



A STUDY OF PRE-HISTORIC STONE AGE PERIOD OF INDIA

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Abstract- Tools crafted by proto-humans that have been dated back two million years have been discovered in the northwestern part of the subcontinent. The ancient history of the region includes some of South Asia's oldest settlements and some of its major civilizations. The earliest archaeological site in the subcontinent is the palaeolithic hominid site in the Soan River valley. Soanian sites are found in the Sivalik region across what are now India, Pakistan, and Nepal.

The Mesolithic period in the Indian subcontinent was followed by the Neolithic period, when more extensive settlement of the subcontinent occurred after the end of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago. The first confirmed semipermanent settlements appeared 9,000 years ago in the Bhimbetka rock shelters in modern Madhya Pradesh, India.

Keywords- history, Mesolithic, Paleolithic, Indian

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Introduction

The Stone Age is a broad prehistoric period during which stone was widely used in the manufacture of implements with a sharp edge, a point, or a percussion surface. The period lasted roughly 2.5 million years, and ended between 4500 BC to 2000 BC with the advent of metalworking. Stone Age artifacts include tools used by humans and by their predecessor species in the genus *Homo*, as well as the earlier partly contemporaneous genera *Australopithecus* and *Paranthropus*. Bone tools were used during this period as well, but are more rarely preserved in the archaeological record. The Stone Age is further subdivided by the types of stone tools in use.

The Stone Age is the first of the three-age system of archaeology, which divides human technological prehistory into three periods [Table-1].

- The Stone Age
- The Bronze Age
- The Iron Age

Table 1- Pre History

| Palaeolithic Age or | Mesolithic Age or | Neolithic Age or |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Old stone age (500,000-10,000 BC) | Late Stone Age (10,000-4,000 BC) | New Stone age (6,000-1,000 BC) |

Historical Significance

The Stone Age is nearly contemporaneous with the evolution of the genus *Homo*, the only exception possibly being at the very beginning, when species prior to *Homo* may have manufactured tools. According to the age and location of the current evidence, the cradle of the genus is the East African Rift System, especially toward

the north in Ethiopia, where it is bordered by grasslands. The closest relative among the other living Primates, the genus *Pan*, represents a branch that continued on in the deep forest, where the primates evolved. The rift served as a conduit for movement into southern Africa and also north down the Nile into North Africa and through the continuation of the rift in the Levant to the vast grasslands of Asia.

Starting from about 3 mya a single biome established itself from South Africa through the rift, North Africa, and across Asia to China, which has been called "transcontinental 'savannahstan'" recently [1]. Starting in the grasslands of the rift, the ancestors of man found an ecological niche as a tool-maker and developed a dependence on it. *Homo erectus*, the predecessor of modern humans, became a "tool equipped savanna dweller" [2].

Neolithic or the New Stone Age

The main period of the Neolithic Age in the Indian subcontinent was 4000-1800 BC. This was the food producing age when man completely changed his way of life. Traces of Neolithic communities have survived mostly in the north-western region and the Deccan. Neolithic settlements in Baluchistan seem to be oldest around 3500 BC. In the new way of life man began to domesticate animals and cultivate plants. The dog, sheep and goat were probably the first to be domesticated.

Among plants, wheat and barley were the earliest cereals grown. As a result man began to settle down in certain selected areas. This led to the growth of villages and farming communities. The tools he needed also changed. All these developments took place first in north western India and culminated in the rise and growth of

great Indus Civilization while the rest of the Indian subcontinent was late in undergoing the transition from Mesolithic to the Neolithic and then to the Chalcolithic periods.

Stone Age in India

The history of India begins with evidence of human activity of *Homo sapiens* as long as 75,000 years ago, or with earlier hominids including *Homo erectus* from about 500,000 years ago. The Indus Valley Civilization, which spread and flourished in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent from c. 3300 to 1300 BCE in present-day Pakistan and northwest India, was the first major civilization in South Asia. A sophisticated and technologically advanced urban culture developed in the Mature Harappan period, from 2600 to 1900 BCE [3]. This Bronze Age civilization collapsed before the end of the second millennium BCE and was followed by the Iron Age Vedic Civilization, which extended over much of the Indo-Gangetic plain and which witnessed the rise of major polities known as the Mahajanapadas. In one of these kingdoms, Magadha, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha were born in the 6th or 5th century BCE and propagated their *śramanic* philosophies.

Most of the subcontinent was conquered by the Maurya Empire during the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. It became fragmented, with various parts ruled by numerous Middle kingdoms for the next 1,500 years. This is known as the classical period of Indian history, during which time India has sometimes been estimated to have had the largest economy of the ancient and medieval world, with its huge population generating between one fourth and one third of the world's income up to the 18th century.

Much of northern and central India was united in the 4th century CE, and remained so for two centuries, under the Gupta Empire. This period, witnessing a Hindu religious and intellectual resurgence, is known among its admirers as the "Golden Age of India". From this time, and for several centuries afterwards, southern India, under the rule of the Chalukyas, Cholas, Pallavas, and Pandyas, experienced its own golden age. During this period, aspects of Indian civilization, administration, culture, and religion (Hinduism and Buddhism) spread to much of Asia.

The southern state of Kerala had maritime business links with the Roman Empire from around 77 CE. Islam was introduced in Kerala through this route by Muslim traders. Muslim rule in the subcontinent began in 712 CE when the Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh and Multan in southern Punjab in modern day Pakistan [4], setting the stage for several successive invasions from Central Asia between the 10th and 15th centuries CE, leading to the formation of Muslim empires in the Indian subcontinent such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire.

Mughal rule came from Central Asia to cover most of the northern parts of the subcontinent. Mughal rulers introduced Central Asian art and architecture to India. In addition to the Mughals and various Rajput kingdoms, several independent Hindu states, such as the Vijayanagara Empire, the Maratha Empire, Eastern Ganga Empire and the Ahom Kingdom, flourished contemporaneously in southern, western, eastern and northeastern India respectively. The Mughal Empire suffered a gradual decline in the early 18th century, which provided opportunities for the Afghans, Balochis, Sikhs, and Marathas to exercise control over large areas in the northwest of the subcontinent until the British East India Company gained ascendancy over South Asia.

Beginning in the mid-18th century and over the next century, large areas of India were annexed by the British East India Company. Dissatisfaction with Company rule led to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, after which the British provinces of India were directly administered by the British Crown and witnessed a period of both rapid development of infrastructure and economic decline. During the first half of the 20th century, a nationwide struggle for independence was launched by the Indian National Congress and later joined by the Muslim League. The subcontinent gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, after the British provinces were partitioned into the dominions of India and Pakistan and the princely states all acceded to one of the new states.

Isolated remains of *Homo erectus* in Hathnora in the Narmada Valley in central India indicate that India might have been inhabited since at least the Middle Pleistocene era, somewhere between 500,000 and 200,000 years ago.

Tools crafted by proto-humans that have been dated back two million years have been discovered in the northwestern part of the subcontinent. The ancient history of the region includes some of South Asia's oldest settlements and some of its major civilizations. The earliest archaeological site in the subcontinent is the palaeolithic hominid site in the Soan River valley. Soanian sites are found in the Sivalik region across what are now India, Pakistan, and Nepal.

The Mesolithic period in the Indian subcontinent was followed by the Neolithic period, when more extensive settlement of the subcontinent occurred after the end of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago. The first confirmed semipermanent settlements appeared 9,000 years ago in the Bhimbetka rock shelters in modern Madhya Pradesh, India.

Early Neolithic culture in South Asia is represented by the Mehrgarh findings (7000 BCE onwards) in present-day Balochistan, Pakistan. Traces of a Neolithic culture have been alleged to be submerged in the Gulf of Khambat in India, radiocarbon dated to 7500 BCE. However, the one dredged piece of wood in question was found in an area of strong ocean currents. Neolithic agriculture cultures sprang up in the Indus Valley region around 5000 BCE, in the lower Gangetic valley around 3000 BCE, and in later South India, spreading southwards and also northwards into Malwa around 1800 BCE. The first urban civilization of the region began with the Indus Valley Civilization.

Culture is how a society lives. The pattern on which the cultures are divided is based on the sophistication of tools (technology). Thus Paleolithic society had larger cruder tools which became smaller and refined in the Mesolithic and further developed in the Neolithic society. Chalcolithic saw use of both stone and metal (Bronze, Copper) tools [Table-2].

Table 2- Paleolithic Age

| Lower Palaeolithic Culture | Middle Palaeolithic Culture | Upper Palaeolithic Culture |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| (5,00,000 - 100,00 BC) | (100,000 - 40,000 BC) | (40,000 - 10,000 BC) |

Homo erectus

Homo erectus lived in the Soanian sites, named after river Soan in the middle Pleistocene in the Sivalik region spanning the modern Pakistan, India and Nepal. It was first reported by de Terra and Paterson in 1939. The age of this culture can be dated from 300-400,000 BC to the end of Pleistocene epoch.

Homo sapiens

Homo sapiens arrived in South Asia between 70,000 and 50,000 years ago. The *Homo sapiens* further spread across South East Asia and reached Australia around 40,000 years ago (mtDNA anal-

ysis). Earliest evidence of modern *Homo sapiens* were found in the cave sites in Sri Lanka. The Bhimbetka cave sites in Madhya Pradesh shows cave paintings and are dated to 7000 years ago (Upper Palaeolithic) [Table-3].

Table 3- Pre Historic Phases

| Stone Age | Primary Culture | Major Site | Importance |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Lower Palaeolithic | Flakes, Chopper Chopping Culture | Kashmir, Punjab, Whole India except Sind and Kerala. Mainly in Sohan (Punjab), Singrauli basin (UP), Chhotanagpur (Jharkhand), Assam, Narmada, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka. | -Head axe and pebble tools, Fossil of <i>Homo erectus</i> from Hathnaura (Narmada basin) -Represented by Sohan Culture (now in Pakistan) |
| Middle Palaeolithic | Scraper/Booer Culture | Navasa (Maharashtra), Didwana (Rajasthan), Bhimbetka (MP), Bankura and Purulia (WB), Narmada Valley etc. | -Varieties of Blades, Points, Borer and Scraper made of Flakes. - 200 rock shelters and caves are located on Bhimbetka hills having thousands of paintings. |
| Upper Palaeolithic | Blade and Burin Culture | A.P. (Kurnool, Chittor) Karnataka, Central MP, Jharkhan Plateau, U.P., Rajasthan, Gujrat | - The age of Neanderthal Man - Earlier "Homo Sapiens" - Harpoon, blade tools from Renugunta (A.P.) - Bone tools from Kurnool. |
| Mesolithic Age | Microliths Culture or Fluting & Geometrical tools | Karnataka, Rajasthan (Bagor, Tilwara), Gujrat (Langhani), M.P., Tamil Nadu, West Bengal (Birbhanpur), U.P. (Sarai Nahar Rai) | - Microlith (a great technological development, introduction of compound tools) - Man still a savage but pottery maing (Tilwara) and permanent habitation found, still a hunter, fisher. |
| Neolithic Age | Polished tool culture | Kashmir (Burzahom, Gufkral), Assam (Daojili Hading), Garohill Meghalaya, Bihar (Chirand), Peninsular India, Amri, Kotdiji, Mehargarh etc | - Earlies Farming community - Kinship became the basis of social organisation - Pit dwelling houses - Food began to be cooked by fire -Evidence of dogs, circular huts made of bamboo, bone-tools, hand made pottery etc - Also called "Neolithic Revolution" -Boat making, spinning cotton and wool. |

Neolithic

The aceramic neolithic lasted from 7000 to 5500 BCE. The ceramic neolithic lasted till about 3000BCE and blended with the early Harappan (Early Bronze age). The oldest neolithic sites in India have been found at Lahuradewa in middle Ganges region and Jhusi near the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna (7100 BCE).

In the South India, the neolithic culture began around 3000 BCE till 1400BCE and merged into Iron Age skipping the Bronze Age but instead having a Megalithic period. In Adichannalur in TN, 12 burial urns with Brahmi script have been recovered containing human skulls and bones with husks, grains of rice and neolithic celts confirming that it belongs to the neolithic period. Below is a map of some of the major Stone Age Sites. I have marked the approximate locations of the sites. Some names may be difficult to read as I had to keep the image small.

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