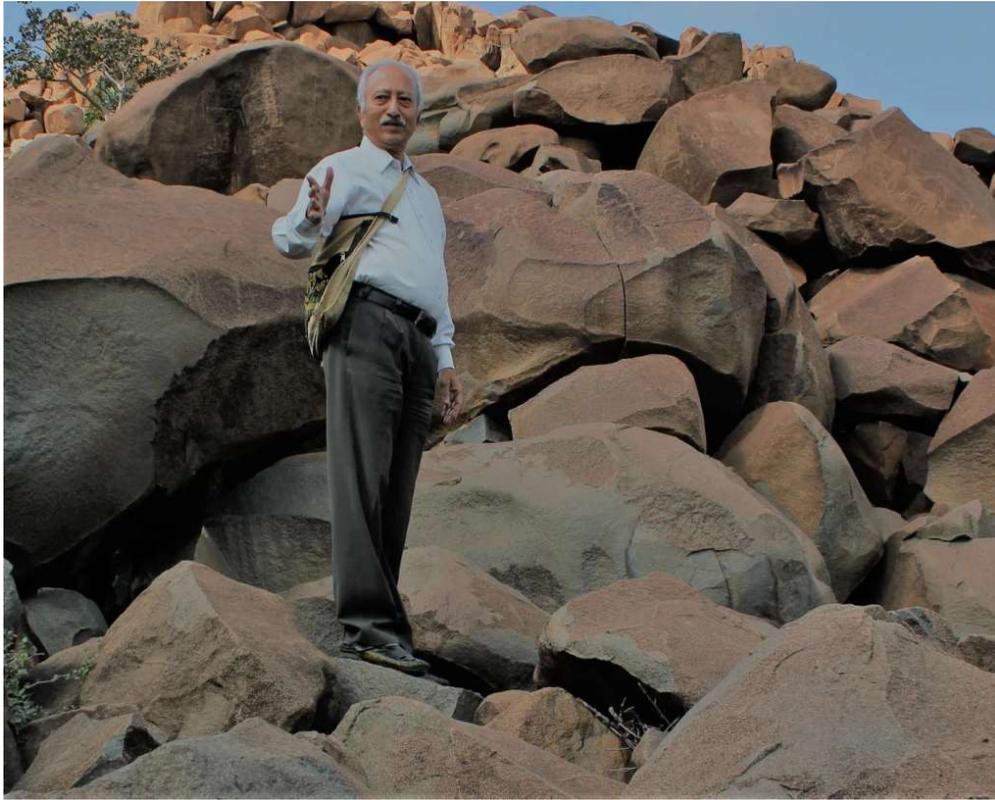




Conversations with: Professor Ravi Korisettar

This week, I am delighted to introduce Professor Ravi Korisettar, Senior Academic Fellow of the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi! Ravi is a key contributor to Indian Palaeolithic archaeology, specialising in geoarchaeological methods and approaches to understanding the relationship between prehistoric humans and their environments. He has published seven books in India and two abroad and is a Section Editor for ***Current Science***, India's leading science fortnightly journal. Ravi has also held the position of Honorary Director of the Robert Bruce Foote Sanganakallu Archaeological Museum in Karnataka since its establishment in 2010.



Professor Ravi Korisettar in front of the rock art site at Sangankallu, Ballare

What are your research interests and your particular area of expertise?

In a couple of years from now, I will be completing fifty years of learning, teaching and researching archaeology. During the first half of this period, I experienced many ups and downs and institution-hopping to make a career as an archaeologist. This constrained me to work on diverse disciplines such as geoarchaeology, Quaternary geology, palaeoclimatology, radiometric dating, tephrochronology, the application of computer techniques, etc. This had enabled me acquire multidisciplinary skills, though carrying the tag of ‘jack of all and master of none’ was a frustrating and sometimes depressing experience.

I am particularly interested in understanding man-land relationships in prehistory and explain why the settlements are found where they are. Currently, I am interested in global migrations and public outreach archaeology. Though primarily an archaeologist, I specialised in geoarchaeological field methods to address the problems of the establishing the antiquity of Palaeolithic settlements, searching for hominin fossils, identifying refugia and critically assessing the correlation between climate and culture change.

What originally drew you towards archaeology?

I was born into a low-income family. My parents used to inspire me with success stories about my Cambridge educated maternal uncle, S. Settar, about whom Raymond Allchin took pride in calling him a polymath. Though Settar was a historical archaeologist, his Cambridge experience had given him a clear interdisciplinary vision of archaeology. And yet, my parents wanted me to take up chemistry and physics combination for my undergraduate studies, which I completed in 1971. At this point, my uncle had returned from Cambridge and rejoined the faculty of Karnatak University. My brief visit to his place and a brief meeting with the Allchins at his residence was a certainly a turning point for me.

Prior to this meeting, I used to spend my summer holidays in a small book store owned by my elder maternal uncle at Hosapete near Hampi, the well-known world heritage site in south India. The store used to sell fiction and scholarly works on art, tourism and culture. Tourists, students and scholars of Indian art and architecture from all over the world visiting Hampi used to drop by the book store and, though unable to speak fluently in English, I used to enter into conversation with some of them and also learn from them about other sites like Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal (also a world heritage site), the cradle of Indian temple architecture. This exposure to such books and scholars from all over, in addition to the proximity of Hosapete to Hampi, where we used spend our weekends, had given me some idea of what archaeologists do and I was also familiar with the adage that though the ‘career of an archaeologist lies in ruins’, it is full of romance and excitement.

During one of my conversations with Settar regarding the choice of a subject for post-graduation, it struck upon him that my science background will be helpful for an MA degree in archaeology. He advised me to go to Deccan College in Poona (Pune) and mentioned that great scholars like Iravati Karve, H.D. Sankalia and S.M. Katre, who have nurtured the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology and linguistics, built this world class institution. Undoubtedly, Poona had the reputation as ‘Oxford of the east’. This was the most motivating advice I received at the critical point of my formative years of life and career. Coming to Poona changed my idea of archaeology and two years of post-graduate study brought me closer to appreciating Pleistocene geoarchaeology, bio-cultural evolution of man and to S.N. Rajaguru, a geologist by training. The latter’s humble nature and exemplary attitudes drew me towards him and Pleistocene geoarchaeology and we built a lifelong relationship, academic and otherwise. Following my post-graduate studies, I enrolled for a PhD under his supervision.



■ "I became obsessed with identifying ashes," says archaeology professor Ravi Korisettar (in white) surveying Toba ash deposits at Jwalapuram in Andhra Pradesh. The Toba ash has been critical to understand human history and evolution.

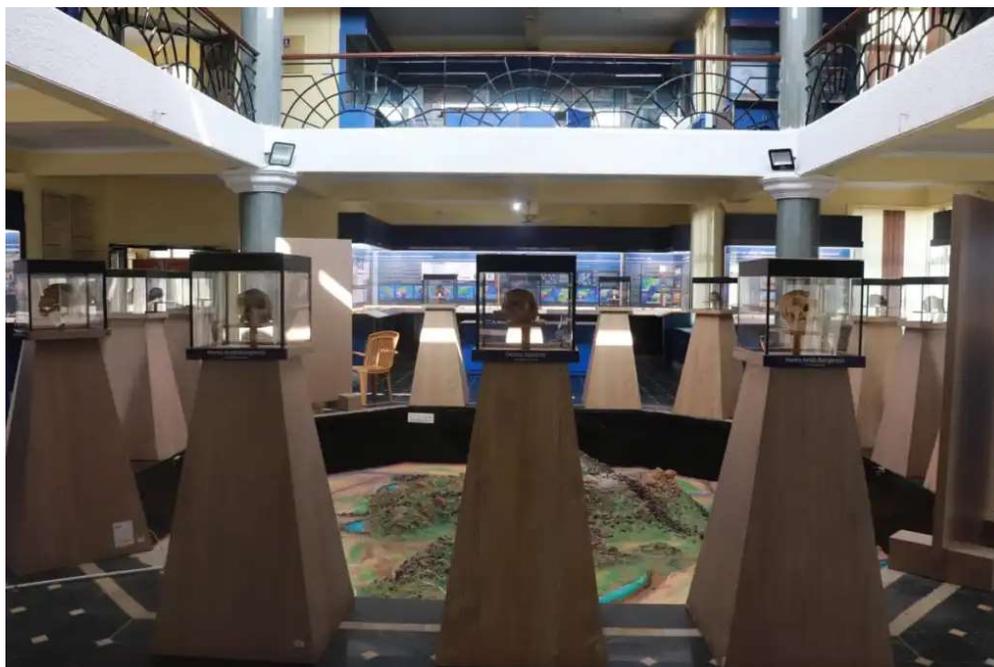
What was your PhD topic? How did you find your PhD experience?

The topic was *Prehistory and Geomorphology of the Middle Krishna*, a braided stream network draining the Precambrian basement complex on the Indian Peninsula. It was both exciting and frustrating. In the 1970s, discovering Acheulian artefacts was very rewarding and great material for writing a prehistory dissertation. However, I did not find any! The most exciting part of my research was my introduction to the works of Robert Bruce Foote, the father of Indian prehistory, and several other colonial and European geologists and geomorphologists. Stimulated by their works, I learnt the fundamentals of geology, fluvial geomorphology and climate change and became a competent field archaeologist. Fluvial deposits known as High Level Gravels were widespread in the Raichur and Shorapur *Doabs* in northern Karnataka (*Doab* refers to land between two rivers). The gravels were chiefly composed of chert (flint) clasts and the chief clasts were the chief raw material for making Middle Palaeolithic artefacts. These deposits and the associated Middle Paleolithic chert artefacts were widely separated in time, provided little or no scope to determine the absolute timeline for human occupation of the area, other than the 'Middle Paleolithic age'. The absence of biotic material further hindered behavioural interpretation of hominins' in a resource poor region Raichur Doab (land between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers). I became obsessed with the problem of the uneven distribution of Palaeolithic settlements across the subcontinent, their chronology and absence of hominin fossils.

After your PhD, what positions have you held and where?

I did not have a permanent job for well over a decade after completion of my PhD in 1979. Short-term research assistantships kept me engaged in work, which

however did not promise a stable future and solid income. I was a Visiting Scientist (1980-82) at the Physical Research Laboratory in Ahmedabad. I was assigned the task of preparing a litholog of Neogene-Quaternary sediments in the valley of Kashmir and laboratory processing of samples for Be^{10} dating, and process samples for palaeomagnetic, micropalaeontologic and palynologic analyses. Following this I had a post doc fellowship (1983-85) from the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), New Delhi, and a Research Associateship (1988-89) at Deccan College. With intervening unemployed days. Finally, I was appointed Reader (1989-98), Professor (1998-2013), at Karnatak Univeristy. Post retirement, I was Dr. DC Pavate Chair Professor (2013-15) at Karnatak University, Dr VS Wakanakr Senior Fellow (Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh), UGC Emeritus Fellow (2015-17) and now I am concurrently ICHR Senior Academic Fellow (2019-21), Adjunct Professor at National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru (since March 2020) and Hon. Director of the Robert Bruce Foote Sanganakallu Archaeological Museum at Ballari in Karnataka (since 2010).



Replicas of human ancestors at the Robert Bruce Foote Museum

What current projects are you working on? Where do you hope these go in the future?

I have multiple projects on going: (a) understanding the cognitive content of prehistoric rock art, (b) re-examining of Late Pleistocene hominin fossils from rock shelter excavations and assessing their potential for aDNA studies, (c) preparing systematic catalogue of antiquities from surface surveys and excavations carried out during the last forty-five years, now handed over to the government at

the Robert Bruce Foote museum in Ballari, Karnataka, (d) preparing a comprehensive report on Sangankallu Neolithic-Iron Age excavations.

My publications bear ample testimony of my many successful international collaborations and that I will be able to successfully carry out these research projects and contribute to a better understanding evolution of past human societies in a multidisciplinary framework in the future.

What project or publication or discovery are you most proud of?

I am very proud of the following achievements:

The discovery of tephra marker bed in the alluvial sediments of the Indian Peninsula (1988).

The development of a Basin model to delineate man-land relationships (2007).

The establishment of Robert Bruce Foote Sanganakallu Archaeological Museum (2020).

The first dating of the Middle Palaeolithic and the oldest date for the microliths in India (at the time of publication, 2009)

The emergence of agricultural economies in the Southern Neolithic of India (chief investigator Dorian Fuller now at UCL, London)

The Bellary District Archaeological Project (Co-investigator: N.L. Boivin, now at Max Institute Planck, Jena)

The Kurnool District Archaeological Project (Co-investigator: M.D. Petraglia, now at Max Planck Institute, Jena).



A down-scaled model of Sanganakallu Neolithic hills at the Robert Bruce Foote Museum.

What are your favourite memories of your career?

Memories have been sweet and sour, but more on the sweeter side. The early decades of my archaeological career were a period of anxiety and stress, compounded by not being able to contribute to the growth of archaeological knowledge through my PhD work. Job applications to the Archaeological Survey of India and several institutions did not find me suitable because of ‘other considerations’...

My entry into Karnatak University in 1989, though helped breathe a sigh of relief, had moved me away from full time research in archaeology to full time teaching history and archaeology, where archaeology was a subsidiary component of postgraduate syllabus. During my harness at the university, I continued to confront non-egalitarian environments, both socially and academically. Yet winter and summer holidays were at my disposal to pursue my research interests and update myself with the developments in method and theory in global prehistory. During the settling in time of a year or so, I began to explore the scope of interdisciplinary collaborative research with scholarly friends from institutions in India and abroad.

The Ancient India and Iran- Charles Wallace fellowship (1996) at Cambridge, UK, gave me my first international exposure to intense and stimulating academic experience.

The Fulbright Visiting Scholarship (2001) at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC gave me greater international visibility and strengthened my wide network with archaeologists in India and abroad.



Ravi engaging in public outreach archaeology, with school children at Jwalapuram.

If you were not an archaeologist, what would you be?

Archaeology was my bread winner. If I were not an archaeologist I would have to opt for a undergraduate lectureship (if considered suitable) or turn towards local industry for a non-academic job.

What advice would you give to a prospective student interested in your field of research?

Though there have been great leaps in Indian archaeology, especially in the areas of Palaeolithic and Neolithic, I see that Indian archaeology is more productive since the turn of the century. The application of processual and post-processual archaeological methods and theory have opened up new pathways of investigation aimed at holistic reconstruction of human bio-cultural and social evolution. Our priorities are the issues relating to (a) identifying potential sites for geochronology of Palaeolithic sites, (b) reconstructing palaeogeography of Palaeolithic landscapes for a better understanding of site formation processes, (c) delineating man-land relationships during the Quaternary, (d) developing

ethnoarchaeological interpretations of archaeological data sets and (d) helping place the Indian subcontinent at the forefront of global debates on peopling of the earth. So, I would advise students to concentrate on these topics.

If you had a time machine, how far would you ask to go back, where would you go, and what would you want to see?

I would be at the time of Big Bang, witness the formation of the atmosphere and the origins of first life forms and travel with the emergence of multiple life forms. Then I would also witness the emergence of hominins capable of making and using tools. It is a fantasy though, of course!

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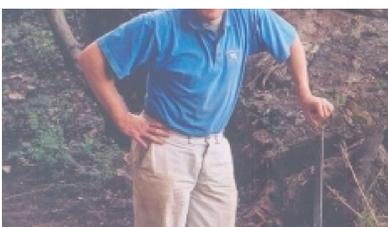
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