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Q4(b)

Discuss the Acheulian and Oldowan traditions of Indian Paleolithic cultures with suitable illustrations.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Paleolithic

(i) Paleolithic

Core demand of the question

- Describe Oldowan/Mode 1 and Acheulian/Mode 2 technologies
- Discuss their Indian distribution, chronology and representative sites
- Provide a clear technological illustration
- Critically assess disputed early dates and the scarcity of associated hominin fossils

Revision summary

Oldowan/Mode 1 uses simple cores and sharp flakes; Acheulian/Mode 2 adds shaped large cutting tools.

Indian Acheulian is rich in handaxes, cleavers and picks, often made on large quartzite flakes.

Foote discovered a handaxe at Pallavaram in 1863.

Attirampakkam has Acheulian occupation around 1.5 million years ago; **Isampur** preserves quarry-workshop behaviour.

Riwat, Bori and Masol figure in early Mode 1 debates, but context and dating are contested.

Soanian is not automatically Oldowan, and tools alone cannot identify the hominin maker.

Introduction

Oldowan and Acheulian name two Lower Palaeolithic technological organisations, not two fixed ethnic cultures. Oldowan or **Mode 1** centres on flakes struck from simple cores; Acheulian or **Mode 2** adds deliberately shaped large cutting tools. India has a rich Acheulian record, while claims for very early Oldowan-equivalent occupation are less secure.

Body**Oldowan or Mode 1**

The African Oldowan begins about 2.6 million years ago and includes cores, choppers, polyhedrons, hammerstones and sharp flakes produced by direct hard-hammer percussion. The flake edge was often the principal tool; "crude chopper culture" understates planning and raw-material selection.

In South Asia, simple core-and-flake or pebble industries occur in Siwalik and peninsular contexts. Riwat and the Pabbi Hills in present-day Pakistan, Bori in Maharashtra and Masol in the Chandigarh Siwaliks have yielded claims of very early occupation, but artefact status, context or dating is disputed in important cases. The Soanian of the north-west is pebble-and-flake based, yet much of it is younger and should not automatically be equated

with African Oldowan.

Acheulian or Mode 2 in India

Acheulian knappers prepared large flakes or cobbles into bifacial **handaxes, cleavers and picks**, with symmetry and edge maintenance. Indian assemblages often emphasise cleavers on large flakes. Quartzite is common, but limestone, dolerite and other local stones were used.

Robert Bruce Foote's 1863 handaxe discovery at Pallavaram founded Indian prehistory and produced the old term "Madrasian". Major localities include:

- **Attirampakkam** in Tamil Nadu, where cosmogenic burial dating places Acheulian occupation around 1.5 million years ago;
- the **Hunsgi-Baichbal valley** and **Isampur** quarry-workshop in Karnataka, showing raw-material procurement and manufacture;
- Bhimbetka, Didwana, the Narmada valley, Chirki-Nevasa and other riverine landscapes.
- **Technological illustration:** Mode 1 removes a few flakes from a core; Mode 2 first conceives a large blank, shapes both faces and regularises a durable cutting edge. Later Acheulian assemblages may become thinner and more symmetrical, but variation also reflects stone and task.

Interpretation and limits

Early Indian Acheulian implies rapid hominin dispersal across suitable corridors, probably by *Homo erectus* or related populations, but tools cannot name a species. India lacks maker fossils securely associated with these assemblages; the Narmada hominin is much later and taxonomically debated. Surface collections can mix periods, and absence of handaxes does not by itself prove an Oldowan age.

Flow diagram

Mode 1 core -> Direct flakes
Direct flakes -> Sharp flake edges and chopper
Large blank -> Biface shaping
Biface shaping -> Handaxe
Biface shaping -> Cleaver
Biface shaping -> Pick: Acheulian Mode 2

Conclusion

India's firm Lower Palaeolithic signature is a widespread, technologically varied Acheulian anchored by **Attirampakkam** and quarry-workshops such as **Isampur**. Mode 1 evidence exists, but its earliest claims require stratigraphic caution. Technology, context and dating-not apparent crudeness-must carry the classification.

Facts & figures

Robert Bruce Foote

His 1863 Pallavaram handaxe discovery established scientific study of India's Palaeolithic record.

Attirampakkam

A stratified Tamil Nadu site where Acheulian occupation has been dated to roughly 1.5 million years ago.

Isampur

A Karnataka limestone quarry-workshop preserving extraction, blank production and Acheulian tool manufacture in one landscape.

Large Flake Acheulian

Many Indian handaxes and especially cleavers were shaped on large detached flakes rather than only on whole cobbles.

Hominin limit

No securely associated skeleton names the makers of India's earliest Acheulian; *Homo erectus* is a plausible broad attribution, not a direct identification.

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