

The Megalithic Culture of Sri Lanka - A Critique

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In an article referring to the Pre and Proto-historic settlements in Sri Lanka Dr.Siran Deraniyagala (1996) while acknowledging that the Megalithic Early Iron Age mortuary complex is akin to the Megalithic complex of Peninsular India and falls primarily or possibly totally within the Proto historic phase concluded that "Megalithic Mortuary trait is but a discrete facet of the Proto historic Early Iron Age culture complex of India had its distribution from the Gangetic Valley down to Sri Lanka with regional variations. Hence it is misleading to refer to a Megalithic Culture, as several scholars are apt to, since this mortuary trait is not necessarily a concomitant of the Early Iron Age of Peninsular India or Sri Lanka." He further added that, the Black and Red ware ceramic tradition is a hall mark of much of the subcontinent's Early Iron Age (except in the North West) and is not confined to the Megalithic mortuary facies in Peninsular India, a point that is frequently overlooked. Finally he concluded by saying that it is important therefore, that the nature of this interrelationship between (a) the total Early Iron Age complex of the subcontinent (b) its Black and Red ware ceramic complex

(c) Megalithic cemetery complex in Southern India and Sri Lanka be kept clearly in mind so as to avoid confusion in interpreting the Archaeological record. The Sri Lankan data need to be interpreted against the backdrop of the total subcontinental Early Iron Age, since medium to long range cultural diffusion appears to have been prevalent.

Now coming to the Megalithic Culture itself, it has four component elements. They are habitations, burials, rice fields and the tanks. In Archaeological terminology Megaliths are termed as tombs built with big stones in natural forms of roughly dressed or even a grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or an excavation in soft rocks containing human remains of the dead. It is also applied to the erection of huge stones either memorial or religious in function. Besides graves without any lithic appendage, but by virtue of possession of certain other cultural traits, especially the pottery, commonly found in the other types of Megaliths are also classed as Megaliths.

In respect of South Asia the distribution of Indian Megaliths have been

grouped into various zones of which the South Indian Zone forms a class by itself (Ramachandran.K.S. 1971:244). In Peninsular India and Sri Lanka Iron and Black and Redware, occurs in direct association with Megaliths and hence the term Iron Age has often been used interchangeably with Archaeological labels referring to the construction of stone monuments viz. Megalithic period Megalithism and even Megalithic Civilization. The focus of this culture lies South of the Vindhyan range, particularly in the watersheds of Godavari and Krishna and along the Eastern and Western Ghats. The Island of Sri Lanka is the Southern most extension of this culture. However the analysis of the Archaeological and the Anthropological data from the excavations show that it was the Neolithic people of Peninsular India who were the progenitors of the present day Dravidian language speakers of the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra and Karnataka (Kennedy.K.A.R. 1975) developed the Megalithic forms of burials and acquired the knowledge of Iron and Black and Redware which became the diagnostic elements of the Megalithic Culture (Sitrapalam.S.K. 1983).

However Dr.Siran Deraniyagala's main contention is based on the view that the Early Iron Age settlement at Anuradhapura does not have a Megalithic Cemetery to which it can be remotely linked. Hence he adds that the Megalithic mortuary complex could possibly have been associated with

just a special group of people, such as pastoralists on the periphery of those who occupied Anuradhapura. This view is nothing but the repetition of the view of Leshnik (1975) who called this Megalithic culture as "Pandukal Complex" and has put forward a theory of nomadic origin for the Indian Megaliths. He contends that there is a putative association of graves with the habitation sites and the association of Black and Red ware and iron with the graves is circumstantial. While elaborating his theory he feels that at those few excavated sites where graves occur near supposed habitations, the remains can in each case also be understood as those of a camping site, perhaps one recurrently visited. Finally he concluded by saying that "Whatever the truth, the effect of the Pandukal people quo nomadic pastoralists on the subsequent development of the South Indian society seems minimal and in that sense their presence represents merely an episode in the course of Dravidian history."

Nevertheless some three decades back Nagaraju and Gururaja Rao (1971: 321 328) have convincingly shown as to how the Iron Age Megalithic Culture overlaps with the preceding Neolithic Chalcolithic phase and later early historic phase. Finally while meeting the arguments of Leshnik with regard to the putative association of graves with habitations they observed that "However strong the above arguments may seem, when a close similarity of Black and Red Ware from burials and habitations

particularly the techniques, fabric and shapes and common graffiti is taken into consideration and the fact that the pottery the trait of the Iron Age is to be seen as the single major ceramic component of the Megalithic graves, their contemporaneity can hardly be considered coincidental." The above view was affirmed by our study of Megalithic Culture of Sri Lanka in 1980 (Sitrapalam.S.K. 1980,1988).

In Sri Lanka the explorations and the excavations conducted during the last three decades (Sitrapalam.S.K. 1980; Seneviratne.S.1984), have now yielded vestiges of Early Proto historic sites running to more than fifty in the littoral, North and South Eastern plains and the lower Montane region. To elaborate it little further, besides the Protohistoric habitation sites such as Anuradhapura (Coningham.R.1999) Kantarodai, Mantai and Tissamaharama (Akurugoda), (Sitrapalam,S.K. 2002), the explorations in the East such as Kuchaveli, Seruvavila and Illankaiturai and South East Panama Moderagala and Ambalantota (Deraniyagala.S.U. and Abeyratne,M. 1997) as well as on the sea ports on the estuaries of the rivers in the Western and the South Western Sri Lanka have confirmed the evolution of early historic phase as in Peninsular India from its preceding Proto - historic or Iron Age phase (Bopearachchi, Osmand 1998)(Plate I).

With regard to iron, the Peninsular Indian region forms a class by itself,

although it appears at the same time as in North India around 1000BC. A broad spectrum of similar tools and weapons of iron found in a number of Megalithic sites suggests a cohesive group of iron workers. These could be even weapons of war apart from the tools of Agriculture and reflect the development of tribes and tribal warfare due to territorial rights or even due to the desire of one group to subdue the other. In short these tools while reflecting the similarity of functions, also exhibit their homogeneity and individuality. The evidence from the Sangam literature as well as the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions do reflect the part played by the tribes and tribal leaders in the early state formation in Sri Lanka (Sitrapalam,S.K. 1986/87, Seneviratne.S. 1992)(Plate II).

It is now pertinent to quote Dr.Siran Deraniyagala with regard to Iron tools which he excavated at Anuradhapura in 1969. He observed that " in technological and typological terms the assemblages at Gedige from 3 A to 4 B (Proto historic to the Early historic phase) is related to the Megalithic assemblages of Peninsular India". For example the chisel tools found at Anuradhapura and chisels and wedges at Tissamaharama have parallels in Maski (Thapar. B.K 1957. Fig.37), Brahmagiri (Wheeler R.E.M 1948, Fig.38), and Perumbair (Rea.A 1915, Pl.XI). This reminds us of the prevalence of common techniques in the making and utilization of Iron tools both in Peninsular India and Sri

Lanka. Similar observations could be made with regard to Copper tools, Beads etc. In fact these all form part of the cultural complex which had its component parts both in the habitation sites and the burials. Similarly the study of the pottery types unearthed during the Megalithic sites (both habitations and burials) while showing a correlation between the two also shows that they are part of the wider South Indian Cultural complex where Black and Red ware, a diagnostic element of this culture predominated. While referring to the Black and Red ware at Kantarodai Vimala Begley (1973) observed that "certain ceramic types especially the Black and Red ware parallel those of the Iron Age of South India and possibilities are great that settlers in both areas were of common origin or at least in close contact". Similarly the pottery forms from Anuradhapura and Pomparippu (Urn burial site) indicate that they are part and parcel of the South Indian Iron Age cultural Complex (Sitrapalam. S.K.1980:228 - 277).

Now coming to the origin of the Black and Red ware several scholars who have studied this problem have arrived at different conclusions. However, a notable breakthrough in the systematic study of the ware was made by Srivatsava (1971:322-417). He sought to analyse this problem on the basis of typology, fabric and chronological position and the cultural context in which the ware occurs. His study revealed that this ware should not be

associated with a single group of people or culture and there is nothing common among the Black and Red ware of different regions within India excepting for the similarity in the technique of manufacturing. Even in the latter aspect, there are variations and the types produced in different regions are also not closely similar. He further classified the Black and Red ware occurring sites into various Zones ranging from A to F. Of these regions E and F are important for our study. His region E comprised the present day state of Maharashtra and F comprised areas of Southern Mysore, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. His contention is that the origin of this ware in region E goes back to a period not later than the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. and it occurs in the Neolithic Chalcolithic context in this region and the technique of manufacturing was borrowed from region E by the people of the region F. In this context it is rather important to note that when the ware occurs in the Chalcolithic and Neolithic contexts, the burnishing aspect of this ware is remarkably absent. This process began to appear only in the subsequent period, namely Megalithic cultural complex. Hence as mentioned earlier not only the homogeneity of the pottery forms from Sri Lankan Megalithic cultural complex bespeak their ancestry to their counterparts in Peninsular India but also the other artefactual similarities confirm that both the regions were in the same Megalithic cultural Zone beginning around 1000 B.C.

The above view has been amply demonstrated in a recent article of Sudharshan Seneviratne (1996) where he made the following observations.

“Archaeological investigations at Proto historic habitations and burial sites indicate that Sri Lanka formed the southern most sector of the broader Early Iron Age Peninsular Indian techno cultural complex. The ecofact and artefact assemblages from these sites in Sri Lanka have established that rice cultivation, animal domestication, the horse, small scale metallurgical operations involving iron and copper, bead production, village settlements, the 'Megalitic' burial ritual, the ceramic industry involving the production of Black and Red Ware and Black ware, and post firing graffiti symbols were introduced to Sri Lanka from Peninsular India, or specifically from South India. This chronological context (largely) obtained in the form of radiometric dates, the techno cultural elements and their region of origin, does not in any way agree with the descriptions of the peopling of Sri Lanka narrated in the Middle historic Chronicles of Sri Lanka

.....These Early Iron Age habitats continued through the Proto historic and Early historic transition, and well into the Early Historic

Period. The association of the earliest Brahmi inscription bearing cave shelters in and around Proto Historic burial as well as habitation sites indicated the continuation of the descendants of the Proto historic communities into a new cultural milieu”.

Thus it is now evident that the people who speak Sinhalese and Tamil are the descendants of the Megalithic people. This is confirmed by the Anthropological analysis of the human remains from Pomparippu (Kennedy K.A.R. 1975). This is further confirmed by the genetical study of the Sinhalese and Tamil populations by Roychoudhury (1984), Kirk (1984), Papiha .S.S., Mastana,S.S and Jayasekara.R. (1996) and finally by Sahan (1988). In this regard it is relevant to quote Saha who made the following observations.

“The present and earlier investigations produced no evidence whatsoever that the Sinhalese are genetically nearer to Eastern Indian populations than to the Tamils or to other South Indian populations. Even though there has been some legendary connection of the Sinhalese with East Indian or East Asian populations through trade or social links, there is no evidence to suggest that the present day Sinhalese population is in anyway genetically distinct from the Tamils of Sri Lanka. As far as we can see, the genetic evidence falls short of

supporting the legend that the Sinhalese are descendants of Prince Vijaya”

That the legend of Vijaya does not provide any evidence for the early Sinhalese colonisation had been clearly brought out by one of our pioneer historians G.C Mendis (1965:263 - 279) in his article on “Vijaya legend” contributed for the Paranavitana Felicitation volume. Even Paranavitana, a doyen of Sri Lankan Archaeology, commenting on the Megalithic Culture in his Book entitled “Sinhala” published in 1970 prophetically made the following statement.

“These Megalithic sites and Urn fields are found throughout the regions inhabited by Dravidian speaking people. The burial customs to which they bear witness are referred to in early Tamil literature. It is therefore legitimate to infer that the people who buried their dead in Dolmens and cists as well as in large earthenware jars were Dravidians. The Megalithic monuments and Urn burials discovered in Ceylon are obviously an overflow from South India. The Archaeological evidence is supported by literary sources. The Dravidian people influenced the course of the Island history about the same time they gained mastery over the South Indian Kingdoms”.

Tamil cultures is also reflected by the comparative linguistic analysis of Sinhala Tamil Languages by Mudaliyar Gunawardhana (1915). Sociological analysis also endorses a common Kinship system and caste system. The folk religion of the Sinhalese again corroborates this. As aptly observed by Susantha Goonetillaka (1980) "Sinhalaisation was fundamentally a cultural process associated with Buddhism and that migration even if it did take place was of a minor kind, so as not to have left a significant trace in the Archaeological data or in demographic terms on the population." In short Sinhalaisation came after and not before Buddhism". Hence as K.M.De.Silva's (1981) assertion in 1981 that the evidence available at present would tend strongly to support the conclusion that Aryan settlement and colonisation preceded the arrival of Dravidian settlers by a few centuries is no longer valid in the light of data available to day.

The common cultural base of the Sinhala -

In the light of the data presented above it was the people of the Megalithic Culture, who laid the foundation for the Sri Lankan Civilization and were exposed to influences or more aptly long range cultural diffusion. The Urban centres of the Gangetic Valley seem to have played a decisive role in the cultural transformation. This is corroborated by the study of Brahmi inscriptions which not only reflect the earlier Hindu beliefs of the authors of these inscriptions (Sitrapalam, S.K. 1990) but also the role played by the local chiefs

(Parumaka/ Perumakan/ Parumakan) in the early state formation of the Island. (S i t r a m p a l a m . S . K . 1 9 8 6 / 8 7 ; Seneviratne,S.1992)(Plate II).

Hence the non discovery of the burials associated with the earliest Proto historic settlements such as Anuradhapura as Dr. Siran Deraniyagala feels does not in any way make us to conclude that the Megalithic mortuary complex could possibly have been associated with just a special group of people, such as pastoralists, on the periphery of those who occupied Anuradhapura. It is very likely that the burials of the Proto- historic Anuradhapura settlement would have got submerged in the Architectural activities during the early historic period. Even one cannot discount the possibility of the utilization of the stone slabs used for the burials by the converts to the new religion, namely Buddhism to construct the monuments for their new faith of adoption after 3rd century BC. It is also possible that the same stone cutters who were familiar with the preparation of the stones for the erection of Megalithic tombs would have been employed for the services of the new missionary religion, namely Buddhism as well when this faith was introduced into Sri Lanka. Commenting on the early caves which contained the Brahmi inscriptions Parker (1909:221) observed that

“It is certain that the men who employed the tools for such purposes were not mere learners of the Art of trimming stone. The cuttings at the earliest cave inscriptions exhibit a freedom and accuracy of touch which are a clear proof of previously acquired skill.”

Finally coming to Dr.Siran Deraniyagala's other argument that the presence of few pottery forms, beads and stone styli on bone of North Indian origin, along with Brahmi writing in Prakrit language on pottery datable to 600-500 AC corroborate the view that Indo - Aryan was predominant from at least as early as 500 BC in Sri Lanka can not be sustained in the light of Archaeological data delineated above. They only reflect cultural penetration and not actual colonization. With regard to the context in which the inscribed potsherds occur he himself had suggested a possibility that certain levels might have been disturbed (Deraniyagala, S.1990). This doubt has been confirmed by Wimalasena (1998) who studied the Palaeographical features of the script claims that it is not earlier than 3rd century BC. Even the Prakrit language, which was popular all over south Asia can not be tied up with the long distance southward migration of the Indo - Aryans elite only.

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