Recent Exploration (2016) in Ranchi and Khunti Districts, Jharkhand

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Received: 28 July 2016; Accepted: 30 August 2016; Revised: 01 October 2016

Abstract: A number of megalithic sites are known from the region of Panch Parganas of Ranchi and Khunti districts of Jharkhand. The salient feature of the megalithic landscape is the continuity of tradition among the Munda people. This paper is a brief report of exploration conducted in the month of January 2016 to document megalithic sites with living tradition prevalent among the Mundas in the study area and its adjoining regions to find out variations in their typologies, locations and megalith orientations.

Keywords: Megaliths, Menhir, Dolmen, Stone Circle, Ranchi, Khunti, Jharkhand

Introduction
The Megalithic tradition in Jharkhand prevails among some of the tribal societies. Many ancient megalithic sites are distributed all over the tribal landscape of Ranchi and Khunti districts. The population of the region is primarily represented by the Munda inhabitants, apart from some other non-tribal groups. The present paper reports the result of recent field investigation in five blocks of Ranchi and Khunti districts. The main purpose of this work was to document megalithic monuments; both ancient and the new ones. Three more blocks of these districts are taken under investigation to find out the differences in various aspects of the living megalithic tradition, such as typology of the memorials, their orientations and associated mortuary rituals. Also, an attempt is made to re-discover the excavated site of Khunti-toli (IAR 1965-66: 10). The field investigation resulted in discovery of 32 new megalithic sites; both ancient and with living tradition. The descriptions of these sites are given briefly in this paper.

Study Area and Previous Work
The study area lies (Fig. 1) on Ranchi Plateau, including southeastern part of the Ranchi District and eastern part of the Khunti District. Geomorphologically, it is formed by Archaean and Dharwar formations, and landscape is caped with phyllites, granite gneisses and various types of schistose, mainly the mica schists (Singh 2005).
The area in Ranchi District is drained by river Subarnarekha and its tributaries such as Kanchi, Karkari, Baru and Raru rivers. River Tajna and its tributaries provide water to the Khunti district. The region is covered with mixed and dry tropical forests with the annual rainfall of 1200 mm.

J.D. Beglar (1872: 186) has reported the first megalithic site in the study area in Dulmi village of Sonahatu block. V. Ball (1872: 292-293) has given a small note with illustrations of some crude stone monuments of Pokaria village on Ranchi-Chaibasa road. Dalton and Pepee (1867; 1872; 1873) were the other scholars to document megalithic burials of Mundas in the region. Dalton has surveyed the enormous megalithic site of Chokahatu village in Sonahatu block. Later a few scholars did ethnographic work on the Mundas and mainly focussed on funerary practices, e.g. Roy (1912; 1915) and Topno (1955). The interest of these scholars was mostly anthropological in which priority was given to the social life of the Mundas. Only one megalithic excavation was done in 1965 by the ASI at the site of Khunti-toli under the supervision of S.C. Roy (IAR 1965-66). A small-scale ethnographic research was conducted by the present author (Shekhar et al. 2014). This work was a case study of three megalithic localities of Besnadih hamlet, in Baru revenue village of Tamar block in the Ranchi district. Recently, B.K. Mohanta (2010; 2015: 700-731) has documented the living megalithic tradition of the Hos, one of the branches of Mundas while documenting their mortuary rituals. The region was again surveyed last year by the author under the field exploration for doctoral research and 32 megalithic sites were documented in five blocks; Bundu, Tamar, Sonahatu, Silli and Arrki (Shekhar and Joglekar 2015).
Present Work
Since the Mundas are under the influence of Christianity and Hinduism, exploration was conducted to understand variations that occur due to such cultural influence. The influence is seen on various aspects of funeral rites and megalithic traditions prevalent among them in and around the study area. Silli block was partially surveyed during last field work; this season it was thoroughly explored. Apart from this, three other blocks; Angara, Murhu and Khunti are surveyed during this fieldwork to document the burial custom of the Mundas residing in these areas. A village to village survey was conducted and interviews were recorded from the people, particularly, the elders in different village in the region. During the course of fieldwork, photographic documentation was done and sites were located using GPS.

Results of Exploration
Altogether, 32 new megalithic sites were explored (Table 1). One previously excavated early historic and megalithic site was documented and a few cultural materials such as potsherds, sling ball and hopscotch, etc. were found during this exploration. The sites have isolated menhirs, clusters of dolmens, stone slabs, menhirs, dolmens associated with menhir with different orientations, with rich evidences of living practices in the form of new structures on or in a vicinity of the sites. Few stone circles were also discovered during the course of field work. These practices are prevalent among different casts of Mundas in different geographical locations along with different associated rituals. These sites can be typologically and locationally distributed into different localities: (a) Single Menhir Sites, (b) Multiple Menhir Sites, (c) Dolmen Sites, (d) Clusters of Dolmens, Menhirs and Slabs, (e) Slabs, (f) Miniature structures and (g) Stone Circles. These types are described below.

Single Menhir Sites
These sites have an isolated menhir standing beside the road in or outside of the Mundari village settlement. These seem to be commemorative in nature and no cultural material was recovered from these sites.

Galau: The site is located on the left side of Sonahatu-Jamudaag road in Sonahatu block of Ranchi District. An isolated menhir is standing inside an agricultural field around 1.5 km east from the main settlement of village Galau.

Loahatu: The site is located in the outer periphery of village Loahatu, 3.5 km west to the Sonahatu-Jamudaag road in Sonahatu block of Ranchi District. The Menhir stands with deviation of 85° west to the village (Fig. 2).

Hesal: It is located on the left side of Ranchi-Angara road in Angara block of Ranchi District. The site has a fallen menhir with cup marks in irregular pattern over it.

Janum: A menhir is located half buried under the soil in Janum hamlet near to the site at Hesal.
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**Bid-di:** An isolated menhir is located on the right side of Ulihatu road in Bid-di village. The name of the village has a literary meaning “Menhir” in Mundari terminology.

**Kantarapiri:** An isolated menhir is seen on the left side of a road in the outskirt of village.

**Rugrihatu V:** The Menhir is seen inside the village in a vegetable field (Fig. 3). This menhir is known as Ekir Bonga (the spirit of the person who died due to drowning in water). The menhir is occasionally worshipped to appease the spirit by the villagers.

**Multiple Menhir Sites**
These sites comprise small clusters of menhirs including fallen and the standing ones. Some of them resemble a sort of irregular alignment.

**Childag II:** The site is located inside the village Childag-soso in Angara block of Ranchi District. It is around half a kilometre away from a site locality where a few slab burials are there. It has a small cluster of few menhirs; half buried under the surface.

**Kurapurti III:** The site comes under the Locality III of Kurapurti group of megaliths in Kurapurti village in Murhu block of Khunti District. This site is located inside the village. Standing and fallen menhirs surround a tree which is now used as a cow-shed by the non-tribal inhabitants of the village (Fig. 4).
Figure 2: Menhir at Loahatu, Ranchi District
Figure 3: *Ekir Bonga* in Locality V of Rugrihatu Village, Khunti District

**Chapatarr:** Seven miniature menhirs are spread in an agricultural field on the outskirts of village Chapatarr. These menhirs are part of the living tradition.
Dolmen Sites
These sites have only dolmens: either a single one or in pairs or in groups. These sites are very rare and found in isolation.

*Kitahatu*: The site lies in Arrki block of Khunti district, along the Khunti-Tamar highway on outskirts of Kitahatu village. It has an isolated dolmen with weathered cup
marks (in irregular pattern) over the capstone. The architectural feature represents the use of stone blocks as orthostats like in case of other dolmens erected by the Mundas in the region (Fig. 5).

**Rugrihatu III:** The site is located inside the village Rugrihatu on the right side of Rugrihatu-Ulihatu road. It is one of the five localities of Rugrihatu megaliths group having a pair of dolmen measuring 2.4×2.6 m and 2.6×3.6 m, respectively. There are four vertical stones as orthostats. Both the dolmens have few cupules over the capstone.

**Clusters of Dolmens, Menhirs and Slabs**

These sites have cluster of *Saasandiris* (Mundari dolmens) and stone slabs. The stone slabs are just lying over the surface without any support like *Saasandiri* dolmens. The capstones of dolmens lie flat on four vertical stones of stone blocks. Some dolmens have associated upright stones one on one side perhaps indicating the location of the urn. These sites show clusters of dolmens in the centre and menhirs on the periphery.

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*Soiko:* The site of Soiko is located in the village with a same name. The site is highly disturbed by local inhabitants and it is turned into a weekly market place. Most of the dolmens have lost their orthostats due to cutting off the soil. The disturbed sections show evidence of coarse Red ware sherds with and without stamp impressions. One exposed dolmen has evidence of twin burial in a pot with remains of charred bones (Fig. 6). The site has menhirs erected in a particular area of the periphery. They are
both modern and the older ones. The modern menhirs have all the detailed information about the dead ones and they are associated with small rectangular slabs. This gives an indication that multiple burials probably belongs to the same family lineage.

**Sillidih:** An abandoned burial ground of Sillidih lies in Silli block of Ranchi district. The site is located in the vicinity of Silli town inhabited by Kurmis, Mahtos, Bengali and other non-tribal ethnic communities. Numerous dolmens of *Saasandiri* types (dolmen with four vertical stones that act as orthostats instead of slabs) are scattered in cluster over a barren land adjacent to a government primary school. Burials were exposed on southern periphery of the site. There were cinerary urns exposed on the surface and sherds of Red ware in the sections exposed up to more than a metre. The antiquity of the site can go back to early historic period considering the pottery recovered from the section. One of the exposed urns shows geometric designs incised on it (Fig. 7). The design resembles the pottery recovered through the excavation of Khunti-tola in 1965.

![Figure 7: Geometric design on the cinerary urn in Sillidih, Ranchi District](image)

**Lota:** A cluster of slabs, dolmens and menhirs was found in the vicinity of a temple in village Lota located on the left side of Angara-Silli road. Some of the stones of megaliths were also used to construct a shrine with miniature *Shivlinga* next to the site. The site is surrounded by old menhirs.
**Getalsud:** Getalsud is a cluster comprising menhirs and slabs (Fig. 8). The site also has evidence of cremation indicating recent use by the Mundas of the village.

![Figure 8: Group of menhirs and slabs in Getalsud, Ranchi District](image1)

![Figure 9: Grinding cupule over the capstone in Lupunghatu, Khunti District](image2)
Lupunghatu: A cluster of dolmens was discovered in the Lupunghatu village of Arrki block in Khunti district. The site is divided by a village road and dolmens are constructed on both side of the road. The table type (square capstone that looks like a table) dolmens indicate the later antiquity of the site and also the living tradition of the Mundas. The capstones bear traditional game boards, such as til-goti and Paw, still popular among the children of the village. Some of the capstones bear cupules used for grinding turmeric for the ritual purpose (Fig. 9). On the western periphery of the site there are five miniature menhirs (memorials) standing in north-south alignment.

Baruhatu: The site is located inside a massive agricultural land of Baruhatu village of Arrki block. The megalithic typology is represented by slabs, dolmens and menhirs. Some of the dolmens have associated upright stones showing different orientations of the graves (Fig. 10). The menhirs are found all around the agricultural land, separately from the cluster of dolmens and slabs.

Figure 10: Dolmen with associated upright stone showing northern orientation, Baruhatu, Khunti District

Slabs

Khunti-toli: The site of Khunti-toli is revisited during this fieldwork (Fig. 11). This is the only megalithic site excavated in the region yet. The enormous site with slab burials has gone through a lot of disturbance after the excavation in 1965, and just six
slabs are now remaining. The rest of the burials were destroyed due to various anthropogenic activities, such as agriculture and settlement. Some potsherds and a rim portion of a burial pottery were recovered from surface and naturally exposed sections. The pottery type is coarse Red ware, Red ware and Red slip ware. The potsherds belong to the smaller size having incised geometric designs and their antiquity can go back to the early historic period.

Figure 11: Megalithic slab in Khunti-tola, Khunti District

Miniature Structures
An interesting typology is the miniature structure raised by the so called lower caste of the Mundas; particularly the Lohras (iron workers). Two such sites are documented in Silli block of Ranchi district.

Jintupiri: The site is located on the left side of Ranchi-Silli road at the entrance of a small hamlet of Jintupiri. The site comprises slabs associated with a miniature upright stone oriented towards south (Fig. 12).

Bharra: A cluster with similar structure to that found at Jintupiri was found on the outskirts of the hamlet. Both these hamlets belong to the Lohras (iron workers). The Lohras of both these hamlets follow the tradition of symbolic burials and they have their separate graveyards. They cremate their dead and deposit an effigy under miniature slabs, with an associated upright stone. Now these people are completely hinduised; they do not follow the traditional rituals of the Mundas and even they are not allowed to use the graveyard of the Mundas.
Figure 12: Miniature structures in Jintupiri, Ranchi District

Stone Circle
Such sites are very rare and made using vertical stones as the stone circles of Western Europe (Das 2014: 19). Two stone circles; one in Ranchi District and the other in Khunti district were found. Many ancient megalithic sites show the similarity with these stone circles in the neighbouring districts of Hazaribagh, Chatra and Ramgarh (Das 2014).

Figure 13: Stone circle in Hid-dih, Khunti District
**Hid-dih:** The site of Hid-dih lies in the village of same name in Arrki block of Khunti district. Miniature slabs are seen erected in circular fashion. The inner portion of the circle has four small upright slabs. These slabs have depressions in the middle part of the upper edge. This portion seems to have been used for certain ritual, probably animal sacrifice (Fig. 13). A fragmented saddle quern inside the circle is the only antiquity found at the site. This probably belongs to the Early Historic period. Some of the slabs of the circle are missing. The local inhabitants use this enclosure to cultivate vegetables. Such examples were also seen in the vicinity of a well-known megalithic site of Bhagimohari in Vidarbha (Personal communication with Dr. R.K. Mohanty).

![Figure 14: Stone circle with menhir in vicinity of Kucchu village, Ranchi District](image)

**Kucchu:** The site of Kucchu is located on the left side of Boreya-Ormanjhi road on the outskirts of the Kucchu village. The site has numerous menhirs made on the sandstone material. Interestingly, there is no source of sandstone up to 100 km since the geology of the region is represented by granite hills and outcrops. The nearest source of sandstone is in Damodar Valley of neighbouring Hazaribagh district. The orientation of the site is north-south and the northern end of the site has a stone circle made by menhirs erected in circular fashion. The enclosure has a menhir at the middle that acted as a pointer stone or head stone (Fig. 14). Diameter of the stone circle is around 7-8 m. Such stone circles were excavated in Chattisgarh, particularly at Kakrabhat (Sharma 2000). Apart from the stone circle, some other menhirs have cup marks over...
the surface. The monuments are not worshipped by the Mundas. There is only a legend that a king was passing through the route with his group and somehow they died on the spot and later were transformed into stones.

**Location of Megalithic Monuments**

In most of the regions of Ranchi district, menhirs are erected on the outskirt of settlements or away from the village, and the dolmens and slabs are constructed inside the village. *Saasan* (graveyard) is mostly just outside the settlement area. But in Khunti district many menhirs are located outside or in the backyard of the deceased person’s house. In some villages, menhirs are found inside or near to the graveyard as well. Even the village graveyards are located inside the settlement area. Sometimes the graves are constructed in front of the house of the dead person.

**Orientation of the Graves**

The orientation of grave stones varies in different regions and depends on beliefs of the Mundas as well as cultural influence of Christianity and Hinduism. Most of the Mundas of Arrki Block in Khunti district are Christian converts and at present they bury their corpse in the Christian graveyards. Even the orientation of corpse is influenced by Christianity; they keep the head towards the west. Even in some of the villages where the traditional Sarna religion (Roy 1912: 260-261) is followed by the inhabitants, orientation differs from the traditional custom and they keep the head towards north. The orientation of menhirs mostly depends on the nature of death. In case of accidental death of a person having higher social status, they erect menhirs and it is oriented towards south. One such example was seen in the village of Kurapurti, where a 3.2 m tall menhir was erected alongside the village road separately from the graveyard. In case of natural death the grave is oriented towards east. In some villages of Murhu block, rich families erect menhir associated with dolmen oriented towards east (interview with Bhola Pahan of Khudda village of Murhu). On the other hand, in Silli and Angara block, they are influenced by Hindu rituals and many traditional Hindu rituals can be observed in their funeral rites.

**Discussion**

The typology of megalithic monuments in the region surveyed during the fieldwork showed a lot of regional variation in basic traditional structures erected by the ancestors of Mundas. Through the course of time, some other components are added in form of associated upright stones which resemble the Christian graves. This is only visible in Khunti district, where most people are either influenced by fashionable Christian graves or they are Christian converts. In most part of Ranchi district the traditional typology of the Mundari dolmens (*Saasandiris*) are visible. Typology depends on the economic condition of the family and the rich people can use the additional upright stone since these days they have to purchase from mine. Also it depends on the social status and the importance of the traditional beliefs in the society. The miniature structures of the Lohras show such reducing interest in the society.
towards megalithism. A strange and completely different typology is the rare stone circle which seems to be ancient and not related to the living tradition of the Mundas. The myths regarding such structures also indicate the remote antiquity of these stone circles.

Orientational variation of menhirs and dolmens indicate different beliefs towards the natural and unnatural death in different regions. In some villages of Khunti district, the dolmens are oriented south-north, which is a traditional practice. But in many villages the orientation is reverse. Even sometimes east-west orientation is also visible. In case of menhirs they are oriented towards east in case of natural death and towards south in case of accidental death. This also contradicts the orthodox south-north orientation of the Mundas. The locational analysis of megalithic structures; both of menhirs and dolmens indicate the change in belief system of the Mundas; particularly in Khunti District. Traditionally, the menhirs are always erected away from the village settlement and the village graveyards should always be located on the outer periphery of the settlement area. Such locational distribution is visible in most of Ranchi district; but in Khunti district, the village graveyards, graves and memorial and commemorative menhirs are located inside the settlement area. Particularly, menhirs are found either along the village road or in vicinity of house of the dead person. Very rare evidence of traditional isolation of megalithic monuments from the village settlement could be observed.

The present exploration showed changes in typology, orientation and locations of megaliths in the tribal landscape of most of the study area; particularly in Khunti district. In Ranchi district, these changes occur up to certain extent only, where some of the Munda communities are influenced by Hinduism, but in other part of the study area, i.e., Khunti district most of the Munda population is culturally influenced by Christianity. They have added certain features of Christian tradition to their own burial monuments. Another important feature of the megalithic landscape in the region is evidence of a few stone circles in the vicinity of Munda settlement which indicates that in the past probably the ancestors of the Mundas used to construct stone circles as well. Typologically the megalithic slabs used by the Mundas are identical to ancient excavated slab at Khunti-toli. This shows the continuation of ancient megalithic tradition among the Munda community. The present paper is initial attempt to understand the megalithic culture of the study area, particularly the living tradition. Further investigations are needed to trace such continuity based on recent constructions of the monuments by people who are still following the ancestral tradition up to certain extent.

Acknowledgements
We are thankful to Dhanik Gurriya, a member of Munda Welfare Society in Khunti district for his help during the field investigation in Khunti district, Bhola Pahan, the priest of Khudda village and Tarkan Munda of Kurapurti village for giving valuable information.
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