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Bridging the Past and Present: Tribal and Ethnographic Archaeology in Bastar, Chhattisgarh

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Abstract

Tribal and ethnographic archaeology in Chhattisgarh and its neighboring states provide valuable insights into megalithic traditions, rock art, and contemporary craft designs, including their commercial applications. This study highlights the continuity of tribal cultural heritage, its interpretations and representations, and the adaptation of traditional designs for commercial use in public spaces. By integrating archaeological excavations, oral traditions, and ethnographic comparisons, this paper examines how tribal communities preserve and transmit their heritage across generations, demonstrating cultural resilience and adaptation. Chhattisgarh's tribal communities, including the Gond, Baiga, and Maria, have maintained strong ritualistic and cultural ties to ancient archaeological sites. This research explores megalithic burials and rock art, offering tangible evidence of Indigenous cultural continuity. Additionally, it examines the role of sacred landscapes and Indigenous ecological knowledge in sustaining cultural identity. The integration of traditional motifs in contemporary tribal art and crafts further illustrates the interaction between historical traditions and modern commercial expressions. Colonial policies, urbanization, and industrial expansion have significantly affected tribal heritage conservation, often leading to the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. This paper addresses these challenges while emphasizing the importance of community-led preservation efforts. The role of museums, cultural institutions, and policy measures in protecting Indigenous heritage is also discussed, highlighting the necessity of inclusive

and participatory approaches to heritage management. Using an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates archaeology, ethnography, and sociology, this study enhances understanding of the living traditions that connect the past and present in Chhattisgarh's archaeological and ethnographic

landscape. By recognizing Indigenous agency and resilience, it underscores the need for sustainable heritage conservation efforts that respect and preserve the historical and cultural legacies of tribal communities.

Key Words

Tribal studies, Oral Traditions, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Knowledge System, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

The study of megalithic traditions and ethnographic archaeology in Bastar provides valuable insights into the continuity of Indigenous cultural heritage. These sites, deeply embedded in tribal life, function as sacred spaces and community gathering points, reinforcing spiritual beliefs, social cohesion, and environmental consciousness. However, colonial policies, urbanization, and industrial expansion have significantly impacted the preservation of these traditions. This paper explores the integration of oral traditions, archaeology, and ethnography in understanding Bastar's megalithic heritage while addressing contemporary challenges such as commercialization, cultural representation, and Indigenous-led conservation efforts.

The significance of megalithic traditions in Bastar lies in their continued relevance to the cultural and spiritual lives of tribal communities. Unlike mainstream historical narratives that often perceive these structures as relics of the past, ethnographic research reveals that they remain central to rituals, oral histories, and communal identity. By incorporating archaeological findings with Indigenous oral traditions, this study demonstrates the resilience of tribal heritage and the ways in which these communities adapt to modern pressures while maintaining cultural integrity.

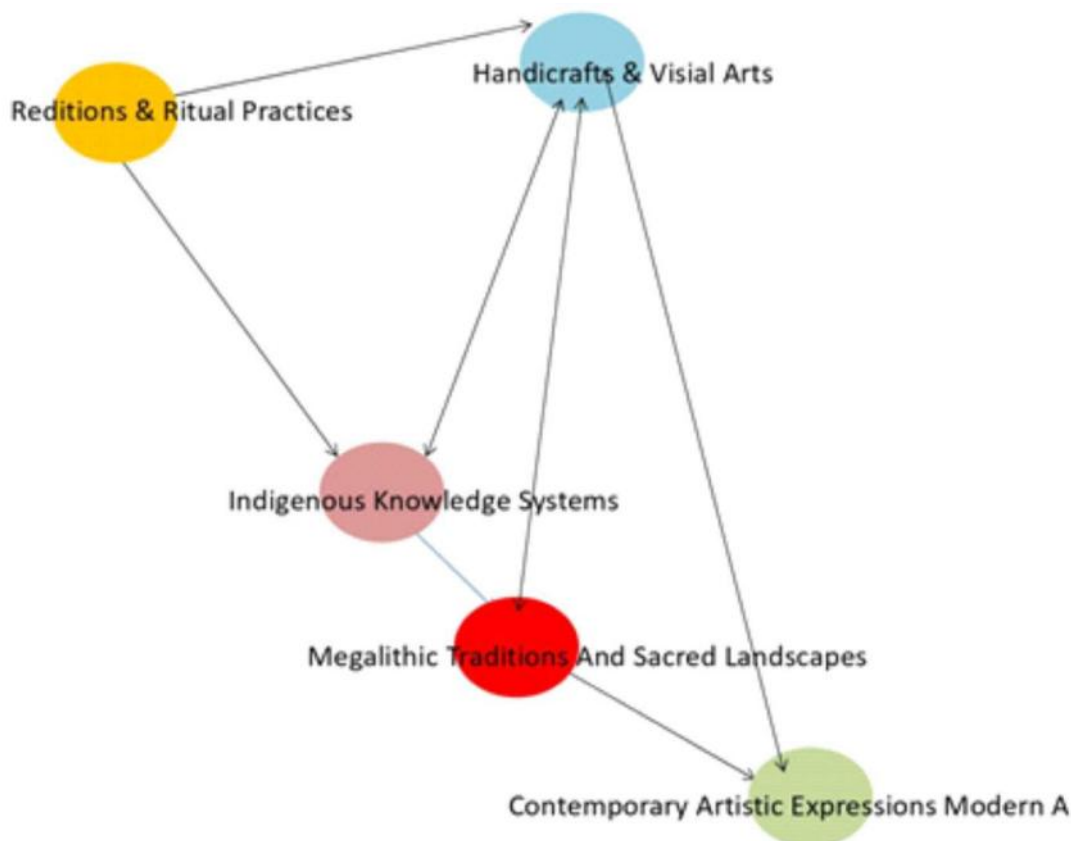
Colonial policies in India historically marginalized Indigenous communities, often dismissing their spiritual and cultural landscapes as primitive. The British administration largely overlooked the ritual significance of megalithic sites, categorizing them as mere archaeological curiosities. This dismissal contributed to the gradual erosion of Indigenous knowledge systems, as official policies favored Western scientific methodologies over Indigenous epistemologies. Today, urbanization and industrial expansion further threaten these sites, necessitating a shift towards community-led conservation models that acknowledge the agency of Indigenous groups in preserving their own heritage.

In addition to heritage conservation, this study also examines the adaptation of traditional tribal motifs in commercial spaces, particularly in public art and contemporary crafts. The integration of megalithic symbols into textiles, sculptures, and murals exemplifies how Indigenous knowledge systems continue to evolve while retaining their cultural significance. However, commercialization poses both opportunities and risks: while it provides economic benefits to Indigenous artisans, it also risks distorting sacred symbols for market-driven purposes. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates archaeology, ethnography, and sociology, this paper aims to enhance understanding of the living traditions that connect the past and present in Bastar's tribal landscape. It underscores the necessity of sustainable heritage conservation efforts that not only protect physical sites but also respect Indigenous agency, ensuring that cultural legacies are preserved for future generations.

Conceptual Diagram: Indigenous Knowledge System, Megalithic Traditions, Rituals and Artistic Expressions

This conceptual diagram illustrates the interconnected relationship between Indigenous knowledge systems, megalithic traditions & sacred landscapes (tribal heritage), oral traditions & ritual practices, tribal crafts & visual arts, and modern adaptations & public art (contemporary artistic expressions). Each component plays a vital role in sustaining and evolving Indigenous cultural heritage, demonstrating the continuity of Indigenous knowledge and living traditions.

By bridging the past and present, this framework highlights how historical Indigenous practices remain integral to contemporary cultural expressions. Indigenous worldviews continue to inspire artistic and craft-making traditions, with megalithic symbols frequently incorporated into carvings, metalwork, and textiles. Many traditional crafts are adapted for modern markets, fashion, and graphic design, ensuring their relevance in today's world. Elements of Indigenous knowledge also find new meaning in urban art, museums, and tourism industries. Public sculptures, murals, and installations feature prehistoric patterns, further reinforcing the influence of Indigenous cosmologies on contemporary aesthetics.



The continuity of Indigenous knowledge is evident in the way Indigenous cosmologies, rituals, crafts, and sacred landscapes remain deeply embedded in contemporary cultural practices. Despite modernization and external influences, these traditions persist, adapting to new contexts while retaining their core spiritual and cultural significance. Ritual practices continue to honor ancestral connections, and megalithic sites remain sacred spaces where communities engage in ceremonies that reinforce collective memory and identity. Indigenous crafts, often infused with cosmological symbolism, serve as both aesthetic expressions and vehicles for cultural transmission, ensuring that traditional knowledge is preserved and passed down through generations.

The interdependence between tradition and modernity is reflected in the evolving role of Indigenous artistic and ritualistic expressions. Megalithic traditions, which once functioned primarily as spiritual and communal landmarks, now inspire contemporary tribal crafts and influence urban aesthetics. This interplay between the past and present is visible in the adaptation of traditional storytelling, songs, and mythological motifs into modern artistic representations, such as murals, textiles, and sculptural installations. Indigenous craftspeople incorporate historical symbols into their work, not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a response to global market demands, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of these traditions in the face of economic and social change.

The bridging of past and present is central to this conceptual framework, illustrating how Indigenous knowledge, sacred landscapes, oral traditions, and crafts continue to shape modern artistic expressions and

heritage conservation practices. Rather than being relegated to history, these traditions actively inform contemporary cultural production, influencing public art, museum exhibits, and heritage tourism initiatives. This framework challenges the notion that Indigenous cultural heritage is static or confined to the past, instead emphasizing its dynamic and evolving nature. It highlights the need for community-led conservation efforts that recognize Indigenous agency, ensuring that these traditions remain a living, breathing part of contemporary cultural landscapes.

Ethnographic Narratives from Bastar

Field research in Bastar reveals the deeply ingrained significance of megalithic sites in contemporary tribal life. These sites, often marked by large stone structures, serve as sacred spaces where the tribal communities engage in ritualistic practices that connect them to their ancestors. Through a series of ethnographic interviews with tribal leaders and elders, it becomes evident that these megalithic sites are not merely remnants of the past but continue to play an active role in shaping cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and social cohesion. Interviews with village elders underscore the continuity of ancestral worship, where stories, songs, and oral traditions are passed down through generations. One elder, for example, described an annual ceremony at a megalithic site where offerings of grains, flowers, and animal sacrifices are made to appease spirits and ensure agricultural prosperity. This ritual, known locally as “Gudi Pandum,” is attended by multiple generations, reinforcing the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Additionally, these narratives highlight the function of megalithic sites as community gathering places. The stones serve as mnemonic devices, each one associated with a specific ancestor or historical event. Oral traditions reveal that certain stones are believed to hold protective powers, ensuring the well-being of the village. These narratives align with broader indigenous practices worldwide, where sacred landscapes act as custodians of history, spirituality, and communal identity.

Field observations further reveal that these megalithic sites are often situated in ecologically significant areas, such as near water sources or forest clearings, suggesting a deep environmental consciousness embedded in tribal cosmology. The maintenance of these sites, through rituals and periodic offerings, reflects an ongoing relationship between humans and nature, a theme echoed in indigenous communities across South Asia and beyond. Moreover, the oral histories associated with these sites often carry moral and ethical teachings. Elders narrate cautionary tales about the consequences of disrespecting sacred stones, emphasizing the importance of communal responsibility and ecological stewardship. These narratives function as tools of social regulation, ensuring that younger generations adhere to cultural norms and values. The ethnographic findings in Bastar contribute to a growing body of knowledge on indigenous belief systems and their resilience in the face of modernity. Despite external pressures, including land encroachments and developmental projects, tribal communities continue to uphold these traditions, demonstrating an adaptive cultural continuity that deserves scholarly attention.

Archaeological Evidence and Scholarly Perspectives

Archaeological studies in Bastar provide further insights into the historical depth and cultural significance of megalithic sites. Scholars such as Singh (2008), Chakrabarti (2019), Bhoi (2010; 2020) and *Mishra, Tirkey, and Besra (2022, 2023)* suggest that these structures date back several centuries, with some possibly having prehistoric origins. The megaliths of Bastar exhibit a variety of forms, including stone circles, dolmens, menhirs, and cairn burials, each serving distinct ritualistic and commemorative purposes.

Recent excavations indicate that some megalithic sites in Bastar align with celestial patterns, hinting at their possible use for calendrical observations. These findings draw parallels with other ancient megalithic complexes, such as Stonehenge in England and Nabta Playa in Egypt, where alignments with solstices and equinoxes suggest an advanced understanding of astronomy. Scholars such as Barsh (2000), Ickerodt (2010), Rashmi (2023), argue that such alignments reflect the cognitive sophistication of past societies, demonstrating that indigenous knowledge systems encompassed both spiritual and scientific dimensions. Despite the antiquity

of these sites, their continued use in contemporary tribal practices challenges the conventional archaeological narrative that often treats megaliths as static relics of the past. Instead, these structures function as “living cultural landscapes” and “living tradition”, continuously embedded within social and ritualistic frameworks (Mitri, 2016, pp.22-80 as cited in Passah 2023, pp. 174). Ethnographic data corroborates this perspective, illustrating how communities interact with megalithic sites in ways that reaffirm cultural continuity and communal identity. Furthermore, the persistence of megalithic traditions in Bastar highlights the resilience of indigenous cultural expressions despite historical disruptions, including colonial interventions and post-independence developmental policies. The British colonial administration largely overlooked the ritual significance of these sites, categorizing them as mere archaeological curiosities. However, local communities have persistently safeguarded these traditions, incorporating them into contemporary religious and social practices.

A comparative analysis of Bastar’s megalithic sites with those found in other parts of India, such as the Khasi and Garo hills in Meghalaya, reveals similar patterns of ritual continuity. In both regions, megaliths are central to ancestor worship, social memory, and territorial identity. For instance, in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, megalithic burial stones serve as residences of deceased ancestors, illustrating their continual importance in the lives of the living (Marak 2012). Additionally, among the Jaintias, there exists a living tradition of erecting megalithic monuments linked to beliefs and cultural practices, reflecting the integration of these structures into social networks and kinship systems (Marak 2019). These parallels suggest a broader indigenous tradition of megalithic veneration across South Asia, challenging simplistic categorizations that separate archaeology from ethnography.

The scholarly perspectives emphasize the role of megaliths in shaping community interactions. The spatial arrangement of these sites often mirrors social hierarchies, with certain stones designated for specific clans or lineages. The act of erecting a new megalith is seen as a communal endeavor, symbolizing unity and collective remembrance. These practices reinforce social bonds, highlighting the integrative function of megalithic traditions within tribal societies (Wunderlich et. al. 2021). By examining Bastar’s megalithic sites through an interdisciplinary lens that combines archaeology and ethnography, scholars can better appreciate the dynamic interplay between material culture and living traditions. This approach underscores the need for heritage conservation policies that recognize the ongoing cultural significance of these sites rather than merely preserving them as historical artifacts.

Linking Bastar’s Megalithic Traditions to Tribal Craft

The relationship between Bastar’s megalithic traditions and tribal craft is deeply intertwined, reflecting the ways in which material culture embodies spiritual and communal meanings. Traditional artisans in Bastar incorporate megalithic motifs into their wood carvings, metalwork, and textiles, demonstrating a continuity between ancient traditions and contemporary artistic expressions. One of the most prominent examples of this connection is found in Dhokra art, a lost-wax metal casting technique practiced by the tribal communities of Bastar. Many Dhokra figurines depict ancestors, animals, and deities associated with megalithic sites. The stylistic representations often mirror the physical attributes of megalithic stones, with elongated forms and geometric patterns that symbolize ancestral spirits and protective forces.

Similarly, woodcarvers in Bastar create intricate panels for village shrines, often incorporating stone-like designs that reference the sacred megalithic structures. These carvings serve both decorative and ritualistic purposes, reinforcing the spiritual link between the living and the ancestral world. Artisans frequently draw inspiration from oral histories, translating mythological narratives associated with megalithic sites into visual forms (Nuruti, 2020, p 50). Further, it is observed that artisans or craftspeople mimic megalithic forms and designs in wood, reinforcing the continuity of sacred symbolism across materials. In Bastar, stone, wood and metal are served as medium for megalithic expressions and the spiritual and commemorative functions of megaliths are retained.

Textile traditions in Bastar also reflect the influence of megalithic culture. Handwoven fabrics often feature motifs resembling standing stones, circular arrangements, and symbolic representations of ancestral spirits. These designs are not merely aesthetic choices but carry deep cultural meanings, serving as markers of identity and belonging within the community. The incorporation of megalithic imagery into textiles ensures that the knowledge and reverence for these ancient sites are perpetuated in everyday life. Moreover, the process of crafting itself is imbued with ritual significance. Many artisans begin their work with prayers and offerings to ancestral spirits, seeking blessings for creativity and prosperity. This practice underscores the spiritual dimensions of tribal craft, where artistic production is not merely a livelihood but a continuation of cultural heritage.

The economic dimensions of tribal craft also play a crucial role in sustaining megalithic traditions. As Bastar's artisans increasingly engage with external markets, they adapt their designs to contemporary demands while retaining core cultural symbols. This adaptability ensures the survival of traditional knowledge systems, allowing indigenous communities to assert their cultural identity in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. By exploring the links between megalithic traditions and tribal craft, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how tangible and intangible cultural heritage intersect within indigenous societies. Recognizing these connections not only enriches our appreciation of Bastar's artistic heritage but also highlights the resilience of indigenous cultural expressions in the face of modernity.

In Bastar, artisans and elders narrate how wooden shrine panels, intricately carved with ancestral symbols, serve as a continuation of the megalithic tradition. Villagers describe how, in the past, stone was the preferred medium for commemorative and ritual structures, but as access to large stones dwindled, wood emerged as a practical alternative. Elders recall community-led rituals where wooden structures are consecrated just as megaliths once were, reinforcing ancestral connections. This shift mirrors urban settings where concrete replaces traditional materials, yet rituals persist. Whether in wood or concrete, the spiritual essence of megalithic traditions endures, adapting to modern realities.

Comparative Analysis: Bastar's Megalithic Traditions and Other Indigenous Cultures

Māori Stone Structures and Bastar Megaliths

The Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand) have a rich tradition of stone-based sacred markers and earthworks that function as territorial boundaries, spiritual sites, and mnemonic devices for oral histories (Brown, Ellis & Mane-Wheoki, 2024). Similarly, the megalithic structures of Bastar serve as commemorative and ritual sites, reinforcing the community's connection to their land and ancestors. According to oral histories recorded in Bastar, tribal elders perceive these stone arrangements as dwelling places for ancestral spirits, similar to the Māori concept of *tūāhu*, sacred altars used in ceremonial rites. Ethnographic data collected during field research in Bastar further supports this parallel, as local communities describe their megalithic sites as places of spiritual invocation and social gathering.

Native American Burial Practices

Indigenous North American groups, particularly the Adena and Hopewell cultures, constructed burial mounds and stone formations that functioned as spiritual conduits between the living and the deceased (Carr & Case, 2006). The megalithic structures in Bastar, often erected over burial sites or as memorial stones (menhirs), align with these practices, indicating a shared indigenous worldview in which death is not the end but a transformation into another spiritual realm. Field interviews in Bastar highlight how these stone markers continue to be sites of annual ceremonies, much like the Native American traditions of mound veneration and ancestor worship.

African Megalithic Traditions

In Ethiopia and West Africa, large stone monuments, such as the monolithic pillars of Tiya and the stone circles of Senegambia, serve as communal memory spaces and ritual centers (Insoll, 2003). These sites, like

those in Bastar, act as both social and spiritual landmarks, reinforcing the interconnectedness of community and ancestral lineage. Ethnographic accounts from Bastar's tribes indicate a similar role for their megalithic structures, with villagers gathering for rituals, oral storytelling, and seasonal festivals. Additionally, archaeological evidence suggests that both African and Bastar megalithic traditions involve complex social hierarchies, where certain clans or individuals are responsible for maintaining these sacred spaces.

Commercial Adaptation of Tribal Motifs

One significant yet underexplored aspect of megalithic heritage is its influence on contemporary tribal crafts. Traditional artisans in Bastar incorporate megalithic motifs into wood carvings, Dhokra metalwork, and textiles, bridging the past with the present through artistic expression. Dhokra figurines, for instance, often depict ancestral spirits and animals associated with megalithic sites, mirroring the symbolic representations found in oral traditions.

Similarly, woodcarvers create shrine panels that echo the geometric forms of megalithic structures. These artistic expressions, deeply rooted in Indigenous cosmology, serve both decorative and ritualistic purposes. In textiles, handwoven fabrics feature motifs resembling standing stones and circular arrangements, embedding cultural narratives into wearable art.

The increasing commercialization of tribal crafts presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, market engagement provides economic sustainability for Indigenous artisans, allowing for the continuation of traditional knowledge systems. On the other hand, the commodification of sacred symbols risks distorting their cultural meanings. It is essential to foster ethical commercial practices that empower Indigenous communities while preserving the integrity of their heritage.

Urban Public Art and Megalithic Symbolism

As cities grow, there is an increasing recognition of the need to integrate cultural heritage into urban landscapes. Bastar's megalithic symbols have found their way into murals, sculptures, and public spaces, transforming how traditional art is perceived in contemporary settings. Several Indian cities have undertaken projects to beautify public spaces with indigenous artistic expressions. In Raipur, for example, government-led initiatives have sponsored mural projects that incorporate Bastar's traditional geometric carvings and petroglyph-like figures. These murals not only serve as cultural touch points but also educate urban dwellers about the region's tribal history.

A significant intervention in urban spaces is the integration of megalithic-inspired sculptures and Indigenous artistic traditions into public parks, roundabouts, and institutional architecture. For instance, the Bastar Academy of Dance, Art, and Literature (BADAL) and the Anthropological Museum in Jagdalpur exemplify how Indigenous knowledge systems, visual arts, and megalithic symbolism are embedded within contemporary urban landscapes. These government institutions serve as platforms where tribal art and craft are not only preserved but also adapted into modern architectural expressions. The incorporation of megalithic-inspired symbols in these spaces demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Indigenous heritage, illustrating how traditional aesthetics and cosmologies continue to inform public art and spatial design in contemporary settings. This adaptation aligns with the broader conceptual framework of bridging Indigenous past and present, reinforcing the dynamic interplay between tribal heritage, artistic expressions, and urban modernity. Further, in 2021, the Chhattisgarh State Tourism Board collaborated with local artisans to install large-scale Dhokra sculptures featuring stylized human and animal forms reminiscent of megalithic carvings. These installations blend the past with the present, offering both aesthetic appeal and historical continuity. Moreover, Bastar's megalithic symbols have begun influencing architectural projects, particularly in the design of cultural centers and eco-tourism resorts (Controller and Auditor General of India 2013). Structures incorporating stone reliefs, traditional wooden panels, and terracotta murals echoing prehistoric patterns have become focal points for sustainable tourism. Such endeavors not only preserve indigenous artistic knowledge but also contribute to the region's cultural economy by attracting heritage-conscious travelers.

Role of Museums and Cultural Institutions in Indigenous Heritage Conservation

Museums and cultural institutions play a crucial role in documenting and preserving Indigenous heritage. However, their historical approach has often been exclusionary, with Indigenous artifacts displayed without contextual representation. Recent efforts in decolonizing museum practices have emphasized the inclusion of Indigenous voices in curatorial processes.

In Bastar, collaborative initiatives between tribal communities and museums have led to the development of cultural centers that showcase living traditions rather than merely exhibiting artifacts. These spaces function as platforms for storytelling, craft demonstrations, and heritage education, reinforcing Indigenous agency in cultural representation. Incorporating digital technology in museum exhibits, such as interactive storytelling and virtual reconstructions of megalithic sites, can further enhance public engagement with Indigenous heritage.

Community-Led Heritage Preservation and Indigenous Agency

Indigenous agency is central to the sustainable conservation of megalithic traditions. Community-led initiatives, such as the revival of traditional festivals and localized heritage mapping projects, demonstrate the proactive role of tribal communities in safeguarding their cultural heritage. Oral tradition documentation, facilitated by tribal scholars and activists, has also become a key strategy in preserving Indigenous knowledge systems. Grassroots movements advocating for legal recognition of sacred sites have gained momentum, challenging government policies that prioritize industrial expansion over heritage conservation. Indigenous environmental stewardship further strengthens these efforts, as communities actively engage in reforestation and eco-tourism projects that integrate heritage preservation with sustainable livelihoods.

Institutional Approaches to Preservation and Display

In many cases, institutions such as national museums, historical societies, and archaeological agencies assume the role of stewards of Indigenous archaeological sites. This stewardship often includes cataloging, excavating, restoring, and displaying artifacts in controlled environments. The logic behind such efforts is rooted in conservation science, which seeks to protect sites from environmental degradation, looting, and destruction caused by urban expansion or industrial development. However, Indigenous perspectives challenge this framework by asserting that cultural heritage cannot be divorced from its living context and community belonging. The act of removing artifacts from their original sites and placing them in museum collections often disrupts their cultural significance, reducing them to aesthetic or historical objects rather than active components of Indigenous identity.

Conclusion

The ethnographic and archaeological study of Bastar's megalithic traditions highlights the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous cultural heritage. Despite challenges posed by colonial histories, urbanization, and commercialization, these traditions continue to thrive through community-led preservation efforts. Megalithic sites in Bastar are not just remnants of the past but remain integral to cultural identity, social structure, and spiritual practices. Understanding their significance requires moving beyond traditional archaeological frameworks that treat them as static relics and instead recognizing them as dynamic, living cultural landscapes.

One of the key findings of this study is the role of Indigenous agency in heritage conservation. Tribal communities in Bastar have actively resisted external pressures by maintaining rituals, storytelling practices, and artistic expressions that reinforce their historical connection to megalithic sites. Community-led initiatives, including oral tradition documentation, localized heritage mapping, and advocacy for legal recognition of sacred sites, demonstrate a proactive approach to cultural preservation. These efforts challenge top-down heritage management models and emphasize the importance of participatory conservation.

Museums and cultural institutions must also play a more inclusive role in heritage preservation by incorporating Indigenous perspectives into curatorial and exhibition practices. The shift from static artifact

displays to interactive storytelling and digital reconstructions can help bridge the gap between traditional museum frameworks and the lived experiences of Indigenous communities. Additionally, policy measures must prioritize Indigenous-led conservation strategies over purely archaeological interventions, ensuring that heritage management aligns with the cultural values and needs of local populations.

The integration of megalithic traditions into contemporary tribal crafts and public art further illustrates the evolving nature of Indigenous cultural heritage. While commercial adaptation provides economic opportunities for artisans, it is essential to strike a balance between cultural preservation and market-driven demands. Ethical commercial practices must prioritize Indigenous participation and ensure that sacred symbols are represented with respect and authenticity.

In conclusion, safeguarding Bastar's megalithic heritage requires a multi-faceted approach that combines archaeological research, ethnographic engagement, and policy interventions. Recognizing the living nature of these traditions is crucial to fostering sustainable heritage conservation that respects Indigenous agency. Future research should continue exploring the intersections between traditional knowledge systems and modern heritage practices, ensuring that Indigenous voices remain central to discussions on cultural preservation. By bridging the past and present, this study underscores the importance of protecting and celebrating the historical legacies of tribal communities for generations to come.

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