

A city bigger than Athens?

Sandeep Mishra, TOI Crest, Aug 7, 2010, 01.25pm IST

Just outside Bhubaneswar, around 2,000 years ago, stood one of old India's biggest cities. When they chanced upon Sisupalgarh, excavators could only gape in astonishment at its modern ways

Sisupalgarh sounds like a happening settlement by historic standards: a sprawling urban settlement that housed 20,000-25,000 people, street-linking gateways, pillared meeting halls, water storage systems and disposable vessels for daily use. In one of the richest hauls for archaeologists in the country in recent times, a 12-member Indo-American expert team discovered the remains of a city from the early historic period in the outskirts of Bhubaneswar two years ago.

The team, comprising representatives from Deccan College, Pune, and the University of California, in collaboration with the ASI, had conducted surface excavations at the fortified site first reported by Prof B Lal in 1948. Fresh excavation was restarted in 2005 to learn more about this mystery city. A large quantity of debris, including household pottery and terracotta ornaments, were discovered during the exercise.

Enthused over the findings, the head archaeologist of the excavation, Monica L Smith from the University of California, had then told TOI: "This is the most visible standing architectural monument discovered in the country so far. It is a huge city existing about 2,000 years ago." The pillars were possibly part of a gigantic structure and used for public gatherings.

According to an archaeologist from Deccan College, Pune, R K Mohanty, a city could be known from its walls. "When it has such well-built walls and such a big expanse, it means it was a very important city," he says. Explaining the importance of the ancient city, Mohanaty says Sisupalgarh has four gateways and could have housed a large number of people (compare this to the 10,000 Athens could manage).

From photographs taken through geophysical research methods, the team had found that a huge urban setup, a much larger area than could possibly be excavated, had existed at the site. "The findings were mind-boggling. The lifestyle of the people then could be more advanced than present-day life," Smith had said. "Potteries found are polished and have ownership marks. The huge number of cups and bowls suggest people then practiced a use and throw system."