

Prehistoric Cultures in India – Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Iron Age

The term Prehistoric refers to a time frame before we began to write. Because of this, there is no written proof of its existence. The prehistoric cultures in India is studied through existing artworks, pottery, tools, and other physical things found at archaeological sites.

There are three ages in total namely – Stone Age, Bronze/Copper Age, and Iron Age. The Stone age was 2.6 million ago and lasted till 3300BC. The Bronze and Iron Age eventually followed.

These stages were almost 8000 years long in total. They have their own characteristics and tools making them different from each other.

Period / Age	Timeline
The Stone Age	30,000 BCE – 3000 BCE
The Copper Age	3000 BCE – 1050 BCE
The Iron Age	1050 BCE – 500 CE

Ancient history can be divided into different periods according to the tools used by people then.

1. Paleolithic Period (Old Stone Age): 500,000 BCE – 10,000 BCE
2. Mesolithic Period (Late Stone Age): 10,000 BCE – 6000 BCE
3. Neolithic Period (New Stone Age): 6000 BCE – 1000 BCE
4. Chalcolithic Period (Stone Copper Age): 3000 BCE – 500 BCE
5. Iron Age: 1500 BCE – 200 BCE

Paleolithic Period – 2 million BC – 10,000 BC

The term 'Palaeolithic' is derived from the Greek word 'palaeo' which means old and 'lithic' meaning stone. Therefore, the term Palaeolithic age refers to the old stone age. The old stone age or palaeolithic culture of India developed in the Pleistocene period or the Ice Age, which is a geological period of the age when the earth was covered with ice and weather was so cold that human or plant life could not survive. But in the tropical region, where ice melted, the earliest species of men could exist.

Main characteristics of the Palaeolithic age –

1. The Indian people are believed to have belonged to the 'Negrito' race, and lived in the open air, river valleys, caves and rock shelters.
2. They were food gatherers, ate wild fruits and vegetables, and lived on hunting.
3. There was no knowledge of houses, pottery, agriculture. It was only in later stages they discovered fire.
4. In the upper palaeolithic age, there is evidence of art in the form of paintings.
5. Humans used unpolished, rough stones like hand axes, choppers, blades, burins and scrapers.

Palaeolithic men are also called 'Quartzite' men in India as the stone tools were made of a hard rock called quartzite.

The old stone age or palaeolithic age in India is divided into three phases according to the nature of the stone tools used by the people and also according to the nature of the change of climate.

1. Lower Palaeolithic Age: up to 100,000 BC
2. Middle Palaeolithic Age: 100,000 BC – 40,000 BC
3. Upper Palaeolithic Age: 40,000 BC – 10,000 BC

Lower Paleolithic Period – up to 100,000 BC

Bori in Maharashtra is the earliest lower paleolithic site in India. Their habitat was mainly caves and rock shelters. Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh is a prominent example of their habitat. It became a world heritage site in 2003.

Another important feature is that they lived near water bodies as the stone was accessible there. Most of their hunting tools like axes made of Limestone and used for skinning, digging, and cutting of animals.

Some of the important Lower Paleolithic Sites in India are – Belan Valley of Mirzapur, Didwana in Rajasthan, Narmada Valley, and Soan Valley.

Middle Paleolithic Period – 100,000 BC – 40,000 BC

Most of the features of this age are similar to the lower paleolithic period. The evidence of using fire was first in this period. The tools for hunting changed from using axes to using flakes. They were more pointed and sharp in appearance.

They were also lighter, thinner, and smaller in size. Some of the important and earliest Middle Paleolithic sites are – Narmada River Valley, Tungabhadra River Valley, and Luni Valley.

Upper Paleolithic Period – 40,000 BC – 10,000 BC

This period saw the emergence of Homo Sapiens. The culture of this period is called the Osteodontokeratic culture which had tools made up of bones, teeth, and horns. This also included fishing tools rather than just hunting tools.

This period was very short, some say it was 1/10 of the total Paleolithic Period. The paintings in Bhimbetka Rock shelters are from this period. Some of the important and earliest sites of the Upper Paleolithic Period are – Belan, Son, Chota Nagpur plateau, Maharashtra, and Orissa.

Mesolithic Period – 10,000 BC – 8000 BC

The term Mesolithic is derived from two Greek words – ‘meso’ and ‘lithic’. In Greek ‘meso’ means middle and ‘lithic’ means stone. Hence, the Mesolithic stage of prehistory is also known as the ‘Middle Stone Age’.

Both Mesolithic and Neolithic phases belong to the Holocene era. In this era, there was a rise in temperature, the climate became warm which resulted in melting of ice and also brought changes in flora and fauna.

Characteristic Features of the Mesolithic Era

1. The people of this age lived on hunting, fishing and food gathering initially but later on they also domesticated animals and cultivated plants, thereby paving the way for agriculture.
2. The first animal to be domesticated was the wild ancestor of the dog. Sheep and goats were the most common domesticated animals.
3. The Mesolithic people lived in semi-permanent settlements along with occupying caves and open grounds.
4. The people of this era believed in life after death and hence they buried the dead with food items and other goods.
5. The characteristic tools of this era were **microliths** – the miniature stone tools usually made of crypto-crystalline silica, chalcedony or chert, both of geometrical and non-geometrical shapes. They were not only used as tools but were also used to make composite tools, spearheads, arrowheads, and sickles after hafting them on wooden or bone handles. These microliths enabled the Mesolithic man to hunt smaller animals and birds.
6. The Mesolithic men started to wear clothes made of animal skin.
7. The Mesolithic people were art lovers and initiated rock art. The subject matter of these paintings was mostly wild animals and hunting scenes, dancing and food collection were also depicted in such paintings. These rock paintings give an idea about the development of religious practices and also reflect the division of labour on the basis of gender.

8. The first human colonization of the Ganga Plains happened during this period.
9. Adamgarh, Madhya Pradesh has the earliest evidence of animal domestication.
10. Langhnaj in Gujarat and Moharana Pahara in Uttar Pradesh have the earliest evidence of burial of the dead. The first human colonization of the Ganga plains is from the Mesolithic period too.
11. Some of the important and earliest sites of the Mesolithic period are – Brahmagiri, Narmada, Vindhya, Gujarat, and UP.

Neolithic Period – 8000 BC – 4000 BC

The term Neolithic is derived from the Greek word ‘neo’ which means new and ‘lithic’ meaning stone. Thus, the term Neolithic Age refers to the ‘New Stone Age’. It is also termed as ‘Neolithic revolution’ since it introduced a lot of important changes in man’s social and economic life. The Neolithic age saw man turning into a food producer from food gatherer.

Characteristic Features of the Neolithic Age

1. **Tools and Weapons** – The people used microlithic blades in addition to tools made of polished stones. The use of celts was especially important for ground and polished hand axes. They also used tools and weapons made of bones – such as needles, scrapers, borers, arrowheads, etc. The use of new polished tools made it easier for humans to cultivate, hunt and perform other activities in a better manner.
2. **Agriculture** – The people of the Neolithic age cultivated land and grew fruits and corn like ragi and horse gram (kulati). They also domesticated cattle, sheep and goats.
3. **Pottery** – With the advent of agriculture, people were required to store their food grains as well as to cook, eat the product, etc. That’s why it is said that pottery appeared in this phase on a large scale. The pottery of this period was classified under greyware, black-burnished ware, and mat impressed ware. In the initial stages of the Neolithic age, handmade pottery was made but later on, foot wheels were used to make pots.
4. **Housing and Settled Life** – The people of Neolithic age lived in rectangular or circular houses which were made of mud and reeds. Neolithic men also knew how to make boats and could spin cotton, wool and weave cloth. The people of the Neolithic age led a more settled life and paved the way for the beginning of civilization.

The neolithic people did not live far away from the hilly areas. They inhabited mainly the hilly river valleys, rock shelters and the slopes of the hills, since they were entirely dependent on weapons and tools made of stone.

Important Neolithic Sites

- **Koldihwa and Mahagara (lying south of Allahabad)** – This site provides evidence of circular huts along with crude hand made pottery. There is also evidence of rice, which is the oldest evidence of rice, not only in India but anywhere in the world.

- **Mehrgarh (Balochistan, Pakistan)** – The earliest Neolithic site, where people lived in houses built of sun-dried bricks and cultivated crops like cotton and wheat.
- **Burzahom (Kashmir)** – The domestic dogs were buried along with their masters in their graves; people lived in pits and used tools made of polished stones as well as bones.
- **Gufkral (Kashmir)** – This neolithic site is famous for pit dwelling, stone tools and graveyards in houses.
- **Chirand (Bihar)** – The neolithic men used tools and weapons made of bones.
- **Piklihal, Brahmagiri, Maski, Takkalakota, Hallur (Karnataka)** – The people were cattle herders. They domesticated sheep and goats. Ash mounds have been found.
- **Belan Valley** (which is located on the northern spurs of the Vindhya and middle part of Narmada valley) – All the three phases i.e., palaeolithic, mesolithic and neolithic ages are found in sequence.

Chalcolithic Period – 4000 BC – 1500 BC

The Chalcolithic Age marked the emergence of the use of metal along with stone tools. The first metal to be used was copper. The chalcolithic age largely applied to the pre-Harappan phase, but in many parts of the country, it appears after the end of the bronze Harappan culture.

Characteristics of the Chalcolithic Age

1. Hunting was still an occupation in addition to fishing and farming.
2. Animals including sheep, buffalo, goats, cattle, and pigs served as food to these people. The rice cropping pattern and cotton farming developed in this period. Some of the main crops were barley and wheat, lentil, bajra, jowar, ragi millets, green pea, green and black gram.
3. The houses were rectangular with mostly one room and were of mud and cow dung. Black and Red pottery were prominent during this time. Humans were buried under the house with their ornaments.
4. These people were colonizers and settled near hills and rivers mostly. The Harappan culture was part of this period.

Important Chalcolithic Sites

- **Ahar (Banas valley, South Eastern Rajasthan)** – The people of this region practised smelting and metallurgy, supplied copper tools to other contemporary communities. Rice was cultivated here.
- **Gilund (Banas valley, Rajasthan)** – Stone blade industry was discovered here.

- **Daimabad (Ahmadnagar, Gujrat)** – The largest Jorwe culture site in Godavari valley. It is famous for recovery of bronze goods such as bronze rhinoceros, elephant, two wheeled chariot with a rider and a buffalo.
- **Malwa (Madhya Pradesh)** – The settlements of Malwa culture are mostly located on the Narmada and its tributaries. It provides evidence of the richest chalcolithic ceramics, and also spindle whorls.
- **Kayatha (Madhya Pradesh)** – The settlement of Kayatha culture was mostly located on the Chambal River and its tributaries. Houses had mud-plastered floors, pre-Harappan elements in pottery along with copper objects with sharp cutting edges were found.
- **Chirand, Senuar, Sonpur (Bihar), Mahishdal (West Bengal)** – These are the prominent chalcolithic sites in these states.
- **Songaon, Inamgaon and Nasik (Maharashtra)** – Large mud houses with ovens and circular pit houses have been discovered here.
- **Navdatoli (on Narmada)** – It was one of the largest chalcolithic settlements in the country. It was spread over 10 hectares and cultivated almost all food grains.
- **Nevasa (Jorwe, Maharashtra) and Eran (Madhya Pradesh)** – These sites are known for their non-Harappan culture.

Iron Age – 1500 BC to 600 BC

The Painted Grey Ware culture and the Northern Black Polished Ware were the most prominent culture of this period. This period marked the arrival of the Aryans (Vedic Period). The Janapadas were the realms of this period and gave rise to 16 Mahajanapadas.

These were the 16 kingdoms of ancient India. The smelting of iron to make tools and weapons marks the start of this period. This was the start of civilization and the emergence of states in the country.

Ochre Colour Pottery and worship of statues began in this period. The idea of a white painting called Ahar-Banas is from this period as well. The idea of using ceramic to make pots began here only. The religion division like Jainism and Buddhism comes from the Iron Age as well.

The first civilization on the banks of the river Ganga after the Indus Valley was by Mahajanapadas. This period ended with the rise of the Mauryan Empire. Some of the important Iron Age sites in India are – Malhar, Dadupur, Raja Nala Ka Tila, Lahuradewa, Kosambi and Jhusi, Allahabad.