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Research Paper

Spatial Distributions of Megalithic Burials in Dharti-Murti, Vidarbha, Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT

This paper comprehensively analyses the distribution and characteristics of megalithic burials at the Dharti-Murti site in the Vidarbha region. Through detailed fieldwork and documentation, a significant concentration of megalithic burials, including cairns, stone circles, and stone circles with cairn filling has been identified. The present study examines the spatial distribution of megalithic burials within the site their orientation, size, and internal contents. The paper discusses the result of the micro-documentation of megaliths, including the typology of megaliths, locational analysis, variation in architecture, and present conditions. By understanding the patterns of megalithic burials at Dharti-Murti, we aim to contribute to a broader understanding of the social, economic, and religious practices of the megalithic folk of Vidarbha.

Keywords: Megalithic Burials, Vidarbha, Cairns, Stone Circles, Spatial Distribution

1. Introduction

The tradition of the erection of a megalith to pay respect to the deceased is an inter-continental phenomenon. In India, megaliths are found in specific locations that fulfill the requirements of these communities. The remains of megaliths are observed in many parts of the county, including north India, Chhattisgarh, peninsular India, and Vidarbha (Sontakke 2022: 39-51). Each region mentioned has its own geographical backdrop, environmental setting, and different pockets of megalithic communities with separate typologies. Easily accessible stones for burial construction seemed to be a major criterion for the settlement of the megalithic community.

Vidarbha is one of the significant pockets of megalithic culture in India represented by widespread distributions of megaliths with distinct typological features. Vidarbha is an important region for megalithic monuments and is located in the eastern part of Maharashtra. Administratively, the Vidarbha region consists of eleven districts wherein the megaliths are found only in the six districts.

Archaeologically, the region of Vidarbha is dotted with the widespread distributions of megalithic sites dating back to the protohistoric period. The megalithic burials of the region are popularly confined to the Wainganga-Wardha river drainage system. The megaliths of the Vidarbha are mostly scattered on the black basaltic plateau with less soil cover. Wider distributions of the megaliths suggest that the Nagpur area was the most preferred landscape for megalithic people. The basaltic terrain of unproductive land, availability of loose rocks, presence of flora and fauna, and water availability are perhaps the causes.

1.1 History of Megalithic Research in India

The exposed and curious nature of megalithic burials has been an attraction for a long. The megalithic research in the Vidarbha started in the British period mainly by British officials like administrators, surveyors, military personnel and priests. These early efforts were curiosity-driven as they aimed only at the collection of antiquarian remains from the

megaliths. The first report of megalithic graves from Vidarbha was by Reverend Hislop. He excavated "good many" megaliths near Takalghat Khapa, in Nagpur district (Wilkinson 1982: 15-18)). Afterwards, Rivet Carnac excavated a few stone circles at Junapani in Nagpur. He also carried out systematic explorations at the site and prepared a detailed distribution map of the megalithic burials at Junapani (Rivett 1867: 1-16). Colonel Godfrey Pearse carried out excavations at Wurregaon, near the Kamptee cantonment area in 1867 (Pearse 1869: 207- 217). After Pearse, J.J. Carrey excavated a few stone circles at Khairwada in Wardha district (Carrey 1871: 238-239). Hunter carried out explorations near Mahurjhari and reported the presence of megalithic burial at Mahurjhari (Hunter 1933: 30-35). During his archaeological tour in Central Provinces in 1873, Alexander Cunningham recorded a dolmen type of burial near Keljhar, in Chandrapur (Cunningham 1966: 140-141). Henry Cousens who carried out a detailed survey of Central Provinces and Berar, while describing the other monuments, mentions villages having megaliths such as Tilotakhairi, and Pipalgaon (Cousens 1971: 3-31).

After Independence, the Archaeological Survey of India, Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Maharashtra, State Universities and associated personnel took a special interest in exploring, documenting and excavating megalithic remains in Vidarbha. B. K. Thaper again excavated the megalithic burials at Junapani in 1960 (IAR 1961-62:32-33). Subsequently, S.B. Deo and his team excavated Takalghat Khapa (Deo 1970), Mahurjhari (Deo 1973), Borgaon (IAR 1980-81: 40), Naikund (Deo and Jamkedkar 1982:12-13), Bhagimaheri (IAR 1982- 83: 61-62; 1983-84: 57-58) etc. Similarly, small-scale excavations at Bhawar, Pachkhedi, Arni, Tharsa, Adam and other sites also added extra information to the megalithic research (IAR 1978-79:71-72, 1984: 53-53, 1985:58-60, Nath 2002: 81-88; Nath 2016). The last two decades of the twenty-first witnessed the careful investigation of various aspects of the megalithic culture of Vidarbha. Sites like Mahurjhari (Mohanty 2002:45-47, Mohanty 2023: 224-249), Dhamnalinga (IAR: 2000-01: 97-107), Vyahad (Ismail et al. 2015: 204-225), Malli (Sontakke 2014: 492-515; Sontakke 2015: 43-53,), Hirapur (Pawar and Kim 2012: 238-261), Khopdi (Pawar and Kim. 2014: 231-262), Ubali (Patel et.al. 2022: 1-17), Gorewada (Pawar 2021: 141-165) were excavated. These excavations were focused on understanding the micro-level studies of the burial and habitation sites of the megalithic community.

1.2 The site

Dharti-Murti is a joint village where the (Fig. 1) Dharti village located in the Wardha district, and the Murti is a part of the Nagpur district. The megalithic burial complex is situated towards the eastern side of the Murti village. Dharti village is in Karanja taluka and is located 57 km from Wardha district and has a population of 1033. The megalithic burial site Murti is situated in Katol taluka of Nagpur district at a distance of 70 km from Nagpur. The area of Dharti-Murti is characterized by its typical basaltic terrain, which has likely influenced the selection of construction materials for the megalithic structures found here. The megalithic burials are located nearly 1.5 km away from the present village. No agricultural activity is going on in this less productive area. The megaliths of Murti bear the usual types like Cairns, Stone circles and stone circles with cairn filling. The site was discovered by the first author in 2012, but a systematic survey was not conducted. After a gap of twelve years, detailed documentation of the megalithic cemetery was carried out to understand the megalithic types, locational patterns, clusters and the placement of the megaliths in the cemetery.

2. Materials and Methods

The megalithic cemetery site of Murti was systematically documented. A detailed survey was conducted to identify and document each of the megaliths. Megaliths of each locality were plotted, counted, numbered, and documented to see geo-coordinates, size, type, actual conditions, and deposits they possess. Each megalith was examined separately with a detailed documentation sheet. Varies equipment like GPS and Destometer were used to get detailed information about the site. A systematic data sheet has been prepared to identify each megalith numerically wherein the micro assessment of the individual megalith is recognized. In the micro assessment, location of megaliths, details of the stones, their arrangement, and any associated features were documented also recording dimensions of individual stones, their orientation, and the spatial relationships between megaliths will be noted. The position of megaliths, the distance between each other, the present condition and the deposit have been documented. Each megalith has been numbered separately, divided According to the placement of megaliths, types, presence of rain gullies, elevation and position of megaliths, the megalithic cemetery was divided into three localities, labelled as A, B and C (Fig. 2).

3. Discussion

3.1 Surface Survey of Megalithic Cemetery

A systematic survey at Murti brought to light a total of 96 megalithic burials. The recent human development activities and soil digging road, divide and disturb megaliths. However, most of the megaliths are in good condition and the deposit is preserved within the data provide three types of megalithic burials, i.e., cairns, stone circles and stone circles with cairn filling. A cairn is a barrow made of heaped-up stones. The cairns of Murti are made of loose stone and soil deposits (Fig. 3). Large stones were deployed at the centre and small stones were at the periphery. Usually, the cairns have a maximum deposit at the centre. Stone circles were the second prominent megalith type of the Murti (Fig.

4). The stone circle possesses peripheral boulders in a circular form. A small deposit of stones and soil lesser than cairns is found within the stone circle. Generally, they are single peripheral types but double and triple peripheral circles are also documented in the study area. Double and triple peripheral stone circles are made out of undressed basalt stones. The remaining area in between the two circles is generally filled with small stones and black soil. The third type is stone circles with cairn fillings being a combination of cairn and stone circles. In this type, the cairns are enclosed with peripheral boulders in circular form. The deposit of stone circles with cairn fillings is usually higher than the deposit of stone circles.

3.2 The Distribution of Megaliths

As stated above total of 96 megalithic burials have been reported in the Murti (Fig. 5). The distribution of megaliths shows their placement in specific areas in the cemetery. Locality A has 20 megaliths, locality B has 31 and locality C includes a maximum of 45 megaliths. These megaliths have different shapes and sizes and possess individual characters (see Fig. 6). The data retrieved from these three localities have been visually represented and analyzed in the following sections.

Different types of megaliths have been found in the Murti (Fig. 7). The cairns are the most numerous, with 68 structures. This suggests that cairn-building was a dominant burial or commemorative practice at the Murti. There are 14 stone circles reported in the cemetery area. The stone circles at Murti are faultlessly made with perfect circular formations. The stone circles with cairn filling megaliths are also reported here. A total of 14 structures are classified in this category. Different types of megaliths in a particular space indicate the significance of the Megalithic cemetery of Murti.

3.2.1 Locality A

Locality A of the Murti megalithic site presents a diverse range of burial typologies, reflecting the complexity and variety of funerary practices in this region. The most prevalent type is the cairn. A total of 11 megaliths of this type have been recorded in this locality. In the stone circle type, 11 structures were identified (Fig. 8). These stone circles, typically composed of big stones arranged in a circular formation, are a common feature of megalithic sites in Vidarbha. Additionally, there is one stone circle with cairn filling, a unique structure that blends the characteristics of both typologies, suggesting variations in burial customs or possibly a higher status of the individual buried there. This variety in burial typology underscores the rich cultural diversity and the sophisticated mortuary practices of the communities that once inhabited the Murti area.

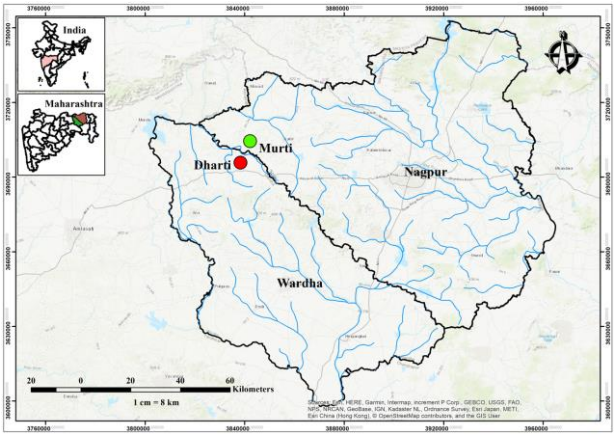


Fig. 1. Location of megalithic site, Dharti-Murti, in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra

Fig. 2. Locality-wise distributions of the megalithic site, Dharti-Murti

Fig. 3. A cairn type of megalith at Murti

Fig. 4. Stone circle type of Megaliths at Murti

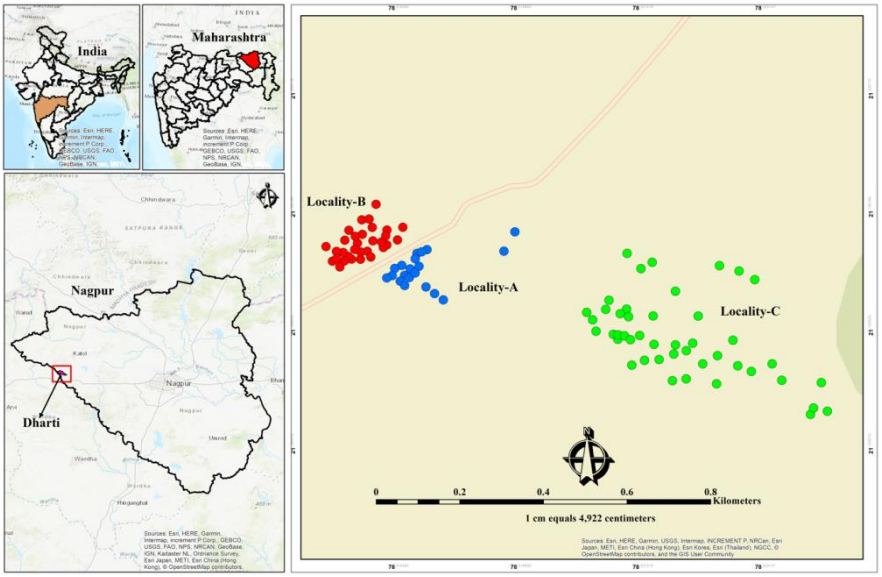


Fig. 5. The megalithic distribution of megaliths at Murti

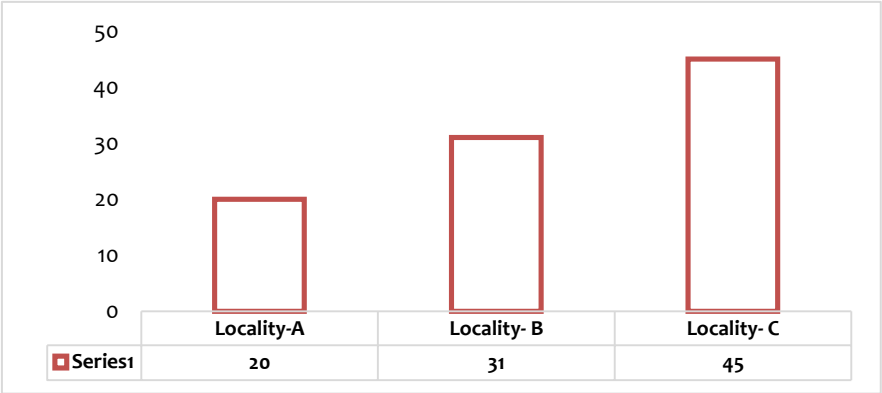


Fig 6. Locality-wise distributions of megaliths at Murti

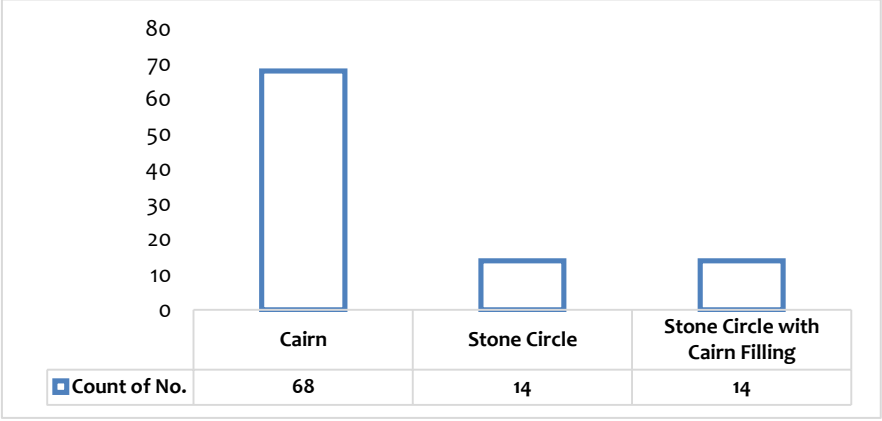


Fig. 7. Type-wise distribution of Megalithic burials at Murti

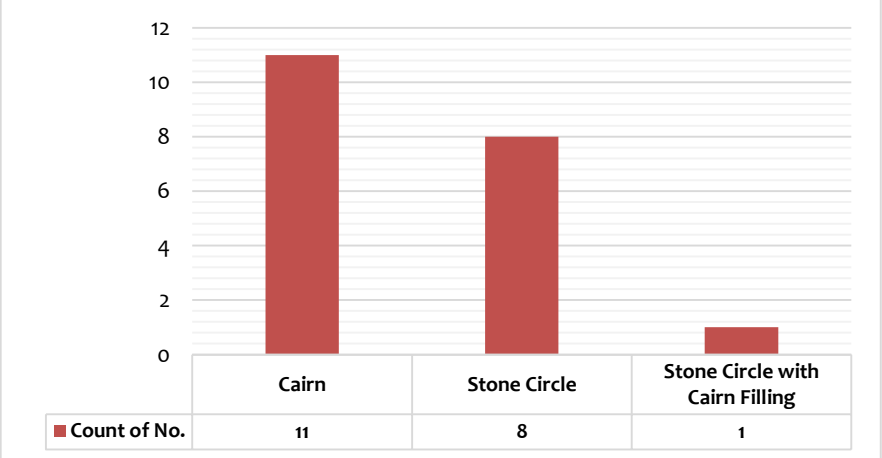


Fig. 8. Megalithic typology and distributions in locality A

3.2.2 Locality B

Locality B of the Murti megalithic site is predominantly characterized by cairn burials, with 26 such structures documented, making it the most common burial typology in this area (Fig. 9). Cairns, which are simple mounds of stones marking burial sites, suggest a widespread and possibly standard mortuary practice within this locality, indicative of a cultural preference for this straightforward yet significant form of commemoration. Only one cairn circle has been recorded, highlighting its relative rarity compared to the other types. In addition to the cairns, four stone circles with cairn filling have been identified, representing a more complex burial type that combines the symbolic circular arrangement of stones with the practical cairn filling. This combination could imply variations in social status or the importance of the individuals buried here. The dominance of cairns in Locality B, along with the presence of these more elaborate forms, reflects a community with diverse burial practices, likely influenced by social or ritualistic factors that dictated the choice of burial structure.

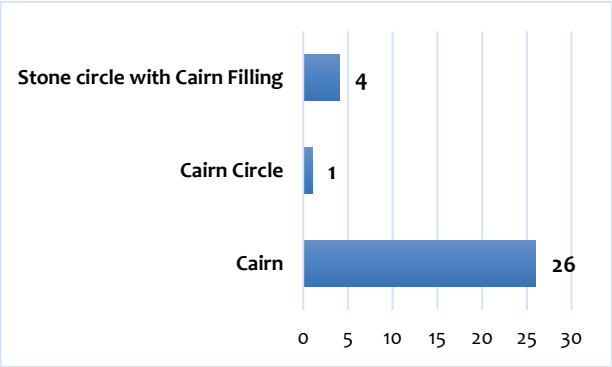


Fig. 9. Typological distributions of megaliths in locality B

3.2.3 Locality C

The typological analysis of the Megalithic burial sites in locality C reveals a diverse array of burial structures. This locality consists of the maximum number of megaliths and it seems that the cairns are the predominant types, with 31 instances identified. Stone Circles, which appear in 6 cases, indicate another prevalent burial form, though less common than cairns. Notably, 9 instances of stone circles with cairn filling are observed, highlighting a practice of combining these two elements (Fig. 10). Overall, the data indicate a predominant preference for cairns and a notable incorporation of stone circles, reflecting a complex and varied approach to megalithic burial practices in this region. Apart from the varying nature of diameter, the deposit of cairns, stone circles and stone circles with cairn filling has individual characteristics (Fig. 12). The analysis of deposits within the megaliths reveals distinct patterns across the three localities. Locality B shows a strong preference for deposits in the 31-60 cm range, with 22 out of 30 megaliths falling within this category, indicating a standardized burial practice. In contrast, Locality C exhibits greater variability, with significant numbers of megaliths having deposits both 30 cm or below and within the 31-60 cm range, suggesting diverse burial practices or environmental factors. Locality A displays a balanced distribution across all deposit ranges, indicating a mix of influences or practices. These variations highlight the cultural and ritual diversity at Dharti-Murti. While documenting the megaliths the condition of megaliths was also taken into consideration to get the current situation of megaliths.

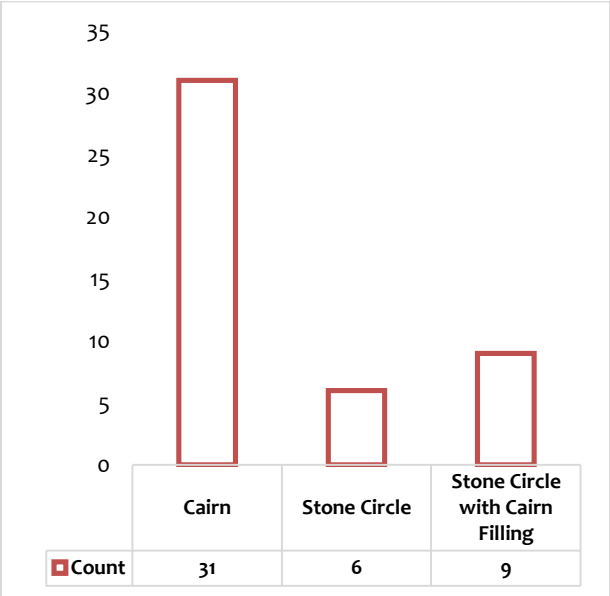


Fig. 10. Typological distributions of megaliths in locality C

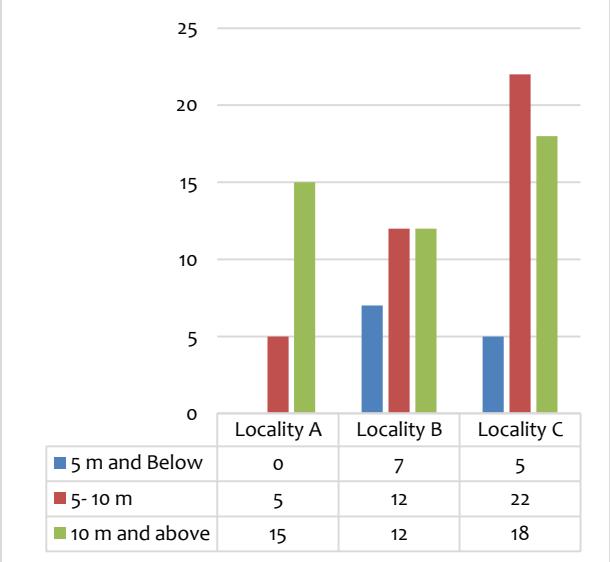
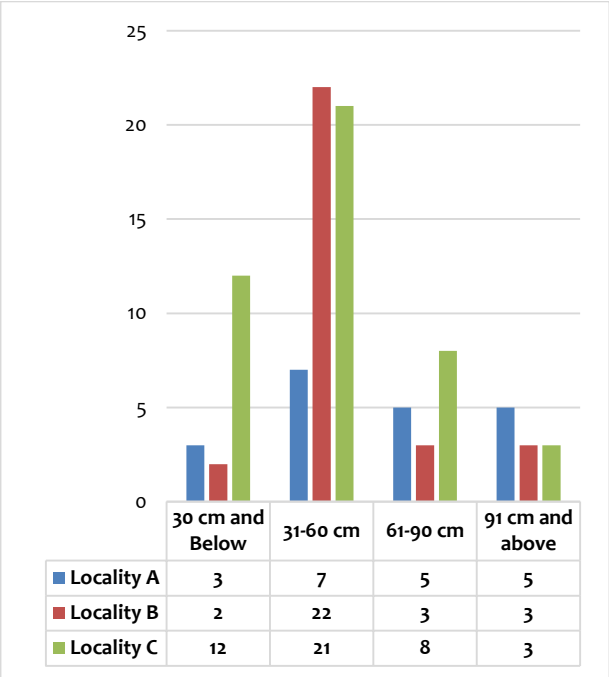


Fig. 11. Distribution of megalithic diameter in all localities of Murti

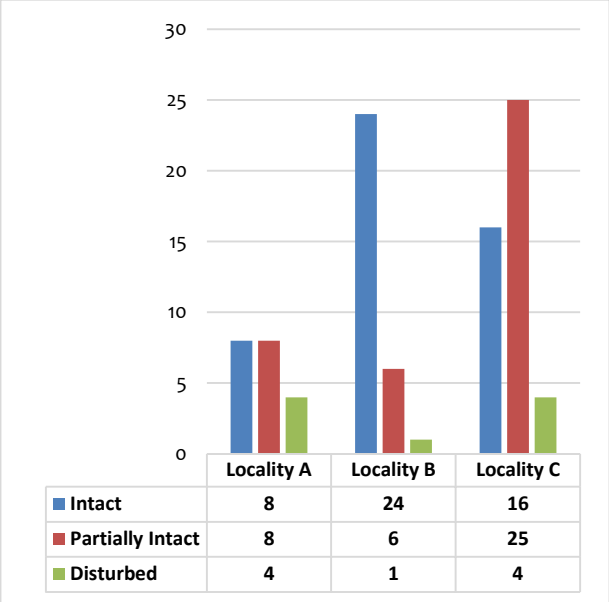
The survey reveals that locality B has the highest number of intact megaliths, where 24 out of 31 structures remain undisturbed, reflecting a relatively well-preserved area, possibly due to limited human interference. On the other hand, Locality C exhibits a concerning trend, with only 16 of

the 45 megaliths intact, while a significant 25 structures are partially intact, and 4 are disturbed (Fig. 13). This suggests that Locality C has likely experienced considerable environmental degradation or human activities, leading to a higher rate of structural compromise. Locality A presents a more balanced scenario, with an equal distribution of intact and partially intact megaliths (8 each), alongside 4 disturbed structures, indicating moderate preservation challenges. The data emphasizes the varying degrees of conservation needs across the site, with Locality C requiring immediate attention to prevent further deterioration.



	30 cm and Below	31-60 cm	61-90 cm	91 cm and above
Locality A	3	7	5	5
Locality B	2	22	3	3
Locality C	12	21	8	3

Fig. 12. Deposit variability of megaliths at Murti



	Locality A	Locality B	Locality C
Intact	8	24	16
Partially Intact	8	6	25
Disturbed	4	1	4

Fig.13. The present condition of the megaliths at Murti

The survey reveals that locality B has the highest number of intact megaliths, where 24 out of 31 structures remain undisturbed, reflecting a relatively well-preserved area, possibly due to limited human interference. On the other hand, Locality C exhibits a concerning trend, with only 16 of the 45 megaliths intact, while a significant 25 structures are partially intact, and 4 are disturbed (Fig. 13). This suggests that Locality C has likely experienced considerable environmental degradation or human activities, leading to a higher rate of structural compromise. Locality A presents a more balanced scenario, with an equal distribution of intact and partially intact megaliths (8 each), alongside 4 disturbed structures, indicating moderate preservation challenges. The data emphasizes the varying degrees of conservation needs across the site, with Locality C requiring immediate attention to prevent further deterioration.

Fig. 14. Ariel view of the megaliths divided by the road and current construction near the cemetery area

4. Discussions

The survey highlights nearly a hundred megaliths at one cemetery showing the preferred area for the megalithic communities of Dharti-Murti. The wider distribution of the megaliths also suggests the extensive use of particular areas for generations. The megalithic burials are explicitly erected over the barren and uncultivated area. This scenario of avoiding cultivated land for megalithic burials has been observed in almost all megalithic sites of the Vidarbha. The site is also interesting where different types of megaliths are erected in one cemetery. This variety in burial typology underscores the rich cultural diversity and the sophisticated mortuary practices of the communities that once inhabited the Dharti-Murti area.

The data from Dharti-murti reveals a rich variety of megalithic structures, with cairns being the most prevalent, followed by stone circles and a unique combination of stone circles with cairn fillings. This diversity in burial practices suggests a complex social structure and evolving cultural traditions at the site. The dominance of cairns reflects a favourite burial for the megalithic community of Dharti-Murti. The preferable choice of cairn along with a stone

circle perhaps influenced by social or ritualistic factors that dictated the choice of burial structure.

Primarily, the megaliths look similar and specific however, the micro documentation of them reveals interesting insights. The megaliths with different deposits perhaps show the personality of the deceased buried beath. It is accepted that the erection of the megalith is a communal effort. Thus more deposits of the megaliths are probably an indication of the socio-economic status of the deceased. Similarly, the megaliths with bigger diameters perhaps belong to the influential fellow of the community.

The megaliths were also documented according to the current conditions of the megaliths. This micro documentation will also help in future studies. The megaliths are already disturbed by the main road (Katol to Karanja) and currently new farmhouses and constructions threaten the megaliths (Fig. 14). The megaliths are partially disturbed and are maximum in locality C showing a major hazard to their presence. The disturbed burials present challenges for interpretation but can still provide insights through careful analysis. They yielded valuable insights into the burial practices and cultural traditions of the ancient communities in this region. While there is a strong presence of well-preserved and partially intact burials, the existence of disturbed sites highlights the need for careful management and preservation efforts to protect these important cultural resources.

The geographical factors played a vital role in shaping, forming and developing ancient cultures. The cemetery area of the Dharti-Murti is an indication of meticulously selected geographical locations, where necessities could be easily fulfilled. Thus, the selection of specific geographical places serves as a reflection of their ancient geographical knowledge (Deglurkar and Lad 1992). The megaliths are found in areas of small hills, non-cultivated land and barren territorial zones. This area is surrounded by natural resources like a perennial source of water, fertile land, abundant availability of loose stones, and stone slabs, extensive vegetation cover and minerals like iron. These elements are crucial for the subsistence of the megalithic community and the practice of their mortuary rituals and customs. Undoubtedly, these favourable geographical conditions were a major criterion for selecting the megalithic site of Dharti-Murti.

This site is an important part of the Vidarbha's archaeological heritage. Different types of megaliths have been documented systematically here. The presence of various megalithic structures suggests a diverse range of practices at Dharti-Murti. The comprehensive analysis of the megalithic structures revealed that the cairn type of megalith was the most preferred type for the disposal of the dead. The cairns might represent more traditional burials, while the stone circles and those with cairn fillings could be associated with special rituals, social status, or specific sub-groups within the population. Cairns, are typically composed of piled stones over burial sites. They are found in all localities indicating a widespread and possibly long-term tradition in this area. The stone circle is the second most preferable megalithic type at Murti. The appearance of stone circles with cairn fillings might reflect a transition in ritual practices, where earlier forms of cairns were incorporated into newer ceremonial structures, indicating a possible merging of traditions or an evolution in the community's mortuary customs.

A total of 96 megaliths documented at Murti revealed interesting information about their structure. The analysis of the megalith diameters divulges a clear pattern in the distribution of monument sizes across the three localities. Locality A is characterised by larger megaliths, with 15 out of 20 megaliths having a diameter of 10 meters or more, and none falling below 5 meters, indicating a concentration of substantial monuments in this area. Locality B shows a more even distribution, with nearly equal numbers of megaliths across the three size categories: 7 below 5 meters, 12 between 5 and 10 meters, and 12 above 10 meters, reflecting a diverse range of monument sizes. Locality C, however, exhibits a significant prevalence of medium to large-sized megaliths, with 22 out of 45 structures falling in the 5 to 10-meter range and 18 exceeding 10 meters in diameter, suggesting a concentration of substantial megalithic activity in this area (Fig. 11). The data highlights Locality C's importance as a site with a diverse array of larger megaliths, warranting further investigation into the cultural and ceremonial significance of these structures.

It is mentioned that the cemetery was divided into three localities. Megaliths of locality A and B were situated not far from each other however locality C was situated at a distance from others at a distinct location. This preference for burial construction is significant and perhaps showed the engagement of different bands of the community. The living megalithic traditions of central and eastern Indian tribals suggest the reservation of particular space for specific communities. The megaliths of the Murti also erected close to each other, this phenomenon is also throw light on the societal bonding of the megalithic people (Kellellu et.al. 2015: 204-225). It is believed that the megaliths located near each other probably belong to the same group or are related to each other. It is observed that the tribal communities of central India follow a similar tradition where close relative's graves are erected close to each other (Roy 1912).

Different types, shapes and sizes of megaliths are observed in the cemetery. The megaliths with high deposits surely require more labour and effort. It is believed that the size and type of megaliths depend upon the socio-political hierarchy and economic strength of the deceased. Different sizes of megaliths found here are indicative of the complex social and religious practices of the communities. The site provides valuable data for understanding the burial practices, social hierarchy and religious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants. Based on the typology, condition and

deposited height of the megaliths of Murti provide valuable insights into the burial practices. The data reveals a diverse array of burial structures, including cairns, stone circles, and stone circles with cairn filling. These data indicate that the Dharti-Murti site was a focal point for varied and intricate megalithic practices, with significant emphasis on the structural and ceremonial diversity of the burials. This variability provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and ritual significance of megalithic construction in the region. The Dharti-Murti megalithic site is a crucial link to understanding the prehistoric past of the Vidarbha region.

4. Conclusions

The Dharti-Murti megalithic cemetery provides a compelling insight into the ancient burial practices of the Vidarbha Megalithic culture. The presence of nearly one hundred megaliths at Murti suggests a preferred landscape setting and extensive use of the cemetery. Diverse beliefs, practices, and burial rites among megalithic communities are evidenced by the variety of megalithic types in the cemetery. The varied sizes and distributions of megaliths within the Dharti-Murti complex underscore the multifaceted socio-economic dynamics of the site. The current state of the megaliths at these sites is precarious and subject to potential disturbance; therefore, detailed documentation is of utmost necessity to gather as much information as possible before they completely vanish. The ongoing survey of megaliths at Dharti-Murti initiates the study of megaliths in this region. Further excavation and scientific work will significantly clarify the mortuary practices and overall nature of megaliths at Dharti-Murti.

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