

History

Lesson-3

The agriculturist: the Neolithic Age

The Neolithic Age was the period of transition from hunters-gathers to farmers. This marked a tremendous change in their lifestyle. They settled down in one place and also learnt to domesticate animals. It was during this period that early humans discovered the use of the wheel. Their tools too improved significantly and they learnt the art of pottery. Some important sites of this period in the Indian subcontinent are Chirand, Hallur, Daojali, Hading, Mehrgarh, Burzoham, Paiyamopalli and Koldihwa.

The Beginning of Farming

The formation of grasslands led to the growth of several grain-bearing grasses. Early humans noticed that plants grew over a period of time and that they usually grew in areas where seeds were dispersed. Thus, they learnt to sow seeds and harvest them at the right time. They also understood that plants needed water to grow. They cultivated wheat, oats, barley and pulses. Farming meant a better supply of food grains. So their dependence on hunting and gathering of food reduced. There was an increase in human population, leading to an increasing demand for food. Thus, early humans began to settle in one place for longer periods of time to farm and cultivate crops. They built strong, permanent houses and lived together as a community.

Domestication of Animals.

Once early humans became food producers, the need to care and tend to their plants became a priority in their lives. They also domesticated different animals such as sheep, goat and cows. They provided them with a regular supply of meat and milk. Perhaps they also learnt that these animals could help them in their agriculture work. Archaeologists have uncovered remains of animal bones at Burzahom, present-day Kashmir, and Hallur in present day Andhra Pradesh suggesting that animals were domesticated.

The Beginning of Settlements

Early humans began building houses. These houses were mainly rounded, oval or rectangular **pit houses**. They were steps leading to these pit houses. Archaeologists have discovered hearths both inside and outside the house. One example of the pit house was found at Burzahom in Kashmir. Pots too were found, perhaps, for storing surplus grains.

The Neolithic people soon began to live in groups. These groups led to the formation of tribes. Tribal people are those who live close to nature.

Improved tools

Tools became more advanced and sophisticated and had multipurpose uses. These tools were polished, more durable and could be shaped easily. They were made of different type of rocks like amphibolites, jadeite and basalt. With these new and strong tools, like axes, Neolithic people could clear forest for agriculture. Wood from the felled trees was used for the construction of houses, furniture and other household things. People also made use of mortars and pestles for grinding grain.

Pottery

As people started producing surplus food, there was a need to store these grains. Initially people started weaving baskets out of grass. Then they started making pots out of clay and sun baked them. Later, kilns were also used to bake the pots and designs were made on them.

The invention of wheel

The invention of the wheel was one of the most important achievements of the Neolithic people. It brought about the development of the earliest forms of vehicle- a wagon, four wheels and an axle. They could not travel fast and comfortably. The wheel also helped them to transport heavy objects from one place to another. Potter's wheel soon came to be used for making pottery and is also used to draw water from the water wells.

Additional craft

Although there has been no archaeological evidence which indicates that the early humans indulged in weaving and basketry, clay fragments bearing impressions of textiles or basketry have been uncovered in many sites. Weaving of cloth, straw mats and textiles was a common practice among the Neolithic people. They used material like flax and wool. Baskets were used to store goods, woven straw mats were used for resting and fine nets were used for fishing.

Burials

During the Neolithic period, the dead were buried inside the houses, beneath the floor or in simple pits. They were buried along with items such as stone tools, pottery, jewellery, animal offering amongst other things. These practices suggested that people believed in life after death. Some burial sites have been found in Mehrgarh (present day Pakistan).

Chalcolithic Sites (4,000 BCE to 2,000 BCE)

The Chalcolithic age was the period that followed the Neolithic age. It was also called the **Copper Age** as it was the period where humans used metals, particularly, copper. Copper was the first metal to be used. Later, it was mixed with tin and the mixture of copper and tin came to be known as **Bronze**. The transition from tools of stone to metal was a slow and a long-drawn process. The earliest metal tools resembled the stone tools in shape and size. The earliest settlements belonging to the Chalcolithic Age in India extend from the Chota Nagpur plateau to the Gangetic Plains.

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