Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
January 2024 5(1), 1266–1270

THE PLEISTOCENE CAVE LIFE OF BILLA SURGAM, KARNUL: A STUDY

Dr. Shivanad Yalala[1]

[1] Faculty Member Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture, and Archaeology, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India

DOI
10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3104

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

It is well known that the Billa Surgam caves of Karnul afford us sure proof of Palaeolithic cave-dwellers in India and eminent authorities would even characterize some of their artifacts as Magdalenian. Though the caves were discovered and partly explored in 1844 by Captain Newbold they were forgotten till more than forty years afterwards when their systematic exploration was undertaken, at the suggestion of Huxley, by Madras Government. There can be now little doubt that Karnul was one of the most ancient settlements of Palaeolithic man in India and many caves were found near Billa Surgam or within a few miles of it containing distinct traces of human habitation.

1. INTRODUCTION

PLEISTOCENE CAVE LIFE-KARNUL

The bones of many animals were found in the Billa Surgam caves, which have been extinct in India long since. Billa Surgam is in the neighbourhood of Benaganapalli within the Nandyal taluq of the district of Karnul and in the neighbourhood of Betamcheru. A few miles of North West of it is the Yerrazari cave and South West by South of that very place is another, while there are no less than three caves at Yegunta Pagoda immediately north of Yerrazari and another cave south of Billa Surgam. Of these details are forthcoming about Billa Surgam caves alone.

There also though 2000 bones were found yet the exact place and depth in which each was found has not been recorded. Though no continuous trace of human habitation could be found little doubt exists as to the fact that even up to Neolithic times the cave was restored to by men, for at a low depth of 2 to 3 ft. broken pottery of very antique pattern was found. But the floor of the cave which was found level for a distance of 160 ft. and could be reached only after an excavation of 27 ft. at one place or even of 33 ft. at another showing the old age of the caves. At the depth of 11 to 12 ft. was found an old fireplace with many fragments of charcoal and some of which looked like cowdung ashballs. This clearly brings out that men acquainted with fire and perhaps with the art of keeping it ablaze by some animal products or otherwise lived in very early age in the cave.

Many bone implements have been found in these caves which have been called Magdalenian. But a consideration of the extinct fauna may lead to dating its beginnings to Mild-Palaeolithic times when cave-dwelling began in Europe. It is well known that India also suffered from the rigours of a glacial period and also of pluvial periods. These drove the people no doubt into the caves. A mysterious change of climate conditions or some upheaval was affecting the conditions of life at that time in India. Though the human bones that were found have been lost sight of, the testimony of the other animals will throw much light on the times. Thus Lydekker after enumerating carefully all the mammalia found in the Karnul caves goes on to point out 'the most remarkable feature in the list is the occurance among a number of existing Indian species, of a Cynocephalus, of Hyana Crocuta of a small Equus indistinguishable from Equus asinus and of a Manis apparently identical with the existing West African Manis gigantea; while scarcely also less noteworthy is the occurrence of a peculiar species of Rhinoceros and of a Hystrix and a Viverra specifically distinct from the species now living in India as well as of the non-Indian genus Atherura.

The occurrence of the genus Cynocephalus and of forms identical with African species of Hyena, Equus and Manis is extremely important in supplementing the evidence afforded by the Siwalik fauna as to the probable derivation of many of the existing Ethiopian mammals from those of later tertiaries of India; and it is interesting to trace the gradual dying out in the latter country of genera and species which are now dominant forms in Africa. There is at present no satisfactory explanation of this total extinction of genera and species which appear equally as well suited to exist there at the present day as those which remain.' It has already been seen that these changes were taking place in times just succeeding the Pliocene epoch. Though it brought down to later than Upper Pleistocene times.

Of course, this epoch in India may or may not synchronise with the same age in Europe but it must be admitted that the same hard climatic conditions were driving the men of Europe as well as of India to the caves. Unfortunately, no stone implements except perhaps one was discovered in the Billa Surgam cave which could have offered us more chance of identifying this culture with the European phase. The bone implements which have been dug out occur only at the depth of 15 or 16 ft. On the other hand, definite proofs exist of the use of stone. Thus, in the Cathedral Cave of Billa Surgam 'two or three bones were found showing distinct traces of having been scraped with a hard and sharp implement the marks being such as would be made by a sharp stone flake.'

2. THE AGE OF THE FAUNA

"The comparatively large number of species either totally extinct or which are not now found living in India, renders it probable that the age of a considerable part of the Karnul cave deposits is not newer than the Pleistocene; and the fauna, as being almost certainly more recent than that of the Nerbudda beds may be provisionally assigned to the later part of that period." After this Lydekker gives an exhaustive list of the fauna, which is the most correct and sole record of mid-Pleistocene India. Prof. H.C. Dasgupta has given in a tabular form a study of these finds in his paper on Indian Prehistory already mentioned.

Of the primates the Indian sacred Hanuman monkey Semnopethicus entellus 'appears to have existed during the whole period of the Karnul cave deposits when probably the range of the existing type was a little more southern.' A species of monkey (Cynocephalus sp.) appears to be indistinguishable from the African species on the one hand and the Siwalik species on the other. Of the cat family we get the tiger or lion, Felis Tigris or leo, the leopard (Felis Pardus), the jungle-cat Felis chaus, the last having a very long range at the present day as well as the small cat still found in Southern India and Ceylon, the red-spotted cat, Felis rubiginosa. Hyana Crocuta linked with the Siwalik species found in the Early Pleistocene of Europe and Pleistocene of China and now living in Africa perhaps originated in India and spread westwards at the beginning of the Pleistocene or the end of the Pleistocene.

The old genus of the civet cat Viverra karnuliensis, found from the upper Eocene of England is also represented by a species here traced to the earlier Siwalik species. An extinct species of tiger-civet Prionodon also occurs in the deposits. This type is unlike any now found in South India. The mongoose still found throught India (Herpestes mungo), the Nilgiri mongoose (H. Fuscus) and the smaller mongoose (H. auropunctatus) not now found in Peninsular India occur in the deposits. The common bear found throughout India (Melursus ursinus), the shrew (Sorex sp.) and two living types of bats (Taphozous saccolamus and Hipposiderus diadema) have been found. The large Malay squirrel (Sciurus bicolor) not now found in South India has been also found. The 'rats and mice and such small deer,' all of which are now found in India, muster six in number, e,g., the Indian antelope rate (Gerbillus indicus), the bandicoot-rat (Nesokia bandicoota), the mole-rat (Nesokia bengalensis), the field-rat (Mus Mettada), the spicy mouse (Mus platythrix) and the bush-rat (Golunda elloti). Two extinct types of porcupines (Hystrix crasidens and Atherura karnuliensis) come from the Cathedral Cave.

The two species of Equus are very interesting for 'the existing wild races of E. asinus being confined to North Africa it is extremely interesting to find evidence in the Pleistocene of a form which there is every reason to regard as specifically the same and which not improbably indicates that African races originally came from India.' The other fragments of an Equus not specifically distinguishable 'indicate a species superior in size to E. asianus which is certainly distinct both from the larger E. namadicus of the earlier Pleistocene and E. sivalensis of Pliocene of India and about equal in dimensions to the existing Indian E. onager and some of the South African species.' An extinct type of Rhynoceros (Rhinoceros karnuliensis) also occurs specifically different from existing R. unicornis or R. deccanensis but the Nilgai (Boselaphus trangocamelus), the Indian Gazelle (Gazella bennetti), the Indian Antelope, the Sambar (Cervus unicolor), the spotted deer (Cervulus muntjac), all living types, have been found.

The Indian mouse-deer (Tragulus memenna) the living type of wild boar (Sus cristatus) and the extinct type of boar (Sus karnuliensis) along with the gigantic Pangolin (Manis gigantea), now restricted to Western Africa, complete the list. The fossils also include living species of seven types of birds, five types of reptiles and four types of mammals. Prof. H.C. Das Gupta thus says of them: "It is clear that the Karnul fauna represent a stage which proceded the present distribution of the mammals, because we have a few specices which are entirely extinct, which are found outside India and a few which are found within India, but in the region to the north of Southern India. As remarked by Lydekker, the fauna is decidedly newer than the Narbada gravels and accordingly the cave deposits cannot be older than the upper Pleistocene. It is also younger than the jamuna-Gangetic alluvium and represents the topmost stage of Pleistocene, if not younger". It is not younger than Upper Pleistocene and not older than Mid-Pleistocene it would appear.

Technologically speaking, the big bone implements, the Magdalenian types of stone-impliments found nearby and the total lack of any primitive art so characteristic of late cave-life would make us assign it to a Magdalenian culture-zone. But the caves which have yielded in Northern India remarkable primitive art occur in a zone of early, middle and late Caspian industries. Billa Surgam caves give us indications of earlier culture-stages which continued up to Neolithic times with big intermediate gaps. It is rather a misfortune for Indian science that caves with art have yielded no fossil-remains and the only cave with fossil- finds has yielded dubious types of Palaeolithic industry. Imshelwara cave in Kashmir, has been said to yield fossil remains of Karnul type but no human remains have been reported from.

3. THE LIFE IN THE CAVES

The Billa Surgam caves are situated on the Yerrakonda hills and are three in number and known as the Cathedral, Charnel house and Purgatory caves. Other caves there are: the North Chapel, the Hermit's cell, the South Chapel and the Chapter House/ a passage to which the name of the 'Corridor' was given, was found to lead at a distance of 55 ft. to another passage running east and west which formed a domed chamber which was so beautiful at its Eastern extremity that it was called the 'Fairy Chamber.'

"All have the appearance of considerable antiquity being above the present drainage levels and full of stalagmite in enormous masses." It has already been pointed out that man did not inhabit the cave continuously. Put the existence of the deep floor and extinct fauna, the bone implements at a great depth as well as of pottery at a smaller depth shows that the cave was resorted to by men from very early times to Neolithic days. Now a curious fact is that the cave was probably associated with magico-religious rites or it was resorted to by peoples who were probably hunters of scalps of men and animals, for it is remarkable how not a single skull was discovered in the midst of the heap of bones. With the exception of two or three tolerably perfect skulls of bats which lived in the cave, no entire crania or large fragments of crania were found. The dwellers of these prehistoric caves were mighty hunters.

According to Brooce Foote at least two hundred bone weapons or implements were found there. They include all manner of primitive weapons required to destroy the wild denizens of the forest and to cut them up for food. Awls, many kinds of arrowheads, small daggers, scrappers, chisels, gouge, wedges, axe-heads, etc., from part of the various kinds of things which bear definite traces of being worked up by man. The flesh probably was selected from any animal that came ready to hand and might have been smoked before being taken as the presence of the cinder plainly brings out the existence of fire. There can be little doubt that the majority of the animals whose bones have been found formed the diet of these primitive inhabitants. The horse, the gazelle, the antelope, the bovine species, the rhinoceros, and the ant-eater supplied quite a heavy meal though it must have been but few and far between. The lion, the leopard, the tiger, the hyaena, the bear, the big monkeys were creatures with whom they had to deal in the course of their forest excursions and they went to bulge their game bag. These primitive dwellers did not lack any muscular strength at all as some of their bone weapons clearly show.

Was the Billa Surgam cave connected with some magico-religious rite, and some of the antique cults were enshrined in a cave temple which played such a prominent part in later India? Then the long list of scalpless animals and possibly the smashed human bone possibly carries the tale of the numerous victims to some pristine cave deity. When we remember some form of magic or religion always existing among the most primitive peoples, the perpetuation of grim mother-goddess cults in caves of India to the present day and human sacrifices still carried on by the primitive wild tribes, we may surmise that in Karnul we are in Venus or a Gondh sacrificing Meriah pole. What is more probable is that the cave was used as an occasional retreat and deserted after the death of somebody there.

4. VEDDA CAVE-LIFE

Now we know how the Veddas represent one of the most primitive stocks of mankind near India of probably Neolithic cave-dwellers. Allowing for the lapse of such a vast time and also some essential modification which climatic changes and intercourse with higher cultures have brought about in the lives of the modern 'Forest Veddas' we might imagine from their mode of living very well the condition of life in the Palaeolithic caves. Mr. and Mrs. Selgman thus write of them 'The forest-Vedda forms a home two or three times a year, as the season demands.

Thus, in the dry hot months when brooks and ponds dry up, the game collects in the low forests around the half-dried river-beds, he then settles with his family in a place close to water. The rain sets in, however, and the iguanas, deer, pigs, etc., are scattered over the country; the elks then seek rocky hills and are followed by the Vedda. Here, if possible, a cave is chosen for therm.' Now here don't we get a very plausible explanation of the mode in which the caves like Billa Surgam were restored to by the primitive cave-dwellers of India as Duckworth surmises the same of Europe.

In Europe the rigors of the climate compelled the cave-dwellers probably to spend most of the year indoors but the conditions in India were much milder. Then again it is from these Veddas that we can suggest a cause of the desertion of the caves for a long time. 'Amongst the Veddas when a man or women dies from sickness the body is left in the cave or rock-shelter in which death took place. The body is not washed or purified but covered with leaves and left as it is. This was formerly the universal custom. And as soon as these matters are attended to, the small community leaves the place or cave in which the death has occurred and avoids it for a very long time.'

5. SUMMERY

Now we find how very likely it was that these cave-dwellers of the Palaeolithic age had similar notions and the fear of being pelted by demons (or Yakkus as in the case of the modern Veddas) drove them to other contiguous caves whence they returned again after they had forgotten the incident which led to their desertion or hard necessity compelled them again to seek their previous shelter. A word of caution is here necessary as in the case of the Andamanese. Many theories or Andamanese or Veddas as the representatives of the most primitive types of mankind as for instance by Wundt in his Folk Psychology. But the cave-paintings of the Veddas and their implements carry to us the impression of their being of a Mesolithic culture. This is quite in accord with Ruggeri's estimate from the physical standpoint correlating the Veddas with the Proto-Australoid peoples-e.g., the Hos, Mundas, etc.- of whom we would speak later on in connection with Indian capsian art. Ruggeri calls the Veddas as of the Australoid-Veddaici stock.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

REFERENCES:

Ball Valentine, 1878. On the forms and geographical distribution of ancient stone implements, Proceedings, Royal Irish Academy.

Brown, J. Coggin, 1017. Catalogue raisonne of the prehistoric Antiquities in the Indian Museums at Calcutta, Simla.

Cockburn, J, 1889. Cave drawings in the Kaimur Range, p.89.

Foote, R. Bruce, 1865. Discovery of Prehistoric Remains in India, p.187.

Wood Mason, 1867. Stone implements from Central India, p.142.

Sewell, R. 1902. Prehistoric burialsites in southern India, p.165.
Dalton, Col. E. J. 1863. Rude stone monuments in Chutia Nagpur and other places, p.112.