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Q6(a)

Describe the salient characteristics and geographical distribution of Homo erectus

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Homo erectus

(b) Homo erectus: Africa (Paranthropus), Europe (Homo erectus heidelbergensis), Asia (Homo erectus javanicus, Homo erectus pekinensis).

Core demand of the question

- Describe the salient characteristics and geographical distribution of Homo erectus
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Erectus has a long low skull, torus, thick bone, and a larger brain than habilis.

Nariokotome shows modern-like limb proportions.

Range runs Africa, **Dmanisi**, Java, and China.

Acheulian is typical in the west; East Asia often lacks classic bifaces.

Narmada is the main Indian cranial candidate; tools are more widespread.

Introduction

Homo erectus is the first hominin with a truly wide **Old World range**. It is a long-lived species of bigger brain, stout bone, and Acheulian tools.

Body

Salient characteristics

- Cranial capacity commonly about 800-1100 cc, above habilis, below later sapiens.
- A long, low vault, **supraorbital torus**, sagittal keeling in some Asian skulls, and a nuchal torus.
- Thick cranial bone, large face, and no chin. Postcrania, as in **Nariokotome** boy, show long legs and committed bipedalism.
- Reduced sexual canine contrast. Some specimens keep a robust body built for endurance walking.
- **Culture: Acheulian** handaxes in Africa and western Eurasia; East Asian assemblages often lack classic bifaces, a pattern still debated.
- Fire and home-base claims, as at **Zhoukoudian** and **Gesher Benot Ya'aqov**, are uneven but part of the species' behavioural file.

Geographical distribution

- **Africa: Koobi Fora, Olduvai (OH 9), Nariokotome (West Turkana), Bouri.** African fossils are often labelled **H. ergaster** by splitters.
- **Georgia: Dmanisi** small-brained early emigrants, sometimes given their own names.

- **Java:** Trinil, Sangiran, Ngandong, Dubois's founding pithecanthropus.
- **China:** Zhoukoudian (Peking Man), Lantian, Nanjing.
- **Europe:** Atapuerca and Ceprano sit near the erectus-heidelbergensis border.
- **India:** the Narmada (Hathnora) calvaria is often read as late erectus or archaic sapiens; Acheulian landscapes imply the grade even where bone is rare.

Time

- Roughly 1.8 million to a few hundred thousand years, later in Java. It is a grade with regional faces, not a single village.

Flow diagram

Homo erectus -> Africa ergaster
Homo erectus -> Java Zhoukoudian
Homo erectus -> Dmanisi
Homo erectus -> Acheulian walking fire

Conclusion

Homo erectus combined a keeled, torused skull, large body, and Acheulian or flake kits. It ranged from East Africa through Dmanisi to Java and China, with Indian bone still thin but the tool map wide.

Facts & figures

Dubois

1891 Trinil femur and skullcap named Pithecanthropus erectus.

Nariokotome

WT 15000, a nearly complete adolescent skeleton from West Turkana.

Zhoukoudian

Chinese cave sample, much of it lost in wartime, known from casts and later finds.

Dmanisi

Early Eurasian hominins showing wide variation at the gate out of Africa.