Ethno-archaeology in India: Survivals & Parallels

Introduction

Ethnoarchaeology is a research approach that **combines ethnographic studies of living societies with archaeological methods** to better understand and interpret the material remains of past human cultures.

It involves observing and documenting the material culture, behaviors, and traditions of contemporary communities, especially those with lifestyles similar to ancient societies, to draw analogies and make inferences about how people in the past may have lived, worked, and interacted with their environment.

In short, **ethnoarchaeology connects the present with the past.**

Ethnography = Studying living people and their culture through direct observation.

Archaeology = Studying ancient people through the material remains they left behind.

Ethnoarchaeology = Using the study of living people (ethnography)

→ to understand the behavior of ancient people (archaeology).

The Concept of Ethno-archaeology

The term came into prominence in the mid-20th century through anthropologists such as **Lewis Binford**, who studied the **Nunamiut hunters of Alaska** to understand hunter-gatherer site formation processes. **Ian Hodder** later emphasized that material culture also carries **symbolic and cultural meanings**, not merely functional roles. Ethno-archaeology thus combines both **processual** (scientific and behavioral) and **post-processual** (symbolic and interpretive) dimensions.

Ethno-archaeology in India: Background

India's archaeological landscape is exceptionally rich. From **Acheulean hand axes in Attirampakkam to Neolithic villages in the Deccan,** the country preserves nearly every phase of human cultural evolution. Equally significant is the persistence of **traditional communities** that maintain ancient lifeways- hunter-gatherers, pastoral nomads, craft specialists, and peasant cultivators.

Indian ethno-archaeological studies began gaining ground in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired by **V. N. Misra**, **K. Paddayya**, and **S. N. Rajaguru**, who pioneered fieldwork linking living tribal and rural communities with prehistoric contexts. For instance, Paddayya's work with the **Kadar tribe** and **Hatgars of Shorapur** demonstrated how ethno-archaeology could clarify the relationship between tool use, subsistence, and site formation processes.

Survivals

Survivals are those **practices, tools, or traditions** that have continued through generations **with little or no change** since ancient times. They represent a kind of **cultural continuity**, showing how some ways of living are so useful or deeply rooted that they persist for centuries.

For example:

- The **use of hand-made pottery** and **open firing methods** among the **Kumbhars (traditional potters)** in parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat strongly resembles pottery-making techniques used during the **Chalcolithic period**. The wheel type, clay preparation, and kiln marks often show close similarities.
- The **use of grinding stones and querns** for processing grains in rural India is another survival from the Neolithic period when agriculture first developed. These tools have changed very little in design or function.

- Among the **Chenchus** and **Birhors**, the use of **simple stone flakes, bows, and wooden tools** for foraging and hunting represents survival of ancient **Mesolithic technologies**.

Parallels

Parallels, on the other hand, are **similarities** that have developed **independently** in different societies. These are not direct survivals from a common past, but rather **new inventions or behaviors** that look like old ones because people everywhere respond to **similar environmental or functional challenges** in similar ways.

For instance:

- The **use of mud and thatch** to build houses in hot, dry regions of Africa, India, and the Middle East is a parallel adaptation. Even though these regions may not have influenced one another, people discovered that mud keeps homes cool and thatch provides insulation.
- Similarly, **stone tool-making** techniques developed independently in many parts of the world where metal was unavailable. This is a functional parallel, showing how humans across different times and places found the same solutions using local materials.
- The **pastoral systems** of the **Rabaris** in Gujarat and the **Mongolian herders** in Central Asia also form parallels — both communities developed mobile herding lifestyles suited to arid or semi-arid environments, despite having different cultural roots.

Ethno-archaeology among Hunting and Foraging Communities

The Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

The **Chenchus**, inhabiting the **Nallamala Hills** in the Eastern Ghats, are one of India's best-studied hunting and gathering groups. They live within the forests surrounding the Krishna River and depend largely on **wild plants, honey, fruits, tubers, and small game**.

Ethno-archaeological studies among the Chenchus reveal several important parallels with **Mesolithic hunter-gatherers**:

- **Use of natural rock shelters and caves** for temporary habitation mirrors the pattern found in Mesolithic rock shelter sites such as **Bhimbetka** and **Kurnool caves**.
- They rely on **simple stone flakes and wooden implements**, used for cutting, digging, and hunting—tools that resemble the flaked stone artifacts found in early Holocene sites.
- Their **seasonal mobility**—moving between forest clearings during dry months and river valleys during monsoon—helps explain how prehistoric groups adjusted their subsistence patterns according to resource availability.
- The **distribution of hearths, stone chips, and discarded food remains** around their camps provides clues for archaeologists about **site formation processes**, i.e., how activity areas in prehistoric settlements were organized and how material traces accumulated.

The Birhors and Hill Kharias of Jharkhand

In the forested uplands of **Jharkhand**, the **Birhors** and **Hill Kharias** continue to rely heavily on forest-based subsistence. They collect fruits, roots, and honey, and hunt small animals using **bows, arrows, and bamboo traps**. Their lifestyle demonstrates a remarkable survival of prehistoric hunting technologies and mobility patterns.

Ethno-archaeological observations among these groups reveal:

- **Bow-and-arrow technology** using bamboo, plant fiber, and iron-tipped arrows represents continuity from Mesolithic hunting equipment.
- The **layout of temporary forest camps**, made of leaf and bamboo huts, provides models for interpreting **open-air Mesolithic sites**, where similar spatial organization of hearths, working zones, and sleeping areas has been recorded.
- Their **use of fire for land clearing** and **honey extraction** mirrors ancient practices of using controlled fire to manage forest resources.
- Discarded stone fragments, food refuse, and ash heaps at these sites closely resemble the debris patterns found in ancient hunter-gatherer sites.

Fishing Communities of Kerala and Odisha

Along India's coastal belts, **fishing communities** preserve practices that shed light on **prehistoric coastal adaptations**. Among them, the **Mukkuvars** of Kerala and the **Kharai** and **Kaibarta** fishers of Odisha are of special interest.

Ethno-archaeological research on these groups has documented:

- The use of **dugout canoes**, **stone weights for nets**, and **shell scrapers**, which resemble tools and materials found in **Neolithic coastal sites** such as **Teri sites in Tamil Nadu** and **Golbai Sasan in Odisha**.
- Their **seasonal fishing patterns**—moving between inland and marine waters—mirror ancient coastal mobility during changing sea levels in the Holocene epoch.
- The presence of **shell middens** (piles of discarded shells and fish bones) along modern fishing villages offers direct analogies to similar middens found in prehistoric contexts, helping researchers identify **subsistence and diet patterns** of early coastal communities.

The Juangs of Odisha

The **Juang tribe** of Odisha, living in the **Keonjhar and Dhenkanal regions**, provides another example of how ancient hunting traditions survive in modified forms. Historically known as **forest hunters and gatherers**, many Juangs still use **bows, arrows, and digging sticks** to supplement their subsistence.

Ethno-archaeological observations among the Juangs have revealed:

- **Hunting tools and wooden implements** that mirror early metal-free technologies of the Mesolithic.
- **Seasonal camps and storage patterns** that help interpret temporary habitation sites found in central and eastern India.
- The Juang practice of **using natural rock shelters and caves** during monsoon months, leaving behind hearths, ash, and broken tools, creates a direct modern parallel to prehistoric cave occupations.

Ethno-archaeology among Pastoral Communities

The Rabaris and Maldharis of Gujarat

The **Rabaris** and **Maldharis**, traditional camel, sheep, and cattle herders of Gujarat and western Rajasthan, represent classic examples of **nomadic pastoralism** in semi-arid landscapes. Their **temporary encampments**, often made of perishable materials like grass, mud, and branches, leave minimal traces—much like prehistoric pastoral camps.

Ethno-archaeological research in Gujarat compares Rabari settlements with **Chalcolithic sites such as Prabhas Patan, Somnath, and Rangpur**. The similarity in **ceramic styles**, hearth patterns, and animal bone assemblages suggests that Chalcolithic herders practiced similar **seasonal mobility**. Studies have also noted

how Rabaris construct **circular hearths** and discard broken pottery outside their huts—patterns identical to those found in the excavation layers of Chalcolithic habitations.

Furthermore, the **pastoral economy** of Rabaris involves **exchange of dairy products, wool, and hides** with settled agricultural communities. This exchange pattern helps archaeologists interpret how **early herders interacted with Neolithic farmers**, establishing networks of **trade, technology transfer, and cultural exchange**.

The Changpas of Ladakh

The **Changpas**, semi-nomadic herders of **Changthang** in eastern Ladakh, live in one of the most challenging environments on Earth. Their subsistence revolves around **yak, goat, and sheep herding**, and the production of **pashmina wool**. Ethno-archaeological studies here focus on how human adaptation to **high-altitude cold deserts** parallels **Bronze Age pastoral strategies** in Central Asia and Tibet.

Changpa camps often include **stone corrals** for animals, **tent bases made of yak hair**, and **rock shelters** that protect against wind and snow. These material traces closely resemble the remains found at **Bronze Age sites in Ladakh and the Indus Valley highlands**, suggesting that early pastoralists here practiced similar survival strategies.

The Changpas' **exchange networks**, where they trade wool, meat, and salt for grains and tea with valley communities, also reflect ancient **interregional exchange systems**. Archaeologists link these with the movement of goods such as **lapis lazuli, carnelian, and metals** across the Himalayan trade routes during the Bronze Age.

The Raikas of Rajasthan

Another significant example comes from the **Raikas** (or **Rebaris**) of Rajasthan, traditional **camel herders** who inhabit the Thar Desert. Their way of life illustrates how communities adapt to **arid ecology through mobility and resilience**. Raikas build **temporary desert camps**, use **leather bags and clay vessels**, and rely on **communal wells**—all features that leave material traces similar to **protohistoric desert sites** in western India.

Researchers studying Raika encampments have drawn parallels between their **livestock enclosures**, dung mounds, and **charred bone deposits** with **archaeological features** found in **Indus Civilization rural settlements**, such as **Ganweriwala and Kalibangan**. These comparisons suggest that early camel herding and trade networks might have originated in such desert-based pastoral cultures.

The Todas of the Nilgiri Hills

In southern India, the **Todas** of the Nilgiri Hills represent a unique form of **dairy-based pastoralism**. Their **buffalo-centered economy**, sacred dairies, and ritual use of milk vessels provide insights into how **symbolic and religious dimensions** of pastoralism can be archaeologically interpreted.

Ethno-archaeological studies show that Toda **temple dairies** made of stone and wood leave specific architectural footprints that can help archaeologists identify **ritual pastoral structures** in prehistoric South Indian sites. The Toda example expands the understanding of pastoralism beyond subsistence—showing it as a complex **socio-religious and symbolic system**.

Ethno-archaeology among Peasant and Agricultural Communities

Tribal and Peasant Cultivators of Central India

In the heart of India, communities such as the **Gonds, Baigas, and Bhils** preserve agricultural systems that reflect early stages of farming. The **Baigas**, for example, practice a form of **shifting cultivation (bewar)** where small forest patches are cleared by burning vegetation before sowing millet, rice, or maize. This practice mirrors **Neolithic slash-and-burn agriculture**, which marked humanity's first attempts at farming in forested landscapes.

Their **tools**—simple **wooden ploughs, digging sticks, stone grinders, and sickles**—are strikingly similar to those found in **Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites** such as **Mahagara (Uttar Pradesh)** and **Chirand (Bihar)**. The **house structures**—circular or rectangular huts with thatched roofs and mud walls—parallel early village forms identified at archaeological sites like **Paiyampalli** and **Burzahom**.

Rice-growing Communities of Eastern India

In eastern and northeastern India, **rice cultivation** has been practiced for millennia. Communities in **Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur** use **terraced fields** on hill slopes, an ingenious adaptation to steep terrain. These terraces are **irrigated using bamboo pipes and small channels**—methods that demonstrate how ancient people controlled water for agriculture.

Ethno-archaeological research shows that these practices resemble the **Neolithic wet-rice systems** of the **Brahmaputra and Ganga valleys**, where archaeological evidence of rice husks and irrigation channels has been found. The **Ahoms** and **Apatanis**, for instance, have long used bamboo aqueducts to divert spring water into fields, a technique comparable to early water management features found at Neolithic sites like **Daojali Hading** and **Koldihwa**.

The continuity of **manual rice transplantation, threshing floors, and granaries on stilts** provides direct parallels to **ancient subsistence systems** in South and Southeast Asia.

Water Management in South India

One of the most remarkable aspects of Indian agricultural heritage lies in **traditional irrigation systems** that have evolved over thousands of years. In **Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh**, rural communities continue to use **tanks (erys)**, **check dams**, and **canals** for water storage and distribution—structures that trace their origins back to the **Iron Age and Early Historic periods**.

Ethno-archaeological studies of **village tanks** reveal how water control shaped both settlement patterns and social hierarchies. **Villages were often arranged around a central tank,** which served not only as a source of irrigation but also as a **ritual and social center**. Archaeologists studying sites like **Adichanallur** and **Uraiyur** note that similar spatial organization existed in ancient Tamil societies, where **hydraulic management** was linked to **political authority and community cooperation**.

Arts, Crafts, and Technological Traditions

Pottery Traditions

Pottery remains one of the most enduring symbols of India's ancient civilization, from the hand-made vessels of the **Neolithic** period to the wheel-turned ceramics of the **Chalcolithic and Early Historic** times. Among the living communities that carry forward this legacy are the **Kumbhars** and **Prajapatis**, found across Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

These artisans continue to use **hand-wheels, simple kick-wheels, and open kilns**, remarkably similar to those used thousands of years ago. Ethno-archaeological studies have observed how the **production process**—from clay selection and

tempering to shaping, firing, and decoration—creates distinct **waste patterns** that closely match archaeological evidence.

For instance:

- **Kiln remains**, **firing debris**, and **wasters (broken pots during firing)** from modern potteries help archaeologists interpret similar finds at **Chalcolithic sites such as Inamgaon and Navdatoli**.
- The **decorative motifs**—incised lines, appliqué designs, and geometric painting—echo designs found in the pottery of the **Harappan, Jorwe, and Malwa cultures**, suggesting both **aesthetic continuity** and **shared cultural symbolism**.

Metalworking Communities

Metalworking is another vital domain where living traditions illuminate ancient technologies. The **Asur tribe** of Jharkhand, regarded as one of India's earliest iron-smelting communities, and the **Lohar blacksmiths** of northern and central India, still practice forms of metallurgy that preserve **pre-industrial techniques**.

The Asurs construct **clay furnaces (smelting hearths)**, use **bellows made of animal hide**, and select **iron-rich laterite ores**, all resembling the remains found at **early Iron Age archaeological sites** in the Chotanagpur plateau and central India. The **slag deposits** and **furnace fragments** left behind by their work serve as direct analogies to **archaeometallurgical findings**—offering insights into ancient methods of **ore reduction, smelting temperatures, and fuel use (charcoal from specific wood species)**.

Among the **Lohars**, who serve as village blacksmiths, the process of **forging agricultural tools, weapons, and ritual objects** helps archaeologists understand how **metal artifacts** from Iron Age and Early Historic layers might have been shaped, sharpened, and repaired. Their knowledge of **temperatures, hammering**

rhythms, and quenching methods represents a living embodiment of ancient **technological expertise and craftsmanship**.

Stone Tool and Bead-making Communities

The **Akkalwadi flintknappers** of Maharashtra and the **Khambhat (Cambay) bead-makers** of Gujarat are modern heirs to India's prehistoric stone-working traditions.

At **Akkalwadi**, local craftsmen use hammerstones and bone tools to flake fine-edged blades from quartzite and chalcedony—mirroring the **flake production sequences** observed in **Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic tool industries**.
Ethno-archaeological studies of their **debitage (waste flakes)** help archaeologists reconstruct **workshop organization, tool standardization, and raw material economy** in prehistoric stone tool sites.

In **Khambhat**, artisans have for centuries specialized in making **agate and carnelian beads** through a labor-intensive process of **chipping, grinding, drilling, and polishing**. Modern bead workshops reproduce many aspects of **Harappan craft traditions**, as evidenced by similar **drill hole marks, microdebitage, and polishing residues** found in **Harappan industrial sites like Lothal, Dholavira, and Chanhudaro**.

PYQs

Direct Questions on Ethno-archaeology

1. Discuss the importance of the ethno-archaeological approach to the study of indigenous craft in India. (2014)
2. Ethno-archaeological evidences for the survival of hunting-gathering traditions. (2016)

3. Ethno-archaeology as a research strategy. (2017)
4. Discuss the relevance of art and craft traditions in the understanding of Indian archaeology. (2017)
5. Ethno-archaeology as a research strategy. (2018)
6. Ethno-archaeological analysis of hunting activities of contemporary tribal communities. (2019)
7. Discuss the importance of ethno-archaeology in reconstructing the past citing Indian examples. (2020)

Questions on Survivals, Parallels, and Cultural Continuity

8. Describe the concept of "Survivals" and discuss its relevance in interpreting cultural continuity in India. (2013)
9. Explain the concept of cultural continuity with suitable archaeological and ethnographic examples from India. (2015)
10. Discuss the significance of living traditions in understanding prehistoric cultures. (2018)
11. How can ethnographic studies of tribal societies help in reconstructing prehistoric subsistence and settlement patterns? (2021)
12. Comment on the persistence of ancient technological and ritual practices in contemporary Indian tribal communities. (2022)

Questions on Hunting, Foraging, and Fishing Communities

13. Discuss the ethnographic parallels for understanding the subsistence pattern of Mesolithic hunters and gatherers in India. (2014)
14. Describe the material culture and adaptive strategies of hunting and gathering tribes in India. (2016)

15. Ethno-archaeological analysis of hunting activities of contemporary tribal communities. (2019)
16. What do ethnographic studies of foraging tribes reveal about the transition from hunting-gathering to food production in India? (2023)

Questions on Pastoral and Agricultural Analogies

17. Discuss the relevance of ethnographic studies of Indian pastoral communities in reconstructing prehistoric pastoral economies. (2015)
18. What role does ethnography play in understanding the transition from hunting-gathering to pastoralism and agriculture? (2016)
19. Examine the contribution of ethno-archaeological studies to the understanding of Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures of India. (2020)
20. How do traditional agricultural and irrigation practices in India contribute to interpreting ancient agrarian societies? (2024)

Questions on Crafts, Technology, and Material Culture

21. Discuss the importance of the ethno-archaeological approach to the study of indigenous craft in India. (2014)
22. Discuss the relevance of art and craft traditions in the understanding of Indian archaeology. (2017)
23. Describe the technological continuity observable in pottery-making and metal-working traditions in India. (2018)
24. Explain how ethnographic and experimental approaches contribute to the study of prehistoric technology. (2021)
25. How can traditional craft communities inform our understanding of prehistoric tool-making and material culture? (2022)

Summary of Trends (2013–2025)

- **Frequency:** Questions related to ethno-archaeology appear nearly every year, either directly or indirectly.
- **Marks Weightage:** Usually 10–15 marks.
- **Focus Areas:**
    - Hunting, foraging, and fishing communities.
    - Pastoral and agricultural analogies.
    - Art, craft, and technology.
    - Survivals and parallels.
    - Methodological approaches and case studies.