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Q7(b)

What are the major theories proposed in support of the origin of food production? How the change in subsistence economy brought revolution during this period?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Neolithic

(iii) Neolithic

Core demand of the question

- State the major theories of the origin of food production
- Give the core claim of each with a thinker
- Show how the subsistence change was revolutionary
- Cover both origin theories and the revolutionary consequences

Revision summary

Childe saw a Neolithic revolution driven by post-glacial crowding around oases.

Braidwood placed origins in hilly flanks where wild cereals already grew.

Binford and Cohen stressed packing and population pressure on the margins.

Bender and Hodder stressed social and symbolic demand.

Mehrgarh is the South Asian early-farming example.

The revolution is surplus, sedentism, labour and inequality, not automatic better health.

Introduction

Food production means the deliberate cultivation of plants and the herding of animals. It began independently in several regions after the Pleistocene. No single cause is agreed. **V. Gordon Childe** called the shift a Neolithic revolution. Later theories kept the importance and argued about the trigger.

Body

Major theories of origin

- **Oasis or desiccation (Childe):** As climate dried after the Ice Age, people, plants and animals crowded around water. Proximity produced domestication. The climate engine is too simple, but Childe named the problem.
- **Hilly flanks (Robert Braidwood):** Domestication happened where wild wheats and pulses already lived, in the nuclear zones of the Near East, among people who knew those species well. Excavations in the Zagros and related flanks were his test.
- **Marginal or packing models (Lewis Binford):** As forager populations packed the best habitats, some groups on the edge had to intensify. Cultivation is a response to stress, not a gift of the richest niche.

- **Population pressure (Mark Cohen):** Growing numbers forced more food per unit of land. Farming is not invented in plenty; it is accepted despite more work.
- **Social and symbolic theories: Barbara Bender** and later **Ian Hodder** (Çatalhöyük) argued that feasting, ritual and household competition could pull intensification before a purely caloric need. People may have produced to feed social ambition, not only empty stomachs.
- **Climate pulses:** Younger Dryas cold and later Holocene stability are often used as a background. Climate is a condition, not a full theory by itself.
- **South Asia's Mehrgarh is the regional example:** early barley, wheat and cattle in Baluchistan, showing that the revolution is not only a Fertile Crescent story.

Why it was a revolution

The subsistence change reorganised society, not only the menu.

- **Sedentism and surplus:** Stored grain supports larger, more permanent settlements.
- **Population and labour:** More children can be raised; more hours go into fields. Health did not automatically improve. Cohen and later bioarchaeology found more infection and dental wear in some early farming series.
- **Property and inequality:** Fields, herds and stored food can be owned, inherited and fought over. Social ranking becomes easier than in many mobile forager bands.
- **Technology and ritual:** Pottery, ground stone, village shrines and, later, metals sit on this base. Childe's "revolution" is still usable if we mean a cluster of linked changes, not a one-year miracle.
- **A living echo:** Today's debates on millets, MSP and farm laws are not Neolithic, but they show that who controls food still organises power.

The change is revolutionary because it created the demographic and political conditions for villages, states and, eventually, cities. It was not instant progress in health or freedom.

Flow diagram

Origin theories -> Childe climate
Origin theories -> Braidwood flanks
Origin theories -> Binford / Cohen pressure
Origin theories -> Social / Hodder
Revolution -> Sedentism surplus inequality

Conclusion

Origin theories divide between climate crowding, nuclear-zone knowledge, population packing, and social demand for feasts and status. Childe, Braidwood, Binford, Cohen and Hodder are the set. The revolution is sedentism, surplus, inequality and a new labour regime, not a happier diet by itself.

Facts & figures

V. Gordon Childe

He named the Neolithic revolution: food production as a cluster of changes in subsistence, settlement and society.

Robert Braidwood

The hilly flanks theory: domestication where wild progenitors already lived, tested in Near Eastern nuclear zones.

Lewis Binford

He linked early cultivation to packing of habitats and intensification on the margins, not to life in the richest wild-food belt alone.

Mark Cohen

He emphasised population pressure and noted that early farming often brought more work and new health costs.

Mehrgarh

An early food-producing site in Baluchistan, used as the South Asian illustration of the Neolithic shift.

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