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**MEGALITHIC CULTURE IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL
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Megalithic Culture in India with Special Reference to Chhattisgarh

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Abstract – Ancient Indian history is divided and studied through its periodization into Pre historic, Protohistoric and Historic phases. The Indian Megalithic culture is regarded as one of the proto historic cultures. The term ‘Megalith’ is combination of the Greek words – Megas meaning ‘big’ and lithos meaning ‘stone’. The Megalithic monuments are the most visible feature of cultures i.e., Megalithic cultures which are named after them. In functional terms, they served as sepulchral or memorial structures, symbolically marking the place where the megalithic people buried their dead and in this manner constitute the most noticeable physical markers of that age.

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Initially, the term ‘Megalith’ was a general term referring to capstones, menhirs, and other long stone structures which formed protohistoric monuments or part of one. With more archaeological excavations down the line, the term became generic, more inclusive in its usage and began to be employed for the regional variants of these monuments such as cairn circles, cist circles which did not employ such big stones.

Megaliths, either in more or less raw form or having been worked upon, are found located over almost the entire landscape of India. However, they are found in especially large concentrations in the regions of far south, central India, the Vindhya and Aravalli ranges and the north west. These monuments are found associated with a somewhat homogeneous group of the black – and – red ware and an equally homogeneous group of iron tools and weapons. [1] These occur as burial goods. Burial goods also sometimes comprise tools made of other raw materials, artefacts, ornaments, vessels, animal remains etc. If none of the features are present, the monument is not qualified to be included under the category of Megaliths.

The burials are often collective in nature in which bones of more than one person are found buried. These can be understood to be of people belonging to families. This practice is seen to have continued even in the later periods, assuming significant aspects in early Iron societies. Over the years, a number of studies have focussed on these Megalithic cultures, offering insights and explanations into the their various aspects, such as the kinds of stone formations that were chosen, their possible meanings, the sites selected by these people and the reasons thereof, the variety of remains unearthed from the burials and their significance, the skeletal remains themselves and the

similarities that these cultures display with other cultures within the same area and of the other areas. Even the, there are aspects that still need more clarity and in depth study.

Archaeologists continue to debate among themselves as to whether the Megaliths of Indian subcontinent have indigenous or foreign origin. It is sometimes held that the authors of the Indian megaliths belonged to the Dravidian group, the main basis for this view being that there is a marked overlap between the distributional area of s. Indian megaliths and the Dravidian –speaking people. Gordon Childe and R.E.M. Wheeler were prominent amongst those archaeologists who stressed on a west Asian connection, much like they did while explaining the origin of features of Neolithic cultures and the Harappan civilization. Von Furer – Haimendorf and Ruben traced the linkages to east Mediterranean coast. Heine – Geldern and Leshnik take C. Asia as the place of origin and Allchins, Soundara – Rajan take the Indian Megaliths ‘as a developing complex with several streams of influence combining in them.[2]

AREA OF STUDY

The area that is to be studied here is Chhattisgarh. The present day eastern districts of Chhattisgarh i.e. Bilaspur, Raipur, Raigarh, Durg and the western districts of Orissa, i.e. Kalahandi and Sambalpur districts of Orissa comprised the historical region of Dakshina Koshala.

Among the early British archaeologists of 19th century to begin excavation of central India were in fact not archaeologists. Rather it was the missionaries who noticed them. In fact, J.D. Beglar came across megalithic monuments in Durg district but was not

able to identify them as such because up till then not many studies had been done on these monuments or the culture they represented. However, even the initial identification of these monuments and excavation of these sites focussed on their documentation and the study of burials themselves. It was only later that the studies came to focus on the multifarious aspects of the cultures such as their distribution pattern, socio – economic organisation, subsistence strategies, trade and exchange and others. With the beginning of the 21st century, attempts were made to include the hitherto unexplored areas of central India in the mainstream of search for remains of early Iron Age societies.

A bird's eye view of the situation in Chhattisgarh shows that there is a paucity of Megalithic remains in the state which otherwise displays a long history of human occupation. A probable explanation for this is that not much work has been done for Megalithic exploration in the state. Among all the districts of Chhattisgarh, it is Durg, Rajanandgaon and Bastar which showed prominent association with Megalithic remains. Although a significant number of Megalithic sites have been explored and reported from Chhattisgarh, in absence of any dedicated large – scale scientific excavations being carried out, the cultural identities of these sites and their relationship with cultures and most importantly Megalithic cultures of other regions are still blurred.

Megalithic complexes have been discovered in Durg district at Dhanora, [3] Karakabhat, [4] at Bartia Bhata [5] (Lat. 21° 22'; 82° 55') in Raipur, at Around – Bhanwarmara [6] in Dhamtari tehsil on the eastern bank of the Mahanadi river. From a comparative study of the artefacts unearthed from a number of sites, scholars date the commencement of the Megalithic age in the Deccan to c. 10th century B.C. A.K. Sharma gives firmer dates. He is of the belief "that megalithic memorials at Karakabhat would be dated to around first half of the first millennium BC." [7]

The extensive site of Karakabhat is located in an area of about 10 sq.km., encompassing the villages of Kannevada, Sorar, Nahanda and Karakabhat. Karakabhat is located 16 kms from Balod on Balod – Dhamtari road. It is spread on both sides of the road. Several megalithic types are present in this complex. Menhirs of different sizes and shapes can still be found scattered here in finished and unfinished conditions. Among the prominent kind of Megalithic monuments found here is Menhir, placed in the centre of cairn. One or more Menhir usually, stands at centre of cairn which were heaped up to a height between 30 and 70 cms. Small stones were used to support menhir at its base. Double menhir located inside cairn is another remarkable feature of Karakabhat – Sorar megaliths in Chhattisgarh. Generally, menhirs were erected in northern and southern parts of the cairn. Multiple menhirs inside a cairn were also observed. Their numbers vary from three in minimum to eleven in maximum. Five menhirs in a circle were reported from Dhanora. Carved Menhirs, carved out of granite or

sometimes sandstone have also been found from Bartiabhata. Fish shaped menhirs have also been found here, a type that are not seen anywhere else. [8]

SETTLEMENT PATTERN

Interestingly, the megalithic monuments always occur concentrated in hundreds in a region. 500 of these were discovered at Dhanora when M.G. Dikshit excavated the site. [9] According to A.K. Sharma, an estimated 3500 to 4000 megalithic burials must have been present in this Karakabhat – Dhanora complex. Majority of them are, however, wiped out and at Karakabhat itself about 800 burials have been found. [10] Unfortunately, in Dakshina Koshala only a few such concentrates have been subjected to archaeological excavations as yet.

It becomes obvious from observing the menhirs, apsidal enclosures, capstones, cairn heaps at these sites that a lot of care was bestowed on making these memorials, probably as a sign of respect for the departed souls. The process of making these monuments which involved cutting, transporting, shaping stones and erecting these structures, was meticulous and painstaking. In this entire process, the stage of transportation of the rocks to the burial site posed considerable challenge. We can also presuppose the existence of considerable skill since this was a prerequisite in fashioning several of these rock cut structures. Here it is important to draw attention to the sculptured menhir in cairn circle at Karakabhat. The face of a man has been sculptured as a menhir here and what is remarkable is that not a single chisel mark can be seen on this menhir. [11] Hence, it was the spatial proximity to the source of this raw material which strongly influenced the distributional pattern of burial site. For instance, the menhirs standing at Bartia Bhata were carved out of granite and some of sandstone, implying the presence nearby of granitic rock – mass. In fact, this raw material was available to them in the Mama – Bhanja hills, 2 km north of the site. [12] A factory for cutting and shaping menhirs of different shapes and sizes was found at Karakabhat. The fact that Megaliths were made in different forms is also an aspect that needs to be studied. These clearly point to different burial traditions being adopted and practiced in the same area and probably by the same people. These structures such as that of concentric circles probably carried some kind of ritual significance and also some socio - economic significance.

The burials occur in cemeteries that are more often than not located in waste lands, located close to cultivated fields, often overlooking a tank or a river valley. Apart from stone, relatively reliable sources of water such as springs, streams, metals were also determining factors in the distribution of these complexes. These were situated usually on somewhat elevated surfaces. Other factors such as availability of various metals could have been a determining factor. Elaborating further on the point, A.K. Sharma has

pointed in the context of the Karakabhat graves that iron deposits are confined to Dalli – Rajhara range of hills which are located nearly 20 km from Karakabhat and also found at Dendi – Lohara. He had remarked “...the location of megaliths was also influenced by the availability of copper, iron and gold.” However, it is significant that the absence of evidence of working in any metal at any of these sites in the form of incomplete tools, slag, kiln indicates that these processes were probably undertaken at the habitation site. [13]

However, not much information has come to forefront about the corresponding habitation site of the iron using societies. To the south of the burial site at Karakabhat, low rock shelters, sufficient enough to accommodate two persons, [14] were explored by archaeologists but except for one or two, yielded no sign of habitation – temporary or permanent indicating that one must look elsewhere for these as also that probably the factors which influenced the distribution of habitation sites was different from that of burial site. These could, however, not be too far away from the cemeteries. All cultures, chronologically older or younger to Megalithic cultures with known burial traditions, are always known to bury their dead close or within the habitation sites. The Megalithic people would also not have been an exception. The only habitation site to be excavated is at Sorar in Durg district which lies geographically to the north of the Karakabhat graves. A trial trench 3m x 3m was laid in the centre of one of the three mounds identified at Sorar. The dig yielded 4-5m of habitation deposit. From the last but one layer, i.e. layer 15, a rammed plastered floor with a hearth sunk into it was also found. Although no other evidence indicating inhabitation has been found but the very size of the deposit by itself is a strong pointer towards the continued use of the site.[15] Microliths have been found nearby, indicating that the area had probably experienced human presence. The presence of successive levels indicate that the site continued to be in use for a long period even subsequently. It would perhaps be more appropriate to suggest here that not only the distribution of the megalithic burial site but that of the habitation sites was determined by the availability and proximity to these natural resources.

If the number of graves in these complexes is taken to be an indicator, it appears that the population of these cultures must have been significantly high. The burial complexes must have been used and therefore come into existence over several years or maybe centuries.[16] Virag G Sonatake points out that though it may appear at first that stone circles and cairn are the main burial type prevalent in general, on a closer look we see that regional variation is clearly visible in terms of typology and inner architecture of megaliths in Upper Wainganga valley, Vidarbha, Chhattisgarh and south India. [17]

SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES

Offerings interned in the graves gives us a glimpse into the material culture of Megalithic builders. Of the sites excavated, only from Karakabhat and Bartia – Bhata have iron artefacts been recovered. The significant advance in metallurgy is apparent.

While from the latter, we obtained iron daggers, spearheads, knives and arrowheads, it is because the details of the tools yielded from the former have been published that we know the numerical breakup of these thirteen objects. These were: 6 spearheads and daggers, 4 arrowheads, 2 spikes and 1 agricultural implement. It is doubtful whether at this stage of development, we could distinguish between warring and subsistence related equipment. While the single agricultural implement identified by A.K. Sharma as a hoe, was definitely used to generate subsistence of one kind, it cannot be argued on parallel lines that the knives, arrowheads, spearheads had a single function – defence and attack. These, at the same time could have an allied function – of obtaining subsistence from hunting animals. No visible signs of pastoral activity can be seen. Apart from the single hoe, no other agricultural remains such as that of grains have been found. A heavy predominance of this hunting – warring equipment implies that these people still pursued hunting and any pastoral and agricultural activity undertaken by them, as implied by heavy habitation deposit, was still in its nascent stage. In other words, a mixed economy had come to be practised. This can be seen through the example that though no iron artefact remains have been found here from Sorar, the very fact the site yielded 4-5m habitation deposit is itself indicative of the change in the subsistence pattern in favour of agriculture. Yet, it must always be borne in mind that while the remains found at these sites enable us to formulate certain generalizations, without dating of these tools and without comparing these remains with the material from other sites, both within and outside the region, it will not be possible to form any conclusions.

Although we have a breakup of the iron implements yielded from Karakabhat graves, one of the small but important details left unpublished is their distribution in the twelve graves which would help us to determine whether iron was an elite metal or not.

CRAFT PRODUCTION

Apart from iron tools, copper, gold and silver ornaments also comprised offerings. Copper rings and bangles of different sizes have also been obtained from a few Karakabhat graves. At Dhanora, one of the four graves dug contained a copper vessel, traced by its outlines left in the form of rings and bangles of different sizes. The comparatively lesser occurrence of copper artefact illustrates that the copper metal was for the elite and was employed mainly to make ornaments. As the pottery was made

from clay, the internment of copper vessel, like many other grave goods probably held ritual significance. These people had knowledge about use of various metals. Their use would have been controlled by chiefs of such societies indicating a socially differentiated society.

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