

# A Typo-Technological and Chronological Survey of Stone Tool Industries in Prehistoric India: A Comprehensive Study

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**Abstract:** This article undertakes a comprehensive typo-technological and chronological survey of the major stone tool complexes of prehistoric India. It traces the trajectory of technological advancement, moving from the heavy-duty core tools of the Lower Paleolithic, such as the iconic hand-axes of the Acheulean tradition, through the dominance of flake-tool industries in the Middle Paleolithic, the sophisticated blade technology of the Upper Paleolithic, and finally, the miniature and composite microliths of the Mesolithic, culminating in the polished stone and standardized blade industries of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic. The focus will not only be on the morphological classification (typology) but, crucially, on the underlying methods of manufacture (technology), raw material selection, and the regional variations that attest to dynamic human ingenuity. By examining key sites and their associated assemblages, we aim to map the evolution of human tool-making skills and connect these technological stages to broader shifts in subsistence strategies and social organization throughout prehistoric India. The foundation of this analysis rests on a critical review of landmark research that has defined the contours of Indian prehistory, from the early explorations of Robert Bruce Foote to contemporary micro-wear and refitting studies.

**Key words:** Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Acheulean, etc.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The vast and intricate tapestry of Indian prehistory is fundamentally woven from the remnants of its earliest technologies, with stone tools serving as the most enduring and eloquent witnesses to human evolution and cultural adaptation across the subcontinent. Spanning a period of nearly three million years, from the earliest pebble tools to the finely ground axes of the Neolithic, the study of lithic industries provides a chronological framework and a window into the cognitive and behavioral shifts of the hominin

populations that inhabited the region. The sheer geographical diversity of the Indian subcontinent—ranging from the arid plains of Rajasthan to the heavily forested valleys of the Deccan and the rich alluvial stretches of the Ganga—necessitated and fostered a wide array of innovative technological responses, making the archaeological record of India a crucial global archive for understanding human-environment interaction.

The history of lithic research in India commenced with the seminal discovery of a hand-axe at Pallavaram, near Chennai, in 1863 by Robert Bruce Foote, an act that firmly placed India on the global map of Paleolithic studies. Since then, successive generations of archaeologists, notably H.D. Sankalia, V.N. Misra, and V.S. Wakankar, have meticulously unearthed a staggering density of sites, leading to a conventional, three-fold division of the Stone Age: the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age), the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age), and the Neolithic (New Stone Age), each defined primarily by its distinctive stone tool technology (Sankalia 1974).

## II. THE PALEOLITHIC PERIOD

The Paleolithic era, the longest phase of human history in India, is characterized by the use of chipped, or knapped, stone tools. The period is conventionally subdivided into Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic based on changes in lithic technology and typology, reflecting a gradual increase in the refinement and specialization of tools.

Lower Paleolithic (c. 2.5 Million Years Ago - c. 300,000 BP):

The Lower Paleolithic in India is primarily defined by two major, often geographically distinct, industrial

traditions: the Chopper-Chopping Complex and the Acheulean Tradition.

The Chopper-Chopping Complex (Sohan/Siwalik Tradition):

This industry, sometimes referred to by its key site name as the Soan Tradition, is concentrated in the northwestern part of the subcontinent, particularly the Siwalik foothills and the Potwar Plateau (now Pakistan).

Typology and Technology: Tools are predominantly heavy core tools, made from river pebbles (quartzite). The defining implements are choppers (unifacially worked core tools with a single cutting edge) and chopping tools (bifacially worked core tools with a sinuous cutting edge). The technique used was simple direct percussion (or block-on-block technique), which is characterized by the minimal removal of large flakes, resulting in a crude, asymmetrical tool form (Paterson & Drummond 1962). The focus was on producing a robust cutting edge rather than a standardized shape.

Chronology and Debate: While initially considered earlier than the Acheulean in the 1930s (the 'Soan-Acheulean dichotomy'), later discoveries, such as at Riwat and Masol, suggest a much earlier hominin presence. For instance, artifact-bearing deposits at Riwat have been tentatively dated to as old as 1.9 million years ago, making them some of the earliest evidence of hominin activity in the subcontinent, though the dating of these specific, non-Acheulean assemblages remains an area of ongoing debate.

The Acheulean Tradition (Hand-Axe/Cleaver Complex):

The Acheulean is the dominant and most widespread lithic tradition of the Lower Paleolithic across the Indian peninsula.

Typology: The hallmark tools are the hand-axe and the cleaver.

Hand-axes: These are large, bifacially flaked tools, typically almond, pear, or cordate (heart) shaped. They are classified based on their outline and refinement (e.g., Early, Middle, and Late Acheulean).

Cleavers: Characterized by a broad, transverse cutting edge at the distal end, often made on a thick flake.

Technology and Advancement: The Acheulean represents a significant leap in cognitive and motor skills. Early Acheulean tools were made using hard-hammer percussion (stone on stone), resulting in thick, uneven flakes and a crude symmetry. By the Middle and Late Acheulean, the use of soft-hammer percussion (using a bone, antler, or wood billet) became prevalent. This technique allowed for the removal of thinner, broader flakes, facilitating a much greater degree of bifacial symmetry and standardization—a cognitive 'mental template' for tool production (Shipton 2016).

Key Sites and Chronology:

Attirampakkam (Tamil Nadu): Crucial for its long sequence, excavations have pushed the dating of the Acheulean in India back significantly, with the earliest artifacts dated to at least 1.5 million years ago, challenging the 'Out of Africa' diffusion models for Acheulean technology (Pappu 2011).

Hunsgi-Baichbal Valley (Karnataka): A cluster of rich factory sites and habitation areas, showcasing the extensive use of local quartzite for tool production.

Bori (Maharashtra): Known for one of the oldest directly dated Acheulean occurrences in India, estimated at around 1.38 million years ago (Mishra 1995).

Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh): Rock shelters yielding stratified Acheulean layers, crucial for understanding the transition to the Middle Paleolithic.

Middle Paleolithic (c. 300,000 - c. 40,000 BP)

The transition from the Acheulean to the Middle Paleolithic marks a fundamental shift in hominin technology from a core-tool-dominant industry to a flake-tool-dominant industry.

Technological Shift: The primary goal changed from shaping the core (as in Acheulean) to manufacturing pre-determined, standardized flakes for tools. This is best exemplified by the adoption of the Levallois technique (named after a French site), a highly systematic and mentally complex method of core preparation to control the shape and size of the final

flake (blank). The Middle Paleolithic toolkit is therefore characterized by tools made on these smaller, thinner flakes.

**Typology:** The toolkit is dominated by scrapers (side, end, convex, concave), points, and borers. These tools were likely used for specialized tasks like scraping hides, working wood, and piercing, suggesting a shift towards more complex processing of materials.

**Raw Materials:** There was a marked preference for finer-grained materials than the quartzite of the Lower Paleolithic, such as chert, jasper, chalcedony, and agate. This selection was dictated by the need for better flaking qualities essential for controlled Levallois preparation and secondary retouch.

**Key Sites:**

**Nevasa (Maharashtra):** The site where H.D. Sankalia first systematically defined the Indian Middle Paleolithic flake industry in 1954.

**Didwana (Rajasthan):** Provides a long, well-stratified sequence documenting the Acheulean-Middle Paleolithic transition.

**Samnapur (Narmada Valley):** Yielded tools indicative of the Middle Paleolithic, often made from local river cobbles.

**The 'Out of Africa' Debate:** The presence of a sophisticated Middle Paleolithic flake industry, often associated with the dispersal of *Homo sapiens*, at sites like Jwalapuram in the Jurreru Valley (Andhra Pradesh), has been controversially linked to the Toba super-eruption around 74,000 years ago. The discovery of Middle Paleolithic tools above the Toba ash layer suggests that populations were either already present or recovered rapidly, potentially providing evidence for an early Southern Dispersal route of modern humans (Petraglia 2007).

**Upper Paleolithic (c. 40,000 - c. 10,000 BP)**

The Upper Paleolithic signifies a shift towards highly efficient and standardized production methods, representing the technology of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) in the subcontinent.

**Technological Hallmarks:**

**Blade Production:** The defining feature is the proliferation of blades—flakes that are at least twice as long as they are wide, with parallel or sub-parallel lateral edges. The most common technique for mass-producing these elongated, thin blanks was indirect percussion (punch technique), where an intermediary punch (often bone or antler) was placed on the core and struck with a hammer, allowing for precise control over the removal of the blade. This method vastly increased the efficiency of raw material use.

**Typology:** The toolkit is dominated by tools made on these blades:

**Burins:** Chisel-like tools used for engraving and working bone, antler, or wood.

**Scrapers:** Made on blades, including end-scrapers and side-scrapers.

**Points:** Often slender and finely retouched, possibly for hafting onto spear shafts.

**Bone Tools:** Though rarer than in Europe, significant bone tools (points, scrapers, chisels) have been found in the Kurnool Caves (Muchchatla Chintamanu Gavi Cave) in Andhra Pradesh (Murty 1979).

**Key Sites and Cultural Correlates:**

**Renigunta (Andhra Pradesh):** A classic Upper Paleolithic site defined by its rich blade and burin industry.

**Belan Valley (Uttar Pradesh):** Provides a continuous stratigraphic record spanning all three Paleolithic phases.

**Bhimbetka and other rock shelter sites:** The Upper Paleolithic is strongly associated with the earliest phases of rock art in India, suggesting the emergence of symbolic expression and complex social behaviors. The painted rock shelters provide contextual evidence of the subsistence and artistic capabilities of these hominins.

**The Mesolithic Period (c. 10,000 - c. 4,000 BP):**

The Mesolithic marks a post-Pleistocene cultural stage, coinciding with a warmer, wetter climate (the Holocene). This shift in environment led to a focus on new resources, demanding a revolutionary change in tool technology.

### The Microlithic Revolution:

The Mesolithic is synonymous with the microlith, a geometric tool complex defined by its minute size and standardized geometric forms.

**Typology and Function:** Microliths are small tools, typically 1 to 5 cm in length, made predominantly from fine-grained, crypto-crystalline silicas like chert, chalcedony, quartz, and agate. Key geometric forms include triangles, lunates (crescents), and trapezes. Their primary function was not as individual implements but as components of composite tools—small elements hafted into bone, wood, or antler shafts to form sharp-edged, barbed implements like arrowheads, sickles, and spear points. The technology of these composite tools vastly increased the effectiveness of hunting and processing gear.

**Technology:** The Crested Guiding Ridge and Bipolar Techniques: The production of the necessary small, parallel-sided blanks required specialized techniques. While variations of the punch technique were used, the crested guiding ridge technique—a sophisticated method for preparing a blade core to ensure long, straight blades—and the bipolar technique (where the core is placed on an anvil and struck, causing force to travel from both ends) were critical for maximizing the output of small bladelets.

### Key Sites and Cultural Context:

**Bagor (Rajasthan):** The largest and most extensively excavated Mesolithic habitation site in India. It yielded an enormous quantity of geometric microliths, evidence of structural remains (circular stone arrangements), and early evidence of animal domestication (sheep/goat), demonstrating the transition to a food-producing economy.

**Langhnaj (Gujarat):** Known for its rich microlithic industry and numerous human burials, offering insights into early social practices and skeletal morphology.

**Sarai Nahar Rai and Mahadaha (Uttar Pradesh):** Key sites in the Ganga plain, famous for extended settlement evidence, burial grounds, and unique finds like bone arrowheads and the earliest skeletal evidence of modern humans in the region, all in association with a geometric microlithic industry.

**Adaptation:** The transition to microliths reflects an adaptation to a changed ecosystem characterized by lighter forest cover and a shift to hunting smaller, faster prey (e.g., deer, antelope) and a broader resource base (the Broad Spectrum Revolution).

### The Neolithic and Chalcolithic Periods:

The Neolithic marks the final stage of the Stone Age, defined not by the absolute absence of metal, but by a radical socio-economic transformation—the emergence of a food-producing economy (agriculture and animal husbandry). This fundamental shift necessitated a corresponding change in the functional requirement of stone tools.

#### A. Neolithic Tool Technology (c. 7,000 BP onwards)

The signature technology of the Neolithic is the adoption of grinding and polishing to finish stone tools.

**Typology: Ground and Polished Tools:** The core implement is the celt (a general term for a polished stone axe/adze) made of hard, often igneous rocks like basalt or schist.

**Process:** The tools were first rough-flaked to a basic shape, then meticulously ground (rubbed against a coarse stone slab with sand and water) and polished to achieve a smooth surface and a very sharp, durable edge. This technique was highly energy-intensive but produced a resilient, efficient tool crucial for forest clearance and woodworking required for permanent settlements. The principal forms were axes (for felling), adzes (for shaping wood), and chisels.

**Regional Traditions:** The Neolithic in India is highly regionalized:

**North-West (Mehrgarh, Balochistan):** Characterized by an early aceramic Neolithic with sophisticated blade industries alongside early evidence of cereal cultivation (wheat, barley).

**Kashmir Valley (Burzahom):** Known for unique features like pit-dwellings and a distinct lithic and bone tool complex, including polished stone axes and numerous bone points, harpoons, and awls.

**South India (Sanganakallu-Kupgal):** Dominated by the Ash Mound tradition, with polished basalt axes being the most common tool.

Eastern India (Chirand, Daojali Hading): Tools often include the unique shouldered celt, a type possibly linked to Southeast Asian Neolithic influences, particularly in the Northeast.

Co-existing Technologies: Microlithic tools and simple flake tools did not disappear; they continued to be manufactured and used, often in conjunction with the heavier, polished celts, reflecting a diverse and efficient toolkit.

Chalcolithic Tool Technology:

The Chalcolithic (Copper-Stone Age) represents the period where the first use of metal (copper or low-grade bronze) co-existed with stone tool technology.

Refined Blade Industries: Even with metal use, the most prominent technological feature of this period is the highly specialized Chalcolithic blade industry. These were long, parallel-sided blades produced from fine-grained chalcedony and agate, often using the crested guiding ridge technique to maximize efficiency. Sites like those of the Malwa, Jorwe, and Harappan cultures (e.g., Inamgaon) are characterized by vast assemblages of these standardized blades, used for daily tasks like cutting and scraping, demonstrating that stone remained the dominant material for utilitarian, disposable tools.

Metal and Stone Complementarity: Metal was expensive and was primarily used for status symbols, weapons, and specialized tools (axes, celts, arrowheads), while the mass-produced stone blades and axes provided the functional backbone of the agricultural economy. The Chalcolithic thus represents the pinnacle of blade-making technology in India before its gradual decline with the full adoption of Iron Age technologies.

Technological Trajectories and Cultural Correlates:

The evolution of stone tool technology in prehistoric India is not a simple linear progression but a complex interplay of innovation, regional adaptation, and cultural contact, revealing the growing sophistication of hominin cognition and behavior.

From Mass to Efficiency: The overarching technological trajectory is a shift from high-mass, low-utility tools (Lower Paleolithic hand-axes) to low-mass, high-utility tools (Upper Paleolithic blades and

Mesolithic microliths). The transition from direct percussion to pressure flaking and the invention of techniques like Levallois and the crested guiding ridge demonstrate a consistent trend toward increasing the tool-to-stone ratio, maximizing the amount of cutting edge derived from a single piece of raw material. This shift reflects greater cognitive planning depth and the ability to visualize and execute complex, multi-stage manufacturing processes.

The Role of Raw Material: The changing tool kit directly correlates with raw material preference. The robust, quartzitic tools of the Acheulean were suited for heavy-duty butchering and digging. The finer, more brittle chert and agate favored from the Middle Paleolithic onwards were essential for the controlled pressure and indirect percussion required to produce fine flakes and blades.

Technology and Subsistence: Each technological phase is intrinsically linked to subsistence:

Acheulean: Heavy tools for a presumed scavenging/early hunting economy.

Middle/Upper Paleolithic: Specialized flakes and blades possibly associated with the hafting of tools, reflecting more effective hunting.

Mesolithic Microliths: Crucial for the development of composite weapons (arrows, spears) essential for hunting fast, small game in a diversifying post-Pleistocene environment.

Neolithic Polished Tools: Tools for taming the landscape—axes for forest clearance, a prerequisite for settled agriculture.

### III.CONCLUSION

The stone tool technology of prehistoric India provides a magnificent record of human ingenuity and adaptation. From the basic pebble choppers of the earliest hominins at sites like Riwat and the robust hand-axes of the Acheulean at Attirampakkam, the technological evolution is clear. The key moments—the adoption of the Levallois technique in the Middle Paleolithic, the mass-production of blades in the Upper Paleolithic, and the invention of microlithic composite tools in the Mesolithic—each represent critical milestones in human cognitive and behavioral modernity. Finally, the development of ground and

polished tools facilitated the Neolithic Revolution, permanently altering the landscape and social organization of the subcontinent.

The Indian lithic record is not merely a regional variant of global trends; it presents unique challenges and opportunities, such as the evidence for an early Acheulean presence and the unique regional adaptations across the vast peninsula. Future research, particularly incorporating advanced dating techniques, microwear analysis, and residue studies, will continue to refine the chronology and unlock the precise functions of these silent stones, allowing a fuller comprehension of the lives of the diverse prehistoric populations who crafted them.

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