A Preliminary Report on the Excavation at Ramnagar : 2006

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Situated on the right bank of the river Ganga, Ramnagar (83^0 17' E & 25^0 16' N) is a small settlement known for the fort of Maharaja of Banaras. This place is approachable by metal roads from Varanasi and Mughalsarai. Since Ramnagar is located on the opposite bank of the Ganga, near the southern periphery of the Varanasi township, one needs to cross the river while approaching the site from Varanasi. Three bridges,—the Malviya bridge, the Shastri bridge and the Pontoon bridge connect the city of Varanasi with that of Ramnagar. Through Malviya bridge the site is about 15 kilometers from the Varanasi Commissioner's Office, while it can be reached by 8 km long road from Banaras Hindu University through the Shastri bridge. The shortest route to reach Ramnagar is through Pontoon bridge, which covers about 4 kilometers' stretch from the Banaras Hindu University. Ramnagar is a small settlement confined primarily in the front part of the fort, where besides market a Police Staton is also located.

The site was again brought to the limelight after a gap of about three decades by the exploration of Dr. Niraj Pandey of *Jñāna-Pravāha* in February 2005. Further explorations by the experts of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture & Archaeology and *Jñāna-Pravāha* inspired to approach the Archaeological Survey of India to grant permission for excavation and also release some funds. The proposal was favourably considered and approved. The work commenced and continued with the full support of *Jñāna-Pravāha.*

Ancient habitation deposit has a wide spread at Ramnagar. As it has a stretch of about 3 kilemeters from the Fort, which itself is located on the northern end of the mound,—to the Shastri bridge. But, the ancient settlement appears to have confined to the bank and does not occupy area lying beyond half a kilometer away from the river side. The river side near Ramnagar has high embankment (about 15 meters high from water level), over which rests ancient deposits reaching at the height of about 25 meters or so. The most promising topography of the

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ancient site is deep erosion and gullies, which appear to dissect the bank in a series of small units or mounds. The promising ones are utilized as *Ghats* by the present inhabitants of Ramnagar. Each *Ghat*,—be it *Hanumanghat, Kuttaghat, Golaghat, Koriyaghat, Pipraghat* or *Oriyaghat,* is on the mound and is of considerable height. It was noted that the cutting side of the river Ganga is along the series of these ghats, where the water is very deep.

The archaeological investigations carried out by the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University during yester years (fifties and sixties of last century) brought to light remains of ancient city of Varanasi, at Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & T.N.Roy, 1977). Located on the confluence of Barna and Ganga, Rajghat lies at a distance of about 7 km down stream north-west as a crow flies from Ramnagar. Rajghat is situated at the northern boundary of the city of Varanasi. It may be interesting to note that the mound of Rajghat too is marked by almost similar topographical feature, as it is also located on the cutting side of the river.

During exploration conducted at the site in the year 2005 by us, *Oriyaghat* was identified as an undisturbed area with thick habitation deposit yielding Northern Black Polished Ware and Black Slipped Ware potsherds. The excavation of this locality was conducted between March 21 and April 30, 2006. Western side of this mound facing the river appears to be eroded extensively by the river, while southern side too was steeply eroded/vertically cut considerably. In view to obtaining the chronology of anceint habitation deposits at *Oriyaghat* locality a 5 x 5 meters' trench (A1) was planned almost in the centre of the mound. Besides, in view to reach the lower levels fast, and also to ascertain the possibility of a peripheral deposits, trenches were also lain along the erosion of the sides of this mound. Such portions were found suitable for the purpose where upper levels were removed and also where traces of compact earth heaps were noticeable. Trenches C'3, B'2 - C'2, where accordingly planned following the format of grid system lay-out (Fig.1).

In Trench A1 natural horizon was reached at the depth of about 10 meters. This horizon was composed of compact fine textured yellow clay and was overlain by a well sorted yellow-green earth. The habitation *debris* over this horizon was divisible within 16 layers. On account of pottery and other antiquities the unearthed

deposits were classified within—Gupta, Kushana, Post-Northern Black polished Ware, Late Northern Black Polished Ware, Northern Black Polished Ware and Pre-Northern Black Polished Ware periods. The Gupta horizon was associated with Layers 1-2, from which Red Ware pottery, and other antiquities such as areca-nut beads, clay boat etc., were obtained.

The habitation of Kushana period appears to be confined to Layers 3, 4, 5, & 6. This horizon was disturbed by deep pits dug during Gupta times. Marked by structural activities in the form of walls of large bricks (29 x 22 cm), this level also yielded typical Red pottery of Kushana times with predominance of incurved rimmed flaring bowls and a few broken parts of sprinkler. Dull red ware ceramic of this period was also marked by large pots, inkpot lids, handled pans etc. A sealing engraved in *Brahmi* was another important finding, along with beads of stone and terroacotta and antimony rod of copper.

The Post-Northern Black Polished Ware remains were obtained from layers 7, 8, 9 & 10 which was marked by bright Red-orange slipped ware, Grey Ware, a copper cast un inscribed coin dated around third century B.C. (which was retrieved from Layer 8), parts of antlers used for tilting operations, beads of stones and a number of successive floors made of ramming brick-bats, pottery and compact earth. A drain attached with a soak pit (?) was another important feature of the period.

The Late Northern Black Polished Ware phase in this trench corresponds with layers 11, 12 & 13 in which thick and degenerated NBPW sherds were found in very restricted proportion along with Grey and Red Wares. This phase appear to be similar to the Period IC *(circa* 400-200 BC) of Rajghat. A number of successive floors indicate continuous habitation of this mound. The noteworthy findings of this phase were carnelian bead, bone points, terracotta wheel and iron objects.

The Northern Black Polished Ware horizon comparable with the Period IB of Rajghat, was associated with the Layers 14 & 15. Occurrence of Northern Black Polished Ware though restricted in number form two distinct types. The mono-chrome with black shining and the bi-chrome with variety of painting compare very well with the similar findings of Period IB *(circa* 600-400 BC) at Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & T.N.Roy. 1977: 115-116; Pl. XXVII). Occurrence of Black Slipped ware though is from the middle of layer 13 it forms a distinct

tradition in Layer 14. Besides, the Grey ware continue in considerable proportion in which both the traditions, the painted and the unpainted varieties were noted. The others finds included pottery discs, terrocatta balls and beads.

The Pre-Northern Black Polished Ware horizon at this site was identified from Layer 16 (about 75-80 cms thick), which was about one meter thick at places. The Black slipped ware though was the dominant ceramic, occurrence of Black on pink/pale red slipped ware was noteworthy. Over thick pink slipped surface floral designs were painted with thick black pigment with bole lines. The types in this case too were bowls, which was the most preponderate form of this period. A number of bone cut with sharp metal equipment were found along with pottery discs, terracotta balls and stone weights etc. This horizon could be dated to around 800 BC as the material had close similarities with Period IA of Rajghat.

The early and late Northern black polished ware deposits in this trench were marked by preponderance of Grey Ware, which emerged in Layer 9 at the depth of around 4.15 m. below the surface. It's continuation up till layer 16 and it's varieties is noteworthy. Besides, painted sherds one notices grey ware in a variety of shades—light grey of steel grey and thin to thck fabric. A number of sherds also had dark grey/pale black slip at their outer surface and were un slipped in the interior providing the look of balck-and-grey ware. It is the proportion and variety of grey ware which separates Ramnagar from Rajghat, where though grey ware occur in Period I (circa 800-200 BC), it appears to be limited and restricted in surface treatment. The other significant observation at the site (Trench A1) was the history of occurrence of Black Slipped Ware. Though restricted in Layer 13 (first apperance at the depth of 6.80 m below the surface), this ceramic gradually becomes frequent in Layers 14 and 15, when Northern Black Polished Ware is also associated with it. But it's preponderance becomes glaring in the Layer 16, when traces of NBPW sherds could not be obtained. But, some potsherds of grey and pale red wares were painted.

The habitation horizons unearthed in Trench C'3 were more or les similar. Except that a very imposing platform made of rammed brick bats, potsherds and *kankar* was encountered at the depth of 4.30 m. This 0.78 m thick structure was superimposed by eleven layers. Layers 1-3 were of Gupta period, while Layers 4-7, which rested against a Kushana period brick wall rested over Layers 8, 9, 10

& 11, respectively. The later four layers could be assigned to Late Northern Black Polished Ware period. Below the platform lay five distinct layers (12-16), which yielded very good quality of NBPW potsherds in large quantities. Fine monochrome Northern Black Polished Ware potsherds had good concentration in Layers 13, 14 & 15. It could be conjectured that the platform was constructed sometime during the Late Northern Black Polished Ware. Extension of this trench to further south (Trench D'3) revealed a platform,which retained pits filled with pots and ashes, and had a cover of water borne deposit, which was perhaps indicative of floods. This type of indication has also been unearthed from the trenches C'3 and B'2-C'2 at the depth of about 5 meters below the surface.

In view to confirm the nature of platform with compact earth deposit, Trenches B'2-C'2 were excavated. Though the rammed platform appeared to be damaged in Trench B'1-C'1 the overlying yellow earth deposition could be seen distinctively. The upper portion of this deposit too was badly damaged by pits. But, it was Trench C'2, which was very rewarding, as the NBPW horizons of Trench C'3 were repeated with distinct evidence for pottery making. Not only NBPW sherds were found in very large numbers but the sherds evidence a range of colours resulting from various types of firing conditions. Also thick layers of whitish ash bands were found in succession in which some half-baked sherds were embedded. In every likelihood this place appears to be a workshop site for the manufacturer of Northern Black Polished Ware, which was marketed to the city sites. Varanasi (Rajghat) being one of the nearest was perhaps the consumer. The inscriptions on the potsherds of NBPW are added support to this presumption. One of the important antiquities of Trench B'2-C'2 is a copper coin of Mitra rulers of Kausambi *(circa* 300/200 century BC). It was found from Layer 4.

The Northern Black Polished Ware horizon of the Trenches C'3 and B'1-C'1 were rich in antiquities like stone weights, beads, copper objects like bowl and cut bone pieces etc. But, the most significant finding was that a large number of these potsherds was engraved in *Brahmi* letters and other symbols. Similar NBPW and Balck Slipped Ware postsherd have also been reported from Period IC and IB of Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & T.N. Roy. 1977: 115-116; Pl. XXVII). Also two red ware pots *(ghats)* filled with ashes placed over a large Black Slipped Ware dish were unearthed from Layer 14 in Trench C'3. As the detailed study of

the excavated remains from Ramnagar is awaited, it is hoped that a number of significant aspects may come to light when the study is completed.

Even though restricted in nature, the excavations at Ramnagar indicates that the site has potentiality to unveiling not only the history of this very place, but shall also enrich our knowledge about ancient Varanasi and other similar settlements of the middle Ganga plains. A meticulous and planned archaeological excavations of the site is therefore imperative. The danger of loosing the very important historical data which is buried at Ramnagar is due to fast colonization of the bank of the Ganga. Already many areas have been occupied and destroyed due to modern constructional activities. It is high time that deailed study of this site is undertaken immediately, which we are very much committed to undertake in near future.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

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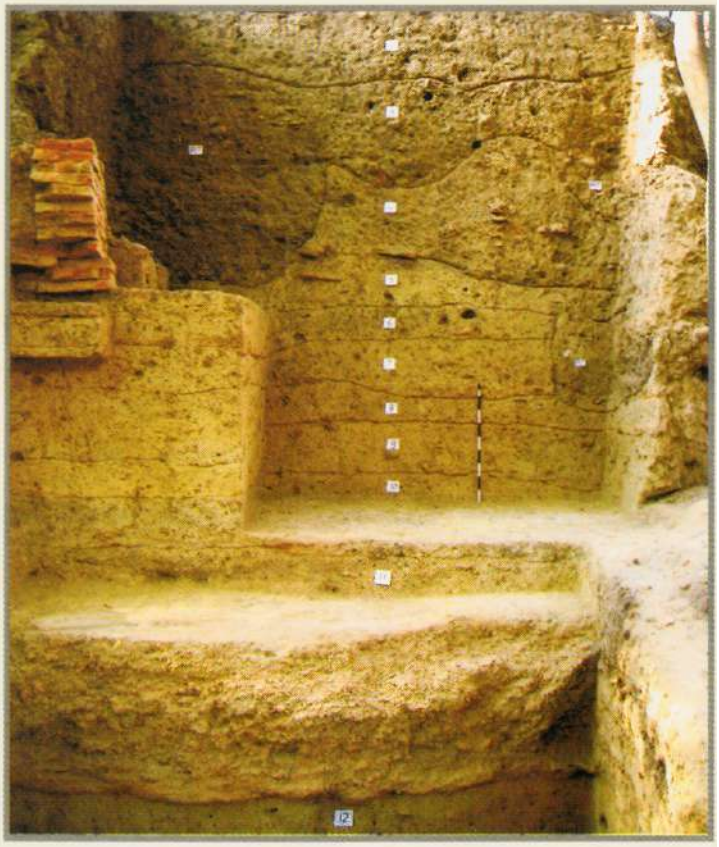
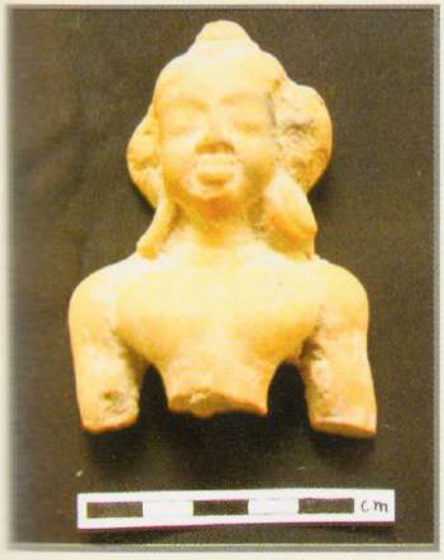
Excavation at Ramnagar





Findings of Field-Exploration at Ramnagar