

# **Significant Characteristics of a Neolithic Site at Barapani (Khasi Hills)**

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## **Introduction**

Very few prehistoric evidences have come to light in the Khasi Hills (i.e., in the central part of the Meghalaya Plateau). Collection of a celt from the Khasi Hills was first reported in the later half of the 19th century by Godwin Austen (1875). Shortly after was reported collection of a pair of polished axes by Cockburn (1879). These were the pioneering archaeological findings and publications as well on prehistory of the plateau (now called Meghalaya), and one of the few earliest finds from the northeastern part of the Indian sub-continent. After lapse of about one century, a Neolithic site came to notice on the right bank of the river Umiam in the Khasi Hills (Sharma, 1980; Medhi, Rao and Husain, 1980). The site is called Barapani (91°54' E : 25°29' N and 1000m altitude).

A very strategic site was selected by the early man owing to many reasons. Of course, safety or protection might have been prime locational factor, apart from availability of suitable rocks (raw material for making tools) in the vicinity. The spur on which the archaeological remains have been discovered lie near the confluence of rivers Wah Umiam with Wah Umshing. When the early man with Neolithic technology was around the river Umiam used to flow about 100 metres below the site. But after construction of a dam in 1964 in the nearby gorge and consequently formation of a reservoir-Umiam or Barapani Lake the water now touches feet of the Neolithic site. Though it appears that the site has been named after the Barapani lake, but actually there was a settlement of same name in the centre of the valley which now is submerged in water of the reservoir.

A number of random surface collections have been made at the site by the academicians and others. No systematic trench has yet been dug to reveal stratigraphical context of the artefacts. However, in 1995 on close observation of a long pit (7m long, 50cm deep and wide, dug for developmental work) it was ascertained that tools are not found in any archaeological and geological layers. Thus, it was concluded that there is little chance of getting artefacts in stratigraphical context

even if a planned excavation is carried out. Moreover, surface finds are characteristic of the Neolithic sites of Eastern region of India, including the Northeast (Bhattacharya, 1972).

The artefacts so far collected and known to the author are enlisted in Table 1. These include axes, adzes, celts, points, scrapers, knives, hand axe, cores, pointed axes, shouldered celt, waste flakes and chips. A few microliths are also found on the site. The rocks used as raw material for making these stone tools are phyllite, dolerite (Khasi green stone), quartzite and slate belonging to Shillong series of rocks. Some tools are ground, some are chipped, while some are crude in form and technique. The tool-kit of Barapani Neolithic site exhibits significant characteristics, and therefore, it has great relevance in the local and regional archaeological framework.

**Table 1. Artefacts from Barapani Neolithic Site**

Sl. No.	Artefacts	Sharma (1979)	Medi Rao & Husain (1979)	Husain and NEHU Team (1988)	Husain and NEHU Team (1995)	Remarks
1.	Celts (Axes)	-	2	2	4	Finished one is like hand axe on slate
2.	Celts (unfinished)	-	7	-	-	Broken two
3.	Blades	-	11	-	-	-
4.	Scrapers	3	11	1	3	-
5.	Adzes	3	-	1	-	-
6.	Points	3	-	-	1	Big size on quartzite
7.	Pointed butt axe	-	-	4	-	Chipped, big & small one unfinished.
8.	Microliths	-	2	-	1	-
9.	Shouldered celt	-	-	-	1	Crude
10.	Waste flakes and chips	3	13	-	3	-
11.	Core	-	1	-	3	-

Though it is unethical to write about an archaeological site where neither systematic surface collection has been made nor any excavation trench has been dug nor the tools have been identified by an expert, but whatever tools have been collected from surface of the site deserve to be examined, analysed and published for the benefit of the academic fraternity. This is because of the reasons that firstly, a research finding in archaeology has to be reported as soon as it is discovered without waiting for final excavation, analysis, results and conclusions. Secondly, finding or analysis is not an end or final word about the site but a step forward in finding the truth. Thirdly, it must be placed before the academicians so that the truth can be revealed by joint efforts, place of the site or artefacts in local and regional archaeological fabric can be determined and some conclusions of archaeological significance can be drawn.

### Significant Characteristics

On the basis of typology, affinity, combination, assemblage, occurrence and raw material of tools, and techniques of tool making some special characteristics about the Barapani site have been identified. Surprisingly, many firsts came to light in the collection made on 11th June 1995 by the author along with NEHU team. The significant features of the Barapani Neolithic site are as follows.

1. Collection of a crude shouldered celt (on quartzite) for the first time in 1995 is an evidence of presence of this Southeast Asian tradition at Barapani. Until then, artefacts of only Indian tradition were known from the site. Though only one shouldered celt, that too crude in form and making (with very little chipping) has been discovered but its significance in local and regional context can not be denied. Because the shouldered hoe or quadrangular adze is considered to be the most striking find in Neolithic sub-culture of Assam and the round-shouldered tools have little chipping and polishing (Bhattacharya, 1972). The single find at Barapani distinguishes this site from other Neolithic sites, such as in the Garo Hills and Naga Hills, where percentage of shouldered celts is quite high. Even Sarutaru Neolithic site (about 60 kms away aerially from Barapani on the northern periphery of the Khasi Hills and 25 kms SE of Guwahti) has remarkable yielded eight shouldered celts in total of nine celts. (Rao, 1973). Thus, predominance of

- the Indian tradition and just arrival of the South-east Asian tradition at Barapani site can easily be seen.
2. Collection of a big size crude point on quartzite shows use of this rock as raw material in tool making for the first time. This also indicates continuation of palaeolithic trait in the Neolithic phase, or it was simply collected by the neolithic man to make another tool from it.
  3. An oval shape hand axe on state, almost complete, was also found for the first time in 1995. Interesting to note that such hand axes are characteristic of palaeolithic culture. This also leads to believe continuation of the preceding tradition in the Neolithic. This conclusion is derived because the hand axe is simply a surface find. The day such hand axes are traced below the Neolithic layer in stratigraphical context, antiquity of the site will go further back in time to the Palaeolithic period.
  4. Different stages of manufacturing of Neolithic celts are well evident in the tools collected from the site. The tools are either crude or chipped or grounded (polished also), indicating a progressive development of tool making technique in course of time. It is also possible that the site was occupied by different groups of people, each leaving its own impression of tool making on the artefacts.
  5. Uniqueness of the Neolithic technology is further proved by the fact that it was a factory site because plenty of flakes, cores and waste products are scattered here. Occurrence of finished and unfinished tools also supports this view. Most likely stone tools were taken from here to other sites in neighbouring area. Therefore, there are chances of getting more Neolithic sites in the Khasi Hills.
  6. The tool making technique in Barapani collection is amazingly varied and rich to great extent. This is clear from the presence of crude celts, chipped tools, ground celts, unground celts, polished celts etc.
  7. Association of various types of artefacts like blade tools, flake tools, hand axes, microliths, shouldered celt, points, knives, scrapers, pointed butt axes etc. severals presence of multicultural traits in the assemblage of the Neolithic material of Barapani. It means,

either the same people living here acquired different techniques themselves or the site was occupied by various groups of people in different times.

8. Continuation of the pre-Neolithic (i.e., Mesolithic and preceding) tradition is easily discernible in the tool assemblage. Thus, Barapani can be described as an early or primary Neolithic site.
9. Evidence of palaeolithic tradition indicates longer and continued occupancy of the site by early man or coexistence of three stages (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic) of evolution of the traditions at the same site.
10. The typical chipped pointed butt axes (triangular) of Barapani are very significant finds in themselves. It is because only a few such axes have been discovered in some other parts of the Northeastern India, for example in the Garo Hills and Naga Hills (Sharma, 1984). But the fact is that, that the chipped pointed butt axes are characteristic feature of South Indian Neolithic tradition. Curiously, these have also been collected from Burzahom in Kashmir. However, it is difficult to establish any relationship of these finds with the South Indian tradition (Bhattacharya, 1972). Barapani has distinction of yielding four pointed bult axes (big and small, 16cms and 10cms long respectively) in the Khasi Hills. Such axes are also found in the Chota Nagpur Plateau where the Australoid Munda are inhabited. The triangular pointed butt axes have got another significance in establishing relationship between Barapani site and the Australoids who were wide spread in the past. The first wave of Mongoloids (the Khasi-Synteng) are believed to had come in contact and lived with the Australoids in Meghalaya where developed more or less similar socio-cultuural and linguistic traits, and miscegenation took place between the two (Husain, 1991).
11. Hitherto, Barapani is the only known Neolithic site in the central part of Meghalaya plateau (i.e., the Khasi Hills). However, tools of palaeolithic cultural stages and periods from Umtraw (Ravidra, 1987) and Mahesh Khola-Balat region (Satsangi, 1984) have been reported by the geologists. But actual sites, that too in stratigraphical context, have yet to be found. Unfortunately, not a single prehistoric site has been reported from the Jaintia Hills. The only dot of Barapani on the archaeological (prehistoric) map of the Khasi Hills is in sharp contrast to numerous prehistoric sites

discovered in the western part of Meghalaya (i.e., the Garo Hills). This is a perplexing reality since the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills are part of one plateau (Meghalaya) having more or less similar biophysical environment today, and probably also had in the past.

12. Since no other Neolithic site has yet come to notice of the archaeologists above the height of Barapani, it can be said that probably the altitude of 1000m was upper limit of human habitation in the past. This might be possible due to prevalence of severe cold and heavy rainfall conditions in the higher region of the central plateau earlier (Husain, 1991).
13. Barapani site also throws light on the migration of early man and human occupation of the Meghalaya plateau. However, it is yet to be established that who were makers of the different tools found at Barapani, and when these were made. If predominance of the Indian tradition is accepted then the makers were the Australoids who were joined by the Khasi-Jaintias with SE Asian tradition, the later coming as the first wave of Mongoloids in the North-eastern part of India (Husain, 1991).

## Conclusions

On the basis of the above it can be said that even from a small surface collection of tools, characteristics of a site can be determined. The characteristics identified about the Barapani Neolithic tool assemblage and site are significant and relevant in understanding prehistoric cultures of the local area and Northeast India as a whole which is considered corridor between India and South East Asia. Presence of Indian and South East Asian traditions is well established here. Undoubtedly, multitypology and technique is significant feature of the site. Presence and continuation of the pre-Neolithic traits are also well marked.

There are many firsts which came to light in 1995. A dedicated detailed exploration for new sites and systematic excavation of the known sites will yield startling results. By discovering new sites and their specialities in the central and eastern parts of Meghalaya plateau, not only gaps in the prehistoric map of India will be filled up but many facts about meeting of the Indian and SE Asian people and technologies will be revealed throwing light on human occupation of

Meghalaya plateau and evolution of culture. That is why this untrained archaeologist has dared to present here whatever he has learnt about the Neolithic site of Barapani. There may be shortcomings, but the matter and material are placed before the academic fraternity to scrutinize it carefully and help in search of the truth collectively.

It is heartening to note that a lot of artefacts from such an important site have been collected by various people. In this way, the invaluable evidence has been scattered here and there without being properly collected, recorded, analysed and published. There are chances of losing significant evidences about the people, culture and area. Passing of the National Highway through the site has also contributed to this deplorable situation. Therefore, for the sake of knowledge and understanding of our past, this site deserves special attention and protection. The Meghalaya government has to make laws and do something in this regard, not only for this particular site but also for many other sites of archaeological importance discovered in the state, which are a rich part of our common cultural heritage.

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