



REVISITING THE PAST OF SUSUNIA – AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND EPIGRAPHICAL STUDY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260401050>

Abstract

Susunia hill has a significant role in history from prehistory to modern times. Susunia is situated at the North Western part of Bankura district of West Bengal. Susunia has attracted the attention of scholars, antiquarians and pilgrims for its rich archaeological, epigraphical heritage, natural beauty and sacred springs. This article revisits the archaeological and epigraphic evidence from Susunia hill to reconstruct its role in prehistoric, protohistoric, and early historic Bengal. This paper undertakes a multidisciplinary exploration method of the site to focus on its archaeological findings and the renowned inscription of king Chandravarman. Through a detailed analysis of paleolithic tools, fossils, early historic evidence and the 4th century Chandra inscription it conveyed that Susunia is an important cultural and political centre which is still in use by the local people. New interdisciplinary approaches are proposed to address gaps in current research.

Keywords: *Susunia, Prehistoric, Paleolithic, Tools, Fossil, Inscription, Chandravarman, Pushkarna*

Introduction

Susunia is a prominent historical and tourist landmark of the North Western part of Bankura district of West Bengal, India. It is located at approximately 23.3° N latitude and approximately 89.6° E longitude and elevated around 440 meters (1442 feet) above sea level. Susunia hill and its surroundings has a rich Prehistoric deposit which attracted the researchers and investigators for a long decade. It has a long geographical, geological, archaeological, paleoanthropological, historical and cultural history which makes the place a rich cultural heritage of Bengal. The area has ended Prehistoric stone tool evidence of fossilized flora and fauna, early historic potsherds, inception and sculpture, indicating its importance as a centre of habitation and spiritual activity for a long time. The main aim of this paper is to revisit the Susunia hill and its adjoining area through its archaeological sources and epigraphic evidence to relook Susunia's history using new insights.

Geology of Susunia

According to the observation of British geologist Thomas Oldham, the Pleistocene Rarh land has a coastal environment. The present day landscape of Rarh land is the remnant of the soil waves on which the Chota Nagpur plateau was formed, resembling eroded hills that suddenly rose from the plains. In the terminology of geography it is called 'monadnock'. The geological foundation of the underlying rock structure is Archean Eon, the igneous rock layer is mainly composed of granite genesis parasist quotes metamorphic rock pegmatite, amphibolite etc. The Gandheswari river flows to the south of the hill. The river originates near the Saltora police station on the Purulia border and crosses the distance of 51 KM before merging with the Dwarakeswar river in the east of Bankura City. The river is fed by streams like Dhankora, Bankajor etc. to the north of the mountain is a vast underground water table. The Rock structure on all sides of the Susunia mountain has faults, fissures, joints, cracks and fractures through which water is filtered through layers of lime and sand and silt as it flows from the north to the south. As a result it is continuously released as a stream on the North and South West sides of the foothills of the mountain. This water is rich in minerals purified and drinkable.

Previous work

In 1865 Geologist Valentine Ball first reported the findings of a number of paleolithic tools in the sites of Bankura and Purulia district of West Bengal. These tools are made of gneiss and quartzite.

In the year 1959-60 the Archaeological Survey of India under the leadership of V D Krishnaswami explored the Kangsabati river valley in the district of Bankura and Purulia which resulted in some interesting findings of prehistoric tools.

Dharam Sen, under the supervision of the department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta unearthed many paleolithic tools and implements in the Dwarakeswar river valley of Bankura in 1962.

P.C. Dasgupta, the Directorate of Archaeology intensively explored the area of susunia and its neighbourhood in November 1965 for the first time, which resulted in paleolithic tool hand axes made of quartz. Later under his supervision approximately 2000 stone tools dated from paleolithic to Neolithic period and fossil evidence occurred. In 1982 A. K. Dutta worked on the area of Susunia and gave a detailed geological succession of the area.

The Directorate of Archaeology of West Bengal conducted an organised exploration in the region of Susunia flanked by the stream of Gandheswari in the district of Bankura in 1985-86. Few trial excavations were also done by them at Bamundiha, Biribari and Suyabasa to understand its stratigraphy. The whole Bankura district was studied and explored archaeologically by R. K. Chattopadhyay. An extensive survey of the area was undertaken by him. According to him the stratigraphic situation at susunia was not very critically assessed as the hill and its slope are extremely eroded.

Avick Biswas, Prof. S. N. Rajguru and their team revisited and examined some prominent sites of Susunia and its adjoining area to understand its Geo archaeological aspects. Anek R. Sankhyan and his team tried to look up the relationship between lithic industries and mammalian fossils. They tentatively dated Susunia to list them 200,000 years ago on the basis of the stratigraphic position of the stone tools and mammalian fossils.

So in this present research paper the author tries to revisit Susunia and its neighbourhood to understand its cultural sequence archaeologically and epigraphically on the basis of previous works.

Methodology

The research adopts a mixed method approach that combines qualitative and interdisciplinary methods to reassess Susunia. The archaeological survey of India's report and the survey report of Calcutta University the author tries to reassess and frame the prehistory to the early historic period of Susunia.

Archaeological finding

Susunia and its adjoining area is highly significant due to its Prehistoric findings and Fossil evidence. It has reflected a wide range of lithic tools indicating human activity in Prehistoric times. The scholars and researchers of ASI have conducted exploration and excavation of the area several times. As a result stone tools and other artifacts have yielded from paleolithic to early historic periods. The earliest period of Susunia dates back to the paleolithic age. Paleolithic stone tools including hand-axes, cleaver, chopper, ovate (pointed, half), lanceolate have been discovered in the area during exploration. Mesolithic tools like cleaver, scrapper (pointed, end scraper), small hand- axes (6.5 cm), knife (6.2 cm) and a number of microliths (blade-burin) recovered from the site Paharghata, Jaljalía, Bharatpur, Dhankora, Babladanga, Biribari, Ramnathpur, Bankajor, Kushbora, Seuilbona, Metela, Hapania, Simulberia. Rajguru and Vishal found unidentified animal Fossil along with occurrence of microlith within colluvial-alluvial gravel. This gravel bed indicated the late Pleistocene period. Among the Neolithic tools the site revealed perforated ring stones, celts, muller, small hand-axes with butt (3.8 cm), triangle handaxes (21 cm) which had a working edge on both sides. The important Neolithic findings occurred at the site of Chandra, Dhankora and Bankajor. The amount of quartzite and chart in the locale indicated that these were used as raw materials for making the tools. The hilly area provided natural caves and rock shelter for the Prehistoric people. The natural water flows on two sides of the hill and there are streams like Dhankura, Bankajor, Gandheswari flows through the region provided the water supply. All this evidence showed Prehistoric people cognitivism and the site catchment process.

Fossil remains

Besides stone tools, the Prehistoric Susunia occurred in several fossil remains. These include Bubalus Palaeoindicus (wild buffalo), Bos namadicus (ox), Bos sp., Palaeoloxodon namadicus (elephant), Equus namadicus (horse), Panthera cf. Leo (lion), Crocuta cf. Sivalesus (hyena). The animal remains belong to the upper Pleistocene period. Yet, the signs of the presence of Bos namadicus is still an older date. A fossilized jaw was recovered from the site Babladanga which was dated c14 by physics professor Shyamadas Chatterjee of Jadavpur University. The radiocarbon dating of 40,000 BCE has been computed from this fossil. The discovery of fossil lions and spotted hyena in Pleistocene deposits near Susunia suggest interesting migration patterns of large carnivores during the Pleistocene period.

Chalcolithic and Iron Age transition

Potsherds and copper indicate evidence of a chalcolithic period in the region. The discovery of iron flat and tools points to the iron age (circa 1000-500 BCE), a period when susunia likely served as a hub for early metallurgical activities. The hill's strategic location would have made it an ideal site for controlling resources and trade routes.

Early Historic Period

By the early historic period (circa 300 BCE–300 CE), Susunia had evolved into a significant center. Excavations have revealed remnants of brick structures, terracotta figurines, and pottery, including Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), which is

associated with the Mauryan and post-Mauryan eras. These findings suggest that Susunia was part of a broader network of urbanizing centers in the Bengal region. The archaeological record at Susunia paints a picture of continuity and adaptation. From nomadic toolmakers to settled communities engaged in trade and craftsmanship, the site reflects the dynamic interplay of environment, technology, and culture over thousands of years.

The legacy of Epigraphy

The most remarkable historical significance of susunia is its epigraphic evidence. The upland is renowned for its two major inscriptions which provide critical insight into the political, cultural and religious history of ancient Bengal. The inscription is located on the north wall of the open rock in the back side of the hill. The rock looks like a rock shelter in its appearance.

The inscription was discovered and first published by Nagendranath Basu. Later it was properly edited by Haraprasad Shastri. The inscription consists of three lines. Among them two lines are inscribed below the design of a big wheel with flaming rib and hub. The third line appears to the right of the wheel. The language of the inscription was written in Sanskrit and the characters are of the eastern variety of Gupta Bramhi. Paleographically the inscription is dated to 4th century CE. So, the inscription is:

Part-I

1. "Pushkaranadhipate Maharaja Srisinghavarmanah Putrasya/
2. Maharaja Srichandrarvarman Krithah"

Part-II

1. "Chakraswaminah dasagrenatisristah."

The meaning of the inscription is: "the work of the great king illustrious Chandrarvarman, son of the great king illustria Simhavarman, lord of Pushkarna, (it is) dedicated by the chief of the servants of lord of wheel or Chakraswami." It appears that Chandrarvarman and his father Simhavarman had their seat of authority in Pushkarna, generally identified with the present village Pakhanna. 'Chakraswami', the lord of the wheel, symbolically represents the God Vishnu. As the wheel is the attribute of Vishnu. The excavated cave on the wall on foot where the inscription was engraved, was intended to be the abode or temple of Vishnu (Shastri, 1915-16). It indicates the worship of Vishnu in the area which is the earliest known evidence of Vishnu worship in ancient Bengal. The ruler Chandrarvarman and his father Simhavarman were the devotees of lord Vishnu. Both of them preached Vaishnavism in that area. Another interesting note is that as the language of the inscription is Sanskrit and letters are Gupta Bramhi, proves their cultural richness.

The inscription raises a debate on the identification of the ruler Chandrarvarman. There is a dichotomy between the scholars behind the true identity of Chandrarvarman. Some scholars identify Chandrarvarman with the Chandra of Mehrauli inscription near Qutub complex in Delhi, others identify them as non-resident rulers who could be possibly from the region of Pushkarna in Rajasthan. Haraprasad Shastri has attempted to identify Chandrarvarman with the brother of Naravarman of the Varmman dynasty of Malwa mentioned in the Mandasor inscription. The Malwas never extended their region beyond the eastern limits of Rajasthan. (Majumdar, 1943- 30). Most of the scholars are of the opinion that the style of the Brahmi script of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription could not be engraved before 5 century CE where paleographically proved that the Susunia Inscription dated to 4th century CE. Hence, the Chandrarvarman of the Susunia rock inscription cannot be the same Chandra of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription. Scholars like Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay and D.C. Sircar with their arguments proved that the Chandra of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription is none other than Chandragupta the second, the Gupta emperor. The period of Chandragupta - II's reign also resembles with the Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription.

Another notable thing is that the great conqueror Samudragupta brought a large portion of Northern India under his control. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta mentions that Samudragupta defeated twelve kings of Aryavarta. In his first Aryavarta campaign, Samudragupta defeated Achutya, Nagasena and Ganapatinaga. In his second Aryavarta war he defeated Rudradeva, Matila, Nagadatta, Chandrarvarman, Ganapatinaga, Nagasena, Achyuta, Nandin and Balavarman. Many scholars believe that the name Chandrarvarman who is mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription was Chandrarvarman of Susunia rock inscription as the ruler of Pushkarna. It can be said with a degree of certainty that with the defeat and death of Chandrarvarman his territories were annexed to the Gupta Empire. The ruler Chandrarvarman was not merely a petty local chief but a strong ruler who extended his kingdom upto Faridpur of present Bangladesh (Majumdar, 1943- 30). There is a place at the South West of Susunia hill named garh, a stone built kunda, and a stone image of a lion from whose mouth a fountain is letting out a big stone built statue of Narasimha, referring to the evidence of the reign of the king Chandrarvarman at Susunia hill. The statue of Narasimha suggests that Susunia and its surrounding area was once under Vaishnavism.

Discussion

Susunia's archaeological and epigraphic records state its role as a political, cultural and religious hub from prehistoric times to early historic time. The site is continuously used by human beings even now. Prehistoric people choose the site on the basis of their locational criteria. At that time they had basic needs of a rocky hilly area which provided them with the stone tools and also the rock shelter and water resources. This upland provided all the criteria. If we look into the other prehistoric sites we easily identify their pattern of choice of living. It showed their cognitivism. The fossil remains suggest the geological time frame and date of the site. It also indicates the climate of the region of that time. Some fossil evidence showed the migration patterns of the animals. (Dutta, 1976-386-390). The excavation at Pakhanna (then Pushkarana) suggests that Susunia was part of a regional power structure. Most probably it was a frontier outpost of the Gupta empire. The inscription also emphasised on temple-building

and also highlights the role of royal patronage in promoting religious and cultural integration during this period. These inscriptions are not only historical footnotes; but also they are the windows of the socio-political dynamics of ancient Bengal. It reveals the dynamic role of local and imperial powers, the spread of Sanskrit as a language of administration, and the institutionalization of religion through royal endowments.

Despite its richness, Susunia's heritage faces challenges. Unregulated tourism, environmental degradation, and insufficient conservation efforts threaten the site's archaeological remains. The inscriptions, exposed to weathering, require urgent protection to prevent further erosion. Additionally, systematic excavations and interdisciplinary studies are needed to fully unravel Susunia's historical context. For instance, advanced geophysical surveys could reveal more about the site's subsurface structures, while comparative epigraphic studies could clarify its links to other Gupta-era polities. Recent efforts by the ASI and local universities to document and preserve Susunia have been commendable, but greater public awareness and funding are essential. Digital archiving and virtual reconstructions could also make Susunia's heritage accessible to a wider audience, fostering appreciation for its historical value.

Conclusion

Shushunia Hill is a testament to the layered history of ancient Bengal, where prehistoric tools, early historic settlements and vivid inscriptions come together to tell the story of human endeavour. Its archaeological and inscriptional remains reveal a place that was a vital locus of cultural, political and economic activity from the dawn of human tool making to the age of empire. Revisiting Shushunia is not just about discovering the past; it is about reconnecting with a tradition that continues to speak to us through its silent stones and faded inscriptions. As we move forward, preserving and studying this extraordinary place, Shushunia reminds us of the enduring power of the past to shape our understanding of the present.

Susunia Hill is a testament to the layered history of ancient Bengal, where prehistoric tools, early historic settlements, and eloquent inscriptions converge to tell a story of human endeavor. Its archaeological and epigraphy reveal a site that was a crucible of cultural, political, and economic activity, from the dawn of human tool-making to the age of empires. Revisiting Susunia is not just about unearthing the past; it is about reconnecting with a heritage that continues to speak to us through its silent stones and faded scripts. As we move forward, preserving and studying this remarkable site, Susunia reminds us of the enduring power of the past to shape our understanding of the present.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Tania Pal: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

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