

The Impact of Neolithic culture in the Iron Age period - with special reference to Thiyagathurugam

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Abstract

To understanding the cultural transition from Neolithic period to Iron Age or Megalithic period in South India particularly in Tamil Nadu is one of the difficult tasks in the field of Archaeology. The available of archaeological material suggests the existence of certain amount of cultural uniformity. But, drawing a chronological demarcation line between Neolithic period and Early Iron Age period has become a complex issue. The Neolithic period as well as Iron Age is generally determined by the presence of a specific cultural element, namely polished stone tools (so called Celt) and some kind of pottery in the case of Neolithic period and the presence of Iron and the availability of Black and Red ware are consider as the Iron Age culture. But still the presences of polished stone axes were continued even in the end phase of Iron Age culture, this is clearly shows that the impact of its previous cultural tradition. In this article I discuss about the continuation of the Neolithic culture in the form of its impact in the Iron Age period with special references to an Early Iron Age site called Thiyagathurugam in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu.

Key Words - Pre-history, Neolithic, Iron Age, Early historical period.

Introduction

The Pre-historic age was the longest period of Mankind. There was no source like literature, Inscription and Coins for write the history of pre-historic man. In the absence of such sources, we can trace the history of Pre-historic period only with the help of certain common features which existed among them. The Archaeological excavation proved that the people who lived in the Pre-historic period commonly used various types of stones for their protection and livelihood. On the basis of availability of the stone tools which was used in those period we can classified the Pre-historic period into Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Megalithic ages.

Among the stone age culture Palaeolithic period was very long covering more than 80%, starting from the first discovery of a Palaeolithic implement from Pallavaram near present Chennai (1863) by Robert Bruce Foote, the remains of the Palaeolithic culture in south India have been noticed in the States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and AndhraPradesh. The Palaeolithic culture was followed by the Mesolithic or Microlithic period.

The next stage in the evolution of Stone Age culture is represented by that of the Neolithic culture. During this period man ceased to be a savage and began to lead a settled life. In this Age he discovered a primitive form of agriculture, domesticated animals, made pottery and used polished stone tools. These stone tools of this age generally consisted of polished axes, adzes, harvesters, polishers, pounders, chisels and mare heads, besides microlithics. Though they were entered in to the primitive period also continued the previous occupations of hunting, fishing and food gathering.

The first important find of a Neolithic in India was made in 1860 by H.P.La Mesuvier who drew attention to his find of ground and polished stone implements in the Valley of East Tons River in Uttar Pradesh. Since then Neolithic implements have been collected in different parts of India from the surface. Even then it was held by some years ago that there was no Indian culture that could surely be called 'Neolithic'. But the Excavations at Brahmagiri by Mortimer Wheeler (1947) have proved beyond doubt about the extensive use of Neolithic in India, particularly in South India. A brilliant period followed the Brahmagiri excavations by

the identification of a large number of sites revealing Neolithic cultures in Southern, Central, Western, Eastern and Northern India.

Transitional Phase of Neolithic and Megalithic Culture

Understanding the cultural transition from Neolithic period to Iron Age or Megalithic period in South India particularly in Tamil Nadu is one of the difficult tasks in the field of Archaeology. The available archaeological material suggests the existence of certain amount of cultural uniformity. But, drawing a chronological demarcation line between Neolithic period and Iron Age period has become a complex issue. The Neolithic period as well as Iron Age is generally determined by the presence of a specific cultural element, namely polished stone tools (like Celt) and some kind of pottery in the case of Neolithic period. The presence of Iron and the availability of black-and-red ware are taken as the beginning of Iron Age. But, the emergences of Iron are not uniform throughout the Tamil Nadu landscape. The cultural transformation in a particular region covers a wide chronological phase and it is unwise to expect uniformity in its cultural expression throughout the landscape (K.Rajan, 2014). The transformation was achieved by the process of acculturation that is more visible in an area of attraction and less in certain pockets which can be labeled as areas of limited attraction. Thus, how understanding the emergence of Iron Age of Tamil Nadu is a fascinating and a complex affair like that the end of Neolithic cultures also a fascinating and complex one, because the impact of Neolithic culture continued in Iron Age, even in the early historical period.

Thiyakathurugam (11°44'32.1"N 79°04'21.5"E)

The developing village (town) Thiyakathurugam is situated about 12 km East of Kallakurichi, 25 km West of Ulundurpettai on Salem high way in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu (Fig. 1) in southern part of India. The village has two hills in the East – West orientation at nearly 200 m interval, located in South- Western side of this village, in which the first hill from the East has the habitation-cum-burial site of Megalithic culture spread around 100 ha is lies on Southern and South-Western side of the foothill. The River Manimuthanadi flows 2 km south of the site. Deposit of the habitation mound is raised 1.5m height from the normal surface level (Fig. 2), perhaps having the deposit of different culture, will be come to light in feature by a systematic archaeological excavation if carried out. It was an accidental discover and found a few shards of Black-and-Red ware which was brought out due to digging the soil here itself, for road construction in and around the hill for public walk. After that the proper exploration has been carried out in this site and find out many shared like black-and-red ware, red ware and russet coated ware with or without painted design as well as some other antiquities related to the Iron Age culture. Apart from these, some stone tools like polished stone axes were also found here in same context of Iron Age, of course it perhaps not right decision, because it was not from a systematic excavation but from the lay man dug out the earth. But it is sure that, the polished stone tools so called Neolithic celt must have used by the Iron Age people, why because the digging place here in this site not reached up to its natural soil, and even the bottom most depth of this deposit still having the same Iron Age content like pieces of Black-and Red ware, hopscotches of red ware, lid knobs, stone balls like weight measurement etc., so that, the polished stone tools which have collected from here could be used by the Iron Age people, but cannot say whether it was made by themselves or not.

Even it is also a complex task to say whether this site belongs to Iron Age period or Early Historic period because, our Archaeologists says that if there is a availability of records in the form written documents to write or reconstruct the history of any region or country it become historical period, like that the early stages of writing system comes under the Early historical period. So, if there is a symbol, so called crafty marks which was used by the people of those periods but not yet decipher can be comes under the end stages of Iron Age culture and the beginning stages of Early Historical period.

As far as the site Thyakathurugam is concerned many potshards with graffiti marks (Fig. 3) have been collected in associated with other remains of Iron Age culture. So, if we consider this period what we as said above, can put its period as the beginning of the early historical period or the end of the Iron Age culture. Though the polished stone axes were not made by the end phase of Iron Age people, the impact of the Neolithic culture had been continued up to the end phase of the Iron Age culture even in the beginning of the early historical period. It was proved in the Brahmagiri excavation in the year of 1947, by Mortimor Wheeler, there has been identified the Neolithic impact even in the Early historical context.

Antiquities

There are many antiquities like hopscotches made out of both red ware (Fig. 4) and red slipped ware, lid knobs of all black ware (Fig. 5), sling ball (Fig. 6), pestle and spouts have been collected. Besides, some of the polished stone axes (Fig. 7) in different sizes, made out of dolerite stone have been found.

Potteries

Pottery is considered to be the A B C of archaeology. It providing rich data for an understanding of the ancient culture and it is important source for the study of the past society. And also it helps to built up the sequence of cultures and reconstruct the material culture of the ancient people. Since pottery differs in style, shape, size, colour etc., and changes from region to region and age to age, it serves as an important criterion for identifying cultures possessing different traits and tracing out extraneous influences.

Pottery types and shapes might have undergone mild or wild changes according to the taste and needs of the people who belonged to one culture to another. Pottery may also throw some glimpses into the socio-economic and religious condition of the contemporary period. For example, many potsherds bears symbols like the sun, moon, river, mountain etc., which suggest that Nature worship was prevalent in ancient times. The richness of pottery, judged by its fabric, polish, glazing, slips, paintings and decorative designs, no doubt reflects the economic condition and the aesthetic tastes of the people who used it. Hence careful study of pottery helps one to identify the different cultural groups and their origin, extent of their spread and also to some extent their influence on one another the beginning and end of a particular culture or civilization may also be determined with the help of pottery.

Pottery types retrieved from this site include, red ware, Black-and-Red ware, Red slipped ware, black polished ware and russet coated ware. Among them red ware includes pieces of Urn, storage jar and its lid and Black-and-Red ware comprises of bowl, vase and miniature pots. The major portion of the pottery collected from the site includes the typical megalithic Black-and-Red ware. They were produced in the method popularly known as “inverted firing technique”, under reduced oxidizing condition in the kiln and they were invariably wheel turned, well baked and polished. The designs on pottery include white dotted, red coloured wave like design in single row, red coloured dots and a mat like designed russet coated ware has executed. As far as quality of the pottery is concerned, they are all finer and well burnished except a few shards.

GRAFFITI

Graffiti mostly on potsherds started occurring from Harappan times and continued through the chalcolithic, megalithic and early historic phase. Unlike in the north, graffiti marks that found in Tamil Nadu are widespread and almost uniform in character. The idea or the concept of the graffiti marks is more controversial. Stratigraphically, they were found in pre-Tamil-Brahmi and in Brahmi levels. At vallam the Brhami script and graffiti marks found in three stages. In the early stage graffiti alone were found. In the middle, found in association with Tamil-Brahmi scripts and in the late stage the Tamil-Brahmi scripts alone were found. It is now accepted that date of the Tamil-Brahmi goes back to 5th century BC. If one takes the graffiti that are found in pre-brahmi context in Tamil Nadu. So, with the help of study of the graffiti marks we can understand or fix the date of the site comparatively.

As far as the site Thiyagathurugam is concerned there are around 20 potsherds with graffiti marks have been discovered during the exploration and most of them engraved on the shoulder portion of the pot except a few shards has its middle or bottom most portion. Here in this site, though many type of potsherds were collected the graffiti marks mostly found on black-and-red ware by post firing technique. The graffiti marks are consists of simple linear patterns, single, double or triple parallel lines either on the upper, middle or lower portion of potsherds.

Burial Practices

The practices of burying the dead in South India, evolved right from the Neolithic period and they were buried adjoining or within the habitation area. During the exploration in this site some pieces of urn have been collected from adjoining to the habitation mount i.e., in the periphery of both north and southern side of the mount. There is no surface indication to identify the burial complex like boulder circle, dolmen and no any other form. In northern side of the mount i.e., in the foothill some piece of the Urn both its body as well as rim portion have been found while in the Southern side an Urn was found in situ. Though the burials of this site belongs to the Iron Age Period we can say, it could be the impact of the Neolithic culture.

Conclusion

So, on the basis of all above mentioned evidences the site could be belongs to the late Iron Age period or the beginning of the Early historical period. But as we have evidences impact i.e. the practices of burial system and the availability of Stone Axes it is clearly shows that it must be the impact of Neolithic culture and it was continued upto the Early Historical period like the site at Brahmagiri in Karnataka.

As there is no proper excavation carried out we cannot say or fix any accurate date. But, some scholars says that the Tamil-Brahmi script developed from the garaffiti mraaks and here in this site we have collected some of potsherds with graffiti marks which is shows that the date of the site may goes back to pre-Tamil-Brahmi script level i.e., before 5th century B.C. (Porunthal excavation) and continued upto early historical period.



Fig 1 - Thyakadurugam, Location



Fig 2 Deposit of the habitation mound



Fig 3 - Graffiti marks



Fig 4 - Hopscotches



Fig 5 - Lid knob



Fig 2 - Sling Ball



Fig 7 - Stone Axe (Celt)

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