



Research Paper

A Typological Classification of Megaliths of Mizoram

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I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of raising megalithic monuments is still a living tradition among some of the northeast Indian tribes such as the Mizo, the Khasi, the Garos and the Nagas. The word 'megalith' simply means a large standing stone but the characteristics features of megalithism include the raising of upright stones, alignment, table stones, cairns, etc. The use of wood or stones, or both as memorials to dead and to the living, is also another characteristic features of this tradition. The purpose and significance of the megalithic tradition in society, differed from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture.

The word '*Megalith*' is of Greek origin meaning a large stone (*mega-large, litho-stone*¹. According to Gordon Childe,² the term (megalith) was first introduced by antiquarians in the middle of the 19th century, to define a class of monuments in western and northern Europe, consisting of large undressed stones bearing celtic names such as dolmens, cromlechs, menhirs etc. These names were subsequently adopted to term complex stone structures, widely distributed over Europe, the Mediterranean region, some part of western Asia, Japan and south east Asia including India.

It may also be noted, that Childe argues that the classification of megaliths is not based merely on the material or magnitude of the stones, but also the function and purpose behind the erection.³ He further adds that, "in practice the term is applied only to monuments the use of which is known imperfectly or not at all, but which we presume were erected for some superstitious, ritual or religious end."⁴ Gordon Childe's observation has been widely accepted by scholars working on the megalithic problem.

Megalithic structures are of many different kinds. Glyn Daniels⁵ who has worked on the problem of European megalithic monuments, list five types of prehistoric monuments. They are-

- 1) the menhir or single standing stone,
- 2) groups of standing stone set in rows called alignments
- 3) circular setting of large stones such as Stonehenge and Avebury
- 4) chambered tombs walled and roofed with megaliths
- 5) apsidal temples of Malta

In the Indian sub-continent, different types of megaliths have been reported from almost all parts of India right from Kashmir to the Malabar Coast and from Assam to Baluchistan.⁶ A number of efforts have been made to classify all the available groups of Indian megaliths by both foreign and Indian scholars. On the issue of classification, Cecile Mawlong states that,

"Early investigators on the megalithic problem of India, like James Fergusson, Meadows Taylor etc. did not employ a uniform terminology which resulted in a lot of confusion as they used terms with varying connotations. Therefore the need for working out a proper classification of Indian megaliths was strongly felt in the mid-twentieth century. The first attempted to work to classify the different types of megalithic monuments in India was made by VD Krishnaswamy, who attempted to work out a precise and standardized nomenclature for south Indian megaliths in 1948. The Archaeological Survey of India had subsequently accepted and adopted his classification. Excavations carried out since, have, however indicated that the nomenclature worked out in 1948, needed modification in the light of new evidences."⁷

Since then, leading Indian archaeologists such as KN Dikshit, KM Srivastava, SB Deo, H. Sarkar, NR Bannerjee, MDN Sahi, KS Ramachandran, KV Soundara Rajan, SP Gupta, MK Dhavalikar and others, have discussed and written a great deal on the problem of megaliths in India, particularly on the subject of classification and distribution pattern.⁸

Even today, megalithism is still a living tradition among some tribal groups in some parts of the world including India and particularly among some of the world including India and particularly among some of the northeast Indian tribes like Khasi, Nagas and the Mizos.⁹ Northeast India, has rich megalithic remains and the

greatest concentration is observed in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, Megalithic structures are also found in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

The practice of erecting megaliths is one of the striking features of the Mizo culture. The megaliths served as memorials to the dead as well as to the living. In Mizo society, megaliths are closely connected with the feast of merit. Erection of menhirs or upright stones is a common practice followed by the erection of other types of monuments, such as stone seats, platforms and heap of stone (cairns), etc. Similar types of megalithic structures are also found in other north eastern states of India. The Mizo erected megalithic monuments usually at the entrance of the village (kawtchhuah) and alongside the road and sometimes in the courtyard of the chief. Whenever a chief erected a stone monument at the entrance of the village, it is always accompanied by a stone platform (lungdawh). The stone platforms of the chief were termed 'Lal Lungdawh (stone platform of the chief). The megaliths usually faced the road and are erected alongside the road at the entrance of the villagers with heavy loads coming from their jhum land or passers by. Other than memorials to the dead, the erection of megaliths are also associated with feasts of merit of the chiefs and of the *thangchuah pa*¹⁰, to commemorate individual prosperity and achievements and also on the occasion of the establishment of the village.

Although there is a fair amount of literature dealing with various aspects of Mizo history, society and culture, studies on the megalithic tradition of the Mizo is still inadequate. Some of the basic issues on the problem include classification of Mizo megaliths. In this regard, only B. Lalthangliana has attempted a classification based on the monuments. No attempt was made to classify the monuments on the basis of typological considerations, which we believe is the primary basis of classification. Accordingly, he divided the stone monuments into three categories based on the techniques of carvings depicted on the monuments, such as simple scratching, incisions or engravings, and embossed motifs which includes animal figures, objects such as gongs, weapons etc. and human figures.¹¹

There are some serious problems with the above classification since carvings are depicted only on some of the upright stones while completely absent on the other types of Mizo megaliths. Therefore the above classification provides only a limited view of the tradition. Categories of monuments such as stone seats, stone heaps (or cairns) and stone platform with an upright stone on top have been left outside the discussion. Although carvings are indeed an important feature of Mizo megaliths, they are not an intrinsic feature of all megaliths. Therefore, B. Lalthangliana's classification is inadequate as it excludes other type of megalithic structures. Therefore, there is a need to work out a comprehensive classification of the Mizo megaliths based on typological considerations.

On the basis of field work, we found that there are four different types of megalithic structures in Mizoram. They are:

- a) Standing stones (*lungphum*) -either singly or in alignment (*hranglungphum*)
- b) Table stones or stone seats supported by three smaller stones (*Sikpui lung*)
- c) Stone platforms carrying a stone upright on top (*lungdawh*)
- d) Cairns or a heap of stones (*pura pachang*)

1. Standing stones (lungphun):

The standing stones are divided into two groups i.e. those erected singly or those erected in rows

a) Single standing stone: Single standing stones are the most common type of monument and are widely distributed throughout the length and breadth of Mizoram. Most of the Mizo megaliths are upright stones varying in height from 1m to 6 meters. For instance. The tallest monument in Mizoram is Lungvando, located at East Lungdar village in Serchhip district. It measures about 6 meters high. The standing stones are erected for various purposes, such as memorials to the dead, to commemorate social achievements, and foundation of villages etc.

b) Alignment: This group includes upright stones set up in rows, with the numbers varying from 4 to 10 or more stones and the height varying from 2 to 3 meter depending upon the donor of the monuments. Alignments were erected to commemorate individual of the foundation of villages. Among the Lusei, brave warriors are commemorated by the setting up of a single stone upright, accompanied by a group of small stones. Such alignments of stone were called *Hranglungphun*¹² and were usually located at the entrance of the village on one of the approach roads.

As discussed earlier, carvings are depicted on most of the standing stones. But on other types such as stone seats, cairns and stone platforms, there are no carvings at all. The figures carved on the upright stone, include figures of humans, animals (specially the mithun), birds, spear, gun, smoking pipe and prestige goods such as gongs, necklaces etc. The technique of carving differs from one stone to another. Thus while some figures are deeply engraved, other are not. The standing stones are again divided into three groups based on the technique of carvings.

i) Plain monument: These include standing stones on which carvings are absent.

ii) **Engraving of figures on standing stones:** Many of the Mizo upright stones bear scratching of figures on the outer surface of the stone. In this method the figures are only lightly incised, giving the appearance of mere scratching on stone, while other bear figures shown in higher relief, achieved by deeper engravings on stone. In second method, figures are engraved by deep incising or deep cutting so that the figure stand out from the main frame. These types of carvings have a widespread distribution throughout Mizoram.

iii) **Engraving of figures in high relief or embossing:** In this method, the figures were first engraved in high relief and then the rest of the outer later of stone was chiseled off so that the figure appeared to bulge out of the main frame which gave the impression of embossing. The engravings are smooth and plain and are of higher quality than those using the previous method. Such kinds of carvings can be seen in Laituma Lung, Mangkhaia Lung, and Lungphunlian.

2. Stone seats (Sikpui Lung):

These are flat table stones raised above the ground and supported by three small stones. The size and shape of the flat stone depends on the availability of stone. The stone seats are erected in the course of the Sikpui Roui¹³ festival celebrated by the Hmar clans. Only the drummer and the chanter were allowed to sit on the stone seat so erected. The height of a stone seat ranged from 2 to 3 ft. This kind of stone structure are concentrated only in Hmar settlements i.e. in the north eastern parts of Mizoram and Churanchandpur district of Manipur, as it is connected with the Sikpui Roui festival of the Hmar clans.

3. Stone platform with an upright stone on top (Lungdawh):

The Mizo also constructed a stone platform (lungdawh) usually at the entrance of the village. The stone platform is usually accompanied by an upright stone, a monument that is raised only in honour of chief and those who had earned the title *thangchuah*. It had no connection with burials. The stone platform of the chief is called 'Lal Lungdawh' (*lal* means chiefs, *lungdawh* means stone platform). The main purpose of stone platforms was to commemorate dead chiefs and also to show the greatness of the chiefs, as well as providing a resting place for the villagers and travelers, and may have also functioned as a place where children were gathered together to await their parents return from their jhum fields. Among the Mara clans who occupy southern Mizoram, the stone platform (*Longdoh/lodawh* in Mara dialect) is regarded as memorials restricted only to the chiefs and wealthy persons in the society. The *longdoh* which measures about 2m in length, 2m in width and 1m in height, is usually located at the entrance of the village. Each platform (*longdoh*) is made up of a number of stones each of which measure 2 feet in length and 1 foot in breath. Thus the *longdoh* takes the form of a square enclosed by four stones wall about 3ft high, and the empty space in between is then filled up with soil and a flat stone placed on it.

4. Stone heaps or Cairns (Phura Pachang):

Another type of megalithic structure found in Mizoram are heaped up stone rubble (or cairns). They are pyramidal in shape. Such monuments are only raised by the Mara clans, as memorials to dead chiefs and wealthy person in society. The heights of these monuments are usually about 2 to 3 meters. It may be noted, that cairns are raised as memorials only for male members in society. The mara calls such types of stone monuments as *phura pachang* and they are usually erected at the entrance of villages on one of the approach roads. Such kinds of stone monuments are found only in the Mara inhabited area i.e. southern part of Mizoram and some parts of the present Chin Hills of Burma where some of the Mara clans are settled.

Thus, we see different types of megalithic structures in Mizoram which we seen in other parts of the world. As mentioned earlier, the purpose and significance of the megalithic tradition in society differed from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture. Unlike others, the significant features of Mizo megaliths are its components of engravings and interestingly most of the Mizo megaliths are full of carvings of different pictures.

NOTES AND REFERENCES :

- [1]. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol, VI*(15th edition), USA, 1981.
- [2]. Quoted in KM Srivastava, *New Horizons of Indian Archaeology*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 156.
- [3]. See Cecile A. Mawlong, "Classification of Khasi Megaliths: A critique", *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Eleventh Session* 1990, p. 9.
- [4]. Quoted in Cecile A. Mawlong, "Megalithic Monuments of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills: An Ethno-Archaeological study", (Unpublished Ph D thesis submitted to the Department of History, NEHU, 1996), p.28.
- [5]. *Ibid*
- [6]. KN Dikshit, "The Origin and Distribution of Megaliths in India", in AK Narain (ed) *Proceedings of Seminar on Problems of Megaliths in India, BHU, 1969, p.2.*
- [7]. Cecile A. Mawlong, *op. cit.*, p.29.
- [8]. *Ibid*
- [9]. *Ibid*

- [10]. There are two kinds of *Thangchhuah* (composed of two words *thang*-fame, *chhuah*- accomplished) i.e. *Inlama Thangchhuah* and *Ram lama Thangchhuah*. For *inlama thangchhuah*, one must have enough wealth to perform a series of feasts of merit in one's life time and one must possess enough domestic animals to be killed for the feasts. The title *Ram lama thangchhuah* could be attained by killing certain prescribed animals such as like bear, sambar, barking deer, wild Mithun (Sele), stag, wild boar, viper snake (rulngan) and Hawk (muvanlai). Therefore, the term *thangchhuah* literally means one who has fulfilled his social obligations to attain a high status in the society as well as the right of admission to paradise (pialral) after death. So many able-bodied men tried to earn in one way or another.
- [11]. B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Chanchin*, p.396.
- [12]. *Hranglungphun- Hrang* means a brave warrior who killed a number of wild animals, *Lungphun* means stone monuments. It is a stone alignment raised in honour of the deceased warrior along with a single standing stone. For details, see Hualngo Literature and Cultural Association (henceforth *HLCA*), *Zofate Chanchin*, Tahan, 1995, p.286.
- [13]. *Sikpui Roui*- It is a feast festival which was observed by the Hmar clan, when a village enjoyed good health and harvest atleast for three consecutive years. The forefathers of Hmar clan did not celebrate Sikpui on those years whenever bad befell on them. It used to be celebrated only and when the time and conditions were at there best; when the community as a whole had a successful and abundant harvest, and the years in which there were no death and disease in the village or among the communities or there were no wars and invasions. It was a thanksgiving festival and observed mostly in winter times. The word *Sikpui* means 'winter' and *Ruoi* means 'feast' and it is probably due to this, the festival is called *Sikpui Roui*. This festival is not much associated with religion, but was more of a social gathering.