

Mesolithic Culture and Its Significance in India: A Review

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Abstract:

The Mesolithic age or middle age of stone represent a phase of transition from the preceding hunting and food gathering stage of the Palaeolithic period to that of farming and herding in the succeeding Neolithic period. It coincides with the beginning of the Holocene age, around 10,000 BP or 8,000 BC. This age witnessed a change in climate from cold and arid to warm and wet because the gradual recession of the glaciers. This change led to the melting of snow and the formation of rivers resulting in the growth of forests and vegetation. The technology of producing tools also underwent change, now small stone tools were being used increasingly. Although the Mesolithic man was still in hunting and gathering stage of subsistence, there was shift in pattern of hunting from big game to small game hunting, fishing, and fowling. The use of animal bones, along with stones, marked the biggest change in the life of man from the Palaeolithic age to the Mesolithic age. The beginning of the art of making clay pots is also a significant development of the Mesolithic age. There was a significant growth in population and the change in demographic profile. Microlithic or small stone tools (their length ranging from 1 to 8 cm) comprised of tools made on blades and include burins, lunettes, crescents, triangles, points and trapeze.

Date of Submission: 06-11-2022

Date of Acceptance: 20-11-2022

I. Introduction:

The Mesolithic is the most prolific and widely distributed prehistoric cultural period in the Indian subcontinent. It has been found in a wide variety of geographical situations and ecological habitats. The stone industries of the Mesolithic period generally indicate adaptation to the early postglacial Holocene environment, the period between the final Upper Palaeolithic and the introduction of agriculture. The Mesolithic is characterized by the appearance of small, highly differentiated stone implements, suggesting a foraging economy with emphasis on small game hunting and fishing. This cultural period has a considerable duration, ranging from c. 8000 to c. 10,000 B.C. (Possehl *et al.*, 1979). Further, in rare cases this way of life outlived the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods and survived into the Iron Age and even into the Early Historical period (Hooja and Rima, 1988). Additionally, hunter-gatherer economies sometimes acquired Neolithic traits, such as sedentary residential patterns and the domestication of animals. Thus, the geographical diversity and cultural variability represented by Indian Mesolithic sites are quite impressive. In the past, the Indian Mesolithic Culture has always been identified as synonymous with microlithic artefact Mohanty (1988). Mesolithic artefacts are present virtually on every one of the thousands of dunes. A significant fact is that the first human colonization of the Ganga plains took place during this period as testified by the presence of more than two hundred archaeological sites in Allahabad, Pratapgarh, Jaunpur, Mirzapur and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, the effective colonization of the deltaic region of West Bengal and West Coast, particularly around Mumbai (Todd, 1950) and in Kerala (Rajendran, 1983), took place during this period (Misra, 1997). The explanation for this dramatic increase in human settlements lies in the increased rainfall and its effect on the growth of plant and animal life at the beginning of the Holocene period, the evidence for which is provided by the pollen data from the salt lakes of western Rajasthan (Singh *et al.*, 1974), deep weathering of sand dunes in Rajasthan and Gujarat (Misra, 1978) and presence of wind blown black clay deposits in central Indian rock shelters Allchin and Bridget (1966). This led to the availability of increased food resources all over the country and contributed to the growth of population.

Technology

The technology of the Mesolithic period is primarily based on microliths. These are tiny tools made from microblades of one to five cm length, by blunting one or more sides with steep retouch. The main tool types are backed blades, obliquely truncated blades, points, crescents, triangles and trapezes. These microliths were used as components of spearheads, arrowheads, knives, sickles, harpoons and daggers. They were fitted

into grooves in bone, wood and reed shafts and joined together by natural adhesives like gum and resin. Evidence for such hafting comes from later sites in India and from Mesolithic and Neolithic sites in the Near East, Africa and Europe. The use of bow and arrow for hunting became common in this period, which is evident from many rock paintings in central India (Wakankar and Brooks, 1976 ;Mathpal, 1985). Small flake tools like side, end, round and thumb-nail scrapers, and burins also form part of these industries. Bifacial points made by pressure flaking are a characteristic feature of the Mesolithic industries of coastal dunes of southern Tamil Nadu (Zeuner and Allchin,1956) and Sri Lanka. Similarly, shallow querns and grinding stones.also occur at several sites. These new technological elements led to enhanced efficiency in hunting, collection and processing of wild plant foods. Heavyduty tools like choppers and core scrapers have been found occasionally at Mesolithic sites in Orissa (Ota 1986;) and along the West Coast .

Mesolithic sites

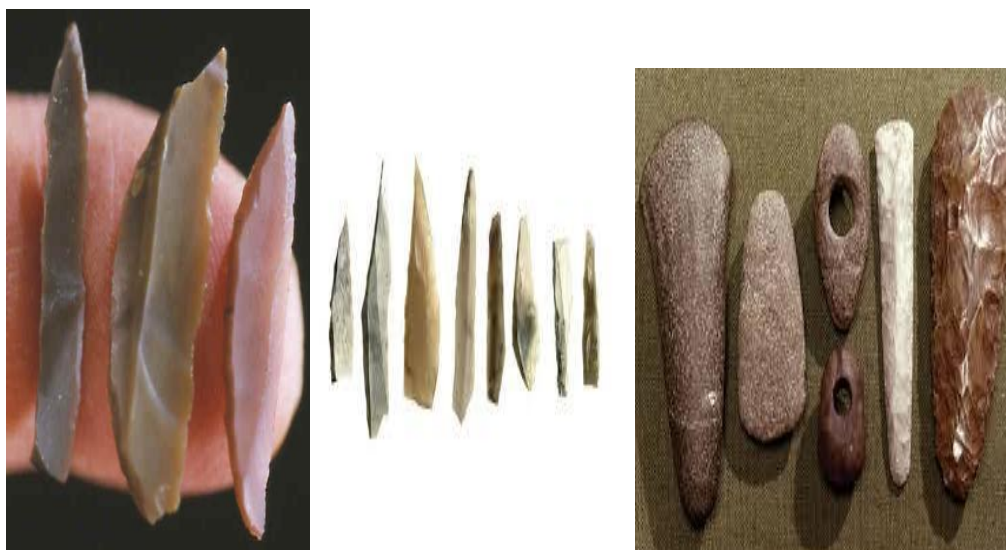
The Pachpadra basin and the Sojat area in Rajasthan are rich in Microliths with Tilwara and Bagor being the most important sites. Bagor on the river Kothari is the largest Mesolithic site in India where geometric Microliths are found along with shells and animal bones. Being located at the juncture of arable and fertile lands and being rich in quartz Bagor was an ideal location for the Mesolithic man whose subsistence pattern relied on his surroundings. Rock shelters excavated at Lekhakia (in Mirzapur district of southern UP) have yielded blade tools and Microliths. In Eastern India, Microliths generally occur on the surface of laterite plains and forests in Orissa, Bengal, and the Chota Nagpur Plateau and on the rocky (sandstone) hillocks of Mirzapur. The tools were generally made of milky quartz, though crystal, chert, chalcedony, quartzite and fossil wood tools have also been found. Birbhanpur located on the river Damodar in West Bengal seems to have been both a habitation and a factory site. Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Kuchai and Sundergarh in Orissa; Sebalgiri in the Garo hills of Meghalaya have also yielded Microliths(Misra, 1974). In peninsular India, Microlithic sites found near Mumbai seem to represent coastal Mesolithic communities who exploited marine resources for food. Further south, the Microliths are mostly made of milky quartz. They have been found at Jalahalli and Kibbanhali near Bangalore in Karnataka, in Goa, and at Nagarjunakonda (in southern Andhra Pradesh). Sagan Kullu in Karnataka has yielded cores, flakes, points and crescents. Microliths have been reported from the Kurnool area and Renigunta in Andhra Pradesh. In the south of Chennai, tiny stone tools, mostly of quartz and chert, have been found on teris (old sand dunes). On the Vishakapatnam coast, stone tablets and ring stones have been found at sites such as Chandrapalem, Paradesipalem, and Rushikonda (Sharma (1980). Microliths have been found in the valleys of Tapi, Narmada, Mahi, and Sabarmati. Meoslithic tools like blades and geometric Microliths made of chalcedony have been found at Bhimbetka (Mohanty,1988).

Subsistence Pattern

Floral and Faunal remains gives us ideas about the subsistence pattern whereas the burials and rock paintings gives us ideas about the development of religious practices. 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 early Mesolithic sites have yielded the faunal remains of cattle, sheep, buffalo, pig, bison, elephant, hippo, wolf, cheetah, black buck, and fish. The appearance and disappearance of the animals has to be understood in the context of changing climatic and environmental conditions(Misra ,1976a).

There is evidence of human burials in India at various sites such as Langhanj, Bagor and SaraiNaharRai. The dead were buried inside the habitation area, and the most common form of burial was the extended burial, a body lying on the back with face upward. There is also evidence of secondary or fractional burials, having only a few bones. Sometimes, the dead were buried in a flexed position with arms and legs folded as if in sleeping positionLal (1958). Beads of semi precious stones such as jasper and agate have been reported from Bagor, Bhimbetka, and Adamgarh. This period reveals the earliest use of ornaments and sheds enough light on the craft activity and aesthetic sensibility of the Mesolithic people (Neumayer 1983).

Mesolithic Microliths:



Source: St Joseph's College, Tamil Nadu.

Art of Mesolithic age

Another significant feature of the Mesolithic period is art, mostly in the form of paintings. Several thousand rock shelters in the Vindhyan sandstone hills in central India contain enormous quantities of paintings on their walls, ceilings and in niches. They are found in both inhabited and uninhabited shelters. The paintings are made mostly in red and white pigments which were produced from nodules found in rocks and earth. Pieces of haematite used for producing pigment have been found at Bhimbetka and other sites. The paintings mostly depict wild animals and hunting scenes. There are also scenes of fishing, plant food and honey collecting, social and religious life. The paintings throw a light not only on the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic creativity of the Mesolithic people but also on their behaviour with respect to hunting and food gathering techniques, dwellings, their social and religious activities and contemporary fauna (Misra, 2001).

II. Conclusion

The Middle Stone age or Mesolithic cultures, which is in between Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures. This stage is much shorter when compared to Palaeolithic stage. Mesolithic period is characterised by Microliths or the tiny tools. The diet of the Mesolithic people consisted of leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, roots, and tubers, flesh of wild land, water animals, and birds. Mesolithic stage in India represented in the following states: Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala.

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Kabom Doruk. "Mesolithic Culture and Its Significance in India: A Review." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(11), 2022, pp. 15-18.