

Indian Historical Archaeology Investigative Research During 1961-2011

B. R. Mani

The archaeological studies in India started in 1784 with the foundation of the Asiatic Society of India under William Jones but remained mostly confined to antiquarianism for many decades till the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861. The European scholarship, despite their obvious shortcomings, got attracted towards investigations in connection with Indian cultural heritage in forms of monuments and sites of which literary references and foreign accounts were available extensively.

The quest brought about a change in the attitude of collection of antiquities to archaeological investigations. James Prinsep's decipherment of Indian scripts and explorations of Alexander Cunningham and others in the first half of the nineteenth century laid the foundation of archaeology in its true sense for further field work. The focus of investigations was on north Indian city and cultural sites, many of which are located today in Uttar Pradesh such as Ahicchatrā, Sārnāth, Kauśambī, Saṅkīśā, Bhīṭā and others which were put to excavations. The archaeological investigations continued during Cunningham's tenure in the Archaeological Survey of India followed by his successors and after joining the Archaeological Survey of India as its Director General, John Marshall introduced fresh excavation techniques and the idea of protection and preservation of the monuments and sites.

The beginning of historical period in India was generally placed around 600 BCE, the period which witnessed emergence of two great historical figures, the Buddha and Mahāvīra and when it was considered that writing had developed, urbanization began and economy consolidated with increase in trade and commerce. Gradually scholars gave new thoughts to the issue relating to the beginning of the historical period. "It is highly likely that this date may go back further into antiquity if the events recorded in our epics and Purāṇas can be corroborated by archaeological evidence. This is now in the range of possibility because it is generally agreed that the PGW culture, which can be dated between 1200 BCE and 600 BCE, probably represents the Culture of Mahābhārata period."¹

Indian archaeology, today, has to choose between so many extremes that it is difficult to say what the scenario would be like, say after quarter of a century. The past, with its miraculous archaeological achievements with emphasis on study of ceramics and material culture should have paved the way to a greater understanding of tradition and archaeology, but far from it, it has devised new ways and means to a more complicated chronological framework. Fortunately, some of the fresh investigative studies in recent times indicate the evolution and development of early settlements in northern South Asia and provide evidence on rise of civilizations emerging from the Neolithic farming communities through Chalcolithic cultures. In this process the settlements in groups can be identified located within pockets of geopolitical boundaries which are comparable to the Vedic janas which definitely came into existence in the third millennium BCE, or earlier and were transformed into janapadas and mahājanapadas towards the end of the second millennium BCE or the beginning of the first millennium BCE, much before their normally accepted period of the sixth century BCE by which time they had been fully established with various urban centers.

Archaeological investigations at the ancient city sites in northern South Asia indicate their early settlements going back to the second millennium BCE in most of the cases. Most of them can be identified with the city sites mentioned in the later vedic Sanskrit literature of Āraṇyakas and Brāhmaṇas and fall in the early Pali and Prakrit Buddhist and Jaina texts in the context of Sixteen Great States (ṣoḍaśa - mahājanapadas). These early settlements of the second millennium BCE became significant urban centres in the beginning of the first millennium BCE much before the time of compilation of Buddhist and Jaina texts. The prominent city sites became the capital of the mahājanapadas. The process of developments of the janapadas and mahājanapadas continued in the early historical age when finally they were merged and unified under the Magadha empire around fourth century BCE. In this context, the evidence of settlements at these city sites of the great mahājanapadas going back to the second millennium BCE, from Sarai Khola (Taxila) and Puṣkalavati (Charsadda) in Gandhar; BMAC and Gandhar Grave Culture sites in Kamboja; Bairat, Gilund and Ojiana in Matsya; Mathura, Sonkh and Noh in Śūrasena; Hastināpura, Hulas and Alamgirpur in Kuru; Ahicchatra, Atranjikhera, Kannoj, Sankisa and Kampilya in Pañcāla; Ujjain, Kayatha, Nagda, Ahar in Avanti; Eran and Tripuri in Chedi; Kauśāmbī and Jhusi in Vatsa; Rajghat-Sarai Mohanā in Kāśī; Ayodhyā, Śrāvastī, Lahurādewa, Siswāniā in Kośala; Rājdhānī, Narhan, Sohaurā in Malla; Rājgir, Chiraṇḍ and Juafardih (Nalanda) in Magadha; Vaiśālī and Lauriyā Nandangarh in Vrijli, Champa and Oriup in Aṅga and Adam and Inamgaon in Aśmaka provide valuable data. In view of the archaeological evidence from the sites of the

mahājanapadas it could be authentically concluded that these political principalities and states were well established during the second millennium BCE, though the settlements started at many of these sites even much earlier.

The earlier supposition by G.R. Sharma about the beginning of the civilization and urban growth in the 2nd millennium BCE at Kauśambī has been further proved at the recent excavations at the Samudrakūpa mound at Jhūsī. It is evident from the C14 dates and available material that the process of urbanization started in the Pre-NBPW phase in the middle of the second millennium BCE and matured in the NBPW phase in the beginning of the first millennium BCE.

During the last fifty years excavations at important historical sites throughout the length and breadth of the country have brought to light significant evidences of material culture with scientific approach towards investigative research. Many of these sites such as Kauśambī, Śīsupālgadhā, Saṅkīsā, Rajghat, Śrāvastī, Ahicchatrā and others were put to excavations earlier also, but required further scientific investigations which could be accomplished during the period concerned. A brief survey of some of the prominent historical sites here would indicate the important work carried out in different regions at these sites in recent times.

Atranjikherā² was excavated by R.C. Gaur on behalf of the Aligarh Muslim University in 1983-84 and was identified with ancient Veranja of the Buddhist texts. Period IV of the site represents the early historic phase.

Kauśambī,³ excavated by the Allahabad University from 1948 to 1967 for several seasons by G.R. Sharma signifies a city site with its defenses going back to the latter half of the second millennium BCE or even earlier. The development of Urban Culture at the site can be assigned to c.885-605 BCE (Period II) followed by extensive development of material culture in Period III (605-45 BCE).

N.C. Ghosh on behalf of the ASI excavated from 1977 to 1980 Satanikota,⁴ District Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, a city site which was occupied from Stone Age to the medieval times. The site was provided with a fortification and a moat around it in the Satavahana period.

The ancient port city of Pumpuhar mentioned in the Saṅgam literature and as Kaberis Emporium by Ptolemy was identified with Kāveripaṭṭinam⁵ and was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India for several seasons from 1963 to 1973 revealing a Buddhist monastic establishment, inlet sluice and a wharf and the beginning of the activities at the port city is dated back to c. 3rd century BCE,

B.B. Lal and K.N. Dikshit's excavations at Srṅgaverapur⁶ in Allahabad have provided a cultural sequence from about 11th century BCE till medieval times, but the

significance of the site lies in the massive Kushan period burnt brick tank with an elaborate inlet channel with intercommunicating system and terraced sides. This is perhaps the largest tank of ancient times so far discovered in the country.

After one seasons excavations at Rajghat⁷ in Varanasi by K. Deva in 1940 on behalf of the ASI, A.K. Narain and his colleagues of the Banaras Hindu University excavated the site for several seasons from 1960 to 1967 and brought to light antiquarian remains and structures of the city site from c.800 BCE till medieval times with a large number of important seals and scalings, terracotta figurines, sculptures and material culture connected with the vibrant life of the city of Varanasi. Later, excavations were also conducted by Banaras Hindu University at a few sites in and around the city of Varanasi at Sarāi Mohānā, Akathā and Rāmnaḡar, the latter in collaboration with the Jñāna-Pravāha.

In some of the recent excavations, several sites throughout the length and breadth of the country have given significant results. Saṅkīsā⁸ in district Farukhabad of U.P. was excavated for two seasons from 1995 to 1997 by the ASI under the direction of the author and it has established the early horizon of the site going back to black slipped, black-and-red and Painted Grey Ware period to the post-Gupta period. Similarly Siswāniā⁹ in district Basti of U.P. was identified with ancient Simsapavanna of the city of Setavya and excavated by the author on behalf of the ASI from 1995 to 1997 for two seasons. The author also excavated¹⁰ Harnol and Muhammadnagar in district Gurgaon, Haryana in 1997-98 which yielded remains of huge structures of the Kushan period. The former site also revealed a structure of NBPW phase with large size bricks of 72 X 48 X 8 cm dimension.

Excavations at Lal Kot¹¹ in Delhi for four seasons from 1992 to 1995 by the author on behalf of the ASI exposed remains of palace complexes of Rajput and early Sultanate periods besides yield of a large number of antiquities and ceramics, establishing an index of early medieval pottery types. Later excavations were also carried out by ASI at Salīngarḡh, Tughlaqābād fort and Sirī fort in Delhi.

In some of the recent-most excavations, the disputed site of Ayodhya was excavated by the author under ASI in 2002-03 season which apart from other features takes back the antiquity of the site to c. 15th – 16th century BCE on the determination of C14 dates.

Although Ahicchatrā in Bareilly district of UP has been excavated in the past for several years, it has been put to excavations by the ASI during last five seasons. Excavations at Vadnagar in Gujarat by the State Archaeology department since 2007 have brought to light remains of a Buddhist monastery complex of about 3rd century CE.

ASI has also excavated the Ahom royal burial mounds (Maidam) in Shibsagar district of Assam in 2000-2002. Amongst the medieval sites excavated by ASI, Hampi in Karnataka has been significant as it has brought to light huge palace complexes and allied structures as part of the National Project initiated by the ASI in early 1980's for several seasons. Similar work was also carried out at Champāner-Pāwāgaḍh and at Fatehpur Sikri.

A very important and large site has been put to excavation by the University of Lucknow under D.P. Tiwari at Sanchankot in district Unnao of UP since 2006-07. Overlying a PGW deposit were encountered remains of temple complexes of early historic period. The first temple is an apsidal one of the Śuṅga period which has yielded thousands of archaic terracotta human figurines. Remains of four more temples of the Kushan period have also been found.

Department of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University excavated the Gupta temples at Bhītari and Chalcolithic sites such as Khairāḍih, Narhan and Imlidih in UP where continuity in the early historic period was noticed. The department also excavated for four seasons from 1999 to 2005 onwards an important Chalcolithic and early historical site Agiābir in Varanasi district which has yielded hoards of metallic utensils and other objects from NBPW levels. On C14 determinations the date of NBPW goes back to C. 1000 BCE,

Ambaran¹² in Akhnūr, district Jammu has proved to be the only known Buddhist site in Jammu region which was put to excavations for two seasons by the author on behalf of the ASI from 1999 to 2001. Two Buddhist stūpas, have been excavated and a gold casket containing bone pieces within a silver casket and both within a copper reliquary were found from one of the stūpas. The southern wall and some chambers of a Kushan-Gupta monastery were also exposed besides discovery of Kushan coins and Kushan and Gupta antiquities and pottery.

Near Bārāmullā in Kashmir, the ancient site of Kanispur¹³, identified with Kaniṣkapura mentioned by Kalhaṇa in his Rājataranṅinī was excavated by the author in 1998-99 and evidence of foundation of the city during the Kushan period were found over the layers of Neolithic settlements going back to the late fourth millennium BCE. The neolithic dates were confirmed later on the basis of C14 determinations.¹⁴

Ter in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra has been identified with ancient Tagara referred to in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and by Ptolemy. Excavations in the 1960s brought to light evidence of Satavahana and Shilahara periods and of a stūpa and other structures and antiquities including Roman clay bullae and glass bottles of the Mediterranean type.¹⁵

Excavations during 1990s by ASI at Chichali¹⁶ in Madhya Pradesh and Paiṭhan,¹⁷ Adam¹⁸ and Mansar¹⁹ in Maharashtra have brought to light significant evidences of early historical period. Sīrpur in Chhattisgarh excavated by J.P. Joshi and A.K. Sharma, where excavations have still been progressing, has revealed valuable antiquities, art objects and important structural complexes.

Excavations at Kanganahalli in Sannati,²⁰ district Gulbarga in Karnataka under K.P. Poonacha from 1994-95 till 1998-99 brought to light excellent stone panels of Satavahana age including a label sculpture of Emperor Aśoka with the legend 'Rāyā Asoko' from the remains of the mahāstūpa.

Apart from regular excavations, some chance finds also prove to be significant. The Horticulture Branch of the ASI discovered in 1961-62 at Kotla Firozshah in Delhi a large number of Chinese porcelain pottery, which is considered to be the largest treasure of its kind in the world found outside China. These ceramics belong to the middle of the 14th century CE when Tughlaq rulers received them from China and as per inscriptions recorded later on the backside of them they were used in the royal kitchen.²¹

As a source of Indian history inscriptions are very important because in most cases they describe contemporary events, thereby imparting authenticity to the history based on them. Aśoka's First Minor Rock Edict is a significant find, discovered in early 2009 in Kaimūr hills at Basahā in Bhabhuā district of Bihar, reported by scholars of Jñana- Pravāha and published by K.K. Thaplyal in a monograph, mentioning the find spot as Ratanpurvā. The site was also visited by the author and a note was printed earlier in e-newsletter SANATAN. Down the hill at Basahā, a stūpa has been noticed by our team of the Archaeological Survey of India.

One of the most important inscriptions, found in Baghlan province of Afghanistan in 1994, written in 23 lines on a stone slab in Tokharian (Bactrian) language and Greek characters, belonging to year 1 of Kanishka, gives genealogical list from Kujula to Kanishka. It clearly indicates that the new language was adopted for official purpose which is called 'Ārya bhāṣā', though Greek script was initially used as it was common amongst the subjects. Kanishka is credited to have introduced an era in his year 1 when he already had sway over the northern India. Various cities of the Kṣatriyas are mentioned under control of Kanishka including Sāketa, Kauśāmbī and Pāṭaliputra. The names of Ujjain, Kaundinya(pura) and Śrīchampā have also been deciphered in the inscription as under Kanishka's rule.

A number of Satavahana inscriptions have come to light, one of them is from Vasana, Dharwar district, Karnataka, belonging to Vasīthiputa Sirī Pulumāvī (3rd cent. CE), which records the making of the pillar by a carpenter (vaḍhakī) for the

(temple of) lord Mahādeva Caṇḍaśiva.

Phanigiri, a Buddhist site has yielded a number of early Brāhmi inscriptions, one such being the inscription of Rudrapuruṣadatta, dated in his 18th regnal year (4th cent. CE). In the recent years, one of the greatest discoveries is the biggest copper plate set, from Indalur, Tamilnadu, containing 85 plates, belonging to the reign of Rajadhiraja Chola I (1053 CE), but was issued during the reign of his successor Rajendra II, which registers the gift of villages to brāhmaṇas. Some Perso-Arabic inscriptions, such as one from Ranthambhor fort recording epigraph of Sultan Fidan Shah of Maiwa and a visitor's record of Akbar's envoy to Iraq from Jaisalmer have been considered important additions in epigraphical studies.

Many Buddhist sites were excavated in between 2001-2003 including Pandavulkonda in East Godawari district of Andhra Pradesh by ASI, Phanigiri in district Nalgonda, AP by the State Archaeology department of AP, Dantapuram in district Srikakulam, AP by the State Archaeology department of AP, Adi Badri in district Yamuna Nagar, Haryana by ASI, Udayagiri-2, district Jajpur, Orissa by ASI, Boxa nagar, district West Tripura by ASI and Dum-Dum mound, district North 24 Pargana, West Bengal by ASI which all belong to the early historical period except Udayagiri 2 which continued till about 11th century CE.

ASI, Srinagar Circle excavated the site Tibba Nameshah in 2008-09 which has revealed a cultural sequence from Painted Grey Ware period to Post-Gupta period.

Excavations at Vaḍnagar were undertaken by the Gujarat State Archaeology Department since 2007 and remains of a Buddhist monastic complex were exposed. The complex could be dated to about 3rd century CE which continued to flourish for about 200 years and the habitation continued at the site till late medieval times.

Excavations were conducted by ASI under the direction of the author at Laṭhiyā, a protected site in district Ghazipur of UP in 2009-10 which revealed the remains of four early Gupta temples and antiquities ranging from about 3rd century BCE to about 6th century CE.

Excavations at the site Kondapur, District Medak, AP have been conducted since 2009 by the ASI, Excavation Branch, Bhubaneshwar. Excavation revealed it as a thriving urban city of the Satavahanas and also proved to be an important centre of Brāhmaṇical faith. The excavation yielded quite a number of glass vessels (pieces of cups nearly 8) with Roman influence, Roman coins (Tiberius), Terracotta pendent embossed with the figure of Emperor Tiberius and other glass material suggesting a brisk trade activity in this place. It has to be ascertained. Inscribed lead and copper coins of Gautamīputra Śātakarṇī, Śrī Śātkarṇī, and Śrī Pulumavī; Roman arretine

ware, roulette ware); glass vessels more akin to that of Arikamedu and Ter; Roman coins, inscribed sealings — datable to the 2nd century BCE to 1st century CE.

Excavations at Malhār, District Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh were undertaken by the Excavation Branch, Nagpur of ASI in 2009 and continuing at present. The site has revealed remains of Satavahana period.

Excavations at Jagjibanpur in West Bengal were carried out by Gautam Sengupta on behalf of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, West Bengal from 1993-94 to 2004-05. The excavations brought to light the existence of a brick-built Buddhist monastery which survived from the middle of the 9th century to the 12th century CE. The monastery has similarities with Vikramśilā and Pahārpur and a large number of beautiful terracotta plaques with divine and semi-divine figures have been found.

Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta excavated the site Moghalmari in 2003-04 in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The site has yielded two structural remains of a Buddhist monastic complex belonging to 7th-8th century CE and 11th-12th centuries CE respectively overlying a Chalcolithic level.

Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) excavated the site Paṭṭanam in Kerala, identified with ancient Muziris from 2007 to 2009 and in association with ASI, Thrissur Circle in 2009-10. Four cultural periods were noticed starting from about 1000 BCE to the late medieval period. The excavations revealed brick architectural remains, Roman amphora, sherds of terra sigillata, West Asian pottery including the green-blue glazed Parthian/Sassanian ceramics, Turquoise Glazed Pottery, rouletted ware, Roman glass bowl fragments, semi precious stone/glass beads, Chinese ceramics, gold ornaments and large quantity of iron objects.

The excavation at Bāngarḥ mound, district Dakshin Dinajpur by ASI, Kolkata Circle since 2008-09 has unearthed successive cultural sequence ranging from Pre-Mauryan to Sultanate/Mughal period. A total cultural deposit of 10.75 M has been found and ascertained. Excavation carried out from 2001- 2002 & 2002-2003 revealed the cultural remains datable to the early centuries of the Christian Era. Evidences of Roman amphorae and a large number of seals and sealing in Brāhmī script are among the prominent discoveries.

The excavation on the slopes of the hills in front of the Ajanta Caves have recently brought to light a brick built monastic complexes. Other finds include coins and figurines.

Throughout the country, a number of very large archaeological sites, some of them with fortification which represent city sites, still remain unexcavated and

unidentified. A number of unprotected but very significant sites are being damaged by cultivation and constructional activities for which no serious attempt has been taken in the recent past in spite of reminding the concerned authorities. Many amateur archaeologists forming some society or organization have been proposing excavation work without proper expertise and having insufficient staff.

To discourage such activities, a National Policy document was prepared by the Archaeological Survey of India and submitted to the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology in its meeting in December, 2009. The national policy has made it essential for every excavation programme to focus on a holistic approach of the study and ensure from excavators to get collected the samples of soil, floors, plaster, human and animal bones, plant remains etc. through appropriate methods and get them examined for incorporation in the detailed report. Paleoclimatic and geomorphological studies also require to be made essential parts in concerned archaeological investigations. Besides this, considerable number of samples for AMS, C14 or other scientific dating must also be collected and sent for examination. There are examples where sites were excavated for continuously many seasons but no scientific date of them are available. The recent scientific dating of samples has enriched our knowledge and has been successfully changing the earlier concept of association of certain ceramics limited to certain period. The results of new data show the antiquity of some sites go back from sixth-seventh century BCE to fifteenth-sixteenth century BCE. The new dates from NBPW levels at Ayodhya, Ajiabir, Jhūsī, Rājdhānī in Uttar Pradesh and Goṭihwā (Nepal) and Juafardih (Bihar) have added a new chapter in understanding the origin and development of early historic archaeology of the region. Thus early dates from Ganwariā, Prahlādpur, Siswāniā, Khairāḍih, Takiāper, Dadūpur and Mathura should not be just ignored which may not be accidental and caused due to wildfire, but may be due to human activity. Similarly the early evidence of Neolithic and Chalolithic phases in the region require special attention for understanding their origin, development and material culture.

References:

1. M.K. Dhavalikar, Historical Archaeology of India, New Delhi, 1999, pp.1-2.
2. R.C. Gaur, Excavations at Atranjikhera - Early Civilization of the Upper Ganga Basin, Delhi, 1983.
3. G.R. Sharma, Excavations at Kausambi 1957-59, Allahabad, 1960; History to Prehistory: Archaeology of Ganga Valley and the Vindhya, Allahabad, 1980.
4. N.C. Ghosh, Excavations at Satanikota 1977-80, New Delhi, 1986.
5. A. Ghosh (ed.), An Encyclopedia of Indian Archaeology, p.216, New Delhi, 1989.
6. B.B. Lal, Excavations at Sringaverapura (1977-86), Vol. I, New Delhi, 1993.

7. A.K. Narain, et.al, Excavations at Rajghat (1957-58, 1960-65), Varanasi, 1976.
8. B.R. Mani, 'Excavations at Sankisa 1995-96', Puratattva, No. 26, New Delhi, 1996.
9. B.R. Mani, 'Excavations at Siswania (District Basti, UP): 1995-1997,' Puratattva, No. 34, New Delhi, 2004.
10. B.R. Mani, 'Archaeological Investigations in Mewat and Excavations at Muhammadnagar and Harnol: 1997-98', Prāgdhārā, No. 14, Lucknow, 2004.
11. B.R. Mani, Delhi- Threshold of the Orient, New Delhi, 1997.
12. B.R. Mani, 'Date of Akhnur Buddhist Terracottas in the Light of Recent Excavations at Ambaran (Akhnur), South Asian Archaeology 2001, Vol. II, Paris, 2005.
13. B.R. Mani, 'Excavations at Kanishpur: 1998-99 (District Baramulla), Kashmir,' Prāgdhārā, No. 10, Lucknow, 2000.
14. B.R. Mani, "Further Evidence on Kashmir Neolithic in the Light of Recent Excavations at Kanishkapura," Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology, Vol. 1, No. 1, Allahabad, summer 2004.
15. A. Ghosh, op.cit. 435-367.
16. Indian Archaeology- 1998-99 - A Review, pp.92-107.
17. Ibid., pp. 107-12
18. Indian Archaeology 1991-92 – A Review, pp.63-68.
19. Indian Archaeology 1998-99 – A Review, pp.14-16.
20. Indian Archaeology – 1997-98 – A Review, pp.93-96.
21. B.R. Mani, "A Hoard of Chinese Blue and White Porcelain from Delhi", Treasures of Ancient China, New Delhi, 2011.