

Built on Shifting Sands: Ceramic Analysis and Gender in South Asian Archaeology

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore and evaluate the potential of existing theoretical frameworks in South Asian archaeological research which deal with questions of gender and its manifestations in past societies. Questions like, why 'gender' and 'archaeology'; and more importantly, how one visualizes gender as manifested in the material culture are fraught with ramifications that affect disciplines beyond archaeology. Moreover, without unpacking and dealing with these seminal questions, it is near impossible to do a 'gendered' archaeology. Issues of gender attribution and the attendant problems of division of labour and essentialism; which are taken to be self-evident in the heuristic tool-kit of the discipline needs to be reassessed and made receptive to the peculiar sub-continental situation. Subsequently, the problems inherent in sole reliance upon analogies in 'engendered' research and the politicization of feminist research in archaeology will also be discussed. Similarly, the potential problems of agenda-driven research relying usually upon a single line of evidence will also be addressed.

Several possible avenues of research are outlined with an emphasis on the use of multiple sources of evidence which can be used to formulate, to test hypotheses and to illustrate the prehistoric context of gender relations. To elaborate the hypotheses further, Panr, a recently excavated site in the Samastipur district of Bihar is focused on. The issues of 'gendered labour relations' with respect to the Middle Ganga Neolithic-Chalcolithic are analysed within this framework and an attempt is made to redirect the focus from a 'gendered femininity' to the individual person – both male and female. With the help of an intensive ceramic analysis, the feasibility and pitfalls of exploring gender relations within pottery-making traditions will be focused upon.

Keywords: Neolithic-Chalcolithic, Ceramic Analysis, Gender, Middle Ganga Plains, division of labour