**PILLARS OF THE SKY**

In the plains of the Chota Nagpur Plateau in Jharkhand lie scattered ancient megaliths that tell stories of the passage of time.

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Perhaps the most iconic megalithic monument in the world is Britain’s Stonehenge, a circular collection of cubicle-shaped rocks which, even till today, is little understood; the only point of agreement among researchers being that it is a marvel of construction, given the tools and logistics at the time. Meanwhile, lying anonymously, overgrown and unloved, out on the hot plains of the Chota Nagpur Plateau is arguably the world’s largest collection of megaliths spread over 53 known sites, one of which once had an astonishing 7,000 megaliths, reduced to a still astonishing 1,000.

Megaliths continue to be subject to research, but a consensus opinion states that they are ancient tombstones; the deceased are reduced to bones through an unconfirmed process – either by cremation or by being allowed to naturally decompose, the bones are then sometimes placed in an earthen pot, sometimes with crude jewellery, and buried, with a carved stone marker placed on the burial site, some flat, some upright, with no explanation for either. Opinion on dates, for want of cutting-edge research equipment, places them anywhere between 3,000 to over 10,000 years old. Some have indented inscriptions while others are raised; the meaning and significance of both are not yet understood or transcribed.

In Ranchi district’s Chokahatu village, first documented by colonial official Edward Dalton (after whom Dalongan in Bihar is named), stand over a thousand megaliths, many larger than family-sized dining tables. Dalton, had written of more than 7,000 of them, but a rough count by me in mid-2018 tallied around a thousand. Surprisingly, they haven’t been stolen by black market antiquities dealers, but smashed to pieces to be the swollen stomach of a pregnant Mother Earth, so intriguingly fertile, perhaps alluding to rebirth. There has not yet been a thorough analysis of the tactical and strategic positioning of the megaliths, to establish if there is a localised pattern – such as those to be the swollen stomach of a pregnant Mother Earth, so intriguingly fertile, perhaps alluding to rebirth. There has not yet been a thorough analysis of the tactical and strategic positioning of the megaliths, to establish if there is a localised pattern – such as the large 1,000-piece collection in Chokahatu – or a wider one across the State. The most glaring question facing even curious amateur researchers is a stark one – why here? What is it about the rolling hills of Jharkhand that made these Mundas settle here and bury their dead in these specific places, why rock formations, varying sizes and why not anywhere else in such concentrations? Although megaliths can be found elsewhere in India, the number in Jharkhand is fascinating.

Beliefs of the Mundas

The alignment and location of many megaliths continue to raise debates, one theory being that they were situated around large, gently semi-circular, rock formations and small hills because the Munda tribe of Adivasis believed in rebirth. There has not yet been a thorough analysis of the tactical and strategic positioning of the megaliths, to establish if there is a localised pattern – such as the large 1,000-piece collection in Chokahatu – or a wider one across the State. The most glaring question facing even curious amateur researchers is a stark one – why here? What is it about the rolling hills of Jharkhand that made these Mundas settle here and bury their dead in these specific places, why rock formations, varying sizes and why not anywhere else in such concentrations? Although megaliths can be found elsewhere in India, the number in Jharkhand is fascinating.

The thought of protecting, developing and promoting the sites as tourist hubs eludes the State Government, let alone the further goal of lobbying UNESCO for World Heritage status, which would boost the State’s profile exponentially, being home to such a collection and the revenue such action would almost certainly generate.

Until then, places like the Chokahatu megalith site will maintain a danger level similar to the megaliths themselves – grave.