



Preliminary Report on a Recent Archaeological Investigations at Ghoramara Island, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal

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Abstract: This research paper presents the findings of recent field surveys conducted within the Ghoramara Gram Panchayat area - specifically Ghoramara Island - located in the Sagar Block of the South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India. These surveys have led to the discovery of numerous archaeological artifacts dating from the the Early Medieval era. The artifacts came to light primarily through systematic field exploration and as a result of riverbank (Muriganga River) erosion. The recovered materials include a variety of terracotta pottery, beads, fragments of black stone sculptures (likely serving as religious paraphernalia), votive stupas, traditional earthen lamps and lamp stand, drinking vessels, weights and measures, among other items. These artifacts - particularly the pottery - provide compelling evidence of the historical connectivity and commercial networks that once linked this site with the Middle and Lower Gangetic regions, as well as with the eastern coastal belt of the Bay of Bengal. A comparative analysis of various Early Medieval archaeological sites across India reveals distinct traces of a continuous settlement history at Ghoramara and the nearby areas. Furthermore, the region is significant not merely as a node within a commercial network; it also exhibits unique characteristics regarding the religious and cultural milieu - as well as the technological expertise; that were instrumental in sustaining a continuous pattern of human settlement. An analysis of the recovered artifacts helps us understand that; the nearby archaeological site of Mandirtala on Sagar Island may have exerted a profound influence on this (Ghoramara) location. This evidence confirms that Ghoramara's unique status as a significant coastal regional site was established as early as the early-historic period. Consequently, Ghoramara holds a distinct and pivotal position within the fields of coastal archaeology and regional historical research.

Keywords: Archaeological Investigations, Coastal Archaeology, Deltaic Region, Ghoramara, Indian Sundarbans, Mandirtala, Sagar Island, Settlement

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Introduction

Ghoramara Island is currently an isolated island situated in the vicinity of Sagar Island. Historically, this region formed part of the ancient 'Vanga' polity (Majumdar 1352 BS: 5). According to James

Rennell's maps from the 18th century, the landmass of Ghoramara was physically connected to Sagar Island; it was situated adjacent to the mainland - specifically, the area now comprising the Harwood Point Coastal Police Station (21°53'09.39"N 88°09'52.35"E; Subdivision – Kakdwip, Ramakrishna Gram panchayet of Kakdwip Block) and Sagar Island (nearby Gram panchayet - Muriganga I & Muriganga II). As depicted in Rennell's maps, Ghoramara was separated from Sagar Island to its northeast by a slender distributary of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River. However, due to major ocean storms, accelerated riverine erosion and shifting currents (Bhattacharya 2005: 94–110), this state of isolation has intensified significantly in recent times, resulting in the complete submergence of landmasses such as Khasimara and Lohachara (21°53'58.81"N 88°06'56.78" E). Recent field surveys and the archaeological artifacts recovered from Ghoramara, provide evidence of continuous human habitation spanning from the historic period through the Early Medieval era in some cases, it can assume that it occurred at a later Mughals and British period. The site reveals a complex interplay of factors, including internal and external trade, maritime connectivity, settlement patterns, and the dynamic interaction between humans and their environment. This research demonstrates that lower-Gangetic and coastal settlements were not established solely for commercial purposes; rather, they fostered continuous cultural and religious linkages with the core settlements of the mainland. The archaeological remains of Ghoramara Island vividly illustrate the uninterrupted evolution of local human habitation in the region.

Location of Ghoramara

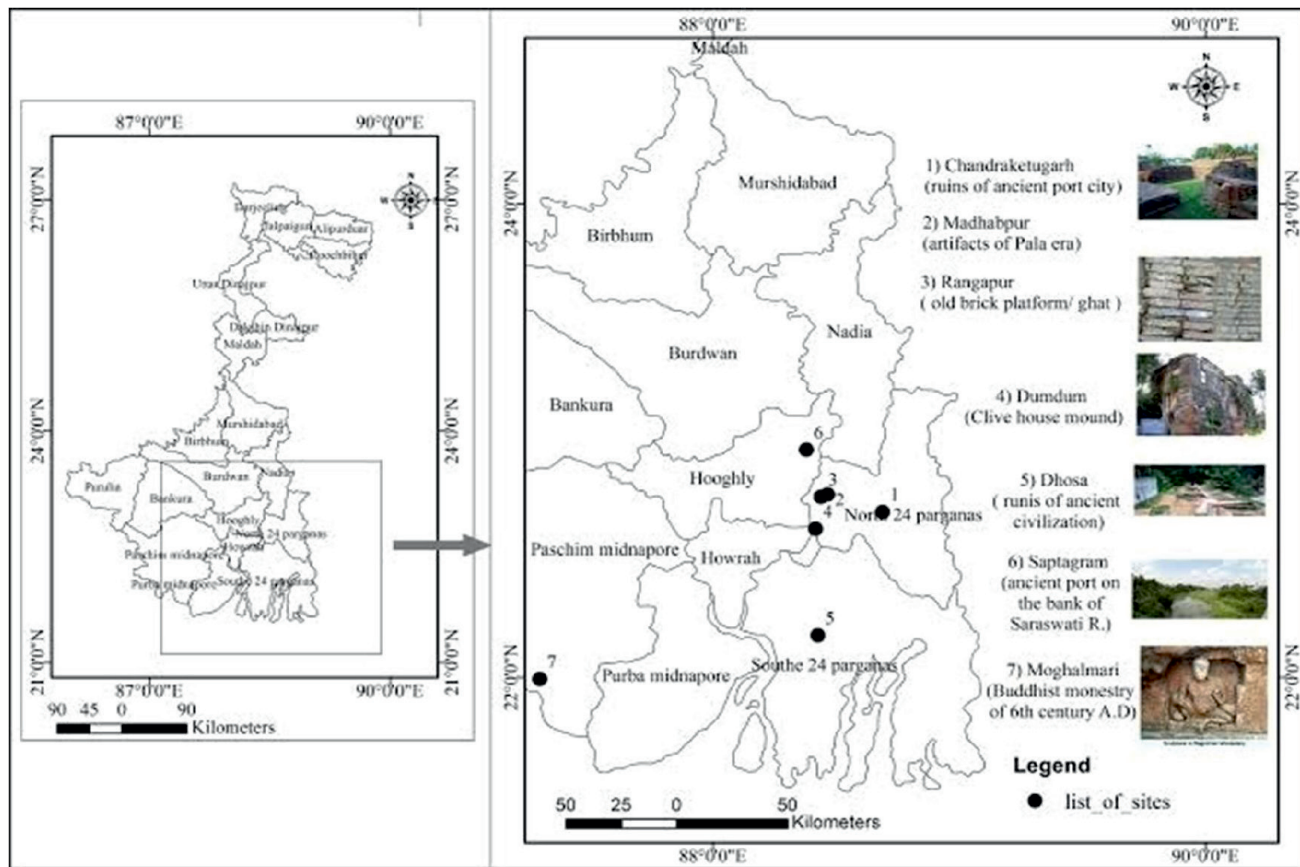
Ghoramara Island (22.03° N, 88.16° E) is situated at the confluence of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River and the Bay of Bengal, approximately 92 kilometres south of Kolkata and 40 kilometres north of the coast. Ghoramara holds distinct recognition as a 'Panchayat' (local administrative unit, India) within the Sagar Block. Nayachar Island lies to the west of the island, while Sagar Island is situated to its southeast. The average elevation of the island above sea level is approximately one meter.

Located within the Sundarbans region, the island is primarily suitable for agriculture; however, it currently stands as an isolated and eroding deltaic area. Given its proximity to Kakdwip (21°52'44.72" N 88°11'58.47" E) - an area rich in archaeological heritage and Sagar Island, the archaeological remains discovered at Ghoramara suggest the existence of a vast repository of antiquities, offering us profound insights into the ancient civilizations and cultural practices of the Lower Gangetic Delta and the coastal region.

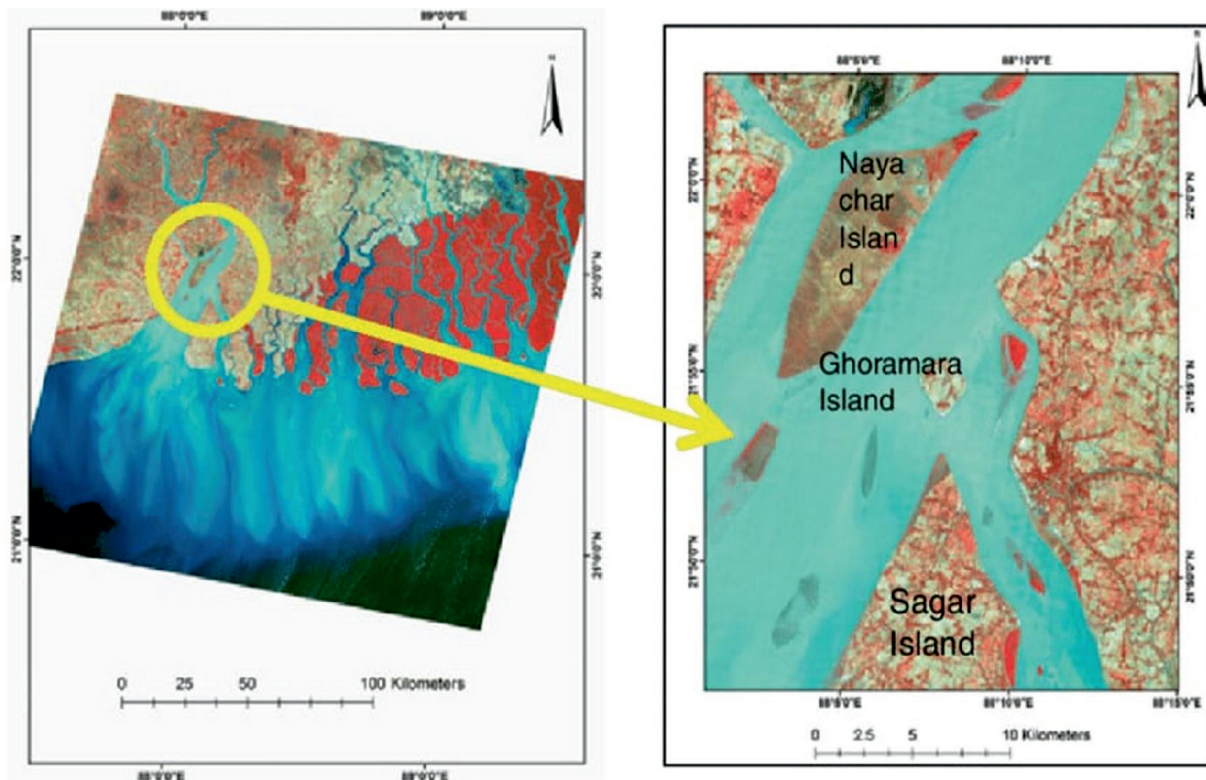
Review of Previous Research

Due to its location at the confluence of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River, Ghoramara constitutes a site of significant interest for archaeological research, both historically and strategically. Being a marginal and isolated island, it has not been the subject of extensive research or excavation activities, largely due to its remote location and various attendant adversities. Consequently, the archaeological significance of this island will be highlighted through a comparative review of existing literature.

In his book '*Sundarbaner Dhanchi Dwiper Gangaridider Sandhane*' (in English- In Search of the Gangaridai on Dhanchi Island, Sundarbans)-published in 2023 by Prabha Prakashani,



Map 1: Major archaeological sight of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal



Map 2: Location of the archaeological sight of Ghoramara, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal

Kolkata—Dr. Tapan Kumar Das, offers insights into the patterns of human settlement within the Sundarbans region and the evolution of civilization in riverine deltaic environments. In the context of archaeological exploration on Ghoramara Island, the methodological framework, comparative analyses and interpretations of material evidence presented in this volume will prove instrumental in deeply integrating the regional history of Ghoramara Island with the broader history of the vast Gangetic Delta.

In his book ‘The Archaeology of Coastal Bengal’ - published in 2018 by Oxford University Press, New Delhi—Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay, elucidates the patterns of human settlement formation as they evolved in adaptation to the local environment. This volume aids in deciphering the specific settlement patterns of Ghoramara and in delineating the spatial organization of its settlements, particularly within the context of regional commercial networks.

In the book ‘Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: The Lower and Middle Ganga’ - published in 2001 by Permanent Black, Delhi -Professor Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti analyses that, archaeological geography and material culture of the lower and middle reaches of the Ganges River, thereby elucidating the distinct regional characteristics of the area. This work facilitates an understanding of settlement patterns along riverbanks, the influence of internal natural landforms and the application of the landscape archaeology approach.

Cultural Sequences of Ghoramara Island

Recent archaeological investigations and field surveys conducted on Ghoramara Island - situated near Sagar Island (21°46’40.24” N 88°07’08.28E) at the confluence of the Bhagirathi and Hooghly rivers - reveal a distinct trajectory of cultural evolution within this region. Although foreign chronicles, epics, Puranas, inscriptions, and medieval literature frequently mention Gangasagar (or Sagar Island), there is no specific mention of Ghoramara as a distinct geographical entity. Historically, the landmass of Ghoramara was contiguous with present-day Sagar Island - specifically the Mandirtala archaeological site - a fact gives us an idea by Rennell's map (Rennell 1781: 34) of 1781. According to this map, a creek bisected the island, separating it from Sagar Island; significantly, a site designated as the “*Place of Sacrifice*” was marked to the east of this creek, “*Gunga Sagor*” to the southeast of this place and to its south stands “*SAGOR*”.

Current observations reveal that a vast sandbank has emerged, extending from Mandirtala on Sagar Island to the vicinity of Ghoramara Island. Field surveys, corroborated by the accounts of local boatmen, indicate that the soil of this sandbank (one of them is Bedford Island 21°50’55.67” N 88°04’27.70” E) is firm - a characteristic consistent with the soil composition of ancient geological strata (Rudra 2001: 21). Had this been a newly formed sandbank, it would typically have contained a higher proportion of sand and been softer in texture; however, the aforementioned sandbank is composed of clay-rich, hard and cohesive soil. Furthermore, satellite imagery reveals the presence of numerous submerged sandbanks adjacent to the island. A striking degree of similarity is observable between the archaeological artifacts recovered from Ghoramara and those found at the Mandirtala archaeological site (21°49’22.58”N 88°05’57.92” E). Based on an analysis of archaeological materials and a review of the geographical terrain, it can be hypothesized that in its initial phase, Ghoramara remained

physically connected to Sagar Island, with settlements established on the elevated riverbanks. In subsequent phases, the scope of these settlements expanded, and their organizational structures became more consolidated developments indicative of enhanced stability and social cohesion. However, due to natural calamities - such as shifts in the course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River and its tributaries, riverbank erosion, tidal surges, and storms - Ghoramara gradually became detached from the mainland, necessitating the relocation of settlements on multiple occasions. At the historical stage, evidence of defensive measures such as the construction of raised mounds and earthen embankments - has been uncovered; these measures were designed to mitigate environmental risks and ward off external invasions. An analysis of the material culture of Ghoramara Island and the surrounding Lower Gangetic Delta regions reveals that, across various phases, the area was influenced by agrarian societies, communities utilizing iron technology (Ghosh 1357 BS: 5), and, subsequently, the administrative systems of historical kingdoms (Chakrabarti 2014: 15).

Areas within Ghoramara Island - specifically Chunpuri ($21^{\circ}54'57.13''$ N $88^{\circ}08'20.11$ E), Bagpara ($21^{\circ}55'00.60''$ N $88^{\circ}07'07.02''$ E), Mandirtala ($21^{\circ}54'30.34''$ N $88^{\circ}08'11.57''$ E), Khasimara ($21^{\circ}55'26.08''$ N $88^{\circ}07'42.55''$ E), and Hatkhola - are residential zones replete with archaeological treasures. Collectively, the island has yielded remnants spanning from the Shunga, Kushan, and Gupta periods through the Early Medieval era, including artifacts characteristic of the North Indian Black Slipped Ware culture. Based on the recovered archaeological materials - as well as the 'I'-shaped vertical river channels (**Figure 1**) formed by riverbank erosion on the island - compelling evidence has been established regarding the continuity of cultural settlement on Ghoramara Island.



Figure 1: General view of the Ghoramara archaeological site

Research Methodology

The archaeological investigation conducted on Ghoramara Island is grounded in an interdisciplinary research methodology. Its primary objective is to assess the island's archaeological potential, as well as to analyse and interpret its sociocultural and commercial networks. Archaeological sites typically form as a result of various factors - most notably through the accumulation of stratigraphic layers generated by both cultural and natural processes. Field surveys at this location have yielded a substantial quantity of artifacts, including pottery shards, terracotta objects, faunal remains, and fragments of stone sculptures. These initially discovered artifacts have been systematically identified and subjected to detailed analysis.

Details of Current Discoveries

Through an examination of the vertical erosion caused by the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River, an attempt has been made to gain a clearer understanding of the stratigraphy of human settlement and the cultural context (**Figure 2**) of this region. Evidence of human habitation has been discovered at a depth of 10 feet below the surface. The current investigation reveals a discernible outline of the continuity of human settlement (Bagchi 1994: 79) on Ghoramara Island, Maharaj (1367 BS: 28) mentions that its river-dependent lifestyle and its trajectory of cultural evolution - thereby establishing a crucial foundation for future archaeological research.



Figure 2: Pottery and Other Archaeological Objects from the Archaeological Site of Ghoramara Island

Evidence of Pottery

Field surveys conducted on Ghoramara Island have yielded a substantial quantity of pottery artifacts. These include red and grey pottery - in the form of bowls, jars, and plates - which were utilized for daily necessities such as water storage, food preservation and cooking. The morphology and manufacturing techniques of these vessels are consistent with those observed at other archaeological sites across South 24 Parganas. The discovery of such earthen vessels at Ghoramara (**Figure 5**) suggests a continuity of pottery traditions and indicates the stability of local lifestyles in the region. It is plausible that these artifacts arrived in the Ganges Delta region through commercial channels.



Figure 3: Sample Collection at an Erosion-Affected Site in Ghoramara Island



Figure 4: Exposed archaeological site at Ghoramara resulting from river erosion



Figure 5: Ceramic Sherds of Different Shapes from Ghoramara Island



Figure 6: Early Medieval pottery

Furthermore, the widespread presence of Early Medieval pottery at Ghoramara indicates that these vessels were, from a technical standpoint, highly advanced. Their usage is primarily observed in Bihar and the eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh. Between 600 and 1200 Common Era, the extensive use of such pottery was evident throughout Northern India (Chakravarti 2008: 155). Field investigations at Ghoramara (**Figures 6-8**) have yielded concrete evidence of the use of these specific vessels. These pots were typically adorned with designs or circular (ring-like) patterns created using the "rouletting" technique. Large quantities of this pottery were unearthed at depths of eight to nine feet beneath the soil surface at Ghoramara. The discovery of such pottery across the entire eastern coastline suggests a widespread usage of these vessels, thereby pointing to the existence of extensive commercial networks (Chakravarti 2022: 262). Additionally, evidence of a distinct type of sand-tempered pottery (**Figure- 9**) was recovered from the aforementioned site.



Figure 7: Early Medieval pottery surface



Figure 8: Early Medieval pottery



Figure 9: Sand-tempered pottery

The exterior surface of these vessels features a lustrous, dark-hued finish - resulting from the admixture of red sand - while the interior retains a bright red color. Due to the presence of sand particles, these vessels possess exceptional hardness and thermal resistance; they do not crack under high temperatures and are effective at retaining heat. It is likely that such pottery was utilized for cooking and food preservation purposes.



Figure 10: Various types of terracotta artifacts and pottery fragments discovered at Ghoramara

Terracotta Artifacts

Field surveys conducted at the Mandirtala (this is the archaeological site of Ghoramara, not Mandirtala on Sagar Island) and Hatkhola localities of Ghoramara Island yielded terracotta animal figurines (**Figure: 11**).



Figure 11: Terracotta animal figurine

These artifacts are likely comparable to those of the Shunga - Kushan period, as the decorative motifs and stylistic presentation are characteristic of that specific historical era. Furthermore, small terracotta balls were also discovered at the site. These objects are crafted from finely refined clay. Whether serving as weights for fishing nets, toys, or perhaps ritualistic implements, their usage offers insights into the daily life, economic activities, and social structure of the ancient inhabitants of Ghoramara. Alongside animal figurines, spouted pottery-specifically pitcher-like vessels fitted with a spout - has been discovered at various archaeological sites across the Sundarbans, such as Tilpi, Dhosa, and Dhanachi Island (Das 2023: 141). Similar pottery vessels have also been unearthed at Ghoramara (**Figures 12-14**). Such pottery, utilized in daily life during the Proto-historic to Gupta periods (spanning roughly the 4th - 3rd centuries Before Common Era to the 5th century Common Era), is also evident at various archaeological sites throughout the Ganges Basin - including Mathura, Ahichchhatra, and Rajghat - as well as at other sites across North-Eastern India.



Figure 12: Pottery Recovered from Ghoramara Island



Figure 13: Pottery Recovered from Ghoramara Island



Figure 14. Single-Spouted Pottery Vessel

Religious Artefacts

In terms of religious artefacts, the archaeology of Ghoramara Island merits special recognition. Chattopadhyay (2005: 280) mentions that, a Vishnu idol discovered at Ghoramara is currently preserved in the museum of Pyarimohan Mukherjee, the Zamindar (landlord) of Uttarpara (Bally, Howrah Sadar subdivision in Howrah district in the Indian state of West Bengal). During field surveys, a fragment—specifically the lower-left section - of a broken stone sculpture (**Figure: 15**), crafted from black stone and measuring 15 centimetres in length, was discovered.



Figure 15: Fragmentary Harihara sculpture bearing the 'Vrishalañchana' (Bull emblem)

The fragment features a seated bull figure within a rectangular block, with its head raised upward; the upper section of the block is adorned with carved decorative motifs. The reverse side of the sculpture is concave and no inscriptions are engraved anywhere on the piece. From an iconographic perspective Nirmalananda (2024: 215) discusses that, no specifically Shaivite sculptures bearing the ‘bull’ (*Brisha*) *Lanchhan* (emblem) - have been discovered in South Bengal to date; the only instances where the image of the Nandi bull appears as an emblem are on the coinage of King Shashanka and the rulers of the Khadga dynasty. Mukhopadhyay (1400 BS: 110) notes that Jain sculptures have been discovered at various locations across South Bengal including Sagar Island, and the Jatar Deul (Das 2021: 209–217) in South 24 Parganas stands as a prominent architectural testament to Jain heritage in the region. Based on these observations, it can be hypothesized that this fragmented sculpture, bearing the bull emblem - may likely be a remnant of a larger idol of “Harihara” (**Figure: 15**), dating back to approximately the 12th century CE. The idol is worshipped as the family deity of Mr. Gautam Maiti of Chunpuri village (21°54’55.85” N 88°08’04.29” E). Alongside this damaged idol, the ‘Thakur-dalan’ (family shrine) at Mr. Gautam Maiti's residence houses a 25-centimeter black stone pedestal (**Figure-16**), a fragment of an unidentified idol, and ranging in size from small to large six heavy (**Figure-17**), spherical black stone blocks.



Figure 16: Deity idol pedestal

As the coastal region specifically, the Sundarbans is not a source of heavy black stone, these objects were likely imported from an external location. According to Mr. Gautam Maiti, these stones and idols were inherited from his ancestors; their original homestead was located in Chunpuri village, but following its submersion into the riverbed, the family relocated to the central part of the village.



Figure 17: The temple at the residence of Mr. Gautam Maiti, Chunpuri, Ghoramara

Additionally, a triangular votive stupa (**Figure 18**), crafted from clay, was discovered at Hatkhola. While triangular votive stupas featuring intricate designs have been found in other parts of the Sundarbans, the aforementioned specimen from Ghoramara is comparatively unadorned, simple, and diminutive-standing approximately three inches tall-with a flat base and an ovoid back. These artifacts bear witness to the continuity of religious rituals and indigenous worship practices.



Figure 18: Votive stupa

Furthermore, a lamp (**Figure: 19**) and a lamp-stand (**Figure: 20**) - both utilized for ritualistic worship, were recovered from the riverbank at Hatkhola; these discoveries draw our attention to a well-structured cultural milieu associated with religious observance. The lamp is of a simple, traditional design and was unearthed at a depth of three feet in the soil.



Figure 19: Earthen lamp



Figure 20: Lamp stand

Metal Bangle

A fragment of a circular metal bangle was discovered at the riverine sandbar of Hatkhola. This ornamented piece has an outer diameter of 7 cm, an inner diameter of 4 cm, and a thickness of 1.8 cm. Crafted from an alloy; the bangle features grooved ends; it was likely secured onto the wrist of a deity's idol using a clasp mechanism-of which one part (**Figure 21**) has been recovered.



Figure 21: Metal bangle; Collection of Suniti Pramanik, Hatkhola.

Earthenware with Rice Husk Impressions

Numerous fragments of earthenware bearing rice husk impressions (**Figure 22**) have been recovered from Ghoramara; these are thick and heavy, featuring ridged surfaces. A significant characteristic of these artifacts is the presence of rice husk impressions on both sides. It is likely that these vessels (rings =?) were initially formed by mixing rice husks into the clay paste and subsequently fired in a kiln; this process enhanced both the physical durability and structural strength of the vessels.



Figure 22: Rice-husk impressed pottery sherd

Identical artifacts have been discovered at Mandirtala on Sagar Island and at archaeological sites in Medinipur. In the context of Indian archaeology, such artifacts were typically stacked vertically to serve as linings for wells or as structures for soak pits. Comparisons with archaeological sites across India indicate that such terracotta artifacts were utilized for water conservation and waste management. The presence of these artifacts highlights aspects of settlement expansion, technological sophistication, and inter-regional connectivity at Ghoramara. It is worth noting that no evidence of a complete ring-well has been discovered at Ghoramara to date.

Discussion

An analysis of the pottery, terracotta artifacts, and other archaeological finds from Ghoramara Island yields significant information regarding the technological advancements and the infrastructure of social and economic networks of the ancient settlement. Bandyopadhyay (2008: 23) states that, a comparison of Ghoramara with other archaeological sites in the middle-to-lower Gangetic plains and along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal reveals both cultural continuity and regional diversity. The pottery from Ghoramara indicates advanced craftsmanship; furthermore, the island's strategic location at the mouth of the Ganges suggests the existence of a commercial (Basu 2013: 127) network facilitating both internal and external trade with coastal sites- such as *Tamralipta*

and *Chandraketugarh* - as well as other archaeological sites in South 24 Parganas and Northeast India. Moreover, as these pottery items often served as objects of luxury and refinement, they point to the presence of a sophisticated and cultured population in the region. Simultaneously, the terracotta artifacts and religious objects reflect distinct local religious practices.

Although the artifacts here bear a strong resemblance to those found at the Mandirtala site on Sagar Island, field surveys and visits to regional museums have so far yielded no evidence of NBPW (Northern Black Polished Ware) or Rouletted Ware on Sagar Island itself. The discovery of weighing weights and drinking vessels points to an organized social system in Ghoramara and the surrounding areas, indicative of a well-structured socio-economic framework. Situated near the Ganges estuary and adjacent to the Bay of Bengal, Ghoramara served as a pivotal hub for commercial and cultural exchange. A comparison of the artifacts and settlement stratigraphy at Ghoramara with those found in the middle Gangetic, coastal, and lower Gangetic regions suggests that the island acted as a confluence point for cultural currents flowing from both coastal and inland areas.

Conclusion

The field survey conducted on Ghoramara Island and the recovered artifacts provide valuable insights into the island's cultural history. Items such as votive stupas, fragments of deity images carved from black basalt, and various lamps and lamp stands indicate a close interrelationship between religious rituals, artistic practices, and daily life. Observations regarding the locations where these artifacts were found reveal that they are primarily concentrated in the western part of the island, whereas few are visible in the eastern section. It would not be surprising if the heritage-rich archaeological site of Mandirtala - located to the west on Sagar Island exerted an influence on the religious and cultural life of Ghoramara.

However, this study has certain limitations. It relies primarily on field surveys and artifacts collected from the surface or recovered following riverbank erosion. Due to the absence of large-scale, controlled excavations, a clear understanding of the settlement's stratification and chronology remains elusive. Furthermore, a lack of awareness among local residents regarding the significance of archaeological heritage has resulted in inadequate preservation of these artifacts. The island's very existence is threatened by continuous river erosion and natural disasters; without immediate intervention, it risks being completely wiped out within a few years.

Nevertheless, the recovered artifacts clearly demonstrate that Ghoramara Island is a significant archaeological site. Evidence suggests a continuous human settlement spanning from the early historic period (4th–3rd century BCE) through to the early medieval period (up to 1200 CE). Bhattacharyya (2004: 2) observes that, by the 7th century CE, the settlement had expanded significantly, reflecting an advanced stage of civilization characterized by a blend of religious beliefs, an organized and refined social structure, and a thriving commercial hub. Consequently, Ghoramara Island can be regarded as a key archaeological site for understanding the socio-economic evolution of the coastal society of the Sundarbans. The importance of this island in the Sundarbans is undeniable - whether viewed through the lens of regional historical studies, its geological location, or its archaeological significance. It is hoped that the archaeology and history of Ghoramara will be studied with due importance in future research on regional history.

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