The Bangladesh Times

040

STONE AGE IN BANGLADESH

Story of the terraces

M. HARUNUR RASHID

The Handaxe or Madras Culture also passed through a similar process of evolution and changes.

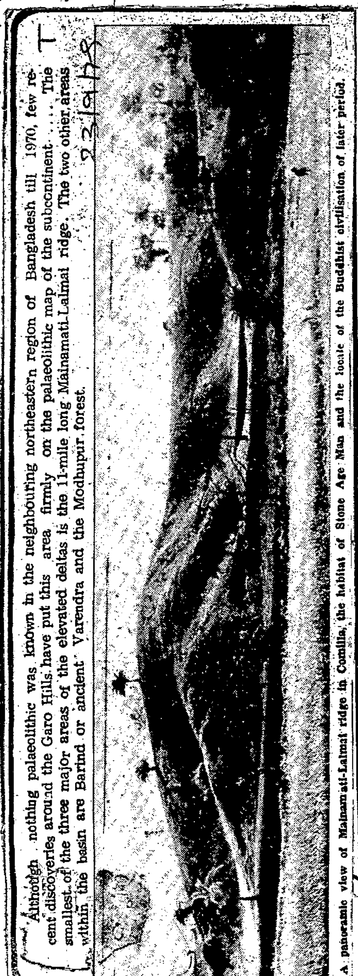
The Indian provinces of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa on the west of Bangladesh have a rich heritage of Palaeolithic cultures. And although nothing palaeolithic was known in Assam, the eastern neighbour of Bangladesh, till 1970, few recent discoveries, particularly at the palaeolithic site of Rongram in the Garo Hills, and a large collection of stray finds have put this eastern area now firmly on the palaeolithic map of the subcontinent. The Mesolithic culture is rather poorly represented in this province, though some recent discoveries of microliths have been reported. However Assam is exceptionally rich in Neolithic culture. And so are also West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa which have rich heritage of Stone Age cultures including both Mesolithic and Neolithic. But Bangladesh, though surrounded by such rich traditions of Stone Age cultures, has nothing comparable to show on record yet except the stray finds of two Upper Palaeolithic handaxes and a small collection of Neoliths, already mentioned. The late Stone Age cultures in India, particularly the Mesolithic and Neolithic, are usually associated with laterite or detrital laterite formation, correlatable with the pluvial and interpluvial phases. But most of these cultures are more precisely and securely dated now by Radiocarbon (C-14) test method, which cannot be successfully applied to the few Neolithic finds of Bangladesh as none of them come from a proper context.

The discoveries of Stone Age relics in Bangladesh necessitate a reexamination now of the physical background of the country which was thought to be unsuitable for prehistoric settlements. Though the whole of Bangladesh is generally deltaic and rather monotonously flat, this vast lowland with a tangled network of rivers, lakes, swamps and swamp forests has nevertheless some elevated old deltas, highland margins and also a hilly and mountainous region in the south-east which effectively break the monotony of flatness. The hilly region in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts contain numerous ranges with peaks over 4000 feet high which gradually merge with the lofty mountains of Arakan and Lushai in Burma and Assam. The highland margins of the country run along its eastern and north-eastern borders abutting upon the Tripura and Garo hills and Shillong plateau, while the old deltas lie in the Bengal basin itself standing topographically high and prominent above the active flood plain, like massive islands of reddish brown soil in a sea of green cornfields and greyish river silt. The smallest of the three major areas of these elevated deltas is the 11-mile long Lalmai-Mainamati ridge which flank the basin west of the folded Tripura hills. The other two areas within the basin itself are known as the Barind (ancient Varendra) and the Madhupur forest and there are also four small outliners. These were formed by older river sediments of well-oxidised reddish brown Pleistocene soil, and are consequently called Pleistocene terraces. They commonly contain ferroginous or calcarious nodules. Stone Age relics in Bangladesh, if they exist here, are most likely to be found in these Pleistocene deposits which are still now almost entirely unexplored.

MORE NEXT WEEK

Complete and semi-complete Neolithic stone tools from the Mainamati excavations, made mostly of fossil wood, a material found all over these semi-lateritic red-earth hills. These specimens are preserved at the Mainamati Museum at Shalban vihara, Comilla.

The Bangladesh Times



A panoramic view of Mainamati-Lalmai ridge in Comilla, the habitat of Stone Age Man and the locale of the Buddhist civilisation of later period.

Although nothing palaeolithic was known in the neighbouring northeastern region of Bangladesh till 1970, few recent discoveries around the Garo Hills have put this area firmly on the palaeolithic map of the subcontinent. . . . The smallest of the three major areas of the elevated deltas is the 11-mile long Mainamati-Lalmai ridge. The two other areas within the basin are Barind or ancient Varendra and the Modhupur forest.

In the general time scale of Indian Stone Age, the Neolithic phase of eastern India is admittedly later than that of western or northern India, but how late it is cannot be determined with any degree of certainty before such tools are discovered in their proper context. No such discovery has yet been made. The Indian Old Stone Age is dated, by and large, on the basis of geological sequence of the Siwaliks. This massive 20,000 feet deep formation of comparatively recent geological age in the foothills of the Himalayas runs continuously from the plains of north-west Pakistan to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. The deposit has yielded fossils of extinct animals and anthropoid apes like Ramapithecus, regarded by experts as the proto-Man, the last evolutionary stage before the species was recognised as fully human in bodily structure and movements. But no remains of the early man himself has yet been discovered in the subcontinent. Since there could be no doubt whatsoever that he lived here, his fossils if they exist at all, are most likely to be found in this (Siwalik) deposit where his stone tools have already been found in large numbers.

The Siwalik sequence has been correlated by H. De Terra and T. T. Paterson with the Pleistocene chronology, specially with its glacial and interglacial phases (Studies On the Ice Age in India and Associated Human Cultures, Washington 1939) which date the stone tools of early man found in these contexts. These relics in their turn date the tools found in other parts of the sub-continent on similarly correlated geological and typological basis. All such relics are broadly divisible into two distinct cultural groups associated with two different geographical backgrounds: (i) the Soan Culture in the Punjab and Kashmir and (ii) the Madras or Handaxe Culture in the peninsular India. This distinction is generally regarded to imply the existence of two different types of early man in India, one using pebble and flake tools, and the other handaxes, but no other information is available at present.

The first definite presence of man in India is noticed in an Upper Siwalik formation called Boulder Conglomerate, correlated with the Second Glaciation. This cultural phase represented by crude stone tools is called Pre-Soan. The presence of fossil bones of the extinct Elephus namadicus (straight-tusked elephant) ascribes it to Middle Pleistocene (c. 500,000 B.P.) It is followed by Early Soan, Late Soan and Evolved Soan or Upper Palaeolithic phases characterised by a gradual change and evolution of tool types. The last phase is correlated with the Fourth or Last Glaciation (20,000 B.P.)