

A Preliminary Exploration of Prabhasa-Somnath

S. R. Rao, Sila Tripathi, A. S. Gaur

Marine Archaeology Centre
National Institution of Oceanography
Dona Paula, Goa - 403 004.

Like Dvaraka, Prabhasa-Somnath (Somnath according to ancient texts) is not only a holy place but also a site of historical importance. The archaeological excavations on land at Prabhasa by the Baroda University and Gujarat Government have yielded evidence of a township of 2000 B.C. The temple of Somnath nearby is dedicated to Lord Siva and the linga is counted among the 12 Jyotirlingas of India mentioned in various Puranas (Srinivasan 1984). Prabhasa is situated (20° 53'N and 70° 24'E) on the southwest coast of Saurashtra at the mouth of the river Hiranya or Hiran. The port town of Veraval is only 2 Km. from Somnath. Prabhasa is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* as Prabhasatirtha (118.15, 119.1-3). The *Bhagavata Purana* says that at this sacred place the river Saraswati flows towards the west and the town is situated on the sea shore. (X. 45.38; X.78.18). The same text also says that Lord Krishna undertook a sea voyage from Bhrugukachcha to Prabhasa. The Nasik and Karle caves inscriptions of Nahapana (119-124 AD) also refer to Prabhasa, (*Epigraphia Indica* 1981).

Prabhasa which seems to have extended upto Somnath was a flourishing port during the protohistoric times. After a short decline the port again became prominent during the Early Historical and Rajput periods. Al-beruni mentions that China and Zanzibar had trade contacts with Prabhasa and the main exports were cotton, textiles and leather goods to Arabia and imports were coral, pearls, ivory tusk, diamond and clover in to Gujarat. Thus the ports of Gujarat including Somnath flourished due to extensive overseas trade with

Southeast Asia, Ceylon and the Middle East countries.

Background : It is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* that when Dvaraka (modern name Dwarka) was swallowed by the sea, Lord Krishna left for Prabhasa with his kith and kin. The marine archaeological explorations conducted by the Marine Archaeology Centre of NIO from 1983 to 1991 at Bet Dvaraka and Dvaraka have revealed the protohistoric structural remains at 10m. water depth and also antiquities such as the Late Indus type seal of conch shell, a votive earthen jar inscribed in Late Harappan script, stone anchors of various types, metal objects, shell bangles and coppersmith's stone mould, (Rao 1990).

The Marine Archaeology Centre was interested in ascertaining the cause of submergence of Dvaraka in 1500 B. C. on a hypothesis that, if Dvaraka was submerged due to a rise in sea level, Somnath-Prabhasa too must have been submerged by sea at least partly, if not fully. Bearing this fact in mind offshore exploration of Somnath was undertaken in 1992.

Coastal Geomorphology : The Prabhasa-Somnath coast forms a straight line revealing a vivid manifestation of marine aeolian and fluvial processes that have resulted in a number of important geomorphic land forms, as the nearshore zone is characterised by the formation of recent alluvium deposits, sand bars, mud flats and mangrove swamps. The coastal zone is covered with beach and littoral sands, oyster beds and sand dunes, (Oceanographic Studies off Sutrapada, report, 1985).

Land Excavation : Prabhas was excavated by the Department of Archaeology of Gujarat and M. S. University of Baroda in 1956 and 1965 and further excavations carried out by the Deccan College, Pune from 1971 to 72 and 1975 to 76 revealed four cultural periods, (IAR, 1971-72, 1975-76).

Period I : This period is represented by a coarse red and grey ware which is associated with a red-slipped ware and a black-and-red ware. The red and grey pottery is represented by *Kundas* with flaring sides and a flat bottom. The red-slipped ware is of fine fabric and also highly burnished. The black-and-red ware has its exterior completely red and the interior completely black, a feature characteristic of the black-and-red ware from Lothal (Sankalia 1974). Besides this there is a painted black-on-red pottery similar to the Late Harappan in Gujarat. Among the small finds mention must be made of segmented faience beads and a blade-flake industry of chalcedony (IAR, 1971-72).

Period II : This period is characterised by the Prabhas Ware. The vessels in the ware are of fine fabric and are treated with a pinkish or orange slip which, in several cases, has turned grey because of peculiar conditions of firing in the kiln. Over the surface are painted patterns in purple or dark brown. The shapes in the Prabhas Ware are mostly copied from a Harappan pottery. Such as the dish-on-stand, big storage jar with heavily beaded rim and dish. But the most prominent type is a sub-spherical bowl with a featureless rim. The habitation remains include a house which is rectangular on plan (3.8 x 2.45m) built of large flat slabs of miliolite limestone which abounds in the region (IAR, 1975-76).

Period III : Prabhas Ware of Period II continues in this period but the Lustrous Red Ware begins to occur now. The most noteworthy feature of this period is the discovery of an extremely complex struc-

ture built of boulders of miliolite limestone set in mud mortar very close to the mouth of the river Hiranya. A close examination of the artefacts recovered from the structure indicates that it was a public building, perhaps the warehouse or marketplace of a port town (Rao 1991). The warehouse can be compared with the West Asian (Tepe Yahya) warehouse (Ghosh 1989). The most noteworthy find of this period is a steatite seal amulet which is engraved on both sides. On one side there are seven stylized sheep, and on the other only five.

Period IV : This period represented by the early historical pottery such as the black and red ware and fragments of amphora, had trade contacts with Roman ports.

Onshore Exploration 1991 : Exploration carried out in and around the excavated area and on the bank of river Hiran by the Marine Archaeology Centre (MAC) yielded pottery of different periods including the Late Harappan pottery and Red Polished Ware. The nick point of the Hiran river where it used to join the sea is now buried under sand bars.

Nearshore Exploration : Before undertaking offshore exploration the nearshore region and the intertidal zone were explored from Veraval jetty upto the sand bars near the mouth of the river Saraswati. During ebb tide near Veraval six lingas came to light. A few of them are under worship. A shipwreck is also visible in ebb tide in 0.5 m to 2 m water depth. Local inquiries revealed that the wreck is hardly 10 to 15 years old.

Offshore Explorations by MAC : Offshore explorations were carried out west of the Somnath temple and opposite the river Hiranya. The diving operation started initially in shallow waters and gradually extended towards the deeper waters upto 9m water depth off Somnath.

The SCUBA (Self Contained Under water Breathing Apparatus) and SDDE (Sur-

face Demand Diving Equipment) systems of diving gears were used and circular and swimline search techniques were followed in Somnath waters. Even at lower water depth the Aquazopp (underwater scooter) could be deployed for exploration.

Area of Exploration : The underwater explored area in Somnath waters has been divided into 3 zones and diving was carried out at 15 places (Fig. 1). In Zone no 1 circular stone artefacts with a hole right through were located, and one of them was found partly buried in sediment while others are lying on the seabed (Fig. 2). A rock cut channel of 2m depth with a prismatic stone anchor laying in it was noticed. The whole area is overgrown with soft pink and grey colour corals.

Zone no. 2 is opposite the Somnath temple. The area is full of sand and no vegetation is noticed. In Zone no. 3 the prototype of corals was encountered. The purpose of diving here was to search for submerged channel of the Hiranya river, if any. This being a preliminary survey of less than a week, further search is necessary to come to a conclusion.

Results and Discussions : The under water explorations of Somnath revealed triangular (Fig. 4) and prismatic stone anchors, which are the prototype of the anchors of Dwarka. Dressed sandstone blocks and massive single holed circular stone artefacts of different shapes lie in the rock-cut channel. The large spheroid stones measuring 75 x 37 x 25 cm and 88 x 61 x 28 cm. and having a hole appear (Fig. 3) to be flagposts used on boat or on the shore. Future exploration may reveal further archaeological remains to arrive at a conclusion whether or not a township of 1500 B.C. lies submerged. The artefacts so far found appear to be of later date. If in the proposed exploration pottery or other antiquities are found the age of the submerged objects can be determined.

Acknowledgement : The authors are thankful to Dr. B. N. Desai, Director for providing necessary research facilities. Thanks are also due to Sri K. H. Vora, Scientist-in-Charge, Marine Archaeology Centre for some suggestions and to Sri S.B. Bandodkar, P. Gudigar and Sundaresh.

References

1. Ghosh A. , 1989. *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, Delhi, pp. 348-350.
2. Rao S. R., 1990. "Excavation of the legendary city of Dwarka in the Arabian Sea" in *Journal of Marine Archaeology* Vol. 1, Goa, pp. 59-98.
3. Rao S. R., 1991. *Down and Devolution of the Indus Civilization*. New Delhi. p. 153.
4. Sankalia H. D., 1974. *Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*. Bombay, pp. 381-83
6. Srinivasan S., 1984. "Prabhasa or Prabhasa Mahatmya" in *Aspects of Indian History & Culture* (Ed) C. E. Ramachandran and K. V. Raman, New Delhi, pp. 18.
7. *Epiqraphia Indica* 1981. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, Vol. VIII, pp.59-96.
8. *Epiqraphia Indica* 1981. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, Vol. VII, pp.47-74.
9. *Indian Archaeology - A Review 1971-72*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp.12.
10. *Indian Archaeology - A Review 1975-76*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp.13.
11. *Technical Report* 1985. Oceanographic Studies off Sutrapada NIO, R. C. Bombay, p. 7-8.
12. *Technical Report* 1992. Marine Archaeological Exploration off Dwarka and Somnath waters, NIO Goa, pp.14-24.

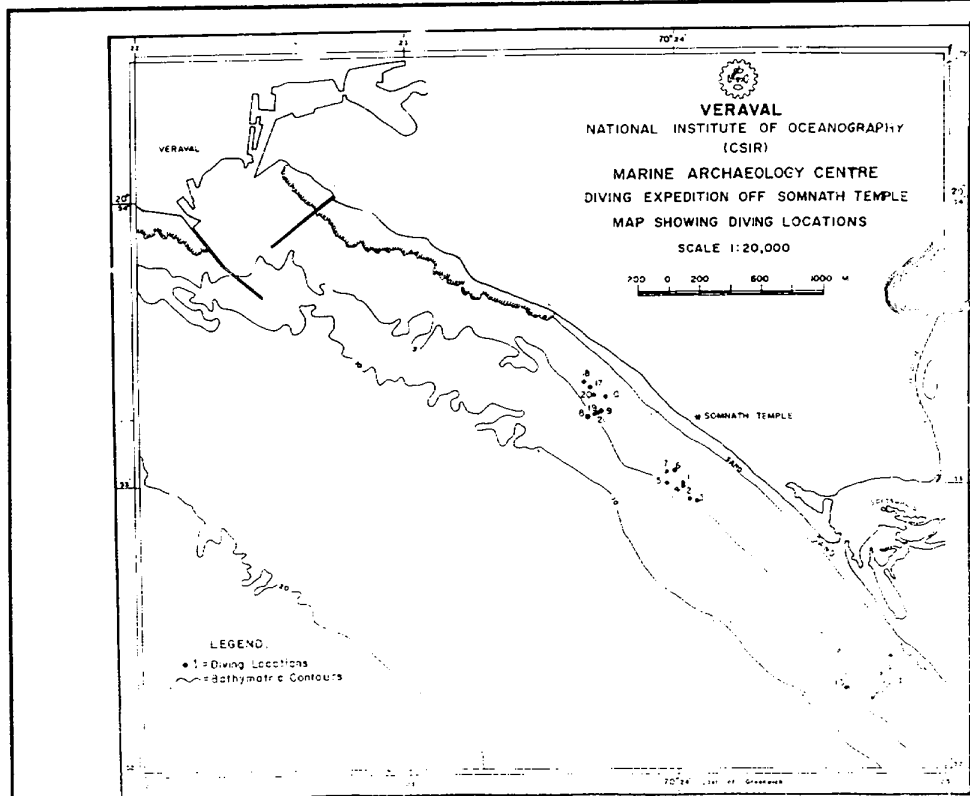


Fig. 2 : Spheroid stone artefact with a hole.
Somnath waters.

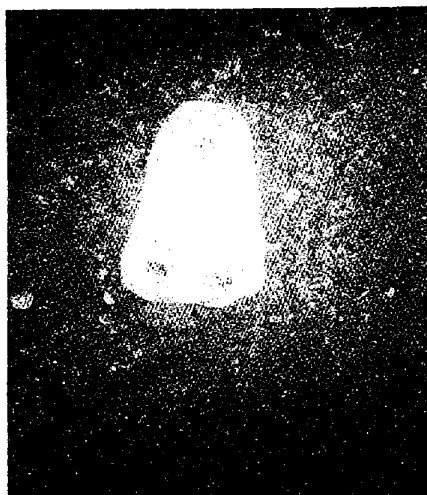


Fig. 4 : Triangular stone anchor found in
Somnath waters