

Mortuary Practices among the Tribes of Western Odisha: A Study on Gond and Munda Communities.

Dr.Nakul Seth* ,

Asst prof of History Panchayat College Bargarh

Subodha Mendaly* and Sakir Hussain*

* Ph.D. Research Scholars, P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University, Odisha.

Abstract

Studies on mortuary practice provide valuable insights on different type of belief systems prevailed in different tribal communities. Among them practicing Megalithism is one of the important belief systems. The present study highlight the living Megalithic tradition of Gond and Munda communities settled in two different environmental zone of Western Odisha i.e. Nuapada and Sundargarh districts respectively.

Introduction

Although a number of researches have been carried out on different aspects of the tribals of western Odisha¹ i.e. socio-economic status, belief system, religion, languages, food habit, traditional knowledge and settlement pattern etc., but still there are other aspects waiting to see the light of the day. One of these aspects is mortuary practice associated with the megalithic building. Evidence for Megalithism has been reported from different parts of India and occur in different chronological contexts viz., from Iron Age down to present day². While in the south India and Vidharbha region due to the concentration of Megalithic monuments a good number of systematic studies have been carried out on Iron Age-Megalithic culture³, similar exhaustive studies are yet to be done in other parts of the country. However, today in few pockets of India people are still practicing Megalithism⁴ i.e. Koraput-Bastar region, Chhottanagpur plateau, North-eastern parts of India, parts of south India etc., which clearly demonstrates the continuation of the practice throughout the ages. In this paper an attempt is made to highlight different belief systems and the association of megalithism with the mortuary practices prevailing among the Gonds of Nuapada and Mundas of Sundargarh.

Area of Present Study

Western Odisha includes the present day Sambalpur, Bargarh, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, Sonapur, Bolangir, Kalahandi, Nuapara, Boudh and Sundargarh districts and Athmallik *tehsil* of Angul district. It is a transitional zone lying between the Chhattisgarh Plains on the west and the deltaic plains of costal Odisha on the southeast. Out of the 62 tribal groups about 52 are settled in this region⁵, belonging to the Austro-Asiatic and Indo Dravidian linguistic family and following their own traditions and belief systems. These communities are mostly living in the hilly region and therefore, their subsistence economy is particularly based upon the seasonal cultivation, hunting-gathering, fishing and collection of different forest products.

Besides, they also prepared different art and craft items and sell them in the local market. After four years of systematic survey in this part of India, we found that there are few communities practicing megalithic building which may be a continuation of their ancestors since time immemorial. The importance of this region as far as megalithic is concerned lies in the fact that besides megalithic sites in archaeological context⁶, some tribal groups are still practicing megalithic erection *i.e.* Gonds and Mundas (Fig. 1).

Methods of Study

For the present work data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through field survey, interview and questionnaire whereas published literatures in the form of books and journals' article represent the secondary sources. Field surveys were conducted between 2014 to 2017 in both Nuapada and Sundargarh districts, particularly in those localities where megalithism have been practiced among the tribal communities. Different field survey burial grounds as well as individual structure are properly documented including the digital photography. Interviews and questionnaires have been conducted to know the whole process in detail and different beliefs associated with the burial.

Funeral Rituals and Megalithic Tradition.

The entire process of the funeral custom broadly divided into two groups⁷ the primary funeral or Green funeral, which occurred suddenly after the death of a person and the secondary funeral or dry funeral, which occurred after few days or some times its take several months or a year also. To organize a secondary funeral system they have spend huge amount of the money, so it is completely depended upon the economic condition of the family. If they are economically sound then they have to organize the ceremony after the few days of the death of the deceased. During the time of secondary funeral customs the tribal people were erecting and using different types of Megalithic structure, this tradition is not only found in western part of Odisha but similar kind of tradition is also prevailed in parts of south and southeast Asian countries. A brief discussion on association of megalithism with mortuary practices among the Gonds of Nuapada and Mundas of Sundargarh districts is given below.

Mortuary Practices and Megaliths among the Gonds

The Gonds⁸ are widely distributed in Madhya Pradesh, Bastar region of Chhattisgarh and its adjoining region and they normally use to speak in Gondi language. Gonds are divided into several subgroups like *Raj*, *Khatola*, *Madia*, *Dhur*, *Dadve*, *Mokasi*, *Gaita* and *Koyas*. Gonds are originally belonging to Austro-Asiatic population⁹, who may adopt in later time the Dravidian language. Unlike other tribal communities who organize feast of merit during funeral rituals, Gonds have to organize their ceremonial feast during the erection of memorial pillars. During our survey we recorded two different type of megaliths erection among the Gonds *viz.* Cairn heap and Menhir.

Cairn heap

The cairn heap is generally a cluster of small stones. When a person passed away, Gonds buried the dead body in the earth by digging a square pit. The size of the pit depends upon the height of the deceased. After that the four sides of the pit is covered by wooden plate and placed the dead body on north-south direction. The relatives covered the dead body with soil, besides they also put several sizeable stone above the burial pit (Fig. 2). They build cairn heap because the cairn heap protects the dead body from the wild animal.

Memorial Pillar of Gonds

Gonds are also erected Memorial pillar in the memory of the deceased (Fig. 3) and in several cases the size of Menhirs depends upon the socio-economic status of the deceased within the society. The common belief of the Gonds is that their ancestors live in this pillar and they protect their clan and if they stop the tradition it is a kind of disrespect to their ancestor and their family members may face number of problems in near future, so every family of Gonds trying to perform this ceremony. Usually, they worship these Menhirs in some of the important days those are;

- (i) On the day of *Amabasya* and *Purnima*, because they believe that in that particular day the evil spirit is more powerful,
- (ii) During the time of crop harvesting,
- (iii) Before going to hunting and gathering in forest region,
- (iv) During the time of marriage ceremony,
- (v) When a child is born in the family,
- (vi) During the time of natural calamity and
- (vii) If they face any kind of serious problem which cannot be solved by them or their village headman.

Mortuary Practices and Megaliths among the Mundas

The Munda are widely distributed in many parts of central eastern part of India which includes Chhatigarh, Western part of Odisha and Jharkhand. They are belonging to prime group of Austro-Asiatic language family¹⁰. In comparison to the other districts in Odisha the concentration of Munda in Sundargarh is the highest after Mayurbhanj. They are divided into a number of subgroups like *Erenga Munda*, *Mahali Mundas* and *Mundas*. The totems of Mundas are drawn from large number of exogamous groups called 'Kili'. According to Munda tradition¹¹, all members of the same *Kili* are descendants from one common ancestor. In general the Mundas are erected two different types of Megaliths namely Dolmenoid cist and Menhir. Dolmen cist is a flat stone slab. It is generally constructed in case of natural death. Though Menhir is generally erected in case of unnatural death, in some case it depends upon the region that Menhir have been erected as a memorial for the person having some sort of special status in society.

Dolmen Cist of Mundas

The dolmen cist is a simple flat stone slab. The stone is in general 1-2 m long, 0.5-2 m wide and 20-30 cm thick. The size of the dolmen cist indicates the social status of the deceased, because cutting a big flat stone slab required huge manpower and takes maximum time in compared to the small one (Fig. 4). Using stone slabs represent primary form of burial system in which the dead body is placed in a square pit under the earth within 3-4 ft. depth.

However, the placing of the stone slabs is not possible for everyone on the day of the death due to financial problem and only higher class people could spent huge amount of money to perform this ceremony within a short time period. For the common people its take a month or year for the collection of money because during this ceremony the family members bound to provide all the facility to the villagers and some extra to village elders and priest. Therefore, it also symbolized the social hierarchy of people in the society.

Memorial Pillar of Mundas

The size of the stone pillar is from 3 to 5 feet height and it is vertically erected in burial ground (Fig. 5) or outside the village on road side (Fig. 6). Elder son of the deceased erect this pillar after twelve days, with the help of other members of the clan and priest. The Mundas have believed that their ancestors live on the stone and protect their families from the evil spirit. During the time of exploration, we have notice many small stone pillars, which placed on the roadside in the memoirs of deceased. Besides, every year the family members organize annual ceremony with a common feast to their clan member.

Discussion

There are different tribal groups settled in western part of Odisha but the living megalithic tradition have been found to be practiced among the Gonds and Mundas only. The megalithic monuments of Gonds and Mundas indicate their belief on ancestral worship and represent social status of the deceased among the society. The associated funeral ceremonies of both the groups differ from each to other but their belief systems are mostly common and among the Gonds and Mundas we found the megalithic structure represent as a protector of family members from the evil spirit. Even some occasions they perform different ceremony by considering these megaliths as the god of fertility also. In this way E. B. Tylor¹² states that all primitive people believe in the immortality of human soul, all virtues and failures of their lives are attributed to the intervention of the spirits of their ancestors and tribal religion may be described as animism or spirit-worship of both malevolent and benevolent. Besides, megalithic types their elaborate process of funeral rituals indicate a social hierarchy of family after the death of deceased within the tribal society which is also very common among the megalithic builders of North-eastern India¹³. Similarities have been noticed among the Mundas, Nagas and Sumbas of North-eastern India and eastern Sumba province of Indonesia¹⁴ such as the stone slabs of Munda community and their associate feature and believes is somehow equally same.

However, unlike other regions the memorial pillars of Gonds of Nuapada and Mundas of Sundargarh are smaller¹⁵.

Although, we found the evidence of megalithic tradition among the tribals of western Odisha but the question relating to the origin of megalithism in this part of the country is still unsolved. Besides the above discussion, we have marked numbers of changes occurred on megalithic building and funeral rituals among these tribal communities. As some of the tribal groups have converted into Christian, they accordingly changed their ancestral traditions also. Further, the expansion of urbanization has a great impact and primarily responsible for introduction of new systems among these communities like constructed cemented burial instead of megalithic structure. Again due to lack of awareness among the tribal groups a number of megalithic structures were displaced and destroyed during the time of road construction (Fig. 7 & 8). Though the present work includes a small chapter in the megalithic practice by people in this part of India, future research may provide more information to understand the problem of Megalithic culture in this part of India.

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FIGURES

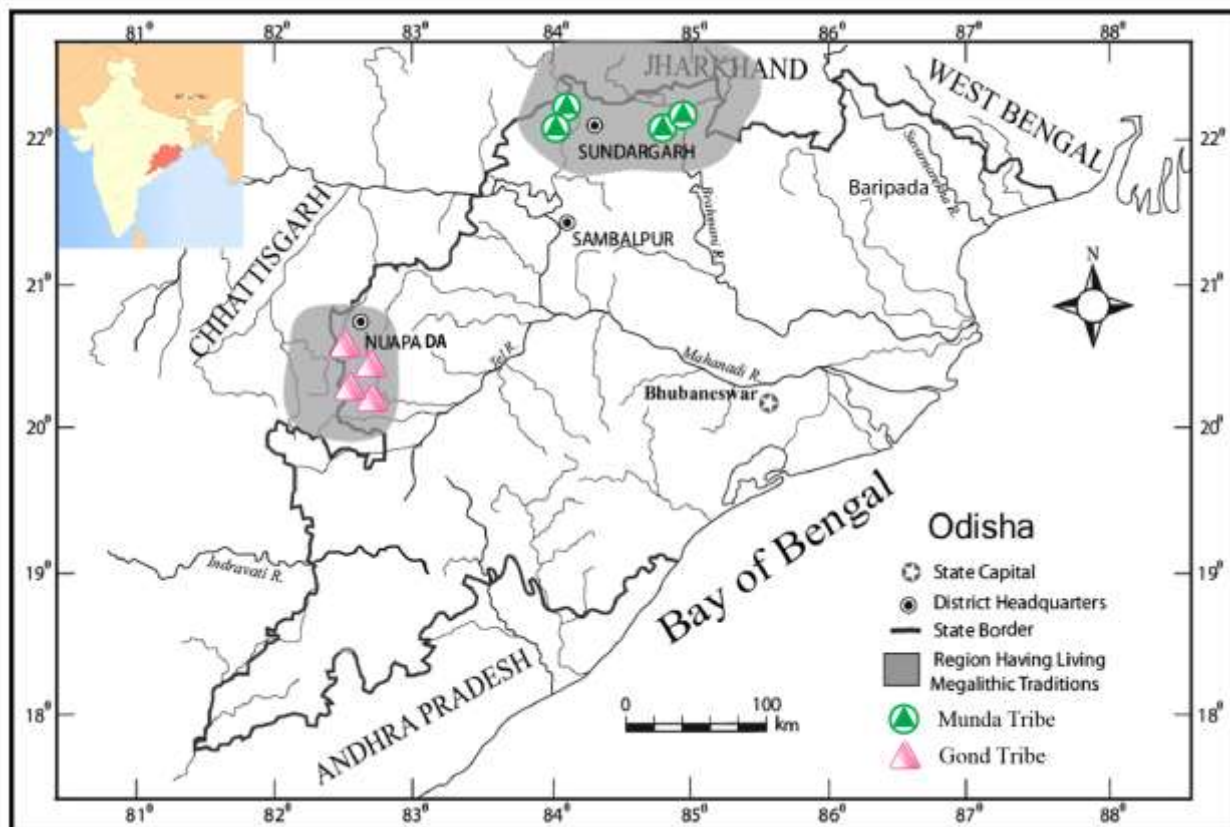


Figure 1: Map showing the Present Study Area.



Figure 2: Burial Ground of Gonds, Nuapada District showing a number of Cairn heaps.



Figure 3: Menhir with cairn heap of Gonds, Nuapada district.



Figure 4: Dolmen Cist of Mundas, Sulabhdhi Sundergarh district.



Figure 5: Burial Ground of Mundas showing Menhirs, Lephripada Block, Sundargarh district.



Figure 6: Menhirs erected by Mundas on road side, Anugul village, Bonaigarh block, Sundargarh district.



Figure-B

Figure 7: Cemented structure of Gonds, Dist- Nuapada



Figure 8: Cemented burial structure of Mundas, Dist- Sundergarh

