

Growing Clues That India's Central Narmada Valley Was A Key Hub In The Human Story

02-22-2024 ~ In December 1982, a geologist digging in India's Central Narmada Valley found something he did not expect. Arun Sonakia, who at the time worked for the Geological Survey of India, unearthed a hominid fossil skullcap from the Pleistocene era.

The discovery sent shockwaves through the field of paleoanthropology and put South Asia on the map of human prehistory. Some experts concluded that the skull likely belonged to a member of a predecessor species of ours, [*Homo heidelbergensis*](#), or perhaps was a [hybrid](#) of homo species, while Sonakia himself suggested "[an affinity... to *Homo erectus*](#)."

The specimen remains the oldest human fossil [found](#) in the South Asian subcontinent; while expert opinions vary, testing [seems to indicate](#) the fossil was between 250,000 and 150,000 years old. For several decades, it was the *only* ancient human fossil found in South Asia—despite abundant finds of tools and other relics.

But in more recent years, more than a dozen other fossil bones that have been discovered have shined a light on the Central Narmada Valley as a [potential](#) hotbed of human evolutionary activity. Paleoanthropologist Anek R. Sankhyan and his team discovered new fossils [between 1983 and 1992](#), followed by further finds between 2005 and 2010.

Sankhyan shared during an interview that only the Central Narmada Valley has so far yielded human fossils from the Pleistocene period in South Asia. The valley, he says, was a key stop along the migration route from Africa to Southeast Asia for *Homo erectus*. [*Homo erectus*](#) was an archaic human ancestor that [lived](#) between about 1.9 million and 100,000 years ago and adapted to regions from Eastern Africa to China to Southeast Asia. It has not been established whether *Homo erectus* comprises one species spread wide geographically or multiple species involving local variations.

Sankhyan connects the Narmada Valley with some of the more sophisticated [Acheulean](#) stone tool cultures that emerged with *Homo erectus* in Europe and Africa. [Acheulean tools](#) are characterized by multiuse-hand axes used for roles ranging from woodcutting to butchering animals.

In the Central Narmada Valley, [Sankhyan's evidence](#) from his paper—published in *Advances in Anthropology* in 2020—on the subject seems to show at least two distinct types of hominins represented: the large “robust” line uncovered through Sonakia’s skullcap discovery, and an evolving “short and stocky” hominin line from 150,000 to 40,000 years ago discovered by Sankhyan and his team.

Sankhyan says that the traits of the skullcap found by Sonakia vary among *Homo erectus*, *Homo sapiens*, and have features that are unique, making identifying it “[confusing](#).” He concluded that the skullcap is also representative of *heidelbergensis*, and perhaps might be a *heidelbergensis*-Neanderthal hybrid. A skull with so many traits is a clue that this region may indeed have been a multispecies melting pot that puts our contemporary sense of human differences to shame.

Heidelbergensis was a species that was the ancestor of both Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, and [first appeared](#) 700,000 years ago, disappearing 200,000 years ago. It was an intermediate species between *Homo erectus* and modern human beings and Neandertals. *Heidelbergensis* was likely the first human species [to control fire and hunt large game animals](#). The hominid fossil found by Sonakia likely used tools like an Acheulian pick axe and was found near a crushed molar tooth of a [Stegodon](#), a large, extinct relative of today’s elephants. Sankhyan says that the ecology of the valley during the Lower Paleolithic was that of a warm woodland forest with megafauna like the *Stegodon*, during his interview.

The “short and stocky” line has been given its own nomenclature: *Homo narmadensis* by Sankhyan. This species was widespread in the Central Narmada Valley during the “Middle to Upper Paleolithic [era],” and hunted smaller game animals in a “broken forest ecology.” *Narmadensis* was discovered near significant numbers of [Mode 3 Acheulean tools](#), which are more sophisticated than the Mode 2 tools attributed to the *heidelbergensis* line.

Paleoanthropologist Sankhyan speculates that the “short and stocky” hominin line was the “likely precursor to the ‘short-bodied’ ancient populations of India,

including the Andaman pygmy.” Interestingly, he believes that the so-called “hobbit” of Indonesia, [*Homo floresiensis*](#), also descended from this line. *Homo floresiensis* was a little more than three-feet tall and lived between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago.

While Sankhyan says that the government organization, Anthropological Survey of India, has not conducted further excavations since 2010, according to him, there have been individuals from other departments who “tried sporadic trial digging,” but those digs have not yielded any significant results.

As research continues in this area, we’re likely to get even more insight into the varied hominin types who lived in the Central Narmada Valley in the last hundreds of thousands of years and how they interacted with one another. Regardless, the establishment of South Asia as a center of human evolutionary activity is likely to have consequences for how the region, and India in particular, understands itself and its prehistory and history.

For decades, nationalists, including representatives of today’s far-right Hindu nationalists in India, have promoted the idea that South Asians and Indo-Europeans as a whole [originated from within India](#). Though this theory is [false](#) and unnuanced, the evolutionary history of hominins in the Central Narmada Valley offers new ground for Indian nationalists to make the argument that hominins or primates had their roots in India.

But if there are dangers in linking contemporary India with the prehistory of the subcontinent and its place in the world, there are also opportunities. As with India, fossil evidence in [South Africa](#), [Kenya](#), [Tanzania](#), [Georgia](#), and [China](#) indicates that these places were repeatedly home to prehistoric population centers—they all have equal claim to being part of a global and gradual humanization process.

As a result, a nonaligned or regionally connected Global South has a powerful new origin story and better pathways for connections, rooted in evidence outside of the historical narratives imposed on them by the West. Further research will establish what science shows, but it will be politics, geopolitics, and the direction chosen by the world’s people that will contextualize the evidence within the human story.

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