

EARLY HISTORY OF THE TEL RIVER VALLEY, ORISSA

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The Tel river valley of southwest Orissa is a land of extreme poverty and backwardness. Perusal of the available literature reveals it as *terra incognita*. Its present backwardness and projection to coastal Orissa as prosperous and advanced in every sphere over the rest of Orissa¹ has resulted in to the inculcation of a disdainful attitude towards this region by the investigators. The present paper tries to reconstruct the history of this landmass. It is primarily based on the material remains and corroborated by traditional accounts and the epigraphic sources.

The Valley Area

The river Tel is a major tributary of the Mahanadi in Orissa. Rising from the highland zones of the present Nowrangpur district of Orissa; it takes northeastern direction to meet the river Mahanadi at Sonepur, after covering 150 miles.² The valley areas thus consist of four nuclear zones³ like- (1) Junagarh, Dharmagarh, Jaipatna of Kalahandi district and stretches up to the Deobhog of Chhatisgarh State, (2) Komna region of Nuapada district, (3) Titlagarh area of the Bolangir district and (4) Karlamunda, M. Rampur, Narla, Bhawanipatna and Kesinga Block of the Kalahandi district, etc. Tributaries such as the Hati, Sagada, Utei, Sandul, Rahul and the Inder, etc., flow into the valley to meet the Tel at its right bank. The entire valley is further interspersed by the mountains and the deciduous forest. The principal mountain system, however, belongs to the Eastern Ghat.⁴ The valley area now-a-days is reckoned, for its gemstone deposits like - Cat's eye, Alexandrite, Diamond, Garnet, Sapphire, Ruby, Topaz and Crystal,⁵ etc. Moreover, the region has been inhabited by several primitive tribes like the Konds, Gond, Saoras, Munda and Gadava,⁶ etc.

Prelude to History

Recent Archaeological exploration and excavation show the Tel river valley as a cradle of civilization and culture. The Mesolithic-Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Iron Age preceded the historical period in the valley. A good number of Mesolithic-Neolithic settlement sites

along with its associated lithic assemblage are documented in Kalahandi district, which constitutes the core area of the valley. Among the Stone tools of the pre-historic times microliths ring-stone, adage, axe (celt), chisel, and muller predominate. Coarse red ware of handmade variety occurs along with these lithic implements. The outstanding feature of the lithic assemblages is the common occurrence of heavy-duty tools side by side with the microliths.⁷ The beginning of agriculture in the valley is attested by the find of muller, pestle, cup marks and stone-plough-share, etc.⁸ The practice of agriculture is further corroborated by the Yogimath pre-historic cave art⁹ (now in Nuapada district). The inception of agricultural economy gave rise to ritual practices in order to cement a common bond.¹⁰ It is marked within the persisting taboos, beliefs and tradition of the concerned landmass, whose genesis certainly going back to the transitional phase of food production.

Technological development in the valley is noted by the findings of copper artifacts such as ring, bangle and griddle, etc. Celt, microliths and ring stone, muller and pestle, etc., are retrieved from sites like Jamgudadar, Chandalpadar, Bhimkela, Bhuddhigarh and Urlukupagarh. It unfolds the chalcolithic cultural phase within the valley. Jamgudapadar further reveals the development in bronze¹¹ artifacts, which is first of its kind in Orissa. The same site, moreover, has revealed chalcolithic painting on a red ware.¹² The said painting in another sense demonstrates the interaction among human beings animals and nature. Ceramic culture of the chalcolithic period was rich and varied. Sherds are of wheel turned, well-levitated clay and slipped. Black-and-red ware, red ware and black slipped ware of jar, pot and dishes, bowl, etc., are hitherto documented from the archaeological sites of Kalahandi and Bolangir districts. The decorative pattern on such wares consisted of groves, incised lines, triangle design and paintings. The proto-historic sites of the valley have revealed the characteristic chalcolithic traits i.e., copper-bronze artifacts, ceramic paintings and terracotta humped bull, nude figurines, terracotta cakes, perforated discs or spindlewhorls and beads. These material remains bear close affinity with the antiquities of chalcolithic Sankarganj (Central Orissa), Golavai (coastal Orissa) and Khambeswarapali of (Western Orissa).¹³

The documented Iron Age sites of the Tel valley unfold stone circles and Menhirs and thus indicate Megalithic imprint.¹⁴ Although, not a single Iron Age site or Megalithic burial in Orissa is excavated, yet the artifacts retrieved from the surface of the concerned sites shows features comparable with the Southern Megalithic grave items

obtained from the stratigraphic layers through excavation. The Iron age/Megalithic sites of the valley have yielded iron implements (like spearhead, arrowhead, sickle and hoe, nail, pin, bangle, bowl and ring etc.) iron slag, semi-precious stone beads like agate and carnelian, brick, tile, black-and-red ware and black burnish ware, etc. Some of the graffiti traced on the exterior and interior of the potsherds, recovered from the Proto and Early historical settlements in Kalahandi district suggest a southern Megalithic imprint.¹⁵

The technological output as evinced in the archaeology of the Tel valley certainly, became feasible in view of the agrarian surplus. Manufacture of iron implements provided extra power to man. Jungles were cleared and more and more lands were brought under cultivation. The rule of inheritance might have had its beginning during this inchoate phase of agrarian expansion within the valley. Agriculture, technology, craft-specialization and trade ultimately gave rise to a heterogeneous society.¹⁶ Technological development and surplus accumulation moreover, ushered the phase of incipient urbanization in the Tel Valley.¹⁷

Historical Geography

No direct reference to the concerned region is noticed in the Vedic literature. At least since the 5th century B.C. direct reference to the river Tel and its Janapada has been discerned in the traditional accounts. Interestingly, the traditional accounts find ample corroboration now from the archaeology of the Tel Valley. Grammarian Panini¹⁸ (5th century B.C.) in his *Astadhyayi* mentions about the river Telavaha and its *Janapada* 'Taitilaka' which have been rightly identified with the present river Tel and Titlagarh region (now in Bolangir district). Panini,¹⁹ however, refers to these two nomenclature in connection with trade as he mentions further about Taitila-Kadru, which is taken for granted as rhinoceros hide.²⁰ The said material might have been exported to other regions of India from the Tel valley. Recent archaeological discoveries in the Tel valley such as rhinoceros pendant made of crystal²¹ and the Punch marked coins, embossing the rhinoceros motif,²² lend credence to the existence of this animal within the valley before the dawn of the Christian era.

The location of the Andhapura and the Terinagari as mentioned in the *Seravanija Jataka* may be sought within the Tel valley. The work suggests that the Andhra tribe²³ had its headquarter on the bank of the Telavaha (Tel). The Jataka further speaks about two pot dealers

who were inhabiting in the town of Seri and who had come to the city of Andhapura where they were hawking the wares round the street of the metropolis.²⁴ The topology and archaeological findings of the valley appear to substantiate the above contention. The southeastern part of the valley region is dotted with numerous early settlements. Settlements like Buddhigarh Terasingha, Godavela and Kaharligarh are rich in ceramic culture.²⁵ Close to the confluence of the Tel and the Rahul river, is the fort known as Kharligarh. The surface contour of Kharligarh with its western rampart, moat and cluster of settlements surrounding the fort area are indicative of its metropolitan character.²⁶ As such the site may be identified with the traditional Andhapura, the abode of the Andhra tribe. Similarly, Terasingha situated on the right bank of the river Tel, is rich in ceramic culture and seems to be the corruption of the 'Teri' nagari of the traditional account. It appears that a branch of the Andhra tribe originally had settled on the bank of river Tel (Telavaha) during the period spanning from the 5th century B.C. to the 2nd century B.C.²⁷

The Jaina text, Jambudivapannatti moreover, adumbrates Kanchanapura²⁸ as one of the metropolis of Kalinga. It was a major centre of trade and commerce. The nomenclature Suvarnapura is synonymous with Kanchanapura. It is possible that Suvarnapura (Sonepur) was designed as Lankapuri²⁹ and Pachhimalanka³⁰ during the medieval time. It is likely that the people of certain highland region³¹ (Lanka), possibly of South India, migrated and settled in the western part of Orissa (Tel valley). Archaeological survey and excavation of Manamunda alias Asurgarh located on the confluence of the Tel and the Mahanadi³² seems to lend credence to the existence of a metropolitan city known as Kanchanapura of the tradition. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya³³ (4th cent. B.c.) further mentions a landmass known as Indravana, which was famous for precious diamond. Indravana has been identified with the land situated in between the river Indravati and the river Tel.³⁴ As such southwest basin of the Tel river at least had formed a part of Indravana during the 4th century B.C.

The existence of the Atavika land on the Western limit of Kalinga further suggest to the Tel Valley as a segment of it.³⁵ Literary sources however designate any wild tract of the Sub-continent as *atavi* or *kan'tara*. The Atavikas were 'savage'.³⁶ The Atavi or wild tract had been of much political significance in Indian history.³⁷ The Atavikas served as scout or soldiers.³⁸ They were heterogeneous peoples and the Andhra tribe was mentioned in Asoka's record as one among the Atavikas.³⁹ Atavi is synonymous to Kantara. The earliest mention of

Kantara is discerned in the *Mahabharata*. Sahadeva is said to have vanquished Kosala (South Kosala) and Kantara.⁴⁰ The independent existence of South-Kosala and Kantara continued up to the 4th-5th century A.D. The Allahabad pillar inscription⁴¹ (4th century A.D.) as well as Varahamihira⁴² categorically refer to Kantara. King Vyagraraj was then the ruling chief of Kantara kingdom⁴³ during the 4th century A.D. He sustained defeat at the hands of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta during his whirlwind campaign. The river valley thus had formed the core of the Kantara kingdom during the 3rd-4th century A.D.

Urbanization and State Formation

The beginning of Urbanization and the process of state formation are apparent from the material remains of the valley. Some of the urban centres within the valley discussed in the preceding pages may be evaluated along with other townships such as Ashurgarh, Budhigarh, Kharligarh, Manamunda-Ashurgarh, Terasingha, Urukupagarh, Jamguda- Padar, Chandalpadar, Godavela, etc. These sites and their antiquities fulfill the basic traits of urbanism.⁴⁴ The documented townships and metropolis grew up on the river banks or on the confluence of the rivers. Not only the river Tel but also its tributaries were navigable. River water navigation had developed immensely in ancient India.⁴⁵ Moreover, the topographic features of the urban centers reveal their existence on the route of inland trade. finds such as mould of ornament, beads and coins and the discarded raw materials indicate the industrial set up in these urban settlements. Large tracts of alluvial soil surrounding the settlements seem to indicate the expansion and development of agrarian society.

None of the early urban centres of the Tel valley is horizontally excavated to uncover the cultural life of the people. Yet, the material objects adduced from the non-stratigraphic contexts bear affinity with similar antiquity belonging to the stratified layers of other contemporaneous urban centres of India. So, on the basis of the material remains of the Tel valley a cognitive approach to the life style of the peoples may be postulated. Antiquities recovered from the valley chiefly consisted of a wide spectrum of pottery, including knobbed ware and the deluxe Northern, lacked polished ware, semi precious stone beads, pendants, metals implements of war and peace, varieties of brick, seal and sealing, glass and ornaments of metal and stone. Inscription moulds, faunal remains, domestic articles made of metal, clay and stone and coins⁴⁶ shed sufficient light on the cultural and material life of the urban dwellers. Political development

and chiefship were the prime mover, irrespective of time and space. Both aspects seem to have derived inspiration from the Gangetic valley with which the valley region had intimate trade and commercial links. Neither the Mauryas nor the Guptas had exercised supremacy over the Tel valley, which constituted a part of Atavika land and Kantara or Mahakantara kingdom. The Allahabad pillar inscription, however, mentions Mahakantara in the sense of a state. As discussed already, Mahakantara state consisted of the southwestern part of the Tel valley and extended up to Koraput (Orissa) and Bastar regions. (Chhatisgarh).

Structure of the State

The paradigm of local state formation seems to be applicable in case of Mahakantara. Local state formation presupposes internal dynamic, external force and trading network. The material remains of Asurgarh (Kalahandi district), Budhigarh (Kalahandi) and Kharligarh (Bolangir district) may be seen as evidence pertaining to the above hypothesis of local state formation.

Asurgarh (Narla), especially its fort area, consists of 60 acres of land. A mammoth wall made of brick and rubble measuring 21x14' in height and breadth at present surrounds it. It has four gateways at cardinal points. Close to the rampart a moat measuring 15x18mt. encircles the fort on all sides. The lower town or residential area surrounds the fort, covering an area of not less than 8 km. in circuit. A mud wall further circumscribed Asurgarh consisting of the fort and residential area. Bastions or watchtowers are traced at four cardinal points inside the encircled mud wall. Towards the east of the fort there exist, even today, the water reservoir of 200 acres of land. On the south another small tank was excavated which is now a shallow land. Close to the western moat, is flowing the river Sandul, which is bifurcated in view of the construction of an anicut to divert the watercourse into the fort. A water system was thus created to fill the encircled moat. A trial trench undertaken in 1973 has revealed sandstone pieces having Mauryan polish, Punch marked coins (Three categories viz: pre-Mauryan, Mauryan and post-Mauryan), plinth of a brick temple, bangle, terracotta figures and figurines, red glazed Kushana pottery, Kushana copper coin, NBP ware, Semi precious stone beads, pendant, glass beads stone plaques, iron implements of war and peace, Vishnu icon (5th century A.D.), brick tile, faunal remains, coin mould and bead manufacturing unit, etc. The cultural sequence of Asurgarh has been placed in between 3rd century B.C. to 5th century A.D.⁴⁷ The fort of Asurgarh has been identified as the

capital of king Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara kingdom during the 4th century A.D.⁴⁸ The lineage of king Vyaghraraja however is obscure at present. The antiquities of Asurgarh further testify trade and commercial relation between the Atavika land/Mahakantara and the Urban Centres of the Gangetic valley. In 1946, a set of copper plate was obtained from Terasingha village, which is hardly 2 km from the Asurgarh settlement site. Paleographical, it has been dated to the 5th century A.D. It registers a land donation to a Brahmin known as Dronaswami by king Tustikara, who was a devotee of the Goddess Stambeswari, a brahminised tribal Goddess. The donation was made in the presence of important officers like ranaka and others. The Archaeological records of Asurgarh thus endorse the local state formation model. Aspects like internal dynamism, rise of local chiefs and external influence, especially from the metropolitan centres of the Gangetic valley and trading network are quite visible.

Budhigarh is hardly 50 km from Asurgarh. It is situated on the right bank of the river Rahul. No monumental architecture is noticed here. The mound of Budhigarh covers an area of 1000x500 mt. The site has already revealed punch marked coin (local variety), stone plaques, semi precious and emulate ornament mould, a wide spectrum of ceramic including Knobbed ware and NBPW. Two seals cum-pendant of gold and copper, brick terracotta objects and faunal remains have been obtained. However, the two seals-cum-pendants of Budhigarh bear significance. One seal-cum-pendant contains two lines of Kharosthi-Brahmi letter, deciphered by B.N. Mukherjee as *Jana Dhapeta* or *Jajyan Sthapayita* (founder of sacrifice). The other seal-cum-pendant bears two symbols on its reverse like 'tree within railing', and a 'parasol'. These symbols are interpreted in the sense of good administration. Both the seals however, belong to one stock and are ascribed to the 2nd century A.D.⁵⁰ The seal legend, interpreted as the founder of sacrifice or ritualistic belief, tends to point to the use of religion for legitimization of authority.

Asurgarh was the nuclear area of the Mahakantara state, which was headed by Vyagraraja during the 4th century A.D. Vyagraraja was certainly a native chief or might have belonged to the line of some native chieftain who had carved the kingdom of Mahakantara in the preceding period. Influences bearing on state formation seem to have come from the Mauryan metropolis through trading network. The investigators have, hitherto proposed gemstone trade between ancient Tel valley and other urban centres of India. The excavation report of Asurgarh shows the existence of a mint for the fabrication of the Puchh marked coins. The dimension of the fort, its architectural

features, hydraulic system, settlement pattern, sophisticated antiquities further substantiate the hypothesis that Asurgarh was the core region of the Mahakantara state.

Budhigarh and Kharligarh sites seem to be the pastoral zones of Mahakantara state, whereas Koraput and Bastar regions clad with the forest and the mountains, constituted the forest regions of the state. Both the pastoral and the forest zones and their respective ruling chiefs enjoyed considerable autonomy. Hence, the ruling chiefs of the periphery regions to legitimize their authority could act as the principal ritualist. Sovereign authority, however, was limited within the core area. The Deccan campaign of Samudragupta, however, gave a fatal blow to the king Vyagraraja and the Mahakantara state. The authority and prestige of Vyagraraja suffered considerably. Taking advantage of the political vicissitude, Mahakantara the former forest region of Mahakantara state severed its connection with the nuclear region under the Nala king Varaharaja in the early part of the 5th century A.D.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 2. N. Senapati and D.C. Kumar, *Orissa District Gazetteers, Kalhandi, Bhubaneswar*, 1980, p.2.
- 3. Ibid.
- 4. P. Mohanty and B. Mishra, *Early Historic Kalahandi*, P. Pal (ed.), *Orissa Revisited*, vol., No.52, 3 Marg Publication, Mumbai, 2001, p.17.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. P. Mohanty and B. Mishra, *Environment and Stone Age Culture of Kalahandi*, K.K. Mishra and M.L.K. Murty, (eds.), *Peoples and Environment in India*, 2001, New Delhi, pp.39-50.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Manikyapuri Museum of Bhawanipatna exhibits - Mullers-3, Pestle-1, collected from the right bank of the river Tel, near Belkhandi. Cup marks are documented on a stone terrace at Phurlijharan, Jamgudapadar (Kalahandi district) and Kharligarh (Bolangir district). Gupti site, on the left bank of the river Ret has yielded one ploughshare of granite stone measuring 9"x4" in length and breadth.
- 9. S. Pradhan, *Pre-Historic Rock Art in Orissa*, *NAHO*, vol.VI, 1988, pp.5-6, P.G. Dept. of History, Sambalpur University.
- 10. D.K. Bhattacharya, *Ecology and Social Formation in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1990, p.36.

11. EDXRF Analysis conducted at the conservation Analytical Laboratory, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., on the large and small samples of metal artifact of Jamgudapadar in the month of June 2001 reveals the object as beight in Bronze.
12. B. Mishra & D. Acharya, The Mesolithic and Post-Mesolithic Cultures of Jamgudapadar *Dist. Kalahandi, Orissa, Man in India*, vol.82, no. 1-2, 2002, p.52.
13. K.K. Basa, Neolithic and Post-Neolithic Culture of Orissa S. Pradhan (ed.), *Orissan History Culture and Archaeology*, New Delhi, 1999, pp.12-13.
14. B. Mishra, M. Brandner, P. Mohanty & P. Yale, 'Urbanization and Trade in Early Historic perspective of the Tel river valley' presented at the Seminar on Archaeology of Eastern India, CDI Project, Dept of Anthropology, Utkal University, Konkan, 2001.
15. P. Mohanty & B., Mishra, op.cit., 2000.
16. D.K. Bhattacharya, op.cit., 1990.
17. B. Mishra, M. Brandner, P. Mohanty & P. Yale, op.cit., 2001.
18. V.S. Agrawal, *India as known to Panini (A Study of the cultural material in the Astadyai)*, Lucknow, 1953, pp.60-61.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Rhinoceros pendant made of crystal was retrieved from Asurgarh (Narla) of Kalahadi district in 1973. It is now preserved in the Sambalpur University Museum.
22. P.K. Deo, Forgotten Forts of Kalahandi-part II, *OHRJ*, vol.XIV, no.2-3. 1995, pp.29-61.
23. Their capital was known, as Andhapura which was located on the bank of the Telavaha. The river Telavaha of the tradition is certainly the modern river the Tel of southwest Orissa. Historians however, attempt to identify the river Telavaha with Telingiri or with some other river flowing into the Krsna -Tungabhadra Valley, and Andhapura with the Bezvada (H.C. Raya-Chaudhury, *Political History of Ancient India*, 1972, pp.82-83) which is erroneous in view of the following facts — A. That the Andhra as wild Non-Aryan tribe is well known in the Brahmanical literature (B.C. Law, op.cit., p.165. 1973). B.R. E-XIII of Ashoka further refers to the Atavika boarder land of Kalinga with its wild inhabitants - the Andhras. The tribe thus must have lived in the hilly tracts of modern Western Orissa or the Tel river Valley. C. Evidently, therefore, the Buddhist text locates the Andhra tribe in the Telavaha (Tel) that is in close proximity to Kalinga of the 3rd century B.C.
24. N.K. Sahu, *Utkal University History of Orissa*, vol. 1, 1964, p.200.
25. P. Mohanty & B. Mishra, op.cit., pp.18-19, 2001 and p.225, 1998.
26. B. Mishra, M. Brandner, P. Mohanty & P. Yale, op.cit., 2001.
27. "Megasthenese (300 B.C.) Speaks of a powerful king of the Andhra country possessing 30 fortified towns and 100,000 infantry, 2000 cavalry and 1,000 elephant" (*Imperial Unity*, 1960, p.194). Recent archaeological survey of the Tel river valley unfolds however a large number of fortified settlements such as Kharligarh, Budhigarh, Urlukupagarh, Godavela, Kumarasingha, Amathgarh Terasingha, and many others. It seems thus to suggest the Tel valley as abode of a branch of the Andhra tribe. Similarly the reference to the Andhra tribe on the west of Kalinga in the Rock edict-XIII of Ashoka again points out the habitation of the said tribe on the bank of the river Tel.
28. A.C. Mittal draws our attention towards the reference of Kanchanapur in the Jaina text. A.C. Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*, 1962, p.119, Varanasi.

29. N.K. Sahu, *Buddhism in Orissa*, p.38, 1954.
30. S.N. Rajguru, *Inscription of Orissa*, Bhubaneswar, Vol.IV, 1966, pp.268-75. Sonepur was designated as 'Pashhami Lanka' in the C.P. of Someswaradeva, the viceroy of the Somavamsi king Udyota Kesari of Orissa during the last quarter of the 11th century A.D.
31. 'Lanka' is a Kond dialect, which means highland region D.P. Mishra, *Search of Lanka*, 1985, p.30.
32. P. Mohanty & B. Mishra, op.cit., 1998, pp.219-21. Also C.R. Mishra and S. Pradhan, Excavation at Manamunda, Dist. Phulbani, India *IAR*, 1989-90.
33. R.P. Kangle (Trans), *The Kautilaya Arthasatra*, Book II, Ch-II 1992, 115, Mumbai.
34. J. Schwartzery, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, Plate III, B12, 16, Sch.
35. See f.n. 27.
36. D.D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, p.236, 1988 (rpt).
37. A.C. Mittal, op.cit., p.116.
38. D.D. Kosambi, op.cit., p.236.
39. A.C. Mittal, op.cit., p.111.
40. N.K. Sahu, op.cit., 1964, p.156.
41. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol.III.
42. A.M. Sastri, *Varahamihira's India*, Vol.II, Delhi, 1996, p.52.
43. Allahabad Prasasti, line 1, Kosala-Mahandra Maha Kantaresu Vyagraraja.
44. V.G. Childe enumerates ten traits of urban revolution. V.G. Childe, *The Urban Revolution*, (eds.), G.L. Possehl, *Ancient Cities of the Indus*, 1979, pp.12-18. But amidst regional diversity, one should prefer polytheist criterion, that is to consider the presence of certain features, but not necessarily of all to define the city or Urban Centre. Sharma thus points out that at least congested construction with drains, refined pottery, sophisticated terracotta, granaries, coin and coin mould, etc., indicate *urbanism* R.S. Sharma, *Urban Decay*, New Delhi, 1987.
45. A.M. Sastri, op.cit., vol.II, p.308, 1996, Delhi.
46. P. Mohanty and B. Mishra, op.cit., 2001, pp.17-20. Also see, B. Mishra, M. Brandtner, P. Mohanty and P. Yale, op.cit., 2001, Konark.
47. S.C. Behera Interim Excavation Report, p.2-7, 1982, Sambalpur University.
48. Ibid.
49. D.C. Sircar, op.cit., 1954, p.274-280.
50. P. Mohanty and B. Mishra, op.cit., 2001.