



Socio-Economic Structure of Bundelkhand Region through Inscriptions: (9th Century to 12th Century CE)

Research Student: Aman Khatik

BA (Hons) History, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi

Abstract

This research paper analyses the socio-economic structure of Bundelkhand during the Chandela period (9th to 12th century CE) through an epigraphic perspective. The primary materials of this study are drawn from inscriptions, copper plates, and sculptural records — that is, primary epigraphic evidence. The in-depth analysis of more than fifty major inscriptions recovered from sites such as Khajuraho, Kalinjar, Deogarh, Mahoba, Ajaygarh, Nanyaura, Icchawar, and Semra forms the cornerstone of this research. These inscriptions cover the reigns of Chandela rulers from Harshhadeva to Hammiravarmana.

The study of these inscriptions makes it clear that Bundelkhand during the Chandela period was a well-organised, prosperous, and culturally highly advanced region. The social structure here was based on the varna system, in which — besides the four varnas of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra — frequent references to social sub-groups such as Kayastha, Rawat, and Mahajan are also found. Analysis of land grants reveals that agriculture was the backbone of this region's economy. The abundant temple-building activity is proof of a robust religious economy.

Keywords: *Epigraphy, Chandela Dynasty, Jejakabhukti, Land Grants, Rock Inscriptions, Copper Plates, Socio-Economic History, Khajuraho, Varna System, Medieval India*

1. Introduction

In the tradition of historiography, epigraphy occupies the foremost position. Inscribed on stone slabs, copper plates, and temple walls, these records are a living mirror of the contemporary society, economy, and politics. The systematic study of Indian epigraphy began in the nineteenth century with James Prinsep, yet the importance of inscriptions has been unparalleled since ancient times. Derived from the Greek 'Epigraphen' — meaning 'to write upon' — this discipline has provided a new light for understanding the history of medieval India.

Bundelkhand — known as 'Jejakabhukti' during the Chandela period — encompasses a vast stretch of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Spread between the Vindhya mountain range and the Yamuna-Narmada doab, this region has been of special interest to historians not only on account of its geographical features but also because of its historical continuity. From the 9th to the 12th century, during the reign of the Chandela dynasty, this region was at the zenith of its development.

The aim of this research paper is to analyse the socio-economic structure of Chandela-period Bundelkhand through epigraphic evidence. This study is primarily based on inscriptions and copper plates published in various volumes of *Epigraphia Indica*. The study establishes that inscriptions are not merely eulogies of rulers, but are highly important documents of the contemporary socio-economic structure.

2. Geographical and Historical Background

Bundelkhand is situated between 23°–26°50' North latitude and 77°–82' East longitude. Its northern boundary is the Yamuna River, its western boundary is the Chambal River, its southern boundary is formed by the Vindhya ranges, and its eastern boundary is the Betwa River. At present, this region comprises seven districts of Uttar Pradesh — Banda, Chitrakoot, Mahoba, Hamirpur, Jhansi, Jalaun, Lalitpur — and six districts of Madhya Pradesh — Panna, Chhatarpur, Sagar, Damoh, Tikamgarh, and Datia.

The terrain of this region is mainly hilly and rugged, but some parts also have flat and fertile land. From a geological standpoint, the region is divided into four formations: the Archean system, the Gwalior series, the Vindhyan system, and river alluvial plains. The rivers Betwa, Ken, Sindh, Pahuj, Chambal, Baghai, and Mandakini were the lifelines of this region, which played an important role in the development of agriculture, settlement, and trade routes.

The Chandela dynasty was founded in the 9th century by Nannuka. Yashovarman is considered the first fully independent Chandela ruler. During the reign of Dhangadeva (c. 950–1002 CE), the empire reached its apogee. The world-famous temples of Khajuraho, the vast reservoirs of Mahoba, and the forts of Kalinjar and Ajaygarh — all these are glowing proofs of the multifaceted achievements of the Chandela rulers. Vidyadhara (c. 1019–1035 CE) demonstrated his military superiority by repelling two invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni.

3. Epigraphy: Methodology and Major Sources

Inscriptions recovered from Bundelkhand can be broadly classified into three categories: first — Rock Inscriptions, engraved on temple walls, pillars, and rock surfaces; second — Copper Plate Inscriptions, which are detailed records especially of land grants; and third — coin legends and others, which include inscriptions on coins, bricks, and pillars. These inscriptions contain descriptions of temple construction, land grants, religious establishments, and the achievements of rulers.

The Dhangadeva Inscription of Khajuraho¹ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, pp. 121–126): This inscription belongs to the reign of the Chandela ruler Dhangadeva and mentions temple construction, land grants, and facilities given to Brahmanas. It is dated to Vikrama Samvat 1011 (954 CE) and declares the full independence of the Chandela dynasty.

The Vishvanatha Temple Inscription of Khajuraho² (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, pp. 431–438): This inscription provides important information about the construction of the temple, a list of donations, and the social status of the donors. It includes details of craftsmen, donors, and religious institutions.

The Kirtivarman Inscription of Mahoba³ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 9, pp. 45–52): This inscription provides information about urban life, trading activities, and social classes. References to merchants (Seths), traders, and the military class make it clear that urbanisation and internal trade were promoted during the Chandela period.

The Ajaygarh Rock Inscription⁴ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, p. 154): This inscription, from the period of Chandela king Yashovarman, describes village organisation, the tax system, and local officials. It mentions taxes such as 'bhaga', 'bhoga', 'hiranya', 'udranga', and 'uparikara'.

The Deogarh Inscription⁵ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 14, pp. 193–196): This inscription from the period of Yashovarman contains details of the construction of a reservoir built for irrigation and agricultural development. It is an important piece of evidence of the state's agricultural policy.

¹Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, pp. 121–126

²Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, pp. 431–438

³Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 9, pp. 45–52

⁴Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, p. 154

⁵Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 14, pp. 193–196

The Hardiya Copper Plate⁶ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, pp. 318–326): This copper plate is a distinctive example of village grant during the Chandela period. It contains details of an entire village being donated to Brahmana scholars, which is extremely useful in understanding the land relations and structure of rural society during the Chandela period.

The Mahoba Merchants' Guild Inscription⁷ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 21, pp. 56–61): This inscription is proof of the existence of merchants' guilds (shrenis) and depicts the organised nature of trade. The Mau Inscription contains a detailed mention of customs duties on 53–59 commercial commodities.

4. 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 Dhangadeva⁸ (Vikrama Samvat 1011) 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 Inscription⁹ provide complete introductions to many Brahmanas — their gotra, pravara, shakha, and educational qualifications. The Nanyaura Donation Inscription of Devavarmana describes a Brahmana named Abhimanyu of the Bharadvaja gotra, who was 'proficient in the Vedas and Vedangas'. The Khajuraho rock inscription¹⁰ 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 Inscription¹¹ (Vikrama Samvat 1261) mentions 'Rawat Savant of the Bharadvaja gotra', whose father

⁶Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, pp. 318–326

⁷Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 21, pp. 56–61

⁸Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, p. 146 — Dhangadeva Khajuraho Rock Inscription

⁹Indian Antiquary, Vol. 16, p. 201

¹⁰Indian Antiquary, Vol. 39, p. 195

¹¹Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, pp. 230–233

'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 as a distinct social class is an important social characteristic of the Chandela period. Kayasthas served in state administration as writers, accountants, and document-keepers. The Ajaygarh rock inscription from the period of Bhojavarman¹² reveals that Subhatta, who was a minister, actually belonged to the Kayastha lineage. The Khajuraho inscription (Vikrama Samvat 1011) 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 Plate¹³ '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.

Epigraphic and literary evidence proves that the practice of sati existed in Chandela society and enjoyed religious and social sanction. The Bamhani Sati Inscription¹⁵ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 27, pp. 140–143) mentions the erection of a stone in memory of a woman who committed sati. The Ajaygarh Sati Inscription — recovered from Ajaygarh Fort (present Panna district, Madhya Pradesh) — 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 remarkable architecture of the Khajuraho temples is living proof of this. The inscriptions mention the 'sutradhar' (master architect). The Khajuraho inscription¹⁶ (Vikrama Samvat 1059) mentions the construction of the Shambhu temple by 'Sutradhar Tachchhan'. The Kalinjar inscription¹⁷ (Vikrama Samvat 1147) mentions the construction of a mandapa under the supervision of 'Sutradhar Ram' and the creation of an image of

¹²Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 30, p. 90, verse 3

¹³Indian Antiquary, Vol. 16, p. 201 — Nanyaura Copper Plate 'B' (V.S. 1107)

¹⁴Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, p. 145

¹⁵Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 27, pp. 140–143

¹⁶J.A.S.B., Vol. 3, pp. 159–184 (Khajuraho Inscription)

¹⁷Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 31, p. 165

Nilakantha by his son 'Rupakara Lahad', proving that craftsmen families were engaged in this profession for generations.

In the inscriptions¹⁸, titles such as 'Mahajan' and 'Shreshti' were used for people of the Vaishya or merchant class. The Khajuraho Jain Inscription¹⁹ 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'.

5. Economic Structure: Epigraphic Analysis

For understanding the economic system of the Chandela period, the inscriptions of that era are the most authentic and reliable sources. 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 Augas Donation Inscription of Madanavarman²⁰ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 16, p. 202) 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 Paramardideva²¹ 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, Shiva-Sagar, Madan-Sagar, Kirti-Sagar, Rahil-Sagar, Vijaya-Sagar, and the main tanks of Kalinjar. The construction of Madan-Sagar is mentioned in the Mahoba Copper Plate²², which was built by Madanavarman. The mention of reservoir construction by Yashovarman in the Deogarh Inscription is clear proof of the state's agricultural policy.

¹⁸Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 13, pp. 208–209

¹⁹Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, p. 152

²⁰Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 16, p. 202

²¹Indian Antiquary, Vol. 16, p. 101

²²Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 16, p. 62

The Chandela inscriptions present an extremely detailed and complex picture of the revenue system. The Ajaygarh Rock Inscription²³ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, p. 154), 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 Inscription²⁴ 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.

The Chandela inscriptions contain extensive details of the tradition of land grants. This tradition was not only religious but also had economic and political implications. Through land grants, kings rewarded Brahmanas, religious institutions, and feudatories, thereby ensuring their political loyalty. The 'Chandavat Inscription of Chandadeva'²⁵ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, pp. 193–196) 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). The footprint inscription inside the Lakshman Temple²⁶ also contains a brief but important account of a land grant, from which it is known that special land was also granted for the construction and maintenance of temples. 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.

²³Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, p. 154

²⁴Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, p. 162

²⁵Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 4, pp. 193–196

²⁶Footprint Inscription inside the Lakshman Temple, Khajuraho

The Mahoba Merchants' Guild Inscription²⁷ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 21, pp. 56–61) shows that organised trade guilds (shrenis) existed in this region. These guilds regulated internal and external trade. The inscriptions²⁸ 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.²⁹

Chandela-period inscriptions mention a monetary system. During this period, the 'dramma' (silver coin), 'dinar' (gold coin), and 'pana' (copper coin) were in circulation.³⁰ 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',³¹ 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 Inscription³³ (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 22, pp. 116–130) is considered most important from the perspective of craft industries. It contains details of silk weavers (kausheya), cotton-cloth manufacturers (karpasika), and dyers (ranjaka).

To understand the economic structure of the Chandela period, it is essential to keep in mind the feudal system. During this period, the economic system of the state was based on a feudal structure in which the king, mahasamanta, samanta, and cultivator were arranged in a pyramidal framework. 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.

²⁷Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 21, pp. 56–61

²⁸Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 19, p. 55

²⁹Alberuni (trans. Edward Sachau), London, 1910, Vol. 1, p. 202

³⁰Khajuraho Inscription of Dhangadeva; Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 1, pp. 122–135

³¹Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2, p. 47

³²Archaeological Survey Reports, Vol. 10, p. 52

³³Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 22, pp. 116–130

During the Chandela period, religious institutions — especially temples — were not only spiritual but also economic and social centres. Temples received vast land grants and played an important role in the local economy. Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Jain — temples of all three faiths existed in this region, which is evidence of the religious liberalism of the Chandela rulers.

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. A record of a Jain devotee's donation in the Jain temples of Khajuraho (Madanavarman period) also corroborates the administration's religious tolerance.

The abundant temple-building activity is proof of the consolidation of a religious economy. For the Khajuraho temple complex, not only land grants but also 'devottara' (property of the deity) were received, enabling its autonomous functioning. In this way, religion, state, and society were intimately interconnected.

6. Conclusion

This research paper has conducted an in-depth historical study of the socio-economic structure of the Bundelkhand (Jejakabhukti) region from the 9th to the 12th century in the light of inscriptions. Based on the analysis of epigraphic evidence, 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. The protection of the varnashrama order was considered a political responsibility by the Chandela kings — this is explicitly recorded in the Khajuraho rock inscription of Dhangadeva.

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 — all these elements are proof of a developed agricultural system. The Deogarh and Mahoba reservoir-construction inscriptions reflect the active nature of the state's agricultural policy.

Third, the land-grant tradition was a distinctive economic feature of the Chandela period. Under the 'agrahara' system, land grants created an economic structure in which land was distributed among the king, feudatories, and village administration. This system ensured the economic autonomy of religious institutions.

Fourth, 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.

Fifth, 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 — in the monetary system is indicative of a developed monetary economy.

Sixth, the economic role of religious institutions — especially temples — was extremely important. Land grants, devottara property, and religious donations by the merchant class — all of these together created a religio-economic system in which religion and economy were mutually linked.

Finally, the incomparable temples of Khajuraho, the vast reservoirs of Mahoba, and the impregnable fort of Kalinjar — all of 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. Thus, this historical study of the socio-economic structure of Bundelkhand in the light of inscriptions is helpful not only in understanding the history of this region but also in elucidating the overall socio-economic processes of medieval India.

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