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MEGALITHIC CULTURE IN THE NILGIRIS DISTRICT

S.Nanthakumar

**Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-time) ,
Dept. of Ancient History and Archaeology ,
University of Madras, Chennai.**

ABSTRACT:

Archaeological research in Nilgiris district initiate in the latter half of 19th century a number of attempts have been made by various scholars and discovered many Iron age sites in different areas. Later on several individual scholars and a few of ASI brought to light several Megalithic sites. The present study has been made on the Iron Age settlements of Megalithic culture in Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu. This study reveals that Megalithic Monuments represented from these sites include pottery, tools along with other cultural material

for the reconstruction of socio- economic and other cultural features.

KEYWORDS: Archaeological research , Megalithic Monuments , cultural material.

INTRODUCTION:

The Megalithic Age is related to the Iron Age of the Prehistoric world. The term Megalithic was used to describe a class of Monuments in Europe consisting of huge undressed stones which were termed as Dolmens, Cromlechs and Menhirs. The word Megalithic means "Mega" meaning is Big or Massive "litho" means Stones. The megalithic monuments are constructed usually of large slabs or blocks of stones either in their natural form or roughly quarried and trimmed. The megalithic sites are generally located on the slopes of hill or in an elevated place. In India the megalithic research was begun at Malabar attracted the

attention of the scholars in 1823. The tombes at Malabar were termed as Pandoo Coolies. Since 1823 many scholars took interest and many monuments were excavated for their studies and contributions. The megalithic monuments in Peninsular Indian, particularly in Tamil Nadu, are far more impressive than their resemblances elsewhere. Some of the megalithic monuments are also to be seen on rocky high ground unfit for cultivation and near irrigation tanks. The beginning and end of this culture on the Indian soil is and unsolved problem.

STUDY AREA

The Nilgiris is situated at the tri-junctions of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The Nilgiris are lofty range of mountains is a part of Western Ghats. The district is

located between 11°12'N to 11°37' North latitude and 76°30'E to 76°55' East longitude. Ooty the "Queen of Hill Station", Coonoor and Kotagiri are the three hill stations of this district. The name 'Nilgiris' means blue hills the first mention of this name has been found in the Silappadikaram. There is belief that the people living in the plains at the foot of the hills, should given the name, the Nilgiris, in view of violet blossoms of kurinji flower enveloping the hill ranges periodically. The district has an area of 2,552.50 kilometers square. The district is basically a hilly region, situated at and elevation of 1000 to 2600 meters above Sea level. The Nilgirie is bounded by the Mysore district of Karnataka and Wayanad, Malappuram and Palakkad districts of Kerala in the west, Coimbatore distric of Tamil Nadu

in the South and Erode district of Tamil Nadu and Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka in the North.



Fig:1 Map Showing Study Area – Nilgiri District

The local peoples

The Nilgiri region is home to four major tribes the Todas, the Kotas, the Kurumbas and the Irulas. The lifestyle and occupation of these tribes are reflected in the Archaeological vestiges like megalithic monuments and Rock arts. Toda tribe is a semi-nomadic pastoral people who have herds of semi-wild hill buffaloes with different pastures. Their settlements are in the midst of shoal forests with good surroundings pasture land. The main sources of Toda livelihood is the buffaloes and therefore they worship buffaloes.

Previous Work

The Megalithic monuments in Nilgiri were studied in the early quarter of 17th Century, when the Italian Jesuit Giacomo Fenicio found his way to the pleasant hill tract of the Nilgiris. H. Congreve has done a large amount of work on the Megalithic of the Nilgiri hills. In response to the requisition from the authorities of the Indian museum at Calcutta, J.W. Brecks, the first commissioner of the Nilgiris made arrangements in 1870s to unearth more than forty Megalithic structures in and around the Nilgiris and revealed their contents to the outside world. And all these details have been published in a monograph on the Nilgiri hills. After Brecks, however, there was not even a single attempt made to explore other remaining megalithic burial site in the Nilgiris.

The Megalithic culture in Nilgiris

The important archaeological remains of the Nilgiri megaliths are identifiable in the form of Megalithic burial complex that exist over the terrain as Draw well cairns circle and stone circle, Dolmens. In the sub terrain levels, these megalithic burial are found to yield prehistoric antiquities of cinerary urns, their decorated pottery lids, metallic antiquities of gold bronze and iron, apart from semi-precious stones of cornelian, agate and chalcedony. Hence,, it becomes imperative to study the marking stone of bigger size above the terrain and the material remains of antiquities at the sub-terrain levels as well.

Throughout the Nilgiri hills megalithic burials of three categories are noticed, viz i) cairn circle ii) Stone circle iii) Dolmens. Of these three types of megalithic structures are also attested in other districts of Tamil Nadu, other states of India, and other parts of the world. Contrary to this, the third type of megalithic structure, namely the draw well cairns circle, stone circle are unique to the Nilgiris and not attested at all in Tamil Nadu or any other parts of India or in any other parts of the world.

In the sub-terrain level of these three types of megalithic structures, unique type of single or multi tiered grotesque pottery in dull red finish bearing terracotta lids of various motifs such as

anthropomorphic motifs, zoomorphic motifs, phytomorphic motifs, and quite rarely a motif of columnar structure of inanimate nature in the same dull red finish are all identified.

Types of Burial in Nilgiris

Based on the architectural features, these burials can be broadly divided into three types namely, cairn circle, Stone circle and dolmens.

Cairn Circle

The cairn circles were constructed using round boulders with a limited cairn packing in the centre. As noted above, their height above ground depended upon the nature of the terrain. If the land was soft with sediments either the cist or urn was placed about 30 to 60 cm below the ground level and then the pit was covered and entombed with cairns. In this case, the cairns were not raised more than 60 cm and the cist is projected out to one to two meters above the ground level. The diameter of the circle varied from 6 to 20 m.

Stone Circle

Stones in these circles were originally laid upon the ground or embedded in a vertical position. By laying stones closed to each other, a covered circular feature would be formed. This might then be surrounded with separate stones forming a circle. Or laying vertically emplacing stones apart from each other may form a single circle. The emplacement of stone to form two or three adjoin circles of erect stones formed most complex circles.

Dolmen

A burial chamber was built of walls on three sides of a rectangular slab placed as a floor slab and it had a wide opening on one side. The direction of the slope decides direction of the opening. The side walls were built of rectangular-shaped stone blocks and this chamber was closed with flat capstone. They were generally raised on the rocky surface on the hill top.

Antiquities found on the burials

The cairn circle and stone Circle, Dolmen are excavated in the 19th century and found many artifact made by various raw materials like Potteries, Iron, Copper, Bronze, Gold, Terracotta and semi-precious stones.

Potteries

The potteries from the Nilgiri megalithic monuments are tall vases, with conical base, bowl, ring stand, lids, and animal decorated lids, jars. Decorated pot. The pottery is a coarse red ware with a black core, invariable treated with a coarse wash in varying shades of red or brown. They are of either a coarse or medium fabric, sometimes with a black core are superior in make to the tall vases.

Terracotta figurines

The human figurines are of men and women, standing riding on horses, with short beards and conical headdresses. They only clothes they wear are waist-cloths. They have necklaces; cross-belts front and back, and short-handled daggers. Some of the human figurines are represented with one of their hands resting on their heads, like some of the early bronzes and terracotta's from the Mediterranean region as mark of salutation or reverence. The animal figurines are of the buffalo, cow, sheep, horse, camel, elephant, dog, leopard, peacock, sambhar (a kind of large deer) and others too rudely fashioned to be identified with certainty. Many figurines of domestic animals, especially buffaloes and sheep, are decorated with garlands and bells on their necks.

Iron objects

The Iron objects found from the cairn circle and dolmen consists of gagers, chisels, spearheads, bill-hooks and sickles, arrowheads, pikes, lance points, bell, a small lamp, a rattle, a shearer and socketed soade. Some are decorated with incised designs, like simple lines, wavy patterns, dots, or chevrons.

Copper objects

A rattle or bell with slit, having at the top a staple for attachment to a strap or cord. Within the bell is a piece of metal which acts as a clapper and rings and a bangles are found.

Bronzes objects

Some of the bronze bowls are very elegant. Some have knobs internally at the base and are decorated with lattice patterns, scroll work, simple flutings, or lotus designs. The most exquisite bronze bowl is decorated both internally and externally with lotus patterns, flutings, buds and fronds in a very artistic manner. It stands on a bronze pedestal. It may have a phylo- genetic connection with gold bowl from Ur, circa . 3500 B.C. Both are oval and have fluted and rosette designs.

Beads

Semi-pericious beads have been found the circles and dolmens on the Nilgiris. The various type of shapes of beads found. The raw materials are Agate, Carnelian, gold and glass were used to made a beads.

Gold Ornaments

In addition to the gold beads, there is a ribbed ring with a diameter of 1.12 cms. at the broadest point and 1.05 cms. at the narrowest point. Its weight is 1.5820 gms. and thickness, .22 cms. A gold stud with a knob weighs. 2486 gms. and has a diameter of .52 cms. Its overall height is .4 cms. Some gold earrings and chains, recovered from the Nilgiri circles and dolmens, are now preserved in the British Museum, London.

DISCUSSION

The circles and dolmens have always been built on hill-tops in close proximity to existing or deserted hamlets of the Todas, a tribe of migratory pastoralists famous for their practice of polyandry and buffalo-cult. They have also been found in the immediate neighborhood of Toda funeral grounds whether existing or abandoned. In addition, at the Toda villages of Nors and Tāradr, two of the most important and ancient settlements of the tribe, barrows exist in the midst of the present-day male funeral grounds, thus indicating that the places for funeral of the ancient megalith-builders and those of the Todas of to-day are one and the same, at least in these two villages. Where there are no Toda villages and funeral grounds either existing or deserted, there are neither circles nor dolmens.

CONCLUSION

The general result of this study remains to be assessed. There is numbers and distribution clearly shows that the culture which they represent powerfully influenced the history of Southern India. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find out who the bearers of this vigorous civilization were. No doubt certain aboriginal tribes of Central and North-eastern India still erect megalithic structures, but these are not tombs but memorial monuments. All that can be said is that the distribution of megalithic tombs in Peninsular India and that of the Dravidian languages largely overlap and that this offers reasonable grounds for attributing the megaliths to the speakers of Dravidian languages. While the origin of the South Indian megaliths in general thus remains largely obscure, the light now thrown on the Nilgiri area by the connection shown to exist between the typical megaliths there and the ancestors of the present-day Todas cannot fail to be of considerable value.

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Fig 2 & 3 Stone Circle at Kothagiri Taluk, Nilgiri District**Fig 4 & 5 Human and Animal Terracotta figurines from Nilgiri now displayed at Government Museum, Chennai**

Fig 6 & 7 Decorated Potteries from Nilagiri now displayed at Government Museum, Chennai



Fig 6 & 7 Bronze bowls from Nilagiri now displayed at Government Museum, Chennai