
An Analysis of Data Collected from Archaeological Explorations in Banaskantha District

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Abstract: Banaskantha district of Gujarat state presents exciting possibilities in terms of archaeological findings. Being situated between the Rann of Kachchh to the west having a number of important Harappan settlements and Mewar region to the north-east with significant settlements belonging to Ahar (Banas) culture, the region seems very important. To the north and south of the district, there are a number of important historic settlements too. With a view to tap the archaeological potential of the area as part of village to village survey, a small part of Banaskantha district, particularly the area lying to the south of Deesa town and the area surrounding Balaram river to the north of Palanpur was explored. The explorations confirmed the presence of microliths associated with pre-pottery Mesolithic culture in the area bordering Abu region and the presence of a number of medieval (Solanki period) settlements in the entire area. The absence of chalcolithic and early historic settlements in the explored area is bit enigmatic.

Keywords: Banaskantha, Banas River, Explorations, Microliths, Chalcolithic, Medieval, Vishnu

Introduction

Situated in the north-western part of Gujarat State, Banaskantha district lies between 23°-35' and 24°-43' north latitude and 71° and 73° east longitude. It is bound on the North by Marwar (Jalor district) and Sirohi district of Rajasthan, in the South by Patan and Mehsana districts, in the East by the Sabarkantha district and on the West by the Rann of Kachchh, which forms frontier with Pakistan. The location of the district is very exciting and attracts archaeological explorers for investigations. Banas is the main river of the district which originates from Dhebar lake near Udaipur hills in Rajasthan and after passing through Banaskantha district empties in the Little Rann of Kachchh. The district is also watered by the small tributaries of Banas like Balaram and Sipu and river Saraswati/ Arjuni in the eastern part. Physiographically, the district can be divided in two parts - 1. Eastern hilly tract and 2. Western plain. The river Banas almost forms a dividing line for the two regions. The western plain which is adjacent to the Rann of Kachchh is archaeologically very significant and has shown the presence of Harappan and chalcolithic elements in the cultural assemblage whereas the eastern hilly tract, in spite of showing the presence of Mesolithic culture and sporadic

historical settlements became inhabited on a larger scale only during late stage of medieval period. Here it is pertinent to mention that the Banas river flowing in Banaskantha district is an altogether different river from Banas river of Banas culture fame which merges into Chambal river. I know an explorer who because of this misconception discovered a number of fake chalcolithic sites in Banaskantha district and continued the same wrongdoing even after being informed of the fact.

As part of village to village survey I could explore only a small part of Banaskantha district, particularly the area lying to the south of Deesa town and the area surrounding Balaram river to the north of Palanpur. But the explorations gave a clear idea that the work done by R.T. Parikh (1977) in the district still stands the test of time and in spite of the area showing great scope for the presence of chalcolithic sites on map, is devoid of such settlements except the western part adjoining Kachchh which the author could not explore. The following sites (Figure 1) came to notice during the explorations.

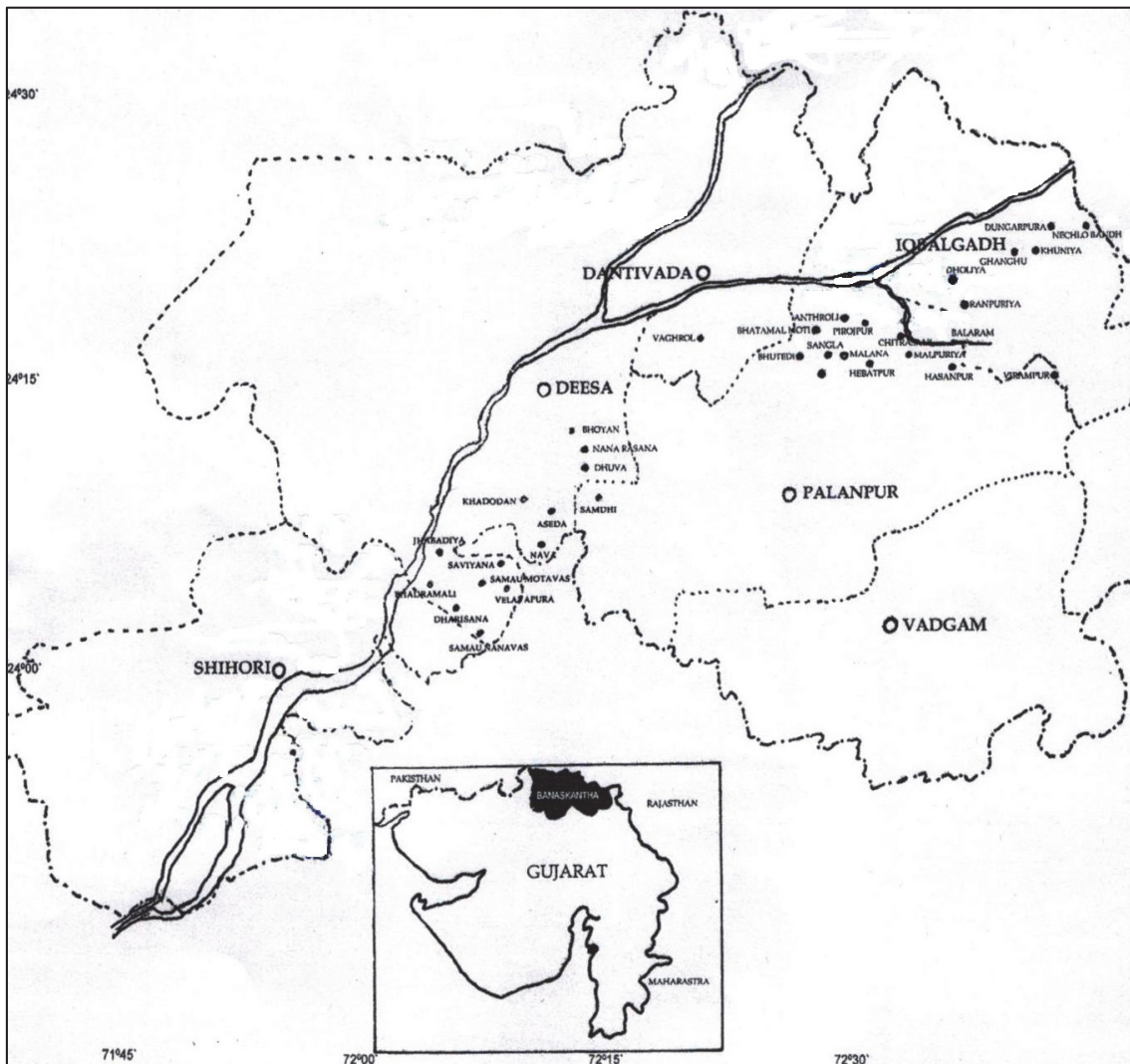


Figure 1: Map showing explored sites in Banaskantha district



Figure 2: Vishnu, Balaram Mahadeva Temple



Figure 3: Panel with Vishnu in the center, Balaram Mahadeva Temple



Figure 4: Vishnu
Balaram Mahadeva Temple



Figure 5: Siva
Balaram Mahadeva Temple

Balaram (24°15' N: 72°30' E): This is a famous religious spot of the region situated near Chitrasani on the left bank of river Balaram which originates in nearby hills. The modern shrine is named Balaram Mahadeva Temple which has a modern look but built over the remains of a medieval shrine. The overall look of the place is quite serene and would have attracted humans and pilgrims in the past. One of the old Vishnu

sculptures in local sandstone (Figure 2) shows a four armed Vishnu standing in *samasthanka mudra*. In his two upper hands, he holds a *gada* and a *chakra* in his right and left hands respectively whereas the natural right hand is in *varada* and the left hand holds a *sankha*. The natural hands are placed over two attendant male figures. *Srivatsa* and traces of *vanamala* are still visible. Another panel in local sandstone (Figure 3) shows Vishnu as the central figure (identifiable with *chakra* held in his upper right hand) surrounded on both sides by attendant figures and musicians. In the temple premises, another architectural fragment (Figure 4) again depicts a mutilated image of Vishnu in standing pose. A beautiful white marble image (Figure 5) at the temple depicts Siva. He is shown four handed. Siva seated in *padmasana* holds a trident in his upper right and a Siva-*linga* in his upper left hands. The natural right hand in *varada* pose holds the rosary whereas the object in his natural left hand is not identifiable. *Jatajuta* wearing God is having ferocious facial look. At top of the panel, seated figures of four handed Brahma and Vishnu are shown. Another panel in inferior quality marble (Figure 6) at the temple site shows three standing deities in a pose of movement. The central figure is of a female. An ancient well was also observed at the site. From the overall evidence from the site, it seems that there would have been a religious shrine at the site during the ancient times, the available evidence dates from about twelfth century CE.



Figure 6: Panel, Balarama Mahadeva Temple

Dholiya (24°15' N; 72°85' E): Near the Mata Mandir red ware and grey ware pottery of medieval period was observed. Two microliths were also observed near the temple in the agricultural fields indicating the existence of modern/ medieval religious sites has

connections to prehistoric period beliefs. At a nearby local shrine in the fields, possibly related to Jakha cult, one medieval Mahishasuramardini and a horse riding deity (Figure 7) were observed. Bricks of 30 x 23 x 5 cm size were observed at this local shrine.



Figure 7: Local shrine, Dholiya



Figure 8: Uma-Mahesvara, Khuniya



Figure 9: Ganesa, Khuniya



Figure 10: Jaina Image, Bhoyan

Dungarpura (23°45' N; 73°20' E): At a village shrine, one sculpture, possibly of Ramadeva Pir, one bronze object and an inscription, all of late medieval period were observed.

Gadh/Mahadeviya (24°05' N; 72°45' E): At Dhori Bhakri, medieval pottery containing red and grey ware was observed. Over a small hill, a medieval brick structure was also observed. One copper coin was found from there along with a miniature Ganesa sculpture of *circa* twelfth century.

Ghanghu (24°21' N; 72°39' E): Medieval red ware was observed at this village site. At Bhairavanatha Temple, two microlithic blades were also observed, confirming Mesolithic presence in the area.

Khuniya (24°21' N; 72°40' E): In front of Ambaji temple microliths were observed. Later on the site was occupied during the medieval times as indicated by the finding of red ware and grey ware. At the Ambaji temple, beautiful medieval sculptures of Uma-Mahesvara, Ganesa, Mahishamardini and Hanumana were observed. The Uma-Mahesvara sculpture (Figure 8 is made of black stone and depicts four handed Siva and two-handed Parvati. Parvati in her left hand holds a mirror whereas her right hand is kept at the feet of Siva. The *jatajuta* wearing Siva's upper right hand holds trident and left some *ayudha* whereas his natural right hand holds some indistinct object, possibly a rock and the left hand is kept at the breast of Parvati. At the base are shown: a standing *gana* to the proper right, seated Skanda figure holding a cock in the center and seated Ganesa figure to the proper left. The Ganesa sculpture (Figure 9) kept in a niche inside the temple is made of greenish stone. The seated figure in his upper left hand holds a *parasu* and in his natural left hand holds sweet balls. Features of both the right hands are quite obliterated and not identifiable.



Figure 11: Panel, Bhutedi

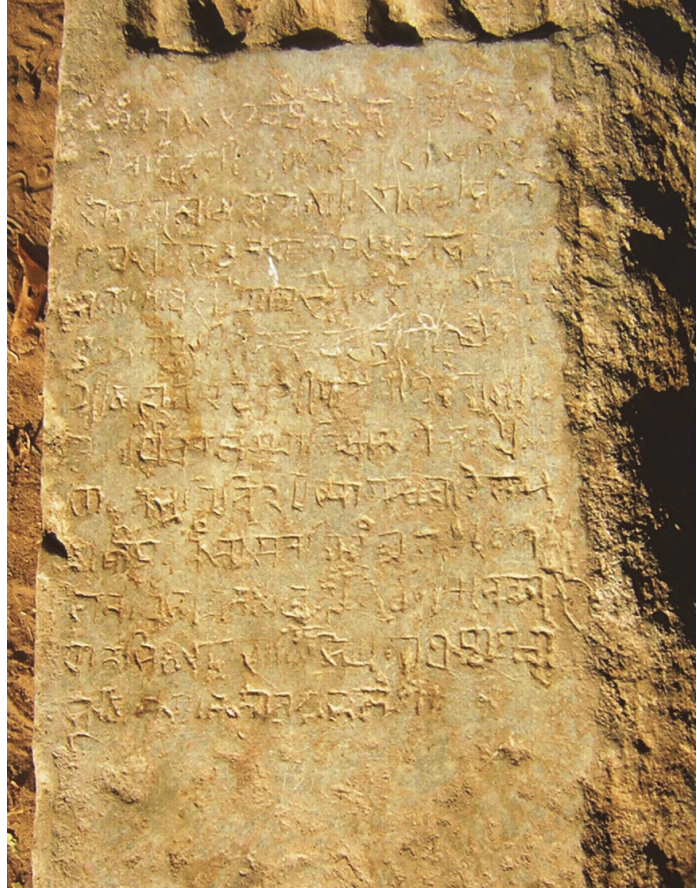


Figure 12: Close up of inscription in Panel, Bhutedi



Figure 13: Inscribed image, Hasanpur



Figure 14: Jakha temple, Virampur Garh Mahadevia



Figure 15: Close up of Jakha temple, Virampur Garh Mahadevia

Nichlo Bandh (24°33' N; 72°44' E): This whole area presents a quite serene and charming landscape and microliths (majority non-geometric), finished, unfinished as well as cores are scattered over the hill surfaces. Two particular spots of microlith's finds were Babu Parmar's and Shamshan wala fields. Near the dam, a deserted Siva temple was observed and on nearby surface was found medieval red ware. During explorations associated pottery of microliths was not observed even at a single spot. It seems that the Mesolithic of this area is quite old and belongs to pre-pottery stage. But the site has a huge potential for further research and may provide some interesting links.

Rajpuriya (24°19' N; 72°33' E): This site has provided evidence of red ware, red slipped ware, black ware and coarse grey ware, all belonging to medieval period.

Ranpura (23°05' N; 72°40' E): From this site, red ware, red slipped ware and coarse red ware of medieval period were found. An old temple of Dharimata, probably wife of Balarama was also observed in the village. This temple may be recent one, but the cult is quite ancient and requires further research. The goddess is related to serpent cult like Samkarshana/Balarama and may have connections to Mathura region from where the cult of Balarama and Naginis developed.

Virampur (23°50' N; 72°45' E): Near this village, a mound was observed along river Balaram which yielded early and late medieval ceramics. A medieval bronze pot was also found from the site.

Aseda (24°05' N; 72°10' E): Red ware, grey ware of medieval period (probably early too) was observed at this site.

Bhadramali (24°05' N; 72°01' E): This site is situated along river Banas. Medieval pottery including red ware, grey ware, black ware and black & red ware was found scattered all over the natural elevations. The site seemed quite promising for finding of earlier cultural horizons including historical and even chalcolithic evidence, if searched further.

Bhoyan (24°10' N; 72°12' E): The mound at this village to the east at its entrance. The size of the mound is about 120 x 160 x 1-1.5 m. The site belongs to medieval period as the potsherds (red ware, black ware and grey ware) and bricks indicated. A broken Jaina image (Figure 10) made of white marble showing seated Jina in meditation was observed at a local shrine which was datable to medieval period

Dharisana (24°03' N; 72°06' E): This site is also situated near river Banas. Medieval pottery including red ware, grey ware, black ware and black & red ware was found scattered all over the natural elevations.

Dhuva (24°11' N; 72°13' E): The site is situated about 1.5 km from the village near a high school. The size of site is about 300 x 200 m with a flat top. Four silver coins and

three copper coins were found from the site. Near a large pond, a mutilated medieval sculpture was observed. One *ukhula* and two pillar bases possibly part of a medieval temple structure were also observed at the site. The pottery found at the site was medieval red, black and grey ware.

Jhabadiya (24°05' N; 72°00' E): Red ware, thick grey and black ware pottery, all belonging to medieval period was found scattered over natural elevation in the agricultural fields. A broken brick (25 x 6 cm with 28 cm length, though broken), two copper coins of early twentieth century and a late medieval inscription (at Juna Shankar temple) were also observed at the site.

Khadosan (24°09' N; 72°01' E): Medieval red ware was observed at this site.

Nana Rasna (24°11' N; 72°13' E): Some red ware potsherds of medieval period were observed in the middle of the village. A late medieval Vishnu sculpture was also observed.

Nava (24°04' N; 72°15' E): Medieval red ware and grey ware were observed at the site.

Samau Mota (24°08' N; 72°10' E): Medieval red ware, black ware and grey ware was found scattered on surface in the village.

Samau Nana (24°08' N; 72°11' E): Late medieval ceramics were observed at Lakshmi Mata temple. The medieval ceramics observed in the village were of early medieval period.

Saviyana (24°06' N; 72°08' E): Early medieval black ware and red ware were observed scattered on surface in the village.

Velvapura (24°04' N; 72°09' E): The site of Mominavas is a small medieval period site as the finding of red ware from there indicated.

Thakurvas (24°05' N; 72°10' E): Early medieval black ware, red ware and thick ware were found from this village site.

Vaghrol (24°28' N; 72°33' E): Late medieval ceramics were observed at this village site.

Antroli (24°18' N; 72°30' E): Medieval ceramics (red ware and black ware of various thickness) were observed at this village.

Moti Bhatmal (24°17' N; 72°28' E): Late medieval ceramics as coarse red ware and red ware were observed at this village.

Bhutedi (24°15' N; 72°20' E): At the site medieval ceramics in the form of red ware and coarse black ware and grey ware were observed. Among important finds was a panel in marble (Figure 11) which on top displays a Jina in meditation and in the panel below it shows a cow eating straw and a suckling calf. The inscription (Figure 12) provides a

date of *circa* twelfth century. It is legible and its reading would provide some information about the religious beliefs of the donors.

Chitrasani (24°15' N; 72°25' E): Medieval ceramics along with sculptures were observed at the site.

Garh Palanpur (24°05' N; 72°18' E): The site is situated on an elevated surface. Some structural remains of medieval period are still visible. From surface medieval ceramics were found. The site could date even earlier but could not be confirmed because of modern habitation. Few medieval sculptures were also observed at the site.

Hanumanpura (24°08' N; 72°17' E): Medieval period ceramics along with structural remains were observed at this site. Bricks were of the size 32 x 24 x 7 cm. Parts of a temple structure in stone were also observed along with some unidentifiable medieval sculptures. The size of the site is about 100 x 40 m.

Hasanpur (24°10' N; 72°30' E): Medieval ceramics were observed at this settlement. At a temple, lower part of a marble image with inscription (Figure 13) was observed. The date on the inscription is samvat 1323.

Hebatpur (24°26' N; 72°48' E): Medieval ceramics (red ware and black ware of various thickness) were observed at this village.

Malna (24°23' N; 72°51' E): Medieval period ceramics were observed at this village.

Malpuriya (24°16' N; 72°34' E): Late medieval ceramics were observed at this village site.

Samadhi Ranajivas (24°09' N; 72°15' E): Medieval period ceramics in the form of red ware and black ware of various fabrics were observed at this site. The size of the site is about 80 x 100 m and is plain. Some temple parts carved with images were also observed at the site.

Conclusions

This small exploration expedition of week duration was fruitful to a certain extent. Firstly, it further confirmed the remarkable work done by R.T. Parikh (1977) where he as a whole had identified 17 (+1 rock shelter) late stone age sites, 2 chalcolithic sites, 4 early historic sites, 5 medieval sites (Period I) and 148 medieval (Period II) sites in Banaskantha district. As far as earliest chronology of Banaskantha district is concerned, it starts with late Stone Age (i.e. Mesolithic culture) which was not associated with pottery. No site of early Stone Age was found in the entire area of exploration and the area near Iqbalgarh bordering Abu region was quite hilly and would have shown some signs of Paleolithic period, if it had existed there. Parikh gave a tentative date of 3000 BCE for the non-geometric microlithic industry. I believe the Mesolithic culture of this area may be datable to 8000-5000 BCE as it is pre-pottery stage and mostly comprise

non-geometric microliths. The area of Nichlo Bandh site was quite exciting and should be further explored. It may provide some evidence of continuity of tradition from non-geometric stage to geometric stage and even later. As far as chalcolithic culture is concerned, only two sites were reported by Parikh and one among them was famous site of Zekada. Both these sites were found in that area of Banaskantha district which has close proximity to Kachchh. If more chalcolithic sites are to be explored in the district, the maximum possibility lies in that area. In recent years, R.N. Kumaran, Asstt. Archaeologist in Archaeological Survey of India has identified a number of chalcolithic sites and has published them in as prestigious journal as *Man and Environment* (Kesarwani, Kumaran and Negi 2009: 56-66 & Nath and Kumaran 2012: 28-40).

Here, from my experience in the area, I would suggest that scholars should be very cautious in accepting their findings. When a scholar of the caliber of Parikh who worked extensively in the area firstly in association with S.R. Rao and then under guidance of R.N. Mehta, two greats of Indian archaeology, could report finding of microliths on both banks of river Banas, raises the question - were they not competent to identify chalcolithic elements in the same culture milieu in which Kumaran and colleagues could identify so many chalcolithic sites? Even if their findings are accepted, it would mean that spread of chalcolithic culture in this area was denser than any other chalcolithic culture including the Harappan and the Ahar culture settlements, which to me seems simply just not possible.

In the present state of my knowledge I would suggest that major part of Banaskantha district was devoid of chalcolithic and later cultures after the Mesolithic period. Even in the historical period, Parikh could report only 4 early historic sites, none of which could be dated on the basis of pottery findings, rather on the basis of finding of punch-marked coins, sculptures, bricks etc. In this entire area which I could take up for explorations, only one site Juna Deesa was reported by Parikh as belonging to early historic period. It is hard to believe that there are so few early historic settlements in the area. At least on the major trade routes, there should be early historical sites. Settlement pattern did not change even during historical period until early medieval period which Parikh has mentioned as medieval (Period I). Even the number of settlements during this period was quite insignificant and the area came into regular habitation during medieval (Period II) which is coeval with Solanki rule in the area.

Out of the total 36 sites reported in this paper, majority are from this medieval (Period II) stage. But the number of sites of medieval (Period I) is more than previously reported (5) by Parikh for sure, particularly in the area near river Banas. It was observed that red ware, grey ware, black ware and even black & red ware continued in this area up to medieval times. Majority of the sites were small settlements. The cult of Dhari Mata, considered to be wife of Balarama (possibly Revati), a snake goddess, was found to be very popular in the area. Her temples were observed on the outskirts of villages. Her cult requires further research, particularly for the origin and antiquity of the tradition.

Another local tradition which was found to be popular in the entire area was the cult of Jakha. Temples of Jakha were observed at hill slopes where a number of terracotta horses were kept. This tradition seems to have continued till present times. At a temple in Garh Mahadevia, Virampur, a possible Jakha shrine was observed inside a room (Figure 14). Jakha or horse riders are made in brass. Few Ganesa and other Hindu idols in stone were also kept at the shrine (Figure 15). The cult of Jakha is very popular in Kachchh area (Saxena 2018: 99-120) but it is significant to observe its popularity even in eastern parts of Banaskantha district. The total number of Jakha deities is either seventy two or seventy three, in case the only female in the group Sayara is also counted. From observing the contexts of the Jakha shrines in the explored area, it seems difficult to accept Saxena's view that the Jakha equestrian warriors arrived from outside and had no connectivity with Yaksha cult and that there is an intended attempt by Hindu society to assimilate Jakha cult in Hindu tradition. How can it be accepted that a major chunk of population who had Hindu beliefs (even Muslims to an extent) just started worshipping an outside cult and then tried to assimilate it in their prevalent religion. For accepting such a view, we must have popularity of such a cult in west Asiatic region, from where the origin of Jakha warriors is suggested.

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