

NEOLITHIC TOOL – THE STONE AXE

It was moment in the history of mankind – a moment spread over several years – when man, instead of following the animals in search of climates and regions where he could continue his ancient ways of life unchanged, elected to adapt himself to his changed environment and find new methods of obtaining food.

Stuart Piggott, Prehistoric India.

The invention of the axe that started the “Farming Revolution” of the Stone Age has been considered to be as important as the wheel and the steam engine of the Industrial Age. Because of this simple human invention, it was possible for the nomadic tribes to transition to the Neolithic Age (new or late Stone Age) to become the first farmers. Indeed, the axe transformed the landscape from forests to agricultural farms. The abundance of food supply produced locally led to permanent settlements, large families with different skills, and structured societies.

The earliest Neolithic sites in South Asia are Bhirrana, (oldest Harappan site), on the banks of Ghaggar river, in Haryana (7570-6200 BC), and Mehrgarh, between 6500 and 5500 BC, near the Bolan Pass in the Kachi plain of Baluchistan, Pakistan; with evidence of farming (wheat and barley) and herding (cattle, sheep and goats). In Peninsular India, the Neolithic began by 3000 BC and lasted until around 1400 BC. (Sastri, *A History of S. India*), 2900-1000 BC (Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to ...*). The primary information was obtained from Kodekal and Hallur in neighboring Karnataka.

In Goa, since no detailed archaeological studies have been carried out, it may be assumed to be similar to the above bordering Neolithic sites. The transition to the Megalithic or Iron Age took place between 1200 and 1000 BC.

In 1863, Robert Bruce Foote, a British geologist discovered the first Paleolithic - Old Stone Age - tool (a stone hand axe) in Pallavaram, near Madras, Southern India. Since, many more axes from different periods have been uncovered throughout the country.



Polished stone axe* found at the petroglyphic site in Usgalimal-Goa.

This highly polished axe, because of its unique shape, may also have been used by tribal chiefs or shamans as a symbol of power, by hanging it around their necks, or as a staff, when attached to a wooden haft.

The *Gawda*, *Kunbi* and *Velip* tribes of Goa are considered to be of the earliest people to walk on the soil of Goa, descendants of the proto-Australoid race called *Mull Goenkars*. These tribes recall their past and traditions in songs and ritual dances at the yearly festivals like: *Perni Zagor*, *Dhalo*, *Shigmo* and *Fugdi*.

The recent scholarly work of Gawas and Velip, have shed more light on the lives and traditions of tribes of Goa. A few insightful lines from their folklore, like, “*Ghantavoilean yeylo Gawdo*”... “*Khuti Marun Muthi Jodli*”... *Gawda gela voilea ranan Gaudi gelea kudya Pona*”. The authors’ translation: “*When our ancestors first arrived from the highlands there was no land to grow but only trees up to the sea. Gawda tribes established the first settlements ... had close relationship with the land and the forest ... the Gawda community is the worshiper of Nature*”.

By clearing the virgin forests, reclaiming the land along the banks of the rivers and the coastline, building bunds (mud barriers) to keep out the saline water, they developed the Khazan paddy fields. Thus, their songs at harvest time and at other festivals reflect their unwritten history.

When oral traditions are passed from mouth to mouth in song and dance through many generations and across religious traditions, they often tend to lose their original form, but are best remembered when embellished with hyperboles, by larger-than-life heroes or monsters in the story-telling, and thus the origin of myths. In this respect, the axe did indeed literally and figuratively stretch the land up to the sea for the earliest tribes of Goa.

*Gifted to Pilar Museum.

Gawas, Vijay M. and Velip, Mahesh, *Tribes of Goa: Their Institution and Movement*, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, July-Aug, vol.3/19, 2015.)

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