

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-09

MAHĀSATI STONES IN KARNATAKA AND TAMIL NADU A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MEMORIAL TRADITION, ICONOGRAPHY, EPIGRAPHY AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

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Article Received: 26 August 2026

Article Revised: 13 September 2026

Published on: 03 October 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.8603>

ABSTRACT

Mahāsati stones form an important category within the wider memorial-stone traditions of South India. In Karnataka, related monuments are described in the literature through terms such as Mahāsati Kallu, Māsti Kallu, Sati Kallu and Vīramasti, while Tamil Nadu preserves related memorial forms within the wider Nadukal tradition. This article presents a comparative study of Mahāsati memorials in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, examining terminology, historical context, sculptural representation, epigraphy, ritual memory and regional variation. Particular attention is given to the raised-hand motif, female attributes, representations of couples, multi-panel compositions, religious symbols and inscriptional evidence. The study combines archaeological and art-historical literature with epigraphic and iconographic approaches. It argues that Mahāsati memorials should be examined within the wider South Indian culture of memorialisation rather than through a single uniform typology. The comparison also highlights the need to distinguish securely identified sati memorials from hero stones, general memorial stones and other female-associated monuments. The paper proposes a field-documentation framework incorporating location, dimensions, sculpture, inscription, palaeography, local tradition and conservation status, thereby providing a basis for future GIS-based documentation of Mahāsati stones in Karnataka.

KEYWORDS: Mahāsati; Māsti Kallu; Sati Stone; Satikkal; Nadukal; Memorial Stones; Vīramasti; Hero Stones; Karnataka; Tamil Nadu; Epigraphy; Iconography; Cultural Memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Memorial stones are among the most informative archaeological sources for reconstructing aspects of social, religious and cultural history in South India. They preserve evidence concerning warfare, cattle raids, village defence, hunting, religious death, gendered commemoration and the construction of collective memory. The major comparative study *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety*, edited by S. Settari and Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, established an important interdisciplinary foundation for the study of such monuments.[1]

Within this broad corpus are memorials associated with women who died following the death of their husbands. Modern scholarship generally refers to these as sati stones or Mahāsati stones. Karnataka provides particularly rich material for studying such monuments, including the categories Māsti and Vīramasti.[2] Tamil Nadu, meanwhile, has a long Nadukal tradition and preserves hero stones, memorial stones and sati stones in different regional contexts.[3] The present article therefore treats Mahāsati stones not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of the larger South Indian memorial landscape.

2. Research Objectives

- To examine the terminology and historical context of Mahāsati memorials in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.
- To compare their principal iconographic and sculptural characteristics.
- To assess the contribution of inscriptions, palaeography and archaeological context to their interpretation.
- To identify regional similarities and differences without imposing a single uniform typology.
- To propose a systematic framework for future field documentation and GIS-based research.

3. Research Scope

The geographical scope of this study covers the principal memorial-stone traditions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, with Karnataka receiving particular attention because of the documented Māsti/Mahāsati and Vīramasti traditions. Within Tamil Nadu, the comparison includes the broader Nadukal environment and reported sati memorials from regions such as Kongu Nadu, Coimbatore-Pollachi and the Nilgiris. The chronological scope is broad and comparative, extending from the early medieval development of sculpted memorials to later medieval and early modern examples where the evidence is available.

The thematic scope includes terminology, memorial function, iconography, inscriptional evidence, ritual memory, gender representation, local worship and conservation. The study does not attempt to establish the social prevalence of sati from the existence of individual monuments; rather, each monument is treated as a historically situated memorial object.

The research also recognises an important methodological distinction: a hero stone, a Mahāsati stone, a general memorial stone and a female figure associated with a hero stone are not automatically interchangeable categories. Identification must be based on the totality of inscriptional, iconographic and contextual evidence.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employs a multidisciplinary methodology combining epigraphy, archaeology, art history, iconography and historical analysis. The principal materials comprise published studies of South Indian memorial stones, epigraphic records, archaeological reports, museum documentation, documented field observations and comparative visual evidence.

For field research, each monument should be recorded using the following material and documentary parameters: (1) GPS coordinates and administrative location; (2) stone material and dimensions; (3) number and arrangement of sculptural panels; (4) condition and damage; (5) female and male figures; (6) raised-hand and bangle motifs; (7) weapons and attributes; (8) sun, moon and religious symbols; (9) inscription, script and language; (10) palaeographic features; (11) associated temple, shrine or sacred landscape; (12) oral traditions; (13) photographic and, where possible, 3D documentation; and (14) conservation status.

Comparative interpretation follows a source-critical approach. Published descriptions are distinguished from observations made on individual monuments, and uncertain identifications are retained as such rather than converted into definite classifications.

5. Terminology and Concept

Mahāsati is derived from the Sanskrit expression mahā-satī and is used in South Indian memorial studies for particular forms of female memorialisation. In Karnataka, Māsti/Mahāsati memorials are commonly discussed in relation to the death of a woman following the death of her husband. The Karnataka Itihasa Academy distinguishes Sahagamana, in which the woman enters the pyre with the deceased husband, from Anugamana, in which she follows after learning of the husband's death.[4]

The terms Mahāsati Kallu, Māsti Kallu, Sati Kallu and Vīramasti appear in the regional vocabulary of Karnataka memorial studies. Tamil Nadu employs a different but related

vocabulary within the Nadukal tradition, including terms such as Sati Nadukal and Satikkal in modern descriptions.[5]

Terminology should nevertheless be used cautiously. A monument must be identified from its inscription, iconography and archaeological context rather than solely from a local label.

6. Mahāsati Stones in Karnataka

Karnataka has one of the richest concentrations of South Indian hero and sati memorials. Memorial-stone scholarship identifies sati memorials as a significant component of the Karnataka corpus.[6] The sculptural relationship between a male hero and his wife is particularly important. Some stones depict a heroic episode below and a celestial or religious scene above, while the female memorial element may be incorporated into the same composition.

The raised right hand of the female figure is a recurring motif in discussions of Karnataka Māsti stones. The hand may be accompanied by bangles and may be interpreted within the broader symbolism of the memorial. The female figure could subsequently acquire a sacred or local goddess-like status in some traditions.[7]

The Gulakamale example has been discussed as a Vīramasti memorial, demonstrating the value of combining sculptural and inscriptional evidence.[8] The famous Dekabbe inscriptional tradition is also significant for understanding the distinction between Sahagamana and Anugamana in Karnataka.[9]

7. Iconography

7.1 Raised Hand and Bangles

The raised hand is the most readily recognisable visual motif associated with many sati memorials. Bangles are often represented around the wrist. The motif should be studied alongside the posture, costume, jewellery and accompanying inscription rather than interpreted in isolation.

7.2 Couple Representation

Some memorials represent the husband and wife together. This creates a visual bridge between heroic commemoration and female memorialisation. The posture, relative scale and attributes of the two figures may reveal the intended commemorative hierarchy.

7.3 Objects and Attributes

Flowers, lemons, mirrors and other objects may occur in female representations in South Indian memorial traditions. Their meaning is not necessarily identical in every region, and

object identification should therefore be supported by close photographic examination and comparison.

7.4 Sun and Moon

Sun and moon symbols occur widely in memorial traditions and can express continuity and enduring memory. They should not be treated as exclusive markers of Mahāsati stones.

7.5 Multi-panel Composition

Where a memorial has multiple registers, the lower scene may represent the event leading to death, the middle scene may depict death or transition, and the upper scene may portray divine or celestial association. Such schemes are particularly useful when comparing hero stones with combined hero-Mahāsati monuments.

8. Mahāsati and Memorial Stones in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has a long-established Nadukal or memorial-stone tradition. The archaeological record and Tamil literary tradition both attest to memorialisation of individuals who died in circumstances considered significant to the community.[10] The Tamil Nadu archaeological record also includes hero stones, memorial stones and sati stones; the Government Museum, Chennai explicitly identifies these categories among its archaeological collections.[11]

The Nilgiris are particularly significant for comparative research because memorial stones there have generated discussion about the relationship between heroic memorials, ancestor memorials and megalithic monuments. Recent scholarship cautions against assuming that every monument with a female figure is necessarily a sati stone.[12]

Recent field documentation around Pollachi and Coimbatore has also recorded sati and hero stones, including examples attributed to the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Such documentation reinforces the importance of regional surveys and contextual recording.[13]

9. Karnataka–Tamil Nadu Comparative Analysis

Feature	Karnataka	Tamil Nadu
Terminology	Mahāsati Kallu, Māsti Kallu, Sati Kallu, Vīramasti	Satikkal, Sati Nadukal; terminology varies by region
Broader tradition	Vīragallu / memorial-stone corpus	Nadukal / hero-stone corpus
Female motif	Raised hand, bangles, regional attributes	Female figures, raised-hand motifs and regional attributes
Couple representation	Often associated with hero memorials	Found in selected regional memorials
Inscriptional languages	Primarily Kannada; Sanskrit and other forms also occur	Primarily Tamil; Sanskrit and other forms also occur
Chronological range	Early medieval to later medieval/early modern examples	Early historic/medieval traditions with later survivals
Research value	Gender, social history, epigraphy, religion, heroism	Nadukal tradition, social history, archaeology, local memory

10. Epigraphic and Archaeological Significance

Inscriptions can provide the name of the deceased, the circumstances of death, the date, the ruling authority, the donor or installer, the place and aspects of social identity. They also permit palaeographic comparison and can help establish chronological sequences.

The value of memorial stones lies in the combination of text and image. An inscription may identify a woman and describe an act of Anugamana, while the sculpture provides the visual vocabulary through which that event was memorialised. Conversely, an uninscribed stone requires greater caution and should be interpreted from form, context and comparison.

The wider memorial-stone literature demonstrates that the category includes multiple forms—hero stones, sati memorials, Jain niśidhis and other commemorative monuments.[14] This broader classification is essential for avoiding over-identification.

11. Social and Cultural Significance

Mahāsati stones are valuable sources for the study of social memory and gendered commemoration. They show that women could become subjects of public memorialisation and, in some local contexts, objects of continuing ritual remembrance.

At the same time, the existence of a sati memorial cannot by itself demonstrate the frequency, voluntariness or social acceptance of the practice across an entire community. The historical interpretation of each monument must remain tied to its inscription, archaeological setting and date.

The monuments therefore have value not only as representations of a past practice but also as evidence for the ways communities constructed memory, sacredness and social identity around death.

12. Research Scope for Future Fieldwork

A future Karnataka–Tamil Nadu Mahāsati Stone Survey can be organised as a digital research corpus. Each record should include a unique monument ID, coordinates, district, taluk, village, chronology, dynasty where securely established, monument dimensions, material, iconographic description, inscriptional text, script, language, translation, bibliography, photographs, 3D model where available, local oral tradition, present location, ownership/custody and conservation condition.

For Karnataka, the corpus can be extended district by district, beginning with regions where hero-stone and Māsti traditions are already documented. For Tamil Nadu, the same

framework can be applied to Nadukal and sati-stone clusters in Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Erode, the Nilgiris, Tiruvannamalai and southern districts, subject to field verification.

GIS can then be used to compare monument density, river systems, settlement networks, historic routes, temples and administrative boundaries. Such spatial analysis may reveal relationships between memorial practices and historical landscapes.

13. Limitations

The study is comparative and synthetic rather than a complete inventory of every Mahāsati stone in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Published documentation is uneven between districts, many monuments are uninscribed or displaced, and local terminology varies. Consequently, chronological and typological conclusions should be treated as provisional where direct inscriptional evidence is absent.

A further limitation is that modern descriptions may use the terms hero stone, sati stone, Mahāsati stone and memorial stone inconsistently. The article therefore recommends monument-by-monument verification before assigning a final category.

14. CONCLUSION

Mahāsati stones form a significant but internally diverse component of the memorial traditions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Karnataka provides a particularly important corpus through Māsti and Vīramasti traditions, while Tamil Nadu contributes a rich comparative context through the long Nadukal tradition and documented sati memorials.

The raised hand, bangles, couple representation, religious symbols and multi-register compositions form an important visual vocabulary, but no single feature should be treated as a definitive diagnostic criterion. Epigraphy, palaeography, iconography, archaeological context and local memory must be combined.

The comparative framework developed here provides a basis for future field surveys, GIS mapping, digital epigraphy and conservation. A systematically documented corpus of Mahāsati stones would contribute significantly to the study of medieval South Indian society, gender, religion, art history and cultural memory.

FOOTNOTES

1. S. Settar and Günther-Dietz Sontheimer (eds.), *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety* (Dharwad/New Delhi: Institute of Indian Art History, Karnataka University and South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 1982), 393 pp.

2. T. Veerasha, "Memorial Stones in Karnataka – A Study," International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts. The study includes sati stones and related memorial categories in the Karnataka corpus.
3. IGNCA, "Material Culture in Tamil Nadu," discussing Nadukal/Virakal and the Tamil memorial-stone tradition.
4. Karnataka Itihasa Academy, "Memorial Stones – Masti – Maha Sati – Mastikallu," on the Sahagamana and Anugamana distinction.
5. For comparative terminology, see the memorial-stone literature and archaeological documentation of Tamil Nadu; terminology should be verified against the individual monument.
6. T. Veerasha, "Memorial Stones in Karnataka – A Study," which identifies sati stones among Karnataka memorial categories.
7. Karnataka Itihasa Academy, "Memorial Stones," discussion of Masti stones and the raised right-hand motif.
8. The Gulakamale memorial is discussed in available digital epigraphic documentation as a Vīramasti memorial.
9. The Dekabbe inscription is cited in Karnataka memorial-stone studies in relation to Anugamana and is associated with Belathur, dated to 1057 CE.
10. IGNCA, "Material Culture in Tamil Nadu," on Nadukal/Virakal and the literary and archaeological background of hero memorials.
11. Government Museum, Chennai, Archaeology section, which identifies hero-stones, memorial stones and sati stones among its archaeological collections.
12. Letizia Trinco, "Whose satīs? Reflections on the so-called 'satī-stones' of the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu," discussing the interpretive complexity of Nilgiri memorials.
13. Recent field documentation around Pollachi, Coimbatore District, records sati stones and hero stones, including examples dated to the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries; such reports should be independently field-verified before formal cataloguing.
14. Settara and Sontheimer (eds.), Memorial Stones, which includes discussions of hero stones, sati stones and Jain nīśidhis within the broader memorial-stone corpus.

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4. Settar, S. and Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, eds. *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety*. Dharwad/New Delhi: Institute of Indian Art History, Karnataka University and South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 1982.
5. Trinco, Letizia. “Whose satīs? Reflections on the so-called ‘satī-stones’ of the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu.” Nilgiri Archaeological Project.
6. Veeresha, T. “Memorial Stones in Karnataka – A Study.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*.
7. Amirthalingam, M. “Hero Stones of Tiruvannamalai: History and Cultural Significance.” *Aryan Culture*, Vol. 04, 1999.
8. Tournier, Vincent and Arlo Griffiths. “Early Memorial Stones from the Deccan.” In *Early Āndhradeśa: Historical Studies around the Epigraphic Corpus*. Brill, 2025.