



EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES DURING STONE AGES

BY

POOJA
MASTER OF ARTS
UGC NET (History)

ABSTRACT

Human history is basically classified into two eras-Prehistoric and Historic. The Prehistoric period tells the story of early man since his appearance on the Earth and also covers his earlier struggles in adjusting with the environment. This period has no written records, while Historic period began with the invent of writing. The Prehistoric period tells about the origin of life and the evolution of the remote ancestors. This period covers the longest part of the human past. This Prehistoric period is further classified into three stone ages - Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. Stone was the first artefact used by early humans that's why these stages have been named as Stone ages. The early humans used the stones as per their need, they broke stones into pieces, chipped them off, made sharp and edgy stone tools and weapons for hunting. The classification of stone ages into three periods is based on the degree of sophistication used by humans to fashion and use stone tools.

In our day-to-day lives, it's impossible for us to live without electricity, technology, mobile phones, and much more. So, a question pop up in our minds that how the earliest humans survived on the Earth? How they made adjustments in an unfriendly environment with many wild animals and dense forest covers? How they built their first dwellings? How they made arrangement for food? Also, our society has not always been like it exists now. So, how the earliest men established social relations? How social organisations emerged? There are many questions like these, the list is endless. In this article we will explore how the earliest social structures emerged and evolved during the stone ages. We will discuss the societal features of the three stone ages, one by one in depth.

KEY WORDS: Social structures, Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Stone ages

INTRODUCTION

The Prehistoric period is the history of earliest man on Earth. The Earth is about 4.5 billion years old and human appeared on it only some 200,000 years ago. The evolution of Earth's crust shows four stages:-

- 1) Primary (Palaeozoic),
- 2) Secondary (Mesozoic),
- 3) Tertiary, and
- 4) Quaternary

The Tertiary and Quaternary together form Cenozoic (the age of the mammals), which began about 100 million years ago (MYA). The Cenozoic is divided into seven epochs, of which the last two - the Pleistocene (ice-age) and Holocene (post ice-age) - are especially important for the story of hominid evolution. The Pleistocene began about 1.6 MYA and the Holocene (or Recent period, in which we live) about 10,000 years ago. Humans appeared in Pre-Pleistocene and early Pleistocene times. The earliest humans were not very different from apes which first developed 30 MYA. Then, Australopithecus emerged and it became the most momentous step in human evolution. Australopithecus is a Latin term which means 'Southern ape'. They possessed both ape like and human Characteristics. They were bipedal and pot-bellied creatures with a very small braincase (400 cubic centimeters). Humans form a part of the hominid line of evolution. Australopithecus was the last of the pre-human hominids. That's why they are also called proto-human.

The first important Homo (human) was Homo Habilis found in eastern and southern Africa about 2-1.5 MYA. Homo Habilis means a 'handy or skilful man'. They had lightly built braincase (500-700 cubic cm). They started using stones in making tools. The second important step began with the appearance of Homo Erectus (an erect or upright man). It is dated 1.8 to 1.6 MYA. Its skull was strongly built with braincase of 800-1200 cubic cm. They discovered how to make and use fire. They travelled long distances and their remains have been found in Africa, China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The third step marked the emergence of Homo Sapiens (wise man).

Our own species evolved from Homo Sapiens. They had a short body and very narrow forehead. It's braincase measured about 1200 to 1800 cubic centimeters. Homo Sapiens sapiens, the full-fledged modern man emerged in Southern Africa in the late stone age to about 115,000 years ago. It had a large forehead and thinner bones. It had a large rounded braincase of about 1200-2000 cubic centimeters in volume. That's how, humans emerged and evolved on the Earth. Now, let's explore how these early humans created and evolved social organisations.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore the need behind emergence of social structures in stone ages.
- 2) To trace the evolution process in social structures throughout the stone ages.

STONE AGES

Early Indians progressed from the primitive life to the civilized one. In this process, they had to pass through many stages, spread over many hundred thousand years. These stages were marked by the different tools, weapons, pottery, habitat and other stone and metallic objects, called the artefacts, used by them for the satisfaction of their elementary needs of food, shelter and rudimentary wear. The Indian stone-age is divided into three ages on the basis of geological age, the type and technology of stone tools, and subsistence base. These three ages are:-

- 1) Palaeolithic
- 2) Mesolithic
- 3) Neolithic

The Palaeolithic cultures belong to the Pleistocene geographical era, while the Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures belong to the Holocene era. These cultures did not evolve uniformly in a neat unilinear manner all over the subcontinent. There were some regional variations in their features and dates.

THE PALAEOOLITHIC AGE

The word 'Palaeolithic' has been derived from two Greek words 'Palaios' meaning 'old'; and 'lithos' meaning 'Stone'. So, Palaeolithic stands for 'Old Stone Age'. This age is further divided into three phases in accordance with the type of stone tools used by the people and the nature of climatic change. They are-

- 1) Lower Palaeolithic → from about 2 MYA to 100,000 years ago
- 2) Middle Palaeolithic → from about 100,000 to 40,000 years ago
- 3) Upper Palaeolithic → from about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago

The Palaeolithic men lived like savages as hunters and food gatherers. They had no knowledge of cultivation and built no houses. However, they had learnt the first lesson in intelligence about the need for socialization, to live together, to meet their two primary requirements; firstly, to satisfy their biological urge to mate, which automatically led to the procreation of life and entailed the responsibility for the protection and rearing up of their offspring collectively; and secondly, to act together in groups to protect themselves against the attacks of other wild animals and the natural calamities. This intelligent behaviour distinguished men from the other beasts, and styled them as a 'social animal'.

Palaeolithic men's life was very hard, physically, man was a weak animal as compared with many other beasts; therefore group behaviour or community life, based on mutual cooperation and love, became a necessity. The basic social structure of Palaeolithic hunter gatherers was a band society. Bands were small communities, usually consisting of less than 100 people. Members of a band were usually related to each other through kinship. The exchange of goods was based on rules of reciprocity. The division of labor was based on age and sex. They were nomadic to some extent, moving from one place to another, depending on the seasonal availability of the animals they hunt and the plant food they gather. They had not developed a sense of personal property thus the natural resources were for all and no single person owned them. There were no institutions of formal government. The leadership of the group was determined by the natural law of selection; the strongest man of the group commanded the others, and the leadership was frequently changed by the emergence of more powerful adults among them. The behaviour of members of the group was not regulated by force but through customs, norms and social etiquette. The early men gradually learnt to protect and feed their very old members just as they cared for their children and minors; a social consciousness was thus taking roots.

The early men had no fixed habitats and lived in shelters made of rock, branches, grass, leaves, reeds. They mainly lived in caves or natural rock shelters; which served as seasonal camps for them, and their stay at a particular place depended upon the availability of vegetable or animal food. They lived on nuts or fruits, edible roots of plants and raw flesh of the animals. They ate fish or fowl, birds or reptiles, and all sorts of animals, including sheep, goats, antelopes and wild beasts that they could lay their hands on by hunting. They did not fully exploit the natural resources of their area. They consciously practised sensible restraint in the exploitation of the environment in order to conserve its resources. A division of labor probably existed in Palaeolithic times based on gender roles. Men hunted and women gathered food. They obtained a significant amount of their food through gathering rather than hunting. So, women must have contributed in a major way to the subsistence base of Palaeolithic communities. The material desires and wants of Palaeolithic humans must have been limited. They obtained only required quantity of food. This gave them plenty of leisure time to sleep, relax, chat, and play games.

The early men lived a nude life. But, with the origin of elementary community life and dawn of social consciousness, they had gradually learnt to hide their private parts with leaves, bark of trees or animal skin. They had also learnt to make fire by rubbing of stones to warm them in cold or to roast the animal flesh. Some of them must have learnt to make thatched dwellings with the branches and leaves of trees as well.

Prehistoric art marks the beginning of the history of art. Prehistoric art could occur in some permanent places (cave paintings) or can be portable (figurines). They were clearly an integral and important part of Community life and some of them seem to have had some sort of cultic or religious significance. Animals are the predominant motifs in rock paintings and engravings. There are some representations of hunting rituals. Female figurines known as 'Venus figurines' may represent fertility beliefs and rituals.

THE MESOLITHIC AGE

The end of the Palaeolithic age was marked by the drastic changes in the climate, which became day and warm. Mesolithic means 'Middle Stone Age'. The intensity of rainfalls decreased. The change of climatic conditions exercised a profound effect on the landscape and the resultant flora and fauna. The Palaeolithic age was followed by a brief period of transition from the old to the beginning of the New Stone Age in India. This transitional period was Mesolithic phase, it began around 10,000 BC and lasted about four to five thousand years. During this time, the environment became more favourable for the survival of men. The changed environment encouraged men to start moving out of the hill regions and the dense forests, and they gradually began to spread out into the more habitable avenues of the northern plains. The valleys and plains were now covered with forests, green foliage and large variety of fauna.

The Mesolithic men still lived a nomadic life and depended primarily on food gathering, fishing and hunting. They were gradually learning to domesticate fowl and some animals such as sheep, goats and Cattle for milk and meat. The seasonal movement of Mesolithic people into certain areas, known for the natural growth of edible crops and fruits, indicates that slowly and steadily they were getting familiar with the natural cycle of agricultural production and were on the threshold of starting cultivation. Their preliminary knowledge about the domestication of animals and familiarity with the agricultural crop pattern paved the way for rise of Neolithic or the New Stone Age.

The Mesolithic men did not know how to dispose of their dead. The corpses were left in the open on the hill slopes and in the jungles to be eaten away by the wild beasts and birds or to rot and decay. The Mesolithic men invented microliths, which were small stone tools usually made of flint or chert. They were mini versions of earlier pebble tools. They were generally tiny in size. The Mesolithic men probably stuck these stones on to the handles of bones or wood to make tools. These tools were used for digging the ground and stitching clothes.

Many Caves and rock shelters of the Mesolithic dwellers have been found to contain rudimentary paintings of men, birds and beasts on their walls and ceilings. These paintings are in bare outlines and sketches, symbolic of various objects, in natural colours of the plant leaves and juicy fruits. They depict the objects in singular form or group scenes of hunting and fighting. The Prehistoric people made such paintings probably for many different reasons - to express their creative urges, to decorate their homes, to tell a story in pictures, to preserve some of their memorable events in picture form. Some paintings may have been the part of a ritual connected with hunting or fertility.

THE NEOLITHIC AGE

The Neolithic or the New Stone Age began around 7000 BC in the Indian subcontinent. The Neolithic culture was marked by the knowledge of agricultural cultivation and domestication of animals - the two most outstanding discoveries, which laid the foundations of the human civilization in the world. The Neolithic stage generally had self-sufficient village communities with equilibrium between food production and population. The obtaining and consumption of food is generally a social activity. Food items may be part of systems of hospitality, gift giving, trade, and social taboos. We see some events of community food preparation and feasting in Neolithic period.

As before, Stone was still important for tool making. Neolithic men progressed in tool making process. Their Stone tools were smaller and sharper than previous tools, which made stone tools more efficient and useful. Bones of animals and Ivory had also been used for tool making. The Neolithic men began agriculture and also animal domestication. This change from food gathering to food producing occupation did not come about all of a sudden. They made many trials and progress in this direction over a few thousand years. In the first instance, they carefully watched the cycle of seasonal growth of edible vegetables and the ripening of fruits and grains in the wild, and then started harvesting them. Once this practice was adopted, it marked the beginning of settled life, as after cultivation, people had to stay there to see through the ripening of their crop. It gave birth to the rudiments of rural economy and the farming communities. The domestication of animals like sheep and goats commenced almost simultaneously with the beginning of cultivation by the Neolithic men. So, the development of agriculture promoted a settled existence and made possible an increase in population. These changes brought revolution in human history. This transition, from hunting gathering to food-producing communities, led increasing levels of sedentariness and also an increase in population, in the long run.

Food production required new tools and equipment. It also involved a new Kind of scheduling of subsistence activities and shifts in the contributions of men, women, children, and aged folk. There were also some changes in the food ethics as farmers had to store food grains for future use. These things required much more long term planning. The introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals made clay pottery universal. They used clay for pot-making and produced many kitchen utensils.

Hunting still remained important and fishing was also a favourite occupation. But, Introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals turned majority of Neolithic men into farming communities who started making permanent settlements along the banks of the rivers as agriculturists. Some people became shepherds and herdsman, while others took to artisan's craft. With the knowledge of making fire, the art of cooking food gained momentum. Neolithic men learnt the arts of spinning and the weaving of Cloth. The dyeing of cloth also originated in this period. Both the sexes wore a dhoti like garment and combed their hair or tied them in various forms. The women, especially adorned their bodies with decorative ornaments. The beginning of social consciousness among the Neolithic Indians aroused the feelings of love for their companions and respect for their elderly folk. These noble sentiments were reflected in the origin of the custom for the burial of their dead out of regard for the departed souls. The bones or ashes of the deceased were put in special pots, and buried deep under the Earth, which were accompanied by household articles and food stuffs, which were supposed to be needed by the departed souls.

The early Indians were nature worshippers. They were deeply impressed by their beautiful environment and the various forces of nature, attributed 'a living soul to plants? They came to believe in 'a

supernatural power that organizes and animates the entire material universe.' It gave birth to the concepts of animism and nature worship during the Neolithic age. They believed in the cycle of life and became worshippers of ancestral spirits. They evolved elaborate mortuary sites for the burial or cremation of their dead. Stone worship or the worship of phallus were prevalent during Neolithic period.

The Neolithic men were the earliest farming communities, so they began constructing their houses. These houses had walls of bamboo screen plastered with mud. The roof was made of grass and straw and was probably conical. Small pits were used to throw up the refuse, while bigger pits were obviously storage pits. These new habitats give us an idea of the sense of sanitation of the Neolithic men. When larger groups of people started living together in settled villages, they would have had to devise new ways and norms of interaction and co-operation. The communities of early farmers and pastoralists must have been internally differentiated on the basis of age and sex. The differences in the sizes of houses and in the quantity and quality of grave goods indicate the existence of social ranks. Among larger groups, the regulation of economic activities and social relations would have required some sort of effective political control and organization.

CONCLUSION

Prehistory represents the longest part of the human past, and is associated with the emergence of modern humans. It included three periods - Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. They have been classified on the basis of stone tools found in these periods. But the exact distinction among these periods is not possible and there are always regional and temporal variations. The social structures were in formative stage during Palaeolithic period Society. Society was simple and was divided into various 'bands' of small sizes. The Mesolithic age was the intermediary phase between the old and the new stone ages. Microliths, literally means small tools emerged during Mesolithic phase. Plant and animal domestication began in the last phase, Neolithic. These changes brought revolution in human evolution. Now, the hunter-gatherers transformed into agriculturists and pastoralists. Their nomadic life came to an end and they started living at permanent settlements. Social structures became complex and some sort of social differences emerged in the Neolithic societies.

So, the earliest social structures emerged due to the need of survival where a group of humans was required to fight against the big wild animals. Then, these social structures kept changing and evolving according to the new environmental changes and human needs.

REFERENCES

- 1) Singh, Upinder. (2009). A history of ancient and early medieval India: from the stone age to the 12th century. Noida : Dorling Kindersley (India) Put. Ltd.
- 2) Mehta, J.L. & Mehta, Sarita (2010). History of Ancient India (From the earliest times to 1206 AD). New Delhi: Lotus Press Publishers & Distributors.
- 3) <https://medium.com/@hamzabneb/mesolithic-social-Structure-53ab4c13c39b>
- 4) [https:// anthrologic.com/mesolithic age](https://anthrologic.com/mesolithic-age)
- 5) <https://www.studocu.com/in/document/aligarh-muslim-university/ancient-india/the-neolithic-revolution-social-structure-belief-system/20008026>
- 6) [https:// www. Vedantu.com/history/ Palaeolithic-Societies](https://www.Vedantu.com/history/Palaeolithic-Societies)