

Chalcolithic Culture of Pandu Rajar Dhibi

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With the end of the Neolithic Age, several cultures started using metal, mostly copper and low grade bronze. The culture based on the use of copper and stone was termed as Chalcolithic meaning stone-copper Phase. In India, it spanned around 2000 BC to 700 BC. This culture was mainly seen in Pre-Harappan phase, but at many places it extended to Post-Harappan phase too. The people were mostly rural and lived near hills and rivers. The Chalcolithic culture corresponds to the farming communities, namely Kayatha, Ahar or Banas, Malwa, and Jorwe.

The term Chalcolithic is a combination of two words- Chalco+Lithic was derived from the Greek words "khalkos" + "líthos" which means "copper" and "stone" or Copper Age. It is also known as the **Eneolithic** (from Latin aeneus "of copper") is an archaeological period that is usually considered to be part of the broader Neolithic (although it was originally defined as a transition between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age).

Pandu Rajar Dhibi situated at Panduk (Burdwan District) on the Ajay, was the first chalcolithic site discovered in West Bengal, India. It was the first Chalcolithic site discovered in West Bengal. The common man believes that the main mound at Pandu Rajar Dhibi is associated with King Pandu mentioned in the epic Mahabharata, hence the name came into being from the folklore. It is situated about 40 kilometres to the northwest of BIRBHANPUR, a microlithic site, which was excavated by BB Lal in 1954-57. The excavations at Pandu Rajar Dhibi, carried out in several phases in 1962-1965 and in 1985 by the West Bengal Department of Archaeology have brought to light the chalcolithic phase of the prehistory of Bengal.

Subsequently, the number of chalcolithic sites rose to 76. They are now spread over the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura and Midnapur, and interspersed by rivers like Mayurakshi (north), Kopai, Ajay, Kunur, Brahmani, Damodar, Dvarakesvar, Silavati, and Rupnarayan (south). From a perusal of the distribution pattern of chalcolithic sites in West Bengal, it appears that there was an extensive rice-producing riparian culture in the area lying to the west of the Bhagirathi. Though the chalcolithic people were essentially agriculturists, they

did not cease to hunt or to fish. They lived in modest circular to square huts with mud-plastered walls. There were hearths and garbage-places in the huts. They ate rice, as well as meat, fish, fruits etc.

Of the Chalcolithic sites that have been found, Pandu Rajar Dhibi is by far the most interesting. The main mound of Pandu Rajar Dhibi is associated with King Pandu of MAHABHARATA fame. The mound (200m' 170m) has been excavated five times between 1962-85. In all 53 trenches of different sizes, varying from 4m' 4m to 10m' 5m, were excavated. The height of the central portion of the mound is 5m from the road-level.

The 1985 excavation has clearly shown that there were, in all, six periods of occupation at the site. Some of the trenches were dug down to natural soil (compact mottled sandy silt overlying decomposed sandstone). Like most Chalcolithic sites in West Bengal, there were two main periods: (a) Chalcolithic and (b) Iron Age. The Chalcolithic period may be divided into two phases - one pre-metallic and the other pure Chalcolithic. The span of the Chalcolithic period in West Bengal is c 1600 BC-750 BC. Of the six periods noticed at the site, the first two were Chalcolithic (the first one was pre-metallic in as much as no metal was found in it); the third was transitional (overlapping of Chalcolithic age & Iron age equipments); the fourth represented the Iron age; the fifth belonged to early historic and the sixth to Pala or early medieval times.

At the lower level of **Period I**, handmade grey and pale red ware pottery-fragments with husk- impressions in the core and a fractional human burial were encountered, while at the upper level the ceramics consisted of plain black-and-red, grey, and matt-red wares. A few microlithic flakes have been found, but no copper object has been recovered from this level. It is, thus, pre-metallic in nature.

Period II represents a full-blooded Chalcolithic culture, having diagnostic ceramics of red, black-painted red, white-painted red, black-and-red (plain and painted in white or cream inside), cream-slipped and grey wares. The colour of the red slip varied from pale or matt to deep red, chocolate, and orange. The shapes and types in red ware consisted of bowls (straightsided, convex and concavy-convex etc), channel-spouted bowls with long and narrow cut-spouts and splayed ends, dishes-on-stand, bowls-on-stand (often painted in black or white pigment), flower pots (some having the shape of a 'tulip' and some of an 'inverted helmet'), tumblers, dishes, vases, lotas (small water pots) and storage jars; bowls, channel-spouted bowls and dishes (often painted on the inside in white or cream). Storage jars in grey ware were also found.

The painting motif in red ware consisted of dots and dashes, bands (parallel, vertical and horizontal), solid triangles, chevrons, ladders, sigma, cheque-patterns etc. A starfish design has also been found. Painting motifs in black and red ware pottery consisted of dots and dashes, parallel bands-vertical and horizontal. Graffiti marks were also noticed on some red ware pots. In addition to pottery, the assemblage consisted of antiquities like microliths (few having crested-medial ridge), copper objects like beads, rings, bangles, fish-hooks, kohl-sticks and a leaf-shaped tanged arrowhead; bone tools like points, arrowheads, awls and harpoons; beads in stone and terracotta; terracotta figures of Mother Goddess (one) and gymnast (one), lapis lazuli and a broken stone pestle. Impressions of silk-cotton fabric were found on clay lumps. An iron dish was also found from the upper level.

The material culture of **Period III** retained some of the ceramics of the earlier period and introduced a new ware, black-slipped (some bearing painting motifs of black-and red ware). Dishes-on-stand and bowls-on-stand, as well as bowls, lotas and dishes were also made in this ware. A tiny broken gold coin with fish symbol on the obverse was also found. Iron was apparently introduced in this period, and implements like swords, arrowheads and sickles were made from it. Bone tools, copper objects, beads in stone and terracotta, terracotta figurines and few Neolithic implements were also found in this period. Period III thus represented a transitional phase.

In **Period IV**, antiquities like black-slipped ware (some painted and some incised with motifs like peacock holding a snake, a row of fish, fishing net), red and grey wares, bone and iron tools, beads in stone and terracotta, a steatite seal (Cretan?), a terracotta Mother Goddess, a pair of hollow terracotta heads having a foreign affinity and a few Neolithic implements were found.

In **Period V**, the NBP ware was introduced. In addition to the NBP, vases, cups, bowls, sauce-pans, pots and jars in red polished ware and some pots in black polished ware; terracotta figures, iron and bone tools, and stone and terracotta beads were encountered in this period. One gold coin of King Kaniska I, discovered in a surface collection, may be assigned to this period. The site was deserted soon after, and remained thus, for a few centuries. The site was probably rehabilitated in the early medieval period. Several stone sculptures in the Pala idiom, some pottery fragments in grey and red wares in addition to terracotta cups, and a ring-well belonged to period VI, or the last period of Pandu Rajar Dhibi habitation. The site was abandoned

afterwards. It seems that the floors of houses were different in different periods and varied from beaten moorum to lime plastered surkhi, or ordinary mud-floor, plastered with cow dung.

As to the artists of the Chalcolithic culture of Bengal, we are in the dark. They might have been proto-Australoids or Veddooids. From an examination of skeletal remains (14-male, female & children) it appears that they were long-headed and medium to tall in height, resembling the Santals or the Sabaras.

There was perhaps a brisk maritime trade in Chalcolithic Bengal, but unfortunately sufficient evidence is not available. Certainly, the Ajay and her tributaries meeting the Bhagirathi were navigable at that time. The excavation at Pandu Rajar Dhibi has provided evidence for the gradual growth of a Chalcolithic culture and its displacement by iron-using people. There is evidence of a great conflagration in period III, which may be considered as the transitional period. The transition perhaps led to the exit of the Chalcolithic culture and entrance of the Iron Age.