



The Earliest Stone Monuments: replication of megalithic structures at NIAS

Srikumar M. Menon

Many of you might have been mystified, or even shocked (quite justifiably!) over the last several days when certain mysterious aggregations of boulders made their appearance at certain locations on the NIAS campus. While pleading guilty of this sacrilege, I want to convey briefly the philosophy behind these structures.

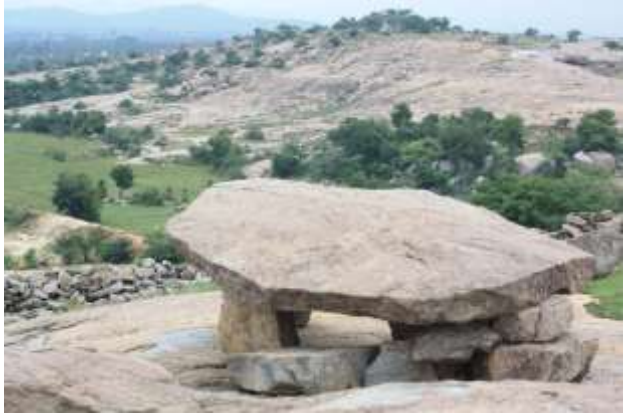
In a nutshell, these structures replicate megalithic structures, which are prehistoric monuments believed to have been erected in the Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent (roughly 1500BCE – 500BCE). Megaliths are found all over the world and in India, they are densely concentrated in the southern part of the subcontinent. Most megaliths are memorials, though a few types defy an understanding of the purposes for which they were erected. What is certain, however, is that megaliths represent the oldest surviving monuments in stone that we can encounter today.

The structure near the lily pool (below) is a crude **dolmen** – a heavy “capstone” erected over three smaller boulders. There is also a single standing stone, known as **menhir**, nearby. Fig 2 shows a prehistoric dolmen that resembles this structure.



1 A dolmen and menhir near the lily pool at NIAS

The structure in front of the car porch (top) is a dolmen too – slightly more elaborate, wherein three stones are arranged to make a small chamber with a horizontal capstone covering this arrangement. There is a boulder circle surrounding the dolmen, with two vertical stones forming a sort of portal giving entry to the structure. A prehistoric dolmen that resembles this is shown in Fig. 3. The NIAS dolmen faces west of north-west and (if the horizon had been clear and free of vegetation) the rays of the setting sun would have penetrated into the chamber around May 15 and 30 July of every year!



2 A crude dolmen near Krishnagiri, in Tamil Nadu



3 A dolmen surrounded by a boulder circle near Chennai

Megaliths might seem just crude arrangement of stones, but in several cases they have evolved to quite elaborate structures and might even have been the precursors from the rich monumental architecture of our country evolved. The megaliths of Mallasandram at Krishnagiri or Hire Benakal, near Hampi exemplify the skills of stoneworking that the megalith builders developed. In all probability, it is these same skills that were later honed to build the splendid examples of monumental architecture that we take immense pride in today as our built heritage.



4 Elaborate dolmens at Mallasandram near Krishnagiri in Tamil Nadu

(Many thanks to Shri. Krishnappa and his team who demonstrated that the skills of our megalith-building ancestors are still very much present in us!)