South Asian Upper Paleolithic

**Absolute Time Period:** 30,000–7000 B.P.

**Relative Time Period:** Follows the East Asian Middle Paleolithic tradition and the South Asian Microlithic tradition.

**Location:** This tradition seems to exist in small regional pockets, the important ones being the Vindhyan hills and the Ganga plains of Central India, the Tapti valley of Maharashtra, and the mid-eastern coastal region falling in Andhra Pradesh. Some less prominent groups appear to exist in parts of West Bengal and Thar desert of Western India.

**Diagnostic Material Attributes:** A comparatively recently recognized cultural stage, Upper Paleolithic tradition of South Asia awaits good habitation deposits and rich cultural remains. The blade-based toolkit of this major tradition is marked by mediocre blade technology—one-third to 50 percent of blades in a collection, in which the fine long blades are restricted. Various forms of backed blades and knives are fairly well made. Burin technology is not common and when found exhibits a few simple forms. Microblades and microliths form an integral part of the collections. There is also little evidence for art and craft activities and use of other media. However, in some regions, bone, ostrich eggshells, and marine shell objects have been found.

**Regional Subtraditions:** Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh.

**Important Sites:** Ainchwara, Baghor (Son Valley), Laharia-dih, Chopani-mando, Sarai-Nahar-Rai, and Patne.

**Cultural Summary**

**Environment**

**Climate.** At the technocultural change from the Middle Paleolithic to the Upper Paleolithic, climatic conditions of South Asia were generally tropical and humid. But the development of blade-based culture evidenced arid and hot conditions. The paleoclimatic studies carried out in the Thar desert of western India indicate that short climatic cycles of dry and humid conditions prevailed in the peninsula during the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene periods. Particularly at around 18,000 B.P., climatic conditions were marked by lower precipitation. This was the time when blade-based cultures flourished on a large scale, and in comparison to early Upper Paleolithic times, had a wider spread. Another noteworthy feature was that the sites of the earlier phase, the Middle Paleolithic, were many, in comparison to which the Upper Paleolithic localities were restricted. However, in the succeeding phase,
around 18,000 B.P., the Upper Paleolithic mode of subsistence gained momentum. The following wet phase of around c. 10,000 B.P. gave impetus to the Mesolithic way of life, which in archaeological records is the transition stage between the Upper Paleolithic and the early Mesolithic. The Epi-Paleolithic and early Mesolithic remains of the Belan and Tapti river valleys are examples. It may be further assumed that Upper Paleolithic tradition flourished only in regions of South Asia where the climatic conditions during the Terminal Pleistocene and early Holocene periods were moderate and the fluctuations were short cycles of humid and dry spells. The cold regions such as the Himalayan mountains of north India and wet zones of the eastern Indian subcontinent remain devoid of Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic remains.

**Topography.** In central India, particularly the river valleys and coastal plains of the Deccan region were suitable Upper Paleolithic habitats. In this wide zone, those regions were under occupations that had twin geographical settings, the hills and the alluvial plains of the perennial rivers. The river Belan is an illustrative example, which had been an area of attraction for prehistoric settlements. The thick Gangetic alluvium plains with grasslands, is drained by Belan and its tributaries, are bounded by forest-covered Vindhya-Kaimur hills to the south, an area full of suitable stones and forest products. Similar topography occurs at the Patne in Dhule district of Maharashtra and in the Chittoor and Cuddapah districts of Andhra, where the Tapti, Suberumuki, and Ganjam river valleys are thick alluvial plains resting against forest-clad hills.

**Geology.** The Upper Paleolithic tradition in South Asia was concentrated primarily in the Deccan region of India. Surrounded on three sides by the sea, this triangular land mass is an old rocky formation. Because of a tilt of the basal formation to the east, most of the major river systems drain into the Bay of Bengal, except for the Narmada and Tapti, which empty into the Arabian Sea. The large rivers cutting through the old rock formations eroded the original surfaces and have filled the depressions with thick alluvial deposits, which are fertile and always attracted human populations. The alluvium plains of the Ganga, Krishna, Tapti, Narmada, and a number of smaller independent rivers were the preferred habitational zones of ancient Indian populations. The plains bordering the hills of the Deccan—such as the Belan-Vindhyan region—have both riverine ecology and hilly terrain where rock shelters and outcrops of stones for implements are available. Similarly, in the Dhule district, the hills of Ajanta are surrounded by the river alluvium of the Tapti river. The mideastern coast of the peninsula also has hills and river plains, which have been supporting hunting-fishing groups of nomads until recently.

**Biota.** The peninsula of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent is characterized by deciduous forests. The hills of Deccan are covered by thick forests, the alluvial plains mostly by shrubs and grass. In certain areas like the east coast, a combination of dry deciduous forest and thorny shrubs is the characteristic vegetation. There are many fruit trees, edible roots, and cereals, which grow naturally in this ecosystem. The river valleys and small lakes formed by the paleochannels of perennial rivers are rich in aquatic animals; the coastal region of the east is rich both in marine and riverine fauna. The forested regions of the Deccan have various species of big and small animals, the most noteworthy being bison, jakwal, hyena, deer, nilgai, bear, wild boar, hare, and rats. Until recently, some of the forests were also known for tiger, leopard, elephant, and wild cattle. The archaeological remains suggest that the plains of some rivers, particularly the Ganga and perhaps the neighboring hills, were also inhabited by rhinocerus during the end of the Pleistocene and beginning of the Holocene. Peacock, many species of parrots, fowl, patridge, and sparrow are common and are often consumed by ethnic peoples.

**Settlements**

**Settlement System.** The Upper Paleolithic hunting-gathering communities of South Asia are divided into three categories—early Upper Paleolithic c. 29th–19th millennia B.P., mature Upper Paleolithic c. 19th–10th millennia B.P., and the Epi-Paleolithic/early Mesolithic c. 10th–8th millennia B.P. The archaeological records suggest changing settlement patterns from absolute nomadism to semisedentism during the three periods.

In the first stage, the early Upper Paleolithic, outcrops of suitable stone of the cryptocrystalline silica group were extensively exploited. The sites discovered at the foot of the Vindhyan and Ajanta hills indicate that lithic resource areas had tool-making scatters. Repeated utilization of these locales by small groups is apparent. In comparison to the Middle Paleolithic workshop sites, the knapping centers of the early Upper Paleolithic were restricted in number. In the absence of evidence for habitation floors where other activities were performed, it may be presumed that the hunter-gatherers of the early Upper Paleolithic lived in small, mobile groups.