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-2

MESOLITHIC AGE

The Pleistocene geological era made way for the Holocene about 10,000 years ago. Many environmental changes took place during this transition and there are detailed profiles of climatic patterns for some parts of the subcontinent.

Towards the end of the Pleistocene or beginning of the Holocene, there were certain changes in the stone tool kits of prehistoric people. People started making and using very small tools referred to by prehistorians as microliths. At sites such as Patne, where there is a long and continuous stratigraphic sequence of prehistoric occupation, the gradual decrease in the size of stone tools can be seen very clearly. The term epi-palaeolithic is sometimes used for the transitional stage of tools that are smaller than those typical of the upper palaeolithic, but smaller than microliths. Changes in tool kits must have been related to changes in environmental factors, but such detailed connections have not been fully worked out.

The term Mesolithic is generally used for post-Pleistocene (i.e., Holocene) hunting-gathering stone age cultures marked by the use of microliths.

MICROLITHS

Microliths range in length from under 1 cm to 5 cm. The tools are mostly made on short parallel-sided blades made of crypto-crystalline silica stone such as quartzite, chert, chalcedony, jasper, and agate. Microliths are usually classified into ‘geometric’ and ‘non-geometric’ types. Some microliths may have been used as tools in themselves, but many must have been hafted, singly or in large numbers, onto wooden or bone handles to make composite tools.

The Mesolithic economy, like the palaeolithic, was still essentially based on hunting and gathering, but some sites have given evidence of the domestication of animals. Mesolithic sites reflect different levels of sedentariness. Some seem to have been permanent or semi-permanent settlements, or at least settlements that were repeatedly inhabited over long periods of time. Pottery is absent at most Mesolithic sites, but it occurs at Langhnaj in Gujarat and in the Kaimur region of Mirzapur (UP).

CHRONOLOGY AND DISTRIBUTION OF MESOLITHIC SITES

The Mesolithic period coincides with the beginning of the Holocene age, around 10,000 BP or 8,000 BP. This age witnessed a change in climate from cold and arid to warm and wet on account of gradually recession of the glaciers.

One of the features of the Indian Mesolithic phase is the spread of settlements to new ecological niches. This is generally seen as a result of an increase in population due to more favourable environmental conditions as well as technological innovations. There is a calibrated range of dates from various Mesolithic sites, e.g., Bhimbetka (6556–6177 BCE; 4895–4580 BCE), Baghor (7416–6622 BCE; 4246–3991 BCE), Bagor (5418–4936 BCE; 4575–4344 BCE), Sarai Nahar Rai (9958–9059 BCE), and Paisra (6377–6067 BCE).

The transition from a hunting-gathering stage to the beginnings of settled agriculture can be traced at Chopani Mando in the Belan valley. The three excavated sites of Sarai Nahar Rai, Mahadaha, and Damdama lie very close to each other. Sarai Nahar Rai (in Pratapgarh district, UP) is located on the banks of a dried oxbow lake which marks an old course of the Ganga. Geometric microliths were found here, along with shells and animal bones (of bison, rhinoceros, stag, fish, and tortoise). Within the habitation area, there were 11 human burials in oblong pits—those of 9 men, 4 women, and a child. The Mesolithic level at Sarai Nahar Rai has been dated c. 8400 ± 150 BCE by the radiocarbon method.

Mahadaha is also on the banks of an oxbow lake. Excavations revealed a 60 cm thick occupational deposit and distinct areas associated with habitation and butchering. Twenty-eight burials of thirty individuals, including two instances of a man and woman buried together, were found within the habitation area. The burials were elliptical and their base sloping. Damdama is situated at the confluence of a small stream belonging to the Sai river system.

Rock shelters excavated at Lekhakia (in Mirzapur district of southern UP) have yielded blade tools and microliths. A 105 sq m section of a Mesolithic floor was excavated at Paisra. Apart from microliths, there was evidence of large and small fireplaces positioned very close to each other. The thinness of the deposit suggests a short period of Mesolithic occupation.

Birbhanpur is close to the Damodar river in Burdwan district in West Bengal. Mesolithic stone tools made of quartz, some of chert and chalcedony, were found here.

Bagor (in Bhilwara district of eastern Rajasthan) is one of the best documented Mesolithic sites. It is located on a sand dune, about 25 km west of Bhilwara in Rajasthan, close to the Kothari river. The three occupational levels represented

continuous human occupation over more than 5,000 years. Period I (c. 5000–2800 BCE, according to radiocarbon dates) was Mesolithic, Period II (c. 2800–600 BCE) chalcolithic, and Period III (c. 600 BCE–200 BCE) gave evidence of iron.

Microliths have been found in the valleys of the Tapi, Narmada, Mahi, and Sabarmati. One of the important sites is Langhnaj.

Other Mesolithic sites include Adamgarh hills near Hosangabad, Baghor II in the Son valley and Bhimbetka. Bhimbetka is famous for its Mesolithic paintings.

In peninsular India, microlithic sites found in the vicinity of Mumbai seem to represent coastal Mesolithic communities who exploited marine resources for food. Microliths have been found in other parts of Maharashtra as well. Further south, the microliths are mostly made out of milky quartz. They have been found at Jalahalli and Kibbanhalli near Bangalore in Karnataka, in Goa, and at Nagarjunakonda (in southern AP), and Renigunta (in Chittor district, AP).

LIFEWAYS OF MESOLITHIC PEOPLE- SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

Excavations at sites such as Baghor, Tilwara, Sarai Nahar Rai etc have revealed that they lived in semi-permanent hut like structures having wattle and doab walls and paved floor. The post holes present in the periphery of hutment suggests the presence of a roof like structure for protection. In central India, these people preferred to stay in the rock shelters.

The animal bones and stone tools found at various sites form the chief evidence of the subsistence pattern of the Mesolithic people. This direct evidence is supplemented by the depiction of scenes of hunting, fishing, trapping of mice and plant food collection in the contemporary rock paintings.

The earliest evidence of human burials in India also comes from the Mesolithic period and these are reported from various sites such as Langhnaj, Bagor and Sarai Nahar Rai.

The grave goods obtained from the graves gives us an important insight into the material culture of the Mesolithic people. These goods included microliths and bone ornaments.

The existence of hut-like structures and the food processing artefacts such as querns and mullers indicate the beginning of a quasi-sedentary or semi-settled life.

MESOLITHIC ROCK ART

The first rock paintings in India (and in fact anywhere in the world) were discovered by A. C. L. Carlleyle, an assistant surveyor with the Archaeological Survey of India in 1867–68 at Sohagighat in the Kaimur hills in the present Mirzapur district (UP). Today, over 150 Mesolithic rock art sites have been found in various parts of the subcontinent and central India has an especially rich concentration of sites. The paintings are an important source of information regarding the lives of Mesolithic communities and show striking thematic similarities across the country.

Bhimbetka-one of the most magnificent rock art sites in the world was discovered by Archaeologist V.S. Wakankar in 1957. In Bhimbetka, there are 642 rock shelters here, nearly 400 of which have paintings, engravings, and bruisings. Their style, theme, and worn state indicate that they belong to old times. Mesolithic paintings have also been found at other sites in Madhya Pradesh such as Kharwar, Jaora, Kathotia, and Lakhajoar.

As at most of the Mesolithic Rock Art sites, animals dominate the scenes at Bhimbetka. Mesolithic paintings at Bhimbetka and other sites also depict men and women, young and old.

NEOLITHIC AGE

The Neolithic cultures constitute the concluding phase of the stone age. These were marked by the use of ground and polished tools and pottery- the features that set them apart from the preceding Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Cultures. The term “Neolithic” was first used by the Danish prehistorian Thomsen, in the nineteenth century to denote the stage of technological progress achieved by early man. But it was Gordon Childe who highlighted the true socio-economic significance of these cultures by associating them with the emergence of the practice of the plant cultivation and animal domestication leading to the growth of farming communities and a settled village life.

The domestication of plants and animals was the outcome of a long series of collective experiments involving many generations of men, women, and children, stretching out over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years.

The domestication of plants and animals marked a special kind of human interference in nature and a new stage in the relationship between people, plants, and animals. It involved removing plants and animals from their natural habitat, a process of selective breeding and rearing under artificial conditions under human control for purposes of human gain. It is possible to identify gradual shifts in the balance of subsistence strategies from hunting and gathering towards animal rearing and agriculture.

The Neolithic age is generally associated with food production, pottery, and sedentary living. The reality is more complex. In the Indian subcontinent, the roots of some of the features associated with the Neolithic can be traced to the Mesolithic phase.

The beginnings of animal and plant domestication did not mean the end of the hunting-gathering way of life. Communities that practised animal rearing and agriculture usually continued to hunt and forage for food. Moreover, there were

numerous communities who retained their hunting-gathering way of life and never switched over to domestication at all.

The Neolithic period was characterized by the ground and polished tools having smooth and round surface for better cutting edge. These tools mark an improvement on earlier ones which once damaged had to be discarded, but now after grinding them they could once more be rendered serviceable. Thus, with the growth of grinding technique, there was an economy of effort as well as raw material. The chief tool-type of this age is designated by the common term 'celt' which is basically an axe or adze. It might have been used to clear the area of wild vegetation and make it fit for cultivation.

A Neolithic celt in India was found as early as 1842 by Le Mesurie in the Raichur district of Karnataka.

CHRONOLOGY AND PATTERN OF DISTRIBUTION OF THE NEOLITHIC SITES IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

As a result of vast explorations and excavations, the evidence of the spread of the Neolithic Cultures in India comes from as many as six different geographical regions, each with its own distinctive features and chronological time-span. These regions are-

I. North-western region i.e., Baluchistan and its adjoining area in Pakistan (7^{th} to mid 4^{th} millennium BC)
II. Northern region i.e., Kashmir valley (2500 BC-1500 BC)
III. Central India i.e., Vindhyan region south of Allahabad (4000 BC-1200 BC)
IV. Mid-Gangetic basin i.e., eastern UP and Bihar (2000 BC-1500 BC)
V. Eastern India i.e., Bengal Orissa and Assam
VI. Peninsular or South India i.e., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (2500BC-1500 BC)

Several sites in Baluchistan illustrate the change from a semi-nomadic pastoral life towards settled agriculture. The oldest and best documented evidence comes from Mehrgarh (Jarrige et al., n.d.). This site is located in the Bolan valley in the northern part of the Kachi plain, near the point where the river emerges from the hills through the Bolan pass.

Periods I and II at Mehrgarh are considered neolithic, even though there is a small amount of copper present. The chronology of this phase is somewhat uncertain due to inconsistent radiocarbon dates. The majority of the dates fall between 6000 and 5500 BP (c. 5000 BCE, calibrated).

Period II at Mehrgarh, dated c. 6000–4500 BCE.

The most remarkable aspect of Periods I–III is that they provide the earliest and most comprehensive evidence of subsistence activities in the region, revealing the transition from hunting and food gathering to a heavy reliance on animal domestication and agriculture.

Barley seem to have been the most important crop. Wheat was another important crop.

The Bolan pass leads from Mehrgarh into the Quetta valley, where there are a number of sites. Kile (also spelt Kili) Gul Mohammad and Damb Sadaat are two of the important excavated sites in this area.

Mundigak is located on a now dry tributary of the Arghandab river in south-east Afghanistan. The dates for Period I (which is divided into several sub-phases) fall within c. 4000–3500 BCE.

In the northern part of the Punjab province of Pakistan, the site of Sarai Khola, lying on the edge of the Potwar plateau, revealed a neolithic occupation going back to about the 4th millennium BCE.

Another early centre of agricultural–pastoral communities lay in the Vindhyan fringes in southern Uttar Pradesh, where over 40 neolithic sites have been identified in the course of explorations in the Belan, Adwa, Son, Rihand, Ganga, Lapari, and Paisuni rivers. Neolithic levels have been identified at several excavated sites such as Koldihwa, Mahagara, Pachoh, and Indari.

Koldihwa and Mahagara (both in Allahabad district, UP) are two important excavated sites, located on the northern fringes of the Vindhyas on the banks of the Belan river. Koldihwa showed cultural continuity from the neolithic to the iron age. Remains of rice and impressions of rice husk embedded in pieces of burnt clay were found here at neolithic levels.

The site of Kunjhun is in the Son valley in Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh, not far from Koldihwa. The neolithic settlement here, which goes back to the 4th millennium BCE, yielded wild and domesticated rice.

In the Kashmir valley, there are several neolithic sites near Srinagar and between Baramulla and Anantnag. These include Burzahom, Gufkral, Haripariqom, Jayadeviudar, Olchibag, Pampur, Panzgom, Sombur, Thajiwor, Begagund, Waztal, Gurhoma Sangri, and Damodara. During the Pleistocene era, the Kashmir valley was a gigantic lake and the neolithic sites are located on the remnants of the ancient lake beds known as karewas.

The dates of the southern neolithic sites mostly fall within the broad time bracket of c. 2900–1000 BCE, but they can be further divided on the basis of chronology and geographical region. The earliest dates so far range between c. 2900 and 2400 BCE and come from Utnur, Pallavoy, Kodekal, and Watgal.

In the southern part of the Deccan plateau, where granite hills rise from the black cotton soil, the earliest neolithic villages were generally located on hillsides and plateaux, sometimes along minor streams, and occasionally along the banks of major rivers. A distinctive feature of many sites in this region is

that they are marked by ash mounds. Ash mounds have been excavated at Utnur, Kupgal, Kodekal, and Pallavoy.

The ash mound sites are large accumulations of ash and vitrified material, created by the repeated burning of heaps of cow dung.

LIFEWAYS OF THE NEOLITHIC PEOPLE

There are different views on the subsistence base of the southern neolithic sites. One view is that the neolithic people were fully sedentary farmers who made clearances in forests to carry out agriculture. Another view is that while these people may have practised some amount of agriculture, they were basically nomadic pastoralists. A third view is that they were sedentary pastoralists who did not practise any agriculture whatsoever.

The neolithic stage is generally associated with relatively self-sufficient village communities with equilibrium between food production and population.

Neolithic cultures are largely defined in terms of transition from hunting and food-gathering to herding and food producing subsistence economy with a sedentary way of life. It could become possible because of better tool types and more conducive environment with the commencement of the Holocene Age.

Changes in subsistence practices would have involved shifts in symbolic and belief systems. The cultivation of crops and the domestication of animals must have led to increased concerns with fertility and magico-religious ways of controlling it. Terracotta female figurines found from neolithic levels onwards at certain sites (e.g., in the north-western zone) have often been given the label of ‘Mother Goddesses’. It is very likely that farming communities connected women with fertility because of the fact that women give birth. It is also possible that they worshipped images of goddesses associated with fertility.

Purposeful, standardized burials do not appear for the first time in the neolithic or neolithic– chalcolithic phase, but they do increase in number. Such burials imply significance attached to the bodily remains of the deceased.

REFERENCE AND ESSENTIAL READINGS

Singh Upinder, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. Delhi, 2008.

Jain, V.K. Prehistory and Protohistory of India: An Appraisal: Palaeolithic, Non-Harappan Chalcolithic Cultures. New Delhi, 2006.

FURTHER READINGS

R.S Sharma, India's Ancient Past Delhi: Oxford University Press 2005

Bhattacharya, D.K. [1989], An Outline of Indian Prehistory, New Delhi.

Chakravarti Ranabir, Exploring Early India upto Circa AD 1300