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Q8(a)

Describe the important Paleolithic sites from South India with suitable examples. What is the significance of South Indian Paleolithic cultures?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Indian Village

5.1 Indian Village-Significance of village study in India; Indian village as a social system; Traditional and changing patterns of settlement and inter-caste relations; Agrarian relations in Indian villages; Impact of globalization on Indian villages.

Core demand of the question

- Name important South Indian Palaeolithic sites with industries and scholars
- Cover Lower (Acheulian), Middle and Upper where evidence exists
- State significance for India and for human evolution debates
- Use **Attirampakkam**, Hunsgi, **Isampur**, and related sites

Revision summary

- **Key sites:** **Attirampakkam** (early dated Acheulian), Hunsgi-Baichbal and **Isampur** (limestone workshops), Pallavaram (Foote), Kurnool caves and Jwalapuram (later Pleistocene).

South India is Acheulian country, distinct from classic Soanian cobble tools.

Isampur shows organised quarrying; **Attirampakkam** shows great antiquity.

Middle and Upper Palaeolithic appear in caves and river valleys without copying Europe's labels.

Significance is early occupation and behaviour; makers' fossils are still scarce.

Introduction

South Indian Palaeolithic cultures are the stone-tool record of Pleistocene hominins in the peninsula south of the Narmada-Son line, especially the **Eastern Ghats, Tamil plains, Karnataka basins and Andhra-Telangana rivers**. They matter because they give some of the **oldest dated Acheulian** in India and a long, well-studied sequence.

Body

Lower Palaeolithic / Acheulian

Attirampakkam (Kortalayar valley, Tamil Nadu), excavated by **Shanti Pappu** and colleagues, has a deep stratigraphy. Optically stimulated luminescence and palaeomagnetic work have been used to argue for **Early Pleistocene Acheulian** (published ages on the order of about 1.5 million years for some horizons, with debate on method and context). Tools include handaxes, cleavers and flakes in a landscape of older **Mode 1** (Oldowan-like) pieces in the same valley. This site places South India inside **Out of Africa** Acheulian dispersal, not as a late cul-de-sac.

Hunsgi-Baichbal valleys (Kalaburagi / Gulbarga, Karnataka), worked by **K. Paddayya**, are open-air Acheulian factory and occupation sites on limestone. **Isampur** in the Hunsgi valley is a **quarry-workshop** where limestone slabs were flaked into cleavers and handaxes - a rare window on **production organisation**, not only finished tools. **Yediyapur**, **Fatehpur** and related localities thicken the same basin.

Other South Indian Lower Palaeolithic occurrences include **Nagarjunakonda** region, **Kurnool** foothills, **Chittoor**, **Gudiyam**, and laterite contexts of Kerala-Tamil coasts (often mixed or later). **Robert Bruce Foote's** 1863 Pallavaram handaxe is the founding find of Indian prehistory, from the Chennai area - the same landscape as **Attirampakkam**.

Middle and Upper Palaeolithic

Middle Palaeolithic (prepared cores, scrapers, points) is documented in **Kurnool caves** (Billasurgam and others), **Jwalapuram** (Jurreru valley, Andhra - important also for **Toba ash** debates), and surface contexts across the Deccan. **Upper Palaeolithic** blade and burin assemblages appear in Kurnool caves, **Renigunta**, and parts of the Eastern Ghats, often leading toward microlithic Mesolithic. South India does not copy the European Chatelperronian sequence; it has its own **flake-to-blade** timing.

Significance

1. **Antiquity:** **Attirampakkam** pushes Indian Acheulian deep into the Early Pleistocene, so the peninsula was occupied early by Acheulian-making hominins (likely *Homo erectus* grade; fossils in the far south remain scarce compared with Narmada).
2. **Behaviour:** **Isampur** shows quarry planning and transport of finished bifaces - cognition and landscape use.
3. **Against a north-only story:** Soanian cobble tools of the Siwaliks are not the only Indian Lower Palaeolithic. South India is **Acheulian country**.
4. **Continuity into later Stone Age:** cave sequences in Kurnool link Pleistocene tools to later foragers, a bridge to living hunter-gatherer studies (Chenchu hinterland), without claiming ethnic identity across that time.
5. **Methods:** South Indian projects professionalised OSL, palaeomagnetism and chaîne opératoire in Indian archaeology (**Pappu**, **Paddayya**, **Petraglia** collaborations).
 - **Limits:** many sites are surface mixes; dates are argued; **no rich hominin fossil** from **Attirampakkam** or Hunsgi to name the maker. Significance is archaeological and biogeographic, not a racial history of Dravidian speakers. Language families are Holocene political facts; Acheulian is Pleistocene technology.

Flow diagram

Foote Pallavaram -> Attirampakkam Acheulian
 Hunsgi Isampur -> Quarry workshops
 Kurnool Jwalapuram -> Middle Upper sequences
 Attirampakkam Acheulian -> Early peninsula occupation

Conclusion

South Indian Palaeolithic cultures, from Foote's Pallavaram through Attirampakkam, Hunsgi and Isampur to Kurnool caves, show early and long Acheulian occupation and a later flake-and-blade record. They fix the peninsula on the world map of Pleistocene humans and display organised stone production. Fossils of the makers remain the missing half of the story.

Facts & figures

Attirampakkam

Kortalayar valley, Tamil Nadu; deep Acheulian sequence dated by Pappu and colleagues to the Early Pleistocene in published studies.

Isampur

Hunsgi valley limestone quarry-workshop; Acheulian production site studied by Paddayya.

Robert Bruce Foote

1863 Pallavaram handaxe; beginning of documented Indian Palaeolithic archaeology in the far south.

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