PRE-HISTORY AND INDUS VALLEY

PRE-HISTORY

Prehistoric period belongs to the time before the emergence of writing. It is believed that man learnt writing only about 5000-8000 years ago during the Neolithic period. The earliest known Neolithic writings are Dispilio Tablet (found in Greece) and Tartaria tablets (found in Romania). Both of these belong to 6th millennium BC. Thus, Prehistory began with appearance of the human beings about five lakh years ago, and finished with the invention of writing about 6-8 thousand years ago.

CLASSIFICATION OF PREHISTORIC PERIOD

Three classes of prehistoric period are stone, bronze and iron ages, with the later two overlapping with historic age.

Stone Age is divided into three periods viz. Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic. Out of them, Palaeolithic {longest) and Mesolithic represent hunting-gathering stage while the Neolithic represents the stage of food production, i.e. plant cultivation and animal husbandry.

PALAEOLITHIC AGE

The term Palaeolithic was coined by archaeologist John Lubbock in 1865. Palaeolithic Age spanned from 500,000 years ago {when tool making members of Homo erectus had arrived} till 10,000 BC. It is divided into three periods viz. lower Palaeolithic, middle Palaeolithic and upper Palaeolithic ages. The transition from each of these phases to successive phases was slow and marked by increased fineness in the stone tools and technology of the time as follows:

Lower Palaeolithic age tools – Handaxe and cleaver Middle Palaeolithic ager tools – Flakes Upper Palaeolithic tools – Flakes and blades

Further, this division is not uniform around the world because of several factors such as time lag, climatic vagaries, great distances, numerous geographical and physical barriers etc. Palaeolithic age finally ended with the end of Ice Age in about 10,000 BC.

NARMADA MAN – THE ONLY STONE AGE FOSSIL FROM INDIA

Narmada Man or Narmada Human is the earliest Homo species of Indian sub- continent. This fossil was found on banks of Narmada River in Hathnora Village of Madhya Pradesh in 1982.

Narmada Man used to live 2.5 Lakh years ago and belonged to Homo erectus species, which was first among the three Homo species (Homo habilis, Homo ergaster and Homo erectus) to acquire tool making skills. These three species predate Homo sapience sapience, to which we belong. The importance of Narmada man is that it is only authentic record of a Homo species fossil from Stone Age in India.

LOWER PALAEOLITHIC PERIOD

In lower Palaeolithic phase, the tools were mainly hand axes and cleavers with some flakes also. These tools were relatively blunt and have been found all over India except plains of Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra {because raw material may not be available in these plains to make tools}.

Many Palaeolithic tool assemblages were found around Tapti, Godavari, Bhima and Krishna rivers. The raw material used for making tools was mainly quartzite and chert but quartz and basalt was also used.

VARIOUS CULTURES IN LOWER PALAEOLITHIC ERA

The Palaeolithic period in India shows several distinct cultural and technological traditions.

SOAN CULTURE

Extensive deposits of pebble tools and choppers found in the Soan river (a tributary of Indus) valley in Pakistan along with some other similar sites in nearby area are collectively called Soan culture or Sohan culture.

MADRASIAN CULTURE

Father of Indian Pre-history Robert Bruce Foote had discovered hand axes near Chennai and called it Madrasian culture. Foote was a geologist of the Geological Survey of India.

NEVASAN CULTURE

Some Middle Palaeolithic era flake tools, scrappers, borers etc. were found at Nevasa site (Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra) in the valley of river Godavari and are called Nevasan culture.

ACHEULIAN CULTURE

Acheulian culture was named after the French site of St. Acheul, which was first effective colonization of the Indian subcontinent and is almost synonymous with the lower Palaeolithic settlements in India. Most of the sites in India including those in peninsular India, Deccan, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, East and North East have been categorized in Acheulian culture.

MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC PERIOD

The lower Paleolithic cultures slowly transformed into the middle Palaeolithic by shedding some of the tool types; and by incorporating new forms and new techniques of making them. In comparison to the lower Palaeolithic era, the tools in middle Palaeolithic became smaller, thinner and lighter. Due to this, middle Palaeolithic period is also known as Flake took industry.

Further, there was also a significant change in the choice of raw material for making tools.

Whilequartzite, quartz and basalt continued to be used, in many areas they were replaced or supplemented by fine-grained siliceous rocks like chert and jasper.

Important Middle Palaeolithic Sites in India included Luni valley, around Didwana, Budha Pushkar in Rajasthan; Valleys of the Belan, Son river, Narmada river and their tributaries in central India {including Bhimbetka} and some sparse sites in Chota

Nagpur plateau, Deccan plateau and Eastern Ghats.

UPPER PALAEOLITHIC CULTURE

Upper Palaeolithic culture developed during the later part of the upper Pleistocene. The Upper Palaeolithic period has recorded a rich panorama of fossils in the peninsular rivers of India. One important discovery is of the ostrich egg shells at over 40 sites in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, which shows that ostrich, a bird adapted to arid climate, was widely distributed in western India during the later part of the upper Pleistocene. There were very important changes in the Palaeolithic-environment which had its own impact on the distribution and living ways of the humans. Some of them were as follows:

There was extremely cold and arid climate in the high altitude and northern latitudes. There was extensive formation of deserts in North west India

The drainage pattern of western India became almost defunct and river courses shifted "westwards".

Vegetation cover over most of the country thinned out during this period.

Coastal areas of south-eastern Tamil Nadu, Saurashtra and Kutch developed quartz and carbonate dunes as a result of the lowering of the sea level.

During terminal Pleistocene south-westerly monsoons became weak and the sea level decreased by scores of metres.

Due to the harsh and arid climate, the vegetation was sparse though the faunal fossils show presence of grasslands. The human population faced rusticated food resources and that is the reason that the number of Upper Palaeolithic sites is very limited in the arid and semi-arid regions. The most opulent archaeological evidence of this period comes from the Belan and Son valleys in the northern Vindhyas , Chota Nagpur plateau in Bihar , upland Maharashtra, Orissa and from the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh.

TOOLS OF UPPER PALAEOLITHIC ERA

The tools of Upper Palaeolithic Era are further refined upon the lower and middle periods and show a marked regional diversity with respect to the refinement of techniques and standardization of finished tool forms. Man also used prototypes of traps, snares and nets during the upper Palaeolithic times. The advancement in tools is evident from bores in stones, grinding slabs etc. The bored stones are still used by fishermen as net sinkers in riverine fishing and marine fishing. The use of grinding stones might have been for processing plant foods such as wild rice.

Another important discovery of upper Palaeolithic period was of rubble built in circular form. Further, the upper Palaeolithic settlements also show a distinct trend ofbeing associated with permanent sources of waters.

The earliest form of art by humans also belongs to upper Palaeolithic period in the form of rock paintings.

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