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Virli Khandar Excavation Sheds Light on Megalithic Culture in India

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A recent excavation at the Virli Khandar megalithic site in Maharashtra has revealed unique burial practices, rare artefacts, and unusual pottery arrangements, offering fresh insights into the Megalithic culture of the Vidarbha region. Archaeologists believe these findings will significantly improve understanding of ancient funerary traditions and socio-cultural practices in early Iron Age India.

Key Findings from the Excavation:

The excavation has brought out several distinctive features:

The site contains a composite megalithic structure combining:

Stone circles

Menhir (upright stones)

Around 69 megalithic burials have been documented, with select ones excavated.

Discovery of rare artefacts, including:

Copper ornaments

Iron tools (axes, chisels, arrowheads)

Semi-precious stone beads (carnelian)

Gold ornaments

Presence of human skeletal remains, indicating burial rituals.

Unique Burial Practices (Special Feature)

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One of the most striking discoveries is the systematic arrangement of pottery:

Nearly 50 pots found in a single burial cluster

Pots arranged in pairs, with one placed over another

All pots were placed upside down, a practice not previously recorded in the region

This suggests symbolic or ritualistic significance, though the exact reason is still under study

Dating and Archaeological Significance:

Charcoal remains found at the site will be analysed using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) dating

Preliminary estimates suggest the site is at least 2,500 years old, placing it in the Iron Age–Megalithic period

The findings help reconstruct:

Burial customs

Technological advancement (metal use)

Social hierarchy and belief systems

What are Menhirs?

A Menhir is:

A large upright stone erected by humans

Often associated with burial sites or ceremonial purposes

Found either singly or in groups as part of larger megalithic complexes

They may have served:

Grave markers

Ritual or commemorative structures

Astronomical purposes in some cases

Beyond the Site: Mudumal Megalithic Menhirs

The Mudumal Megalithic Menhirs site in Telangana provides a broader context:

Dates back 3,500–4,000 years

Included in the UNESCO Tentative World Heritage List

Considered one of the largest megalithic burial sites in South India

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Notably:

Some menhirs are aligned with sunrise and sunset during solstices, indicating use as an ancient astronomical observatory

Contains representations of constellations like Ursa Major, showing early astronomical knowledge

Megalithic Culture in India:

Period: ~Iron Age (1500 BCE – 300 BCE)

Spread across:

South India

Deccan Plateau

Parts of Central & Eastern India

Types of Megalithic Structures:

Menhir (standing stone)

Dolmen (table-like stone structure)

Stone circles

Cists (box-like burials)

Significance:

Provide evidence of:

Burial rituals

Use of iron technology

Trade (semi-precious stones)

Social stratification