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### **Rural-Agrarian Change, Politics and Neo-feudalism in India: Case of Bundelkhand Region**

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## **Rural-Agrarian Change, Politics and Neo-feudalism in India: Case of Bundelkhand Region<sup>1</sup>**

(Rough draft, Not to be Cited)

*Sudhir Kumar Suthar*

### **1 Introduction**

The Bundelkhand region in the central India has been in the news for the problems of farmers' suicides, hunger, malnutrition, migration and other challenges of underdevelopment. The existing political, academic and civil society discourse largely focuses on the economic aspects of underdevelopment. This article tries to bring in one major factor which have significantly hampered the process of change in this region but have not received much attention. This paper makes an attempt to understand role of the state policy for rural-agrarian development in the region. The region received significant political attention in the last one decade and also attracted special financial assistance both from the state governments as well as from the central government.

The paper attempts to argue that the role of state intervention in the region has failed to produce desired outcomes. On the contrary, there has been a gradual restructuring of the traditionally existing socio-political dominant structures. There has been an increasing nexus of the traditionally dominant socio-economic caste-classes of the region and the state machinery. Consequently, the region continues to remain in the grip of social as well as economic underdevelopment despite serious state intervention at multiple levels.

These newer socio-economic structures of dominance, called here as neo-feudal relations, are a mix of the traditional structures of dominance and market being its new partner. What has further facilitated this process is the emergence of a weak-governing state on the one hand and a welfare state on the other. A weak state has paved the way for market and their new alliance with the feudal elements to take over the natural resources of the region. Emergence of a strong welfare state, functioning through various welfare schemes, has simultaneously resulted into leakage in the implementation of these schemes. This has provided newer economic opportunities to the rural feudal elites in the form of rampant corruption in implementation of these schemes. Consequently, many major developmental interventions like the Bundelkhand Development Package have failed to achieve the objective of transformation of the region.

#### **a. The Mode of Production Debate (Add references of Bardhan, Patnaik)**

For a very long time Indian discourse on agrarian and rural change got its academic articulation in the famous mode of production debate during the 1960s-80s. This debate was about the change in India's agrarian economy and its socio-economic basis. Scholars like Alice Thorner (Thorner 1982), Ashok Rudra *et al* (Rudra, Majid and Talib 1969) etc highlighted that India was witnessing a structural transformation in the form of agrarian change from a feudal model of production to a capitalist mode of production.

However, there were others who questioned the validity of these conclusions and argued that in this process of transformation elements of feudalism sustained despite the agriculture witnessing a shift towards usage of technology and farmers getting access to the market to sell their products. Pranab

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Bardhan (Bardhan 1998) had shown that in the areas of green revolution a new nexus between the ruling politicians, bureaucracy and the agrarian capitalist classes had also emerged.

This debate almost became silent with the global decline of Marxist ideology and India becoming a member of the World Trade Organization and thereby promising to integrate its agrarian structure with the global economy. The debate shifted to the emergence of neo-liberal economic order and its impact upon India's agrarian economy. Alongside, Indian economy had also witnessed the emergence of a strong informal economy in the newly emerging urban or semi-urban centers. This economic change was also interpreted as a catalyst for major social change in the rural India which was largely agrarian in nature. On the basis of these changes scholars like Dipankar Gupta argued that gradually 'ruralities are disappearing.' Most of such regions are the beneficiaries of the green revolution either in its early phase or in the later phase. (Gupta 2012)

The informal economy not only provided diverse sources of livelihood to the rural poor and marginalized sections but it also facilitated a kind of social change by gradually destroying feudal values and bringing in individualistic social values instead of a community centric rural society. (Gupta 2012) (Jodhka 2012) (Chatterjee 2008)). Economically this also reduced the labor classes dependent upon the landed sections and agrarian sector. Consequently, many regions had also witnessed increasing rates of migration from the rural areas to the nearby towns and cities.

The feudal modes of production which were centered around the land and agrarian economy bounded by the fixed production relations between the landlord (or zamindars in many parts of India) on the one hand and the landless agricultural laborers on the other. With the agrarian sector moving away from this feudal mode production paving way for decline of landlordism and agricultural being a profitable profession for accumulation of wealth, the capitalist mode of production gradually takes over. Farmers do not produce merely for subsistence but for the market. In other words, this economic change and social change based on this has transformed the nature of modes of production in a significant manner from a feudal setup to the capitalist mode of production. This phenomenon led many scholars to conclude that the traditional Marxist explanation of the agrarian-rural transformation need to be modified in order to incorporate such developments.

Marxist scholars had questioned the nature of India's economic transformation and argued that though there is a change in rural economy yet this change is not an outcome of any significant transformation in the existing modes of production. Land was dominated by a specific elite section of the society and the conditions of landless laborers continued to be the same. (Patnaik 1971) (Saxena, Mohanty and Chakravathy 2012)) The new theories of economic transformation criticized these conclusions and argued that the conventional Marxist understanding of rural-agrarian transformation has gradually become irrelevant as it failed to foresee the emergence of many new socio-economic sections in the rural India. Besides, the nature of land relations had also undergone a change due to increasing sources of income of the landless laborers or the marginalized sections.

The findings of these debates were substantiated largely by taking few regions into consideration and providing larger generalization based upon the analysis of different regions. Hence, regions were not regarded as a specific case in themselves. It was largely believed that those changes which were taking place in a region were generalizable. Consequently, the regions which were left behind in this process of agrarian transformation were largely ignored in this debate. In fact, many such regions had took a very different trajectory in terms of the nature of politics and governance. For example, the region of Punjab was the first amongst those which had witnessed the capitalist transformation but it also witnessed increasing number of suicides. Similarly the region like Western UP witnessed agrarian change on the one hand but also saw state-society clash and increasing nature of communal polarization on the other hand. Is it really so? Even till date India's rural-agrarian transformation debate is largely dominated by the regions which are agriculturally prosperous or are moving in that direction due to increasing access to technology and irrigation facilities.

What about the region which didn't witness such transformation? What if there are regions which have remained largely untouched from the drive of agricultural modernization or the emergence of an informal economy? This article is an attempt to understand Bundelkhand region, which fits into this

category of change. This paper attempts to argue that the widely discussed existing conclusions about the India's rural transformation may be applicable in case of regions which are the beneficiaries of the green revolution. But in case of the regions where on the one hand not a very conducive environment for green revolution (such as the availability of water and quality of the land) exists but on the other hand other natural resources like forests, coal or other minerals are available have seen a very different kind of rural change (and not transformation). In regions like Bundelkhand, especially the MP part of the region, the traditionally existing feudal elements continue to remain dominant actors. Besides, they have developed a new kind of political and economic alliances with the state on the one hand and market on the other. In other words, these sections have recreated their structure of feudal economy. This phenomenon is being described here as 'neo-feudalism.'

## **b. Neo-Feudalism**

Neo-feudalism is a distinct phenomenon from the semi-feudalism as an analytical category of social transformation. In this process though the society transforms from the feudal modes of social change but this change is oriented not towards any realization of social change, or modernization or a desire to adopt to newer social values. Rather, it is based upon a rigid social behavior for protection of status quo in favor of the feudal society. However, in order to sustain the status quo there is an understanding of looking for newer social as well economic alliances with the new socio-economic actors either from the similar social background or economically and politically influential groups, in case they are from other social categories. In other words, feudalism transforms itself to gain economically and politically on the one hand and to ensure continuity of traditional values of caste, class and other social hierarchies on the other.

This phenomenon may not be visible in case of regions which have benefitted from the green revolution or from the emergence of industries and market centre in the nearby vicinity. But in case of regions which do not have conducive environment for green revolution (irrigation water, land suitable for products of certain crops etc) and also rich in natural resources this phenomenon of neo-feudalism is categorically visible. The Bundelkhand region of northern India is a good example of this form of underdevelopment.

In the new political economy of Bundelkhand, which has emerged in the last two and half decades, the feudal economic structures are redrafting their strategies of political and economic control. This happens in the form of two parallel political processes.

One, the traditional feudal castes and classes (Roy 1993) (traditionally dominating upper castes especially Rajputs and some owner-cultivator castes like Yadavs, Kumis etc) resist any policy initiative which is forward moving especially by creating serious law and order problems. This was done with more assertion if such programs were meant to benefit the marginalized sections. Two, these sections have also been redrafting their alliance with the state apparatus which also has a similar upper-caste and class character.

This is not to argue that they didn't have such alliance earlier. In case of Bundelkhand such alliances have always existed. (Shanker 1988) In fact, it was this alliance which prevented the ruling political class from initiating any program meant for social transformation. Yet in the new era of emergence of a new political economy of inviting foreign as well as domestic companies investments and increasing demands of natural resources, these sections are determining the entry of market forces and nature of industrialization in the region.

This helps them in increasing their bargaining power vis-a-vis the state's political leadership and the market players, who want to use resources in the region. For the market players its not possible to exploit these resources peacefully without the active support of the muscle power of the socially dominant classes. In return of such support these classes adopt two types of bargaining strategies with the market actors. Firstly, they demand for involvement of their own resources in the business activity of such players. For example, the tractor, digging machines or other kinds of machinery which the

rural social groups own to be included in the mining or construction activity. Second, sometimes (though this strategy is rare) such groups demand direct benefit in the company's investments. In some cases the latter has not materialized but the former is a very common case in most of the mining activities.

In addition to these material benefits, the traditional feudal class in Bundelkhand also has access or control over the media and civil society organizations in the two states. Such control may not necessarily be in terms of ownership or leadership role in these institutions but a close look at the people working in such organizations clearly demonstrates this trend. Though historical processes of marginalization of weaker sections can be attributed as a reason behind this phenomenon but it also reflects how there have been no proactive policy initiatives in any of these institutions to promote participation of these groups. Although many of the people who come from the traditionally dominant social sections do advocate need for a major structural change of the region yet their major focus is on economic change. Such an approach has rather reinforced the already existing hierarchies and modes of exploitation instead of bringing any qualitative change in the social character of this region. (Jafferlot 1996).

Politicization of the question of underdevelopment of the region in the last one hand half decade led to increasing economic intervention of the state. Before the announcement of the Bundelkhand Development Package this intervention came through various developmental schemes which were to be implemented through the Panchayati Raj institutions.<sup>2</sup> However, the socio-economic character of the region also determined the political character of panchayats. Socially dominant sections continued to control the functioning of panchayats.<sup>3</sup>

In case of the panchayats where leadership came to the marginalized sections, including the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes or women, due to the reservation were not allowed to function independently. Those who didn't resist, as happened in most of cases due to the power nexus of powerful castes with the state bureaucracy and politicians, could survive politically. Those who tried to resist faced either violent resistance or were removed by the district administration under the political pressure in the name of corruption. In other words, the higher bureaucracy, especially at the level of the district or tehsil which is largely dominated by the upper caste-class combination, didn't show any supportive or sensible attitude towards such sections.

In many cases the assertion of marginalized sections faced resistance in atrocities, rape cases and torture. Such cases of violence were not even registered in a majority of the cases. If the panchayats would have been allowed to function democratically it might have led to some change in the socio-economic structures of the rural society which the dominant sections of Bundelkhand didn't want to happen. Besides, the economic status-quo which is in favor of the feudal elements would have been altered since panchayats had a major role to play in ensuring welfare scheme's benefits to the poor and the marginalized sections. In order to retain their control over the rural social structure on the one hand and ensure their ownership over the economic resources of the region the other the process of resistance of any positive change faced sever opposition from such sections.

A major addition to this politics of dominance was the Introduction of the position of *panchayat sachiv* who have been given the administrative control of the panchayats. In most of the cases the *sachiv* is from the dominant section if the sarpanch is from the weaker sections or lower castes. This prevents any possibility of emergence of any leadership amongst these sections. The gradual penetration of state in the political economy of the region through the welfare programs which are heavily funded from the central government has also helped these feudal actors in retaining their control over the political economy of the region and therefore social dominance. Due to the political nexus between the bureaucracy, local panchayat leadership and the leadership at the state level, and this originates from the caste-class alliances as well, it is easier for the local panchayat leaders to get

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Interview with activist and writer Sachin Jain who runs a popular organization in Madhya Pradesh. Interviewed on 19 February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Jain, Sachin Kumar, 2016. Drought of Vision in Bundelkhand", Entry on <http://bundelkhand.in/Article/Drought-of-Vision-in-Bundelkhand-Sachin-Jain>, accessed on 20 December 2016



into corruption and get benefited from these schemes. As per some media reports after the announcement of the Bundelkhand Development Package, the demand for four wheeler vehicles like Bolero jeep saw a sudden jump. A similar increase was also seen in case of demands for the consumer items like television and refrigerators. The benefits of such schemes had gone more to the feudal castes of the region instead of the poor. This kind of political economy further increases their closeness with the ruling class as well. Consequently, it is virtually impossible for any opposition group to raise alarms against such corrupt practices.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the traditional understanding of transformation from feudalism to capitalism, the traditional feudal sections gradually develop an alliance with the market forces in order to get into the capitalist mode of production. A major incentive for this shift comes from the fact of desire to maximize their economic benefit. In case of Bundelkhand, on the contrary, such feudal classes do not even feel the need to get associated with the capitalist forces or the market. They want to use the state machinery as a medium of access to market and use its policies to get wealth without changing their traditional character. As a result, what we witness today in the region is a new kind of feudalism which is deeply involved in caste exploitation or the exploitation of women.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the traditionally dominant castes especially the Rajputs, a new owner-cultivator class has also emerged in both the states. It is more applicable in case of UP than MP. In case of UP some of the castes, which are now categorized as the OBCs like Yadav, Kushwaha, Kurmi, Patel etc, have emerged strong economic actors due to the changing character of agriculture. Since the UP Bundelkhand has relatively better supply of water for irrigation purposes and it has also witnessed a significant increase in the usage of chemicals and fertilizers, the owner-cultivator communities are the biggest beneficiaries of this change. In UP both the main national parties, the Indian national congress as well as the BJP, could not sustain their support base. This political vacuum was used as an opportunity by two state parties: the Samajwadi Party as well as the Bahujan Samaj Party. A major support base of both the parties, especially of the former is these OBC. (Jafferlot 1996)

Not only the parties used these castes to win political power but these castes also used these parties to increase their penetration into the state power. Bundelkhand OBCs are a strong support base of the BSP in the region. This led to increasing rate of corruption by the leaders who came from these communities.<sup>6</sup>

During the BSP regime in the state from 2008-2012, the UP Bundelkhand region was a major center of development politics and the state government focused a lot on the region through its various schemes. The state government also prepared an extensive development plan for the region. Such initiatives also resulted into increasing number of corruption cases on the political leaders from the region. However, due to their control over the state apparatus no major action was taken against any of these leaders for a very long time. Leaders of the other caste groups, especially Yadavs, who continue to remain a strong political group and have absolute control over the state since it is Samajwadi Party government in the state which is primarily a political support of this community.

In case of MP the situation is slightly different. Due to lack of irrigation facilities and a traditionally feudal society this part of the state has not seen any major social change. However, the owner-cultivator class did see an economic emergence as their population is largely concentrated in the districts adjacent to the UP districts. Some of these communities also benefitted from the education as

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<sup>4</sup> “बांदा जिले में दलितों का राशन और मनरेगा जॉब कार्ड भी नहीं छूते हैं अगड़े कोटेदार और प्रधान” report published in *Dainik Bhaskar*, Jan 21, 2016

<sup>5</sup> “Dalit atrocities in Lalitpur: NHRC demands report” *Hindustan Times* (Lucknow Edition), June 8, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> One major leader of BSP from the Kushwaha community was Babu Singh Kushwaha. He was involved in many corruption cases and received notices from the state vigilance commission. He runs his own newspaper as well as a news channel. Both these mediums used to work in defense of his actions and were also used to spread propaganda against those who spoke against him. Finally, under political pressure and to maintain her image of clean governance, Mayawati the then UP chief minister removed him from the cabinet and later suspended from the party as well.

those who moved out from the region could get this for their children. This also resulted in their political assertion. However, the traditional upper castes used to be a strong support base of the Congress party. These OBC communities largely supported the BJP as that was the only viable political alternative available in the state for a very long time. With the BJP coming into power in 2002, these communities also got benefitted. However, the local social elites also aligned with the BJP against the INC especially the Rajputs. In other words, both the communities got an access to state power simultaneously. Since the other upper castes were already taking advantage of this situation as they were with the Congress. Not there changing political affiliation also came along with the many other OBC castes. Now even these OBC classes have also joined hands with the upper castes in exploring the scheduled castes, tribes or other OBC castes which are not very powerful.

In other words, in the phenomenon of neo-feudalism the new castes have also aligned with the traditionally powerful castes in order to enjoy the state power. Leaders of these communities now take advantage of the welfare schemes for their own lands and business activities. As a result, Bundelkhand is witnessing significant rise in the number of dalit atrocities and crime against women. The state agencies, instead of taking strict action against the culprits, rather try to protect them due to political pressure.

In the process of gradual penetration of the state and market few other sections especially the owner-cultivator communities which are largely the other backward classes have also been the beneficiaries. However, unlike other regions where the OBC's have emerged as a new socio-economic as well as political elite, in case of Bundelkhand this has not happened. A major reason of this is that there has not been any significant change in the pattern of landownership in the region. Though during the land reforms many people from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes were given the land by the state but they still do not have the possession of these lands due to the existing control of feudal actors.

### **c. Changing Nature of State: The State-Market-Upper caste-class Nexus**

Another major feature of neo-feudalism is the changing nature of the state. It is necessary to understand the character of state in these two contexts to better understand the Bundelkhand case. As highlighted earlier, in the process of neo-feudalism the feudal classes use the state as an instrument to maintain the status quo since it puts them in a powerful situation. Such a control also helps these classes in taking economic benefits from the state as well as the market. In case of both the states there has been a significant change in the manner in which state used to interact with such classes.

The state apparatus which is in close alliance with the feudal actors in contemporary times has a distinct character from the nature of the state in the regions where the process of rural transformation had already taken place especially during the late 1970 till late 2000. The state in this part of the country, especially in MP, is being controlled by a very strong right wing political ideology. Besides, this state is also in close alliance with the new corporate market players especially the Indian corporate players. Here state is trying to facilitate gradual control of the market on the natural resources in the region. This can only be done with the alliance between the local dominant sections on the one hand and the state machinery on the other.

In this process the nature of state plays a very crucial role as an intervening variable. In the era of neo-liberalism state has acquired a special place of facilitating the market forces. Here state plays role of an intermediary between the people on the one hand and the market on the other. State facilitates land acquisition for the market actors for establishing their plants. Besides, the state also plays a critical role in assuring supply of natural resources for the production of various goods. State also becomes a major player in ensuring cheap labor supply for the industry. In a region like Bundelkhand, where there are plenty of natural resources but at the same time there are prevailing challenges of governance, state's role becomes more crucial. In such a scenario, role of state can be exploitative, emancipatory or weak as well. This question of the nature of state can be determined by the nature of ruling class and its composition.



The nature of state in case of Bundelkhand as a region is quite distinct from the other nearby regions especially those which are doing economically better like Malwa or western UP. The point which deserves special attention is that the nature of overall state can be different vis-a-vis a region within a particular state. The same distinction can be made between the MP Bundelkhand on the one hand and the UP part of Bundelkhand on the other. The attitude of the ruling regimes towards the region can be determined by the kind of ruling elite it has and what kind of overall developmental policies it has for the region.

The region witnessed a significant change in the attitude of state towards its cause of underdevelopment during the BSP regime in UP. There were two major reasons for this. First, BSP has a sizable presence in the region as its support base since there are a sizable number of dalit voters in the region. In fact, initial efforts of Kanshi Ram to mobilized dalits started from this part of the country. Secondly, BSP has tried to focus on the backward regions of the state in its previous term in order to project itself as a party committed to the notion of 'good governance' along with the traditional agenda of dalit empowerment. For this purpose, the party leadership made special efforts to include representatives from the region into the state cabinet. BSP also had prepared a roadmap for the development of the Bundelkhand region as well as the Poorvanchal region of UP. So much so that the government also passed a legislation for division of the state into smaller states before its term was getting over. Since BSP government was known as a government of dalits, the marginalized sections of the region did have a sense of political assertion. This also led to declining number of cases of atrocities. Law and order situation significantly improved during the BSP regime in the state.

However, corruption did prevail in the BSP regime as the local leadership was involved in exploitation of natural resources by ignoring illegal mining. The local BSP leadership was also investing in buying land and other properties at much lower rates than the market rates. These leaders were also alleged for promoting the land and mining mafia in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, corruption and political assertion of the weaker sections came together in the UP Bundelkhand. Consequently, the nature of political processes as well as economic development did witness a change of approach in the state. In fact, it also led to the occurrence of the demands for a separate state of Bundelkhand. These demands received some attention in the state of UP.<sup>8</sup> Similar kind of stories of corruption were narrated by Aashish Sagar who is a Right to Information activist in Banda. Aashish shared his various posts on facebook where he has shown the reality of the progress of the development package and of other government schemes.<sup>9</sup>

The MP case has been quite different from the UP Bundelkhand. Unlike UP, the MP Bundelkhand has largely been the princely state except the Sagar region. As a result, the caste exploitation was already very strong in these regions due to their history of one caste domination. Secondly, the nature of state in MP has always been more influenced from the right wing agenda within the Congress government rather than having a more progressive character. Contrary to UP where dalit mobilization did result into their political assertion, no such mobilization has taken place in the MP region of Bundelkhand. Due to the British presence in the UP as well as in Sagar region, modernization did happen in the form of improvements in the transportation facilities. No such development happened in the princely states until quite recently. Another factor which hampered the development of the region was the problem of banditry.

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<sup>7</sup> “तो क्या फिर ठेकेदारों के लिए मांगा जा रहा है बुंदेलखंड पैकेज !” A report available on <https://www.patrika.com/news/lucknow/social-workers-arises-issue-of-corruption-in-bundelkhand-package-hindi-news-1549850>.

<sup>8</sup> “मुख्यमंत्री जी! यहां भूसे-पानी में भी खोजी जा रही मलाई” a report showing corruption in the Bundelkhand Development Package available online <https://www.patrika.com/news/jhansi/intermediaries-can-corruption-in-government-schemes-in-bundelkhand-13826>

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with the author on June 2, 2014. Banda, UP

A cumulative impact of this history has been the continuing phenomenon of the ruling class exploitation of the weaker sections. Since it was the ruling class which was largely the land owning class, it controlled agricultural and agrarian relations and hence the livelihood of other social sections. Lack of transportation facilities due to resistance from the dominant sections on the one hand and the problem of the law and order on the other, also prevented these sections from exploring alternative sources of income. The feudal classes of the region had close relations with the ruling class. The muscle power of these sections was also helping the ruling parties to garner electoral support for them. Overall, there was neither any internal movement nor external factors which would have pushed for structural reforms in the region.

With the increasing transportation facilities, gradual penetration of the market in these areas and gradual decline in the economic power of the ruling sections has led to emergence of a new socio-economic order in the region. However, the speed of change of these reforms have been extremely slow due to a minimalistic state intervention in the region. A major reason of this is that new alliances between the ruling class and the traditional feudal class of the region have replaced the older ties. In other words, not much has changed in terms of the power structure in the region.

#### **d. The Neo-Feudals: Beneficiaries of the State Welfare Programs**

One factor which has been helping the traditional feudal elements of the region is the increasing state penetration in the Bundelkhand region through welfare schemes and activities. In the last one and half decades, especially after the increasing state inclination towards inviting more and more Foreign Direct Investment under the neoliberal policy framework, the nature of state intervention has expanded. However, this expansion has come along with a weak governance framework so that the market can be allowed to takeover with the support of state policy.

The neoliberal policy framework guided by the motives of rapid industrialization can only be implemented if the state facilitates the market expansion. This can easily be achieved in a region like Bundelkhand where there is plenty of cheap land available for the industrial expansion. Besides, the region could have also been a place for the availability of unskilled cheap labor since there is a lot of unemployment in the region. What would have facilitated this process was the already existing nexus between the ruling elite of the state and the socially powerful sections. In fact, this nexus is used as a powerful social base to implement the neoliberal agenda.

Unlike many other regions of India where the traditionally ruling elite also became spokespersons of social and political change, in case of Bundelkhand these sections have resisted any kind of radical socio-economic changes benefitting the marginalized sections to maintain the status quo. For instance, the bidi making industrialists who were benefitting from the cheap labor of the region resisted any move for modernization for a very long time. Similarly, it is quite difficult for the panchayats as well as for the district administration to implement various welfare schemes like MGNREGA, ICDS, Mid-day Meal Scheme etc due to prevailing conditions of social rigidity and feudalism.

On the other hand, these sections are involved in getting financial benefits from these schemes by using their physical power. Rakesh Diwan, who is a very popular journalist and has been associated with the Narmada Bachao Andolan also highlighted some of these issues of socio-economic change in the region. The change in economic character of their feudal control is also not a voluntary move. Rather, with the increasing intervention of the state in order to facilitate exploitation of natural resources by the market forces, the feudal actors are forced to redefine this relationship. However, this process is also determined by the caste-class character of these sections.<sup>10</sup>

Another factor which is responsible for the reassertion of these feudal classes and emergence of a few groups is their nexus with the local politicians and bureaucracy. This nexus also emerges due to two major factors. First, these are the sections who had access to the education in the traditional structures.

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<sup>10</sup> Rakesh Diwan, Personal interview with the author, February 13, 2017

Due to slow pace of expansion of state supported education system the weaker sections couldn't achieve the similar kind of education. Secondly, these groups also got access to the government sector jobs not only due to education but also their close proximity with the ruling political class. Consequently, they controlled the local administrative machinery in a significant way.

The political leadership continues to remain controlled in the hands of the traditional sections. This has further expanded to their control over the media, civil society and the new market forces especially the mining industry. These sections have also got the benefit of the new economic policies followed by the BJP government in the state. Under the banner of investor's meet the government offers quick and cheap land to the corporates. Since largely the land in Bundelkhand, especially the fertile land is owned or controlled by the dominant sections, the supply of land to these new corporate entities come from them. State being an agency for acquiring land purchases land from these sections at reasonably high rates as compared to the otherwise market rates. This has further extended the benefit of compensation to these sections. These sections have also invested in these new business activities by themselves becoming a partner or at least negotiating some participation in the implementation of these projects at the grass roots. For instance, the local actors demand for their machines (tractors, JCB's and other machinery which is available locally) to be used in these projects.<sup>11</sup>

Bundelkhand region of the north-central India has been in the news for the last eight years for its severe drought conditions and underdevelopment. The Bundelkhand Development Package which was seen as a major solution to such problems, turned out to be nothing but a short term financial support. In the entire discourse on drought the larger issues of underdevelopment especially its social, and political implications in case of the region have been ignored. Bundelkhand has been historically known for its feudal society and unequal political economy. Drought becomes a harsh reality of life due to the prevailing conditions of not only economic backwardness but also due to social exploitation and political helplessness.

The new phenomenon which is largely determining the nature of socio-economic change of Bundelkhand region is the reassertion of these traditionally dominant castes and classes. This reassertion emerges from the economic benefits which they acquire from the implementation of various developmental schemes on the one hand, and gradual penetration of market forces on the region and the dominants castes' subsequent control over the exploitation of natural resources on the other.

A cumulative impact of these two phenomenon is the reassertion of traditionally dominant castes and classes. Unlike other parts of India where the economic change is ensued by emergence of a new aspirational middle class, which also brings a certain kind of social change by breaking the traditional social customs and norms, such a class is missing in case of the Bundelkhand region. Though there are differences in the UP Bundelkhand and MP Bundelkhand. The UP part has still witnessed some kind of social churning due to the impact of a strong dalit mobilization by the Bahujan Samaj Party. Similarly, the Other Backward Classes have been through the process of political mobilization in favor of the Samajwadi Party. Such a case of change is missing in case of the MP part of Bundelkhand. One major reason of this is the absence of any such impactful political mobilization by the marginalized sections of MP Bundelkhand.

Secondly, the vision of structural change has been replaced with the cooption of various leaders, journalists, civil society activists in the political discourse. Hence, instead of championing the cause of the marginalized, such progressive elements also become a part of statist discourse and gradually switch over from their demands of an equitable society to a welfare oriented state system.

What makes this process of domination further entrenched is the exclusion of marginalized sections from the entire discourse of development. First and foremost, there are no special programs to ensure upliftment of the historically marginalized sections of the region. The welfare of these sections is expected through the already existing and functioning schemes like MGNREGA, PDS, ICDS etc. Though such schemes are crucial for their livelihood options but they are not meant for any structural

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<sup>11</sup> Sachin Kumar Jain. Personal interview with the author, February 19, 2017, Bhopal

change in the society. In other words, such schemes, at least partially, provide some source of livelihood and their survival but doesn't alter the existing power structure in the society.

## **f. Migration and Rural Change**

Bundelkhand is amongst the few regions from where heavy labor migration takes place every year. There are two major reasons, which are part of the mainstream discourse, for this phenomenon: first, the poverty levels are relatively high in the region which forces people to migrate and second, its proximity with some of the major urban-industrial centers of the country like Delhi in the north and Ahmedabad in the west. However, another crucial factor which hardly makes any news is increasing cases of migration due to caste exploitation.

Despite having a large population of the scheduled castes the Bundelkhand region has been the epicenter of violence against these communities. This violence takes place in various forms ranging from everyday forms of practice of untouchability to the institutionalized forms of bonded labor, and physical exploitation especially against the women. What makes this situation worse is the improving living style of some members of the marginalized communities after migration or education and consequent resistance from the upper castes or even by the OBCs now.

Role of the police administration in this process has either been ineffective or extremely biased. Consequently, the situation One major process which is significantly impacting the process of rural transformation in the region is the migration. Bundelkhand is the region which has witnessed tremendous migration from the region to the nearby metro cities like Delhi, Ahmedabad etc. A majority of those who migrate are the youth in the age-group of 18-35 or so. The people of Bundelkhand feel closely attached to their land, village and culture hence the character of migration is seasonal in nature and not permanent.

When these youth come back to their villages during festivals or family gathering, apart from getting cash they also bring stories of a relatively liberating urban life where caste discrimination is not so clearly evident as it is in the rural areas of the region. Besides, they also bring a sense of assertion which comes from the other nearby regions especially from the UP part of Bundelkhand. This new aspirational youth has affected the process of social transformation significantly. However, the seasonal migration is more likely to convert into permanent migration in the next few years or decades due to declining availability of land and gradually diminishing attachment with the rural culture and society.

Gradual migration of the marginalized sections from the region on the one hand and increasing control and dominance of traditional sections on the other hand may lead to a more devastating situation in the region. The new feudal class feels more close to the new corporate sector and the agenda of governance. This section is also moving to the nearby urban centers and paving the way for exploitation of natural resources by the private sector.

Consequently, Bundelkhand might witness a clash between the neo-feudal classes and those who are not in a position or deliberately chose not to leave their villages. In such a situation the state is most likely to stand with the former than the latter as these neo-feudal classes are more likely to be a part of state discourse of corporate loot and exploitation of natural resource at the cost of marginalization and exploitation of the historically marginalized groups.

## **2 Conclusion**

This paper attempts to argue that the absence of a long term vision for the region as well as lack of coordination amongst the state governments as well as the central governments is resulting into reproducing feudal relations in the region. Instead of taking marginalized sections out of the trap of poverty and underdevelopment the development vision in the region has left no choice for these

sections but to migrate. This kind of socio-economic change here is identified as neo-feudalism. Though there have been attempts to bring some major structural change in the region by introducing large scale changes like the Ken-Betwa projects and other initiatives by the present government including not only continuing with the Development Package but enhancing its budget, but its success depends upon the changes at the grass roots.

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