Megalithic Remains in the Middle Mahanadi Valley Region of Odisha, India

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Abstract: Last three decades of systematic archaeological investigations conducted in the middle Mahanadi valley region of Odisha brought to light different aspects of human behaviour right from the Palaeolithic down to the early medieval period. One of such important aspects is the Megalithic tradition. The evidence for Megalithism in the present study area is recorded from both archaeological and ethnographic context. However, in comparison to the ethnographic data very few information is available on Megaliths in different archaeological literatures. Therefore, the authors carried out explorations during last three field seasons in the middle Mahanadi valley and the present paper outlines the results of the preliminary investigations.

Keywords: Megaliths, Iron Age, Excavation, Exploration, Middle Mahanadi Valley, Ethnic Communities, Odisha

Introduction

Evidence for Megalithic cultural traditions have been reported from different parts of India and occur in different chronological contexts viz., from Iron Age down to present day (Mohanty and Selvakumar 2002: 317; Basa et al., 2015). 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 culture (Mohanty and Selvakumar 2002: 313-352), similar exhaustive studies are yet to be done in other parts of the country. However, even today in few pockets of India people are still practicing Megalithism 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. The present study area of the middle Mahanadi valley is surrounded by such regions where practice of Megalithism is still continuing among the different ethnic communities (Haimendorf 1943: 149-78; Shekhar et al. 2014: 706-15; Mohanta 2015: 700-31; Basa 2015: 751-70; Mendaly 2015: 1-6, 2016: 1-4, 2017: 930-43). Though during the ending decades of the last century several Megalithic structures were reported near/on the archaeological sites in the middle
Mahanadi valley (Pradhan 1987-88: 16-22; Behera 1995-96: 177-79; Brandtner et al. 2000: 406-16), no detailed study was carried out to understand the chrono-cultural context of these Megalithic remains.

**Table 1: List of Megalithic Sites in the Middle Mahanadi Valley Region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>Geo-coordinates</th>
<th>Megalithic Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Burla</td>
<td>21° 30’ 27.19” N; 83° 54’ 0.28” E</td>
<td>Cairn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Barpali Asurgarh</td>
<td>21° 11’ 37.30” N; 83°33’31.81” E</td>
<td>Menhir with Cairn and Cairn Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Saradapali</td>
<td>20° 52’ 33.01” N; 83° 50’ 32.91” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Khajeriapali</td>
<td>20° 53’ 23.99” N; 83° 53’ 31.36” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hikudi</td>
<td>20° 52’ 17.74” N; 83° 54’ 14.09” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Manamunda Asurgarh</td>
<td>20° 49’ 59.90” N; 83° 56’ 0.63” E</td>
<td>Menhir and Cairn Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Khairmal</td>
<td>20° 49’ 26.69” N; 83° 56’ 44.25” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dangajhol</td>
<td>20° 46’ 51.65” N; 83° 55’ 14.03” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kurumpadar/ Masinapara</td>
<td>20° 49’ 43.51” N; 83° 58’ 12.57” E</td>
<td>Menhirs and Stone Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Amudda</td>
<td>20° 49’ 22.13” N; 84° 00’ 47.03” E</td>
<td>Menhir, Cairn Circle and Dolmenoid Cist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Budhikon</td>
<td>20° 04’ 45” N; 83° 20’ 56” E</td>
<td>Menhirs, Carins and Cairn Circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Jamtangi</td>
<td>20° 47’ 55.57” N; 84° 02’ 44.80” E</td>
<td>Menhirs and Dolmenoid Cists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Baunsuni</td>
<td>20° 49’ 15.96” N; 84° 03’ 33.71” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Khameshwarpalii</td>
<td>20° 50’ 14.6” N; 84° 00’ 10” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Deuli</td>
<td>20° 50’ 05.1” N; 84° 03’ 26.4” E</td>
<td>MenhirS and Dolmenoid Cists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kumersingha</td>
<td>20° 51’ 54” N; 84° 05’ 00” E</td>
<td>MenhirS and Dolmenoid Cists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Kurumpadar/ Tentulipalii</td>
<td>20° 51’ 10.1” N; 84° 07’ 03.9” E</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Kelgan</td>
<td>20° 52’ 13.4” N; 84° 03’ 47” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>20° 53’ 11.84” N; 83° 14’ 31.33” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Badabankapada</td>
<td>20° 48’ 21.36” N; 83° 19’ 39.91” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Gopapur</td>
<td>20° 45’ 35.49” N; 84° 21’ 23.49” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Kantipuleswar</td>
<td>20° 44’ 35” N; 84° 30’ 42” E</td>
<td>Menhirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bhejigora</td>
<td>20° 39’ 18.45” N; 84° 34’ 57.41” E</td>
<td>Cairn Circles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Until recently, a true Iron Age-Megalithic site was only the scholars’ observation on comparative basis from the surface findings but the excavation at Amudda (Behera et al., 2017: 965-991) provides valuable insights on the occurrence of the Megalithic remains (Cairn circle) in association with the Iron Age context in the region. Therefore,
keeping in view the evidence of Megalithic remains reported from Amudda, the authors undertook further explorations in the middle Mahanadi valley region which resulted in the discovery of several Megalithic structures, mostly represented by Menhirs with or without cairns, Cairn circles and dolmenoid cists near/on the Iron Age-Early Historic settlement sites. The present paper outlines the results of our preliminary archaeological investigation conducted during last three field seasons in the middle Mahanadi valley region.

During the exploration a total of 23 sites (Table 1) are reported with Megalithic association in the middle Mahanadi valley (Figure 1). As most of the sites are located close to the river bank due to the antiquarian activities, expansion of the urbanism, cultivation and repeated floods in the Mahanadi majority of sites are disturbed and even some of the Megaliths lost their context forever. However, few settlement sites associated with Megaliths are still well preserved, one such site is Amudda located on the right bank of the river Mahanadi in Boudh district.

![Figure 1: Map showing the distribution of Megalithic Sites in the Middle Mahanadi Valley Region](image)

**Amudda Excavation**

In 2015 field season P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University under the supervision of P.K. Behera (Behera et al., 2017) excavated the Megalithic habitation site
near Amudda village which is about 14 kilometers east of Subarnapur district headquarters in the Kantamal tehsil of the Boudh district. The ancient settlement site is located at a distance of about 600 metres towards the north-eastern part of the present village and measures nearly 240 meters north-west and south-east in length and 80 meters north-east and south-west in width. The north-eastern face overlooking the Mahanadi represents sloppy section rising to a height of about 6 metres from the surrounding plains. The excavations yielded different ceramic assemblage, iron object, bone tools, pottery discs and faunal remains, besides a part of a megalithic structure in Trench-II (Figure 2). The investigators on the basis of a detailed study on excavated material remains divided two broad periods of human habitation viz., Period-I (Early Iron Age) and Period-II (Late Iron Age-Early Historic).

The megalithic structure (cairn circle) at the site was revealed from period-II as per the excavators. The cultural remains recovered from this period comprise ceramic assemblage i.e. RSW which was the dominant pottery of the phase followed by BSW, BRW and RW. Other important findings of this phase are bone tools, iron slag and iron objects, pottery discs and finger impressed terracotta cakes. At present also remains of several megalithic structures are found here and they are in the exposed surface at different location of the site, as the local villagers destroyed several such megalithic monuments at the site in search of treasure.

Interestingly, on the southern part of the excavated mound a huge granitic outcrop is located which contains the evidence of cupules on its surface (Figure 3). A few broken capstones with a good number of cupules are also found in the habitation mound area (Figure 4), displaced from their original context. Though most of the structures are partially disturbed, in Amudda at least three different varieties of Megaliths are found i.e. Menhir, cairn circle and dolmenoid cist. Brief descriptions on the explored sites associated with Megalithic remains are given below.

**Burla, Dist. Sambalpur**
The Megalithic cairns (Lat. 21° 30’ 27.19” N; Long. 83° 54’ 0.28” E) are located about a kilometer east of the bridge constructed over the Mahanadi river in National Highway-6 and five kilometers east of the Burla town in Sambalpur district. It was reported by P.K. Behera (1995-96) of Sambalpur University, who discovered 11 cairn types of Megaliths. Besides, he also reported material remains viz., Red Ware, Black Slipped Ware, bored stone, stone pestle and few bone pieces scattered in and around the site.

**Barpali Asurgarh, Dist. Bargarh**
The site (Lat. 21° 11’ 37.30” N; Long. 83°33’31.81”E) is located near Barpali tehsil headquarters in Bargarh district. Inside the ancient fort area Megalithic structures i.e. Menhirs, Cairns and Cairn circles have been found (Figure 5). Though the site is well preserved, antiquarians conducted illegal excavation and destroyed few Megalithic structures in search of treasure. The local people are worshipping few of the Megaliths as guardian of the ancient fort.
Figure 2: Cairn Circle from Trench-II at Amudda (after Behera et al., 2017: 981)

Figure 3: Granitic Outcrop having Cupules on the Surface from Amudda
Figure 4: Capstone with Cupules on the Surface from Amudda
(after Behera et al., 2017: 987)

Figure 5: Megalithic Structures from Barpali Asurgarh
Figure 6: Menhirs of Saradapali
Saradapali, Dist. Subarnapur
The village Saradapali is located about 10 kilometers north-west of Subarnapur district headquarters on the right bank of the Mahanadi. While going towards Subarnapur from Binka, one can see two large sized Menhirs (Lat. 20° 52' 33.01" N; Long. 83° 50' 32.91" E) standing on the right side of the road (Figure 6). At present it is difficult to say whether these Menhirs were brought to the present place from nearby areas and placed before the local deity or they were originally standing there, and local people started worshipping the village deity near the Megalithic structures.

Khajeriapali, Dist. Subarnapur
Khajeriapali (Lat. 20° 53' 23.99" N; Long. 83° 53' 31.36" E) is a well-known archaeological settlement site (Behera 2006: 39-41), situated on the left bank of the river Mahanadi in Subarnapur district. The Megalithic structures (Menhirs) are located about 200 meters east of the ancient settlement area, in the centre of the present village. The local villagers surrounded the Megaliths with a cemented wall as well as concrete the surface level (Figure 7). At present these Megaliths are worshipped as the village deity.

Hikudi, Dist. Subarnapur
In archaeological literature Hikudi (Lat. 20° 52' 17.74" N; Long. 83° 54' 14.09" E) is frequently mentioned as a Neolithic and Early Historic settlement site. However, the main deity located at the centre of the village is also a huge Menhir structure.

Manamunda Asurgarh, Dist. Boudh
Manamunda (Lat. 20° 50' 00" N; Long. 83° 56' 02" E) located on the confluence of the river Mahanadi and the Tel was first reported by R.D. Banerjee (1929: 64-86) and subsequently subjected to several seasons’ excavations by P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University (Behera 1982: 16-22; IAR 1989-90: 80-85, 1991-92: 86). The excavations revealed extensive settlement remains, which has been ascribed by the excavators to a time period between the 4th-3rd centuries BC to 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Two broad cultural phases have been identified, mainly on the basis of ceramic remains, besides other associated findings i.e. structures of brick and stone, iron and copper objects, beads of semi-precious stones and silver punch-marked coins. During the excavation a number of megalithic monuments (Menhirs and Cairn circles) were noticed by investigators in the habitation mound and the surrounding region. But at present due to repeated floods in the Mahanadi major portion of the mound have been washed away and no detailed information is available which will throw light on the Megalithic remains of the site.

Khairmal, Dist. Boudh
The village is located near Manamunda in Boudh district (Pradhan 1987-88: 20). Megalithic structures (Menhir) at this site (Lat. 20° 48' 56.73" N; Long. 83° 56' 41.30" E) have been worshipped presently as Karlapat devi. On the southern part of the village
during exploration we have collected few archaeological remains *viz.*, iron objects, iron slag, pottery comprised of black-and-red ware and red slipped ware. However, it is not possible at present to corroborate the surface findings with the Megaliths but the surface findings revealed the fact that the surrounding area was inhabited during ancient time.

**Dangajhol, Dist. Boudh**
Dangajhol village (Lat. 20° 46' 29.28” N; Long. 83° 55' 23.63” E) is situated on the left bank of the river Meherani-a minor tributary of the Mahanadi. The Menhir is presently worshipped by the villagers as the presiding deity of the village (Pradhan 1987-88: 20).

**Kurumapadar, Dist. Boudh**
The Megalithic site locally known as Kurumapadar (Lat. 20° 49' 44” N; Long. 83° 56' 02” E) is located on the right bank of the river Mahanadi near Masinapara village in the Boudh district. It is situated about 7 kilometers east from Manamunda on the State Highway no. 14. The site was first reported by S.B. Ota (IAR 1981-82: 54) during his field survey, he identified the site as an early historic settlement and later on by S. Pradhan (1987-88: 18-19) of Sambalpur University during his exploration in 1987, he reported stone circles of both granite and sandstone boulder at five places of which the one at the south-western direction seems to be more intact in its arrangement of stones.
He states that, this may be compared with the un-chambered cairn circles of south Indian Megaliths. Subsequently the site was surveyed by the German team under the supervision of Paul Yule (Brandtner et al., 2000: 409; Yule 2006: 46) in the beginning of the last decade, they suggested that the site was belonging to Iron Age period as revealed from the surface remains. The team also reported several stone circles and disturbed dolmen (Figure 8). During our exploration at the site we found that several broken dressed stone slabs have been scattered on the surface of the mound whereas few are in standing position and mostly located in the agricultural field (Figure 9). Probably these stone settings (Stone circles and Menhirs) were disturbed due to the illegal excavation of the antiquarians in search of treasures. The surface collection yielded fragments of Grey Ware, Black-and-Red Ware, Red Ware, Red Slipped Ware and Knobbed variety of Black Slipped Ware. Other antiquities include biconical terracotta bead, bangles of shell, glass and terracotta, iron nails and iron slags.

Figure 8: Map Showing the Distribution of Megaliths at Kurumpadar/Masinapara (after Brandtner et al., 2000: 409)
Budhikon, Dist. Boudh

The Megalithic site of Budhikon (Lat. 20° 04' 45" N; Long. 83° 20' 56" E) is located on the right bank of a small stream Gudguda-a southern minor tributary of the river Mahanadi in the Boudh district (Pradhan 1987-88: 17-18) and 3 km towards south-west from the village Jamtangi which is at a distance of about 15 kilometers east of Manamunda on the State Highway no. 14. At present due to erosion major part of the site has been washed away (Figure 10) and 138 granite boulders are found scattered on the surface (Figure 11). The total area of the site measures about 2 acres of land. Though due to erosion some of the boulders are displaced from their original position, few stone settings clearly resemble to Megalithic structures (Figure 12). As per the local tradition “when two marriage parties met each other, which is considered highly inauspicious, they were cursed to turn stones” (Pradhan 1987-88: 17). During the exploration of the site few archaeological remains are collected from the available eroded sections i.e. iron slag, a few pieces of iron ore, fragments of Red Ware, Red Slipped Ware and Black-and-Red Ware.
Figure 10: Eroded Section of Budhikon

Figure 11: General View of the Megalithic site of Budhikon
Jamtangi, Dist. Boudh
This site (Lat. 20° 47’ 55.57” N; Long. 84° 2’ 44.80” E) is situated at a distance of about 15 kilometers east of Manamunda on the State Highway no. 14 in Boudh district. Inside the village several Menhir stones are standing within a complex and presently these stones are worshipped as the village guardian deities (Figure 13). Besides, about 100 meters east of these Menhir structures there are two Capstones surrounded by the bamboo trees and the villagers in annual festivals celebrate animal scarifies at this place.
Figure 13: Menhirs and Capstones from Jamtangi
Figure 14: Menhirs from Khameswaripali

Baunsuni, Dist. Boudh

The village Baunsuni (Lat. 20° 49’ 2.04” N; Long. 84° 3’ 31.38” E) is located on the right bank of the river Mahanadi in Boudh district. Presently a Menhir is worshipped by the people as the Gramadevati of the village. Besides, in front of almost each house of the village a Menhir stone is found.
Khameswaripali, Dist. Subarnapur

Khameswaripali (Lat. 20° 50’ 14.6” N; Long. 84°00’ 10” E) is located on the left bank of the river Mahanadi in Subarnapur district and is frequently mentioned in different archaeological literatures as a Chacolithic and Iron Age settlement site spanning in date from the mid-fourth millennium BC to the later part of the first millennium BC (Behera 2001: 13-34, 2013: 195-204). Interestingly, several Megalithic structures (Menhirs) are noticed in different parts of the village and presently people are worshipping them as the village guardian deity (Figure 14). Though the present village is situated on the ancient mound area, it is difficult to fix the time period of these Megaliths as most of the mound area have been washed away due to the repeated floods in the Mahanadi.

Deuli, Dist. Subarnapur

The archaeological site of Deuli (Lat. 20° 50’ 05.1” N; Long. 84°03’ 26.4” E) is situated about 3 kilometers south-east of Khameswaripali in Subarnapur district. At present the site is badly disturbed due to river action as well as extensive agricultural activities by the villagers. During our exploration we have noticed few Menhirs and a Capstone near the site under the Peepal tree (Figure 15). At present these Megalithic remains are also worshipped by the local people as their village deity.

Kumersingha, Dist. Subarnapur

The Iron Age-Early Historic settlement site of Kumersingha (Lat. 20°50’ 14.6” N; Long. 84°00’ 10” E) is located about 4 kilometers east of Deuli on the left bank of the river Mahanadi in Subarnapur district (Behera 2002-03: 87-95). Like Khameswaripali, the present village area of Kumersingha is also situated on the ancient mound. Several granite boulders of almost identical size along with stone slabs (Menhir?) and stone sheets (Capstones?) of granite are found at one place in the centre of the village (Figure 16). As per the villagers these stones are placed in the village since time immemorial.

Kurumpadar, Dist. Boudh

The ancient habitation mound locally known as Kurumpadar (Lat. 20° 51’ 10.1” N; Long. 84° 07’ 03.9” E) is located towards the northern part of the present village Tentulipali on the right bank of the river Mahanadi in Boudh district. Though this Iron Age-Early Historic settlement is well known for its rich archaeological antiquities and for industrial activities during ancient time (Behera 2002-03: 95-101), due to the construction of the ring road the ancient mound area along the bank of the river has been completely destroyed. There were several Menhir structures near the mound area which have also been lost forever due to the construction activities.

Kelgan, Dist. Subarnapur

The Megaliths (short Menhirs) are located near the Early Historic mound of Kelgan (Lat. 20° 52’13.4" N; Long. 84°03’ 47” E), situated about seven kilometres north-east of Kumersingha on the right bank of the Mahanadi in Subarnapur district.
Figure 15: View of the Menhirs and Capstone from Deuli
Figure 16: Displaced Megaliths from Kumersingha Village

Figure 17: Menhirs from Badabankapada
Chandigarh, Dist. Boudh
Chandigarh (Lat. 20° 51’ 10.1” N; Long. 84° 07” 03.9” E) lies about 10 kilometers east from Kurumpadar/Tentulipali on the right bank of the river Mahanadi in Boudh district. Like Kelgan few short Menhirs are found on the eastern part of the ancient settlement area.

Badabankapada, Dist. Boudh
The Iron Age settlement site locally known as Barpadar is located near the water tank of Badabankapada village (Lat. 20° 48’ 21.36” N; Long. 83° 19’ 39.91” E) on the right bank of the Mahanadi in Boudh district. During exploration conducted last year the first author collected ceramic and other associated materials of Iron Age phase from the site. On the eastern part of the mound there are some Megalithic structures (Menhirs) and few of them are displaced from their original position (Figure 17).

Gopapur, Dist. Boudh
Two kilometres north-east of the village Gopapur the ancient settlement area (Lat. 20° 45’ 35.49” N; Long. 84° 21’ 23.49” E) is located on the right bank of the river Mahanadi. Several dressed stone slabs of granite are exposed on the eroded section of the mound facing towards the river. On the surface level of mound few broken stones are also found buried in the earth but due to the cultivation and river action major portion of the mound is damaged.
Kantipuleswar, Dist. Angul
This Iron Age settlement (Lat. 20°44' 35" N; Long. 84°30' 42" E) (Behera et al., 2007: 43) is located about five kilometres south-west of Athmalick town on the left bank of the Mahanadi in Angul district. Though the section facing towards the river has been badly eroded, major portion of the mound is still well preserved. On the surface of the mound several short Menhirs are scattered, probably displaced from their original setting.

Bhejigora, Dist. Boudh
Bhejigora (Lat. 20°39' 18.45" N; Long. 84°34' 57.41" E) lies about three kilometres south-east of Harbhanga tehsil headquarters and two kilometres from the left bank of the river Mahanadi in Boudh district. The ancient settlement area is located near the primary school and is partially disturbed due to agricultural activities. On the northern part of the mound a stone circle is found which was recently exposed by the antiquarians in search of treasure (Figure 18). There are few more stone circles located on the north eastern corner of the mound.

Discussion and Conclusion
Though the present investigation on Megalithic remains of the middle Mahanadi valley is limited in nature, fulfilled the main objectives for which it was conducted. At present it is difficult to date each and every Megalithic structure but the excavation at Amuudda revealed the fact that at least few of these structures are dated back to the Iron Age period. As mentioned above the middle Mahanadi valley is surrounded by the region where different ethnic communities i.e. Bondos, Gadabas, Gands, Hos, Mundas etc., are still practicing the Megalithism.

In the light of the available archaeological and ethnographic data it can be said that unlike other parts of the country in this region the Megalithic tradition is being practiced since the Iron Age up to the present day. Due to the growth of urbanism, expansion of modern constructional activities as well as plundering of the land by antiquarians in search of the treasure, most of the Megalithic structures were destroyed in the region. However, the available information suggest that there are not much typological variations in the Megalithic structures as reported from south India. A systematic detailed study of Megalithic tradition in future may be fruitful in drawing some inferences on the early belief system relating to mortuary practices, distribution of settlement, cultural contact and cultural changes in the Megalithic complex of the region.

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