

RESEARCH PAPER

A Study of Living Megalithic Tradition Among the Gond Tribes, District – Nuaparha, Odisha

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The present paper deals with the existence and continuation of living megalith tradition among the Gond tribe in Nuaparha district of Odisha. The mortuary practice of different tribal community have given many ethnographical data, which is used as a primary source to reconstructing the past social and cultural history of megalithic people.

Introduction

The study of burial practice is one of the most important sources for archaeologist (Aleksin 1983) and the analysis of ancient burials is very much useful to reconstruct the burial rites (Grayaznov 1956; Chapman 1981), and it also reflects the basic feature of the socio-economic structure of primitive tribe (Ravdonikas 1932; Binford 1971: 6–29). Thus, the knowledge of living Megalithic tradition is helpful to unfold the history of early Iron Age communities. It would also enable us to trace out the antiquity of those communities who follow megalithism in present day.

The evidence of burial practices in Indian subcontinent goes back to Mesolithic period (Allchin and Allchin 1983: 62–96), and these practices grow with the beginning of Neolithic culture. During the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, the tradition of burial practice continued to exist in most of the parts of this country (Gupta 1972a; Leshnik 1974: 21–5; Sahi 1991; Rajan 1994: 39–40). Whether the evidence of ‘megalithism’ is found in the pre-Iron Age context, this tradition became fashionable during the Iron Age in India, and it sustained even during the historical and up to present times, in a few pocket of this subcontinent (Mohanty and Selvakumar 2002). The Gadabas and Bondo in central India (Haimendurff 1943), the Bondo (Elwin 1950; Tripathy 1969) in Southern part of India, the Todas (Brecks 1873; Walhouse 1874a, 1874b), the Kurumbas (Kapp 1985; Poyil 2009, 2013), and the Malarayas (Krishna Iyer 1939) and the Nagas (Singh 1985; Hutton 1922; Binodini Devi 1993; Sharma 1997; Jamir 1997–98), the Khasis (Austeen 1872; Gurdon 1914; Bareh 1981; Cecile Mawlong 1990; Rao 1991), the Marams (Binodini Devi 2004), the Jaintias (Marak 2012), the North-Eastern part of India, can be analysed as a form of living megalithic tradition with in the different tribal's community (Devi 2013).

Historiography

Research on the living tradition of Megalithic practice in Odisha is very few. Most of the studies are concentrated on the typology of burials, their individual and common features, a comparison with those of other parts of India and the world, and the belief systems associated with Megalithism. However, in this field has begun before pre independence era. When for the first time Haimendorff (1943), published his work on Bodo and Gadabas and this is the first evidence on living megalithic tradition on tribal group in Odisha, but after that we don't have any first hand research information about the living megalithic tradition in this region.

Present area of study

Nuaparha is located in the western part of Odisha between 20° 0' N to 21° 5' N latitudes and between 82° 20' E to 82° 53' E longitudes. Its boundaries extend in the north, west and south to Raipur district in Chhatisgarh and in the east to Bargarh, Balangir and Kalahandi districts of Odisha (**Fig. 1**). This district spread over an area of 3852 Sq. kms (2.47% of Odisha) and has a forest covering an area of 1849.69 Sq. kms (48% of the total area 3,852 Sq. kms). The forest is of dry deciduous type. The population of the district is 6,10,382 as per the 2011 Census of India out of which 225841 (37.11%) are schedule tribes. The Prominent among them are Gond (66.56%), Sabars (12.30%), Saora (5.82%) and others tribal community (15.20%). The tribal dominated villages are located in the isolated pockets in forest area of Nuaparha district.

Methodology

During the 2013–14 field sessions in Nuaparha district, we located some burial ground or *Matha*, we systematically surveyed this area, to understand the burial practice among the Gond tribes, and we took the help of ethnographical data. The case study method and interview technique were, frequently used for data collection. Further, in this field work questionnaire schedule was adopted to understand the thinking of the people and their opinion regarding the megalithic practice and their belief on death after life. Five

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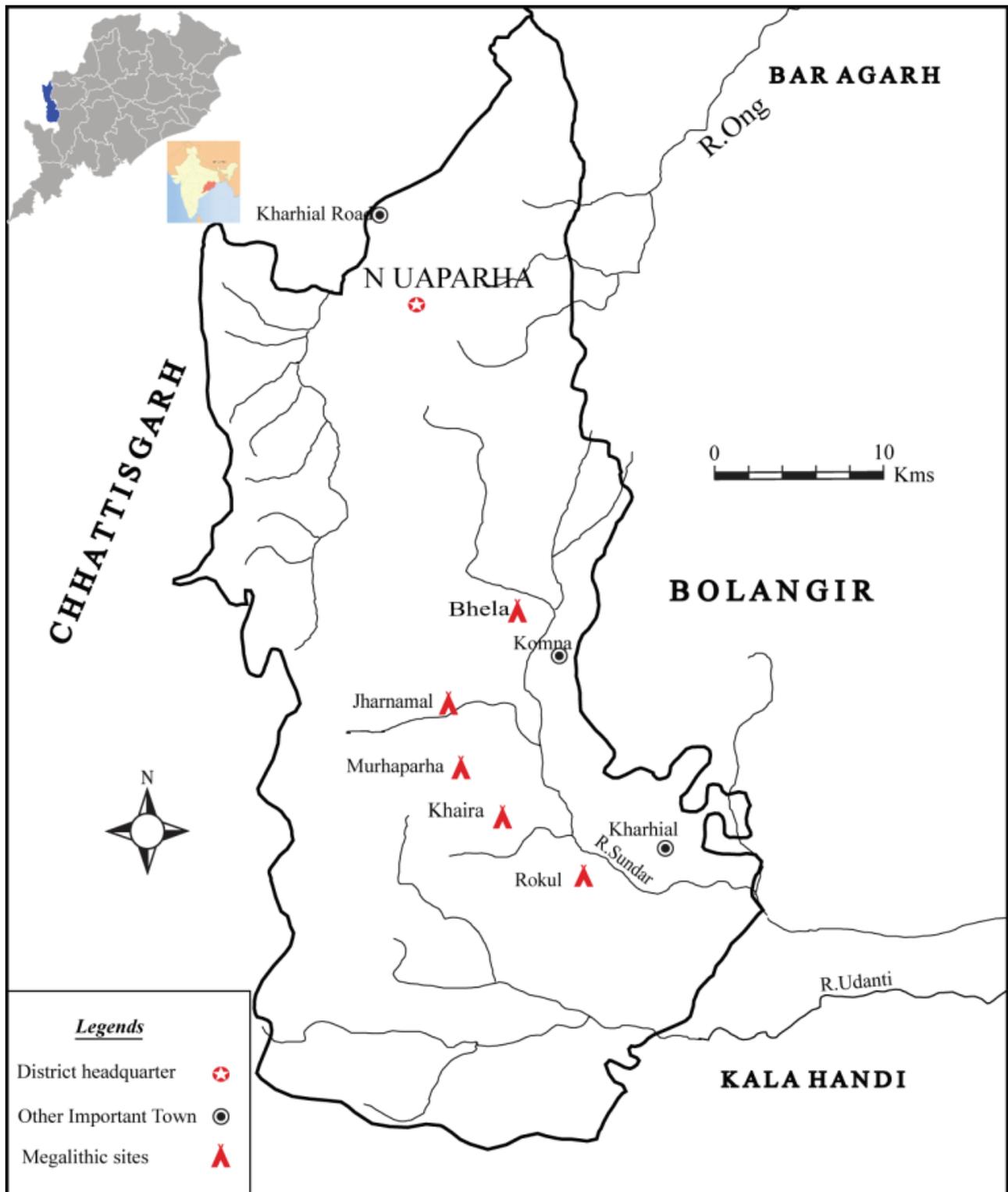


Figure 1: Distribution of megalithic sites in Nuaparha district.

villages under the Nuaparha district had been selected, for in depth study (**Table 1**), as well as we are mapping a site for better understanding about the projection of Burials (**Fig. 1**).

Gond of Nuaparha District

Nuaparha district is a hilly track area, the Gond people settle down in a low land area of this district, there economic condition bases upon three categories. First category – the

higher class Gond people, those depend upon different seasonal and non-seasonal agricultural activities, second – they basically depend upon cattle herder, and the third group depends upon the forest products and forest goods like – honey collection, collection of medicinal plant route, and also hunting and fishing contribute but sparsely to the food supply and they belong to the labour class who often work in other’s plough field on the basis of daily wage. The female members of the family engage them with spin yarn

Name of the site	Tahasil	District	Geo-Reference	Projection	Material findings
Bhella	Komna	Nuaparha	N-20.31.26.7" E-82.36.21.3"	N/S	Burial Ground
Jharmal	Komna	Nuaparha	N-20.35.48.6" E-82.36.54.4"	N/S	Burial Ground
Murhaparha	Komna	Nuaparha	N-20°42' 14.55" E-82°35' 11.80"	N/S	Burial Ground
Khaira	Rajkhariar	Nuaparha	N-20.30.50.0" E-82.37.08.	N/S	Burial Ground
Rokul	Rajkhariar	Nuaparha	20° 15' 59.00"N 82° 41' 37.97"E	N/S	Burial Ground

Table 1: Details information on study area in Nuaparha District.

from the bark-fibre of a deciduous flowering shrub, colourings with vegetable and other natural dye, and weave clothes, which are both durable and artistic in effects. They also prepare handicraft like bamboo jar and some of the pots, with expertise, which is made from the leaves of different type of plant, the local market are very much favourable for them to sell their products to earn some money.

Ancestor worship of the Gond is closely relates to the Megalithic tradition, generally the custom of megalithic practice performed by the male head of the family. In his absence, next senior male person holds the pos. In every Gond dominated village in Nuaparha district, we found the evidence of living megalithic tradition as a form of burial practice.

Death Rituals

The Gond people believe in death after life, they believe that every human being has two souls: the life spirit and the shadow (Elwin 1945, 1991). The life spirit goes to *bada devta* but the shadow still stay in the village after the erection of stone memorial. Gond people believe that the first and foremost duty of shadow spirit is to watch over the moral behavior of the people and punish them those who go against the tribal law. During the cremation the position or direction of the dead body is one of the essential part of the death rituals, they lay the dead body in North-South direction, because they were worshiper of Sun god. When a Gond dies, first his family members inform their relatives as well as the village headman (*Jatir Mukhia*), the village headman inform to other members for the preparation of death rituals. Now other village members prepare a casket using bamboo mat and banana trees, the women members of the family cry very loudly time to time, the headman of the village or *Jatir Mukhia* puts some water, *Haladi* powder and *Neem* leaves over the dead body for the purification of the dead body.

After the arrivals of the all relatives and family members, the male members of the village and family take the dead body on their shoulder to go towards the *Matha*. The *Matha* is generally situated on the north-east corner of the village. The dead body is followed by men and a woman, the female members of the deceased throws some rice products *Chuda*, and *Lia* over the dead body. Under the guidance of the village headman (*Jatir Mukhia*) the elder son of deceased come to the burial ground with every

primary material, which is already used by the deceased, like the *Tanger or Tangia*, *bamboo stick*, arrow, bow, etc. to bury along with the dead body. The village headmen select the area to prepare grave and the grave is filled with different types of goods, basically depending upon the socio-economic status of the deceased.

Grave Goods

The grave goods totally depend upon the age, sex as well as socio-economic status of the dead person. The corpse is interred with a variety of goods including two kinds of personal possessions. One is the domestic possession of the deceased person, which includes different kinds of food items like water, clothes, ornaments, pots, and a cane basket known as *kunli* which contains different varieties of grains, and the second variety contains the implements like knife, hoe, axe, spade, sickle, digging stick etc. Apart from these various kinds of food grains such as *rice*, *millet*, *ragi*, *kora*, *thuvara*, etc. also are included. Money is regarded as the token for the ferry charge to cross the river in the land of the dead for the spirit. After interment, the Gonds use to fix a stone as a burial mark at the head. All these grave goods give us important historical clues regarding their economy, their use of different metals, their dietary pattern, anthropological data and belief in life after death etc.

Burial stone

After the preparation of burial ground, they bury the dead body of the deceased, the village people collect the stone under the guidance of village headman, which is used in the burial ground or *Matha*. If they find shortages of cist or stone they directly collect them from other burials, with the help of village headman, who follow some rules and pay homage in front of the other burial chambers and there village deity. During the course of my research, I have noticed some stone query sites, which is especially for stone burial of Gond people from the nearby foot hills (fig. 5, 6). The distance of the foothill is nearly one and half kilometre from the burial ground. So it is very much easy to procure the raw material from the sites, they were used some iron objects to query the stone from the parent rocks. It not only indicates the efficiency of raw material procuring technology but also it indicate their socio-cultural bondage.

Belief towards the Erection of Memorial Pillar

The Gond people erect the memorial pillar or menhir in memory of the deceased; and it is called as “Uraskal” in Gondi (Elwin 1991). They maintain this practice, which is different in variety. During the time of erection they sacrifice a sheep, goat or black cock and the size of menhirs depends upon the reputation as well as personality of the person. Gonds believe that their ancestors live in this pillar and they are responsible for the protection of their clan; and if they stop the tradition it is a kind of disrespect to their ancestor and they may face number of problems. Usually they worship the memorial stone or menhirs during the subsequent days: (i) The day of *Amabasya* and *Purnima*, because they believe in that particular day the evil spirit is more powerful, (ii) before cultivation of the crop, (iii) before going to hunting (iv) during the time of marriage ceremony (v) when a child is born in his family (vi) during the time of natural calamity and (vii) if any serious problem which is not solved by them, the maximum duration of worshipping of the pillar is twenty to twenty five year.

Ceremonial Feast

After the funeral ceremony on the day of tenth and twelfth, they organize a feast which is called ceremonial feast. On the third day, they invite their village head man and their relatives to discuss further procedure of death rituals like the searching and erection of memorial pillars, and about ceremonial feast. On the day of tenth, they organize a feast but they invite their relatives and other people too. The importance of the day is that, on this day they go to search a “menhir” or memorial pillars on the guidance of their tribal head (*Jatir mukhia*) to the forest. During this time if a stone is not available in the forest they procure, a pillar like stone from the foot hill area and it is up to twelve to fifteen feet. On the day of twelfth, they invite their relatives and friends from other villages and other castes of the respective villages, and they erect the memorial stone in burial complex or *matha*. After that a sheep or goat is slaughtered in honour of the deceased, and its meat eaten at the feast, but before that they offer this meat to their village deity and their ancestors. They believe that the animals killed in this occasion are supposed to become the property of the deceased in the spirit world and there is the belief that, if this ceremony is not organized then they face serious problem throughout the year. The ceremonial feasts are not confined to the Gond community but are common to many Hindu castes and aboriginal tribes in Odisha as well as in peninsular India.

Discussion

The ethnographical studies suggest that megalithic monuments are not only erected for a funerary purpose, but also to commemorate feast of merit and other event of coupled with various faith and beliefs. As it is an expensive affair and is not performed for each and every member of the community.

In Odisha, we do not have that much of megalithic remains, which is found in South India. If we discuss about living form of megalithic then we have only one detail account of Haimendurff (1943; p. 177), who said that

North-Eastern megalithic, which is still a form of living tradition among the tribal group, which are of South-East Asian origin. Again, he said that there is no relation between the megalithic practitioner of North-East India and south India, rather there is many similarity between the megalithic builder of Assam, Odisha and Bastar region. However, the evidence come from Luzon, Flores, Ambon and Ceram island suggest that the crucial part has already been developed much before the beginning of Austronesian migration, and the Austro-Asiatic race move towards peninsular India. The ethnological and archaeological evidence indicate that this migration process occurred during Neolithic times which indicates that the distribution of shoulder polished Celts and Austro-Asiatic language flourished in similar period, and the Austro-Asiatic people are responsible for the spread of highly developed Neolithic culture characterized by the long polished Celts with quadrangular section those are found in Indian peninsular and so far south of Godavari (Geldern 1928; Haimendorf 1945). However, when we are come to Odisha, yet there is no evidence on shoulder Celts that are found with the association of megalithic culture, so that due to inadequate field data we cannot co-relate the emergence of megalithic culture with shouldered Celt type of Neolithic period in Odisha at present time. So we may précis that the key features of megalithic monuments are the memorial often connected with the graves.

Concluding Remarks

The chronological status of the culture is very much difficult to co-relate with other, because still many part of Orissa is unexplored, rather the research on living megalithic practice on tribal community have begun since pre-independence era. The south-western zone of Orissa comprises of many tribal groups, and still they have practicing their own tradition and custom. There believe is quite different from any of the religious believe in Indian sub-continent. Due to lack of research in Odisha with the use of scientific method, we do not have much information, which give us a general idea to represent the pattern of the living megalithic tradition among the different tribal group of people in Odisha.

During the course of investigation we noticed that, the recent megalithic erected by the Gonds have some sort of change in size up to certain extent. There is some typological variation on this burial site as compared to ancient megalithic, which is found in other part of Odisha and India. We have also noticed some changes in their mortuary practice as well as their ceremonial feast, which is quite common in Hindu caste as well as other tribes and aboriginal groups. Mainly they were influenced, by Hindu rituals and they adopt same practice which is followed by Hindus in present days.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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