Pre-Iron Age and Iron Age Pottery of Khopdi, District Nagpur, Maharashtra

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Abstract: Vidarbha, that is eastern part of Maharashtra, is well known for Megalithic burials. This structural phenomenon broadly belongs to Iron Age of the region. It is preceded by Chalcolithic period which was first recognized at Adam. The recent excavation at Khopdi, district Nagpur, Maharashtra, unearthed uninterrupted occupation from Pre-Iron Age to Iron Age. This article discuss about pottery at the site from both the periods. It also shows development within rim forms of globular pots from Pre-Iron Age to Iron Age.

Keywords: Vidarbha, Khopdi, Excavation, Pre-Iron Age, Iron Age, Pottery, Stratigraphy

Introduction

The site of Khopdi is located on the right bank of the river Nag, about 2 km east of Kuhi (tehsil place) in Nagpur district (Figure 1). The Nag river flows along northern and southern margins of the site. From the river up to Kuhi town, the landscape is characterized by flat arable land. Further ahead is a raised terrace of bedrock which also forms the base of present Kuhi town. The same surface extends towards northern side of the site and is intercepted by the same flat arable land extending between the river and the town. The habitation mound is slightly raised from the surrounding surface. The potsherds collected from surface indicate Pre-Iron Age (Chalcolithic) and Early Iron Age occupation at the site. In 2013-14 and 2015-16, small scale excavations were undertaken to determine the chronology and to study other cultural aspects of the site. The pottery from those two excavation seasons is reported in this article. The pottery revealed four periods of occupation, out of which the first two, Pre-Iron Age/Chalcolithic and Early Iron Age, are represented by uninterrupted occupation; these are followed by Early Historic and Medieval periods which are separated by a long hiatus. In the first year a small vertical trench (Index Trench) measuring 3 x 2.50 m with a baulk of 0.25 m was excavated almost in the middle of the mound. In the second
year, six trenches, three each in two rows, and each measuring 5 x 5 m with a baulk of 0.25 m were excavated. Out of these six trenches, eastern half of trench XD1 was excavated up to the depth of 2.26 m, but could not be reached up to virgin soil, whereas the western half of trench XE1 was excavated up to the virgin soil. Since the later one was disturbed till the lowermost level, the pottery recovered from it was not useful for a detailed study. Therefore, this study includes the pottery from the Index Trench of previous year and trench XD1 of the next year. The primary objective of this paper is to describe the Early Iron Age and Pre-Iron Age/Chalcolithic pottery of the site.

Figure 1: Map of Vidarbha, Showing Location of Khopdi

Previous Studies
A good number of Early Iron Age sites have been explored and excavated in the Nagpur area and surrounding region (Sawant 2012; Ismail, et. al. 2015; Joshi 2015; and Mohanty 2015). The beginning of sedentary occupation in this region, as supported by radiocarbon dating at Adam, goes back to c. 17th century BC. This stratigraphic level at Adam is devoid of iron and the pottery is at variance with the ceramic assemblage of rest of the contemporary chalcolithic cultures in the neighboring region. Therefore, Amarendra Nath coined a term ‘Vidarbha chalcolithic’ for this period at the site (IAR 1988, Nath 1989-90). Tuljapur Garhi is another site, located in western Vidarbha (Bopardikar 1996), at which chalcolithic culture is unambiguously identified; but it corresponds with Jorwe culture of the Deccan chalcolithic. There are a few more sites which have shown early cultural sequence, such as Paunar (Deo and Dhavalikar 1968),
Bhawar (IAR 1992-93), Tharsa (IAR 1985-86) and Mahurzari (IAR 2003-04, Mohanty), but none of these show affinity with Deccan chalcolithic.

Good amount of archaeological reports are available for early Iron Age of this region, but similar data is absent for the preceding period. The lack of detailed reports, except for Adam (Nath 2016), has made it difficult to undertake comparative study between Pre-Iron Age/Chalcolithic assemblage and subsequent Early Iron Age. This article is an attempt to furnish a detailed account of the pottery assemblage at Khopdi in its stratigraphic context. Though the findings of first season have already been published (Pawar, et.al. 20014); the present article provides comparative details of pottery from both the seasons. It sheds light on the fact that the pottery from both the excavation seasons reveals same stratified distribution pattern, and thus implies strong chronological indications.

**Pottery from Khopdi**

The pottery from Khopdi contains Red-Slipped Ware with mica, Micaceous Red Ware, Black-and-Red Ware and Black Burnished Ware. The geological formation exposed in the region reveals mica content; this mica content is an integral component of sediment in this part of Vidarbha. On account of this, all the pottery assemblage from the site shows mica content, both in fabric and slip. Broadly speaking, there are two groups of pottery, the first one contains fine mica particles, both in fabric and slip; and the second one contains big mica flakes. There is no conspicuous variation in the second group of pottery, apart from the appearance of big mica flakes as a dominant feature. Traditionally, this group of pottery is known as Micaceous Red Ware, and this nomenclature has been used for the similar pottery found at Khopdi too. There is, however, a visible variation in mica particle size and concentration in the first group. We found that the variation in size and concentration of mica particles in different rim forms was almost unmistakably similar. Thus it appears that the red slip was the basic component of the first group of pottery, and, for achieving desired surface effect, the size and concentration of mica particles was deliberately changed. Therefore, this group of pottery has been categorized broadly as ‘Red-Slipped Ware.’ The regular forms, such as bowls and dishes made in Black Burnished ware are almost absent at the site. There are, however, sherds of basins and stands that are made in this ware. The bowls and dishes are specifically produced in Black-and-Red Ware. The following discussion contains detailed description of each ware and rim forms found in each of them.

**The Red-Slipped Ware**

The Red-Slipped Ware is essentially made in medium fine fabric, it is wheel turned, and is incompletely oxidized. The red slip has various shades, from pale red to dark reddish brown, and contains fine particles of mica. But these variations in colour do not appear to be intentional. Pale red is the shade, which, unlike others, occurs uniformly over entire surface; other shades are result of either uneven firing or soot coats formed during their use. Some specific pottery forms are highly burnished. This
ware consists of bowls, basins, globular pots and stands. Bowls invariably, and basins and stands are often treated with good burnishing. Globular pots consist of both burnished and un-burnished varieties.

Figure 2: Rim Forms of Red-Slipped Ware
Globular Pots: These have relatively thick walls, medium fine fabric and mat or smooth well-burnished surface. This group consists of variety of rims as follows:

- Long incurved rim of almost uniform thickness and round end edge with concave short neck (Figure 2.5). This type is found only in layer 9 (below 2.2 m depth) of Index Trench. The levels which are immediately above it, layer 7, 8 and 9 (1.87 m to 2.2 m depth), contain similar rim form but with angular internal edges (Figure 2.5a). The same rim form is found in layer 15 (below 2.2 m) of trench ZD1.

- Simple outturned clubbed rim with upper edge articulated with upward round bulge. It is associated with concave neck. The upward round bulge is either little short (Figure 2.6) or raised (Figure 2.6a) and well-rounded or having tapering external edge (Figure 2.6b). This type is found in layer 7, 8 and 9 (below 1.8 m) of Index Trench and in layer 14 and 15 (below 1.96 m) of trench ZD1.

- The rim similar to above but more prominently vertically oriented. This type is found in layer 6 and 7 (1.56 m to 1.97 m) of Index Trench and layer 12 and below (below 1.60 m) of trench ZD1.

- The rim similar to above but internal rim face is channeled and features angular upper internal edge. The neck is concave and short. This type is found in layer 5, 6, 7 and 8 of Index Trench and layer 12 and 13 (1.6 m to 1.82 m) of trench ZD1.

- Flaring cupular rim of uniform thickness or slightly thickening towards round end edge and feature constricted neck (Figure 2.9 and Figure 2.9a). This type is found...
in layer 5, 6 and 7 of Index Trench and layer 12 and 13 (1.6 m to 1.82 m) of trench ZD1. This type also contains another variant which features slight undercut bulge at the internal upper edge of the rim (Figure 2.9b). This variant is found in limited deposit of layer 6 of Index Trench and layer 9 of trench ZD1.

- Flaring rim articulated with bulge in upper part of rim. Depends on extent of bulge, and its lower cutting edge, variety of rim forms are seen (Figure 2.10 and its varieties). There are three different varieties of this type – (a) long flaring rim (Figure 2.10), (b) medium long flaring rim (Figure 2.10b), and (c) short flaring rim (Figure 2.10c and 2.10d). The first variety is found in layer 3 and 4 (0.54 to 1.35 m) of Index Trench and layer 13 to 3 (1.71 m and above) of trench ZD1. The second is distributed from layer 6 to 3 (1.73 m and above) of Index Trench and confined to layer 8 to 5 of trench ZD1. And, third was found in layers 7 to 4 (1.87 m to 1.1 m) of Index Trench and layer 11 to 5 (1.82 m to 0.68 m) of trench ZD1.

- Flaring rim, thickening towards nearly flat, externally steeply slanting end featuring round edges, with constricted neck. Two varieties are found in this type – first is relatively long (Figure 11) and second is short. Both varieties are found in layer 6 and above (above 1.64 m) of Index Trench and layer 11 and above (above 1.71 m) of trench ZD1.

**Stands:** Identical two flaring sides joined by narrow hollow stem. Rim is externally thickened, tapering toward end. These stands (Figure 3) are made in medium fine fabric, surface is highly burnished, and some of these sherds bear bright surface due to profusely added fine mica particles in slip. Some of these specimens are intricately painted in black. Vertical strokes externally and internally are common on rim. The sides are painted often with multiple horizontal lines and slanting comb pattern arranged next to each other. These are found in all levels.

**Micaceous Red Ware**

This ware (Figure 4) is made of very coarse fabric containing grits and small to relatively big mica flakes. It is not uniformly oxidized. It breaks easily, and hence it is often described as brittle in nature. Both surfaces, external and internal, are invariably uneven. The lining of rim end in some cases does not appear to be perfectly balanced. It is so probably because this ware was handmade and not wheel-turned. Two types of vessels are found in this ware, globular pots and basins. The globular pots comprise two types of rims and more or less uniform type of rims belongs to basins.

**Basins:** These have wide mouths, flaring bodies with vertical sides and flat bases. Rim is invariably simple and round. Body varies in shape externally; it either features ridges of variety of forms or is free of any modification. These occur in both the trenches, approximately above 1.7 m depth.

**Globular Pots:** The deposit lower than approximately 1.4 m depth of both the trenches produced rims which are short and splayed out or flaring. The rims that are found in
Index Trench are thick, of uniform thickness, and feature round ends. The Trench ZD1 contains two different varieties of rims, the first is similar to above rim from Index Trench, but is thinning towards end. The surface, unlike its above-mentioned counterpart, is uneven. The second variety features short and flaring rim. Acutely out-turned long flaring rim is the characteristic feature of this ware in a deposit up to approximately 1.4 m in both the trenches.

![Figure 3: Stand (Type 12) of Red Slipped Ware](image)

**Figure 3: Stand (Type 12) of Red Slipped Ware**

**Variety of Black-on-Red Painted Designs on Red-Slipped Ware**

- The most common design pattern is latticed diamond band flanked at the bottom by multiple thin horizontal lines and at the top by pair of similar lines.
Another important pattern is horizontal band of slanting comb pattern arranged next to each other and occasionally with space in between. The combs occur slanting to the left or right flanked with group of thin horizontal lines.

A group of vertical strokes on both external and internal surface of rim. It is one of the most common design patterns at the site.

A group of short curved strokes arranged in vertically ascending order.

Band of mesh pattern.

Vertical strokes on internal surface of red-slipped bowls.

Series of slanting strokes internally all along rim on thick sturdy red-slipped bowl.

Thick bots on internal surface of a bowl.

Band of thick crisscross strokes.

Disconnected band of group of short strokes arranged one above another.

**Black-and-Red Ware**
The majority of sherds of this ware are approximately 3 to 4 mm thick and a very few exceed beyond it, up to 5 mm. On account of thin body, when buried, these vessels crumble into pieces easily, as a result complete vessels are totally absent. This ware consists of basically table ware, such as bowls and basins or dishes. The majority of vessels have approximately 20 cm diameter, while few are around 12 cm in diameter. The sides of these vessels are slightly incurved or vertical. The available bases are flat. There are two distinct rim forms which are as following:

- The bowls and dishes with simple round rim are common. The rims of bowls with diameter less than 14 cm characterize acutely inverted sides. Others have greater diameter, in the range of 18 cm.
- Another rim form features thin groove externally, close to the rim end.

**Black Burnished Ware**
The surface of this ware is black and burnished, resembling that of Black-and-Red Ware. The most common vessel type produced in this ware is basin and stands. Sparsely, dishes are encountered in it. The thickness of these vessels is greater than Black-and-Red Ware vessels. The fabric of basins is finer than stands, as it contains more inclusion.

**Stratigraphic Distribution of Different Rim Forms in Index Trench and Trench ZD1**
Figures 5 and 6 furnish information regarding stratified distribution of each type in Index Trench and Trench ZD1 in graphic form. The upper deposit of these trenches was disturbed. It contains mixed pottery belonging to Iron Age, Early Historic and Medieval periods. Therefore, pottery from this deposit has been excluded in the present study. Both the graphs represent distribution pattern of different rim forms of Red-Slipped Ware, and Micaceous Red Ware in stratified context. Such variation is not observed in other two wares, therefore, has been excluded from graph.
Figure 4: Rim Forms of Micaceous Red Ware
Figure 5: Stratigraphic Distribution of Different Rim Forms in the Index Trench

Figure 6: Stratigraphic Distribution of Different Vessel Forms in Trench ZD1
The graphs show identical distribution pattern for bowls and stands of the Red-Slipped Ware that are present in all levels of both the trenches. However, marked variation is seen in rim forms of globular pots. On the basis of their distribution pattern in stratified context, these types can be grouped into four groups.

**Group 1:** Types 3 and 5 show identical pattern in both the trenches and both types are present in lowermost levels of both trenches. Type 6, which does not show identical pattern, is confined to lower levels.

**Group 2:** Type 7 shows different patterns in both the trenches. Given its presence in lower levels of trench ZD1 and middle levels of Index Trench, it could be considered that it begins from lowermost level and overlaps with middle levels.

**Group 3:** Types 8 and 9 show identical pattern, these are confined to the middle level, viz. type 8 to layer 7 of Index Trench and layer 12 and 13 of trench ZD1; and type 9 to layer 6 and 7 of Index Trench and confined to layer 12 and 13 of trench ZD1.

**Group 4:** Types 4, 10 and 11 show almost identical distribution pattern. None of these are present in lower levels.

Micaceous Red Ware is one of the important pottery assemblages of Early Iron Age of Vidarbha. The long flaring rim of globular pot is the most commonly found rim form in this ware. But the site of Khopdi has shown that this type does not occur at the site from the beginning (see Type 3 in both the graphs). There are rim forms in preceding period which are similar to it, but these are comparatively short in extent, and very limited in quantity. Another form is represented by splayed out rims. The basins however have shown a differential distribution pattern. In Index Trench, these are found in layer 6 and above, but in Trench ZD1, it starts occurring from much lower level, i.e. from layer 14 upwards.

**Conclusion**
The typological distribution of various types makes it clear that the stratigraphic distribution of these types have chronological implications. Iron artifacts are found at Khopdi in layers 3 and 4 of Index Trench and layer 3 of Trench ZD1 respectively. Rest of the deposit from lower layers is free of it. Taking into account the absence of iron from lower levels, this deposit may safely be assigned to pre-Iron Age period. That means pottery of Group 1, 2 and 3 of Red Slipped Ware with Mica can safely be assigned to Pre-Iron Age period. The rim forms of Group 4 of same ware also appear to begin during Pre-Iron Age and the same rim forms appear to be continuing after the introduction of iron at the site. The other associated pottery includes bowls and stand which are found uninterruptedly from lowermost levels.

The same may also be confirmed for Micaceous Red Ware. Though the basins are not reported from lowermost level of the site, those are evident from Pre-Iron Age to Early Iron Age. The same may also be concluded about long flaring rim (Type 3), but it starts
at much later level of Pre-Iron Age. The type 2, however, is confined to Pre-Iron Age only. This confirms beyond doubt that the habitation at the site continued uninterruptedly from the Pre-Iron Age to the Iron Age.

References


