

Original Research Article

Dolmens of Kodaikanal Hills: Uncovering Megalithic Traditions in Tamil Nadu with a Focus on Kodaikanal

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Abstract

The dolmens in the Kodaikanal hills provide a remarkable insight into the burial practices, technological abilities, and spiritual beliefs of the Iron Age people who inhabited the region. According to R.M. Wheeler (1956) megaliths are “those monuments which are built on rough, large, undressed blocks of stones, usually though not invariably of rudimental character. These monuments are connected with burials, which fulfil funerary or commemorative or religious functions.” Megalithic monuments occur on surface at the foot of the hills and hillocks, unlike other underground pre- historic and protohistoric remains their vary size in terms of hugeness is very striking. Experts opine that the megaliths in the earliest stages were used in the funeral proceedings, but later on those were erected as memorial stones. Megalithic graves yielded not only the skeletal remains of the dead, a number of other items as funerary appendages. The dolmens in the Kodaikanal hills are a remarkable testament to the megalithic culture of Tamil Nadu. These ancient structures provide insight into the burial practices, technological abilities, and spiritual beliefs of the Iron Age people who inhabited the region. As ancient monuments, they serve not only as a link to Tamil Nadu’s past but also as cultural landmarks that highlight the continuity of traditions and values across centuries.

Keywords: Tamilnadu Megalithic, Archaeologists, Pottery, funeral, Preservation, Heritage

Introduction

Megalithic culture in India is often characterized by Funerary Practices Burial chambers, stone circles, dolmens, and cairns used to commemorate the deceased. Structures that are Monolithic Menhirs, or large slabs of stone, are constructed to mark significant locations. Many people believe that they hold astronomical or ceremonial significance. Tools and Pottery the megalithic people demonstrated advances in metallurgy and artistry through manufacturing weapons, iron implements, and ceramics in shades of red and black. Site evidence points to an established way of life where trade, agriculture, and pastoralism were major facets of daily existence.

Kodaikanal is a charming hill station situated in the Southern crest of the upper Palanis Plateau, immediately above Periyakulam town in Southern India. Nature is gorgeous in Kodaikanal. Its wood slopes, mighty rocks, enchanting waterfalls and beautiful lake would enhance or mesmerize any visitor. Giant green trees shoot up to the sky everywhere, plants and shrubs with flowers in different colours greet the visitor at every nook and corner. From the top of the Southern rim of this, the plains are seen immediately below. Its Northern side is high and steep; on the West it is bound by a high ridge; but on the East the land falls rapidly away to the lower Palanis and discloses fine views of that range and of the steep. Square topped peak of Perumal hill rising head and shoulders. Its average elevation above sea level is about 2033 meters. At the highest point is located an observatory, which has an elevation above 2343 meters. The Kodaikanal hills, nestled in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu, are not only known for their scenic beauty but also for their ancient megalithic structures, especially dolmens. These dolmens, which date back to the Iron Age, are evidence of a thriving megalithic culture in this region. The dolmens of Kodaikanal offer insights into the burial practices, lifestyle, and beliefs of the prehistoric communities that once inhabited these hills.

Dolmens are above-ground constructions that resemble boxes. Typically, three stone pillars support a single stone slab that is three feet from the ground. They are single-chamber stone graves, according to British botanist and Kodaikanal International School (KIS) alumnus Nora Mitchell. Megalithic structures called dolmens are usually utilized as places of burial. They resemble tables and are made up of big slabs of stone arranged in polygons or rectangles with a flat capstone on top. These monuments were mostly utilized in Tamil Nadu and other areas to identify the final resting place of significant people, including high-ranking officials and community leaders.

The walls of a dolmen are usually made up of large, vertical slabs of stone, though they can vary in size and style. The burial chamber was covered by a single, heavy slab that was positioned horizontally on top of the orthostats. Some dolmens are encircled by little stone piles or placed inside stone circles.

The orientations of the dolmens are multifarious. Each complex was enclosed by an enclosure wall of either rectangular or circular one. These walls are raised of dressed stones of regular courses of no fixed sizes, but adjusted without any trace of binding medium. In the rectangular walls, the flat rectangular or square stones were used and in the case of circular, triangular stones were used with the outer or broader edges of the blocks were trimmed in a semi-circular form to build perfect walls. This is one of the special features of the dolmens of Palani hills. In one of the complexes the dolmens were bifurcated into two generally at the narrow end usually by a flat rectangular stone.

According to Mitchell, the 'dolmen builders' were the first people to live in the Palani Hills in about 1500–2000 BCE, as evidenced by the artefacts left by them. In her book, the *Indian Hill-Station: Kodaikanal* (1972), she describes groups of dolmen circles surrounding Kodaikanal. These were constructed so that a torch flare lit in any one circle could be seen by its neighbours on either side, making it an effective way for people to communicate with each other.

Nobody is aware of who constructed the dolmens. Because certain Kurumbas (an indigenous community, now classified as a Scheduled Tribe by the Indian Government) continue to construct dolmens as temples or as places of rest for their deceased, Thurston, a British Professor, describes that the Kurumbas, an indigenous group currently listed by the Indian government as a Scheduled Tribe, are the descendants of the dolmen builders.

The dolmens in the Kodaikanal hills are scattered across various locations, often situated in remote and elevated areas. The sites are characterized by dolmens, cairn circles (stone heaps), and other megalithic structures. The prominent dolmen sites in Kodaikanal include:

Thandikudi, one of the major villages in the Lower Palani Hills occupies a unique position as this village was well connected by major trade routes. The archaeological vestiges unearthed here have clearly attested that it was continuously occupied since pre-Iron Age times. The occurrence of Dolmens, Cists, Cairn-circles and Urns points out to the convergence of different cultural traits.

The information gathered from expeditions and excavations provides insight into the cultural development of the Palani hills, especially Thandikudi, which was heavily involved in trade during the Middle Ages, as evidenced by trade guild inscriptions. The goal of the current study was also to gain an understanding of the Iron Age architects' technological advancements, engineering prowess, construction techniques, and stone working accomplishments.

The groups of dolmens in eight complexes locally known as Pettu (which refers 'to die') were found on the way to Murugan temple, when approached through Regional Coffee Research Station (RCRS). All the complexes were more or less disturbed. The dolmens are raised on the slopes of the rocky surface and were in groups, which normally consists of two rows. To stop the orthostats from shifting outward, cairn stones were firmly packed into the spaces between the chambers and the enclosure walls all the way up to the capstone. The chamber slabs' interlocking mechanism prevents the inward tilt.

The slabs were positioned on the floor, one above the other, in a pit that had been dug. Initially, the western orthostat was lowered and positioned against the pit's western wall. The orthostats from the South, North, and East were then positioned. Each of these slabs was positioned precisely around the floor slab. In the centre of the Eastern orthostat is a trapezium-shaped aperture. Similar to how the Eastern and Northern orthostats are shattered, this slab is broken at the porthole level. This would have taken place as the capstone was being placed or dragged. It is assumed that the shattered fragments were carried from the East because they have fallen inside the chamber.

The cist does not follow any clockwise, anti-clockwise or swastika pattern. For instance, the Western slab rests on the Southern and Northern slabs. The Northern slab stands independently without any support. However, all the orthostats stand erect due to the thrust of the other slabs. The uneven edges of the orthostats were cleverly wedged with small slabs. In order to prevent the outward tilt, buttress walls were constructed between the orthostat and the pit wall from the base to the top. The top borders line up with the ground's level. By pulling it from a distance, this assisted in positioning the enormous capstone over the cist. This capstone has an uneven shape and, except from a rough hammer dressing, shows no signs of chisel marks. Undressed rocks of varying sizes were positioned at ground level to make a circle around the cist after the massive capstone was precisely positioned over it.

Gundupatti Located near Kodaikanal, Gundupatti is known for its dolmen clusters and cairn circles, dating back to the Iron Age (around 1000–500 BCE). The dolmens here are well-preserved, giving a glimpse into the structural design and stonework skills of the builders. Nestled within the serene hills of Kodaikanal, Gundupatti is a quaint village in Tamil Nadu that holds a unique historical treasure. Here lie the remnants of an ancient culture, expressed through megalithic dolmens—stone burial structures that mark the landscapes as silent witnesses to the lives of those who came before. These dolmens, some of which date back to the Iron Age, have captivated

historians, archaeologists, and cultural enthusiasts alike, as they provide an invaluable glimpse into the early inhabitants' burial practices, social structures, and worldviews.

Perumal Malai is another important dolmen site in Kodaikanal, situated on the slopes of Perumal Peak. The dolmens here are situated in ideal locations that provide sweeping vistas of the surroundings, which may have had symbolic or spiritual meaning for the builders.

Dolmen Circle in Kodaikanal near the town of Kodaikanal, this site features dolmens that are easily accessible, allowing visitors to observe the unique structure and layout of these ancient tombs. Some of these dolmens have port-holes (small circular openings), a feature often found in megalithic tombs in South India.



Cultural Significance of Kodaikanal's Dolmens

The dolmens of Kodaikanal, like other megalithic monuments, reflect the burial practices and cosmological beliefs of the Iron Age communities in Tamil Nadu. These dolmens' placement and design suggest that these prehistoric societies were picky about where they would bury their dead, frequently choose high ground with picturesque views. Archaeologists believe that the dolmens served several purposes beyond being simple burial chambers. Some scholars suggest that these sites may have been used for:

Ancestor Worship: The dolmens might have been considered sacred spaces for honoring the dead. The ancestors were likely believed to hold an important position in the spiritual and social life of the community, which is why elaborate stone structures were built for them.

Social Status and Memory: The size and design of the dolmens suggest that they could mark the resting place of individuals of high social status. The effort involved in constructing these monuments implies that they were built for prominent community members or leaders.

Astronomical Alignments: While not all dolmens display clear astronomical alignments, some might have been intentionally oriented toward significant celestial events, marking solstices or other important dates.

Archaeological Features and Findings

The dolmens of Kodaikanal often contain various artifacts and structural elements that shed light on the lifestyles and technological achievements of the Iron Age communities in Tamil Nadu:

Port-holes: Some dolmens have a circular opening, or port-hole, on one of their stone slabs. These openings could have served as an entry point to the tomb or as a way for offerings to be passed to the deceased

Burial Artifacts: Excavations at megalithic sites in Tamil Nadu (although not specific to Kodaikanal) have often yielded artifacts like pottery, iron tools, beads, and personal ornaments, hinting at the burial rituals and the belief in providing essentials for the afterlife.

Craftsmanship in Stone: The construction of dolmens demonstrates remarkable skill in handling massive stone slabs without modern machinery. The stones were likely sourced from local quarries and carefully shaped and placed to form sturdy structures. The dolmen builders' mastery in quarrying, transporting, and positioning these stones highlights their technological and engineering knowledge.

Lifestyle and Beliefs of Kodaikanal's Megalithic Builders

Based on artefact made at other megalithic sites, it is thought that the Kodaikanal dolmen builders engaged in a diversified economy that included hunting, farming, and animal husbandry. They probably lived in small, crowded villages where the focus of communal life was on forests and rivers. Iron, which they used to make tools and weapons, was available to the Kodaikanal dolmen builders, suggesting some degree of technological development.

The presence of burial goods within the dolmens, such as pottery, iron objects, and ornaments, suggests that these communities believed in an afterlife where these items would be of use to the deceased. The elaborate construction of the dolmens shows respect for the dead, implying a strong cultural focus on ancestors and the spiritual importance of burial rites.

Challenges in Preservation

The dolmens in Kodaikanal, like other megalithic constructions in India, are threatened by a number of factors, including urbanisation, tourism, and natural erosion. A few locations exhibit signs of vandalism, and some dolmens have been destroyed or damaged. These dolmens contain important information on early human communities in Tamil Nadu, thus efforts to preserve and document them are essential.

Archaeological institutions and local governments are working to promote awareness of the importance of these heritage sites, emphasizing the need to preserve these ancient monuments for future generations. Conservation initiatives aim to protect these structures from deterioration, and there are ongoing efforts to establish these sites as protected heritage zones.

Conclusion

The dolmens in the Kodaikanal hills are a remarkable testament to the megalithic culture of Tamil Nadu. These ancient structures provide insight into the burial practices, technological abilities, and spiritual beliefs of the Iron Age people who inhabited the region. Preserving these dolmens is essential, as they are not just remnants of the past but vital pieces of heritage that reveal the ingenuity and worldview of India's ancient communities.

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