
UNIT 4 MEGALITHIC CULTURES

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Learning Objectives



Once you have studied this unit, you should be able:

- to study the Megalithic Culture of India;
- to study the Megalithic types;
- to understand the development of Megalithic culture keeping in view the regional variations;
- to briefly outline the main problems of the Megalithic Culture in India;
- to study the Megalithic practices among Indian Tribes; and
- to study the Iron Age Culture of India.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A megalith is a stone which is larger in size and has been used to construct a monument or a structure. The monument or the structure has been constructed either alone or together with other stones. Megalithic has been used to describe buildings built by people living in many different periods from many parts of the world. The construction of this type of structures took place mainly in the Neolithic and continued into the Chalcolithic Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age.

4.2 TYPES OF MEGALITHS

There are large numbers of megaliths found all over world but we may group the similar types together. The types of megalithic structures can be divided into two categories, the “*Polyolithic type*” and the “*Monolithic type*”. In polyolithic type

more than one stone is used to make the megalithic structure. In monolithic type the structure consists of a single stone. Following are the different megalithic structures.

Polyolithic types

Dolmen: This is a type of megalith which is made in single chamber tomb, usually consisting of three or more upright stones supporting a large flat horizontal capstone. Dolmens were usually covered with earth or smaller stones to form a barrow. But in many cases that covering has weathered away, leaving only the stone “skeleton” of the burial mound intact.

Cairn: A Cairn is a human-made pile of stones, often in conical form. They are usually found in uplands, on moorland, on mountaintops, or near waterways. In modern times Cairns are often erected as landmarks. In ancient times they were erected as sepulchral monuments or used for practical and astronomical purposes. These vary from loose, small piles of stones to elaborate feats of engineering.

Cromlekh: Cromlekh is a British word used to describe prehistoric megalithic structures, where *crom* means “bent” and *llech* means “flagstone”. The term is now virtually obsolete in archaeology, but remains in use as a colloquial term for two different types of megalithic monument.

Cist: A cist or kist was used as encasements for dead bodies. It might have associations with other monuments. It would not be uncommon to find several cists close with each other in the cairn or barrow. The presence of ornaments within an excavated cist, indicate the wealth or prominence of the interred individual.



Fig.4.1: Cist excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler at Brahmagiri

Monolithic type

Menhir: A Menhir is a stone Monolithic standing vertically. It could also exist as part of a group of similar stones. They have different sizes with uneven and square shapes, often tapering towards the top. Menhirs are widely distributed across different continents viz., Europe, Africa, and Asia, but are most commonly found in Western Europe; in particular in Ireland, Great Britain and Brittany. Their origin dates back to pre-history. They are members of a larger Megalithic culture that flourished in Europe and beyond.

Stone Circle: A Stone Circle is a monument of standing stones arranged in a circle usually dated to megalithic period. The arrangement of the stones may be

in a circle, in the form of an ellipse, or more rarely a setting of four stones laid on an arc of a circle. The type varies from region to region.

4.3 MEGALITHIC CULTURE OF INDIA

In 1872, Fergusson brought out his excellent work entitled “Rude Stone Monuments in all Countries: their age and uses. This first attracted the attention of scholars. Although Babington (1823) had published his book, “Descriptions of the Pandoo Coolies in Malawar” and Meadows Tylor (1873) was writing about his observations pertaining to the “Distribution of Cairns, Cromlechs, Kistveans and other Celtic, Druidical or Scythian monuments in the Dekhan”. Fergusson’s work on Megaliths may still be regarded as a landmark because of its wide scope and integrated approach.

In 1873, Brecks tried to correlate Megalithic practices with some of the customs and rituals practiced by the tribals still living in the region of the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu. All earlier authors showed a strong bias towards tracing the ancestry of the Megalithic builders to the Celts, Druids or Scythians. Brecks, at least, was the first to show that local megalithic bias had survived in the Nilgiris.

As with the descriptive accounts, the first excavation of Megalithic monuments also took place more than a century ago. In the last quarter of the 19th century, Dr. Jagor first excavated in the classic site of Adicanallur in the Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. The extensive site of Junapani, near Nagpur in Maharashtra was also excavated on a small scale by Rivett-Carnac (1879). Simultaneously, extensive exploration in the Madras region continued, resulting in the publication of the list of antiquarian remains in the Presidency of Madras by Sewell in 1882. At the turn of the century, Foote (1901) brought out an excellent Catalogue of antiquities, including megaliths.

In the later years of the 19th century, Alexander Rea (1902-03) excavated a number of megalithic sites in South India. The classic site of Adichanallur was also re-excavated in 1903-04 by Louis Lapicque. The remarkable variety and distinctive natures of the Indian Megalithic cultures were then placed before the world by Rea in 1915, when he published the Catalogue of the Prehistoric antiquities from Adichanallur and Perumbair. A decade later, Hunt (1924) published the result of the excavation of Megalithic graves in Andhra Pradesh.

By the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, a number of Megalithic sites had been excavated. However, the first attempt to place the South Indian Megaliths in a chronological framework was by Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1948), who excavated the sites of Brahmagiri and Chandravalli in Karnataka in 1944.

In 1962, it appeared that the megaliths, that is, huge stone monuments, were a special feature of South India. Preliminary classification had shown regional types. Wheeler’s excavation at Brahmagiri showed that these were not as old as once believed. This was confirmed by subsequent excavations at Sanur, Maski and other places. While studying the Karnataka megalithic monuments A. Sundara (1975) concluded that “the varied tomb types in different geological zones are essentially due to the traditional affiliations rather than environmental influence.” The megalithic builders at Hallur and further south at Paiyampalli, were not

only adept at quarrying all kinds of stones, but they made a judicious use of these rocks. They employed a particular stone for a particular part of the tomb. Again, these people were excellent architects-engineers. The best example is the constructional plan of the passage chamber. Though we still do not know about the houses and habitations of these megalithic builders, the recovery of sickles and plough coulters of iron, rice and *rugi* grains from the excavations at Kunnattur and Hallur respectively, shows that these people were probably dependent largely upon agriculture and partly upon hunting, as proved by the hunting scenes in the rock-paintings at Hire-Benkhal. Animals such as cow/ox, goat/sheep, dogs and horses were domesticated.

So far no evidence of literacy in the form of writing of any kind has been found from the megaliths in Karnataka. Finally, on the question of the identity of the megalithic builders, Sundara (1975) has shown how there was mutual borrowing between the Neolithic-Chalcolithic inhabitants of Karnataka and the megalithic-builders who arrived about 800-700 BC. As Kennedy has said, it is difficult to say anything about the racial types from the study of the extant skeletal remains. Hence, the only thing left to a culture-historian is cultural relics. Amongst these, the only significant thing was the post-holed cist. In this regard Sundara again is of the opinion that all the megalith-chamber types of tombs of North Karnataka or South India, are the passage chamber type that has fundamental resemblances with those of the Mediterranean and Western European megaliths. He further thinks that the South Indian megaliths were derived from the Mediterranean region via the coastal route.

Some idea of the megalithic in Coorg can be had from the work of K. K. Subbayya. Excavation of four sites at Heggadehalli revealed some new types of burials, which seem to be unique. Instead of the stone sides containing a simple pit or underground cist of stone slabs, at this place, the sides contained a pit and at the base of the pit were laid a granitic slab over which the funerary offerings were deposited. The pit was then filled with soft earth. On this lay the large capstone. Another megalith contained only a pit without a stone slab at the base, whereas in the third one was a cairn side, under which was a stone chamber of large granitic slabs, inordinately large in dimension. It also contained an underground passage to the east outside the cist.

Except pottery, nothing else was found from the chambers. This is of the usual kind, black-and-red ware and included bowls, tall three-legged vases and conical vessels. Up till now, any kind of weapons have not been found at these sites. However, the differences in the method of making these three megaliths might indicate a kind of economic and social status their builders enjoyed in their society.

An extension of the South Indian Megaliths to Vidarbha has come to light by the excavation at Junapani and subsequent full-fledged excavations at Khapa and Muhurjhari. The excavations at Khapa and Mahurjhari and another site at Naikund have supported that the megaliths belonged to a particular section of the community or people in each region. The evidence from Vidarbha and Tamil nadu, particularly horse bits and several types of iron weapons suggest that these sepulchral monuments might only belong to a warrior class.

At Khapa, situated on the left bank of the river Krishna there are a number of megaliths in the form of stone circles, whereas on the opposite side at Takelghat there is a habitation site. Both were dug in 1968-69 by Nagpur University. Out

of the nine megaliths, Megalith-1 which was the largest of all having a diameter about 25-26 metres, yielded interesting evidence like pots and pans of black-and-red ware, micaceous red ware, and coarse red ware, utensils and weapons of iron and copper, copper bangles and beads of carnelian and bones, possibly of the horse. Among the other interesting objects must be mentioned the copper dish and a copper lid each with a bird motifs, the copper bell and a chain of copper rings. The excavation of the habitation site on the opposite side at Takalghat gave some idea of the houses these people lived in. The floors are well made with rammed brown clay, and coated with lime, whereas the walls are made of mud, with supports of wood/bamboo posts for roof. This, at present on the evidence of C-14 date from Takalghat, is placed around 556 B.C. Takalghat megalithic culture is believed to be similar to that of Hallur in Karnataka.

Compared to Khapa, Mahurjhari from Nagpur is considered as a megalithic haven. With Junapani, it is said to have more than 300 stone circles. Altogether three localities have been identified at Mahurjhari.

In Locality-I, megaliths yielded iron axes, daggers, copper bowls, bells, bangles, numerous beads of semi-precious stones, black-and-red pottery and gold leaves.

In Locality-II, the megaliths yielded several copper bangles, iron axes, chisels, gold spiral, iron nails etc. This locality seems to be more important because a human skeleton found associated with large number of objects and painted black-and-red potsherds, which were placed near the various parts of the interred body. The other antiquities recorded from the site are gold ornaments with punched decoration, and pottery lids with the goat and bird motifs, in addition to the usual iron and copper objects.

In Locality-III, megaliths yielded full length human skeletons with iron and copper objects, including those for the horse. Gold ornaments and painted pottery belonged to a family or persons who were rich and important- probably warriors of a high status. The pottery particularly the painted black-and-red ware is said to be similar to those found at Takalghat and Khapa.

The megalithic monuments found in Pune district might be just memorial structure. Megalithic monuments had already been reported near Pune in the last century. They, when re-examined in 1940-41, turned out to be memorials to the dead, but not funerary in nature and devoid of any pottery and dateable objects.

A new dimension to the megalithic problem in India was revealed with the discovery of megaliths in the districts of Banda, Allahabad, Mizapur and Varanasi located in south-eastern Uttar Pradesh. The monuments called as cairns and cists are comparatively sparsely distributed near the junction of the northeast slope of the Vindhyas, and in the Ganga plains. The east-west dimension of this region is about 320 km. There are differences in the materials used for constructing the structures. This is obviously due to vast extent of territory in which the megaliths are distributed. It has been found at all excavated sites at Varanasi, Allahabad, Mirzapur and Banda, that their makers dug fairly deep pits, deposited the funerary goods and covered them with hemispherical cairns of boulders bounded by stone circle. The funerary goods, though varying in other essentials, had a black-and-red ware. In case of a cist, a similar pit was dug and a box-like chamber was prepared with orthostats. The box was packed with small stones, and covered with massive single stone slab resting directly on the four uprights.

Interestingly, unlike in the south, the Allahabad megaliths reflect the cultural change. The basic types- cairns, stone circles and cists-remain the same, but the grave goods consist, instead of microliths, iron objects like sickle, adze, arrow-head and dagger. There was a significant variation in the livelihood pattern between the two zones. Iron had replaced stone and copper and, as the evidence from Kotia in Allahabad shows, these were made local iron smiths.

On the opposite bank of the River Belan at Koldihwa and Khajuri megaliths belonging to chalcolithic cultures were found, lying between cultures of Varanasi and Kotla of Allahabad. In the former iron is absent, and microliths are scarce while in the latter fragments of iron are associated with microliths. These types of megalithic cultures have also been observed in Mirzapur and Banda districts.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the local variations, the inhabitants used, right from the beginning up to the end, a Black-and Red Ware. For nearly 1500 years the technique of making of pottery, its decoration and firing did not change and the way of life of the people remained the same.

Megaliths have also been discovered at Waztal, about 12 kms from the Matau Spring, and Brah, about 9 kms from Martand in Kashmir. At both the sites a number of huge standing stones were found. But these are scattered around without any regular plan.

Habitation sites are rarely found in association with the megaliths, excepting at Maski, Tekalghat, Paiyampalli and a few others. Recently, a large habitation site along with scores of stone circles has been discovered at Naikund near Nagpur in Maharashtra. However, the ratio of habitation sites to burial sites still remains exceptionally low. This poses problems for the study of settlement patterns, and it is high time that excavation of the few habitation sites are undertaken on a priority basis, before the megaliths are blasted by local bodies for road building. Despite the fact that as early as 1960 an International Commission for the study of megaliths was instituted by the Second International Congress of Archaeo-Civilisation, no planned and conscious efforts have been made in India towards understanding of the settlement patterns of the megalithic people. Further studies must also be undertaken to define the main regional complexes of the Indian Megalithic cultures. The above descriptions are of the South Indian, Northern and Northwestern Megalithic cultures. It is obvious that these complexes are not exclusive of each other. Some common elements can be traced among the cultures. Similarities and dissimilarities of ceramic fabrics and typology, presence and absence of iron, and concentration or otherwise of certain megalithic types in certain regions are all problems for which widely diverging views are available. They can be solved only if planned work is carried out, and it is futile and dangerous to generalise on the basis of sporadic and meagre data.

4.3.1 Burial Rituals and Social Organisation

The above description of the megalithic culture shows that the megalithic communities were dominated by religious and supernatural beliefs. This is evident from the elaborate objects associated with the burials. Different burial tradition could indicate different social and ethnic groups, but so far no fixed regional conventions regarding orientation of the bodies or the graves have been observed. The burials vary from total to only fractional types. In the Vidarbha region horses were buried with the dead, possibly after sacrifice, and this may have been a local ethnic tradition.

The social organisation of the Megalithic people of India can be worked out only in a sketchy manner, and data on settlement pattern are virtually absent. However, it appears that communities may have comprised different professional groups, such as smiths, warriors, goldsmiths, agriculturists and carpenters. This may be deduced from the types of grave goods offered. Even burial must have involved community effort because setting of such huge stones in a Circle or erection of a gigantic Menhirs, or the placing of massive stone slabs on a Dolmen is not possible by one or two individuals.

4.3.2 Ethnic Affinity and Origin

The origin of Megalithic culture in India is not clear. No satisfactory answer is yet found. Some early European scholars put forward a view that the builders were Celts or Scythians. Rivett-Carnac related them to Central Asian tribes. Other scholars tried to relate them to the Dravidians. Practice of erection of megaliths are still found among some tribes in India in the southern, central, eastern and northeastern parts of the country.

The skeletal remains found especially from Brahmagiri, Yeleswaram and Adichanallar show that people were of a mixed racial type. According to Sarkar (1960), the Brahmagiri skeletal remains were probably of Scythians or Iranian stock. Gupta and Dutta (1962) concluded that similar trend is noticed for Yeleswaram remains but Adichanallur skull, however, show different affinities.

4.3.3 Chronology

Apart from the ethnic affinities and possible migration, the chronology of megaliths in India still poses certain problems. Wheeler (1948) assigned a date for the megalithic culture approximately to the 2nd Century B.C. Gordon and Haimendorf (as quoted by Srinivasan and Benerjee 1953:114) proposed dates between c. 700 to 400 B.C. Seshadri (1956) dated them between 6th century B.C. to 1st century A.D. Sundara (1969-70) proposed a date at c. 1100 B.C. for Terdal in Karnataka. Sundara and Aiyappan (1945) extended antiquity of the megaliths as far back as the Indian Neolithic times. The Chalcolithic-megalithic contact period in Maharashtra goes back to c. 700 B.C. Megaliths of Vidarbha is dated to the 6th or 7th centuries B.C. While the question of date of the megaliths cannot be easily settled, well-organised attempt be made to understand the political, social and economic background of the megalith-builders, be it in Vidarbha, Andhra, Karnataka or in Tamilnadu. It seems almost certain that no ordinary family or individual could erect such huge megaliths. Community effort and activity must have been involved in the erection of such huge structures. Such community involvement is noticed among the tribes of the present-day who are still practicing erection of megaliths.

4.4 ERECTION OF MEGALITHS BY SOME INDIAN TRIBES

The custom of erecting megaliths on a large scale is seen among different communities from the Neolithic times right up to the Bronze Age and the Early Historic period. However, the tradition of erecting megaliths is still found among the tribals living in Northeastern, Eastern, Central and South India. The reasons behind the erection of megaliths are not very clear. In this situation, we can

derive some clues on the megaliths' associations by observing the practices of the tribes who still include megaliths in their religious beliefs, for example, the Gadabas, Gonds, Kurumbas, Marias, Mundas, Savaras, Garos, Khasis, Nagas, Karbis, Tiwas, and Marams. These groups still construct megalithic manuments for the dead. 'Megalithism' may be considered as a living tradition.

The Gonds, Kurumbas, Morias and Savaras plant and worship stone menhirs and sometimes erect wooden pillars. Some of these wooden pillars are curved with a rounded projection at the top to represents the human head. These tribes consider the stone menhirs and the wooden posts to represents their gods, or occasionally, the spirit of the dead. The beliefs of the various tribes differ with respect to the stone and wooden menhirs erected in connection with the death rites. The Gonds believe that the spirit of the dead resides in a stone. Thus the wooden pillars and stone menhirs are believed to contain the soul of the dead.

The veneration of the wooden and stone pillars is evident in the practices of the Morias who apply turmeric and oil on them. They sacrifice a buffalo and offer rice and worship these stones in the belief that the spirit of the dead resides in them. The Savaras, before sowing, present the seeds in front of the pillars and sacrifice animals to promote the fertility of the seeds. Similarly, the Kurumbas approach the megalithic monuments of their ancestors whom they implore to help them tide over their difficulties. The Gonds mention three reasons for erecting pillars and dolmens: "first, the spirit of the dead not to wander after death; second, they must not worry or harm the descendants; third, they must help by bringing rain and driving away the harmful spirits".

The practices of the tribal people mentioned above indicate their belief that the spirit of the dead resides in the stone or wooden pillars, which they erect. These pillars are venerated and worshipped with various offerings. If the spirits are satisfied they can grant boons and on the other hand they can cause harm, if they are not satisfied (Rao, 2000).

At Mottur in Tamilnadu, a 'headless' anthropomorphic statue was noticed in the middle of a megalithic site. The local people call the megalith *Valiyar Vadu* (house of Valiyar) and the anthropomophic statue *Valiyar Daivam* (god of the Valiyars). There is a very interesting tradition about the *Valiyar* current in this locality. According to the tradition, the Valiyars were pygmies of 10 to 15 cm in stature. They used to plough the fields with the help of rabbits. On one occasion they came to know that there would be rain of fire. If they stayed there they would be perished. To escape the fate of burning to death, they decided to leave the place, and requested their god to accompany them. When their god refused to come along, they cut off his head and took it with them. For this reason the statue stands headless. This tradition suggests that some communities consider the megalithic, anthropomorphic statue to represent their god.

The Savaras of Orissa construct a miniature hut over the place where the dead are cremated or the bones are buried. They keep wooden figures in the huts to accommodate the soul of the dead till the mortuary rite known as Gaur ceremony is performed. Interestingly, figures with female features are used, if the 'soul house' is meant for women. During the elaborate Gaur ceremony, which is conducted by the whole community of a particular village or a group of villages, menhirs are erected to represent the dead, who are believed to have reached the

‘Under World’. That is why during the Gaur ceremony “the stones are washed with water-so that the dead can get bath in the Under World-and oil and turmeric are used so that they can anoint themselves and do their hair. For whatever is given at the Gaur goes straight down to the Under World” (Elwin 1955:360).

The above mentioned practices and beliefs of the tribal communities indicate that wooden and stone statues are mainly meant to represent their ancestors. At Mottur alone, the local people believe that the anthropomorphic statues represent the god of the ancestors. Further, where statues with feminine features are erected they would represent a female member who has passed away.

The erection of megaliths, both commemorative and burial, though is prehistoric in origin, are still practised by many hill tribes of Northeast India and in the Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar (Burma), Indonesia and Thailand. The custom of erecting menhirs or alignments of stone slabs and dolmen in honour of the dead is practised by the Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the Tiwas and the Karbis of Assam, the Morams of Manipur and the Nagas of Nagaland. There is another interesting example of megalithic tradition found among the Garos of Meghalaya. They erect a forked wooden curved post of ‘Y’ shape in front of their houses in mamory of the dead member (s) as in Indonesia and Oceania. People erect the ‘Y’ shaped forked wooden post with the belief that they will be protected from the dangers of life, the fertility of the family will increase, they will escape god’s punishment and so on.

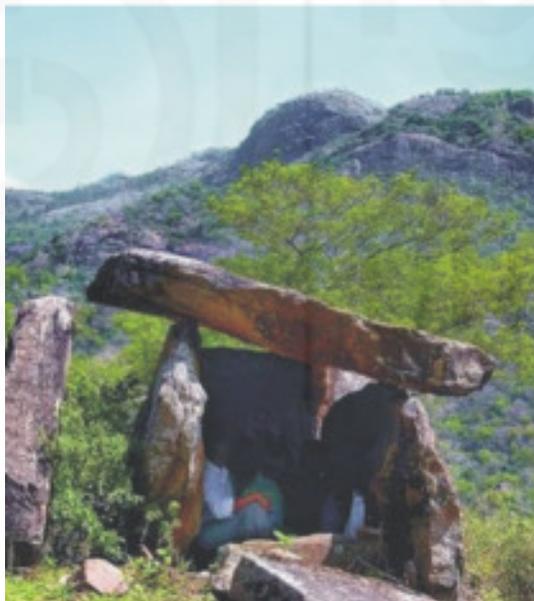


Fig. 4.2: Dolmen

The Khasis of Meghalaya, who are matrilineal tribes, erect Megalithic structure in accordance with their traditional religion. Upright stones (Menhir), large and small, horizontal table stones (dolmen or cromlech), cist and cairns are seen all over the Khasi Hills but full and precise information about them have never been recorded and is hard to obtain. The Khasi megaliths are memorial stones, called ‘Kynmaw’, literally meaning “to mark with a stone”. In Khasi language it refers to “remember”. The Khasi megaliths are cenotaphs, the remains of the dead being carefully preserved in stone sepulchers, which are often at some distance apart from the memorial stones.



Fig. 4.3: Menhir of the Khasis of Meghalaya

Though there are some observable similarities between the megaliths of the past and those of the living tribes, yet it is very difficult to bridge the gap between the past and the present continuum of the traditions. It is well known that the structures built by the contemporary tribal folk are generally linked with the commemorative purpose, whereas those of the past are mostly graves. The porthole opening, a special feature of many of the megalithic cists, is not found in any of the megalithic graves made by the contemporary tribes. It is possible that the people have given up the tradition of making portholes in course of time.

Although all megaliths found all over the world are associated in one way or another with the cult of dead it does not provide sufficient ground to establish a common origin for any two megalithic cultures.

The memorial stones of the Ho and Munda of Chhotanagpur would appear to resemble greatly the Khasi Menhirs. The funeral ceremonies of the Ho and Munda tribe are similar to those of Khasi. Both first cremate the body, collect ashes and bones after cremation and put them in to a grave. They also offer food to the spirit of the deceased. They also have a common linguistic resource in the form of 'Mon-Khmer Family'.

There are other tribes in Northeast India, who erect memorial stones. They are, Karbis and the Tiwas of Assam and certain Naga tribes of Manipur and Nagaland. The Karbis erect Menhirs and Dolmens in honour of their deceased similar to the Khasis of Meghalaya. Similar to Khasis, the Karbis dig a small tank for purification purpose before erecting the memorial stones and give feast after the memorial stones are erected. Anal Nagas and Morams of Manipur and Angami Nagas, Lothas and Konyak Nagas of Nagaland erect memorial stones to show reverence to the memories of deceased ancestors. The Anal Nagas traditionally believed to occupy a site of an ancient market place known as Nortiang (some 26 km Northeast of Shillong), which is an important megalithic site of Meghalaya. In the stone monuments of the Anal Nagas and Angami Nagas, the female principle is represented by a flat stone, lying on the ground, while the male is represented

by an upright stone (menhir). These typical clan mortuaries are same like those still associated with the Khasis and Syntengs of Meghalaya. Haimendorf (1945) was of the opinion that the ritual associated with megaliths of Northeast India is to gain prestige for the living and to establish links with the soul of the dead. This also is at the root of the megalithic cultures of Indonesia. On the basis of this, he suggested a unity in the megalithic complex in the zone extending from the Nagaland and Khasi Hills up to Nias in Southern Sumatra. He further expressed that the Meghalaya complex found in Northeast India and many other parts of Southeast Asia appeared not as an accidental aggregation of various cultural elements, but as a well coordinate system of custom and beliefs, a philosophy of life and nature.

4.5 IRON AGE CULTURE IN INDIA

We study the Iron Age culture here because Megalithic culture is very much a part of Iron Age. The Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent succeeded the Late Harappan culture. The main divisions of Iron Age in India are the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture (1100 to 350 BC) and the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) culture (700 to 200 BC). Iron Age in India brings one to the threshold of ancient history. This culture had recorded history. Literary accounts of the contemporary period are recorded in Vedas, Upanishads and other Brahmanic literatures. A combination of archaeological evidences and such literary accounts have become a standard method of dealing with Iron Age culture in India. The origin of iron in our sub-continent still remains a matter of dispute among specialists. It is important also to remember that some tribes of India, such as, Agarias of Madhya Pradesh, prepare iron tools from surface ores with indigenous techniques and trade their finished products among the local villagers. It can be assumed that these communities must have had their knowledge for a time, may be for several thousand years.

The earliest Iron Age sites in South India are Hallur, Karnataka and Adichanallur of Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu at around 1000 BC. Technical studies on materials dated c. 1000 BC at Komaranhalli (Karnataka) showed that the smiths of this site could deal with large artifacts, implying that they had already been experimenting for centuries (Agrawal et al. 1985: 228-29). Sahi (1979: 366) drew attention to the presence of iron in Chalcolithic deposits at Ahar, and suggested that “the date of the beginning of iron smelting in India may well be placed as early as the sixteenth century BC” and “by about the early decade of thirteenth century BC iron smelting was definitely known in India on a bigger scale”.

Historical kingdoms of the Iron Age:

Iron Age India	1200-272 BC
Maha Janapadas	700-300 BC
Magadha Empire	648-424 BC
Nanda Empire	424-321 BC
Maurya Empire (Pre-Ashoka)	321-272 BC

With the exception of the earliest phase of the Rigveda, most of the Vedic period, falls within the early part of the Indian Iron Age around 12th to 6th centuries BC. The development of early Buddhism takes place in the Magadha period around 5th to 4th centuries BC.

The edicts of Ashoka, 272-232 BC suggest that the North Indian Iron Age can be taken to end with the rise of the Maurya Dynasty and the appearance of literacy, indicating gradual onset of historicity. South India simultaneously enters historic age with the Sangam period, beginning in the 3rd century BC. From the 2nd century BC, the cultural landscape of Northern India is transformed with lasting effect with the intrusion of the Indo-Scythians and Indo-Greeks. The kingdoms succeeding these periods, up to the medieval Muslim conquests are conventionally grouped as Middle kingdoms of India.

4.5.1 Gangetic Valley

The colonization of Ganga basin by iron users can be taken as one of the best evidence of second urbanization in India. Urban centres, which mushroomed around Indus, Ghaggar and its tributaries during 2600 BC to 1500BC were generally deserted after this time. Understanding of the second colonization in this region needs a consideration of the changes that can be witnessed further west. In Baluchistan, the earliest evidence of copper has been noted at Mehargarh. The occupation at this area was abandoned even before the development of mature Harappan culture but around the same region one can witness the transition of the post Harappan phase at Pirak. Initially Harappan influence can be demonstrated in this occupation centre but very soon and perhaps around 1370-1340 BC first pieces of iron appeared here. The cultural continuity from pre-iron phase is so remarkable that an invasion by iron users as a possibility also can't be entertained. Here the houses are prepared of mud bricks like the pre- Harappan stage. The pottery is coarse with appliqué bands and finger tips impressions. Terracotta figurines become more in frequency of occurrence than the preceding period and they include horse, camel and human figures. The most important feature of this phase is barley and rice cultivation in this zone. Evidence of full-fledged adoption of iron, however, is not seen until another 2 to 3 centuries. Iron Age in the west of the Indus broadly belongs to the time bracket of 1100-900 BC. In the northwest another culture developed. This culture is known from the Gandhara sites. There are large complexes of graves and the culture is entirely known and defined from the accompanying grave goods. Taxila, Charsada and Timargarha are some of the important sites from this complex. The pottery is a red burnished type. City structures in this region are not identified till about 500 BC. Similar to Pirak in south west, in Gandhara iron emerged without any change in the earlier culture in the area. Furthermore these pre-existing cultures are unique in character and does not bear any resemblance to the widely distributed Harappan features.

4.5.2 Painted Grey Ware Culture

You have already read about this culture in another Unit in connection with chalcolithic phase. This cultural phase is interesting because it has the use of tools made both from stone and metal. Early phases of this culture are associated with copper and bronze. The phase, which corresponds with Northern Black Polished ware phase in Ganga valley, has yielded iron tools but stone tools also continued. The Painted Grey Ware culture (PGW) is an Iron Age culture of

Gangetic plain, lasting from roughly 1000 BC to 600 BC. It is contemporary to, and is a successor of the Black and red ware culture. It probably corresponds to the later Vedic period. It is succeeded by Northern Black Polished Ware from ca. 500 BC.

Although you are already familiar with the PGW culture, a few words may be added here to establish its relevance in the Iron Age cultures of India. PGW culture is named after the pottery of the same name. This ware was first found at Ahicchatra in Bareilly district of Uttar Pradesh during excavations in 1944 but its importance was fully realised only after its discovery by B.B.Lal in the excavations at Hastinapura during 1950-51.

The first large-scale and effective use of iron in India is associated with this culture. The PGW culture is found in the Indo-Gangetic Divide and the upper Ganga-Yamuna doab, the ancient Aryavarta and Madhyadesa.

The PGW was produced from well-lavigated clay and manufactured on a fast wheel. A thin slip was applied on both surfaces and the ware was baked at a temperature of 600 degree celcius under reducing conditions, which produced the smooth ashy surface and core (Hegde, 1975). The distinctive shapes are dish with curved sides and bowls with straight sides. The vessels are painted in black pigment on both surfaces with geometric patterns like dots, groups of vertical lines, concentric circles, bands, and strokes of vertical and slanting lines, dashes, chains, loops, spirals, sigmas and swastikas. Naturalistic patterns like lotuses, leaves, bunch of flowers and the sun are also occasionally found. The PGW people cultivated rice and wheat and lived in wattle-and-daub houses. They were the first people to have definitely used the domesticated horse.

4.5.3 Northern Black Polished Ware Culture and the Second Urbanization

The Northern Black Polish Ware (NBPW) Culture in India is a definite Iron Age Culture, succeeding the Painted Grey Ware Culture. Iron technology accelerated colonization of the middle and lower Ganga valley by farmers around 700 BC onwards. The characteristic pottery of this period is Northern Black Polished Ware. The NBP period saw the emergence of cities and first political entities known as *Mahajanapadas* in the Ganga plains in the 600 BC.

The NBP region is also the locale of the second major Hindu epic, the Ramayana, and of the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. This period witnessed the second urbanization of India. By 600 BC a number of these Mahajanapadas had been assimilated into the first Indian empire known as the Magadhan Empire with its capital at Pataliputra being located at the place where modern Patna in Bihar is situated. The Magadhan Empire was succeeded by the Mauryan Empire in the 400 BC. The best known Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, expanded the empire up to Karnataka in the south, Bangladesh in the east and Afganistan in the northwest. He also patronized Buddhism and promoted its spread within the country as well as outside in Sri Lanka and other countries of Asia. After the long gap between first and second urbanization, lasting about 1500 years, writing again appeared during this period. The script is known as *Brahmi*. Buddhist and Jains literatures were in *Pali* language. The pillar and rock edicts of emperor Ashoka were written in *Brahmi* script. Coinage in the form of silver punch-marked coins appeared in this period.

4.5.4 Southern Zone

This is the area, which developed a fairly consolidated regional character during 1500-1300 BC. Iron Age in this area does not develop any special characteristic of its own like what has been observed in Western Uttar Pradesh.

The Iron Age in South India till today is known entirely from a large variety of burials and their accompanying grave goods. Since these graves are mostly megalithic in nature the cultures are traditionally known as 'Megalithic Culture'. Further, the 'Megaliths of India' may also refer to the memorial and sepulchral stones erected by the tribals living in various parts of India in the historic period.

You have already learnt about megalithic types. Following is the brief information on Iron Age Megalithic types of South India. The Megalithic burials found so far with iron were from South India particularly from Deccan. They can be grouped as follows:

- Large urns with bones collected from previously excarnated dead bodies in them. These urns are kept with grave goods in a pit. The pit after covering can be marked by a circular demarcation made of stones.
- Cists made out of slabs of stones and may at times be covered with a similar flat stone on top. These are sometimes with portholes curved out on one of the chamber wall slabs.
- Legged-urn or sarcophagi used to encase the body before actual burial is another important pattern of these Megaliths.
- Sometimes chambers have been cut out in the compact lateritic floor and the body was placed inside the chamber.

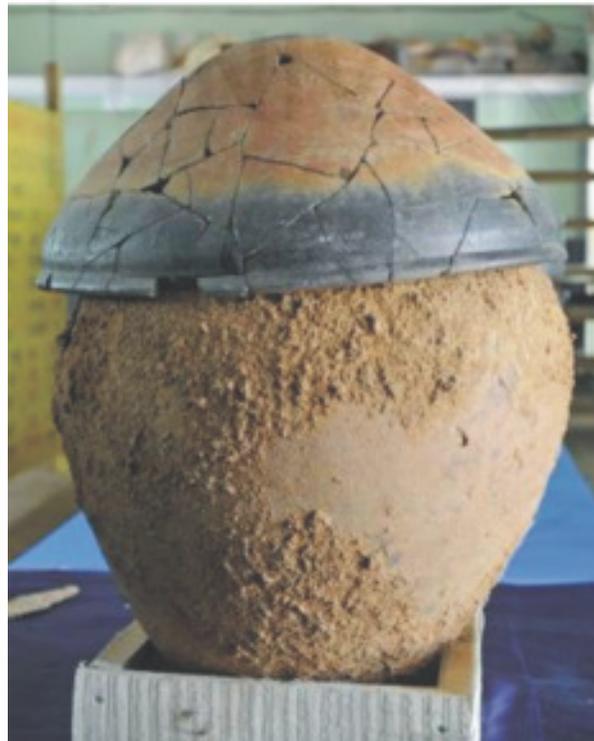


Fig.4.4: Urn burial (Museum specimen in Southern India)

Large numbers of variations are seen in the pattern of disposal of the dead in the region. The Megalithic arrangement on the ground to mark the grave also can vary from one kind of burial system to the other. In all Iron Age sites of Deccan India Black-and-Red ware is seen as the common feature of Iron Age and Megalithic culture. The pottery types include carinated vessels, bowls with pedestals and spouted dishes. A conical shaped lid is found often provided with a loop on the top. The iron implements which are common to all megalithic sites are flat axes with crossed straps, sickles, tripods, tridents, spear heads, lamps, multiple lamp hangers and arrow heads.

The Megalithic builders appears entirely exotic in the pre-existing cultural canvas of the region. And this led many scholars to visualize a new population movement from west. The traditional homeland of Chalcolithic culture, i.e. West Asia, does not show the practice of Megalithic burials and hence cannot be considered as the source of dispersal of the iron using megalithic builders. Instead the coastal regions of South Arabia and the Levant show sarcophagi and cist graves during Iron Age. They probably came by sea route to enter into Deccan India. Apparently, these people did not create any urban settlements, the likes of which we have witnessed in the Harappan period or during the phase of second urbanization in the Ganga valley. Megalithic builders might have maintained isolated gypsy like tented colonies where they might have bred and grazed horses to be traded with the newly rising political centres around the middle Ganga valley. Megalithic Iron Age in Deccan India remained so much self-centred that it did not take much effort for the northern centres of power to spread their dominance into this region within a span of 500 to 600 years.

4.6 SUMMARY

Prehistoric Megaliths or large stone constructions dating before the advent of written history are found in huge numbers in all parts of India. The monuments are usually found in granitic areas. We still do not know exactly who the megalithic people were, whether they represent an immigrant group, or a local development. Since similar monuments are found in many places around the world, right from Ireland, Malta, West Asia, Baluchistan to Southeast Asia it is possible they represent a single group which spread all over the world. Among the possible groups are the Celts originating from Central Asia, who later became great seafarers: some group from West Asia like the ancient Elamites of Mesopotamia: the Central Asian “Scythians”, who roamed all over the world: a group of early Aryan tribes: and more fanciful, the Atlanteans who washed off far and wide.

The facts are known from archeology: the detailed explanations are yet to come.

Suggested Reading

Deo, S.B. 1973. *Problem of South Indian Megaliths*, Dharwar: Karnataka, Kannada Research Institute.

Deo, S.B. 1978. *The Megalithic Problem: A Review*. in *Recent Advances in Indo-Pacific Prehistory*: Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Poona, 1978, p.447.

Rao, K.P. 2000. *Megalithic Authropomorphic Statues: Meaning and Significance*. Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Bulletin, 19:110-114.

Sankalia, H.D. 1979. *Indian Archaeology Today*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications (India).

Sample Questions

- 1) What is Megalithic Culture? Discuss the Megalithic Culture of India with special reference to Northeast India.
- 2) Give an outline of Painted Grey-Ware Culture of India with special reference to the excavated sites.
- 3) How would you classify the megalithic types? Describe the different types of Megalithic monuments found in India.
- 4) Megalithic is a living tradition among many Indian tribes. Elaborate your answer with proper examples.
- 5) Discuss the main features of Indian Iron Age.
- 6) 'Megalithic Culture of South India means iron age'. Discuss.
- 7) Write short notes on the following:
 - i) Cairns, ii) Monolith, iii) Northern Black Polish Ware, iv) Living Megaliths, v) Painted Grey Ware, vi) Dolmen.

