

For First Annual Meeting of AOGS (5-9 July, 2004) at Singapore

COASTAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN INDIA: NEW DISCOVERIES

(Abstract)

---S.P. Gupta

Chairman,

Indian Archaeological Society

New Delhi-110 016

India is located in the centre of the Indian Ocean. Since its physical form is triangular with the apex entering into the ocean it has on its east and west two long stretches of coastlines running north-south. Due to this, the Indian coasts became the nodal agency for forging links, commercial and culture, between the Indian Ocean Rim countries on her west and east, from the Red Sea through the South China Sea. Recent archaeological investigations, both in the sea and on the land of the Indian coasts have yielded much new material remains of human cultures which throw solid evidence of India's contacts with the Indian Ocean Rim countries forged with the mechanism of Sea-borne trade.

The Western Coast of India has, for example, given us enough archaeological findings to establish the fact that there have been some very significant sites on the rivers, near their mouths on the Arabian Sea, which are now completely submerged in the sea, for example the Narmada river. There are also many sites of similar nature which have somehow escaped the submergence in the Arabian Sea, for example, those on the Tapi river.

The excavations conducted by Marine geologists and archaeologists of the NIOT from 2002 to 2004 in the Gulf of Khambhat or Cambay in Gujarat have revealed the existence of a human settlement on the river Narmada going back to 8th millennium B.C. which continued to exist later also. This is established by the findings of stone tools, potteries and wattle-and-daub samples which were once the parts of regular houses.

Recent excavations (2002-2003) conducted by ASI at Hathab, around 24 km from Bhavanagar, located on the rivulet Maleshwari, only 1.5 km off the shore, have shown that it was an Early Historic port-township on the Gulf of Khambhat. The discovery of a large number of Mediterranean amphorae of the early centuries of the Christian era lying over the Mauryan deposits of the 3rd century B.C. and followed by deposits of various periods, upto Vallabhi period of around 6th century A.D. along with 350 seals and sealings used in trading activities, clearly establish the fact that the Gulf of Khambhat was one of the most flourishing trading zones joining the western world with India and taking these linkages to the East Coast at sites like Arikamedu and others.

Our own excavations conducted at Kamrej, near the mouth of river Tapi, a river running parallel to Narmada, with a distance of about 100 km between them, has yielded in the year 2002 a great amount of material establishing the fact that there was brisk sea-borne trade between India and most the countries of the Indian Ocean Rim in cotton, iron, shell, glass, rice and many other items from the early centuries of the Christian era. A large number of Polished Red Ware from India, Blue wares, Grey Wares and Turquoise Glazed Ware from West Asia, bear out the fact that these activities continued upto around 9th -10th century A.D.

A still further down the west coast site in Gujarat is Sanjan, located on the junction of Vairoli Creek and Vairoli river, around 9 km from Umargaon township on the Arabian Sea. Our excavations conducted from 2002 through 2004 have clearly shown that it was an Early Historic Port Town engaged in long-distance trade with the west and east of India from the early centuries of the Christian Era through the 12th century A.D. The flourishing period of this trade coincided with the coming of the Zoroastrian Parsis in India, possibly from the ports of southern Iran in the 8th century A.D. when they were persecuted by the Arab invaders. The site has yielded Turquoise Glazed Ware, Glazed Pink Ware, Red Slipped Pink Ware, etc. of West Asian origin and Celadon Ware of Chinese origin.

Further south, around 11 km from the Port-city of Mumbai, is the famous island of Elephanta in which there are several fishing villages called 'Bander' locally which means port. One of them is named Mora Bander. Here a huge deposit of Mediterranean amphoraes of a variety of types have been explored in 2003 by the ASI. These and many other antiquities show that there was a brisk sea-borne trade with the Mediterranean world between the early centuries of the Christian Era through at least the 6th century A.D.

The same phenomenon is borne out from the antiquities found in the excavations conducted at several East Coast sites also, such the site of Manikapatana on the Chilka lake, a natural harbour in the Bay of Bengal. Excavations conducted here by Marine archaeologists of the Govt. of Orissa have yielded a large variety of plain, crackled and embossed celadon wares of greenish hue along with several copper coins of Chinese origin and antiquarian remains which came from the countries of South-East Asia.

There are many other sites on the east and the west coasts of India which have been investigated by archaeologists, both Marine and Coastal, which throw fresh light on the East-West contacts in the Early Historical periods, ranging between 300 B.C. and 1300 A.D.