

Chhattisgarh : The Land of Thirty Six forts

Formed on November 1, 2000, as a state carved out of Madhya Pradesh the region was described as Chhattisgarh, or the region with thirty six forts in inscriptions, literary works and foreigner's travelogues. Covering an area of 135,000 sq. km and a population of about 20 million, it was the largest of the three new states of Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh formed in that year. New states and included the sixteen eastern districts of MP, which lost about one third of its territory and population to Chhattisgarh. The states ancestry can be traced to the legendary Dakshin Kosala, the kingdom of Rama's mother Kausalya, as well as Dandakarnya, where he, along with Lakshman and Sita had to spend fourteen years in exile from Ayodhya. The capital city Shripur (etymologically the city of wealth) on the banks of Mahanadi became an important center of Buddhism, at par with Nalanda for its hundreds of monasteries and thousands of monks from the fifth BCE to the twelfth CE. From the tenth century, the Chedis and the Chalukyas ruled the region directly, and then under the suzerainty of the Mughals from the sixteenth century. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the British extended the colonial enterprise to this region. As Nadine Sunder, an insightful scholar and chronicler of contemporary Chhattisgarh puts it 'the colonial situation meant that the primary impulse for extension of administration did not come from the changing exigencies of local society, but from the colonial authorities perception of the necessity to govern' The superabundant forest wealth drew the colonial gaze, and thus began the 'reservation of forest, organized timber felling, infrastructure for the 'hunt' , and the systematic curtailment of rights of forest dwellers over the forest produce, thereby upsetting the ecological balance and livelihood opportunities of the forest dwellers. These conflicts over traditional rights to forest produce versus the 'legal grime of the colonial state 'often led to revolts and rebellions, which were intense and violent, but spatially confined to the region. However the central narrative remained common and unchanged: the inalienable right of tribals over local land resources and forests. The Bastar tribals therefore sought a separate state of Gondwana, but the movement petered out as they could not mobilize political support from the Congress, or Acharya Kirplani's Kisan Mazdoor Praja (later Praja Socialist party) which was the lead opposition in the region. Also, they could not make common cause with the pre -dominantly rice growing plains areas around Raipur, where political mobilization for Chhattisgarh had started from the twenties and their conception of Chhattisgarh included the forest and hill regions. It may also be mentioned that while Raipur and the adjoin plains were part of the erstwhile CP and Berar , the tribal areas came under a variety of princely and feudatory states and were also linguistically and geographically separated.

The first stirrings of the national movement in the region were felt when Mahatma Gandhi toured Raipur on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1920 to mobilize support for the Khilafat and Non co-operation movements, and to raise resources for the Tilak and Swaraj Funds . He was accompanied by the Ali brothers, and the arrangements for the conference were made by the political stalwart of the region Ravi Shankar

Shula who later became the Premier of CP& Berar, and the first CM of Madhya Bharat. A flavour of the times is captured in the repartee of Ravi Shankar Shukla to Asgar Ali who thanked the Hindu brethren of Raipur for supporting the Moslem cause of the Khilafat. Shukla responded: We do not consider ourselves Hindus or Moslems: we are all Hindustanis

This led to the formation of the Raipur District Congress Committee, which raised the demand for a separate province of Chhattisgarh in 1924. This was also raised in the Tripuri session of the Congress, but did not gain much traction o account for the domination of Shuklas in the larger arena of state and national politics.

Nevertheless a memorandum was submitted to the SRC in 1954, and the demand for a separate state came up in the Nagpur Assembly of the then state of Madhya Bharat, which was in many ways the reiteration of a demand that had been raised in the CP & Berar assembly prior to Independence as well. But even though the demand was not accepted by the SRC, the 'seed had been sown', and even though unlike most together states where the demand for linguistic states took violent forms, over the next three decades, a bi partisan consensus on the new state was formed, and the separation from MP took place with the least acrimony.

Incidentally the reason which the SRC gave for rejecting the Chhattisgarh demand was that Madhya Pradesh would not be economically viable without the forest and mineral wealth of Chhattisgarh!