

Kingdom Formation, Legitimacy and Cultural Change: A Comparative Study of the Malla Kingdom of Bishnupur, the Gajapati Kingdom of Orissa and the Meitei Kingdom of Manipur (15th to 18th Century)

Synopsis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts of Jadavpur University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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2024

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The study of the formation of the kingdoms is not an unknown trend in research. Adequate attention is paid by the historians to understand the origin and nature of the kingdoms since the ancient times. For historical research on pre-colonial India, there are several writings so far been developed by the political scientists and the general scholars. Since the ancient times in Indian context, several noticeable works have been produced regarding the nature and origin of the kingdom. Different scholars with different approaches have dealt with the nature of the Indian kingdoms differently. Whether the Romanticists had described it as a ‘spiritual land’, the nationalist historians had seen it as a strong centralized power, the Imperialist historians, on the contrary, had tried to adore the British rule. But these works are in no way directly connected to our study. However, from the mid twentieth century, we have noticed the publication of several works which have dealt with the origin and evolution of the kingdoms. This strength was initiated by Bhupendranath Dutta, D.D. Kosambi and followed by R.S. Sharma, B.N.S. Yadav, D.C. Sircar, R.C. Majumdar etc. From the 1980s, some notable works regarding the nature of the kingdoms in India came into being. The preeminent historian of India, Romila Thapar started writing mainly on ancient Indian history. Thus the trend about writing the history of the kingdoms is continuously changing and growing.

However, coming to the main area of research, three pre-colonial kingdoms of Eastern and North–Eastern India namely the Malla Kingdom of Bishnupur (16th to 18th century), the Gajapati Kingdom of Orissa (15th to 16th century), and the Meitei Kingdom of Manipur (17th to 18th century) are taken into account. These three realms conducted some identical political evolution as well as the cultural fabrication of Vaishnavism in the pre-colonial period. The Vaishnava religion, from the 15th century, has appeared there as a means of legitimization process and has acted as a catalyst of cultural alteration in these three kingdoms.

In addition to the legitimization procedures, these kingdoms have also gone through a similar political progress from chiefdom to kingdom and from subsistence economy to surplus producing economy that backed the polity. Once addressing the past of these three kingdoms, it seems that the historical developments, cultural achievements, and social influence of these

kingdoms became a significant part to analyse in the medieval history of India. Thus a detailed work is undertaken to understand the whole process.

Initially starting with Bishnupur, it is shown that by the support of the newly form religion named Vaishnavism, the Malla kings upgraded their status from the tribal chiefs to powerful kings during the 16th century. The main religion of Mallabhum became Gauriya Vaishnavism, which was initiated by the 49th ruler Bir Hambir. This religion with its humanistic approaches attracted the mass of Bishnupur and helped in legitimizing the rule. On the other hand, by patronizing the Brahmins and adopting the Indo-Aryan rituals, the aboriginal Bagdi kings were regarded with Kshatriya status. The kings rejected their aboriginal title and adopted the Singha title and also made matrimonial alliances with Rajputana to foster their kshatriya status. The influence of this religion felt on various aspects of their life. Thus the legitimization process accelerated the growth of the kingdom and continued its rule for more than 1000 years.

The same features were noticed in the case of the Gajapati kingdom of Orissa. In Orissa, the Gajapati kings having practical, political and diplomatic attitude began to legitimize their kingdom by using the most popular deity of the region Lord Jagannath in various aspects of their rule. During this time, Sri Chaitanya Deb (1486 A.D.- 1534 A.D.), the great saint came to Orissa. He lived for 18 years in Puri. This staying had a remarkable bearing upon the Vaishnavas and Hindu society in general. Various tenets of Sri Chaitnaya Deb's faith were assimilated in the cult of Jagannatha Deb. The cult of Radha Krishna became very popular in Orissa. Thus they were together called a total and complete manifestation of Lord Vishnu. Manipur, one of the 8th North-eastern states of India have more than 60 percent of its inhabitants as Meiteis who have their own language, culture and tradition. Under the Meiteis, Manipur got a different flavour in the culture, traditions and began to get influenced by the Vaishnavites. Under king Kiyamba (1467-1507 A.D), an influential Brahmin advised him to follow the rituals of the Hindu God Vishnu and bring good fortune to his kingdom. From then onwards the royal patronage was given to the worship of Vishnu by its successive rulers. Intense sanskritization was started and under the influence of Vaisnavism, the Manipuri classical dance came into being which is even continued today. Thus under the Meiteis, Manipur became enriched in military, culture, traditions, customs etc and got influenced by Vaishnavism. The next important king Meidingu Pamheiba (1708-1747 A.D.) himself got converted to the Ramanandi sect of Vaisnavism. Under the influence of

the then Vaishnava guru Santi Das Gosai, the Meiteis made Vaisnavism the state religion of Manipur. The kings constructed several temples both for the Meitei deities and Vishnu god.

Nevertheless, the studies found relating to these kingdoms are different from the study which is pursued to be analysed. The approaches of the present study show the evolution on one hand and the circumstantial changes on the other hand. The evolution from non state to state in case of Manipur is comprehended .Whereas in the case of Orissa and Bishnupur, in absence of even any powerful domain, a circumstantial change is seen. Keeping in mind this above approach, the hypothesis for the study is formulated. However, coming to the foremost area of research, both evolutionary and non- evolutionary models in this work are found. In such a background, the study related to these three kingdoms is undertaken. Though numerous writings are present on the study of the mighty empires, very few observations are made on the formation of the regional kingdoms.

Overview of Secondary Literature:

Though numerous writings are available regarding the mere history of these kingdoms, very few observations are made on their formation. Moreover the concerned books on the kingdoms have mainly given emphasis on the origin, administration, description of temples or festivals. But the motives behind the formation of these kingdoms, the procedures by which the legitimization of their power were done are not shown in any work. The emergence of Vaishnavism from the 15th century and its appearance as a marker of cultural change in these kingdoms are not found in any writings. Moreover, the socio-cultural influence of this religion on a broader aspect are not explicated on a historical basis. Thus an attempt has been made to show the work regarding these aspects.

Regarding some theoretical books on the formation of states, *The State in India-1000-1700* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995) edited by Hermann Kulke has described the several models of Indian state forms arguing that although the notion of centralized empire may still dominate the historiography, alternative models like the segmentary state and the patrimonial state are also giving rise to productive debates. In his book several important articles regarding state formation and political process are provided by Ram Sharan Sharma, Harbans Mukhia, M. Athar Ali etc. Thus from there, further models are considered to integrate ideological discourse into the study of Indian State. Apart from the above mentioned book, there are several other

books where theories regarding state formation are discussed like *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1956) by D.D Kosambi, *From Lineage to State: Social Formation in the Mid First Millennium B.C in the Gangey Valley* (Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1984) by Romila Thaper, *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Cambridge, 1929) by W.H. Moreland and *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology* (New York, Random House, 1967) by Morton H. Fried. However the micro level studies on tribal state formations are not numerous in Eastern and North Eastern Indian context. On that note, mention may be made of Surajit Sinha in his edited book *Tribal politics and State Systems in Pre-colonial Eastern and North Eastern India* (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1987), who has described the several features of the pre-colonial states and various procedures adopted by these states like Bishnupur, Manipur, for the legitimization of their kingdoms. The contributions of the scholars like Amalendu Guha in his article *From Tribalism to Feudalism 600-1750*, IHR. 1(1974) and by K.S. Singh in his article *Tribal Society in India: An Anthropo-Historical Perspective* (Delhi, Manohar, 1985) are also notable in this regard.

The colonial government began to compile different gazetteers from the 19th century onwards for better administration on the conquered areas. The historical description regarding the origin of the dynasty was first given by W.W. Hunter in his book '*Statistical Account of the district of Bankura*' (Trubner & Co, London 1877, reprint edition, Delhi, D K Publishing House, 1973). Here a sketch of the traditional history of the dynasty with a weary list of some of the kings of the empire, along with a small description on agriculture as well as trade is provided. On the other hand, O' Malley in his *Bengal District Gazetteers* (West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, 1995) has mostly described the physical aspects, people, public health, agriculture, natural calamities of the 19th century. A very short description of the legendary history is accessible from his gazetteer. Later after independence, Amiya Kumar Banerjee in *West Bengal District Gazetteers* (Calcutta, State Editor, 1968) has given detail pre-historical reports of the region and its evolutionary phases. Thus basically some pre-historical description of the region along with the description of the legendary history are available from these gazetteers. The reason for the emergence of this chieftom and its sudden conversion to kingdom are not elaborated.

The history of Bishnupur is traditionally represented in the famous book titled *History of Bishnupur Raj* (Bishnupur, The New Minerva Press, 1982) by Abhaypada Mallik. This book has

thoroughly described the government, civilization, religion of the empire. But various differences of opinions are seen regarding the authenticity of his narrations. On the other hand, Hitesranjan Sanyal in an excellent article titled *Mallabhum* in the edited book *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India* (Calcutta, K P Bagchi & Co., 1987), has given an excellent description of the political status and nature of Malla polity along with various military operations of the king. Here some fragments of examples of the legitimization process are portrayed. Rathindra Mohan Chaudhury in his book *Atit Bankurar Arthachitra* (Bankura, Pashim Rarh Itihas O Sanskriti Charcha Kendra, 2012) has depicted the trading pattern and the imports, exports which were conducted during the Malla rule. His another book '*Bankurajaner Itihas Sanskriti*' (Bankura, Best Books, 2000) shows the emergence of the Radha region and the position and development of the kingdom during the medieval period. The relationship between the Mughal rulers and the Malla Kings are described in his book thoroughly which proves very significant for conducting the research on the study of Mallabhum.

The existence and importance of the kingdom of Mallabhum is known from the important sources initially from the book like '*Madhyayuger Itihas Sandhane*' (Howrah, Dolly Saha, 1998) by Prabhat Kumar Saha, where the influences and consequences of the Vaishnava religion on the Malla Kingdom are known. Amiya kumar Bandyopadhyay in '*Bankura Jelar Purakirti*' (Kolkata, Purta Puratatta Bibhag, 1971) has described about both the temples of Bishnupur and its surrounding areas with its architectural importance. Sri Anukul Chandra Sen's "*Bankura Parikrama*" (Kolkata, Naboshakti Press, 1376 B.S.) has also described the history, influence of Vaishnava religion on the Malla Kings. The book '*Pashim Rarh Bibidha Prasanga*' (Bankura, Bankura Jilla Parishad, 1999) has furnished about the history, culture, music of Bishnupur and the book '*Bankura Parichya*' (Kolkata, Progressive Publishers, 2012) describes the political history of the Malla Kings. '*Bankurar Mandir*' (Kolkata, Sri Saraswati Press, 1371 B.S.) by Amiya Kumar Bandyopadhyay has described the details of almost all the temples of Bankura with its architectural importance and pictures forming an excellent work to apprehend all the temples. The book '*Bishnupur –Bankura –Oitiyher Dhara*' (Kolkata, SS Print, 2015) by Achintya Mondal is a nice collection where description regarding the Kshatriya status of the Mallas, their temples and later the influence of the musical gharana are noticed. '*Bankura Itihas O Sanskriti*' (Bankura, Sailen Das, 1997) by Sailen Das has mentioned about the evolution of the region with its festivals, handicrafts etc. In the book '*Bishnupur Tathygrantha*' (Bishnupur, Arati

Printers, 2008) edited by Asit Majhi, writings on the temples, festivals and culture are found. However the historical development and nature of the kingdom of Mallabhum are not mentioned by any author. Fakirnarayan Karmakar in his book *'Bishnupurer Amar kahini'* (Kolkata, Sri Fanibhushan Mukopadhyay, 1967-68) has highlighted the agriculture, trade, festivals, administration of kingdom. *'Bishnupur Mandir Teracotta'* (Bishnupur, The New Minerva Press, 1386 B.S) by Chittaranjan Das Gupta has shown and described the vaishnava, hindu and the mughal influence on the walls of the temple. *The temples of Bankura District* (Bishnupur, Pradip Kar Tulsidas Maiti, 1972) by David Mccutchion tell the details about the number of temples in Bishnupur, their location, date of building and their present condition. The book *Mallabhum Sanskritir Atit O Bartaman'* (Midnapore, Bakpratima Press, 2006) by Lakshikanta Paul tell us about the different festivals, religion of this kingdom. A very small description of the literature of the Malla kings is given which proves unuseful for research. *'Pratna Parikrama: Mallabhum'* (Bishnupur, Mallabhum Kirtisala, 2009) edited by Jaladhar Haldar is an excellent book dealing with different socio-cultural and regional aspects of the empire. Here the article of Nihar Hazra titled *Rajdhani Bishnupurer Jol Sompod Niti Atit O Bartaman* proved very useful for the measurement of canals, the sources of the public utility. Pradip kumar singha in his article *Mallabder Jonmologno* has described in detail about the formation of a new era created by the kings of Mallabhum. This edited book also showed the origin of the dynasty and the description and details of various festivals. Along with these, the description of the temples of Bishnupur as well as the temples of the nearby areas the influence of religion on this area are also there. Even little description of economic background for the temples can also be found in his book.

Regarding Orissa, various books were written on the dynastic histories of Orissa. Shishir Kumar Panda in his book *'Political and Cultural History of Orissa'* (New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers, 1999) has described about the conquest, military achievements, administration of the Gajapati kingdom. But these description are mainly written like a story telling mode without proper historicity. Santilata Dei in her book *'Vaisnavism in Orissa'* (Calcutta, Punthi Pustak, 1988) has given description about the evolution of this religion and the effect of the trend of Radha Krishna cult in oriya literature. Prabhat Mukherjee in his book *'The History of Medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa'* (New Delhi, Asian Education Services, 1981) has shown an important aspect regarding the religious condition of Orissa on the eve of the

Chaitanya age. He has also shown the influence of Buddhism on the philosophy of the Medieval Vaisnavism. Upinder Singh in her book '*Kings, Brahmans and Temples in Orissa*' (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994) has given a description about the ancient and early medieval kingdoms of Orissa. Along with these, she has given description about religious elements in the ideology of kingship. Thus it proves useful to conduct the research regarding these aspects. Achintya Kumar Deb in his book '*The Bhakti Movement in Orissa*' (Calcutta, Sonnet Printing House, 1984). has described about the origin and development of Vaisnavism from a very early age, the socio-religious background of Orissa, the follower poets of Chaitnya in Bengal and the coming of Chatanyadev in Orissa.

Ramakanta Chakraborti in his book *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, 1996) has discussed about the importance of Vaishnava religion on the State and thoroughly discussed about the long term impact of Sri Chaitnya on the overall society. This book has described about the impact of the temples of Jagannath on the socio-cultural life of the people. This book has also described about the religious life of Orissa during the 15th and 16th century. Gangmumei Kabui in his book '*History of Manipur*' (New Delhi, National Publishing House, 1991) has shown about the land, people of Manipur from an early age. The evolution of the Meitei state, the expansion policy of the state is also shown in his book. But no description regarding religion of Manipur is evident from his book. R.K. Jhalajit Singh in his book '*A History of Manipuri Literature*' (Imphal, Manipur University, 1976) has shown the books which were written on the early medieval times. This book has also portrayed the society of Manipur during the medieval times. Thus some effect of the religion of Vaisnavism is seen in his book. Naorem Joykumar Singh in his book '*Religious Revitalisation Movements in Manipur*' (New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2012) has described the primary religion of Manipur and the change of religion due to the effect of Vaishnavism. N. Birachandra Singha in his book '*The Meitei Society: A Study on Traditional Life Circle Ceremonies*', (New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2006) has shown the structure of the society along with marriage ceremonies of the Meiteis. Sansam Amal Singh in his book *Meitei Calendar: Rites and Rituals in Manipur*, (Kolkata, Anshah Publishing House, 2010) has described about the various festivals of Manipur continuing from the ancient and medieval times and its impact in the society. Sruti Bandopadhyay in the book *Manipuri Dance: An Assessment on History and Presentation*, (Gurgaon, Shubhi Publications, 2010) has broadly described about the ritualistic dance of Manipur.

The scholarly works analyzing the contributions of the province of Mallabhum, Gajapatis and the Meiteis are lacking. The concerned books on this kingdom have mainly given emphasis on the historical origin, description of the temples, their new religion etc. But the motives behind the construction of so many lavish temples in Bishnupur, Orissa and Manipur, their kingdom formation process, the legitimization of their power or the socio-cultural influence of their newly formed religion on a broader aspect are explicated in this work on a historic basis. Thus the present work is an attempt to show the historical analysis of those regions on the base of these aspects.

Research Hypothesis: The three kingdoms (Bishnupur Raj of Mallabhum, Gajapati Kingdom of Orissa, Meitei Kingdom of Manipur) almost at the same period implemented several legitimizational procedures for evolving and sustaining their powerful realms. Here, the main research hypothesis observed are-

1. These three kingdoms arose from smaller realms, consolidated their political authorities and gradually transformed into powerful dynasties.
2. These kingdoms gathered wealth and thus amplified the agricultural production, developed the trade and commerce.
3. Due to economic sustainability, these kingdoms could follow the process of legitimization through the medium of the perceptible surplus distributions.
4. They have followed the process of divine connection of kingship, redistribution of surplus and adopted the Indo-Aryan rituals to attain legitimacy for their kingdoms.
5. The patronization of the priestly class was an essential part of the legitimization process. With their vigorous support, the ruling section adopted the religion Vaishnavism and imbibed the Indo-Aryan customs with an aim for making their kingdom legitimate in the eyes of the public.
6. The cultural adoption and diffusion led to the synthesis of one diversified culture in those regions resulting in a wholehearted transformation which influenced the whole society of Eastern and North Eastern India.

Research Objectives:

1. The first objective of the present study is to understand the similar procedures for the legitimization aspect which is taking place in the context of three pre-colonial kingdoms of Eastern and North-Eastern India.
2. The second objective is to show the ways and the stages in which the legitimization processes is taking place simultaneously in these three kingdoms.
3. The third objective is to conceptualize the changes which is taking place due to legitimization. Thus, it analyse the source and effect of the alterations in which the broader cultural assimilation in Eastern and North-Eastern India has taken place.

Main Research Questions:

The three kingdoms (Bishnupur Raj of Mallabhum, Gajapati Kingdom of Orissa, Meitei Kingdom of Manipur) transformed from the smaller realms to powerful kingdoms. On the basis of the hypothesis formulated for the study, the main research questions articulated are -

On the basis of the hypothesis, the research deals with some of the major questions.

1. How did the three kingdoms grew from such trivial territories and became dominant?
2. What are the approaches by which the economic viability got recognized in these regional kingdoms?
3. How did the economic sustainability of these realms helped in the procedure of legitimization?
4. What are the processes of the legitimizational method followed by these kingdoms?
5. How did the Vaishnava religion acted as a catalyst and formulated the comprehensive incorporation of their cultural fabrication in all over Eastern and North-Eastern India?

Data Collection and Methodology: The present study is an amalgamation of field surveys, various secondary as well as primary sources. In the first phase, these secondary sources in the form of books, articles etc and different primary sources with archaeological evidences like images of various temple inscriptions are accumulated. These collected sources are assembled

and properly investigated and analysed carefully in the second phase. In the third phase, these vigilant references are used articulately and interpreted according to the needs of the research.

Chapterization:

On the basis of both the literary and archaeological evidences, the thesis is divided into six chapters taking up specific themes. With a meaningful introduction, the first chapter titled as the Kingdom Formation: A Theoretical Overview has shown about the several approaches starting from the ancient to the very recent times to understand in general about the formation of state. The trend of the anthropological approaches, later followed by the historians are elaborated through the help of a number of works. The references of the publication of these several works to understand the theory of origin and evolution of the states are elaborated widely.

The second chapter termed as the Geo-Historical Evolution and Consolidation of Malla kingdom in Bishnupur has shown a study of the Radha region and the historical evolution of the Malla kingdom from the ancient times. The early historical analysis and the initial struggle and organization of these kingdoms is also shown in this chapter. Afterwards, the influence of other powerful dynasties on these small realms are elaborated from the ancient till the pre colonial period. The construction of lavish decorated terracotta temples in Bishnupur, the pleasure gardens, the seven lakes and thus their long term beneficial effect in the society is shown in the chapter.

The third chapter is designated as the Expansion and Advancement of Gajapati kingdom in Orissa. The study has revealed a reading of the historic evolution of the realm of the Gajapatis from ancient to the modern eras. Initially, some examples of the existence of mankind from the Palaeolithic to Neolithic age found are mentioned in the chapter. The initial historic review and the early struggle and association of this realm with the other dynasties is also presented in this chapter. The evolution of the Gajapati kings and the difficulties faced by them throughout their reign due to various reasons is shown in the chapter.

The fourth chapter is termed as the Progression and Persistence of Meitei kingdom in Manipur. The historical evolution and the origin of the Meiteis is shown in the chapter. It has dealt with the procedures by which the kings of these dynasties consolidated their empire and made it strong and powerful among its neighbouring states. On this note, the taxation policy,

administration, development of trade and commerce along with the growth of the Vaishnava religion in this province is discussed in the chapter. Along with these, some internal weaknesses over the religious propaganda which led to the causes of decline for the kingdom are also highlighted.

The fifth chapter termed as the Economic Background of the Realms has dealt with the ways on how the economic viability develop in these peripheral kingdoms. Some of the causes described were increase in the agricultural way of production, huge amount of offerings to the God, influence of trade and commerce etc. This chapter has elaborated how the treasury of these kingdoms raised and aided in the overall development of the region. It showed how the monarchs were profited from these economic sources and how it uplifted their economy. Because of these financial advantages, the rulers became able to legitimize and consolidate their kingdoms.

The sixth chapter named as the Legitimization, Ruling Authority with Socio-Cultural Influence has shown the uniqueness and similarities of the legitimization process. It has also shown how through the different modes of public utility, the synthesis of the primordial culture and Indo- Aryan culture, the general mass came closer to the ruling class. It has analyzed the procedures by which the Malla kings legitimize their kingdom. Thus this chapter describe the causes and the ways of building so many temples, lakes, canals, tols, gardens in all over these three kingdoms. The work also showed how through the different modes of public utility, the synthesis of the primordial culture and Indo–Aryan culture, the general mass actually came closer to the kings and supported their policies in every need. The chapter has analysed how the Vaishnava religion appeared, and became the marker of cultural change in these three kingdoms and how it upgraded the status of them from mere chiefdoms to kingdoms. This chapter has also focussed on the ways by which they paved the way for the broader cultural assimilation of Bengal.

Thus arguing the above chapters in this existent research, the summary and the shortcomings of the study in the well required conclusion is provided.

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D. Land Grant:

The image of the land grant is provided in the appendix which shows the gift of the king Durjan Singha to the sabayat of the temple.

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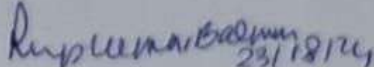
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