



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF AKHNUR (FROM EARLY AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD)

KEY WORDS: Chandrabhaga, Harappan, Takka Desa, Trade, Kushana, Gupta, Stupa.

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ABSTRACT

From the settlement nomenclature to its material culture, the ancient riverside settlement of Akhnur is one of the most important Archaeologically significant area of the Jammu region. Its antiquity dates back to the pre-Harappan days and shows a continuous cultural development upto early medieval period. The finding of the pre-historic stone tools from the Tandawali khad to the Neolithic stone tools of Malpur supports the idea of the presence of primitive human society subsisting on stone tools in and around Akhnur. The resemblance of artifacts of Malpur to those found at Burzahom and Gufkral in the Kashmir valley shows some material connection between the two pre-historic societies. We find the traces of continuous human settlement in various stages from Akhnur and its adjacent areas. The northernmost site of the Harappan civilization is found from Manda in Akhnur. The material finding from the site reveals some west Asian affinity which further makes Akhnur an important Harappan centre of trade and cultural exchange. The excavation of Ambaran reveals an important Buddhist Stupa and its reliquary covered in gold casket containing small pieces of charred bone probably a minute part of tooth, further makes it archaeologically interesting. The inscriptional material found from this town, containing south Indian names corroborates the idea of Akhnur being an important trade and pilgrimage centre in early medieval days. It also establishes some cultural connection of Akhnur with south India. The finding of the ekamukhalinga is another interesting sculpture from Akhnur. The travel description of Hiuen Tsang mentioning the Takka Desa, which shared boundaries with Rajapuri. It seems probable in many ways that either Akhnur was a city under Takka country or it was the capital of Takka Desa. Another place Narsimha Pura mentioned by the Chinese traveler is situated in close proximity of Akhnur, were under its territory. Despite having such interesting cultural landscape and material richness, no single research work was available that could provide the sequence of cultural development of Akhnur. The present paper aims at filling up this gap in our knowledge of the development of cultural sequence of Akhnur by using recent cultural and archaeological finds.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient riverside settlement of Akhnur is situated on the western bank of the *Chandrabhaga* River at a distance of twenty eight kilometers west of Jammu. *Chandrabhaga* derives its Sanskrit name from the Chandra and the Bhaga, it's two principal feeders. The river is known as *Asikini* by the Rigvedic people. It is called '*Sandabal*' by Ptolemy and *Akesines* means 'ill omen' by the Greek historians of Alexander. Bishop Thirlwall says perhaps owing to its similarity in sound with a word that means devourer of Alexander. Muslim historians have mentioned this river as Chenab. Due to ignorance they considered it as a river coming from China and named it Chanav or Chenab. In folk memory its name Chandla has also appeared.

Aka-sin in Pushtu would mean river of the Akas, who probably gave their name to the town of *Akanawar* or Aknur. Jagdish Chandra Sathé, a local scholar have the idea that a new city was built with a Greek settlement there by a Greek army hero Python after his father Agenir or Agenor. Later the name developed as Akhnur from *Agenor*. The town is believe also o be associated with the characters of Barbarik and King Virata of the *Mahabharata*. Under the patronage of the Indo-Bactrian Greeks, this place emerged as a Trade Centre as well as a centre of Buddhism. The interaction between the Vedic and Greek cultures flourished in this region. The result of this interaction was the emergence of trade cum art centre of Akhnur. We find another nomenclature for this place as 'Akhnur' by the Persian historians.

This is one of the most important archaeologically significant area of the Jammu region. Its antiquity dates back to the pre-Harappan days. An early stone age site was discovered from the village Tanda, six kilometres north of Akhnur, on the western bank of a seasonal ravine (khad) known as Tandewali Khad. Besides a number of flakes, the tools consists mostly of unifacial choppers with conical and rounded butts. The Neolithic site of Malpur is situated very near to Akhnur. The site yielded a few Neolithic artefacts in the form of celts, chisels, querns, ring-stones, pounder, blades, ball and scrapers. A floor with patches and burnt boulders with some tiny pieces of charcoal were found from the excavation.

Typologically, the artefacts resemble to those found at Burzahom and Gufkral in the Kashmir valley.

We find the traces of continuous human settlement in various stages from Akhnur and its adjacent areas. The northernmost site of the Harappan civilization is found from Manda in Akhnur. The Harappan plain and painted red ware pottery including jars, dishes, dishes-on-stand, goblets and beakers, few sherds of grey ware were found from excavation. Other associated finds consists of a copper double spiral headed pin, having west Asian affinity, tanged bone arrow-heads, terracotta bangles, terracotta cakes, potsherds bearing incised Harappan script, an unfinished seal, chert blade and a few saddle querns and pestles were the other Harappan artifacts found during the course of excavation from Manda. The place becomes more significant adding the fact that it was an important trade centre during the mature Harappan time from where timber was transported through river channel, to other sites of the Harappan civilization.

Akhnur flourished as an important art centre with distinguished designs of terracotta figurines and stuccos, collected and studied by Charles Fabri. According to Fabri, Akhnur flourished as an art centre during the days of Karkotas. i.e, eighth century CE. However, other art historians find traces of the Kushana and Gupta traits in Akhnur terracottas. The area was under the influence of Kushana and Gupta kings. Akhnur has yielded plenty of pot sherds of Kushana days showing their settlements on both the river sides. The Kushanas were great patrons of Buddhism. They built many Buddhist monasteries and the Buddhist stupa of Ambaran could be one of their construction. The epigraphic evidence clearly indicates that Samudragupta had ruled over *Madra* janapada which was extended upto Akhnur without any doubt. The analysis of the material remains recovered from the excavations of nearby villages of Manda, Pambarvan and Malpur, it seems that the material culture of this place dates before the Kushana period.

The excavation of Ambaran near Akhnur revealed the finding of material remains of an important Buddhist stupa. Along with the stupa, sculptures of male heads made of clay, stones

sculptures, idols were also found from this site. Inside the reliquary of the stupa, a circular gold casket in two equal parts with their diameter 1.5 centimetres and 1.4 centimetres respectively was found already opened inside the silver casket along with small pieces of charred bone and probably a minute part of tooth. It was also closed after applying some liquid and heating the round edges. A Huna coin was found near the pillar base. Although, there are not many strong evidences of invasion and destruction of this Buddhist site by the Hunas but possibility of an invasion is there as at some spots burning activity was also noticed in the sealing layers. From their study it seems that Akhnur must have been a prosperous city around the early centuries.

Within the town, there is an ancient temple dedicated to lord Kameshwara is situated at a small distance from the Chandrabhaga river. From the premises of this temple ancient, a seventh century inscription with ornamented south Indian names have been found. The inscription mentions names like Bahuvijneya, Bhupangama, Sukhigamati, Mahiso, Nahusha and Balasrayavirya. As Akhnur was situated on a trade route connecting the Punjab plains with the Kashmir valley, it seems to have emerged an important pilgrimage centre in early medieval times. From the compound of the same temple, two inscriptions of Shell characters were found. A sixty centimetres long sculpture of ekamukhalinga, stylistically assignable to tenth century were another interesting finding from Akhnur.

Hiuen Tsang in his travel account has mentioned the route he travelled from Kashmir to Kannauj. He gives a detailed account of the hill states of Parnots (Poonch) and Rajapuri (Rajouri), lying in Jammu region. He also makes mention of the *Takkadesa*, which shared boundaries with Rajapuri. It seems that Akhnur was a city under Takk country. This can be assumed because in the Jammu region, we find the people of *Takkai* caste, who still holds the folk memory that their ancestors were the residents of *Takka* country. From such accounts we can assume that it was Akhnur which was called *Takkadesa* or it was actually the capital of the *Takkadesa*. In the *Rajatarangini*, *Takkadesa* is called the country of the Bahikas. A *Takka*, *Asidhara* by name is mentioned in the *Rajatarangini*. In the same text we find another name of a *Takka*, *Laksmidhara*, who was a councilor of Kashmir during king Harsa's time shows their politically active role in Kashmir's political history. The *Takkas* were a powerful tribe living near the Chenab, and were at one time the undisputed lords of the Panjab. The kingdom of *Tsih-kia* mentioned by Hiuen Tsang is probably, therefore, that of the *Takkas*. The Ravi was possibly the eastern boundary of the *Takka*.

The *Chandrabhaga* river is divided into several streams after crossing Akhnur. It becomes wider when it reaches the Kandi plains. Whenever the *Chandrabhaga* river came in spate, it wiped many human settlements inhabiting on its banks. The material remains of such a wiped ancient town of *Narsingh Pura* is found in village Pragwal on the eastern bank of the Chandrabhaga River near Akhnur. The name of this ancient settlement comes from an ancient *Narasimha* temple located in the village. The village is of special importance because it is believed by some scholars that this is the same place mentioned by Hiuen Tsang in his travelogue. He mentions that there was a city here by the name of *Narasimha* that leads to the *Sakala*. There was a Palash forest between *Narsimha* and Sialkot. After crossing the Palash forest, the territory of *Sakala* (Sialkot) started. Even today a dense forest of Palash which is spread upto Palanwale, from which it derives its name, exists between *Narasimha Pura* and *Sakala*.

The travel description of Hiuen Tsang mentions that he had seen *Narsimha Pura* around *Chandrabhaga* river. The river kept changing her path. Therefore, it is possible that *Narasimha Pura* may have been affected by the floods, but it still exists in the form of a village. It seems to have been a

prosperous city in ancient time. Before the partition of India, there was a direct route from *Narsinghpura* to Sialkot and people used to travel through this route on daily basis. *Narsinghpura* had remained part of the *Takkadesa*.

Next to *Narsimhapura* is the village of Pragwal, which is situated on the eastern bank of *Chandrabhaga*. In the fourteenth century, the empty area between the two streams of *Chandrabhaga* in Pragwal is said to have been occupied by *Natha Panthi* tantriks. When these tantriks started intimidating the local people with tantric activities, a sage drove them away from this place and built a temple at a place called *Indribakool*. But that temple also came under the wraps of flood in *Chandrabhaga*. A small kingdom called *Ramgarh* used to be in this area around the *Indribakool*. Today the remains of *Ramgarh* are not found. Perhaps that city has already submerged to this river. The *Chandrabhaga* river reaches *Mirpur Siddhar*, before it enters the boundary of present Pakistan. There was once a huge settlement of *Kanjars* (musicians) in *Mirpur Siddhar*.

From the surroundings of Akhnur, many historical sites of various cultural assemblages were also discovered. These were *Nad*, a *Kushana* site, which produced antiquities of this period, *Bakore*, an early medieval period site, *Naraina*, *Maira* and *Mutthi*, which produced medieval period antiquities. A historical site of *Devipur* provides the evidences of a late medieval *Siva* temple. From the archaeological exploration in and around Akhnur town, traces of the early historical sites of Akhnur, *Ambaran*, *Guda* and *Mandika* *Mehra* were discovered. These sites yielded, a *Red plain ware*, sometimes slipped, *Handle* having deep incised oblique designs and spouts, *Black painted Red* and *Incised sherds*. Roughly contemporaneous with the *Kushan* and early *Gupta* periods, these sites yielded pottery of painted and the decorated variety similar as obtained at Akhnur. Some of the painted sherds from these sites were found similar in colour and texture to the ceramic tradition of the *Rangamahala* culture of the north *Rajasthan*.

Around the settlement of Akhnur, about sixteen sites were located providing material belonging to the historical and medieval periods. These sites yielding pottery of the early-Christian era represented early historical Akhnur. Late-historical sites of *Ambaran*, *Bahor*, *Sauli-Chak*, *Dalpat*, *Pambarwan* and *Kat* yielded typical *gupta terracottas*. Post-gupta and early medieval sites of *Kurora*, *Bamal*, *Ambi*, *Bandwal*, *Man-Chak*, *Ratti-Danda*, *Lehrian*, and *Mandiala* yielding glazed and stamped pottery.

Ancient sites of *Tibba*, *Kotgarhi* and *Bakor* were also found around Akhnur. *Kotgarhi* seems to be an important early human settlement. The sites of *Kotgarhi* yielded sturdy raw ware sherds with similar shapes and fabric as obtained from the *Harappan* level at *Manda* in Akhnur. Besides, a fragmentary terracotta bull was also collected from this site. From other sites of *Kotgarhi*, *Red ware* showing similarity with the pottery of *Pambarwan* and upper level of *Manda* were collected. A few sherds of black painted red ware and red slipped ware were also collected. From *Kot-Garhi* in Akhnur, a copper coin showing a standing male figure or a king on obverse and an animal most probably a horse on reverse.

From the hamlet *Pambarwan* at *Ambaran* near Akhnur, burnt brick damaged structures were found belonging to various phases. This site earlier yield so called, *Akhnur Buddhist terracotta heads*, resembling closely with *Gandhara art* of *Indo-Greek style* and the *Gupta art* of central India. The site was continuously prone to heavy floods, due to which most of the fenced area of the site was submerged in river flood, which would have been a regular feature in ancient times. From the deposition of boulders at the site, it seems that the site have been abandoned sometimes around the seventh century A.D, due to floods. The cultural sequence of the site

revealed in a preliminary study falls between Pre-Kushana (second-first B.C) to Post-Gupta period (sixth-seventh CE.)

The brief summation of the sequence of the cultural development of Akhnur presented above is enough to indicate that like other regions of the sub continent Akhnur also experienced different cycles of cultural development from pre-historic stone culture to Harappan civilization and further the Kushanas to post- Guptas. It seems to have been a part of the northern India and was influenced by all the political and cultural developments occurred in the greater part of northern Indian.

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