

# Memorial Stones and their Unknown Builders: Archaeology of Lesser-known Facts

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## Abstract

The Indian subcontinent has a long tradition of erecting commemorative stones for deceased ancestors. This tradition started in the Prehistoric Megalithic and is still in practice today. The purpose of the earthly rituals and rites concerned with death is mainly to eradicate the spread of pollution from the dead body and to transfer the soul successfully to another world. These memorial stones have different names in different regions, such as 'Viragals', 'Gadhegals' etc. The concept of the death cult is a widely discussed phenomena in Indian archaeology and centres around erected structures such as megaliths, *satī*-stones, *samādhis*, *chattrīs*, *vṛndāvanas* and unhewn stones. Despite some differences, the architectural features of memory stones associated with the concept of commemorating death have some uniformity all over the subcontinent throughout the time period under discussion. As there is no definite literary evidence, here the question arises as to who built these memorial stones? Was there any homogenous community especially associated with such practices? Uniformity in the execution procedure of these stones suggests a community that had been functional since early times. Our research will look for this lesser-known community, who have never been fully studied. It will further try to understand how these monuments have influenced the present communities and their impact on their daily livelihood.

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## Introduction

The concept of death and the afterlife is a widely discussed phenomenon on the Indian subcontinent. The aims of the worldly rituals and rites associated with death are mainly to eradicate the spread of contamination from the corpse and to transfer the dead soul successfully to another world (Kane 1953). Since prehistoric times, the concept of death has had a significant impact on humankind, and especially for those people who have sacrificed their lives for some noble cause. The departed soul often remains alive in the memory of their near and dear ones after leaving this world. This process of memorization has found expression in different ways and one of them is the erection of the memorial stones, which are generally erected for the commemoration of some important events, and especially to honour a person who died a heroic death during a violent contest for a public cause. It has been observed that the erection of hero stones is not attached in any way to the actual practice of the disposal of the dead (Tripathi 2006). A memorial stone generally bears some pertinent epigraphical and iconographical features that convey key information about the identity of the deceased and the context of his death (Trinco 2014).

The regional variation of memorial stones, along with their geographical distribution, is very significant for a better understanding of their context (Tripathi 2006). The term 'hero stone', which is one of the prototypes of memorial stones (Settar and Sontheimer 1982), has been expressed in different terms according to regional variety and structural changes, such as '*Viragals*' in Marathi, '*Virakkal*' in Tamil, '*Virakallu*' in Telugu, '*Viragallu*' in Kannda, '*Chayastambha*' in Andhra Pradesh (Murthy 1982 and '*Khambha*' or '*Khambi*' in northern or central India (Sontheimer 1982; Shah 1982; Doshi 1982). In Gujarat and Rajasthan, they are solely constructed to commemorate the protector of the community (Doshi 1982).

## Origin and History of Memorial Stones

The years-old tradition of erecting memorial stones on the Indian subcontinent is mainly represented by scenes of land battles, conflicts over cattle and war horses and elephants (Ramabraham & Challa 2016). The major difference between the memorial stones and hero stones is that the latter are solely dedicated to the people who participated or died in battles or any similar kind of activities. Vedic texts yield evidence of the erection of monuments in the memory of a dead person. The Satapatha Brahmana (9<sup>th</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) also refers to the mechanism of erecting memorial stones in memory of the clan leaders. It further discusses its relationship with the funeral practices prevalent during that period. The Sangam literature (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE - 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), such as '*Ahananuru*' and '*Purananuru*,' refers to hero stones (Nagaswamy 1974). Scholars have pointed out that that these memorial stones either have their origin in the Megalithic culture (Srinivasan 1946; Sontheimer

1976; Thapar 1981), or had a probable link with some Indo-European cultures (Deo 1973; Leshnik 1974; Allchin & Allchin 1982). Oral traditions of present-day aboriginal groups reflect those memorial stones were generally erected in a place where the hero took his last breath or the place where his remains have been buried, or sometimes in a native village or at a place where his relatives resided (Vanamalai 1975).

## Ideas and Purposes of the Memorial Stones

The memorial stones have one common characteristic in that they represent cattle breeding societies. If we look at the pan India picture, most of the memorial stones were erected to glorify their 'hero', who has been killed in cattle raids, as the memorial stones depicting cattle raids in their lowest panel generally indicate the dominant pastoral economy of bygone societies and also throw light on social mobility. On the other hand, if we look into the emergence of the Rajput nobility in medieval India, it is known that the memorial stones are an important indicator of a social hierarchy and are also associated with status (Dandekar 1995).

Other than scenes of cattle raids, sometimes women are also depicted on these memorial stones and Vassilkov (2011) identified these women as the ones who were either rescued or defended by the hero from violence, or as the female warriors who fought for the protection of their clan members. The concept of 'undying fame' is also reflected on these stones (Vassilkov 2011), as it can be observed that most of them had multiple panels depicting the 'hero' with his weapon, or the 'hero' fighting with his enemy. Keeping the glory of heroes alive after death is the premier motive for erecting them. In some traditions, the 'hero' is personified as a god accepting offerings from his fellow countrymen (Settar & Sontheimer 1982).

Apart from these, there are memorial stones that are used as a boundary-markers on an individual's land or a property owned by one particular clan. Wooden posts engraved with a figure of a warrior (identified as the protector of the clan) are erected on the village boundary. Ass-curse symbols engraved on a memorial stone are mostly found on land donated to some religious bodies.

Even today, memorial stones, popularly identified as tomb-stones, are constructed by the near and dear ones of the deceased, and are rarely found in association with the ashes or charred bones of the dead person (Ramabraham & Challa 2016). These solely dedicated commemorative stones are currently regarded as an integral part of funerary traditions, which has led to the emergence of a particular, specialized 'class' or group of people in the society who are professionally associated with cremation or burial procedures and who construct such memorial stones.

## Discussions

Both Resilience and Vulnerability are associated with the adaptation, evolution and sustainability pathway, and they are closely linked. Vulnerability, being one of the defining components to determine the degree of a disaster, which itself is a human construct. To date, the Resilience and Vulnerability model has been duly used in the human-environment adaptation model. In our current study, we have tried to focus on the model of social resilience, to predict the longevity of society and how the cultural factor played a conducive role in connecting the above two phenomena.

Firstly, memorial stones bear the testimony of the people who have always remained unrecognised in mainstream societal norms, i.e., royal charters or other pertinent literary sources. The concept of the glorification of the death of a local chief and its association with the erection of stones has its roots deeply in the cultural milieu of the sub-continent, though these local leaders were an integral part of the local folk traditions and have their roots in the tribal and folk religious practices of the region. So, it can be concluded that these commemorative monuments played an important role in defining religious and cultic spaces, and there are instances where these memorial stones are found in association with Brahmanical temples.

It can therefore be established that, in the case of memorial stones in India, the tradition was directly connected with the agro-pastoral communities of India. Memorial stones or their prototypes, such as hero-stones, somehow worked as a symbol of glory, valour and sacrifice. Being identified as a marginalized community and under constant threats from the landholders, these vulnerable communities created their way of resilience. According to Romila Thapar (2000), these types of memorial stones are found less frequently in the areas where agriculture flourished, as there would be less fighting over livestock in those areas. She further stated that, due to the growth of agriculture and with the emergence of a stable economy, the land fights related to livestock and cattle declined, which gave these marginalised communities their own identity and allowed them to assimilate them into mainstream society.

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