Proto-historic settlement of artisans unearthed

An exciting discovery made in Bengal village

Minute bone and crystal drills of less than 2 cm size used for making beads, different varieties of beads of semi-precious stone, bone points as well as a large number of microlithic tools have been unearthed by archaeologists of the University of Calcutta during a recent excavation at Asuralay village in West Bengal’s Birbhum district.

A month-long excavation from the first week of March to April 2018, on a mound, which is about two metres from the surface of the earth, has revealed a proto historic settlement. The initial estimate tells that the settlement could date to the second millennium BC (about 3500 years from the present times).

“We have found evidence of raw materials in the form of bones and stones, finished materials like minute stone tools and beads, tools like stone and bone drills used for making these products and several hearths or fire places at the excavation site used for making the tools,” Rajat Sanyal, Head of the Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta told The Hindu.

A large amount of black and red ware pottery (BRW), which signifies a proto historic level of human occupation in different parts of India, has also been found at the site in large quantities. Saptarshi Chowdhury and Bidhan Halder, researchers of the department working at the excavation site, said both coarse and fine varieties of BRW pottery, which appear to be remains of bowls and handis, have been discovered.

“Along with BRW, large quantities of other contemporary pottery such as red ware, black ware and buff ware have also been found,” Mr. Halder said.

There is evidence of high temperature burning and charcoal deposits at the mud floor of this monocultural site. The cultural deposit, varies from 60 cm to 1.2 metres, at various levels of the 7,700 sq.m. excavation site.

“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 artefacts for local consumption,” Dr. Sanyal, who is director of the Asurdanga excavations, said.

According to Monalisa Rakshit, geo-morphologist who was involved in exploration of the site, river Manikarnaka which now flows as a moribund tunnel very close to the site must have played a crucial role in the settlement.

Former Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India Gautam Sengupta, who visited the site on Friday, described it as a “significant excavation” as it reveals the “inner working of the earliest village settlements in Bengal.”

“The skill and finesse of the artisans is beyond our imagination. Moreover it tells us what kept the villages going thousands of years ago,” Dr. Sengupta, currently Professor of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Visva Bharati University.

The discovery of the excavation site also has an interesting story.

“It was in March 2015 during an exploration of the Mayurakshi-Dwaraka interfluves, we came across this unexplored mound at one end of the village. The legend around the site was very interesting and people kept associating this mound with stories of Mahabharata, as it happens with many ancient archaeological sites across the country,” Dr. Sanyal said.

Haripada Bagdi, a local villager, said that his forefathers believed that the mound was associated with Bakasur, a demon slayed by Bhima whose references we get in Mahabharat. About six km from this site there is another archaeologically significant place known as Kotasur and the elderly villager is convinced that there is some link between Asuralay and Kotasur.

“Till a few years ago not many villagers would dare to visit the mound called Asurdanga. This could be one of the reasons that the mound was left undisturbed for so many years,” Mr. Bagdi said.