

Delving into the Early Prehistory of Central India

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ABSTRACT: The history of humankind that had taken place before any written records arrived engagements in unanticipated discoveries and the elucidation of findings based on already given theories and shreds of evidence. Since the evolutionary development of the genus *Homo*, their cultural practices, technological advancements, and means of sustenance have bestowed upon humanity a profusion of enigmatic phenomena, providing invaluable insights into the conundrums that preoccupied our predecessors. The archaeological findings in the Tapti and Narmada River basins of Central India contributed to significant cultural insights into the early prehistoric era. This paper elucidates substantial discoveries in Central India with special references to the early Stone Age times and explores investigations conducted on the ancient cultural aspects of early human societies. This would shed light on the scientific community's enthusiasm for further scientific studies and the need for anthropological rigour to uncover the past.

INTRODUCTION

Prehistory focuses on the study of humanity, emphasising the importance of continually acknowledging the intrinsic human nature when examining cultural aspects of humankind (Goodwin, 1946). In 1833, Paul Tournal used the term “*ante historique*” in French, referring to the geological period that marked the advent of humans extending up to the historical period not going beyond 7000 years (Grayson, 1983:102). This was later mistakenly translated into English as “*prehistorique*”. This led to the origin and use of the term prehistory (Chippindale, 1988, p.303). However, the term prehistoric was likely employed by Daniel Wilson in his 1851 publication “*The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*” (as cited in Chippindale, 1988:303).

French geographer J. B d’Anville (as referenced by Haguët, 2011) produced a cartographic

representation of India that featured multiple archaeological sites for the *Compagnie des Indes*, titled *Carte del 'Inde dressée pour la Compagnie des Indes*. In the year 1784, Sir William Jones set up the Asiatic Society of Bengal in India with the intent of examining the historical antiquities of the subcontinent, with an objective of “enquiry into the history and antiquities, arts, sciences, and literature of Asia” (Mitra *et al.*, 1885:4).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, European scholars held a prominent status within the domain of prehistory (Dennell, 2000). During the abovementioned era, scholarly research and prehistory inquiry emphasised notable innovations’ focal points. The commencement of prehistoric investigation in India could be traced back to the British colonial period, particularly to the year 1845, when renowned palaeontologists Falconer and Cautley published the inaugural treatise on fossils unearthed from the Shivalik hills of the Indian subcontinent (Dennell, 2000).

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In 1863, Robert Bruce Foote, the father of Indian prehistory, discovered the earliest Palaeolithic tools in Pallavaram, South India. In the following years of the early 1900s, significant attention was drawn to notable pieces, including a work in 1917 situated in the Sanjai valleys and its associated streams by C. W. Anderson gathered tools from the Stone Age (Ghosh, 1970), while Cammiade and Burkitt (1930) provided new perspectives on the Stone Ages in southeastern India. In the early 1990s, Todd (1939) uncovered prehistoric Stone Age findings on Sabette Island, located north of Bombay.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This paper examines the pivotal areas of inquiry and investigation that have underscored the importance of central India in the prehistoric period of Indian history. The study aggregated citations from secondary sources, including academic journals, books, and conference proceedings, that had significantly contributed to the analysis of important prehistoric archaeological sites, their significance, and their cultural implications. A thorough and systematic search was performed utilising relevant keywords, a specific research topic, the source title, and crucial academicians and scholars who had meticulously contributed to this field. Using keywords played an essential role in identifying a wide range of sources. However, employing a specific subject can produce more accurate results by carrying out searches within a limited scope. Incorporating the author's name or the title or placing the names of significant sites was an essential means of identifying the specific work needed for this paper. The research utilised the resources available at the University of Delhi, including the Central Science Library and the Department of Anthropology library, as well as materials from the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) in Bhopal and the Archaeological Survey of India regional office in Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh. These resources provided a comprehensive collection of journals and books relevant to the study region. In addition, online scholarly platforms such as JSTOR and Springer were accessed to analyse the research presented in the paper comprehensively. A total of seventy resources were studied to produce a synthesis on the topic, and

conclusively, more than fifty of them were used to write the paper.

CENTRAL INDIA

Location and Significance in Early Stone Age Research

The central region of India encompasses the Tapti and Narmada River basins, along with select areas within the drainage basins of the Godavari and Son rivers (Joshi, 1966). Predominantly characterised by the Narmada River, meandering across the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, this area stretches from its origin in Amarkantak to its eventual culmination in the Arabian Sea, covering an approximate distance of 1,300 kilometres (Chauhan, 2010).

The convergence of the Arabian Sea and Bay streams during the southwest monsoon season in the central region of India, specifically to the west of the Eastern Ghats, increases precipitation levels. This region is the central zone of India or the Vidhyanchal region; therefore, it is notable as one of the primary ecosystems associated with the Palaeolithic era (Korisettar, 2007).

Central India boasts a conspicuously dense concentration of archaeological sites from the ancient world (Jacobson, 1985). The region was similarly humid as it is today, as suggested by the Acheulian assemblages at III- F 23 in Bhimbetka (Rajaguru, 1978, as cited in Misra, 2001), supporting colossal flora and fauna species. This region, even today, is bestowed with ample precipitation, possesses perennial river systems, boasts a dense vegetation cover, and abounds in abundant resources of wild plant and animal nourishment (Misra, 2001). The strategic positioning of the Narmada basin in central India implies its significance as a pivotal biogeographic conduit, thereby assuming a critical role in comprehending the historical migration patterns of human populations across the country (Chauhan *et al.*, 2015).

In the northeastern part of Madhya Pradesh lies another significant area, the geographic region of the Middle Son River valley. This had conserved considerable alluvial sediments that accumulated during the Upper Pleistocene epoch, with potential

presence from the Middle Pleistocene era. Artefacts representing the Lower, Middle, and Upper Palaeolithic periods and microlithic and Neolithic artefacts had been successfully retrieved from these deposits (Jones and Pal, 2009).

Therefore, Central India occupies a position of prime importance and is innately significant, as it boasts a plethora of prehistoric artefacts that possess immense potential in elucidating the enigmas surrounding our ancestors.

EARLY INVESTIGATIONS IN CENTRAL INDIA

The initial documented finding of the prehistoric studies in Central India could be traced back to Evans' research in 1853, where he was recognised for uncovering several crafted flints near Jabbalpore, Madhya Pradesh (Misra, 1939). V. Ball, in a scholarly article published in the esteemed Asiatic Society of Bengal proceedings, explained certain British antiquarians, such as Capt. Abbot embarked upon an exploration of the Narmada Valley in 1845. Abbot's study (Ball, 1888) documented the findings of agate splinters. Similarly, certain preliminary discoveries were made by H. P. Le Mesurier in 1861, who found polished implements around the region of Jabbalpore in Madhya Pradesh, which caused a significant step toward the archaeological findings around the Bundelkhand region (Roy, 2012). This could be categorised as one of India's earliest recorded evidences of farming (Pal, 1990).

A year later, in 1862, W. Theobald also documented similar findings, further supporting the presence of such artefacts in the region. (Ball, 1888). S.B. Wynne (1866) reported his discoveries of several agate implements from the banks of the Godavari alluvium river in the south of Aurangabad in the Paithan region, which later he corroborated with other fossil findings concluding the similarity between the Godavari alluvium and the Narmada-Tapti regions. In the year 1867, a scholarly publication appeared in the esteemed Proceedings of Asiatic Society of Bengal, delving into the discoveries made by W. Blanford, an eminent researcher, made a significant discovery of an abundance of microliths in the southern Madhya Pradesh and Nagpur region. In his scholarly assessment, he posited that these microliths were likely utilised by hunting and fishing communities.

Furthermore, he observed striking similarities between these microliths and their counterparts in European contemporaneous societies (Chakrabarti, 2006).

Hacket came across a quartzite Celt from Bhutra in the Narsinghpur district within the Narbada valley (Medlicott, 1873). To support their Paleolithic investigations of the Narmada River in 1935, De Terra and Teilhard de Chardin made a trip to the ancient Adamgarh hill located 2 kilometres away from Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh, that led to findings of several palaeolithic implements (Joshi, 1966).

The Landmark Beginnings in the History of Indian Archaeology: Central India

The exploration of central India started in 1939 when De Terra and Paterson conducted a research expedition. They focused on the region between Hoshangabad and Narsinghpur and documented the presence of well-stratified Pleistocene deposits (De Terra and Paterson, 1939). These deposits contained human artefacts in the form of lithic implements (Joshi, 1966), which provided a platform for future researchers to investigate various prehistoric sites and cultures in central India. With its fertile landscape and native fauna, the Narmada valley would have been a rich terrain for the Palaeolithic humans to thrive (De Terra and Paterson, 1939).

In 1939, De Terra and Paterson researched the lower Palaeolithic of South Asia. Despite limited evidence, they made a significant discovery and interpretation of the Soanian industry. They proposed theories about two parallel cultures in India. They suggested that the Soanian culture in Pakistan and the Madrasian culture in peninsular India had different origins (Armand, 1985). They theorised that the Soanian culture was linked to the Anyathian culture in Burma and the Choukoutienian culture in China, which was an indigenous progression. The Madrasian culture, known for its use of handaxes and cleavers, was believed to have originated from Africa through migration. The merging of cultures in the Narmada valley, through migration, created a blend of traditions (Armand, 1985).

Movius Jr. (1948, p.350) constructed a summarisation of the regional evolution of Paleolithic culture. He recognised “two mutually distinct cultural traditions in the Lower Palaeolithic of the Old World:

one, the chopper-chopping-tool tradition, which is fundamentally Eastern in its distribution, and the other, the hand-axe tradition, which is fundamentally Western". Though the above theorisation played a crucial role in contextualising stratigraphic contexts in the prehistoric literature of the Indian subcontinent, some debates later occurred on this sequence due to a lack of lithic evidence (Armand, 1985).

Until the early 1960s, there was a paucity of comprehensive information regarding Palaeolithic cultures in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, with only a limited number of field notes available (Jacobson, 1975). In the academic realm, Ghosh (1960, as cited in Jacobson, 1975) addressed Wakankar's identification of a Palaeolithic site near Raisen Fort. Additionally, in 1961, he expanded upon the discoveries made at Goharganj in the southwest district of Raisen. Furthermore, in 1967, Ghosh highlighted various findings in Govindapura, situated east of Bhopal.

According to Ghosh's findings in 1959 (as referenced by Jacobson in 1975), R. V. Joshi surveyed the districts of Bhilsa, Damoh, and Sagar in 1958 and 1959. Joshi's survey specifically focused on the course of the Betwa River upstream and included examining the Pagnesar site, located approximately 13 kilometres northwest of Raisen town. This site yielded a compact gravel deposit containing a variety of lithic artefacts, including quartzite flakes, cleavers, and handaxes (Jacobson, 1975).

In 1961, Joshi made notable findings concerning multiple locations along the Ken River tributaries close to the north bank of the Narmada River. The excavated trenches at Adamgarh Hill were particularly significant, which yielded a considerable abundance of lithics, representing both Palaeolithic and Microlithic traditions (Joshi, 1966). The preliminary assessment of the findings holds great importance due to the continual presence of pebble choppers across early to Middle Stone Age deposits at the site, which was previously regarded as linked to the earliest cultural assemblages on the Indian subcontinent (Jacobson, 1975).

Mahadeo Piparia, located approximately 24 miles northwest of Narsinghpur in Madhya Pradesh, is on the southern bank of the river Narmada (Khatri, 1962). In 1961, the author extensively discussed the

particular site and introduced the term "Mahadevian culture" to describe a pebble culture discovered beneath the layer containing the Chelles-Acheul culture in the Narmada Valley of Central India. This culture was believed to be ancestrally similar to that of East Africa, where it was observed that the handaxe-cleaver culture had developed from the pebble culture of Kafuan and Oldowan types (Khatri, 1962). In Africa, this particular stage corresponds to the Lower Middle Pleistocene era, specifically towards the conclusion of the Kamasian Pluvial period (Khatri, 1963).

At the Mahadeo Piparia type site, the basalmost stratum of the stratigraphy- the red layer of the Narmada had this horizon, which was found in abundance and with no mixture (Khatri, 1962). The discovery of the pebble horizon was initially made in 1960 by a scholar who had conducted diligent research under the guidance of Dr. Sahni, at the time President of the Paleontological Society of India. The investigation occurred in Hasalpur, located within the Hoshangabad district, where the pebble tools were observed in situ. The previous assertions positing Sohanian pebble culture as an autonomous formation had been invalidated, as evidence suggested its evolutionary convergence with the Chelles-Acheulian culture (Khatri, 1962).

A.P. Khatri, in 1963, gave extensive details about his studies on prehistoric cultures of Malwa in central India based on his six months of fieldwork in 1956-57. Malwa was used with cultural and linguistic connotations. It covered the western part of central India, extending from the Narmada in the south to Nimach in the north, from Betwa in the east to Mahi in the west (Khatri, 1963).

Here, he found several chronological sequences of Stone Age cultures: lower Palaeolithic (series-I), middle Palaeolithic (series-II), pre-chalcolithic microliths and the chalcolithic culture. Before Khatri's work in this area, a minimal number of investigations had taken place that included a grey quartzite boucher from Nimach picked up by an unknown geologist, and in the 1950s, V.S. Wakankar discovered several paleoliths from the Mandasaur region, Madhya Pradesh (IAR 1955-56; Khatri, 1963).

Supekar's 1968 doctoral dissertation, mentioned in Jacobson's 1975 work, focused on the stratigraphy and prehistoric archaeology of the central Narmada

basin. S.G. Supekar's 1968 (as cited in Jacobson, 1975) unpublished doctoral dissertation on Pleistocene stratigraphy and prehistoric archaeology of the central Narmada basin. His research in the southern border of Raisen district in Madhya Pradesh uncovered many pebble choppers and flake tools, surpassing the number of handaxes and cleavers.

Ansari *et al.*, in the 1960s (IAR, 1963-64), explored the river Narmada between the regions of Hoshangabad and Narsinghpur. They found early and middle Stone Age tools in situ, along with the fossils of *bos*, *elephus*, and *hippopotamus* from Pleistocene deposits. Furthermore, more minor excavations were being conducted on the riverbanks of Sher at Rati-Karar-Kalan, in addition to Saguna ghat along the Narmada River.

The Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Poona, under the expert guidance of Dr H. D. Sankalia collaborated with Dr. Z. D Ansari and Shri S. N. Rajaguru along with a few research students, conducted a modest excavation at a prominent Early Stone Age factory site close to Lalitpur, in the district of Jhansi (IAR, 1961-62). This site was previously identified by Shri Rameshwar Singh (IAR, 1959-60), a research scholar affiliated with the same institution.

Based on the analysis of the abundance of tools found in open fields and the pervasive existence of granite outcrops within the examined region, it was deduced that the area served as an expansive manufacturing site. The archaeological artefacts obtained from this modest excavation comprised handaxes, cleavers, cores, pebbles, wasted flakes, worked pebbles, and angular fragments made of fine-grained granite (IAR, 1961-62).

In the years 1970-1971, Jorge Armand unearthed and excavated Durkadi, a site located in Central India, which is a tributary brook of the lower Narmada River near the lower within the state of Madhya Pradesh (Armand, 1979). The site was situated approximately 150 km southwest of the Hoshangabad region.

According to Armand (1979), the site in Central India entailed the discovery of pebble artefacts in an unaltered context within the oldest deposit of the Narmada River in Maheshwar. These artefacts were identified to have a meagre occurrence of handaxes and cleavers, comprising less than one per cent of the

assemblage.

IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES

A Few Decades Later

During the 1970s, Jerome Jacobson conducted a comprehensive survey in central India, identifying a significant concentration of Stone Age sites (Jacobson, 1985). Professor V. N. Misra (1973) excavated the Bhimbetka site. Bhimbetka, discovered in 1957 by V. S. Wakankar (Pathak, 2014), held great importance. The excavation conducted by V.N. Misra of rock shelter IIIIF-23 from 1973 to 1975 revealed evidence of uninterrupted human habitation dominated by the Acheulian Age until later (Misra and Rajaguru, 1978). It was also suggested that the paintings in the shelters of Bhimbetka contained paintings from Mesolithic to Medieval times (p. 65).

The prehistory branch of the Archaeological Survey of India, led by K.D. Banerjee, B.P. Bopardikar, and several others conducted excavations in the Harda Taluk Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh at the site of Hirapur Khadan (IAR, 1974-75). Later, after a few years, the same institution, led by B.P. Bopardikar (IAR, 1986-87), excavated this early stone age site.

Six trial trenches were excavated to comprehensively ascertain the extent of the prevailing cultural expansion. The excavation in Trench One exhibited compelling evidence of the Acheulian period, which was subsequently succeeded by the microlithic industry in the higher layers. The results of this study additionally suggested a persistent and lengthy presence of Acheulian occupation. The remaining excavations indicated occupation during the Middle and Late Stone Age, establishing a sporadic palaeolithic era presence (IAR, 1986-87).

The Archaeological Survey of India's prehistory division, headed by S. B. Ota and colleagues, Extensive investigations were carried out in the Harsud and Khandwa areas of the East Nimar District in Madhya Pradesh (IAR, 1987-88). These investigations yielded numerous prehistoric discoveries, such as valuable Acheulian sites like Bijalpur Khurd, Sarai, and Abhawa. These sites contained a diverse array of essential artefacts like handaxes, cleavers, discoid

tools, and choppers, mainly composed of quartzite.

In addition to these, there were also open-air middle Palaeolithic sites like Khudia and Kukdal, where various tools such as scrapers, points, and worked flakes were discovered. Most microlithic industries were also in open-air settings, typically featuring simple artefacts and utilising flakes. Microliths were discovered with structural remains at Gondikhera, Boribandri, and Charkhera sites, indicating contemporary tribal communities engaged in these activities (IAR, 1987-88).

Tikoda is a significant reference point for elucidating the characteristics of the Acheulian archaeological sites in central India. The excavation was collaborative between Deccan College, Pune and the Archaeological Survey of India. Dr S.B. Ota and Prof. Sushama Deo led the geoarchaeological investigations in this area in 2010.

The site under consideration encompasses an expansive open-air expanse, accommodating a notable dispersion of Acheulian artefacts. The prevalence of a substantial quantity of cleavers on this site holds great significance for stone tool analysts (Ota and Deo, 2014). Tikoda is situated near the district of Raisen, and the research efforts have yielded noteworthy findings about the existence of eight distinct localities. The investigations conducted in 2010 and 2011 unveiled a substantial presence of Acheulian artefacts within diverse geological contexts.

Further exploration of the south of Narwar-Narwar-Tikoda Hill unearthed various Acheulian sites from the early to middle Pleistocene era. Several locations were identified in Damdongri village. The collection suggested that one of the localities consists solely of Large Flake Acheulian artefacts (Srivastava and Pandey, 2022). Early hominins at Damdongri sourced unfinished materials from another area (possibly from Tikoda), prepared them off-site, and transported them for refinement into cutting tools at the site (Srivastava and Pandey, 2022).

CENTRAL INDIA AND HOMININ REMAINS

The valley's upper region, from Narsinghpur to Hoshangabad, exhibits a confluence of implements and fossils enmeshed within ancient sediments

(Khatri, 1963). The prehistoric habitation of hominins in conjunction with the Narmada River had been observed since the Middle Pleistocene epoch. Potentially, this occurrence may have transpired earlier (Chauhan, 2010). V.N. Misra 1997 argued that there is undeniable substantiation of recurrent human inhabitation, as substantiated by an abundance of archaeological sites extending from the Early Paleolithic era to the Chalcolithic Periods (Chauhan, 2010).

The region in and around Hoshangabad and Narsinghpur is known for its remarkable productivity in the Narmada Valley (Khatri, 1961). In this location, the deposits, segments, and samples of the river's past reveal its history and help comprehend shifts in climate. A significant discovery could occur within this geographical basin in the forthcoming period: unearthing the "Fossil Man" (Khatri, 1961, p. 519).

This probable hope years later was fruitful with the discovery of the Narmada man (Sonakia, 1984). The hominid site is near Hathnora, a village on the northern Narmada River (Sonakia and Kennedy, 1985). The fossil consisted of a fully intact right half of the skull cap, with a portion of the left parietal bone also present. This specimen demonstrates a notable absence of a mandible, maxillary bones, and dentition, possibly affiliated with the evolved *Homo erectus* (Sonakia and Kennedy, 1985), which, however, later assigned it to "archaic" *H. sapiens* (Badam et al., 1986; Kennedy et al., 1991). Later, the fossil was studied between *H. heidelbergensis* and *H. erectus*; the inability to designate a specific label to this entity is attributed to the limited presence of comparable Asian species in the region (Athreya, 2007).

A.R. Sankhyan and some colleagues from the Anthropological Survey of India commenced a decade-long extensive research expedition in Hathnora. This resulted in uncovering two clavicles and a ninth rib from Hathnora (Sankhyan, 1997a, 1997b, 2005). These findings had similarities with the Narmada calvarium concerning gender, age and the region of finding. However, they indicated that they could have belonged to a dwarf individual (Sankhyan, 1999), resulting in further debates regarding the status of the Narmada man.

A partial hominin femur and humerus were found in Central Narmada Valley at a new locality, Netankheri,

3 km upstream from the previous hominin site, Hathnora. The femur recovered from the same level as Hathnora calvarium, which was that of the Middle Pleistocene. It combines traits from *Homo erectus* and archaic *Homo sapiens* (Sankhyan *et.al.*, 2012). These findings indicated this region to be a fossil hub, which gives a positive light to researchers for upcoming mysteries and future discoveries.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Implications for Anthropology

The region of Central India possesses significant potential for research in the field of prehistory, owing to its abundant resources that have been consequential to its inhabitable geography since the early stages of prehistoric eras. While the availability of complete hominin remains has been limited, there is always the possibility of uncovering additional discoveries that could contribute fresh insights into the study of human prehistory. Scholars with a historical background have excelled in Stone Age research. Through their invaluable contributions, these scholars have played a crucial role in developing and shaping our collective understanding of the history of humankind. However, it must be recognised that due to the inherent nature of examining the reconstruction of human history, including anthropological viewpoints is indispensable in reconstructing their cultural frameworks. Beyond mere collection and reporting, the comprehensive documentation and analysis of sites are of utmost importance within an academic context. Additionally, it is crucial to develop a nuanced understanding of the cultural behaviours associated with these sites, encompassing aspects such as settlement patterns, dietary habits, subsistence activities, and other related practices by conducting a comparative analysis of contemporary societies.

Binford (1962) also considered another vital dimension. The contention posits that archaeologists are less inclined to perceive archaeological data within a comprehensive systemic frame of reference. Archaeological data is often examined through a particularistic lens, focusing on specific events rather than overall processes. This approach usually provides explanations grounded in the context of these

events. Innovating in the realm of archaeology, he contended that archaeologists should actively study the evolution of human culture to gain insights into the continuities and comprehend the enduring shifts in human behaviour. This marked the start of perceiving “Archaeology as anthropology” (Binford, 1962).

Archaeology has traditionally centred on the meticulous documentation of material artefacts and subsequently establishing a chronological framework, with the ultimate objective of safeguarding the historical records of the human race amid apprehensions about the potential demise of our valued antiquities. New research in Anthropological archaeology should incorporate the *cultural-historical approach* (Trigger, 1989) in their further study. This approach concentrates exclusively on ideational aspects related to the potential development of culture without necessarily demanding empirical evidence in the archaeological record to substantiate these speculative notions.

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