



**EARLY HORSEBACK RIDERS IN SOUTH INDIA AND  
CENTRAL INDIA  
Their Role in the Transformation of the Contemporary  
Socio-Economy**

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**ABSTRACT :**

*This article investigates the emergence and cultural significance of the horse (*Equus caballus*) among the Early Iron Age Megalithic builders of Vidarbha and South India. Recent scholarship identifies that the contemporary people of Megalithic communities were pioneer horseback riders. By synthesising archaeological data with rock paintings, the study correlates horse remains and associated equestrian artifacts such as horse bits and ornaments found in the megalithic burials of Vidarbha with the rock art of Hire Benakal (Karnataka) and Nagargota (Chandrapur, Maharashtra).*

*However, the advent of horseback riding marked a transformative shift in land transport; its specific origins in the Indian subcontinent remain a subject of debate. Recent research suggests that the Megalithic builders were the first to ride horses in the region. To support this argument the study considers the rock paintings at Hire Benakal and Nagargota as corroborative evidence for the physical remains found in burial contexts. The evidence suggests that the horse was not merely a utilitarian tool but a pivotal driver of social stratification, ritual sacrifice, and economic prestige, laying the technological and cultural foundations for the cavalry-centric empires of the early historical period.*

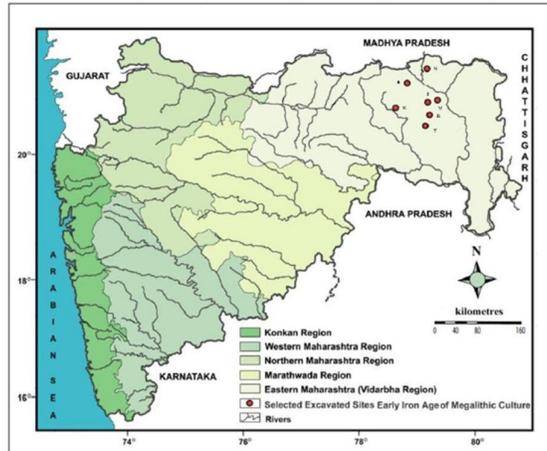
**KEYWORDS:** *Early Iron Age megalithic builders, South India, Vidarbha, Horse, Rock Art, Hire Benakal, Nagargota, Early land transport.*

**INTRODUCTION**

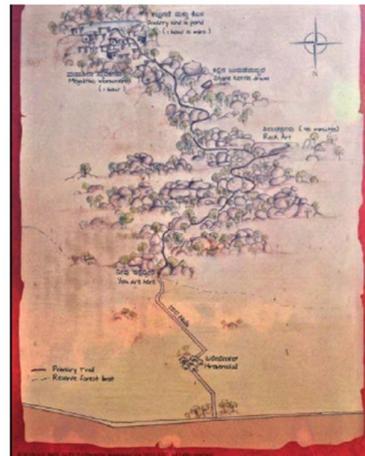
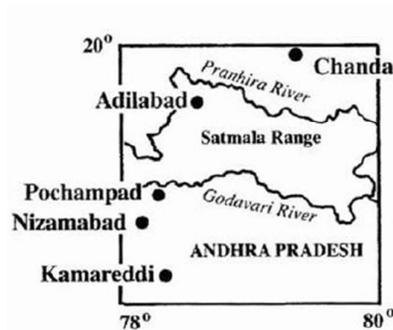
The emergence of the horse (*Equus caballus*) within the Early Iron Age Megalithic culture of Vidarbha and South India represents a transformative shift in the socio-economic and ritual landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Nineteenth-century investigators frequently misattributed Megalithic monuments to Scythian influence. Recent scholarship has identified these builders as the region's pioneer horseback riders (Joshi and Bhaisare 2025). This equestrian transition is evidenced by a strong correlation among faunal remains (Thomas 1992, 1994), specialised iron technology (Joshi 1993; Bhaisare 2018), and contemporary rock art (Joshi and Bhaisare 2025), collectively suggesting that the horse was not merely a utilitarian asset but might also be a marker of social stratification and religious practice (Joshi 1993; Bhaisare 2018).

## GEOGRAPHICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The research domain center in the Vidarbha region of eastern Maharashtra, Early Iron Age Megalithic sites include Borgaon, Junapani, Khairwada, Mahurjhari, Naikund, Raipur and Takalghat-khapa (**Fig. 1a**). And the rock art of the site Nagargota in the Chandrapur district adds a critical dimension to this landscape through its megalithic rock paintings, presenting a contemporary way of life in pictographic form. To establish a broader context of a contemporary society in a peninsular area such as Pochampad in Andhra Pradesh (**Fig. 1b**) and Hirebenkal in Karnataka (**Fig. 1c**). Taking into consideration the diverse archaeological material found from the Deccan Plateau, this represents the scenario of cultural practices of contemporary society during the Early Iron Age Megalithic tradition.



**Fig. 1a: Early Iron Age Megalithic Tradition Sites from Vidarbha (after Deotare *et al.* 2013)**



**Fig.1b: Location of Pochampad, Andhra Pradesh    Fig. 1c: Location of Hire Benkal (Online) (After Kennedy 2002: 104)**

### Evidence: Literary and Archaeological

The cultural trajectory of the horse is deeply rooted in early literary traditions, with the *Rig Veda* and *Atharvaveda* elevating the *ashva* to a divine status associated with deities such as the Asvins and Indra (Sharma 1993). The remains of horses in Harappan or Neolithic contexts remain fragmentary and therefore scientifically disputed, but the Early Iron Age evidence provides definitive proof of a human-equine relationship. In Vidarbha, systematic excavations of mortuary contexts at sites such as

Mahurjhari (Deo 1973), Naikund (Deo and Jamkhedkar 1982), and Khairwada (*JAR* 1981-82: 51-52; Roy 1019) have consistently yielded equine remains buried alongside their masters. The discovery of nearly complete skeletons at Naikund and Pochampad (Ramachandra Murthy 2000; Kennedy 2002), alongside a rare intact skull at Ubali (Trivedi 2019: 199), underscores the sanctity of the horse. Archaeozoological analyses by P.K. Thomas (1989, 1992) indicate a selective sacrificial pattern involving prime stallions and mares, suggesting that these animals served as prestigious status symbols, with their ritual interment reinforcing the lineage and authority of the deceased.

Economically and technologically, the transition from chariot-pulling/draught to active riding is marked by the introduction of the "jointed snaffle" iron horse-bit. The archaeological remains from sites such as Takalghat and Junapani (Joshi 1993; Deotare *et al.* 2013; Bhisare 2018), linked to canon devices, enabled precise mouth-pressure control necessary for mounted manoeuvres. This functional evolution was mirrored by an aesthetic investment in the animal; e.g., elaborate copper facial ornaments, often riveted with iron and sewn onto leather, reflect a "glitter economy" in which the horse served as a canvas for social display. The high-quality craftsmanship of these ornaments, found from Vidarbha (**Fig. 2a and b**) to Adichanallur [Tamil Nadu] (Deo 1970: 52), suggests a shared regional expertise in equestrian luxury.



**Fig. 2a: Horse Ornaments, Mahurjhari Ornament, Takalghat-Khapa**



**Fig. 2b: Reconstruction of Horse**  
(Courtesy: A.I.H.C., & Archaeology, Nagpur University (RSTMNU))

This material culture reflection is evident in the rock art (**Fig. 3c**) of the Deccan and South India, especially at Hire Benakal (Koppal district, Karnataka) (Munn 1935; Gordon and Allchin 1955; Sundara 1975, 1999), a World Heritage Tentative List site, as well as the Nagargota rock shelters (Chandrapur district) (Mane 2003). Depictions of riders in dark red-black pigments provide a contemporary pictorial record of equestrian life, documented in megalithic burials. These paintings, such as the "hunter riding a horse" motif, bridge the gap between archaeological artifacts and lived experience, illustrating a society where the horse was integrated into hunting, conflict, and daily ritual.



**Fig. 2a, b: Rock Paintings of Hire Benakal (Karnataka) and Nagargota (Chandrapur district of Maharashtra) (After Mane 2003)**

### CONCLUSION

With this varied evidence, such as faunal, technological, and pictographic strands, it is stated that the Megalithic builders established the foundational equestrian identity of the subcontinent, transforming the horse into a vital instrument of social power, status, and religious devotion, eventually facilitating the rise of the Deccan's early historical states.

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