

Megalithic Culture in Tamil Nadu

Dr. P. Raja
Associate Professor
Department of History
D.G. Government Arts College
Mayiladuthurai,
Tamil Nadu.

The term “Megalith” in Archaeology is defined as a tomb built with big stones containing the remains of dead human beings. It is made by the erection of huge stones. The Megalithic Monuments of South India largely fulfilled a funerary of commemorative purpose. In fact, they were sepulchral in nature. Considering these aspects of Megalithism, found among some sections of the population during the Iron Age, the culture complex of these people as a whole, sometimes called Megalithic Culture. It is to be admitted that such a generalisation has its own short comings. The burial customs that were prevalent among all the people of this age were not uniform and diversified in nature. It is possible that only certain communities with settled instinct followed these practises whereas other sections of the population might have practised other methods with regard to the disposal of the dead.

One such mode of burial was the skeletal remains of the dead in earthen potteriespecially made for the purpose which is evidently called urns. But unfortunately, we donot have much archaeological evidence about the burial

practises other than those of megalithic urn burials of the non – megalithic people of this age, though there is sufficient literary evidence to such ones in some of the TamilSangam works. Moreover, that at least a section of the Neolithic people themselves had a practice which may literary be called megalithic. Therefore, the culture complex of this age may better be called Iron Age Culture or Iron using Megalithic Culture rather than merely megalithic culture.

The Megalithic Culture originated in South and spread to other parts of India. The Megalithic culture in south has to be seen in the last quarter of the Second millennium B. C. E. The abandoned use of iron is noticed in all the sites. Regarding the authorship of the megalithic people, it has been held by many scholars that they are Dravidians. The recent excavation and the study of the objects at Adichanallur burials also point to this fact. Further some of the findings from Adichanallur like iron trident, banner bases, presentation of fowl in bronze etc., strongly support the theory that they were Dravidians.

The archaeological excavations conducted in the southern districts so far had revealed the earliest culture being the Iron Age Culture. The beginning of the Iron Age in Tamil Nadu is at present dated roughly to 500 B. C. E. Most Iron Age sites have been devoted to burials, which are often associated with

megalithic in the form of large stone slabs placed in various formations as menhirs, dolman cists, or circles of stones. Such monuments can be seen overlooking the little cultivable valleys settlement in the fertile parts of Southern Tamil Nadu. Tali(pot) burials have been uncovered suggesting that this region was well populated.

The megalithic builders have been recognised as the primary speakers of Dravidian languages, and as an extravagant guess the map of the Dravidian languages. The megalithic people invariably settled on the slopes of hills or on elevated ground which are not suitable for irrigation. Neither is there any irrigation for land nor any tanks nearby in these regions. There are many sites where there are no tanks. The above evidence amply testifies to the fact that the megalithic people were not the people who introduced tank irrigation in Tamil Nadu. The tanks might have been natural ponds which supplied water for their daily needs, but not for irrigation. It is evident from the occurrence of harvesting implements or sickles that the people might have known cultivation of plants and even the agriculture but not tank irrigation.

The archaeologist is seen the absence of identifiable habitation remains of megalithic communities of Tamil Nadu. The metal ornaments from the graves of Adichanallur should have been made of the several gold diadems having

parallels. There is reference to several types of ornaments like necklace, ring, earing, pendant and stud of gold in the early Tamil literature this varied jewellery implies a knowledge and use of all the necessary equipment like the furnace, blow pipes, moulds and crucibles.

Coins from the megalithic sites are rare. As reported in some places so far, Bronze coins have been identified by Allen as medium of transaction dateable to 3rd and 2nd century B. C. E. The megalithic people were agriculturist. They selected a convenient portion of a slopping ground and put-upon earth and bound to a required length. Their arable lands were always situated beyond the bound and were watered through sluices located on the bound at convenient distances or places that these people were agriculturist is proved on the ground that all their burials are located on the banks of these tanks, hill slopes etc., but always in place not suitable are utilized for cultivation.

In fact, these people utilized every bit of cultivable land for agricultural purpose iron implements were used in their agricultural operations. Paddy appears to be the major cereal ground by them and this has been found in many graves. The presence of husks of rice have been discovered from several megalithic sites in Tamil Nadu. Evidence of horse gram or kollu in Tamil and

possibly green gram are found in the same place. Besides agricultural operations, the megalithic people also hunted and fished to supplement their food.

A good number of arrow heads, tangled, barbed, triangular, leaf shaped etc, attest to small game hunting including bringing down birds. Lances, Sphere heads could also have been utilized in big game hunting, although fish hooks were found in actual burial. Yet it may be assumed that these people supplemented their diet with fishes. They reared sheep and goats and raised cattle and poultry. A number of iron weapons such as the lance, spear and spear heads, arrow heads, swords point out the material culture of the megalithic folk.

The presence of various types of horse bits from Adichanallur and Sanoor and the bones of horses spreading over Tamil Nadu suggest of a cavalry but then the animal must have been used for long distance travelling. The weaving and dyeing industries were largely followed by the people. Archaeological evidences connected with these industries come from different sites. There are numerous terracotta figures of men and women adorned with garments of different kinds of Madurai area. The excavations yielded many round pieces of pottery with a central hole which were used as spindle whorls in spinning.

Pottery manufactured and its technique reached new heights in Tamil Nadu during the later stage of Megalithic Age. The pottery developed

particularly in the Megalithic Age was called the black and red ware. This was done on the specialised process of firing called the inverted firing. The bright and polished surface which this pottery presented was a notable achievement of the times. All the wares of this culture bear post firing graffiti marks, engraved with the help of some sharp pointed instrument on the surface of earthen vessels but rarely on the inner side as well. These scratching do not penetrate generally deep into the pot. They are variously interpreted as potter's mark or tribal marks etc.,

The antiquity of terracotta art in Tamil Nadu goes back to the Neolithic times as evidence from the excavations at Paiyampalli. But the art has reached its zenith of perfection only during the First century C. E. Hundreds of terracotta figures representing men, women, god and goddess, animal, and birds, besides beads and bangles have been collected from the excavated sites like Uraiyur, Korkai, Kanchipuram, Alakarai etc., The Terracotta that are available are mostly handmade and only a few are made out of mold.

A careful study of these terracotta figures will give us an insight into the socio economic and religious condition of the period. Metal working seems to be an important profession practised during this period. It involves a high degree of skill and knowledge of scientific methods like smelting, casting and carving.

The objects found at Adichanallur bear evidence to the progress of this industry in ancient times.

The Megalithic Culture which came in its wake was widespread in Tamil Nadu particularly at Adichanalur. The Megalithic Culture being essentially an Iron Age Culture found in large scale in Tamil Nadu. The objects are varying type and size have been found. These clearly, indicate that the megalithic people knew about Iron ore and its allied industries.

End Notes and References

1. A. Iyappan, "Rude Stone Monuments of the Perumal Hills, Kodaikanal", *Q. J. M. S*, Vol XXXI, Bangalore, 1940 – 41.
2. B. K. Gururaja Rao, *Megalithic Culture in South India*, Mysore, 1972.
3. L. A. Krishna Iyer, "The Significance of Megalithic Monuments", *Q. J. M. S*, Vol XXIX, Bangalore, 1938 –39.
4. R. Nagaswamy, *South Indian Studies*, Part II, Madras, 1979.
5. Narasimmaiah, *Neolithic and Megalithic Culture in Tamil Nadu*, New Delhi, 1980.
6. K. S. Ramachandran, *Indian Megalithics*, Madras, 1971.
7. A. Rea, *Pre - Historic Antiquities in Tirunelveli*, Calcutta, 1902.

8. K. V. Soundararajan, *Megalithic Times and Black and Red Ware*, Varanasi, 1969.
9. P. Stuart, *Pre - Historic India*, London, 1962.
10. K. R. Srinivasan, *The Megalithic Burials and Urn Fields of South India*, Delhi, 1946.