CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION: NEW INTERPRETATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Focussing on a region, which has not formed the basis for any serious investigation in the past, has reaffirmed the relevance of micro level studies. Such studies are imperative for certain levels of abstraction possible from the archaeological record with the help of insights from current anthropology and social theory. The traditional atheoretical orientation and obsessive tendency of working only at the empirical level has often impeded such interpretative possibilities. Positing such possibilities from the archaeological record has often proved futile. The evidences at hand provided by the megalithic structures very rarely has been mapped or documented systematically. Getting a good idea of their construction and distribution has lacked the methodological rigour, which is vital, as this study has proved in the process of trying to understand an unexplored region. The need to place these structures in the macro context seeing them as apparently similar looking results in the past being reduced to an assumed sameness. In the search for universal elements local adaptations and variations get dissolved often loosing the wood for the trees. Studies in Kerala is in stark contrast to similar studies in the neighbouring regions of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh where at the empirical level a full presentation of the areas and evidences are given. Mapping and documentation has received the methodological rigour so imperative in decoding the archaeological record.

The largest database provided by the burial monuments and associated assemblages largely in the Hosdurg and Kasaragod Taluks have been studied by means of systematic field walking, description, documenting and mapping to get a representative and exhaustive picture of their distribution and construction features. Plotting these sites in relation to dominant landscape features reveals a uniform spatial patterning in the big and small clusters with certain commonly occurring components. They occur in landscape Eco systems of cattle keeping and highland agriculture
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with monuments mostly on low sloping laetrite formations overlooking green paddy fields and in a territory where several resources necessary to sustain daily life like water; arable land, pasture and wooded parts were available. Yet one does not find monuments uniform externally or internally. The morphological features of these monuments, their location in relation to dominant points in the external world where ancestral connections get tied unto the being of landscape, where groups returned because of their lasting linkages to known places with elaborately constructed monuments, cannot be thrown away. These monuments are manifestations of their lasting linkages. The construction of visible monuments, commemorating them individually or collectively is one means of giving them material expression in the affairs of humans. The dead are an important part of the past in the present especially in the form of ancestors, deities and other supernatural beings. Death and treatment of the corpse represent probably a transition from life to death or a process through which claims to social position and inheritance are considered by the living. In a way it is reflecting the existing relations in society, where building of these monuments and the ceremonial activities around them (which sometimes is fully not visible in the archaeological record) redefined social categories. The survivals of the Neolithic in the megalithic are evident at umichipoyil. This is visible again in the adjoining areas bearing sites, and makes one posit a transformation of a Neolithic place into a megalithic space. Though we do not have other strengthening evidences for the same other than the occurrence of large quantity of Neolithic pottery from the burials along with few Neolithic Celts, we can postulate on transformations in the landscape. These transformations took the form of construction of monuments where ancestral powers came to be appropriated by individuals and groups. We are unable to understand how people associated themselves with the ceremonies but the monument is symbolic of an elaborate ritual context, which is enough to generate meanings. The excavated site of Umichipoyil forms the basis of a case study and when compared to an intensively explored site that of Varikulam, the site of Umichipoyil bears a cluster of rock cut caves with a centrally located one in the big cluster and one distanced away from the cluster. Varikulam has a cluster of kotakkals and rock cut caves where the kotakkals again have one centrally located one with one distanced away from the cluster. From the primacy and centrality of the monument at Umichipoyil and Varikulam the other monuments in both the sites have features, which strike ones attention. At Umichipoyil striking perhaps is the regularly occurring portholes, a pillared cave without the porthole and a half-abandoned one. The half-abandoned one helps one imagine the actual process of construction and the constraints, which forced them to abandon it. A half-finished monument gives us an exact trajectory of the beginning point to the end. It allows us to reconstruct the process of quarrying, the beginning and the ending. The visible crack directly above the pillar in the pillared cave hundred percent functional is some of the morphologically significant but striking elements. If Umichipoyil helps one imagine the process of construction Varikulam displays two forms but the precision with which the umbrella stones have been laid is striking. If the portholes at Umichipoyil were either east or north the east west axis of the Kotakkal in linear alignments extending further into the adjoining site is striking.

The assemblages from the excavated caves are features again related to human beings where pottery and iron relates to the people involved in this. The pottery making people, the iron-working people testified by the presence of artefacts immediately bring in association of artefacts and craftsmen. Practices, which required full time specialists. It also takes us to the paleo environmental context and what we have before us is just a fragment of what existed 2500 years ago. We are seeing processes of soil
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erosion, vegetation change, changes through human interventions and a
terrain which has been fundamentally and radically transformed. A
traumatically reconstituted space but where what survives is the
archaeological monuments which allows us to dabble with possibilities of
viewing them as symbols of social groups presumably descent groups and
of societies having widely differing subsistence bases. It is perhaps
possible to think in terms of a combination of several means of subsistence
together with ancillary means of subsistence. An economy structured by
the domination of pastoral agricultural practice but able to support ancillary
crafts like pot making, iron working. Full time nomads cannot construct
monuments but this could be credited with a sedentary community, which
structured the principal economy in all ways to whom the idea of a fixed
place was visually drawn out establishing the relationship between people
and land through the construction of these monuments. A lineage group
with small folk settlements of potters, full time iron workers and laetrite
cutting artisans. The monuments are important for the people who lived
there as the complex structure indicates elaborate rituals, which
automatically presuppose convergence of collective labour, of social
labour. It also presupposes complex functional relationship of the
monument with the people. It is not the person who is buried and his close
relatives alone who find meaning in the site. The potter, iron craftsmen all
in one way or the other are related to these monuments. The idea of
dispersed settlements does not hold its ground here. Such a formulation can
raise questions, which do not arise because we do not relate actual labour
processes involved in the monument. The actual process of construction
and the human labour involved becomes evident. The chiselling marks and
the iron implements from the assemblages reflect their ways of negotiating
with the arches, domed vaults and rounded forms within the caves.

Rather than conceiving them as dispersed settlements the evidences
from Kasaragod strengthens the possibilities for the assumption which has
a long tradition in archaeology but difficult to test, of tombs representing a
descent group. Here rather than associating it with a single descent group
they could be associated with several descent groups with the presence of a
chiefly lineage evident at the excavated site of Umichipoyil and explored
site of Varikulam with the largest clusters of differing monuments. In both
the clusters the biggest centrally positioned one makes one think in terms
of the notion of the great saviour, the great ancestor maintained with some
sort of primacy for the living. The others small ones relate or could be a
close kin in the lineage and there are many more. In the archaeological
record internally and externally similar monuments are not seen nor we see
ones of the same sizes.

These are interpretative possibilities, which need to be further debated
and tested with evidences from other sites. Each region in Kerala should be
taken up separately where a wider area is taken as a unit of analysis. We need
to carefully, first record and document monuments in each region through
careful and systematic mapping to frame questions pertaining to their
distribution, frequency and occurrence and correlate such evidences from
those derived in similar fashion from other areas. What hinders studies on
Kerala’s prehistory is that the readily available evidences are hardly subject to
any kind of detailed recording where even basic details are not put together.
The archaeological record becomes far weaker and any attempt to cull
answers for specific questions does not even arise, where at the empirical level
a huge lacunae remains and unless this receives serious attention we might
still find ourselves spilling too much ink on the limitations of the
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our intellectual engagements with the past rather than the inbuilt failing in the
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