

## Hunter-Gatherers and Early Food Producing Societies in Kerala

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Hunter-gatherers and early food producing societies represent two different stages of human cultural and technological development. Hunter-gatherer societies are characterized by their reliance on hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants for sustenance. These societies typically live in small, nomadic groups and their way of life is closely tied to the natural environment. Hunter-gatherers have a deep understanding of the plants and animals in their environment, and their survival depends on their ability to adapt to changes in their surroundings. Early food producing societies, on the other hand, are characterized by the development of agriculture and the domestication of plants and animals. This allowed these societies to settle in one place and rely on farming as their primary source of food. The development of agriculture brought about significant changes in human society, including the growth of larger, more complex communities, the development of specialized roles and professions, and the rise of civilization.

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In the absence of written records, scholars have drawn inferences about pre historic culture and society from other kinds of evidence. Archaeologists have excavated many sites that open windows on pre-historic life, and anthropologists have carefully studied hunting and gathering societies in the contemporary world. The transition from hunter-gatherer societies to early food producing societies occurred gradually over thousands of years, and was driven by a combination of factors including climate change, population growth, and technological innovation. This transition also had significant impacts on the environment and on human health and wellbeing. While early food producing societies were able to support larger populations and develop more complex cultures and technologies, they also faced new challenges such as increased disease transmission, resource depletion, and social inequality.

One of the earliest food producing societies in India was the Mehrgarh culture, which flourished in what is now western Pakistan between approximately 7000 BC and 2500 BCE. The people of this culture were among the first in the world to cultivate domesticated wheat, barley, and other crops, and they also raised cattle, sheep, and goats. They lived in small villages and developed sophisticated pottery, jewellery, and other crafts. Another important prehistoric food producing society in India was the Neolithic culture of South India, which emerged around 2500 BCE. This culture is characterized by the development of rice cultivation and the domestication of animals such as cattle, goats, and pigs. The people of this culture also developed sophisticated irrigation systems to support their agricultural practices, and they created elaborate burial practices and pottery. In addition to these cultures, there were also several other prehistoric food producing societies in India, including the Jorwe culture of Maharashtra, the Chalcolithic cultures of central India, and the Megalithic cultures of southern India. These cultures all developed unique practices and technologies, and contributed to the rich cultural heritage of India.

### Previous Studies

The credit for the rediscovery of Indian pre-history goes to Primrose, an Englishman, who was the first person to discover pre-historic implement in 1842 at a place called Lingsugur in the Raichur district early of Karnataka. However, John Evans was first to publish an account of worked flints stone discovered on the bed of the Narmada River near Jabalpur in 1853. In the second half of the nineteenth century Colonel Meadows Taylor published many excavation reports of megalithic burials in South India. Another person who enriched our knowledge about Indian pre-history was Robert Bruce Foote who discovered a large number of pre- historic sites in South India and collected stone artefacts (Foote, 1916). In 1930, M.C. Burkitt published an account of the collection from the Krishna basin in 1935. H. de Terra and T.T. Paterson studied the glacial sequence of Kashmir and Punjab and related their findings to the pre-historic stone industries of Punjab, the Narmada valley and Tamil Nadu. Subsequent discoveries show that Indian Prehistory goes beyond 1.4 million years. Mortimer Wheelers works also resulted the entire pre-historic culture sequence of India. The efforts of the 1940s resulted in the publication of Stuart Piggott's *Prehistoric India* in 1950. Since then, the explorations and excavations done have resulted in the identification and establishment of culture sequences more firmly.

Kerala was a region where exploration was neglected till 1974, certain findings Megalith burials in Chirakkal (Babington, 1823), Neolithic tool from Kannyakod Hill (Lake 1891), quartz flakes, a fragment of Neolithic celt and carvings at Edakkal cave (Fawcett,1901), Mesolithic implements from Chevayur (Allchin, 1968), had been reported. Megalithic were reported from Thozheppadam and Tint from Thrissur district. Odanur and Peringottukurssi in Palakkad district (IAR 1971-72) Aiyappan (1933) conducted excavations at Feroke, (Thapar,

1952) at Porkalam and (Poduval, 1934-45) at Panjapalliparamba. Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Kerala and Archaeological Survey of India did some work reported in *Indian Archaeology A Review*. Foote had hypothesized that Kerala was inhospitable for prehistoric human habitations because of heavy rainfall, impenetrable forests, dissected terrain, absence of quartzite, etc. This led to neglect of serious explorations until 1974. It was P. Rajendran whose efforts resulted in our highly knowledge of the entire pre-historic culture sequence of Kerala, putting Kerala firmly on the map of pre-history.

### Classification

Based on the tool-making traditions, the entire Stone Age culture has been divided into three main stages viz. Palaeolithic, Mesolithic & Neolithic. Palaeolithic and Mesolithic period people exclusively used stone tools, it ends with the Megalithic or Iron Age when there was profuse use of iron implements. The intermediate stages, Neolithic and Chalcolithic, witnessed traditions from the hunter-gatherer types to agriculture, domestication, seasonal settlement and the beginning and development of ceramic and metallurgical technology. These culminated in the Megalithic when metals like iron, copper and gold were efficiently worked out. Relics of this culture still survive amazing some tribal communities living in the deep forests

### Palaeolithic Culture

The Palaeolithic period or the old stone age constitutes the longest phase of pre-history. In this period, the early humans, who shared the landscape with various wild and giant animals or megafaunas. The Palaeolithic Age is divided into three cultural phases viz. Early or Lower Palaeolithic, Middle Palaeolithic and Late or Upper Palaeolithic. This division is based on progressive improvement in tool-types which gradually came to acquire better efficiency in their cutting edge and operating ease (Jain, 2006). The tools of lower palaeolithic age include mainly hand-axes, cleavers, choppers and chopping tools. The middle Palaeolithic tools are based mainly upon flake industries and the upper Palaeolithic is characterised by burins and scrapers.

Earliest evidence of human habituation in Kerala dates to the upper palaeolithic age. Palaeolithic tools and implements have been reported from Valluvasseri, Karimpulakkal and Kunnathubhalu in Beypore Basin, Tenkara and Kanhirampuzha in Nila Basin, Kunnoni in Meenachil Basin, Abhayagiri in Kallada Basin consisted mostly of Chopper-Scraper-Flake implements of quartz, showing morphological, typological and technological affinities with some lower palaeolithic industries of various parts of India (Rajendran 1981, 1998). The Palaeolithic tools at Abhayagiri and Valuvasseri were obtained from the lateritic surface whereas similar implements from Kanhirapuzha, Tenkara, Kunnathubalu, Karalikkot, Karimpulakkal, Mukkali, Pandikkad and Kunnoni were collected from the gravel beds. But the recent discovery of a few hand-axes from Tenkara in Palakkad shows that Kerala Palaeolithic industries have an Acheulian element rarely seen elsewhere in the West Coast. The Palaeolithic implements of Kerala are mostly made of locally available river worn quartz pebbles with the stray utilization of gneiss pebbles. They consisted of both the core tools and the flake tools worked unifacially or bifacially. (Rajendran, 2003).

### Mesolithic Culture

The Mesolithic or the Middle Stone Age Cultures 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. The Mesolithic period coincides with the beginning of the Holocene age, around 8000 BC (Jain, 2006). This period witnessed a change in climate from cold and arid to warm and wet on account of the gradual recession of the glaciers. This change led to the melting snow and the formation of rivers resulting in the growth of forests and vegetation

The evidence from Mesolithic industries in Kerala was first discovered by Capt. K.R.U Todd from Chevayur, Kozhikkode (Allchin & Allchin, 1965), After 1975 more than two dozen archaeological sites were discovered by P. Rajendran. Most yielded implements made exclusively of quartz, except at two places where a few of them were made of chert (Rajendran, 1981). The use of the locally available quartz is evident, it continues since the Lower Palaeolithic (Rajendran,1981). From the typology, technology and morphology, it is clear that the Mesolithic people of Kerala had mastered quartz as raw material for flaking though elsewhere it was probably considered a poor rock type. Different forms of quartz are seen in Kerala boulders, cobbles, pebbles, gravels and veins. The implements are mostly made on flakes, and include bifacial points, blades, lunates, borers, burins, backed knives scrapers, discoids and small choppers made on medium pebbles. (Rajendran, 2003). The apex of the Mesolithic culture in Kerala was in the early Holocene, and continued till 3000 BC (Rajendran, 1983). Stone tools are the prime indicators of the technical skill. They could lubricate the most beautiful and effective implements from quartz. This reflects the dependence on locally available raw material and capacity to innovate suitable techniques in its utilization.

Mesolithic sites were discovered at Niramalagiri and Madayippara in Kannur district; Walayar, Malampuzha, Podippara, Mankara, Kulappalli, Cherakkalppadi, Ayannur,

Agali, Narasimokkai and Sirakadavu in Palghat district; Chellur and Pandikkad in Malappuram district; Chempara and Kuppakotti in Wayanad district; Tenmala and Odanavattom in Kollam district, and Ankode and Neyyar in Thiruvananthapuram district. The Mesolithic rock shelter sites were discovered at Tenmala in Kollam district and at Ankode in Perumkadavila in Thiruvananthapuram district. (Rajendran, 2018). The increase in the number of sites from this culture indicates the significant growth in population and the change in demographic profile.

It is suggested that greater availability of food and better health of the people were probably the main factors which led to decrease in mortality rate and the increase in population. While better rainfall in Holocene age contributed to greater plant growth as well as increase in fish and animal population, the use of microliths as arrows or spear-heads greatly improved the hunting efficiency of the Mesolithic man. Hunting-gathering remained the main survival strategy, but there was a change from big- game hunting to smaller animals and birds, they had also started fishing. More shelters and caves were occupied, there was rapid growth in the execution of artistic forms such as petrographs and petroglyphs (Rajendran, 1998).

### Neolithic Culture

The Neolithic Cultures constitute the concluding phase of the stone age. The term Neolithic was first used the Danish prehistorian Thomsen, in the nineteenth century to denote the stage of technological progress achieved by early man. The term neolithic era means “new stone age,” as opposed to the old stone age of palaeolithic times. Archaeologists first used the term neolithic because of refinements in tool-making techniques, they found polished stone tools in neolithic sites, rather than the chipped implements characteristic of palaeolithic sites. Gradually, however, archaeologists became aware that something more fundamental than tool production distinguished the neolithic from the palaeolithic era. Polished stone tools occurred in sites where peoples relied on cultivation, rather than foraging, for their subsistence. Today the term neolithic era refers to the early stages of agricultural society, from about twelve thousand to six thousand years ago. The Neolithic Cultures are largely defined in terms of transition from hunting and food-gathering to herding and food producing subsistence economy with a sedentary way of life. It could become possible because of better tool-types and more conducive environment with the commencement of Holocene Age. The domestication of animals and cultivation of cereals by the Neolithic folks is evident from the discovery of charred pieces of grain animal bones. This period also marks the beginning of the use of handmade potteries.

In Kerala the first Neolithic evidence was discovered from Kannyakod Hill in 1891 by Philip Lake and later Fawcett had discovered similar evidence from Wayanad in 1901 (Philip 1891& Fawcett 1901). Only after several decades Polished stone axes and beads, typical of the Neolithic, were reported from Kalpetta and Pulpalli in Wayanad and the Periyar river bed at Aluva. Later similar evidences were discovered by P. Rajendran in 1989 from Mantrothuruth in Kallada river basin of Kollam District and in 1995 from Kunnoni in Kottayam District (Rajendran, 1990 & 1995). Axes were made on locally available gneiss or granite rock and other implements were flakes, blades and beads. Axes were well made through flaking, pecking, grinding and polishing. A Neolithic axe was also discovered from the Palai in the Meenachil river basin in 2006. In 2006, a stone axe of the Neolithic culture has been discovered from Vembayam in Trivandrum District in south Kerala. (Rajendran & Divya, 2006). The tool was half buried in the hard matrix and it is, for the first time, that a Neolithic axe has been found from the district. The occurrence of Neolithic cultural evidence and other early Stone Age finds from all the three physiographical zones in Kerala indicates the fact that the region had conducive environmental situation for the prehistoric habitation from the coast to the ghats on the south-west coast of India.

Prehistoric human communities span a vast timeframe, from the emergence of early humans millions of years ago to the development of writing systems in different regions of the world. During prehistoric times, humans lived as hunter-gatherers, relying on hunting animals and gathering wild plants for survival. These societies were nomadic, moving from one location to another in search of food and resources. Over time, prehistoric societies began to develop more advanced technologies and social structures. The most significant development was the transition from hunting and gathering to settled farming communities, which occurred during the Neolithic period. This transition marked a major turning point in human history, leading to the establishment of permanent settlements, the domestication of plants and animals, and the emergence of agriculture as the primary means of subsistence. In addition to technological advancements, prehistoric societies developed their own cultural practices, art forms, and religious beliefs. Archaeological evidence, such as cave paintings, rock art, and burial sites, provides insights into the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of these early human communities. It is important to note that our understanding of prehistoric societies is largely based on archaeological findings, scientific studies, and anthropological research. While these sources allow us to reconstruct and interpret the lives of prehistoric humans to some extent, there are still many gaps and uncertainties due to the lack of written records from that time.

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