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Research highlight

Prehistoric men of Narmada included pigmies

New human fossils discovered recently in Narmada valley in central India have provided strong support to the theory that two types of human ancestors populated the valley during middle to early late Pleistocene times (250,000 to 70,000 years ago) — a 'large-bodied' species and a hitherto unknown 'pygmy-sized' man.¹

The large species hunted mega mammals with large-sized implements, according to lead researcher Anek Sankhyan. The 'large-bodied' species (Acheulian Man) survived until the emergence of the 'short-stocky' man around 150,000 years ago. "These findings have shed new light on human evolution in South Asia," he said.

The Narmada valley yielded India's first human fossil — a partial skull cap — in 1982. No new human fossil from the valley was found until mid-1990s when Sankhyan, then a senior scientist at the Anthropological Survey of India, discovered three human fossils — two collarbones and a rib. The right clavicle was 9 cm, too robust for its small size (most human clavicles are not less than 14 cm) and bore size similarities to the clavicles of Andaman Pygmies.



Anek Sankhyan at the Narmada valley site of the fossil find.

This and other observations at the excavation site made Sankhyan theorise that the clavicles and the rib belonged to a human ancestor who was "short and stocky". The hypothesis has now been confirmed by two more fossils he identified from a collection made during intensive explorations in the same area between 2005 and 2010.

"The latest findings confirm the hypothesis of two lineages of culturally and physically distinct hominins (human ancestors) in the region during that period," Sankhyan said.

References

1. Sankhyan, A. R. *et al.* New human fossils and associated findings from the Central Narmada. *Curr. Sci.* 103 (2012)

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