

Book Review

Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain The Lower and the Middle Ganga by Dilip K. Chakravarti 307 pp., maps, plates, Index, Rs. 1095/- Permanent Black, Delhi (2001)

This book discusses the ancient historical geography of the lower and middle sections of the Ganga Plain. For this the area considered is Chotanagpur Plateau which borders the area on the west and the Bangladesh section of the Ganga delta which lies to its east is the main study area. The eastern limit of the study area is the Sagar island south of Kolkata and its western border is an irregular line running through the trans-Sarayu plain in Bahraich and linking Faizabad, Sultanpur, Pratapgarh and Allahabad. Further, south of the Yamuna in Allahabad traverses have been taken up to Chitrakut and Kalinjar and south of the Ganga between Banaras and Mirzapur. Similar traverses were taken up to Robertsganj and the border of Surguja in Madhya Pradesh to understand the nature of the middle Ganga plain's links with central India. The major hill range which flanks the valley on the west between Bhagalpur and Munger and sends outliers right up to the river bank is the Kharagpur range. Westward from Maldaha and west Dinajpur in West Bengal, the northern bank of the Ganga provides a broad and uninterrupted sweep of alluvium which is fringed far to the north by the line of the Siwaliks in Nepal.

First the study proposes to establish the protohistoric perspective extending well back into the third millennium B.C. Secondly, the importance of exploration is given a proper recognition as well.

The base line of the study are the sites which have already been published in different areas. The main geographical issues of this study are the location of sites, the historical linkages of different areas, the problems of ancient political geography and finally the major routes passing through these areas.

A rapid survey of some of the historical and geographical studies conducted in Europe is done in the following pages. The Indian preoccupation is contrasted with these literature in the following way :

“What sets the Indian situation apart is that the beginning made by early writers was not systematically followed up in the subsequent stages. Thus the task of relating Indian ancient history to the ground - has thus remained seriously incomplete. But as far as one knows the tradition of publishing articles related to ancient history and archaeology in popular literary magazines possibly has nineteenth century roots in Bengal” (Page-55).

In the context of the Mahananda plain the abiding significance of Varendra as a geo-political unit in the history of the Ganga plain is being highlighted. A chain of inscriptions from the Mauryas in the third century B.C. to the Palas and Senas till the twelfth-thirteenth centuries A.D. are being used for this analysis. According to Chakravarti that such a geo-politically significant area must likely to have had a protohistoric antecedent, although the direct testimony is still not more than a fragment of a Black and Red Ware bowl from the surface of Bangarh.

The second geographical unit of the field study is the western bank of Bhagirathi which extends on the west up to the Chhotanagpur plateau.

Third unit of field study in West Bengal deals with the Bhagirathi mouth and the Midnapur Coast and exclusively with early historic and later sites.

In conclusion, Chakravarti drew attention to only two major archaeological tasks ahead in the lower and middle Ganga plain. The first is to determine the origin character and spread of its neolithic antecedent. In the case of the region on the western bank of the Bhagirathi in the lower Ganga plain, it is perhaps connected in some way with the newly emergent Orissan neolithic at Golbai Sasan, whereas in the case of the middle Ganga plain, the role of the Vindhyan region has to be considered.

As far as early history is concerned, it should be obvious by now that one of our major tasks was to focus on the sites of this period as parts of a wide network. None of the areas from Kausambi / Ayodhya to the Bhagirathi mouth survived in isolation, there is a whole chain of links between them. Perhaps, this can be taken further forward by taking more intensive ground

studies in different areas so that the nature of interaction on the regional level too becomes clearly marked. A fuller reconstruction of the interconnected archaeological geography of third century B.C., middle and lower Ganga plain should be an exciting task for the future.

The book rests on extensive cross references from diverse disciplines. It has been able to capably frame the issues relating to topographical connection of Ganga Valley with rest of India.

The statements of archaeological dispersal, however, seem to be mainly conjectural primarily because Black and Red Ware ceramics like a

dominant colour seem to mask variations in the entire region under consideration and exhibit a false uniformity.

Like all other works of Chakravarti, this work also does not cover any issue in depth. It is also true that covering of such an enormous canvas does not leave any space for an author for deeper probe. One is finally left to wonder whether we should still formulate research designs in the manner of early anthropo-geographers like Heine Geldern any more. Finally, one must add that the price kept for this book is absolutely beyond the reach of majority of scholars.

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