INTRODUCTION

The study of Indian megaliths has a history of over a century-and-a-half, beginning with Babington's discovery of the megaliths in the early nineteenth century. Much has been written, and continues to be written about the megaliths of India. However a very serious problem is that most of the writings on Indian megalithism have tended to view 'the megaliths' as one cultural phenomenon or horizon. The above presumption is based on a certain homogeneity of artefactual assemblages (irrespective of their context) like Black-and-Red ware pottery, distinctive iron tools and weapons and burial forms. Further, there have been attempts to link areas of particular archaeological cultures with particular ethnic and language groupings-- so that the 'megalithic culture' becomes a people, speaking a particular language (Aryan or Dravidian) who arrived in Peninsular India and spread gradually all over the south. The fact that there may not be a necessary relationship between boundaries of any given body of material culture and group affiliation is not considered.

However, is a mere spatial-temporal variation of certain artefact-types, irrespective of their context (whether they were recovered from megalithic burial or habitation sites), basis enough for defining an archaeological culture? How then, does one explain similar types which occur in other areas and other times; or those distinctive of one 'culture' which might turn up sporadically associated with another culture? It must be pointed out that no group of cultural assemblage of artefact-types ever contains, nor did ever contain all of the cultural artefacts (Childe 1956 : 33; 1963 : 41). And thus it is not correct to define a culture on the basis of a single type(s).

It is this confusion regarding what actually constitutes an archaeological culture; and the criterion applied to differentiate one culture from another (after all, where is the cut off point or dividing line?) which initiated me to undertake a small exercise examining the concept of 'culture' in archaeology, for which I have chosen an archaeologically coherent entity both
in terms of space and time and consisting of two kinds of archaeological phenomena, i.e. megalithic burials and habitation sites in the region of Vidarbha (Maharashtra). In Vidarbha we have a tight cluster of megalithic stone circle and habitation sites not spilling over into the regions around. The rough date is between 8-7 B.C. to 4-3 B.C.

The entity called culture in archaeology (comprising like assemblages in a region) turns out not to be a self evident or a pre-defined starting truth especially when translated into social terms (a 'tribe' or 'people' or 'society'). The archaeological culture is not an empirical entity immediately apparent on inspection of the archaeological record. The same group of Nunamiut Caribou hunters use entirely different set of tools in different locations, for example, the tools found at the 'kill' site are different from those at the butchering site or the storage site (Binford 1983: 109-43), so that an archaeologist might predict four cultures, therefore groups, in place of one. Petrequin (1993) stresses how similar excavated material culture items can be, even amongst groups whose subsistence varied, and even in the Swiss lakes area with its well-preserved remains: he points out were an archaeologist to handle remains of the Anga of New Guinea, he might, on the basis of variation in house form, snares, bows and arrows, infer two separate cultures, whereas for the anthropologist the Anga area is a cultural and linguistic unit divided into 30 recognizable tribes.

Archaeologists, it must be remembered deal with units of analysis which are the material remains assemblages, group of like assemblages etc. It is not easy to translate such material entities into the historian's or the anthropologists 'culture', or 'culture area' leave alone a 'tribe' or 'ethnic group' or 'historical region'. Therefore the archaeologist has jumped from units of analysis which are just material objects to units of ideas such as 'culture' or 'culture area' or 'tribe' or 'ethnic group'. Therefore what is an archaeological culture?
We need to point out at the very onset that the archaeologist deals with only a fraction of material culture items. And all inference in archaeology is via material culture alone. David Clarke in his book *Analytical Archaeology* honestly admits that if there are 100 basic material cultural traits in a peoples culture the archaeologist can never hope to recover more that 15 of these! (1978 : 380). And it is on the basis of this 15 percent that all inferences have to be drawn regarding the once dynamic past. Moreover the limited material evidence we have is ambiguous, with no straightforward relationship between the past and the present record. Material culture thus needs to be studied contextually, i.e., by considering the network of relationship which give meaning to the artefactual record. That is to say an object never signifies in and of itself, but through a web of relations which make up a context (Thomas 1996 : 71).

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part-I deals exclusively with the theoretical debate on the anthropological and archaeological understanding of the culture concept. A two way theory-data relationship naturally enhances the adequacy of archaeological explanations (Snodgrass 1985 : 32). Thus Part-II is an attempt to apply the theoretical concepts on culture to my case study of the Vidarbhan megalithic sites (burial and habitation). It must be pointed out at the very onset that my thesis on iron age Vidarbha is not a search for the truth. Instead, I have tried to explore how different approaches and different assumptions can lead to different levels of analysis.

What archaeologists produce in the present is an interpretation which is not of the past, but which stands for the past. "Archaeology is a textual practice which is performed in the present upon materials which speak to us of the past" (Thomas 1996 : 64). Herein comes the subjective element because the materials we excavate do not come out of the ground with labels attached; we have to assign meanings to them (Nicholas 1994 : 448); we have to decide which idiosyncrasies should be considered or ignored when defining a culture (Childe 1951 : 40) and which should be disregarded as purely individual and which should be taken as social traits, "the differentiae of new cultures" (ibid.).