

Dolmens in India: Megalithic Monuments

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Abstract

Dolmen, a table like structure consisting of three or more upright stones supporting a large flat horizontal capstone, is one of various types of megalithic monuments found in various parts of India. As these structures hold cultural significance as tangible remnants of ancient civilizations and their burial customs, solike other archaeological sites, Dolmens require conservation efforts to protect them from natural degradation, vandalism and urbanization. The present review article is an attempt to provide the detailed information regarding various dimensions of Dolmens, with special reference to India, like its structure, material of construction, construction technique and form, purpose and function, distribution, relation with later architecture, living tradition and relation between past and present. The work is based on the secondary sources of the data and the description is illustrated through pencil sketches drawn by the author herself. The present study is crucial for students and other interested readers to understand the chronological, historical, cultural and social contexts of dolmen sites in India. It would also stimulate to make collaborative efforts between archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, local communities and government agencies essential for the preservation and study of these invaluable heritage sites.

Key Terms: Megalith, Monument, Dolmen, Sepulchral, Memorial, Porthole

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Introduction

Megalithic monuments are the structures of large and roughly dressed stones. These are erected as sepulchral monuments or as memorials. Megalithism is a worldwide phenomenon, as they are found from the shores of England to that of Japan. These monuments have fascinated the lay public and the archaeologist and antiquarian alike for ages because of their curious and bold appearance on the surface of the earth.

Megaliths: World Scenario

Almost throughout the old world, these ancient stone structures have been noticed. The areas of greatest abundance of megalithic monuments include the groups: the British Isles, western France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and the islands of the western Mediterranean; Scandinavia; North Africa; Crimea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East; the Iranian uplands; Japan, Myanmar and India, especially Peninsular India; and also, the islands of the South Pacific Ocean, particularly Easter Island.

Keane (1896) divided the worldwide megalithic structures into two categories: 1. Monolithic Type (Menhir, Alignment or Stone row avenue, Cycolith or Stone circle, Stantare, Trilithon, Orthostat, Stone ship, Statue and Gateway) and 2. Polyolithic Type (Dolmen, Taula, Cistvaen, Passage grave, Tumulus, Punden, Cairn, Cromlech, Kurgan, Nuraghi, Talayot, Sessi, Round tower, Marae and Ahu with Moai and Pukao). Thus, Keane included the Dolmen in polyolithic type of megaliths in his classification (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Dolmen from Caucasus, Russia

Megaliths: Indian Scenario

In India, megalithic tombs at Malabar, called as 'Pandoo Coolies' attracted the attention of the scholars in 1823 (Babington, 1823). From that time, many scholars took interest in this direction and thousands of monuments were excavated in the country for study purpose. Moorti (1994) claims 2000 sites in south India alone and around 100 megalithic sites in remaining part of the subcontinent. Except for the plains of Punjab, the Indo-Ganga divide, the Ganga basin, the deserts of Rajasthan and parts of northern Gujarat, megaliths are located practically all over India. However, they are concentrated in peninsular India, in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Maharashtra comes next, followed by Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, north-eastern Rajasthan, the Kashmir valley and Ladakh. The apparently bewildering varieties of typologies of the megaliths are distributed in most of the regions of the subcontinent. But endemism is also seen in the distribution of the various typologies. Thus, these megaliths

represent a widespread phenomenon. Its types and geographical significance vary from place to place. It is a tough task to know about the interrelationship between the areas and social customs. The beginning and end of this culture on the Indian soil is an unsolved problem.

After the studies of Pandoo Coolies at Malabar, hundreds of megalithic sites have been discovered in southern India in the decades that followed. Several of them have been excavated, studied and classified. H. Meadows Taylor's gave a classification in the description of his discoveries and investigations. However, he did not use the term megalith, but classified structures into Cromlechs, Kistvaens, Cairns, Barrows and Rock temples (Taylor, 1853). The man who made a 'scientific' attempt to define the megalithic varieties was V.D. Krishnaswami, although his terminology was confined to Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Krishnaswami, 1949). He had described the three types: 1. Types in Chingleput, Tamil Nadu (Dolmenoid cist and Cairn circle), 2. Types in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu (Cairn and Cist), 3. Types in Cochin, Kerala (a. In Eastern Mountainous Region - Dolmen, b. On Lateritic Plains - Rock-cut caves and Menhirs, and c. On Alluvial Sea-board - Megaliths of umbrella series and Urn burial). After, V.D. Krishnaswami, a number of scholars have attempted classification of the megalithic burials like Dikshith (1969), Sundara (1979), Moorti (1994, 2008) and Srivastava (2015, 2023). K.N. Dikshith (1969) classified Indian megaliths into three types on the basis of origin: 1. Imported types (Dolmen, Rock-cut cave, Menhir and Cist), 2. Indigenous types (Imbibed from contemporary cultures - Urn and extended burials, Topi-kallu and Kuda-kallu) and 3. Origin not established (Cairn and Cairn-circletumulus etc.) On the basis of certain characteristics and distribution, A. Sundara (1979) put all the types of megaliths into three groups: 1. Chamber tombs (Porthole chamber, Oblong chamber, Topikkal, Kotakkal and Rock-cut cave), 2. Unchambered graves (Pit-circle, Barrow, Menhir, Cairn stone circle, Terracotta sarcophagus burial and Urn burial) and 3. Monuments (Stone alignment figured). On the basis of nature of the structure, U.S. Moorti (1994, 2008) further reduces Sundara's megalithic classification into two basic categories: 1. Sepulchral Megalithic Monuments (Pit burial - 8 types, Chamber burial - 6 types and Legged and Un-legged urn burials - 7 types) and 2. Non-sepulchral Megalithic Monuments (Dolmen - chamber open on one side, Port-hole dolmen - a closed chamber, Menhir, Stone alignment, and Avenue). Srivastava (2015, 2023) broadly divided two categories of the structure of Indian megaliths: 1. Simple Megalithic Structure (Menhir, Alignment, Avenue, Cairn, Cairn circle, Hood stone, Multiple hood stone and Umbrella stone) and 2. Complex Megalithic Structure (Dolmens, Cists and Rock-cut caves). Besides, she explained some other related significant terms also as Pit burial, Urn burial, Chamber burial, Sarcophagus and Hero stone). Thus, from the beginning to present several classifications of Indian megaliths have been given by various scholars revealing megalithic varieties in India based on

origin, characteristic, distribution, nature and structure. All of them, describe a type – Dolmen, a table like structure, consisting of three or more upright stones supporting a large flat horizontal capstone, which was earlier called ‘cromlech’ by Taylor (1853). It is also described as a portal tomb and portal grave and is a type of single-chamber megalithic tomb.

Dolmen

The dolmen is constructed with mostly four orthostatic boulders or slabs and one cap stone. In this structure, the orthostats are arranged in such a way as to enclose a space or chamber beneath the capstone. Generally, the capstone rests on the orthostats is a single slab, but sometimes comprised of multiple slabs. Since this arrangement gives it a table like look, therefore, it has been designated as dolmen which loosely means a stone table. Several complex variants of dolmen are available. Dolmen structures are found mostly above or sometimes partially above the ground, with or without demarcated by the circle of stones. However, mostly the single dolmen is enclosed on the surface by a stone circle but there are cases where one circle encloses a number of dolmens which is called as multiple dolmens. The excavated dolmens have yielded the usual burial goods but there are examples of a few which have not any burial remains. A dolmen may be with or without port hole, a circular opening in the east wall. Thus, on the basis of this criterion, dolmens are of two major types: 1. Dolmen without opening (Figure 2) and 2. Dolmen with port hole (Figure 3). Some dolmen sites in India are Tindivanam, Chingleput, Pallavaram and Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu; Brahmagiri and Hirebenakal in Karnataka; Pimpalgaon in Maharashtra; Marayur in Kerala; and Palavoy and Muttalabanda in Andhrapradesh.



Figure2: Dolmen without Opening of Marayur, district Idukki, Kerala

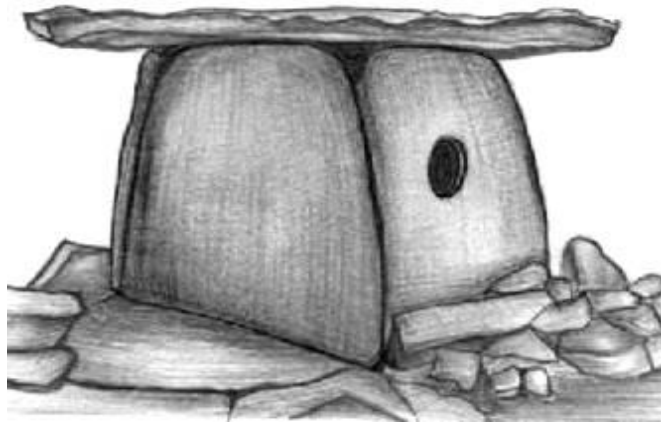


Figure3: Dolmen with Porthole at Hirebenakal, district Koppal, Karnataka

Materials of Construction

Regarding the raw materials of the dolmens, sandstone, granite and laterite are the principal rock material variously used for their construction. These materials of construction vary according to the availability depending on the geographical region. For example, Aihole group dolmens were made up from sandstone(Figure 4) while the dolmens of Hirebenakal were constructed by granite (Figure 5). While, at Marayur, there are some dolmens which have a quadrangle scooped out in laterite. These are lined on the sides with granite slabs and are also covered with granite cap stones (Figure 6).

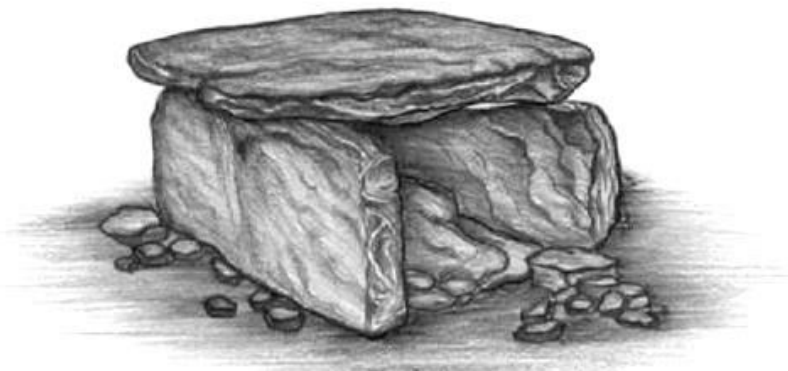


Figure4: Dolmen from Aihole, district Bagalkot, Karnataka

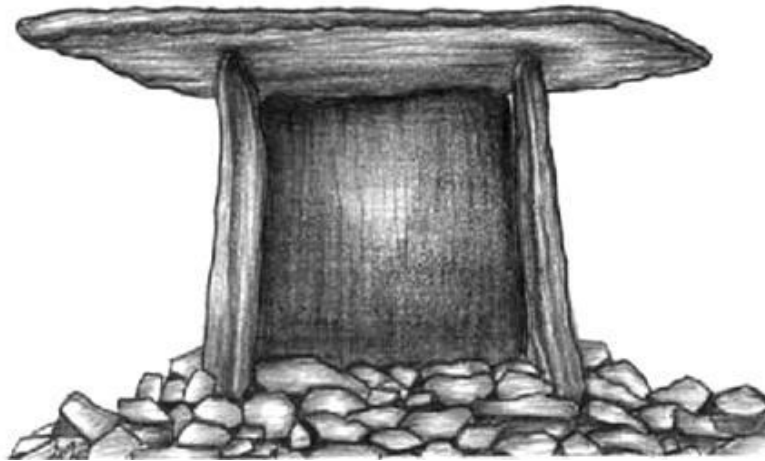


Figure5: Dolmen from Hirebenakal, district Koppal, Karnataka

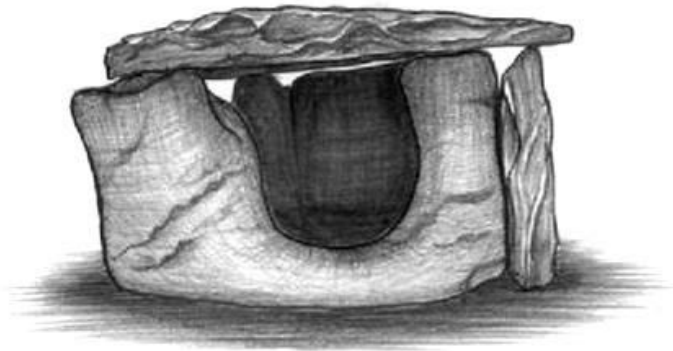


Figure6: Dolmens of Marayur, districtIdukki, Kerala

Construction Techniques and Form

Dolmens are typically constructed using large stone slabs, with the horizontal capstone resting on upright stones, while the size and arrangement of dolmens can vary widely, from small single-chambered structures to larger and more complex multi-chambered ones.

The construction techniques employed reflect the engineering capabilities and cultural practices of the communities that built them. The skill in using the stones in construction of dolmens, varies from site to site, suggests a chronological sequence in techniques. For example, the slabs of the Hirebenakal group dolmens are thin, well-cut to the required size with straight edges. These are unlike the rough, thick and large-sized slabs of the Aihole group, the edges of which are sometimes crudely dressed. The device of interlocking the stone slab orthostats to prevent inward collapse is found at Hirebenakal but not at Aihole. It suggests that the Aihole was the earlier site in comparison to Hirebenakal.

Sometimes, different typologies within a single site seem to indicate that the site was in use over a long period of time and that techniques evolved in that span of time. For instance, Hirebenakal is reported to be the largest necropolis among the megalithic monuments of India. It is located in Karnataka. The monuments at this site were built over more than 1,000 years. This time span includes south Indian Iron Age (1200 - 500 B.C.) and Early Historic (500 B.C. - 500 AD) periods. Here, the typology of dolmen with interlocking orthostats at Hirebenakal indicate an evolutionary sequence. At this site, dolmens are located on a rocky range of seven hillocks. However, their structures are varied in shape and size and are primarily block-supported and slab-supported dolmen forms. From a higher vantage point, the slab-supported granite dolmens look like a field of giant mushrooms with their tops lopped off, because dolmens forming three sided chambers with capstones are in clusters (Figure 7). The small dolmens are of 50-100 centimetres (20-39 inches) height (Figure 8); while, the larger ones measure up to 3 metres (9.8 feet) height in which thin stone slabs are interlocked perfectly without any cement or mortar (Figure 9). The grand and tall dolmens are in a dense clump. The dolmens with round portholes flank both sides of the main street.



Figure7: The Slab-Supported Dolmens at Hirebenakal on Moryar Gudda Hill, Gangavathi Taluk, district Koppal, Karnataka



Figure8: Smaller Dolmen at Hirebenakal**Figure9: Larger Dolmen at Hirebenakal**

Purpose and Function

The exact purpose of dolmens in India is not universally agreed upon and their function likely varied across different cultures and time periods. However, several theories exist regarding their significance: 1. Burial Sites - Many dolmens are associated with burials, serving as tombs or funerary monuments for ancient communities. Archaeological excavations at dolmen sites often uncover human remains, grave goods and funerary artifacts, supporting the burial theory; 2. Ritual and Ceremonial Use - Dolmens may have served as sites for rituals, ceremonies or religious practices. The architectural significance and alignment of dolmens with celestial events suggest a possible religious or ceremonial function; 3. Territorial Markers - Some dolmens might have functioned as territorial markers or boundary stones, signifying land ownership or marking significant locations within a landscape; and 4. Social Status and Commemoration: The construction of dolmens could have been a means for elites to assert their social status or commemorate individuals of importance within a community.

Distribution

The distribution of dolmen sites in India is not evenly spread and varies across different regions. Some key areas where dolmen sites are found are: 1. Southern India - South India particularly the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, has a significant concentration of dolmen sites. Tamil Nadu, in particular, has a

large number of dolmens; 2. Western India - Maharashtra is another state where dolmen sites are found, especially in regions like Pune, Satara and Raigad districts. Some dolmens are also found in Gujarat; 3. Eastern India: Dolmens have been reported in parts of eastern India, including Odisha, West Bengal and Assam. These structures are relatively fewer compared to southern and western regions; 4. Central India: Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh also have dolmen sites, although they are not as numerous as in southern India; and 5. Northern India: Dolmen sites are relatively rare in northern India, but there have been some reports of such structures in states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. In fact, the distribution of dolmen sites in India may not be exhaustive due to factors such as limited archaeological surveys, changes in land use and natural erosion. Additionally, the significance and purpose of dolmens in different regions may vary based on local cultural practices and historical contexts.

Relation with Later Architecture

The sepulchral and other architecture of the megalithic period had enormous bearing in the subsequent development of indigenous architecture in several regions. Kramrisch (1976) has discussed the architectural origins of the Hindu temple. According to her, various phases of stone temples, which are of dolmen type, are found in south India. Of these, some are of roughly hewn stones, with a stone *linga* in the interior; while, others are of carefully dressed slabs of stone accurately fitted at the angles, with their walls resting upon a plinth. Kramrisch argues an origin in the dolmen for the square plan of the *garbhagriha*. In this regard, she quotes the cubical form of the flat-roofed sanctuary of the earliest Gupta Age temples, which are built of large and well-cut stones. In these temples, the stones are dressed to level beds and placed one upon the other without any mortar or cementing substance. Vahia, et al. (2010), while discussing the growth of the temples in India, said that the hero stones surrounded by large stone plates in the style of dolmens are found (Figure 10). In these structures, the idol inside is being worshipped. The hero images eventually get replaced by the images of Gods and structures resembling modern day temples can be seen.



Figure10: Hero Stone, Kodumudi, district Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu**Living Megalithic Tradition and Dolmen**

'Megalithism' may be considered as a living tradition in India, as the practice of erecting megaliths in honour of dead is still found among the tribals living in north-eastern, eastern, central and south India like the Khasis and the Garos and the Syntengs of Meghalaya, the Tiwas and the Karbis of Assam, the Nagas of Manipur and Nagaland, the Hos and the Mundas of Chota Nagpur, the Gonds and the Morias of Chattisgarh, the Kurumbas of Kerala, the Bondos and the Gadabas of Orissa and the Savaras of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa.

Dolmen structures are erected by these Indian tribals with various religious beliefs and practices. The Khasis erect horizontal table stones (dolmens) in accordance with their traditional religion (Figure 11). The Karbis erect dolmens in honour of their deceased. The Mundas bury bone remains of the members of a family in graves under the dolmen, consisting of a cover-slab supported by smaller stones (Figure 12). The Gonds also erect dolmens. The Bondos and the Gadabas erect a table-like cist above ground (dolmen), often of small size, as the seat of the dead (Figure 13). In Kurumba, after the secondary burial, bones are put inside a dolmen like structure (Figure 14). They believe that the soul remains alive after death and it hovers around the hamlet to cause harm to the members of the entire hamlet. Hence it is essential to provide a permanent abode for the spirits.

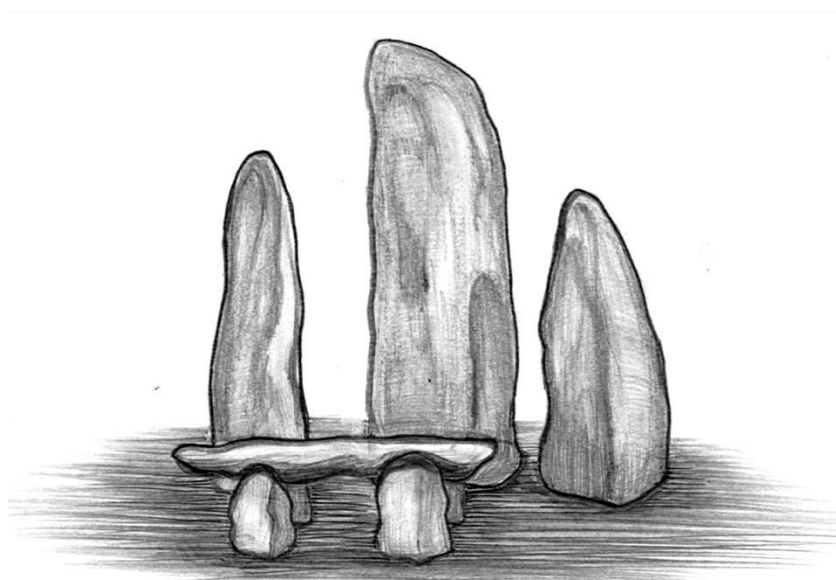


Figure 11: Khasi Dolmen in front of Menhirs

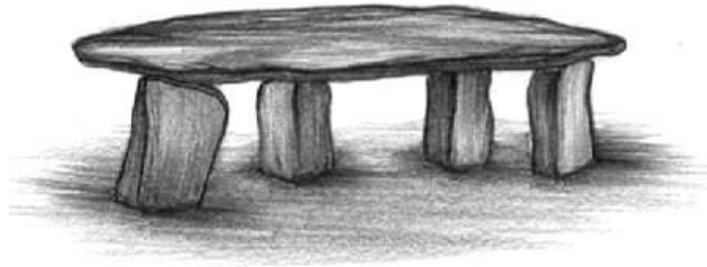


Figure12: Munda Dolmen

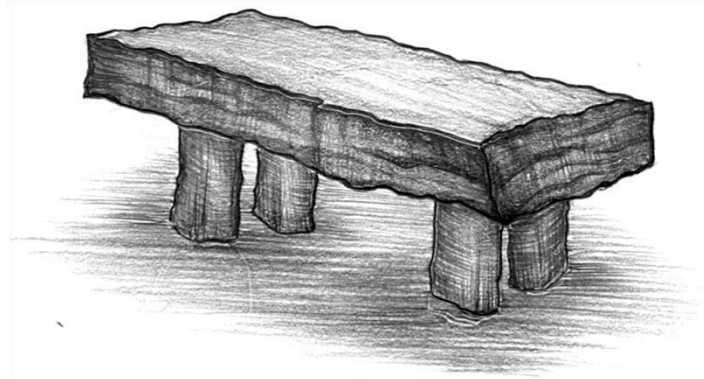


Figure13: Bondo Dolmen

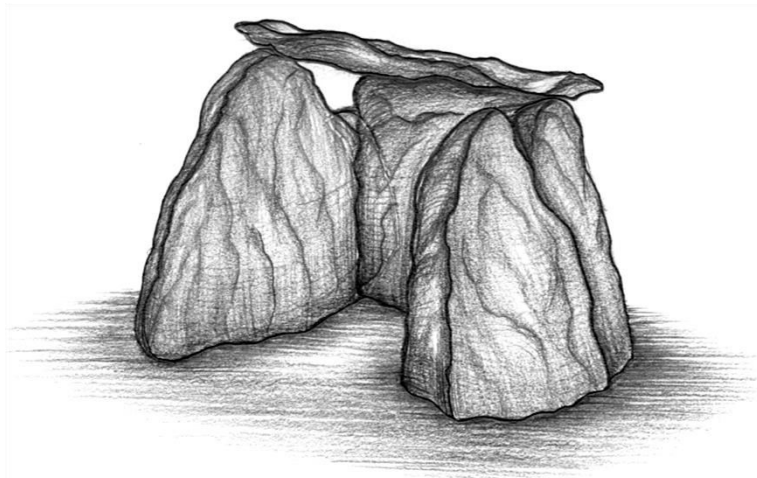


Figure14: Kurumba Dolmen

Relation between Past and Present

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.

Fürer-Haimendorf (1945) reported that there is no any close resemblance between the seen monuments of the Nagas, Khasis, Gadabas, Bondos and Gonds, and prehistoric

dolmens and cromlechs of Hyderabad. He said that there are some differences observed: 1. The megaliths of the tribal folks of today are, with comparatively few exceptions, memorials unconnected with graves or burning-grounds. Those of prehistoric times are in the majority graves or closely associated with graves; 2. The distinctive 'port-hole' opening, which is found to characterize many of the dolmens of southern India, does not occur among any of the tribes of middle India like Munda and Ho who bury their dead in megalithic graves; and 3. The time-factor is another consideration to which much further attention is needed. The south Indian megaliths seem to have come to an end in the 1st century A.D. While, megaliths of middle India and the north-east represent a living tradition of entirely unknown antiquity. Thus, on the basis of these differences, he denied any genetic affiliation between the megaliths of the tribal areas, and the ancient tombs of the Deccan and peninsular India. He argued that they belong essentially to south-eastern Asia.

Later on, an archaeologist J.R. McIntosh (1985) has given an important re-assessment of the dating of south Indian megaliths, written under the supervision of F.R. Allchin. In his study, he does not mention any problem of the possible connections of the Iron Age megalithic cultures of the Deccan with the present-day megalithic complexes of Bastar-Orissa and north-eastern India. Therefore, he relates these traditions.

Conclusion

Dolmens, megalithic structures found in various parts of India, hold cultural significance as tangible remnants of ancient civilizations and their burial customs. They offer insights into the social organization, belief systems, and technological capabilities of those societies. Additionally, dolmens are often associated with local folklore, legends, and oral traditions, further enriching their cultural importance. In India, dolmens represent a fascinating aspect of the country's ancient history and cultural heritage. They stand as enduring symbols of human ingenuity, craftsmanship and spirituality, inviting further exploration and interpretation by scholars and enthusiasts alike. Thus, like other archaeological sites, dolmens require conservation efforts to protect them from natural degradation, vandalism and urbanization. Comprehensive archaeological research, including excavation, survey and documentation, is crucial for understanding the chronological, cultural, and social contexts of dolmen sites in India. Collaborative efforts between archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, local communities and government agencies are essential for the preservation and study of these invaluable heritage sites.

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