



# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE MEGALITHIC TRADITION OF SONBHADRA: AN ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

RAJNATH, VIRAG GOPAL SONTAKKE AND PUSHPALATA SINGH

*Dept. of AIHC & Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi*

*Corresponding author E-mail: [virag@bhu.ac.in](mailto:virag@bhu.ac.in)*

**Abstract:** Southeastern Uttar Pradesh is characterised by a rich natural environment and abundant mineral resources. It borders multiple states and boasts lush forests, bodies of water, and mineral resources that have supported human habitation since prehistoric times. Numerous archaeological sites reveal evidence of early human settlements. The district preserves a significant number of prehistoric paintings that depict aspects of ancient human life. Today, tribes such as the Gonds, Panikars, Khars, and Cheros continue to live here, relying on natural resources for their livelihoods. Their ancient origins are reflected in funeral rites, beliefs, customs, and traditions, including burial practices similar to those of the Megalithic Age. This research paper examines contemporary tribal funeral rituals and mortuary practices from an ethno-archaeological perspective.

**Keywords:** Megaliths, Graves, Tribes, mortuary practices, burial tradition

**Received :** 23 December 2025

**Revised :** 21 January 2026

**Accepted :** 02 February 2026

**Published :** 08 May 2026

## **TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Rajnath, Virag Gopal Sontakke & Pushpalata Singh (2026). Continuity and Change in the Megalithic Tradition of Sonbhadra: An Ethno-Archaeological Perspective. *Journal of South Asian Research*, 4: 1, pp. 17-35.

## **Introduction**

Burial traditions are among the oldest socio-religious customs of human beings. The megalithic culture provides extraordinary examples of burial traditions worldwide. New findings indicate that the Iron Age megalithic tradition in India is among the earliest worldwide, traceable to the 4th millennium BCE (Rajan and Sivanantham 2025). The megalithic culture encompasses megaliths from the Himalayas to the Nilgiris, from the Aravalli to the Eastern Ghats, and beyond. The widespread distribution of megalithic monuments, particularly in the Vindhya, Vidarbha, Deccan, and Southern India, suggests the presence of a culture across a vast area comparable to the Indus Valley Civilisation. The

practice of rigid mortuary rites is evident in megalithic cultures. Burial customs can be inferred, to some extent, from the burial appendages and material culture associated with them. Modern tribals who uphold the living megalithic tradition help us understand traditional mortuary rites, customs, and beliefs regarding burial practices. The southern Uttar Pradesh, including the district of Sonbhadra, where several tribes practise the living megalithic tradition, has been studied by the authors, and their rites related to burial customs have been documented.

Sonbhadra district lies in the southeastern part of Uttar Pradesh, spanning 23°52' to 25°32' north latitude and 82°72' to 83°33' east longitude. It was established on 4 March 1989, when it was carved out of Mirzapur district. The district comprises four tehsils, namely Robertsganj, Ghorawal, Duddhi, and Obra, and ten development blocks. Its natural boundaries are the Deccan Plateau to the south, the Ganges to the north, the Chota Nagpur Plateau to the east, and the Baghelkhand and Rewa Plateaus to the west. Politically, it borders Garhwa district in Jharkhand to the east, Bhabua district in Bihar to the northeast, Sidhi district in Madhya Pradesh to the west, Surguja district in Chhattisgarh to the south, and Mirzapur and Chandauli districts in Uttar Pradesh to the north. Geographically, the district can be divided into distinct regions (Kumar and Singh 2022: 3441-3450). The Son Valley, located in the southern part of the Son River, is characterised by hills and forests. Areas such as Singrauli and Duddhi within the Son Valley are notably fertile. The principal river in this area is the Son, which is fed by smaller tributaries, including the Rihand and Kanhar.

The Duddhi region includes the Robertsganj and Duddhi tehsils. Most of Duddhi is mountainous. To its north lies a long range of hills and plateaus. The hills extend from west to east. Some hills, such as Gohda Mrigrani Hill, Chainpur Hill, Jhandi Hill (Baheradol section), Bansi section, and Chilkadaar Hill, appear steep. Most of the hills are covered with forests. Due to the forest cover and rocky terrain, farming is difficult. However, some parts of the region are plains, dotted with numerous small villages. The Kaimur group of Sonbhadra is located in the central and eastern parts. Sedimentary rocks are deposited on the banks of the Son River flowing in this region, and sandstone, conglomerate, porcelanite and limestone are spread to the south of the Son River. Quartzite is also deposited in some areas. The final geological structure is the Semri group area, which is spread in Obra, Dala, Kajrahat, etc., situated

in the southern part of the Son River. Glauconitic sandstone and limestone are spread in this Semri group area. Granite deposits are found near Jhircgaddi in the eastern part of the Kanhar River (Quasim *et. al.* 2018: 145-160).

The study area exhibits climatic variations due to geographic differences, but it predominantly has a tropical, monsoonal climate. The soils in this district are ancient, dating back to the underlying rocks. Although the Son River is a tributary of the Ganges, its soils differ from those of the Gangetic plains, consisting mainly of loamy, clayey, and sandy types. The plateau's soil tends to be hard, red, and rich in iron, which results in low agricultural productivity (Singh *et al.* 2019:1597-1605). Tropical dry deciduous forests are present in this district, where Stone Age humans relied on fruits and other resources for survival. Today, these forests continue to support local tribes by providing fruits, medicines, timber, fuel, shade, and clean air. Common tree species include mango, mahua, neem, peepal, banyan, sycamore, and palash.

### **Archaeological Analysis of Burial Methods**

Burial rites have been a fundamental component of social and cultural traditions since antiquity. Evidence of systematic human burials dates back to prehistoric times. In Uttar Pradesh, archaeological sites such as Mahadaha, Damdama, Lekhaiya, and Sarai Nahar Rai have yielded evidence of formal burials dating from the Mesolithic era (Sharma 1980, Thomas *et al.* 1995: 90-102, Lukacs 2002:127-138). Following the prehistoric period, burial practices during the Iron Age are evidenced in the Vindhya mountain range through the megalithic culture. Sandstone from the Vindhya region has been used in the construction of megalithic burials. Numerous megalithic burials have been uncovered across the districts of Kaimur, Chandauli, Mirzapur, Rewa, and Sonbhadra, all within the Vindhya region, and are predominantly associated with the Iron Age. In the southern Indian subcontinent, megalithic burials commenced in the Iron Age and continued into the historical period. Throughout history, human societies have demonstrated reverence for burial practices. In India, tribes in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and the northeastern regions continue to observe burial customs akin to ancient megalithic traditions.

Due to the absence of written records, little is known about the traditions and customs of megalithic burials in the ancient Iron Age. Based on the number of burials and the size and shape of the sites, it appears plausible

that many people in society participated in megalithic burial practices. The mortuary rites, beliefs, and traditions associated with the ancient megalithic culture remain enigmatic. Contemporary tribal burial customs can provide valuable insights into ancient burial traditions. Recent research in Sonbhadra, southern Uttar Pradesh, has unearthed evidence of primitive tribes practising megalithic burials. Sonbhadra is a forested district inhabited by various tribes and home to ancient traditions. This paper investigates the burial practices of these tribes, with a survey conducted in the Duddhi area to examine contemporary megalithic burial traditions, including burial methods, rites, and classifications. The aim is to enhance understanding of funeral rites among local tribal communities and their links to ancient megalithic burial sites.

## **Typology of megaliths in Southern Uttar Pradesh**

### ***Cairn***

A cairn is a heap of stones and soil formed on the ground. This heap is often circular, with its apex at the centre and gradually diminishing towards the periphery. The height of the stone pile can vary from 20 centimetres to 1.40 metres above ground level. Cairn burials are notably prevalent in the Vindhya region. The loose sandstone, which is abundantly available in the region, is used for the construction of these megaliths. This is the most popular type of megalith reported in all areas of the Vindhya.

### ***Cairn with Cist***

The second most prevalent type of megalithic culture in the Vindhya region involves cairn with cists. In this type, the cairn deposit remained the same as above but included a cist at the center. Four stones are arranged in a table-like formation inside the cairn, half-buried and half-exposed. A large stone is placed on top of these stones, forming a roof known as a capstone, also made of sandstone. A pile of smaller stones is placed around these stones. In the Vindhyan megalithic complex, two types of cists are reported. The first type included a cist made of small dressed stones, resembling a brick wall, known as an embryonic cist, which was popular in the Mirzapur area. Another type is a cist made of four independent, big vertical stones. Both these cists are always found inside the cairn. No individual cist has yet been reported from the Vindhyan region.

### ***Cairn with Menhir***

This is a newly identified type within the Vindhyan megaliths, distinguished by a vertical stone erected within the cairn. The placement of these menhirs differs: at the Dantari site, they are situated centrally, whereas at Khajuri, they are positioned in the southern part of the cist. Menhirs are commonly found inside cairns, and independent menhirs have also been documented in the Kaimur district. The menhirs are often triangular in shape towards the top, showing deliberate cuttings.

### **Tribes of Southern Uttar Pradesh**

Owing to extensive forest cover, diverse geographical settings, and varied land cover, the Sonbhadra district is home to tribal communities. The primary tribes living in the area include the Kol, Majhwar, Kharwar, Biyar, Vind, Gond, Chero, Panka/Panika, Baiswar, Bhuiyan, Dhangar, Bhuiyar, Bhuratia, Agariya, Pahari, Korwa, Pathari, Parhiya, Ghasia, among others (Hasan 2024). Some of these tribes, such as the Chero, Dhangar Gond, Bhuiyar, Korwa, Parhiya, and Ghasia, are believed to have Dravidian origins, while the origins of others remain undocumented. However, certain legends among these tribes offer insights into their social, religious, and cultural characteristics beyond their original regions. In Sonbhadra district, tribes such as the Gond, Panika, Kol, Majhwar, Kharwar, Agariya, Chero, and Korwa are predominant in terms of population. These tribes are primarily concentrated in the tehsils of Robertsganj and Duddhi (Singh et al., 2005). The Gonds are regarded as one of India's major primitive tribes, primarily inhabiting the Vindhya region and central India (Paul 2014). Their populations are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, including Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Varanasi, Banda, Jhansi, Jalaun, and Lalitpur. Traditionally, the Gonds reside mainly in hilly and forested areas, particularly south of Sonbhadra. They rely heavily upon natural resources. Their dwellings are built from mud and thatch, and they use wooden beds and straw bedding. Their weaponry includes axes, bows, and arrows. Ritualistic worship is integral to their culture, including village worship and sacrificial offerings. They worship a deity called *Jai Badadev* before commencing any work. Their spiritual practices often involve *Tantra-Mantra*, witchcraft, and hypnotism. Mostly the tribe's diet is non-vegetarian; they hunt wild animals, fish, and gather roots and tubers, which help them stay healthy. They also consume cultivated crops such as Sawa, Kodo, Madua, Mahua, maize, millet, rice and Sarai (Koreti

2016: 288-298). Recently, many have taken up occupations such as labouring, ploughing, and herding to supplement their traditional livelihoods (Rai 2016: 25885-25887). They practised the burial process of deceased individuals (Elwin 1964).

Historically, the Cheros were sovereign rulers. During medieval conflicts, tribes such as the Gond and Kharwar also exercised control over the Kaimur region. Originally inhabitants of these areas, they migrated to mountainous regions to escape persecution by non-tribal groups, thereby attaining independence and solitude. The Cheros refer to themselves as *Baiga*. The Chero caste comprises various sub-groups, including *Nagavanshi*, *Chandravanshi*, *Chaudhary*, *Mahato*, *Surajvanshi*, and *Paduvanshi*, primarily located in the districts of Sonbhadra and Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh. The Chero are classified within the Dravidian ethnolinguistic group (Singh et.al. 2005). They reside in villages, with matrimonial alliances linking Chero and Baiga families. Currently, their primary livelihood is agricultural labour in forested zones. Chero, also known as Baiga engaged in farming. Their main settlements are in forested areas, and their dwellings, typically with thatched or tiled roofs, are usually situated near forests; originally, these were huts in the woods that have since been developed into permanent residences. Historically, their subsistence depended on hunting animals and birds, with roots and tubers supplementing their diet during periods of prey scarcity. In contemporary times, their economic activities have shifted toward agriculture, including working for larger landholders and harvesting grains such as millet. In ancient times, they were believed to possess demonic powers and perform various rituals, including exorcisms, witchcraft, magic, and sacrifices.

The Panika tribe, also called *Panka* or *Kotwar*, mainly lives in the southern parts of Sonbhadra and Mirzapur, in the Kaimur mountains. They are mostly found in Duddhi tehsil of Sonbhadra district. Traditionally, they were artisans who wove cloth, but now they mainly farm, and many are migrating to cities for work. They live in huts surrounded by dry, thorny bushes. Due to government housing schemes, many now have permanent homes, some with tiled roofs. Economic hardship has forced some families into bonded labour. The *Panika* also hunt and gather roots and tubers from forests. Their diet includes Sarai, Mahua, and Chakwad, but they remain poor. Their food is simple and dry, including chicken, goat, pork, and they also drink alcohol, which women also consume. They believe in witchcraft and keep certain customs. They celebrate

Holi, Dussehra, Diwali, and especially Nagpanchami. *Dulha Dev* is one of their main deities, and sacred trees such as *Peepal*, *Mahua*, and *Banyan* represent their sacred sites (Singh et al. 2005).

It is believed that the Kharwar name derives from their involvement in producing catechu from the Khair tree. Besides Sonbhadra, they also reside in Mirzapur and neighbouring districts, with a prominent presence in the Kaimur region. Additionally, they are found in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand adjacent to the state, as well as in the foothills of the Son River and various other regions across the country. Historically, the Kharwar tribe was a governing community, with its kingdom extending from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar (Bano et al., 2023: 16-22). They governed numerous areas of Santhal Pargana and ruled approximately fifty villages. The *Kharwars* identify as *Suryavanshi*. According to some accounts, their ancestors fled to forests, caves, and riverbeds to preserve their independence (Singh et al. 2005). Their lifestyle is characterised by simplicity: men generally wear knee-length dhotis, turbans, kurtas, shirts, and vests, while women wear saris and wear jewellery. Due to economic hardship, their jewellery is typically inexpensive. Women also have a tradition of tattoos, though urban influences are gradually altering these customs. Their social cohesion is weakening, and poverty and illiteracy threaten family unity. Currently, they predominantly work as labourers, ploughmen, and shepherds, often without land, and live in simple huts. Their diet includes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets, and they consume alcohol during festivals and social events. They worship *Bada Dev*, *Bhavani*, *Baghaut*, *Dulhadev*, and *Semrahwa Dev*. Women within the tribe possess skills in witchcraft.

Significantly, the Kol, Majhwar, Biyar, Pankha/Panika, and Bhuiyar continue to observe their age-old customs and religious practices. The Gond tribe worships natural deities, including the prime goddess *Angaramati*, the Goddess of Burning Coal. Several other tribes also believe in tribal heroes, including *Banhiya Bir* and *Nadubir* (Bhukya 2017). The Kharwar tribe worships deities such as *Jwalamukhi* and *Raja Lakhani*. The prominent tribe that follows the megalithic tradition is as follows. The Kharwar community primarily produces Katha from the Khair tree, which has led to their nomenclature as Kharwars. Although believed to originate from Khairgarh in Hazaribagh, Khairagarh in Chhattisgarh, or the Khairagarh tehsil of Allahabad, they are also recognised for their diverse livelihoods. In addition to their trade in catechu, they sustain themselves by collecting wild fruits, plants, and herbs. The Gond tribe is

known for stone cutting and harvesting and is often regarded as the King of the Forest. Bamboo holds special significance as a family deity revered by the entire Gond community. The Chero tribe, a branch of the Kol tribe, is known as the Baiga in the Mirzapur region. They primarily work as labourers and farmers. Among other tribes in Sonbhadra, the Pankha, like the Bhuiyar, rely heavily on forest produce for their livelihood. The Korwa and Ghasiya tribes also rely on forest produce. These are the major tribes residing in this region, each with a tradition of funeral rites.

### **Tribal graves and ancient megalithic burial traditions**

Funeral rites play a significant role in human social culture. Archaeological evidence of ritualised funeral practices has been found across various regions of the world since antiquity. This tradition, dating back to prehistoric times, appears to have been a fundamental aspect of culture during the Chalcolithic period. Burials from the Indus Valley Civilisation offer significant insights into social attitudes, respect, affection, and reverence for the deceased. During this period, numerous burials included supplementary objects such as pottery, stone beads, jewellery, and weapons.

The widespread adoration of the deceased during the Iron Age is evident across various regions of the Indian subcontinent. This cultural practice is often referred to as the Megalithic culture because of its focus on honouring the dead. Archaeological excavations in India have revealed numerous burials associated with this culture, located in places such as Kashmir in the north, across southern India, Rajasthan in the west, Odisha in the east, and northeastern India. Evidence of the Megalithic culture has also been reported in Uttar Pradesh, specifically from districts such as Chandauli, Mirzapur, and Prayagraj. Surveys in the Vindhya-Kaimur regions have uncovered many ancient burial sites (Sontakke et al. 2025). A detailed analysis indicates that these burials are diverse, with common types including cairn, cairn with cist, and cairn with menhirs. Among these, cairn types are widespread throughout India.

It is worth noting that Sonbhadra district is located in southern Uttar Pradesh, south of the Vindhya Range. This region, rich in minerals, forests, and jungles, has been conducive to human habitation since ancient times. Evidence of prehistoric human existence has been reported from the forests and hilly areas of Sonbhadra. Rock paintings provide insight into the diverse means of subsistence of ancient humans. The abundance of megalithic cemetery sites

on the Vindhya Plateau suggests that the landscape was favourable to the megalithic people. The variety of megaliths discovered in the area indicates regional differences and may be linked to distinct societal beliefs and practices. Due to limited archaeological investigation, the actual practices, meanings, and significance of megalithic buildings, funerary rites, and customs remain unknown. Indigenous societies that still practise megalithic traditions may shed more light on the ancient rites and rituals associated with megaliths.

In this context, Sonbhadra district is predominantly inhabited by tribes such as the *Gonds*, *Panikas*, *Khars*, *Baigas*, and *Musahars*. These tribes continue to uphold their rituals and traditions. Funeral rites are regarded as ancient and hold significant importance; they are practised by these tribes. When a member of the Gond community passes away, the family initially informs their relatives. Subsequently, the family head directs others to prepare for the funeral. Upon being informed, villagers prepare a bier using bamboo mats and banana leaves. Female family members often weep loudly during the preparations. The family or clan head pours water, rice, turmeric, and neem leaves over the body to purify it. After all relatives arrive, male family members and villagers carry the body on their shoulders to the burial site, typically in the northeastern part of the village. A group of men accompanies the body, and rice offerings are cast over the deceased. Led by the family head, the eldest son transports the funeral items to the burial site. These items vary depending on the deceased's age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

A specific place is designated for the burial of the deceased. This burial site is typically located away from the village, near a river or stream. The connection of burial sites with water is prominent. A pit is dug at the burial site, taking into account the deceased's age and physique. The pit appears large from the inside and narrow from the top. The deceased is buried in a north-south direction, and the pit is then filled with excavated soil. The position or direction of the deceased during cremation is an essential part of the funeral rites. The body is placed in a north-south direction, as they were worshippers of the Sun God. Men primarily participate in the burial rites and perform the rituals. The deceased's belongings are buried with them. After the burial, a pile of stones is placed on the burial site. These stones are brought from the surrounding area. Each person involved in the funeral rites brings stones and places them on top of the burial site. After that, the deceased's cot, bed, clothes, slippers, shoes, pot, plate, etc. are placed. In the burial rites for small children, a small

pit is dug. A pile of three to six small stones is placed in the child's burial rites. It is customary to bury medicines, toys, clothes, etc., among these. The pile of stones at the end of the burial is visible in the burials of almost all tribes. The shape of these burials reminds us of the megalithic culture of ancient India, which appears similar to the cairn-type of burial.

The deceased is buried with various items, including two categories of personal belongings. One consists of household possessions such as clothing, jewellery, utensils, and a cane basket called a *kunli*, containing various grains. The second category includes tools such as iron knives, spades, axes, sickles, digging sticks, and other implements. Diverse food grains such as rice, millet, ragi, kora (kodo), and tuvar are offered to the deceased. After burial, Gonds place a stone at the head of the grave as a marker, and each person present adds a stone on top of the deceased, according to their ability. Under the guidance of the village or family head, villagers gather stones to cover the body. If stones are scarce, they gather them from other locations. Burial sites are mainly near rivers, where stones are plentiful in some spots.

On the third day after the funeral, they gather elders and relatives to plan additional rites, such as a formal feast. On Dashami, they host a feast, inviting their relatives and others. On the Twelfth, they hold a special feast, inviting relatives, friends, and clan members from neighbouring villages and castes. During this feast, a sheep or goat is slaughtered in honour of the deceased and then consumed. Beforehand, the meat is offered to the village deity and ancestors. They believe that animals slaughtered on this day become the deceased's spirit property, and neglecting this ceremony can cause serious issues for the upcoming year.

A few days after a burial, the Panika tribe sacrifices a sheep, goat, or black rooster. They believe their ancestors reside in the burial site and protect their lineage. It's seen as disrespectful to stop this tradition, and doing so could cause problems. The tribe worships at the grave after the funeral. On special days such as the new and full moons, they believe evil spirits are stronger. They also worship the grave before harvesting, before hunting, during weddings, at a child's birth, during natural disasters, and when facing serious issues.

A survey was conducted in the Duddhi area of Sonbhadra district to delve deeper into the living megalithic tradition. The study focused on burial practices, the variety and quantity of graves, and associated rituals, providing insights into their funeral customs and links to ancient megalithic burial sites.

## Modern Cemetery sites

### *Nagwa*

This village is situated on the banks of the Kanhar River, about 15 km from Dudhiya tehsil. The village is home to the Kharwar and Panika tribes, who primarily practise burial rites. Around 90 graves, of varying sizes, have been discovered at four sites near the river. One location yielded 45 graves, another 30, a third 10, and the last five. These cemetery sites extend over roughly 500 metres. The tribal community here typically buries or cremates their dead. Most of the documented graves are of adult men, probably aged 20 to 25. Unmarried individuals are generally buried, while married ones are cremated.

### *Khajuri*

The cemetery is located roughly 3 km south of Dudhiya tehsil, near the Thema River. The Musahar community lives in the area, and their burial customs are still practised today. The cemetery area spans approximately 50 metres, and about 10 graves have been found along the river. The larger grave measures around 2 metres long, probably for adults, and the smaller ones are between 1 and 1.5 metres long, likely for children.

### *Lilasi Kala*

This grave site is situated on the banks of the Thema River in Lilasi Kala village. Two graves have been found here. The cemetery area is small compared to others. The surrounding community consists of the *Gonds* and *the Kharwars*. Both small and large graves have been observed at this location.

### *Jharaitola (Jampani)*

This burial site is located on the banks of the Thema River in Jharaitola village. This village consists of tribes like the *Gonds*, *Kharwars*, and *Panikas*, who practised burial traditions. Two graves have been uncovered, reflecting current burial practices. The site is small, with only two graves found.

### *Barvatola (Arangapani)*

The cemetery site is located on the banks of Lohara Mahuari Nala in Barvatola village. The graveyard covers about 10-20 metres. During the survey, 10 graves were identified across the three locations. The area is inhabited by the *Gonds*, *Kharwars*, and *Panikas* tribes.

### *Chaga*

This cemetery is situated along a mountain stream in Chaga village, 15 km. The cemetery area is approximately 100 meters in size. During the survey, 15 burials were documented at this site, each containing items such as plates, urns, medicine boxes, and clothing. A few graves also contained a cot. These items were scattered around the graves. The nearby community includes the *Gonds* and *the Kharwars*.

### *Khairatia*

This site is located 15 km northeast of the Khairatia village, along a mountain stream. The region is forested, and there is no designated graveyard; instead, the deceased are buried in a nearby vacant area about 50 metres in size. During the survey, two graves were identified at this location. The surrounding communities include the *Gond*, *Kharwar*, *Panika*, and *Ghasiya* tribes.

### *Deohar*

This site is located in Devhar village, 20 kilometres east of the Babhani block. A stream named *Duddhi Ghat* flows north of the village. During the survey, about 20 graves were found at this location. The nearby tribes include the *Gonds*, *Kharwars*, and *Baigas*. These tribes still practise living megalithism today.

### *Murta*

This site is situated on the banks of the Thema River, north of Lilasi Kala village. The cemetery area covers approximately 50 meters. Its proximity to the river makes stones easily accessible. During the survey, five graves were found. The nearby area is inhabited by the *Gonds* and *Kharwars*.

### *Mahuaria*

This grace site lies along the Thema River in Mahuaria village, about 15 kilometres south of the Duddhi block. Situated in a riverine area with abundant nearby stone resources, it serves as a burial ground for the residents of two villages. Locally known as the Sawangagi cremation ground, the site yielded six graves. It is inhabited by members of the *Gond*, *Kharwar*, and *Parhiya* tribes.



Fig. 1: Grave along with cot found from Mahuarria (photo by first author)

### *Rannu*

The site is situated 12 km south of Duddhi tehsil, along a mountain stream. The area is rich in stone and is located in a riverine zone with a small coverage. During the survey, two graves were found. Nearby, the *Gond*, *Kharwar*, and *Dharkar* tribes reside.



Fig. 2: Grave found from Rannu (photo by first author)

### ***Kudri***

The cemetery is located in Kudri village, along a stream that flows from the village's slopes. Recent surveys found only one, which belonged to a young child. The area is inhabited by the *Gond*, *Kharwar*, and *Panika* tribes.

### ***Naudiha***

This cemetery area is located on the banks of the middle stream in Naudiha village. The grave area covers an area of approximately 50 meters. Stone is abundant here. Six graves were recovered during the survey. Bamboo poles were recovered from the site and used to carry the deceased to the cremation ground. The *Gond*, *Kharwar*, and *Panika* tribes live near this site.

### ***Gohra***

This site is located on the banks of the Kirma Nala in Gohda village. Although stone is plentiful here, the area is limited. During the survey, three graves were found. The local tribes include the *Gonds*, *Kharwars*, *Baigas*, *Ghasiyas*, and *Panikas*.

### ***Nachanatad (Korchi)***

This site is located on the banks of the *Amdahwa nala* in Nachantad village, near the Chhattisgarh border. It spans about 100 meters. During the survey, six graves were uncovered, and the area is rich in stones. Nearby communities include the *Gonds*, *Kharwars*, *Dharkars*, *Bhuiyas*, and *Panikas*.

### **Funeral rites**

Studies of tribal grave sites in Sonbhadra district show that various tribes follow the living megalithic tradition similar to that of the Megalithic Age. In the Gond tribe, when someone dies, the family first removes the body from the house and places it in a north-south-aligned courtyard. Family members and neighbours gather, and close relatives cry loudly. The head of the family or the elders notify relatives and friends. Once relatives and villagers assemble, the funeral rites begin. Incense sticks are lit near the body. The deceased's body is bathed in water, milk is poured over it, and it is dressed in new clothes and tied at about three points. Five people apply turmeric to the body, and rice grains are scattered over it. Family members, neighbours, and relatives offer the deceased a shroud or clothing. All present pay their last respects before

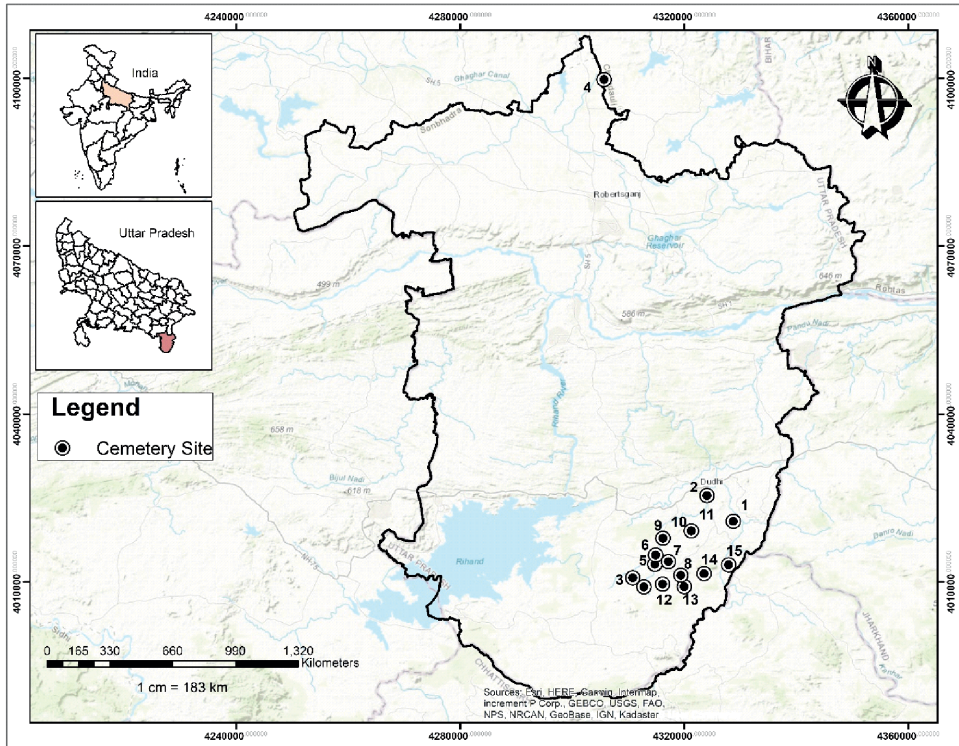


Fig. 3: Location of the grave sites in the Sonbhadra district

Table 1: Quantity of graves observed in the tribal cemeteries

<b>Nagwa</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Khajuri</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Lilasi Kala</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Jharaitola (Jampani)</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Barwatola (Arangpani)</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Khairatia</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Changa</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Devhar</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Murta</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Mahuaria</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Rannu</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Kudri</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Naudiha</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Gohra</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Nachantad / Korchi</b>	<b>6</b>

the body is taken to the crematorium or cemetery. A bamboo bier is built to transport the body, stopping at about five points along the way. Items linked to the deceased, such as a pot, plate, walking stick, medicines, clothes, and a cot, are also taken to the cemetery site (Kharwar and Raj 2025: 7-29).

Some family members determine the size of the grave beforehand, based on the deceased's age and height. Before the individual arrives at the mortuary site, a pit is prepared. After burying the body in the pit, the body is covered with excavated soil, then a bush is placed on top, and stones are arranged over the bush. The body is circumambulated five times. The person conducting the burial is handed a mop, and everyone present offers him soil, which he deposits over the grave. Some offerings, such as jaggery, ghee, and five types of grains like *sawan*, *kodo*, paddy, sesame, and millet, are brought from home and placed near the deceased's head. The deceased is also greeted with salutations before leaving the home. Afterwards, the person carrying out the cremation and their companions return to the deceased's house after bathing in a pond or river.

Upon returning home, everyone applies oil and tilak as part of the mourning rituals. From that point, the deceased's brother is responsible for preparing food using his own knife and pot. He places food on a plate for the deceased over three or five days and also eats himself. Salt is not consumed until the thirteenth day. On the tenth day, a *Bar-Chundi* (tonsuring) ceremony is held at a river or pond, with relatives and friends performing the tonsure first, and the person responsible for the cremation or burial performing it last. After returning from the *ghat*, a priest is called to perform the *Pind Daan* ritual for the peace of the departed soul. Afterwards, clan members wear turbans. On the second and third days, a feast is held, inviting everyone. These rituals indicate that the Gond tribe has incorporated some Hindu rituals and customs into mortuary practices (Koreti 2016: 288-298).

## Conclusion

Archaeological evidence from the Sonbhadra district supports ethnoarchaeological findings that burial traditions have been consistent from the earliest periods. Megalithic burials, dating from the Chalcolithic period through to the Iron Age, are found in considerable numbers within the Vindhya mountain range. The customs, traditions, and beliefs associated with these ancient burials remain largely unknown owing to a lack of comprehensive documentation. Nevertheless, the sheer number of megalithic burials suggests

the significance and popularity of their construction. To gain insight into this silent link to ancient history, the funeral rites of contemporary tribal communities can serve as valuable sources of understanding (Dube 1955).

Archaeological findings show that ancient megaliths were often situated along rivers and streams, separate from settlements. The dead were interred in pits, with their belongings buried alongside them. Once the pit was filled with earth, a pile of stones was placed over it. Modern tribal funeral practices in Sonbhadra seem to resemble ancient customs, with tribes burying their deceased and then stacking stones on top of the graves. During these rituals, each participant adds a stone to the pile.

Even in ancient megalithic cultures, the stone piles may have been constructed by individuals participating in funeral rites. Finds of wooden cots placed over burials among modern tribal groups support this idea. The presence of wooden cots in Deccan megaliths, especially in the Mahurzari burials of Andhra Pradesh and Vidarbha, further confirms this connection (Sontakke ). This article observes variations in cemetery areas and grave sizes among tribal communities in Sonbhadra district, noting that smaller graves are typically for children while larger ones are for adults. Such differences at ancient megalithic sites may also indicate the age of the deceased. Contemporary tribal burial practices, such as burial rites, covering graves with stones, and burying items used by the departed, appear to be continuations of ancient traditions. Changes within tribal communities are evident today, with influences from modern developments such as road networks, mobile phones, television, lifestyles, and cultural shifts affecting almost all tribes. While Hindu rituals have evolved, mortuary customs remain deeply rooted in ancient history. These practices and rites offer valuable insights into the lifestyles, social, and religious traditions of people from the Megalithic era. For the tribal communities in Sonbhadra, this study holds significance as it works to preserve and comprehend their ancestral customs in modern times.

### *References*

- Bano, Mohsina, Jahanara, and Alam Ara. "A Study on Socio-Cultural Life of Kharwar Tribe of Sonbhadra District (U.P.)." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 23, no. 2 (2023): 16-22.
- Bhukya, Bhangya. 2017. *Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Brockman, D. L. Drake. 1911. *Gazetteer of Mirzapur*, Government Press, Allahabad.
- Dube, Shyama Charan. 1955. *Indian Village*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955.
- Elwin, Verrier. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Hasan, Amir. 2024. *Meet the U.P. Tribes*. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation,.
- Lukacs, J.R. 2003. Skeletal Variation among Mesolithic People of the Ganga Plains', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 121(2):127-138.
- Kharwar Deepak. 2024. Gond Janjatiyon ka Samajik, Arthik Jivan ek Samajshashtriya Adhyayan (Uttar Pradesh ke Sonbhadra Janapad Ke Vishesh sandarbh me (in Hindi), *Purvadeva*, Vol. 30: 49-64.
- Kharwar Deepak and Pratibha Raj. 2025. Janjatiya Samaj Ki Samajik, Sanskrutik evm Dharmik Sanrachana: Uttar Pradesh Ke Sonbhadra Jile Ke Vishesh Sandarbh Me, *Bhartiya Samajshatriya Samiksha (in Hindi)* 12 (1): 7-29.
- Koreti, Shamrao 2016. Socio-Cultural History of the Gond Tribes of Middle India. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 6, no. 4: 288–298.
- Paul, Anuradha. *The Gonds: Genesis, History and Culture*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 2014.
- Quasim M.A., Rabindra Nath Hota, A.H.M. Ahmad and M. Albaroot 2018. An approach to provenance and tectonic setting of the Proterozoic Upper Kaimur Group sandstones, Son Valley: constraints from framework mineralogy and heavy mineral analysis, *Himalayan Geology*, Vol. 3 (2), 2018: 145-160.
- Rajan, K. and R. Sivanatham. 2025. Antiquity of Iron Recent radiometric dates from tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu: Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Archaeology
- Ramesh Kumar Rai, 2016. The political empowerment of scheduled tribes communities in Uttar Pradesh (A study of Gond and Kharwar tribes)", *International Journal of Current Research*, 8, (01), 8, (01), 25885-25887.
- Sharma, G.R., Mishra, V.D. and Pal, J.N., 1980. *Excavations at Mahadaha, 1977-1978: A Mesolithic Settlement in the Ganga Valley*. Archaeology of the Vindhya and the Ganga Valley, No. 4. Allahabad: University of Allahabad.
- Shekhar, Himanshu, 2022, Continuity: Changing Aspects of Ancient Megalithic Culture of Jharkhand: Iron Age in India, Abhayan Shree Mus, Rajesh Mus, Preetha Nair, Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala, pages 111-120.
- Shishu Pal Singh<sup>1</sup>, Jay Prakash Verma<sup>2</sup>, Shivraj Singh<sup>3</sup> and Rajesh Kumar. 2019. Evaluation of soil fertility status for available sulphur in various location of Myorpur block, district Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh, India. *Journal of Bioscience and Agriculture Research*, Vol. 19, Issue 01: 1597-1605.

- Singh, K.S., B.R. Rizvi, and J.C. Das, eds. *People of India: Uttar Pradesh, Volume XLII, Parts I–III*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2005.
- Sontakke, Virag, 2022, Megalithic Culture of Vidarbha, Maharashtra Inter Regional Relationship, *Archaeology* No. 52, pages 39-51.
- Sontakke, Virag., Sachin Kr. Tiwary and Dheeraj Sharma. 2025. Pre and Protohistoric Archaeology of Chunar, Mirzapur (Uttar Pradesh): New research from Dantari Hill, BAR, Oxford London. <https://doi.org/10.30861/9781407362694>
- Thomas, P.K., Joglekar, P.P., Mishra, V.D., Pandey, J.N. and Pal, J.N., 1995. *A Preliminary Report of the Faunal Remains from Damdama. Man and Environment*, 20(1): 90-102.
- Upadhyay, Prabhakar, Swatantra Kumar Singh and Sadiq Mo, Raodhan, 2018, Archaeological Exploration of Rock Art Sites of Robertsganj Block, District Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh in *Bharati* Vol., 42.