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CHOTA NAGPUR: A NOMENCLATURE IN CONTRADICTION

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ABSTRACT

The present work is claimed to tend definitely to the advancement of knowledge regarding the local history of Chotanagpur, as no specific material, on socio historical line is available; embodying the researchers of different scholars is known to have yet been written. It further claims to be the result of the recovery of dying traditions, local records, documentary and archaeological and collection of other scattered fragments of materials, carefully collected, correlated and systematized in the form of a continuous narrative.

The object of writing this treatise is to present in outline the history of the tract, known as Chota Nagpur in the Pre-British period, which is even now the dark period for the country. F.B.Bradley Birt characterized the tract as a little known province of the empire. It is a matter of great regret that no history of this plateau, in the form of a continuous narrative, embodying the results of specialist studies after critical shifting, has yet been written by a competent scholar. Though S.C.Roy's excellent treatise contains, besides ethnological and anthropological observations, some historical references relating to the district of Ranchi, where the Mundas predominate but the author has not included in that work the history of the other districts of the division. Thus there has been a long felt need for a history of this country.

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INTRODUCTION

The prefix 'chota' in chota Nagpur has given rise to various theories and interpretations among scholars. J.H.Hewitt¹ who spells 'chota' as 'chutia' derives its meaning from 'chot' and says: "The very ancient Nagbansi family, who gave their name to Chutia Nagpur, meaning the mother (Chut) of the Nagas, and who still rule the country, also belong to this race, whose cognizance is the Naga or Cobra snake standing erect and this they used to depict as a Tilak or caste symbol on their foreheads, as was the custom observed by the Egyptian Kushika Kings. In their snake genealogy the mother snake is the five headed Naga, worshipped yearly throughout India on the 5th of Sraban (July-August) as Nag-Panchami, whose image is depicted as watching over Shiva, Krishna and Buddha".

This explanation has the advantage of simplicity and accounts for the present custom for the present custom of the Nagbansi chiefs. But the meaning seems improbable, as there is no such word as 'chut' meaning mother, either in Sanskrit or Mundari or any other kindred language of the aborigines.

A novel theory of the origin of Chota Nagpur has been propounded by B.C.Mazumdar, published in the Modern

Review of Calcutta in 1907, in which he has tried to establish that Chota Nagpur was first colonized about the 6th century A.D. by the Nag-worshipping Bhuiyas, who were associated with a class of 'legendary heroes' called the Chutias and that the two together contributed to the name-"Chota Nagpur". He seems to adduce from Sir Edward Gait's History of Assam the fact that the Chutias and Bhuiyas were dominant in that country, prior to its conquest by the Ahoms in the thirteenth century and considers that these Chutias gave their name to Chutia or Chota Nagpur. B.C. Mazumdar further supposes that the Bhiyas and the Chutias were the earliest inhabitants of Chota Nagpur and that they were pushed towards the east and south by the Mundas. This view appears to be unfounded and untenable. All authoritative writers and documents on the subject such as Dalton, Tickel, Hunter, Risley, Ball and Bell, S.C.Roy, Bradley Birt, the settlement Report of the Ranchi District, the imperial Gazetteer of India and the district Gazetteer of Ranchi (1917) are unanimous in their statement that the Mundas were the

Hewitt- Primitive Traditional History. Vol. 1 pp 251-52.

Also Monier Williams- Religious Thought and Life in India. pp 324

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earliest inhabitants of Chota Nagpur and none of them has a word to say about that Chutias or the Bhuiyas as prior to the Mundas. If it is urged that the unanimity has little significance, as all the authorities have indulged in sheer speculation, B.C.Mazumdar's speculation is unsound and is opposed to fact. That this theory is absurd was demonstrated by S.C.Roy in an article in the J.B. & others published in 1932.

Col. Dalton, in his *Ethnology of Bengal* (p.81), says about the Chutias thus: "About the eighth century of our era the Hindu dynasty (in the valley of the Bramhaputra) was overthrown by the Chutia or Kachari hordes". Again, "I have pointed out the remarkable linguistic affinities between the Chutia and Bodo or Kachari, and this tradition of their having been driven from Upper Assam by the Ahoms is confirmatory of the common origin of the two races, and the expulsion alluded to must mean the conquest of the Chutias". About the Chutias, Sir Edward Gait, in his *History of Assam*, writes: "The Chutias now number about a twelfth of a million, and are found chiefly in Lakhimpur and the adjacent part of Sibsagar. Their language, which is still known to the Deoris or priestly section of the tribe, is unmistakably Bodo, but their appearance suggests that they absorbed considerable numbers of the earlier emigrants of that race, just as in more recent times they have intermarried with the Ahoms". "The earliest known centre of Chutiya (Kachari) power and civilization", says Endle, is Sadiya, in the north-eastern frontier of Assam. The same authority further informs us that their language belongs to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Tibeto-Chinese family of languages; their features approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and Tibet and China are believed to have been their original home". There is, therefore, not the slightest suggestion offered by any authority about the occupation (by the Chutias) of the plateau of Chota Nagpur. S.C.Roy, who has been carrying on first-hand field investigation into the ethnology of the different tribes of Chotanagpur for about 40 years, has not a word to say about the Chutiyas, in the list of several hundred clans into which the Munda tribe is divided. Nor does there appear to be any justification for the view that the Bhuiyas had ever occupied the Chota Nagpur plateau before the Mundas. But so far as the central plateau of the district of Ranchi is concerned, the traditions of the Mundas, which have found support in the discovery of the Asura Site, point to the occupation of the country by the Asuras before the Mundas appeared on the plateau. Thus B.C.Mazumdar's attempt at identifying the Bhuiyas with either the Chutias of Assam or the Baro-Bhuiyas ever came to Chota Nagpur or near it; on the other hand it is a fact, and all authorities agree that the Chutias entered Assam from the north and north-east of that country and not from its south or south-west. B.C. Mazumdar's theory, therefore, that "the name Chutia Nagpur is traced to the tribal name of the legendary heroes- the Chutias who once conquered the country" is highly improbable and has no factual foundation.

A plausible explanation of the name of the country seems to be the one given by Walter Hamilton, in his *Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description Hindostan*, published in London in 1820, where the author states: "This sub-division of Bahar is designated by the term 'chuta' (little) to distinguish it from the other Nagpoor possessed by the Bhoonslah Maharatta family, and the name (Nagpoor) indicates that in the opinion of the natives the territory contains diamonds". And, as to Chota

Nagpur the writer says:- "Still further to the South there is a third and elevated region, containing 18,000 square miles", though proportionately of considerable value. The highland includes the modern sub-division of Palamow Ramghur, and Chuta Nagpore, bounded on the west by the Soubah of Allahabad, by Gundwana and Orissa and on the east by Bengal. The last division is geographically termed the three Bellads or Cantons as also sometimes described, under the appellation of Kokerah but more commonly Nagpoor, from the diamond mines it contains, or is supposed to contain", We may mention here that the same explanation of the name, Chota Nagpur is given in Dr. Francis Buchanan and in B.Hamilton in the *East India Gazetteer*, first published in 1815.

Scholars very soon seem to have been prejudiced by the old traditions that have gathered round the name of 'Chutia', a suburb of the present town of Ranchi. According to the Munda traditional migration, the patriarch chutu hadam (meaning, in Mundari an old man) was the founder of this suburban village. The tradition further ascribes to it the honour of being the royal seat of the Nagbansi raja, who was fourth in descent from the traditional King Phani Mukut Rai.

The British officer posted in this part of Bihar, in order to make more widely known the name of the suburb village 'Chutia', perhaps for its traditional association with the seat of the Nagbansi Rajas, transferred the only great fair of the region from the bank of the Subernarekha river between Silli and Jhalda to the village of Chutia. This fair which was started in February, 1851, lasted till 1877.²

The village can even now show a temple bearing an inscription on the northern wall to the effect that it was constructed by the guru of the Raja in Sambat 1742, corresponding to 1684 A.D. There is a magnifying delight of the mind in associating a name with an historical event or place. Thus originated the theory that the region was named after the village Chutia, a place of historical memory. This particular derivation of the name was sponsored by Col. Dalton, the Second Commissioner under Act XX of 1854, and by Geographer Blochmann. The belief found favour for some time. G.C.Depree, officer-in-charge of the Topographical Survey, in his report, published in 1868 explained the meaning of the name of the plateau by saying that "the word 'chota' is a corruption from 'Chutia', the name of a village of note lying one mile east of Ranchi; thus the country is known as Chutia Nagpur amongst the natives". This derivation of the 'Chota' for a time held the ground, so that when the District Gazetteer of Ranchi was written in 1917, the writer, without assigning any reason, accepted the above meaning and wrote that "This interpretation (of Hamilton's) is almost certainly incorrect and the name is probably derived from Chutia, a village close to Ranchi, which is reputed to be the original home of the Nagbansi chiefs.

But it may be pointed out that the prefix 'Chota' to Nagpur is of comparatively recent origin, having been used for the first time by the British in the latter half of the 18th century and more regularly from the middle of the 19th century of the Christian era. The Purans give us different readings, such, as Marundu and Murndu in the Vayu puran; Purundu and Purandu in the Matsya Puran; Nurundu and Gurundu in the Bhagwat Puran, Narandu in the Brahmanda Puran, and Munda in Vishnu Puran. Ptolemy reads it Mundala; whereas Pliny Monedes. Hien-Tsang refers this tract as Kie-lo-na-su-fa-la-na

or Kiran Subarna, lying at a distance of 700 li or 117 miles to the north-west of A letter dated 28-2-1851 from J.H.Crawford, agent to the Governor General of South-Western Frontier Agency, as Chota Nagpur Division was then called, addressed to the Secretary, Sudder Board of Revenue.

Another letter from the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Finance Department dated 31-3-1876, proposing withdrawal of Government grant of Rs. 500/- These two letters have been traced in the record room of the Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, Ranchi.

Tamralipti. Another Chinese traveller, Fahien, coming up to Bodh Gaya was afraid to proceed further south and named the mountainous region to the south "kukkulada", which has been identified by Cunningham with Kurkihar, 16 miles to the south-east of Gaya. The early and the mediaeval Sanskrit literatures called the plateau by the names of "Pulinda-des" or "Poulinda" and Dasarna. The later Sanskrit literature called the modern Chota Nagpur by the name of "Jharkhand", the land of forests. The Muhammadan historians who knew the country as "Kokerah" or "Kokra" and occasionally also, in the later period, "Nagpur" but without the prefix "Chota".

Even in the earlier years of the British rule, in official reports and other publication, the modern Chotanagpur was generally named "Nagpur". Thus when the East India Company in 1771 A.D. for the first time entered into a revenue settlement with the then Raja, Drip Nath Sahi, the area was simply described as "Kukrah". In a letter addressed to the Governor at Fort William, dated Ramgarh, 12th August, 1774 from Captain Camac, who was the first British Officer to enter Chota Nagpur, the region was named simply "Nagpore". I Sir John Shore's famous Minute of the 18th September, 1789 this area was still "Nagpore". It was for the first time, in 1792, that James Rennell³, in his Map of Hindustan, prefixed the term "Chuta" to Nagpur, but it was not till 1812 that Nagpur was officially recognized as "Chota Nagpur" by the Parliament⁴. The examination of the official reports shows that the prefix 'Chota' was not regularly maintained by all British officers. The name appears to be used from the forties of the nineteenth century, or more properly from 1854, when Thomson in his Gazetteer described the region under the heading 'Chotaf Nagpore or Napore the lesser'. The same view has been shared by W.W.Hunter⁵, when he says: "The name Chota is the modern corruption of chutia. Rennell's map has 'Chuttiah'; and in 1787, Grant (Fifth Report vol. 1 p.503) speaks of the Raja's estate as 'Chutea Nagpur'.

It may also be pointed out that the idea that 'chota' of Nagpur was from the village 'chutia', most probably originated in the mis-pronunciation of the foreigners and their indiscriminate spellings. It appears that the foreigners could not pronounce the letter

1. The conquered Province on the south of Bihar containing Ramgur Palamau, and Chuta Nagpore with their Dependencies.
2. The fifth report of the select committee on the Affairs of the East India Company.
3. W.W.Hunter-Statistical Account of Bengal, 1877. Vol, XVI, pp, 321.

"chh", and hence 'chota' or "chhota" was spelt as 'chuta'. Before the adoption of the present spelling 'chota' we meet with all possible spellings, e.g. 'chuta', 'chota' 'chutea' 'chuttiah', 'chutteah', 'chutiya', 'chootiah', 'choota', 'chut', 'chootah', 'chutia'- perhaps this list almost completes all possible permutations and combinations. It, therefore seems highly probable that when the spelling reached this anomalous and confusing stage an idea gradually gained ground in the minds of the scholars that it was time to explain its historical significance by associating it with the village 'chutia', around which so many historical traditions have gathered. Spiritual interpretation of common events is a hobby with some men. Similarly, an historian's hobby is to trace the historicity of every name. It is a pity that the old theory of the chutia origin of Chota Nagpur is upheld by some, even though the old spellings have been definitely abandoned in favour of the present accepted from 'chota'.

There is a popular saying that the village 'chutia' with its surrounding plain was called "Bauisa", meaning 'big' in contradistinction with other plains. It has therefore absolutely no connection with the bigger Nagpur in the Central Provinces. Rakhal Das Halder, sometime the manager of the Maharaja of Chota Nagpur and the first Special Commissioner, appointed under topographical Survey of the Chota Nagpur Division on page 21, has written with his own hands the words "Nonsense", against the lines, "the word 'chota' is corruption from Chutia, the name of a village of note lying one mile east of Rachee", and remarks in the same margin, "chutia is mouse-like or small as distinguished from 'Bauisa' or big". This view finds support in a private letter, dated 26th July, 1871, (as yet unpublished) addressed to Miss Marry Carpenter, Bristol, in which he supplied information about Chota Nagpur for publication in the journal of the National Indian Association. From the above consideration we may conclude that the prefix 'chota' to Nagpur has no historical connection with the present village chutia and that the word 'chota' was beginning to be used by the British in the last decade of the 18th century, or more strictly from the middle of the 19th century.

Evidently in the beginning of the 19th century, the British had to deal, almost simultaneously, with two Nagpur chiefs, viz. one the Nagbansi Raja and the other the Bhonsla Raja, Raghuji Bhonsle II. To avoid confusion, or for the sake of convenience a distinctive mark was considered necessary, and hence the Nagpur plateau was named "chota" in order to distinguish it from the other Nagpur possessed by the Bhonsle Maratha family.

Therefore it seems that the present nomenclature could not specially defined the historical context of Jharkhand and its plateau name chhotanagpur had different meaning and historical development.

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