
Addressing Gender in Archaeological Research: Some Reflections

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Abstract: *After the infusion of “New Archaeology”, the study of the past has witnessed several considerable alterations that emerged by analysing the remnants of the ancient world through multiple perspectives. This diathesis made revulsion in World Archaeology, and the way toward a more nuanced interpretation of the past laid the mainspring for Gender Archaeology. Ever since, archaeologists from all over the world started making great efforts to refuse androcentrism which prevailed in portraying humanity’s deep past. There is a rich and varied body of work for uncovering the women’s role in that era, where the contribution of men was only taken into account in mainstream research. Hence, in this review, we make an effort to integrate and elucidate much of the existing work which made it possible to recognise and magnifies the true role of women alongside men in prehistoric time.*

Keywords: Archaeology, Gender, Androcentrism, Prehistory, Women, Stereotype, Indian History

Introduction

Gender is one of the common issues for any Humanities or social science disciplines that consider Humans as central to their study. Archaeology has also been influenced by this emerging trend over the past few decades and has provided archaeologists with a new perspective on looking at the past. Etymologically, Gender means kind or type, which denotes the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women. Nevertheless, the concept of gender, in the modern sense, is a recent innovation in human history. The ancient world had no basis for understanding gender as it has been understood in the humanities and social sciences for the past few decades (Holmes, 2012).

Since Archaeology is the study of the past through the physical remains of human societies, the emergence of gender in this study tries to prompt the discipline to prevent research from becoming androcentric (e.g., Bertelsen et al. 1987; Conkey and Gero 1991; Conkey and Spector 1984; Engelstad 1991; Hjørungdal 1994). In simpler

words, the Gender issue in archaeology is represented by an assortment of approaches and individual experiences to achieve the goal of women's representation in the past. The progress of this new subfield, named "Gender archaeology," can be traced back to the emergence and influence of Feminism and the women's movement in the late 1960s. In that initial phase, there were primary concerns among a few archaeologists about the investigation of the social construction of gender and its representations, ideologies, identities, and other such manifestations in the archaeological record. 'The value of these studies begins with a recognition of female labour in a broad range of activities, many of which were once considered exclusively male domains, such as Paleoindian encampments, Palaeolithic cave art, Natufian transitions from foraging to agriculture, Maya animal husbandry, or pre-Columbian Moche mortuary rituals' (Conkey and Gero, 1997). Moreover, such work of 'locating women' (Conkey and Gero 1997) in all the possible aspects of archaeology has been undertaken, and this search for women's impressions on artefacts resulted in the most unlikely places. Consequently, there are multiple theoretical approaches emerged to engendering the archaeological data and also witnessed some exorations. So, it needs to be clear that gender archaeology does not attempt to create a female-biased view of the past, nor does it try to tell an anti-male-centred story of the past (Varteresian, 2014). The most prominent goal of this practice is to justify the contribution of every gender in the creation of the archaeological record and prevent various stereotypes that already exist in the study of the past.

In this opinion piece, we aim to situate all of these debates, articulate the conceptual framework and explore the new avenues of representation of gendered social agency in the archaeological context. Our analysis stands a viewpoint about the requirement of gender-oriented research in archaeology to remove many ambiguities that prevail in this discipline, especially for women's role in prehistory. The goal of this review is to advance an explicitly feminist approach to archaeology that is committed to altering how the discipline is conducted, how it is communicated, and how it is interpreted. Indeed, we do not delve into all the existing literature that considers the depth of methodological approaches to reveal the footprints of women in the archaeological records. Since there are too many to list individually and the archaeology of gender has far too many manifestations to review them all, we won't. Here, we only make an effort to openly acknowledge much of this rich and varied body of work to give a short account of how gender perspective may influence archaeology. We discuss whether gender archaeological research really informs us about women and what kind of knowledge it can provide about prehistoric women and their involvement in the far history of humanity. We also concentrate on examining a number of gender perspectives that are grounded in particular theoretical stances.

Why Archaeology Needs a Gendered Approach

Pointing to an exigent affinity between gender and archaeology, some archaeologists argue that it would be impossible to imagine the human past without considering the involvement of women in the evolutionary phase of prehistory of the world (e.g.

McCafferty and McCafferty 1988, 1994; Brumfiel 1991, 1992, 1996, 2001; Cyphers 1993; Joyce 1992, 1993, 1998, 2000; Silverblatt 1995; Sweely 1997; Lesure 1997, 2001; Gillespie and Joyce 1997; Hendon 1997; Hewitt 1999; Klein 2001; Burkhart 2001; Ardren 2002; Ashmore 2002; Ayala Falcon 2002; Bell 2002; Cohodas 2002; Geller 2004). They raised their voice for a long time, saying the irrefutable fact that Archaeology has long been anarchic and patriarchal, conducted by men who have long been interested in exploring men in the past. Due to the fact that the discipline's bias against men still holds true, their opinions are de facto valid and meaningful. Through numerous scholarly research, museum exhibits, and popular literature, gender and feminist archaeologists have battled for decades to overturn this unfair conclusion. Despite their best efforts, many assumptions that downplayed the significance of women in ancient societies continue to remain and even thrive in both academic and non-academic contexts, particularly in nations like India, where gender archaeology does not exist or is scarcely acknowledged. Given this situation and the rise of objective interpretation of archaeological artefacts globally, the field requires a gendered approach that will directly address the frequently-overlooked issues surrounding gender in the study of the past.

The awareness of how the present always influences the perception of the past intensified during the 1980s and paved the way for the vast array of perspectives that characterises post-processual Archaeology (Hill, 1998; Conkey, 2007; Dommasnes, 2012: 370). It started a new arena of archaeological study and moved the discipline to merge with cultural studies integrating findings from previously isolated areas of scholarship and linking these insights to the concerns of ancient societies. Post-processual archaeologists view objects or artefacts in a subjective manner, taking into account the context in which the artefact is found, the other objects that may be around it, and finally, on these bases, they try to interpret the human behaviour and culture of that period. This practice may also be named interpretive archaeology. As such, any past items discovered through archaeology could provide valuable insight into the owners of those items and their way of life. This owner will not always be male; there are also residues showing ownership of females which need to be interpreted with their associated gender padrone (Arnold, 1988; Ehrenberg, 1989; Adovasio, 2016). So, archaeology needs a gendered approach to realign this interpretation tendency.

Feminist archaeologists such as Rita Wright (1996), Margaret Conkey (1984), Ruth Tringham (1994), and Joan Gero (1985) have sought to establish careful methodologies for both fieldwork and interpretation that counter the established conviction of "man the hunter" propounded by misogynists. They have aimed to uncover a world that probably had a multiplicity of local economies, a world where men and women were mutually involved in daily activities, a world in which women were not only helpless dependents but active participants in the production of food, a world in which every member of society either female or male were involved in various activities such as making and using tools, making pottery, baskets, and clothes and creating artistic delineation. Human prehistory, from hominids through the Palaeolithic and Neolithic

worlds, did not consist of men, providers, and protectors sheltering and feeding dependent women whose primary job was cooking and caring for children. Such a model of the human family is an ideology born of the nineteenth-century, post-industrial British and American middle class (Ruether, 2005).

The Formation of “Gender Archaeology”

Archaeology underwent many milestone changes in the late twentieth century and emerged as the “New Archaeology,” mainly the theoretical movement rooted in the 1960s-1970s. It does include not only the scientific method but also an interpretive approach that is more interested in exploring the people behind the artefacts (Watson, 1991). Simultaneously, the feminist movement of the 1960s, which can still be seen today, produced a new feminist perspective on archaeology. This liaison to work on the deep past provided a unique opportunity for a more accurate analysis of archaeological data that focused more on the woman. Because archaeologists, like historians, are often accused of making the past a mere projection of their norms and values. So since, a group of archaeologists started addressing many of the patriarchal biases imbued in the archaeological research, analysis, and interpretations. In their masterly article “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” (1984: 28), Margaret Conkey and Jonet Spector point out that such unilateral studies involve the undeniable application of our own gender ideology. They also make the point that archaeological research is, therefore, biased concerning gender (Conkey and Spector, 1984: 13). These two personalities are considered the first to examine the application of feminist approaches and insights to archaeological practice and theory. But we can also find an echelon of Norwegian archaeologists who had an interest in studying gender roles in prehistory during the early seventies. They ardently organised a workshop titled “Were they all men” in 1979 and regularly published a dedicated journal for feminist and gender studies in archaeology, i.e., *Women in Archaeology in Norway*, from 1985 until 2005. This is how the need to “engender” archaeological research took shape in the UK in the form of numerous workshops, conferences, and a special issue of *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, “Women and Archaeology” (Arnold et al., 1988: 28).

By the 1990s, several archaeologists in the West started expressly taking gender into account when doing their studies. In the first chapter of their widely reviewed book “Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory” (1991), Gero and Conkey stated that “there has long been the claim that if only we could find pollen in early hominid sites to counteract the overwhelming visibility of the more durable bone residues left by scavenging males, then we would have women in the Plio-Pleistocene, there would be women in early human studies” (Conkey and Gero, 1991). In fact, their reliance on archaeological evidence is admirable since, rather than just the male, both genders contributed to the development of many parts of life on Earth, and without taking into account both equally, one cannot examine the artefacts of the past in an above-average manner. In the same book, Alison Wylie expressed her concern about “Why is There No Archaeology of Gender” (Wylie, 1991: 44). She is correct in saying that Archaeology

cannot be expected to pursue questions about gender until a body of theory has been developed in other fields to make a truly interdisciplinary work.

Circumstances changed slowly over time, and archaeologists began to pay considerable attention to research on gender in the human past. A plethora of topics emerged that took gender as their central point, and Western archaeological research changed drastically (Moss 1993; Wylie 1992; Dent 1991; Joyce 1993; Solomon 1992; Gifford-Gonzales 1993; Tringham 1994; McGuire & Hildebrandt 1994; Sassaman 1992). "Exploring Gender through Archaeology" was a collection of papers from the 1991 Boon conference, edited by Cheryl Classen, that illustrates how the meeting on the topic of Gender and Archaeology anywhere in the world was widely appreciated (Classen, 1992). The papers in the book, ranging from Gendered Division of Labour, Gender and ancient technology, Engendering Pleistocene, and various aspects of women's participation in the prehistoric era, were written scholarly. Other scholars Watson and Kennedy, make a powerful argument on gender roles, and they accepted the conventional wisdom that women were primarily responsible for foraging wild plants before they were domesticated and for cultivating and processing them when horticultural practices were established (Watson and Kennedy, 1991: 188).

However, the field of archaeology has had to deal with numerous gender preconceptions in the way that its practitioners interpret the past and communicate it to the general public; as a result, objectively illuminating the historical remains has become a vital action. Rita P. Write's book "Gender and Archaeology," which was published in 1996, calls on archaeologists to incorporate broader feminist discourses into their analyses of ancient societies. Using a variety of techniques and theoretical frameworks that incorporate gender into the crucial issues surrounding the knowledge of the past, her book also exemplifies the most recent feminist studies in archaeology thinking. Further, two well-known anthropologists,

J.M. Adovasio and Olga Saffer, and science writer Jake Page tried to rectify the misinterpretations of the human past. Their book "The Invisible Sex: Uncovering the true roles of Women in Prehistory" (2007) clearly mentioned that in the dangerous conditions of the palaeolithic and early neolithic, when human populations were so small and existence was so fragile, the contribution of every member of a group, whether male or female, was too valuable to ignore or denigrate. The famous journal "Nature" commented on this book as "Helps flesh out a more plausible female role in prehistory than has been offered previously. In many ways, this book is a much-needed antidote to the past hundred years of popular and scientific writing on prehistoric human life" (Shipman, 2007). Similar to this, a booklet titled "Gender Stereotypes in Archaeology" (2021), edited by Laura Coltofean Arizancu, Bissierka Gaydorska, and Uros Matic, provides a wealth of information about archaeologists and the gender biases that exist in both the discipline's modern practice and historical accounts of archaeology. The questions that arise here are: In prehistory, were males the only ones that hunted and created tools, art, and innovations? Were women the only ones to

gather, stay at home, and provide care for others? And so forth. All answered 'No' because these are some of the gender stereotypes that we still encounter in our discipline.

The True Past Being Sought: Representing Dynamic Role of Women in Prehistory

Archaeologists always seek to present their findings as an actual depiction of the time of its formation, but this pleading could not be stated correctly unless the accurate portrayal of Gender is not there. Living in the twenty-first century, we cannot allow any arbitrary bias in academic writing as previously neglected analytical or thematic issues such as gender have now become mainstream (Llorens, 2021; Lamphere, 1987). Even in archaeology, the past cannot be accurately depicted unless we consider the role of women in prehistory, the initial phase of human civilisation, when humans started to connect with each other, and women were an integral part of this amalgamation; then how can one deny their contribution? Although this notion has not been established globally, an endeavour of a group of male and female archaeologists gives a glimmer of hope that, at some time, archaeology will present the actual past.

The most epochal book that became an all-time classic and cardinal resource for anyone who comes to be interested in the archaeological study of Women is "Women in Prehistory" by Margaret Ehrenberg (1989: 77). The book strongly criticises previous scientific studies with strong androcentric tendencies that have omitted the mention of women. Through a broad evolutionary perspective and careful critique, the author discusses some significant contributions that women of ancient times could have made. In prehistoric times, when humans were trying to evolve as civilised, they expressed their thoughts through various creations, and saying that women were not involved in the prehistoric revolutionary alteration, we may be denying a specific side of the contribution. In her long article "Women in Prehistoric Art" (2004), Camilla Power discussed women's role in the emergence of art. She tried to create a model which predicted that the earliest art was evidenced by various ritualistic behaviour of females, dominated by red pigments. A recent study also declared that handprints in prehistoric cave art most often belonged to women, overturning the dogma that the earliest artists were all men. This prediction is supported by the quest of archaeologist Dean Snow of Pennsylvania State University, who analysed hand stencils found in eight cave sites in France and Spain. By comparing the relative lengths of certain fingers, Snow determined that three-quarters of the handprints were female (Snow, 2006: 398).

An exhaustive literature on this concern that tries to provide a brief overview of all the writings that are significant to the study of gender in this particular discipline is "A Gendered Past: A critical bibliography of Gender in Archaeology" (1995), edited by Elisabeth A. Bacus and others and forwarded by Alison Wylie. It would indeed be an impossible task to compile all the writings on such a topic. Still, the editors tried well to collect most of the articles and books dealing specifically with gender in Archaeology.

The book invites archaeologists from all over the world to solve the gender riddle of the past, as there is a long way to go in this regard, and we cannot say that the work done so far is enough. The unique ability of archaeology to pose social questions not across the longueur of five hundred or even a thousand years but across millennia; lets archaeology address questions of gender inequality by specifying how and not simply speculating why (Bacus,1995). Hence when this becomes a focus of archaeological study, the possibilities for expanding the interpretation of the past open up a new territory.

In light of evidence that females hunted (and engaged in combat) throughout the history of the *Homo sapiens* genus, recent archaeological research has called into question the traditional view of men as hunters and women as gatherers (Bengtson, 2017; Wei-Haas, 2020; Anderson, 2023). After analysing intensive archaeological and ethnographic data from all over the globe, one of these studies tries to shift the gender paradigm during prehistory by stating that “in societies where hunting is considered the most important subsistence activity, women actively participated in hunting 100% of the time” (Anderson, 2023). These are only a few examples of the many works that have been produced in an effort to portray the past as precisely as possible. Many case studies have been conducted to identify the contributions made by women to early human cultures. However, there is a downside to the fact that this type of research, which predominantly concerns gender roles in prehistorical cultures, was conducted in Western nations. Of course, Gender Archaeology solidified itself as a field of study in various European nations in the early years of the twenty-first century (Dommasnes et al., 2012). The important thing is to appreciate the pioneering quality of these early works.

Contextualising Gender in Indian Archaeology

When archaeological researchers worldwide consistently ponder over gender on a broader scale, it becomes necessary to consider the issue in the Indian context, where ancient myths and oral traditions represent women as emphatical as men, and both are considered complementary to each other. The utterance is not wrongly stated, as the significance of myths to archaeological interpretations has been widely proven (Gilchrist 2019). However, the examination of gender in Indian Archaeology from a mythological perspective fall beyond the scope of this paper, and we intend to draw attention to the need to dig into gender within the material remains of one of the ancient civilisations of the world.

After independence, Indian archaeological study proliferated, marking various miles by works done to the present. One of the critical points here is that Indian archaeologists have allegiance to their work and always keep themselves in vogue so that the discipline benefits from scientific applications and never lags behind interdisciplinary studies. Other scholarly subjects have influenced de facto the study of past physical remains over the last several decades, and now it is not only the study of anthropogenic remains as here; archaeologists are doing prodigious research in

Bioarchaeology, Geoarchaeology, Environmental archaeology, and hence, Indian Archaeology has become really widespread and highly effective. However, a lacuna is still visible there, the androcentrism and negligence of women's role in the age of human evolution.

The occupations, diets and roles of women side by men in prehistoric India have to be the subject of a number of individual archaeological and bio-archaeological examinations that have begun to highlight both parallels and contrasts. To date, the gender dimension has not yet been mentioned as a problem in the archaeology of South Asian countries, nor has a broad synthesis of these facts been made. The majority of the information on gendered practices in Indian history has come from more general studies of complexity, burials, and eating habits at some places in India. But it is now the time to explicitly focus on gender, creating a larger data set from which to make conclusions, and take into account the ramifications of the patterns that are being seen in prehistoric context.

Conclusion

All prior attempts to establish a framework that is gender-sensitive for archaeological studies worldwide must have seemed incredibly onerous to archaeologists. However, we should compel that to get at an objective, realistic, and uniform view of women's involvement in our early history; there is still a long way to go. Thoughtful attempts have been made to change the existing state of archaeology since the 1960s when the feminist movement first emerged. But the moment has come to spread this agenda to the countries of the global south, like India, where gender archaeology has not yet received much attention. Therefore, the current review provided a direction to commend and recognise some of the classic works which paved the way for a gendered approach in world archaeology and have added new, significant, and relevant elements to the study of the past.

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