
UNIT 2 NEOLITHIC REGIONAL VARIANTS

Contents

- 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.2 Neolithic Cultural Complexes in India
 - 2.3 Finds from Northern India
 - 2.4 Finds from Southern India
 - 2.5 Finds from Eastern India
 - 2.6 Finds from North-Eastern India
 - 2.7 Finds from the Ganges Valley
 - 2.8 Pre-Harappan Sites from the Subcontinent
 - 2.9 Summary
- Suggested Reading
- Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



Once you have studied this unit, you should be able to:

- define the characteristic features of Neolithic complexes in India;
- state the regional variation inherent among them;
- discuss why these characteristic cultures arose in the regions it did; and
- describe how it is a connecting link to the Chalcolithic and later cultures in India.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already learnt that over a time of a million or more years during the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods there was a steady but slow technological improvement as evidenced by artifacts and other occupational debris. However the mode of subsistence continued to be based on hunting, fowling, fishing and wild food gathering. This continued till around 10,000 years ago in the vast stretches of mountainous environment in the east coast of the Mediterranean to the eastern edge of the Baluchistan plateau, an area referred to as the “Fertile Crescent” and the nuclear area of cultivation of cereals. This new economy based on food production — the first animals domesticated being dog, cattle, sheep and goat, and first plants cultivated being wheat and barley — had a lasting impact on human culture and environment. Meanwhile, sometime around 7,000 BC in Southeast Asia, cultivation arose. The new plants domesticated included cereals such as rice and millet, and animals such as the pig. It is also believed that certain plants such as beans, cabbages and root crops were first cultivated here.

The advent of food production led to an assured food supply, inclusive of plants and animals, which ultimately led to sedentarianism and settlement of villages. This had a great impact on the cultural life of man. In the new economy men, women and children of varied ages contributed to production, which had not

happened in the economies of the earlier cultural phases. The food supply, based on production, at times led to a surplus, thus enabling many to follow other occupations such as basketry, pot-making, masonry, carpentry etc., thereby leading to diversification in economic and occupational practices. Sedentarianism also had its effect on material culture, the biggest contribution being made to the erection of structures and houses, which were more or less permanent in nature. Besides this, there was an improvement in stone tool technology with the development of grinding and polishing technique, and introduction of pottery making. The technique of grinding and polishing gave rise to the re use of the tool. As the tool became blunt after use, it could be re sharpened by grinding and polishing. Earlier a mistake in flaking and breakage at the time of use would lead to the discarding of the unfinished tool and /or the broken tool, and the knapper would have to start all over again by manufacturing another tool. The technique of the Neolithic was free from such limitations. Religious beliefs increased during this period, with the dead being buried along with weapons, pottery, food and drink in their graves. Although such burials were found sporadically in the earlier periods, its importance and use increased in the Neolithic period.

In India, the beginnings of this “revolution”, as V. Gordon Childe defines it, were seen in different parts of the country. In this unit we will look into the different Neolithic cultures observed from different parts of the country on the basis of archaeological evidences from some specific sites. Additionally, we will see whether there is any regional variation among them. Towards the end of this unit we should be in a position to state how this culture developed and played an important role in the evolution of succeeding cultures in the country.

2.2 NEOLITHIC CULTURAL COMPLEXES IN INDIA

In India, hundreds of Neolithic sites have been discovered, however a single and uniform Neolithic culture has never been witnessed. This phenomenon led scholars to try and find out the patterns visible in the Neolithic context. As early as 1959, V. D. Krishnaswami studied the Neolithic cultures in India and concluded that four geographical zones corresponding to specific cultural traits could be seen. These included the northern zone comprising of Kashmir, eastern zone comprising the states of Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Assam, central and western zone comprising Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, and southern zone comprising the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It was observed that the northern zone was characterised by pit-dwellings and pointed-butt celts, while the eastern zone was characterised by shouldered celts. The central and western zone featured microliths and potsherds more in comparison to celts, while the southern zone showed the evidence of broad butt-end celts.

In 1962, another well-known scholar H. D. Sankalia tried to look into the Neolithic complexes in India. He opined that in the country two clear-cut complexes could be seen: Pure Neolithic and Neo-Chalcolithic. Pure Neolithic was seen in states such as Assam, Bihar and Bengal. Here shouldered ground axes and very little pottery were found. On the other hand, Neo-Chalcolithic cultures show a combination of both Neolithic and Chalcolithic traits. It was observed that many sites in the country did not show a pure Neolithic nor a pure Chalcolithic, but

rather a combination of the two. This mainly comprised the central, western and southern zones of Krishnaswami. This is a culture mostly seen in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu where ground stone tools, microlithic blades, handmade pottery, round huts and one or two pieces of metal were found. Early Baluchi cultures, for instance that found in Kili Ghul Muhammad, where hand and wheel made pottery, ring stones, saddle and quern and celts were found, together with Bagor in Bhilwara where microliths, copper arrowheads, pottery and huts with wooden posts were found, were also included in the Neo-Chalcolithic culture.

At present, due to the discovery of newer sites and systematic work undertaken, more specific culture-based zonation is witnessed. This zonation is however broadly based on the earlier works of Krishnaswami and Sankalia. These various cultural complexes are so called since it reveals some characteristic traits or features in the region where it is found. Interestingly, these complexes correspond to various geographical regions in India, viz., north, south, east, north-east and the Ganges valley. These different cultural complexes will be dealt in the next section.

Activity 1: Take a map of India and plot out the cultural zones as given by Krishnaswami and Sankalia. Reason what might have been the mitigating factors which led to the zone-specific cultures.

2.3 FINDS FROM NORTHERN INDIA

In the north, the most important sites come from the Kashmir valley. Here over forty Neolithic sites have been discovered, of which the most important ones are Burzahom and Gufkarl. The word *burzahom* in Kashmiri refers to “birch”, and is an indication that a large number of birch trees grew in this region. Two phase of the Neolithic culture is found here – early Neolithic and late Neolithic. In early Neolithic, sixteen dwelling pits were recovered, with dimensions such as circular or oval at the top and square or rectangular at the bottom. Hearths and storage pits were also recovered inside the pits indicating the use of fire and possible use of cereals. The largest pit measured 2.7 metres at the top, 4.6 metres at the bottom and at a depth of 4 metres, with stairs leading into it. There is no doubt that the Neolithic people lived and pursued their daily work inside the pits. However, you would be surprised that hearths and storage pits were also found outside near the covered area, indicating that they also lived outside the pits. How could this have happened? Does it mean that some people lived inside, while others lived outside the pits? It can be however conjectured that the same group of people lived inside the pits in the biting cold of Kashmir, and preferred to sleep and work outside in the warm summers. Some of the important material evidences found includes pottery of grey colour, evidently handmade, coarsely finished and ill-fired. In all probability pottery was made by coil method, husk and grass having been used as tempering material. Celts were also found which included axes, wedges, chisels, adzes, hoes, picks, ring stones, querns and harvesters. Bone tools included harpoons, eyed needles, points and arrowheads. No evidence of domesticated plants was found.

There occurred a change in residential pattern in late Neolithic, when pits were abandoned, filled, rammed and sprinkled with red ochre. Presence of post holes suggests that probably houses were made of mud. A large rectangular

superstructure with forty-two post holes was also seen, probably used as a community assembly hall. Same types of pottery continued, while a new variety called the burnished black ware was introduced. Evidence of human burials in flexed position is witnessed. Interestingly, evidence of trepanning of skull is also seen.

In a neighbouring site called Gufkarl, three phases of Neolithic culture could be seen. Neolithic IA was an aceramic phase comparable to Burzahom. Here underground pits were found together with a large variety of stone tools such as points, scrapers, axes, drills, picks, pounders, querns and mace heads. Bone tools such as needles and points were also found. In Neolithic IB, handmade pottery with mat impressions makes an entry while all other tools continue. In the final Neolithic IC, ground stone celts, querns and pounders appear together with terracotta spindle whorls.

Radiocarbon dates places the Neolithic culture in Kashmir at 2400 to 1500 BC.

Activity 2: What do you think was the purpose of trepanning as found in Kashmir?

2.4 FINDS FROM SOUTHERN INDIA

One of the most critical evidences of the new subsistence economy comes from peninsular India, from northern Karnataka and western Andhra Pradesh, and a few sites located in southern Karnataka, coastal Andhra Pradesh and northern Tamil Nadu. Important sites are many and include Palavoy, Utnur and Nagarjunakonda from Andhra Pradesh; Halur, Maski, Parval, Tekkalokotta, T. Narsipur and Sangankallu from Karnataka; and Piyampalli, Dailaimalai and Mullikadu from Tamil Nadu, among others. Results obtained from all these above mentioned sites are similar with a few exceptions. In the earlier Neolithic phase, handmade coarse pale red ware with microliths and ground stone tools were seen. In the later phase, handmade, dull burnished grey ware, ground stone tools like axes, adzes, wedges and chisels, bone points and beads and terracotta are seen. Burials were in extended exhumation with stone grave goods for adults, and urn burials for infants.

The most important finds from this region are the ash mounds (accumulation of burnt cow dung) found in Utnur situated at Mahbubnagar in Andhra Pradesh. What do you think these ash mounds, made up of burnt cow dung, indicate? Well, it indicates that the Neolithic people reared cattle, and that cattle herding was an important component, if not the only one, of their economy. Many authors consider it as a direct evidence of stockade and cattle penning. They are found closely associated with habitation sites thereby giving credence to the evidence of the role of cattle herding in the economy. It is likely that dung from cattle pens was allowed to accumulate and periodically set ablaze in a ceremonial way. This conjecture can be made by observing the present scenario in many places in south India, where during annual cattle festivals; accumulation of dried cow dung is ceremonially set ablaze. The study of the ash in the mounds showed that it had several distinct layers; in some layers it is soft and loose and in others heavily vitrified, suggesting that cow dung was burnt at varying temperatures. In the ash mounds were also found artifactual evidences such as stone and bone tools, animal bones and pottery. At Budihal at Gulbarga district in Karnataka,

hoof impressions of cattle have been found beneath the cow dung, which again shows evidence of cattle penning. Budihal has also produced evidence of a butchering floor. Evidently and proven conclusively, animal husbandry was the mainstay of the economy of the Neolithic people in the peninsular region. However the presence of rubbing stones and querns in the habitational debris suggests that some form of grain cultivation or collection was also done.

The Neolithic people lived in circular or rectangular wattle-and-daub huts with floors having stone paving. Interestingly, large stones were supposedly placed around the huts on the outside. Why do you think it was done so? It has been suggested that this particular structural feature relates to an attempt at protection of the huts from winds. Besides the use of stones, and wattle and daub, the people used thatch for a roof as evidenced by a burnt hut from Sangankallu. The Neolithic people buried their dead, both children and adults in clay urns beneath the floors of their houses. The urns contained sometimes double or multiple burials.

This particular culture in southern India specially those with cattle pastoralism is dated by radiocarbon dating from 3000 to 1000 BC.

2.5 FINDS FROM EASTERN INDIA

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Eastern India, comprising the states of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, has also yielded a number of Neolithic sites. Most of tools from these sites are surface collections. In fact there is no dearth of surface occurrence of Neolithic tools, and apparently many manufacturing sites have also been found but dates and stratigraphy pose a serious problem. The Neolithic tools include pointed-butt celts (axes), chisels, bar celts, shouldered celts, hammer stones and perforated discs found in the Chhotanagpur plateau. Direct evidence on agriculture was rarely found. Mostly indirect evidence is gathered from potsherds from Singbhum showing evidence of straw in the paste, except for a site called Barudih, in Singbhum, which was excavated by Dharani Sen of Calcutta University and had yielded burnt rice grains in a small pot. All these suggest that Neolithic people in eastern India subsisted on cultivation of rice.

In the last decade, a few sites from eastern India were excavated partially. These include sites such as Kuchai in Mayurbhanj district, Golbai Sasan in Khurda district, Kuanr in Keonjhar district and Sankarjang in Angul district in Orissa which have provided more evidence about the Neolithic culture of this region. Kuchai is a stratified site that yielded evidence of Neolithic culture after a long sequence of earlier cultures. This site has yielded pointed-butt celts and cord impressed pottery. Golbai Sasan is also a stratified site even though the excavated area is very limited in extent. Here, period I appear to be Neolithic and show a range of dull red and handmade pottery with cord or tortoise shell impressions in association with a few worked pieces of bone and traces of floors and post holes. Additionally, stone celts and an extended human burial have also been recovered. The succeeding period is Chalcolithic since it yields copper objects together with polished stone and bone tools. Similarly, Kuanr has yielded pointed-butt celts, evidence of wattle and daub structures and copper bangles. From Sankarjang too several human burials were excavated in association with bar celts and copper artefacts. Ground stone tools are also very common as surface finds in Dhenkanal

and Keonjhar districts. They also include miniature celts which were probably intended for some ritual function.

Radiocarbon dates from Barudih, Golbai Sasan and Sankarjang suggest duration of 2200 BC to 700 BC for the Neolithic culture.

2.6 FINDS FROM NORTH-EASTERN INDIA

Reports of Neolithic tools from North eastern part of India came out since the pre-independence period. Garo Hills in Meghalaya is reported particularly to be rich in Neolithic sites. As many as eighteen sites have been discovered and studied. These include, Selbalgre, Misimagre, Tebrongre, Rongram, Chitra Abri, Didami, Makbil Bisik, Matchakholgre, Ganolgre and others. Besides these, numerous tools have been reported from the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura as well. In many of these regions, Neolithic tools have been found as surface finds. Some of these are reportedly factory sites for manufacturing of tools. How can one say whether a site is a manufacturing or quarry site, or not? Evidently, it is possible to infer so, from the presence of a large number of cores, unfinished and discarded tools and large quantity of waste materials which came out while manufacturing of tools. In the Neolithic context, a large number of grinding stones were also found.

The tools found from this region include ground stone celts of shouldered and splayed varieties collected mostly as surface finds. These along with cord impressed pottery found in the excavations of Daojali Hading and Sarutaru in Assam, and Selbalgre in Meghalaya, form important material evidences for Neolithic culture. The pottery is handmade and made of impure clay. These might have been made by coil or ring method. Many sherds carry impressions of cord or string and grooved wooden mallets on their surface suggesting that the vessels were enlarged and shaped by beating with a wooden mallet wrapped with a cord.

Daojali Hading is a stratified Neolithic site from North Cachar Hills, Assam. A large number of household appliances like corn grinders, mortar, pestle, querns and mullers are present at the site. These provide indirect evidence of food production by Neolithic inhabitants of the area. Large quantities of grinding stones and by-product flakes have been found here too. Sarutaro, another excavated site located in south eastern corner of Kamrup district, Assam, showed ground stone celts, pottery and charcoal. Pottery was handmade, coarse, gritty and brown, pale brown or grey in colour. The site is quite late in date as is found by Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. At Parsiparlo, an excavated site from Kamala valley in Arunachal Pradesh, Neolithic cultures preceding the Iron Age is found. Mostly pecked and ground stone implements together with a few sherds were found. The sherds were beaten in such a way that square-grid and honey comb grids were impressed upon them. Few fire places with deposition of ash and charcoal were found. However no structural remains (like post holes) were seen suggesting that Parsiparlo was an open-air site. Selbalgre, the site from Garo Hills in Meghalaya turned out to be a stratified site, with the Neolithic phase overlying geometric and non-geometric microliths. The Neolithic phase yielded handmade pottery, very coarse and grey or dull brown in colour.

No radiocarbon dates are available for the Neolithic culture in north-east India. However H. D. Sankalia inferred that the Neolithic cultures in the region could have been within the time frame of 5000 BC to 1000 BC.

2.7 FINDS FROM THE GANGES VALLEY

South of the Ganges, ground stone tools have been reported as surface finds widely from the hilly tracts of the northern Vindhyas, particularly in Rewa and Sidhi districts of Madhya Pradesh and Banda and Mirzapur districts of Uttar Pradesh. However important sites that were excavated include the sites of Chirand in the middle Ganga plains, Koldihawa and Mahagara in the Vindhyas among others. This is a strategically located area where evidence of the use of rice is seen.

Chirand, situated in district Chhapra in Bihar is a stratified site with Neolithic preceding Chalcolithic and Iron Age. Tools found include bone and antler tools, microliths (blades, lunates and points), picks, scrapers, eyed-needles, bodkins, pierced batons, ground celts, pestles and querns. Pottery used was red, grey, black and red wares, made on a turntable. Terracotta objects, beads, bangles, wheels, bulls, birds and serpent figurines were also found. The use of rice is evidenced from paddy husk impressions on burnt clay. Besides rice, they might have also grown wheat, six-row barley, lentil and green gram such as *masur* and *moong dal*. Evidently they lived in houses that were circular with a diameter of 2 metres, and made of bamboo and mud plastered walls, and paved floors.

Koldihawa, situated towards the south of Allahabad and on the right bank of Belan river, showed a three-fold sequence, namely, Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Iron Age. The people here also lived in circular huts marked by post holes. They used ground stone tools and handmade cord-impressed ware. A cattle pen with post holes at the corners and hoof impressions on the floor were found. The animals domesticated included sheep, goat and cattle as analysed from the faunal remains and hoof impressions. Evidence of an irregular cattle pen also comes from Mahagara, a site on the left bank of the Belan River. This irregularly rectangular cattle pen (12.5 x 7.5 m) was fenced by 20 posts, with wider space for opening. No pottery and tools were found within. Large number of cattle hoof marks was found within. Outside the pen, sheep and goat hoof marks were present. Evidently, Mahagara Neolithic people also lived on stock raising.

Interestingly, rice husks were found in Koldihawa in the paste used in pottery-making. Palaeo-botanical analysis of this rice showed that it belonged to a domestic variety. Radiocarbon dates place it at 7000 BC to 5000 BC. This provides the earliest evidence for rice cultivation in the sub-continent.

Activity 3: List the artifactual evidences from different regions. Make a comparative chart.

2.8 PRE-HARAPPAN SITES FROM THE SUBCONTINENT

Whenever we discuss Neolithic culture in India, we very rarely touch upon the pre-Harappan Neolithic sites. The Neolithic cultures of the Indus valley are actually of great importance as they are the fore-runners of the Indus valley civilization. For this reason, these Neolithic cultures are often called pre-Harappan while the Indus valley civilization is labelled as Harappan. Some of the important pre-Harappan sites include Amri, Kot Diji, Gumla and Mehrgarh, which will be dealt with in detail in another lesson. Amri, a site situated in modern day Sind in

Pakistan, showed evidence of well-planned houses. Some of the houses were rectangular and of various sizes, while others were small cells probably used for storage purposes. About 55 per cent of pottery was seen to be wheel-made. In this site, jar burials were also noticed. On the other hand, Kot Diji showed very interesting pre-Harappan features with defensive walls, well-aligned streets and houses, large communal fire-places, wheel-made pottery, terracotta toys etc. In Gumla, which lies to the northwest of Dera Ismail Khan in Baluchistan, a bullhead deity or a horned deity made of terracotta was found.

For several decades, agriculture-based Neolithic settlements in the subcontinent, which used only stone tools, have been known from sites like Kili Ghul Muhammad and Rana Ghundai in the hilly terrain of Baluchistan. Their beginning has been dated to around 4000 BC. However, later excavations at Mehrgarh have pushed back the antiquity of settled village life in the subcontinent to 7000 B.C.

Mehrgarh is known to be the oldest agricultural site in the Indian subcontinent. This is a site which is located near the Bolan Pass, Baluchistan. At this site about seven cultural layers were found, of which the earliest three were Neolithic. The first Neolithic phase (IA) in Mehrgarh showed the evidence of tools such as polished stone tools, microliths and bone tools. There was no pottery at this stage but baskets coated with bitumen were used. Hunting, together with stock-breeding and plant cultivation were the economies of this region. Cattle, sheep, goat and water buffalo were reared while the cultivated plants comprised several varieties of wheat and barley. The houses were made of mud and mud-bricks. Multiple rooms without doors were believed to have been used for storing grain. The dead were buried under the floors of the houses where people lived. Some of the skeletons which were buried have been found sprinkled with red ochre. Necklaces of micro-beads of steatite along with beads of semi-precious stones such as turquoise, lapis lazuli and sea shell were found in the graves. Stone axes and microliths have also been found as grave goods. In two cases, bodies of young goats were also discovered. The next phase (IB) saw the appearance of pottery. The third Neolithic phase datable to 5000 B.C., is divided into three sub-periods on the basis of changes in ceramic technology. In IIA - handmade, basket-impressed coarse ware was used. Quality seemed to have improved in sub-period IIB. In IIC, wheel-made pottery was introduced. The vessels of buff to reddish colour were painted in black pigment with simple straight and curved lines, rows of dots and criss-crosses. One of the interesting finds of this site is cotton seeds. This find is of great importance since it suggests the possibility of the use of this fibre for textile manufacture. Neolithic III saw a marked increase in the size of the settlement and remarkable development in ceramic industry. Vessels were decorated with paintings of birds and animals as also with geometric designs. Oats and another variety of wheat were added. There is evidence of stone bead manufacture and copper smelting at the site too. Architectural remains include a large granary with multiple rectangular cells, much larger than the granaries of the preceding periods.

2.9 SUMMARY

As we come to the end of this lesson, it is very clear that there are different cultural traits as far as Neolithic in India is concerned. Interestingly two different

features are witnessed. At one level, the differences are many and varied while at another level, some traits are similar even though they fall in different geographical zones. It is therefore unlikely that climatic changes and shifting of floral and faunal boundaries at the end of the Pleistocene and the beginning of the Holocene, when Neolithic started, are directly related to the origin of agriculture in India. It was probably the environment and the exploitative technology, combined with adaptability that was more or less largely responsible for the transition from the food-gathering to the food-producing economy. Such a transition came at different periods in different parts of the country, as evidenced from the difference in dates procured. This brings us to the point that India seemed to have witnessed a very fluctuating Neolithic in terms of the great difference in time, for instance, between the pre-Harappan sites vis-a-vis the eastern sites.

In terms of relationships, it would seem that with the exception of the Chhotanagpur region which may have some connections as yet unidentified with the south, the early farming communities in each region were distinct from each other. Of these the Indo-Pakistan community seems to be inspired from west Asia, the north from northeast, the Ganges valley from south, and northeast from south-east Asia and vice versa. In fact, northeast India which is very strategically located in the borderline of Southeast Asia and south Asia has been touted by many as the nuclear area of early rice cultivation. However, this fact is yet to be ascertained.

At the same time it is observed that there is an apparent time lag between the manifestations of the Neolithic economy in the Indian group of regions and their counterparts in the nuclear areas earlier mentioned. In fact, in India it makes its appearance after thousands of years have elapsed. One of the main issues herein is the mechanism of diffusion and its extent which are yet to be ascertained. Therefore, the appearance of the early farming communities or the transition from food gathering to food producing in India is shown to have come about palpably later than in west Asia and southeast Asia which is rather conditioned by several factors including the level of exploitative technology, environment, late continuance or survival of the Mesolithic economy etc. It is also partly due to the fact that we have as yet not investigated the antecedent stages of the food-producing economy especially with reference to the domestication of animals and plants, climate, soil, relief etc., which could, in the light of the present approach to the problem, push the story of early farming in India backwards.

Suggested Reading

Agrawal, D.P. 1982. *The Archaeology of India*. New Delhi: Select Books Syndicate.

Allchin, B and R. Allchin. 1983. *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: SBS.

Bhattacharya, D.K. 1989. *An Outline of Indian Prehistory*. New Delhi: Popular Prakshan

Chakrabarti, D.K. 1999. *India An Archaeological History: Palaeolithic Beginnings to Early Historic Foundations*. New Delhi: OUP.

Sankalia, H.D.1974. *The Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*.

Subba, T. B and S. C. Ghosh. 2003. *The Anthropology of North-East India: A Textbook*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the Neolithic Culture of Northern and Eastern India.
- 2) Why Neolithic is called revolution not evolution? Comment on it with suitable Indian Neolithic examples.

Write a note on the following

- i) Chirand
- ii) Daojali Hading.

