Disappearing Heritage: A Case Study from Belagavi, Karnataka

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Abstract: *Rapid urbanisation is becoming one of the major threats to archaeological monuments and sites. Also, there are elements of human vandalism showing up in many regions. These have destroyed a large number of cultural remains from the land. This paper assesses the present-day state of preservation of a set of monuments in Belagavi. The megalithic monuments in this region were documented by earlier workers. The present work notes that unless some urgent measures are taken by government authorities, these monuments may even fade from memory soon.*

Keywords: Megaliths, Belagavi, Konnur Type, Typology, Destruction, Heritage, Conservation

Introduction

The paper examines the megalithic monuments of Belagavi, popularly known as "Konnur type" which is a branch of Aihole series of megaliths. These are also classified as "Passage chamber dolmens". A large number of megalithic monuments were reported from this region, a great majority of them have been destroyed. Rapid urbanization followed by a variety of anthropogenic and natural transformations have become a major threat to archaeological monuments and sites. As a result of socio-economic changes, the developmental activities are constantly increasing and this calls for a risk mapping in different areas. Within the context of this, an archaeological survey was carried out in Belagavi region, Karnataka. This area was extensively surveyed by Sundara (1975) who brought to light 21 sites. The preliminary archaeological survey of this region by the first author of this paper revealed that the number of monuments and its variety in this area must have been more than what it was reported, though the investigation could only locate 7 of the earlier 21 sites during the recent visit.

The archaeological potentials of this region were first brought to light by Burgess (1874), who excavated a few monuments in Konnur. His method of excavation was very different and unfortunately the results were never published. Following him,

Sundara reported 21 sites from this region (1969). Rao excavated Honnur (previously: Hunur) as a salvage operation where he recovered bones (human?), black and red ware, copper fragments and charcoal (IAR 1968-69). The site was dated to 1200 BCE – 700 BCE (Sundara 1975).

Figure 1: Recently Surveyed Sites

The site of Konnur (16°11'25.40"N; 74°45′10.61″ E) (Figure 1) is 69 kilometres north-east of modern city of Belagavi (15°51′0″N; 74°30′0″ E) in Belagavi district. The excavated sites at Konnur is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India. Rest of the 6 megalithic sites are scattered on the hill slopes close to the banks of river Ghataprabha and Markandeya, tributaries of River Krishna.

Exploration

The data collected was studied using traditional archaeological methods. The sites reported by Sundara (1975) were revisited and studied in order to understand the factors affecting the destruction of megalithic monuments. The megalithic monuments were studied on the site to understand elements of its architecture; dressing of orthostats, and the raw material used.

The preliminary surveys were followed by intensive explorations in selected areas based on literature review (for instance Sundara 1975) and observations made on the landforms and drainage patterns on satellite maps. Amongst the diverse landforms that occur in the region, special focus was laid towards exploring hill slopes. These led

to the documentation of 7 sites. All these sites were properly recorded through geo coordinates on the global positioning system.

Results

Large number of megaliths have been destroyed from many sites leaving behind a total sum of 120 monuments out of 700 approximately previously reported by Sundara (1975).

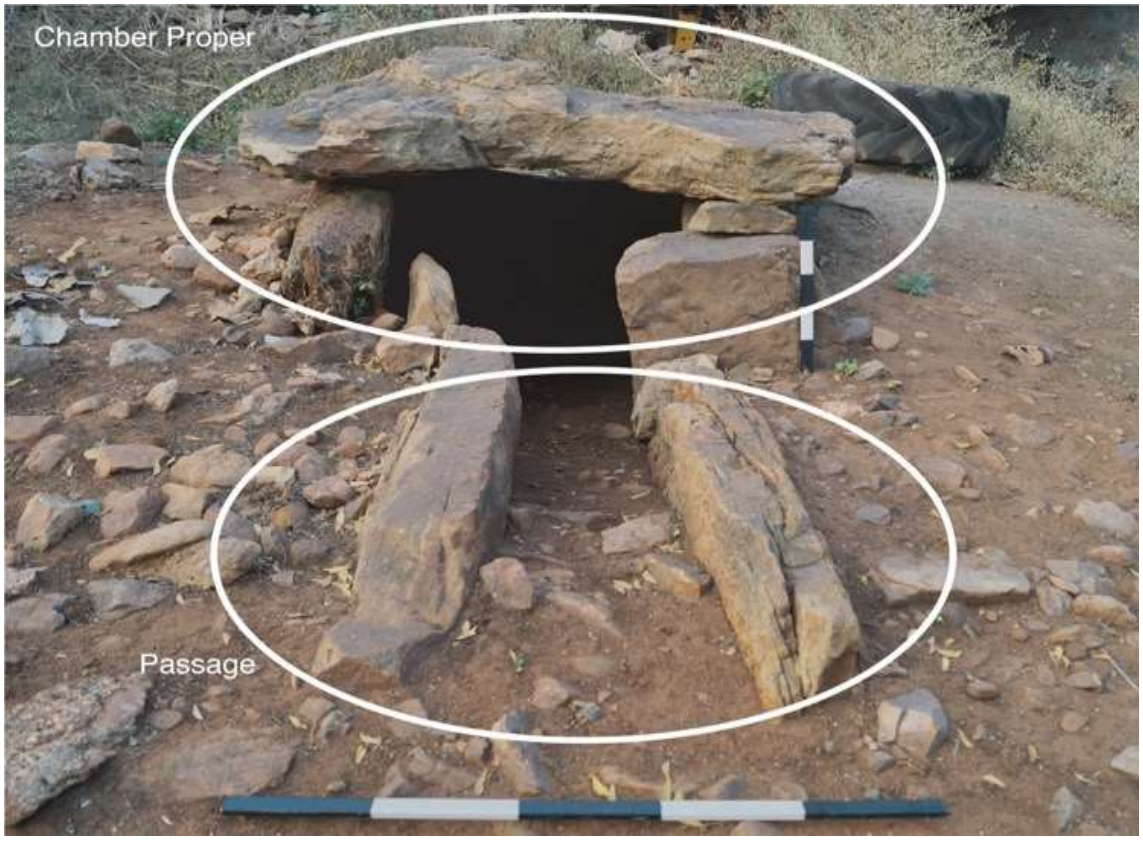

Figure 2: Passage Chamber Dolmen at Konnur

Typology

Passage Chamber Dolmens: The chamber is built on a trapezoidal plan with a passage facing south. It is usually raised from the ground and remains either partially or fully buried. The monuments of this group have three huge monolithic orthostats in the western, northern, and eastern directions. The southern side has two slabs that are relatively smaller in width in order to accommodate the passage exactly in the centre (Figure 2). The capstone on the top of the chamber proper is the largest stone slab of all, which usually projects on all sides. The slabs used for passage are smaller in height compared to the chamber proper. In some instances, a capstone was also seen at the top of the passage. These chamber tombs were either bounded by rectangular stone slabs or by stone circles and were covered by cairns. A variation was recorded in which the passage was placed on the south-eastern side; this variant, though, is very rare (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Passage Chamber Dolmen with the passage placed in the south-east corner at Pachhapur

Long Barrow: Two or more passage chamber dolmens bounded by rectangular slabs in an elongated manner and covered with cairns are called a long barrow (Figure 4). The orientation of these barrows is usually east-west, with the tombs facing south and equidistantly away from each other.

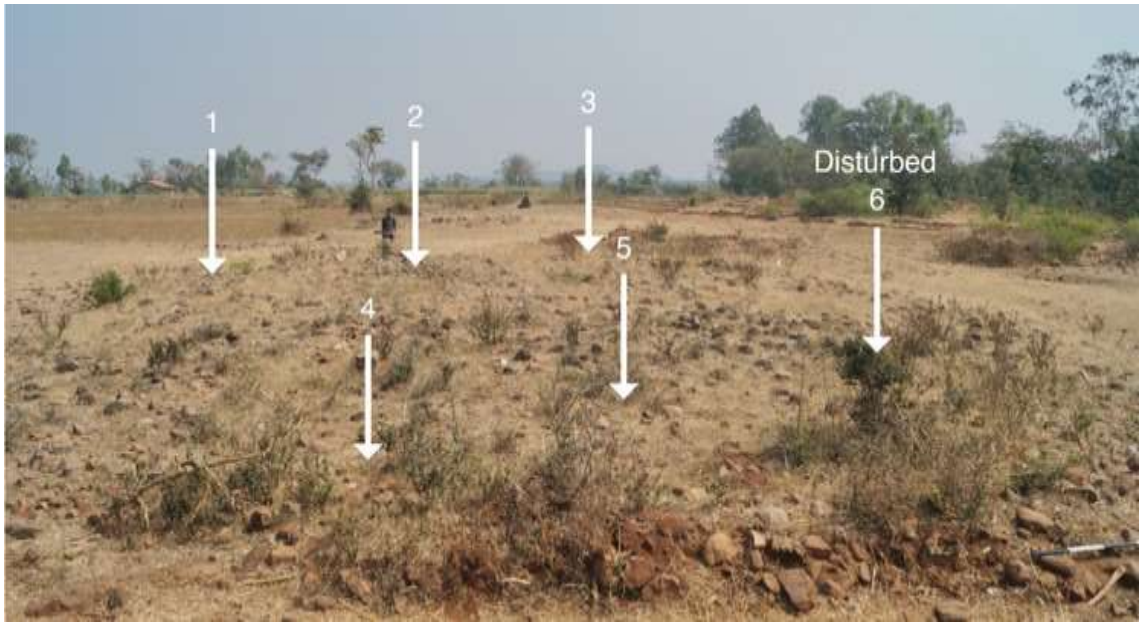

Figure 4: Long Barrow at Badkundri

Small Square Chambers: A very rare type of chamber tomb is built of five stone slabs: four orthostats in the cardinal direction and the fifth on top; the capstone. These variants are small in size, measuring about 50cm (average) on each side (Figure 5). Tombs such as these are seen around passage chamber dolmens, probably part of a complex. These chambers have no passage but are covered with cairns.

Figure 5: Small Square Chamber at Hidkal

Types such as round barrows, stone circles, and cairn circles reported by Sundara (1975) were not found during the explorations and possibly do not survive anymore in this region.

Measurements

An average of these monuments was taken to work out a ratio. These monuments measure about 80cm to 100cm on the north-south axis and 65cm to 75cm on the east-west axis. The measurements can be scaled down to a ratio of 9:7 (NS axis: EW axis).

Raw Material and Dressing

The chamber tombs were built of locally available sandstone slabs from the nearby exposure (Figure 6). The cairn packing consists of quartzite sandstone rubbles, Deccan trap pebbles, and sometimes river-worn quartz pebbles in odd proportions (Sundara 1975). Pegmatite is also found in the cairn mix; however, it is only connected with Passage Chamber Dolmens. Pegmatite and white quartz are not readily available in the surrounding area; this could be a significant indicator of a death rite. Sandstone, Deccan trap pebbles, pegmatite, conglomerate, and laterite were the five stones chosen. Orthostats show no signs of dressing or straightening of edges, probably due to the availability of naturally split stone slabs of convenient shape and size. Rough dressing was recorded on the rectangular slabs that enclosed the cairn packing and the chamber tombs. Some well-dressed conglomerate slabs were found in the cairn packing of a long barrow (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Sandstone source, Kaladgi Hills. Well exposed due to road construction

Figure 7: Slabs of Conglomerate at Godchinmalki

Frequencies

The following tables will give a detail record of 1975 (Table 1) in comparison with the record of 2018 (Table 2) (Figure 8).

Table 1: Megalithic Monuments in the Study Area during 1975

Record as in 1975	Passage chambers enclosed in cairn	Passage chambers bounded by rectangular slabs	Cairn packing bounded by stone circle	Cairn packing bounded by stone circle and rectangle	Long barrows	Small square chambers	Small square chambers bounded by rectangle	Small square chambers bounded by circle	Round Barrows	Stone/ Cairn Circle
Ainapur	30	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hattargi	50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dadabanhatti	37	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jinaral	70	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-
Badkundri	23	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-
Hunur	13	-	1	1	2	3	-	1	-	-
Nirvanhatti	72	17	1	3	8	-	-	-	-	-
Nadigudiketra	11	2	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-
Hidkal	27	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-
Sultanpur	35	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Ghodageri	28	3	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	-
Savalagi	50	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-
Konnur	78	7	2	-	-	9	-	-	-	-
Godchinmalki	11	11	8	2	-	-	1	-	-	-
Sigiholi/Urabinahatti	6		4	2	-	-	-	-	-	3
Kadihalli	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pachhapur (Gumachinmardi)	8	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mavanur (Honin Mavanur)	6	9	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	557	56	2	4	32	12	1	1	-	3

Sites

Badkundri: The site at Badkundri consists of 24 chamber tombs, of which 20 are passage chamber dolmens with cairns, and a long barrow with four tombs within it. The megaliths reported by Sundara (1975) at Hidkal are underwater due to the construction of the dam.

Table 2: Megalithic Monuments in the Study Area during 2018

Record as in 2018	Passage chambers enclosed in cairn	Passage chambers bounded by rectangular slabs	Cairn packing bounded by stone circle	Cairn packing bounded by stone circle and rectangle	Long barrows	Small square chambers	Small square chambers bounded by rectangle	Small square chambers bounded by circle	Round Barrows	Stone/Cairn Circle
Ainapur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hattargi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dadabanhatti	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jinaral	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Badkundri	20	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-
Honnur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nirvanhatti	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nadigudiketra	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Hidkal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hidkal (Labour Camp)	36	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Sultanpur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ghodageri	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Savalagi	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Konnur	24	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Godchinmalki	11	3	-	-	2	-	1	1	-	-
Sigiholi/Urabinahatti	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kadihalli	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pachhapur (Gumachinmardi)	8	2	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Mavanur (Honin Mavanur)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	104	5	-	-	6	6	1	1	-	-

Hidkal **(Labour Camp):** The relocated village of Hidkal is referred to as Labour Camp, where the present investigation discovered previously unreported megalithic monuments. A total of 38 megalithic monuments were recorded in this region.

Ghodageri: The megalithic monuments were bulldozed by the farmers to extend their farmlands. As of today, only three megalithic monuments survive.

Table 3: Sites with coordinates on Global Positioning System

Sites	Latitude	Longitude
Badkundri	16° 9'48.10"N	74°34′15.47″ E
Hidkal (Labour camp)	16° 9'22.28"N	74°38′59.31″ E
Ghodageri	16°10'42.20"N	74°41′45.94"E
Savalagi	16°12'52.45"N	74°42′37.30"E
Konnur	16°11'25.40"N	74°45′10.61"E
Godchinmalki	16° 8'18.46"N	74°43′38.43"E
Pachhapur (prev. Gumachinamardi)	16° 6'13.41"N	74°41′39.92"E

Figure 8: Passage chamber dolmens photographed from 1975 (Sundara, 1975) in comparison with 2018

Savalagi: A similar case of large-scale destruction as at Ghodageri was observed at Savalagi, where, of the previous 54 megalithic monuments (Sundara, 1975), only two remain. The megaliths were removed to make a Christian cemetery. The remaining monuments lie about 700 metres apart from each other.

Konnur: The rate of destruction is low due to the protected area (by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Jain Community, who associate their faith with these chamber tombs). Previous studies revealed the presence of 96 megalithic monuments (Sundara, 1975), out of which only 24 survive today.

Godchinmalki: Long barrows, small square chambers, and passage chamber dolmens bounded by rectangular slabs, all at one place (a possible complex?) can be seen at

Godchinmalki. Although only 17 megalithic monuments survive as of today out of 33 reported previously (Sundara, 1975).

Pachhapur (Previously Reported as Gumachinamardi): The present investigation found the same number of tombs as reported by Sundara in 1975. Two new small square chambers were discovered during the recent investigation.

Honnur (in Previous Records: Hunur): Honnur was excavated as a salvage operation by S.R. Rao in 1969 and 1970 by the Archaeological Survey of India, south-western circle, Aurangabad, Maharashtra (IAR, 1968–69). The chamber tombs were relocated to the inspection bungalow at Hidkal (Figure 9). The sites at Honnur have submerged underwater due to the dam construction.

Figure 9: Reconstructed Long Barrow at Hidkal Inspection Bungalow

Factors Affecting the Destruction of Sites

The sites in this region are mainly disappearing due to the ever-expanding farmlands. Local agriculturalists use earth-moving machines to raze these megalithic monuments, as seen at the site of Pachhapur (Figure 10). An attempt was made by the first author of the paper to make the local agriculturalists aware of the significance of the site, where the monuments were left undisturbed. An exception was seen at Savalagi, where an approximate total of 50 such monuments were razed to make a cemetery right on the edge of the village. Another cause of the disappearance of these monuments is the building of a dam on the river Ghataprabha. The reservoir of the dam has submerged the sites at Honnur and Jinaral. On the other hand, megalithic monuments are also a good and easy source of stone slabs, the raw material for building houses in the rural settings of north Karnataka. These slabs are either used in building houses or taken to

the stone crushing quarries. The rise in the construction of *pukka* houses in rural India is one of the major contributors to the destruction of these monuments. The mounds are flattened, and the monuments are continuously removed to either extend the agricultural lands or build infrastructure such as houses or irrigation tanks for farming.

Figure 10: Destruction of the site at Pachhapur - June, 2017 (Left) and September, 2018 (Right)

Figure 11: Isolated Megalithic monument at Godchinmalki

Factors Affecting the Preservation of Sites

The site at Konnur is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, Dharwad Circle, Karnataka (Figure 12c). Only a part of the site at Konnur is under protection; the vast majority of it is destroyed. Although four such Megalithic monuments are protected by the local Jain community, they believe that monks used to meditate inside them (Figure 12d). Farming has taken over this region, and many monuments have been removed, yet remnants of this grave architecture are seen in the farms of Konnur and

Godchinmalki (Figure 11). Chamber tombs converted into temples are another important factor, as seen at Savalagi, where a local deity called *Kari Kallavva* sits inside (Figure 12a). These Megalithic monuments are used as storage by the farmers to keep their tools and apparatus needed for farming stored inside them (Figure 12b).

Figure 12: Factors affecting the preservation of site; a. Savalagi: Chamber converted into a temple, b. Ghodageri: Chamber used as a storage, c. Konnur: Protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, and d. Konnur: Maintained by local Jain community.

Discussion

Since the pioneering Megalithic Surveys undertaken by Sundara (1975), the region has been subjected to increased agricultural operations and irrigational activities. Further, while only one locality, Konnur, came to be protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, the fate of the unprotected localities looks rather grim.

This research, in this context, revisited the localities in the region and also undertook explorations to document new localities in its vicinity. Of the 21 sites reported by Sundara (1975), currently only seven localities continue to have megalithic monuments. The remaining areas lie either under water following the construction of a dam or were destroyed by agricultural operations. Also, while Sundara (1975) reports a large number of monuments preserved at the sites mentioned above, recent surveys revealed only a handful of monuments being preserved. The first author of the paper was, however, able to engage the local populations to protect the monuments during the field survey, and it may be pertinent to revisit these sites again to observe the status of the sites. Such an approach may perhaps throw insights into strategies for site preservation and conservation.

While pursuing this study, the surrounding areas were explored to see if there was any indication of the ethnic community that raised these monuments, but in vain. Most importantly, despite a part of the locality at Konnur being protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, human vandalism is progressively increasing as they find readily available raw material scatters, which are megaliths but do not mean anything to the common person. This calls for the need to mobilise people on a larger scale by holding heritage workshops and making them realise the importance of connecting with the past.

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