

# The beat of a different drum

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Ringling stones: Srikumar M Menon writes about the ancient musical creations of Ballari-Raichur region that attract tourists and researchers alike



Resonant: A view of Vanibhadreshwara Temple near Mallapur. PHOTOS by author

The place has changed since I last visited it, in 2010. A steep embankment supporting the newly-laid railway line from Ginigera to Raichur has cut off the old approach path from Hire Benakal village to the rocky hills in the south. A tunnel of sorts in the embankment leads off to the new approach. The path winds through the surreal landscape of tumbled boulders and precariously perched rocks that is so characteristic of the Hampi–Hire Benakal region. Signboards put up by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) punctuate the trail at intervals, educating the visitor about the prehistoric site that is tucked away in these hills.

**The rock that sounds**

The megalithic site, locally known as Moriyara Gudda, is spectacular. Several hundred stone 'huts' are scattered in the clearings between low bouldery outcrops in three clusters in this remote location. Megaliths are the funerary or memorial creations of cultures that occupied most of southern India during the Iron Age and later, roughly 3,500-2,000 years ago. But even as megalithic sites go, Hire Benakal is remarkable, with a profusion of large dolmens made of thin stone slabs arranged into box-like structures, often with a circular or semi-circular 'porthole' in one of the erect slabs. There are other, smaller megaliths too, and the whole area is replete with signs of stoneworking — large slabs pried loose from the bedrock, boulders split into two, stones broken into cobbles by the megalithic artisans to stack around their creations. But one of the most unique features of the site sits prominently perched atop a large outcrop of rock — a stone kettle drum, which the locals call the nagaari gund.

The nagaari gund is a rock that has been neatly sliced in two, like one might halve a fruit. Archaeologists opine that the drum was made by the same cultures that built the megaliths and must have formed part of the ritual paraphernalia at the extensive megalithic site. There are several balancing rocks seemingly defying the laws of gravity at the site and the megalith-builders must have selected a suitable one among these to fashion into a drum. When I first visited the site in 2008, Jambanna Anchinagudi, my local guide, had informed me that the drum was still sounded on occasions like the village fair, but recently this practice seems to have died out. He said that the stone gave off a rich, resonant note when struck with a smaller rock and that the sound could be heard from kilometres away.

Today, Moriyara Gudda is an eerie deserted site, with the silent stone structures commemorating unknown people from a distant past, but three millennia ago, it must have been a place bustling with activity — teams of stone workers prying loose great slabs from the bedrock, masons shaping these into squarish slabs some two metres across, and still others breaking rock into cobbles. The presence of a rock pool to the south-east of the site, which the megalith builders had enlarged by quarrying, suggests that water must have played an important part in the rituals at this site. And the prominent presence of nagaari gund testifies that whatever these rituals were, they must have played out accompanied by the booming notes of this stone drum.

Ancient stone drums and gongs are not a rare phenomenon and similar examples from the prehistoric past are found at many places worldwide, though they seem to be encountered more often in Africa, Asia and North America. In fact, there is another ancient rock gong quite close to Hire Benakal, near Vanibhadreshwara Temple at Mallapur. This small temple and a couple of associated buildings are located about 3.5 km south-east of Hire Benakal, amidst dramatic scenery of towering granite tors and balancing rocks, one of which has been hewn into a likeness of Nandi. Roughly 50 metre to the east of the temple is a huge boulder, from which a large flake seems to have sloughed off. Closer examination shows a series of cup-shaped depressions, termed cupules, pecked along the periphery of the flake. Striking these cupules with a small stone produces loud metallic notes. Though today the 'musical rock' is just an object of curiosity for visitors to the temple, we can only guess of what importance it was to its

creators.

Rock gongs like this, which are found isolated from the traces of any culture that could have created it, are notoriously difficult to date, unlike nagaari gund which can be attributed to the culture that built the megaliths nearby. Rock gongs and drums seem to have played important roles in the ritual landscapes of prehistory. But how were they created? Robert G Bednarik, renowned rock art expert and someone who has studied the phenomenon of musical rocks across the world, feels that the shape of the rock piece is more important than the rock type, though there does seem to be some preference for granitic stones. Rock gongs, also called lithophones, are usually thin, disc-shaped or elongated. Another consideration seems to be that very little of the surface area of the lithophone should be in contact with the rock it rests on, leaving the rest of the ringing rock to vibrate freely. Both nagaari gund and the rock gong at Vanibhadreshwara Temple fulfil this condition satisfactorily.

### **Vestiges of a bygone era**

Bednarik's views on 'musicality' being independent of rock type is exemplified by the rock gongs of Sanganakallu, near Ballari. Near the village of Sanganakallu is the Kapgal complex of prehistoric sites, with traces of human habitation that might stretch back to the Mesolithic when humans wandered as bands of hunter-gatherers. However, the Sanganakallu-Kapgal complex is most famous for vestiges of occupation and activity from the Neolithic period, roughly 1900-1400BCE. There are remnants of Neolithic villages, rock bruising of cattle and people, evidence of a factory that manufactured stone tools and, of course, several rock gongs. These gongs are of different sizes and shapes and mostly are of dolerite rock. From their distribution and context, it is clear that music from the rock gongs and preparation of the bruising were part of the ritual activity which went on at Neolithic Sanganakallu.

Another instance of music from stone is from the much more recent past – the 'musical pillars' of Vittala Temple at Hampi.

While academics quibble over whether these 'musical' creations were intentional or not, it seems highly unlikely that those artisans who spent so much time and effort striking stone against stone, be it the stone-tool makers of Sanganakallu or the dolmen-builders of Hire Benakal, or metal against stone, like the artisans of Vijayanagar, would have failed to notice the resonant, musical notes of certain forms of rock, when struck.

