

PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology is a scientific discipline which studies history from the evidences of the artefacts and remnants of early human cultures as discovered chiefly by systematic excavation. The first pre-historic research work in North East India was started by Sir John Lubbock only in 1867. Comprises of seven political divisions as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, her prehistoric stone Age culture seems to have a common genesis. In Manipur, the easternmost State of India, the potentiality of the archaeological study came into light only in the recent years and not so rich as compared to those of the other parts of India. The archaeological studies in Manipur show that the stone age of Manipur may be divided into Palaeolithic Hoabinhian and Neolithic culture. Most of the prehistoric sites are concentrated in the hilly regions of the state.

Keywords: Archaeology, artefacts, genesis, easternmost, Hoabinhian, Neolithic.

Introduction:

Archaeology is the study of material remains of past human life and his activities. It is defined as the scientific study of historic or pre historic peoples and their culture by analysis of their artefacts, inscriptions, monuments and other such remains especially those that have been excavated (www.dictionary.com. assessed on 05/1/2019). In brief it is a scientific discipline which studies history from the evidences of the artefacts and remnants of early human cultures as discovered chiefly by systematic excavation. The answer to the big question how old is man and his culture in Manipur has to be made with the help of the spade and shovel of the archaeologist.(Kabui:1991:48) Thus, Sankalia rightly defined that Archaeology in brief is the pursuit of the History of Man.(Sankalia:1965:1)

According to the archaeological study man's past has been divided into three temporal phases or periods namely prehistory, proto-history and history. Such phases however varied from region to region and their beginning and ending are not also simultaneous. Prehistory is the study of men and his culture before the invention of writing script. It is also defined as the period of man's existence since the time he emerged from his animal ancestry until such time before the written records are available. The source materials for the reconstruction of Pre-history are the material culture objects like stone implements, bone tools and weapons, potteries plants, animal and human remains.

Prehistory period covers Palaeolithic (old stone), Mesolithic (middle stone) and Neolithic (new stone), which estimated to cover over 5,00,000 years and forming part of the latest pleistocene. The term Mesolithic is commonly used in Europe. This phase of prehistory is known as Natutian in west Asian whereas it is called hoabinhian Culture in south East Asia. The name hoabinhian is derived from archaeological site Hoabinhi in North Vietnam.

Another phase of man's past which succeeded pre-history is proto history. Some rudimentary and primitive forms of writing, oral works, myths, legends etc began to appear during this period. But for the reconstruction of this phase of human culture, we still depend largely on archaeological evidences. The third phase i.e, history begins with the introduction of keeping records of man's achievements in readable forms of writings. But in order to reconstruct the complete picture of historical period, literary or written records should also be supplemented by archaeological evidences. It is defined as the scientific study of historic or prehistoric peoples and their cultures by analysis of their artefacts, incscription, monuments and other such remains especially those that have been excavated (www.dictionary.com assessed on 5/01/2019)

Discussion: *Historical background of the study:*

Our planet "the earth" is nearly 4600 million years old. (Bruce Mitchell:1984:5) The evolution of the earth's crust witnesses four different stages, viz., quaternary. Such stages have been subdivided tentatively into two periods or ages which is known as i) Pleistocene (Ice Age) and ii) Holocene (Post Ice Age) Pleistocene lasted from 2 million B.C. to 12,000 B.C. approximately and the latter began in about 12,000 B.C. and continues to this day.(Ranjit:2008:48) In the archaeological and anthropological study, it is believed that the early Homo Sapiens (wise man) began to appear about 7,50,000 years ago during the Pleistocene era and their remains had been discovered. Homo sapiens or the present day modern man evolved about 40,000 years ago during the upper Pleistocene age in Europe (Indrani:2007:4) The Homo Sapiens migrated to different continents of the Globe and their migration routes are influenced by landscape or natural routes through mountains and rivers.

Like prehistoric Europe, Northern India experienced ice ages and it was in about 1,00,00 B.C. that man first left surviving traces in India. These are the Palaeolithic pebble tools of the Soan Culture (Soan River in Punjab) and such tools resemble to those which are abundantly found all over the world. In the South there existed another prehistoric stone industry viz. Madras Industry as discovered by the archaeologist. It has close affinities with the stone tools found in Africa, western Europe and Southern England (Basham:2004:10-11) So far two fossil men have been discovered in India one of them on the Siwalic beds of the Himalayan Ranges. It is known as Ramapithecus punjabicus and the other, on the right bank of the River Narmada namely Hatnora, which resembles to Homo Erectus. (Indrani:op:cit:4)

It was in the 1867, the first pre-historic research work in N.E. India was started by Sir John Lubbock. He reported the evidence of pre-historic culture from this region for the first time in this year. But in this region, the stone age culture did not blossom to the fullest extent. There is a wide diversity of flora, fauna and ethnic groups, etc, as such unique region of India lies at the tri-junction of Indo Chinese, Indo Malayan and the Indian sub-regions of the north-East. In its adjoining and surrounding region like China, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, cultural remains and artefacts of early man are discovered in large numbers by the recent archaeologists. But, the N.E. India including Manipur is least known to the outside world so far as the archaeological aspect is concerned. The scholars attending the *Indo-Pacific Pre-Historic* congress held in Pune on 20th to 23rd December, 1978 also emphasised the need of the region.

Though the N.E. India comprises of 7 political divisions, her prehistoric stone age culture seems to have a common genesis Palaeolithic cultural artefacts like handaxe, cleaver (hunter's knife or knife), chopper/chopping tool and flake blade tools are found in the Garo Hills, Meghalaya and Manipur. The present archaeological evidence corroborated with linguistic data suggests that the Neolithic Culture of North East India has close affinities with the Neolithic culture of South China and south East Asia but no remains of fossil man has ever been unearthed so far in North East India.

Prehistoric Archaeology in Manipur:

In this hilly region, Manipur, lying the easternmost part of India, the archaeological works are very recent. But such prehistoric cultural objects and artefacts have ever been discovered chiefly thereby resulting in enabling the historians and archaeologists to reconstruct the Stone Age culture of Manipur. The first archaeological research work was carried out during 1930s by Late Shri Wahengbam Yumjao Singh, an eminent scholar. For many years Shri Singh has carried on investigations privately and has brought to light many interesting relics relating to the past history of Manipur. Systematic exploration and excavation started only recently about a couple of decades ago by Dr. O.K. Singh, an eminent anthropologist and archaeologist, who was the Superintendent of Archaeology and could discover a number of sites related to prehistoric, proto-historic and metal Age culture. By the year 1976 the Manipur Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and remains Act, 1976 was passed by Manipur Legislative Assembly and consequently the state Archaeology office was established in 1978 with a view to preserve the past cultural remains and artefacts of Manipur. So far 51 archaeological sites have been preserved by the State Government. (Indrani:op:cit1)

Geologically and geographically Manipur is situated on the tertiary ranges of the branch of eastern Himalayas (Kabui:op:cit:7). This mountain chain was formed some

million of years back by severe earth movements. And it is further said that there were five remarkable phases of uplifts. As a result of the series of tectonic movements, the great Himalayan mountain attained their present configuration. Along with the rise of this great mountain chain the geosynclinal basin became progressively shallower accompanied with gradual change in the marine environment. (W.I:Singh:1986:2) It is presumed by the geologists that there existed a shallow sea called the Tethys which provided a geosynclinal environment in Manipur and its surrounding areas of North East India. (Kabui:op:cit:8). In 1952-53 A.D. one fossil of a sea living creature, cattle fish was found at Kangpokpi in the north eastern part of Manipur (W.I Singh:op:cit:2) This shows that Manipur was at one time a sea bed. Besides, the rocks of early and mid Tertiary Age suggests that Manipur in the mid Tertiary Age or late Tertiary Age has been formed due to tectonic movements resulting from Himalayan orogeny.

Recent archaeological research shows that the peopling of Manipur began since prehistoric times (O.K. :2008:5) as the fact is evident for the cultural objects found in the caves and open air sites in the hills and valley of Manipur. In spite of this no human remains cannot be discovered in this region. The archaeological studies in Manipur show that the stone age of Manipur may be divided into Palaeolithic Hoabinhian and Neolithic Cultures. The important sites of Manipur where the Palaeolithic cultural remains are abundantly found are:

1. Songbu Cave, Chandel District
2. Khangkhui Cave, Ukhrul District
3. Machi Chandel District
4. Nongpok Keithelmanbi open air site, Senapati District
5. Khomunnom cave and Fuikon Ningthou cave at Sajik Tampak, Chandel District (recently discovered)

The Songbu cave Chandel District have advance middle Palaeolithic culture. Tools and weapons left in this cave are hand axe, chopper, scraper, point and flakes. This is the earliest stone age site, probably 40,000 years B.C. [O.K.:op:cit:24]

Another remarkable site of Palaeolithic culture is Khangkhui Cave, Ukhrul District. The caves are situated near Khangkhui village at a distance of eleven Kilometers south east of Ukhrul. It was O.K. Singh who did the first excavation at Khangkhui caves on scientific line. The caves are limestone caves. Tool types found in these areas include chopper, cleaver, burin, blade, flake, bone tools and funeral remains.

In Machi village (a Maring Naga Village) (located on a hill top of Chandel district) a pebble chopper tool is found which is considered as a land mark in the Palaeolithic archaeology of Manipur. Besides in the Nongpok Keithelmanbi site on the banks of Thoubal River, the stone remains of Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic age are found in large

numbers. Still archaeological research work on scientific line is continuing to highlight more information about the prehistoric culture.

According to the archaeological research, tools from Songbu Cave, Khangkhui cave, Machi and Nongpok Keithelmanbi, typologically belonged to upper Palaeolithic and can be compared with that of Choukotien culture of China. (Kunjeswori:2008:22) They further observe that during 30,000 years B.P. to 12,000 years B.P. Manipur faces cold and dry climate. During this period Choukotien men and pre & proto- Australoid men were moving throughout the South East Asian Countries. But comparative study of tools with that of Choukotien Culture the Khangkhui Cave dwellers might possibly be one of the hybrid of these races. (Ibid)

During this phase of human culture people did not know the art of weaving, cultivation, making houses, and potteries, domestication or cooking. They were nomads, hunters and food gatherers. They used only rough, unpolished and rude stone tools. Another important and interesting achievement in these fields is discovery of Khomunnom cave and Fuikon Ningthou Cave at Sajik Tampak, Chandel District. The excavation work was carried out very recently by a team of Archaeological survey of India, experts of M.U. and D.M. College, Imphal. Remains of human culture like charcoal, potsherds, bone remains a kind of sea snail etc are found. According to the experts the cultural remains discovered at Sajik Tampak belong to Palaeolithic era.

Hoabinhean or Mesolithic Culture:

The first concrete evidence of Hoabinhian culture is represented by the finds of the caves at Tharon in Tamenglong District. Hoabinhian culture is the Mesolithic Cultural pattern of South East Asia, based on the historic finds of village of Hoabinh in North Vietnam. Stone tools types found in this cave are proto hand axe, hand adze, cleaver, scraper, pointed edged ground pebbles & graters (probable age is 12,000 B.P.). Most of the stone artefacts are made of Quartzite sand stone. The Hoabinhian tools discovered from Tharon cave, Nongpok Keithelmanbi and Napachik have a close proximity with those of Thailand, Burma, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The Hoabinhian Cultural artefacts found in Nongpok Keithelmanbi are pebble tools, flakes and blades made of Quartzite Sand Stone.

Neolithic Culture

Important sites where Neolithic cultural remains are found is Nongpok keithelmanbi, Senapati District, Napachik in the village of Wangoo in Bishnupur District, and phunan in Senapati District. (Indrani: 2007:3) During this phase of pre-historic ape, man began to

abandon their nomadic habit, gathering of food and humanity. They gradually knew the art of making pottery and farming. Besides, potteries were well polished.

Conclusion:

Archaeological research in Manipur is very recent and it was only about a couple of decades ago, systematic exploration and excavation started in the State. On the basis of the archaeological research it can be assumed that the peopling of Manipur began since the Prehistoric Stone Age. However no human remains have been found in the State. According to the archaeological research findings, the Stone Age of Manipur may be broadly classified into three different categories, viz., the Palaeolithic, Hoabinhian and Neolithic Cultures. Due to topographical difference during Palaeolithic and Hoabinhian and Neolithic the pattern in their settlement and food habits were also different. Prehistoric people used to settle in the hills during the Palaeolithic, while Hoabinhian & Neolithic people settled in both hills as well as valley areas.

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