



The Continuity of Strength: A Comparative Analysis of Prehistoric Women's Roles and Modern Rural Women in the Indian Context through Archaeological Evidence

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ABSTRACT

The operation aims to ascertain the historical continuity between prehistoric Indian woman in ancient societies and their modern counterparts of rural India on primary archaeological-ethnographic evidence. Prehistoric women in the olden days were often portrayed as little more than objects of submissiveness. This is contested by archaeological evidence from India and elsewhere that shows the central role of women in leadership, rituals and subsistence. It argues that women have always been central to health care, social relations, the formation of culture and subsistence. Ethnographic analogies drawn from rural Bihar, Odisha and Chhattisgarh also theories like excavation reports (Mehrgarh/ Inamgaon/ Burzahom) are used to propose the new analytical roadmap that bridges historical accounts with contemporary lives this article proposes. The continuation of knowledge, cultural responsibility and economic participation point to the vital legacy that women have contributed in shaping society.

Introduction

With mounting archeological proof, the conception that ancient human societies were purely patriarchal and masculine is being challenged. Prehistoric women in India and elsewhere were not merely caregivers; they also took an active part in rituals, hunting, food gathering, and cultural life. Women's roles, particularly in prehistory, have often been neglected in the dominant narratives of Indian history.



Modern advances in archaeology, however, provide rich primary data to fill these gaps. Women appear to have had significant roles in prehistoric India in producing food, medicine, crafts, and religion. We argue that the multifaceted tasks rural women contribute today represent these tasks. Rural Indian women of today carry out homework and economic contributions, which reflects a resilient pattern lasting over time. This essay examines the similarities between these two personas. This study provides a comparative study based on archaeological evidence and contemporary fieldwork, documenting a tradition of continuity and change in women's roles.

Methodology

This paper is based on a comparative approach using primary sources:

- Excavation reports and osteological studies from prehistoric Indian sites (Mehrgarh, Inamgaon, Burzahom, Bagor, and Bhimbetka)
- Typological and spatial analysis of tools, figurines, storage units, and burial assemblages.
- Integration of carbon dating, isotopic analysis, and GIS mapping from archaeological fieldwork reports

Prehistoric Indian Women: Analysis from Archaeological Primary Sources

1. Subsistence and Food Production

Despite the fact that India has not uncovered a tomb such as that of the famous WMP6 huntress of Peru (Haas et al., 2020), recent studies provide strong circumstantial evidence. Researchers found microliths commonly associated with household units in Indian Mesolithic sites like Bhimbetka, suggesting that women too used tools (Wakankar 1975). A less strict labor division is suggested by the shared space of tool-making. Indian patterns must be reconsidered in the context of global observations (Lacy & Ocobock, 2024), with consideration for the potential that women would have been involved in post-hunt processing or communal hunts.

- Mehrgarh (7000–2600 BCE): Grinding stones, mortars, storage pits, and plant remain were analyzed to demonstrate women's involvement in early wheat and barley processing (Jarrige et al., 1995).
- Bagor (Rajasthan): Microlithic tool assemblages in domestic areas indicate female involvement in food preparation and small-game processing.
- Inamgaon (1600–700 BCE): Human remains' stable isotope evidence indicates diverse diets and gender-based food partitioning, where females were linked to home food webs (Dhavalikar, 1984).



2. Craft Production and Cultural Expression

- Harappan Settlements (Rakhigarhi, Lothal, Mohenjo-daro): There are many terracotta female figurines, some very elaborately dressed, with hairstyles and jewelry, which indicate their symbolic, perhaps spiritual function in fertility and group identity.

- Textile Evidence: Impressions of woven fabrics on pottery in Lothal and Nausharo suggest weaving technologies possibly operated by women, running parallel to current handloom practices in Odisha and Assam

Terracotta female figurines have been found in Kondapaka (Telangana), a Neolithic site overlaid with Satavahana period artifacts (TOI, 2025).

Among them are figures with embellished breastplates that are regarded as symbolic of ceremony or leadership. Gupta period figurines of goddess worship and symbolic nuptials were unearthed at the Chausa site in Bihar (Buxar) (TOI, 2025). Such relics prove the significance of women in religious and social life. Also present in Harappan sites such as Rakhigarhi and Balu are female figurines, including the iconic "mother goddess" designs. These figurines are utilized for fertility and protection rituals, showing continuity from early pastoral societies.

3. Burial Evidence and Social Status

- Burzahom (Jammu & Kashmir): Interment of female skeletons with deer bones, red ochre, and stone implements suggests ritual significance and specialized societal functions.

- Chirand (Bihar): Chalcolithic cemetery burials in which women are represented by ornamental bangles, shells, and beads (most of marine origins) suggest trade involvement and symbolic status for women (Verma, 2000).

4. Healthcare and Medicine

- Chalcolithic Nevasa: Plant residue in pottery and tools with wear consistent with scraping and mixing substantiate women's participation in herbal medicine (Deo & Dhavalikar, 1973).

- Bhimbetka Rock Shelters: Rock painting scenes of gourd and plant-carrying female figures may symbolize early medicinal or food preservation practices

5. Symbolism and Ritual Depictions in Rock Art



The IGNCA's record of primary sites such as Bhimbetka, Dhana Boi, and Kathotiya in Madhya Pradesh indicates a number of images of women playing active social and ritual roles. Social centrality is indicated by cooking, childcare, and grinding grain scenes. Other images show women engaging in ceremonies under trees (IGNCA, 2009). Especially during such festivities as Navratri, Chhath, and sowing ceremonies, these depictions bear witness to the ritual independence that continues to be enjoyed by rural women. Women are also depicted dancing, performing rites, and using implements in rock paintings from the Kaimur hills of Bihar and Sundargarh in Odisha, testifying to their ceremonial and economic importance.

6. Gender Equality and Prehistoric Leadership

There is no apparent distinction between the status of men and women, based on an examination of grave contents and spatial arrangements in South Indian megalithic graves such as Brahmagiri and Maski (Shinde, 2014).

This indicates that there was an egalitarian regime where women's roles were not auxiliary but integral. At Daimabad, women with elaborately decorated headdresses and sitting positions in obeisant postures work toward promoting the idea that women may hold high social positions or even leadership roles.

Modern Rural Indian Women: Ethnographic Continuities

1. Agriculture and Biodiversity Conservation

Almost 70% of the agricultural production work, such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and seed preservation, is performed by Indian rural women, FAO (2025) reports. Women in the Deccan plateau and Odisha still grow millet according to traditional practices. These traditions are an immediate inheritance of the original female-controlled food production systems. Archaeobotanical studies validate the hypothesis that women played a key role in crop domestication among prehistoric societies (Fuller, 2007). Their role as genetic guardians of indigenous seeds is analogous to that of Neolithic women who began to experiment with edible grasses, attested to by sites such as Chirand (Bihar).

- In tribal Chhattisgarh, women maintain kitchen gardens and seed banks using traditional methods. This echoes Mehrgarh's plant domestication zones. - Studies from Odisha's Kalahandi district show women's dominance in millet preservation and soil fertility management.

2. Craftsmanship and Cultural Preservation



- In Madhubani (Bihar), Mithila art-passed down through maternal lines-illustrates women's role as cultural stewards, similar to figurine traditions of Harappa.
- Rural Gujarat's embroidery traditions show symbolic continuity with prehistoric terracotta motifs.

3. Spiritual and Healing Roles

- The Dai communities of Jharkhand utilize plant-based medicines, traditional midwives who carry on chalcolithic healing practices in their oral tradition handed down through matrilineal generations.
- Women shamans in Bastar (Chhattisgarh) carry on their ancient ritual-spiritual practices by carrying out ritual healings associated with the agricultural cycle. Present-day rural women retain climate-resilient practices, seasonal calendars, and therapeutic plant knowledge. Based on a study by the Centre for Science and Environment (2023), women's organizations are leading the charge to save water and maintain forests in Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Their role is akin to the probable eco-spiritual role of the prehistoric women depicted in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand Forest worship murals. Protection of sacred trees and water sources by women is a true demonstration of the manner in which women protected the environment historically.

4. Social and Political Agency

- In Bihar and Rajasthan, growing female participation in panchayats indicates a gradual reemergence of women's social leadership, perhaps dating back to joint decision-making paradigms deduced from equitable burial wealth distributions at prehistoric gravesites.

The Lado Panchayat in Haryana-a self-governance system composed solely of women-shows how rural women in the present are resurfacing with moral and civic powers (India Development Review, 2023). This may be contrasted with prehistoric matrilineal organization or ritual role of the women elders, hinted by the burial practices in which women were buried along with ornaments and instruments (Shinde, 2014). Tribal groups such as the Khasi and Garos of Northeast India, although not prehistoric, still possess remnants of these ancient matriarchal systems.

5. Prehistoric Women as Ancestral Archetypes

Prehistoric Indian women can be seen as direct counterparts for contemporary rural women, inheriting the burden of ceremonial and economic life. Women's life in ancient times, as it is documented in symbolic rock art, burial rites, and material culture, are seen in fortitude, adaptability, and leadership in



contemporary contexts. It is not only that women were equal to males but also often crucial to spiritual leadership, ecological balance, and social cohesion.

Analysis: A Living Continuum

Food security, health care, and ritual knowledge are some of the central functions and responsibilities that have been shared by Indian women through history. A consistent pattern of female-dominated ecological and social interaction can be observed in prehistoric rock painting, burial artifacts, and ethnographic comparisons. These ancient features continue to exist in rural women today. Rather than shattering the more equal gender systems of early Indian societies, colonization and modern patriarchy represent a deviation from them. An understanding of this continuum challenges present gender biases and presents opportunities for more inclusive policymaking.

Discussion

In fact, by the analysis of burial evidence, tool distributions, food remains, and modern ethnographic parallels, it is evident that Indian women played complex and essential roles in prehistoric times. These have not disappeared but evolved in response to socio-economic transformations. The strength of this continuity has been underlined by the persistence of female agency in food systems, health care, spiritual life, and cultural production.

Conclusion

Women contributed significantly to the growth of early civilization, as indicated by primary archeological data from Indian history. Their leadership, labor, and expertise formed the foundations for the social life that still persists in modern-day rural India. Besides undermining traditional assumptions about history, the recognition of such continuities gives a more realistic and comprehensive picture of women's roles in the past and the present. Women had a central role in early Indian society instead of playing the supporting role. Rural women continue this practice despite challenges. Understanding history and the present becomes more complete with such connections recognized through archeological information. This enduring leadership and women's contribution as social architects, cultural communicators, and ecological stewards must be included in gender discourse, policymaking, and education.

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