

Gondwana: Whether Political or Socio-Cultural Reality

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ABSTRACT The present paper is an attempt to examine the Gond tribal organization in historical depth. There has been lot of emotions and commotions in the effort to re-establish some of their traditional customs and also to introduce a new set of values reflecting purity in ideology and ritual practices. Gonds and Gondwana are not new names in Anthropology but these have been described at length by various scholars at different times. We have tried to compile some of the earlier observations with a view to comprehend the present state of affairs which is more stable, better organized and has taken a definite shape. The tribal members now have started to fight against exploitation, to prevent corruption and resist so called development schemes. They are now planning to become autonomous economically and to some extent politically. Apparently this movement looks like political in nature but in real sense it has all the merits of social and economic justice.

Gondwana is historic region in central India, comprising portion of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. There were two supercontinents in the ancient time. The name of the North Hemisphere was Laurasia and South Hemisphere was known as Gondwana land. According to Edward Guess, "that Antartica, Australia, India, South Africa and South America once formed a single continental land mass, which is now called Gondwana land for the Gondwana region of India" (Guess 1963, 7). The Gondwana area was ruled by powerful Gond dynasties from the 14th to the 18th century. They were disturbed by the Mughal, Maratha and British rule. But some Gond kings continued to rule till 1947. The Gonds are concentrated in the Gondwana region of India and the largest organised group in central India. "The Gonds, who form the greater portion of the population of Gondwana, have been conjectured to be the aborigines of Hindustan" (Thomson, 1860).

The important demand of the Gond rebels was a separate state for the Gonds. A Gond Raj was demanded by the Kurma Bhimu in 1941.

Some sporadic disturbances were reported from the Gondwana region in the late fifties and early sixties. Sense of insecurity, grievances over the developments, exploitation of tribals were the important reasons of these disturbances. In 1963, the Gond leaders demanded the formation of the separate state for the tribal regions of Chattisgarh and the adjoining districts of the Rewa region and Vidarbh. Gondwana Adibasi Seva Mandal demanded the formation of separate Gondwana state for the tribal regions of Chattisgarh and the adjoining districts of Vidarbh. A movement of the Gonds was started by Kangla Manjhi in the 1950s and reached at the zenith of its popularity in 1962-63. He founded the Bharatiya Gondwana Sangh and demanded the formation of Gondwana state with a view to protect them from exploitation. Tribal leaders said that government neglected the map and existence of the Gondwana area at the time of reforming the state in 1956. Therefore it is the duty of the government to make a separate state by the name of Gondwana, so that the culture of this area can be maintained.

A movement by the name of 'Gondwana Movement' developed in Nagpur and Bilaspur districts and started spreading slowly over Gondwana region. Bilaspur district in particular is much more influenced by this movement. The main reason of this movement is the dissatisfaction of the Gond with their present social, economic and political condition. It has launched against the exploitation of the tribals by the government officials, forest department and money lenders. They formed different political and social organisations like Gondwana Mahasangh, Gondwana Mahasabha, Gondwana Mahila Mandal, Gondwana Ganatantra party for the upliftment of tribal people by protecting them against exploitation and to preserve their culture and identity. It aims at uniting all the Gonds under the name of Gondwana, to create a society free from exploitation, establish a Gondwana

bank for their economic development, work for advancement of education and women and to propagate their religion and culture.

Gondwana Mahasabha acts according to the direction of Gondwana Mahasangh. Bilaspur district of Madhya Pradesh has become highly sensitive to the activities of the Mahasabha. The norms of the society and other mechanisms of social control are being strictly followed by Mahasabha. The objectives of the Mahasabha are as under: prohibition of drinking alcohol and spendthrift habits; formation of service organization for extending free service to the mass; to follow customary laws and maintain orderliness; to unite the Gond society and to protect the Gondwana culture. Next to Mahasabha is Circle and Gramsabha. All wrong and unethical activities of the society are controlled according to the direction of the Mahasabha by the Circle and Gramsabha. The functions of the Mahasabha and Circle may be divided into the following four fields: Executive (Kary Palika), judiciary (Nyay Palika), finance and organization. Judiciary body is only empowered to frame and amend any law relating to the society. When anyone commits crime, he or she is punished not by the Circle or Gram Sabha. It is the judiciary of the Mahasabha competent to take a decision in this respect. The main functions of the organizational body is to keep it intact and strengthen the organization; to compaign for membership; to come in contact with its members and to develop social awareness. Now Mahasabha has raised some questions pertaining to their identity, like, if they are Hindus, then why is their god not worshipped by the Hindus? Why their festivals are not being observed by the Hindus? It indicates that they are not Hindus, but they are made out to be Hindus. The social contact with the Hindu society has influenced their rituals and religious practices, as a result it has undergone changes in their socio-cultural life. Now they have become the part of Hindu society, which is the result of contact and acculturation with the Hindu society. "The entire Gond population professed faith in Hinduism. In Bilaspur, earlier in 1931 census 1,23,950 Gonds were returned as professing faith in Hinduism and 48,410 in tribal religions. Under the influence of Hindus their pantheon includes Bhagwan (Mahadeo). They have also

adopted the social and moral codes of their neighbours" (Shrivastav, 1978). But after the formation of rules by Mahasabha to a great extent they have revived their earlier traditions. Some bad habits and practices, like, drinking, over expenditure, child marriage, greater age differences between husband and wife, unpractical marriage ceremonies, polygyny have also been controlled by the rules of Mahasabha. Now the women is allowed to remarry under the name of churi marriage upto two times.

Finance body formulates the annual budget and get the accounts audited. Gondwana Mahasabha has taken decision to start a saving programme and develop the society through Gondwana bank. Government has various schemes to uplift them, but they are not able to use those optimally. They are often exploited by government officials. Now they are eager to be independent. Therefore they established their own bank, through which their economic standard may be improved and the problem of unemployment could be reduced through co-operative society. The Gondwana bank was at first established at Ratanpur in Bilaspur district which is now the head quarters of Madhya Pradesh. The bank runs as per the directives of the Gondwana Mahasangh and Mahasabha. They propagate that all members of the bank will be benefitted and in due course each one may earn rupees one lakh in a day. Membership is taken by depositing rupees thirty to the bank. The people have promised that they will open a pass book and continue to deposit money from time to time. They have also taken vow that they would be shareholders of one thousand rupees each. After depositing this money, one is entitled for loan. This programme is being continued for the upliftment of the society. There are about 25,000 members in Madhya Pradesh out of which 12,000 from Bilaspur district alone. The bank has 8000 tribal members in Bilaspur district, of which 6000 members belong to Gond. They have appointed a number of agents to collect the money. Agents give suggestion on how they can save their money and why they should save it. They encourage the people to save at least one rupee a day. This one rupee will become thirty in a month. Then this money will be deposited with the account of the Gondwana bank. If it is

not possible to save money, then they ask the housewife to save one handful of rice everyday from their family quota instead. After 30 days it will become 30 handful. This could be sold in the market and the money thus procured will be deposited in their account. They collected to the tune of rupees 19 lakhs in the first year from Bilaspur district. Now it has increased to rupees 45 lakhs. Sensitizing women for economising and saving they raise slogan: Women awake! Destruct distalities! Open Gondwana bank!

Many tribal areas in M.P. are identified as the areas of poverty, illiteracy and exploitation. Most of the tribal peoples are at the subsistence level of economy and miserably distressed by different forms of exploitation. They think that they were being blackmailed in the name of welfare by the Government. The achievement of the development schemes are evaluated in terms of money spent rather than the quality of life improved. The corruption by the government officials, exploitation by the contractors and businessmen, unemployment of the tribal youth, land alienation, displacement and partial rehabilitation, failure of government schemes have created social tension and has led to the idea of forming a separate Gondwana state. The movement of Gondwana Mahasangh has given a chance to the Naxals to make a dent in Bilaspur district. Gondwana organization leaders, Shri Hira Singh Markam and Smt. Kausalya Porte said that Naxals have established a good relationship with us and have given full support to help us in achieving our political goal. They have formed Gondwana Ganatantra party and Gondwana Mukti Sena with a view to uplift the tribal people by protecting them against exploitation and by preserving their identity. Gondwana Mahasabha arranged a number of annual conferences with a view to form a self sufficient, independent, exploitation free society by gaining their political autonomy. The main agenda in these conferences figure opening of Gondwana bank branch in every district, formation of Gondwana Mahila Mandal for the development of women, abstaining from drinking liquor, bringing up conformity and solidarity in their culture, propagation of Gondi religion and culture and building up Gondwana Mukti Sena in every village. They want that re-

habilitation should follow displacement and also to demanded that 50 per cent of the share of profit from industries to be spent for affected areas. They do not want that the agricultural land be acquired for urban development. They also plan to run rural industries, cottage and small scale industries and minor forest produce based industries in villages for villagers to be set up with Government help. Those government officials who are found guilty or dishonest must be taken to task by the verdict of the people concerned beneficiaries, as stated by the members of Gondwana movement. Gondwana Mukti Sena acts according to the direction of the Gondwana Mahasabha. Gondwana Mahasabha is responsible for arranging training programmes from time to time for the members of Gondwana Mukti Sena with a view to develop their awareness, personality and competence.

Out of the 40 parliamentary and the 320 Assembly seats 9 and 75 seats each are reserved for scheduled tribes. Tanakhar Assembly seat of Jajghir parliamentary area is reserved for scheduled tribes. Congress party has always been dominating in this area. Of late the Gondwana Ganatantra party has gained ground under the leadership of a former legislator, Shri Hira Singh Markam who is very popular in this area. Now they seem to have gained lot of confidence. They are continuing their agitation for the fulfilment of justified needs. Such as rights of the tribals over forests other needs are to stop land alienation, to protect their women and children against physical, economic and social exploitation, to maintain clean administration free from corruption. According to them, political and social development of Gondwana will undoubtedly come through this movement. The Thanakhar Assembly Constituency has 138208 voters. The number of Gond voters are 95906, which is the largest group. The strong leadership of Hira Singh Markam has emerged as a messiah of this area and political events have become headline news. In the 1996 election, Hira Singh Markam was selected as a candidate of the Gondwana Ganatantra party from Jajghir parliamentary constituency. The party scored third position with 56419 total votes. The party had a sweeping victory from Tanakhar Assembly area. In October 1996 re-election and 1998 election, Hira Singh

Markan was again elected. They try to understand the causes of economic backwardness of their society and try to prepare the various economic plans and programmes at grass-root level to be implemented for their own development. On the one hand the revivalists outrightly reject the Hindu culture and religion and they tend to discard their age old drinking habit on the other. Hence, out of tribal unrest and discontentment a neo-tribalism is gradually emerging. In other words, ethnic identity and reintegration has become necessary for greater socio-political and economic interest.

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