

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

II. A BROAD SURVEY OF PALAEOLITHIC, MESOLITHIC AND NEOLITHIC CULTURES

NOTE-1

Man had lived on this earth for several hundred years before he learned the art of writing. This long, distanced past when man kept no written records is called prehistory or prehistoric times.

The history and identity of human settlements on India go back to prehistoric times. The credit for doing an early extensive study of Indian prehistory go to Robert Bruce Foote who discovered what was probably the first palaeolithic tool discovered in India-the Pallavaram hand-axe. Later he discovered a large number of prehistoric sites in south India. The contribution of Sir Mortimer Wheeler is equally significant, as his efforts greatly contributed towards our knowledge of the pre-historical cultures of India and their sequence.

The Indian stone age is divided into palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic on the basis of geological age, the type and technology of stone tools, and subsistence base. The palaeolithic is further divided into lower, middle and upper palaeolithic. A general time range for the lower palaeolithic is from about 2 mya to 100,000 years ago, the middle palaeolithic from about 100,000 to 40,000 years ago and the upper palaeolithic from the 40,000 to 10,000 years ago. The palaeolithic cultures belong to the Pleistocene geological era, while the Mesolithic and Neolithic belongs to the Holocene era.

PALAEOLITHIC AGE

CHRONOLOGY, DISTRIBUTION, TOOL TYPES

- The Palaeolithic period or the Old Stone Age constitutes the longest phase of Prehistory and covers the whole range of Pleistocene epoch from about 2 mya to 10,000 BP.
- The Palaeolithic age in India is divided into three phases in accordance with the type of stone tools used by the people and also according to the nature of climatic change.
- Palaeolithic tools have been found in almost all parts of the subcontinent. Although hardly any sites have so far been discovered in the alluvial stretches of the Indus or Ganga valleys (Kalpi in UP is an exception), they have been identified on rocky areas within or on the margins of these valleys, e.g., in the Rohri hills in Sindh and the northern fringes of the Vindhyas. Sites are prolific in other parts of the subcontinent, especially in peninsular India, leaving aside the coastal plains. Comparatively few palaeolithic habitation sites have been identified, but it can be assumed that people lived close to sources of food, water, and stone in different kinds of habitats—for instance, along the banks of rivers or streams and in caves and rock shelters.
- Man during this period used tools of unpolished, undressed rough stones—mainly hand-axe, cleavers, choppers, blades, burin and scrappers.
- Early Palaeolithic tools were fairly large core tools made of quartzite or other hard rocks.
- The Palaeolithic period is divided into three phases (lower, middle and upper palaeolithic) according to the nature of stone tools used. They are—
 Use of hand-axe, choppers and cleaver, mainly for digging, chopping and skinning during the Early or Lower Palaeolithic; Use of stone tools made of flakes, mainly scrappers, borers, points and blade like tools during the Middle Palaeolithic; Use of parallel-sided blades, burins and some instances of bone tools during the Upper Palaeolithic.

- Early or Lower Palaeolithic sites have been found in the valley of river Son or Sohan in Punjab, now in Pakistan. Several sites have been found in Kashmir and the Thar desert. Lower Palaeolithic tools have been found in the Belan Valley in Uttar Pradesh and in the desert area of Didwana in Rajasthan. Didwana yielded not only Lower Palaeolithic stone tools but also those of Middle and Upper Palaeolithic ages. Chirki Nevasa in Maharashtra has yielded as many as 2000 tools and those have also been found in several places in the south. Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh is an important site and the caves and rock shelters of Bhimbetka near Bhopal also show features of the Lower Palaeolithic age.
- The geographical horizon for the Middle Palaeolithic sites coincides roughly with the Lower Palaeolithic sites. The artefacts of this age are found at several places on the river Narmada and also at several places south of the Tungabhadra river. The Belan Valley in Uttar Pradesh, which lies at the foothills of the Vindhyas is rich in stone tools and animal fossils including cattle and deer. Middle Palaeolithic sites have also been found in the Potwar plateau (between Indus and Jhelum), Sanghao cave (near Peshawar, Pakistan).
- The Upper Palaeolithic sites have been found in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Central Madhya Pradesh, Southern Uttar Pradesh and Chotanagpur Plateau. Bone tools have been found at cave sites of Kurnool and Muchchatla Chintamani Gavi in Andhra Pradesh.
- In recent years, important evidence of dates for lower palaeolithic contexts has come from the Potwar plateau and the Siwaliks. At Dina and Jalalpur in the Jhelum basin, members of a British archaeological team discovered 15 artefacts including three hand-axes in a boulder conglomerate deposit dated c. 700,000–500,000 years ago by the palaeo-magnetic method.

- Some absolute dates are now available for lower palaeolithic contexts in other areas as well. Didwana in Rajasthan has been dated 390,000 BP (by the uranium/thorium series dating method). For the Son valley (MP), there is a thermoluminescence date of $103,800 \pm 19,800$ BP. Nevasa (in Maharashtra) has given a date of 350,000 BP (via uranium/thorium series dating). In Karnataka, the site of Yedurwadi has been dated 350,000 BP.
- Factory sites are generally located close to the sources of raw materials and are marked by a profusion of stone tools in various stages of preparation. In upper Sindh, there are factory sites in the Sukkur and Rohri hills.
- In Rajasthan, lower, middle, and upper palaeolithic tools have been found around Ajmer and stray finds of lower palaeolithic tools occur in the Luni valley. The Mogara hill near Jodhpur seems to have been a factory site where lower, middle, and upper palaeolithic as well as mesolithic tools were made.
- The Bhimbetka hillside is composed of sandstone and quartzite. There are three perennial freshwater springs in the area, and several creeks filled with water. This site must have been attractive for stone age people from the points of view of shelter, food, and raw material for tools. Most of the stone tools at Bhimbetka were made of a yellowish quartzite available in plenty in the area, but a grey quartzite was also obtained from further away.
- A stratigraphic sequence of lower and upper palaeolithic tools was identified in the Malaprabha– Ghataprabha valleys in Karnataka. Lower palaeolithic tools have also been found in the Hunsgi– Baichbal and Krishna valleys.
- Attirampakkam, in the Kortallayar river basin, is one of the richest palaeolithic sites in Tamil Nadu.

- Within the palaeolithic, there were gradual changes in stone tools. Hand-axes, chopping tools, and cleavers did not altogether disappear, but the balance shifted towards smaller, lighter flake tools, some of them made by prepared core techniques, including the Levallois technique.
- Middle palaeolithic tools have been found in many parts of the subcontinent, often in river gravels and deposits, which give clues about prevailing climatic conditions. There are some dates for middle palaeolithic contexts. Didwana (Rajasthan) has given two thermoluminescence dates of 150,000 BP and 144,000 BP. The Hiran valley (Gujarat) has yielded a uranium–thorium series date of 56,800 BP.
- The middle palaeolithic industry of central and peninsular India is sometimes referred to as the Nevasan industry after the site of Nevasa, where the pioneering archaeologist H. D. Sankalia first discovered middle palaeolithic artefacts in a stratified context.
- In South India, the middle palaeolithic culture is marked by a flake tool industry. On the Visakhapatnam coast, quartzite, chert, and quartz were frequently used to make stone tools.
- The important technical advance of the upper palaeolithic was the making of parallel-sided blades. There was also an increase in the number of burins. The trend was towards smaller tools, and this must have been due to adaptations to environmental changes.
- There are some dates for upper palaeolithic contexts. Site 55 at Riwat gives the earliest date for the upper palaeolithic—c. 45,000 years ago. C-14 dates from the Sanghao cave range from $41,825 \pm 4,120$ BCE to $20,660 \pm 360$ BCE. In central India, the Son valley has given radiocarbon dates within the range of 12,000–10,000 BP, and a piece of ostrich eggshell at Mehtakheri has been dated to over 41,900 BP. Two dates from

the Kurnool caves (in Andhra Pradesh) are 19,224 BP and 16,686 BP (based on the electron spin resonance method).

- The upper palaeolithic context in the Belan valley has been dated between 25,000 and 19,000 years ago, and that of the Son valley about 10,000 years ago. Chopani Mando in the Belan valley seems to be a habitation site with a cultural sequence from the upper palaeolithic to neolithic.

PALAEOLITHIC ART

- Prehistoric art marks the beginning of the history of art. It is also an important window into the world of prehistoric people. Apart from paintings on rocks, rock art includes petroglyphs, a word used when some substance of a rock surface is removed through engraving, bruising, hammering, chiselling, or scooping. Prehistoric art can occur in permanent places (e.g., cave paintings) or can be portable (e.g., figurines). Such remains were clearly an integral and important part of community life and some of them seem to have had some sort of cultic or religious significance.
- In India, however, there is very little evidence of palaeolithic art. It has been suggested that some of the paintings at sites such as Bhimbetka go back to the upper palaeolithic period, but this is far from certain.
- For instance, a very damaged upper palaeolithic carved bone object found at Lohanda Nala in the Belan valley (UP) has been identified as a mother goddess figurine by some and as a harpoon by others. Animal teeth found in a cave at Kurnool have grooves which suggest that they may have been attached to a string and worn as ornaments. A piece of ostrich eggshell engraved with two panels of criss-cross designs was discovered at Patne. Four perforated beads and one incomplete bead made of ostrich eggshell

came from Patne and one from the Bhimbetka rock shelters, all from upper palaeolithic contexts.

LIFEWAYS OF PALAEOOLITHIC PEOPLE-SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

- The life-ways of palaeolithic people living in different parts of the subcontinent were based on their adaptations to their specific environments. However, there were some basic similarities in the lives of these hunting-gathering communities.
 - Palaeolithic people lived in shelters made of rock, branches, grass, leaves, or reeds. More and less permanent settlements can be identified and some sites represent specific kinds of activities. Habitation sites such as Bhimbetka and Hunsgi give evidence of continuous occupation over centuries. Other sites indicate temporary camp sites, where people came, lived for some part of the year, and then moved on. Still others were connected with specific activities—e.g., kill or butchery sites and factory sites.
 - The Prehistoric people were Hunters and Food Gatherers—they lived on hunting animals and gathering wild fruits and vegetables.
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