

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

# BHIMBETKA

PG / M.A. 3<sup>rd</sup> Semester

CC-11, Pre And Proto History Of India And Indian Potteries

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The richest evidence for Mesolithic culture in Central India has come from a site, or rather a group of sites, at Bhimbetka (22° 66' N; 77° 37' E), in Sehore District of Madhya Pradesh. The site lies 45 km south of Bhopal and 32 km north of Hoshangabad, between Obaidullaganj and Barkhera stations, on the Central Railway, and about 2 km west of the Bombay-Delhi Railway line and the Itarsi-Bhopal road running parallel to it. A pucca (tarred) road connects the site from the railway line and road. The road was built several years after V.S. Wakankar and I excavated the site during 1973-1977, and after the site became popular because of its wealth of rock paintings, and specially after the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and his wife, Sonia, visited it in 1984.

Bhimbetka is name of a hill, adjacent to the tribal hamlet of Bhiyanpur, inhabited mainly by the Gonds and a few Korkus and Muslims. The hill is conspicuous in the local topography because it is surmounted by a row of tall monolithic rocks, standing in a row from north to south. At the feet of these rocks as also on the slopes of the hill there are a large number of caves and rock shelters. Many of these contain paintings of variable antiquity on their walls, ceilings and hollows in the walls, and habitation deposits of Lower Paleolithic to Mesolithic periods on their floors. The biggest of the shelters is known as Auditorium Cave because of its size, and long, narrow shape. It is nearly 40 m long and 4-5 m wide, but the majority of the shelters are much smaller, with floor areas of 25 to 100 sq m.

Bhimbetka, however, is not the only hill containing caves and rock shelters in the area; and a number of other hills in the vicinity of the villages of Jondra, Kari Talai and Vinayaka also contain caves and rock shelters, having paintings and stone age habitation deposits. They are found in an area of 10 km

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between the villages of Jondra in the west and Kari Talai in the east. So far over 1000 shelters have been discovered. Nearly 600 of them contain paintings and a large number also habitation deposits of Lower Palaeolithic to Mesolithic periods. While the raw material for making tools is plentifully available on the Vindhyan hills, the environment around Bhimbetka is rich in other resources as well. There are a number of nullahs or seasonal channels which flow only during the monsoon but contain some water throughout the year on or below their surface. Besides, there are perennial springs which yield ample clean and clear water that meets the needs of the local human population as well as of livestock and wild animals.

The forest in the valley and on the hilltops and slopes harbours a large number of trees, plants and creepers which yield edible leaves, flowers, fruits, roots and tubers.

These are extensively exploited today by the local tribal people, whose economy is considerably dependent on hunting of wild animals, like wild boar (*Sus scrofa cristatus*), sambhar (*Cervus unicolor*), nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*), jackal (*Canis aureus*), porcupine (*Hystrix indica*) and hare (*Lepus nigricollis*). There can be little doubt that they were exploited in the past as well by the prehistoric peoples who, unlike the present-day hunting-gathering communities which live in the plains, inhabited the caves and shelters, as also the valleys between the hills and open flat ground on the surface of the rocky slopes. Some of the animals, listed above, were often seen by us moving in the forest as also grazing in the fields, and some, like nilgai and boar, even came to our camp at night. The availability of numerous shelters, ample water, food resources and raw material, attracted many Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups to Bhimbetka. They not only lived in caves and shelters but also on

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the hill slopes, in the valleys and on the plain as well. Large Acheulian sites have been found on the plain and hill slopes near Barkhera, south of Bhimbetka.

V.S. Wakankar, who discovered Bhimbetka in 1957, decided to excavate it in 1971, but as, because of his inadequate training and experience in prehistory, he was unsure of getting permission for excavation from the Archaeological Survey of India, he approached Prof. Sankalia for collaboration. Sankalia, in turn, advised me to collaborate with him.

## **EXCAVATION AT BHIMBETKA**

Wakankar and V.N. Mishra excavation in 1973. Wakankar chose shelter IIF-24 and recommended the adjacent shelter IIF-23 to me for excavation. I dug this and two other shelters (IIF-13 and IIB-33), very systematically for five seasons. **Shelter IIF-23** Shelter IIF-23 had a floor area of 52 sq m and a deposit of 3.80 m, divisible into eight layers, and yielding a sequence of four cultural periods. These comprised:

**Layers 8-6: Late Acheulian;**

**Layer 5: Middle Palaeolithic;**

**Layer 4: Upper Palaeolithic;**

**Layers 3-1: Mesolithic.**

The microlithic industry was made on siliceous materials like chert, chalcedony and agate though large blades and some bladelets and microliths were also made on quartzite.

The Mesolithic industry occurs in layers 1-3. In layers 1-2, it is made exclusively of crypto-crystalline silica, and to a smaller extent, quartz. In layer 3, it is made of chert, chalcedony and quartz, and occurs in association with quartzite

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blades and flakes. And what is particularly significant, is that occasionally micro blade cores and micro blades are made on quartzite. This shows that microlithic technology was introduced to the pre-existing inhabitants of the site who were used to working only in quartzite, and they tried to experiment with the new technology in the material they were familiar with. There is little evidence to show that the microlithic technology developed locally; instead it appears to have been introduced from outside, probably by contact with microlith-using people of the Belan and Son valleys to the north where there is clear evidence of the local evolution of the microlithic technology.

The microlithic industry is very rich. The types present in it include retouched blades, blunted back blades, obliquely truncated and or blunted blades, short and long scalene crescents and isosceles triangles, trapezes, occasional transverse arrowheads, points, blades and scrapers. Most of the tools are made on microblades but occasionally blades are also present. Cylindrical and conical cores with shallow parallel scars suggest use of pressure flaking technique for detaching blades. The total impression is of a highly developed geometric industry which can only be compared with the industries of Tilwara, Bagor and Mirzapur rock shelters.

The presence of haematite pieces with clear rubbing facets in the microlith-yielding layers attests to the fact that at least some of the paintings on cave walls were made by the Mesolithic people.

In Trench I in cave IIF-24 and Shelter IIIA-30 the Mesolithic deposit rests directly over the Acheulian layer while in shelters IIB-33 and IIF-13, it rests directly on the bed Tock (Figs. 83-84). In shelter IIB-33, the Mesolithic deposit was over one metre thick and could be divided into four layers, In layer 4, about 40 cm thick, only microlithic industry was found.

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As in Shelter IIF-23 this layer contained plenty of weathered Sandstone chips. In layer 3, 25-50 cm thick, besides microliths, hammerstones were found. The pottery sherds are sherds of painted pottery, pieces of copper, querns, rubbers and Chalcolithic cultures of Central India. Copper tools from this layer include a razor blade with a tang and a rectangular piece with a hole at one end. It is clear that the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers had imported pottery and copper tools from some Chalcolithic settlements in the Betwa valley to the north. In layers 1-2, 15 cm thick, a copper ring and Early Historic pottery were found.

The microlithic industry is made entirely of microblades and predominantly geometric in character. A characteristic feature of the industry is the comparatively large size of microblades; in particular a number of crescents are made on exceptionally long and narrow bladelets, the length being four times or more of the width. Because of their unique nature we have given this type the name Bhimbetka crescent.

### **HUMAN SKELETAL RECORD OF BHIMBETKA**

Next to the Ganga valley sites of Sarai Nahar Rai, Mahadaha and Damdama, Bhimbetka has provided the richest human skeletal record of the Mesolithic period. According to a list prepared by Wakankar, following localities were excavated at Bhimbetka. The localities which yielded human skeletal remains are marked with an asterisk.