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# Living Megalithic Tradition Amongst the Munda Community of Jharkhand

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**Abstract:** *The disposal of death is one of the most ancient traditions in human past traced back right from the prehistoric times. By the time, with the idea of ancestor worship it has been transformed into more sophisticated burial custom and man began to erect monuments as memorials. Megalithic phase in India is largely associated with Early Iron Age shows distinct variety of burial traditions and rituals associated with them. In India, the heritage of Megalithic burials lies in its living traditions followed by the present tribal and ethnic communities in various parts of the country. In Jharkhand, many tribal communities are still practices Megalithism. This particular paper is concerned with the Megalithic tradition followed by the Munda community of Jharkhand. The present work is a case study of the Living Megalithic Traditions among the Munda community of a particular village in Ranchi District of Jharkhand, lies in Chotanagpur Plateau. It is a little attempt to study the burial practices of the community in comparison to their ancestral society, the other Munda communities in the region as well as other contemporary tribal groups within a region.*

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**Keywords:** Megalithic, Munda, Saasandiri, Pankaridiri, Besnadih, Hoyom, Jharkhand

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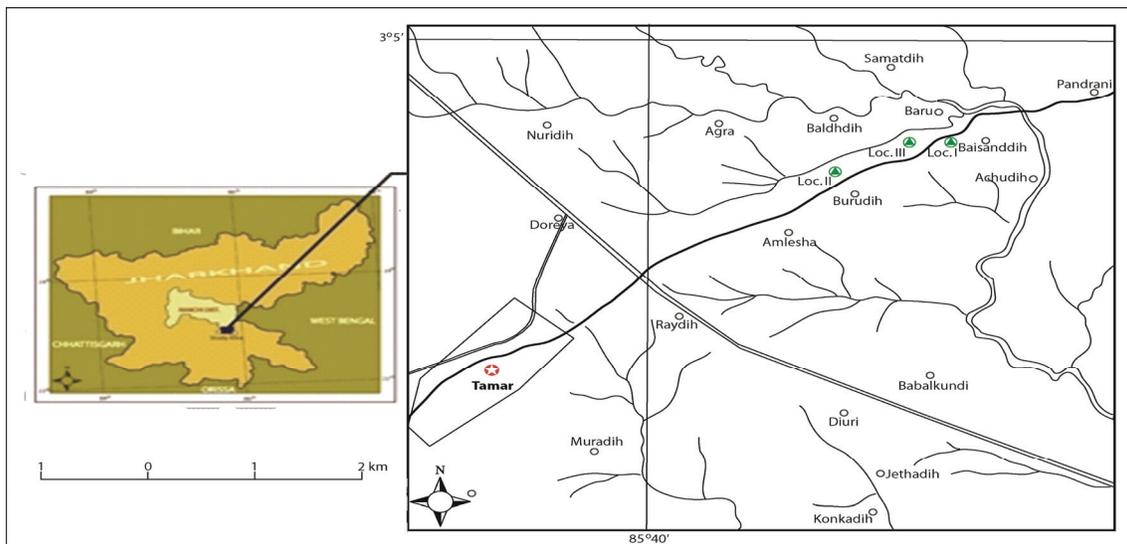
## Introduction

During the colonial time, many ancient Megalithic sites have been discovered by the British ethnographers in Ranchi District. After independence, excavations conducted by Mid Eastern Circle of Survey in Khunti subdivision ascribe these sites to the ancient Asura community (IAR 1965-66: 10). Megalithic culture of Jharkhand is a living tradition, still followed by several ethnic and tribal communities such as *Mundas, Hos, Birhors, Malers and Oraons*. Amongst all of them, the Mundas are the tribal community, widely distributed in Chotanagpur region. The Mundas are one of the branches of Kolarian Aborigines and they are geographically distributed mainly in the Ranchi, Khunti, Ramgarh, Hazaribagh and Chatra Districts of Jharkhand (Mandal et.al: 2001). They belong to Austro-Asiatic language family, spoken mainly in South-East Asian countries. The Mundas call themselves as *Horo-ko* (men) and the word Munda given to

them by their Hindu neighbours (Roy 1912). The present research has been carried out with an objective to understand the nature of burial custom within the Munda community and regional differences if any.

## The Study Area

The study area of Besnadih village falls in the South eastern part of Ranchi District in Jharkhand, which comes under Subarnarekha River Basin (Fig. 1). Geomorphologically, the region is formed by Archaean and Dharwar formations, and landscape is capped with phyllites, granite gneisses and various types of schistose, mainly the mica schists (Singh 2005). The region is covered with mixed and dry tropical forests. The available natural resources have been exploited since ancient past by the local inhabitants. The village Besnadih is a small hamlet in Baru revenue village, lies in Tamar Block, drained by the River Kanchi and Baru, which are the tributaries of Subarnarekha River. Tamar is one of the five blocks of *Panch Parganas* (five blocks), where the Mundas have arrived first, when they entered Chotanagpur plateau (Munda 2003).



**Figure 1: General View of the Study Area**

## Past Research

The Chotanagpur plateau has been studied by many scholars with different aims and objectives. The area of interest of these scholars was mostly anthropological in which priority has been given to the social life of the Mundas. However E.T. Dalton (1867; 1872; 1873) was the first person to document the Megalithic burials of the Mundas. Later on few more scholars have done some ethnographic work on the Mundas and their Funerary Practices. (Pepee 1873, Roy 1912; 1915, Topno 1955).

## Mundas and Megalithism

The Mundas in general, erect two different types of Megaliths, which are also very common in the traditional Iron Age megaliths.

- **Saasandiri (Dolmen):** It is small Dolmen having very low height, supported by four small vertical stones known as *Pankaridiri*, and a flat capstone is placed over them to cover the grave. It is generally constructed in case of natural death (Fig. 2).
- **Biridiri (Menhir):** Menhir or *Biridiri* is generally erected in case of unnatural death. In some exceptional case, depends upon the region, Menhirs are erected as a memorials for the person having some sort of special status in society (Fig. 3).



Figure 2: View of Saasandiri or Dolmen



Figure 3: *Biridiri* or Menhirs

Three Megalithic sites located outside the periphery of village Besnadih have been selected for the study. These three sites have been divided into Locality I, Locality II and Locality III. All these three sites are situated around 3 Kms to each other, outside the southern end of village settlement. The Orientations of the Megaliths are confirmed with North-South orientation, similar as placing the head of the corpse towards North during cremation. The inhabitants of Besnadih village construct only dolmens for their dead ones and they do not give any special treatment to the dead who died due to unnatural cause. Therefore, there is no provision of erecting Menhirs by them.

### **Locality I**

The site (23° 04' 21.2'' N; 85° 41' 25.5'' E) is situated outside the Southern end of the village Besnadih covering an area of the site is around 4.3 acres (Fig. 4). The Megaliths erected at the site are small dolmen with lower height in thousands in number with symbols and cup marks in linear pattern on the cap stone oriented towards North-South. In most of the cases, the vertical supporting stones are buried under soil and they are appearing as stone slabs. Capstones of some of the dolmens have been removed and in these cases; the buried earthen pots are visible to eyes (Fig. 5). At many places, the soil has been dug by the locals and the pots are visible on surface and in sections (Fig. 6). On the eastern side of the site, there is a fallen memorial pillar, which was, according to the villagers, erected in the memory of the warriors, participated in an ancient tribal war (Fig. 7). This is an evidence of erecting memorials by the Megalithic authors of Besnadih for their soldiers in ancient past.

### **Locality II**

This site (23° 04' 12.2'' N; 85° 40' 59.3'' E) is around 2 kms south from the village Besnadih, having around 110 megaliths with two types, one is the typical *Saasandiri* type and the other one is table type dolmens in the outer periphery, which are actually very recent one with detailed informations about the dead and its ancestors (Fig. 8).

Just like the first locality, only capstones are visible of most of the dolmens. Cinerary urns are easily visible under some of the megaliths due to erosion of soil and some potsherds have been observed on surface as well. Near one dolmen, the rim of a cinerary urn can be visible on the surface which is possibly, an evidence of *Sat-bharwa* ceremony, performed by the Hinduised *Mundas* (*Sat-bharwa* is a post-cremation urn burial ceremony performed by the 'Caste Hindus' within a region up to around two decades back) (Fig.9). On the Southern side, there is a hill which can be possible source of quarrying stones (Fig. 10). Some prepared capstones have been found on the hill having symbols and cup marks in linear pattern (Fig. 11).

### **Locality III**

This site (23° 04' 19.4'' N; 85° 41' 15.3'' E) is nearly 1km away to the locality II, south to the Besnadih village. Around 150 megaliths are erected by the present *Munda* community of the village and some of them have been disturbed due to agricultural activities very near to the locality (Fig. 12). The typology of the megaliths at the site has



**Figure 4: General View of Megaliths in Locality I**



**Figure 5: Urn Visible in Section**



**Figure 6: Open Pot Visible on the Surface**



**Figure 7: Fallen Memorial Pillar**



**Figure 8: General View of Megaliths in Locality II**



**Figure 9: Earthen Pot Used in Sat-bharwa and Potsherds Under Dolmen**



**Figure 10: Quarry Hill Near Locality II**



**Figure 11: Prepared Capstones on the Hill**



**Figure 12: General View of Megaliths in Locality III**

some variations. There are both, big and small dolmens have been constructed at the site and few of them having the description of the dead ones buried under the dolmens in *Mundari* and Hindi language (Fig. 13). Some of the dolmens having vertical supporting slab at the southern end, having description of the dead one and the ancestors. These types of dolmens can be observed only in the outer periphery of the site and resembles Megaliths made by the Oraons known as *Kursi* or *Bhut Kursi* (Fig. 14).

### **Rites and Rituals of Mundas**

The Mundas performs three main rites and rituals during erecting the megaliths. The mortuary practice of the Mundas can be divided into three parts:

- *Rapa* (The Cremation Ceremony)
- *Umbul- ader* (Calling Back the Shadow of the Dead)
- *Jang-topa* (the annual Bone Burying Ceremony)

The Mundas of Besnadih have given up the traditional bone burying festival *Jang-topa*, and instead of that, they perform *Harr-garri*, having a similar function as the previous one.

***Rapa*:** The body of the deceased is dressed in a new cloth and anointed with turmeric and oil. Sometimes coins are put into the mouth. After that, the dead body is carried on a *charpoy* to the cremation place. On the way, at the outskirts of the village, it is put



**Figure 13: Table Type Dolmen with Inscribed Capstone**



**Figure 14: Kurisi or Bhut Kurisi of Oraons**

down to the ground for a moment and again taken up. A handful of rice or mustard is placed at the four points over which the legs of charpoy was stood. Then the corpse is taken to the burning place and carried three times around the wooden pile, arrange to burn it. A son of the deceased or the nephew in absence of son puts a burning charcoal fixed at one of the end of *boel* twig into the mouth of the corpse and funeral pile finally put on fire.

After cremation, some of the relatives of the dead one pour water on the ashes by an earthen vessel (*chatu*). This procedure is known as '*Airre*'. The remaining bones are collected in a new piece of cotton cloth of any married woman of a family. Then the village *Paahan* construct a small effigy of the deceased with tender grass shoots, and draw a figure on the ground with parched rice to represent the dead one. The grass-effigy is placed over the figure with its head pointing to the south. Then it is taken up and kept into a cloth containing a bone and finally all these things are kept into a small earthen *chukiya*, which is anointed with turmeric and hang it over a part of the roof called *chhacha* of the deceased house. The use of turmeric over the earthen *chukiya* is just to prevent the smell of the remains comes out of it.

***Umbul-ader*:** Unlike the traditional *Umbul-ader* of the *Mundas*, this ritual is performed by the *Mundas* of Besnadih on the same night of cremation. After having their dinner, few relatives and the guests of that family goes to the place where *charpoy* was put down while the corpse was taking for cremation. They have four *tiril* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) branches with them. Two of them are planted at the place in a form of cross and the third one is planted vertically, so as to intersect the other two at their point of junction, thus making a figure of six pointed star (Roy 1912:264). A big earthen pot is placed in between them and a thorn is tied up at the junction of three branches. A small earthen vessel is placed over this tripod of *tiril* branches and the whole thing is covered with straw so as to appear like a *kunba* (a hut) with a small opening at the north. One of the relative of the deceased sits down before the opening, with his face to the south, and presents offerings of rice mixed with pounded turmeric to the shadow of the deceased. Finally, the *kunba* is set on to fire and the small earthen vessel is smashed into pieces by the remaining fourth branch (Topno 1955: 722). Then the kinsmen of the dead call his name thrice to come back to the home. They light a small *diya*, which represents the soul of the dead person inside a *bougi* or *tokri* and start for the deceased house, one of them striking two ploughshares, one against the other or against a sickle. Meanwhile, a female member of the house spread some ashes in front of the door in a room and placed few leaf-cups filled with boiled rice, vegetables, pulses and chicken curry, all covered with a winnowing pan, inside the door of *Mandi-ora*. On the arrival to the house, the relatives knock the door three times. After some questionings regarding their identity, they are allowed to enter the house. Then the person carrying *diya* inside *bougi* goes inside the *ading* and placed it there. Then he checked the leaf cups and ashes have been disturbed or not. If, so it is considered that the spirit of the dead is returned back to home otherwise the whole ritual repeated again.

**Harr-Garri:** It is the bone burying ceremony celebrated by the *Mundas* of Besnadih village. The *Mundas* of Besnadih bury their dead ones after seven or nine day of cremation. After seventh or ninth day, the relatives of corpse invited the residents of the village on their *Saasan* to participate in the *Harr-Garri* of dead person. They bring some gifts in form of country liquor, *Harriya* and chicken or goat for offerings and sacrifices, depends on the economic condition of the family. The burial of bones depends upon two factors. Generally the bones are buried in a family *Saasandiri* of the dead one (of his respective *Kili* or clan), but if there is not enough space to bury the cinerary vessel under the family *Saasandiri*, they construct a new one for the corpse. They arrange stone slabs to construct *Saasandiri*, few days before the day of *Harr-Garri*. They quarry stones from the locally available source, which is a hill just opposite to one of the three Megalithic sites. They quarry stones either on their shoulders or on a country-cart called *Uri-garri* or *Agiya-garri*, depends upon the size of a stone. On the day of *Harr-Garri*, relatives bring the remains of corpse, which were hung on the *Chhacha* in an earthen *Chukiya*. A suitable place within a *Saasan* is chosen to make new *Saasandiri*. A woman of the family clean all four supporting stones (*Pancari diri*) at the burial place as well as the cap stone with water, rubbed with oil and daubed with turmeric. One person digs four small pits in north-south direction and fixes all four *Pancari diri* vertically so that they can act as a supporting stones or orthostats of the structure. One of the relatives of dead person digs a small pit at the centre of them. *Paahan*, the village priest, opens the *Chukiya*, began to chant some *mantras* and smears the bones with oil, Turmeric and flowers and keep all of them in a new earthen vessel. Then the vessel is place in the pit. Over that vessel, one small *Chukiya* is kept, with offerings of rice, oil, turmeric and few coins. Then one of the male members aims the *Chukiya* from bow and arrow and breaks it. He breaks arrow-head and leaves it with the offerings inside the grave. Then at last, he covers the pit with soil and few members of the family cover the grave with capstone. The family which can afford, they add another big vertical slab as a supporting stone on the southern end of the dolmen, which has all the description of dead person and other ancestors, buried under the grave. Earlier they use to write in their own *Mundari* language, but now days, they are using Hindi for it. The family which could not afford to add another stone to the structure, they write all the details only on the capstone itself. Apart from the new construction, each old *Saasandiris* having the symbols of the respective *Kili* of the dead people, carved on the capstones. When all the remains and offering are deposited and the grave is covered with capstone, one of the women of the family lite a *diya* over the capstone and make three to five marks from vermilion. In one leaf cup she place the country liquor *Harriya* and in other one rice and turmeric are placed as offerings to the dead (Fig. 15).

In the mean time, they also mark the other capstones of the burial ground with vermilion. During all this time *Paahan* continued to chant the *mantras*. After that one of the *Munda* women put few pieces of bred on the capstone of the grave of the corpse as well as on the other capstones of the burial ground and they sprinkles turmeric mixed

in water, on all the graves. In some cases, the *Mundas* of Besnadih sacrifices the chicken during this ceremony. At the end, they distribute the country liquor, *Harriya* to all relatives and villagers, and heads towards the house of the dead person.



**Figure 15: Offerings to the Dead Given by *Mundas***

***Hayom:*** *Hayom* is the shaving ceremony performed on next day of *Harr-garri*, in which the village barber; shave the head and beard of the male relative of the dead who burn the funeral pyre.

Next day, a commemorative feast is organised for village people by family of the corpse, in which they serve meat of goat and chicken, as well as country liquor, *Harriya*. The noteworthy thing is, they also cook and serve those animals, which were brought by the visitors on previous day at the village *Saasan*.

## **Megalithic Tradition and Other Munda Communities of Jharkhand**

The *Mundas* perform ten types of mortuary practices with regional variations throughout Chotanagpur plateau (Das 2009). Most of the places, *Jang-topa* has been given up. But in some region it is still prevalent. In Khunti district, they burry the whole body in a separate place on their Village *Saasan*, and on the day of *Jang-topa*, they dig out the bones out of the grave, collect it in the earthen vessel and ceremonially bury them under family *Saasandiri*. These *Mundas* are Christian converts and occasionally they made a symbol of cross on their megaliths.

In Baroudi village of Burmu Block (Ranchi District), the Mundas try to finish all the mortuary rituals, i.e., *Rapa*, *Umbul-ader* and *Harr-garri* at a same day. They call back the shadow of the dead after burying the bones. Apart from this, they erect both *Saasandiri* (Dolmen) and *Biridiri* (Menhir) in cases of natural and unnatural death. They sacrifices fowls during *Harr-garri*.

## **Observations and Concluding Remarks**

The Megalithic tradition of the Munda community at Besnadih undergoes through various changes through the time. In comparison to ancient megaliths scattered in clusters at three localities, the recent megaliths erected by the Mundas have some sort of change in size up to certain extent, some typological variations have also been observed during documentation of all these three different localities. Apart from this, changes have also been observed in the orthodox mortuary rituals and the mortuary practices followed by the Mundas of the village. All these factors indicate the influences of other different tribal and non-tribal neighbouring communities, mainly, the Hindus and the Christians. Ritual like *Hayom*, also prevalent in Hinduism shows the cultural effect of Hinduism on the Mundas. Apart from this, most of the Mundas of *Panch Parganas* are hinduised now and they follow many religious customs of the Hindus. The Megaliths of these people exhibits their religious, social and economic conditions as well. It reflects their extremely primitive religious believe, i.e., ancestor and nature worship. All the mortuary behaviours of them give an essence of nature worship. The procedure of *Umbul-ader* shows the importance of their ancestors in their society. Use of vermilion, turmeric and other offerings in mortuary practice show an idea of life after death. The economic condition of the Megalithic builders can be seen in arrangement of burial stones. The Megalithic authors of Besnadih have to purchase slabs from local contractors, who quarry stones from the hill. A family which can't afford to use the big slabs, they construct their megaliths on small slabs. Even, the use of sacrificial animals depends upon economic condition of the family. Apart from this, they construct bigger megaliths for the family, which has some sort of hierarchy in society. The size of Megaliths represents the social status of dead person. Education and cultural interaction also influenced the Megalithic tradition of these people. Instead of carving symbols, the Mundas are using writing for description. Although, the burial custom of the Mundas of Besnadih undergone through a lot of changes throughout the time and influenced by the other ethnic communities and some new elements have been added in their burial custom; still they have not left their actual traditions.

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