

Megalithic Art in Central India

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Abstract: The art is one of those things which started from the Stone Age and continues till date but the degree of perfection varies during different periods of time. One of the living examples of ancient art form is Megalith. Among the Indian Arts megaliths are one of the most mysterious art forms. The Central India Megalithic art is considered to be tribal in nature, which originated in 1000 B.C. Megaliths are associated with the one of the last rituals to pay respect to the ancestors or to the departed soul. This paper makes an attempt to understand the origin of megalithic art, along with its presence, either on large stones or small stones. This art form is the expression presented in the form of aligned stones, with different shapes and sizes. This paper is an attempt to highlight the unnoticed aspect of megalithic culture which is megalithic art in the form of cup-marks, anthropomorphic figures etc. The paper also studies the present status of this art in Central India. There is a threat to the identity of this art form because of the fast growing urbanisation, this art is annihilating. There is a threat to the identity of these stones. So, the paper discusses the role of the government and civilian to preserve this art form.

Keywords: Megaliths, Art Monuments, Modernisation, Conservation.

1. Introduction:

The reference of art in India can be traced back to the Stone Age. In earlier research works the concept of art is limited to the paintings that were found in the rock caves. These paintings in rock-cut caves are considered to be the earliest evidence of existence of human art. The presence of art in the context of Central India started from the Stone Age Bhimbetka paintings. The art which is found in relation to expressing one's feeling for dead ancestor's that still continues is in the form of megalithic art. The megalithic art is among the most widespread remains of man in Central India since Iron Age. It is important to understand the meaning of 'Megaliths' and 'Art'. The term is applied only to a particular class of monuments or structures, 'megalith' is derived from Greek word 'megas', which means great and 'lithos' meaning stone. So, 'megaliths' refer to the monuments built of large stones. But in the context of Central India megaliths are mostly found in small stones and wooden pillars.

The term Art means the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, sculpture etc. One such art form is the art of megalith. It is thousands of years old and the *Adivasis* have continuously planted them on their burial lands.

Megalithic art is the usage of large stones in a creative manner. The megalith has art in it, in the form of placement of stone and wood in a particular alignment. R. G. Bednaik for the first time invented the term cupules/cup-marks and explain it as an intriguing feature of megalithic art found on some of megalithic tomb is the presence of hemispherical depression of oval or circular carved holes on the surface of the stones, which are known as 'cup-marks'. The anthropomorphic figure, which is representation of god, ghost or human, is another form of 'Megalithic Art'. The megalithic art maker had left behind no written documents for the generations to come it is difficult to understand the cause behind them.

In the context of present paper, the Central India comprises the region of Jharkhand state. The area is decided as central part of megalithic culture on the basis of distribution of this culture in India not on the basis of political map of India. Hence, the megalithic art usually refers to the burials made of large stones engraved with cup-marks, anthropomorphic figures, paintings etc. in graveyards away from the habitation area.

2. Historiography:

Earlier research scholars deserve to be commended for the fact that they were able to group these different sets of art distributed over a large geographical area as product of the megalithic culture ^[1]. The first documentation of megalithic culture around central India is by J. D. Begler in his report on a tour in central provinces, which he undertook in 1873-74. The credit to the discovery of megalithic art like cupules in India goes to Rivett-Carnac, who in 1879 at Junapani in Maharashtra founded them ^[2]. But it was in the second half of the twentieth century when megalithic art as a research subject got prominent among the scholars work such as "Petroglyph sites in Kalapahad and Ganesh Hill: Documentation and Observations" by G. Kumar and M.

Sharma (1995), "The Secrets of the Avebury Stones" by Terence Meaden (1999), "Early Petroglyphs and their Global Context" by R. G. Bednarik (2001) "Some Salient Features of the Surface Architecture of Megaliths of Hazaribagh" by Subhashis Das (2008) etc.

3. Methodology:

The work is grounded on literary and archaeological data. The literary sources are referred to study the Megalith and its different art form reported till date. After understanding all the concepts an interview technique using detailed questionnaire schedule was used to understand the people practices and opinion regarding the death, belief and practices of the tribal people towards the megalithic art.

4. Origin of the megalithic culture:

No one knows for certain the immediate source of the Central Indian megalithic art. Though it is generally accepted among archaeologists that the practice of erecting megaliths in Jharkhand began in the Iron Age^[3] (3000 BC-200 AD) that succeeded the Neolithic-Chalcolithic in the region^[4]. Megalithic art is related to megalithic culture so; it can be concluded that this art form might have started in this period. No proper excavation has been conducted of the sites in question hence no scientific data is available for this significant tribal art.

The general speculation has been observed by some of the scholars is that the megalithic art was used for doing religious activities through these aligned stones on burial sites. Some scholar has observed the study of the astronomical observatories for the sun and other celestial bodies through these aligned stones. The armed fights among the clans to conquer tribal chiefdom by the other must have resulted in the death of many chiefs and warriors. Probably, this was the reason for erecting numerous sepulchral monuments during the megalithic period. This also accounts for the emergence of the cult of heroism and ancestral worship.

5. Megaliths in Central India:

A majority of the Jharkhand district such as Ranchi, Ramgarh, Khunti, Chatra, Koderma, Simdega and both the Singhbhum, Lohardagga etc. districts accommodate large number of megalithic art ranging from the much ancient to the present times. This art is thousands of years old and many of these features are still in use. In central India different tribes like Gond, Mundas, Oraons^[5] are the tribe that still practices this megalithic art form. But this paper focuses only on the Munda's megaliths. Munda call these stone a hathgarhis/pathalgarhis. Munda practices, mainly two type of megalith structures. The one is Mundari sasaniri/dolmen comprises of a capstone placed on four or more stones. A sasaniri is meant to perform a family grave vault in which the cremated bones of the deceased of the same family are inserted. And the second one is Mundari menhirs or the birdiris are memorials of the dead and these even serve as commemoratives for several reasons besides death^[6]. The megalith has some variations in the structure of the monuments. Regional variations amongst the burial practices are considerably governed by the availability of raw material at the place of erection of burial. Different major art form that found in central India is: Stone circle: it presents a pit inside the circle and stones surrounding the pit. Menhirs: they are monolithic pillars erected vertically into the ground. They were perhaps created in the memory of the dead. Dolmens: it is a structure where one large stone is placed over 4-3 vertical stone.

The feature such as cup-marks on surface of stones and presence of anthropomorphic figures on burial site throw light on the religious beliefs of megalithic people. The megalithic people had great veneration for the dead as they constructed these art forms with great effort and devotion. They believed that the dead had a life after death and the cup-marks are made purposely, it is used to offer food or water to the departed soul during festivals such as *JangTopa*, an ancestral worship ritual celebrated in the month of Feb-march, when new burial were graved and along with them old ancestors were also remembered and assembled people offered goods in these cup-marks when they depart to their houses after burying the dead. All these certainly reflect that the 'cult of the dead' had a strong hold on the people. The grave goods represented the affection and respect of the living for their dead.

The differences in the size of the monuments and the nature of the grave valuables reflecting differentiation in status and ranking, also suggest the nature of contemporary political power. The construction of a huge monument involving the mobilisation of substantial collective labour implies the power of buried individual to command it.

It is interesting to note that the megalithic people tried to represent the human form in very simple and symbolic form. At present it is not known whether these anthropomorphic figures represent their God, ghost or ancestors. Though these figures are very few and association of these figures is not a common feature of all the megalithic monuments, the study of these figures is nevertheless, not without significance as they reveal their

funerary customs and probably their religious practices^[7]. But due to the lack of research work in Jharkhand this art form is still unexplored.

As megalithic art is related to the stone in memory of dead and the dead were buried in a separate area away from the habitation land. So, this art is also found away from the habitation land. Description of the megalithic art in various sites:

The randomly chiseled cupmarks on the surface of a single cuboid stone, found at Basantpur in Ramgarh district. They are about fifty in numbers with varying diameters between six to nine cms, their depth varied between 0.7 cms and 1.5 cms^[8].

N.G. Nikoshey explored a new site Fatkaof Dumangdari in Torpa block, located 42km from its district headquarters Khunti. The village is significant for the megalithic remains of numerous menhirs and cap stones (flat stone slab) distributed in three clusters. Here, the megalithic burials are mainly of two types-menhir with a cap stone and without capstone. The height of the menhir is ranging from 60cm to 170cm. The length of the cap stone slab is either rectangular or roughly oval, ranging from 50cm to 150cm^[9].

A newly explored site Moorabadi, in Ranchi district, where number of megalith either in the form of standing stone/menhir or stone lying on floor can be seen. The site covers an area of around 1-2 sq.km having 15-20 megaliths.



Figure 1: Menhir found at Moorabadi, Ranchi, Jharkhand

One large stone standing in the corner under kusoom tree shows the perfection of the Lohara's work in cutting the stone. The stone is about 5-6 feet tall. The size of the stone depends on the economic wellbeing of the person. It helps us in deciding the status of the dead person has in the society when he was alive. Another important figure that we can see in Moorabadi is of different shape. Where all the stones are



Figure 2: Anthropomorphic Figure found at Moorabadi, Ranchi, Jharkhand.

large this stone standing in the peripheral of group of stones is in small in size near about 1-2 feet. One can clearly identify the face and the lower part on stone. This stone is very much similar to the anthropomorphic figure (which represents human form on stone). The question arises why such type of stone engraved there where all stones are flat and them either standing or resting on land.

Kanke is the site in Ranchi district of Jharkhand



Figure 3: Stone in circle, at Kanke, Ranchi, Jharkhand

Where we found twenty stones in circular form. Where in *Moorabadi* we found menhirs, here in this site we don't found any such typology. All stones are large, round and resting on land. These stone are the representative of burials of their ancestors. The question here arises why these stones are implanted in particular shape and pattern. Is this being not their way of expression of their feeling towards the departed soul?

Menhir with concave shape in the upper part of the stone is seen at site Madho Manda, in Khunti district of Jharkhand state. The stone is of 5-6 feet high. It is standing at the corner of the site. We can see the names of the dead person of one family engraved on the stone. Apart from



Figure 4: Menhir, at Madho Manda, Khunti, Jharkhand

menhir we observe large stone with different shape and size resting on the floor.

At Chitarpuri in Ramgarh district of Jharkhand. It is the only site in the Ramgarh district where dolmen is found.



Figure 5: Dolmen at Chitarpuri, Ramgarh, Jharkhand

We found two big stone standing vertically with equal height and one conical shape stone resting horizontally upon these vertical stones. We can see the chamber made under this dolmen.

Indian society has been passing from the process of modernization, so all the tribes were not remaining untouched by this factor. In Bhaipur, in Ramgarh district of Jharkhand we observe number of large and small stones some flat on land and some standing upright to which we call menhirs. In this site, only 2-3 menhirs found. The site covers the area of 3 acres, where red ware, black and red ware was



Figure 6: Megalithic Site at Bhaipur, Ramgarh, Jharkhand

found. This is the site where we got the evidence of the pot burial. The pot containing the bones buried under the soil and then large stone is placed over it. We can see the destruction caused to this culture by the illegal occupation of bhatti people that has taken place here recently.

Apart from all these sites, there are sites such as Napo in Ramgarh district, Gurua and Raja Gosain in Hazaribagh district, which present the evidences of Megalithic art. The Raja Gosain has the largest cup-marks site yet discovered in Jharkhand. The beauty of placement of number of aligned stones is observed at

PunkreeBarwadih, where Equinox point can be witnessed on 21st march and 23rd September during morning time.

Tourism which is a very fast growing industry in India can play important role in the conservation of this art form. Megaliths are found in every corner of the earth. One of the living examples of conservation of megalith through tourism is from stone henge in Great Britain. Such a step should be taken in India so that people of India would know about this unique art of disposal of the dead body. By preserving this art form we open the gate of better research work on this subject by future researchers. More research works can be done on this subject to better understand the megalith art.

6. Conclusion:

Megalithic art has a tribal origin, is found in almost the entire expanse of the country. This art form is being appreciated primarily for their beauty. We clearly see the regional variation in typology and inner architecture of Megaliths in Jharkhand. Megalith art with different shapes and features substantiate that they may have been constructed by different tribes and at different time periods. With the passage of time tribes started converting to other religions as Christian and the megalithic art gets influenced by that as we can see in the Munda tribe. Tribes were forced to leave their lands in the influence of modernization. Hence, there is no one left behind to take care of this art form. Government had taken few steps like providing the boundary to these structures so that they can be preserved. The government alone can't do anything till the Jharkhand people do not come forward to safeguard this art form.

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