

MEGALITHIC TRIBAL CULTURE IN KISHTWAR DISTRICT, JAMMU REGION: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

Kajal Devi * and Tirtharaj Bhoi **

1. Introduction

Megaliths are structures that are made up of huge stone and are presumed to have some superstitious, ritual and religious end meaning¹. They are found in the entire stretch of the country. The term Megalith is derived from a Greek word Megas which means huge or big and Lithos means stone. Thus, megaliths are different types of structures that are made up of large and roughly dressed slabs of stone. Some of them are made up of only a single stone while others have more than one. The construction of these structures reflects the belief system of those people who constructed them.

Objectives and Methodology: The objectives of the study are to examine the rock structures which are similar to megaliths. Further to compare them with the features of the other megalithic sites and thereafter to scrutinize the possibility of megalithic culture in this region. The study has taken in to account the field surveys conducted at the site. The rock structures are observed and investigated thoroughly. The ethnographic data has been collected by taking interviews of the locals which helped in gathering oral history. The analysis of the present traditions has been done through the lens of archaeological practices.

Historiographic analysis:

The writing on the megalithic culture in India was brought in to limelight by James Fergusson² in 1872, which is still considered a landmark in this arena. An inclusive explanation of the stone architecture in India and worldwide was commenced. The study of which was designated as of immense importance to understand the history of architecture in India. Subsequently the questions related to origin, chronology and authorship became the subject matter of research for many scholars. In 1949 V.D Krishnaswami³ has tried to explain the fundamental structures, typological features, and its terminology and attached scientific definitions to it. Afterward, V. Gordon Childe⁴ in 1956 who has tried to define the criteria to classify a stone as megalith. He explained the term to the particular class of monuments, which are presumed to have some superstitious, ritual and religious significance. This

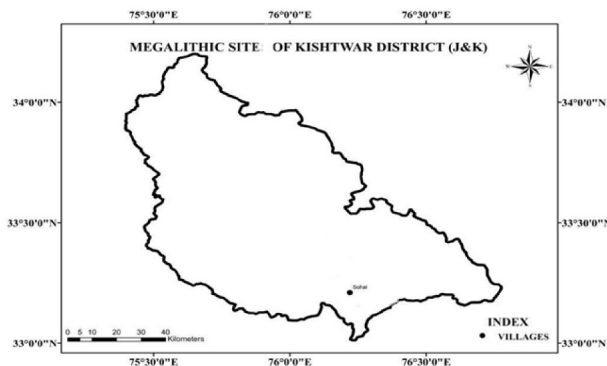
* PhD Research Scholar, (UGC NET- JRF), Department of History, University of Jammu.

** Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Jammu,

culture is prevalent throughout the Indian Subcontinent. It is still a living tradition among some of the tribes in central and north east India. Deccan India is also thriven in this cultural aspect. The traces of this culture are widespread in North India as well. The earliest acknowledgement in this field of megaliths in Jammu and Kashmir was noticed by Hellmut-de-Terra⁵ in 1935. He discovered the unprecedented material culture in Burzahom in Kashmir. But it was only the post-independence phase when extensive excavation was carried out at different places of Jammu and Kashmir, under the supervision of T.N Khazanchi,⁶ A.K Sharma and K.D Banerjee⁷. The extreme north that is the Ladakh region also has the occupancy of this cultural fabric, which was specified by George Roerich in 1930⁸. In the southern part of Jammu and Kashmir lies the Kishtwar region where no comprehensive work regarding this particular topic has been carried out but mentions of these rock structures are evident in some of the micro regional compilations. One of such is the D.C. Sharma's book History and Culture of Kishtwar where he has specifically described the rock structures at Sohal in Kishtwar. There is another half yearly magazine the Heritage Himalayas which has also covered the article, Through the lens of Archaeology and Anthropology: Vestiges of Ignored Sites of Kishtwar in 2021 written by Anil Kumar Bhagat. He has given a detailed explanation of the rock monuments of this village. Therefore, while studying these rock structures in Kishtwar district an integrated approach is being followed by comparing all such similar structures in the entire Jammu and Kashmir.

Geographical Location of Kishtwar:

Kishtwar district is amongst the 20 districts of Jammu and Kashmir union territory located on the southern portion. It is situated 124 km away from Srinagar, the summer capital. The geographical position of Kishtwar is on the bank of river Chenab (Asikni). It was known as Kashtwata in ancient times⁹. The first historical citation of Kishtwar is accommodated in Kalhana's Rajatarangani. It is also known as Land of Kishat Rishi, land of sapphire and land of saffron. The whole region is covered with mountains, hills and forests.



Description of the site:

There are several places in Kishtwar where some kinds of rock structures which appear similar to the megaliths are found. One of them is Sohal .It is a small village situated in tehsil Atholi. 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. (Fig.1.) 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 Bhotnala. It is situated 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.

Fig.1.Sohal (Standing Rock Structures)



Possibility of Megaliths: The possibility of megalithic culture in the region is attested on the bases of the fact that Kishtwar is located just adjacent to the Anantnag district of Srinagar where large number of megaliths is excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India. As culture of any region does not vanish within a specific boundary, it affects the peripheral zones as well, though with certain alteration. Therefore, there is a large prospect that similar kinds of culture might have witnessed here too with meager differences. Secondly

the erection of rock structures for the dead is still carried out in several villages of this region, which is a major characteristic feature of the megalithic tradition. Nevertheless, all such glimpses and possibilities of megalithic culture in the specified region are still a matter of further research but it has at least caught the attention of scholars who are working in this field.

Concluding Remarks:

The imperative rock structures in the region indicated that the megalithic culture was prevalent in the region. Therefore, it establishes its significance in terms of the distributional pattern of the megalithic rock structures throughout India. Nonetheless, the interpretation of these rock structures still needs to be cross checked because of the various local narratives rampant in the region that relates these structures to religious or cult practices. However, these narratives are just based on the oral traditions and do not testify the genesis of these structures. Hence the chronology and the purpose of these structures are still the subject of research in the region.

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Foot Notes

- 1 Childe, V.G. 1948. *Megaliths*. *Ancient India*, vol.4,p.p5.
- 2 Fergusson James. 1872. *Rude Stone Monuments in all countries: their Age and Uses*
- 3 Krishnaswami, V.D. 1949. *Megalithic Types of South India*. *Ancient India*,vol. 5, p.35-45.
- 4 Child, V.G. 1948. *Megaliths*. *Ancient India*, vol.4, p. 5.
- 5 Terra, H.D. 1942. *The Megaliths of Bursahom, Kashmir: A New Prehistoric Civilisation From India*.
- 6 ASI. 1960-72. *Indian Archaeology: a review*.
- 7 ASI. 1981. *Indian Archaeology: a review*.
- 8 Aldenderfer, Mark. 2003. *Domestic rDo rings? A New Class of Standing Stones from the Tibetan Plateau*. *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 28,p.p 3-20
- 9 Shali, S.L. (1993). *Kashmir: History and Archaeology Through the Ages*. Indus Publishing Company.