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Historical Geography Of Odisha In The Writings Of Prof. N. K. Sahu

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A comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the geography of any given area is necessary in order to conduct a scholarly study on its history. Without exact knowledge of the precise location of the numerous locations that play a vital role in the story, it will be difficult for a historian to investigate the sequence of events. On the other hand, no state's history can ignore the profound impact of its physical attributes, which are crucial in determining the nature of its citizens as well as their socioeconomic and political circumstances.

The term "Historical Geography" refers to the geographic prominence of locations in connection to their historical significance. The main goal of historical geography is to recreate the landscape of a location during a bygone era. All facets of that time's landscape can be recreated by assembling fragments of dispersed material. The geographical history of ancient Odisha warrants special consideration in this context. The most well-known names by which the area now known as Odisha was called in the past were Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, Tosali, Kangoda, and Kosala. Knowing the age and size of the principal ancient geographical entities is crucial to understand the ancient geography of Odisha. During their historical existence, each of them was mentioned in many sources that offer fascinating accounts of it.

Historical geography of Odisha by N. K. Sahu

The 'Historical Geography' written by N.K. Sahu in his 'Utkal University History of Orissa', Vol.I, is fabulously a holistic study on the origin and growth of different regional states and kingdoms prevailing during various periods of Orissan History. The study of 'Historical Geography' was a novel concept to be



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capitalized by N.K. Sahu before discussing the political and cultural history of Orissa in ancient times. This aspect had never drawn the attention of the scholars before Sahu. Although we find casual references about the physiographical features of Orissa in the works of Pyarimohan Acharya¹, Krupasindhu Mishra², R.D.Banerjee³, and H.K.Mahtab⁴ but systematic study had been attempted by N.K.Sahu. For the purpose, he studied epic and Purana literature, Greek accounts, writings of Kalidas, Buddhist literature and classical accounts like Ptolemy's Geography, etc. Besides these original literary sources he studied meticulously the works of Pargiter.⁵

An inscription from Epigraphica Indica texts on linguistics, Bharata's Natya Shastra, inscriptions of Orissa and various other journals. He adopted specific guidelines when examining the Historical Geography of the Utkal, Kalinga, Udra, and Kosala regions. The talks mostly focused on the origin, geographic location, geographical features, identity, references in numerous ancient literary sources, locations of significant capital cities, political and dynastic history, significance, as well as the rise and fall of empires, etc. Some of the conclusions he came to were perfect. In order to connect the studies of Orissa with Indian circumstances, he avoided localizing Historical Geography and made every effort to create broad generalisations.

According to him, "rather than the names of the monarchs who formed them, nations like Utkala, Kalinga, Udra, and Kosala were given their names after various stocks of the local population".⁶ He mostly used ancient Indian literature, including Brahminical and Buddhist works, for this aim. He made significant borrowings from Pargiter's work when he was composing the chapter. He attempted at some logical derivations in terms of technique and references in ancient Indian traditions in order to explore the place name meaning of Utkala. According to N.K. Sahu, "The epic and the Puranas mention the 'Utkala' people, whereas the Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas speak of the 'Okkala' or 'Utkala' tribe. Along with the Mekala, the Okkala are described as a people in the "Apadana" of the "Khuddaka Nikaya" of the Sutta Pitaka. According to the Mahachattarisaka Sutta of the "Majjhima Nikaya", Vassa and Bhanna, two tribes of the Ukkala people, were referred to as Ahetuvadis, Akiriavadis, and Nathikavadis because they absolutely denied cause, consequence, and reality. Barua explains that the language used in this essay is unintelligible and impolite jargon from the Ukkala nation.



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However, Buddha Ghosa, a well-known commentator from the fifth century A.D., proves the Ukkala are the ones making up the Ukkala Janapada. The Ukkala Janapada, the residence of Tapassu and Bhallika, the first lay followers of the Buddha, is mentioned in the "Mahavagga" of the Vinaya Pitaka. The "Jatakas" also refer to "Ukkala Janapada" in relation to the Tapassu and Bhallika episode. While Sugriva is portrayed in the Ramayana as ordering Susena to send his entourage to Mekala, Utkala, and Dasama along with other countries of the South, the Drona Parva of the "Mahabharata" claims that Karna also conquered the Utkalas along with the Mekalas, Kalinga, Andhras, and others.

The Utkakas are mentioned in the Vayu and Matsya Puranas as being related to the Malavas, Karusas, Mekalas, and other people. Unquestionably the same people lived under the names Okkala (Ukkala) and Utkalah, and their home region was known as Ukkala or Utkala".⁶ He established a framework for the investigation of the Utkal kingdom's origins, and other kingdoms adopted it. "The same observation may also be made regarding the genesis of Kalinga and Odra," N.K. Sahu said in this regard. Kalinga, Oddaka, as well as Kalingah and Odrah, respectively, are frequently mentioned in both Pali and Sanskrit texts, while the Greeks also make reference to the Calingae and the Oretes. It should be noted that, similar to Utkala, the areas of Kalinga and Odra were also given their names from the tribes who once inhabited them. When discussing the Odras, Manu's commentator Medhatithi made the accurate observation that the nation may have gotten its name from the tribe"⁷

Regarding the territorial extent of Kalinga N.K.Sahu stated, " Among the four political units mentioned above, viz. Utkala, Kalinga, Odra and Kosala, Kalinga was by far the most important power which very often over powered the other three territories by her force of arms and succeeded in building up a far flung empire which could endure long in ancient times. The rich and fertile coastal plain stretching from the Ganges' mouth up to the mouth of the Godavari with a hinterland of wild mountains and up lands formed the traditional homeland of the ancient Kalingas".⁸

He explained in greater detail about the arguments put forwarded by H.C. Roy Choudhury and B.C. Law on the basis of the references of 'Mahabharata' about the fixation of the Baitarani River as the territory of Kalinga. The particular reference in the Vana Parva the sage Lomasa is represented as pointing out Yudhistira from the Ganges mouth saying, " this is the territory of the Kalingas where flows the river



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Vaitarani ...”⁹ Refuting the argument N.K.Sahu pointed out that the Baitarani is referred to as a river flowing in the territory of Kalinga not as the border of it. The interpretation offered by N.K.Sahu is as follows, “ the sage Lomasa declared at the Ganges mouth that the territory of the Kalingas extended onwards from that spot, indicating that the river Ganges rather than the river Vaitarani was the boundary of that territory’.¹⁰

Regarding the Northern, Southern and Eastern extent of Kalinga he tried to find references in the writing of the Greek writers like Megasthenes and Pliny. To all country river Ganga was forming the Northern and Eastern boundary and river Godavari. About the western extent of Kalinga citing references in ‘Matsya Purana’, ‘Kurma Purana’ and ‘Skanda Purana’, he tried to prove it conclusively that the traditional territory of western boundary was fixed at Amarakantaka. As Kalinga had to undergo several changes in the pages of history over centuries, there had been lots of changes and transformations regarding the exact territorial extent of Kalinga. He, however, did not like to restrict the territorial limits of Kalinga as if these were permanent as in modern day Orissa. The observations of N.K.Sahu go like this, “

Hence, the territory of Kalinga may be said, according to traditions, to have extended as far as the Gangetic valley in the north, the Godavari in the South, the Amarakantaka hills in the west and the sea in the East. Too much emphasis can not, however, be placed on traditional accounts as political geography has frequently been disturbed in course of history leading to changes in territorial limits”¹¹. As regards the political tribulations during different periods starting from Mahapadma Nanda’s rule in 4th century B.C. up to the Suryavamsi rule and Mughal rule in Orissa during 15 and 16 century A.D. He discussed in greater detail about the changes both major and minor that were brought about during different historical periods. In fixing the capital of Kalinga he referred to various Buddhist texts like Mahagovindasuttanta of ‘Digha Nikaya’ and ‘Jatakas like Kurudhamma, Chullakalinga, Kumbhakara and Kalingavodhi.¹² He was of the opinion that Dantapura was the capital of Kalinga, which was replaced by Kalinga Nagara during the rule of the Eastern Gangas.

Although the Eastern Gangas established and developed Kaling Nagara into a beautiful city with shrines and places, Dantapura however continued to be the Head quarter of the TriKalinga country. Although



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there were lot of controversies regarding the identification of Kalinga Nagara by scholars like General Cunningham, Fleet, G.V. Ramamurthi and other, he, however, shared his opinion with G.V. Ramamurthi by stating, “ G.V. Ramamurthi identified Kalinga Nagara with the village Mukhalingam on the left bank of the Vamsadhara river about 20 miles from Paralakimedi. He points out that ruins of ancient temples and buildings around this village and those are also found even beyond it up to Nagarakatakam two miles off this place. It may, however, be suggested that Nagarakatakam where stands the famous temple of Madhukesvara with a number of inscriptions of the Ganga Kings was the political seat of the dynasty and this may well be regarded as identical with Kalinga Nagara.

This city flourished as the capital of Kalinga till the time of Chodagangadeva, who after conquest of Utkala shifted his seat of government to Varanasi Kataka in Cuttack district.¹³ In connection with the identification of Kalinga Nagara, he discussed in greater detail about the historical and cultural importance of Mahendragiri Mountains. For the purpose he made a detailed study of the references in ‘Mahabharata’ the ‘Raghuvamsam’ of Kalidas, Allahabad pillar inscription, Dhavalapeta grant⁴,¹⁴ Umavarman of the Mathara dynasty,¹⁵ the Cuttack Museum Charter¹⁶ and came to the conclusion that, “ It may be pointed out that the Mahendra mountain is included in the traditional list of the Kulagiris in the Puranic literature as well. An early group of temples standing on the Mahendragiri indicates that this was an important seat of Saivite culture during medieval period”.¹⁵

Another most pertaining problem was the identification of Trikalinga Terminology on which scholars like A. Cunningham, Gerini, J.F. Fleet, Kielhom, Burnell, R. Subba Rao, B. Mishra, D.C.Ganguly, and G. Ramadas have offered their own explanations. Where as he refuted the arguments of some scholars as vague. He shared his opinions with Ramadas by stating, “ The suggestion of Ramadas is illuminating and a number of medieval inscriptions of South-eastern India point out that ‘Trikalinga’ can not be taken to be the same as Mudu Kalinga of Pliny, a fact which R.D. Banerji is tempted to accept and that is can not also be the combination of Utkala or North Kalinga, Kalinga proper and Telkalinga or south Kalinga, extending from river Ganges in the North to the river Godavari in the South as supposed by R. Subba Rao”.¹⁶ Still then he was of the opinion that the geographical allocation of Trikalinga by these scholars are being vague and founded, he considered it worthwhile to examining the records of different ruling dynasties associated with it. For the purpose he referred, “ The Masalipatam grant of the Eastern



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Chalukya king Amma-I (916-925 A.D.), reveals that king Vijayaditya was ruling over Vengimandala adjoining the Trikalinga forest (Trikingataviyuktam). The Somavamsi Kings of Kosala assume the proud title of Trikingadhpati from the time of Janamejaya- I (circa middle of the 9 century A.D.), while the Kalachuri rulers of Dohala took this title from the time of Gangeyadeva Vikramaditya (circa Middle of the 10th century A.D.). The Brahmesvara Temple Inscription reveals that Janamejaya, who was the king of Kosala and the Lord of Trilinga (Trikinga) conquered Odra which was in the neighborhood of Kosala, and as stated above the copper plate grants of Vajrahasta-V and Chodagangadeva clearly point out that Trikinga lie to the west of Kalinga”.¹⁷ He also referred various titles used by the Somavamsi Kings of Kosala.

The conclusion offered by him is still being considered as most logical and scientific. His exploration goes like this, “ A palm-leaf manuscript of the ‘Brahmanda Purana ’ preserved in the manuscript library of the Orissa Museum, Bhubaneswar, throws important light on the extent of Kalinga and Trikinga. According to this work, the territory extending from the river Rusikulya to the Jhanjavati was called Kalinga, while Trikinga extended from the river Jhanjavati up to the river Vedavati. The Jhanjavati flows through an Eastern portion of modern Koraput district as a tributary of the river Nagavali, and the Vedavati, identified with the river Indravati, drains the western part of the same district and flowing through the district of Bastar forms the boundary of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra for some distance until it meets the river Godavari. Territorial extent of Kalinga and Trikinga described above, very probably refers to the period of rule of the early Eastern Gangas from the end of the 5th century A.D. to about the middle of the 11th century A.D.¹⁸ About the extent of Utkala, epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Pali literature including ‘Vinaya Pitaka’,¹⁹ ‘Majjhima Nikaya’, Raghuvamsa of Kalidas, Huen Tsang’s accounts, Epigraphic evidences such as Medinapore copper plate have been consulted by him.

To conclude about the extent that Utkala Territory was extended from Kajangala-nigma on the east to river Sallavati on the southeast.¹⁹ While Kakangala was identified near Rajamahala on the southern bank of the Ganges, Sallavati is identified with the river Suvarnarekha.²⁰ The associations of Utkala with the territories like Odras, Mekalas, Kalingas, Andhras, Dasama, Karusas, Uttamamas and the Dasamas as inhabiting the Vindhya regions.²¹ The association laid Pargiter to suggest that, “ Utkal comprised the southern portion of modern Chotanagpur and he may be correct if the Chotanagpur hills²² are considered



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to be an extension of the Vindhya ranges.²³ Moreover, the expression ‘Sumhottarah’ meaning a people of the eastern countries in the ‘Matya Purana’²⁴ is taken to be ‘Sumhotkalah’ by scholars, in which case, Utkala would be at the neighbourhood of Sumha, which roughly comprised the modern districts of Bankuram, Midnapur and Manbhum⁴⁸⁹. Besides Pargiter’s conclusion,²⁵ Sahu on the basis of references in Yana Parva in ‘Mahabharata’ inferred that Utkala forming a part of Kalinga extended up to the mouth of the Ganges during the epic period. But confusion arose because in ‘Raghuvamsam’ of Kalidasa Utkala is represented as neighbouring states of Kalinga situated to its north and Kapisa being the boundary of Utkala and Kalinga territory. Citing references of Midnapur copper plates issued by Somadatta in the 18th reign year of Sasanka.²⁶ N.K.Sahu deduced the conclusion that Dandabhukti corresponding to the Midnapur district of west Bengal formed a part of Utkaladesa during 7th century A.D. As there are no epigraphic references about Utkala after 8th century A.D. so Sahu concluded the name Utkala might have been replaced by Uttar Tosali. However, the name Utkala appeared again during BhaumaKaras, Somavamsis and Ganga records when we find innumerable references to terms like Utkala-Kula, Utkalendra. In this context the Chaurasi Copper Plate²⁷ the Maranjamura charter²⁸ and ‘Skanda Purana’ have been meticulously investigated.

About the capital of Utkala citing reference from Vana Parva of ‘Mahabharata’, Visnu Purana, Jataka Stories, Parlakimedi Copper Plates, Soro Copper Plates, Ganjam Copper Plate Grant, Sahu was of the opinion that Viraja, variously named as Jajnagara and Jayatinagara situated on the river Vaitarani was the capital of Utkala since earliest times down up to the time of Chodagangadeva. In the Muslim Chronicles Yayatinagara was named as Jajanagar. About the present city of Jajpur, Nabin Kumar Sahu stated that, “The Muslim Chronicles called Yayatinagara as Jajnagar and very often they named the territory after this capital city. It is evident that in course of time Yayatinagara came to be known as Jajnagar and subsequently the suffix ‘nagar’ were replaced by ‘pur’ both conveying the same meaning”. The next important territorial unit was Tosala references about which are found in the Atharva Veda, the Puranas, Jaina Avasyaka Sutra, Buddhist text and Gandavyuha. Beside these, the territory of Tosala is mentioned in Soro, Patiakela, Midnapur and Kanasa copper plates.

It seems that the capital city of the Mauryan time came to be known as Tosala denoting a kingdom. Another significant unit of states in Early Medieval Orissa was the existence of number of Mandala



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States. These Mandala States were mostly semi-independent but played important role in the history of Early Medieval Orissa. Nabin Kumar Sahu opined that, “The word ‘Mandala’ appears somewhat confusing because even territories like Kalinga, Utkala, Kosaia and Odra were sometimes being considered as ‘Mandalas’. According to tradition recorded in the Dharmasastra a state is called a Mandala, when it is roughly a square either of twenty yojanas or of forty yojanas. The Mandala States mentioned below more or less conform to the tradition of the Dharmasastra. These states were Kongoda Mandala, Svetaka, Kodalaka Mandala, Yamagartha Mandala, Airavotta Mandala, Khinjali Mandala, Khijjinga Mandala, Dandabhukti Mandala, Khindirasmga Mandala, Chakrakotta Mandala etc”²⁹.

In this context he cited various arguments as follows: “ (2) Kalinga is mentioned as a ‘Mandala’ in the Chicacole Plates of Madhu Kamamava.³⁰ In the Ratnapur stone inscription of Jajalladeva, Daksina Kosaia is called a ‘Mandala’ along with Andhra, Khimedi, Vairagara, Lanika, Bhanara, Talahari, Dandakapura, Nandavali and Kukkuta.³¹ Saraladasa, the famous Oriya poet of the 15th century A.D., declares Odra rastra as a Mandala at several places in his Mahabharata. It may be pointed out that Somunda Mandala and Bhramarakotya Mandala were parts of Khindirasmga and Chakrakotta respectively.³² There were some other Mandalas which were treated as Visayas or districts of a kingdom and as such these administrative divisions do not come under the present discussion. As examples of this class of Mandalas, mention may be made of Amvavadi Mandala and Soda Mandala in Kalinga”.³³ Citing references from Dharmasastra, Sahu argued that a state is called a Mandala when it is roughly a square either of twenty yojanas or of forty yojanas.

Thus, Sahu discussed in greater detail about the location, territorial extent, political history against space and time and their rule in the process of state formation in Orissa during early medieval period. Besides these Kosala representing western Orissa and Southern Bihar had been properly investigated by Sahu. Orissa, the modern name of our state, its origin and historical development was meticulously studied by him. For the purpose of finding the origin of the word Odisha, he consulted wide variety of sources, such as the writings of Ibn Khurdadhbih, Hudud al Alam and Haraha Inscription, Alberuni’s work, a number of Muslim chronicles and large number of inscriptions and the Mahabharata. His conclusions were conclusive. According to him, “It is thus, evident that the word ‘Uddisa’ or Udisa is already developed by the 15th century A.D., and the poet Saraladasa naturally makes ‘Udisa’ or ‘Odisha’ synonymous with



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Odrarastra.³⁴ The Odrarastra Odisha of Saraladasa is represented as Odisha-Rajya, also as Odisha-Rajya in the proclamations of Gajapati Kapilesvaradeva (1435-1467 A.D.) during whose reign the poet flourished. From this time onwards the word 'Odisha' denoting to the entire land of the Oriya people, came to be of common use".³⁵

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