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Original Article

The Economic Landscape and Trading patterns of Medieval Jharkhand

Nazmi Azmat
Research Scholar, University, Department of History, Ranchi University, Ranchi
Email: nazmatrumy@gmail.com

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Abstract

The article examines the economic landscape and trading patterns of medieval Jharkhand, focusing on the region's geographical significance, natural resources, trade routes, markets, and political influences. It highlights the role of forest products, minerals, agricultural commodities, and handicrafts in local, provincial, and imperial trade. The study discusses the impact of Mughal and Afghan rule, the development of transport networks, administrative towns, religious centres, and important trading centres such as Rajmahal, Teliagarhi, and Kahalgaon. It also explores the participation of indigenous communities, merchants, artisans, Sahukars, Mahajans, and local traders in the regional economy. The emergence of European trading interests further expanded commercial activities and market opportunities. Overall, the study demonstrates how geographical advantages, resource availability, political changes, and indigenous trading networks shaped the economic development of medieval Jharkhand.

Keywords: *Medieval Jharkhand, Trade and Commerce, Mughal Period, Afghan Rule, Indigenous Communities, Trade Routes, Forest Products, Agricultural Trade, Local Markets, Rajmahal; Teliagarhi, Imperial Trade, Haat System, Economic History.*

Introduction:

Medieval Jharkhand is a captivating period in the rich tapestry of Indian history, marked by a confluence of cultures, traditions, and socio-political dynamics. Nestled in the eastern region of India, Jharkhand's history during the medieval era is characterized by a blend of indigenous tribal communities and the influences of various ruling dynasties. During this period, Jharkhand was part of the larger geographical landscape of eastern India, often witnessing shifts in power dynamics as different kingdoms vied for control. The medieval era saw the rise and fall of several prominent dynasties, each leaving an indelible mark on the region's socio-cultural fabric. One of the significant aspects of medieval Jharkhand was the interaction between indigenous tribal communities and external influences. While the tribal communities maintained their distinct cultural identity and way of life, they were not immune to the changes brought about by external forces, including the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam. However, the tribals of Jharkhand were very hesitant of the external influence during medieval period, for instance, Santhal tradition speaks that Santhal leaders and gurus tabooed the crossing of the Ajai river as the area beyond that river was inhabited by Muslims.[1] Hence the imperial rule during the medieval period had not only penetrated the core areas but also the rural and tribal areas of Jharkhand, hence the socio-economic transaction to the area became inevitable. A Garh or Kila or kherobari on the small table land and on the very confines of Birbhum and Panchet(Shergar) around the river Ajai, stands the fort constructed by Chitrasen Rai,(king of Burdhman) but the engravings are found in Persian characters lay there and there had been only the tribal population of Kherwars or Santhal situated in the south-east corner of tribal hegemony of Chotanagpur plateau, famously known as Jharkhand.[2] The nature of economic activities in this territory of Santhals in the Manbhum, Birbhum, considered as gateway of lower Bengal had been similar with the Chotanagpur plateau under the rule of Nagvanshis and Palamau under Cheroes where the tribes like Munda and Oraon were either engaged with the agricultural activities and arable trade or trade with forest goods or with hand made goods.[3] All the areas of Jharkhand witnessed very significant changes in terms of polity, due to intervention of Mughals and Afghan and later British, due to which the socio- economic changes also became inevitable.

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Address for correspondence:
Nazmi Azmat, Research Scholar, University, Department of History, Ranchi University, Ranchi

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The medieval period in Jharkhand also witnessed the emergence of local chieftains and tribal leaders who played pivotal roles in shaping the region's political landscape. These leaders often engaged in alliances and conflicts with neighbouring kingdoms, contributing to the intricate web of power dynamics prevalent during that time. Trade and commerce flourished in medieval Jharkhand, facilitated by the region's rich natural resources and strategic location. The bustling trade routes passing through the region connected it to other parts of India, fostering cultural exchange and economic prosperity.

Blochmann observes that from garhi (Teliagarhi) the frontier of Bengal passed along the Ganges to the South of Agamahal (Rajmahal), where it again turned westward to north-western Birbhum, passing along the boundary of the modern Santhal pargana to the confluence of the Barakar and Damodar. Further touching the towns like Burdhwan, and moving to the direction of north-west and western boundaries of modern Hoogly and Howrah. Hence the strategic location of the Jharkhand and its further connectivity to the Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, which had been the prime location of Imperial trade led to the commencement of trading activities to the region. Trade during the Mughal and Afghan periods in medieval Jharkhand was a pivotal aspect of the region's economic landscape. Situated in the heart of the Indian subcontinent, Jharkhand served as a crossroads for various trade routes connecting the hinterlands with the bustling markets of the Mughal Empire and the Afghan territories. This chapter delves into the dynamics of trade in medieval Jharkhand during this era, exploring the commodities exchanged, the routes traversed, and the impact of political changes on trade patterns. Firstly, it is important to discuss the various factors which either paved the ways for the trade and commerce or created a hinderance towards economic and trading activities and then towards the various methods and nature of trade in the medieval Jharkhand.

1. Geographic Significance of the area

Jharkhand's geography played a crucial role in shaping its trade dynamics. Located in eastern India, Jharkhand was blessed with abundant natural resources, including forests, minerals like iron ore and coal, and fertile land for agriculture. This made it a valuable region for imperial powers seeking to exploit these resources for economic gain. Additionally, its location served as a crossroads between different regions, making it a hub for trade routes linking the Gangetic plains with the Deccan plateau and beyond. Jharkhand was rich in resources; it was composed of areas of several geographical varieties. It was the area lying between Subah of Bengal in the east, and Subah of Allahabad and Awadh in the west. However, in the south of Subah Bihar, there had been hills and jungles of Nepal and Jharkhand respectively. The rivers flowing in Bihar and Jharkhand provided alluvium deposits on their banks and also irrigation facilities covering wide range of area and it was rich in food staple, cash crop, mineral and metals. It was for the purpose the local merchants and producers of Jharkhand looked after the requirements of providing raw materials for the developing trade in the nearby province of Bihar. Jharkhand, with its rich natural resources including minerals, forests, and fertile land, was a significant contributor to the trade networks of the Indian subcontinent. The region's forests were a source of timber, lac, and other forest produce, while its mines yielded precious metals like gold, silver, and iron ore. Additionally, agriculture flourished in Jharkhand, producing grains, pulses, and spices that were sought after in distant markets.

Trade Routes and Networks:

Imperial trade in medieval Jharkhand relied heavily on established trade routes and networks that connected the region with other parts of the empire and beyond. These routes facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural influences, contributing to the region's economic prosperity and cultural diversity. The Grand Trunk Road, for example, passed through Jharkhand, connecting it with important trade centres like Kolkata, Delhi, and Lahore, and facilitating the movement of goods and people across the empire. The most frequented river routes through the Ganga were Agra-Patna-Hooghly River route and vice versa, most of the important towns of Bihar and Jharkhand such as Buxer, Hajipur, Patna, Munger, Bhagalpur and Teliagarhi were situated on the banks of the ganges. It served as an important link between Patna on one side and Hooghly and Agra on the other. Establishment of the Mughal rule in Bihar, which led to the political peace, stability and revenue reforms to the people and also developed irrigational and transport facilities which further supplemented industrial and commercial growth and also accelerated the process of urbanization and trade.

Transport and means of communication

Transport and means of communication was also contributing to the possible environment of economic activities. Due to the imperial rule of Mughals and Afghans to the area the means of transport and communication was much improvised. Better transport facilities resulted into the better connection of the Jharkhand and Bihar Subah with other provinces like Awadh and Allahabad in the west and Bengal in the East. The subah of Bihar had various trading routes via river-route or land route and hence it even penetrated the region of Jharkhand for the purpose of acquiring raw material and meeting the demand of flourishing trade. The trade routes of medieval Jharkhand were shaped by its geographical location. The region served as a crucial link between the Gangetic plains to the north and the Deccan plateau to the south, as well as between the eastern coastal regions and the western hinterlands. The Grand Trunk Road, constructed by Shershah and a major thoroughfare constructed during the Mughal era, passed through Jharkhand,

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facilitating trade between Delhi and Bengal. Other routes connected Jharkhand to the ports of the Bay of Bengal, such as present-day Kolkata, and to the inland markets of Central India.

Availabilities of trading goods and markets

The commodities traded in medieval Jharkhand were diverse and reflected the region's natural resources and economic activities. Forest products like timber, lac, and resin were in high demand for construction, crafts, and medicinal purposes. Minerals such as iron ore were essential for the production of weapons, tools, and implements. Agricultural produce like rice, wheat, pulses, and spices found their way into the markets of the Mughal Empire and beyond, enriching the culinary and cultural landscape of distant regions. Further with the coming of European the trading activities in Bihar subah enhanced further of which the Jharkhand was part of. At first it had trading link with that of Dutch, then English and French and undoubtedly the most striking element of business and trading environment in Bihar area had been investment of European in Bihar trade. It is notable here to mention that because of the appearance of Europeans in this area, the scenario changed from 17th century onwards both the European companies and private European traders entered into the local market as buyers and sellers of goods and increased the possibilities of profit for the traders, farmers and craftsmen, as before the arrival of Europeans in the area the trade and commerce in Bihar was mainly agro-based which was fetching the goods from areas of Jharkhand as well but later due to foreign demands of agro- forest and commercial goods, the area started emerging as the supplier of textile, saltpetre, sugar, indigo and opium.[4]

The subah of Bihar, in which Jharkhand was located the farmers cultivated the food grains or Jins-i-ghalla but they also produced subsistence and cash crops or Jins-i- Ala of modern period like cotton, sugarcane, saltpetre and opium etc.[5] Besides, the artisans of the area also produced the industrial goods and the commodities which remained in high demand during the contemporary goods. For instance, the great demand of salpetre had been there among the European merchants and the saltpetre of this area was considered as the best for the purpose of procuring gun- powder and it also remained 40-50 % cheaper than the Bengal saltpetre. It is also worthy to know that this area and its geography provided marked degree of natural facilities for the formation of saltpetre, especially the areas in different district of Indo- Gangetic tracts like Patna, Gaya, Tirhut, Saran, Champaran, etc., and the Europeans had their factories at various places like Patna, Chapra, Singhia and Tirhut etc., the areas which remained very close to Jharkhand. So, its didn't only have trading potentials but also witnessed industrial potentials resulting in the development of various market areas.

Imperial Encroachments and resource exploitation

Throughout medieval history, various imperial powers sought to exert control over Jharkhand and its resources. This often led to conflicts and power struggles as empires vied for dominance in the region. For example, the Gupta Empire, known for its administrative efficiency and extensive trade networks, extended its influence into eastern India, including parts of Jharkhand. Later, during the Mughal period, Jharkhand became a part of the Mughal Empire's territorial expansion, further integrating it into the imperial trade networks of the time. One of the primary objectives of imperial powers in Jharkhand was the exploitation of its rich natural resources. Though it was limited during the Mughal and Afghan rule as they could only access this area politically and for the purpose of procuring the roadways and paths to the Bihar and Bengal. This statement was mostly proven with the advent of British in India who even started penetrating into the essence of tribals of Jharkhand albeit land, water and forest resources. The region's forests provided timber for construction and fuel, while its mineral deposits, particularly iron ore, were highly sought after for metalworking and trade. Imperial authorities often established mining operations and trade outposts to extract and transport these resources efficiently, thereby stimulating trade within the empire and with external markets.

The political landscape of medieval Jharkhand was characterized by a succession of rulers, including local chieftains, Mughal governors, and Afghan warlords. The political instability resulting from these power struggles sometimes disrupted trade activities, as routes were affected by conflicts and insecurity. However, periods of relative peace and stability, such as those under enlightened rulers like Akbar the Great, saw a flourishing of trade and commerce in the region. Akbar's policies of religious tolerance and administrative reforms promoted economic growth and facilitated trade relations between different regions of his empire. The arrival of Afghan rulers like Sher Shah Suri and his successors also had a significant impact on trade in Jharkhand. Sher Shah's administrative reforms, including the introduction of standardized weights and measures and the construction of the Grand Trunk Road, improved the infrastructure for trade and facilitated the movement of goods across the region. However, the intermittent conflicts between the Mughals and the Afghans, as well as among rival Afghan factions, sometimes disrupted trade activities and caused hardship for merchants and traders.

Religious centres and trading transactions

Religion also played a significant role in shaping medieval Jharkhand, with temples, monasteries, and mosques dotting the landscape. The patronage of religious institutions by ruling dynasties further underscored the influence of faith on the region's socio-political milieu. It had also somehow led to the growth of trade and commerce, because the religious places became a rich centre of economic activities, for an example, Temples, mosques and religious shrines. The example could be taken of famous Jagannath Temple, which was built during the seventeenth

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century under the reign of Raghunath Shah, the Nagvanshis ruler of Chotanagpur. Similary he constructed number of temples at Doisa and places like Boria and Pithoria near Ranchi.[6] These temples also served as important trading centres as the areas around the temples had grown as a major centre of activities for the whole communities. Religious centres had always been a factor for the rise of towns and enlarged trading transactions, heavily crowded by people, rulers, priest and commodities selling artisans and producers. Despite these challenges, trade continued to thrive in medieval Jharkhand, driven by the region's strategic location, abundant natural resources, and enterprising merchants. The markets of Jharkhand attracted traders from distant regions, fostering cultural exchange and economic prosperity. Over time, Jharkhand emerged as an integral part of the vast trading network that connected the diverse regions of the Indian subcontinent during the Mughal and Afghan periods, leaving a lasting legacy on the region's economy and society.

An Analysis of the Trading Dynamics

The nature of imperial trade in medieval Jharkhand, a region known for its rich natural resources and strategic location, was characterized by a complex interplay of local commerce, regional exchanges, and interactions with external powers. While Jharkhand itself wasn't an empire, it was often influenced by imperial powers that sought to control its resources or establish trade routes through the region. To delve into this topic, let's explore the key elements that shaped imperial trade in medieval Jharkhand. Despite imperial control and influence, local commerce played a significant role in shaping trade relations within Jharkhand. Indigenous communities, including tribal groups and merchant guilds, engaged in trade activities, exchanging goods such as agricultural produce, handicrafts, and forest products. These local networks often intersected with imperial trade routes, leading to the exchange of goods and ideas between different socio-cultural groups.

Nature of trading activities in Medieval Jharkhand

If we demarcate the nature of trading activities in medieval Jharkhand, there had been three kinds of trading activities which were going on in contemporary period, Firstly, The Imperial trade, where the imperial heads like crown heads, provincial chiefs, Mughal and Afghan governors were regularly trading in the Jharkhand territories being stationed here. Secondly the provincial trade where the regional territories of trading significance were being indulged in trade and commerce and thirdly the local trade where the local tribals and communities were being part of local economic transaction and strengthening their economy and ensuring their livelihood.

Imperial Trading dynamics: -

The nature of imperial trade in medieval Jharkhand was characterized by a complex interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors. While imperial powers sought to exploit the region's resources for their own gain, local communities continued to engage in trade and commerce, contributing to the region's economic vibrancy and cultural diversity. Understanding the dynamics of imperial trade in medieval Jharkhand provides valuable insights into the broader processes of empire-building, economic exchange, and cultural interaction in pre-modern South Asia. With the entry of Shershah in the territory of Jharkhand, the area became the subject of regular interactions and activities. It was regularly visited by large number of provincial chiefs, officials and troopers. As the imperial power during the 17th and 18th centuries, including the Afghans and Mughals were the urban loving class, demanding all the facilities and equipment, so wherever they visited and arrived their flourished a class of Urban strata, like Artisans, merchants and local industrialists and service providing groups, who could fulfil their requirements. In the territory of Jharkhand, though we have least sources, providing the details about nature of Afghan Mughal trade but still it could be derived with analytical descriptions of Persian accounts and contemporary sources. For example works like, Ain-i-Akbari, Tujuk-i-Jahangiri, Padshahnama, Khulasat-ut- Tawarikh and various European merchants like Portuguese Durate Barbasa, Sabastion Manrique, The Italian Varthema, The British Ralf Fitch, Edward Terry, Pater Mundy and John Marshall, the Dutch Palesart and Flemish De Laet and most importantly French traveller Bernier and Tavernier and Venetion Manucci etc all confirm that subah of Bihar was a major trading centre and a place of widespread and varied manufacturing activities. Though Jharkhand was an isolative centre but still it provided the forest products and agricultural goods for trading activities.

The Turko- Afghan and Mughal period in Hindustan gave rise to a little urban life in a few big towns which served as the seat of local and provincial administration. The towns were usually walled and protected and also served as centre of refuge for the neighbouring population in time of danger and insecurity. In time of peace, they served as centre of distribution of agricultural goods and industrial produce. So, towns led to the growth of social and intellectual culture, but they were not of sufficient economic importance to modify the economic outlook of the people as a whole.[7] In the territory of Jharkhand a different situation prevailed, the growth of towns and trading activities did not develop as a process of interactions and mutual exchange of goods, since the area was completely isolated and preserved. When did the Afghan and Mughal intervene in the politics of Jharkhand, the provincial heads, Jagirdars, and officials started coming to the area, they economically engaged to the area since it remained a resourceful state. For example, in order to maintain law and order, the Afghan- Mughal rulers used to appoint officials, who either resided with the emperors or were posted at strategic location of the country, with the passage of time and with the territorial expansions the number of such officials increased further.[8] Similarly, there emerged various towns and cities, as a

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result of expansion and consolidation, in the form of provincial headquarters, district headquarters, and provincial and regional capitals, providing boost not only to imperial trade, but also to inter-provincial trade.[9] Irfan Habib argues that medieval Muslim rulers were Urban loving ruling elites, and service required Urban elites, so they required various commodities and services at their headquarters, leading to the rise of migration of artisans to the urban areas as well as different trading groups.

However such developments remained more visible in the territories of Bihar, but the area of Jharkhand could also not isolate itself specially during Afghan and Mughal period. Here we could better take the reference of the provincial city Rajmahal, where the provincial and district level administrative officials set up police station and military posts at the appropriate points and placed them under the proper incumbents. These police station and strategically important places grew into administrative and trading centres and later expanded rapidly.[10] The imperial trading activities were mostly prominent in the area like Kahalgaon, Teliagarhi and Rajmahal of which the latter was most important. Rajmahal was founded by Raja Man Singh (1595-96) and initially known by the names like Akbarnagar, then as Agmahal and later as Rajmahal, which was basically a provincial headquarter. Rajmahal was a major centre of imperial trade, with the various resident buildings and religious monuments.[11] The imperial town of Rajmahal was major centre of economic activities and trade and commerce where salt, sugar and silk were found in abundance. According to medieval traveller Abdul Latif, Rajmahal was a metropolitan city having high range of economic transaction and trading network with the many trading centres of Bihar and Jharkhand.[12] It had also been a major mint city,[13] where the Mughal currency was procured which also prompted trading activities in Jharkhand. Similarly, the area of Kahalgaon where Mughal emperor Babur spent four days and from where he marched to Garhi, which was later known as Teliagarhi.[14] So during the Mughal Afghan period there had been so many trading centres emerging in the form of administrative towns, provincial capital, sarkar, dastur, headquarters or seat of imperial officials like faujdars, kotwal, thanedars, amils, shiqdars, karkuns, qanungoes and patwari and the requirements of service and commodities undoubtedly led to the trading transactions and at the same time emergence of towns and cities. Sir, John Marshall had also given as much details of the Chowkis or Custom houses, were trading activities were being held and both the imperial as well as Company's official were regularly visiting the places for an example, Rajmahal, where he himself reached in 1670 A, D. and took the details of custom revenue from a vakil or diwan and secured Dastak(trading pass). Likewise, Burjungle or barajangal, Dellegola (two miles away Teliagarhi), Teliagarhi, Pirpainti, Mokameh had been important chowki or trading centres, where the official like Mir- bahr (custom or harbour master) and vakil or diwan had been important officials,[15] serving both for imperial trade as well as inter-provincial trade.

Local Trade and role of Indigenous trading groups

Local trade in the Mughal India was mainly confined to the rural areas and was aimed to procure the products from peasants and artisans and distribution within small local boundary.[16] Further the growth of money economy had also contributed the local trade during medieval period as during Akbar's reign emphasis had been given for the creating cash nexus. Since the emperor demanded revenue in cash the farmers and producers of goods were compelled to sell off their good to the nearby markets in order to obtain cash and pay revenue demand, even if they were paying the revenue in kind, the Mughal officials were selling it to the market and procuring cash because it was not possible for them to get the grains from all over the Empire and preserve the stock for long period of time. Hence the revenue system of the Medieval rulers also led to the growth of local trade due to the continuous need of selling the surplus good. Mughal Jagirdars and Zamindars started visiting the territories of Jharkhand during the 16th and 17th centuries after the confrontation of Cheroes of Palamu and Nagvanshis of Chutianagpur. This event marked the beginning of large scale trading transactions to the area. The medieval ruling class had been service loving class since beginning and hence their arrival into the area resulted into the regular visit of artisans to the area and growth of local trade. These officials entered into the area as buyers and increased the possibilities of profit for the traders, farmers and craftsmen and also boosted the production of cash or high-grade crop and great volume of inland trade. The main commodities of local trade were food grains like wheat, rice pulses, oil seeds gur or jaggery, sugar, salt, coarse cloth, iron, fire wood, charcoal, grass for thatching roof, carpet, dried fruits, opium, coconut etc. and the various raw materials like cotton threads, metals like brass and iron, bamboo sticks and forest goods were all items of trade.[17] Local Haat acted as the means of supplier of the commodities in the nearby areas, which was generally being conducted weekly and monthly. Jharkhand had been a traditional supplier of food products especially vegetables to cities like Asansol, Patna, Roulkela, Bokaro, Jamshedpur etc.[18] It is believed that the very famous Haat system existed in the region since 10th century.[19] And few states like Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa are having a very deep roots of local haat and bazaars, as these served as an easiest accessible platform for exchanging products, both in terms of barter system and monetary mode too, between nearby village or Qasba.[20]

Hence, local trade was conducted through elaborate networks that penetrated into the countryside to acquire goods and commodities to the big merchants located in the cities and market towns. In the successful conduction of local trade, the Sahukar and Mahajans in the gunges, and big merchants of the towns used the local vyaparis, paikars, and baladiyas to secure the raw materials and goods from the rural areas and then to distribute the urban goods to these places. In few areas the gunges and local markets had also been created by the zamindars and imperial officials, for the

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purpose of acquiring local goods and services. They not only supervised these local markets but also regulated and protected it, creating the invariable stimulus for the growth of towns and trade. However, medieval Jharkhand was not without its challenges. The region often faced invasions and conflicts, leading to periods of instability and turmoil. Yet, through resilience and adaptability, the people of Jharkhand persevered, preserving their cultural identity amidst the ebb and flow of history.In conclusion, the medieval period in Jharkhand is a captivating chapter in the region's history, marked by a fascinating interplay of cultures, traditions, and socio-political dynamics. It is a testament to the enduring spirit of the people who called this land home, and their ability to navigate the complexities of an ever-changing world.

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