

HISTORICAL TRADE ROUTES AND MARKET SYSTEMS IN BUNDELKHAND

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Abstract :- This paper examines the historical development of trade routes and market systems in the Bundelkhand region of central India, covering both the medieval era and early modern periods. It explores how the geography of Bundelkhand, its mineral and agricultural resources, and its position between larger regions shaped internal and external commerce. The study analyses the types of markets (haats, bazaars, mandis), the trading communities, the flow of goods, and the decline/transition of trade under colonial rule. It argues that Bundelkhand's commerce was integrally linked with its markets and routes, and that understanding these systems is vital to comprehending the region's socio-economic history.

Keywords :- Bundelkhand, trade routes, markets, haat, bazaar, medieval India, commerce.

▪ Introduction

The region of Bundelkhand-spread across present-day Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in India- is historically significant not just for its heroic Rajput and Bundela past, but also for its role in commerce and trade.

While much scholars emphasises its political and cultural heritage, commerce and market networks have received less attention. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on two inter-related themes: (i) the trade routes, both internal and connecting Bundelkhand with adjacent regions; and (ii) the market systems-weekly haats, permanent bazaars and mandis -that facilitated goods exchange, credit and merchant networks. By doing so, the paper aims to show how trade shaped Bundelkhand's social and economic fabric over time, and how changes-geographic, political and colonial-impacted these systems.

▪ Geographic and Historical Context of Bundelkhand

To understand trade and markets, one must first appreciate the regional geography and historical configuration. Bundelkhand is a plateau region characterised by rocky terrain and relatively dry soils, interspersed with rivers like the Betwa. Its positioning places it between the Malwa plateau and the Gangetic

plain, making it a corridor through central India. Historically, Bundelkhand was known as Jejakabhukti under the Chandelas (9th-13th centuries) and later under the Bundelas, and was often influenced by neighbouring states, including Gwalior. This positioning allowed Bundelkhand not only to be a political frontier but also a trade corridor.

The terrain, however, posed challenges: limited fertile land, water scarcity, and relative remoteness from major ports or riverine navigation. Nevertheless, these very constraints meant the region developed trade routes and market systems adapted to its inland character and linking adjacent regions.

Bundelkhand has a rich history of local arts and commerce, shaped by cultural exchange and trade. This study traces their evolution, challenges and opportunities. It aims to preserve cultural heritage, promote sustainable development and empower local communities, inform policy decisions and initiatives to revive Bundelkhand's unique cultural and economic traditions. Historically, the integration of art and commerce in Bundelkhand is very ancient. The paintings made by primitive man in the Stone Age are indicative of the antiquity of art here.

If we take a look at the history of Bundelkhand, we find that during the Mahabharata period, the first introduction of Bundelkhand region is found from Dasharna or Chedi Janapada. In the post-Rigvedic period, this entire region was ruled by Mauryas. Thereafter Shungas ruled the region and then the Guptas took over the administration of this region, proof of which is the Dashavatara temple situated in Devgarh near Lalitpur. In the post-Gupta period, this region was ruled by the rulers of Maukhari, Kalchuri and Gurjar Pratihara dynasty. After the Pratihara dynasty, this region was dominated by the Chandela dynasty.

In ancient times, the origin of Bundela Thakurs is believed to be from Lav, the eldest son of King Ramchandra of Ayodhya. In the 8th century, the king of Kashi named Karnaraj organized a Yagya for Grihnivaran. His descendants were called Grihnivar who later came to be known as Gahirwar. Veer Bundela, son of Pancham Bundela of this Gahirwar dynasty, established his kingdom in Mau-Mahoni region. Due to the Bundela Thakurs establishing their rule over the territory of Vindhya region, they were called Bindhyala, which later got corrupted to Bundela. It is worth noting that after Orchha court, the Panna court in Bundelkhand flourished under the leadership and laid the foundation of the Panna state. In the beginning of the 19th century, the princely states of Bundelkhand became a princely state of British India. In the revolt of 1857, most of the rulers of Bundelkhand revolted against the British. Some rulers of Bundelkhand contributed in helping the British in the revolt of 1857 and the British rewarded them with different titles. However, scholars also have an opinion that the rulers here have also indirectly supported the agitators and rebels.

Historically and culturally, Bundelkhand has been a confluence of diverse artistic and occupational traditions for centuries. Bundelkhand comprises about 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Bundelkhand

has a unique blend of Indian, Persian and European influences. The region's strategic location has facilitated cultural exchange and trade, which has shaped its distinctive arts and commerce. From ancient temples to majestic forts, Bundelkhand's architectural heritage reflects its rich history.

The region's local arts, including handicrafts, textiles and performing arts, are shaped by its cultural exchange with neighbouring regions and distant countries. Bundelkhand's artisans have borrowed techniques and motifs from various traditions, incorporating them into their own unique styles. For example, the famous Bundelkhandi pottery reflects the influence of Islamic glazed pottery, while the region's textiles show a blend of Indian and Persian designs.

Despite its significant cultural and economic contributions, Bundelkhand remains an under-studied region. Its local arts and commerce have declined due to factors such as globalisation, lack of infrastructure and inadequate conservation efforts. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring the historical dynamics of Bundelkhand's local arts and commerce.

This study will examine the historical evolution of Bundelkhand's local arts and commerce, analysing their significance in shaping the region's identity and cultural heritage. By exploring the historical context of Bundelkhand's arts and commerce this research attempts to provide a nuanced understanding of the region's cultural and economic heritage.

■ **Trade Routes: Internal and External:**

- **Internal Routes**

Within Bundelkhand, trade routes connected rural hinterlands with towns, fort-towns and market centres. These routes were often seasonal, following agrarian cycles, and linked villages to weekly haats (rural markets) and permanent bazaars. As noted in a detailed study of Bundelkhand and Gwalior marketplaces:

"town had designated a Mandi or mandapika area, where farmers from nearby village would come to sell their produce. The street market was called hatta or haat (rural-level markets centres and weekly marts) and was lined with shops."

These internal routes enabled agricultural produce (grains, pulses, oilseeds), minor crafts, and local resources (stone, terracotta) to flow from villages to towns. The movement of goods facilitated the growth of towns as market hubs

- **External Routes and Linkages**

Beyond internal movement, Bundelkhand's trade was influenced by its external linkages. While Bundelkhand did not lie on the main major maritime routes, it was part of inland trade networks linking Malwa, the Gangetic plain, and other territories. For example, the general understanding of the northern highway (Uttarapatha) emphasises how inland caravan routes ran through central India. Specific to Bundelkhand, the town of Chanderi (on the edge of Bundelkhand) is noted to have been "dominated by the trade routes of Central India ... proximate to the arterial route to the ancient ports of Gujarat as well as to Malwa, Mewar, Central India and the Deccan." This illustrates how Bundelkhand was part of broader trade grids that connected to western India and to northern plains.

- **Major routs:**

1. Connected kaushambi -Prayag-Eran-Vidisha
2. Routes connected Bundelkhand with Kannauj and Ujjain
3. Khajuraho linked to Varansi , Ujjain , Mathura
4. Passed throughVidsha –Bundelkhand-Deccan
5. Enabled trade with Satavahana territories

- **Another study mentions:**

"Trade and commerce of Bundelkhand flourished due to the active participation of prominent trading communities like Banias, Marwaris, Gujaratis, and Multanis... Precious stones, such as diamonds, were the wealth of Bundelkhand and were famous due to the mines of Panna, which were extensively traded."

The above indicates commodities from Bundelkhand (e.g., diamonds from Panna) entered long-distance trade networks. The route may not have been maritime but via caravan and road networks into larger markets.

- **Strategic Towns and Forts as Trade Nodes**

Forts and towns in Bundelkhand often served as trade nodes because rulers needed revenue, markets needed protection, and the presence of rulers encouraged craft production and commerce. For example, the fort town of Jhansi grew in importance under British rule and earlier, benefiting from its connectivity and market role. Such nodes anchored trade routes and allowed markets to flourish.

▪ **Market Systems: Haat, Bazaar and Mandi**

The functioning of markets in Bundelkhand can be categorised into three types:

Weekly haats (hatta / hat) were rural markets held periodically (weekly or bi-weekly) where villagers from surrounding areas came to purchase and sell. As the study of Bundelkhand & Gwalior states: "The street market was called hatta or haat (rural-level markets centres and weekly marts) and was lined with shops." These markets were crucial because many villages did not have permanent bazaars; hence the haat provided a vital point of exchange for produce, livestock, craft goods and credit.

These haats served multiple functions: agricultural marketing, craft item sales, social interaction and credit (especially via village money-lenders/merchants). They also stimulated the circulation of goods and the flow of information.

○ **Permanent Bazaars and Mandis**

Permanent bazaars (bāzār) were physical marketplaces in towns or at village crossroads, enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces where merchants, craftsmen, bankers and buyers met regularly. According to Shrivastava: "A bazar is permanently enclosed market place or street where goods and services are exchanged or sold ... The term bazar is sometimes also used to refer to the network of merchants, bankers and craftsman who work in that area." These bazaars represented more structured and continuous markets than weekly haats.

Mandis or mandi-type markets were for agricultural produce where farmers brought larger quantities for sale to wholesalers or merchants. In Bundelkhand the "mandapika area" term refers to such a zone. These mandis were crucial nodes where rural supply aggregated and entered into wider trade networks.

○ **Merchant Communities, Credit and Market Structure**

The functioning of these markets depended not only on physical space but also on social institutions of trade: merchant-banker networks, credit, community links. For example, the role of Hindu merchants (Vaishyas and Jains, especially Gahoi community) in Bundelkhand internal trade is noted: "In Bundelkhand internal trade was generally in the hands of Hindus particularly Vaisya and Jains and Gahoi community." They acted as traders, money-lenders, brokers. Such networks ensured goods flowed from village to market to outside region.

Moreover, the presence of crafts and minor industries (stone carving from Mahoba, terracotta from Lalitpur) added further complexity to markets as goods for trade.

■ Commodities and Trade Patterns

Bundelkhand's trade networks supported a variety of commodities. Some key items:

1. **Minerals and precious stones:** The diamond mines of Panna (in Bundelkhand) were world-famous and formed part of long-distance trade.
2. **Stone and building material:** The region has sandstone and granite resources (e.g., Banda, Chhatarpur) which over time have been exported.
3. **Agricultural produce:** Grain, pulses, Kathiya wheat , jiggery ,rice , bajra, kodo, kutki,til, oilseeds- especially in the agricultural
4. **Craft goods and textiles:** Though not as large-scale as some other regions, Bundelkhand did have terracotta, woven goods, and craft items for local trade.
5. **Livestock and rural goods:** Haats often included sale of livestock, essential for agrarian economy.
6. **Trade patterns:** Produce and goods moved from village to haat, from haat to permanent bazaar, then from bazaars to regional centres, and from there possibly to larger external markets. Some goods (like diamonds, stone) were significant enough to travel farther afield.

■ Role of Political and Social Institutions

Trade and market systems in Bundelkhand were shaped by rulers, social-communities and governance.

- **Rulers and policy:** The ruling houses (Chandelas, Bundelas, local chiefs) regulated markets, collected duties/levies, and encouraged craft production to boost revenue. Their forts and palaces also served as demand centres.
- **Merchant communities:** As noted, Vaishyas, Jains, Gahois played key roles. Their networks bridged village markets and regional trade.
- **Credit and money-lending:** Markets required credit; the link between
- agriculture and markets meant that villagers often depended on merchants for advance or credit to bring produce to market.
- **Infrastructure:** Roads, routes, caravan paths, river crossings influenced trade. Although Bundelkhand lacked major navigable rivers, its land routes were critical. Decline, Colonial Intervention and Transformation
- With the arrival of British colonial rule and the changing economic systems, Bundelkhand's traditional trade and market systems experienced transformation and, in many places,
- The shift of trade routes (railways, colonial administrative centres) changed the flow of goods.

- Traditional artisans and minor industries in Bundelkhand "met with inevitable death" under colonial rule due to lack of protection and competition from industrialised goods.
- The agrarian economy faced distress, which undermined marketing patterns and haat/bazaar systems. Modern research notes constraints in marketing pulses in Bundelkhand-reflecting structural issues.
- Further, modern trade (e-commerce initiatives) attempt to revive regional products- showing that historic trade legacies continue to matter.
- Thus, while the old trade routes and market systems were critical to Bundelkhand's historic economy, colonial and post-colonial changes rewrote them.

■ **Analysis:**

What the Trade Routes and Markets Tell Us

Studying these trade routes and market systems yields several insights about

Bundelkhand's socio-economic history:

1. Integration despite geography: Although Bundelkhand is geographically challenging, the existence of multiple routes and markets shows how communities overcame constraints and integrated into regional commerce.
2. Markets as social as well as economic spaces: Weekly haats and bazaars were not just places of exchange of goods- they were occasions for social interaction, credit linkage, craft exchange, and information flow.
3. Local-global linkages: Even though Bundelkhand was inland and away from major ports, its economy connected to larger markets via minerals (like diamonds), stone, and trade networks.
4. Interdependence of crafts, agriculture and trade: The flow of agricultural produce, craft items, and minerals shows a multifaceted economy where markets linked different sectors.
5. Vulnerability to shifting trade patterns: When major routes shifted (railways, colonial change), or when crafts lost patronage, the local market systems suffered-leading to economic stagnation in many parts.
6. Legacy and revival potential: The historic systems of trade and markets form an inheritance; modern efforts (such as e-portals marketing Bundelkhand products) show that the region's trade identity persists.

■ **Challenges and Gaps in the Literature:**

A few challenges emerge in studying Bundelkhand's trade route/market history:

- **Scarcity of primary documentation:** Many market systems were informal; therefore archival records are limited.
- **Route mapping:** Precise mapping of historical caravan routes through Bundelkhand remains thin; many routes are inferred rather than documented.
- **Differentiation of time periods:** Much work deals with "medieval" broadly or "modern" generically; teasing apart phases (Chandela, Bundela, Mughal, British) requires more work.
- **Craft-trade interface:** While crafts are noted, detailed analysis of how craft goods moved through markets is lacking.
- **Integration of socio-cultural and economic analyses:** Markets are often studied economically but less so as cultural spaces. Addressing these gaps would strengthen our understanding of Bundelkhand's commerce.

■ Conclusion

The historical trade routes and market systems of Bundelkhand tell a story of how a seemingly marginal region carved its place in Indian trade networks. Through a web of internal routes, markets (weekly haats, bazaars, mandis), merchant community networks, and the circulation of goods (agriculture, craft, minerals), Bundelkhand participated actively in regional commerce. Although geography and resource limitations posed challenges, adaptive systems emerged to connect villages to towns, towns to region, and Bundelkhand to broader marketplaces. With the advent of colonialism and modern structural changes, these systems transformed—but the legacy remains relevant, especially in efforts to revive local trade and crafts.

In studying Bundelkhand in this way, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how trade and markets shaped not just the economy but the social and cultural fabric of the region. For future research, deeper archival work, route-mapping, and craft-trade linkages could provide richer insights.

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