



From Orchha to Jaitpur: Bundela Challenges to Imperial Authority

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Abstract - This paper analyzes how Bundela Rajput chieftains in Bundelkhand challenged Mughal sovereignty from the late 17th to mid-18th centuries. It first outlines dynastic fragmentation and early frontier uprisings under Aurangzeb, then examines Maharaja Chhatrasal's landmark rebellion (1728–1731) and the decisive Battle of Jaitpur, where Bundela-Maratha forces routed Muhammad Khan Bangash. By integrating Persian and Ahom sources with regional chronicles, the study shows how agrarian levies, hill-fort strongholds, and opportunistic alliances enabled Bundela chiefs to carve out semi-autonomous principalities under Mughal suzerainty.

Keywords – Bundela Rajputs, Bundelkhand, Mughal Empire, Dynastic Revolts, Chhatrasal Bundela, Battle of Jaitpur, Frontier Autonomy, Subsidiary Alliances, Subaltern Warfare

I. Introduction

- Bundelkhand—a rugged plateau bisected by the Betwa and Ken rivers was ruled by the Bundela clan from hilltop forts at Orchha, Panna, and Chhatarpur.
- While some Bundelas accepted Mughal farmāns and mansabs, others resisted excessive taxation and imperial interference, launching revolts that periodically forced Delhi to divert troops from more secure provinces.

Historiographical Context

- Early colonial historians often dismissed Bundela uprisings as localized banditry born of internal feuds rather than coherent resistance.
- Nationalist scholars in the mid-20th century, seeking heroic tropes, highlighted figures like Maharaja Chhatrasal, casting their rebellions as proto-national freedom struggles.
- Since the 1970s, subaltern studies and regional approaches have re-examined Bundela revolts through village-level networks, frontier economies, and dynastic politics, emphasizing how fragmented principalities nonetheless constrained Mughal fiscal and military reach.
- Recent memory-studies research explores local ballads and fort restorations in Orchha and Panna as living testaments to Bundela rebellions.
- By integrating Persian and Ahom sources with regional chronicles, the study shows how agrarian levies, hill-fort strongholds, and opportunistic alliances enabled Bundela chiefs to carve out semi-autonomous principalities under Mughal suzerainty.



Dynastic Uprisings under Mughal Suzerainty

- Bundela principalities suffered repeated inheritance disputes, leading rival branches to seek Mughal patronage or rebel when terms grew onerous.
- These dynastic feuds produced a cycle of submission and revolt, compelling the Mughals to negotiate subsidiary alliances rather than risk costly sieges.
- As one study notes, Bundela internal dissension, while preventing unified statecraft, nevertheless underpinned persistent challenges to imperial integration.

Frontier Revolts in the Late 17th Century

- During Aurangzeb's Deccan campaigns, reduced imperial oversight in Bundelkhand emboldened local chiefs to withhold tribute, raid passing caravans, and plunder small Mughal outposts.
- Hill forts at Orchha and Ajaygarh served as rebel sanctuaries, while tribal auxiliaries from Gond and Bhil communities provided vital intelligence and guerilla fighters in the monsoon-soaked forests.

Chhatrasal's Rebellion and the Battle of Jaitpur

- Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundela (r. 1675–1731) emerged as the most celebrated rebel, capturing Bundelkhand strongholds and expelling Mughal garrisons in 1728.
- Facing a siege by Muhammad Khan Bangash, Chhatrasal appealed to Peshwa Baji Rao I, whose 25,000-strong cavalry turned the tide at Jaitpur in March 1729.
- The allied Bundela-Maratha victory forced Bangash's surrender and restored local sovereignty; in gratitude, Chhatrasal ceded one-third of his territory to the Marathas and married his daughter Mastani to the Peshwa.

Engagement	Date	Bundela Leader	Mughal Commander	Outcome
Siege of Orchha	1728	Maharaja Chhatrasal	Muhammad Khan Bangash	Bundela defense; call for Maratha aid
Battle of Jaitpur	March 1729	Chhatrasal & Baji Rao I	Muhammad Khan Bangash	Bundela-Maratha victory; Mughal retreat

Aftermath and Semi-Autonomous Bundela States

- By 1731, Chhatrasal's kingdom was recognized as largely independent, paying only nominal tribute.
- Other Bundela rajas of Panna, Khajuraho, and Garh Kunder followed suit, negotiating farmans that preserved their internal administration while acknowledging nominal Mughal overlordship.



II. Conclusion

The Bundela resistance exemplifies how fragmented Rajput polities leveraged dynastic rivalries, frontier geography, and strategic alliances to thwart Mughal centralization. Their episodic yet impactful revolts imposed significant military burdens on the empire and laid foundations for Bundelkhand's later semi-independent principalities.

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