

# Reporting Two Black and Red Ware Sites at Dantan: The Cult of Mother Goddess, Material Culture and the Chalcolithic Imagination

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## Abstract

The author along with his colleagues undertook explorations at various places of Dantan over a long period from 2017 to 2021 and it resulted in the discovery of two large black and red ware sites, one at Satbahini sacred grove at the village, Kusturia and another at the village, Urisal. The article reports on the archaeological sites and the artefacts recovered from the places. Since the sites are a kind of conglomerates of various cultural phases, the article primarily comments on the early medieval *Saptamatrika* cult and the late medieval cult of *Chandi* and tries to locate the prehistoric cult of Mother Earth in the immediate context of the region. Based on the prehistoric and ancient artefacts, the author tries to comment on the Chalcolithic material culture of the region and makes an effort at relating them to other BRW sites recently discovered in the adjoining district of Purba Medinipur. Then, in the context of the Subarnarekha river and the larger techno-complex, the author tries to go beyond the material culture in order to explore their social formations based on totemic values. Finally, it seeks to explore the intellectual exercises reflected in the art of image-making and creating symbolic connections and representing through early art from the Chalcolithic times.

[**Keywords:** BRW, Chalcolithic, Mother Goddess, Saptamatrika cult, totem, Chalcolithic art]

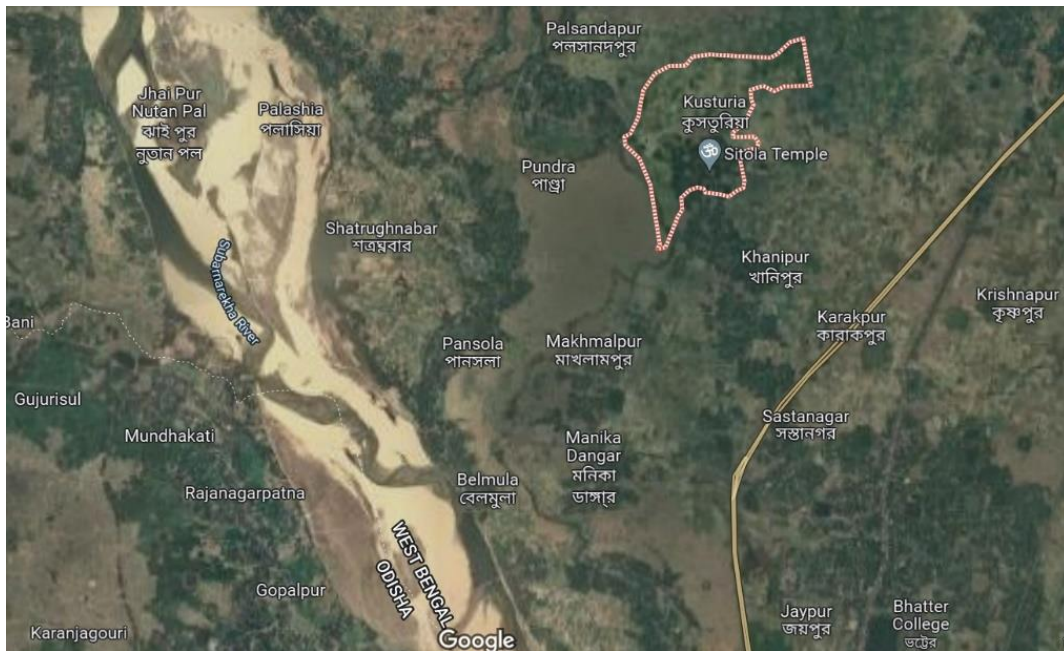
## Introduction

It was for the first time perhaps that Ashok Dutta reported the finding of the prehistoric settlement at Dantan. (Datta, 2008). A few other studies<sup>i</sup> reported prehistoric settlements with the occurrence of black and redware pottery. The extensive area over which the occurrences are reported points to a vast Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement at Dantan. These findings link the area to other prehistoric settlements in the connected regions of Jungle Mahal, East Medinipur, and West Medinipur. In spite of wide-range reporting at Dantan, no systematic excavation has been undertaken in those areas. The present author undertook to explore the vast places over a long period and searched for the BRW traces specifically from earthen mounds. Two such mounds were found yielding pottery sherds and possibly other objects of the prehistoric material culture from the surface and accidentally excavated places.

## The Sacred Grove and the Satbahini Mound

Satbahini Than (also called Satbahinar Than by some) is a sacred grove where the local people worship some square pieces of lateritic stone with human-made depression inside in the shape

of a female vulva or Yoni as seven sisters on the outskirts of the village Kusturia, at Dantan Block 1, in the district of Paschim Medinipur. (21.976382, 87.259135). The name of the village 'Kusturia', a corruption of the original name 'Kasturi', alludes to its association with something holy in the past or its wild state with reference to deer. Inside the sacred grove, two *thans* are there, one for *Gramdebata Chandi* and another *Satbahina or Satbahini*. What makes it interesting is its immediate location. It is located on the upper portion of the stairs of a paleo channel of the Subarnarekha river and the river would take a left-ward turn from there. A very casual look reveals that the mound was artificially created over a fairly large area. Much of the mound has been excavated and turned into ponds, agricultural fields, orchards, and a playground but the main mound still remains and demands extensive excavation. The local people reported that the entire place was a jungle and wild animals would come 50-40 years ago. Interestingly several villagers reported the finding of gold at the site. In our repeated visits to the site, we found many archaeological pieces of evidence in the form of pottery sherds and lateritic stone blocks confirming its dating to the early medieval period (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries here). But the finding of the Black and Red Ware and Neolithic/Chalcolithic stone tools at the site pushed the dating of the site back to the Neolithic/Chalcolithic times (around 3000 years back) and forced us to reconsider it in a new light.



**Image 1: Location of the Kusturia village, Dantan, Paschim Medinipur**

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**Image 2: Location of the Satbahini Mound at Kusturia**



**Image 3: Satbahini Than**



**Image 4: Slope down to the paleo channel**

### **Who are the *Satbahini* or *Satbahinas*?**

The *Satbahina* or *Satbahini* is a local coinage but it is not an abrupt coinage; rather it seems to have been drawn from the collective memory of a cult of mother goddesses (*Matrikas*) once prevalent here. In the wider context. The worshipping tradition of *Matrikas* is prevalent mostly in the Southern Part of India and also in some neighbouring places like Nepal. We generally find these groups of mother goddesses in '*Sapta-Matrika*' or '*Ashta-Matrika*' forms. According to Jagadish Narayan Tiwari (Tiwari 1998) and Dilip Chakravarty (Chakravati, 2001) the primary concept of *Matrikas* was existent as early as the Vedic period and the Indus Valley Civilization. Seals with a row of seven female figurines are cited as evidence of the above theory. The Rigveda too speaks of a group of seven mother deities who supervise the preparation of 'Somerasa', the religious drink that used to be offered in the Rig-Vedic period. Thus, the tradition of worshipping the group of seven mother goddesses (*Sapta-Matrika*) is a continuation from the very long part to the very contemporary times.

The *Saptamatrikas* are described as the embodiments of the attributes of various gods or *devas*. Thus, the *Matrika* Brahmani, Vaisnavi, Maheshwari, Indrani, Kaumari, Varahi, and Chamunda all emerge from Lord Brahma, while also deriving from Lord Vishnu, Lord Indra, Lord Skanda, and Lord Shiva. Thus the *Matrika* Brahmani emerges from Lord Brahma; Vaisnavi from Lord Vishnu, Maheshwari from Maheswara Shiva, Indrani from Indra, Kaumari from Skanda, Varahi from Varaha and Chamunda from Devi Chandi<sup>ii</sup>. Along with the other parts of India, there is a *Saptamatrika* temple at Jajpur in Orissa in which the *Saptamatrikas* were installed by King Jayati Keshari dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD. The best-preserved gallery of *Saptamatrikas* is to be found at Hirapur, near Bhubaneswar, a temple created in the shape of the vulva following Tantrik philosophy.

There are strong pieces of evidence that the *Saptamatrika* cult was prevalent at Dantan at least from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. A stone statue of Maheshwari was found at Dantan.



**Images 5 and 6: Maheswari and Bhairabha head**

The Ektarpur region of Dantan was earlier named as 'Satdeulia'<sup>iii</sup> (a place with seven temples), more precisely, meant for a group of seven deities. The finding of the fragments of a massive Bhairaba stone statue from Ektarpur<sup>iv</sup> proves that a temple complex (Sat-deul) was dedicated to *Saptamarikas* as the *Bhairava* figure would be installed as the guard or protector of temples dedicated to *Shakti*. So, there is a strong possibility of the existence of a Saptamatrika temple at 'Satdeulia'. Brahmani, one of the mother deities of *Saptamatrika* is still being worshipped in the Narayangarh block of West Bengal which is only 29 kms away from Dantan.

It seems that from the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>v</sup> onwards the cult of *Tarini*, *Tara*, and local *Chandis* came into existence perhaps through a conversion of the Buddhist female goddess into Brahminical and folk deities as a result of the waning Buddhist hold over the people. Such *Chandis* are to be found at many places of Dantan including the other prehistoric place, Urishal which we will report on later in this article.

So, it is understandable now that the Satbahina worship, though now reduced to the folk level, is drawn from the Brahminical tradition of the Saptamatrika cult. There are hard archaeological pieces of evidence behind this statement. The mound is strewn with ritualistic pottery sherds, pieces of bricks, decorated lateritic blocks from the early medieval and medieval periods. All these prove the use of the mound as a temple or sacred site from the early medieval period. The isolated location of the site from the major settlement areas of Dandabhukti points to its location on a major roadside and its use as a shelter and/or a place of blessing for the people before entering Dantan crossing the river or leaving it to cross the river. Another possibility is that the place functioned as a major burning ghat. Some villagers reported the finding of human bones while removing soil from one of the mounds. We also found some pieces of mortuary pottery with unique designs, which were recovered from other isolated locations at Dantan.

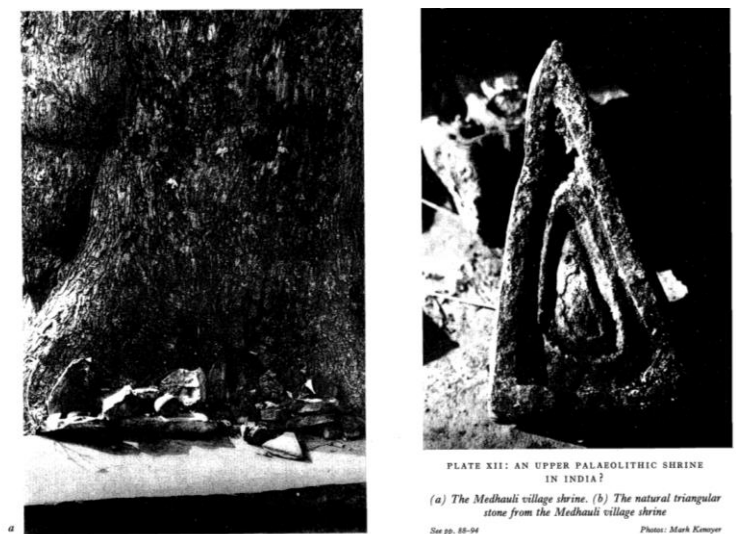


**Image 7: Medieval pottery at Satbahini**

But the finding of the Black and Red Ware on the site changed the whole course of its history for us and forces us to reconsider the vulva-shaped stones. We have proofs that Yoni Pattas were worshipped separately as part of the Shakti cult in Dandabhukti in the late medieval period. We can find such remains at the village Hirapari, Narayangarh.

### **Are the Satbahina Stones from the Prehistoric Times?**

But the stones on the *Satbahina Than* may also belong to the prehistoric Chalcolithic period (though one of the stones was found to be created in recent times, maybe as a replacement for the old one). The practice of worshipping the vulva as a reproductive and regenerative principle predates any religion and dates from the Upper Paleolithic period. A glorification of the vulva as a symbol of Mother Earth, *Dharitrimata*, is found all over the world in the form of sacred vulva-shaped caves, prehistoric rock paintings and sculptures, cupules, passage tombs etc. The sacred place, sometimes stone circles and large tombs would be created in the form of the womb of Mother Earth. The Satbahini mound also presents an elevated womb-like structure. We have an interesting instance with the Baghor<sup>vi</sup> stone from Central India. J. M. Kenoyar et al (1983) unearthed a triangular vulva stone near the village of Medhauli, in the Sidhi District, Madhya Pradesh.



**Image 8: The platform and the Baghor Stone. Photo: Mark Kenoyar**

After scrutiny the team concluded:

We believe that there is a very strong probability that this structure and the stone represent a shrine to the goddess, or female principle, Shakti, which was built by the group of final upper paleolithic hunter/gatherers who were living at the site... (Kenoyar et al, 1983, p. 93)

Since no dating has been done with the *Satbahina* stones, we cannot be sure of their age. The stones might be from the medieval period, early or late, used as mortars for some sacred or medicinal or practical purpose. We found pestle-like stone from the site.



**Image 9: Satbahini Than**



**Image 10: The sacred stones**



**Image 11: Pestle or some sacred phallic stone. Images 12 & 13: Smaller pestle or a cosmetic tool**

### **The BRW and other artefacts at Satbahina**

The beautiful location would attract us frequently over the years, especially just before the arrival of the Monsoon and during winter when the whole area is flooded with golden crops. On one of such visits, we found some pieces of the BRW from the bottom of a mound which was removed with a JCB and made flat. Then in our recent visit we found one large mound was excavated and the accumulated soil yielded huge amount of BRW.



**Image 14: Excavated mound**

This prompted us to reconsider the entire place and search it thoroughly. Some other places of the site, then, yielded more BRW, pieces of buff ware, crude ware, possible pieces of pre-wheel pottery, basket ware, broken pieces of pestle-like (or phallic) stones and dabbers from the Subarnarekha River. We also found some strange pieces which will be discussed later on.



**Image 15: BRW, buff ware, crude ware, red slip ware**



**Image 16: basket ware**



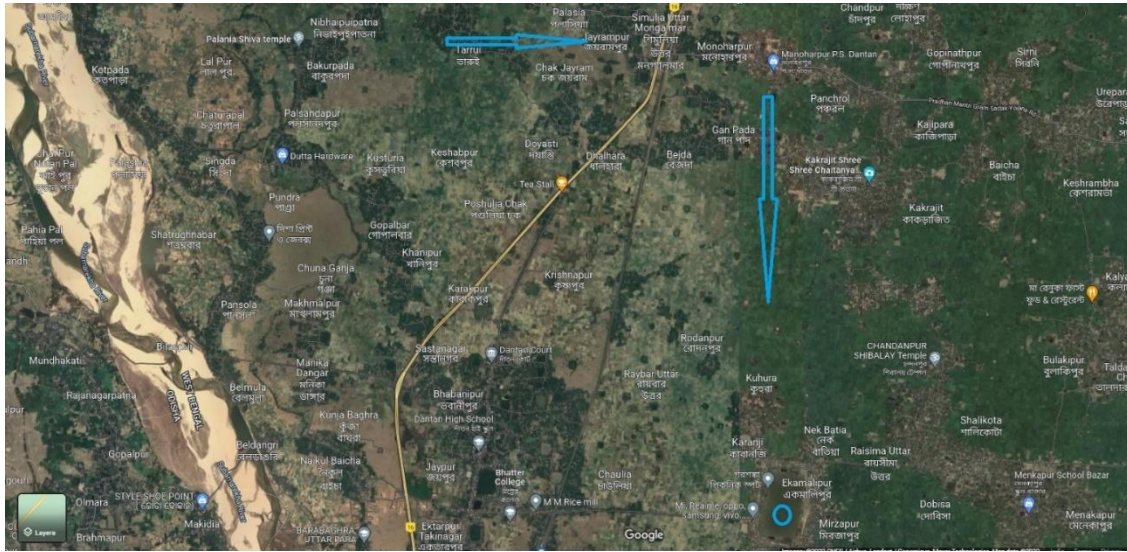
**Images 17 & 18: Stone tools**

### **What the location tells us:**

The location of the mound indirectly reveals certain information from the prehistoric past. In the absence of any official report on this place, we need to understand it in relation to the similar Chalcolithic culture found at Egra. The preliminary report on the artefacts from Egra dates the settlement to 1000-1300 BC and if we apply the dating to the Satbahina Mound, we understand that 3000 years back the river or a paleo channel was fully flowing and providing support and sustenance to the settlers there. The river still flows; but not as a full-fledged river. It is now a sedimented paleo channel and no longer does it get any support from the main course. A careful observation of the entire landscape, both on the field and from the satellite pictures reveals that the Subarnarekha river at Dantan gradually shifted its course from the eastern to the western side. We do not know exactly when the shifting near Satbahina took place and why, but the Satbahini mound proves that 3000 years back, the "early farming" community was developing a culture completely different from "hunting and gathering". The discovery of the culture at Kusturia points to the possibility that such contemporaneous settlements might have arisen along the winding river bank of the same stream at other places like Sarisha, Maljamuna, Bamanda, Unchadiha, Jotidoberia, Kharkai (around the Mahabila lake), Bakurpada, Palsandapur, Pundra, Khanipur, Makhamlampur, Manika Dangor, Kunjabaghra, Barabaghra, Naikulbaicha and other places. On

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the basis of the settlements, a scientific study can be undertaken for exploring the various points in time when the river shifted its course at the lower course at Dantan for 3-4 times. At one point of time, it seems from the satellite view and physical observation on the southern side of the Moghalmari village that the river would flow directly to the east and take a turn near Sarasanka and would flow down to the south and meet the Bay of Bengal. This speculation is not supported by any scientific study. But if so the Sarasanka lake might be a remnant of a river. Interestingly, the finding of the BRW is reported from the Sarasanka area and the next BRW site that we discovered could be found along that way.



**Image 19: Possible prehistoric river stream that would flow over the Sarasanka lake. BRW site**



**Image 20: The BRW site of Urisal in comparative position from the BRW site of Sarasanka**



**Image 21: The Urisal village and the BRW site**



**Image 22: The Urisal BRW site**

### **The *Dangor* at Urisal**

The BRW site of Urisal, situated at the outskirts of the village on a Dangor or Danga, meaning an artificially elevated land, is approximately 100 meters in diameter. Since the mound has been flattened to great extent and transformed into a playground, many of the artefacts are gone. Previously it was so thickly strewn with pottery sherds that agriculture was not possible. Instead, the white soil of the place, just like the white soil of Satbahini, would be used by the local people as a colouring material for their mud houses. The white/greyish soil is a mystery and can be found at several places of Dantan yielding pottery sherds. This place has several parallels with Satbahini: it is considered holy and associated with mother worship in the form of Dangor-Chandi, an idol of some Buddhist female deity converted into a Chandi back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or so following the Tara or Tarini cult. The name 'Urisal' suggests its medieval origin from Ustrasala or Utsala (a place where camels are kept). The battle of Tukaroi needs to be remembered here.



**Image 23: Dangor Chandi at Urisal**

What is important to be noticed in the site is its continuous or continual human use. We found pottery sherds, just like the Satbahini site, from the early medieval through the medieval to the late medieval period.

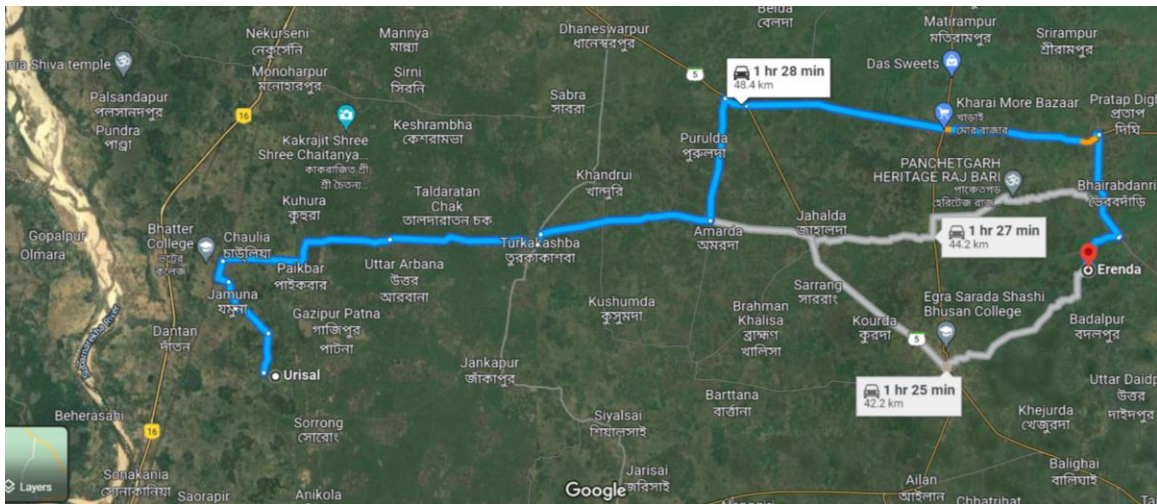


**Image 24: Potsherds from Urisal**



**Images 25-26: BRW from Urisal, obverse and reverse**

We made several visits to the site and recovered several pottery types and microliths. With the discovery of the BRW pieces, we placed the Urisal site in the same position as that of Satbahini and now would place both sites in relation to the excavated Chalcolithic site of Erenda, Egra.



**Image 27: Urisal and Erenda sites in comparative location**

Gangopadhyay et al in “Chalcolithic Pottery from Erenda (West Bengal): A Preliminary Assessment” placed the prehistoric culture at Erenda within the range of c.1400–900 BCE with a caveat:

The chronology of the [Erenda] site can be divided into two cultural periods, I and II. ... it is safe to assume that period I belongs to the early farming culture represented by Black and Red Ware...The Black and Red Ware is the characteristic pottery of the Chalcolithic and Iron bearing early farming cultures of West Bengal (c.1400–900 BCE). But almost all the important sites and dates are derived from sites in upland alluvial regions. Therefore, a thorough study of the pottery from this site, near to present coast, along with AMS dates, is desideratum. (Gangopadhyay et al. 2017, p. 129)

These BRW sites can be studied in relation to some coastal prehistoric sites at “Shankarpur, located in Contai Block, Chandpur in Patashpur Block 1 and Tajpur in Ramnagar Block” (Ghosh et al, 2020) reported in the article “Recently Discovered Intertidal Archaeological Sites Along the Shoreline of Bay of Bengal: East Medinipur District, West Bengal”. This can reveal a large techno-complex of the region operating in an interconnected manner.

These BRW sites can be further compared to the Golbai Sasan site of Odissa (Kingwell-Banham et al, 2018), but not in the manner of the movement of the agricultural practices, the archaeologists have suggested, from the Vidhyan region or the Gangetic plains, but in a schematics of movement from the Chotanagpur plateau region down the rivers to the plains of West Bengal and Odissa. However, this is a wild oversimplified statement and needs to be established scientifically. This is beyond the capacity of the present researcher at this point of time.

## Beyond the Material Culture: Chalcolithic Imagination

### Fixity and Home

An elevated settlement place had greater meaning than just physical space. A view of the river taking a turn from their high location must have been a pleasant experience. But it was also a fixity in the physical space, a fixed location that would allow leisure for the prehistoric shamans who would interpret the world—plain land, the river and the sky, and their place there in the wider sense. In their attempts at making meanings, the external landscape would be transformed into a metaphor of a larger home, that is, “Dharitri Mata”, as it would be called later on in Sanskrit. The equation was further developed to include the female reproductive principle (later on called *Shakti*). There is ample proof from all over the world that the vulva would be worshipped right from the Paleolithic period. In the Chalcolithic period the place of worship took the shape of circular elevated land just like the womb. In many cases, the womb became the tomb<sup>vii</sup>. The stones of Satbahina contain the shape of vulva but just as stated earlier the stones might be from the medieval period. But the presence of the BRW and other artefacts leads us to the question of image making: whether and how and why were the Chalcolithic people involved in the effort of image-making?

### Images on the Stone

The BRW and other sites of Dantan yielded many microliths and strange pieces of pebbles having anthropomorphic and animal features. Some of them seem to be naturally formed but one piece of pebble was found to be incised both horizontally and vertically and a double-faced composite image was created. This piece of object—if at all from the Neolithic/Chalcolithic period, reveals the Chalcolithic imagination. The object might have been a special possession of a special person like a shaman who would use it as a pendant. Its double-faced image may refer to a primitive cult of ancestor worship and more importantly to the process of image-making or the creative imagination of early art that would emerge in the Chalcolithic period.



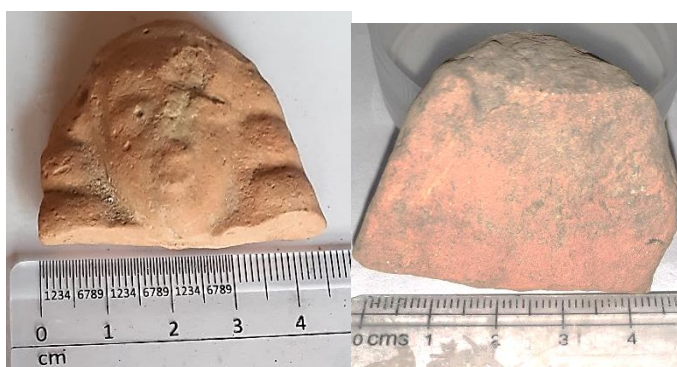
**Images 28, 29 & 30: Anthropomorphic stones**

The pebbles resembling animal features might have played certain symbolic functions associated with their identity; they might refer to totemic values and the formation of groups.



**Images 31, 32 & 33: Animal features on the stones**

Recently a portion of the mound was excavated and a pond was created. From the soil collected on one side, we chanced upon a piece of the head from some terracotta figurine. We are not certain of the age of the piece and leave it to the experts to decide. But the headgear and the age of the site prompt us to think of it in relation to the terracotta art from the Mauryan or Shunga period when image-making of various deities from the fertility cult was in progress at the folk level and the figures of Yaksha-Yakshi were made. The headgear of this particular piece here reminds of the matted hairstyle of Yakshis of the terracotta figurines from Tamluk and Chandraketugarh.



**Image 34: Obverse and reverse of a head of a terracotta figurine**

### **Final Observations:**

The BRW sites of Dantan are still in a more or less preserved state and demand full-fledged excavation by experts in the field. The present article is based on surface and chance findings and so nothing can be said categorically about them. The present author has accumulated certain pieces of evidence and wants them to be in a state of record for future researchers to use. The author also wants to draw the attention of the authorities concerned for preserving the sites and making arrangements for excavation.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author is immensely indebted to Dr Rajat Sanyal, Dept of Archaeology, for helping in identifying the BRW and several other pieces. The author also thanks the following persons for accompanying the author and helping in finding out many of the artefacts on the site: Mir Mohammad Ali, Mir Ahammad Ali, Thakurdas Jana, Pragati das, Akashdip Dey.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> (Chattopadhyay, 2018)

<sup>ii</sup> Maheswari is the power of Lord Maheswara Shiva who is too known as Raudri or Rudrani after the name of Rudra and Maheshi after the name of Mahesh (another name of Lord Shiva). She sits on a bull named Nandi. She has a white complexion and three eyes (*Trinetra*). She has four or six arms. Mainly she holds a trident (*Trishula*), *Damru* (the drum), *Akshmandala* (garland of *Rudraksha* beads) and occasionally the drinking vessel (*panpatra*) or axe or a *kapala* (a bowl obtained from a human's skull) or a serpent. She is embellished with snake-ornaments, a crescent moon on her head and adorned with *jata-mukuta* that is formed with the terrific matted hair pilation.

<sup>iii</sup> The reference to a place-name 'Satdeulia' or 'Satdeul', now extinct, can be found in the writings of H.L. Harrison, Nagendra Nath Vasu and Jogesh Chandra Basu. Nagendranath Vasu wrote:

There is a tradition current here to this effect that this Chandaneshwara is Svayambhu (self-evolved) *linga* and it was installed by the queen of Vikramajit. Daily she came here to worship this God, while her husband went daily to Dantan to offer his homage to the famous image of Shyamaleswara. At that time the principal gate of Mughalmari was close to the Sat-deul of Dantan. (N N Vasu, The Archaeological survey of Mayurbhanj, 1911, p. 111.)

<sup>iv</sup> The tradition of worshipping Ekpadeswara Shiva was probably also existent in the other parts of Bengal. The Ekteswara Shiva of Ekteswara town in the district of Bankura is most probably conveying the mark of the same tradition, though in a different form today. So, it will not be surprising if the name 'Ekterpur' comes from the name of "Ekpadeswara Bhairaba", derived as Ekpadeswarapur > Ekteswarapur > Ekterpur > Ekterpur.

<sup>v</sup> The legend associated with Tarini points toward the creation of a new deity or the conversion of an earlier one to the new: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140203225202/http://www.maatarini.com/history/>

<sup>vi</sup> Baghor site has been interpreted as the earliest mother goddess shrine in the subcontinent. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/444365>

<sup>vii</sup> Consider Brian Celli du from Orkney or the passage tomb of Newgrange.

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