions of loyalty from subordinate chiefs and tribal leaders, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of the state (Sundar, 2016). As Glasfurd (1862) documented, the festival brought together "all the principal zamindars and chiefs from every part of the state, who come to pay their respects to the Raja and to the goddess" (p. 34).

3.3 The Paik System and Administrative Structure

The administrative structure of the Bastar state was organized around the paik system, a form of service tenure that tied local chiefs to the central authority. Under this system, subordinate chiefs were granted land in exchange for military and administrative service to the Raja (Sundar, 2016). The paik system created a hierarchy of authority that extended from the central court at Jagdalpur to the village level.

The administrative hierarchy included:

- Pargana level administrators overseeing multiple villages
- Zamindars who collected revenue and maintained order
- Mukhiyas (village headmen) who represented local communities
- Paik families who provided military service and labor

This system maintained continuity with earlier tribal governance structures while establishing the centralized authority of the Raja. As Sundar (2016) explains, the paik system "represented a compromise between the need for centralized control and the recognition of local autonomy" (p. 56). Village headmen retained significant authority over local affairs, while the Raja's power was exercised through the distribution of patronage and the management of ritual and religious institutions.



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4. INDIGENOUS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: THE GHOTUL AND VILLAGE GOVERNANCE

4.1 The Ghotul as Political Institution

Despite the emergence of centralized state structures, indigenous political institutions continued to play a vital role in Bastar's governance. Among the most significant of these was the ghotul, a distinctive institution of the Muria and other Gond communities that served multiple social, educational, and political functions.

Elwin (1947), who conducted extensive ethnographic research among the Muria of Bastar, described the ghotul as "a kind of club or hostel for the young people of the village, where they sleep at night and spend most of their leisure time" (p. 15). However, the ghotul's functions extended far beyond these practical purposes. As Elwin (1947) documented:

- The ghotul served as a "training ground for citizenship," teaching young people the values of cooperation, collective responsibility, and community service (p. 94)
- It functioned as a "parliament" where young people debated community issues and learned decision-making processes
- It provided a space for the transmission of oral traditions, customary law, and cultural knowledge
- It reinforced social bonds and clan affiliations that formed the basis of political organization

The ghotul represented an alternative political model to the centralized state structure. While the Raja exercised authority over taxation, military affairs, and external relations, the ghotul and village councils maintained authority over many aspects of daily life, including dispute resolution, marriage arrangements, and resource management (Sundar, 2016).

4.2 Village Councils and Customary Law

Village governance in Bastar was organized through councils of elders, typically composed of respected members of the community representing different lineages and clans. These councils, known as panch or jati panchayat, exercised authority over local affairs according to customary law (Singh, 2002).

The functions of village councils included:

- Resolution of disputes through mediation and arbitration
- Enforcement of customary law governing marriage, inheritance, and social conduct
- Regulation of access to village resources, including forests and water
- Representation of village interests to higher political authorities

The relationship between village councils and the state was characterized by negotiation rather than subordination. As Sundar (2016) notes, "the state's authority was often mediated through these local institutions, and their cooperation was essential for effective governance" (p. 78).



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This arrangement allowed for a degree of political pluralism that accommodated both indigenous and external governance structures.

5. COLONIAL INTERVENTION AND TRANSFORMATION

5.1 Maratha Influence and the Treaty of 1742

The political landscape of Bastar underwent significant transformation beginning in the mid-18th century with the expansion of Maratha power into central India. In 1742, the Maratha general Bhaskar Pant established a treaty with the Raja of Bastar, initiating a period of indirect rule that would eventually lead to British control (Glasfurd, 1862).

The Maratha period introduced several changes to Bastar's political structure:

- Payment of annual tribute to the Maratha government
- Increased revenue demands that placed pressure on the paik system
- Introduction of new administrative practices and personnel
- Growing involvement of Maratha merchants and bankers in the regional economy

The Maratha presence did not fundamentally alter the internal governance of Bastar, but it established precedents for external intervention that would intensify under British rule. As Sundar (2016) observes, the Maratha period "introduced a new dynamic in which the state's autonomy was constrained by external powers while its internal authority remained largely intact" (p. 89).

5.2 British Paramourcy and the Princely State

Following the British victory over the Marathas, Bastar came under British paramourcy as a princely state. The British policy toward princely states involved indirect rule through local rulers, with the British Resident exercising oversight over matters of external relations, succession, and major administrative changes (Glasfurd, 1862).

The British period witnessed significant transformations in Bastar's political and economic structure:

- Systematic documentation of the region's resources and population
- Introduction of new revenue systems that undermined traditional paik arrangements
- Growing commercial exploitation of forest resources
- Increased presence of non-tribal populations, including merchants and administrators
- Development of infrastructure, including roads and administrative buildings

Captain Glasfurd's report of 1861-1862 provides a detailed picture of Bastar at the beginning of British rule. Glasfurd (1862) documented the state's geography, population, administrative structure, and economic resources, noting that "the Raja exercises absolute authority within his dominions, subject only to the suzerainty of the British Government" (p. 45).



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5.3 Resistance and Rebellion

The colonial period also witnessed significant resistance to British intervention in Bastar. The Bhumkal (earthquake) rebellion of 1910 represents the most significant uprising against colonial authority in the region. Sparked by British attempts to impose forest regulations and extract labor from tribal communities, the rebellion spread across Bastar and required substantial military force to suppress (Padel & Das, 2010).

Sundar (2016) has analyzed the Bhumkal rebellion as a manifestation of the tension between indigenous political traditions and colonial governance. She argues that the rebellion "represented an attempt to defend a particular way of life and form of governance against the encroachments of a new and increasingly intrusive state" (p. 145). The rebellion's leadership came from traditional village headmen and tribal chiefs, demonstrating the continued vitality of indigenous political institutions even after a century of colonial influence.

6. POST-INDEPENDENCE TRANSITION AND CONTEMPORARY GOVERNANCE

6.1 Integration into the Indian Union

Following India's independence in 1947, Bastar was integrated into the Indian Union as part of Madhya Pradesh. In 2000, with the creation of Chhattisgarh state, Bastar became a district within the new state (Census of India, 2011).

The integration of Bastar into modern Indian governance structures represented a fundamental transformation of the region's political organization. The princely state's administrative hierarchy was replaced by democratic institutions, including:

- Elected local government (panchayati raj)
- Representation in state and national legislatures
- Application of Indian law, including constitutional protections for tribal communities
- Integration into national economic and development frameworks

This transition was not without tension. The abolition of princely privileges and the incorporation of the region into modern bureaucratic structures disrupted traditional political arrangements that had persisted for centuries (Sundar, 2016).

6.2 Constitutional Provisions and Tribal Autonomy

The Indian Constitution includes provisions designed to protect the rights and autonomy of tribal communities. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution provides for the administration of scheduled areas, with special provisions for tribal governance and land rights (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2021).

In Bastar, these constitutional provisions have created a hybrid governance structure that combines:

- Application of modern administrative and legal systems
- Special protections for tribal land and forest rights



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- Institutions for local self-governance
- Reserved representation for scheduled tribes in political bodies

However, the implementation of these provisions has been uneven, and tensions between state authority and tribal autonomy continue to shape the region's political landscape (Sundar, 2016).

6.3 Contemporary Challenges and the Persistence of Indigenous Political Forms

Despite the transformation of governance structures, indigenous political institutions continue to play a role in contemporary Bastar. Village councils, traditional leaders, and customary practices remain important for many tribal communities, particularly in areas where state presence is limited (Padel & Das, 2010).

The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency that has affected Bastar since the late 1960s represents, in part, a rejection of the modern state's authority and an assertion of alternative political visions. As Padel and Das (2010) argue, the insurgency "draws upon deep currents of resistance to external authority that have characterized the region for centuries" (p. 287). The conflict highlights the ongoing tension between centralized state authority and local autonomy that has been a recurring theme in Bastar's political evolution.

7. CONCLUSION

The evolution of tribal chiefdom in Bastar reveals a complex history of political adaptation, synthesis, and resistance. From ancient tribal republican systems to the emergence of centralized state structures under the Nala, Naga, and Kakatiya dynasties, from the establishment of the Bastar princely state to its integration into modern India, the region's political formations have been characterized by a continuous dialectic between indigenous and external governance models.

Several patterns emerge from this historical analysis. First, the political evolution of Bastar has consistently involved the synthesis of different governance traditions rather than the replacement of one system by another. The Danteshwari cult, which integrated indigenous and Brahmanical religious traditions, exemplifies this pattern of synthesis. Second, indigenous political institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience, persisting through periods of state formation, colonial rule, and modern governance. The ghotul, village councils, and customary law continue to shape political life in Bastar. Third, the relationship between centralized authority and local autonomy has been characterized by negotiation and tension, with periodic episodes of resistance when external powers sought to impose changes without accommodating indigenous political traditions.

For contemporary Bastar, this history offers important lessons. The persistence of indigenous political forms suggests that effective governance must recognize and accommodate local institutions rather than simply imposing external models. The historical pattern of synthesis demonstrates the possibility of integrating different governance traditions. And the legacy of



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resistance warns against ignoring the legitimate claims of local communities in pursuit of state or economic objectives.

As Bastar confronts the challenges of development, conflict, and social change, its rich political heritage provides resources for imagining governance arrangements that combine the strengths of modern institutions with the wisdom of indigenous traditions.

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