

## Antiquity & Mythology of Shooltankeshwar in Archaeological Perspective

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Located near Madhavpur village (Lat. 25° 12' & Long. 82° 52'), Shooltankeshwar is locally famous for the Śiva temple, which occupies the highest part of the left bank of the river Ganga. To the residents of Kashi this place is auspicious because of its affiliation with mythological story of *Ganga-avatarana* (heavenly descent of Ganga). According to Purāṇas, river Ganga's descent from the Himalayas to the Plains was a significant event, which happened through efforts of a number of divine and earthly personnels, like king Bhagīratha and lord Śiva. Role of Bhagīratha and Śiva in harnessing Ganga in Kashi region, where it flows now, is also emphasized in mythology (*Kāśīkhaṇḍa* 30.1-9). Shooltankeshwar fairs well in story of advent of the river in Kashi. Pandit Kedarnath Vyas, for instance narrates the event as, when *Sadāśīva Bholenātha* saw Ganga entering in to Kashi region with great velocity, he became worried about inhabitants of Kashi. He then went at the boundary of Kashi with his *triśūla* (trident), and waited for her. After some time Śiva saw Ganga, he went forward and tied her in his trident, and said, 'Gange ! Before entering my city you must promise that you will always flow in Kashi for your devotees. And the inhabitants of aquatics in your womb shall never bother the persons bathing'. At the place where Śiva held Ganga is known as Shoolatankeshwar, where a Śiva-liṅga is still found (Pt. K. Vyas, 1987: *gha*). The trio Śiva, Ganga and Kashi, have been woven in this case as to present the most auspicious combination for Hindu devotees.

Recording of Shooltankeshwar event is part of *Ganga-avatarana* mythology\*. The question is whether the mythology of Shooltankeshwar is a folk memory of a geological event of the remote past which determined the

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\* *Ganga-avatarana* actually means 'coming down of Ganga from heavens'. What is really meant in relation to Kashi is 'entrance of Bhagīratha led Ganga in the premises of Kashi'.

flow of the river Ganga in Kashi region? Similarly, is it possible to determine antiquity of this mythology? In view to date this myth the chronological sequence of *Ganga-avatarana* tale was attempted in an earlier study (Sharma, M., 2013). It was noted for instance that, *Ganga-avatarana* mythology was a popular theme of the epics, and post date Vedic period (Sharma, M., 2013: 130). It portrays origin and descent of the mighty river from Himalayan mountains to the plains with some obstructions. But, recording of this mythology in the Epic Period (c. 400 BCE – 400 CE) does not mention Kashi. Elaboration of *Ganga-avatarana* mythology is well documented in Purāṇas dating between 400 and 1400 CE. Divided within two, the earlier *Purāṇas* (400-700 CE), repeat the story of *Ganga-avatarana* of the Epics. Ganga brought to Kashi by Bhagīratha is not mentioned, for example in *Brahma-purāṇa*, *Padma-purāṇa* and *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa*, etc. Those *Purāṇas*, which have *Kāśī-Mahimā* as a separate section, include description of advent of Ganga in Kashi with the help of *Ganga-avatarana* mythology. In this part also it is said that the Ganga was brought to Kashi by king Bhagīratha. The narration of *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (part of *Skanda-purāṇa*), composed between c. 700 and 1300 CE, is classical instance for the extension of this myth as to include Kashi, at a much later time. This was, perhaps done when Kashi gained the status of a holy place. In view to glorify this religious centre, which had become famous because of Śiva followers, significance of Ganga was highlighted by narrating the same story of its advent which was popular in the upper reaches. Together, Śiva-Kashi-Ganga, merged with each other in such a way as to boost the status of Kashi and Ganga, as one of the most holy geographical units of India. On account of the above scrutiny, the mythology of *Ganga-avatarana* in Kashi appears to have crystallized during medieval times.

The probability based on the mythology of *Ganga-avatarana* is that, the advent of the river Ganga in Kashi region was a geological event. This was tested earlier by Shukla and Jayaswal through geomorphologic and archaeological field studies, around Varanasi and Ramnagar (Srivastva, P. & U.K. Shukla, 2009; and Jayaswal, V. & M. Kumar, 2005-6). On account of absolute dating methods and archaeological findings, it was possible to conclude that advent of the river Ganga in this region was around 40,000 years ago. The present morphology of its banks was formed around 7,000 years ago (Srivastva, P. & U.K. Shukla, 2009). But, its banks were inhabited only in the middle of 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE (Jayaswal, V. & M. Kumar, 2005-6). Since

Shooltankeshwar mythology is part of the main story of *Ganga-avatarana*, advent of Ganga in the region, particularly its present course between Chunar and Gazipur (Fig.1), would be the same. But, the addition of the event in terms of Śiva holding the river on his trident, appears to suggest some kind of obstruction in its flow near Shooltankeshwar, from where the river enters into the boundaries of

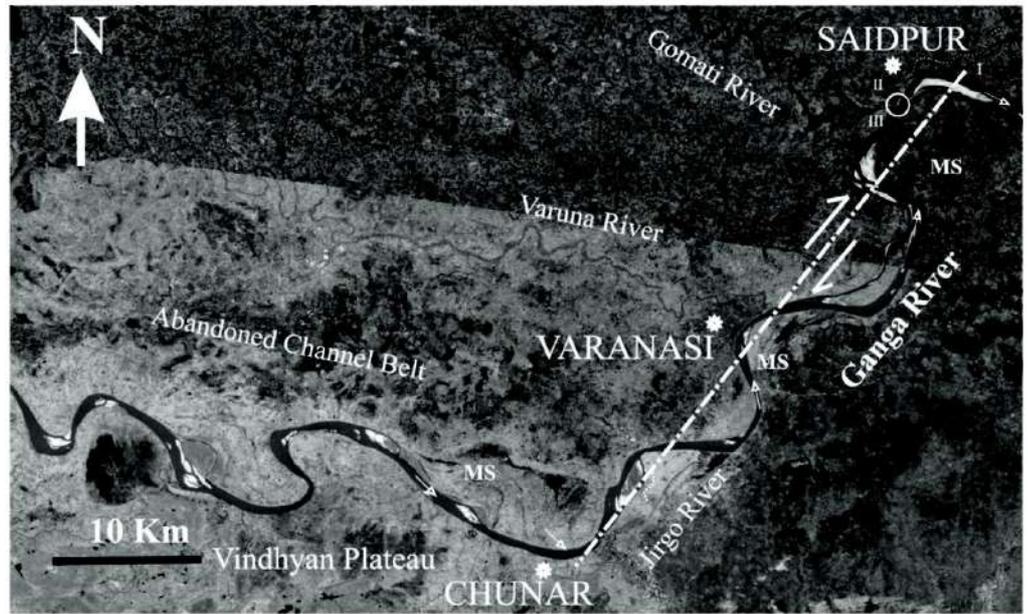


Fig.1. Satellite picture showing Course of the river Ganga in Varanasi (after Shukla, U.K., 2013)

Varanasi city. In depth study of Geological composition of the area and its morphology suggest that the Vindhyan formations near Chunar, which are extended up to the main channel, had governed the northwardly turn of the flow of the river Ganga; making it *Uttaravāhinī*, an auspicious geographical composition. It may be noted that Shooltankeshwar is located, on the opposite

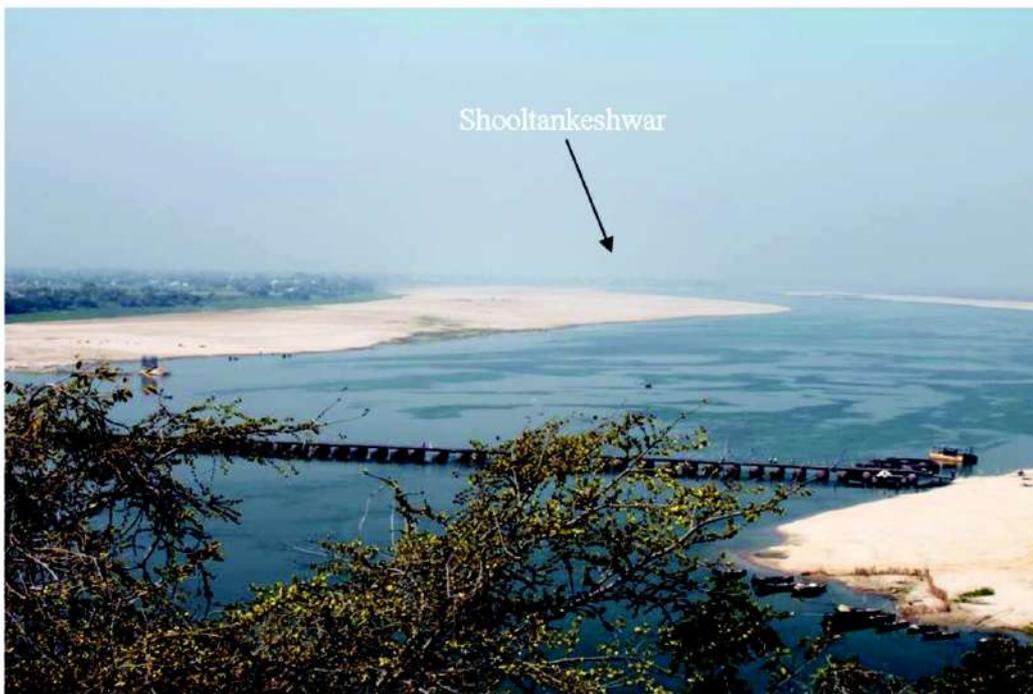


Fig.2. View of turning point of Ganga from Ramnagar Fort.

bank of Chunar, just on the point from where the river turns to north or becomes *Uttaravāhinī* (Fig.2). Antiquity of Shooltankeshwar was important to know, both for the growth of mythology of *Ganga-avatarana*, and other religious

connotations attached with Kashi and Ganga, for which archaeological investigations in the region was an imperative. It is the findings of our field studies which form basis of this paper.

As part of our archaeological investigation in Varanasi, Shooltankeshwar was subject to probing in the months of February and March 2013. The field investigation, besides ascertaining the antiquity of the site, was aimed at locating ancient satellite settlements of Early Historical city of Varanasi. It may be mentioned that, history of Varanasi, in last few decades has rightly relied upon archaeological investigations (Narain, A.K. & T.N. Roy, 1976; Jayaswal, V., 1998 & Jayaswal, V., 2009), as a result of which, a better understanding of ancient Varanasi could be achieved. It is established now that Kashi-Rajghat locality of Varanasi was the metropolitan of Kashi *Janapada*. Krishna Deva's

(ASI) identification of this site as the Capital city of Kashi kingdom, and confirmation by the team of archaeologists of Banaras Hindu University (1960s) is significant to note. But, what was the scenario of the rural Kashi was anybody's guess. Northern periphery of ancient Varanasi was investigated between the years 1994 and 2009. As a result of which a number of sites (Fig.3), such as – Aktha, Kotwa, Ashapur, Tilmanpur and Ramnagar – were discovered and excavated (Jayaswal, V.,

1998). All these sites appear to have served different purposes. For example Kotwa and Ashapur were stone sculptors' villages, while Tilmanpur and Ramnagar were located on the land and navigation routes. The later could be

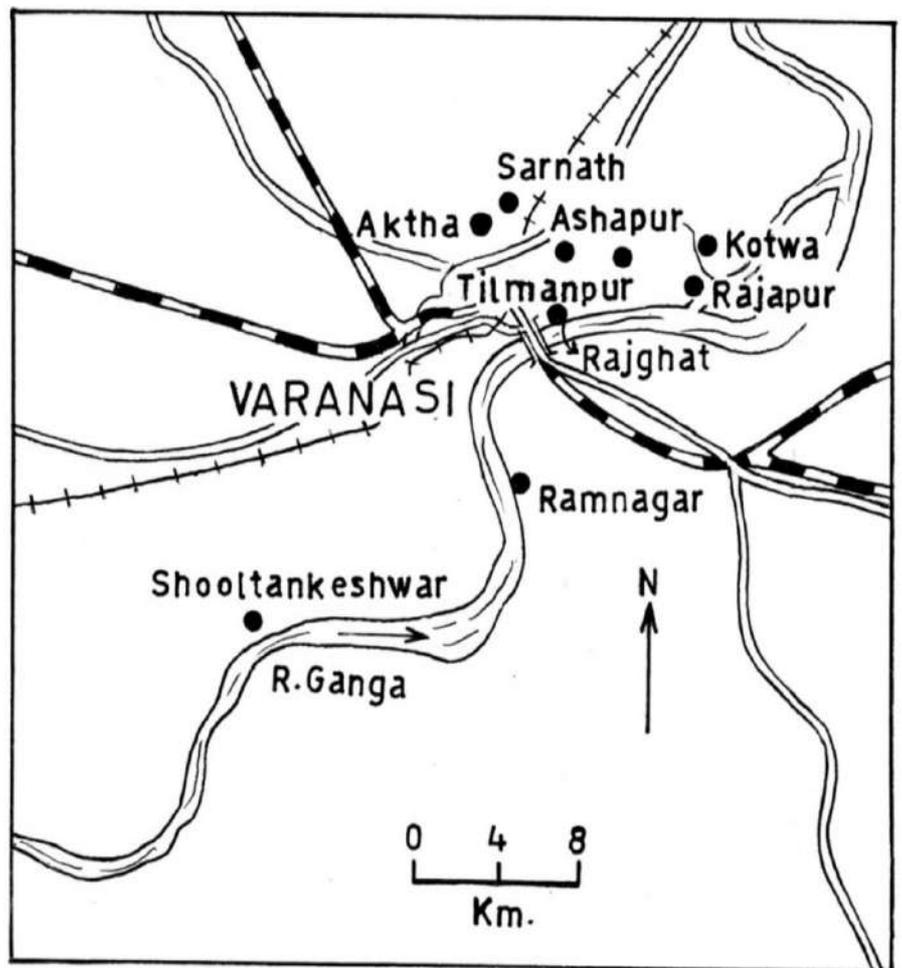


Fig.3. Map of ancient sites of Varanasi in relation to Shooltankeshwar.

identified as *maṇḍī*-settlement, while Aktha, though located on the main land route of northern India was a simple hermitage based settlement. All these sites appear to have clustered on the eastern and northern periphery of the capital city of Kashi kingdom. The western and southern periphery of this city remained unexplored. Thus, for a holistic view of ancient settlements of Kashi southern periphery of Varanasi had to be investigated. Archaeological investigation was also necessary for determining antiquity of the site, and also mythology of Shooltankeshwar.

The site of Shooltankeshwar is in the form of a small mound on the left bank of the river Ganga. It is about 20 km south west of Kashi-Rajghat, the ancient capital city of Kashi, and about 10 km upstream of Ramnagar. While the ancient city of Varanasi was located on the same bank, Ramnagar, the *maṇḍī*-settlement contemporary to the former, occupied the opposite bank of the river Ganga. The undulating terrain along the river Ganges in and around Shooltankeshwar is marked by a number of small raised grounds at close



Fig.4. View of the mound with the Śiva temple, Shooltankeshwar.

intervals. On top of some of these, one to two meter thick archaeological deposits were recorded. Exploration of the area indicated that approximately at an interval of 1 to 2 km were located ancient sites, which were occupied

for short duration. The noteworthy sites were Rudauli, Mudadih, Chitauni, Churamanpur and Gosaipur. But, the largest mound in the area was that on one side of which the temple of Shooltankeshwar is located (Fig.4). It was this site which was subject to detailed probing.



Fig.5. View of the Trenches (K3, J3, I3, H3) on the northern slope of the mound, Shooltankeshwar.

The northern part of the mound, behind the Śiva temple was available for digging. Four trenches (K-3, J-3, I-3 & H-3), each measuring 4 x 4 m were laid in east-west orientation as to give a cross section from slope to the highest point of this mound (Fig.5). Besides, Trench BB'-12 was also excavated on the southern slope facing the river. The concentration of the ancient deposit was towards northern side of the mound.

The thickness of archaeological horizon in the excavated trenches ranged between 1.50 and 0.65 m. Divisible within three layers, the entire habitation debris of Shooltankeshwar represent one culture period. Since all the categories of antiquities obtained

SHOOLTANKESHWAR ( 2013)  
SECTION LOOKING NORTH  
TRENCH NO. I<sub>3</sub>

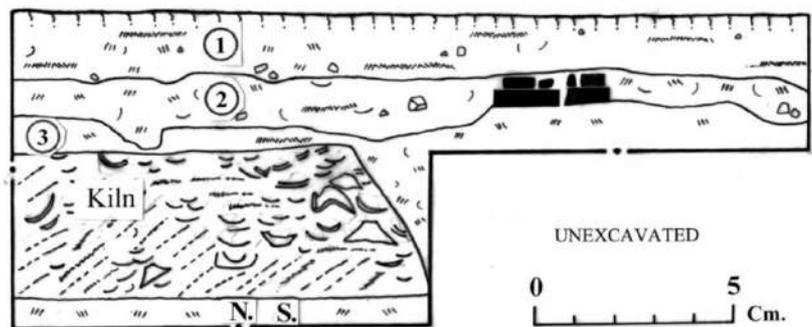


Fig.6. Section of excavated archaeological deposits, Shooltankeshwar.

from these layers were marked by uniform characteristics. The ancient settlement at this site was not only small, but was modest in nature. The floors exposed were made of rammed earth with potsherds and retained post-holes (Fig.7). The walls of the structures were brick constructions (Fig.8). But the bricks used were mostly fragmentary and were inset with clay plaster, a feature comparable to Late Kushan and early Gupta structures of Bhitari (Jayaswal, V., 2001: Figs.15



Fig.7. View of a rammed floor with post-hole in Trench-J-3, Shooltankeshwar.



Fig.8. View of brick wall and a floor with post-hole exposed in Trench H-3, Shooltankeshwar.

37, 46 & 65). A large kiln was encountered in Trench I-3, which was full of ashes and complete and fragmentary pots. Large *paraī*, straight rimmed, slanted sided bowl was found in abundance in this kiln-pit, which were placed mostly upside down over one and other.

Post-holes cut through the bricks in some of the walls, indicating that super structure of all the exposed

structures were composed of thatch. This feature of dwelling structures has been exposed from other late Kushan levels of Varanasi region, like Aktha (Jayaswal, V., 2009: pl.VII) and Ramnagar (Jayaswal, V. & M. Kumar, 2005-6).

The most common category of antiquity from the excavated horizons of Shooltankeshwar was Pottery. The Red Ware collection was composed of mostly medium and rough fabric. The range of pot size was very wide. It

included miniature pots *ghaṭa*-shaped, dish, bowl and vase of about 3.5 cm at one hand and on the other very large storage vessels having 40 cm diameter. The shapes in the large pots were *ghaṭa* (vase), *Kaṭhautī* (basin), *hāṇḍī* (wide mouthed vase), etc.

The typical type of the ceramic collection of Shooltankeshwar was *paraī*, the straight featureless rimmed bowls with slanting sides and



Fig.9. Close up view of the pottery kiln, exposed, Shooltankeshwar.

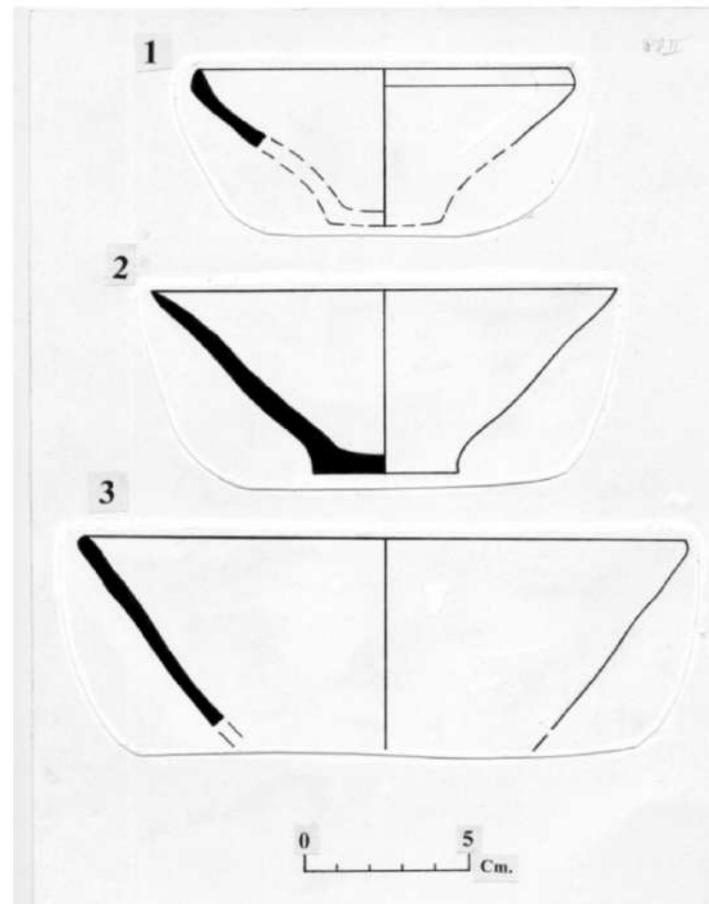


Fig.10. *Paraī*, the typical bowls of Shooltankeshwar ceramic collection

thick base (Fig.10). Made on wheel, the type was in use mostly without surface decoration slip and painting. Made of medium fabric the type is well fired, as a result these acquire red to orange hue. The three common shapes of rim of *paraī* (Fig.10: 1, 2 & 3), are suggestive of different usages.

A range of large pots recovered from Shooltankeshwar bear typical Kushan and Gupta features. Basins (with splayed out and incurved rims (Fig.11: 1 & 2), and large storage jars fare well in this collection. At Shooltankeshwar also these jars were found in very good proportion. High neck *gagarī* (Fig.12: 1), short necked *ghariā*, (Fig.12: 2) and carinated *hāṇḍī*

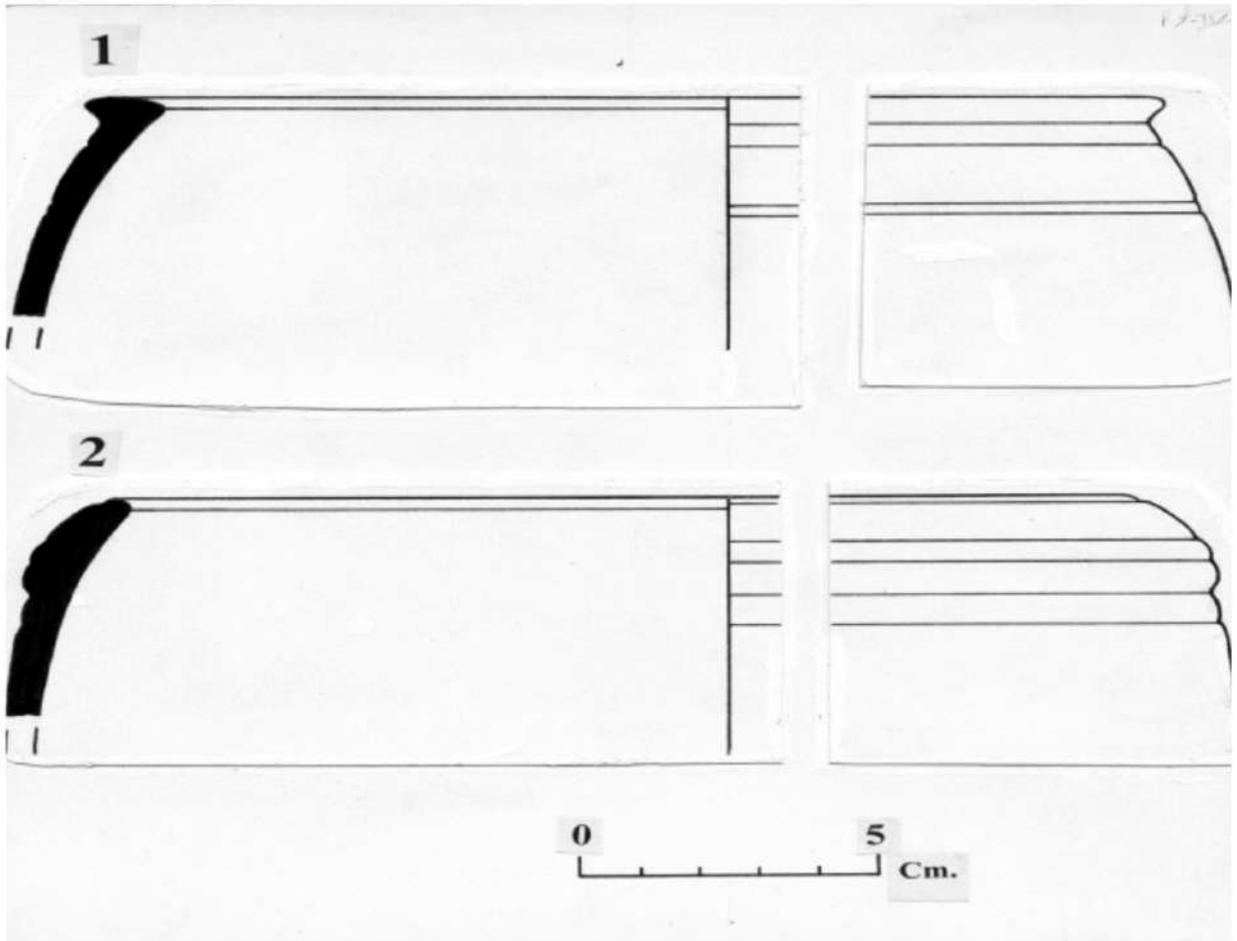


Fig.11. *Kaṭhautī*, typical basins of Shooltankeshwar ceramic collection.

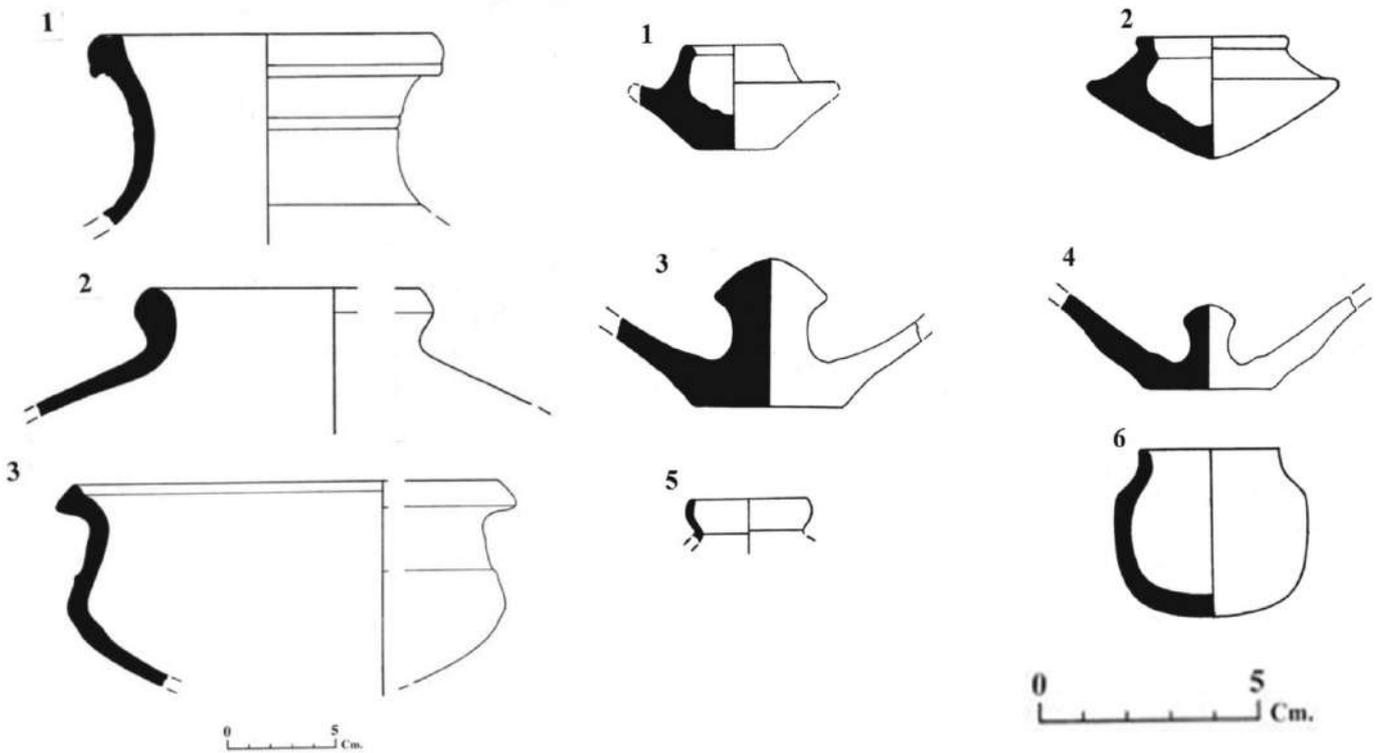


Fig.12. Large storage vessels of Shooltankeshwar ceramic collection

Fig.13. Miniature pots & Lids of Shooltankeshwar ceramic collection

(Fig.12: 3) were the prevalent forms. That some of the storage jars were covered with lids, too is attested from the shards (Fig.13: 1-4). In the lids two varieties were common. One, is with the middle knob (Fig.13: 3 & 4) and the other is with a small *ghaṭa*-shaped pot attached in the centre of the lid (Fig.13: 1 & 2). The lid with pot is of economic significance, since this type could be associated with storage of grains in large quantities, as in grain shops.

Low in count, the group of miniature pots is important to note. Since, on account of technique, shape and traces of utility, these appear to be ritualistic in nature. A handmade miniature vase (Fig.13: 6), is interesting to note, as it has smoky back surface both inside and outside with red and *khāki* patches at the base. The pot was not kiln baked, but appears to be in contact for a long duration with an open fire, on which it was placed as to receive some oily substance. This condition can logically be assigned with some type of fire ritual performance. Fragment of another miniature vase (Fig.13: 5), which was unearthed from the site was wheel made and well fired. But this was a black pot without slip.

Clay modeling at Shooltankeshwar is also represented by restricted number of fragments of terracotta figurines. In this group of 28 broken parts, both hand model and mould made compositions were identified. Moulded figurines were executed by using single mould.

Though animal forms (2) and winged fauna (1), were noted, human figurative forms (mostly mutilated) dominated the collection. The illustrative example which was retrieved during excavation (Fig.14), depicts a lower part of left leg, which is kept on a pedestal. A robe is shown hanging from its side. Cast by a single mould this fine



Fig.14. Fragment of Terracotta figurine exposed during excavation (Trench-I-3), Shooltankeshwar.

fabric specimen was well baked and was also painted with white. Bust of a female made of single mould, another specimen was of dull red colour and was painted with white (Fig.15, left in the lower row). This figurine compares well with the specimen reported from Period IV (c. 300-700 CE) of Kashi-Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & P.K. Agrawala, 1978: 136, 393: Pl.LX, 9). A comparable male/female



Fig.15. Terracotta figurines, Shooltankeshwar.

*bhikṣu/bhikṣuṇī* type which are reported from St.IIIa (c. 650-750 CE) of Ahichchatra (Agrawala, V.S., 1985: 149-151; Pl.LII.A. 188; B. 197-200) and Periods IV and V (c. 100 BCE – 300 CE) of Kumrahar (Altekar, A.S. & V.K. Mishra, 1959: 111-12; Pl.XLIII A), was also recovered from Shooltankeshwar (Trench – I-3). Made of single mould, this broken part of the figurine depicts feet and pedestal. In the hand models two compositions were noteworthy. Lower part of standing female figure with cylindrical base was composed of coarse fabric. This large composition was similar to specimens reported from Kushan and Late Kushan levels of the other sites of the Middle Ganga Plain Period III (c. 100 BCE to 300 CE) of Khairadih (Jayaswal, V., 1991: 62-63; Pl.XV: 40), Strata III A-B (c. 350-700 CE) of Ahichchatra (Agrawala, V.S., 1985: 158; Pl.LVI. A), and Period III (Beginning of Christian era to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) of Kashi-Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & P.K. Agrawala, 1978: 41-42). In comparison to this the other handmade figurine was archaic male form. Hands and legs in this are executed by pressing lump of clay, while the nose is shown by pinching. Ill fired and smoky grey colour of this figurine from other sites

have been identified as 'Star shaped' figures which were made by the worshippers as 'Mother goddess' effigies for ritual purposes (Agrawala, P.K., 1974). That the type was used during the Kushan and Late Kushan times is testified from the findings of Sringaverapur. These clay effigies obtained from Tank C, are dated to second half of 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the end of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, and the one from the structural phase of late Kushan complex has been identified by Lal as figure of child usually held by Hariti Shashti (Lal, B.B., 1993: 141; Pl.CXLVII. b. 1-4). The comparative account of the clay models discussed above indicate that terracotta figurative forms unearthed from Shooltankeshwar are marked by Late Kushan stylistic features.

In the category of daily utility items the most pronounced medium used at Shooltankeshwar was iron. A total of 30 specimens were obtained from the



Fig.16. Iron objects, Shooltankeshwar.

digging. Though the collection was in worn out condition, the identified types were varied (Fig.16). The category included arrow-heads, clamp, bangle, broken part of dagger, knife and nail. There were however some unidentified specimens. Local production of iron objects at the site was testified by occurrence of lumps of iron slag (105 in number) from all the three layers, with the concentration in the upper part of

the mound (Trenches- J-3 & I-3).

The reminiscent of ornaments at Shooltankeshwar site were made of four media terracotta (beads and bangles), iron (bangle), glass (bangle and bead)

and semiprecious stones (beads). Clay ornaments appear to be most common, as the collection of terracotta beads (13) include *ghaṭa* shaped, areca-nut shaped and barrel shaped with grooved exterior, and bangles (8). Not all the terracotta beads were used for ornamentation. As the areca-nut shaped beads are known to be used as spindle-whorl (Jayaswal, V., 2009: 203). All the categories of terracotta objects from Shooltankeshwar are common to find in the early historical levels, Maurya to Gupta at the sites of the Middle Ganga Plain.

The glass bangles were small (diameter 3.6 cm) and large (diameter 6.6 cm) and were black in colour. The type (plano-convex cross-section) was also in use during Kushan times at Aktha (Jayaswal, V., 2009: 174). The small iron bangle (diameter 2.5 cm) found at Shooltankeshwar was open at one end. Its one end was broad and the other was divided by small cut mark. This square cross-sectioned specimen compares with a similar type reported from Period III (c. 200 BCE – 200 CE) of Vaishali (Sinha, B.P. & S.R. Roy. 1969: 200; Pl.LXXXVII: 5). The beads of semi-precious stones (carnelian and agate) like other antiquities were also restricted in number (total being 5). These were in different shapes hexagonal, long cylindrical, tetragonal cylindrical and barrel circular (Fig.17). Two were unfinished and the other two were complete specimens. The

hexagonal and tetragonal types of the collection have closeness with the specimens reported from Kushan and Late Kushan levels of Kashi-Rajghat (Narain, A.K. & P. Singh, 1977: 24 & 40; Pl.I: 24).



Fig.17. Beads & bangles of terracotta, glass and semi-precious stones, Shooltankeshwar.

Another important category of antiquity found at Shooltankeshwar was Pottery-discs (101). Made on potsherds of all kinds of fabric (Fig.18), which



Fig.18. Pottery-discs from Shooltankeshwar

were collected during excavation fine to coarse Red Ware, slipped and un-slipped were utilized for the purpose. We have inferred in our earlier publications that this category can be identified as *kapāla*, which according to the ancient texts were used as containers for cooking food to be offered to deity during *Yajña* (Jayaswal, V. & M. Sharma. 2006: 38-47).

It has also been shown by us that amount of pottery-discs decreases considerably after 4<sup>th</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, when Buddhism was embraced by large sections of the society in the Middle Ganga Plain (Jayaswal, V., 2009: 30-34). If this observation is accepted, then the high proportion of pottery-discs at Shooltankeshwar is noteworthy. Does it not convey that the inhabitants of ancient settlement at Shooltankeshwar were followers of Brahmnic faith?

The above account of the archaeological remains of Shooltankeshwar confirms that this site was inhabited during late Kushan times, for some time (about half a century). The exposed structures here indicate non-urban and non-permanent nature of the settlement. Locations of other contemporary sites around Shooltankeshwar, which were discovered during exploration, too were of similar nature. It may further be inferred that the region was abandoned after

first occupation (late Kushan period). One does find some late medieval icons in the fields. But no imposing structure or mound retaining long duration dwellings of ancient communities could be found in the region. It may be important to recall that most of the smaller settlements, like Aktha, Ramnagar, Tilmanpur, etc., of Varanasi region were deserted after Kushan/during late Kushan times (Jayaswal, V., 1998 & 2009). Desertion of city site Kashi-Rajghat, also is recorded in post-Kushan period in the excavation report (Narain, A.K. & T.N. Roy, 1977). The question arising from this instance, therefore, was where had people of Varanasi gone? It may be presumed that a good section of the population of the city dwellers had migrated from Kashi-Rajghat region to the south-west, Dashashwamedh/Pacca-mahal area (Jayaswal, V., 2009: 214), which was the later nucleus of Varanasi city. Then how does one explain the movement of people from smaller settlements of Varanasi? Results of Archaeological investigations conducted in Shooltankeshwar region provide answer to this enquiry. It appears that migration of inhabitants of Varanasi took place during the late Kushan times. This community movement in the form of small groups was perhaps from Varanasi to south-west along the river Ganga. Due to Ganga being one of the major trade routes during early historical times, it may be held that people were very familiar with the geomorphology of the bank sides. And it was easier to select a suitable habitat, as well as be in touch with other community members. In the process of the suggested migration, it is logical to assume that during this process new localities were inhabited, while the earlier ones were deserted. We have mentioned above that the small settlements of Varanasi regions were completely deserted and the Shooltankeshwar region was dotted with a number of small sites in the late Kushan period. The restricted number of antiquities, recovered from excavation at Shooltankeshwar, is further indicator of living debris of immigrants. As in such a situation minimum daily utility items are used. If this hypothesis is accepted then one is faced with another very pertinent question Where did these moving communities finally settled? Answer to this question needs further study and a close scrutiny of pan Ganga Valley archaeological remains of late and post Kushan settlements, which is difficult to achieve at the moment.

The mythology related with Shooltankeshwar site appears to be an extended version of *Ganga-avtarana story*, which became prevalent during medieval times. As the evidence stand today, the site is significant for its

geomorphological feature the turning point of the channel of Ganga. The satellite imagery clearly shows that up to Chunar the course of the river has horizontal west to east flow (Fig.1). But, as the river crosses Chunar, at Shooltankeshwar its channel takes a sharp turn to north (Fig.2) and flows in vertical direction through Varanasi to Saidpur (Gazipur district). The mythology also mentions that lord Śiva seeing Ganga entering Varanasi goes towards her to assure its mild flow for the city. The change in the direction of the flow of the river, however, does not occur in the mythology. But, can it not be presumed that due to the flow in northern direction the damaging capacity, the velocity of Ganga was controlled, and it is perhaps this geomorphologic feature which is implied in the mythology under consideration. In view to confirm this hypothesis, detailed geological and geomorphic studies are to be taken up. In the present state of our knowledge, it appears that the current course of the river in Varanasi was governed by geological events, which were imbibed by the mythological story of *Ganga-avtarana of the Purāṇas, both with regard to the channel brought near Manikarnika and that of some kind of obstruction near Shooltankeshwar, which controlled velocity of the river.*

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