The Early Iron Age Pottery of Vidarbha: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: It was a general belief that all Megalithic habitation sites in Vidarbha region were contemporary to each other. The ceramic variations at all sites were also regarded to be uniform. However, the recent excavation at Khopdi challenges this understanding. Until now studies of ceramics were based on ware considerations. This study, however, employs rim form analysis of the Red slipped and Micaceous red ware characterizing complex articulated rim forms at the sites located in western Wainganga valley. This study argues that all Megalithic habitation and burial sites are not contemporary and that they belong to two distinct phases.

Keywords: Vidarbha, Iron Age, Megalithic, Pottery, Rim Forms, Ware, Sites

Introduction

Megalithic burials and culture, which is an integral feature of the Early Iron Age of Vidarbha, an eastern part of the state of Maharashtra, is one of the most comprehensively archaeologically investigated phenomena in the region. In fact, it has been the centre of attraction since pre-Independence times (Reshma 2012). After 60’s of last century systematic disciplinary approach has helped in revealing multiple aspects related to the socio-economic condition of the period (Deo 1985, Joshi 1993, Mohanty and Joshi 1996, Mohanty 2015, Joshi 2015).

The well-accepted time frame for this Age in the region is from around 8th century BCE to the beginning of the Early Historic period, i.e. 3rd century BCE (Mohanty and Joshi 1996). However, radiometric dates from Adam have challenged this previously recognized time frame, as based on it the beginning of this culture may go back to c. 14th century BCE (Nath 2016). Recently the author has suggested the end of approximately 5th century BCE as the age for the end of this culture in the region (Shete 2014). The argument is based on pottery of Kholapur, an early Historic site in Amravati district, and reevaluation of radiometric dates available from Megalithic habitation sites.
Recent excavation at the archaeological habitation mound of Khopdi (KPD), district Nagpur, has revealed uninterrupted occupation from Pre-Iron Age to Early Iron Age (Pawar, et.al. 2014; Shete and Pawar 2017). The ceramic of the site inferred that the various pottery forms of Red slipped ware and Micaceous red ware of Early Iron Age has its precedence in Pre-Iron Age levels. The comparative study of rim forms reported in published excavation reports of other sites showed that there are some sites like Naikund, which contain pottery similar to Khopdi. Then there are other sites, though they belong to the same period, contain pottery much different from Khopdi. This led to compile the rim form data of different sites for the comparative analysis. The objective of this article is to produce this data in table form and discuss the possible implication of their variation at different sites.

The present study includes the site of Naikund (NKD), Takalghat-Khapa (TKL-KHP), Gangapur (GNG), Mahurzari (MHR), and Raipur (RPR), as the published reports of these sites are available. All these sites are located in the region flanked to the east by the Wainganga river and to the west by the minor hilly ranges forming the divide between Wardha and Wainganga valleys. Thus almost all these sites belong to the same geographical unit. This region, however, is characterized by two distinct Geological formations – the Deccan trap and formations older than it. These cover approximately western and eastern half of the district respectively. The entire Nagpur district, irrespective of covered with two distinct geological formations, is dotted with Early Iron Age habitation and Megalithic burial sites.

**Reported Wares from Above Mentioned Sites**
The variety of wares reported from above-mentioned sites are as follows:

- Painted black-on-red ware: Takalghat, Khapa, Gangapur, Naikund, Mahurjhari, Paunar
- Black burnished ware: Takalghat, Khapa, Naikund, Mahurjhari, Paunar
- Black-and-red ware: Takalghat, Khapa, Gangapur, Raipur, Naikund, Mahurjhari, Paunar
- Tan slipped ware: Takalghat
- Tan ware: Paunar
- Matt red ware: Takalghat
- Medium thin, Mica-coated Red Ware: Mahurjhari
- Coarse red ware: Takalghat, Khapa, Gangapur, Raipur, Paunar
- Red slipped ware: Paunar
- Micaceous red ware: Takalghat, Khapa, Gangapur, Raipur, Naikund, Mahurjhari

**Reevaluation of Wares and Assessment of Material**
Based on the above data we find that some wares, such as painted black-on-red ware, black burnished ware, black-and-red ware, coarse red ware, and Micaceous red ware are ubiquitous. Whereas tan slipped ware, tan ware, matt red ware, medium thin Mica-coated red ware, and red slipped ware are reported at selected sites. The black
burnished ware and black-and-red ware consists mainly of bowls and dishes, and rarely globular pots. Hardly any variation is observed in rim forms of these wares at different sites. Given this limitation and since this study is based on variations observed in rim forms at different sites, these wares are not useful in the present study. Therefore, the assemblage of these two wares is not included here.

The black-on-red ware is a painted pottery. The term itself indicative of the characteristic feature of this ware, that is painting in black made on the red surface. That means the paintings are found either on red slipped or unslipped red surfaces. It is observed that there is no separate pottery made for this ware. The same pottery that is found without painting appears sometimes decorated with paintings. Given the distinct nature of this ware and its significance as diagnostic assemblage for periodization, these are reported with priority in reports. In this effort non-painted pottery can receive secondary treatment, causing negligence towards their complete reporting. But, given the premise that same non-painted pottery is used for painting, the rim forms reported under painted pottery has also been used as representative forms of non-painted red slipped or unslipped ware.

The other wares, such as coarse red ware, tan slipped ware, tan ware, matt red ware and red slipped ware belongs to the same category that is red slipped ware. These have been categorized into different wares because of either variation in shade of surface colour, which basically belongs to red colour or fabric. The variation in shades within red colour is a result of a differential atmospheric condition in the kiln during firing. There is no variation in vessel forms according to the variation of these wares (see Takalghat report in which these wares are reported). Therefore, all rim forms reported under these different wares has been brought under the common umbrella of red slipped ware.

Micaceous red ware is reported unmistakably from all above sites. There are two variants of this ware, the first is characterized by the conspicuous presence of big mica flakes in fabric and on the surface, and second is marked with fine mica particles/powder mixed with slip applied on the exterior surface. This difference is identified at Raipur and Mahurjhari. At Takalghat and Naikund only the first variant is mentioned. Non-mentioning of the second variant at these sites is an indication of their absence at these sites. There are two rim forms, the first is long flaring and the second is slightly or prominently inverted at the end (hooded), that are common in the first variant (Figure 1). The former rim form is unmistakably found at all sites unlike later which is not that common. At Takalghat, as mentioned above, due to varying colour and fabric red slipped ware has been categorised into different wares. All articulated rim forms at the site either reported under these variations of red slipped ware or under the second variant of micaceous red ware. Naikund, however, is devoid of any of these variations except the first variant of Micaceous red ware, as a result all articulated rim forms of this site are reported under same ware. However, the absence of red slipped ware or its variations seems to be the most unlikely situation. Personal
visit and surface spread of pottery at Naikund, infer the presence of the second variant of micaceous red ware at the site. The articulated rims were found made in this ware. It substantiates the possibility that because of the presence of mica in the second variant, irrespective of its varying concentration, the second variant was also put under micaceous red ware without explicitly differentiating it into two variants, as it is described at other sites. Taking into consideration this anomaly at Naikund all articulated rim forms of globular pots reported at the site may need to be categorized under the second variant of Micaceous red ware.

![Figure 1: Two Rim Forms of First Category of Micaceous Red Ware](image)

Thus, it appears that due to the differential amount of oxidization during firing different shades of red is formed on pottery. And according to variation in it excavators categorized them into different wares. It also appears that variation in the appearance of pottery is made by potters by deliberate addition of fine mica particles/powder/dust in the slip. All these wares mainly contain globular pots with articulated rims. Therefore, all such rim forms are produced together in this study.

While compiling data one of the major hurdles was assessing the frequency of each rim form as it can give an idea about abundance or paucity of it in each period. No such information, however, is available at any of the above sites. It also does not inform basis for the selection of specific rim sherd for drawing. As a result we have to consider available information as complete information for the site and draw our inferences based on it.

**Rim Forms and Their Appearance at Different Sites**

The rim forms of globular pots of red slipped and the second variant of micaceous red ware from different sites is furnished in the following table. There are some megalithic habitation-cum-burial sites, such as Naikund and Takalghat-Khapa. Gangapur is an extension of Khapa. The information of such sites is divided into habitation and burial sites and produced separately in the table. It can give us an idea about the co-occurrence of rim forms in both the context. For comparative convenience, the rim forms are placed directly in the table, as a result, these are not to the scale.
<table>
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<th>Type No.</th>
<th>Rim Type</th>
<th>KPD</th>
<th>NKD</th>
<th>NKD Meg.</th>
<th>TKL</th>
<th>KHP</th>
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<td><img src="image" alt="KPD Diagram" /></td>
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<td>T.18b, 18c, 18d, 31a, 31b, 47d, 47f, 47g, 64c</td>
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<td>Phase IB 30B</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="MHR-T.20" /></td>
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<td>Phase IB 30B, 64, 64B, 66</td>
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<td>T.72A</td>
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<td>Phase IB T.70, 72A K13</td>
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<td>K10, 13, 17A, T4-76 10a 18</td>
<td>K19, T3-24 19A</td>
<td>K20, T.13, T3-23, 13B 25, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73</td>
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Observations

- The first three rim forms in the table that are found at Takalghat and Naikund have their parallel at Khopdi in the middle levels (Group 2) (Shete and Pawar 2018). At Takalghat these are reported from lower levels of this site.

- The type three in the table which belongs to group 2 and 1 at Khopdi (Khopdi type 6 of a globular pot) and became a characteristic feature in upper levels (Group 1) appears in good number also at Naikund (both at habitation and burials) and Takalghat (Shete and Pawar 2018). It is reported in both Megalithic phases (Phase IA and IB) of Takalghat, but unlike Naikund it is absent in associated burials of Khapa and Gangapur.

- It appears in little-changed form during Phase IB of Takalghat and at Mahurjhari, see type 4, the internally thickened part of the rim is much longer (almost half of the total length of the rim), relatively less thick and gently sloping towards rim end. Their representation by single illustration at Mahurjhari indicates their rare representation in the burials of these two sites.

- Type five, flared rim with flat or round end, is absent at Khopdi, Naikund and Phase IA of Takalghat. It is represented by more than the single illustration in Phase IB of Takalghat, at Khapa and Raipur.

- The near similar observations as above are made in the case of type 7, having the flaring rim with the articulated square end. It is reported by a single rim, indicating scarce use during Phase IB of Takalghat and Mahurjhari, and limited use at Gangapur and Raipur.

- Type 8 (Table 2), having concave or out turned neck characterized by externally and internally thickened rim edge with the flat end is also reported by the single illustration from Phase IB of Takalghat. It is there at Khapa and Gangapur but prolifically reported from Raipur.

- Type 9 appears to be characterized by the concave neck and externally thickened rim featuring flat external and slightly round end edge. It is reported by the single illustration from Phase IB of Takalghat (Shete and Pawar 2018) and burials of Khapa and Raipur.

- The type 11 is much similar to above but marked by internally projecting internal rim end edge. It appears to have flimsy representation in Phase IB of Takalghat and burial sites of Gangapur, Mahurjhari and Raipur.

- All further types are absent at Takalghat and also at the burial site of Gangapur and having good representation at rest of the three burial sites.

- The last type, however, is only reported from Mahurjhari and Raipur.
Discussion

Above observation confirms that all types are not present at all sites. The first two types are present at Khopdi and Takalghat (Phase IA), type three at above two and at Naikund (habitation and burial), but are absent at other places. The other types, which are present at Takalghat (IB), Khapa burials, Mahurjhari burials and Raipur burials are absent from Khopdi and Naikund and Phase IA of Takalghat. Thus there are clearly two groups of sites, first comprising type 1, 2, and 3, and second comprising rest of the types. Further, the third group may also be formed in it, based on type 11 to 15, which are absent at Takalghat.

There are three different possibilities for such kind of distribution of rim forms at these sites. First, due to their functional implication, some were produced for daily use and others for offering in burials; second, due to the diverse tradition of rim forms existing at different sites; and third, because these sites chronologically differed from each other. Presence of type 3 both at Naikund habitation and burials, and total absence at Khapa, Gangapur, Mahurjhari and Raipur burials helps to discard the first possibility. There are several types of Takalghat Phase IB that are present also at various burial sites. Looking at the geographical distribution of sites, it indicates that these are located in the different direction of Nagpur. Khopdi is located to the southeast of Nagpur, Naikund to the almost north-northeast, Mahurjhari to the northwest, Raipur, Takalghat-Khapa and Gangapur to the south-southwest. Presence of type three at Khopdi, Naikund and in Phase IA of Takalghat infer that though these localities are in the different direction same rim form was being produced at these sites. Therefore, the second possibility also does not seem to be applicable.

Stratigraphically at Takalghat, we come across pottery during Phase IA that does not include types present in Phase IB. Khopdi has revealed a continuous habitation from Pre-Iron Age (Iron free horizon) to Iron bearing horizon. Categorical development of types can be easily traced at the site. The first two types at Khopdi are found in the iron-free horizon. Finding these types at Takalghat may imply traces of Pre-Iron Age deposit at this site. The type 3, which is present in Takalghat Phase IA and at Naikund, occur at Khopdi from levels little lower than Iron bearing horizon and continue as the only type within red slipped ware globular pot category during Iron Age. Thus stratigraphically its beginning at Khopdi in the iron-free horizon, followed by its predominance in the iron-bearing horizon, as well as presence of this type in Phase IA at Takalghat and absence from Phase IB, broadly assures that this type from the first group belongs to early phase of Iron Age, forming a precursor to the second group of types. As a result, it appears that there is a lack of evidence for the mixed assemblage of the first and second group of rim forms at any site.

Epilogue

It was until now believed that all Iron Age/Megalithic sites of Vidarbha region are contemporary to each other. Pottery was considered to be monotonous, and no changes were appreciated due to ware focused analysis. But, it appears that rim form
analysis is more effective for identifying small and multiple phases within the single cultural time frame. The above discussion identifies two distinct phases within the Iron Age of Vidarbha or western Wainganga valley. The first phase followed immediately after iron free or pre-Iron Age period, consisting mainly of type 3 and second consisting of the second group of rim forms, including type 5 and onwards.

The above analysis confirms that different habitation and burial sites of the Iron Age in Vidarbha has emerged at the different time within the Iron Age and existed for a relatively short period. There is still the possibility of more minor phases within it. As we have already observed that types 11 to 15 are absent at Takalghat, but are present at Khapa and other burial sites. There is a need to take into consideration these minor changes which may lead us to identify the temporal diversity of sites, though not a precise period of it. In the absence of calibrated dates, and finding the problem of inconsistency in available dates, typological analysis of pottery carries more importance. Definitely, there is a need for high resolution absolute calibrated dates for this period.

References

