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An observation on tribal burial rituals and megalithic burials in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

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Abstract

Megalithic culture is notable for its burial construction. Belief system of Megalithic community is always represented with certain customary practices. Present tribal communities in Andhra and Telangana also had their own burial rituals with specific practices. Beliefs in life after death, fear of dead, evil spirit are the some of the beliefs followed by the megalithic people and some of the tribes in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Keywords: Index terms, burial construction- beliefs- ritual practices- Hoyo Racham ceremony-Jagen festival

I. Introduction

The cultural practices of different communities in India could be understood in the light of fairs, festivals, customs, ceremonies, and lifetime celebrations. Most of the communities in India attribute their cultural practices to a specific extra natural power. In the life of every individual birth and death are two unavoidable ceremonies as per the customs of majority communities in India. Historically Megalithic culture is remembered for its wide range of burial constructions and practices. Megalithic culture in the world scenario recognized with burial practices, though there are certain peculiar characters which are pertain to a specific region. As part of present research the burial rituals of present tribal communities in Andhra and Telangana was analyzed and made an attempt to correlate the burial practices and rituals of present tribes with Megalithic burial practices.

II. Some of the funerary rituals of tribes in Andhra and Telangana

Majority of the tribal communities in Andhra and Telangana practice various funerary rituals. Every tribal society has a long and storied history of funeral rites, but similar ceremonies are also practiced by members of other social groups and religious denominations. During the course of present researcher studies, the researcher came across a number of *Smasanas* or *Masan*, or cremation sites, in various communities. "These ceremonies are often carried out by the dead man's son and vary widely depending on the tribe to which they belong." The ossuary is where the tribes keep their dead. Some wealthy tribal families cremate their dead, although their reasons, rituals, and perspectives vary widely.

The *Oraons* buried the corpse face up with the head pointing north. There are many stages of purification as part of death. The first stage of purification occurs on the fifth day of the death and the last stage is noticed after a few months in certain tribes. A libation is prepared by the tribal priest for the soul of the deceased. For final disposition, the *Bhuiyan* practice both cremation and burial. Bodies of pregnant women and those who have died from communicable diseases like cholera, smallpox, snakebites, etc. are often buried together. After the corpse is buried or cremated, the *Kisans* create a little effigy of the departed to worship. The purifying ritual concludes when the effigy is thrown into a river on the next full moon day of *Margasira* (November-December). The *Khari* tribe has a strong tradition of burial, although they prefer to cremate those who have achieved great status in society. The graveyard has a hole where the body is buried. The body is placed in the grave beside an implement, rice, oil, and money. As a general rule, a 12-day period of mourning is followed.

These twelve days were considered as an inauspicious days for them. On the last day, family and friends are invited to a feast to celebrate the end of death pollution.

Across the Chotanagpur Plateau, the 10 different forms of burial rituals practiced by the Tribes have slight geographical variances. When a member of the Tribe passes away, his loved ones notify his extended family and the *Dewon* (the chief of the village). A clean cloth, or occasionally a brand-new one, is used to drape over the dead person's corpse. After this turmeric and oil are applied to the body. The dead may have coins placed in their mouths on rare occasions. The corpse is transported to the crematorium on a bamboo mat that has been prepared as a coffin or charpoy by family members. When everyone in the family has gathered, the men of the village and the family lift the corpse onto their shoulders and carry it to the crematorium. Mathas is typically located one to two Kilo Meters from their respective villages. Both sexes are influenced by physical appearance. In addition, the males in the group toss rice over it. The oldest son of the dead travels to the burial cemetery with the deceased's possessions, including the tangia or iron axe, bamboo stick, arrow, bow, and the like, under the supervision of the local priest (*dewon*). After the grave site has been chosen by the local priest, it is filled with various items that belonged to the dead. In other cases, a pile of wood is stacked in order to burn the corpse and then gather the bones for use in ceremonies.

III. Hoyo Racham ceremony

Hoyo Racham ceremony is another practice identified in the tribes of Andhra and Telangana. People from the same lineage and tribal group, both from inside the same village and from neighboring villages, are asked to participate in this event, which takes place on the tenth day and is also known as *Dasa*. Depending on the deceased's social standing, some or all families in the community may choose to perform the ritual of sacrificing two black chickens to the clan god and the village deity, respectively. Before everyone in the community drinks the country liquor, or Kusna, they present it to the local god to thank them for allowing permission to have the Hoyo Racham event. According to their beliefs, constructing a memorial pillar or placing a stone slab atop the cairn is impossible without first completing these procedures. There are numerous additional aspects of the secondary funeral system that are thoroughly discussed by the community elders at the *Hoyo Racham ritual*. Rituals play a significant role in this context because they provide an opportunity for the community's elders to come together and reflect on the hardships faced by the deceased's family, particularly in terms of finances. The *dewon*, or tribal priest, is a very important figure since he is responsible for all aspects of the funeral ceremonies and serves as an intermediary between the Tribe and their god.

IV. Jagen Ceremony

Jagen festival is one of the customary practices identified in the tribes of Oraons and some other tribes in Andhra and Telangana. *Jagen* ceremony is a cleansing custom to purify the community from the death of the person in the community. As part of this before the day when a memorial pillar is built in the deceased's honour, the Tribes conduct a

rite called *Jagen* to cleanse the community. Before the memorial pillar is set in place, all members of the deceased's family and extended family are required to attend and cleanse themselves. The rite is carried out with the blessing of the local chief. The failure to observe this celebration is said to invite trouble onto one's household from the wicked spirits that inhabit the Tribe. Members of the deceased's relatives who choose not to take part are barred from entering into marriage within their community. Everyone in the hamlet enthusiastically takes part in and backs this ritual. Everything is overseen by the *dewon* or tribal priest. First, he often gathers the staff together to distribute responsibilities. When a group of people, often the elderly, participates by cooking a meal, another group of people, typically the younger generation, ventures into the forest in search of a suitable rock to raise as a memorial pillar in honour of the departed.

After the memorial pillar has been selected, the tribe priest will offer a sacrifice to the forest god in honour of the dead. When the tribe priest has to carve a special stone, he traditionally goes to the elders for their blessing before heading out to one of the hill quarry locations. The memorial pillar is sometimes represents the status of the dead in the community. Mendaly (2015) writes that the size of the memorial pillar might be indicative of the deceased's sex, age, and socioeconomic standing. Many of these ceremonies and rites take more than a day to complete because of the time required to set up large stones as opposed to smaller ones. Because the whole process might take two or three days, it's important to have enough money to feed and house everyone engaged in hewing the rock. Large memorial pillars often depict the departed person's position in life. The memorial pillar usually decorated with various flowers and other leaves in the area.

V. Burial Ceremony of Chenchus

According to Chenchu community people, after the death of a person the soul will leaves to the body and reaches the god. They bath the dead body and decorate the corpse with lime powder and Vermillion on the chest, forehead and middle of the legs, hands and palms. The hair of the corpse would be combed neatly. The dead body would be covered with white cloth. The dead body would be taken to the cremation ground on bier which is made with long bamboo pole. Before reaching the burial the dead body would be kept on the ground for some time, this tradition was called as *Dimpudu Kallam*. As part of this ceremony the cloth over the face of the dead body would be removed and everyone will see the face of the deceased for one more time.

After reaching the burial ground the paternal uncle make first stroke after that the members of the tribe will dig the pit. The paternal uncle removes the red thread waist band. After this the cloths of the dead body would be removed. The dead body used to be buried in naked. The Chenchu tribes believe that the human being borns naked hence he has to be buried naked. Dead body would be kept in pit by keeping the face towards North. The dead body would be covered with bier cloth. Generally all the belongings of dead person would be kept inside the burial. The paternal uncle will throw the earth first into pit and later the people of tribe will fill the pit.



Fig 1: Ceremonial dance while moving the dead body to burial ground in Chenchus (Courtesy: Andhra Online.in)

After bury the dead body all the members who attend the bury process will leave the place by not looking back. They wash their hands, face, and legs and would consume liquor. Vermillion mark would be applied to everybody who participated in the burial process. Paternal uncle enters the house first and light the lamp at the place where the person

was dead. The people who participated in the burial process will reach the lamp with folded hands. On that day food would not be prepared in the house of deceased. As part of tradition no hearth is lit on the house of the dead on that day. The widow of dead person would be outside of the house.



Fig 2: Customary practices of Chenchus

On the second day a fowl would be killed on the place where the person died and food would be cooked to serve the people. First the food is served to the soul of the died and served to the all members of tribe. They also served liquor. Chenchus follow ten days period as mourning period. Purification is also vital in Chenchu community. Purification ceremonies would be conducted two times within the 10 days of death occurred. The purification activity would be done on the 3rd day and 10th day after death. All the kit and kin would be attended to the purification ceremony.

VI. Grave goods

Archaeologists use the phrase grave goods to refer to anything other than human bones that is discovered in a grave. This includes things like clothing remnants, trinkets left behind by the deceased and even sacrificial offerings

(Harke 2014). European archaeologists began studying grave goods for the first time in the 18th and 19th centuries. As archaeology matured as a field of study in the late 19th century, burial goods became an increasingly valuable resource for piecing together a chronology for a previously incomprehensible period of history (Graslund 1987; Janssen 1975). They provide light on the social stratifications among different groups of people and the racial relationships between them (Childe 1948, 4–13) ^[2], (Reinecke 1925; Veeck 1926).

But in Tribal groups, grave goods are put during burial rituals or cremation rites because they include items to which the dead was particularly connected in life or which would be necessary for his continued comfort and joy in the hereafter. They may include rice and rice beer in addition to the usual fare of bow, arrow, axe, spade, and chisel. The grave goods of a person from the higher classes often

consist of highly expensive items (ornaments made of precious and semiprecious stones, silver, and occasionally gold), reflecting the community's established social order. For the ceremony of the dead person all the relatives and well-wishers would be participated.

VII. Conclusion

Various Megalithic burial excavations in India reveals that majority of them are associated with death. In majority Megalithic burials the grave goods says that the people of Megalithic culture had belief life after death. Stuart Piggot (1959) ^[11] credited that Megalithic burial builders are the *Missionaries* of Megalithic religion to various generations. Megalithic burials are demarcated with various styles of burial construction. The megalithic excavational reports reveal that majority of the Megalithic burials are secondary burials. In many occasions the megalithic burial material projects that they had belief in soul or respect towards dead or ancestral worship. It was identified in many Megalithic sites. A skeleton identified in sitting posture with cross legged visible in *Padmasana posture* has been reported from Kodumanal (Tripathy and Rajan 2015: 545) ^[15]. One of the airn circle at Yeleswaram contains two skeletons which are placed one over the other (IAR 1962-63:2). At Perumbair one complete skeleton in seated posture is identified, and the hands of the skeleton are placed on the knee (Rea 1915; Darsana 2014: 66).

In the Megalithic burial ceremonies dead body is treated with many special rituals and customs. Trepanning, cut marks and also applying of red ochre might be part of death rituals. In many megalithic burial excavations it was found that lower parts of the dead were missing. Megalithic burial excavations at Satanikota (IAR 1979-80:3-6) ^[3], Ramapuram (IAR 1980-81: 7), Kadambapur (IAR 1974-75: 3-5) ^[8] and Mahurjhari (Sawant 2015:233) ^[14]. It assumes that the feet of the dead were deliberately removed. This intentional activity might be done to avoid the ghost or spirit of the deceased from walking back to their residences.

As part of the burial constructions and rituals some of the similarities could be identified between present tribes of Andhra and Telangana with Megalithic culture. In many megalithic sites, the burial floors were very neatly arranged with rubble packing. At some of the megalithic burial sites thick ash bed and lime was used to cover the uneven floors, and over this arranged bed the dead body with funeral offerings was placed. The evidences of ash bed were identified at Hunur, Nagrajunakonda, (IAR 1968-69:21), Ramapuram (IAR 1981-82:6), Chagatur (IAR 1977-78:11), Satanikota (IAR 1979-80:5), Uppalapadu (IAR1978-79:65), and Damnalanga (IAR 2000-01:102). Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra megalithic burials are specially represented with ash bed which is absent in many megalithic sites in India.

Many tribal communities of Andhra and Telangana are practicing special burial ceremonies and rituals. Hoyo Racham ceremony, Jagen ceremony and keeping the various goods and tools in the burials show certain resemblance with the practices of Megalithic people. Preparing the burial, erecting the memorial stones, performing special ceremonies, belief in life after death are following by the tribes of Andhra and Telangana even today. Bhuiyans and Orans burial practices also had certain similarities with megalithic burial beliefs. Though, there are similarities in the burial practices, beliefs, customs of Megalithic people

and present tribes of Andhra and Telangana, it cannot be concluded that there is direct relation and ethno archaeological features in it. It is very early to conclude the direct relation between megalithic people and present tribal communities of Andhra and Telangana. More archaeological excavations, explorations, and analysis is in need to understand the relation between megalithic cultural practices and present tribal communities.

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