Prehistoric Cultural Traits of Western Tripura

Jougathi Basumatary[1]

[1]. Department of Archaeology, Cotton University, MCB Road, Pan Bazaar, Guwahati, Assam – 781 001, India (*Email: jougathi.basumatary@cottonuniversity.ac.in*)

Received: 09 July 2023; Revised: 01 October 2023; Accepted: 31 October 2023
Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11 (2023-24): 845-852

Abstract: *The article explores the prehistoric cultural landscape of Tripura, focusing on its archaeological findings, geomorphological history, and significance within the broader context of Northeast India and Southeast Asia. It begins by outlining Tripura's geography, physiographic features, and geological formations, highlighting the discovery of Quaternary terraces with significant prehistoric deposits, including Pleistocene and Holocene dating. Early archaeological investigations led by N.R. Ramesh revealed a variety of Neolithic tools and pottery sites in the Khowai and Haora valleys, indicating the presence of Stone Age cultures. The article discusses artefacts such as celts, scrapers, and chopping tools, many fashioned from locally available silicified fossil wood, with typological similarities to Southeast Asian Hoabinhian traditions and late Anyathian tools from Myanmar. Interdisciplinary studies have shown evidence of significant palaeo-environmental changes during the late Quaternary, possibly impacting human habitation patterns in the region. The author emphasizes the need for extensive excavation and advanced dating techniques (such as OSL and C-14) to build a detailed chronology of Tripura's prehistoric human activities. Through comparative analysis, the article suggests that Tripura served as a potential cultural bridge between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia during prehistoric times.*

Keywords: Tripura, Prehistory, Quaternary Terraces, Anyathian Tools, Neolithic, Hoabinhian Tradition, Paleoenvironment

Introduction

Tripura lies in the north-eastern part of India, sharing international border with Bangladesh in the west, south, and north, with Mizoram in east and Assam in north-eastern part. The state of Tripura consists of eight districts namely: West Tripura, Khowai, Unakoti, Sepahijhala, Dhalai, North Tripura, Gomati and South Tripura. The physiography of Tripura is characterised by plains, hills and valleys. The region was also known as "Hill Trippera" in the ancient times. There are six main hill ranges increasing in height as one move from west to east. They are Jampui, Sakhantang, Langtarai, Atharamura, Baramura running in northerly direction and disappear in the plains of Sylhet. The hill ranges with their highest peaks are Deotamura range, Atharamura range, Langtarai range, Sakhantang and Jampui range. Several rivers, tributaries, streams and streamlets filled with Quaternary sediments flows in between these parallel hills. There are long river valleys extending over a vast area in different

sub-divisions formed mostly of deep alluvial deposits of rich fertility, excellently suited to the cultivation of paddy, jute oil seeds, pulses, fruits and vegetables. The principal rivers in the district are: Gumti, Haora, Khowai, Manu, Deo, Dolai and Fenny. The forests of Tripura may be conveniently classified as follows: evergreen forest, moist deciduous forest, swamp vegetation, riverine forest, bamboo forest, cane brakes, garjan forest, savannah forest and grassland forest types. The forests and hill ranges of Tripura are in close continuity with the Chittagong hill tracts and the hills of southern Assam. It is therefore natural to expect that the fauna of Tripura to have a close resemblance to the adjoining areas (Menon, 1975). Tripura is known for its rich collection of prehistoric artefacts, temple architecture, Buddhist stupa, rock-cut sculptures, art and iconography.

The four Quaternary terraces have been named as Kalyanpur formation, Teliamura formation, Ghitoli formation and Khowai formation. After a detailed study on the basis of geomorphic and geological analysis and C-14 dating result, it has been known that Kalyanpur formation falls under the Pleistocene age whereas the other three fall in the Holocene age group. C-14 dating from the Kalyan formation indicates an age of 34,680 ± 2980 years BP from the other three formations C-14 dating established date of Holocene ages. From the Telimura formation the date is 1100 ± 90 to 3450 ± 110 years; whereas from the Ghitoli and Khowai formation C-14 date is 165 ± 80 years BP (Ramesh 1985).

Prehistory of Tripura

Noted geologist N.R. Ramesh was the first to bring to light about the presence of prehistoric cultural remains in Tripura. It has been mentioned in the Tripura District Gazetteers, Govt. of Tripura, about finds of Neolithic fossil tools while digging a tank in Nandannagar in Agartala. The Neolithic tools found were scrapers or hoe manufactured on chert and grinder of petrified fossil wood. It is mentioned that the scrapers were beautifully polished (Menon, 1975). The discovery of Stone Age sites since 1980's by Ramesh in Tripura marked the region in the prehistoric map of India and Southeast Asia. The first systematic mapping was conducted in the early 1980s by the Geological Survey of India with morpho-stratigraphic approach in the season 1980-81, 1981-82 and 1982-83 (Ramesh and Kar 1981; Ramesh 1982). During the Quaternary mapping in the year 1981-82, some celts, pebble tools and stratified pottery sites were reported in the Khowai and Haora valleys (GSI 1982; Ramesh 1982). This approach has led to the discovery of several stratified Stone Age sites and pottery sites in the Upper Pleistocene and Holocene terrace deposits in the landscape of west Tripura. The pottery sites were reported from Khas Khalyanpur and Seratoli in the Khowai region and from the Haora valley pottery finds were reported the site of Kolaghar. Ramesh (1986) also mentioned about the radio-carbon dating on the semi-carbonised wood fragments which is around 1430 ± 80 BP suggesting the potsherds belonging in between protohistoric to historic period whereas stone tools belonging to pre-Neolithic to Neolithic time period on the basis of typology. The archaeological evidence of the Stone Age culture of Tripura comes from the investigation by Ramesh (1988, 1989),

Poddar and Ramesh (1983), Prasad and Ramesh (1984), Prasad (1988), Debbarma (2012, 2013, 2014 and 2017), Hazarika *et al.* (2020) and Ramesh *et al.* (2020). Most of the artefacts recovered earlier are manufactured on the silicified fossil wood which is locally available on the area. However, few artefacts were reported which were manufactured on Quartzite stone but vey less as compared to the silicified fossil wood. Ramesh (1986) mentioned about the finds of celts, pebble tools and pottery sites in the valleys of Khowai and Haora during the Quaternary mapping in 1981-82.

Three decades after Ramesh's work, Debbarma (2012) has carried out extensive survey in the Saidra valley of west Tripura. He relocated the sites mentioned by Ramesh and also located some new sites. In his unpublished M Phil dissertation, he discussed about the potentiality of the sites in the Saidra valley. In his unpublished PhD dissertation, the research in the Saidra valley was continued in which the artefacts collected from the surface finds, river beds and from test pits at Sonai were documented. Hazarika *et al.* in 2020 along with team have carried out geo-archaeological exploration in Khowai-Saidra (Haora) valleys in the districts of Khowai and west Tripura. Ramesh *et al.* (2020) in the Field Excursion Guide Book mentioned about the Quaternary history and discussed about the associated geo-archaeological remains. Most of the earlier investigations are carried out in the Saidra/Haora valleys focusing the site Sonai and nearby regions. There are more regions in Tripura which show ample potentiality of prehistoric remains which need to be explored extensively and studied further. The previous researches on the prehistoric remains have been studied on the basis of morphological characteristics of the typo-technological features. It has been categorized by Ramesh (1989) under pre-Neolithic to Neolithic period. The morphological features of the tool typology show close affinities to the Neolithic of Southeast Asia. The prehistoric cultural remains in Tripura in the Quaternary landscape are in the form of artefacts such as scrapers, points, chopping tools, hammer stones, blades and fluted cores. The presence of archaeological artefacts suggests the prehistoric human occupation in the Quaternary landscape of Tripura.

Interdisciplinary studies has been carried out by Prasad and Ramesh (1984) in the palynological studies of the peat samples from Sekerkot village in west Tripura which mentioned that it was the first record of *Circinoconis conidia* from the Holocene deposits of Tripura. Prasad (1988) with an interdisciplinary approach along with group of scientist involving geologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and biologists conducted ecological and archaeological studies on Quaternary deposits in Tripura and adjoining regions of Burma to unravel the traits of the prehistory of man and biosphere. Peat samples of fungal remains, leaf cuticles and petridophytic spores were recovered from the west Tripura. They studied and analysed micro-macrofossils and stone implements to understand and interpret palaeo-climatic and palaeo-environmental changes. The geomorphological features of the region suggest that during the late Quaternary epoch, major environmental, eustatic and morphotectonic changes have considerably affected western part of the Tripura. The occurrence of stone implements of various types at different localities indicate that the *tilla* lands have been preferred at prehistoric times

as it was safer camping grounds from the devastating floods. The *lunga* lands might have been subjected to periodic floods, which is supported by the evidence of the occurrence of *Clasterosporium* spores which grows on the leaves of marshy vegetation is subjected to periodic floods.

Significance of the Prehistoric Cultures of Tripura in Context of Northeast India

The archaeology of northeast India claims the presence of Paleolithic assemblages coming from the early and middle Pleistocene context. Sharma (1974) mentioned about the presence of tools showing characteristics of Lower Paleolithic tools, in the Garo hills. Sonowal (1987) claims presence of blade tradition in Garo hills. Mahanta (1995) analysed the stone artefacts from Selbalgiri in the western Garo hills and classified it into three stages belonging to Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures. Ghosh (1978) has suggested that these materials are not Palaeolithic, but just 'Neolithic debitage'.

In 1969, Sanaklia (1974) visited the Garo hills and observed that the Palaeolithic elements might be present in the area. Ashraf (1990) talks about the Palaeolithic stone tools consisting of choppers, cleavers and handaxes from Kamla and Dikrong valley of Papumpure district of Arunachal Pradesh. Medhi and colleagues (2006) claimed about the presence of Palaeolithic artefacts in Mizoram. Singh (1972, 1983) in the excavation at the limestone cave site of Khangkhui in Manipur unearthed stone and bone tool artefacts. The handaxes and cleavers are unearthed at the lower level of the cave whereas scrapers, points, borers, blades, burins and bone points are found at the upper level.

Sharma (1979) mentioned that the stone tools from Daojali Hading in Assam consist of ground stone axes in triangular, quadrangular and shouldered variety, grinding stones, pestles and mulers. Jamir (2023) pointed out that Hoabinhian tool assemblages in the archaeological record of late Pleistocene and early Holocene context is problematic. The archaeological record from the mid and late Holocene seems to be more supportive, when we see from the context of hunting-gathering subsistence, evidence of cord and paddle impressed potteries, edge-ground tools, facetted/shouldered ground tools and emergence of the early agriculture in the region.

Hazarika (2012) mentioned that the Paleolithic industries could be contemporaneous to microlithic/upper Paleolithic tradition of India and Hoabinhian tradition of the Southeast Asia that of late Pleistocene to early Holocene. From the morphological characteristics of the tool typology, it shows closer affinities to that of the Hoabinhian tradition. Silicified fossil wood as a raw material has been found so far as a dominant raw material for the manufacturing of prehistoric tools of Southeast Asia. The prehistoric remains recovered earlier show close affinities to the Hoabinhian and late Anyathian of Irrawady valley of upper Burma and Myanmar, Tham Lod rock shelter of Thailand, Lalmai hills, Comillla district and Chaklapunji area in the district of

Habiganj, Sylhet division, Bangladesh of Southeast Asia suggesting the cultural links or similarities between the Tripura and Southeast Asia.

Roy and Ahsaan (2002) reported archaeological artefacts in the regions of Hobiganj of Sylhet. In the year 2007, they have reported fossil wood artefacts in Lalmai hills and Chaklapunji of Bangladesh. These artefacts show close resemblances to the Anyathian and Neolithic tools of the Irrawaddy valley of Myanmar. It is also pointed out by Chakrabarti (2006) that the artefacts of Lalmai hills of Bangladesh and Tripura hills are identical with the Late Anyathian. Hazarika (2012, 2017) pointed that the Northeast India might have been used as crossroad between Indian subcontinent and Southeast for the movements for early humans.

Conclusion

The prehistoric culture of western Tripura offers crucial insights into the cultural evolution and ecological adaptations of ancient societies in Northeast India, underscoring significant connections with Southeast Asia. Evidence from archaeological surveys and excavations in regions like the Sonai Valley, Khowai-Haora valleys, and Saidra valley reveals the presence of stone tools, pottery sites, and artefacts primarily made from silicified fossil wood, reflecting affinities with the Neolithic and Hoabinhian traditions of Southeast Asia. The geomorphology and stratified Quaternary terraces of western Tripura have preserved cultural materials across a range of prehistoric time periods, from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic. Radiocarbon dating, palynological analysis, and interdisciplinary studies have illuminated the palaeoenvironmental shifts that impacted human settlements and subsistence patterns in the region.

Western Tripura, with its rich lithic and pottery assemblages, occupies a unique position in the prehistoric archaeology of the Indian subcontinent, providing evidence of cultural exchange and migration routes that connected Northeast India with the broader Southeast Asian cultural sphere. Given the large potential for discovery, extensive future explorations and systematic excavations in Tripura are essential. Using advanced dating techniques, such as Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL), radiocarbon dating (c14) and Thermoluminescence (TL) for sediments and artefacts, along with interdisciplinary research approaches, can further clarify the chronology and cultural significance of Tripura's prehistoric heritage. Comprehensive investigations in this region will deepen our understanding of human occupation, environmental adaptation, and the cross-regional interactions of early populations in prehistoric South and Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor Dr. Manjil Hazarika, Department of Archaeology, Cotton University who has guided me thoroughly in completion of this paper. I am thankful to Geologists N. R. Ramesh who has put light on the Prehistory of Tripura. Thanks to all of them who had made contribution to the Prehistory of Tripura.

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