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Neolithic Ashmound of the Konchageri

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Introduction

Konchageri village is 27 kms away from Siruguppa taluk and 35 kms away from Ballari district centre. This village is surrounded by hills. It has small ash mound to its East and Siddaramapurabetta to its West and Kurugodu hills to its South. There are huge granite boulders in this hill. Robert Bruce Foote (1914), during his research study had unearthed crystalline lime stones deposits in the environ of Konchageri village[1]. However, recently an ashmound has been explored during the field survey. The discovery of ash mound near Konchageri has drive home the point that this village was suitable for human habitat during Neolithic period. The present paper discuss about the discovery of ash mound at Konchageri village. The Konchageri ash mound is found in the agriculture field that belongs to Abbe Nagappa. This ash mound is spread in half an acre area. The locals used to dig out soil from this ashmound to increase to the soil fertility and also spread the soil on roof tops. They villagers have been quarrying the soil leaving behind the circular body of the ashmound. This has helped the excavators to unearth this ash mound. This ash mound has hardened and soft vitrified layer of ash. This ash mound is 5.4 feet tall. Excavators have discovered bones from it.[2] The ashmound problem has deep roots in the history of archaeology in the present days. The main dimensions of the ashmound problem, as it is referred in archaeological literature, center on debate over the reasons for and dating of their construction and use. A detailed treatment of its history is beyond the scope of this discussion but excellent summaries are found in Allchin, Rami Reddy, Majumdar, Raja Guru, Sundara and Paddayya.

Allchin in his research book Neolithic Cattle Keepers of South India: A Study of Deccan Ashmounds states that ashmounds are associated with fragments of pottery, stone tools and animal bones. His report shows how these sites provide important clues to the lifeways of the earliest farmers and herders in southern India. Other ancient sites of human habitation, usually located on the tops of dramatic granite hills, share the landscape with the ashmounds. His investigation of ancient plant remains from these hilltop sites, as well as observations on the ashmounds, is helping us to understand the beginnings of agriculture in southern India. Ashmounds are made of stratified deposits of

decomposing, burned and vitrified cow dung along with mixed soils, and usually contain some fragments of pottery, stone tools and animal bones[3]

Rami Reddy opines that After extensive excavations at numerous sites and chemical examination of the contents of the mounds, it is now widely accepted that ash mounds are the remains of cattle dung heaps which had been regularly and perhaps ritually burned over the course of their many years of use. Presence of regular lines of postholes in the earliest layers of the mound, followed by a raised barrier of dung built around the periphery of some of the mounds reinforces this hypothesis. The glassy appearance of the ash blocks could be due to the presence of silica in the straw/grass pieces/particles in the dung; the intriguing question is about the temperature at which this silica melted and fused

Robert Bruce Foote says that there are basically two hypotheses concerning the mobility of cattle herds implied in the structure and location of the ash mounds. One is the seasonal movement of herds from one location to another to adjust to the symbiotic requirements of the farmers and the herders. Paddayya posited that these accumulations of dung and subsequent burning were likely the result of the efforts of the Neolithic inhabitants of adjacent settlements to keep their communities clean of the vermin associated with animal fecal matter.

K. Paddayya argues that ash mounds were Neolithic dung refuse piles appended to cattle pens located within pastoral village sites. He agrees with Allchin assignment of a possible ritual function for the ash mounds although specific details beyond his consideration of the cyclical and episodic burning of the dung are not offered. Based on the result of decades of survey and excavation Paddayya argues that ash mounds are central features located within sedentary Neolithic settlements.[4]

Sundara A argues that ash mounds are found within a range of sites related to Neolithic pastoral activities, yet none of which should be considered permanent, year-round settlements. They base these conclusions on the low densities or absence of occupational debris surrounding many ashmounds, environmental and topographical similarities of non-ashmound settlement sites vs. variety in ashmound site locales, and the contrast of thicker and more extensive archaeological deposits in non-ash mound settlements with the thinner occupational deposits at ash mound sites. The ash mound excavated at Konchageri resembles the ash mounds excavted in Kappagallu, Sanganakallu, Kudutini, Kakubalu, Venkatapura and other sites. These observations seem to indicate that ashmound construction activities were carried out regularly and repeatedly yet with differential building rhythm and tempo throughout

much of the South Indian Neolithic. This paper examines ash mound features as important monumental places, integral parts of a Neolithic cultural landscape. The landscape of the Neolithic was something both inhabited and conceptualized by its prehistoric occupants; a multitude of interconnected places in which specific economic practices were conducted and social and ideological relations mediated, maintained, modified, and reinvented. Landscape production involves social and spatial practice, perception, and conception as critical moments within historically and culturally unique fields of social action. It does not simply entail the construction or fabrication of things in space but rather the active configuration of social relations and forms through dynamic and historically contingent processes. These processes are both material and ideological and articulate the natural environment with human knowledge, technology, and labour. The abundance of the remains of native plants in the earliest levels so far sampled indicates that indigenous crops played an important role in

the local development of agriculture, a conclusion that counters the widely held view that the beginnings of agriculture in most parts of the world resulted from dispersal from one of a few primary centers. Agriculture appears to have begun in southern India during a period when rainfall was declining, and the effects of this on vegetation and human communities may be important for understanding the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture - a process that transformed the cultural and natural landscape from one used by hunter-gatherers in the Neolithic through the practices of village agriculturalists[5].

Conclusion

The present paper has made an attempt to analyze the newly explored ash mound in Konchageri village. It is imperative to explore the how and why ash mounds were formed and the rationality behind such constructions . Comprehensive research studies in this aspect are the need of the hour. (I am grateful to my research Guide Dr. Ramesh Nayak for his continued support and thank Thippeswamy and Satish M B for giving me positive suggestions during the field study.

End notes:

1. Robert Bruce Foote, 1914, The Foote Collection of the Indian Pre Historic And Post Historic Antiquities Page 74-76.
2. Ramesh Nayak 2015, Yadagiri Jilleya Samskrutika Adhyayana (unpublished PhD dissertation) Kannada University, Hampi. Page 32-33.
3. Fieldwork information
4. Paddayya, K. 2019, Neolithic Ashmounds of the Deccan, Aryan Books, New Delhi.Page 28
5. Vasudeva Badiger 2012, Ballari Parisarada Samskrutika Parisara, Prasaranga, Kananda University, Hampi page 11-12.

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PHOTOS

Neolithic Ashmound and Tools (Hammerstones) at konchageri