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Understanding Aspects of Gender from the South Indian Megalithic Data

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ABSTRACT　The study of gender is an important aspect of ancient Indian studies since the nineteenth century. We can identify four layers of historiography orientalist, utilitarian, nationalist and feminist scholars. While exploring gender equations, the studies have mainly centred themselves on whether on presence or lack of golden age. Also, these studies are mainly based on literary and epigraphical sources. The use of archaeology has been minimal. In this article, we attempt to understand gender as visible in the megalithic burials of south India. These funerary monuments dominated the southern landscape from 1200 BCE to 300 CE. The study of gender in these monuments can be done by identifying the sex of the skeletons and also the artefacts buried with them. We believe that this can give a unique insight into the role of the women, and gender equations in the society.

1.1 Introduction

The concept of gender is deeply rooted in the theory of functionalism that influenced the academia in the 1950's and early 1960's. According to this concept, the perceived differences between man and women were social constructions and not nature-given. The definition, of course, does not deny biological difference; instead, it refers to ideas on masculinity and femininity[1]. The application of this concept in history means exploring 'the changes over time and the variations within a single society in a particular period in the past with regard to perceived differences between women and men, the make-up of their relationships, and the nature of the relations among women and men as gendered beings[2].

In India, the study position of women in the ancient period dates back to the nineteenth century. It attracted the attention of both British and Indian scholars. Our aim here is to give a brief overview of the historiography. In the 19th century, we can see two strands of British writing - orientalist and utilitarian. The former school coincided with what Trautmann has called Indomania[3]. India's ancient past was being rediscovered through pioneering work done by William Jones, Henry Colebrooke and others. While the concern on gender question was largely marginal, nevertheless important work was done on the subject by Colebrooke. He tried to understand the practice of Sati. In his essay, 'On duties of faithful Hindu widow,' he quoted various texts to understand the validity of the practice[4]. But unintentionally this essay ended up highlighting "an awesome aspect of Indian womanhood, carrying in both associations of a barbaric society and of the mystique of the Hindu women who voluntarily and cheerfully mounted the pyre of her husband[5]."The school, in general, ended up glorifying Indian society and contributed to perception of golden age.

On the other hand, the work of Utilitarian school took an opposite stand. The best representative of school is James Mill. In his, 'History of British India Vol I', he argued that a civilization is best judged by how it treats its women. So he sought to understand Hindu society by analysing Manu Smirti or the Code of Gentoo Laws, as it was known[6]. He found the text to reveal "a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot be conceived."The dependence is seen in way she is dependent on her father as a child, her husband in her youth and son in old age. Further, the best for women to achieve salvation is through devotion to her husband. No religion, sacrifice or fasting could be prescribed for her. The text declares women to be infidel, violent, deceitful, envious, greedy, and without any good qualities. Thus, to him, the Hindus were the most barbaric people in the world because of the way they treat their women.

Needless to say, this is a selective quoting from the text and such writings elicited a strong reaction from the Indians. While part of the motivation was to defend Indian society, part of it came from the urge to reform Indian society[7]. Thus, we had reformers like Raja Ram

Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others to studying the ancient texts. They concluded early Vedic society as reflected in the *Ṛg Veda* to be devoid of practices like sati, child marriage and other social evils. Their work perhaps also influenced the historians, and the understanding of Vedic period as the golden age is constantly found in the Nationalist school. The best representative of this school is A.S. Altekar (1938, 1956) in his work 'The position of Women in Hindu Civilization.'

This work is a survey of position of women from ancient times to right up to modern times. Altekar reveals a good knowledge of other ancient cultures like Greek, Persian, early Christianity and others. Thus, in his opinion, many of patriarchal practices like preference for son, absence of divorce could be also found in other cultures[8]. So these are not peculiar to Indian civilization. The best age for women was Early Vedic period where girls had access to education, could choose their grooms, could perform sacrifices, and could even take part in the political assemblies of the day[9]. The decline in their status started in later Vedic Age, and early centuries of Christian era. It reached its nadir during the Islamic invasion.

Altekar's work proved to be extremely influential as seen in many post-independence writings like J. B. Chaudhari (1956)[10], R.M Das (1962), S. Jayal (1966), and Saroj Gulati (1985). But from the 1980's the concept of golden age increasingly came under scrutiny. This period coincided with dowry murders, and led feminist scholars to reassess the gender equations in the past. The biggest critic was Uma Chakravarti. In her essay 'Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm,' she raised two important issues with Altekar's work[11]. One, it relied too much on elite brahmanical sources which gives us a limited view of the past. And second, inherent in Altekar's formulation is the ideas of biological determinism and hence inferiority of the fair sex. So, while explaining lack of queens in Vedic era, Altekar relates it to the conquest of India by the Aryans. Since women were not strong, they were not suitable to lead armies; so there were no queens in this period. Similar explanation was given for property rights. Chakravarti, on the other hand, argues that lack of complexity in the early Vedic society makes ideas of kingship and property irrelevant.

In the article co-authored with Kumkum Roy, an attempt was made to give new direction to gender research. A slight Marxist tinge is visible in the writings. In their opinion, there should be, "a systematic investigation of connections between women's status and their participation in productive activities, both as producers and as controllers of production. We also need to examine the relationship between women and the productive process as mediated through connections between women and men, including variations, as well as variations between different recognised categories of women based on the *varna-jati* system. Such an investigation, apart from contributing to a meaningful history of women is also likely to modify historical analysis of production, which have so far focussed only on relations between different categories of men."[12]

Their critique has had an important influence. In recent years, the

focus has shifted from Sanskritic sources to Pali and other sources. This is seen in works of Nupur Dasgupta, 'Toils untold: an appraisal of the attitude towards women and their work in the early Pali Buddhist literature,' Indra Kaul, 'The Therighata: a study in tradition and modernity', Kathryn Blackstone, 'Standing outside the gates: a study of women's ordination in Pali Vinaya' and others. Besides literature some of the work is based on the epigraphical data, like Kumkum Roy, 'Women and Men Donor at Sanchi,' Harihar Singh, 'Women's Patronage to Temple Architecture,' Kriti K. Shah, 'The problem of Identity: Women in Early Indian inscriptions,' and others. The use of archaeology has been minimal. But it is vital as for many areas we still do not have any literary sources. In this paper, we shall try to understand the role played by the women in day-to-day life of the megalithic folks. But before that, we shall briefly introduce the megaliths and review the debate on the nature of society that built them.

1.2 What are megaliths?
The word megalithic is a combination of two words of two Greek words, 'megas' meaning huge and 'lithos' meaning stone. It denotes a funerary architecture built of huge stone slabs. The entire south from Telangana to Kerala is dotted with these monuments. They occur in a bewildering variety and it is not easy to classify them. A good attempt was made by U.S. Moorti in his work 'Megalithic Culture of South India' (1994). We shall use his scheme here. He sees broadly three types of burials i) Pit burials ii) Cist/Chamber burials and iii) Urn/ Sarcophagus burials. To this, we may add rock-cut caves of Kerala. Some scholars consider it to be a variant of chamber burial and a local adaptation to the material available[13]

Adding to their complexity is the existence of different lithic appendage on these burials like presence or absence of capstone, cairn packing, passage, port-hole and single/ double stone circle etc. As a result, Moorti recognises nearly eight sub-types of pit burials: 1) Pit enclosed by earthen mound, 2) pit enclosed by cairn packing, 3) Pit burial enclosed by boulder circle/s 4) pit burial enclosed by cairn packing and bound by boulder circle/s 5) Pit circle capped by a slab and enclosed by boulder circle/s 6) pit circle enclosed by boulder circle/s, having flat slabs at the centre 7) pit circle with a ramp and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s 8) pit circle with a passage and enclosed by cairn stone circle/s.

Similarly, for cist burials nearly six sub-types are known. 1) Chamber burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 2) Passage chamber burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 3) port-holed chamber burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 4) passage, port-holed chamber with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 5) chamber with a sarcophagus burial and with/without a passage/port-hole and with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 6) rock-cut chamber burial.

The urn/sarcophagus burials also can be divided into seven sub-types. 1) urn burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 2) urn burial capped by a slab and with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 3)passage urn burial capped by a slab and covered by a kudai-kal (umbrella stone) 4) Urn burial capped by a slab and covered by a topi-kal (hat stone) 5) urn burial capped by a slab and marked by a menhir 6) Unlegged and sarcophagus burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s 7) legged sarcophagus burial with/without cairn packing and boulder circle/s.

1.3 The Debate on the Nature of Society
The opinions on the nature of society have varied among the scholars. The main debate centres on whether we are looking at a nomadic society or settled agriculturists. Due to limited excavations of the habitational sites, it is not easy to resolve. Leshnik in his work argued the megalithic folks to be nomadic pastoralists.[14] This is because the number of habitational sites reported was very less as compared to the burial sites. Also, important sites like Maski and Brahmagiri had thin habitational deposits. On the other hand, scholars like U.S Moorti reject the observation of lack of habitational sites. According to him, since the 1930's nearly 176 habitational sites

have been reported. While habitational deposit of only 19 sites is known, it averages around 1.5m - 2.5 m.[15] A metre of cultural deposit implies almost 400 years of occupation.[16] So the idea of nomadic folks may not be completely correct. Another observation that substantiates this is the location of sites near deep hill valleys. The rainwater in these valleys can be trapped for irrigation purposes.[17] In fact, even today such methods (tank cultivation) are prevalent in the region.[18] So some scholars speculate that megalithic builders were the originators of such irrigation practices. This underlies the importance of agriculture in this society. However, A. Sundara[19] argues that many sites were in danger of being submerged if a bund was raised in the vicinity. Instead, the location of settlements near tanks may have got something to do with the availability of raw material in the region than irrigation. With the current data, the research thus remains inconclusive. In these debates, however, the gender aspect of the society has never been explored. The women question has rarely been commented on, so this paper attempts to overcome this lacuna.

But we should also keep in mind the limitations of our data. One, there is not much literary data for the study of these monuments. It possible that the final phase of the monuments coincided with the composition of the Sangam literature composed between 300 BCE to 300 CE. Some of the poems in Sangam literature have references to them.[20] But these are too less to throw any light on society or even gender. On references to women, we can only make a minor point of their presence in the burials. The hymns as such do not throw any light on gender relations. Thus, we turn to archaeology. An obvious limitation of this data is that monuments don't speak. So, lot depends upon conjectures and inference drawn by the archaeologists. Second, the focus of the archaeologists in south India has been more on the graves than habitational sites.[21] Even when habitational sites were excavated, only vertical excavations were done. This gives us a limited view of the past. Keeping these limitations in mind, we seek to explore the gender equations in the society. For our purpose, we further divide the megalith graves into skeletal and non-skeletal ones. In the former graves, it is easy to study the gender as we may be aware of the sex of the skeleton. Further, the artefacts buried may give us a further insight into the roles played by the women. In the latter, also known as symbolic graves, we have to mainly depend on the artefacts buried in the graves.

1.4 Skeletal Graves
The skeletal graves have been reported from many sites. We may cite some examples from Uppalpadu[22], Upperu[23], in Telangana, Yeleshwaram[24], Nagarjunakonda[25], Satanikota[26] in Andhra Pradesh, Brahmagiri[27], Maski in Karnataka[28]; Sanur[29], and Kodumanal[30], in Tamil Nadu and Porkalam in Kerala[31].

 But because of the nature of the burial, we encounter a significant issue. The presence of lithic appendage like capstone or cairn packing often used to crush the skeleton underneath. Thus, it becomes difficult for anthropologists to identify the sex of the skeleton. So while sites like Peddamarur, Uppalpadu, and Agripalli, have reported a total of 16, 17 and 8 skeletons respectively, sex of not even one skeleton is known![32]

So we are left with very few graves that have identifiable female skeletal data. These are in Yeleshwaram, Nagarjunakonda, Satanikota, Brahmagiri and Sanur. At Yeleshwaram, one female skeleton occurs each in pit burial, chamber burial and an urn burial[33]. Two examples occur in pit burials at Nagarjunakonda[34]. In Satanikota, two were found in a chamber burial and one in a pit burial[35]. And one example is found at Sanur (see table 1)[36].

Table 1: Details of Skeletal Burials

Site	Name	Skeletal Remains	Funerary Articles
Yeleshwaram in Andhra Pradesh	Cairn Circle	male and female	pottery, weapons, horse sacrifice

Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh	Megalith XIV	female	Pottery iron weaponry, deceased wore jewellery
Sanur in Tamil Nadu	Megalith 5	Groups of disarticulated human	pottery, weapons, horse bit; conch shells, terracotta whorl bead, shell beads
Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh	Megalith XI	male and female	pottery; iron wedge or celt; spindle-whorl
Satanikota in Andhra Pradesh	Megalith CI	Set1: 2 unidentified; Set 2: teenage girl (?)	Set 1: pottery, goat bones. Set 2: none
Brahmagiri in Karnataka	Megalith IV	two sets of skeletal data	First set: pottery, magnesite beads Second set: pottery; small terracotta ring
Brahmagiri in Karnataka	Megalith VI	human bones	pottery, weapons, spindle whorl
Brahmagiri in Karnataka	Megalith VIII	two skulls	pottery; weapons, chisel; magnesite, dolomite beads
Sanur in Tamil Nadu	Megalith 2	Sarcophagus A: male and female	pottery, weapons, sickle; stone ball, whorl bead, animal figurine
Yeleshwaram in Andhra Pradesh	Dolmenoid Cist	Three remains, one outside the cist and two inside; one female	pottery
Yeleshwaram in Andhra Pradesh	Urn Burial	child and female	pottery; weapons
Perumamalai in Tamil Nadu	Urn burial on a slope	human bones and teeth	pottery; antler bone beads
Paiyampalli in Tamil Nadu	Megalith 1	two skeletons	pottery; weapons. terracotta bead
Tenneru in Telangana	Legged-sarcophagi	mostly adults	pottery; knives, blades; two beads of carnelian, shell beads
Jonnawada in Andhra Pradesh	Burial 1	post cremation burial	pottery; beads
Porkalam in Kerala	Urn burial cylindrical pit	bones	pottery, hooks; carnelian beads

Except for few graves at Yeleshwaram and Nagarjunakonda, most of the burials were multi-skeletal. This indicates to us that they were buried mostly next to their husbands. Thus, most of these graves were built for men which indicates a deeply patriarchal society. The women did not have any independent existence. They existed only as companions to men. It is also possible that some of the women were slaves or domestic servants. In megalithic CI, at Satanikota, we have a double burial, possibly of male and female[37]. The cist also had a teenage skeleton, possibly of a girl. Its feet and head were cut off. It was not kept in the main chamber and no artefacts were kept with it. Ghosh argues this to represent a sacrifice[38]. But it is possible that the teenage girl was domestic help or a slave, killed to accompany her masters in after-life.

From the artefacts buried in the burials, we can draw some inference on the role played by the women. At Nagarjunakonda, in Megalithic XI a female skeleton had spindle-whorl kept below her[39]. This implies presence of female weavers in the society. Female weavers are mentioned in later-day texts like *Arthaśāstra* [2.23.14]. The superintendent of yarns and textile is instructed to get yarn spun out of widows, crippled women, maidens who left their homes, women paying fines, mother of courtesans, old female slaves of king

and female slaves of temples. The existence of this industry is supported by our data, but it is difficult to guess its antiquity. Textile impressions have been reported from southern Mysore, Adichanallur and Nilgiri[40]. Fuller recovered a cotton plant at Hallur at 900 BCE[41]. In T.Narsipur, Seshadri reported a cloth polisher which is used by weavers to rub cloth and give it a shine[42]. This could mean the presence of women in the army. But it is more likely these objects were of deceased's husband. This again implies lack of any identity.

1.5 Non-skeletal Graves

In the symbolic burials, our guide to gender studies is mainly the artefacts kept in them. We can associate objects like grinding stone, stone mortar and ornaments with them. For instance, in megalith III at Ramapuram, funerary objects include pottery, iron weaponry like javelin, and shallow circular stone mortar. It is not difficult to realise that the female aspect is represented by stone mortar(see table 2)[43].

Table 2: Details of non-skeletal graves

SITE	NAME	FUNERARY ARTICLES
Ramapuram in Andhra Pradesh	Megalith III	BRW and others; javelin, shallow circular stone mortar;
Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh	Megalith IX	Primary offering: pottery; iron dagger, animal bones; Secondary offering: lance, knife-blades
Brahmagiri in Karnataka	Megalith II	pottery; weaponry, chisels, wedges, iron bar, iron sickle; granite pestle; spindle-whorl
Kunnattur in Tamil Nadu	Megalith 2	pottery; iron sword; terracotta whorl bead; copper bell
Pazhayannur in Kerala	Transepted cist	pottery; weapons, chisels, hooks, nails, and rods; agate, carnelian beads
Kunnattur in Tamil Nadu	Megalith 2	pottery; iron sword; terracotta whorl bead; copper bell
Pazhayannur in Kerala	Transepted cist	pottery; weapons, chisels, hooks, nails, and rods; agate, carnelian beads

We might also include those skeletal graves where sex is not known. For instance, in Paiyampalli, pit burial labelled as megalith 1 is double skeletal, but the sex of neither skeleton is known[44]. This burial had terracotta bead and iron weaponry as funerary objects. It may be inferred that terracotta bead was meant for the female skeleton, and iron weaponry for the male. Again, at Sanur, megalith 5 is a multi-skeletal pit burial[45]. Among other things, it had terracotta beads possibly kept near a female skeleton (see table 1).

Beads, in fact, have been reported from many burials. It can be summarised in the following table 3.

Table 3: Beads from various megaliths

Site	Name	Material
Mottur	Megalith 1 & 2	carnelian
Sanur	Megalith 2	terracotta
Kunnattur	Megalith 2	terracotta
Kodumanal	Megalith 2	carnelian
Perumamalai	Urn	antler bones bead
Porkalam	Sarcophagus	carnelian
Tenneru	Sarcophagus	carnelian
Jonnawada	Sarcophagus	shell

In some of the symbolic graves, we can see exclusive female presence. For instance, the Jonnawada, the post-cremation sarcophagus burial only had beads and pottery buried with it[46]. In Perumamalai, some of the urn burials only had white antler beads along with pottery[47]. Since these burials lack weaponry, these were possibly dedicated to women.

While most of these beads were meant as ornaments, for terracotta beads an alternate interpretation of them being whorl-beads is possible. A whorl bead is used for making yarn out of plant fibre. We have already noted the possibility of presence of female weavers in

the society. In the symbolic burials, the terracotta beads might affirm the presence of female weavers.

1.6 Conclusion

Thus, we see some inference on gender equations in the society can be drawn from the burials. The society was deeply patriarchal with the burials mainly constructed for men. And given the labour involved it was for elite strata. Women were generally an adjunct in these burials. They are mainly companions, and rarely exist as an independent individual. We cannot say if these were sati-like burials or not, as we do not know the nature of death. It is possible that some of the buried women were either domestic servants or slaves buried with their masters. But such low presence of women is puzzling. It does not go with matrilineal practices known in the region. We can account for this in few ways: i) existence of alternate funerary practice like cremation in the society, ii) limited excavations at several sites. While more than 2000 graves have been excavated, these are spread across the region. For instance, at Kadambapur only five graves out of five hundred have been opened [48]. This could be the reason for such low reporting. Besides, the artefacts buried in the burials can also reveal the roles played by women in the society. The presence of stone mortar and grinding stone indicates the presence of gender-based division of labour. The presence of spindle-whorl and terracotta beads reveals women weavers. Thus, while archaeological data might have some limitations in understanding gender equations, it is not completely useless.

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