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Megalithic monuments and ancestral sites: An ethnoarchaeological investigation of continuity of tradition among Austroasiatic communities of Jharkhand

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Abstract

Over the years, several megalithic sites have been reported from different regions of Jharkhand. The initial investigations were conducted during the second half of the 19th century and the early phase of the 20th century by colonial ethnographers and anthropologists. An excavation was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India in the year 1965-66 at the site of Khuntitoli, where evidence of cremated bones of multiple individuals was found separately under a stone slab, indicating evidence of a secondary family burial. Recent investigations are carried out by the members of INTACH, Hazaribagh. The author has recently conducted an ethnoarchaeological study as part of the doctoral research, studying the continuing tradition and culture of raising megalithic monuments, comparing them with the archaeological parallels in light of evidence found through the survey of ancient sites and ethnographic analogy. This paper briefs the research of the present tradition of Austroasiatic communities; Mundas, Bhumij, and Hos in light of present monuments and ancestral sites, which indicate the distribution of megaliths on their possible route of the movement in Chotanagpur plateau throughout the past and existence of old and recent burial monuments over different ancestral sites.

Keywords: *Austroasiatic population, Megalithic tradition, ancestral sites, Menhirs, capstones, burials, human remains*

Introduction and history of megalithic research

The megalithic sites of Jharkhand have been sparsely studied by a few freelance explorers through annual surveys and explorations over the years (Ball 1872; Beglar 1872; Dalton 1873; Roy 1916a: 61- 77; 1916b: 481- 487; Mitra and Bose 1936: 394; Topno 1955: 715- 734; Patil 1963; Imam 2014). All of these works done by the authors are related to the ethnological and anthropological study of various ethnic groups of the region and not much archaeological aspect or methodology was followed by them, although they are important as pioneer works in the study of funeral custom and associated stone monuments, providing valuable archival data for the further research of the subject. Apart from one archaeological excavation at Khuntitoli by a mid-eastern circle of a survey of Archaeological Survey of India (now Patna Circle), way back in 1965- 66, no other proper excavation work is been carried out in the field of megalithic till now, though, the excavated site has yielded important evidence of multiple posts cremated burial from a single stone slab, along with grave goods in form of beads of copper, bronze and different semiprecious stones and ornaments of copper and bronze within separate urns (IAR 1965- 66: 10). Besides all these archaeoastronomical aspects of megalithic monuments was taken under consideration by the freelance researcher, Subhashish Das (Das 2009; 2014; 2018). The region was recently studied through an ethnoarchaeological perspective by the present author as part of his Doctoral research, which was an attempt to interpret various aspects of archaeological data of ancient megaliths by using ethnographic analogies of the available present tradition of megalithism among three branches of Austroasiatic communities; Mundas, Bhumij and Hos constructed and raised megalithic structures as secondary burial and for commemorative reasons (Shekhar *et al.* 2014: 705- 719; Shekhar and Joglekar 2015: 257- 269; 2016: 261- 278; 2017a: 19- 36; 2017b: 65- 74; Shekhar 2019: 347- 360; 2020a: 1- 12; 2021: 82- 94).

Study area and geological settings

The present research area comprises five districts of Jharkhand; Hazaribagh, Chatra Ranchi, Khunti, and West Singhbhum. Archaeological exploration and ethnographic study have been conducted in 24 blocks of these five districts, roughly 6,623 square kilometers. The area is diversely elevated, ranging from 200 meters/average mean sea level to 650 meters/average. Geologically, the area is mostly covered by sandstone and granite formations of Upper Gondwana and Gondwana sandstone in Chatra and Hazaribagh districts and Granite gneiss of Dharwar and Archean formations (Roy Chaudhury 1957: 38). The entire region is shaded by the water of different tributaries of Falgu and Damodar Rivers in Chatra and Hazaribagh and Swarnarekha and South Koel along with their tributaries and small Rivulets in Ranchi, Khunti and West Singhbhum districts. The soil type is mostly reddish lateritic soil with debris for ferrous contents and slightly alluvial yellow soil in some parts, particularly in the *Panch Pargana* plains of the southeastern part of the Ranchi district. The region is densely forested with *Saal* (Shoera robusta), Mahua (*Bassia latifolia*), Asan (*Terminalia tomentosa*), Gambhar (*Gmelinaarboria*), Kendu (*Diospyros tomentosa*) and Simal (*Bombax malabarincum*), Hara (*Terminalia chebula*), Karam (*Adina cardifolia*), etc (Haines 1925: 39-45). and mostly comprises reserve forests in Hazaribagh and Chatra districts and forested areas of Taimara, Saranda, and Porahaat forests of Saal, Saguan, and many other wild floras rich in various natural resources and wildlife, utilized by the ancient population since prehistoric times.

Present work

The present archaeological survey in the region was a part of the doctoral research of the author (Shekhar 2020) and the research is continued further (Shekhar 2021: 82- 94). Altogether 241 megalithic sites were surveyed in the region of all five mentioned districts talked above, which includes photographic documentation and plotting of the sites on the map through GPS etrex 10 was done (Fig. 1).

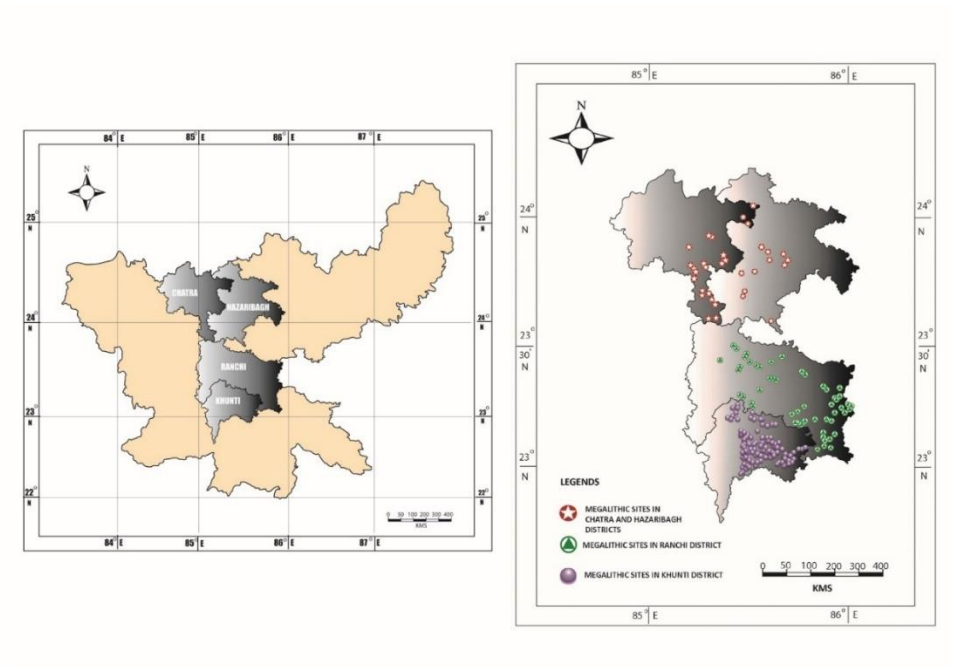

Fig.1. *Distribution of megalithic sites in the study area*

Apart from this, surface collection of cultural material from the weathered surface and disturbing section was done to understand the material culture of the sites. Apart from documentation of megalithic sites, two associated habitation sites containing identical cultural material to the burial sites were also explored. All these sites were properly studied by dividing them based on different clusters and features of megalithic monuments.

The methodology adopted to conduct the field survey and analysis

Toposheets and maps of the region were studied and published literature related to the sites was referred to. Documentation of the site was done with the help of GPS of Garmin etrex 10 for plotting the sites on the map. Photographic documentation is been done through Nicol Coolpix L810 digital camera. Counting and measurement of megaliths were done during the documentation of sites and the extension of the site was determined by GPS. The surface collection was done through random sampling from exposed burials and even from the weathered surface. Apart from the methodology adopted for archaeological survey and analysis, the ethnographic inquiry was also conducted in 207 villages in the region of Ranchi, Khunti, and

West Singhbhum of south Jharkhand. This includes the interview method to gain insights regarding the beliefs of the communities towards megalithic practice and the associated rituals and legends. Live photographic and audio-visual documentation of the funeral customs of different case studies and raising of megalithic monuments and related ceremonies and the commemorative feast was also done. Ethnographic analogies, both direct historical and general comparative were used to interpret the archaeological records of ancient sites by available present data collected through the ethnographic survey was also done.

Typology and distribution of megalithic monuments in the region

The typology of megaliths is primarily represented by Dolmens, capstones, or slabs in Ranchi, Khunti, and West Singhbhum districts, occasionally associated with menhirs of upright stones. Another dominant typology of megalithic structures in the region is menhir in cluster or alignment, with rare isolated occurrences away from the main cluster. The sites with continuity of tradition in the region have both, old and recently raised structures, with carved descriptions (in *Devanagari* script) of names and families of dead, as it is used as a repository of mortal remains of the whole family. Some of the sites have a clear demarcation of present and ancient megalithic monuments, as the recent ones are raised separately, slightly away from the ancient cluster of megaliths. In the region of Chatra and Hazaribagh region, they are represented by clusters of menhirs at a site, sometimes near capstones. Menhirs have another sub-type, with a supporting small stone and the sites have menhirs of different sizes, perhaps resembling the different social persona of the dead among the ancient megalithic community. Some of the menhirs have associated capstone, which seems to be a later addition, which is also noticed in the recent burial monuments of the Mundas in Ranchi and Khunti region (Shekhar *et al* 2014: 705-719; Shekhar and Joglekar 2016: 261- 278). At some of the sites, features of cairn packing to support the monument are visible over the weathered surface, indicating the inner architecture of the monuments (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. *Menhir at Obra in Chatra district showing evidence of cairn packing around it*

Since the work also includes the living tradition along with ancient archaeological sites, for the convenience of research sites are sampled and divided into; a. ancient megalithic sites, b. ancestral sites of the present megalithic communities, c. Different localities of ancient and recently raised structures.

A. Ancient Megalithic Sites

Most of the ancient sites are located in the northern part of the study area with ruined and disturbed burial monuments due to natural and anthropogenic factors laid to the site formation. Weathered surfaces and disturbed sections reveal cultural materials and mortal remains, such as ceramics and fragments of charred bones.

Different clusters of megalithic monuments and evidence of habitation deposit is been observed in the outskirts of Obra village of Pathalgarha block Chatra district. It is situated on the bank of a small river, named Bakulia Nadi. The site also has

evidence of Iron smelting nearby the burial locality, evident from traces of a broken iron furnace and heaps of iron ore (Fig. 3).

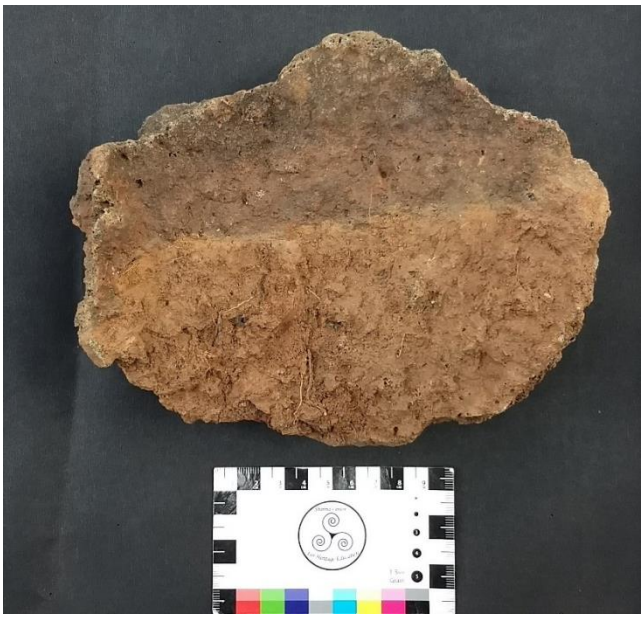

Fig. 3. *A broken piece of furnace recovered from the weathered surface of site Obra*

Traces of habitation deposit is been found in form of a disturbed mound, 150 meters west of the megalithic site. Megalithic monuments are found in different clusters, located at different distances from the habitation mound. Such distributions of megaliths at different distances from each other indicate the use of the landscape for living and the dead with different socio-economic personalities or based on different circumstantial death. A similar pattern of landscape utilization for burial and settlement is visible in present megalithic communities in their surviving tradition.

An exposed cross-section of one of the menhirs at the site, Survey gives clear evidence of the sepulchral nature of the menhir, which is been observed first time in the history of megalithic archaeology of India, as limited excavations reveal a non-sepulchral nature of menhirs at different parts of the Indian subcontinent (Allchin 1960; Thapar 1957; Nath 2002: 81- 88). Evidence of charred bones inside a broken

urn was found approx. 35 cm below the surface in the exposed cross-section (Shekhar 2020: 154; Shekhar 2020a: 9).

The site of Purni Mandar in the Katkamsandi block of Hazaribagh district is represented by Menhirs of different sizes clustered in a north-south orientation. Some of them have lean supported stones and some have small blocks surrounding menhir in roughly circular form. Many miniature menhirs look like surface markers (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. *Megalithic monuments at Purni Mandar in Chatra indicate inter-site variations*

The site indicates traces of spectacular intra-site typological variability in terms of the size of the monuments, perhaps raised for the people having different social persona or statuses.

A very well-known site of Pankhri Baruwadih in Barkagaon block of Hazaribagh districts was studied from an archeo-astronomical point of view by a freelance explorer, Subhashish Das (Das 2009; 2011; 2018). The megalithic typology is again represented by menhirs and slabs, arranged in a roughly circular fashion. Traces of habitation deposits and probable stone quarry outcrop of sandstone, located around

500 meters southeast of megalithic monuments were found during the survey conducted by the author. Evidence of habitation was revealed by anthropogenic activity (digging a foundation for the wall by the laborers) in form of identical potsherds during the survey in the year 2017 by the author from the dugout soil and weathered surface of the megalithic locality.

B. Ancestral sites of present megalithic communities

Such sites possess huge clusters of capstones and dolmens, either with four vertical stones to support the capstone or proper stone slabs or blocks that act as orthostats. Such sites also have an occurrence of recently raised monuments. The prominent sites that deserve to be mentioned here are Chokahatu, Marchadih, Barenda, Tetla, and so on. Edward Tutie Dalton (Dalton 1873: 112- 118) have reported over 7000 megalithic monuments from Chokahatu in Ranchi district, most of them are absent in recent time as the cluster of megalith seems to be very small, observed during the survey conducted by the author. The site has a cluster of large stone slabs and dolmens and even several modern structures are found at the site (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. *Cluster of Ancient and recent stone structures at Chokahatu, an ancestral site of the Mundas in Ranchi district*

Another large cluster of megalithic slabs and dolmens was discovered by the author in the year 2015, on the outskirts of a nearby village, Marchadih (Shekhar and Joglekar 2015: 258). Barenda, Tetla, Kasidih, Besnadih, Burudih, Sillidih, Sirkadih, Soiko, Lupunghatu, and many other village settlements of the Mundas and Bhumij in Ranchi and Khunti districts have similar megalithic clusters with traces of ancient

and modern monuments, resembling the ancestral site, even used by the community today for the raising monuments and depositing the mortal remains under them. Evidence of cremation, which is prevalent among the megalithic communities is been found nearby megalithic clusters (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. *Recent cremation activity at the site of Chokahatu*

C. Different localities of ancient and recently raised megaliths

These are the sites having different localities in the same village area with old megaliths and the recently raised funeral structure in different times and spaces. Most of these sites are found in the southern part of the study area and distributed in and around the present settlements of the Munda and Ho tribes, who have a tradition of raising stone monuments. The sites like Baruhatu, Sirka, Murhu, Burju, Bandgaon, Ichahatu and Damudih in Khunti and West Singhbhum districts of south Jharkhand have different localities possess recent and old monuments, which are related to the present communities and their ancestors. Even stone monuments are now days replaced by cemented Samadhi type of structures (Shekhar and Joglekar 2017b: 67).

Grave goods and archaeological remains

Grave goods recovered from the present survey just comprises potsherds of Red Ware and Red Slipped Ware with different types of rims, and decorated sherds with incised designs. Sherd doesn't have paintings at all. Apart from this, some miniature vessels, like, lamps and urns containing fragments of human bones, and broken parts of spouts are an important part of rituals related to the funeral and burial customs of ancient megalithic people.

Apart from grave goods, there were few other archaeological remains gathered in through surface collections, including, funerary remains in form of fragments of cremated human remains, and charred animal bones, from the sites; Survey and Obra (Shekhar 2020: 154). A broken part of a perforated iron object from the habitation site of Obra, a Broken part of the furnace along with an abundance of iron slags from one of the localities at Obra.

The megalithic tradition of Munda, Bhumij, and Ho

Megalithic monuments are raised by these three communities as funeral monuments and many other commemorative purposes (Shekhar and Joglekar 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; Shekhar 2019; 2020; 2021). The funeral custom of these communities is predominantly cremation and cremated remains are buried under ancestral stone repositories; Dolmen or capstone burials. Menhirs are raised as memorial stones and in commemoration. Sometimes, instead of cremated remains, a symbolic effigy is buried under the stone chamber (Shekhar 2020: 7). These stone monuments are appeased by annual worship, and sometimes animal sacrifices are offered to the monuments raised for a person who died due to unnatural death (Shekhar and Joglekar 2017b: 33 & 35) (Fig.7).

Fig. 7. *Ancient and recently raised menhir at different localities of Digri Village in Khunti district*

Ethnographic Parallels of ancient grave goods

The cremated and disarticulated bones selected from the funeral pyre and dug out grave through associated secondary funeral ceremony prevails at present, a symbolic effigy of the dead inserted under the monument, small ritualistic pots used during the funeral custom, etc. are the ethnographic complements of ancient grave goods found in ancient burials (IAR 1965- 66: 10; Das 2018; Shekhar and Joglekar 2017a). Such modern grave goods can be part of the archaeological records hundreds of years from now, showing during ancient times such articles were part of the funerary materials of ancient megalithic authors, which could have been used in the megalithic tradition of that time.

Concept of monumentality among the Austro- Asiatic population

As the recent linguistic and genetic research on the AA population suggests, they belong to the same language family with some sort of genetic similarity and have a long history of the movement between southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent right from the pre-Neolithic and Neolithic period through different waves of migrations (Sidwell 2010: 117- 134; Choubey *et al*. 2011: 1013- 1024). The Austroasiatic language families are conventionally split into three different branches based on linguistic studies; The Munda, the Nicobarese, and the Mon- Khmer languages speaking communities (van Driem 2001: 262; Anderson 2006: 598). In south-east Asia, the Monic, the Khmer, the Khumic, the Katic, the Nias, Toraja, Nicobarese, and many more communities belong to the AA population and in India, the region of Northeast, eastern and central India is populated with the Khasis, the Jayantiyas, the Mundas and their different Branches, such as Bhumij, Ho, Santhal, Kharwar, Juwang, Sora, etc. Many of them share very similar sort of cultural traits on which their traditions and subsistence depend. According to recent genetic research on Indian AA population groups, they moved into mainland south Asia from Southeast Asia during the Neolithic period and went through sex-based admixture with a local population of the subcontinent (Chaubey *et al.* 2011: 1024). The concept of monumentality is an important trait, which has been shared between these communities, brought to the region of north-east, eastern, and central Indian regions. The AA communities cremate their dead predominantly, both in southeast Asia (Perry 1918: 35) and the region of the Indian subcontinent constructing and raising stone monuments as bone repositories and commemorative stones. Apart from the Mundas, Bhumij, and Hos, the Khasis (Godwin-Austen 1876-37-41; Hutton 1926: 333- 346;1933:167- 169; Roy 1963: 520 -556), the Karbis (Medhi and Choudhury 2015: 687- 699), of Assam and Meghalaya, Saora (Elwin 1955; Mohanty 2015: 732- 750), Bondo (Haimendorf 1943: 173), Gadabas (Haimendorf 1943:148- 179; Basa 2015: 751- 770), etc. have a very similar tradition with slight differences to raise megalithic structures in association with death custom and as a representation of commemoration.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Megalithic monuments in the region have been raised by the Mundas, Bhumij, and Hos, who belong to the AA population of the region and it is confined to them only. The monuments have a rich archaeological parallel, studied through limited archaeological investigations. In lack of such lacuna of archaeological research, the author has conducted an ethnoarchaeological model of research to understand the ancient past of the megalithic tradition of three AA populations of the same branch through the study of their ancestral sites and even to study the ancient megalithic monuments reported from the region through available ethnographic data.

The distribution of megaliths can be divided into three categories; a cluster of ancient sites with weathered surfaces and exposed cross-section due to the site formation process, ancestral sites of the AA population, i.e., Munda, Bhumij, and Ho, having inter-site continuity of landscape utilization for burial monuments, and the sites having different localities raised both old and recent monuments. Even these sites are further studied by dividing them according to the clusters and localities. A few ancient sites have also been studied by the view of landscape utilization for the living and the dead if there are traces of habitation deposits. They are further analyzed on the view of probable ancient mortuary variability, visible in different locations of clusters, which have been also observed in the landscape utilization of present megalithic communities in the region (Shekhar and Joglekar 2017a: 22). The work proposes that there are some similar cultural traits shared by both ancient and present megalithic communities, in terms of funerary architecture, nature of funeral custom and their remains and land use pattern for the living and the dead. The close affinity of the present population with the ancient can be seen in the cultural heritage of both present tradition and ancient sites. The ancestral sites of the Mundas and Bhumij indicate a long history of continuity of megalithic tradition, reflects in funeral remains and present funeral custom, showing a long history of cremation in the ancestral society even seen in ancient megalithic remains and ethnographic data. Cremation seems to be a common procedure as most of the AA population of India, such as Khasis, Karbis, Saoras, and Gadabas of the eastern and

northeast regions of the subcontinent, and several AA communities of southeast Asia perform such tradition since ancient times, which still survive in their funeral procession. The concept of monumentality is been shared among the AA population of Jharkhand, another part of eastern India and north-east India and Southeast Asia, which can be witnessed in the megalithic tradition that prevailed in Indonesia, Laos, and so on, continued in the region of Assam, Meghalaya, Odisha, and Jharkhand region. Stone monuments are also raised by Tibeto-Burman communities of Northeast India and Dravidian-speaking populations of Southern and central India, because of two possible reasons; the universal phenomena of the concept of monumentality and long cultural interaction among these population right from the long history of migration and intermingling throughout the past.

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