An Archaeological Study of Kunur River Basin, Barddhaman District, West Bengal

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Abstract: *The present study concentrates on the Kunur river basin, Bardhaman district, West Bengal. This study aims to understand the man-land relationship and cultural diversity in this riverine landscape. This river basin is considered an archaeologically potential area, and two important excavated sites are Mangalkot and Pandu Rajar Dhibi. This area ranges from prehistoric to Medieval remains. The flood-prone alluvium zones are potential for agricultural habitations from chalcolithic to historical periods. The forest and lateritic zone's prehistoric activities were noticed in various localities of the river basin. The formation of settlements and cultural development has been observed through the cultural materials of stone tools, ceramics, architecture, sculpture and other associated materials. This discussion clearly shows that this area is occupied and reoccupied in different time-space for the potential locational criteria of the Kunur river basin.*

Keywords: Kunur River, Mangalkot, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Prehistory, Chalcolithic, Medieval, Bardhaman

Introduction

Kunur river is one of the major tributaries of the Ajay river. The river played a significant role in archaeological settlements and cultural development of the past inhabitants. According to the previous reports, this river basin bears archaeological pieces of evidence in which; some are very significant archaeological sites and find spots (Dasgupta 1963, 1964; Nag 1987; Chakrabarti 1993, 2001; Roychoudhury 2002; Chattopadhyaya et al. 2005; Chattopadhyay et al. 2006) (Fig. 3). This study aims to understand the man-land relationship and cultural diversity in this riverine landscape. The author investigates the prehistory to late medieval cultural archaeology in this study area (Dasgupta 1963; Nag 1987; Chattopadhyay et al. 2006). The methodology applied to investigate the study area has been majorly extensive field survey, literature review, and toposheets study (73M/6, 73M/10, 73M/11, 73M/14 and 73M/15). Google earth maps and computer-based analysis were also applied to understand the man-land relationship in this particular proposed area.

The most important excavated sites in this region are Mangalkot (Roy and Mukherjee 1992; Roychoudhury 2010) and Pandu Rajar Dhibi (Dasgupta 1964). These excavated

sites have yielded the protohistoric, early historic and early medieval in the systematic context (Dasgupta 1964; Roy and Mukherjee 1992). Other areas are termed as findspots as there have been no habitation markers. They are located in the administrative blocks of Mangalkot and Durgapur (Chattopadhyay et al. 2006) (Fig. 3). Many scholars opined that early historic, early medieval, and medieval ceramics are unknown except the remains of secular and religious (temples and mosques) architectures (Chakrabarti 1993, 2001; Roychoudhury 2002; Chattopadhyay et al. 2006). The region evidenced various structural base of temples, temple remains, sculptural remains, coins and coin hoards, which is evidence of impact from the early historic period to the medieval period. The study area has many sculptural remains, such as *shiva linga* of schist stone which is locally available. Images of mother goddesses, *Nataraj* or dancing *Shiva*, Buddhist and Jain of stone are also been found. Those sites also have ceramics, iron slags, iron ore, and terracotta objects (Chakrabarti 1993, 2001; Roychoudhury 2002; Chattopadhyay et al. 2006).

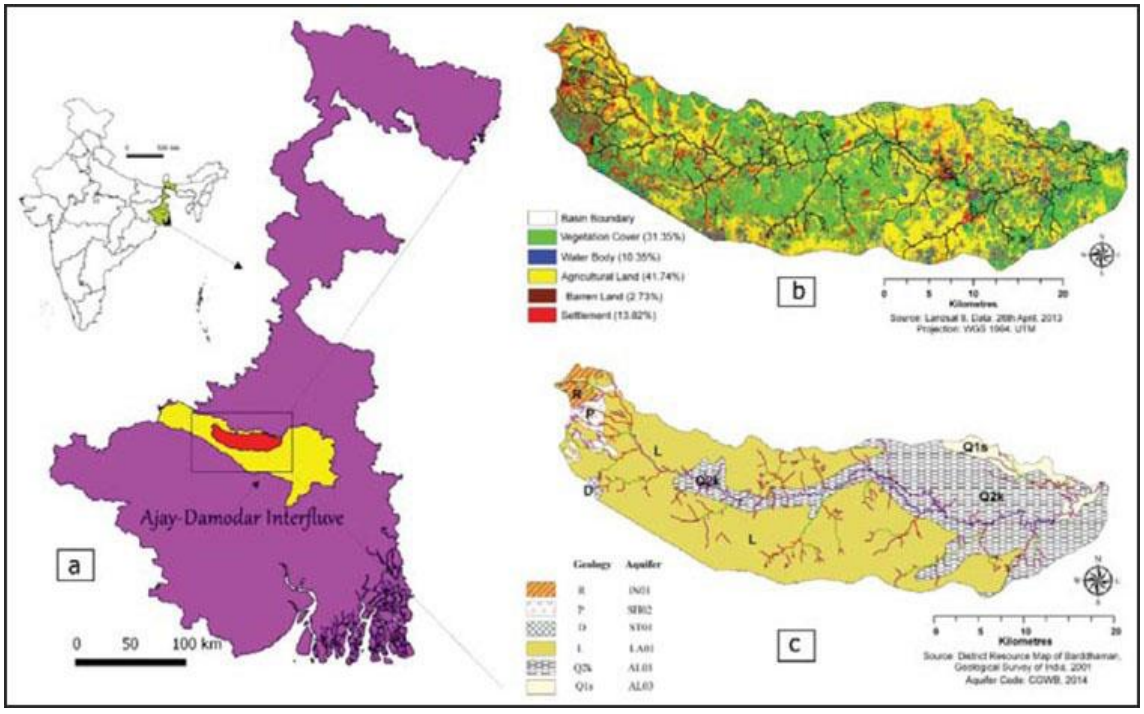

Figure 1: (a) Location map, (b) Land cover map, and (c) Surface geology map of Kunur River Basin (Roy and Sahu 2015b)

Geographical Settings of the Kunur River Basin

The present study area concentrated on the Kunur river basin (between 23°25'N and 23°40'N Lat. 87°15'E and 87°54'E) (Figure 1), Bardhaman district, West Bengal. The study area falls in Ajay and Damodar interfluve region, and Kunur river is the right bank tributary of Ajay river (Chattopadhyay et al. 2006; Bandyopadhyay et al. 2014; Roy and Sahu 2015a, 2015b). The total area of this study is about 916.40 km2. Kunar river originates near Jhanjira village of Ukhra Gram Panchayat, a western upland of the Barddhaman district and its altitude 125 meters. From its origin, the river runs 114

km towards the east direction (Roy and Sahu 2015b). "The elevation ranges from 131 meters to 20 meters throughout the basin. It has a forest cover, spreading over almost 31.35% area, waterbody holds around 10.35% area, 13.82% area is for human settlement, 41.74% for agricultural land, and 2.73% area comes under barren land or unsuitable areas for agriculture" (Roy and Sahu 2015b) (Figure 1).

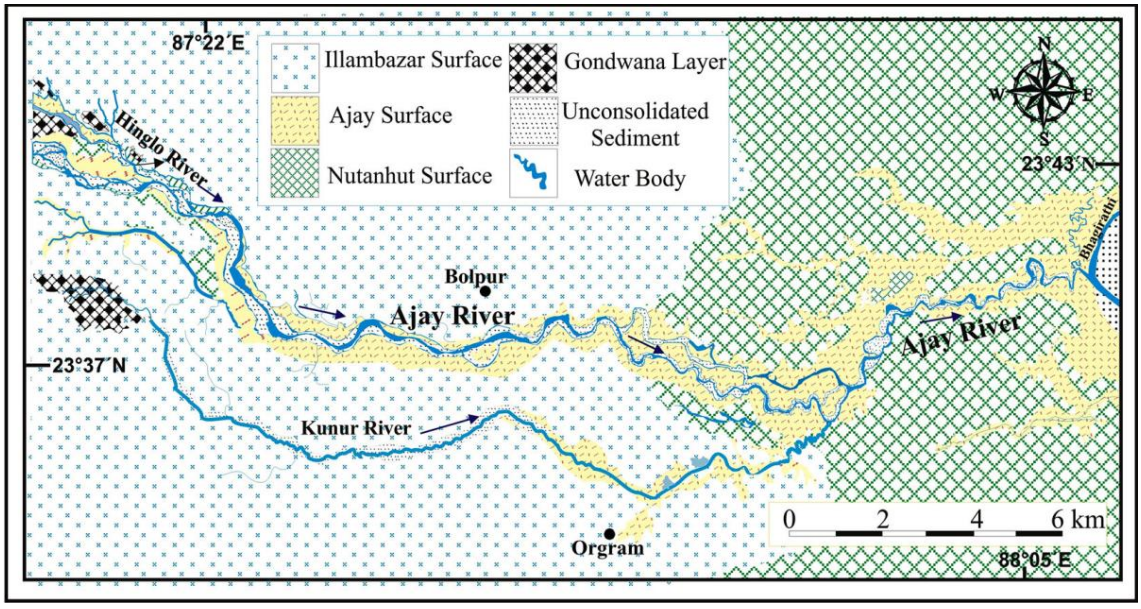

Figure 2: Surface Map of Ajay river Basin and Kunur River Basin (Banerjee et al. 2021)

The Kunur river meets with Ajay River at Kogram (23°32'N and 87°54'E), Natunhat near the site of Mangalkot (Figures 2 and 3). The Ajay river basin is characterised by the low drainage density and various landform features. As the Kunur river basin falls in the Ajay river basin, therefore two geomorphological surfaces have been recognised for this study area. They are Illambazar surface and Natunhat surface (Roychoudhury 2002; Banerjee et al. 2021) (Figure 2). The Illambazar surface (Figure 2) is a formation of ferruginised, lateritised sand, gravel pebble and latosol. This is a lateritic soil belong to the Pleistocene to pre-quaternary (Banerjee et al. 2021). This landform is an older alluvium landscape comprising with thick to compact brown sand and sandy loam, and this kind of soil is very productive in agricultural activities (Roychoudhury 2002; Banerjee et al. 2021). So this area had occupied by the protohistoric sites like Pandu Rajar Dhibi and occupied some early historic medieval sites (Dasgupta 1964; Chakrabarti 1993, 2001; Roychoudhury 2002; Chattopadhyaya et al. 2005). The Natunhat Surface (Figure 2) is a formation of clay, sand and silt oxidised with caliche and Fe-nodules (Roychoudhury 2002; Banerjee et al. 2021). This is a pedocal soil belong to the lower Holocene to the upper Pleistocene (Banerjee et al. 2021). This is also an older alluvium terrace but wider than the Illambazar formation because of the river's meandering (Figure 2). In this landform, Ajay and Kunur rivers have their confluence (Figure 2) and both river's flooding, erosional and depositional activities create here different geological environment. So, this landform evidences lot of early historic sites protohistoric sites and some are medieval sites (Suchira Roychoudhury 2002).

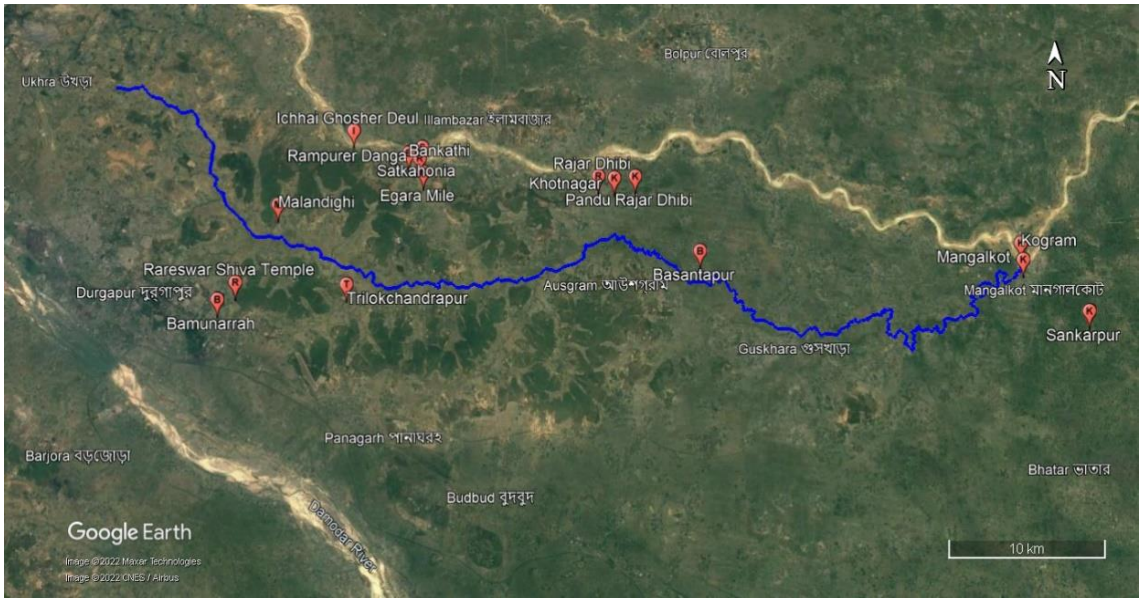

Figure 3: Sites Distribution Map of the Kunur River basin (Google Earth: 2022)

Sites Distribution and Features

Some of the explored sites discussed here, which are identified as potential and important to understand the man-land relationship of cultural diversity in this riverine landscape. Sites are following:

Mangalkot: Mangalkot (23°31'49.54"N, 87°53'52.39"E) is an excavated site (Figure 4) situated on the right bank of the Kunur river and 3 km south of the Ajay river, Natunhat in Barddhaman district of West Bengal. This site was excavated by the Department of Archaeology, the University of Calcutta and reveals a cultural chronology from Chalcolithic to Medieval periods without any occupational break and 14-15 m cultural deposit has been identified (Roychoudhury 2002). The excavation has revealed six periods-Period I is chalcolithic culture (1200 to 600 BCE), Period II is a farming culture of a transitional phase (c. 600 to 300 BCE), Period III is the Maurya-Sunga Period (c. 300 to 100 BCE), Period IV is the Kushana phase (100 BCE to 400 CE), Period V is the Gupta Period (400-600 CE) and Period VI is Medieval (Roy and Mukherjee 1992; Roychoudhury 2002). The soil of the site is alluvium because of the Ajay and Kunur river confluence at Natunhat, which is very close to this site. The site was well deposited with cultural objects and elements like structural remains, ceramics and antiquity objects. The villagers occupy the site and cut the mound to make their houses and roads.

Kogram: This village (23°32'25.72"N, 87°53'50.36"E) is located between the Ajay river and his tributary Kunur river on the confluence of these two important rivers at Natunhat, Barddhaman district. In this village, the important aspect is the *Ujani Satipith* temple, and in this temple has some sculptures. Those sculptural artefacts are recovered from the bed of Kunur river and Ajay river. The stone sculptures are a female deity worshipped as *Sati* (Figure 5), a *linga,* a seated Buddha and a Ganesh

sculpture. All the stone images are fully covered with cloth. The sculptures are dated back to the c. 9th century to 13th century CE. Previously reported, this site has yielded early historic materials (Roychoudhury 2002).

Figure 4: General View of the Mangalkot

Figure 5: The main deity of the *Ujani Satipith* Temple, Kogram

Figure 6: Nengteswar Shiva

Babladihi-Sankarpur: This is a findspot located 8 km south-east from the Mangalkot at Babladihi village of Sankarpur. This village has a *Nengteswar Shiva* temple. In this temple (23°29'58.76"N, 87°56'17.90"E) a Jain image has been worshipped as a naked god of Shiva (Fig. 6), which is made with black basalt and measured 60x120 cm. This image belonged to Mangolkot and it was found in a pond. According to folklore, this image dislocated from Mangalkot to Shankarpur to save this from Kalapahar. The folklore said that when Muslim invaders had destroyed all the Hindu religious images and temples, the villagers were thrown into the water body like a pond and river to save

their god and goddesses. This image is highly ornamented; two small figurines are standing on both sides of the central image. The central image stand on a lotus. This area is a fully flat zone and suggests the flood-prone area and alluvium plan. In this village, no other archaeological assemblage except the Jain image (Fig. 6) has been evidenced.

Pandu Rajar Dhibi: Pandu Rajar Dhibi (23°34'51.84"N, 87°38'31.41"E) is situated on the right bank of the Ajay river in Panduk village. The site was excavated in 1962-65 by the Department of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal (Dasgupta 1964). Five periods have been identified (Chattopadhyaya et al. 2005: 95). Period I (1180 BCE) is an early small settlement community, Period II (1000 BCE) & III (930 BCE) shows a flourishing Chalcolithic culture, Period IV & V are not clear because of the lack of description of the revealed assemblages. However, most of the assemblages are related to the early historic to medieval (Roychoudhury 2002 and Chattopadhyaya et al. 2005: 95). The author observed that ceramics are scattered everywhere in the mound and village in the recent fieldwork. The mound has been destroyed with the school building, cultivation land and robed pit (Figure 7). The soil of this area is yellowish-brown alluvium. The village bears historical evidence is abundant in condition and some are worshipped as the *chamunda* or serpent goddesses. On the eastern side of the mound, an open-air religious place called *Chanditala* bears some sculptural stone remains. Those are recovered from the Ajay river bed during sand procuring. One sculpture is Buddhist, and the rest are related to Brahmanical deities.

Figure 7: General View of the Pandu Rajar Dhibi

Rajar Dhibi: This site has been also excavated with Pandu Rajar Dhibi (23°34'52.30"N, 87°37'2.44"E) and situated about 2 to 3 km west of the Pandu Rajar Dhibi. The revealed stone structure has more similar base style with the Rareswar Shiva temple of Bamun Arrah in Durgapur, so it is easy to identify this structure as a religious structure made of laterite blocks with projection (Figure 8). This area recently covered with wild trees and grass, so very difficult to identify the structural features of this archaeological asset.

Figure 8: The laterite block structure's base

Figure 9: Brick Temple of Khotnagar

Khotnagar: This site (23°34'48.08"N, 87°37'40.99"E) is situated on the right bank of Ajay River in the Burdwan District, and the distance between Pandu Rajar Dhibi and Khatnager is approx 1km, towards west. Presently this site is located near the Panchayet office of Ramnagar and beside the Morband-Egara Mile road. At this site, there are ceramics scattered on the pond's embankment. This site has three ponds situated in the direction of east, west and north and ceramics are evidenced with terracotta pipe and decorated ceramics. The ceramics are red ware, red slipped ware, and a few are black ware. Few fragments of ceramics have decoration like the incised line on the neck portion. Fragments of base, body and rim are noticed. This site is disturbed by anthropogenic activities like pond digging, local road making, and mud wall building. The site's undulating features indicate that it was a mound at the time. In this village, one can easily identify some late medieval brick temples with wall ornamentation (Figure 9), and most of the temple's worshipped god is Shiva in the form of a *'linga'*.

Figure 10: Brick temple of Icchai Ghosher Deul

Ichhai-Ghosher Deul: Icchai Ghosher Deul is a brick temple (23°36'34.12"N, 87°27'7.00"E) (Figure 10), located on the right bank of the Ajay river in the deep forest of Gourangapur. It is a late mediaeval *sikhara* type bricks Temple and the *grava griha* has a *shiva lingam*. Traditionally it's said that Ichai Ghosh constructed the temple in honour of the Goddess *Bhagabati*. The temple wall has some ornamentations. This temple dated back to the mid-18th century CE (Chattapadhyay et al. 2006).

Egara Mile: Egara Mile (23°35' N and 87°30' E) is significant as prehistoric clusters. Many scholars reported this area as the importance for the prehistoric elements and findings in the forest area (Figure 11) (Chakrabarti 1993). A handaxe made of wood fossil was found in situ at the base of the detrital lateritic matrix. Upper palaeolithic

blades are scattered on the surface. Microlithic tools occurred on the top of the detrital lateritic bed and was covered with a thin sand layer. Tools belonging to lower, middle and upper palaeolithic have been evidenced. Implements are core, discoid core, flake, handaxe, scraper, blade, point, side scraper, retouched core and retouched flake. They are mostly made of wood fossils, quartz and quartzite (Chakrabarti 1993).

Figure 11: General view of the Egara Mile

Bankathi: From Egara Mile, the road leads towards Bankathi (23°35'42.9"N 87°29'22.8"E) on the west direction. This area is surrounded by deep sal forest. The Ajay river follows in north direction. Few new houses have been made in this village. The modern construction of houses, soil procuring, and road construction destroyed the palaeolithic horizons. In this location, microliths are also evidenced in the same horizon as Egara Mile locality and Rampurer Danga. This assemblage was accompanied by some upper palaeolithic blades. The assemblage is found on the top lateritic bed (Dasgupta 1964; Chakrabarti 1993).

Basantapur: Bashantapur village has a large mound discovered by P.C. Dasgupta (1962) named Hazrar Danga (Lat. 23°32'30" N and Long. 87°41'30" E) (Dasgupta 1993). The bank of Kunur is situated about 6 miles from the site on the south. Findings are mainly painted BRW, lustrous red ware, microliths, copper lump and channel bowls. Some ceramics are decorated and painted. Also revealed chalcolithic red ware bowls and painted grey ware ceramics (Chakrabarti 2001).

Rampurer Danga: This locality (23°35'30.99"N and 87°29'49.68"E) is located about 4 km from Egara Mile towards Ajay river near Ayodha School. According to the previous report, only microlithic was evidenced in this locality. The microliths occurred on the top of the detrital lateritic deposit and that is covered with a thin sand deposit. The area is fully covered with forest (Chakrabarti 1993).

Satkahonia: Satkahonia is a small village settled on the right bank of the Ajay River. On the north-west of the village, a large shallow elevated mound (23°35'55.97"N, 87°29'55.36"E) bears ceramics. The author discovered this mound in 2017 and identified it as a chalcolithic site. The mound is about 3 km north of the Ayodha High school. The mound was formed on the old alluvium land surface. The findings are red ware, red slipped ware, black ware, black slipped ware, black and red ware potshers, and miniature pots. Shapes could be handy, jars and bowls. Fragments are rim, body, base, neck.

Trilokchandrapur: In this village (23°30'53.19"N, 87°27'6.39"E) has a late medieval ruin fort locally called Rajgarh. Siutaed near Kanksa about 6 Km on illambazar road. This site has been significant for the ruling community since the Pala-Sena periods to utilise and mobilise the natural resources (Chattapadhyay et al. 2006).

Bamunarrah: Bamunarrah is a village (23°30'19.56"N and 87°22'4.17"E) is located about 3 km from the main town of Muchipara towards the west. This village has many late medieval brick temples. At this village's centre has an intact sculpture of Dancing Shiva under a tree (Figure 12). This sculpture has been worshipped as a village deity. At the same spot, some sculptural remains were also noticed. Ceramics are also collected from the mud house's wall and the banks of ponds. All the evidence suggested these remains dated back to 900 AD to 1300 AD (Chattapadhyay et al. 2006).

Figure 12: The village deity (Dancing Shiva)

Rareswar Shiva Temple: Rareswar Shiva temple (23°51'55" N and 87°37'86" E) (Figure 13) is a huge stone temple situated north-east end of the Bamunarrah village. This temple is made of laterite and sandstone blocks with lime mortar. It is an ornamented wall temple, and projection has been observed. This temple dated back to 900 AD to 1300 AD (Chattopadhyay et al. 2006).

Figure 13: Rareswar Shiva Temple

Malandighi: This village (23°33'46.80"N, 87°24'13.55"E) is situated at the interfluve of the Ajay-Kunur river. The village is surrounded by highly dense sal forest. In this village has a huge tanks, which are an indication of the old settlement. Besides this, ceramics, iron slags, terracotta objects, and polished stone tools were found in different locations. According to the folklore, the tanks were excavated around the locality during the Sena periods (Chattopadhyay et al. 2006).

Conclusion

The recent study observed that this area has very much potential in the process of human settlement from prehistory to late medieval period. The landscape, geological features and environment sustain the inhabitants in this region. Also observed, that the Illambazar and Natunhat surfaces have provided more stable landscapes to the chalcolithic to medieval period's agriculturists (Roychoudhury 2002). The prehistoric inhabitant adapted lateritic zone of Illambazar formation, particularly in the upper palaeolithic/ microlithic age (Chakrabarti 1993). Therefore, this region is occupied in various cultural ages by the past inhabitants in terms of their suitable eco-zones (forest area, alluvium plain and lateritic outcrop) (Figures 1, 2 and 3). The formation of settlements and cultural development has been observed through the cultural materials of stone tools, ceramics, architecture, sculpture and other associated materials. This discussion clearly shows that this area is occupied and reoccupied in different time-space for the potential locational criteria of the Kunur river basin. More research will open more scope to give new dimensions of the archaeological study of the Kunur river basin.

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