

Chandigarh News

Man came from Africa... or maybe Chandigarh

Rohit Mullick, 19 April 2017

Pre-historic archaeological finds from Masol, 18km from Chandigarh -which challenge the Out-of-Africa theory of man's origins -could be older than 26 lakh years.



Mukesh Singh conducting excavation work at Masol .

CHANDIGARH: Pre-historic archaeological finds from Masol, 18km from Chandigarh -which challenge the Out-of-Africa theory of man's origins -could be older than 26 lakh years.

The Indian-French excavation team has sent fresh samples of sediments, including sand and stones taken out from the land formations of Masol archaeological sites, to Paris for testing. Cosmogenic Radionuclide Dating, a technique that maps the impact of bombarding the material with cosmic rays to know its age, will establish the time of these fossils and tools.

Masol is claimed to be the oldest site where Hominin activities have been discovered and if the latest samples in Paris turn out to be older than 26 lakh years, then it could reopen a new chapter in the pre-history of the origins of man and strengthen the view that man's evolution took place outside Africa as well.

Mukesh Singh, director of the Society for Archaeological and Anthropological Research (SAAR), Chandigarh, which is in research partnership with National Museum of Natural History , Paris, said it would be "a very important development".

"It would mean that the fossils and the tools belong to the same age," Mukesh Singh said. The IndoFrench pre-historic research project that could challenge the 'Out-of-Africa' theory of human evolution after having already made ground-breaking discoveries in Masol village, 18km from Chandigarh, is in dire need of funding.

The project, a collaboration between the National Museum of Natural History , Department of Pre-history , Paris, and the Society for Archaeological and Anthropological Research (SAAR), Chandigarh, has been searching for donors for some time now to continue with its excavation work and further research in Masol.

The SAAR members have already met former Punjab governor Kaptan Singh Solanki and present governor VP Singh Badnore seeking funds and also approached the ministry of culture in this regard.

Recently , SAAR also wrote to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) requesting release of Rs 40 lakh to carry on with its research work in Masol.

However, the SAAR request is still to be cleared. According to SAAR president Mukesh Singh, who has devoted most of his professional life searching for evidence of Hominin (early man) activities in Masol, paleontology field research and analysis is quite expensive. "Uninterrupted flow of funds has become crucial to our project as we are entering the next level in our ongoing research. We are trying our best so that further excavation and analysis of fossils should not suffer due to lack of money ," said Singh.

Last year, the joint IndoFrench team had created a sensation by publishing a paper in a French journal Comptes Rendus that had claimed that cut marks on fossilized bones found in Masol are a proof of Hominin activities that went back to 2.6 million years. The findings have come to be seen as a challenge to the widely-accepted and dominant 'Out of Africa' theory of human evolution that holds that humans evolved in Africa and then dispersed to other continents.

The team has continued its research work in Masol hoping to dig up more evidence to support its findings and discover something new. "We feel motivated by our findings till now. Statistically speaking we should have found a Hominin fossil in Masol and this is what makes our research work even more important," said Singh.

Along with the ministry of culture, the SAAR has also approached private business houses, in the country and abroad, for financial help.

"We have got financial assistance from private donors as well but it's not enough to keep us going. We are trying for more private funding as well," said Singh.

The SAAR had also approached the Punjab government, which initially funded the project work but later stopped releasing the money altogether. Also, the analysis of fossils, another costly affair, dug up from Masol has been done in France till now with the assistance from National Museum of Natural History that has helped SAAR to sustain the project. According to Singh, it's time the project got its own budget.

During the visit of French president Francois Hollande to Chandigarh in January last year, it was announced that an Indo-French Centre on Pre-historic Research would come up in the city. However, even after a year the project continues to exist on paper only.

No Protection

It was also announced to convert around 80 hectares of Masol archaeological site into a protected zone and the ASI was to ensure that the fossils there are not destroyed by any human activity. The entire area was also to be fenced with barbed wires. However, none of this has happened.

'Further discoveries in Masol depend on financial support'

Anne Dambricourt is a palaeoanthropologist at the National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS), Paris.

She shared details about the Indo-French Masol research project with Rohit Mullick

What is the significance of Masol findings?

Masol findings prove that a new level of consciousness emerged in the animal kingdom at least 3 million years ago during the last phase of the Tertiary (66 million to 2.6 million years ago) period and not later during the Quaternary period (2.6 million years ago to the present).

Do you think there is a possibility of finding Hominin fossils in Masol?

We think that it is probable that Hominins were fossilized in the same condition of other rare species such as Merycopotamus (an extinct hippo species). We can hope to find a tooth or a fragmented jaw, because these are the most frequent bones in the Hominin fossil records. But the discovery depends on the time on the field. When the NGO of Dr Mukesh Singh will receive financial support, our Indian colleagues could return on the field and survey interesting localities more often. If they will find stone tools in situ, it will also be easier to find French financial support.

This research project requires funding. What do you have to say?

Thanks to the fieldwork done last February, we have the first stone tool in situ and new irrefutable cut marks on bone. Now Masol is the only site before the Quaternary period where cut marks and stone tools are associated. Dikika in Ethiopia is limited to few cut marks on bones and Lomekwi in Kenya has delivered only stone tools. I had the privilege with Dr Mukesh Singh to meet PM Narendra Modi in January 2016 in Chandigarh. I believe PM Modi knows the great value of this heritage because everybody was face to face with rare marks of the oldest human consciousness. We need to understand who we are. This is a very important planetary challenge and it seems logical to me that India will support this research that could unlock the secrets to our evolution as conscious being.

Many have raised doubts over the Masol findings. What do you have to say?

This is normal as we were also doubtful at the beginning. It is a healthy posture necessary in science. Now more than one year after the publication, everybody has time to publish counter-arguments in academic review journals. Masol is a treasure trove as this year also we have discovered the first stone tool (a chopper) in situ and a long bone with cut marks.

