

ASURGARH - AN EARLY URBAN CENTRE OF ORISSA

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As early as Chalcolithic period, the fundamental principles of fortification were in practice for the protection of life and properties of the inhabitants and for strategic reasons. The ancient texts like *Arthasastra*, *Manasara*, *Sukranitisara*, *Yukti-kalpataru* and many others deal with the subject of fortification in details.¹ Archaeologically speaking long before the preparation of Sanskrit treatises on fortification of township and villages, they were in vogue in many sites like Harappa, Mahenjodaro and Kalibangan of Chalcolithic period.² When we come across the term *durga* meaning a fort in *Rig-Veda* it was used in the sense of a fort or a strong hold. It was synonymous with *Pura* meaning a rampart or fort or stronghold. The *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads* also refer to the word *pura* and *Mahapura* to mean the fort. The *Ramayana* furnishes us with the classified list of forts into river forts (*nadya*), the hill fort (*parvatiya*), the forest fort (*vana*) and the artificial fort (*krtrima*). On the other hand the *Mahabharata* reports different types of citadel in *Shantiparva*, viz :- water citadel, human citadel and forest citadel. The Jatakas also mention about cities being fortified with walls and ramparts with buttresses, watch -towers and massive gates, multistoreyed dwellings, underground chambers. It is also evident from the writings of classical writers that Alexander invaded forts and strongholds held by Hindu chiefs in 4th century B.C.³

Kautilya, the great authority in military science classified the forts on the basis of their location. In his view they are of four kinds, Viz :- *Parvata* (hill fort), *Audaka* (water fort), *Dhanbana* (desert fort) and *Vanadurga* (forest fort). So there are in-numberable references about forts and techniques of fortification in early Indian text.⁴ In the present study the word *garh* has been referred to an early human settlement having fortified township in Ancient Orissa (from- 4th century B.C. to 5th century A.D.).

THE CONCEPT OF ASURGARH IN WESTERN ORISSA

The concept of Asurgarh is very ancient in the history and culture of Western Orissa. The very literal meaning of Asurgarh is “the fort of demons”. Forts bearing names Asurgarh are found in different parts of Western Orissa usually on the bank of river or in the outskirts of the villages/towns. From very ancient times people had associated such places with rulers and administrators. In course of time, such places were abandoned and only structural remains and antiquities are found. These places are fearful for common people but are important for archaeologists and historians. Forts bearing the names ‘Asurgarh’ though

found at near Barpali, Rampur, Manamunda and Adgaon, exploration and excavation are conducted only at Asurgarh, near Manamunda in the district of Sonepur and near Narla in the Dist. of Kalahandi. In the present paper discussion has been made on Asurgarh of Kalahandi as an early urban center of ancient Orissa.

ASURGARH OF KALAHANDI

Asurgarh fort is situated one and half miles to the north-east of Rupra road Railway station on Sambalpur-Vishakhapatnam railway lines. The fort of Asurgarh is located at latitude 20': 30' and longitude 83': 83'. It is about 20 K.Ms from Bhawanipatna, the district headquarters of Kalahandi. About one K.M. to the south of this fort, there is an old village named Asurgarh and it is perhaps the fort was named after the village or it may also that the village has been so named after the old fort. This fort is the largest and most important one and the excavation there throw significant light on the history and culture of South Kosala and Mahakantara region.

The P.G. Dept of History, Sambalpur University and the Dept. of Culture, Govt. of Orissa had undertaken limited excavation of Asurgarh jointly in the year 1973.⁵ Antiquities were already exposed at Asurgarh as mentioned by Scholar P.K. Deo,⁶ late Maharaja of Kalahandi. The fort resembles with that of Sisupalgarh. It is square in plan and covers an extensive area of one square kilometer. The ramparts as found at present are about four meters in width and 15 to 50 meters in height and are made of rubbles and mud with bricks facing close to the western ramparts, the river Sandul flows to the north to meet the river Tel and there by providing a natural boundary. It appears that the flow of the river has been diverted to pass by the sight of the fort. On the eastern side of the fort, there was an extensive lake covering about 200 acres of land. It was so arranged that when the enemies surrounded the fort, a secret sluice might be opened so that the whole inside and outside of the fort would be flooded with water and consequently the hostile army washed away by the water currents. The fort would remain as an island if such a flood were created, because the fort was situated on a high level. It is presumed that the palace was constructed at the center of the fort. During 2nd half of the 19th century, Raja Udit Pratap Dev renovated the lake for agricultural purpose. The lake at present is known as Udit Sagar according to the name of Raja Udit Pratap Dev.⁷

UNIQUE WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

As revealed from the archaeological records that digging of dam, pond, reservoir etc. were meant to preserve water for multiple purposes. The people of ancient India had realized the importance of water. They used the synonyms of water (*jala*) as life (*jivana*).⁸ It is one of the five primary elements (*panchamahabhutas*, viz :- Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether) of nature. It is a myth as well as reality that the rise and fall of various Ancient civilizations rested on the proper management and mismanagement of the water resources.⁹ It is revealed from the literature that those who had effective control on this natural resource,

particularly in the agrarian societies did enjoy considerable social, economic and political power.¹⁰

Two such huge tanks in Western Orissa have been identified, one at Maraguda urban complex in Nuapara district and the other at Asurgarh urban center in Kalahandi district. Asursagar also known as Udit Sagar, has covered an area of more than 200 acres of land.¹¹ Its alignment is from east to west exactly corroborating the cardinal directions of tank as outlined by Varahamihira (6th century A.D.).¹²

The water of this tank could be utilized for multiple purposes. The water can be channeled to fill up the encircling moat in case of external aggression and can also be utilized for agricultural purpose during scanty rainfall.¹³ Small and big ponds invariably noticed in early historic towns and metropolises of Orissa. The utility of these ponds are more or less the same everywhere.¹⁴ Such ponds are located at Jaugarh (Ancient Samapa),¹⁵ at Maraguda complex and at Asurgarh urban complex.¹⁶ In close proximity to the Southern rampart and ditch of Asurgarh, a small pond was excavated, which is now a shallow land, yet the site still retains its original name known as Radhasagar. The excavation in this site revealed nude terracotta figurines (female fertility deities) and square plinth of the brick structure (identified as shrine).¹⁷

Beside domestic utility, small tanks head their religious bearing in ancient India. It was also known as *Puskara* (lotus pond) in Sanskrit.¹⁸ In the beginning such ponds were dug independently. Later on, however, temple structure was added or vice versa adjacent to the pond. Small pond was also needed for the consumption of the king and priest.¹⁹

Ancient Indian texts also speak about pond associated with the fertility rite.²⁰ In Orissan context, finding of nude terracotta figures and temple structure in Asurgarh lend us to belief that ponds were imperative for fertility rites.²¹

Thus water sources were a vital and contributing factor for urban upsurge in ancient Orissa. The water gallery found in early Indian urban centers and forts invariably circumscribed. Sanskrit and Pali literatures as well as *Vastusastras* exhibit moat, ditch or natural water barriers as safety valve of defense for the fort or the capital city.²² Early urban centers in Orissa were located on the confluence or bank of rivers. These centers not only exhibit large number of antiquities but also exhibit the water management system in early Orissa.

IMPORTANT POLITICAL & COMMERCIAL CENTRE

The strategic location of Asurgarh fort guarded the commercial roadways, which facilitated secured passage of merchandise resulting to, *efflorescence* of trade, commerce and agriculture. The Asurgarh fort had four wide gates in four cardinal directions. The river Sandul is flowing in the western side of the fort. It is known from the debris-clearance carried out near the outer wall that although the wall was made of bricks, stones were given in outer

side of the bricks to make the wall stronger. It shows about the building activities of that time.²³ In medieval India, independent statuses were given to eighteen chieftains, who were in charge of the forts. Asurgarh was one of the eighteen *Garhs*, which was known as *Asurgarh Baksa*.²⁴

Asurgarh bears a special importance so far as the Atavika people are concerned. These people find mention in Asokan Edicts and they were considered to have constituted the fighting forces of Kalinga against Ashoka in the famous battle of Kalinga in 261 B.C. The *Atavika* land comprised roughly the present districts of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa and Bastar of Madhya Pradesh. It was an important recruiting ground for the veteran army of Kalinga even as early as the time of the *Mahabharata* war. Asurgarh seems to be an important center of the *Atavika* territory. The discovery of antiquities like Punch-marked coins, a piece of Chunar sandstone, Red, Black Slipped ware, NBP, Beads, etc., dates back the site to Mauryan period. A hoard of 539 numbers of silver coins datable to c.4th century B.C. to 5th century A.D., belonging to the king of Kalahandi provides considerable cultural data. The first group of coins (69 numbers) is assignable to the pre-Mauryan period, the second group (272 numbers) to Mauryan period and last group (198 numbers) from the post Mauryan rule to the Guptas. Such large group of Punch marked coins indicate that perhaps there was a Mint industry in Asurgarh.²⁵ These finds indicate that Kalahandi region was civilized and prosperous in the days of Ashoka and the *Atavika*, who were regarded as forest dwellers, were not uncultured and had developed a high standard of civilization characterized by well polished potteries of NBP fabric. The similarity of some of the punched mark coins of Asurgarh with those of Bijnor and Palia near Kausambi and the similarity of texture and fabric of some pottery types of Asurgarh with those found at Ahichhatra indicate that there was trade intercourse of Asurgarh with prosperous towns like Kausambi and Ahichhatra in northern India during the days of the Maurya. The findings of red glazed Kushana pottery along with highly polished black wares, also indicate that there was cultural and commercial intercourse of Kalahandi region with the Kushana Empire during the 1st-2nd century A.D.²⁶ Beads from Asurgarh must have played an important role in the trade network, because this region happens to be a rich gemstone deposit belt and it lies on a major trade route of ancient times connecting the eastern Indian site of Tosali with Kosala and further with the northern Indian site of Ujjain. Perhaps there was a bead manufacturing industry at Asurgarh. The most common materials are Carnelian, agate, crystal, glass, jasper, sapphire, quartz, ruby, garnet, stone and terracota.²⁷

Asurgarh was an important political and commercial center situated on the high road joining South Kosala and Mahakantra with Kalinga. According to late scholar Paramananda Acharya, it was situated on a short route through which salt and other commodities were transported from Mahamagiri to *Dakshina Kosala*.²⁸

The discovery of terracotta ornaments, glass bangles, gems stones suggest the habitation of royal and aristocratic people during 4th and 5th century A.D.. The discovery of

Terasingha copper plate of Maharaja Tustikara near the site is datable to 5th century A.D.. The place of issue of the charter, Parvatadvaraka, which literally means “the gateway of the hill” represented the site under consideration. It served as a royal residence with proper fortification; free from external danger from the western side of Mahakantara region.²⁹ The iron artifacts portray urban trend culture based on agricultural patterns.

IMPORTANT SAKTA CENTRE OF ANCIENT ORISSA

There is legend about Asurgarh that there were 64 deities. The villagers worshiped a deity named Dokry as the guardian deity, which was inside the fort. Among the 64 deities, Goddess Ganga was in the East, Kalapata in the west, Vaishnavi in the North and Budharaja in the south. The third excavated site, which has been pointed out as a mound in a topographical map, is perhaps there was a temple. The important discovery is a spherical shaped sculpture made of brick. Late Dr. N. K. Sahu³⁰ has identified a circled brick wall as a ruin of a Yogini temple; which may be compared with Yogini temple of Ranipur Jharial. Among the terracotta objects, includes animal figurines, goddess, a silver ambulate seal, silver ring and a large quantities of bones and skeletons. It may be possible that human sacrifice was prevailed during this period.³¹

The discovery of Terasingha copper plate grant of Maharaja Tustikara³² (5th century A.D.) near Asurgarh indicates that Tustikara was perhaps the last ruler of Asurgarh region who was a great devotee of goddess Stambhesvari, who was responsible for the spread of Stambhesvari cult.

ASURGARH—ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF WESTERN ORISSA

Asurgarh possessed a physical and cultural individuality. It has revealed cultural continuity from a remote past to historical periods assisted by Geological deposits. The location of the site, discovery of materials indicate the evolution of cultural phases from B.C. to A.D. period, contributing substantially for the reconstruction of early historical events in Western Orissa. The materials discovered from this site present a clue in understanding the proto-historic cultural phase of Western Orissa. The Chalcolithic cultural ramparts have been reported from Asurgarh of Kalahandi.

In 4th century A.D., the fort of Asurgarh appeared to have belonged to king Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara, to whom Samudragupta claimed to have defeated in course of his Southern campaign. The next important king known to have held sway over Asurgarh was Maharaja Tustikara, the donor of Terasingha copperplate grant. However the excavation indicates that the fort area was deserted in 5th-6th century A.D. and it is presumed that Tustikara was the last ruler of Asurgarh region. In 7th century A.D., Chinese pilgrim Yuan-chwang travelled through this area but has not mentioned about Mahakantara, so it is presumed that at this area had lost its importance by 7th century A.D.³³ The discovery of charcoal, coal, bone and ashes indicate that the residence of the last dweller of this fort were destroyed due to the natural calamities or fire.³⁴

Asurgarh region flourished from 3rd century B.C. to 6th century A.D. with such important features like: - fortified settlements, structural features (both religious and secular), a rich ceramic industry, terracotta, bead and mint industries. Thus the fort of Asurgarh bears testimony to the antiquity of an early urban center of ancient orissa.

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