

## HISTORICAL NOTE

### KONASAMUDRAM: THE FAMOUS WOOTZ STEEL PRODUCTION CENTER\*

Konasamudram is a small unnoticed village located at 18°44' latitude and 78°31' longitude in north east region of Nizamabad district of modern Andhra Pradesh state. It is located in the erstwhile Armoor Taluq, which is presently Kammaripally Mandal. This region is referred to as Northern Telangana. The Konasamudram village is located about 80 km from Nizamabad (which was formerly known as Indur) and 26 km from the Mandal headquarter Kammaripally. Kammaripally falls on the National Highway 16, on the way to Nizamabad and Karimnagar.

The Andhra Pradesh Nizamabad District Gazetteer<sup>1</sup> reports that "iron smelting was also one of the ancient industries of the district. The knowledge of iron smelting and its forging was known in the peninsular India from very early times, from at least the beginning of the first millennium BC<sup>2</sup>. Konasumudram in Armoor (Armoor) Taluk was reputed for its steel, known as 'Indian Wootz', with which the world famous Damascus swords were made." The name of the village was synonymous with Deccani wootz and was one of the important wootz steel producing centers in pre-modern India. A detailed survey of iron and steel manufacturing sites of Northern Telangana was performed recently and the specific locations that were actively engaged in wootz steel manufacture were identified.<sup>3</sup>

There were several villages that were closely associated with wootz steel, but none was as famous as Konasamudram because it figures in travel reports of several visitors<sup>4,6</sup>. Merchants from different countries placed indents for thousands of wootz ingots with the traders at Indur<sup>6</sup>. The brisk trade in iron and processed objects of this region has also been mentioned in *Āin-i-*

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*Ākbari*.<sup>7</sup> Henry Voysey<sup>4</sup> described the wootz steel making process, which was carried out at Konasamudram. The brisk trade in wootz steel ingots from Konasamudram to places as far away as Persia has been reported by Voysey<sup>4</sup> and is also known based on Dutch East Indies records.<sup>8</sup> The ingots purchased from this region were exported through Machilipatnam port in the east coast or Mangalore port in the west coast to far-eastern locations like Indonesia and western locations like Persia, respectively.<sup>8</sup> It is evident that wootz steel manufacture employed several thousands of people in manufacturing units at Konasamudram to meet the demand from the traders. Wootz steel making and its processing was a major industry in Telangana and in particular Konasamudram. Several aspects related to wootz steel manufacture in Konasamudram will be highlighted in this historical note.

Konasamudram village was involved in wootz steel production activity for a long time. The village and its near about areas were surveyed in detail and ample evidences were collected regarding iron smelting (namely slag remains) and wootz steel processing (namely wootz steel crucible remains).<sup>9</sup> Heaps of slag (iron smelting debris) remains and wootz-making crucible debris are still found extensively in the village. When one looks carefully at the location of Konasamudram village, it is noted that the entire village appears to rest on top of the remains of refractory wootz steel crucibles. Further, several wootz steel implements were also collected from the village.<sup>9</sup> The extensive use and availability of wootz implements found in the village even today is a standing testimony to the wootz making tradition of this region. Unfortunately, there has been no systematic radiocarbon dating of the sites in the village.

Konasamudram village was once located in a deep and thickly forest area. The village is surrounded by small hills and hillocks, with beautiful landscapes. The fauna and flora of this region is rich and varied. In addition to its location between hills, there is a natural water logging area where three tanks were constructed adjacent to the village. There is one big tank, and this is known as *Pedda Cheruvu*. The village is named after this big irrigation tank. It has been postulated that this was the reason to call the village as Konasamundar or Konasamudram, which translates as '*Kona*' means a dell or glade in the hills, while '*samundār*' (in Urdu) or '*samudram*' (in Telugu) in this particular case means a big tank. The general meaning of the word

'*samudram*' in Telugu (and several other Indic languages) is sea. The Kākāṭīya kings constructed large number of big tanks in the early medieval period between 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD, in Telangana region. Most big tanks that were constructed by these kings in the region were referred to as '*samudram*'.

Due to the influence of Urdu language during the rule of Muslim rulers from the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, the name of the village is called nowadays as 'Konasamundar'. After the Kākāṭīyas, this region came under the rule of Bahamanis of Deccan, who ruled between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was followed by the rule of Golkonda Qutb Shahi kings between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Asaf Jahis from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is to be noted here that the name of the village could also be derived from the wootz steel industry that was prevalent at this place, especially from the shape of the crucible covers used in wootz steel production. The top of the wootz crucible was concave or in pinecone shape while the main body was cylindrical. The bottom shape of the Konasamudram crucibles resulted in wootz ingots that were circular and relatively flat (see Refs 9 and 10 for wootz steel ingots from Konasamudram area). This pinecone shape wootz crucibles are called, in the local language, '*konam pavulu*' or '*wukku pavulu*'. The name of the village Konasamudram etymologically connects it with the pinecone shaped-wootz steel crucible covers. In fact, a large number of villages in the Northern Telangana region are named 'Konapuram'<sup>2</sup> (for example, Konapur in Sarangapur Mandal, Konapuram in Pudoor Mandal, Gattla Konapuram in Medipalli Mandal in Karimnagar district, Konapuram in Kothagudem Mandal in Warangal, Konapuram in Medak, Konapur in Bhanswada Mandal, Konapur in Kammaripally Mandal in Nizamabad district). Interestingly, there is a village by name "Konapuramu" at a distance of 10 kms from Konasamudram in Nizamabad district. It is likely that Konasamudram village must also have been called Konapuram before the digging of the big tank in the village, after which it must have taken the name of Konasamudram.

Currently, it is interesting to note that, there are several artisans and laborers working in this village with their old ancestral implements made of wootz steel. The tools of the traditional blacksmiths of this village need to be carefully studied and catalogued. Member of local occupational groups

like toddy tappers and butchers express their displeasure and discomfort in using modern steel implements. Some of the wootz-steel based tools from Konasamudram have been catalogued in a related article<sup>9</sup>.

There are two *Māmāyī* temples called as *Pedda Māmāyī* and *Cinnā Māmāyī* temples existing in Konasamudram village. *Māmmāyī* is the Goddess of Metal. *Māmmā* or *Āmmā* means mother and *Āyī* or *Ayas* means iron in Sanskrit language. While the *Pedda Māmāyī* temple is located on the *Kāmārī* Street (“Blacksmith’s Street”) and primarily worshiped by the blacksmith community, the *Cinnā Māmāyī* temple is located on *Kanchari* Street (“Bronzemaker’s Street”) and worshiped by the members of the bronze makers community. The photographs of these deities can be seen in ref 11. The original reason for establishment of two temples may have been related to internal disputes between the smith communities living and working in different localities of the village, as told by the villagers. At present there are no such differences between these smith communities in the village but they perform celebrations separately. There are twenty two Viśvakarmā families living in the village.

The traditional wootz steel merchants of the village belonged to the ‘*komaṭi*’ or Bania community. There still exists a large double storied building called *Bandrodi Baṅglā* in the what-was-called *Bandrodi* Street. A photograph of this building is available in Ref. 11. It is now known as *Bandari Baṅglā* on *Bandari* Street, taken after the surname of the Bania community who lived in the village. This mud-constructed building is a symbolic monument in the wootz steel trade in the village. It was here that the wootz ingots were traded.

Two villagers J. Laxminarsaiah and Sāma Srinivas Reddy recollect: “They were very rich in the village. They advanced money to the smiths involved in wootz steel production. The entire wootz steel trade in the village was under their control. Therefore a good number of external traders used to visit their house every day, when wootz steel production was very brisk. The visitors were provided food and accommodation in the village.” It may be interesting to note here that the involvement of local merchants in the wootz steel production (by way of lending of capital) has been also recorded by Buchanan<sup>12</sup> from the Mysore region in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In a similar manner, there were prominent families in other wootz producing villages that were involved in wootz steel trade, like the Donthula family at Ibrahimpatnam and Siddam Shetti family at Kalleda. Donthula Cinnā Buchannā, aged 76 years, once belonged to Ibrahimpatnam village, but now resides in Metpally in Karimnagar district also confirmed the above fact. Ibrahimpatnam village was also an important wootz steel production center in the region. The Donthula family was involved in wootz steel trade in Ibrahimpatnam village. He recollected that his grand father Buchi Rājalingam and father Cinnaiah were trading wootz metal during his childhood. The Bandari families of Konasamudram and Siddam Shetti families of Kalleda village (in Adilabad district) are closely related to them. One of the Siddam Shetti families of Kalleda was the 'vatandar' (hereditary right holder) of the village and also they were the landlords of the village. The present situation is that these families have lost everything in the villages. The Bandhari families of Konasamudram and Siddam Shetti families of Kalleda left the villages long time back and settled elsewhere. Siddam Shetti Vīrasaṅgaiah, aged about 75 years, is now settled at Jagtial in Karimnagar district and is not well off.

The people of Konasamudram are very interested in preserving the heritage sites of their village and to maintain a good record of the historical facts of the village. In the recent past, the alumni of the village Government High School published a small Telugu book<sup>12</sup> called '*Kalagamanamlow Konasamudram*' in remembrance of the past glory of the village. The villagers recollect that several people come to the village from different places and different countries to see and collect the materials like crucibles, slag pieces and samples of wootz and iron. However, they are unhappy that nobody provides any reliable information to the villagers. In particular, they recollect the visit of Thelma Lowe, who did an extensive field survey of wootz steel making sites in the Deccan in 1980s. They remember how she did excavations in the crucible slag field and collected a good number of wootz and iron implements from the smith families in the village. The teachers of the High School and the village Secretary helped her in her work by helping her communicate with the villagers. The villagers are unhappy that they are not aware of the results of her study, especially since a large number of objects were collected from the village smith communities and it has not been reported

anywhere. They requested the authors to find out about the research findings and her whereabouts.

The village people are really interested in dating of the erstwhile crucible steel works in the village. They are really interested in establishing a heritage center or a small museum in the village, if the required funds could be provided. They are ready to collect all the wootz implements that are still remaining in the village and place them in the heritage museum. Unfortunately, there is neither private or government interest and help in setting up such a centre and this is indeed sad considering the boast of Indian industry and government about the greatness of Indian iron. If the remains of Indian wootz making tradition cannot be persevered at the very place which was famous for wootz steel manufacture, it is quite unlikely that India will be able to preserve any aspects of Indian material culture. Two youth leaders J. Laxminarsaiah and Sāma Srinivas Reddy told that “Our people sold out most of the native swords, daggers, knives and wootz ingots to the visitors at cheap rates. They do not know the value of the artifacts. Now, we are not allowing anybody to sell the wootz implements from the village.” It is heartening to note that the villagers are now aware of their material culture and the importance of preserving them. With a little help from private and government sources, the people will take pride in preserving their heritage. Further, it would be relevant, the villagers note, that the wootz steel heritage of this village can be highlighted by ASI or museum by way of exhibits.

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