

CHANDRAKETUGARH AND KHANA MIHIRER DHIPI: EARLY HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE IN THE GANGETIC DELTA

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Abstract

Chandraketugarh was one of the most important cultural and as well as urban centre of coastal Bengal in early times. Occasional excavations were conducted by Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta, Archaeological survey of India (ASI) and Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training since 1956. Archaeologists who were involved in the excavation works opined that the site Chandraketugarh was most extensive in the period between 200BCE and 200CE. It is proved from its relics that the site was inhabited by the Pre-Mauryan people. Most of the Greek and Roman writers mentioned that Chandraketugarh was part of the ancient kingdom Gangaridai. Now a museum is being set up by the Government of West Bengal to display Bengal's 'forgotten history', its maritime links to ancient Greece and Rome, and also incredible terracotta and relics of Chandraketugarh. Still we have many questions which remain unanswered due to lack of actual research on the issue. Hence Chandraketugarh is completely a challenge and also an opportunity to the scholar and also to the historian at present.

Keywords: Berachampa, Khana Mihirer Dhipi, Chandraketugarh, Bengal's forgotten history, Gangaridai, *Geographike Hyphegesis*

Chandraketugarh (22°41' N and 88°42') is approximately 2,500 years old archaeological site in the Gangetic delta. The site is located near Berachampa, close to the Bidyadhari river, about 35 kilometres north-east of Kolkata, in the district of North 24 Parganas. It was an important hub of international maritime trade during early times. Khana Mihirer Dhipi is a massive Gupta or post-Gupta temple complex. Regarding these archaeological site so many local myths are there in the absence of actual research. The history of Chandraketugarh dates back to almost the 3rd century BCE, i.e., Pre-Mauryan era. Archaeological findings and most of the relics suggest that the site was continuously inhabited and flourished through the Shunga-Kushana period and onwards, until the Pala-Sena period. This site was an important town and a port city. This coastal city had a high encircling wall complete with a rampart and moat. Most of the residents were involved in various crafts and mercantile activities.

In response to the petition of local resident Tarak Nath Ghosh, an ASI official, A.H. Longhurst visited the site in 1907 and reported the site to an 'early period' but considered "the ruins are of little or no interest". Again Rakhil Das Banerji visited the site 1909 onwards and collected many

archaeological evidences; terracotta plaques, cast copper coins, silver vessels, steatite seal, finials etc. These evidences he kept in Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and expected that the site would be excavated in near future.¹

Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta conducted excavation between 1956 to 1962 under the supervision of K.G.Goswamy and 1962 to 1968 under the supervision of C.R.Roychoudhury. During 1963-1964 excavation was done jointly with D.P.Ghosh. All excavations revealed relics of several historical periods² but the chronological classification of these relics remain incomplete. Many of the relics are now in collections of museums in India and abroad; and many of them are a part of private collections.

Archaeological survey of India (ASI) excavated in this archaeological site in 2000-2001 and 2010-2011. During 2010-2011 ASI excavated the site jointly with the Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training and reported that the site was most extensive in the period between 200BCE and 200CE.³

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According to some historians, Chandraketugarh and its surrounding was known to ancient Greek and Roman writers as having the same name as the river Ganges.⁴ Most of the Greek and Roman writers mentioned that Chandraketugarh was part of the ancient kingdom Gangaridai. Claudius Ptolemy wrote it in detail in his famous work '*Geographike Hyphegesis*' (Geographical Guidance).⁵ Only the religious beliefs of the people are not clear.

Examples of terracotta art of Chandraketugarh are comparable to those found at Kaushambi, Ahichhatra and many other sites. Many similar motifs were executed in nearly identical fashion. Similarity of motifs establishes communication link and common cultural heritage among these sites. Many silver punch-marked coins and a few gold coins have been unearthed from Chandraketugarh, including a gold coin of Chandragupta-Kumardevi. Many semi-precious stone beads were also found here. A few wooden objects have survived till now. Some of the potteries carry inscriptions in Kharoshthi and Brahmi scripts.

Definitely the heritage of Chandraketugarh will help people to find the missing links between Ancient Bengal and rest of the India including Western Civilization. As Chandraketugarh was a major Indian port of contemporary Indian Ocean trade which has been amply proved by its antiquities bearing unmistakable Roman influence. The riverine and coastal routes paved the way for trade and cultural contacts with the rest of India. This close contacts were expressed in ceramic assemblage; strongest affinity with the terracotta plaques and figurines. They are similar mostly with the Kausambi in style.⁶ The uninscribed copper coins were found in Chandraketugarh are same as those of Eastern India, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.⁷

Besides Chandraketugarh has yielded a large quantity of stamped potsherds, Manikpatna and Radhanagar in Orissa, Satanikota in Andhra Pradesh, Arikamedu, Kottapatnam, Alagankulam in Tamil Nadu, has also produced stamped potsherds. Stamped ware specimens have also been found from Anuradhapura, and Kantarodai in Sri Lanka. Stamped motives have been found from

Chandraketugarh region on Rouletted ware, Grey ware, Northern Black Polished Ware, but the most distinct stamped ware fragment found at the site is a Black-and-Red ware sherd. The decoration on it is seen on the interior just below the rim and is quite similar to Wheeler's type 10 at Arikamedu. It consists of a row of stamped medallions with a bird motif engraved within a square panel.⁸ Similar kind of stamped sherd has been found from Sembrian on the north coast of Bali in Indonesia also. In the inner side of a glossy black rim can be seen a stamped panel with a bird motif. Ardika and Bellwood suggested the ware of which the sherd was a part was not locally produced, and the bird motif was non indigenous too.⁹ Hence it is quite clear that this archaeological site or port city Chandraketugarh was completely connected with the rest of India and abroad.

Geological and also Archaeological works are being carried out till now to understand its past landscape and cultural associations. But still we have many questions which remain unanswered. Till now we don't know the process of urbanity or urban structure of Chandraketugarh. We don't know the food habits of the city-men. We don't know whether it can be equated with *Gange of Periplus*.¹⁰ We don't know whether Khana Mihirer Dhipi was a Hindu temple or Buddhist religious place. So in coming days Chandraketugarh is completely a challenge and also an opportunity to the scholar and also to the historian.

Notes and References

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