

**The Status of Preservation of Prehistoric sites:
A Study on the Megalithic Structures of Marayur Village**

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Abstract

This Research paper aims at understanding the status of preservation of Megalithic structures, particularly on dolmens and the strategies adopted for the preservation. It also extends towards finding the reasons for the present condition of these dolmens. The paper acknowledges the politics of these sites by comparing its status or privilege with other contemporary prehistoric sites. It also extends its aim to locate the significance of the dolmens of Marayur village in the larger framework of archaeology of Kerala. Paper revolves around the idea of behaviors of local people, institutional behaviorism, the natural behavior of the environment and its effect on the status of these prehistoric structures.

Keywords: Preservation, Megalithic structures, Dolmens, Institutional behavior, prehistoric period.

Introduction :

Archaeological evidence is considered as a way to reconnect with the past. It will lead us to the chain of discoveries and developments that happened through the course of time. Reconstruction of the past will result in the discovery of an entire culture or civilization, at the same time minute mistakes or unscientific way of approach will lead to destruction to the entire group of evidence which is not renewable at any point of time. Archaeology is that branch of study which looks into the available remaining bits and pieces of information and joins together as a jigsaw puzzle. This particular paper analyses the existing policies related to archaeological preservation strategies and the suggestions about the amendments needed to make the strategies better. It also deals with the other reasons which act as hindrance towards preservation of prehistoric sites and the suggestions to solve those problems.

Pre- history can be divided into Stone Age, Bronze Age, copper age and Iron Age. Each period has its own significance and differences. It is based on the development in the lifestyle and progress in the economy and society, these divisions have been made. The evidence and artifacts of prehistoric sites are very important and they should be protected in order to understand the significance the past carries. From further study about the

prehistoric sites, researchers can obtain evidence of cultural practices, understanding social behavior, developments undergone from one period to the another etc. Under this broad area of study, the researcher would be focusing upon the preservation strategies adopted by the authorities and the Government in order to protect and preserve the archaeological sites and prehistoric monuments. There are many legal sides to the preservation angle when it comes to archaeological sites and also provisions like 'Ancient monument act of 1905' supports the idea of scientific preservation to all historically significant sites. Article 49 of part IV of the Constitution, dealing with the directive principles of state policy, places an obligation upon the state on this same issue of preservation of archaeological sites (Rao, 1980).

The primary area this paper would look upon will be Marayur village and its megalithic structures. Marayur is a village situated in the Idukki district of Kerala which is rich in megalithic structures from the late Neolithic period as well as starting of the Iron Age (Das 18). Megalithic is the period in which slab like stones were introduced in order to make the living easier. This was used in all of their constructions. People in prehistoric time have belief in life after death. This idea can be backed up with the presence of burial structures especially of dolmens throughout the village. There are also instances in which artifacts like pottery, copper jewelry, and tools were obtained. And also, as these dolmens are constructed in the very early periods of human kind, it still survives. This shows their construction skills especially in case of dolmens, as the slab cut rocks are very difficult to make. As Marayur being a village on top of hill, there is availability of stone or boulders to fulfill their needs. Also in this village, the dolmens are scattered all throughout the entirety of five villages. So it is difficult to find out all of those and understand the present situation of all of them. This paper help in finding out the loopholes in the policy making of the Government, especially in the field of archaeological preservation of Marayur village. It also has wider scope of making people aware about the significance of these megalithic structures and the need for the preservation of the same. This paper

will also help in finding out the reasons for the present and status of Megalithic structures of Marayur. Considering the issues mentioned in this paper, this issue might be addressed by The Archaeological Survey of India as there are only limited papers on this issue till date. It also sets a base for further studies by other researchers.

Research Objectives

- To find the degree of effectiveness in the preservation strategies adopted by the authorities in the Marayur village
- What are the barriers which come in between the protection of these structures and the possible suggestions to the same?

Politics of Preservation of Marayur Archaeological Site

Archaeology of micro-regions is a field which is often overlooked by the authorities when it comes to Kerala. Kerala marks its significance in the same field by the presence of early pre-historic monuments such as menhirs, dolmens, rock cut chambers, cave paintings, artifacts etc. Lack of trained researchers in the field can be considered as a reason behind this. The presence of Paleolithic artifacts is still debated but microliths of the Mesolithic period shows the abundance in cultural history which Kerala carries. The Iron Age megalithic culture is the most advocated discussion when it comes to history and archaeology of Kerala. More than hundred megalithic sites have been reported all over Kerala till date (Sankalia, 1984).

Marayur is a village situated in north-eastern part of Devikulam Taluk in Idukki district of Kerala and it is one of the villages which constitutes the Anjunad valley which is in the western slopes of Western Ghats. Anjunad valley means the valley of five lands in Tamil and other Dravidian languages which are Kanthalloor, Keezhanthur, Karayur, Marayur and Kottakudi. The word Mara in Malayalam means hidden and Ur means village. So, it together means a 'hidden village behind mountains' that is Marayur. (Das, 2013).

Marayur has its own significance in the area of archaeological studies by its presence of prehistoric burial sites particularly the dolmens and cave paintings which is almost 5,000 years old as confirmed by the Archaeological Survey of India (Raman). Dolmens are made up of megalithic stones which are slab-like structures on rocks which are mostly found in the megalithic period. The Greek word '*Mega*' meaning large and '*liths*' meaning stones together constitutes the meaning of megalithic age. Dolmens consist of four stone slabs facing each other and a capstone covering its roof. These megaliths are generally considered to come into the conclusion about the exact period of its origin with the help of carbon dating methods. In Malayalam, Dolmens are known as Muniyaras meaning 'Abode of sages'. This comes from the belief that there were sages who used to come here and use these burial structures as a secluded place from people to meditate with ultimate concentration and also that can also be connected and interpreted with the advent of Buddhism also. In support of this Buddha idol was found in nearby areas. Because of the lack of studies conducted in this field, the debates over the origin of dolmens are still going on. Tamil Sangam Literature which is considered as the watershed between prehistoric and historic era in South India states the importance of burial systems and also the post-cremational type burial acts as a memorial to the deceased. The artefacts obtained from some of the dolmens supports these arguments.

The burial structures found in the area of Marayur village are post-cremation type

secondary burials made up of laterite minerals. Secondary burials are those burials sites or structures which came into existence after the death as a monument or memorial. Also, there are two types of dolmens considering their occurrence that are over ground and subterranean.

There are around fifty dolmens found in and around the village of Marayur. It is scattered all over the place even inside the deep forest nearby that is the present day Chinnar WildLife Sanctuary near Alampetty settlement. Tribal settlements of these regions such as Mannan, Muthuvan, Paliyan, Malarayan, Oorali, Ulladan and Hill Pulaya are well familiar with the dolmens located in the interior parts of the forest (Kumar, 2018).

Even though the Archaeological Survey of India has put forward some efforts to study more about the significance and artifacts of this area, it is under Marayur Grama Panchayath. There are records suggesting that a group from the department would visit every year and would submit a report to ASI and Government of Kerala regarding the present status of each of those structures, but there hasn't been much success to that as well.

There exists a difference between a monument and an archaeological site. This was made clear by the Government of Kerala during the case of Joseph Pothen versus State of Kerala (Rao, 1980). The structures which are surviving from a former period are called the monuments whereas archaeological sites will have the scope to analyze the study of life and culture of ancient people. Therefore, Marayur village or the whole of Anjunad valley should be considered as an archaeological site and also there exists a provision of making an archaeological site with national importance into a protected area thus ensuring the protection and conservation of the same.

Marayur village is settled in the foothills of Western Ghats, it gets an average rainfall every year and most part of the village is covered by tropical forest which constitutes a variety of flora and fauna. But during the 1790s Europeans visited these hills. They made a trigonometric survey of the area. The British troops who came into the deep forest for Shikar (hunting) understood the commercial potentiality these hills carry. Small plots of land were bought by these holders and finally in 1895, Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company Limited (KDHP) started. Along with the course of time, the small parcels of land were turned into tea or coffee plantations. Thus, the conversion of forests in the Tea plantation Period (1790-1940) also influenced the reduction and destruction of the number of dolmens in Marayur village (Kumar, 2018).

The demographic status of Marayur village is very different from that of Idukki district as a whole. Marayur village sharing its border with Tamil Nadu has a mixed population of Tamilians and Malayalis. Most of these areas are rural and these people does not have any access to educational institutions. As most of the people are illiterate, the

significance of these structures or archaeological sites would remain unknown to them. The population of Marayur village has increased dramatically in recent years. This is because of the tourist attraction to this place and the increased scope for trade and commerce. But the land availability for habitation is less in this area therefore people began to convert parcels of land into houses.

Even the common people have no idea how to preserve these existing structures. They are using the dolmens as a place to do all illegal activities. Using cigarettes, drinking alcohol, drugs and dumping plastics inside those dolmens are very common because it is easily accessible, open to all and secluded. This leads to the destruction of the same and also will affect the balance of the ecology as a whole. There are also a few dolmens which are fenced by the authorities with steel fences which are found broken using sharp blades and entered inside the dolmens. This exactly shows how unaware the locals of the village are about the significance of these and the need for preservation of the same.



Fig.1 The cut down fences around a complex of dolmens (Researcher itself)



Fig.2 The iron rod which connected the fences were also cut off (Researcher itself)



Fig.3 Inside picture of a dolmen which is full of plastic covers (Researcher itself)



Fig.4 ‘Don’t destroy the monument’ written on the monument itself (Researcher)

There exists a forest trekking system which also focuses on the significance of dolmens by the forest department. The dolmens in the trekking site were different from others. It is all almost destroyed and it is comparatively small in size. Unlike other burial sites, these are seen close to each other like a family burial. But as it is located deep into the forest, attack from animals will be a common danger.

Climatic changes can also be another reason behind the destruction of these dolmens. As the forests were acquired by individual holders and plantation companies, the ecological balance of this area would have lost and might result in fluctuations in the existing climate. The heavy rainfall or heavy snowfall could make these rocks break as the place is located in a higher altitude. The megalithic stone slabs are mostly made up of laterite rocks and they are prone to corrosion and breaking. The algae infection which affects these rocks could damage the structure even though it takes a long period of time. Also, the growth of plants inside the dolmens also causes problems to the existence itself. The roots of these

plants go deeper to the underground soil restricting the rocks to cement itself to the soil, thus it will result in coming out of the whole structure.



Fig.5 Algae on the rock which will result in destruction (Researcher itself)

The presence of prehistoric paintings in this area also increases the significance of Marayur village. Those cave paintings are found inside the deep forests and now it is a tourist spot. It takes hours of trekking through forest to reach those destinations. Even those cave paintings are not protected or scientifically studied till date. The weak fence existing was only constructed six months before and it is very fragile even though it is located in deep forest where leopards and elephants are common. The security system is also not efficient in this region in spite of being a flourishing tourist spot and more than half of the area covered with thick forest consisting of undulating topography and wild animals.

There are many ways to solve this issue of improper preservation strategies taken by the authorities in this particular archaeological site of Marayur village. The departments could make a committee to study about the present status of these structures and could submit a report based on that. This report would be beneficial for the authorities to take actions against the activities which results in the destruction of pre- historic dolmens of this area. An awareness campaign or classes should be given to all the people in the village in order to understand the historical significance as well as the need for its protection.

More strict laws and regulations should be put forward by the authorities in order to restrict people from committing activities which cause destruction to the sites. Tourists can be allowed to the site and could levy entrance fees from people which can also be used as a funding for establishing a proper preservation system. But the structures should be protected with fences and people should not be allowed to enter or touch it. Jeeps and other transport services which are carrying tourists to the site can continue doing its work, but it should not come near the dolmens because they might cause disturbances and destruction to the same. Professional and well-trained team should be assigned in this area which is

also rich in prehistoric cave paintings. The authorities should also make the people aware about the legal aspects of destruction of prehistoric sites. The Panchayath authorities should be more responsible on this issue and should allocate funds for preserving those structures. Panchayath should take assistance from experts who work in the field of archaeology and should document the exact number of dolmens present in this village currently. Without the documentation of number of the dolmens existing we will not understand whether the dolmens are being destroying in the coming future.

The prehistoric dolmens should be fenced properly in order to protect it from the attack of wild animals like elephants. Also, it should not be electric fences which are against the stable environment of the wild animals. Scribbling on these rock shelters, littering inside and the surrounding area, using the megalithic slabs for other purposes like construction of houses or walls should be strictly restricted and strict laws should be implemented for this matter. Also extended studies should be carried out to protect the structures from natural elements like algae and bacteria. That should be carried out by experts and environmentalists. Also, many existing dolmens in the village, Marayur are on the verge of destruction. It is necessary to preserve or recreate in a better way in such a way that it will not affect the natural system of archaeological sites. And also, the artifacts obtained from these areas should be studied by experts and that could give concrete ideas about the origin and existence of dolmens.

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