

# The Kurumbas' Relationship to the "Megalithic" Cult of the Nilgiri Hills (South India)

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## 1. Introduction

"The distribution of prehistoric monuments like dolmens and menhirs follows the zones of the primitive tribes of India" (Ananthakrishna Iyer 1961: 18). They "are found chiefly in Assam, Chota Nagpur, and South India" (cf. also Leshnik 1974: 1). In South India, they "exist over the Godavari Valley, and more commonly over the Krishna Valley, and on both sides of the Ghats through Coimbatore as far as Cape Comorin. There is a great concentration of dolmens in Bellary. Stone circles, cairns, dolmens, and menhirs are found throughout Kerala, in Coimbatore, the Nilgiris, Salem, North

Arcot, Kurnool, Anantapur, Coorg, and Mysore" (Ananthakrishna Iyer/Bala Ratnam 1961: 76). And it is, in particular, the State of Tamil Nadu which not only "has remained the best-served region archaeologically till recently," but also represents "archaeologically one of the richest provinces in the subcontinent" (Gururaja Rao 1972: 63).

"Since the publication by Brecks (1837) [misprint for 1873] on the megalithic<sup>1</sup> monuments of the Nilgiris, the megalithic monuments of Tamil Nadu have attracted the attention of as many as seventy antiquarians, amateur archaeologists, scholars and the institutions alike on account of their curious and imposing structures. They continue to baffle scholars regarding their date, authorship and origin" (Narasimhaiah 1980: 109; similarly, p. 3).

The Nilgiri Hills, today a small district of Tamil Nadu, altogether covering 2543 km.<sup>2</sup>, constitute a massif some 1500 km.<sup>2</sup> in area located at the point of union of the Eastern and Western Ghats. The plateau is generally in the elevation of 2000-2500 m., its highest peak, Doddabetta, touching the 2670 m. contour line. The Bhawani River forms the natural boundary of the plateau on the south and the Moyar River on the north where the district borders the Karnataka State. On the west, it adjoins the Wyanad plateau (Kerala State), on the east, the

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<sup>1</sup> For the inadequacy of the label "megalithic" in the South Indian context, cf. the arguments put forward by Leshnik (1974: 1): "Undue emphasis on certain of the constructional elements, and reference to European analogies has given rise to the label 'megalithic burials.' Collectively, these early burials in South India are usually referred to as the 'megalithic complex.' But the inadequacy of the term becomes more than usually evident when it is made to include quite plain burials such as urns deposited in pits marked only by fist-size stones arranged in a circle. The lithic character of such burials is unimpressive and certainly they cannot be called megalithic."