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Full Length Research Paper

Influence of Ancient Sacred Sites of Jharkhand on the Evolution of Indian Religious Traditions

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ancient sacred sites in Jharkhand as dynamic agents in the evolution of Indian religious traditions. Moving beyond descriptive cataloguing, it argues that these sites functioned not merely as passive backdrops to religious practice but as active nodes of interaction, negotiation, and transformation between tribal cosmologies and institutionalised religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Drawing on archaeological evidence from megalithic cultures, ethnographic accounts of Sarna groves, and historical documentation of Parasnath Hill and regional temples, the paper demonstrates how Jharkhand's sacred landscape fostered processes of syncretism, localisation, and contested identity-formation over the longue durée. Applying Eliade's notion of hierophany alongside more critical frameworks drawn from landscape anthropology and postcolonial religious studies, the paper contends that Jharkhand's sacred geography represents a palimpsest of religious change. The findings suggest that indigenous Adivasi traditions made substantial, though historically under-acknowledged, contributions to the broader fabric of Indian religiosity, and that contemporary contestations over sites like Parasnath Hill are continuations of much older negotiations.

Keywords: *Jharkhand, sacred sites, Adivasi religion, Sarna, Parasnath, religious syncretism, megalithic traditions*

1. Introduction

Sacred sites in the Indian subcontinent have long constituted more than topographical features imbued with religious meaning; they are sedimented records of encounter, adaptation, and contestation. In historical terms, a "sacred site" may be defined as a bounded spatial locus where communities recognise the manifestation of transcendent power, and around which ritual, memory, and social organisation coalesce (Eliade, 1959; Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). Jharkhand, carved out as a separate state in 2000 but historically part of the Chhotanagpur plateau, offers a

particularly rich terrain for examining such sites because of the sustained co-presence of Adivasi (tribal) populations notably the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, and Ho alongside waves of Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist influence extending from prehistory to the present. The central research problem this paper addresses is the following: how did Jharkhand's sacred sites mediate the interaction between tribal and organised religions, and what role did they play in shaping the evolution of Indian religious traditions more broadly? The thesis advanced here is that Jharkhand's sacred geography operated as an active agent of religious change, simultaneously preserving indigenous cosmologies and enabling their entanglement with pan-Indian traditions, producing syncretic forms that continue to shape regional religiosity and political identity.

2. Theoretical Perspective

Any analysis of sacred sites must grapple with Mircea Eliade's influential proposition that such spaces mark ruptures between profane and sacred realities hierophanies where the transcendent "breaks through" into ordinary geography (Eliade, 1959). While Eliade's framework remains useful for its attention to the phenomenological density of sacred space, it has been criticised for its ahistorical and essentialising tendencies (Smith, 1987). More recent approaches in religious studies and landscape anthropology treat sacred sites as socially produced, historically layered, and politically contested (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Bremer, 2006). Particularly relevant here is the notion of the "sacred landscape" developed by scholars such as Bradley (2000) and applied to South Asian contexts by Eck (2012) and Sinha (2006). This framework holds that natural features hills, rivers, groves are not merely containers of religious meaning but co-constitute it through their material properties and the ritual practices they invite. For Jharkhand specifically, this is crucial: the dense sal forests, the granitic hills, and the riverine confluences of the Chhotanagpur plateau have shaped tribal cosmology in ways that cannot be reduced to later textual traditions. The paper therefore adopts a hybrid theoretical stance, combining Eliade's attention to the experiential power of sacred place with a critical insistence on historicity, contestation, and the agency of non-textual traditions (Sundar, 2007; Carrin, 2017).

3. Archaeological and Early Historical Background

The archaeological record of Jharkhand and the wider Chhotanagpur region provides the earliest material evidence of ritualised engagement with the landscape. Palaeolithic and Mesolithic tool assemblages from sites such as Paisra in the Kharagpur Hills and rock shelters in the Hazaribagh district demonstrate long human occupation (Pant & Jayaswal, 1991; Imam, 2014). More pertinent to the question of religion are the rock art traditions of the Isco caves and other sites in Hazaribagh, which depict anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and geometric motifs that scholars have tentatively associated with early ritual or shamanic practice (Imam, 2014). The megalithic tradition is especially significant. Sites such as Chokahatu ("the place of mourning") in Ranchi district contain thousands of memorial stones, some reportedly still maintained by Munda communities (Roy, 1912/2004). Megalithic burials across Jharkhand dolmens, menhirs, cairn circles indicate sustained practices of ancestor veneration, funerary ritual, and community memorialisation extending from the first millennium BCE into historic periods, and in ethnographic continuity into the present (Behera, 2013; Prakash, 2008). These sites do not represent a single religious system but a substratum of practice around death, lineage, and territorial belonging upon which later

traditions would be overlaid. The persistence of megalithic-type memorials in Munda and Ho society, sometimes erected for individuals who died within living memory, challenges any neat chronological separation between "prehistoric" and "contemporary" religion (Roy, 1912/2004; Parkin, 1992).

4. Religious Continuities in Jharkhand

The indigenous religious systems of Jharkhand often collectively labelled Sarna or, in Santhal contexts, Sarna Dharam display remarkable continuities with these archaeological substrata. At their core lie three interlinked features: animistic recognition of spirits or *bongas* inhabiting natural features; ancestor veneration through communal ritual and memorial stones; and a sacred ecology in which particular groves, trees, and hills are treated as inviolable (Bodding, 1925/2001; Troisi, 1979; Carrin, 2017). The Sarna grove itself typically a cluster of sal (*Shorea robusta*) trees preserved at the edge of a village functions as the principal ritual site for Oraon, Munda, and related groups. Here, the supreme deity (variously Dharmesh, Sing Bonga, or Marang Buru depending on community) is propitiated alongside village and ancestral spirits during festivals such as Sarhul and Karam (Roy, 1928/1995; Munda & Bosu Mullick, 2003). Anthropological studies emphasise that these groves are not merely sites of worship but ecological commons sustained by ritual prohibition, embodying a form of sacred ecology in which cosmological order and environmental conservation are mutually reinforcing (Malhotra et al., 2001; Xaxa, 2008). Ancestor veneration similarly persists in domestic ritual, with spaces within the house (the *ading* among Santhals) reserved for ancestral spirits, and in the erection of memorial stones that echo, in attenuated form, the megalithic practices of earlier millennia (Bodding, 1925/2001; Archer, 1974). These continuities are significant because they demonstrate that tribal religion in Jharkhand is neither a recent formation nor a derivative of Hindu practice, but an autonomous tradition with deep temporal roots.

5. Sites as Nodes of Religious Interaction

The analytically richer question concerns how these sites became arenas of encounter with organised religions. Three broad currents of interaction deserve attention.

Tribal–Hindu synthesis is visible across the region, but particularly at sites where tribal deities were gradually assimilated into the Hindu pantheon or where Hindu shrines were erected at pre-existing tribal sacred locations. The temple of Chhinnamasta at Rajrappa, located at the confluence of the Damodar and Bhairavi rivers, illustrates this process. While the site is today a major centre of Shakta worship associated with one of the Mahavidyas, ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that the confluence was a ritual site of longer standing, with tribal communities continuing to participate in its festivals (Sinha, 1962; Banerjee-Dube, 2008). Similarly, the goddess Kali at various rural shrines across Jharkhand often overlays older village-goddess traditions of the Gramadevata type, which themselves shade into tribal *bonga* worship (Sinha, 1962; Banerjee-Dube, 2008).

Buddhist and heterodox influences are more fragmentary but archaeologically detectable. Sites in the Singhbhum and Santhal Parganas regions have yielded Buddhist sculptural fragments and stupa remains, and the broader Magadhan hinterland to which Jharkhand belonged was traversed by Buddhist and Ajivika networks during the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods (Chakrabarti, 1993; Thakur, 2008). While Buddhism did not establish a dense institutional presence in the Chhotanagpur plateau comparable to

its hold in the Gangetic plains, its passage left traces that later Hindu and tribal traditions absorbed.

6. Transformation of Religious Traditions

These interactions were not unidirectional. Pan-Indian religions did not simply impose themselves upon a tribal substrate; they were themselves transformed through localisation. The Vaishnavism of the Chhotanagpur Nagvanshi rulers, for example, incorporated tribal ritual idioms and territorial deities into its political theology (Jha, 2003; Sinha, 1962). The cult of Jagannath, though centred in Odisha, drew upon tribal sources the god's origin in the Sabara community is embedded in temple mythology and Jharkhand's borderlands with Odisha exhibit similar patterns of tribal-Hindu fusion (Eschmann, Kulke, & Tripathi, 1978). Reciprocally, tribal traditions absorbed symbols and narratives from Hinduism. The Karam festival, centred on the worship of a branch of the Karam tree, has acquired in some contexts narratives linking it to Puranic figures, without displacing its indigenous ecological and ancestral meanings (Roy, 1928/1995; Munda & Bosu Mullick, 2003). The rise, in the colonial and postcolonial periods, of reformist movements such as the Tana Bhagat movement among the Oraon and the Birsa Munda-led Ulgulan similarly involved a complex rearticulation of tribal religion in dialogue with Hindu and Christian idioms (Singh, 1966/2002; Sundar, 2007). These shifts demonstrate that ritual meaning at sacred sites is not fixed. A hill that begins as the dwelling of a tribal deity may become a Tirthankara's mountain, a Shakta pitha, or a contested heritage site, with each transformation layering rather than erasing earlier meanings.

7. Case-Based Analysis

7.1 Parasnath Hill (Sammed Shikharji / Marang Buru)

Parasnath Hill is perhaps the most analytically productive site in Jharkhand for studying religious entanglement. For Jains, it is the holiest pilgrimage site, the place of *nirvana* of twenty Tirthankaras, with twenty-four shrines (*tonks*) dotting the ridge (Dundas, 2002; Cort, 2001). For Santhals, the same hill is Marang Buru, a primordial deity and ancestral seat, central to cosmological narratives and annual ritual (Hembrom, 1996; Carrin, 2017). The 2022–2023 controversy over the proposed designation of the site as an ecotourism destination, which drew protests from both Jain and Adivasi communities, made visible a contestation that is historically much deeper: the simultaneous sacrality of the site to two distinct traditions, each with legitimate claims, and neither reducible to the other (Rycroft, 2014; Carrin, 2017). The hill exemplifies the proposition that a single sacred site can sustain multiple, overlapping religious worlds.

7.2 Sarna Sacred Groves

The Sarna groves distributed across villages in the Chhotanagpur plateau constitute a decentralised sacred network rather than a single site. Anthropological research documents their role as loci of communal ritual, as repositories of oral cosmology, and as ecological commons (Malhotra et al., 2001; Xaxa, 2008). The recent political demand for the recognition of "Sarna" as a separate religious category in the Indian census (a longstanding issue that has gained new momentum in the 2020s) underscores how these groves function not only religiously but as symbols of a distinct Adivasi religious identity resistant to absorption into Hinduism (Xaxa, 2008; Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011).

7.3 Megalithic Sites: Chokahatu and Beyond

Chokahatu, in the Tamar region of Ranchi district, is among the largest megalithic necropolises in eastern

India, with thousands of memorial stones covering an extensive area (Roy, 1912/2004; Behera, 2013). The site's continued use by Munda communities into the historical and colonial periods provides a rare instance of observable continuity between prehistoric and ethnographic ritual. Similar sites at Barudih and across Singhbhum reinforce this picture (Chakrabarti, 1993; Prakash, 2008). Analytically, such sites show that ancestor veneration and territorial memorialisation features often associated with "primitive" religion persisted robustly alongside and within later religious formations.

7.4 Regional Pilgrimage Centres: Rajrappa and Baidyanath

The Chhinnamasta temple at Rajrappa and the Baidyanath Jyotirlinga at Deoghar (now in Jharkhand) represent the integration of the region into pan-Indian pilgrimage circuits. Baidyanath, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, draws millions of pilgrims annually during the Shravan month, particularly via the Kanwar Yatra from Sultanganj (Banerjee-Dube, 2008; Mohapatra, 2014). Yet local practice at both sites retains features animal sacrifice at Rajrappa, certain subsidiary shrines at Deoghar that suggest substrata of non-Brahmanical and tribal ritual woven into the Shaiva-Shakta framework (Sinha, 1962; Banerjee-Dube, 2008).

8. Conflict, Contestation, and Cultural Negotiation

Sacred sites in Jharkhand are not irenic spaces of pluralism but arenas of active contestation. Parasnath/Marang Buru is the most visible contemporary case, but similar dynamics play out at smaller sites where Hindu temple-building has sometimes occurred on tribal ritual grounds, and where Sarna communities have resisted the classification of their religion as a sub-variant of Hinduism (Xaxa, 2008; Sundar, 2007). The colonial encounter intensified such contestations: ethnographic and administrative projects from the late nineteenth century often categorised tribal religion as "animism" distinct from Hinduism, while simultaneously Hindu reform movements sought to incorporate tribal communities under the banner of *sanatan dharma* (Banerjee-Dube, 2007; Rycroft, 2014). These dynamics have political dimensions. The Jharkhand movement that culminated in statehood in 2000 drew heavily on sacred geography the hills, the groves, the memorial stones as symbols of Adivasi distinctiveness (Munda & Bosu Mullick, 2003; Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011). In this sense, sacred sites have functioned as resources for identity construction in ways that extend far beyond the strictly religious.

9. Critical Interpretation: Passive or Active?

The evidence assembled here supports an argument for the active role of Jharkhand's sacred sites in shaping religious change. Three dimensions are particularly important.

- First, sites such as Parasnath Hill and the Sarna groves have resisted complete assimilation into any single tradition, maintaining instead a multiplicity that has forced institutional religions to accommodate rather than overwrite local meanings. The very persistence of competing nomenclature Sammed Shikharji and Marang Buru for the same hill is evidence of a durable pluralism.
- Second, these sites have been generative of new religious forms. The syncretic devotional practices at Rajrappa, the reformist tribal movements organised around sacred landscapes, and the emergence of the Sarna political-religious identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries all attest to ongoing creativity (Singh, 1966/2002; Sundar, 2007; Carrin, 2017).
- Third, the material and ecological properties of these sites the sal grove, the granitic hill, the riverine

confluence have shaped what could be imagined and practised there. Sacred ecology is not a passive backdrop but an active constituent of religious meaning, a point underscored by recent work in environmental humanities applied to South Asia (Malhotra et al., 2001; Sinha, 2006).

At the same time, this agency is constrained. The sites have not been able to prevent displacement, mining-led ecological destruction, and political appropriation. The Chhotanagpur plateau's mineral wealth has made many sacred landscapes vulnerable to industrial encroachment, and the resulting struggles reveal both the power and the fragility of sacred space as a historical force (Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011; Xaxa, 2008).

10. Conclusion

Jharkhand's ancient sacred sites are best understood not as relics but as ongoing participants in the making and remaking of Indian religious traditions. From megalithic necropolises that preserve ancestor veneration across millennia, through Sarna groves that anchor a distinct Adivasi cosmology, to Parasnath Hill and Baidyanath Dham where pan-Indian traditions engage with indigenous substrates, these sites have been arenas of continuity, interaction, and transformation. They challenge any narrative of Indian religious history that treats tribal traditions as peripheral or merely receptive; they show instead that indigenous sacred geographies have been co-constitutive of the broader traditions that scholars gloss as Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist. The broader implication is methodological as well as historical. Studying Indian religious history from the vantage of Jharkhand's sacred sites displaces the Gangetic-Sanskritic centre and brings into view the plurality, contestation, and dynamism that have always characterised the subcontinent's religious life. Recognising this is not merely an academic correction; it has consequences for contemporary debates over religious classification, heritage management, and the rights of indigenous communities to their sacred landscapes.

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