Stone Age Archaeology in the Garo Hills: Some Issues

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Introduction

Archaeological investigations are generally taken to be based on the material remains of the past human societies such as artefacts and ecofacts. These are carefully examined and studied to obtain a picture of past lifeways of human beings. If the archaeological record is insufficient for the reconstruction of the past, other sources such as ecological, geographical, and ethnographical become very helpful for archaeological interpretation. North-east Indian archaeology including the Garo Hills region suffers from the problem of insufficient data because of which this region is often referred as *terra incognita*[1] in the archaeological arena. Besides the question of limited findings, another problem is the lack of correlation or synthesis among all these works. Therefore in this paper, I try to collate and review the findings of several scholars that have so far been made and attempt to answer certain veritable questions that the Stone Age archaeology of the region elicits. I conclude by looking at the future prospects of this relevant field of study and why it should be encouraged and lauded.

The Stone Age is a broad prehistoric period, lasting about 2.5 million years, during which humans widely used stone as tools after initial knapping. This period is nearly contemporaneous with the evolution of the genus *Homo,* the only exception possibly being at the very beginning, when species prior to *Homo* may also have manufactured tools. The oldest known stone tools have been excavated from several sites at a locality called Gona in Ethiopia datable to 2.6 – 2.5 million years. On the basis of typo-technology of stone tools, the Stone Age is subdivided into different stages, such as the Palaeolithic (Greek: *palaios*=old, *lithos*=stone), Mesolithic (Greek: *mesos*=middle, *lithos*=stone) and Neolithic (Greek: *neos*=new, *lithos*=stone), which are believed to have succeeded one another chronologically. The Palaeolithic which is believed to cover 99% of man's past was a period when man lived by gathering and hunting and was a nomad moving from one temporary shelter to another. Mesolithic was a period when man became semi-sedentary and lived mostly on specialized hunting/fishing and incipient agriculture. Full-fledged agriculture however began and

flourished only in the Neolithic which is evidenced by the use of stone celts as hoes and axes and pottery. The Stone Age came to an end with the beginning of the Iron Age some 2000 – 1000 years ago, variable in different parts of the world.

The area currently referred to as Garo Hills was earlier a part of Assam state during and after British rule in post-independent India. In 1972 it became a part of the state of Meghalaya. This at present comprises the three districts of West, East and South Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya. For the purpose of this paper I refer to the whole of Garo Hills wherever archaeological work relating to the Stone Age has been done; and some outlying areas in its vicinity which lie in neighbouring Assam. Comparatively much is known from West Garo Hills and very less or none from East and South Garo Hills. What is encouraging and refreshing in the recent times is the work that has been done in the outlying Garo areas in Assam which give credence to a greater Garo Hills Stone Age culture.

Archaeological research in Garo Hills, especially its prehistoric past, is said to have begun in the pre-independence period even though there is no written record about this. Some of the early works during this period which discusses Neolithic culture might also have included sporadic findings in Garo Hills.[2] This is difficult to confirm since these works were based on random collections without context by British officers from different parts of erstwhile Assam. However the earliest reference to the past of Garo Hills can be traced to 1959 when Goswami and Bhagabati[3] discovered a prehistoric site near Rengsanggre village in Rongram in West Garo Hills. More systematic and thorough investigations however started after the Prehistoric Archaeology branch was set up in the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University in 1966. Since then for more than four decades, teachers and students of the department were annually involved in exploring different areas of the Garo Hills (and other parts of North-east India) in search of relevant sites. The Stone Age sites discovered so far in the area are mainly found concentrated in the valleys of the rivers of Rongram, Ganol and Simsang in West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, in all numbering 17 well-established sites, and one in the Simsang valley of East Garo Hills district.

Important Features Of Stone Age Garo Hills

The most interesting and eye-catching feature of Garo Hills archaeology esp., of West Garo Hills is the innumerable stone artifacts

discovered. In every season, in the 1970s to 1990s, when teachers and students of Gauhati University and scholars from other institutes explored the area, hundreds of tools were discovered either as surfacial or sectional finds. Many more were found by villagers while working in the fields or in the process of constructing roads. Some of the important findings include the following.

Tools belonging to all the cultural phases (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic) have been found, which is rarely the case in other parts of North-east India. The palaeoliths of Garo Hills possess a very interesting feature, i.e., the Acheulian tradition, similar to the Indian palaeoliths, first identified in the Simsang-Nangal valley at Nangalbibra in 1978.[4] This cultural phase also revealed tools such as scrapers showing indication of the Levalloisean technique, and therefore an evidence of an advanced middle Palaeolithic culture. Blade tools indicative of an upper Palaeolithic culture were collected from different sites such as Didami, Tebronggre and Selbalgre in the Rongram-Ganol valley. The Mesolithic phase is marked by microliths from Nangalbibra and Selbalgre, and Hoabinhian[5] tools from Rongram valley, Bibragre, Matchakolgre and Ganolgre. The Neolithic phase characterised by ground tools was the most widespread and encompassing culture in Garo Hills as evidenced by its discovery in all the sites, including the newly discovered sites from the lower reaches of neighbouring Assam.

Tools were found both as surface finds and in stratified sites. Normally in archaeological reconnaissance only surfacial collection takes place where tools found on the surface are randomly collected and analysed in the lab. These tools lack context and therefore fail to impart information on time and space, and other relevant data on the tool maker and tool user. In Garo Hills all previous discoveries made were on surface collections from river banks, *aba* (jhum fields), and river and road sections. However in the last two decades, some excavations were undertaken which revealed stratified layers giving credence to a chronological sequence in Garo Hills. Selbalgre and Rongram Alagre revealed a microlithic horizon below the Neolithic[6] indicating that the Neolithic culture succeeded the Mesolithic at these sites.

Interestingly, Garo Hills showed evidence of a unique amalgamation of culture in the Mesolithic due to the presence of microliths and Hoabinhian tools. These are typical tools of the Mesolithic period, with microliths being the characteristic tools of Mesolithic Europe and India. The microliths found were of the non-geometric kind consisting of micro-scrapers and points. This could have been used as missile

weapons or as compound tools for cutting purposes. Hoabinhian tools on the other hand are typical South-east Asian epi-Palaeolithic tools appearing at the close of the Pleistocene epoch and beginning of the Holocene. Unlike microliths, these could have been used as cutting tools and as food processing equipments.

The raw material for making tools in Garo Hills is rather unique and interesting. Over 90% of the tools found were made on dolerite, a compact fine-grained rock of dark grey colour. It occurs in the form of dykes which have intruded into the Archaean series commonly found as outcrops in Garo hills[7]. Besides Garo hills only in the Deccan region of central India esp. Maharashtra, Palaeolithic men used dolerite to make Acheulian tools. In the succeeding period however the Deccan Palaeolithic man used better quality silicious stones for making flake and blade tools[8]. However in the Garo Hills context, it is seen that prehistoric man preferred dolerite for making tools in all the cultural periods from the earliest to the latest.

Debates And Problems

One of the biggest problems that the Garo Hills archaeology faces is chronological issues pertaining to the past. Is the culture of this area as old as archaeologists and anthropologists have concluded about Stone Ages in other areas? Unlike Africa and Europe where material cultural remains have been corroborated by fossil remains, it is not the case in Garo Hills. One of the biggest hurdles in this region is the lack of human fossil remains. Due to the wet tropical nature of the region organic remains such as hominid fossils and ecofacts perish over time thereby leaving no archaeological record. This unfortunate event leads to a total lack of information regarding the Stone Ages of the region. This however forces us to study the sole evidence which is present, the stone tools, together with geological and ethnographic evidences.

For a very long time this region was known to have only one cultural period, viz., the Neolithic about which there is consensus among all scholars. However debates cropped up when the authenticity of the pre-Neolithic tools esp., the Palaeolithic tools that were reported, was questioned. In 1967 when T.C.Sharma reported two implements showing significant Palaeolithic characteristics, and four years later with his student H.C. Sharma reported the discovery of Palaeolithic tools in Garo Hills[9], there were many who scoffed at the idea. This group of scholars were of the opinion that many of the tools were naturally flaked and not humanly produced. Ghosh[10] was one such opponent who strongly contradicted the occurrence of Palaeolithic arti-

facts in Garo Hills and referred to the tools as "Neolithic debitage". In order to validate the existence of this cultural phase Sharma[11] studied the various Quaternary deposits developed in different river valleys of the Garo Hills, and gave a firm geological and stratigraphic support to the Palaeolithic cultures. Later along with Roy[12] he further established the presence of this culture when they found tools such as choppers, chopping tools and flakes *in situ* in a cemented gravel deposit in Nangalbibra in the Simsang valley. Sankalia[13], the father of Indian archaeology visited Garo Hills in the 1980s and was also convinced that the tools procured were indeed palaeoliths. Soon after Medhi[14] too agreed that the chipped stones of Garo Hills are not simply debitage, as advanced by Ghosh, but purposefully knapped artifacts, at least in part.

Another question that plagued scholars was whether a cultural sequence could be envisaged for the region. In the 1960s it was believed that there were only two phases the early Neolithic and late Neolithic[15]. However, later explorations in Garo Hills helped Sharma[16] propose a different cultural chronology, viz., early Stone Age – early middle Stone Age – late middle Stone Age – late Stone Age, considering the Stone Age cultural chronology for North-east India on stratigraphical and typo-technological basis. The stone tool evidences led him to believe that there is a continuous Stone Age cultural sequence starting from lower and middle Palaeolithic Upper Pleistocene cultures to Hoabinhian-Mesolithic Cultural phase to early Neolithic and late Neolithic cultural phase. In the 1980s, on the basis of stratigraphical evidences provided by Rajaguru[17] and typo-technological evidences of the Stone Age tools from the Garo Hills and other places of North-East India, Sankalia[18] proposed the following Stone Age cultural sequence thus giving a temporal framework to the phases.

Stone Age Cultural Sequence : Meghalaya

Early Paleolithic	c. 200000 - 50000 B.C.
Middle Paleolithic	c. 50000 - 20000 B.C.
Late Paleolithic	c. 20000 - 10000 B.C.
Mesolithic	c. 10000 - 5000 B.C.
New Stone Age (A)	c. 5000 - 2000 B.C.
New Stone Age (B)	c. 2000 - 1000 B.C.

This in a way gave closure to the persistent questions regarding the cultural phases prevalent in Garo Hills.

The third issue that confounds many in the region is the authors of this culture. By now, there is no doubt that prehistoric and more specifically Stone Age people lived in this region. But the

question, I am generally asked, is, who were these Stone Age people? Were they the present occupants of the hills, the Garos, or someone else? It is difficult to conjecture on this topic without bringing into focus the different temporal phases since this covers a period of over 2 million years or so. For the Palaeolithic period, it is seen that the cultural remains of Garo Hills are similar to those of mainland India but with some regional variations, and therefore were probably made and used by a similar group of hominids.[19] In terms of similarity of the tools we can also look at our neighbouring Anyathian culture from Burma which however differs strongly in the use of fossilwood as raw material. Husain[20] opined that most likely the makers of these tools were of the same species or probably of the same racial stock as those in mainland India. He postulated that the Narmada Man (*Homo erectus narmadensis*) the descendent of the same species might have continued to live in the middle Palaeolithic. Homo sapiens might have appeared only during the upper Palaeolithic as in North Africa, Europe and West Asia.

The succeeding phase, the Mesolithic, revealed two distinct tool kits – the microliths and hoabinhian. Who were the makers of these tools? Were they two sets of people living in the same area or was it a result of culture contact? The latter seems more likely since the number of microliths vis-a-vis the hoabinhian tools is minuscule. Perhaps the hoabinhian tool users were the group of people who lived here, who however also borrowed or used microliths for some specific purpose. Unlike Garo Hills, in Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Mesolithic seems to be the earliest phase when it was colonised. Ashraf[21] calls the Mesolithic in Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Sawmerian (after the type-site Saw mer) cultural phase. This group of people were the sole representative of this phase without having any sub-group in the population as indicated by the inseparable lithic traditions of the given assemblages. In Khasi Hills during this period there was a common subsistence strategy, and that was hunting as indicated by the highest frequency of implements belonging to the piercing and boring category. Absence or lack of missile weapons in the Garo Hills region also points to the fact that they were similar to the present people (the Garos) who are not expert hunters or lack the hunting abilities of nearby tribes such as the Khasis with bows and arrows and Nagas with spears[22].

What we do know for sure as an outcome of ethno-archaeological studies is that the Neolithic people of Garo Hills show remarkable resemblance to the present occupants of the region. Roy[23] while trying to trace the Neolithic agricultural patterns was able to correlate

the salient features of material cultural elements of the past and present by studying the shifting cultivation of the Garo Hills. Marak[24] was also able to show continuity between the Neolithic implements of Garo Hills and the present implements used by the Garos. Medhi[25], while agreeing with Worman[26], also felt that the Neolithic system entered India through Assam from Southeast Asia proper and seems to have flourished in the Garo Hills.

Future Prospects Of The Subject

How and why Garo Hills, in comparison to other North-eastern sites, became an area of immense archaeological significance is difficult to envision at present. What we do know is that early man lived here over a long period of time spanning thousands of years from the late Pleistocene to the early Holocene geological epochs. There are four very interesting outcome of this phenomenon which could be researched further.

The sites so far discovered in the Garo Hills yielded a huge quantity of stone tools of various types found in association with a large number of cores used for detaching flakes to be then converted into tools as well as a huge quantity of waste flakes and chips. Does this evidence indicate factory sites, where the tools were manufactured? The location of the sites on or near the source of raw material consisting of outcrops of dolerite dykes confirms this observation. One of the areas that archaeologists believe could be such a manufacturing site is the site of Misimagre which falls between the sites of Selbalgre and Bibragre in West Garo Hills. This particular site revealed thousands of chips and waste flakes. These were indeed an indication that tools were made here. Another similar site mentioned by Sankalia[27] is the site of Warumsiri near Rongram where middle Palaeolithic people supposedly lived some 40,000 years ago. He called it a factory site since several cores, flakes and flake knives were found in mint condition. Could Garo Hills then have been a quarry and manufacturing site where tools were mass-produced and then exported to other nearby areas? The similarity of the tools found throughout the area in terms of type, technology and raw material does point to a nuclear area of production.

For archaeologists, a quarry is the starting point for exchange activities. A quarry is the place from where one of the most visible and enduring elements of exchange originates – stone raw materials. Hiscock and Mitchell[28] criticized researchers who insist that a stone outcrop can be called a quarry only if it demonstrates evidence of

extraction, such as pits, broken bedrock, anvils, and products from specific knapping events. Consequently, a stone extraction site or quarry may be an excavated hard stone quarry, where raw material for stone tool manufacture has been removed from the natural outcrop by excavation (pits or smashed bedrock), leaving archaeologically detectable evidence, or a surfacial hard stone quarry. The raw material from this latter type-site was extracted simply by collecting fragments of rock scattered on the ground surface. In Garo Hills too the later type of quarrying could have taken place due to lack of evidence otherwise.

Could Garo Hills be a corridor through which early human migrations took place? Discoveries of evidences of early human presence in different geographical areas of the Old World suggest that our earliest ancestors came out of the African continent to Europe and Eastern Asia through West Asia and South Asia. Many have argued that North-east India might have acted as natural passageways for various early human migrations. This area may have acted as a possible mid-way from Africa to Southeast Asia through South Asia for the eastward dispersal of early humans during the Pleistocene geological age (roughly within the time bracket of 1.8 million years to 10,000 years before present) with Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) cultures. In this period, prehistoric man were mainly food gatherers either scavenging for food and dependent on hunting and predating animals, gathering and collecting wild plant foods for their subsistence. As mentioned earlier in Garo Hills evidence of piercing and hunting missiles are rare, so they must have subsisted more on scavenging for meat rather than hunting. They must have used tools made of perishable materials such as bones, wood and bamboo for their requirements. Due to its fragility in the archaeological record these would have left no evidence at all except tools made of stone. When we look at the stone tools from Garo Hills we see similarities to tools such as Acheulian tools and microliths of mainland India while similarities exist between the Hoabinhian tools and Neolithic celts of Garo Hills with those of South-east Asia too. Therefore it is highly likely that there could have been some trade relations or migrations from one place to the other. This could be a challenging and interesting study.

North-east India including Garo Hills is presumed by many scholars[29] to have played a great role in the domestication of a number of food producing plants essential for man including rice. India is the centre of greatest diversity of domesticated rice with over 20,000 identified species and Northeast India is the most favourable single area of the origin of domesticated rice[30]. Though till date we do not

have rice remains from a stratified archaeological context in North-east India, we cannot ignore the possibility of early cultivation of rice which have played important role in the evolution of wild rice to domesticated rice. The Neolithic stage of human history was the new way of life for our ancestor that is characterized by the domestication of animal and plants. As evidenced by the innumerable Neolithic stone tools found in Garo Hills, this could as well be the nuclear area that archaeologists are looking for. Besides wild rice, there are various other flora and fauna which have both wild and domesticated species in the Garo Hills region alone. One can easily find wild species of banana, bamboo, yams and varieties of other root crops in the hilly areas as well as wild pigs and cats. However we have no idea about the process of domestication of these species. Moreover, we do not even know whether or not they are indigenous. These are again questions that could be addressed.

The recent works done in the vicinity of Garo Hills also referred to as the lower reaches of Garo Hills have proved that there indeed exists some continuity between the Stone Age of the former and the latter. Early man seemed to have lived in the Aradonga-Hahim areas of Nongstoin-Assam border along the Garo Hills[31], as well as in the Damra area of Goalpara district (Assam) as revealed by archaeological explorations in the area by a team led by Ashraf in November 2010. These were predominantly Neolithic cultures showing similarity with the Garo Hills tool kit. It would be interesting to build up on these studies to try and find out how far a relation exists between the upper and lower reaches of Garo Hills so as to draw a plan of the nuclear area of Stone Age in the region.

Conclusion

Garo Hills is clearly an area of great cultural and archaeological significance. It is the area of largest stone tool collection in North-east India with characteristic features. Earlier researchers focused on the study of the tools and classifying them, while present researchers are trying to connect the Stone Age cultures with the contemporary cultures of the region, however not yet able to solve the question of prehistoric migrations in the region. The linguistic research in the region is also not developed enough to answer any of the questions that the people of the region have in their minds.

Archaeological analysis should in essence try and go beyond the tools they have dug out to tell the scientific community the stories of cultural continuities as well as discontinuities and the implications of both for contemporary societies. Such efforts will certainly make

archaeology relevant and help it grow beyond the confines of museums and classrooms[32].

What is required at present is renewed and sustained interest in this area of study which if fully solved can have a great repercussion on the history of the region. This could also help shed light on the popular interests on questions of aboriginality, pre-historic trade relations and migrations. Therefore more scholars and students with interests in the archaeology of the region is the need of the hour. This interest needs to be focused on issues of prehistoric migrations, impact of trade in the prehistoric times as well as in trying to locate the nuclear areas of early cultivation. For this purpose funds from government and non-government organizations is required together with building awareness among the local populace. An eclectic approach is required where scholars from different academic disciplines discuss and share their findings, as well as help each other out in reconstructing the story of the unwritten past.

After all, as Mawlong[33] says, it is the Garo Hills sites that hold the key to determining the nature and stages in the development of the Stone Age cultures in the North-East Indian region.

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