

MEGALITHIC SITES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: PAST AND PRESENT DISCOURSES

Tirthraj Bhoi

Abstract: This paper takes up a study of the use of iron and megalithic practices in Jammu and Kashmir region. The first archaeological research on Neolithic-megalithic has been taken up in 1935 by H. de Terra, and T. T. Paterson in this region. In this paper, the author analyzes the observation of ancient megalithic sites like Gufkral and Burzoham from Kashmir and Sohail as the living megalithic culture from Jammu region. The observation from Kashmir is based on the report from ASI and field observation by the author. A comprehensive approach to study the both past and present is taken under consideration. It tries to relate the memorial stones which were erected to commemorate the dead in the form of megaliths and the mortuary practice by the some tribal communities of Jammu region.

Keywords: Megaliths, Iron, Sati stones, Ethnography, Oral tradition.

Introduction

Indian megalithic burials and monuments generally belong to the Iron Age and are largely sepulchral in character. However, the sepulchral aspect of this tradition was not a new feature of the Iron Age. One can find the burial practices in Mesolithic and Neolithic period as well. The term “megalith” derived from the Greek words “meghas” meaning “large” and “lithos” meaning “stone”.¹ In the earlier stages of research, the term ‘megalith’ was used to refer to large stone monuments. However, subsequently, in India, the term was applied to all the burial and habitation sites yielding the pottery with black-and-red ware surface in southern India, irrespective of their association with megalith in the early Iron Age context. Though the incompatibility of the term “megalith” has been discussed by many scholars like Childe,² Deo,³ Ramanna,⁴ Krishna Sastry,⁵ Gururaja Rao,⁶ Rao,⁷ it has been widely used and accepted by a large section of archaeologists and has become a well-established term.

Methodology

An Ethnographic approach has been undertaken to gather the widespread data from the sites. Exploration is the process of discovering new archaeological sites. The Archaeological sites are often found in deserted place like dense forest, near river, rock shelter etc. A considerable amount of data has been collected from the megalithic sites with applied standard archaeological methods. The study has taken in account the field surveys conducted at the site. The rock structures are observed and investigated thoroughly.

Tirthraj Bhoi; Associate Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Jammu, Jammu-180006, JKUT ; E-mail: tirtharajbhoi@jammuuniversity.ac.in.

Historiography and Geographical Location

The Geographical location of megaliths is important for studying its different aspects because geographical impacts all others spheres. It is very important to note that majority of megalithic sites in India are found on the banks of river and located in tropical deciduous, tropical thorn and tropical moist deciduous forest zones. The distribution of megaliths in India and world is elaborated by S. L. Shali in his work *Kashmir: History and Archaeology through the Ages* in 1993. It suggests a comparison and affiliation of north Indian megaliths with the western countries. Similarly, the geological genesis and geographical location of some megalithic sites in Jammu and Kashmir, their detailed analysis and archaeological objects associated with it is explained by Hellmut-de-Terra in his research paper, *The Megaliths of Bursahom, Kashmir: A New Prehistoric Civilisation from India* in 1942. While describing of ancient monuments of Jammu and Kashmir, D. C. Sharma has explained few megalithic sites as well as structures with their geographical location in his book *History and Culture of Kishtwar* in 1995. In the year 1999 A.K Singh wrote an article Cist Burials in Kinnaur, Western Himalayas: A Preliminary Report on Recent Discovery, in which he has given a preliminary report of the burials which he discovered in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. He has explained the burial site and the skeletal remains associated with it. On the basis of the skeletal and material analysis, he found striking similarities in the ancient burial tradition of this region, central Asia, Swat valley and Kumaun region. He has described the graves as the cist burials. This account is convenient to provide details of ancient graves and material evidence to reconstruct the history of western Himalayan region. The present author's work on living megalithic of Gond tribes⁸ linked with the structure of the tribes of *padder* valley of Jammu region.

Associated Fauna and Flora

The people at Gufkral herded cattle, sheep, goat and pig. They also practiced poultry. As compared to cattle they had more sheep and goat wealth. This was natural as the latter animals provided both food and wool for winter clothing though single cattle will provide many times the amount of meat produced from the slaughter of a sheep or goat. Due to plentiful of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food available with them in and around their settlement itself, there was not much need for hazardous task of hunting wild animals, as such occasionally only ibex and like were hunted or captured, more so for the sake of horns for making agricultural and other implements. Apart from the grains of wheat, six row barley and naked variety, lentil, pea, clover, apricot, rice and millet grains were also recovered from the last levels of the Neolithic period-IC, it is certain that rice was introduced to the valley by the Megalithic people. Rice dominates numerically whereas barley and wheat occupy the second and third positions respectively.

Chronology

On the basis of 14C dates for iron from Gufkral ranging from 1550 to 1300 B.C. and 1850-1550 B.C. from the Megalithic period indicate possible diffusion from Iran-Afghanistan area to Kashmir valley most probably by north-eastern route passing through Baramulla, Dwi-ekam-pura etc. which are also prominent Megalithic sites. The various potteries are handmade burnished ware, gritty red ware and wheel made dull red ware, long neck jars, bowls and basins.

Setting

The location of the megaliths of this region could be based on physical condition. The megaliths are concentrated on high rock-bench areas, where the large quantity of iron ore and traces of gold is available. The burials are noticed over rocky high land near the water sources. In this region, they lived near by burial, where the bounties of stone were available. One can find both habitation and burial sites within a small distance. The majority of megalithic site of this region are only burial in nature.

Description of Megalithic Sites

Started on the method of disposing of the dead, it could be said that there are three stages of transition; burying the dead individually inside the pits with full articulation, exposure of the dead and collection of skeletal remains, cremation of the dead and collection of important bones for interring in family vaults. Very less attention has been given to research and investigation about the megalithic culture in Kashmir. In Kashmir smaller number of megalithic sites has been discovered so far. The important sites are Burzoham, Gufkral, Begagund, Hariparigom, Pampur, Brah, Sombur and Semu. Out of above-mentioned sites, Burzoham and Gufkral are excavated so far. The excavation reports show the availability of early man in the Kashmir valley.

Site I: Burzoham

The site⁹ is located in the direction of (latitude 34° 10' N, longitude 74° 54' E). The megalithic period of this site is represented as the continuation of Neolithic period without any stratigraphical gap. The found menhirs in the site suggested that the burials are secondary and commemorative in nature. However, an adult human male skeleton was found below one of the menhirs. The structures of this period were generally built of mud and rubble. Some platform sorts of structures made with rubble masonry were also found. The artifacts found in the megalithic site are similar to the Neolithic artifacts. The Neolithic people maintained their tradition and culture as a continuing process up to historical period. The two cultures got assimilated in this site. The artifacts found in this site are wheel made pottery and burnished wares, copper arrow head, stone-axes, adzes, spearhead and bones tools.

Site II: Gufkral

The site¹⁰ is located in the direction of (latitude 35° 54' N, longitude 75° 60'E). Both the habitations and burials are available in this site. Since the site is disturbed, not a single menhir is in proper standing position and huge quantities of broken pebbles are littered all over the site. The outer appearance of the areas shows that the menhirs did not have very deep foundation pits. They erected huge memorials in honors of their departed souls. The people have the idea about the use of iron, cultivation of rice and millet. The habitation deposit contains 10 cm. thick floors, almost running the site. People of this period were living in huts made of wattle and daub whose roofs supported by wooden poles. The floors were made by *karewa* silts and then plaster with lime. The artifacts found in this site are four ring stones, three cylindrical pestles on sandstone, one pounder, one small ball, one broken sharpener and one large harpoon. Thirty animals bone sharpener tools were recovered from the site. The other objects recovered from this site are cowries shell, copper object include a point, a bangle, beads and wooden carnelian. Three long iron needles were also found.

Site III: Sohail

It is located on the bank of river Chenab. This site indicates the presence of some standing rock structures that resemble the Menhir which is a type of megalithic structure. The structures there though actually witness a kind of similarity with the megaliths in their appearance but their inception still requires thorough research. They are vertical standing stones with a small lump on the top. Perhaps it represents an anthropomorphic figure. They are found in groups and few of them are standing while others are in a ruined state. Almost all the structures have the same dimensions except a few minor variations. The site is located on the periphery of two water sources, one is the river *Chenab* and another is *Bhot nala*. It is sited near the present cremation ground. The dating and purpose of construction of these rock structures is still a matter of research. The morphological structures of the vertical stones resemble a close affinity with this megalithic tradition. But there is no concrete dating and the purpose of their erection. The local people of the area consider them as the sati stones. As per the local narrative they are believed to be erected for commemorating the event of Sati which took place long back. There are also similar structures in the peripheral area of the village where the similar kind of practices still erecting.



Fig. 1: Sohail



Fig. 2: Gufkral

Fig. 3: Dadsar (Reflection:
Adil Abdul Paray)

Fig. 4: Kistwar



Fig. 5: Sohail



Fig. 6: Gulabgarb

The above memorial stone structures to felicitate the departed soul are of slab and Menhirs form of nature. The flat and upright blocks of stones are placed in the form of a seat, generally where people use to worship as their local god and goddess. In the Kistwar and Gulabgarh area many Menhirs found which are in memorial nature or secondary burials. It again depicts some symbols of square, circle and rectangle on it.

Livelihood

The megalithic people of this region were partly agriculturist and partly hunter as shown by the excavated evidence of iron tools and implements. Most of the settlements are noticed to be close to water sources and in hilly areas. All the above evidences show that, they were primarily agrarian. Pottery was another profession they adopted. The people were expert in different profession to fulfill the demand of the whole community. They indulged in community hunting of different animals and birds as shown by the implement of offence found, like arrow-head, spearhead etc. They also had knowledge in iron ore smelting.

Use of Metal Technology

The North Western Frontier Province of the subcontinent, Afghanistan and Kashmir have not yielded enough evidence for early occurrence of iron following the bronze Age. Our knowledge of the early Iron Age in this region limited to cairn burials and the grave furniture from Gandhara Grave Culture sites and from other sites in the neighborhood such as Moghal Ghundai, Gatti, Basot, etc. In the Kashmir valley, early evidence of iron in multi-cultural sites is found contemporary with the above mentioned sites, for example, at Gufkral three un-identified iron artefacts, plus two needles and one nail were reported from the megalithic phase dated to c. 1550–1300 BCE. At Semthan an arrowhead and a few slag pieces were found along with the NBPW ceramics dating to 700 to 500 B.C. Two artefacts (a nail and an arrowhead) were reported from the Early Historic level of Burzahom (1st century to 5th century A. D.). According to Minies Ministry, further to the exploration by the Geological Survey of India in 2023, lithium reserves have been found in Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir.

Conclusion

The Jammu and Kashmir megalithic monuments are commemorative in nature and one can not locate the primary burials. Kashmir site is Neolithic-megalithic-historical continuation. In the sites, the monuments are found in groups and not associated with skeletal remains. In Kashmir, the monuments were erected towards the end of the Neolithic period. And no direct connections can be seen with the other part of the India. They may have some contact with other parts of India but do not follow uniform sequence of culture. A new group of people arrived in Kashmir and started living with the Neolithic settler. This is evidence of earliest introduction of iron and rice in Kashmir. Tradition of megalithic culture has not died because of the continuing tribal social customs and obligation and beliefs.

Endnotes

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