Changing Tradition and Megalith Practices in Odisha: Some Observations

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Abstract: Last few years’ research in the state of Odisha has brought to light several megalithic sites of ethnic community and most of them belong to Austro-Asiatic group of family. Their megalithic structure is as that of other ethnic communities that follow megalithism in the present day in central eastern part of India. During the course of our research, we have noticed many changes that have occurred on their funeral rituals, beliefs and cultural tradition. Different factors were responsible for their changes. However, in this paper, we have given some observation on changing tradition and beliefs, its responsible factors; problem and prospect in future research on living megalithic tradition.

Keywords: Burial Custom, Megalithic Tradition, Population, Austro-Asiatic, Subsistence Pattern, Urban Process, Odisha

Introduction

Funeral rituals and burial custom is a very common tradition found in every human society. It began during the prehistoric time and continues to the modern era but their process, tradition, beliefs and characteristic feature have changed from time to time and, it also differs from community to community. However, the present paper is a preliminary observation on changing traditions of living megalithic culture within the ethnic community viz., Munda, Gond and Ho communities, settled in hilly tract of Odisha.

Megalithic burials are not only found in India but also a similar kind of tradition found in Europe (Chapman 1981; Hodder 1982a; Bradly 1998), Africa (Laporte), Southeast Asia (Sahi, 1991; Mohanty and Selvakumar 2002:313-352) and other part of the world (Child 1948; Drinot 2009:15-32). During the Iron-Age phase we find a variety of megalithic structure in different parts of the country, mostly the southern and central parts of India provide good evidence regarding this cultural tradition (Sundara 1975, 1979: 331-340; Sudyka, 2011:359-89; Mendaly 2016:1-4). There are a number of ethnic communities that are still practicing this tradition but due to urbanization and effect
from other religious developments, many changes have been occurred in these cultural traditions.

The state of Odisha has occupied a unique position in the field of ethnographical research in India for having highest numbers of tribal communities. The Constitution of India (Amendment) in 1976 enlisted 62 types of ethnic communities in Odisha (Census Report 2001). However, the present study is focused on Gonds of Nuaparha district, Mundas of Sundergarh district and Ho communities of Mayurbhanj district. All the three groups were practicing megalithism. Their beliefs and traditions differ from group to group, region to region and different from other religion. Mostly, they are nature worshippers and follow their own traditional beliefs and practices (Roy 1912; Elwin 1945, 1955; Haimendorff 1943; Mendaly 2015).

However, the present study is based upon the data collected from both primary and secondary sources. In addition, authors have carried out several seasons’ fieldwork. During the time of survey, we systematically surveyed several burial grounds or Matha, located in foothill areas occupied by tribal people in Nuaparha, Sundergarh and some parts of Mayurbhanj district. This was also, supported by further ethnographical data as well as questionnaire schedule which had been adopted to understand the opinion of the people regarding the megalithic practices and their belief on changing tradition.

**Population Distribution and Their Subsistence Pattern**

The Mundas were settled more or less in all the districts of Odisha and they were belonging to Austro-Asiatic language family (Anderson 2001, 2008). The Munda people call themselves as Horo-ko (men) and the word Munda is given to them by their Hindu neighbors (Roy 1912). The concentration of Munda communities in Sundargarh is the highest in numbers. Further, they were divided into a number of groups like Erenga Munda, Mahali Mundas and Mundas.

The Gonds were widely distributed in Bastar region comprises eastern part of Chhattisgarh and Western part of Odisha (Elwin 1945:78-133; Dewangan and Kumar 2015). They were sparsely distributed in Nuaparha district and are belonging to southern Mundari groups which is also a branch of Austro-Asiatic language family (Chaubey et al, 2017). The Ho tribes are one of the major groups found in Jharkhand and Orissa. The Kolhan area of Jharkhand is the original place of their habitat. In due course of time, they spread towards its neighboring states of Odisha, West Bengal and Assam (Chaterjee and Das 1927; Duary et al 2005:293-304). The H os belong to the “Munda branch” of Austro-Asiatic languages and in certain respect allied to Santali and Mundari dialect (Anderson 2008). The Singhbonga or the Sun God is the supreme deity of Ho communities (Das Gupta 1983:42-45) (Figure 1).

Subsistence pattern of the tribal communities are based on the agro-pastoral economy; most of the people were seasonal cultivators and cattle herders and in forest area.
Paddy is the principal crop grown and rice is their staple food. Agriculture is supplemented by one or more subsidiary occupation such as hunting, fishing, collecting different types of forest products. They collect honey, roots of the different types of medicinal plant, and also hunting and fishing but they belong to labourer class, those who often work in others’ plough field, as daily wage earners. The female members of the family engage themselves with spin yarn from the bark-fiber of a deciduous flowering shrub, colorings with vegetable and other natural dye, and weave clothes, which are both durable and artistic in effect. Besides, they prepare different types of handicraft products like bamboo jar and earthen pots and the local markets are very favorable to sell their products and earn some money for maintaining their livelihood.

Changing Tradition of Megalithic Culture

Urban process in many parts of the world, lead to change the socio-economic status of people day by day, gradually they have been changing their lifestyle. Sometimes the local people were bound to migrate to other areas to maintain their minimum livelihood. Besides, due to the process of deforestation the quantity of forest product is gradually decreasing and most of the ethnic groups prefer to live in forest or hilly region but now a days they are not able to find sufficient amount of forest product for their survival and are bound to migrate to another region. Migration process and change of environment is responsible for the change of their traditional beliefs and practices. Further, NGOs and Missionary activities have greatly influenced the people in these regions to change their food habit, adaptation strategies, cultural traditions, traditional practices and beliefs.
Figure 2: Cemented Burials of Gond Tribes

Figure 2A: Cemented Burials of Gond Tribes
The Gonds

The Gonds occupy most of the parts of the Nuaparha district and still practicing megalithic tradition (Mendaly 2015) but during last few years we have seen a number of changes that occurred due to the influence of other caste and religion along with the process of urbanization which may have had some impact resulting in change in their tradition and custom. In mortuary practices, they have changed many ritual processes and used new types and methods of tradition. In some of the region of Nuaparha district, they use cemented chamber for burial purposes instead of cairn heap and Menhirs. Some of the wealthy people prefer to build cemented chambers because they believe construction of cemented structure involves less human labour and is connected to socio-economic conditions of the people. Mostly the higher-class people do not prefer to build any cairn heap or memorial pillars, which was practiced by their ancestors (Figures 2 and 2 A).

However, burning the body of deceased and performing secondary funeral rites is still popular within the Gonds community. After burning the dead body, they collect the burnt ash and bone fragments to the river Ganga for purification and salvation from
The concepts of “Ganga and purification” is recently included in their ceremonial procedure and found within the urban and semi urban people. The secondary funeral rituals were not prevalent before a few decades in this region and it has occurred due to the influence of other caste people in this region, which is now connected with the social status of the person within the community and society. Some people preferred to preserve the burnt bone fragments and they construct small Pidha type of structure using mud and bricks or cement and bricks, depending upon their financial status (Figure 2B). However, we have observed number of changes that occurred in their ceremonial feast. On the day of erecting memorial pillars, the family members of the deceased distribut feast of merit and in this feast time meat and fish play an essential part. But within the last few years changes have occurred in this ceremonial feast and we have noticed that in some of the cases the higher-class people prefer to use vegetarian food.

The Mudas

Among the Munda community of Sundergarh district, we have seen a number of changes that took place in their megalithic practices and beliefs regarding death rituals. Presently some of the Munda people prefer to use cemented structures instead of cairn heap or stone slabs. When asked why, they said that some of the Munda people were greatly influenced from other religions and cemented chamber comparatively requires less human involvement than the procurement of stone material requires. In a broad spectrum, if any one preferred to use stone slabs or erecting a memorial pillar he may require much more wealth to complete the entire procedure of death rituals, because searching, selecting, cutting and transporting from the query site to burial ground is not an easy task and it requires the involvement of many people. Further, the family members of the deceased are bound to every type of facility to complete this work, but on other side, to build a cemented chamber, they need hardly five to ten people to complete their work. Sometimes the observation of the entire ritual process is not possible for common people, since now a days most of the people belong to lower class family prefer to build concrete cemented chamber (Figure 3). Sometimes the higher-class people burn the dead. One of the biggest problems is the lack of cultural awareness; during road construction work, many megalithic structures were destroyed and due to lack of awareness people did not take care of these structures. During the exploration in Bonaigarh subdivision of Sundergarh district in 2015, we had found many memorial pillars, that were erected along the road sides of the village and every year the village people performed ancestor worship over there but during my recent visit to this region I found that all the memorial pillars were destroyed due to road construction (Figure 4).

The Hos

The Ho tribes from the Northern Odish also practice living megalithic traditions and performed an elaborate procedure of death rituals. The expenses they endure during the funeral ceremony results in them taking a few years to gain their previous
economic status (Mohanta 2015). Even though the beliefs and procedure of death rituals are different from group to group, every person of this community try to observe the entire procedure of death rituals for the satisfaction of ancestral soul and protection of his own clan from evil power.

![Cemented Burial of Munda Tribes](image)

**Figure 3: Cemented Burial of Munda Tribes**

Presently due to urbanization and influence of other religion, caste, and community, we have observed many changes that occur among the Ho people such as changes on their social organisations and cultural practices. Like Mundas and Gonds tribes, Ho are also preferred to burn the dead body of the deceased and after that they collect burnt ash to preserve it in a small “Pidha” type structure, which is usually about one to five feet high. Originally, this process was not found within the Ho tribes, perhaps they borrowed it from the Hindu people.

Changes are also seen on their megalithic structure, many of them now construct cemented grave and use small size of pillars for memory of the deceased. Most of the younger people migrated to other state, to work in factories instead to maintain their livelihood. Besides during the rainy seasons many people are involved in agricultural field, so they cannot give much time to the family member of deceased and also shortage of laborer is a big issue in the countryside. We observe that construction of a
cemented structure is requires a smaller number of labour forces in comparison to cutting and transporting a mega structure from query to burial ground and vertically erecting the structure in the memory of the deceased. However, in some areas wealthy people are much more interested to construct cemented burials as it symbolizes economic status of the family (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 4: A- Memorial Pillars Placed in Road Side of Anugul village (in 2015), 3B and C - Destruction of Memorial pillars in Anugul Village (2018)
Figure 5: Concrete Memorial Platform of Ho Community (Mohanta 2015)

Figure 6: stepped Round-Shaped Concrete Memorial Pillar (Mohanta 2015)
Discussion
Changing cultural system is a continuing process, it has occurred from time to time and a number of factors are responsible viz., changing environment, migration, influence of other community- culture and religion. Changing traditions due to the influence of other religion is not only seen in Odisha rather similar form of changes also occurred in other part of India such as North eastern India. Our recent visits to North eastern India (Some parts Phek district of Nagaland and Senapati district of Manipur) region provide some valuable information on changing tradition due to the influence of urbanism and effects of the other religions. However today we do not find the same rituals and traditions that were practiced a few years ago among the ethnic communities. Some of them are influenced from Hinduism and many others are influenced from the Christianity. Now a days very few villages are there who are practicing megalithic tradition. In addition to the tribal population settled in urban and semi urban areas have almost forgotten their traditional beliefs and practices. They do not know why they were practicing this tradition, some of them do not believe in ancestral soul or evil spirits but people settled in hilly regions were still practicing megalithic tradition although, few changes have occurred on their ritual process. Finally, the processes of cultural changes have created obstacles in ethno-archaeological researches since we are using and doing ethno-archaeology, we always have try to elucidate the truth behind the Megalithic culture which is that it started during the Iron Age phase in India and continued up to the modern era. In such extent, the study of living megalithic tradition of ethnic community gives us much information to understand the socio-economy and political condition of megalithic using community in Iron Age phase, but after few years we face some problems to elucidate and reconstruct their history.

References


