

Ph.D. Thesis

Materiality of Past Foodways: An Ethnoarchaeological Study of Central India

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Abstract

This research focuses on the foodways of early inhabitants in central India, reflecting on the cultural settings that emerged around their food-related practices. It aims to explore how food and associated material culture have been developed and shaped human lifeways in past. While the idea of materiality suggests that humans create objects, and objects, in turn, shape their actions and experience. The material culture of foodways is not meant to only fulfil basic dietary needs; its role in accelerating the cultural process is tremendous. As the descendant groups of the region, such as the Gond and Baiga, show how food is an intrinsic part of their social-cultural settings, and their everyday mobility revolves around foodways. The landscape, the culinary crafts and space and most importantly, their folk traditions reflect that food has been the catalyst behind their development. With this backdrop, this research considers artefacts recovered from the region's archaeological sites as traces of continuous human dwelling, a concept proposed by Ingold (2000), in which materials are not static objects but part of ongoing 'processes of becoming.' Where the human-food entanglement has been the prime mover.

This research has applied the ethnoarchaeological approach. It uses information from major archaeological sites across the region and ethnographic data from the Maikal Hills. While looking at both together, the prehistoric evidence suggests how food behaviour has evolved and structured the human experience. Recent scholarship in archaeology has significantly proposed that early humans were highly experimental. From such a viewpoint, the cultural shifts and societal complexity in human life occurred gradually, where the transition to agriculture was not the sole driver of massive human cultural upheaval. The analysis presented in this study also resonates with this idea, highlighting a long-term process underlying the development of the cultural setting. Therefore, materiality, in this context, is presented as the subtle, continuous stimuli created by foodways that shape the social world and the distinct traits that define human beings in central India. By foregrounding the cultural landscape developed through the food procurement methods, the domestic life structured around the culinary crafts, and the expressive traditions woven with the food-centred memory, this study puts forward how they all define the region's past foodway.