

Pre and Proto- History of Birbhum District, West Bengal; an Overview

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Abstract: From the historical point of view Birbhum is extraordinary rich. Local history, traditions and artifacts are spread over different places of Birbhum and we have noticed the evidences of prehistory, proto history and different phases of history. There are many folk tales prevailing in Birbhum. Few local history writers also explored the local traditions through their writing. Present study deals with an overview of explored and excavated pre and proto historic sites of the district; we are giving their location, characteristic features, and time range on the basis of the available artifacts from the sites

Key words: Physical features, Site names, Chronology, Artifacts and characteristic features.

I. INTRODUCTION

The district is situated in the western side and in the northern *Rarh Region* of West Bengal. Geographically the district lies between 23° 32' 30" and 24° 35' 0" north latitude and 88° 1' 40" and 87° 5' 25" east longitude. According to W.W Hunter, it means the land of heroes (*vira-bhumi*). Historical records show that the district was mainly under different Hindu rulers. So it is quite possible, that the district was named 'Birbhum' - to indicate simply the territory of the 'Bir' titled kings (*Bir Rajas*). Birbhum is bounded on the north and west by Pakur, Dumka (Jharkhand), on east by the district of Murshidabad and Burdwan, and on the south by Purbo(East)Burdwan, from which it is separates by the Ajay River

II. PHYSICAL FEATURES

Birbhum as we understand it today is the out-come of geological and geographical changes. Geologically the district shows a succession of Archaeans, lower and upper Gondwanas, Rajmahal traps, tertiary rocks and old and new alluvium soils. Geographically main interest of the district is, it is one of the district of West Bengal, which is a continuation of the Chotanagpur plateau and gradually merging into the Gangetic alluvium. During the colonial period, these changes are aptly reflected in the colonial period account and post- independence Government publication. L.S.S, O' Malley's Birbhum District gazetteer published in 1910 probably gives the first coherent and connected account of the geography of Birbhum. O' Malley discussed the length, physical aspects of the district, wherein he discussed boundaries, configuration, River system, botany, flora and fauna, geology and climate. It will be worthwhile to cite some examples from O'Malley's account 'The geological formations represented in Birbhum are Archaean gneiss, the Gondwana system, laterite and Gangetic alluvium. The gneiss belongs to the division designated as Bengal gneiss, which is remarkable for the great variety of rocks which it contains. The Gondwana system is represented by the Barakar Subdivision of the lower Gondwana. Coal measures are found in this latter sub division, which forms the small Tangsuli coal-field on the northern bank of the Mor river at the northern edge of the Raniganj coal-fields. The coal in those outcrops is scanty and of poor quality, and as a rule, is scarcely more than carbonaceous shale. Ferruginous laterite occupies large area in the valley of the Mor and Ajay River'.

III. PRE – HISTORY

Before discussing the Pre-history of Birbhum, it is necessary to know how pre historic study started in West Bengal. The muse of prehistoric research inside the district was laid down with the aid of Vallentine Ball. Just two years after the discovery of the first Paleolithic tools in India at Pallavaram, near madras, in 1863, the primary lower Paleolithic hand axe turned into discovered in Bengal at Kunkune, remote approximately 19 km north-west from Govindapur in Bankura in 1865, and handaxe from Gopinathpur (Gopeenathpoor), eighteen kilometers south-west of Biharinath hill (1867). This changed into observed via discovery of some extra Paleolithic tools from the Ranigunj cold field area in lateritic context in West-Burdwan district of West Bengal. Then almost hundred years there were very few works on Pre-history. The Stone Age studies must have started in Bengal with the pioneering discoveries crafted from Bankura and Burdwan districts as it happened in madras after the Pallavaram discovery. unluckily, the importance of the primary discovery of Paleolithic in Bengal did no longer acquire due attention, and simplest in the 1940s a few attempts had been made to understand the past stone age of Bengal however these were intermittent and sporadic in nature, and no similarly severe studies in investigating the stone age of Bengal was undertaken until the 1960s. In 1959, V.D. Krishnaswami, ex-director of ASI Kolkata Circle and Debala Mitra, Ex- Director General of ASI they both explored in Bankura and river valleys of Kanshwati, Kumari and Jam in Purulia. From the exploration they discovered lower and middle Paleolithic artifacts. Later, more Stone Age sites have been identified in West Bengal by department of archaeology, Kolkata University. Ashok Kumar Ghosh, explored Ghargram district and Belephari. Likewise, late Paresch Chandra Dasgupta, ex-Directorate of archaeology, Government of West Bengal also played an important role in this field. In the 1960s and 70s, he explored various region in the districts like -*Susunia* and *Biharinath* hill and adjacent area in Bankura, Subarnarekha river valley area in Medinipur, Baghmundi, Balarampur, Arsha, Kanshawati and Kumari river valley region, Birbhum and Murshidabad. It is to admit that, these works enriched the Pre historic study in Bengal. This work is more dynamic after 1977. Otherwise various Universities, institutions, interested persons and local scholars have been exploring and excavating various archaeological sites in the districts.

In Birbhum, the evidence of the lower Palaeolithic cultural remains is associated with the acheulian culture, the acheulian has been subdivided into early, middle, and late. There is a lack of properly-dated acheulian sites in Bengal. The in situ prevalence of acheulian implements inside the upper Lalgahar formation in Midnapur district (Ghosh, 1966; Chakrabarti, 2001) and at the Pleistocene beds from the vicinity around the Susania hills in Bankura district (Sastri, 1966) in all likelihood shows their origin in higher Pleistocene. But the acheulian regarded later in Birbhum, as it stands these days, has a totally confined regarding their distribution, especially in northwest Birbhum at Malutisadarghat (Now in Dumka district, Jharkhand) on Chila, the rivulet that flows in birbhum – Jharkhand borderland. The gathering of artifacts of this locality is small. It consists of divergent edges splayed bit rounded but cleaver, an elongated oval hand axe, nine scarpers and a few unmodified wastes. Raw materials used for the manufacturing the equipment are sand stones, basalt, chert and jasper.

In addition to south, approximately seventeen kilometers from the MalutiSadarGhat and twelve kilometers north from Suri, inside the place of the basalt quarry, at Hatgacha Mouza, Mahammadbazar P.S, a reconnaissance survey yielded twenty-nine artifacts from atop a large flat planer floor. The tertiary rock-surface upon which the Paleolithic artifacts have been determined within the area of the basalt quarry at Hatgacha Mouza of the Mahammadbazar P.S should, in no way, be in their geological context. Nevertheless, the first discovery of Paleolithic artifacts from this old landmass is significant from the viewpoint of the past hunter-gatherer's movement in the region. After a preliminary analysis these tools had been found, viz, scrapers, peignoirs, notches, burins, blades, flake-blades, cores and unmodified but halved agate pebble. These tools mainly made of chert, besides, others raw materials like jasper and agate also had been used.

After judging the overall character, composition. Morphological, typological and technological features of the reported artifacts from Hatgacha, it would be difficult to place them in Middle Paleolithic, nor could they be given the status of an Upper Paleolithic. This kind of industry had been recognized in 1889 in middle reaches of the Chilla valley and, therefore, based upon typological analogy, the Hatgacha collection could well be a transitional Middle Paleolithic- Upper Paleolithic industry.

In Birbhum, there are at least five Mesolithic sites, viz, Paruldanga, Syambati, Cheap-Kuti, Deer-Park, Ballabhpur these all are situated within a 15 kilometers radius of Ajay-Mayurakshi water divide in the Kopai-Bakreswar valley. Among them Paruldanga is most important because, this site represents activities of longer duration and denotes probably larger groups were occupied at Paruldanga. Paruldanga area is located at 23.42'15" N: 87. 43' 20" E, and about 4 kilometers north of Bolpur Railway station. The site was discovered in August 1979 and was subjected to trial excavation and explored in March 1981 by Prof. Subrata Chakrabarti, department of A.I.H.C& A, Visva-Bharati. In 1989 and 1993 further exploration was carried out during these exploration many new materials was discovered. Prof. Subrata Chakrabarti re-explored the site, Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic assemblages were collected from here. There is indication of lithic reduction collection within the manufacture of artefacts along with flake-blade to blade and blade-permit equipment. In the paruldanga series the completed tools are outnumbered by debitage, probable an indication of tool knapping on the site. The finished tools encompass blades, lunates, factors, borers, burins, scrapers, notches and retouched flakes. Some pieces of triangles had been found from the floor however none found in excavation. The chert is the dominant raw material followed by agate, quartz and fossil woods employed for tool manufacture at Paruldanga. The site Shyambati comprises of twelve specimens on a softer Variety of basaltic rocks. These are, four medium size fan-shaped flakes, three similar flakes showing attempts to retouch, four slender and thick blades and a flattened fluted core. Another important site is Taltorer Danga, from this site sixty three pieces artifacts have been found, of which the main bulk is of basaltic materials similar to that found in the Shyambati collections. The rest of the raw materials used agate, quartzite and fossilized wood. Most of the collection is flake and retouched and non-retouched flakes also reported from here.

IV. PROTO – HISTORY

In Birbhum, at least forty protohistoric sites have been discovered; these villages-sites are located below 50 metre contour and stood on proximal reaches of the river valley built up by alluviums. Chalcolithic sites in the district are small in size and not very reach in terms of materials recover theirs from. BRW is the most distinctive artefacts from these sites followed by beads, fragmentary terracotta figurines and very merge copper object etc. Most likely the sites represent early village settlements of modest dimension. Proto-historic sites of the district are mostly identified by exploration works and few sites have been excavated.

Bahiri- (23.6476° N, 87.7677° E) Bahiri is a big village and the place is situated 10 kilometers east of Bolpur on the Bolpur – Palitpur road. The river Ajay flows six kilometers south of the village. The mound was excavated by Dilip Kumar Chakrabarty and S. Jamal Hassan on behalf of the archaeology and Museum Unit of the Department of History, Delhi University, in March 1981. This village-site consist of three mounds, one among them roughly measures 90 m (north-south) and 70 m (east-west). The circumference is roughly 250m and the height is about 3 m from the surrounding plain level. The second mound is very low; it is just about one meter above the plain level but is quite extensive, roughly 300 meter in circumference. The third mound is locally known as Chandra HazarDanga. The mound roughly measured 80m (north-south) and 70m (east-west). The central section of Chandra HazarDanga yields a considerable amount of Black-and-red pottery, all of which is actually from the earth dumped from the pond.

Beluti: The place is around 13 km toward the east of Bolpur on the Bolpur-Nanoor road. The mound is in the compound of higher secondary school (Beluti M.K.M High School) which lies quickly toward the north of Bolpur-Nanoor road. The original height of the mound was about 6m but recently the site is totally destroyed due to construction of school building. Interesting findings from this site are shreds of black-and-red ware, channel spouted bowls, lustrous red ware, perforated pottery etc. P.C.Dasgupta also collected microlithic waste flake and a fragment of fossil wood from Beluti.

Nanoor: (23.7040° N, 87.8673° E) The site is about 20 kilometers East of Bolpur. There is a high mound (152.4 x 5.2m), locally known as 'ChandidaserBhita', Nanoor is praised as the origination of Chandidas, the popular Bengali poet of Medieval time. The mound is named according to him as ChandidaserBhita. and it was first excavated (1945-46) by K.G. Goswami on behalf of Asutosh Museum, Kolkata University. During exploration shreds of black –and- red ware had been already found by Debala Mitra, knife edges bowls shreds of red ware with painted bands, as also incised and stamped, notwithstanding those of the black-and-red ware, were gathered by S.M Das. The site was again excavated by the Eastern Circle of ASI in 1964. The pottery composes including a few characteristic, states of the Chalcolithic Black-and-red ware, which however did not get due thought of that time. From the excavation it reveals that the site was under occupation from Protohistoric to modern times intervening through the early-historic and medieval periods. The lower levels of the sites are relatively undisturbed and are divided into two periods. Period I is Chalcolithic and period II is degenerated Chalcolithic, no radio carbon based dates are accessible for Nanoor.

Kirnahar: The site is around 28 kilometers from Bolpur and it is found 8 Kilometers north of Nanoor. The mound locally known as Chandidaser Pats, lies on the western side of the village (Paschimpara). An estimation of the mound is given by Chakrabarti, Sengupta and others, the mound is 60 m north-south by 70 m east-west, tallness is around 3 m, total extent a more than one acre, and it is hemispherical in shape. They gathered black-and-red ware, red slip ware, black slipped ware with incised designed, microlithic flakes, one core, one blade, one point, one burin, iron slag and stone pieces and broad hints of the later brick structures from the site. Other than shreds of black-and- red ware, including the channel spouted bowls, as likewise those of lustrous red ware painted in black and perforated pottery were recouped from Kirnahr.

Charkalgram: The village is under Nanoor police station, and is about 4 kilometers south-west of Nanoor. This is a black-and-red ware site. The site is very board and secured an area of about 6 acres. The ancient occupational deposit is located in the western part of the village and locally known as Kholakuchir Math. Black-and-red ware, red and grey ware, microlithic flakes and iron slag were reported from here.

Supur: The site is situated on the left bank of the river Ajay and around 3 km south of Bolpur. There is a relinquished current Siva temple, on the highest point of the mound is popularly known as *Sivtala* mound, where the road to the village of Supur fans out from the Bolpur-Illambazar road. An annual fair is held in February (*ShivaratriMela*). Eastern side of the Temple there is a stone made Bhairava image without hand, legs and head and it's belongs to 10th -12th century C.E. Black-and-red ware, microlithic, agate and chalcedony pieces used as raw materials and clear evidences of burnt brick structures above the Black-and-red ware level. There is another mound in the village- *SurothrazarDhibi*. *Devimahatmya* section of *Markandeya Purana* mention that there was a king named *Surotha*, from the name of *Surath Raja*, the name of this village is super and the mound is also named *SurothrazarDhibi*. The mound is 2 m high from the plain level. From this site Black-and-red ware, microlithic quartz and fossil wood flakes and later historical artifacts were reported from here. According to P.C. Dasgupta, the findings from the eroded base of *SurothrazarDhibi* include small fragments of mutilated lustrous red and chocolate-brown wares as also a small carnelian bead and a retouch microlithic.

Mundira: Mundira is a village placed in Illambazar Police station of Birbhum district, it is 11 kilometers from Illambazar and 2 kilometers south-east of Joydev-Kenduli village. The village is situated to the left bank of the river Ajay. The artifacts reported from the site bear evidence of an industry of microlithic apart from revealing the use of painted black-and-red ware and lustrous red ware, channel-spouted bowls as also perforated pottery. The Department of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal, in the course of exploration discovered the Shreds of black-and-red ware, including the channel-spouted bowls, lustrous red ware painted in black and perforated pottery from the site.

Mahisdal: It is an important Protohistoric site of West Bengal, the site is located on the northern bank of the river Kopai, and it is around 3 km north-east of Santiniketan. The mound certainly affected by the railway bridge construction. Few Shreds of black-and-red ware was discovered by R.P Das, similar to those found from Panduk and Nanoor. This extensive site (230/135 m) is five meters high from surrounding field. Mrs J. Birmingham, senior Lecture in archaeology of the University of Sydney, collected black-and-red ware from Mahisdhal, during the course of an intensive exploration. According to Chakrabarti and others, it is a single occupational deposit site; now in the modern village the continuity of occupation has been noticed. In the year 1963-64 a small scale excavation was undertaken by Shri R.P Das, Eastern Circle of ASI, from this excavation Maximum deposit of 2 meters is revealed. Two cultural periods have been noticed, period I is Chalcolithic and use of iron has been noticed in period II.

Excavator identified three structural phases, two among them belonging to period I. The floors of period I was made of beaten earth with a soling of rammed terracotta nodules. The structures were made of reed-impressed clay-daubs, burnt husk-impressed clay plaster and large quantities of ash, which indicate that the houses were simple. An interesting discovery was charred-rice found scattered all over the second floor level. The ceramics reported from the period I were - black-and-red ware, plain and painted in white as well as in black, black painted red ware, red ware, channel- spouted bowl, carinated bowl etc. otherwise microliths, consisting of scrapers, lunates, short blades, terracotta, including a small realistic small phallus were also found.

Hatikra: The site is situated on the southern bank of the river Brakeswar, and it is 13 kilometers south of Suri. Hatikra was excavated by Prof N.C. Ghosh and A.K. Nag in 1985, on behalf of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Visva-Bharati. Measurement of the site is 190 m from north to south and 2-2.5 m high from the ground level.

According to Chakrabarti and others this site covers an area of 4 acres, and recently the mound is badly affected by the ponds and also by construction of Bolpur- Suri road. Occupational deposit of Hatikra is divided in two periods, period I belongs to Chalcolithic and period II is Ferro-Chalcolithic. There is no intermediate period between Chalcolithic and Ferro- chalcolithic. Chalcolithic phase or period I is about 78 cm thick deposit on average and available artifacts from this period were red, black-and-red ware and buff wares. It is appeared from the excavation report that the red ware was more popular than other types. Grey and black slipped ware also found from the site, but they were very few in number. The shapes of red ware were- vase, bowl and dish, and most of the black-and-red ware were vessels with an out turned rim, straight neck and angular shoulder, deep bowls and deep basins. Other important associated findings were stone Muller, pounders, beads, terracotta beads and a terracotta black and red disc.

The tradition of earlier culture continues without any perceptible change in Period II. The most significant innovation of this period is the advent of iron technology. Eight iron pieces and few lumps of slag were recovered. The iron made identifiable object was a sickle.

Haraipur: Haraipur (*Salkhana-Yaksherdanga*) is under Suri Police station and it is thirty kilometer from Bolpur and Eight kilometers from Hatikra. The site is situated on the bank of the river Mayurakshi on Bolpur – Suri road. Before its excavation the site was explored in several times. During the exploration of 1965-66 by Mrs. J Birmingham and Shri V. Sen of the Eastern Circle of A.S.I, the site yielded Black-and-red ware. In 1975-76 department of Archaeology, Kolkata University, besides black-and-red ware, they also discovered microliths and beads of semi-precious stone from the site.

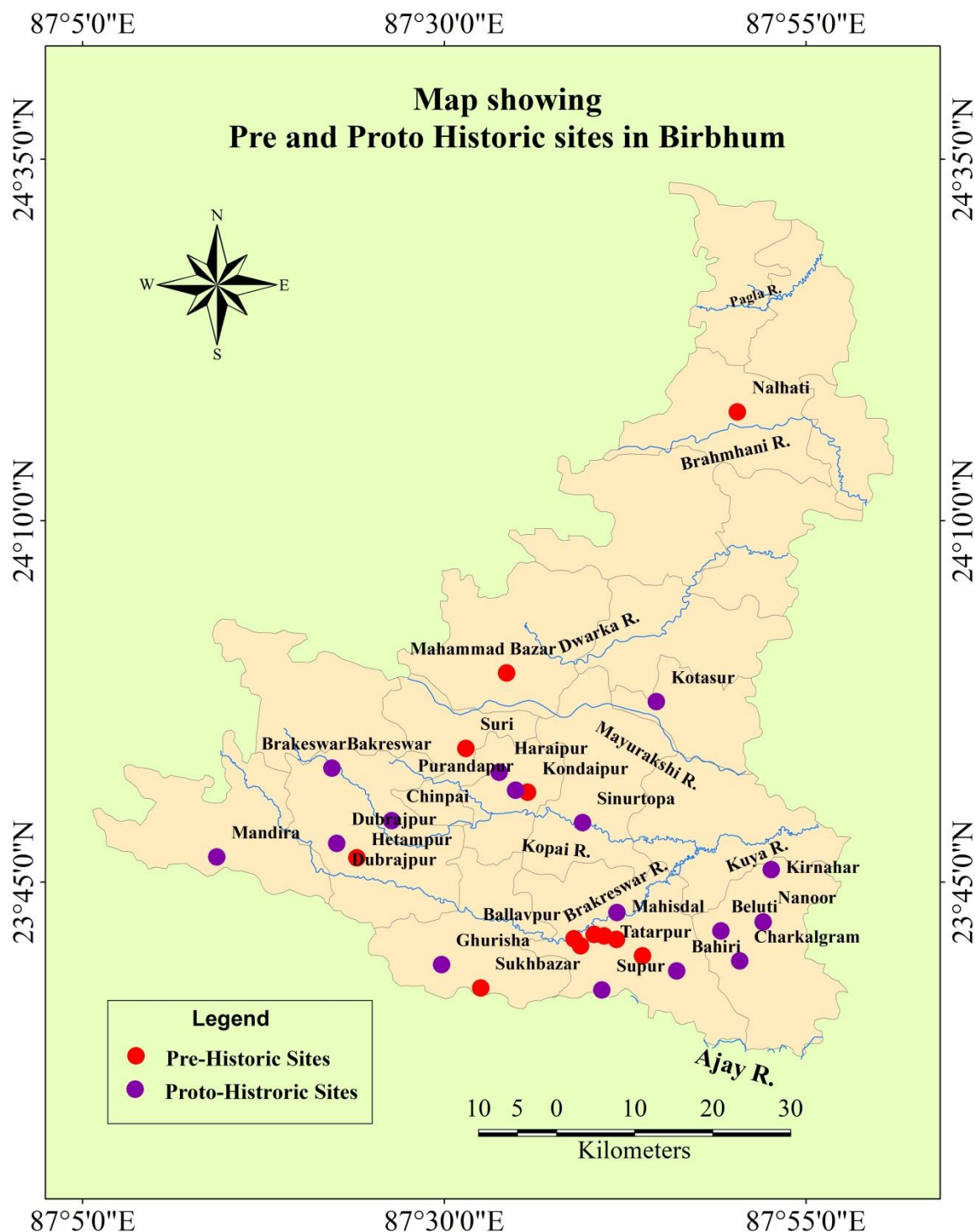
The site was excavated by R.C. Kar, R.G. Pandeya and Amir Singh, Eastern Circle of ASI, in 1964-65. 3.5m deep occupational strata revealed from the excavation and this occupational stratum is consisted by six layers. Out of 3.5m deposit, 2.6m thick is the Chalcolithic habitation deposit. The pottery consisted of plain and painted black-and-red ware, local grey ware, red slipped ware, otherwise, in layer-2 few fallen bricks of a structure were noticed. Ten extended burials of children were the most important discovery from the site. These burials were oriented from north to south within the habitation areas. Though, no funerary objects or grave goods were found from these burials.

Asurdanga: The site is situated at Asuralay village in Mayureswar I Police Station and it is eleven kilometers from Mayureswar via Santhia- Kotasur – Rampurhat road. The site has excavated by Dr. Rajat Sanyal, head of the Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta (March- April, 2018). The mound is about two meters from the surface of the earth, has revealed a proto historic settlement. The initial estimate tells that the settlement can be dated to the second millennium BC. A large amount of black and red ware pottery (BRW) has been found; other contemporary pottery such as red ware; black ware and buff ware have also been found. Dr. Sanyal is of the opinion that, “We have found beads made of semi-precious stone like agate, carnelian and chalcedony. Unfinished beads and drills further suggest that craftsmen working at the settlement were not only making these artifacts for local consumption,” but also for others sites.

These are mostly excavated and important proto-historic sites of Birbhum. It has been appeared that the chalcolithic settlements were increased in the central and southern parts of the district, because commonly these sites are located in those regions. Apart from these, there are more Proto-historic sites in the district, like- Kotasur, Bansra, Kagas, Nirbhaitala, Potanda, Brakeswar, Batikar, Behariya, Dubrajpur, Keora-Jinaipur, Khustigiri, Kusumjatra, Mangaldihi, Pachhira, Sindurtopa. Black-and-red ware is the common artifacts along with others associated wares.

V. CONCLUSION

Our discussion tends to indicate to the complex matrix of Pre and Proto-historic archaeology in a westerly district of Bengal. Admittedly more intensive and multidisciplinary exploration and examination will be required to comprehensive the situation in holistic manners.



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