

Historic Importance Of Iron Age Culture In Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Iron Age of Tamil Nadu is always identified with three important cultural components namely iron, black and red ware and the megalithic monuments. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, the Iron Age succeeds Neolithic culture in northern Tamil Nadu and in southern Tamil Nadu it succeeds Microlithic culture. The introduction of iron, black-and-red ware and megalithic monuments are not identified in clear terms. As these three cultural items are observed in all the excavated sites, it is generally assumed that the Iron Age synchronizes with the megalithic culture in Tamil Nadu. The introduction of iron, black and red ware and sepulchral monuments are considered a coeval cultural infusion. The Iron Age overlaps with Chalcolithic culture in northern India whereas in South India it overlaps either with Neolithic or Microlithic culture. The excavations conducted at three different locations provided new evidence on mortuary practice. Nearly 265 Iron Age sites had been noticed in this entire valley and nearly 80 sites have been identified in the present exploration. The study of excavated material unearthed in Tamil Nadu would give a clue to understanding the cultural link that existed in this region. Keeping the cultural material unearthed in these excavated sites, standing apart in all aspects, it is very difficult to discern any constructive cultural information other than highlighting the existence of the human settlement of different kinds. The cultural term 'megalithic' is not only a misnomer but also stands as an inadequate term to define comprehensive and complex sepulchral monuments that are found in different ecological zones. The human settlements in the other two zone namely the upper and lower began with Iron Age. The archaeological findings made in the field and the limited excavations conducted in Tamil Nadu indicate that there is no cultural gap between the Iron Age and the Early Historic period.

Key Words *Iron Age - Megalithic monuments – Components - Microlithic culture – Chalcolithic - Cultural infusion – Neolithic – Constructive - Ecological zones – Archaeological - Historic period - Human settlement*

Introduction

The Iron Age of Tamil Nadu is always identified with three important cultural components namely iron, black and red ware and the megalithic monuments. The introduction of iron, black and red ware and sepulchral monuments are considered a coeval cultural infusion. Now, it is increasingly realized that these three important cultural elements are not introduced as a cultural package rather each element has its origin and diffusion. Though the picture does not emerge with utmost clarity, the available evidence forced us to look into the material evidence as fresh due to conflicting chronological schemes. The material evidence gathered in explorations and excavations suggests that each ecological zone culturally and sequentially differs. If one observes the stratigraphical context of the culture

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that precedes and succeeds the Iron Age, one may realize the nature of the subsistence pattern that existed in these cultural phases. For instance, the Iron Age overlaps with Chalcolithic culture in northern India whereas in South India it overlaps either with Neolithic or Microlithic culture.

Recent Excavations:

The recent excavations conducted in the habitation-cum-burial sites like Kodumanal, Mayiladumapara, Thandikudi and Porunthal provided a better picture of this aspect. Nearly 62 trenches opened in the habitation mound and 17 graves excavated in the graveyard at Kodumanal, an Early-Historic habitation-cum-burial site, provided a different depiction of the nature of cultural material. A Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherd reading *visaki*, carnelian and agate beads, russet coated painted ware and black-and-red ware recovered from the burial are similar to the one found in habitation. However, the material unearthed in the habitation provided much more evidence than the graves. For instance, the evidence of the existence of the industries like iron and steel industry, copper industry, gemstone industry, textile industry, conch-shell industry and more than a thousand graffiti marks and more than 500 Tamil Brahmi inscribed potsherds demonstrated various dimensions of the Early Historic society. Thus, the material unearthed in habitation cuttings provided a panoramic view of the society that followed megalithism. Recently excavated sites like Thandikudi and Porunthal also provided similar evidence. The ten graves excavated at Thandikudi differ structurally and chronologically from one another. The excavations conducted at three different locations provided new evidence on mortuary practice. Nearly 265 Iron Age sites had been noticed in this entire valley and nearly 80 sites have been identified in the present exploration. There is an observable distributional pattern. Urns were placed in a pit surrounded by stone circles or cairn circles in Theni, Andipatti, Nilakkottai and Usilampatti taluks in upper Vaigai river valley. In mid-Vaigai river valley, particularly in the taluks of Manamadurai, Sivagangai and Madurai, the stone circles are built of laterite. Otherwise, majority of the sites yielded urns placed in a pit covered with soil.

Excavated Iron Age Sites

There were nine excavated sites in the study area and each having distinct cultural phases. The site S. Pappinayakkanpatti, T.Kallupatti, Tuvariman and Tirunelveli met with a microlithic phase followed by an Iron Age phase whereas Paravai, Anuppanadi, Kovalanpottal and Keezhadi met with Iron Age phase and continued with Early Historic phase. The site Alagankulam witnessed a much developed Early Historic phase with intensive trans-oceanic cultural and commercial contacts. The site Periyapattinam is exclusive to medieval ports providing altogether different ceramic assemblage. The study of excavated material unearthed in Tamil Nadu would give a clue to understanding the cultural link that existed in this region. Keeping the cultural material unearthed in these excavated sites, standing apart in all aspects, it is very difficult to discern any constructive cultural information other than highlighting the existence of the human settlement of different kinds. Future explorations followed by selective but objective-oriented excavations alone could give a better picture of the cultural transformation or cultural process involved in the formation of settlements in this region.

Neolithic Culture

As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, the Iron Age succeeds Neolithic culture in northern Tamil Nadu and in southern Tamil Nadu it succeeds Microlithic culture. The introduction of iron, black-and-red ware and megalithic monuments are not identified in clear terms. As these three cultural items are observed in all the excavated sites, it is generally assumed that the Iron Age synchronizes with the megalithic culture in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds collected from cist burials at Kodumanal and Porunthal, urn burial at Marunkur and from a disturbed stone circle at Virapandipudur points to the erection of megalithic monuments in Early Historic times. Thus, the megalithic monuments reported in explorations could either be of Iron Age or Early Historic. Thus, one cannot

label a site as Iron Age based on the mere presence of huge sepulchral monuments. Irrespective of these complex issues, the Iron Age culture of Tamil Nadu is considered one of the important areas of study.

Therefore, the cultural term 'megalithic' is not only a misnomer but also stands as an inadequate term to define comprehensive and complex sepulchral monuments that are found in different ecological zones. In every society, the disposal of the dead is one of the important rituals and one can observe this ritual from the time of the Neolithic period. Only the method of disposal and the expression of their belief have transformed over time due to cultural, social and economic factors. The survival of these sepulchral monuments for more than a thousand years witnessed an evolution in terms of the erection of monuments and in perfuming the rituals. It is highly difficult to place all the monuments in a single time bracket. The surface feature of the majority of the monuments is the same as the cairn circle, stone circle and dolmen. The field observations did not yield many pieces of evidence to understand the change in their material life, ritual and the construction of monuments due to the hidden nature of the graves. The limited excavations suggest that the graves do express a certain level of homogenous cultural traits like black-and-red ware and iron objects. But, there is a greater amount of variation in the erection of these monuments within a region due to ecological differences and in some cases within a site as one observed at Thandikuḍi, Porunthal and Koḍumanal. Likewise, the artifacts and features unearthed in the habitation differ from the graves due to the nature of the ritual performed in graves.

Iron Objects

Iron objects have been found both from the habitation as well as graves. Iron is used to produce weapons of different shapes and different purposes of tools for agricultural activities. The varieties of iron objects help us for understanding the aspects of the economy and way of life of Iron Age people. Iron is considered a valuable material in society. The range of identical tool types, repeated many times, at sites as far apart must testify to the diffusion of a fairly tightly join group of ironworkers. A variety of iron objects ranging from chisels or adzes, knives, daggers, swords, arrowheads, and spearheads and some of the objects were reported in the Vaigai river valley. Three hatchets, an oval elliptic ring, a chisel of a broken knife, two triangular heads of a weapon, sword, flat piece, knife and blade, are some of the iron objects recovered from the excavated sites.

A trident was noticed at Adichchanallur. The horse bits and stirrup were reported in the site of Adichchanallur, Kodumanal, Porunthal, Sanur, Amaravathi, etc. Iron swords collected from the Iron Age burial site at Telunkanur met with high carbon steel contents. Other iron objects including bells, nails, small cylindrical boxes and bangles were recovered from the excavated sites. The evidence of iron production sites was noticed at some the places like Nattapurakki, Andakkudi, Athikarai, Ilaiyankudi, Tirunelveli and Kalkulam. The iron furnace was noticed at Nattapurakki, Kottarpatti and Putuppatti. The evidence of furnaces, tuyeres and iron slag demonstrate the production of iron. The iron objects collected from the habitation are mostly agricultural implements like hoes, sickles and knives and tools of domestic use like rings, nails, knives, hooks, spoons, arrowheads, thin rods, beads and spindle-whorls. The iron objects recovered from the graves are mostly weapons indicating they were ritualistic. The objects from the habitation show wear and tear and are mostly worn out due to frequent usage. In the case of grave tools, they are very fresh. The swords generally had a mid-rib. Most of the iron production centers are observed in the lateritic mid and lower Vaigai river valley.

Ornaments and Other Objects

There are several objects collected from the graves and habitation of the Iron Age and Early historic sites in Tamil Nadu. It is ranging from terracotta to gold ornaments. They are beads, rings, bangles, diadems of various metals, ear ornaments, etc. The beads are made on different materials like terracotta, agate, feldspar, quartz, jasper, ivory, silver, copper, gold, glass and paste. In one of the excavated sites Paravai which is located in the Vaigai river valley, a large number of etched carnelian beads, a few white crystals and some greenish

stone beads were reported. The bangles were usually cut and carved out of shell and gold, but the terracotta or copper bangles rarely found in the excavation. Rings were made of iron, copper and terracotta. The diadems were found in the urn burials at Adichchanallur. Generally, diadems were mostly of gold but few of them were made in bronze and given a gold coating. The other objects yielded in the habitation sites are terracotta toys, spindle whorls, hopscotch, gamesman, stone balls, etc. At Alagankulam, the copper rings, conch and glass bangles, beads of semi-precious stone, glass, and shell paste varieties were collected from the excavation. Some of the conch bangle pieces are having deep grooves. These grooves were likely fitted with gold strings. The antiquities like beads made of glass, pearl and terracotta and terracotta figurines were collected from the recent excavation at Keezhaḍi.

Iron Age Monuments

Nearly 340 archaeological sites have been reported in the study area. Of which nearly 247 sites are associated with graves. Among the Iron Age burials, urn burials predominate with 76.92%. If one considers the urns that were placed inside the chamber tombs, then the percentage of the urn burial site would rise to 93.97%. Thus, one may suggest that the entire Vaigai river valley experienced urn burials. Urns were placed in a pit enclosed with a cairn circle or stone circle in the upper Vaigai river valley, particularly in Kambam valley. This too is found in a limited manner. Otherwise, the majority of urn burials are placed in a pit covered with soil. Only a few cist burials are noticed in the Kambam valley again containing an urn as an interment. Besides, dolmens are noticed on the top of the hill concentrated in the high altitudes of Western Ghats. Slab circles and menhirs are observed in a few sites mostly concentrated in the upper part of the Vaigai river valley and very few sites are found in the lower part. Keeping these factors in mind, the explored and excavated sites of the Vaigai river valley have been studied. The broad view on the structural analysis of the megalithic monuments and its implication in understanding the pre-Early Historic period is explained here to understand the archaeological situations in the Vaigai river valley. Here the term megalithic monuments denote the graves, both found in Iron Age as well as in Early Historic. The graves without the use of boulders or slabs placed directly in pits have been excluded and it has been dealt with separately. The major megalithic monuments are dolmens, cists, stone circles and menhirs.

Dolmens

The dolmens were noticed on the hilltop mostly concentrated in the Western Ghats. In South India this type of burial is noticed at Sinkukantam and Suryanelli of Idukki District and Alampatti, Ma.Kalluppatti, Maṅalattu-kuḍicai, Cinnur, Aracaḍi and Komputukki of Theni region. Some of the dolmens are identical to the ones found in Kodaikkanal and Pazhani hills, which are not far from the above sites. Generally, dolmens are found in groups. The occurrence of dolmens varies from six to nine. This type of burial are stand on the only rocky surface. They are all without exception, surrounded by built-in courses ranging from one to eight. The shapes of the dolmen are rectangular box-like structures. Normally six slabs are found in the chambers, one slab kept in a horizontal position but directly on the bedrock serving as a floor slab. Around the base slab, three or four vertical orthostats are placed in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction to form a box. The capstone is being supported by these orthostats. Normally the top edge of these standing orthostats had an uneven surface. In rare cases, the side wall of the chamber is built of two orthostats placed one above the other. The enclosure wall is a special feature of the dolmens. These walls are made up of rough blocks. The shapes of the blocks with varied dimensions, square or triangular are found. The stone blocks are commonly used as a cheap substitute for better cementing material. Normally the enclosure walls are either circular or rectangular form and the trapezium form is rare. The enclosure walls are built up to the level of the capstone. The average length of the wall varies from 6 to 11 mts on the longer sides and the height is more than 180 cm.

Conclusion

The human settlements in the other two zone namely the upper and lower began with Iron Age. There is a marked difference in the Iron Age graves too. The lower plain alluvial zone is dotted with innumerable urn burials devoid of any stone appendage whereas the upper and middle zones are reflected with megalithic monuments like cairn circle, menhir, stone circle and dolmen. The identification of more than 265 Iron Age sites in the entire valley suggests that the entire region was occupied around the 2nd millennium BCE and later, most of the Iron Age sites were transformed into Early Historic sites. The lack of excavation of Iron Age sites limited our understanding of the hidden nature of the cultural traits. However, the observations made on the disturbed Iron Age graves and in the habitation cuttings suggest that the cultural interactions between the zones are well established. The availability of black-and-red ware, russet coated ware, carnelian beads, iron objects and other cultural traits like disposal of the dead suggests that a certain level of cultural uniformity emerged within the cultural zones and between the cultural zones. These inter and intra-cultural activities established during Iron Age are well reflected in the Early Historic period. The archaeological findings made in the field and the limited excavations conducted in Tamil Nadu indicate that there is no cultural gap between the Iron Age and the Early Historic period. The Iron Age people who survived from the 2nd millennium BCE to the 6-5th century BCE slowly got transformed into the Early Historic Age.

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