
Mekala Benchi of Aspari (Kurnool District): A Unique Neolithic Site in Andhra Pradesh: A Study

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Abstract: Kurnool District in Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh state is one of the richest zones of the prehistoric centers in the world and so it gives valuable information about its ancient culture. Archaeological evidences here cover a range of time periods from the present day and potentially extending back into the Pleistocene. From Captain Newbold's time (1844) to very recent (2018) several archaeologists conducted investigations and some of them have conducted excavations in the study area. It is known on the basis of these explorations and excavations that evidence of the early man activities here are copious. In connection with the archaeological explorations I visited Mekala Benchi of Aspari, Kurnool district. In this backdrop, an attempt is made in this paper to portray the Neolithic Culture along with the rock-art depicted on the rock boulders of a hillock called boodida konda/boodidoni konda. The petro-glyphs depicted here include human figures; bulls; bulls associated with humans; elephant; horse riding; cupules and nandipadas etc. Stone tools and potsherds are also collected from the same site.

Keywords: Mekala Benchi, Neolithic, Megalithic, Petroglyphs, Ethnoarchaeology, Conservation, Ceramics

Introduction

The food-procuring cultures were succeeded by food-producing cultures in different parts of the world. The early man of food-producing cultures used stone axes finished by grinding and polishing. These stone axes are called neoliths; and cultures using polished stone axe are called Neolithic culture. It may be predicted that these neoliths were evolved to meet the cutting of vegetation in large areas and to till a field for cultivation. (Bhattacharya, 2015:182-184).

The Neolithic people settled either on the tops of granitoid hills or on leveled terraces on hillsides or on valley floors (Sarma 2003:89). In the southern part of the Deccan plateau, where granite hills rise from the black cotton soils, the Neolithic villages were generally located on hillsides and plateau, sometimes along minor streams, and occasionally along the banks of major rivers. (Singh 2016:123) Settled village life, domestication of cattle, goats and sheep and using of finished stone axes were the salient features of the Neolithic age.

Neolithic Culture in Kurnool District

Prehistory of Andhra Pradesh begins from Kurnool District as the earliest evidences of early man and his activities are found in this district. The first authentic piece of evidence for the existence of man in the peninsula occurred in 1844 in the form of some animal bone and a human tooth of late Pleistocene times in the Billasurgam Caves near Betamcharla of Kurnool District, was found due to the efforts of Captain Newbold. Subsequent contribution by Robert Bruce Foote, C.J. Pelly, Captain Meadows Taylor, Francis, Cammiade and Burkitt, Soundara Rajan and more recently by Issac, Murthy, Rao, Rami Reddy, Thimma Reddy and some others demonstrated the appearance of early man and his activities. The history of research into the early farming communities of Andhra Pradesh goes back to 1876 when a sandstone adze was picked up for the first time by Bruce Foote. He vigorously continued this activity from 1885 through to 1891 leading to the discovery of over 50 sites most of which lie in the present Kurnool and Anantapur Districts (Rami Reddy 1987:9-12). The above information is enough evidence that prehistoric culture in the Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh has a long research history. The present exploration proved once again that the Kurnool District is one of the richest zones of the prehistoric centers in the world.



A General View of the hillock-Boodida konda and Mekala Benchi

Mekala Benchi

The present study site 'Mekala Benchi' ($15^{\circ}28'47.589''\text{N}$ $77^{\circ}24'6.916''\text{E}$) which means a pond of goats, is situated 2 km towards East from Aspari Town, the Mandal head quarter, at the bank of Nallajeruvu vanka which joins finally the Handri River, and

very near to the northern side of K-B road (Kurnool-Bellary Road) in Kurnool District. Here the Neolithic people settled on leveled terraces on granitoid hillsides which reveal the nature of Neolithic occupations.

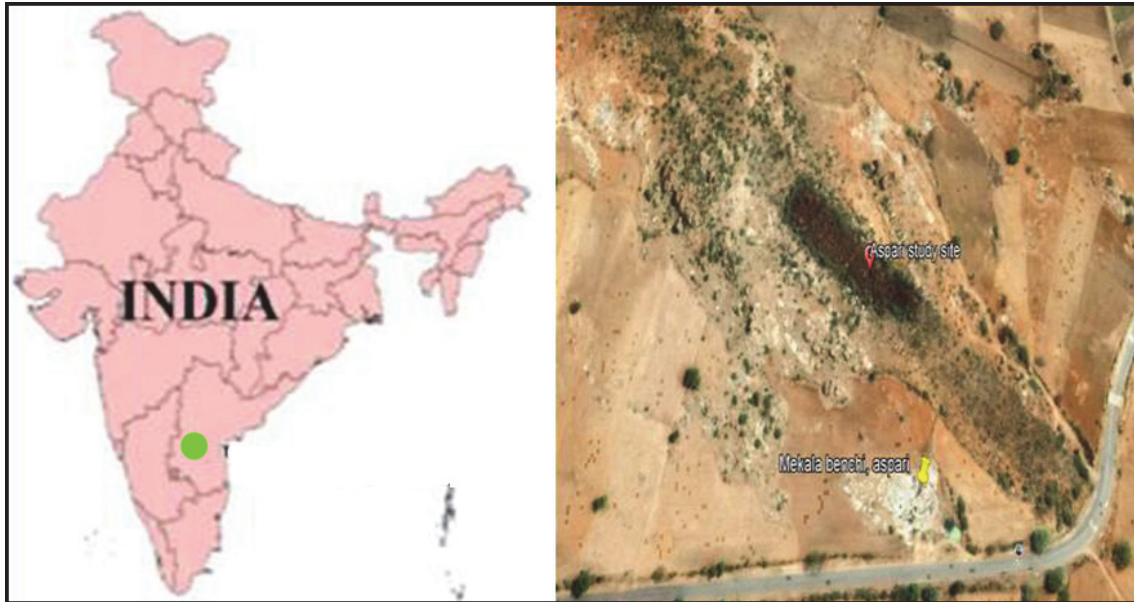


Figure 1a: Map of the Study Area



Figure 2: Depiction of Bulls



Figure 3: Representation of Bull



Figure 4: The ox image with long horns



Figure 4a: Native Bulls, Desaveddulu



Figure 5: Representation of a Warrior

The author visited and surveyed this unknown site. The author observed two granite hillocks situated side by side; on which engraved stone slabs with depictions of various scenes were explored. Various types of stone tools (polished stone axes, using of which mainly in Neolithic Age) formed by the basaltic and dolerite intrusions and potsherds way back to the Neolithic period (2900BC – 1000BC) (Upinder Singh 2016:123) were collected. On the basis of Rock-Art depicted on the boulders of the study site, it is to be understood that the site is unique example for the cultural continuity from the Neolithic period to early historic period as the assumption of archaeologists it is known that depictions of humped bulls are tentatively dated to the Neolithic period; the petroglyphs with the circle-with-trident symbols are ascribed to the Megalithic period and finally, the depictions showing elephants and horses may date to the Early Historic period (Chandramouli 2003:149).



Figure 6: Representation of a Human

Discussion on the Neolithic Rock Engravings

There are basically two categories of Rock-Art. The first refers to Pictographs and the second refers to Petroglyphs. Petroglyphs make their appearance from the Neolithic phase in Andhra Pradesh. (Chandramouli 2003:148-150) The Rock-Art in the form of Petro-glyphs explored in this site are engraved on the stone slabs of two granitoid hillocks situated side by side in a short distance; the first one is locally called *Boodida Konda* (Boodida means Ash and Konda means hill/hillock) as it is in Ash colour and

another hillock is not named by the rural folk. *Boodida konda* is the hillock of hummocky masses varying from large blocks to boulders sizes range from 0.5m to 3m and are in hog-back structure on which Petro-glyphs were depicted. Maximum of depicts are South faced (Figures 1 and 1a).

Petroglyphs engraved on the stone slabs of *Boodida Konda* are mainly oxen images; ox riding; bullock-drawn carriage associated with a peasant; horse riding; camel riding; elephant, cheetah like animal; human figures; warriors, and cupules (cup marks). Among these depictions, unique one is a pair of oxen (Figure 2); each ox measures 23cm height and the total depiction covers an area of 23cm height and 60cm width. In one another case, a bull with an erected sexual organ and lifted tail was engraved by which it is understood that the bull was grownup and fit for the cow (Figure 3). The significant feature regarding the oxen images with long horns drawn by the Neolithic man is that the same type of oxen is being used in agriculture by the present peasant community. This type of oxen is locally called '*Desaveddulu*', a corruption of *Desavali Eddulu* which means native oxen (Figures 4 and 4A). Warrior images were engraved with a sword in their right hand and a shield in left hand (Figure 5). One bruising seems to be a couple staying close to each other. A unique east faced depiction is flat wash full size image of human measuring 80 cm in height engraved on a granite boulder of another granite hillock (Figure 6).



Figure 7: Cupules or Cupmarks



Figure 8: Nandipadas



Figure 9: Stone Objects and Potsherds

Megalithic Rock Engravings: Cupules/Cup Marks

Cupules were engraved on two stone slabs located side by side of Boodida Konda. On one stone slab about 28 cup marks and 7 on another stone slab were found. The stone slab which has an evidence of about 28 cup marks measures 150cm length and 60 cm

width (Figure 7). Engraved stone slabs with depictions of trident symbols and *nandipadas* (Figure 8) are also found. According to archaeologist's opinion these depictions go way back to the Megalithic period, a subsequent of Neolithic period. In this way, the artistic views in the form of petroglyphs by the Neolithic and Megalithic man in this site are highly appreciable.

Tools and Ceramics

We know that the Neolithic people produced and used polished stone axes for their livelihood. The author explored one beautifully polished and finished triangular stone axe measuring 12cm length; 6cm width at the fringe and about 2 cm thicknesses.

Two unfinished stone axes; one broken stone axe; grinding stones; milling place on a stone slab of *Boodida konda* and potsherds predominantly handmade red, black, grey and buff ware are explored. It is come to know that legged pots or jars were also used as it is confirmed by finding a broken leg of the same. A unique explored one is a small pointed stone tool which seems to be an Awl, may be used for piercing holes, especially in leather (Figure 9).

Ethnoarchaeological View

The Neolithic people were the earliest pastoral folk as the domestication of animals was also one of the features of Neolithic age. It may be assumed that the lifestyle of the Gollas and Kurubas, the pastoral castes in the current society, enumerates to understand the life and culture of the Neolithic folk.

What I came to know during the field work is that the agricultural lands are in the vicinity of the Neolithic site belong to Golla Caste people. The location of the study site is called *Mekala Benchi*, a Telugu word which means a pond of Goats (*Mekalu* means Goats and *Benchi* means a pond) (*Interview with Golla Nagaraju*). The appearance of pond near to the site indicates that this pond was used by the pastoral community to quench the thirst of Goats during the Neolithic times. Even today, this pond is useful for the cattle, flock of sheep and droves of goats of the pastoralists i.e. the Gollas. The beautifully finished axes made of bronze/iron used by the Gollas while grazing a flock of sheep are alike to the polished and beautifully finished stone axes used by the Neolithic people.

With this information it is understood that, the faunal remains and the rock art of Mekala Benchi of Aspari indicate that the Neolithic activities were not much different from the practices of the Gollas. And so, we can conclude that the Gollas are living parallels or the survivors of the Neolithic pastorals.

Conservation

What is the current condition of the site is, some of the stone slabs, on which the figures are depicted, were cracked due to the nature's effect that too in a systematic way. And the Rock bruising here are going to be eroded due to the effect of natural

corrosion. But the rock art is still in flawless condition except for some natural corrosion. If the both the Central and State Governments or the Dept. of Archaeology continues to neglect, the archaeological site may disappear from the scene within a short period. The very need of the hour is that these prehistoric monuments in the Rayalaseema region are to be protected, the sites may be pivotal to reconstruct the prehistory of India in general and Andhra Pradesh in particular.

Conclusion

Rock bruising of cattle and bullock-drawn carriage on rocks in this site testify to the importance of Cattle rearing and cultivation in the Southern Neolithic. Cattle pastoralism along with farming is the chief economic activity in the Rayalaseema even during the present times. Finally, the significance of this site is, after the Kandanathi site (Kurnool District) wherein about 200 depictions are available, Mekala Benchi is the biggest Petro-glyph site in Andhra Pradesh, having the evidence of about 80 depictions engraved. So, the biggest Petro-glyph sites in Andhra Pradesh can be traced back to the Neolithic and Megalithic periods are from Kurnool District. No Celt and terracotta beads are found in my present exploration in this site. The author's findings in this particular site show that there is a need to extend field work in this region.

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