Discovery of Prehistoric Sites in the Lower Reaches of River Sher, Narsinghpur, Madhya Pradesh, India: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract: *Central India is considered one of the hubs for Palaeolithic research. The Narmada, the fifth largest river, and its tributaries have provided promising insights into human migration. The Hathnora fossil from Central India has become a benchmark for understanding the bio-cultural entities of the Quaternary period. While many prehistoric sites have been reported from various parts of the Central Narmada basin, only a few have been studied in detail due to dense vegetation, restricted forest areas, and other challenges. Narsinghpur, being a significant center for research, was selected for the present study, focusing on the River Sher. The goals of this paper include a survey of the lower reaches of the River Sher, where more than 900 artifacts and a few fossils were studied. This paper discusses the newly explored sites, their artifact assemblages, and their geological context.*

Keywords: Narmada Basin, Palaeolithic, Sher River, Central India, Lithic Assemblage, Pleistocene, Microliths

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, the Narmada River which is not only considered sacred but in turn is also the fifth largest river in India. It has provided a vital resource for people, animals, and plants. It has also served as the habitat for numerous early animal and human communities. It's regarded as one of the most extensively researched river basins in peninsular India because of its distinct geological context, dense layer of alluvium covering extremely fertile soil, and significance for paleoanthropology (Lal et. al. 2022).

The central Narmada valley is considered to maintain a homogeneity to various prehistoric cultures along with significant fossil discoveries (Lal et al., 2022; Chauhan

2011). The presence of abundant mega-vertebrate fossils and lithic artifacts from the Middle and Late Pleistocene periods has drawn much interest of numerous palaeontologists and archaeologists over the years along the Narmada basin. The majority of the sites found along the Narmada's tributaries are primarily from the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic cultural periods. A small number of primary context sites like Tikoda in the Vindhyan foothills north of the Narmada basin and few rock shelters like Bhimbetka were recorded (Misra et al. 1990). First discovered in the Jabalpur-Narsinghpur region, a fossil from the Narmada alluvium was later published in the inaugural volume of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal along with follow-up findings made by Splisbury (1834, 1837, 1840) and Princep (1833, 1834) (Mishra 2016). According to McCown's field notes, the hunt for humans was concentrated in the area between Harda and Jabalpur, which was thought to represent the representative Middle Pleistocene period in peninsular India. Later on McCown team's (1964–1965) exploration yielded promising results, including sites from the Middle Pleistocene to Holocene period and representing Barman Ghat with Lower to Late Palaeolithic artifacts; the Middle Pleistocene with Lower Palaeolithic artifacts Mahadeo Piparia; and the Late Pleistocene with artifacts representing River Sher. 1986 marked an initiation phase to re-study the Central Narmada valley by the team of Deccan College, Pune where areas like Devakachar, Guwarighat, Talayaghat on river Sher and Barurewa were visited and fortunately numerous Palaeolithic assemblages and fossilized vertebrates were discovered. Since then, archaeologists have focused on a number of locations in the Narsinghpur district. Other sites included the Early Acheulian phase represented by Chinki; Piparha and Ratikarar Khurd on the Sher-Narmada confluence; Manoria, Umariya, Balghat, Devakachar, Guwarighat, Madardha, and Shyamkheda on the Sher River; Khamariya on the Nagpur-Sagar Highway; Talayaghat on the Barurewa River; Mungwani on the Nagpur-Sagar Highway.

From Early Acheulian to microliths, the artifacts from these sites were discovered in a variety of states, from rolled to extremely fresh (IAR 1960–61; 1977–78; 1981–82). In light of this, the current investigation focuses on comprehending Pleistocene archaeology at locations investigated in and around Narsinghpur, along the lower reaches of river Sher. Even though the previously documented sites have been examined, a lot of attention has been paid to the recently found sites in order to document and comprehend their geomorphology as well as to research the lithic artifacts.

Study Area

Physiographic Setting: River Sher is a sub-tributary of River Narmada and is present in the district of Narsinghpur, Madhya Pradesh (22°36′ to 23°16′ N and 78°27′ to 79°40′ E) where 55/I, 55/J, 55/M and 55/N was considered as a part of the topographical study (Pandit et.al., 2022). Narsinghpur lies at an elevation of 1185ft above MSL. Physiographically the Narsinghpur district is divided into three major geological units which includes: 1) the vindhyan range marking the northern edge while 2) the

Satpuras forming the southern part and 3) Narmada valley stretching from East to West. The temperature of the region records from as low as 8^0c during the winters to >45^0c as high as summers (Pandey and Khare 2018). The important tributaries of the river Narmada within the district are Sher, Shakkar, Dudhi and Hiren. Amongst them Sher is one of the second largest tributary which has its two sub tributaries as Umar joining river Sher at the village Umariya and Barurewa joining from the Guwari village (Lal et al, 2022). The significance of this sub tributary is that it flows North Westerly which originates from Lakhnadone in the Seoni district and meets the river Narmada at Ratikararkalan of Narsinghpur district. It is approximately 136km is length.

Present Work: The present study focuses on understanding Palaeolithic localities in and around river Sher for detailed study and also examining newly discovered localities to understand the contextual information and site formation process.

Table 1: Newly discovered sites during surveys

Sl. No.	Site Name	Context	Cultural Affinity	Geo-coordinates	No. of Artifacts
1.	Tindni	Riverbank	Late Middle Palaeolithic	22°59'23.5"N 79°10'34.3"E	15
2.	Dundipindrai	Riverbank	Late middle Palaeolithic to Late Palaeolithic	22°59'29.1"N 79°13'11.2"E	23
3.	Supla	Riverbank	Late Middle Palaeolithic	22°59'39.9"N 79°14'35.0"E	9
4.	Ghatpindrai	Riverbank	Late middle Palaeolithic to Late Palaeolithic	22°58'10.6"N 79°17'16.6"E	18
5.	Pansi	Riverbank	LMP-LP	22°58'24.2"N 79°17'31.1"E	7
6.	Singhrampur	Riverbank	LMP-LP	22°57'21.9"N 79°18'13.8"E	20
7.	Bahadurpur	Riverbank	LMP-LP	22°56'31.5"N 79°19'08.0"E	9
8.	Belkhedi	Riverbank	LMP	22°55'50.0"N 79°20'21.5"E	10
9.	Lurhata	foothills and riverbank	LMP-LP, microlithic	22°54'07.5"N 79°20'41.4"E	106
10.	Sihora	Foothills	LMP-LP, microlithic	22°52'15.3"N 79°21'59.2"E	44
11.	Gararіya	Riverbank	LMP-LP, microlithic	22°48'20.8"N 79°27'23.8"E	35
Total Number of Artifacts					**296**

A Brief Overview of the Sites

To investigate the prehistoric cultures in this region, explorations were carried along the tributaries of the river Sher both from the previously reported sites as well as newly discovered sites within the vicinity (Pandit et. al, 2022). The potential areas of explorations were conducted using the satellite imagery from Google Earth and topographical maps.

The first target to get into the discovery of newly discovered sites were mainly investigated along the streams and river channels. Foot surveys were mainly conducted while the exploration process of lithic artefacts and the sites survey includes 11 newly discovered sites (Table 1) with 296 (21 cores, 194 flakes and 82 tools) specimens. These sites have been designated with multicultural entities and varied geological contexts. In this paper each sites along with its associated lithic typology along with the geological contexts has been discussed.

Tindni: The site is situated on the right bank of the right bank of the river Sher. The elevation of the site is approximately 352 m. it is approximately 9332.09 m East of the river Narmada. The nearest locality is Tindni village with is 1023.63 m North East of the surveyed site. Total number of artefacts collected were 15. Due to extreme vegetation very limited exposure of the sections were noted to understand the geological context of the site. The surveyed area was approximately 150 m. The raw materials utilized were chert, quartz and sandstone. The assemblage consists of 2 cores (13.33%); 4 flakes (26.66%) and 9 tools (60%). The artefacts mainly include scrapers, point, end flake, blade core and microlithic blade while the assemblage belongs to the late middle Palaeolithic period (Figure 1).

Dundipindrai: The site is situated on the right bank of River Sher. The elevation of the site recorded approximately 343m and 4264 m away and situated on the eastern side of the river Narmada. The nearest village is Dundipindrai which is situated 798 m North of the surveyed site. The total number of the artefacts collected are 23 where the collection was mainly based on loose kankered gravels along with some calcretised sandy gravels (Pandit et al., 2022). The raw materials utilized is mainly quartz while some artefacts have also been made from reddish quartzite. The composition mainly includes 6 cores (26.08%), 14 flakes (60.86%) and 3 tools (13.04%) (Figure 3 and 4). The assemblage contains scraper, levallois point, centripetal tortoise core, knife, discoid cores and microlithic blade core and technologically ascertained as middle to late Palaeolithic phase (Figure 2).

Supla: The total number of artefacts recorded were nos 9 and this claims to be very limited due to the high flow of the water body and dense vegetation. The site is situated on the right bank of river Sher and the elevation recorded approximately is 358 m. it is approximately 10 kms away from the Narsinghpur town and 15,000 m East of the Narmada River. The raw materials mainly include chert and quartzite. The assemblage mainly includes 5 flakes (55.56%) and 4 tools (44.44%) and the typical artefacts that has been explored are scrapers, flake, blade and point (Figure 5).

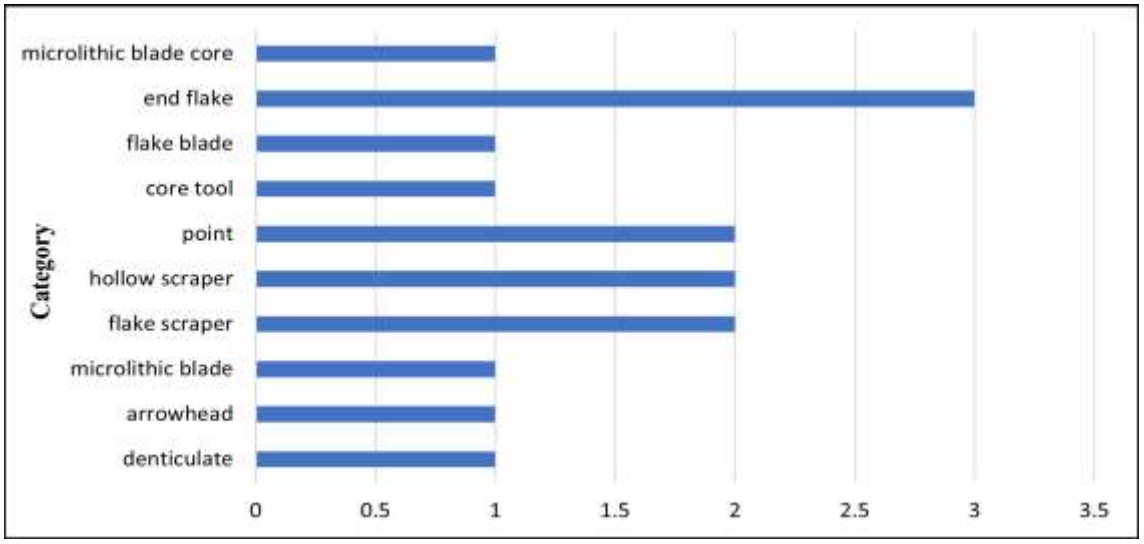

Figure 1: Assemblage composition from the site Tindni

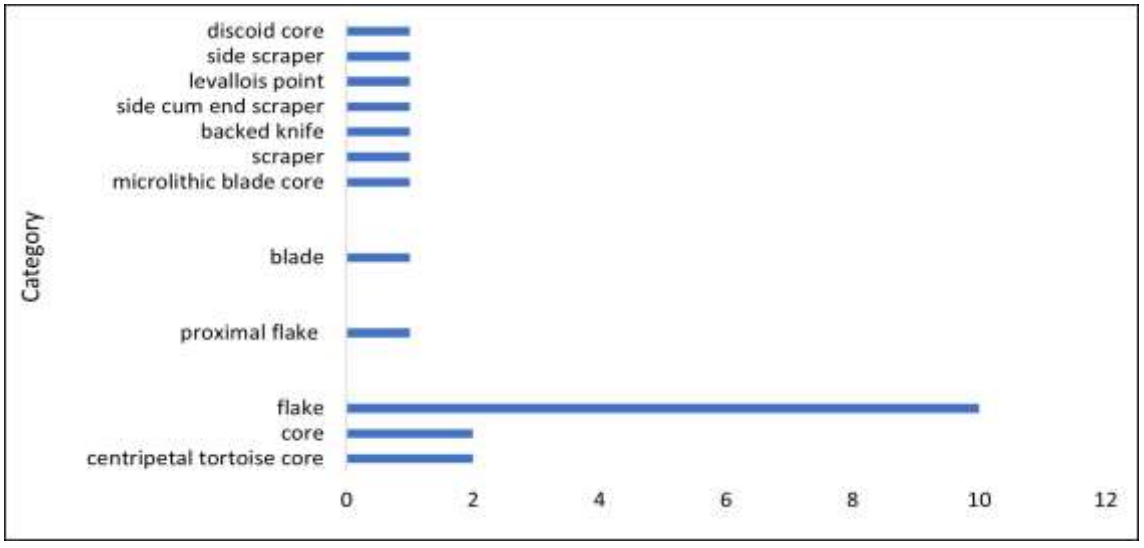

Figure 2: Assemblage composition from the site Dundipindrai

Figure 3: General view of Dundipindrai

Figure 4: Cores from the site Dundipindrai

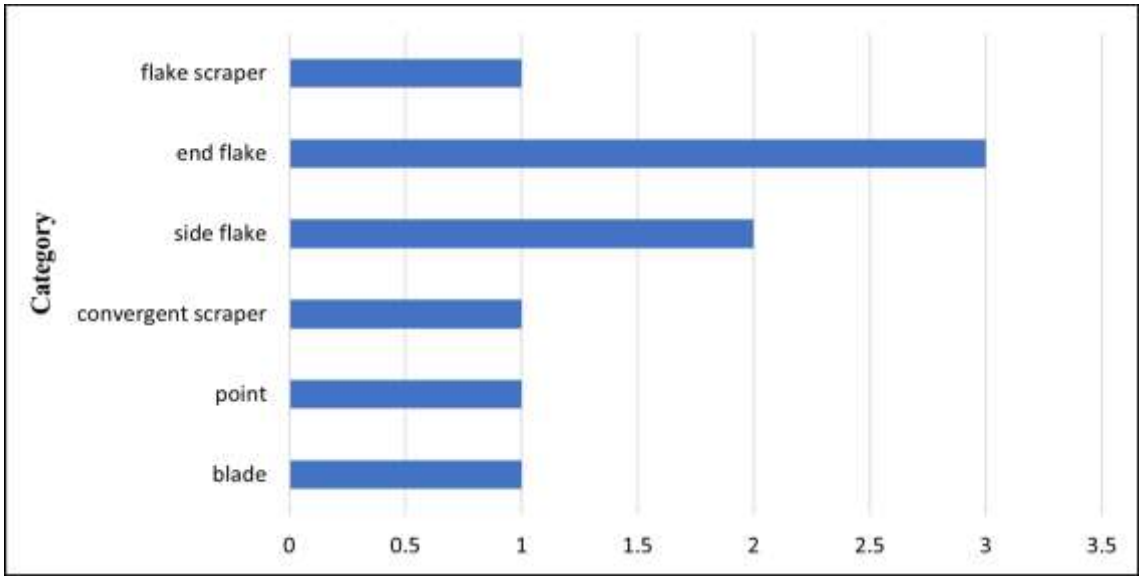

Figure 5: Assemblage composition from the site Supla

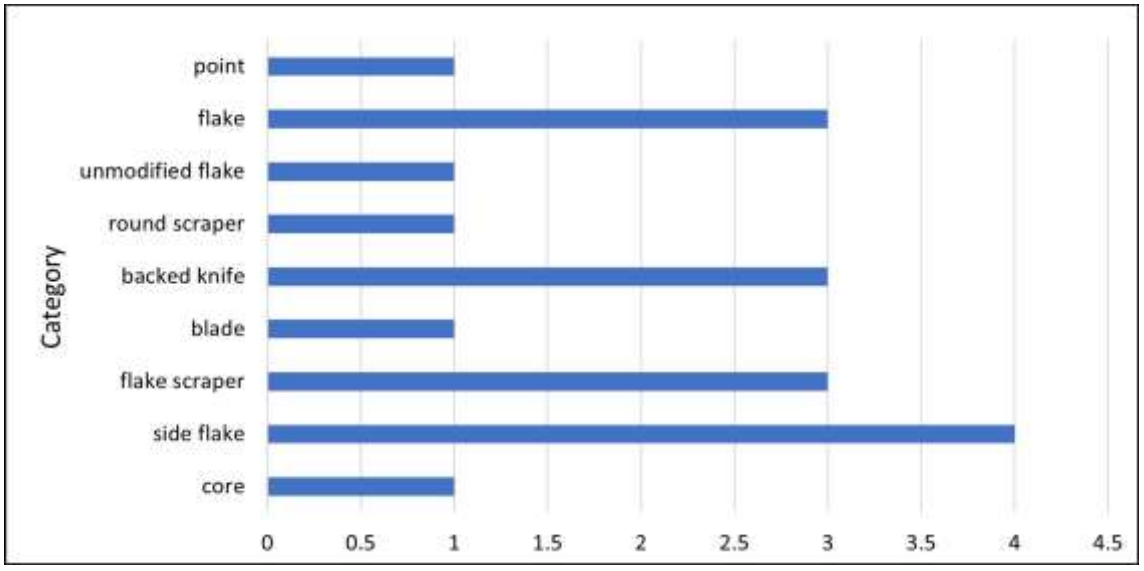

Figure 6: Assemblage composition from the site Ghatpindrai

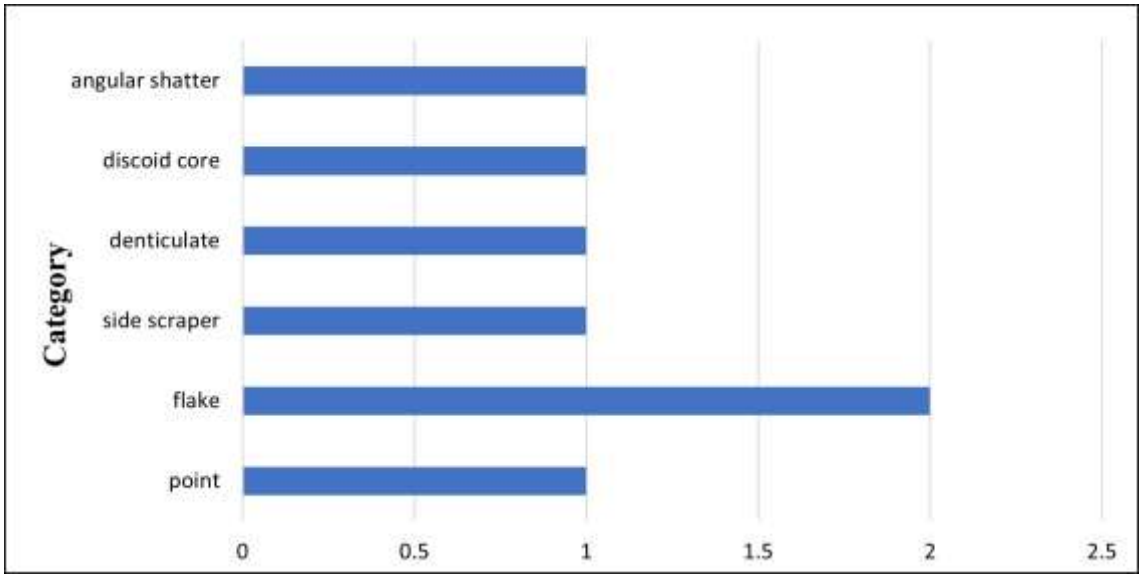

Figure 7: Assemblage composition from the site Pansi

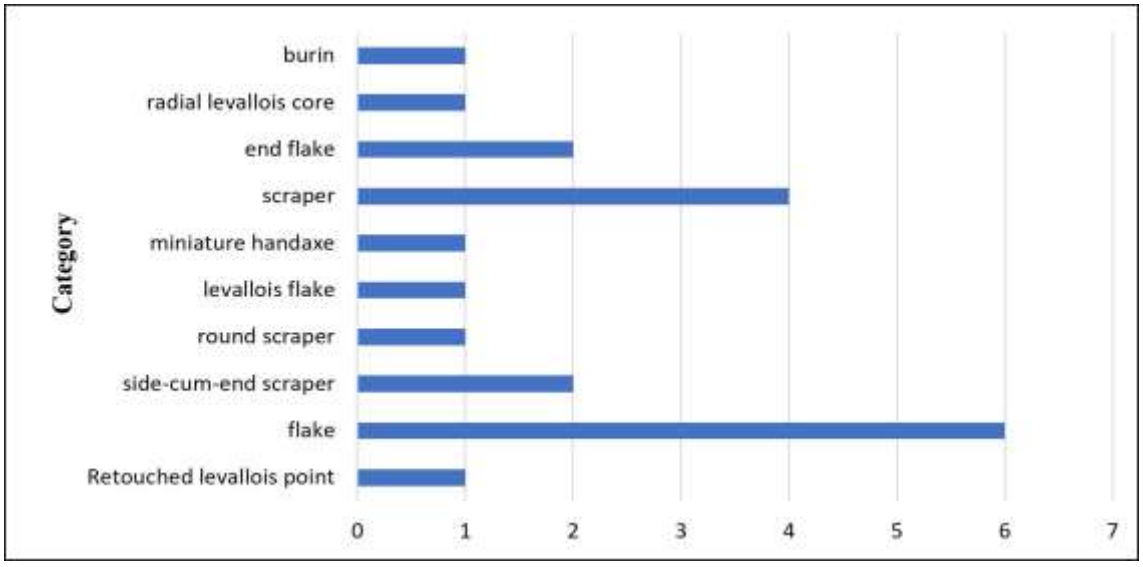

Figure 8: Assemblage composition from the site Singhrampur

Figure 9: In situ artefacts from Singhrampur

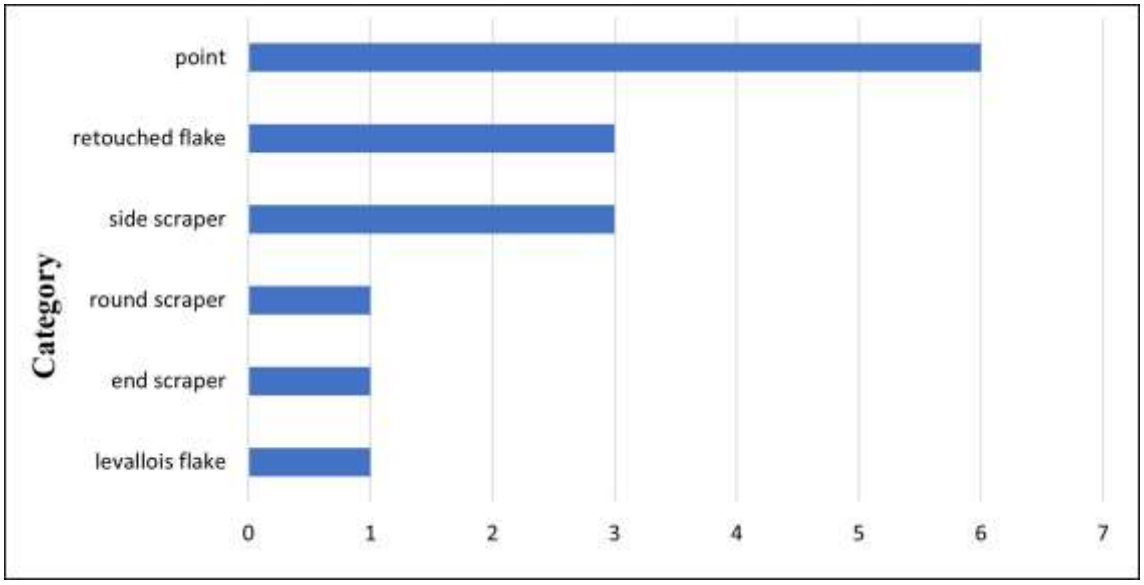

Figure 10: Assemblage composition from the site Bahadurpur

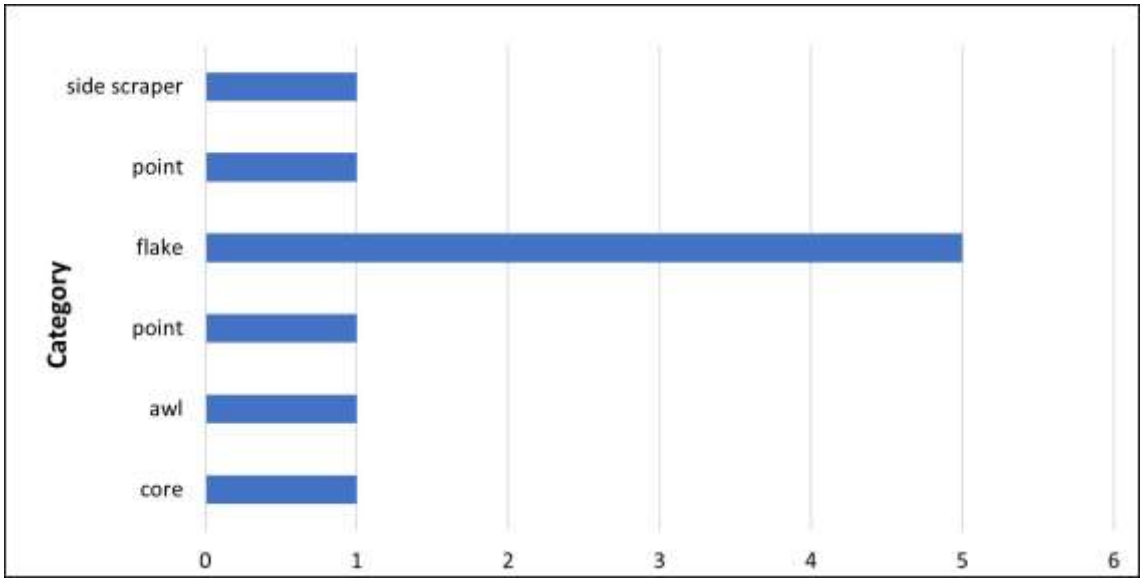

Figure 11: Assemblage composition from the site Belkhedi

Ghatpindrai: The site is situated on the right bank of the river Sher and is situated approximately 15 km North of the Narsinghpur town (Pandit et.al, 2022) while the site surveyed is situated at an elevation of 357m. due to dense vegetation the geological context of the artefacts is not known and therefore the artefacts are considered to be of secondary context. The total number of artefacts collected were 18 in number out of which 01 cores (5.56%), 08 flakes (44.44%) and 09 tools (50%) were explored. The main raw materials utilized are chert while few artefacts have been found with quartzite. The assemblage includes scrapers, flakes, blade and core (Figure 6).

Pansi: It is situated near a seasonal rain gully and approximately 385 m away from the river Sher lying on the Western side. The site is situated at an elevation of 361 m and

approximately 17 kms Northeast of the main town (Pandit et. al, 2022). Due to dense vegetation the artefacts were collected from the kankary gravel beds. The total number of artefacts collected are 7 out of which 01 core (14.29%), 03 flakes (42.86%) and 03 tools (42.86%) (Figure 7). The raw materials mainly include chert and quartzite. The typical artefacts explored were discoid core, denticulate, side scraper and point.

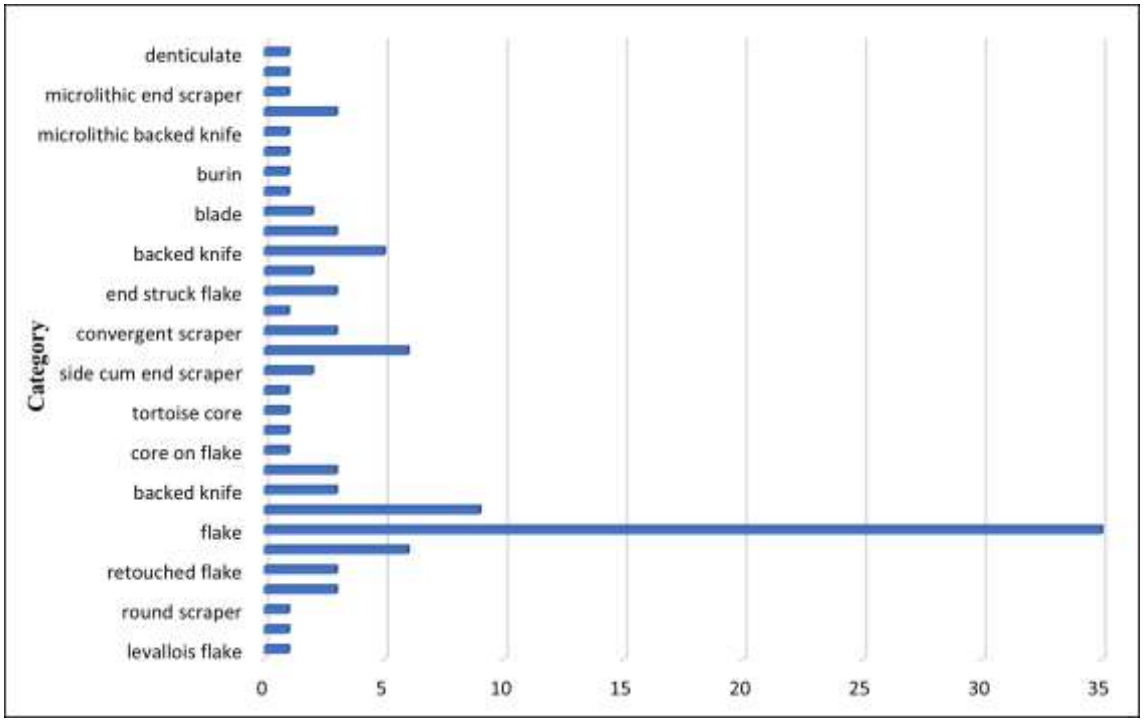

Figure 12: Assemblage composition from the site Lurhata

Figure 13: In situ artefacts from the site Lurhata

Singhrampur: The site is situated on the left side of the rive Sher and is approximately 13 kms East of the main town. The surveyed site is situated at an elevation of 360 m and lies 23, 345 m East of the main river Narmada. The nearest village lies on the

Northwest of the site and is approximately 389.27 m. The total number of the artefacts are 20 out of which 01 is core (5%), 09 flakes (45%) and 10 tools (50%) (Figure 8). The assemblage composition mainly includes retouched levallois point, side-cum-end scraper, miniature handaxe (Figure 9).

Figure 14: Scraper embedded in the conglomerate bed of the site Lurhata

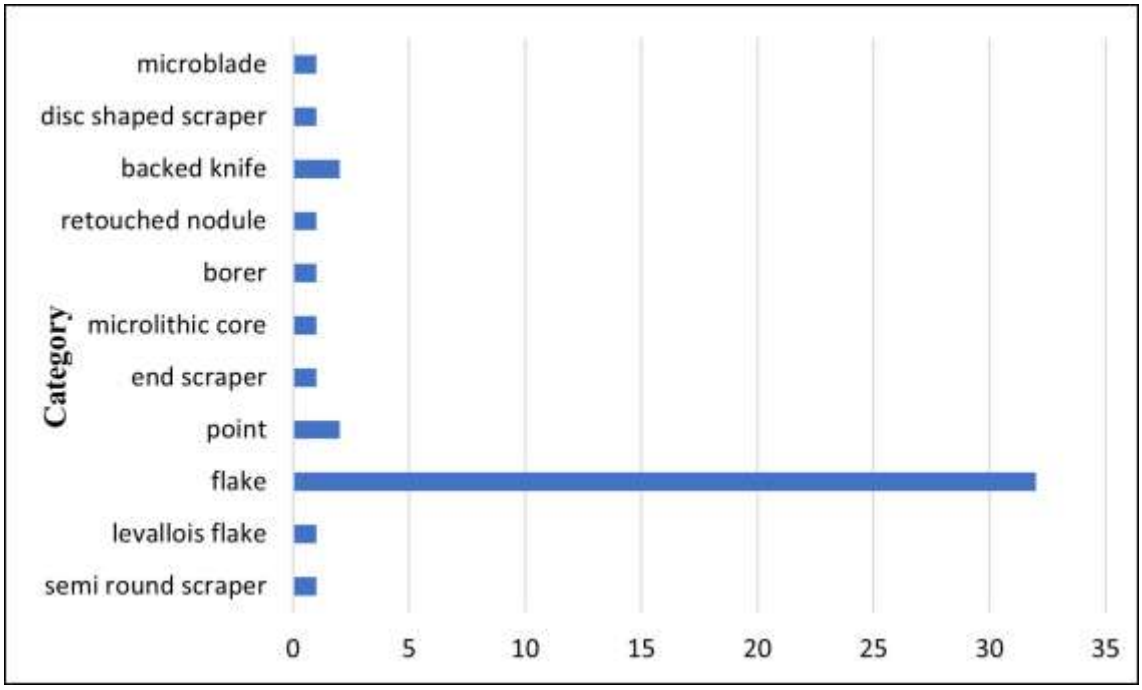

Figure 15: Assemblage composition from the site Sihora

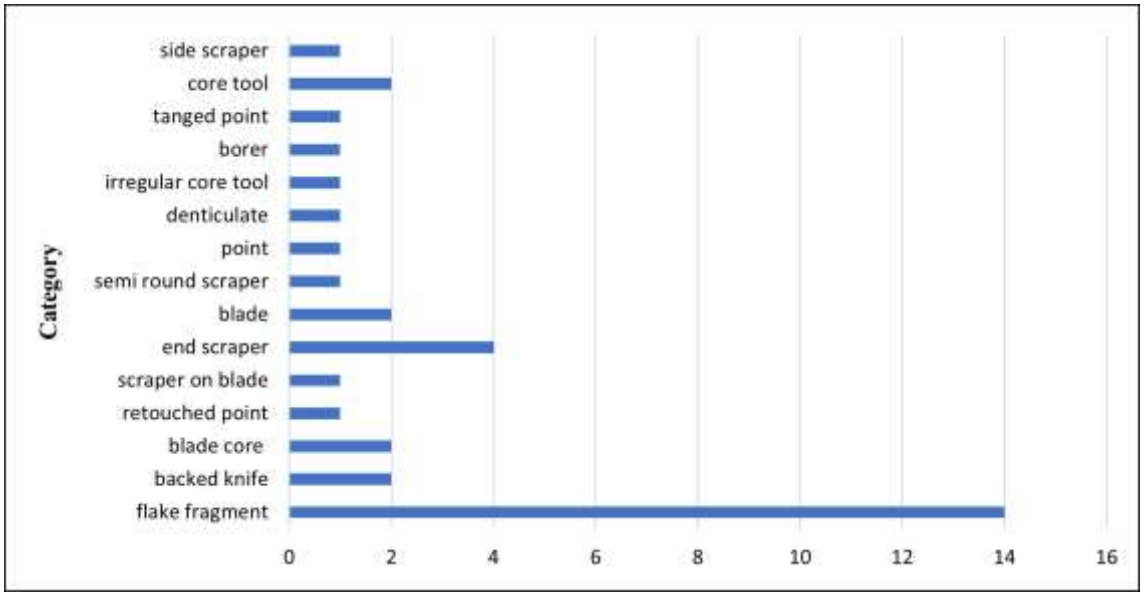

Figure 16: Assemblage composition from the site Gararіya

Figure 17: Agricultural field of Gararіya yielding fresh artefacts

Bahadurpur: The site is situated on the left bank of the river Sher and situated at an elevation of 361 m. The artefacts collected from this region are from secondary context while the total number of artefacts are 09 in number. The assemblage mainly includes 04 flakes (44.44%), 05 tools (55.56%) and the collection have levallois flakes, point and a variety of flaked scrapers (Figure 10). The raw material mainly included chert and quartzite.

Belkhedi: The site is situated on the left bank of the river Sher. The artefacts are of secondary context and some artefacts has also been found from the pebbly context. The assemblage composition is 10 out of which 01 core (10%), 05 flakes (50%) and 04 tools (40%) are the findings (Figure 11).

Figure 18: End scraper from the site Gararіya

Lurhata: The site situated on the left bank of the river Sher and situated at an elevation of 389 m. The site is approximately 207.28 m West of river Sher. The nearest village is approximately 403.38 m North from the actual site of the exploration. The artefacts collected are both from gravel deposits as well as conglomerate deposits. The total number of artefacts explored are 106 out of which 03 cores (2.83%), 84 flakes (79.25%) and 19 tools (17.92%) (Figure 12). The assemblage comprises of side scrapers, side-cum end scraper, tortoise core, backed knife, end struck flake, microlithic blade, discoid core, burin, microburin etc. (Figure 13 and 14). Raw materials mainly include chert which the one of the predominant materials however quartzite is also exploited. A skull of a bovine group has also been discovered from the conglomerate bed situated on the left side of the river.

Sihora: The site is situated on the left bank of the river Sher and near the confluence of the river Macharewa. The assemblage composed of 44 artefacts out of which 01 core

(2.27%), 36 flakes (81.82%) and 19 tools (17.92%) (Figure 15). The raw materials utilized were quartz, chert, chalcedony as well as quartzite.

Gararіya: The site is situated at an elevation of 429 m and approximately 70.35 m West of the river Sher. The artefacts collected were from the agricultural field as well as river terrace. A total of 35 artefacts (Figure 16) has been analysed out of which 05 cores (14.29%), 22 flakes (62.86%) and 08 tools (22.86%) (Figure 17 and 18).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the Narsinghpur area, the river Sher, a tributary of the Narmada, is highly noteworthy from both an archeological and geological perspective. The current study set out to report new locations and do a follow-up investigation on previously identified ones. 11 new sites have been documented. Lurhata, Sihora and Gararіya are the most important explored sites as they have the prominence of the deciphering multicultural materials as well as utilizing various types of raw materials to manufacture a utility artefact. Although quartzite is one of the most commonly used raw material but apart from that chalcedony, basalt, and chert have all been employed. This suggests that over various cultural periods, a range of raw materials were used to create various kinds of stone tools. The prevalence of blade-based tools, including blades, backed tools, points, burins, borers, micro blade cores, etc., is indicative of the Late Paleolithic period. It is generally evident that from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Late Palaeolithic cultural stages, the river Sher was constantly inhabited. The majority of the locations have phases of transition and are multicultural. It is possible to speculate that this area has been inhabited by From the Middle Pleistocene until the Late Pleistocene, hominins have existed. The fact that the majority of the artifacts in this study came from secondary contexts and were gathered using the random sampling approach is one of its shortcomings. Therefore, the results reached in this work are tentative and unresolved till further research.

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