Stories of Ancient Stones: A Living Tradition of Indigenous People (*Mundas*) in Jharkhand, India

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the continued tradition of constructing megalithic monuments among the Munda community, an indigenous group in Jharkhand, India. These monumental stones serve a dual purpose: as burial sites and symbols of collective heritage and resilience. The paper examines the historical, cultural, and ritual significance of these megaliths, demonstrating their central role in the Munda's oral traditions and spiritual beliefs. These structures are not only places of ancestral memory but also key markers of the Munda's unique cultural identity. Additionally, the study highlights the growing threats to this tradition, particularly from modernization and urbanization, which risk erasing these ancient practices. By documenting these megaliths' ongoing relevance, the paper emphasizes the urgent need to preserve them, as they represent a critical link to the past and a living tradition

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that continues to define the Munda community today. Through this exploration, the research makes a compelling case for the protection and conservation of this invaluable cultural heritage.

Keywords: *ancient stones, Munda, living tradition, Jharkhand, India.*

INTRODUCTION

Megalithic structures, often regarded as remnants of ancient, prehistoric civilizations, continue to capture the imagination of historians, archaeologists, and indigenous communities alike (Laporte *et al.* 2022; Wunderlich 2019; Russell and McNiven 1998; Holtorf 1996). From the famous Stonehenge in England to the lesser-known dolmens in Africa and India, these ancient stones serve as physical testimonies to early human civilizations (Allen 2022). However, their significance extends beyond their role as archaeological markers of prehistoric times. For many indigenous communities, including the *Mundas* of Jharkhand, megaliths remain a living tradition (Shekhar 2021). These stones were not merely remnants of a distant past but serve as active, vibrant components of social, spiritual, and cultural life (Pétursdóttir 2013). Hence, this paper aims to delve into the dynamic role of megaliths in *Munda* society by examining how these ancient structures are integrated into rituals, commemorate ancestral presence, and maintain a deep connection to the land.

Across the globe, megalithic monuments, ancient stone structures found across continents, showcase the architectural ingenuity and cultural practices of prehistoric societies (Laporte *et al.* 2022). Notable examples include England's Stonehenge, aligned with astronomical events, and Africa's Nabta Playa and Ethiopia's Tiya megaliths (Das 2017). These sites highlight a shared tradition of building monumental stones for socio-religious or astronomical purposes. Archaeologists primarily focus on the construction methods, astronomical alignments, and symbolic meanings attached to these megalithic structures, often regarding them as relics of a civilization that no longer exists (Krzemińska *et al.* 2018).

However, the role of megaliths in some indigenous communities, particularly in South Asia, challenges this narrative. In many parts of India, especially in Jharkhand, megaliths are far from being dead stones of the past (Shekhar 2021). Among the *Mundas*, these ancient stones are still imbued with life, playing an essential role in rituals, social organization, and territorial demarcation (Standing 1976). They serve as

markers of cultural continuity, linking the past with the present, and offering insights into how indigenous peoples interpret their world through physical and spiritual landscapes (Smith *et al*. 2000; Sissons 2005).

For the *Mundas*, these megaliths have been sacred (Devi and Bhoi 2017; Shekhar and Joglekar 2017). They were seen as an enduring part of the landscape, often connected to the broader spiritual geography of the area (Das 2017). The stones, whether large standing ones or flat slabs, have been symbols of territorial ownership and ancestral protection (Verardo 2003). This connection to the land has been vital in understanding the importance of megaliths in *Munda* society. These stones have been physical representations of the indigenous' claim to the land, rooted in their belief that the spirits of their ancestors continue to inhabit the earth (Shekhar 2021). Such spiritual connection reinforces the *Mundas*' attachment to their land and provided a cultural counter-narrative to the modernization and industrialization pressures encroaching on indigenous territories.

One of the most distinctive features of the *Munda* megalithic tradition has been its integration into daily life and rituals. Unlike other parts of the world where megaliths were regarded as static, archaeological objects, for the *Mundas*, they still remain central to their religious and communal practices (Shekhar 2021; Das 2017). Rituals involving the megaliths have been performed throughout the year, particularly during significant life events such as births, marriages, and deaths (Shekhar 2020). These rituals have been vital for maintaining the indigenous' connection to the land and the spirits that protect it (Standing 1976; Rahmann 1959). The stones serve as conduits between the living and the dead, ensuring that the spirits of the ancestors are honoured and that their protection over the community and its land continues (Srivastava 2007; Shekhar *et al.* 2014).

By emphasizing the spiritual and cultural significance of these stones, the *Mundas* have been able to challenge external forces seeking to encroach on their land (Arora 2006). Hence, the megaliths serve as focal points in this spiritual landscape, acting as markers of ancestral presence and spiritual power (Mullick 2011). This connection to the land has been central to the *Munda* identity, and the stones play a crucial role in maintaining this bond (Saha 2024). This relationship between the stones and the environment reflects a broader indigenous

worldview in which the land, the people, and the spirits were and are still interconnected.

Hence, the study focused on the *Munda* megalithic tradition represents a unique intersection of material culture, spirituality, and social identity. Unlike megalithic structures in other parts of the world that have become relics of the past, for the *Mundas*, these stones remain a living tradition. Therefore, the focal theme of the study revolves around how living traditions serve as vital components of rituals, commemoration, and territorial demarcation, reinforcing the community's connection to their ancestors and the land. Understanding the dynamic role of megaliths in *Munda* society not only enriches our understanding of indigenous cultural practices but also offers valuable lessons on the importance of preserving and protecting indigenous heritage in a rapidly changing world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent archaeological research has significantly enhanced our understanding of megalithic monuments. Parker (2012) provides a thorough analysis of Stonehenge, integrating data from recent excavations to explore its social and ceremonial significance. Cummings (2019) analyzes the placement of megalithic structures within landscapes, emphasizing the strong relationship between geography and ritual in prehistoric Europe. Similarly, Chambon *et al.* (2018) discuss the social organization of megalithic societies in Western Europe, emphasizing communal efforts in monument construction. Hardenberg (2016), focusing on Indian megaliths, examines their cultural and spiritual continuity among tribal communities. The article by Avikunthak (2022) explores recent excavations in South India and reveals new insights into the socio-political contexts of these monuments.

Megalithic sites are scattered across the Indian subcontinent, with notable concentrations in the southern and central regions. Thapar (1975–76) and Krishnaswami (1949) have extensively studied the distribution and typology of megaliths, identifying common features such as dolmens, menhirs, stone circles, and cairns. These structures, typically associated with burial and ancestral worship, date back to the Neolithic and early Iron Age periods, with most megalithic cultures flourishing between 2000 BCE and 500 CE (Thapar 1976). However, unlike in many other parts of the world where megalithic traditions have faded into history, some indigenous communities in India con-

tinue to maintain living megalithic traditions which is persistent and evident among the tribes of central India, including the *Mundas* of Jharkhand (Shekhar 2021).

Evolutionary Trajectory of *Munda* Megalithic Structures: Tracing the Importance from the Past to the Present

Megalithic structures among the *Mundas* in Jharkhand have evolved from their ancient origins to present-day significance, adapting to changing contexts while maintaining their spiritual and social cohesion. Prehistoric megaliths were integral to *Munda* society, serving ritualistic and commemorative purposes. Constructed during the Neolithic or Chalcolithic periods, these stones marked burial sites, territorial boundaries, and sacred spaces (Thapar 1976). Megaliths were believed to house ancestral spirits, ensuring protection and continuity between the living and the dead. Often aligned with natural or celestial landmarks, these structures symbolized the relationship between the human world and the cosmos (Krishnaswami 1949).

In the medieval period, the *Mundas* adapted their megalithic traditions to changing social, political, and economic contexts. The stones continued to symbolize ancestral presence, but also became crucial in asserting territorial rights against external encroachments, particularly during the rise of feudalism and the arrival of non-indigenous rulers (Shekhar 2021). During the colonial period, *Munda* megalithic traditions faced challenges from British authorities, who viewed them as obstacles to modern legal and economic systems. In response, the *Mundas* used these traditions to resist colonial policies, with megaliths becoming symbols of indigenous identity and resistance, notably during the *Munda* rebellion led by Birsa Munda (*Ibid*.).

In the post-colonial period, megaliths have continued to evolve, playing a role in contemporary political and cultural struggles, such as land rights, conservation, and debates about indigenous heritage. They served as reminders of historical connections with the land and resistance to industrialization and environmental degradation (Das 2018). In the modern era, the *Munda* megalithic tradition faces challenges from modernization, urbanization, and industrial expansion. Despite these pressures, the tradition continues to evolve with megaliths becoming symbols of cultural revival and indigenous pride. Indigenous activists, scholars, and community leaders work to preserve

and protect these sites in Jharkhand, advocating against industrial encroachment and illegal mining.

Highlighting the theories of origin, the beginning of these massive stone structures was linked to changes in society during the Neolithic period, which included developments in farming and technology. The shift towards agriculture around 9000 BCE resulted in communities becoming more settled, increasing demand for cultural or religious symbols like megaliths, which served as markers of territory, burial places, or locations for social events (Renfrew 1973). Improved technology, such as the development of polished stone tools, allowed for large-scale construction (Renfrew and Bahn 1991). In economic terms, having access to extra food allowed people to focus on specific jobs, including the construction of these monuments, which contributed to social stratification (Pearson 2012). Politically, these structures represented a shared sense of identity and power, strengthening community ties and early forms of religious leadership (Renfrew 2004).

Focusing on theories on the cultural and linguistic affiliations of ancient megalith scholars suggests they shared cultural traits or linguistic origins. Many associate megaliths with Neolithic and Chalcolithic agricultural societies, such as the Cardial Ware and Bell Beaker cultures, which spread throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa and used sophisticated stone tools (Kipfer 2021). The Proto-Indo-European hypothesis links megalithic traditions to early Indo-European-speaking groups, although evidence is mixed, as some regions retain non-Indo-European languages. In South Asia, Austro-Asiatic speaking groups like the Munda have deep-rooted megalithic practices, suggesting connection between language and cultural rituals and highlighting both diffusion and adoption across linguistic borders.

The *Mundas* and Their Megalithic Traditions

The *Mundas* are part of the larger Austroasiatic language family (Roy 1912). They have a long-standing tradition of erecting megaliths, known locally as *Sasandiri* (stones of the ancestors). Roy's work mentioned that these megaliths serve as commemorative markers for the deceased, with each stone symbolizing the continued presence and influence of an ancestor. The erection of megaliths is a communal event, involving elaborate rituals, feasting, and offerings to the ancestors. The megaliths are often arranged in specific formations, such as circles or rows, and are located near burial sites. Roy's early work provided valuable insights into the spiritual and social significance of

these stones, which are viewed as sacred objects imbued with the spirits of the deceased.

Recent studies have expanded on Roy's foundational work by exploring the deeper cultural and cosmological meanings of megaliths in *Munda* society (Shekhar 2021). In a similar vein, Singh (2016) contended that megaliths are not only spiritual markers, but also symbols of *Munda* identity. Singh's research emphasized the role of megaliths in reinforcing kinship ties and social cohesion. The communal nature of megalithic rituals strengthens the bonds between family members, clans, and the larger community, and they are seen as living entities embodying the history and memory of the community. Singh's work provides a nuanced understanding of how megaliths function as both cultural artifacts and symbols of identity in *Munda* society.

Oral Traditions and the Role of Megaliths

One of the most important aspects of the megalithic tradition in *Munda* society is its connection to oral traditions. The stories, songs, and folktales that surround the megaliths serve as repositories of ancestral knowledge and cultural memory. Both Roy (1912) and Imam (2014) document the rich oral narratives that accompany the megalithic sites, noting that these stories often revolve around themes of bravery, leadership, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. These narratives are passed down through generations, ensuring that the cultural significance of the megaliths remains alive even as physical stones endure.

The role of oral traditions in preserving the megalithic heritage of the *Mundas* is also explored by anthropologists such as Singh (1985), who argues that oral narratives play a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of cultural practices in indigenous societies. Singh notes that stories associated with megaliths are not static but evolve over time, to incorporate contemporary events and issues. For example, some *Munda* oral narratives have incorporated references to land alienation and displacement due to industrialization and development projects, focusing the resilience of indigenous culture in the face of external pressures. This dynamic aspect of oral tradition ensures that the megalithic heritage remains relevant to the *Mundas* in the present day.

Contemporary Challenges to the Megalithic Tradition

While the megalithic tradition of the *Mundas* has persisted for centuries, it faces significant challenges in the contemporary era. The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization in Jharkhand has resulted in

the destruction of many megalithic sites, particularly due to mining activities and infrastructure development. As Pathy (1999) notes, the displacement of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands has not only disrupted their social and economic lives but also severed their spiritual connection to the land and the megaliths that embody their history. The loss of these sacred sites threatens the survival of the megalithic tradition and cultural identity of the *Mundas*.

In addition to the physical destruction of megalithic sites, the younger generation of the *Munda* community is increasingly disconnected from their traditional practices and knowledge systems. Bhengra *et al.* (1998) argues that modern education and urbanization have led to a gradual erosion of traditional practices, as younger *Munda* individuals are more exposed to mainstream Indian culture and less involved in the rituals associated with megalithic sites. This cultural disconnection poses a significant threat to the transmission of the megalithic tradition, as the oral narratives and rituals that sustain it are in danger of being lost. However, both the Munda community and external stakeholders are making efforts to preserve and revitalize the megalithic tradition. The activists, anthropologists, and scholars have been documenting and studying megalithic sites, recording oral histories, and conducting ethnographic research to ensure that the tradition is preserved for future generations.

Megaliths as Symbols of Resistance and Identity

In contemporary Jharkhand, megaliths have taken on new meanings in the context of indigenous struggles for land rights, cultural preservation and political autonomy. As Singh (2016) notes, the megaliths have become symbols of resistance for the *Mundas*, who invoke their cultural heritage in their fight against land alienation and displacement. Stones, once primarily viewed as spiritual markers, are now also seen as political symbols, representing the *Mundas*' historical claims to the land and their right to self-determination.

By invoking the megaliths in political and legal discourses, the *Mundas* are asserting their right to control their ancestral lands and protect their cultural heritage from the forces of industrialization and development. This politicization of the megalithic tradition is not unique to the *Mundas* but is part of a broader trend among indigenous communities around the world. Alfred (2009) and Coulthard (2014) have explored how indigenous peoples use their cultural traditions as tools of resistance against colonialism and dispossession. In the case of the *Mundas*, the megaliths have become both symbols of resistance

and markers of identity, embodying their struggle for cultural survival and self-determination.

The literature on the megalithic tradition of the *Mundas* of Jharkhand mentioned the complex interplay between archaeology, culture, spirituality, and identity. Roy (1912), Imam (2014), and Pathy (1999) have documented the historical and cultural significance of these stones, emphasizing their role as both spiritual markers and symbols of identity. However, the megalithic tradition faces significant challenges in the contemporary era, as industrialization, urbanization, and cultural disconnection threaten the survival of these sacred sites. Despite these challenges, the megaliths have taken on new meanings in the context of indigenous struggles for land rights and cultural preservation, becoming symbols of resistance for the *Mundas*. The continued efforts to protect and revitalize the megalithic tradition offer hope for the preservation of this unique cultural heritage for future generations.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive research on megalithic structures in India, significant gaps remain in understanding the cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions of megaliths among the *Mundas* of Jharkhand. One primary gap is the lack of comprehensive ethnographic data on contemporary practices, with most studies focusing on historical significance and neglecting present-day rituals and beliefs. Another gap pertains to the intersection of *Munda* megalithic traditions with modernity and globalization, including the impact of urbanization, industrialization, and mainstream culture on the preservation of these traditions. The role of younger generations in these traditions, influenced by technology and globalized cultures, is also largely unexplored. Additionally, the gendered dimensions of the *Munda* megalithic tradition, in particular the involvement of women in rituals and the transmission of oral traditions, are less well understood. Finally, there is a need for research on policy and preservation strategies for megalithic sites in Jharkhand.

Although there has been advocacy for protecting indigenous cultural heritage, including megalithic sites, the effectiveness of these efforts remains under-researched such as how are current governmental and non-governmental initiatives addressing the threats to megalithic sites? What role can indigenous communities themselves play in the preservation of these sites, and how can they be empowered to safeguard their cultural heritage? These questions remain largely un-

explored in the existing literature. Accordingly, three primary objectives have been formulated:

1. To document the contemporary practices and beliefs surrounding megalithic stones among the *Mundas*.

2. To examine how modern developments, such as industrialization, land alienation, and cultural shifts, are impacting the preservation of megalithic traditions.

3. To explore the intersection of gender, social identity, and the megalithic tradition, particularly focusing on the role of women in the rituals and oral transmission of knowledge related to megaliths.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research methodology is based on a qualitative framework with an emphasis on ethnographic and participatory research methods. The qualitative approach was appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the meanings and significance attributed to megaliths by the *Mundas*. It also permits the exploration of intangible aspects such as oral traditions, rituals, and the spiritual connection between the community and the stones.

Site Selection

The research focused on multiple *Munda* villages in capital city of Jharkhand that is Ranchi, where megalithic traditions are still practiced. The selection of diverse sites is intended to capture variations in the megalithic practices across different *Munda* communities and to understand how regional factors influence the tradition.

Participant Selection

The *Munda* people aged between 18–70 years and residing in rural areas of Ranchi were the research participants in this study. This age range was chosen to capture a broad range of experiences and knowledge about culture, beliefs, traditions, oral history, and their participation and engagement with living traditions. Initially, participants were approached through the contact of peers and colleagues of researchers working in tribal areas, and then the snowball method was employed to identify potential participants. For this study, 15 participants (see Table 1 for participants' background information) shared their views on the living tradition of megaliths. All of the participants belonged to the *Munda* community.

Table 1

Background of Participants

Sl. No	Research Participant (Pseudonym Names)	Age	Gender	Designation	Place (Different blocks of Ranchi)
1	Sawna Pahan	37	Man	Pahan (Religious Head of community)	Shembo Kudlong (Ratu)
2	Nishita Kumari	27	Woman	Normal Person	Janum (Namkum)
3	Janamlal Munda	39	Man	Village Head	Childag Soso (Namkum)
4	Mahendra Pahan	45	Man	Pahan	Kucchu (Ormanjhi)
5	Chumna Pahan	23	Man	Normal Person	Humbai (Purbi Sarnatoli) (Ormanjhi)
6	Manmohan Pahan	38	Man	Village Pahan (Religious Head of five villages)	Humbai (Ormanjhi)
7	Shanti Kispotta	45	Woman	Normal Person	Sundil (Kanke)
8	Bablu Munda	34	Man	Normal Person	Childag Soso (Namkum)
9	Pradeep Pahan	36	Man	Pahan	Hesel 1,2,3 (Namkum)
10	Tuiya Pahan	47	Man	Pahan	Nagri Tikratoli (Nagri)
11	Jaynath Munda	34	Man	Normal Person	Hatma (Mander)
12	Sundri Devi	67	Woman	Village Head's Mother	Hatma (Mandar)
13	Chotu Munda	34	Man	Normal Person	Khijurtoli (Mandar)
14	Sahendra	25	Man	Old Pahan	Khadra/Nayatoli (Burmu)
15	Magho Pahan	46	Man	Pahan	Maltuti (Burmu)

Source: compiled from fieldwork.

Data Collection

Ethnographic fieldwork was the core component of this research, involving immersive observation and participation in the daily lives and cultural practices of the *Mundas*. The fieldwork included participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and collection of oral narratives. Participatory methods, such as participatory action research (PAR), were also incorporated to ensure collaboration with

the *Munda* community, guiding the research with local voices and providing practical benefits. Focus groups and interviews with women were conducted to explore their participation in rituals, oral traditions, and the transmission of cultural knowledge, offering a holistic understanding of social dimensions of the megalithic practices.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was primarily qualitative, employing thematic and narrative analysis to interpret fieldwork data. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns or themes regarding the cultural and spiritual significance of the megaliths, their role in social identity, and the impact of modernity on these traditions. It involved systematic coding of interview transcripts, field notes, and oral narratives to reveal underlying meanings and connections. Narrative analysis focused on understanding how stories are constructed and what they reveal about the community's worldview and values.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research among indigenous communities requires careful attention to ethical principles, including respect, consent, and reciprocity. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their role, and their rights, with verbal consent obtained to ensure they could withdraw at any time. Identities were protected through pseudonyms and confidentiality, and sensitive cultural information was shared only with express permission. The researchers approached fieldwork with cultural sensitivity, consulting community leaders and elders to respect local customs and norms.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study on the living megalithic tradition of the *Mundas* revealed a multifaceted relationship between the community, their ancestral landscape, and the ancient stones they continue to revere. It has been organised into several key themes: the cultural significance of megaliths, the ritualistic practices associated with them, their role in community identity and social cohesion, the gendered dimensions of the tradition, and the impact of modern challenges such as land alienation, industrialization, and cultural erosion, as illustrated below.

Cultural Significance of Megaliths

Megaliths, historically been recognized as a key feature of the *Mundas'* cultural heritage. The research findings confirmed that the stones

were not merely relics of the past but continue to play an active role in the spiritual and cultural life of the *Munda* community. The stones, locally known as *sasan* or *bir* stones, serve as sacred markers that are tied to ancestral spirits and the memory of deceased family members (Imam 2014). Regarding this, Sundri Devi (67 years, the village head's mother) illustrates:

> …these megaliths are often associated with burial practices, with stones being erected to commemorate the dead. However, their significance extends beyond funerary functions. The stones are viewed as a tangible link between the physical world and the spiritual realm, embodying the presence of ancestors who are believed to watch over the living. As such, they are integral to our community's cosmology, representing a connection to the land and a deep sense of continuity with the past…

Such oral histories, collected during fieldwork, emphasize the role of these megaliths in preserving the collective memory of the *Mundas*. In the viewpoint of respondents, the ancient stones function as repositories of communal knowledge, ensuring that future generations remain connected to their heritage and the sacredness of the land. Thus, the megaliths are both spiritual and historical artifacts, preserving the identity and resilience of the *Mundas*.

Ritualistic Practices Associated with Megaliths

One of the most significant findings was the active ritualistic use of megaliths in *Munda* community. Contrary to the view that megaliths were relics of an ancient civilization, the *Mundas* continue to perform rituals around these stones, especially during funerary and commemorative ceremonies. These rituals, known as *Munda Sasan Puja* or *Munda Jatra*, involve the entire community and are conducted to honour the spirits of ancestors, ensure their protection, and seek their blessings for the wellbeing of the living, also documented by Imam (2014) and Manmohan Pahan (38 years, Village Pahan) described it as

> The rituals are typically led by village elders or Pahan, who possess specialized knowledge of the spiritual significance of the stones and the appropriate methods of veneration. The ceremonies involve the offering of food, drink, and sacrificial animals, alongside prayers and chants directed at the ancestors. These practices underscore the role of megaliths as conduits between the living and the dead, maintaining the community's spiritual balance and harmony.

Such fieldwork observations highlight that these rituals were collective in nature, reinforcing social bonds within the community. The participation of all village members, regardless of gender or age, in these ceremonies fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility for the care of ancestral spirits. The ritualistic use of the stones also illustrates the enduring nature of *Munda* spiritual traditions, despite the pressures of modernization and cultural assimilation (Pathy 1999).

Role of Megaliths in Community Identity and Social Cohesion

During fieldwork it was observed that megaliths play a crucial role in shaping the social identity and cohesion of the *Mundas*. The erection and maintenance of these stones were not individual acts but community-based efforts, reflecting the collective nature of *Munda* community. The stones symbolize the collective memory of the village, linking the present generation to their ancestors and reinforcing the community's connection to the land. Explaining about it, Jaynath Munda (34 years, normal person) highlighted,

> The erection of new megaliths is typically performed during significant communal events, such as after a major harvest or the birth of a prominent child. These events are marked by celebrations that involve feasting, music, and dance, further strengthening the community's social fabric. The stones, therefore, serve as focal points for social gathering, reinforcing the collective identity of the Mundas as custodians of their ancestral heritage.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the megaliths have been used as markers of territorial boundaries and clan affiliations within the *Munda* community. These stones delineate the sacred spaces that are regarded as belonging to specific families or clans, and they are often used in resolving land disputes or demarcating inheritance rights. In this sense, the megaliths function not only as spiritual symbols but as social and legal instruments that help to maintain order within the community (Singh 1985).

Gendered Dimensions of the Megalithic Tradition

A key finding of this research is the recognition of the gendered dimensions of the megalithic tradition. While the physical erection of the stones is typically seen as a male-dominated activity, the role of women in the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of the tradition is significant. Interviews with women in the *Munda* community reveal that they are of-

ten the custodians of oral traditions associated with the megaliths, passing down stories, myths, and rituals from one generation to the next, as Sundri Devi (67 years, Village head's mother) states,

> Women are also actively involved in the rituals performed at megalithic sites, particularly in preparing food offerings and participating in prayers.

The involvement of women in the megalithic tradition challenges the perception that such practices are exclusively male-dominated and underscores the importance of incorporating a gendered analysis into the study of indigenous cultural practices.

Impact of Modern Challenges on the Megalithic Tradition

The findings also shed light on the challenges facing the *Munda* megalithic tradition in the context of modernization, industrialization, and cultural assimilation. Land alienation due to industrial projects, such as mining and infrastructure development, has resulted in the displacement of many *Munda* communities, severing their connection to the ancestral lands where megaliths are located. This displacement has not only disrupted the practice of erecting new megaliths but has also led to the neglect or destruction of existing stones (Pathy 1999). Sawna Pahan (34 years, Pahan) elaborates,

> …the encroachment of mainstream cultural practices and the influence of modern education have contributed to the erosion of traditional beliefs surrounding megaliths, particularly among younger generations. Further, a growing disinterest in the rituals and spiritual significance of the stones, with many perceiving them as outdated or irrelevant in the modern world.

The findings suggest that the pressures of urbanization and economic development are contributing to the gradual fading of the megalithic tradition, especially as younger generations prioritize integration into mainstream society over the preservation of indigenous practices. However, the findings also highlight the resilience of the *Mundas* in the face of these challenges. Efforts to revitalize the megalithic tradition, led by community elders and cultural advocates, are underway in several villages. These efforts include the establishment of cultural heritage programs, the documentation of oral histories, and the promotion of traditional rituals as part of cultural tourism initiatives. Such initiatives represent a form of indigenous resistance to cultural ero-

sion, as the *Mundas* assert their identity and reclaim their ancestral heritage in the face of external pressures (Coulthard 2014).

Megaliths as Symbols of Indigenous Resistance

One of the most compelling findings of this research was the evolving role of megaliths as symbols of indigenous resistance. In the context of struggles over land rights and cultural preservation, the megaliths have taken on new meanings for the *Mundas*. They were not only seen as sacred markers of ancestral presence but also as symbols of resistance against the forces of dispossession and cultural assimilation (Alfred 2009).

> …the megaliths have become rallying points for land rights movements, with Munda activists invoking the stones as evidence of their historical claim to the land. The stones, which mark the graves of ancestors and delineate traditional territories, are used to assert indigenous sovereignty and challenge the legitimacy of land acquisitions by industrial and governmental authorities. (Pradeep Pahan, 36 years)

In this context, the megaliths have become powerful symbols of the *Mundas'* ongoing struggle to protect their land, culture, and way of life (Singh 1985). The megalithic tradition, far from being a relic of the past, is actively evolving in response to contemporary challenges. The stones, once primarily spiritual and cultural symbols, have taken on new political significance as the *Mundas* navigate the complexities of modernity and fight to preserve their heritage. Far from being static relics of a bygone era, the megaliths continue to play a vital role in the spiritual, social, and political life of the *Munda* community. While the megalithic tradition remains resilient, it is clear that concerted efforts are needed to ensure its preservation for future generations. These efforts must include the documentation of oral histories, the promotion of cultural heritage initiatives, and the protection of ancestral lands from industrial encroachment.

DISCUSSION

The *Munda* megalithic tradition has been a striking example of how indigenous communities maintain a dynamic relationship with their ancestral past while simultaneously negotiating the pressures of the present. This discussion explores the broader implications of the findings on the *Mundas* megalithic practices, situating them within the contexts of indigenous knowledge systems, spirituality, land rights,

gender, and cultural resilience. By examining these interrelated themes, the discussion reflects on the significance of megaliths as more than just material artifacts but as living symbols that link the *Munda* to their ancestors, land, and identity.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Living Tradition of Megaliths

The *Munda* megalithic tradition has been part of a broader indigenous knowledge system that interweaves spirituality, history, and the environment. Indigenous knowledge systems have often characterized by their holistic approach to understanding the world, where material culture, oral history, and rituals are deeply interconnected (Cajete 2000), evident in the oral histories and rituals surrounding megaliths. These stones act as repositories of communal memory, ensuring that knowledge of family lineages, historical events, and the spiritual significance of the land were preserved across generations (Singh 2016).

By participating in rituals, the *Mundas* reaffirm their connection to their ancestors and the landscape, maintaining a continuous dialogue with the past. However, these knowledge systems are under threat due to the encroachment by modern educational systems, economic pressures, and cultural assimilation. Many younger *Mundas*, especially those exposed to formal education, are increasingly disconnected from the traditional significance of the megaliths (Pathy 1999). This disconnection raises important questions about how indigenous knowledge systems could be preserved in an increasingly globalized world.

One potential solution is the incorporation of traditional knowledge into formal education systems. This could include the teaching of oral histories, the significance of megaliths, and the broader cosmological views of the *Mundas* within local schools. Such initiatives would help ensure that younger generations understand the value of their cultural heritage, even as they navigate towards modern life (Cajete 2000).

Spirituality and the Sacred Landscape

Megaliths hold profound spiritual significance for the *Mundas*. They are not simply stones but have been viewed as living entities that embody the presence of ancestors and the spirits of the land. This belief reflects the broader indigenous cosmology in which humans, nature, and the spiritual world are inextricably linked (Imam 2014). The findings suggested that this spiritual relationship with the land is being

increasingly threatened by industrialization, mining, and land alienation. The loss of ancestral lands due to these factors not only disrupts the *Munda*'s material livelihood but also severs their spiritual connection to the land (Coulthard 2014). As land is commodified and exploited, the sacred spaces where megaliths are located are often destroyed or desecrated.

This erosion of the spiritual landscape has serious implications for the cultural identity of the *Mundas*. Indigenous communities worldwide have long emphasized the importance of land as central to their spirituality and identity (Alfred 2009). For the *Munda*, the megaliths are a symbol of this spiritual bond with the land, and their destruction represents a profound cultural loss. The struggle for land rights, therefore, becomes not just an economic or political issue but a spiritual one. Protecting ancestral lands where megaliths are located is essential for maintaining the spiritual balance of the community. Indigenous land rights movements, such as those led by the *Mundas*, often invoke the sacredness of the land as a key argument in their fight against industrial encroachment (Coulthard 2014).

Land Rights and Megaliths as Symbols of Resistance

The findings discovered that megaliths have taken on new meanings in the context of contemporary struggles over land rights. As symbols of ancestral presence and markers of traditional territories, these stones are now being used as tools for asserting indigenous sovereignty and challenging land alienation. The *Munda* people's efforts to protect their ancestral lands from industrialization and state acquisition are rooted in their spiritual and cultural connection to the land, embodied in the megaliths. The use of megaliths in land rights movements the political significance of indigenous material culture. While megaliths have long served a spiritual function, they are now also symbols of resistance against the forces of dispossession. This reflects a broader trend among indigenous communities worldwide, where cultural heritage is used as a form of political resistance (Alfred 2009).

By invoking the presence of their ancestors and the sacredness of the land, the *Mundas* are able to frame their struggle in terms of both cultural survival and political sovereignty (Coulthard 2014). The megaliths, in this context, are not only material objects but symbols of the *Munda's* enduring connection to their ancestral past and their right to self-determination. The destruction of megalithic sites for mining or development projects is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of indigenous cultural heritage in the face of industrial capitalism (Pathy

1999). The challenge, therefore, lies in finding ways to protect these sites while also addressing the economic needs of the *Mundas*.

Gender and the Megalithic Tradition

One of the key findings of this research has been the gendered dimensions of the megalithic tradition. While the physical erection of megaliths is often associated with male members of the community, women play a crucial role in the spiritual and ritualistic aspects of the tradition (Aswani and Kumar 2018). Women are the custodians of oral histories, the preparers of ritual offerings, and, in some cases, spiritual intermediaries between the living and the ancestors. This finding challenges the common perception of megalithic practices as maledominated and uncovers the importance of incorporating a gendered analysis into the study of indigenous cultural traditions. The involvement of women in the ritual life of the community reflects the broader gendered division of labor in indigenous societies, where spiritual and material responsibilities are often shared between men and women (Pathy 1999).

However, the research also suggests that the role of women in the megalithic tradition is often overlooked or undervalued in scholarly discussions of indigenous material culture. This reflects a broader pattern in anthropological research, where the contributions of women to cultural and spiritual life are frequently marginalized (Aswani and Kumar 2018). By highlighting the role of women in the *Munda* megalithic tradition, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics of indigenous cultural practices. As *Munda* society adapts to modernity, the role of women in maintaining the megalithic tradition may become even more important to preserve the traditional burial rites, particularly as younger generations become disconnected from traditional practices (Coulthard 2014).

Cultural Resilience and the Preservation of the Megalithic Tradition

The findings reveal that this tradition has been increasingly at risk of being lost, particularly as younger generations become disengaged from their cultural heritage. The influence of modern education, urbanization, and economic pressures has led many young *Mundas* to view the megaliths as irrelevant to their lives (Singh 2016). This generational divide raises important questions about the future of the megalithic tradition and the role of cultural heritage in contemporary indigenous communities. Efforts to preserve the megalithic tradition must therefore take into account the changing social and economic

realities of the *Mundas*. Initiatives such as cultural heritage programs, the documentation of oral histories, and the promotion of traditional rituals as part of cultural tourism offer potential pathways for preserving the megalithic tradition for future generations (Cajete 2000). These initiatives must be community-led and designed in a way that empowers the *Mundas* to take ownership of their cultural heritage. The recognition of megalithic sites as cultural heritage under national or international law could provide legal protection against their destruction.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of the *Munda* megalithic tradition is significant for its contributions to indigenous studies, cultural heritage preservation, and social resilience. It enhances our understanding of *Munda* cultural practices and provides insights into indigenous cultural preservation and resistance. The research aids in preserving *Munda* cultural heritage by documenting ongoing rituals and the spiritual significance of megaliths, crucial in a context of modern challenges. Additionally, it explores the gender dimensions within the tradition, challenging gendered assumptions and emphasizing the importance of a gender-sensitive approach to cultural heritage. Overall, the study is significant for its contributions to cultural preservation, understanding of indigenous knowledge systems, analysing cultural resilience and resistance, and recognizing gendered dimensions in cultural practices.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

While providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations. It focuses on a specific region in Ranchi, which may not fully represent the diversity of practices across Jharkhand or among other indigenous groups in India. The reliance on oral histories, while crucial, introduces challenges such as subjectivity and the potential for variation or loss of content due to generational shifts. The dynamic nature of the tradition means it is subject to continuous change influenced by modernization, urbanization, and cultural assimilation, and the study captures it at a specific point in time, which may not reflect ongoing changes or future trends. Ethical considerations also arise when conducting research with indigenous communities. Addressing these limitations through broader geographic research, rigorous documentation methods, longitudinal studies, and ethical considerations could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of indigenous cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

The study on megalithic tradition reveals a complex and vibrant cultural practice that holds profound significance for the *Mundas* of Jharkhand. These ancient stones, integral to the *Munda'*s spiritual and social fabric, function as physical manifestations of ancestral presence and spiritual connection. The tradition maintains cultural continuity, asserts land rights, and navigates the challenges of modernity, reflecting the *Munda'*s resilience and cultural identity. Despite modernization and cultural assimilation, the megalithic tradition persists as a symbol of cultural resilience. The ongoing practice of rituals and efforts to protect these sites illustrate a dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary challenges. The megaliths stand as a testament to the *Munda'*s ability to adapt while preserving core aspects of their cultural identity.

The megalithic tradition also plays a crucial role in the Munda's struggle for land rights and cultural sovereignty, serving as symbols of ancestral territories and spiritual significance. The study underscores how megaliths are powerful tools for asserting indigenous rights and resisting land alienation and industrial encroachment. The study also reveals important insights into the gendered dimensions of the megalithic tradition. While the physical construction of megaliths is often associated with male roles, women play a critical role in the ritualistic and spiritual aspects of the tradition. In conclusion, the *Munda* megalithic tradition offers a rich and multifaceted perspective on indigenous cultural practices, demonstrating the intricate connections between material culture, spirituality, and social identity. By safeguarding these traditions, the *Mundas* not only preserve their heritage but also assert their resilience and adaptability in the face of contemporary challenges. The insights gained from this study contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous cultural preservation and provide valuable lessons for similar efforts globally.

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