Archaeological Investigations in Lower Course of Mayurakshi River, Murshidabad District, West Bengal: A Preliminary Survey

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Abstract: The lower basin of Mayurakshi river is located in the Murshidabad district, West Bengal. This article deals with preliminary investigation in the lower river valley to understand the nature of sites in a landscape context different that of the major excavated site of Kotasur. It becomes imperative to understand the differential locational criteria on the lower basin of Mayurakshi river. This area has not been well documented which is also important aim of this paper.

Keywords: Mayurakshi, Murshidabad, Early Historic, Medieval, Ceramics, Settlement, Exploration

Introduction
The Mayurakshi river valley is known to have a long history of archaeological past. One of the most important early historic fortified sites in this Rarh region is Kotasur (Chaktabarti. et. al 1981; Chattopadhyay 1993-1994). Kotasur needs to be situated in the changing pattern of Mayurakshi River which is important for settlement system reconstruction. One of the major thrusts of the article has been to understand the settlement pattern in the lower Mayurakshi river valley, which is beyond the lateritic zone of Rarh. The main aim is to make an analogy of sites with that of Kotasur.

For this reason, a simple methodology of intensive field walking has been utilized to understand the settlement pattern of the settlements in lower Mayurakshi river basin. The understanding of locational criteria of sites on different ecozones has been an important objective in the fluvial zone of Bengal. As discovery of sites become a matter of chance in the fluvial dynamism, such intensive methodology was absolutely imperative (Roychoudhury, S. 2002; Chatterjee, S. 2013; Rajaguru, S.N. et al, 2011).

Previous Research
The knowledge about the transitional period from Mesolithic to Chalcolithic has been scanty in this region. The Neolithic stage in the district has not been distinctly
identified. The evidence of protohistoric sites in Birbhum and elsewhere in West Bengal is dominated by plain and painted Black and Red Ware (hence BRW) potsherds. The term BRW sites are interchangeably used to denote the protohistoric/chalcolithic settlements. The first BRW site to be excavated in Birbhum was Mahisdal on the bank of Kopai (IAR-1963-64). The other excavated BRW sites in the district are Nanur (SAS.9), Haraipur (IAR-1965-660), Bahiri (Chakrabarti and S.J. Hasan, 1982), Hatikra (IAR-1967-68) and Kotasur (IAR-1965-66). Excavation revealed that all these BRW settlements in Birbhum practiced agriculture and hence settled on the older alluvium flood plains of the rivers namely Ajay, Mayurakshi, Kopai and Bakreswar.

The survey undertaken by the University of Calcutta (IAR-1975-76) in the Mayurakshi-Bakreswar river valleys has revealed quite a few BRW sites with microlithic tool-kits in the Mayureswar, Suri, Sainthia, Bolpur, Nanur, Dubrajpur and Illambazar subdivisions. Between Ganutia and Kotasur, especially near the old course of the Mayurakshi near Sainthia a large number of ever, detailed reports about these sites are lacking.

As compared to BRW settlements, the early historic settlements are few in Birbhum. The only noteworthy settlements is Kotasur (Latitude: 23° 58’ N; Longitude: 87° 45’ E) located on the left bank of the Mayurakshi river, which now flows about 8km down south from where excavation was carried out at the site in 1985 and continued in 1986-87 by the Department of Ancient History, Culture and Archaeology, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan under the guidance of N.C. Ghosh and Arun K.Nag. Five broad periods of cultural deposits have been identified at the site starting from the NBP period and continuing almost to eighth century A.D. From this excavation dull red ware, bowl, basin, vases, carinated handi often with soot marks, Kadhai with luted handles and incense-burner found at the upper level and bowl, basins, vases in red ware of medium fabric found in mid-level and Northern Black Polished (NBP) ware, grey ware bowl and dish and black ware in association with the NBP ware found from lower level.

As per the archaeological works that has been conducted in Murshidabad district, Kherur village has immense importance in archaeological view point (Chakrabarti, D. K. et al, 1993). Kherur village (2422N and 8805E) is located in the north eastern part of Sagardighi Police Station. There are several evidences of 15th century, Gupta and Post Gupta period (4th to 7th century A.D.) and Pala Period (8th to 12th century A.D.) in this village. Hosen Sahi mosque is belonging to the period of 15th century A.D.; Black On Red ware, grey and buff wares, iron slag, microlithic debitage (in quartz) fragments of earlier pillars and bricks reused in the mosque belong to Gupta and Post Gupta period and Black stone (showing an ass and a cow in the act of coition) belong to Pala period. The previous researches indicate that apart from Kherur in the lower course of the river, no other site has been reported. The main thrust therefore has been to investigate the nature of sites in the region, which is more fluvially dynamic. The previous research is lacking in this part.
Study Area

The entire Mayurakshi river course can be divided into three physiographic units i.e. Upper, Middle and Lower courses on the basis of its physiographic as well as landscape characteristics (Bhattacharyya, A. 2013). The places having 50 to 300 meter from mean sea level (MSL) are denoted as Upper Basin, Middle Basin represents 25 to 50 meter from MSL and less than 25 meter from MSL denotes the Lower part of the Basin (Bhattacharyya, A. 2013). The Upper course is a part of the Chotonagpur fringe and is characterized by a quite rugged topography. The middle part of the basin mostly Birbhum and partly in Murshidabad district in West Bengal characterized by little undulating topography with plain land. The Lower course of the river is situated in Birbhum, Murshidabad and Burdwan districts of West Bengal. This Lower Course is consisting of the geo-political unit of the Rarh cover up portions of the Birbhum and Murshidabad districts, as well as a small portion of the Burdwan plains. This paper deals with the Lower basin of the Mayurakshi river, which encompasses the floodplains of the Mayurakshi river along with its tributaries and distributaries covering portions of the Murshidabad district (toposheet i.e. 79A/1) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Digital Elevation Model of Mayurakshi River and Its Surrounding

In the lower basin of the Mayurakshi River, the availability of fertile alluvial soil may have helped the emergence and the development of the archaeological settlements. Even after having such potentiality, this region has rarely been explored as a potential area for historic settlements and is one of the least discussed regions. This is why this particular region of the Mayurakshi River is considered for this present extensive
exploration work, in order to identify the distribution of archaeological settlements in this region. The majority of the landform belongs to Murshidabad Rarh plain western part comprises the lateritic Rarh and eastern part belongs to Deltic Region. The whole study area characterized by low lying topography with several small river, tributaries, gullies, wetlands, swamp and chars etc.

Mayurakshi River in lower part of the river basin plays a dominant role. Mayurakshi river after meeting with Koiya river near Talgram (23° 51’ 58”N and 88° 02’ 28” E) flows towards North –Eastern direction based on the regional slope having the name of Kiu river and meets with Dwarka river (23° 58’ 19” N and 88° 09’ 29” E) near Nalghasa. There are several small tributaries, rills, gullies which meet with Mayurakshi River in different parts. These minor tributaries, rills and gullies are basically seasonal in nature and fed by water during monsoon seasons and little amount of water at other times.

![Figure 2: Distribution of Sites in Lower Part of Mayurakshi River](image)

This part of the river basin is active in nature because of frequent siltation due to the flooding of the river track and its surrounding areas. The continuous deposition of fine texture silt clay disturbs the proper development of soil profile of the region. So the deposition of younger alluvium is most common in the lower part of the Mayurakshi river basin. In terms of texture of soil in the area concerned, it comprises sandy, clay, loam and sandy clay loam soil. During pre-monsoon the depth of ground water from surface is below 12 meter and 3-6 meter during post monsoon period (Biswa P.C, 2008: 25-27), which determines the nature of agricultural practices in study area.
Description of Sites

In the lower basins the maximum explored sites belong to medieval period. During the explorations two early historic sites has been found on the left bank of the Mayurakshi river i.e. Matiara and Jayjan and other eight sites i.e. Panchthupi, Chuator, Birpanchanon, Gudapara, Chandpur, Kalla, Talgram, Alugram etc. belonging to medieval period (Figure 2).

Panchthupi: 79A/1 (23° 53’ 7”N and 87° 57’ 13”E) is a medieval site (on the basis of ceramics similarity with early medieval Kotasur). This site is situated on the left bank of the Mayurakshi River and 3 km from the river. The river flows towards the northern side of this village. The newer alluvium and loamy soil are found from different parts of the village. In Panchthupi, there is an old important site known as Barconi (east side of the Panchthupi village). A 3.5 feet high mound is seen which is surrounded by agricultural field. Most of the edges of the mound or exposed section which have been destroyed for agricultural activities. The surface of the mound is covered with grass. The total mound area is around 5760 square feet. On the middle portion of the mound, a small old Deuleswer temple exists. In the south part of the mound there is a modern Shiva temple. The artifacts mainly ceramics were found from the surface exploration on the mound. Basically, ceramics are Red ware, Red Slipped and are similar to medieval ceramics of Kotasur.

Jayjan: 79A/1(23° 54’ 32”N and 88° 01’ 19”E) is an early historic site (Figure 3). The ceramics are similar to excavated early historic site of Kotasur. This village is located on left side of the Mayurakshi River and 4 km from river. Fertile alluvium soil found in this village and it helps the people with their agricultural activities round the year. In this village there is a mound which is known as old Dangal para. North side of this Dangal para, the remains of an old mound that is flattened is seen and it covers 7200...
square feet area. During the exploration early historic and medieval ceramics have been found from the surface of the mound. The maximum area of the mound has been destroyed for modern habitation. On the east part of the mound there is a Maa Baka Bhobani temple. Ceramics found from the surface of the mound include Red ware, Red slipped ware.

**Chuator:** 79A/1 (29° 55’ 09”N and 88° 04’ 10”E) is located in Bharatpur tehsil of Murshidabad district in West Bengal (Figure 4). This site is situated on the left bank of Mayurakshi river and this village is very close to Kua river which is 7-8km away from Mayurakshi river. Birpanchanan and Sripatipur are two small villages that are conjucted with Chuator village. A large Kandor (palaeo channel) flows towards the Chuator village and it could be located at east portion of Birpanchanan village and west part of Chuator village. This channel flows through Harishchandrapur, Madanpur, Banipur, Bhabanipur etc. villages and ultimately it meets Kunu river near Siala or Suniya. During the monsoon time this canal used to flow out the excessive water from agriculture fields. During other seasons this channel is used for agricultural purposes. The soil is basically fertile loamy on the both side of the channel.

![Figure 4: General View of the Site Chuator](image)

The artifacts which are mainly ceramics were found towards the edges of an old pond, known as ‘Kanon pukur’, which is located towards east part of the Birpanchanan village. It probably must be the ancient mound which was cut into a pond. This dug out area is a very rich area for ceramics belonging to medieval period. The varieties of ceramics are found from the slope of the pond and within this area Sticky red slipped ware, Red unslipped ware, sticky black ware and Black ware etc has been found.

**Matiara:** 79A/1 (23° 55’ 07”N and 88° 02’ 08”E) This site (Figure 5) is located on the left bank of Mayurakshi River and was surrounded by agricultural field (basically which contain loamy soil and, in some parts alluvium, soil is also found) and it is under the
Bharatpur I Block Panchayat. The located village is 4 km from Mayurakshi River. In the north side of Matiara village there is an old 10,080 square feet mound that has been found. The height of the mound is 2 feet. Presently the area is totally destroyed for agricultural purpose and that has reduced the height of the mound. Ceramics like Red ware, Red slipped ware, Black Slipped ware etc. were found here. The features of these ceramics are very similar with early historic and early medieval ceramics of Kotasur. In the east part of the mound, there is an old pond, locally known as “Lada pond”. From the eastern slope of the pond and its surroundings there has been a good density of artefact assemblage especially medieval ceramics which include Red ware, Red slipped ware, Sticky Red Slipped ware, Black ware etc.

Talgram: 79A/1(26° 51’ 45” N and 88° 02’ 33” E): This site (Figure 6) is located on the right bank of the Mayurakshi River and Kiu River and located in the junction point of Mayurakshi and Kiu River. The northern part of the village is situated near Kiu River. Due to excessive bank erosion of Kiu River in the northern part of the village, the settlements are in a great risk and during floods certain parts of village are flooded severely. Due to flood erosion and deposition activities by the river, the remnant site is evidenced only on the river bank. Ghutings or calcrite nodules are also found from the surface exploration of the river bank. The height of the river bank is 15 feet from the river water level. The artefacts which are mainly ceramics has been found at the bank of the river. They are basically Red Slipped ware, Sticky Black Slipped ware, Buff ware, Grey ware etc. These are very similar of early medieval Kotasur ceramics.
Chandpur: 79A/1 (24° 10’ 54” N and 88° 07’ 06” E) This site is located in the middle of Mayurakshi and Kiu river. It is a traditionally old village. The river is flowing towards the left side of village. Due to heavy anthropogenic activities, the site is destroyed. The archaeological evidence of ceramics is present on the river bank and those are basically Red ware, Red slipped ware and Black ware etc. The collected ceramics represent similarity with early medieval Kotasur ceramics.

Kalla: 79 A/1(23° 52’ 58” N and 88° 02’ 25” E): This village is situated in between of the Mayurakshi and Kiu river. Towards the north-west part of the village ceramics have been collected from an elevated mound portion. Surface exploration was conducted, and ceramics have been collected. The ceramics were collected from the slope of Law pukur which is located in the western part of Bamungram village. Collected ceramics are basically Red Ware, Red Slipped ware and coarse ware etc.

Gudapara: 79 A/1(23° 52’ 32” N and 87° 59’ 42” E): This site (Figure 7) is located on the right bank of the Mayurakshi river and is about ½ km from the river and 8 km from nearest village Sundarpur. The locational importance of this village is that at this site, the main river is divided into two branches one branch flowing towards the south (it is a main river channel) and another flowing towards the south-west(this river ultimately joins Kiu Nadi near the place of Talgram village). The villagers are mainly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood because of fertile newer alluvium soil found in this
village. Surrounding villages are Pulia, Godda and Singhariya etc. Ceramics has been found from the right bank of the river sections. Some are also found on cultivated fields which were probably mounds presently razed to ground. Most of the ceramics are Red ware, Red Slipped Ware, Black ware etc.

**Figure 7: General View of the Site Gudapara**

**Alugram:** 79A/1 (23° 54’ 12” N and 88° 05’ 53” E). This medieval site is located on the right bank of Mayurakshi River. The soil is basically new alluvium in the agricultural fields and its surroundings.

**Ceramic Repertoire of Sites**

The features of ceramics (Figure 8) such as rim shape, manufacturing technique, type of paste or fabric and paintings are explained in table 1 according to the methodology in followed in Balathal (Mishra, A. 2008).

**Table 1: Characteristics of Potsherd from Study Area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rim Shape</td>
<td>Hooked, Everted, Straight, Pointed, Flat, Nail-headed, Inverted, Feature less, Clubbed, Flared, Tapering, Out turned, Faceted, Triangular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Techniques</td>
<td>Two types- Handmade Moulding, Wheel made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vessel Form</td>
<td>Handi, Kalsi, Jala, Bowls, Dish, Basin, Jars, Khola, Patna, Ghat etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of paste or Fabric</td>
<td>Red ware (medium fabric), Red slipped (fine fabric), Grey Ware, Buff Ware, Coarse Ware, Sticky Black Ware and Black ware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Various floral design, geometric design (i.e. parallel and wavy lines on the neck and belly portion)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations on Settlement Pattern

The lower basin of Murshidabad therefore exhibits a very different characteristic of settlement pattern. Most of the sites are medieval in nature. It could be due to the presence of newer alluvium character of the landscape. The river was probably more fluviually active which was detrimental for any early historic or chalcolithic sites to thrive. It was probably only in medieval period that the inhabitants could adapt to the dynamic landscape. Two early historic settlements have been evidenced on the interior part of landscape away from the main river but closer to its palaeochannel. This could be because of more stable landscape which was adaptable by the early historic inhabitants. In medieval period, the settlement pattern is a linear arrangement along the river while the early historic is dispersed probably due to the adaptable parameters and resource exploitation required by the inhabitants. It could also be because the early historic inhabitants wanted to stay out of the onslaught of main River. The study clearly indicate that early historic sites are found only on the left bank of the river while medieval sites are concentrated on both banks of the river, but the concentration is higher in case of left bank than right bank.

Conclusion

The present preliminary survey is limited in scope, but a few generalizations can be made. Undoubtedly the distribution pattern indicates that the river played a major role in governing the location of sites. Through the observations and artefactual evidence especially based on features of ceramics analysis most of the sites belong to medieval period and on the left bank of the Mayurakshi river two sites i.e. Jajan and Matiara belong to Early historic period. However, the sites are smaller or medium in size. Further investigation on the geoarchaeological aspects and more detail analysis of the ceramics is required to make a comparative study of the area with that of Kotasur which is the major excavated site in the region.

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