Menhirs and cultural diffusion: megalithic practices in Central-eastern India

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On the Indian subcontinent, megalithic burial practices have been traced back to the Mesolithic period (Allchin & Allchin 1983: 62–96), continuing through the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (Leshnik 1974: 21–25), the Iron Age and the historical periods, and down to the present day as a form of living tradition among some tribal communities (Mohanty & Selvakumar 2002: 313–51). Similar traditions, from the Neolithic period onwards, are found across the wider region, including Taiwan, the Philippines and many islands of the Malay Archipelago (von Heine-Geldern 1928: 276–315). Menhirs are the simplest form of megalithic structure, but they can be associated with complex ritual practices that vary from one region to another.

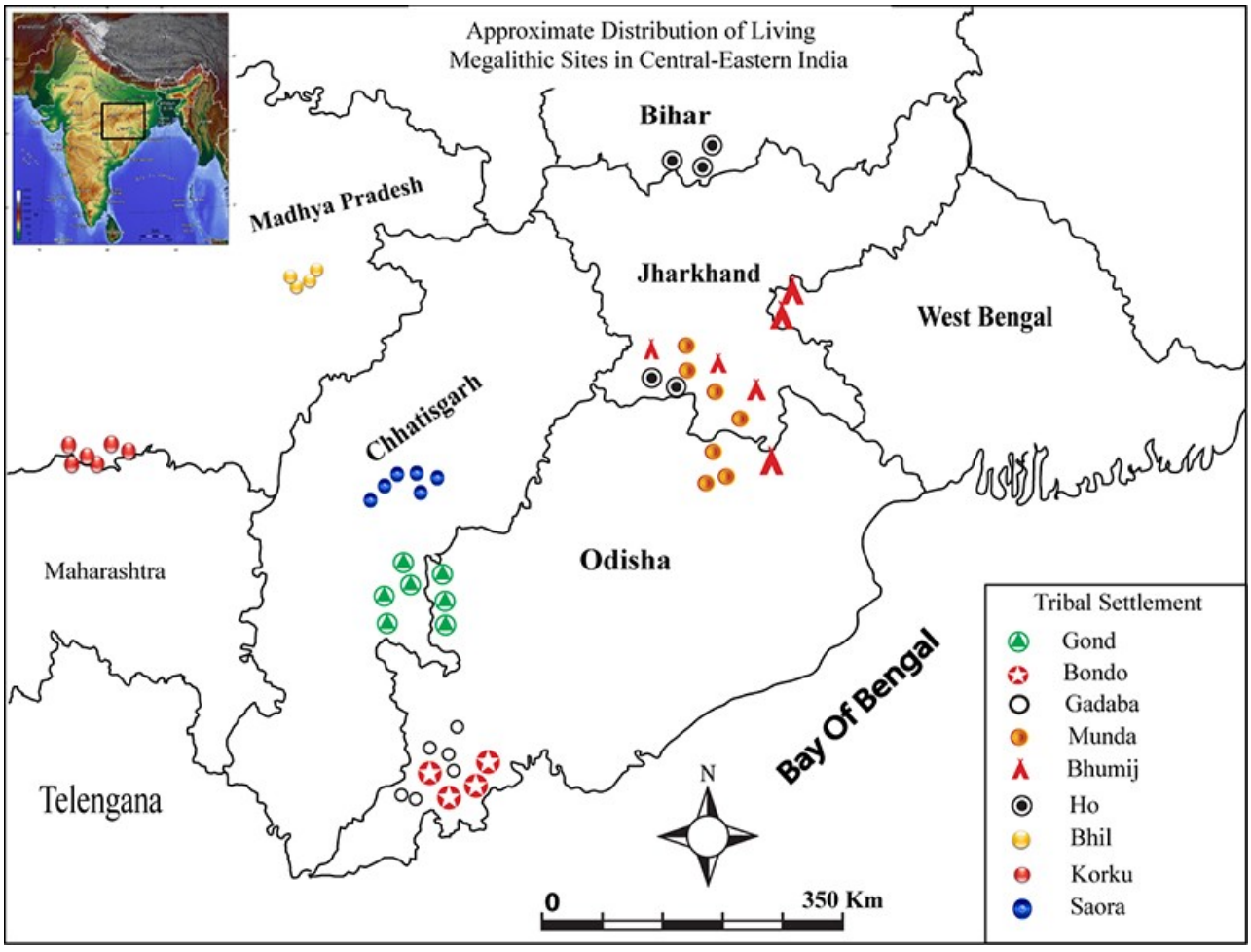


Figure 1. Distribution map of megalithic sites.

Central-eastern India covers adjoining parts of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, West-Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh (Figure 1). Its geographic location favours many tribal groups belonging to different linguistic families: Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. Very few of these tribal communities continue a living tradition of megalithic ritual. The Gadabas and Bonda communities erect stone pillars during the annual memorial feast (*Gota Mela*) and Crab festivals (*Ongongota*). These pillars are located in the immediate vicinity of rice fields, and tribal belief connects them with agriculture. The Bonda believe that these menhirs are the seats of village deities (or *'Baanumpa'*) who have existed since the beginning of the world. During the annual feast for *Diali*, tribal communities sacrifice a red chicken to the *Biredevata* or stone deity (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1943: 149–78).

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The Gond tribal community believes that their ancestors remain within stone pillars to protect their clan. The size of the menhirs is indicative of the socio-economic status and character of the ancestors (Mendaly 2015: 1–6); these pillars are worshipped for a maximum of 20–25 years (Figure 2). Meanwhile, the Munda people put up a menhir if a person dies an unnatural death outside the village (Figure 3), although only higher-status families within the community follow this tradition (Roy 1912).



Figure 2. Menhir of the Gond tribe.

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Figure 3. Menhir of the Munda tribe.

Among the Saora, families report that they regard menhirs as houses for the dead, and that the concept of the soul is privileged (Elwin 1955: 365–66). Sometimes wooden pillars are set up for memorial purposes, and similar forms are found among the Korku people and the Ho tribe in Bihar (Chattopadhyay 1943: 201–209; Das & Chatterjee 1927: 94). The choice of wood in these cases may be due to the absence of suitable stone; such wooden menhirs may be regarded as 'megaxylic' (Childe 1948: 12–13). Among the Hill Marias and Bison-Horn Marias tribes, both small table stones and carved wooden posts are used simultaneously for memorial purposes; here the combination of wood and stone may be explained by the persistence of earlier practices alongside newer ones that have spread from other areas (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1945: 73–86).

The Munda and Ho communities belong to the Austro-Asiatic language family, but their use of dolmens has no exact parallel in Assam and other areas of the Austronesian linguistic sphere; rather, the use of dolmens by the Munda and Ho is more similar to the situation found in the Nilgiri Mountains, which are home to people belonging to the Dravidian language family (William 1976: 90–128). Similarly, the Gond people belong to the Dravidian family, but in Central-eastern India, the Gond prefer to erect menhirs rather than dolmens, even though menhirs are commonly associated with groups of the Austronesian language family (Elwin

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1955). Finally, the Bhil people of Madhya-Pradesh belong to the Indo-Aryan language family, but the group practises megalithic building (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1945: 73–86), perhaps as a result of ancient contact between people of different linguistic families in this region.

Austro-Asiatic speakers in India today derive from a dispersal of people across South Asia followed by extensive sex-specific admixture with indigenous populations, although such movements of people and their effects on language were not uniform (Van Driem 2007: 1–14). Moreover, cultural practices tend to spread more quickly from one region to another than mass migrations of people, giving rise to the notion of the "diffusion of religious ideas" among tribal communities proposed by von Heine-Geldern (1928: 310–11).

Currently, we cannot trace the origins of menhirs on the Indian subcontinent back to the Neolithic period because of a lack of clues such as the diagnostic quadrangular shoulder adze. Nonetheless, it seems clear that megalithic practices are derived from specific blends of cultural influences that developed simultaneously in different parts of the country (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1945: 81–82). Yet much of India remains poorly known archaeologically, including North-eastern India, the Indo-Burmese borderlands and the Bengal littoral. Further scientific investigations of both the prehistoric and historic periods will help to elaborate the origins of megalithic traditions and the diffusion of religious ideas across the subcontinent.

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