

Rakhigarhi Field Visit 21- 22 January, 2023: A Report



Image 1: The students and faculty of School of Heritage Research and Management

The final-year students of MAHM and MCPHM, School of Heritage Research and Management, along with five faculty members visited Rakhigarhi on the occasion of the *Rakhigarhi Mahotsav*, organised by Astitva Heritage, during 21st and 22nd January, 2023. Rakhigarhi in Hissar district, Haryana, is one of the largest and important Harappan sites of the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization. In the 2020-21 Budget announcements, the Government of India declared five iconic archaeological sites where Rakhigarhi was specially focused. Prof. Suraj Bhan firstly reported Rakhigarhi in the 1960's and thereafter Pre-Harappan attributes were identified by Dr Silak Ram. Excavation at this site was carried out firstly by Dr Amrendra Nath, thereafter Prof. Vasant Shinde excavated the site during 2014-16 sessions. Recently, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) resumed excavation under the direction of Dr S. K. Manjul and the third phase of excavation was completed last year. The main purpose of organising the *Rakhigarhi Mahotsav* by Astitva Heritage was to highlight the importance of the site by creating awareness amongst the masses. Accordingly, a series of activities were planned and executed, which included the seminar, table-talk, antiquity displays and question-answer session. In this *Mahotsav*, all three excavators of the site were invited to present their experiences and views about the site and excavation details. The programme focused on the cultural and historical dimensions, emphasizing the distinction of our long-standing legacy of heritage, customs and traditions dating back to at least the Bronze Age, if not earlier.



Image 2: The Rakhigarhi Resort and Farm where the event was organized.

The first day, the 21st of January, commenced with the inauguration of the 4th season of excavation at the archaeological site of Rakhigarhi by Dr. Sanjay Manjul, Director of Excavation, followed by academic sessions on the topic "Rakhigarhi: Past, Present, and Future" by three renowned archaeologists known for their work on Harappan Archaeology, namely; Dr. Amarendra Nath, Former Director, Institute of Archaeology ASI, New Delhi, (however, he could not participate due to the sad demise of his mother), Prof. (Dr) Vasant Shinde, Former Vice-Chancellor, Deccan College PGRI and Dr. Sanjay Manjul, Joint DG, ASI, who have worked at Rakhigarhi and have contributed significantly through the excavations and interpretation of data.

Dr Shinde elaborated and discussed archaeo-genetic research, the use of cutting-edge technology to reconstruct 3D Facial Models of the Harappan People taking the help of ancient Harappan DNA Analysis via Cryno-facial-reconstruction. Other fascinating technologies like internal anatomy and bone metric data were also used to reconstruct the ancient Harappan facial and bodily structures.

Dr Manjul focused on the plans for developing the Rakhigarhi archaeological site and the role of constructing a Site Museum and Interpretation Centre in preserving the recovered antiquities and creating awareness amongst the visitors. He also stressed upon the importance of preservation, conservation and promotion of the site by making a Site Management Plan for visitors. But he also confessed that the plan for preservation and conservation of the site is still in its initial stage and requires immediate and adequate attention. He drew the attention of the scholars and audience to help in developing facilities for comfortable and affordable stay of visitors such as the one being developed by the Astitva Heritage.

Dr Narender Parmar of MD University Rohtak focused on the archaeological evidence of the urban settlements in the Upper Sarasvati Basin and their importance. Further, he highlighted the region's cultural development from agrarian settlements to the urbanized settlements as revealed through archaeological evidence based on the agricultural, structural and industrial activities unearthed at these sites. He emphasized the need to understand the transformation from the initial cultural stage to the civilizational stage.

A panel discussion followed the session.

On the second day, 22nd January, Dr Vasant Shinde and Dr Sanjay Manjul led the participants for a Heritage Walk of the Archaeological Mounds I-IV to provide an onsite experience of working on the excavation site and the day-to-day challenges they faced. In between they also detailed the recent findings after two months of extensive excavation. The most important results were the excavated remains of two burials, and collecting and recording of DNA samples from it. While excavating the burial, the material remains and the sacrificial pit was clearly identified, which was considered path-breaking evidence. They demonstrated how the IGR-1 Street plan discovery and a trench in Mound 2 helped them to understand the outer fortification's interior and exterior patterns. Surface Study of Mound number 1 and 3 showed house planning similar to the modern settlement at Rakhigarhi, which is interesting. According to Dr. Manjul, the upcoming season of 2023 excavation will be carried out to understand the Town Planning and its different phases through the limited excavations.



Image 3: The excavated remains showing exposed structures and layers.



Image 4: Experts explaining the Students about mounds, trench layout and structures.

Dr Sanjay Manjul talked about the On-site development and tourist infrastructure consisting of affordable stay for visitors. He emphasized the need for museum, site preservation and its management in accordance with the living tradition and heritage.

Learning Outcomes:

Students could physically experience how the actual archaeological onsite work is carried out. Understanding the importance of layer sampling, through which the material remains are documented and distinguished with each other. The students got clarity on the concept of surface findings and stratified layers and learned to differentiate between modern pottery and Harappan pottery remains. The students also learnt to differentiate between man-made and natural mounds during the Heritage walk conducted by Professor Shinde. How a trial trench is planned and excavated and marking of layer by layer was also explained here. The importance of documentation, report writing, and publishing was reiterated repeatedly because it is the only source to guide future excavation work, if required.

By the end of the field visit, the students could identify different types of pottery, terracotta bangles, bones, chert blades and even the micro-Harappan steatite beads from these mounds. The students also understood much about the conservation and preservation practices that should be followed on the site and with all the artifacts unearthed here. The students came to know about the preventive conservation practiced while trying to collect DNA samples, and how difficult the procedure was. They failed initially in the collection of DNA samples but finally succeeded by taking preventive measures. The students understood the laying of trenches, protection of exposed sections and artifacts inside the trenches from the external climate and environment such as the giant storage jars, covered in protective sheets. It was a great learning experience for conservation students also. The famous exposed selfie wall on mound 4, for visitors, to see different layers, was an important example to understand how environmental conditions lead to the weathering and erosion of the mound on a daily basis.



Image 5: The famous selfie wall on mound 4

The famous wall is turning into a dilapidated state due to combined reasons like the rainwater, which percolate through it; weathering of the exposed parts of the mound on daily basis; oozing of salt from mud bricks and structures, which is making the situation even worse and if appropriate steps are not taken urgently, the entire section may collapse or cave in. This problem was also discussed by the panel. The preservation and conservation of mud structures are sensitive and challenging. Chalking-out the site conservation and management plan is still in its initial stage, considering the nature of structures and artifacts. Some very important and sensitive findings/artifacts like discovered skeletons have been taken to a safe place after being exposed to a new ecosystem. Hopefully, these rare objects will be returned to the Site Museum after its construction soon.



Image 6: The display of artifacts to be housed in the Site Museum

The involvement of the local communities is considered essential for protecting and preserving the site and the mounds. An ‘in-situ’ conservation lab, along with the museum, is



going to be built, according to Dr Manjul. This will help conserve many less-deteriorated artifacts, which can be displayed in the museum. The inclusion of local conservation practices and techniques—since the local communities are ‘in touch’ and are part of a living heritage, their knowledge of the material and the ancient methods are much more comprehensive than professional conservation scientists. On the last day, all the Guest speakers were facilitated with tokens of appreciation, amongst which Dr Ravindra Kumar, faculty at the School of Heritage Research and Management, Dr B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, was also facilitated. Because of the combined efforts of Dean SHRM and Faculty, students could get an enriching experience of academic and practical learning, which they are grateful for. Many more such field visits are required for the overall understanding and growth of archaeology and conservation courses at the SHRM, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi.

Image 7: Dr Ravindra Kumar being facilitated by the organizers.

The two days long *Mahatosav* was closed by a Haryanvi Cultural Performance by school students.

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