Rituals and Practices Associated with the Megaliths of Bastar

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Abstract: Megalithic culture has no regional bounds as its cultural remnants are found all over the world. The Stone Age burial practice, however, has disappeared in Europe, Latin America and many parts of Asia, but the “grave tradition” continues to flourish in Gond tribal pockets of Chhattisgarh’s Bastar region. Adivasis converging at the village burial ground, performing cremation or burial rituals for the dead clan member amidst recital of “hanal pata” (burial song in tribal Gondi dialect), beating of drums in a melancholic rhythm, and then raising memorials to “preserve the soul of the dead” is still a common sight in remote tribal areas of Bastar. The architectural designs of the memorial structures found in different places in Bastar are as varied from each other as is possible. As the Stone Age legacy, dating back to the Iron Age in India, passed on to the successive generations, the Bastar tribal people have continued the tradition. The present paper discusses about the rituals, practices, superstitions, procedure of installation of megaliths, art decoration associated with the megaliths of Bastar.

Keywords: Bastar, Tribes, Death, Ritual, Megalith, Menhir, Uraskal

Introduction
The word ‘megalith’ is derived from two Greek words megathos and lithoi, megathos meaning huge and lithoi meaning stone; hence, it denotes a huge stone. The term ‘megalith’ may be explained as ‘a grave or memorial erected in stone, either dressed or in its natural form containing, enclosing or erected over the funerary assemblage’. In the words of A. Sundara, “the term ‘megalith’, in archaeology, is, as is well known, defined as a tomb built with big stones in natural forms or roughly dressed or even a grave marked with a prodigious rude stone or an excavation in soft rocks containing remains of dead human beings. It is also applied to erections of huge stones, memorial or religious in function. Besides graves without any lithic appendage, but by virtue of pottery their possession of certain other complex traits, especially pottery, commonly found in the other types of megaliths, are also classed as megaliths” (Sundara, 1975:52-54). M. Wheeler in 1948 describes megaliths as “those monuments, which are built of rough, large and undressed block of stones” (Wheeler, 1948:181-308). The varieties of megaliths of Europe include the temples of Malta, the stone alignments of Brittany, stone circles of Britain (that include Stonehenge) and the like. Megalithic culture has no
regional bounds as its cultural remnants are found all over the world. These monuments are found in Europe, Africa and Asia, including in the far eastern countries. In the neighborhood of the Indian sub-continent, the presence of this culture is noticed in Iran and Baluchistan, extending up to Pakistan. In northern India, this culture is sporadic in occurrence as compared to south India.

**Megalithic Tradition among the Tribes of Bastar**

Although the Stone Age burial practice, however, has disappeared in Europe, Latin America and many parts of Asia but, the “grave art” continues to flourish in Gond, tribal pockets of Chhattisgarh’s Bastar region. Bastar District is a district of the state of Chhattishgarh in central India and is only slightly bigger than Kerala state of India. Bastar state was a princely state in India during the British Rule. After Indian independence in 1947, the princely states of Bastar and Kanker acceded to the Government of India and were merged to form Bastar District of Madhya Pradesh state. Bastar is the melting pot of cultural behaviour for a long period. In fact, this region has been the meeting ground of the historical, linguistic and ancestral traditions of the three states of Chhattisgarh namely, Orissa, Andhra and Maharashtra. The influx of population in the district is gradually increasing. The original inhabitants of the district are tribal, namely two types of maria namely Abuj Maria and Dandami Maria (Bison-Horn Maria), Muria, Bhatra, Halba, Dorla and Dhurwa. Apart from these there are other tribal groups like the Gadaba, Oraon, Munda etc., which are very small in number and more so, they are not the sons of soil of Bastar. *Adivasis* (tribe) converging at the village burial ground, performing cremation or burial rituals for the dead clan member amidst recital of “*hanal pata*” (burial song in tribal Gondi dialect), beating of drums in a melancholic rhythm, and then raising memorials to “preserve the soul of the dead” is still a common sight in remote tribal areas of Bastar. The architectural designs of the memorial structures found in different places in Bastar are varied from each other. As the Stone Age legacy, dating back to the Iron Age in India, passed on to the successive generations, the Bastar tribals have continued the tradition. In Bastar, basically menhirs type (large standing stones) of megaliths is noticed. Currently three tribal groups — Marias, Dorlas and Murias — practice the megalithic culture. Earlier, Gond tribals of Kanker in Bastar also practiced this tradition, but they discontinued it since long. The tradition, according to anthropologists, has come to Bastar from the Indonesian archipelago and to the north-eastern region of India and Orissa through Burma (Haris. 1997:134).

Bastar being one of the most primitive centers of the tribal culture has the most exclusive and ancient pattern of culture in relation to the Megalithism as is followed in the means of death ceremonies mainly in the tribal context which is still being followed by the occupational tribes rather though with many modifications. Among the tribes who are following the megalithic culture are the Gondis and with the gradual development of time the off shots of the tribes who followed this tradition are Marias, Dorlas as well as Dhurwas. The important places of Baster where still this practice is prevalent are- Raikot, Dillimilli, Bastanaar, Kilepaal, Kodenar, Dantewada, Tirtum, Gamawada (Figure 1),
Kapanaar, Durli, Dugeli etc and also the areas of Chitrakote as well as Madum, etc. Gonds of Bastar reveals a fusion of cultures which has not only taken place in the past but is going on in the present. The practices of erecting a dolmen as a seat for a village elder, for the ‘Village Mother’ or for the ghost of a dead person to sit on, a circle of stones for the village panchayat and a memorial menhir in the village of ancestral origin, together with a belief in a collective clan soul and what amounts to a form of ancestor-worship recall very strongly the Sawara, Munda and Khasi cultures, while they link up with other similar practices of the megalithic cultures farther east, e.g. in the Naga hills, Mentawi, Farther Asia generally and even the Pacific. The same group of cultures is again suggested by the use of a communal bachelor’s hall, of the sago palm and of grass raincoats, by stilt-walking and by the making of fire by means of a fire-saw instead of a drill. Reference has already been made to the megalithic culture of the Maria, now apparently rapidly decaying. Here again, much is suggestive of various Assam and Indonesian cultures where menhirs are transported as by Lhota Nagas and erected as by the Angami,. Seed is fertilized with blood, suggesting not only the Khond meriah sacrifice, but also the general theory underlying the head-hunting practices of Naga, Wa, Kayan, Igorot or Taigal from Assam to Formosa.

![Figure 1: Megalithic Site Containing Menhir at Gammewada, Dantewada](image)

The sporadic studies carried out in the recent past and the reports of some of the British officers indicate that the region has numerous Megalithic monuments like Cairn Circle,
Dolmens and Menhirs. Some of these Megalithic sites have also been excavated. The antiquities recovered from these monuments reveal that the Megalithic culture in this region is coeval with similar culture in other parts of India. But, so far no comprehensive studies of these archaeological monuments have been carried out.

**Previous Work**

The first documentation of megalithic culture around Chhattisgarh is by J. D. Begler in ‘Report on Tour in Central Provinces’ (*ASI-report 1878*) where he has given information about group of Menhirs, Cairn Circle in 1873 during his archaeological tour to Chhattisgarh.

V. Elwin, in his paper ‘Funerary Customs in Bastar State’ (*Man in India, 1945*) produces a very detailed and descriptive account of the funerary rites and belief of the aborigines like Hill maria, bison maria and jhoria of Bastar. C. Von Furer Haimendorf, in his paper ‘The Problem of Megalithic Culture of Middle India’ (*Man in India, 1945*) mentions that the similarity of customs and rituals are found between the middle Indian and North East Indian tribes. The megalithic culture of the South East Asiatic type is found among the Gadabas, Bondas and Bastar Gonds who came from the East with its centre of diffusion in Eastern Assam or North Burma or China.


**Death Rituals of the Tribes of Bastar**

The Gonds of Bastar believe in life after death. They believe that each human being has two souls: the life spirit and the shadow. The shadow must be prevented from returning to its home, or it will harm the surviving relatives. The life spirit goes to *Bhagwan or budha deo*. The shadow stays in the village after the erection of a stone memorial. These ancestor sprits watch over the moral manners of the living Gond and punish offenders of tribal law.
The final rites of passage of the ritual are performed on the death of a person. The Hill Marias are more aboriginal when compared to the Muria and the Muria life style influences the hill maria of Abujmarh region. The muria bury the body of some people such as children, the victims of small pox, those who are killed by tiger and die in lightening. Apart from this, all others are cremated. During cremation they lay the dead body in East-west direction because they believe in the worships of the Sun god and the Sun comes from the East. The sunshine first touches the head of the deceased and the departed even worships the sun while resting peacefully in the grave forever.

When a Muria dies, his house, ghotul and the village become defiled. First the relatives of the deceased preferably son, daughter, niece or nephew inform their relatives. The ghotul is closed that day till the cremation is finished. The relatives and others assemble in the house and in the street. The relatives cry loudly from time to time. After arrival of the relatives the corpse is carried out on a bamboo mat into the courtyard accompanied by death songs. Women and relatives sit crying. Everybody puts some water and haldi (turmeric) powder to purify the dead body. The male members of the family take the dead body on their shoulder and go to the entrance of the village or road side of the village which is called marghat. Generally, the marghat is located in jungle near the village or at the entry point of the village. The dead body is followed by the men and women. The younger sister or niece or any woman of their clan throws rice over the dead body.

Women come with their spade and axe. The eldest son or brother comes to marghat with all the primary material which was used by deceased such as spade, pottery, arrow, bamboo stick, drum, bow etc to be put with the dead body.

After the dead body is put on the pyre, some women place a little earth and saja leaf (Terminalia elliptica) at either side of the dead body. Some women take a stone and break the bracelet of the dead man’s wife. They put all the material with dead body on the pyre ground and cover with saja leaf. They place some stone on the pyre ground to identify the place when they will again come to erect the memorial stone. One can find different kinds of practices however in the same community.

When a reputed person dies such as gaon mukhia, gaita or waddai, the ritual is more elaborate where the whole village gathers and the body is taken out to burial ground with singing and dancing. The akomama (mother side) relative beat the traditional dhol (drum), which is kept in ghotul (youth dormitory) to summon the relatives, and it is followed by the dance of dhangda (boys) and dhangdi (girls) before the dead body.

Stone slabs used for building the tombs are engraved with what is the depiction of the culture of the clan to which the dead belonged, along with the deceased’s own life and achievements. Figurines of animals, birds, men and women are also found in the engravings. The motifs also illustrate the dead person reaching heaven riding on an elephant. The articles used by the deceased are also buried under the memorial along with an iron ring, in which the local priest “entraps” the departed person’s soul by performing some complex rituals. The rituals associated with the burial ceremony are
very expensive, as it involves a feast for the clan members and even slaughtering a cow. However, in many cases, tribals, who cannot afford the practice, are forced to postpone it to a later period.

**Practices and Superstitions**

All tribes of Bastar accept the existence of the soul. The Muriya tribe even accepts death freely and honours it. This is very clear from their traditions, beliefs, and rituals. Death is always very easy going affair in these tribes. This is because they believe in life after death. The body is perishable but not the soul. They know this fact very well. Death of an old person brings them happiness because the dead become their deities. In Bastar region there are many deities like this including: Muttal Amma, Chirpi dev, Jalani budhi, Kesarpalin, Gangadai, amabalin, Kodaibudi, Chitararav, Godanamata, Sitaladai, Kunwarirav, Nilrv, Kudakanarin, Nandirav, Bhandarin, Chinammi, Phenbati, Kunwari, Neelmati, Garabbati, Sonmati, Singadin, Bhanmati *etc.* This indicated how a human being after deceased turned in to a clan God or Goddess and is worshipped by the descendents.

The practices in the Megalithism include funeral rites and death sacraments as well as the various curiosities in relation to the identification of the natural and the unnatural death mysteries. This cover a wide angle of test ceremonies performed by the *siraha, guniya*, and the *baiga* who are the real head men of the village since they are one among them and who are also the medicine men as well as priest for their respective clans. There are various practices by which the deceased is called through by the means of those who are living to know the various hidden facts which were unknown for those who are living.

Funeral songs are sung by the Muriya tribe, who are known as the ‘*Muriya*’ in the plains, as the ‘*Madiya*’ in the hills and as the ‘*Abujhmadiya/Abujmaria*’ in the deep forests of the Narayanpur-Bijapur tehsils. But these funeral songs are only sung on death of old people. These songs express both sadness and happiness. They are called *amur pata* or *hamur pata* (literaly ‘death song’). The *amur pata* consists of two types of song: *kilana pata* (weeping or mourning song) and *girada pata* (happy song). The wife, mother, sister, daughter or other family members of the deceased sing the *kilana pata*, while the deceased’s daughter’s son and daughters sing the *girada pata*. Among the Muriya (Gond) tribe there is a custom of bringing home the soul of the departed person. During this ritual they sing the *ana pata* or *anal pata* (the soul song) and the theme of the song is immortality of soul.

**Jiu Uthani: The Ceremony of Belief towards the Soul**

This ceremony is performed after twelve days from the death of a person. The relatives summon a feast. The relatives both *akomama* and *dadabhai* assemble on that day. Generally, this ceremony is performed on a weekly market day because everybody comes to bazaar for their weekly ration. The *chelik* and *motiari* dance with their drum. The elders of the family put some rice in the corner of a room and stay away for two
hours. When they enter the room, generally on rice they find some foot prints of animals or goddesses. They believe that the symbol of the foot print is the sign of the soul that comes via animals to home and stays in departed pots.

A variant practice is that the relatives go into the water and try to catch any kind of living thing. Whoever first catches is regarded as being specially loved by the dead person and rewarded with extra drinks. If they catch fish, they put the fish into one of the pots. The pot is covered with a new sari and the akomama relatives put some haldi (turmeric) and oil over it. Then a married woman lifts the pot and puts it down near the pot of the departed. Their idea is that the soul will come back home through the fish.

![Figure 2: Worship of the Wooden Saja Pole](image)

**The Clan – God Ship among the Marias**

Every Maria village has its own Bhumi which is the clan territorial land unit as whenever anybody dies, they abide by their own rule to cremate with in their bhumi. Each Bhumi has its own Anga Dev/Anga pen who is their Clan God. The Clan God is someone who is imagined ruling over the clan and who is supposed to have protected his subjects residing with the jurisdiction of the land unit. Among the rites too the celebration on the Daswa din is celebrated with due care and the full ceremonial rites are well performed by them. Former to the erection of the memorial the spot is well marked with the Saja wood (*Terminalia elliptica*) as this is taken as the tree related to their Anga pen. This wood has special significance in the tribal world mainly with in the Maria land unit, though in practice today we do not see the practice of this custom (Figure 2).
Figure 3: Daily Use Materials Thrown on the Grave

Figure 4: Offering of Liquor to the Soul of the Deceased after Burial

**Primitive Procedure of Installation**

The works of W.V. Grigson as well as V. Elwin reveals the secrets of the fact that, before the installation of the memorial the spot is marked with a *saja* wood and then the rock
hillock was selected, by a crew of the priests, relatives as well as friends who collectively move and select the rock; then the priest by placing his hand over the rock invites the deceased’s soul and asks him to stay and rest there as they will soon carry him and place him permanently in his own house. The term as his own house is what we mean by the deceased’s soul residing within the rock erected on his name. The erection of the memorial is nothing but the way to keep him alive even after his death. This is a concept based over the pure belief and philosophy of life after death. The offerings for the memorials include the daily use items of the deceased person (Figure 3), the mahua liquor, landa which is also called as rice beer, and then newly husked paddy transferred into rice, currency coins etc. (Figure 4).

**Anal Pata/Death Song**

The Marias and almost all the sub sections of the Gondis have the tradition of singing anal- pata (crematorium song and spirit song or soul song) and kilna-pata (weeping or mourning song) (Figures 5 and 6) during the time of the cremation as well as during the time of installation of memorial. This song is sung by a group of ladies in the leadership of an old lady. Only women are allowed to sing this song. But today no any sign of the practice of anal pata is observed these days among the Gondis.

![Figure 5: Female Members Singing Anal-pata](image)

**Erection of Memorial/ Menhirs /Urasagatta**

Relatives come to the pyre ground to erect the urasgatta (menhir) on any festival or bazaar day that comes seven days after the completion of the death ritual, In between they collect wood from the forest and prepare wooden pillar. These days in lieu of stone they
erect a wooden pillar due to the unavailability of proper stone in hills. They decorate the pillar in various shapes and draw various pictures on it. The picture is based on the likes of the dead according to the instruction of the relative. After putting the uragsatta, they sacrifice a chicken, goat or buffalo in the name of the dead soul. The relatives give a feast in the village.

![Figure 6: Kilna-pata near Grave](image)

If a reputed person dies in the village such as gaita, gunia or village mukhia, they erect the menhir but without sacrificing the cow. Instead of a cow they sacrifice many goats or pigs. The stone is selected and carried from the hills to home. If they do not find any suitable stone in the hills then they go to the factory area at Jagdalpur these days to buy the stone. They collect the feast materials more or less from each household. They put the menhirs near the village at an important place and they cover the menhirs with cement plaster now as days.

**Installation of Memorial in Case of Unnatural Death**

The erection of memorial also has the classification with the separate term of cultural patterns of sacraments for those who have died unnatural death viz which may include death due to the snake bite, small pox, chicken pox, cholera, murder, death during pregnancy etc. Among all, the main and the most significant is the death due to tiger’s attack. When a man dies due to tiger’ attack the special rite is performed which is called as Mati uthana. The ceremonial function in this relation is very well described in the book of Sir, V. Elwin, *The Baiga.*
Art Decorations over the Uraskals or the Painted Memorials
Various figures are carved as well as painted over the uraskals or the painted memorials, and also the cemented cenotaphs (Figure 7 and 8). The main attraction is the depiction of birds including pigeon, hen cock, peacock etc which represent atma (souls) of the deceased individual (Figure 9). The other decoration includes dance sequence of the Dandami Marias (Bison Horn Marias) which is rather a marriage dance (Figure 10 and 11). The other decorations include the Kali mata, VishnuDashavatatas, and also floral and faunal themes. The panel also includes portrait figure of the deceased individual male and female (Figure 12). the figures on the facades of wooden uraskal is crude and rough which include almost the same patterns as discussed above. In addition to these patterns, wooden uraskal also have the image of the deceased individual as being raided over elephant or some other gigantic animal like tiger. These are considered as a sign of royalty which shows the individual was rich and influential (Figure 13 and 14). The wooden pillars are often decorated with floral and faunal motifs also. Generally, the top parts of such pillars are designed with kalasa motifs. Depending upon the wishes of the family member of the deceased, stone pillars are also erected for performing such practices.

Installations of Memorials According to Age Groups
The installation of memorials also varies according to age as generally adults have a bigger uraskal installed and in case of children they install small memorial. They very strongly believe that when their deceased is pleased by the offerings, they made to him or her the stone grows bigger in size, like wise is the saying of the attendants of the sites as well as the nearby localities that while these memorials were installed they were not as big as they are now as they have grown in size later. This is taken as a good omen for the whole of the family.
Figure 8: Cemented Cenotaph in the Form of a Car

Figure 9: Memorial Stones from Upper Bhanpuri Village, Lohandiguda, Jagdalpur
Figure 10: Painted Memorial Pillar, South Bastar
Figure 11: Memorial Stone of Bison-horn Maria from South Bastar
Figure 12: Figures Engraved on the Memorial Stone
Figure 13: Wooden Memorial Pillar from Dhilmili, Bastar
Discussion

These days there is a change in the Megalithic practices. Now-a-days, we find the erection of Megaliths both in dense forests and village. Megaliths are not erecting in the villages situated near the urban centres. Due to industrialization, most of the tribals are working in the factory as wage labourer. They have no time to spend looking for suitable stones for menhirs. Gradually the concept of the memorials has changed from installation of crude and rough megaliths to the well carved menhirs and then became bifurcated for special people mainly those who were rich as well as influential in the society or who hold some powerful position in their society as Patel, village head man etc. The gradual passage of time tends the human beings to change their mentality from the mode of just being utility based towards these megaliths as well as monuments towards changing their taste to the mode of formality. The Christian missionaries have established their churches in the dense forests and are trying to convert them subsequently. Large number of tribals are migrating to town, due to salva judum, the anti maoist movement. Hence this resulted in the development of the forms of various modern touched memorials which are reflecting today in the forms of painted sequence and display of their own ethnic identity as they show their traditional dance sequences over the surface.

There are many problems that obstruct the practice of this tradition. The major problem is expenditure of the feast which have to bear at the time of the installation of the memorial by the deceased’s relatives. The second one is the law prohibiting the sacrifice
of cow in our country especially in such a political scenario when many political fractions are trying their best to create political advantages over such sensitive issues. The author has noticed that the Archaeological Survey of India is taking initiatives to create awareness in the state to protect the memorials as we have seen shelters being constructed over many of the wooden memorials in these days and blank painted new boards waiting for information with newly fenced area protecting these priceless heritages.

Any attempt has not been taken by the Government to preserve the megalithic monuments in this region. The Megalithic monuments of this area are going to ruin due to road construction and canal construction. The stone contractors destroy the stone monuments by converting the menhir into metal chips. Due to construction of Pandit Ravi Sankar Sukla dam, most of the megalithic monuments at Dhamtari have been submerged. The megalithic sites in Bastar region have not so far yielded any intrinsic evidences of chronology. Even the Gammewada, the only site centrally protected by Archaeological Survey of India is also stand yet to be tabled under certain specific chronology; still since centuries it is under every body’s guess that it is a site which marks the beginning since 3rd century BCE. It is not possible as the megalithic fields in each village under study are painstaking as living monuments and they are protected by the villagers. Since they hold a indivisible part of their life and to whom they are very deeply attached sentimentally, any harm or even an act of test over them just to observe them goes wrong as they feel it a bad omen when any memorial is uprooted or pushed down from its position, they will not allow us to study with such intensive angle.

Though the concept of Megalithism has changed a lot which can be observed from what was during the time of crude and rough megaliths and the present cemented cenotaphs and the painted memorial, what yet pleases is the basic core concept of megalithism is unchanged in this region.

References


