

# Neolithic culture in South Maidan, Karnataka, India

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## Abstract

*The neolithic period may be regarded as a major stepping stone in the progress of man from pre-history towards proto-history and history. It was during Neolithic period that there was a noticeable shift in subsistence patterns and a marked improvement in technology as reflected by tool types, making of varied types of pottery, ornaments particularly beads, terracotta, etc. The present paper contextualizes the neolithic culture as it existed in South Maidan with respect to the local environmental conditions. An effort has been made to understand the manner in which the neolithic communities utilized the immediately available sources to meet their requirements. Also, the establishment of exchange networks has been taken into account to understand their contribution to the sustenance of neolithic settlements.*

**Keywords:** *archaeological assemblage, minerals, animal remains.*

## Introduction

In Karnataka there is a fundamental division-recognised in both traditional and official nomenclature- between the forested Malnad in the west and the more open country of the Maidan in the east: the transition is in places remarkably abrupt (Spate and Learmonth, 1984:701). Karnataka plateau with its Malnad rim and Maidan character is diversified by the Krishna and Cauvery river systems, rainfall variability resulting in varying patterns of land use and settlements. The vast Maidan, so named after its relatively low and subdued relief, is divided into north and south, largely owing to cultural differences, the former is mostly drained by the Krishna and the latter by the Cauvery system. South Maidan (Chitradurga, Tumkur, Bangalore, Mysore), is a plateau region studded with bare granitic boulders and hills. The region has a relatively moderate climate with greater variability of rainfall, the drier parts lie around

Chitradurga, in the extreme east near Kolar and around Srirangapatam. The region is very rich in mineral deposits, particularly in iron ore, manganese, gold, etc. (Singh, 1971:817, 819). The availability of resources, river systems and suitable climatic conditions has encouraged human habitation in this region through the millennia. The evidence for the neolithic period can be found almost all over Karnataka with some areas such as North Maidan being extremely rich in the typical archaeological remains. However, South Maidan may not be as rich but it does have remains of neolithic culture (Fig.1). It has been hospitable for human occupation from the prehistoric, through the proto-historic and historic period. Neolithic culture appears to have commenced in parts of Karnataka by the middle of the third millennium B.C. and continued till about 1200-1100 BC.

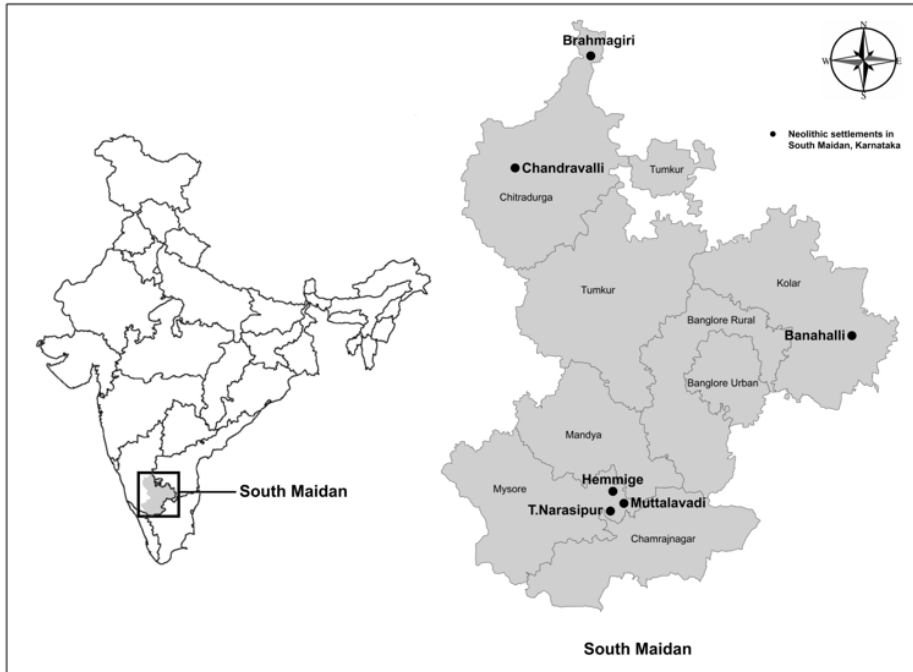


Fig.1. Neolithic Settlements in South Maidaan (based on Google Earth Image)

**Aim**

The aim of the paper is to understand the neolithic culture as it flourished in the region of South Maidaan and try and contextualize it with respect to the availability of sources and prevailing environmental conditions. Neolithic settlements have been found on the terraces of hills as well as close to the rivers or on the river banks. Did these settlements derive their sustenance completely from the immediately available sources? Did the Neolithic communities develop any exchange network to fulfill their requirements or did they have some kind of interaction with other communities? Was there a beginning of vocational specialization even if it was only nascent? These are some of the issues which the author has tried to investigate.

**Methodology**

The primary source used to prepare the historical narrative is the archaeological remains that have been recovered in the course of excavations and explorations. The details of settlements including the find spots, immediate surroundings and description of archaeological artefacts are given in the excavation reports and reviews which have been extensively used. Further, the information about the local geographical conditions is given in the District Gazetteers and it has been incorporated in the paper.

**The Geographical Setting**

The state of Karnataka occupies a position physically well defined, in the south of India; and has been termed a rocky triangle- a not inapt description. It is a table-land, situated

in the angle where the Eastern and Western Ghat ranges converge into the group of the Nilgiri hills. West, south and east, therefore it is enclosed by chains of mountains, on whose shoulders the plateau which constitutes the country rests. The general elevation rises from about 2,000 feet above the sea level along the northern and southern frontiers to about 3000 feet along the central water-parting, which separates the basin of the Krishna from that of the Kaveri and divides the country into two nearly equal parts. The face of the country is everywhere undulating, much broken up by lines of rocky hills or lofty mountains and scored in all parts by deep ravines. The region of Karnataka extends from the Deccan lavas on the north to the Moyar in the south, the western limit is the Ghats crests and to the south-east, the border hills and scraps of the Mysore plateau provide a fairly sharp boundary between the Moyar and the Palar. In general, the region corresponds with the area in which Kannada or Kanarese speech is dominant. However, the lower levels of the Raichur Doab and Anantapur district go more naturally with Telangana. There is a belt of cultural conflict with Maharashtra. Karnataka covers 74,210 miles<sup>2</sup> (1,92,204 km<sup>2</sup>) and is nearly two and a half times as large as the old princely state, incorporating Coorg; South Kanara and Bellary from Madras; North Kanara, Belgaum, Bijapur and Dharwar districts from old Bombay; Raichur, Gulbarga and Bidar from Hyderabad (Spate and Learmonth, 1984:700-701).

Rock types that predominate in South Maidan include Crystalline Schists, Granite Gneisses, Granites, Closepet Granites, Dharwars, Gneissic Complex, Dolerite Dykes and Laterites (Gazetteer of India Chitradurga District:11-13; Gazetteer of India Tumkur

District:12-13). Minerals found in South Maidan are asbestos, antimony ore, bauxite, corundum, copper, chromite, calcite, gold, iron, limestone, lead, manganese, pyrites, white quartz, construction material like clay, granites, silver sand, feldspar, garnet, and soapstone (Gazetteer of India Chitradurga District:13-18; Gazetteer of India Tumkur District:14-16). Karnataka along with these resources has had a very sound agricultural base due to the availability of fertile soils, adequate water for irrigation and conducive climatic conditions. The Maidan consists in general of a rolling plateau rising in the east (between Tumkur and Kolar) into disjointed granitic hills of irregular plan and elevation (Spate and Learmonth, 1984:702). The level plains with fertile soils are highly suitable for agriculture, with the result that agriculture is an extremely important occupation. Karnataka is well endowed with natural resources of various types but the distribution of these natural resources is not uniform, with some areas being rich in forest and faunal wealth (Malnad) while others being more suitable for agriculture (Maidan). The abundance and unbalanced distribution of these resources have influenced the course of historical development.

### **Archaeological assemblage**

The evidence for neolithic culture has been located at various settlements in South Maidan. Some of the notable excavated settlements are Brahmagiri, T. Narasipur, Hemmige, Muttalavadi, Chandravalli, Banahalli which have been discussed in this section and the archaeological assemblage recovered is mentioned in the tables.

Brahmagiri is a granite outcrop, rising some 600 ft. above the plain, within the Molkalmuru taluk of District Chitradurga.

R.E.M. Wheeler excavated the site in 1947 and established a sequence of three cultures- The Brahmagiri Stone Axe culture (phase I - sub-natural surface); The Megalithic culture (phase II- extending to a height of 3-4 ft.); The Andhra culture (phase III - 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 ft. thick). The stone axe culture has been divided into two phases- phase IA and phases IB (see Table 1). In 1956 the site of Brahmagiri was re-explored by Seshadri who collected flake

tools of jasper, chert such as scrapers and assigned them to pre 1-A phase of Wheeler.

An important site to give information about neolithic-chalcolithic culture as it flourished in South Karnataka is T. Narasipur, district Mysore (*I.A.R.*, 1958-59; *I.A.R.*, 1959-60; *I.A.R.*, 1961-62; *I.A.R.*, 1964-65). The excavation was conducted at the site by M. Seshadri in the late fifties and sixties (see Table 2).

Table 1 Brahmagiri

Structures	Pottery		Stone Objects			Ornaments	Burials
	Fabrics and shapes	Surface Treatment and Decoration	Polished Stone Axes	Microliths	Other Stone Objects		
Post-holes indicated that the houses had been mostly of timber, occasionally supplemented by basic lines or low walls of rough granite blocks	Coarse grey ware Painted ware. Incised ware. Painted ware - The painted sherds have alternatively a red or a buff slip. Those with a red slip are urnished and seem to have been salt glazed. Those with a buff slip are neither burnished nor glazed	The painted decoration is applied after firing. The pigment is ochre with a predominantly brownish-purple colour. The patterns executed included curved lines possibly representing in some cases a summary and highly conventionalized plant pattern.  The incised decoration consisted of elementary herring-bone or criss-cross patterns	One complete axe; three broken axes, many chips	Nine microliths the double-edged blade without retouch; double-edged blade without retouch; simple serrated blade; point; chisel ended blade	A saddle quern of granite; three rubbers; a stone ball	Bead agate-one	Burials were of two kinds. Infant burials. Two other inhumation burials were found

Source: Wheeler R.E.M., 1948

Table 2 T. Narasipur

References	Pottery	Stone Objects	Burials	Metal objects
I.A.R. 1958-59, p.33	Thick burnished grey ware. Few burnished sherds in orange-red and brown. Some of the orange-red ones had curved lines in violet and some of the grey ones incised ornamentation. A clay object, neck rest, was found	Polished stone axes; pounders; fluted core		
I.A.R., 1959-60, P.38	Burnished grey pottery. Coarse grey thick ware. Coarse grey ware had simple incised designs like crossed straight or oblique lines or herringbone			
I.A.R., 1961-62 pp. 35-36			The skeleton lay in an east-west direction with its hands placed over each other on the abdomen part. Besides the head were found two pots of the handmade cream-coloured ware together with a shallow bowl with channel-spout. A neck-rest was found placed by the right side of the head	
I.A.R., 1964-65 p.32	Burnished and unburnished wares	A quartz blade flake with a prominent bulb of percussion and radial lines		
I.A.R. 1959-60, p.38 (Chalcolithic remains)	Fragment of Jorwe ware			
I.A.R. 1964-65, p.32 (Chalcolithic remains)	Sherds of black-painted red ware			A biconical copper bead

Source: *Indian Archaeology – A Review, 1958-59, 1959-60, 1961-62, 1964-65*

Table 3 Hemmige

Structures	Pottery		Stone objects			Metal objects	Ornaments	Animal remains
	Fabrics	Surface treatment and Decoration	Pecked and Ground Stone industry	Flake industry	Blade industry			
Area A -Possibly rectangular houses built of pise walls. Area B – Few post-holes with no tangible plan in their location	Area A - Eighteen pots were recovered red ware; burnished buff ware Area B – 1 burnished grey ware; burnished buff ware; burnished red ware. Head-rest	Area A -Burnishing; painting with red ochre. Area B – Burnishing; Post-firing ochre smearing	Area B – Thirty implements. axes; hammer stones; a fragment of a spherical rubber; hammer stone or pounder; grinding stone; quern	Area B – Discoidal scraper; side scraper; convex scraper; flake blade; core-cum-hammer; core	Area B – fluted core; parallel-sided blade	Area B – One small somewhat twisted flat piece of copper measuring 2 x 1/2 cm	Area B - Bead - terracotta	Area B – A few heaps of bones

Source: Rao M.H. and S. Nagaraju, 1974

Hemmige is a small village in the Talkad Hobli of T. Narasipur Taluk, District Mysore. It is located on the right bank of the river Kaveri, 12 km. east of T. Narasipur. In 1964, the site was excavated by M. II. Rao and S. Nagaraju. The excavation was undertaken at two sites, Area A (the site near the village) and Area B (the site on the Adiyantittu island) (see Table 3).

Muttalavadi is located on the left bank of the river Kaveri, in district Mysore. The site was excavated by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Karnataka (see Table 4).

Chandravalli lies in a triangular valley of the same name formed by three hills, the Chitradurga, the Kirakanakallu and the Cholagudda in district Chitradurga. The site was excavated on four occasions, by L. Narasimhachar, M.H. Krishna, R.E.M, Wheeler and V. Mishra. The excavations established a threefold culture sequence—the neolithic, the megalithic and the early historical (see Table 5).

Banahalli is located in district Kolar. It lies in the upper reaches of the Palar basin. It was excavated over three seasons. On the first occasion, it was excavated by LK Srinivasan

Table 4 Muttalvadi

Pottery	Stone Objects	Ornaments
Burnished grey ware	Ground Stone axes; axe-hammers	Shell bead

Source: Indian Archaeology – A Review, 1974-75

Table 5 Chandravalli

Excavation at Chandravalli – M.H. Krishna	Excavation by V. Mishra and K. Venkateswara Rao Indian Archaeology 1977-78 – A Review		
Stone objects	Structures	Pottery	Stone objects
Celts and pounders	Remains of huts with circular flooring and post-holes at regular intervals	Burnished grey ware with coarse core	Number of ground stones axes with lenticular section and sharp cutting edge

and B.S. Nayal. The excavation established a fourfold culture sequence- neolithic-period I, neolithic-megalithic-period II, megalithic period III, early historic-period IV. On the second occasion, the site was excavated by B. Narasimhaiah. The culture sequence revealed was chalcolithic- megalithic; megalithic; early historic. The third excavation was under the direction of B. Narasimhaiah. The culture sequence which came to light was neolithic period IA; neolithic-chalcolithic period IB; chalcolithic-early Iron Age period II, Iron Age period III; early historical-period IV (see Table 6).

### Discussion

Excavations and explorations have proved beyond doubt that neolithic culture existed nearly all over Karnataka. A closer scrutiny of the available evidence however reveals that there was no uniformity in the chronological and spatial distribution of the neolithic culture. Neolithic culture appears to have unfolded itself in parts of Karnataka by the middle of the third millennium B.C. This early phase is known from sites of the ash-mound type, such as the one at Kodekal, district Gulbarga. A C-14 date of 2335 B.C. was obtained from Kodekal. At T. Narasipur of district Mysore, neolithic culture has been assigned a date between the beginning of the second millennium B.C. to 800 B.C. The C-14 dates available for T. Narasipur

are  $1495 \pm 110$  B.C. and  $1805 \pm 110$  B.C. At Hemmige, district Mysore, the neolithic-chalcolithic culture has been dated around the middle of the second millennium B.C. The dating of these various sites points towards the spread of neolithic-chalcolithic culture from the north towards south.

Neolithic culture flourished in South Maidaan but from the available evidence, it seems that certain parts such as Kolar and upper Kaveri valley were particularly rich in the vestiges of the neolithic culture. The major excavated settlements of this region were generally located on or very near the rivers, as for instance Hemmige on the right bank of Kaveri, T. Narasipur on the left bank of Kaveri (at the confluence of Kaveri and Kapini), Muttalavadi on the left bank of Kaveri, Banahalli in the upper reaches of the Palar and Brahmagiri close to Chinnahagari. Some of the explored sites were also located on river banks like Shivakalli on the right bank of the river Suvarnavati, Booditittu on the right bank of the river Suvarnavati, Hosahalli on the left bank of the river Suvarnavati, Booditittu on both sides of a small stream known as Gundla which joins the river Suvarnavati and Yechagalli on the left bank of the river Kapini (Krishnamurty 1971:6-7). Proximity to the rivers must have fulfilled not only the basic needs of subsistence including agriculture but would

Table 6: Banahalli

IAR Reference	Structures	Pottery	Stone Objects			Metal objects	Bone objects	Animal Remains	Burials
			Pecked and Ground Stone Industry	Microolithic Industry	Other stone objects				
1973-74, p. 17		Burnished grey ware		Microoliths					
1983-84, pp. 42-45	A portion of circular house plan with an approximate diameter of 320 m was exposed	Burnished buff ware; red ware; grey ware; back-on-red ware; thick buff red ware Grey ware has the post-firing ochre colour painting on the rim portion A design of cross hatched segment and triangles is found on black-and-red ware A potter's kiln was found		Two cores of quartz			Small and big bones of a quadruped representing an animal. Large quantities of charred bones with cut marks		
1986-87, pp. 42-44	Period I A - House plans as indicated by the post holes throughout remained to be circular. The hearths were located outside the hut	Burnished and unburnished grey ware; tan ware; red ware	Axes; adzes; dabbers; rubbers; burnishers of basalt and granite	Blades; lunates; flakes; fluted cores of quartz and chert	Saddle querns of granite		Points made of bone		
1986-87, pp. 12-44 (Essentially Neolithic but with chalcolithic traits)	Small circular houses of approximately 2.50 m in diameter were built in clusters, where the large circular house of the previous period was existing			Microoliths		A copper parer	Bone tools		Vertical urn burials

Source: *Indian Archaeology – A Review, 1973-74, 1983-84, 1986-87*



have facilitated traffic as well. However, the discovery of rock shelters at Chandravalli and West hill of French Rocks indicated that the neolithic group also inhabited hills.

These settlements appear to have been reasonably well-populated as can be inferred from a large amount of pottery found. It seems that like North Maidan, South Maidan also enjoyed a sound economic base that helped in sustaining various neolithic settlements. The remains of cattle, sheep, goats and buffalo indicate that people practised a pastoral economy. The bones of cattle, sheep and goats often bear chopping marks. Many of them were charred suggesting that they were roasted. Thus, the flesh of these animals was devoured by the neolithic people. Certain tools like axes, points and stone balls showed that man continued to practice hunting. Blades mounted together in a composite haft of wood or bone in a gummy matrix could have been used for scraping the hides and skins. The available evidence points towards agriculture as one of the vocations of neolithic man particularly in the region of Kaveri valley. The alluvial plains on the banks of river Kaveri and its tributaries Hamavathi, Lokapavani, Shimsha on the north and Lakshmana Tirtha, Kabbini (Kapila) and Suvarnavathi (Honnuhole) to the south constitute one of the most fertile areas in Karnataka, encouraging agriculture (Rao and Nagaraju, 1974:3). Further, the identification of two ossified hock joints at T. Narasipur is highly suggestive of the fact that cattle were possibly used for heavy draft purposes (Sahu 1988:196). Tools such as querns, rubbers, blades and grinding stone indicated the use of grain. There was now growing reliance on agriculture which resulted in new patterns of land use. The communities began to rely on

the land they were cultivating and this bonding grew steadily and over a period of time land became an asset for the farming groups. In the subsequent proto-historic and historic period land became an important variable for class constructs and social formations.

The subsistence economy was further reinforced by various kinds of crafts. The abundant pottery found indicates that pot making might have been an important craft. The evidence for the use of gold at T. Narasipur showed that neolithic man exploited the locally available minerals. Gold is found in Mysore and Kolar gold mines. Among other important crafts were tool making, ornament making particularly of beads and terracotta. Along with essential articles such as pottery and tools there is evidence for ornaments and terracotta. These give insights into the aesthetic aspect of neolithic people. Beads found were made of agate, magnesite, terracotta and shell. The finer instinct of man was reflected not only by ornaments but also by various types of terracotta. The availability of these various crafts points towards the beginning of the division of labour and perhaps nascent specialization.

Some kind of elementary exchange probably took place in the region of South Maidan as well. The location of many of the sites on or near the rivers must have aided this exchange. At T. Narasipur, Muttalavadi, Hemmige, Telnur, Shivakalli, Booditittu, Hosahalli and Yechagalli varieties of pecked and ground stone implements made of trap rock have been found. However, in the area where these sites are situated i.e. Mysore, trap rock is not available. Only finished implements were recovered with no waste flakes or rejects. Hence, there is a probability that finished polished stone

implements were imported to this area from elsewhere. This possibility is substantiated by the occurrence of a few crudely made implements on granite imitating the trap ones (Krishnamurty 1971:10). Furthermore, a factory site was reported from Gangasandra. There is a possibility that tools from this site were sent across to settlements where they might have been in demand. A tentative indication of external contact comes from T. Narasipur, Hemmige and Piklihal (on the rock face above site VIII) and Hallur (the latter two sites are located in North Maidan). An interesting artefact recorded at sites such as T. Narasipur, Piklihal (on the rock face above site VIII), Hemmige and Hallur is the neck-rest. Almost all the pottery specimens were made of burnished grey ware. They were sometimes painted with red ochre after they were fired. They had a carefully burnished concave top and a hollow stand. On the basis, of radiocarbon dates for both T. Narasipur and Hallur, the neck-rest or the head-rest can safely be assigned to a period beginning from 1800 B.C. At T. Narasipur, a complete specimen was found near the right side of the skull in the burial pit. On this basis the sepulchral use of these objects was established. Their geographical distribution is confined only to neolithic Karnataka. Interestingly head-rests made of various materials such as ivory, lapis-lazuli; wood and occasionally pottery have been found in Egypt from pre-Dynastic times down to the Roman period. One of the most common types is almost similar to the examples from neolithic sites of Karnataka. In Egypt head-rests invariably formed part of the burial appendage (Nagaraja Rao 1985:144). In

Africa, there is ample modern ethnographic evidence for the use of head-rests. The tribes of Maszana and Makabanga of southern Rhodesia and Balubas of Congo use wooden head-rests (Nagaraja Rao 1985:144). This evidence tends to suggest possible contacts between South India and Egypt which need to be explored.

### Conclusion

South Maidan was endowed with natural resources including fertile land and minerals thereby attracting settlements that have been located both on the river banks and hills. Agriculture, though on a limited scale along with the domestication of animals and hunting constituted the base of the economy. Craft making was known during this period. The endowment of natural resources was perhaps the factor responsible for the continued occupation of South Maidan in the megalithic and early historic period when the settlements were more in number and clearly gave evidence for varied archaeological remains hinting at a progressively more complex culture.

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