

# Archaeological Survey and Tourism Prospect of Salangthel Megalithic Site (Manipur)

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**Abstract**—Megalithic sites in the world are popular tourist attractions. But unfortunately, this has not been the case in Manipur and northeastern India despite having informed of the widespread presence of megaliths. Although many early accounts have testified to the wide-ranging presence of admirable megalithic monuments in Manipur, the absence of systematic archaeological studies and proper management of the archaeological sites has undermined the significance of several megalithic sites. This paper is therefore mainly aimed at highlighting the potential of a much ignored megalithic site called Salangthel in Churhandpur district of Manipur for the prospect of archaeological studies and tourism. This paper is primarily built upon my preliminary archaeological field survey and detail documentation which was undertaken in the region.

**Keywords:** *Megaliths, archaeological survey, tourism.*

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The rich archaeological potential of the megalithic stone monuments in the northeastern part of India had been highlighted by few early conscious colonial administrators cum ethnographers, which can be dated back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Mills (1933) wrote,

“An archaeological characteristics of Assam of world-wide fame is its wealth of megaliths. Indeed it is one the few places in the world where monuments of this type are still erected ... The recording of these has been almost entirely neglected”. (p. 4-5).

However, the general lack of problem-oriented archaeological exploration and studies in the region is largely failing to draw the attention of the ongoing larger academic discussion of megalithic studies in India. This poor state of archaeological studies in the northeastern region of India is best surmised by Hazarika (2008) as,

“terra incognita” (p. 1). As a result, the widespread presence of the megaliths in northeastern India has been overlooked and largely remain unknown to the majority of the world. The importance of these stone monuments are many; for reconstructing the history of the early past societies that had left no written records at present and for tourism potential. But, in the absence of proper archaeological explorations and studies, the other well prospect of tourism at the megalithic sites has remained unexplored in the region.

As far as the state of Manipur is concerned, the early information of megaliths construction among the valley occupants was first recorded in the Cheitharol Kumpapa or royal chronicle of Manipur, dated as early as 1558 C.E. (Parrat, 2005, p. 57), and in later period by colonial administrators cum ethnographers (e.g. Hodson, 1911, p. 186-191; Hutton, 1929, p. 332. etc.). These accounts have all testified to the widespread presence of the megalithic monuments in the state. Nonetheless, given these invaluable early primary sources, only recently a few selective sites have been studied rather than exploring all other megalithic sites. These early studies were fundamentally in view of giving a simple descriptive report which has failed to provide any detail interpretations. Over and above, many of the megalithic sites in Manipur are at present rapidly undergoing a serious threat of destruction and deterioration due to - settlement expansion, road construction, shifting cultivation, etc. Therefore, the multiple potentials which are being presented by the megalithic sites in the state will sooner or later be in the state of an irreparable loss.

Considering the necessity for highlighting the scope and pertinence of megalithic sites in Manipur, this paper is intended to indicate the potentials of the Salangthel

megalithic site in Manipur, which is about twenty hectares in size. This paper is a part of my larger archaeological pedestrian survey work which was conducted in the region in the month of September 2017. Through this studies, it will be concluded that the Salangthel site has a huge future prospect of archaeological studies and tourist attractions. Furthermore, tourism at this site in conjunction with several other local tourist spots will encourage proper management of the site and overall improvement of the economy of the nearby locals and in large the state.

### 1. DEFINING THE MEGALITH

The word 'megalith' is derived from two Greek words – '*mega*' meaning big, and '*lithic*' meaning stones. So etymologically, the word 'megalith' denote any large stones structures. However, in archaeology, megalith is a defining term in the specific sense of pertaining to the built stone structures or tombs that consists of single or group of roughly dressed large block of stones over the death burials. Therefore it can be classified largely as sepulchral and non-sepulchral monuments. The term is also used for the construction of huge stones for commemorative, funerary, and religious purposes (Devi, 2011, p. 2). However, small stone structures which do not exactly fit into the broader category of the term (i.e. large stones), and burials that do not have any stones appendage are also understood as megaliths (Devi, 2011, p. 2).

### 2. SALANGTHEL SITE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

The archaeological site of Salangthel is located in between 24°32'09.33" and 24°31'40.35" north latitudes and 93°42'23.05" and 93°42'23.73" east longitudes on the top of Koubru / Thangjing range with elevation points ranging slightly in between 1,300 to 1,400 meters above sea level (Figure 1). The site is nearby to Tuikong village which is mostly inhabited by tribal ThadouKuki group in the Churchandpur district of Manipur (Photo 1). This site is more easily commutable through the road that is directed towards the Koubru/ Thangjing ranges from the side road of Thapnapokpi village which is located in the Moirang subdivision in Bishnupur district, Manipur.



Figure 1: Google Earth image showing the region of the Salangthel megalithic site, Manipur.

The site is approximately twenty hectares in size and has a large number of distinctive megalithic monuments which are temporally and spatially distributed in the region's landscape. It is about fifty-six kilometers from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. This site is among the least studied megalithic sites, given the fact of its rich archaeological resources, it has presented in the larger landscape of the region. This site is at present no more inhabited by the people.

As for previous studies in the site, only a few exploratory surveys have been made. To begin with, the site was first discovered through the exploratory work of the Mutua Museum which is dated back to 1983. Nevertheless for reasons unknown the detail reports of the survey were not published (Devi, 1989, pp. 4-5). In the later period, R. K. Tamphasana Devi (1989) formally reported the presence of the megaliths in the Salangthel region. Subsequently and similarly, anthropologist PotsangbamBinodini Devi (2011) reported the presence of the megaliths in the region through her survey work carried out in the early 1990s. Both the scholars only reported a general categorization of the megaliths forms therein this site. Unfortunately, as a result of their unsystematic approach of studies i.e. anthropological approach (without details documentation), their reports have failed to provide any interpretation pertaining to the societies which had built these stone monuments. After these reports, no attempt was being made to systematically survey the site in the traverse of more than two decades.

Acknowledging the need for exploring further at the Salangthel, a fresh preliminary field-based survey work was carried out by me in the month of September 2017. The survey work was well assisted by villagers of the Tuikong village, as a result, the outcome was well satisfied. The survey work was mainly intended for identifying the 'ancient' important landscape features of the region including the distinctive megaliths form, early water sources, etc. Nevertheless, the survey work was well accompanied by proper photographs using 100 cm scale along with proper documentation. Though it was difficult to notice the temporal changes of the stone structures and to understand comprehensively how these stone were configured exactly in the early past, many of the ancient remains could be identified during the survey. Through the engagement of survey work, it was possible to identify, the primary elements used in the construction of the megaliths i.e. sandstone: a form of sedimentary rock. Moreover, during the survey, it was possible to identify the five distinctive megaliths forms of the region which is listed below in Table 1.

**Table 1: List of the general classification of megaliths in Salangthel site, Manipur**

Forms	General descriptions
Menhir	Roughly hewn single monolith which is erected vertically above the ground.
Cairn	Stone monument formed by the compilation of heaps of small stones.
Stone circle	Circle formed by the arrangement of the stones. The stones are usually small in term of size.
Flat stones	Slabs of roughly hewn stones placed horizontally on the ground.
Stone Avenue	Group of menhirs arranged in a row.

Speaking about the potential of the archaeological studies, the site has hold sufficient prospect of systematic archaeological studies. In the first place, menhirs in the site are found to be widely distributed in the forested bumpy landscape. Some of the menhirs appeared very admirable in terms of sizes and measured up to 250 cm in height (Photo 6 & 14). However, the majority of the menhirs in the region are found to be in the state of badly weathered and few of them are found to be fallen on the ground (Photo 3).

The stone alignment is another prominent widespread megalithic features available on the site. In the site usually, it consists of five to seven stones which

are arranged in either row or in a specific direction. These stones are likewise to other stone monuments roughly hewn and presented the impression of being mortuary monuments in term of functional aspect. Few of them are also associated with flat stones which further increase the expectation of being a mortuary connection. An interesting feature is that these stone monuments are comparatively smaller in sizes as compared to the sizes of the menhirs. For example, the height of the stones that comprises these alignments are generally below 150 cm (Photo 4 & 10). Moreover, the orientations of the stone alignment follow some peculiar specific direction of the north-south and east-west directions. Also, the majority of the stone alignments are also located within close proximity to each other and mostly located in the elevated region of the site.

Stone circles are also found in the Salangthel region. But stone circles are usually small and mostly built by cairns. Stone avenues are also found in this region. The stone avenues usually consist of alignment following a certain pattern.

Another interesting feature of the stone monuments of the Salangthel site is the presence of engraved marks on the surface of the stones. There are beautifully engraved footmarks on few of the flat-stones (Photo 9). What does this engraved marks signifies of the early societies need to be studied properly. Local tradition has its belief that the engraved footmarks on the flat-stone were related to the early Manipuri's famous folktale of Khamba and Thoibi. Besides, on few of the stones, there is also engraved mark of the female vagina (Photo 13).

Furthermore, other landscape features such as water sources i.e. streams, are also found to be in close proximity to the stone monuments. This is also an indication that the settlement area in the early past would be near or around the area, where the stone monuments are identified.

To the extent the archaeological potential of the site is concerned, it is a fact that the site has offered ample amount of sources for reconstructing the early history of the societies which has left no written records. But proper studying of the site would require careful engagement with systematic survey techniques within a broader theoretical approach which has been advanced recently by the scholars. Apart from waiting and relying on excavated reports, the site has already given a good

opportunity for conducting cost-effective pedestrian surveys, which will also enable to indicate the spatial dimension of the megaliths and other small archaeological remains. Furthermore, via detail documentation of each stone structures, it will be possible to highlight the amount of labour workforce which would be required at the time of hauling and construction of such structure. As mentioned on the above page, the site is an abandoned site, as a result, there is a high potential of carrying out proper excavations. Though few archaeological sites had been excavated, not even a single excavation has happened so far on the megalithic sites of Manipur till date. Therefore, the site of Salangthel could become the first ever excavated megalithic site in Manipur. The excavation would further enable to establish a relative date and several other cultural sequences of early history which are crucially lacking for historical studies in the state. Once a proper cultural time frame of the megaliths of this region is established then it could further be studied in relation to other megaliths forms found in other different parts of the state. Although there is a huge gap in the megaliths studies of Manipur, these fragments of the past has yet held a promise to bring good fortune of archaeological studies in the near future.

Unfortunately, it should be mentioned that majority of the megalithic stones are found in deteriorating state because of weathering and also by the local activities. As the site has remained unprotected, local populations are largely uninformed of the significance of this specific site. Consequently, on the majority of the megalithic stones, local people used to write their names and engraves roman letters which have aided in the destruction of the stone structures. The act of practice of shifting cultivation which is carried out by the local people in and around some parts of this site is another serious factor which is aiding in the destruction of others small archaeological evidence on this site. Besides, the lack of initiative as well as proper management of the site by the public and Manipur government has in large failed to preserve the site. Manipur government should in this regards, take up initiatives and frame laws to safeguard and acknowledge the archaeological heritage of this site. Along these lines, if the archaeological potential of this site is not explored in time then there is a chance of vanishing the site permanently from the landscape of Manipur.

### **Prospect of Tourism at Salangthel Megalithic Site**

There is an ample scope for developing the Salangthel megalithic site into a well attractive tourist hotspot of Manipur. To begin with, the state may be small in its geographical area, but it is no less than a big country in terms of diversities viz. ethnicity, food habits, climates, customs, languages, traditions, and religions. For instances, there are thirty-four different ethnic groups of people in the state with their own sets of unique traditions, cultures, food habits, languages, and religions. Multi-ethnicity and great diversity have always offered to the visitors an opportunity to better understand various cultures and different traditions of the state. Besides, the physiographical features of the state that comprise of valley region encircled by hills with its pleasant subtropical climate. Moreover, with the variations of climatic condition depending on the differential regional elevations will also attract visitors in the state from across the world.

To substantiate further, the rich archaeological heritage of the megalithic in the state is a considerable reason to further tourist attractions. In this regard, the Salangthel megalithic site can become one of the best tourist destinations for witnessing the material evidence of the early past societies. The mysteries and wonders of how these mega stone monuments were hauled and built by the early ancestors in the past would leave a thrilling and unforgettable experience to many of the visitors. The rock engraved marks on the megaliths, and the architectural layout of the stones monuments on the landscape will raise the eyebrows of every visitors. Visiting this site also mean establishing a sense of historical consciousness and reenactment of early social life to the visitors. However, the uniqueness of this site lies not entirely on the massive sizes of the stone structures rather also with the scenic beauty of the larger landscape of the site as well. As the site is located on the top of the hill range, it will be quite adventurous for many visitors for small trekking activities on the bumpy slope of the hill to reach the site. After reaching the site, the visitors would have an opportunity of enjoying the birds-eye view of the unique hill-valley combination of Manipur's landscape, including a breathtakingly beautiful sight of famous Loktak Lake and the Thanga Karangisland.

The location of the Salangthel megalithic site is such that it is situated in close proximity to other well-known

tourist hotspots of the state. Within the range of less than twenty kilometers radius, there is floating Keibul Lamjao National park which is the only home for the Sangai (brown antler deer). Again near to the site is the Sendra tourist home, which is known for being a favourite tourist spot which offers a scenic view of the Loktak Lake and to behold the fishing activities of the local folks. Visitors can also witness the unique lifestyle of the fishermen living in the floating hut that is built over the aquatic plants. Another tourist spot near to the Salangthel megalithic site is the Indian National Army (INA) Museum which is located in Moirang. Last but not the least, the close proximity of the famous Thanga Karang Island has further enhanced the point of more tourist attraction in this archaeological site.

On the economic aspect, tourism will create more jobs and reduced the issue of unemployment among the locals and for the larger population in the state. In other words, tourism will provide more jobs by recruiting tour guides, opportunities of working in the restaurants, hotels, etc. Furthermore, it will enhance the overall transportation facilities and road condition of the Salangthel region and the state as a whole. Tourism in this archaeological site will benefit the locals by opening up more shops and small markets to sell local produce to the visitors, which in turn will increase the local people's economy. Also, local people near the Salangthel site can also open up Homestay facilities, public parking, etc. at the expense of small fees from the visitors to provide convenience and more facilities.

Apart from the economic aspect of tourism at the Salangthel megalithic site, there is also a good prospect of making local people very proud of belonging to the region which has abled to attract visitors. This will help them to value their early history and preserve their own distinctive cultural identities. Further, this will make the locals and the entire population conscious about the archaeological potential of several others archaeological sites in the state. Hence, a more conscious attitude of preserving and promoting the archaeological resources at the local and state level is potentially achievable.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The preliminary archaeological survey work at Salangthel has enabled me to draw various interesting potential of one of the most ignored archaeological site of Manipur. It was able to highlight in this paper that there is a huge prospect of undertaking several deliberate

archaeological studies at the site for re-enacting the history of the early past societies. There is a huge scope for recovering other early cultural material remains from this site through cost-effective pedestrian survey methods. In case, if it is necessary than excavation can be taken up at the site. Moreover, the engraved marks on the megaliths can also be brought to proper studies in conjunction with the local oral narratives to get a comprehensive understanding of the site. Proper archaeological studies will also further increase the relevance of this site in the larger ongoing academic discussion of the megaliths studies in India and around the world.

Another important potential of the Salangthel megalithic site is in term of the future prospect of tourist attractions. The stone monuments of the Salangthel site are indeed a wonderful gift which is left to us by our early ancestors and therefore will always be a source of wonder and admiration to the visitors as well. Developing a sustainable tourism at this site by acknowledging its archaeological resources holds all the prospect of preserving and managing the site properly. This will transform the economy of the tribal people who are now depending primarily on the shifting cultivation as their main source of income by creating larger economic opportunities. Overall, this will, in turn, benefit the economy of the Manipur and regions of northeastern India at large.

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**Photo 2: Tuikong village, near the Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 4: Stone alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 2: Flat stones, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 5: Stone alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 3: Fallen menhir, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 6: Menhir, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 7: Stone circle, formed by cairns, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 10: Stone alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 8: Stone alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 11: Stones alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 9: Flatstone with engraved footmark, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 12: Stones alignment, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 13: The engraved mark of the female private part on stone, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**



**Photo 14: Menhir, Salangthel megalithic site. (Photograph by Oinam Premchand Singh)**