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Q3(a)

Describe the distinctive features and distribution of Upper Palaeolithic of India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Define the Upper Palaeolithic in India by technology and time
- Describe distinctive features of tools, art and settlement
- Give the distribution of major sites
- Note debates on date, hominin author and relation to microlithic later phases

Revision summary

Upper Palaeolithic India is a late Pleistocene blade, burin and ornament phase between Middle Palaeolithic and Mesolithic.

Patne ostrich-eggshell beads and **Baghor's** ritual stone are distinctive behavioural finds.

- **Distribution:** Maharashtra-Madhya Pradesh-Uttar Pradesh valleys, **Kurnool caves**, some Thar-Gujarat and southern sites.

Authors are generally taken as Homo sapiens; skeletal proof is scarce.

The phase grades into microlithic industries and must be dated site by site.

Introduction

The Upper Palaeolithic in India is the late Pleistocene blade-and-burin horizon that sits after Middle Palaeolithic prepared-core industries and before the full microlithic Mesolithic. It is patchy compared with Europe, but it is no longer a missing chapter.

Body

Distinctive features

Technologically the phase is marked by **punched or pressure blades, bladelets, burins, backed tools, scrapers and points**, sometimes on chert, chalcedony and crystal. Bone tools are rare but reported. **Ostrich eggshell beads** (**Patne** and related western Indian finds) are a behavioural marker of ornament. Some workers link **rock art** beginnings and ochre use to this horizon, though much Indian rock art is later.

Settlement is often **open-air**, in river valleys, dune edges and rock shelters (**Kurnool caves**, Bhimbetka sequence). Groups were still foragers. The phase overlaps the **Toba debate** and the spread of Homo sapiens into South Asia; Indian Upper Palaeolithic is usually read as **modern human**, not Neanderthal, though skeletal proof is thin.

Dates commonly cited fall in the **late Pleistocene**, roughly 40,000-10,000 years ago, with some blade industries argued earlier at sites such as **Mehtakheri**. Chronology is site-specific.

Distribution

- **Western and central India:** **Patne** (Maharashtra) for eggshell beads; **Bhimbetka** and neighbouring Vindhyan shelters; **Baghor** (Son valley, Madhya Pradesh) with a possible stone shrine or triangular plaque that **Kenoyer, Clark and Pal** discussed as ritual.
- **Eastern and southern:** **Kurnool caves** (Andhra) bone and stone; parts of the **Belan and Son** valleys (Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh) in the Allahabad-G. R. Sharma tradition; **Jwalapuram** related Late Pleistocene sequences in Andhra (more famous for Middle Palaeolithic around Toba).
- **North-west:** blade elements in some Thar and Gujarat contexts (**Visadi**, dune sites).
- **Sri Lanka and Nepal** have related late Pleistocene hunter-gatherer records that help frame the peninsula.

H. D. Sankalia, V. N. Misra, J. N. Pal, M. L. K. Murty and S. Pappu are the names that moved the phase from a European copy to an Indian sequence.

Limits

Many so-called Upper Palaeolithic collections grade into **microlithic** Mesolithic. Some blade industries may be Middle Palaeolithic variants. Art is hard to date. The distribution is real but uneven: it is denser where quartz and chert and shelters coincide, not a uniform national "culture".

Flow diagram

Middle Palaeolithic -> Upper Palaeolithic blades
 Upper Palaeolithic blades -> Mesolithic microliths
 Upper Palaeolithic blades -> Patne beads
 Upper Palaeolithic blades -> Baghor Kurnool

Conclusion

Indian Upper Palaeolithic is a late Pleistocene blade-burin and ornament horizon, best seen at **Patne, Baghor**, Kurnool and related valleys. It marks modern-human behaviour in the peninsula without copying the European cave story term for term.

Facts & figures

Patne

Maharashtra site with ostrich eggshell beads, a clear sign of personal ornament in the late Pleistocene.

Baghor

Son valley site where a triangular stone and rubble arrangement has been read as a ritual feature of the Upper Palaeolithic.

Kurnool caves

South Indian caves with late Pleistocene bone and stone assemblages used to argue for a regional Upper Palaeolithic.

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