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Q1(a)

Material culture and archaeology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on material culture and archaeology
- Define material culture and show how archaeologists recover and interpret it
- Give Indian site and ethnographic links
- Keep the note within a 10-mark length of about 150 words of argument

Revision summary

Material culture is objects and built space left by people.

Archaeology recovers them in stratigraphy and infers subsistence, rank, and exchange.

Binford stressed function; Hodder stressed meaning.

Indian illustrations include Hunsgi, Navdatoli, Bhimbetka, and Harappan weights.

Ethnography of living potters and hunters checks how objects enter the soil.

Introduction

Material culture is the set of objects, tools, houses, graves, and waste that people make and leave. Archaeology is the method that recovers those objects in context and infers social life from them.

Body

What material culture is

- Material culture includes stone tools, pottery, metals, beads, houses, hearths, burials, and food remains.
- **Lewis Binford** treated objects as the hard evidence of subsistence and site use.
- **Ian Hodder** added that objects also carry meaning, rank, and identity, so a pot is both a container and a social sign.
- **M. N. Srinivas** and village ethnography show that living people still use ploughs, hearths, and jewellery as rank and ritual, which helps the archaeologist read the past.

How archaeology uses it

- Stratigraphy, typology, and association turn a find into a dated activity, not a museum curiosity.

- **H. D. Sankalia** at **Navdatoli** and Nevasa, **K. Paddayya** at Hunsgi-Baichbal, and the Allchins at sites such as Bhimbetka showed how tools and houses reconstruct settlement.
- Ethnoarchaeology in India, including **M. D. Kajale** on plant remains and studies of living potter and hunter camps, tests how objects enter the ground.
- Harappan weights at Dholavira and Lothal, and megalithic iron and pottery in South India, are material culture that records trade, craft, and death rites.

Limit of the method

- Objects survive unevenly. Wood, cloth, and speech vanish, so the record is biased toward stone, bone, and fired clay.
- Without ethnography and texts, the same bead can be read as trade, ritual, or waste.

Flow diagram

Material culture -> Tools pots houses graves
Tools pots houses graves -> Archaeology in context
Ethnography -> Archaeology in context
Archaeology in context -> Subsistence rank exchange

Conclusion

Material culture is the durable residue of social life. Archaeology dates and places it. Indian sites and living craft show the method, but perishable life always exceeds the find.

Facts & figures

Lewis Binford

Processual archaeologist who treated artefacts as evidence of subsistence and site-formation processes.

Hunsgi-Baichbal

Acheulian localities in Karnataka studied by K. Paddayya, used to reconstruct Palaeolithic land use from stone tools.

Navdatoli

Malwa chalcolithic site excavated by H. D. Sankalia, with houses, pottery, and food remains as a village material kit.

Dholavira weights

Harappan cubical weights that record a shared measure system and long-distance craft exchange.

Ian Hodder

Post-processual argument that objects carry meaning and identity, not only function.

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