

V-Shaped Columns at Kachari Monolithic Rajbari Site in Dimapur, Nagaland: Their Architectural and Social Reflections*Hemendra Nath Dutta***Abstract**

Monolithism has been, since prehistoric days, a very common cultural practice in the northeastern region of India. Lingering Neolithic tradition, sustained amidst the varied topography formed of hills and plains, seem to have maintained the remaining monolithic traditions there.

Remarkably, the existence of the specially designed, carved, ornamented or dressed monoliths is therefore a specialty in the field of monolithic interment in this region. Such dressed varieties of monoliths stood for different meanings and purposes. At the Dimapur monolithic site, three groups of monolithic structures have been found, with evidence of Chessman, Large Isolated Chessman, and V-shaped Monolithic Columns. In this paper, the V-shaped Monolithic Columns found particularly in Nagaland have been taken up for study to trace their significance, structurally and culturally, as historical material.

Introduction

Monolithic tradition existing in the northeastern region is considered to be southeast Asiatic (Krishnaswami 1949, 41). Monolithism has been found to be prolific in the northeastern region of India. Remarkably, evidence of monolithic interment in this region is found in the area bounded by the Brahmaputra River in the north. The erection of Monolithic Columns has not been discovered so far on the northern stretches of the river. Flowing from east to west in this region, it seems to divide the northeastern region of India virtually into two parallel halves. The Brahmaputra River appears to have acted as a natural barrier to the expansion of the monolithic tradition beyond its route and evidence of monoliths have so far been found only in the southern part of the region. Erected by members of the community, varying types of monolithic structures do exist in this region, mostly on hills, foothills or plains. The scope of the structural, functional, meaningful, and sociocultural nature of the different types of monolithic monuments in this region is vast, as the shape, forms and features of these monolithic structures convey definite purpose, meaning and significance. As is already known, monoliths form a universal concept of the erection of large roughly hewn stone slabs in their natural form, by humans since prehistoric times. Such a tradition of monolithic interment and worship still persists in the northeastern region of India (Figs. 1 and 2). Lingering traditions of stone and tree worship are also found to persist there (Fig. 3).

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Fig. 1. A row of roughly hewn undressed monoliths, Kamrup District, Assam.

Fig. 2. Lingering tradition of monolithic worship by community people, Silputa, Kamrup District, Assam.

Fig. 3. Lithic (sitting stones) and tree worship at Raipara, Kamrup District, Assam.



Remarkably, the existence of the specially designed, carved, ornamented or dressed monoliths is therefore a specialty in the field of monolithic interment in this region. Such dressed varieties of monoliths stood for different meanings and purposes. At the Dimapur monolithic site, three groups of monolithic structures have been found, with evidence of Chessman, Large Isolated Chessman, and V-shaped Monolithic Columns.

Structurally, the V-shaped columns are different from the other Monolithic Columns and it is apparent that these monoliths were erected with identical meanings and purposes. The monoliths within each category are erected in the same way, but each category has a unique form and its own meanings, purposes and objectives. We may point out, for example, that at the Dimapur monolithic site, which has three separate groups of monolithic structures altogether, a Large Isolated Chessman Column had been erected in association with each group. However, only two such columns are found to exist. The one associated with the row of principal monolithic structures, aligned north-south, is found with the V-shaped (Fig. 4) and Chessman Monolithic Columns (Fig. 5), covering an area of 77×22.86 m. This Large Isolated Column associated with the principal group of monoliths is situated 36 m to the west of the site. The column is broken and its present height is 1.10 m with a circumference of 3.65 m (Fig. 6).

The other Large Isolated Chessman Column at the Dimapur monolithic site is found in the western part of the site (Fig. 7). This column, carved to give a magnificent appearance, is 4.57 m high with a 7.02 m circumference. (Such a Large Isolated Chessman Monolithic Column is also found at the Kasomaripathar Monolithic Site in Golaghat District, Assam.) This Large Isolated Chessman Monolithic Column is found 9 m from the principal group of the ficus Monolithic Columns. The Large Isolated Chessman Monolithic Columns seem to represent the figure of an avenging demon (Dutta 2012, 62), believed to have been erected for worship to pave the peaceful journey of the soul to heaven - a belief in the journey of life after death (Chatterjee 1951, 5). Such columns have a hemispherical top, with a decorative waistband laid horizontally below and with the lower part finished with vertical arrangements of drooping petals intersected by daggers or swords pointing upwards. The Chessman Type Monolithic Columns found at this site represent abstract forms of human figures (Dutta 2012, 59). The ficus Monolithic Columns depict carved profiles of ficus branching out in five circles, reflecting the Kacharis' worship of the ficus (Dutta 2012, 59). Tree worship is ancient in India. Many seals and seal impressions showing various gods, solitary representations of the Tree of Life or Tree of Knowledge, the sacred altar, the *asvattha*, the pipal leaves and the like that are meant to serve some talismanic values have been found in the Indus Valley Civilization (Sastri 1965, 123). The Nagas also worshipped ficus and iron swords are put under the ficus on the death of family and friends (Dutta 2012, 59).

The Dimapur Monolithic Site, also known as Rajbari, is situated on the banks of the Dima River, now known as the Dhansiri. The site was a royal establishment of the Kachari kings and was fortified with ramparts. The name Dimapur is drawn from the term *di ma pur* meaning the city built on the river *dima*, that is to say, Dhansiri. The Dhansiri River, which is known for its meandering course, has generated an agriculturally based settlement pattern since ancient times. During the medieval period, Dimapur was the capital of the Kachari kingdom, which flourished on the banks of this river. The fortified site with a brick-built entrance gate surrounding the monolithic structures is historically known as Rajbari and is now situated within the township of Dimapur (Annual Report 1906–07, 19–24). One category of monolithic column here is known as the V-shaped Monolithic Column (Fig. 4). Significantly, this category constitutes the first line of the principal group of monoliths facing the Large Isolated Chessman Monolithic Column in the west. The name of this category of V-shaped Monolithic Columns stems from the resemblance of its structure to the letter V, or sometimes Y, in the English alphabet. However, the absence of historical literature and evidence of such Monolithic Columns and their traditional continuity in this region is a hindrance to the study of this subject. It seems possible that certain remote beliefs and ritual practices of offering feasts and animal sacrifices, helping chieftains and rich men attain social status are related to the origin of the V-shaped or Y-shaped columns found in this region.

Structurally, the V-shaped Monolithic Columns have a solid base, while their V-shaped feature, with its two separate arms, gradually bifurcates widely upwards, assuming the shape of a V and sometimes of a Y. The V- or Y-structure distinguishes the V-shaped Monolithic Columns from the other monolithic structures, that is to say, the chessman-type or the ficus-type (Figs. 5 and 8) and the Large Isolated Chessman Monolithic Column (Figs. 6 and 7) of this region. There are V-shaped Monolithic Columns at the Rajbari archaeological site in Dimapur. The first of the three rows of monoliths there comprises V-shaped Monolithic Columns. These structures are datable to 1400 CE. Except for one erect V-shaped column, all the other



Fig. 4. V-shaped Monolithic Column, Dimapur.



Fig. 5. Chessman-type monolithic column, Dimapur.

V-shaped Monolithic Columns are found broken and lying *in situ*. The only V-shaped column remaining upright now is 2.10 m high and 1 m wide at the bottom (Fig. 4). The arms of the V-shaped columns facing east are carved with symmetrically arranged reliefs of horizontal lotus in their upper parts; then, extending downwards from them, follow floral motifs, the figure of a goat, a floral motif with four equidistant decorative projections placed around the rim, and a relief of a goat at the bottom.

Their immense size together with their Y-shaped feature may be one of the reasons for their collapse. The broken V-shaped columns are so large and top-heavy that perhaps they could not stand upright for long and therefore collapsed. The broken beams of one such V-shaped column measure 4.38 x 0.97 m and the width of this beam measures 1.14 m at the bottom, 0.97 m in the middle and 0.75 m at its upper part. It seems that the V-shaped posts that were initially erected were subsequently provided with the present monolithic shape in a sumptuous style, with carvings of peacocks, horned animals, and lions. The carving of herbivorous animals, such as goats, is associated with male procreative power and carnivorous figures like lions and tigers, irrespective of their sex, represent female attributes. Furthermore, the V-shape of the monolithic structure itself seems to emphasize female attributes and indicate prosperity (Sen 1972, 16).

Discussion

It is essential to understand the beliefs and the associations of the V-shaped Monolithic Columns in social life in order to understand their structural and cultural significance. It seems possible that the origin of the V-shaped Monolithic Columns was connected with propitiating animal gods through sacrifice, which gradually emerged as a symbol of prosperity and social status in social life and the lives of individuals. Figures of gods with animal horns and the worship of such animal gods are galore in ancient civilizations across the world. The Pashupati Siva, worshiped as the lord of all animals as found in the Harappan Civilization, could be cited as an example. In the Indus Valley, the bull, the peacock, the lotus as well as the *asvattha* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and *sami* tree (*Acacia moduca*) were regarded as sacred celestial trees and objects and as having associations with the solar world (Sastri 1965, 142–143). Remarkably, the V-shaped Monolithic Columns in Dimapur are also found with carvings of lotus, peacocks, motifs of trees and more. The Atharvaveda records that an ox and goats were sacrificed to facilitate the dead man's journey to the next world. The Rigveda records that the human body is supposed to possess an unborn and imperishable essence. The Atharvaveda states that the soul has to traverse a vast gulf of darkness before it can complete its course from earth to the third heaven. Such concepts of the journey of the soul of the dead fully developed in the Indus Age and continued down to the Middle Vedic Age, as found in the Atharvaveda. During the Vedic Age, the goat played an important role during post-death ceremonies. A black cow (*Anustarani*) and a black goat (*Panchaudana*) were sacrificed at the time of the cremation of the dead man. After the sacrifice, the goat was cooked and a ritual feast was held in honor of the deceased (Sastri 1965, 144–145).

The erection of the Monolithic Columns in Dimapur by the Kacharis seems to have established such remote ancient Indian beliefs of soul worship and life after death. Wooden effigies seem to have been erected as part of a ritual to provide a safe journey for the souls of men of status. Later, they perpetually provided the shape for the chessman columns, giving a permanent nature to the essence.

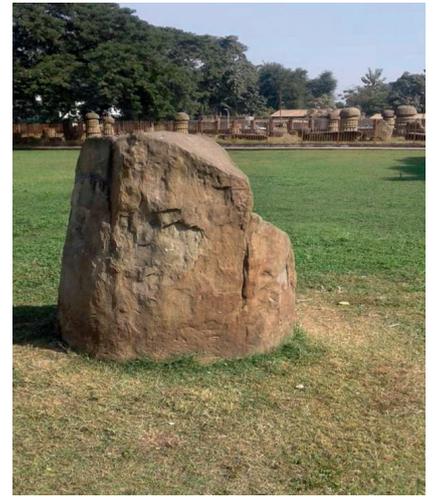


Fig.6. Large isolated monolith (broken), Dimapur.



Fig. 7. Large Isolated Monolith, Dimapur.

The ornamentation on the columns was undertaken according to how the deceased wore his costumes, garments or weapons during his lifetime. The V-shaped Monolithic Columns seem to have been also erected in memory of those men of status who had used the shape V socially either as a chieftain or a rich man in society. The figures of the goat carved on V-shaped columns seem to represent the goat which was sacrificed during the ritual of the cremation of the dead.

Structurally, the V-shaped columns are prototypes of the Y-shaped posts, showing the carved head of a mithun (*Bos frontalis*) and erected by the Angami Naga during festivals (Hutton 1921, 48). The houses of the chief of the Sema tribe and also the houses of the rich Sema Nagas were adorned with carved forked posts; other posts were set up on the ground and mithun were tied to them and then slaughtered during festivals (Hutton 1921, 36). The provision of the mithun seems to have a certain relation to prosperity, social status or a fertility cult. Y-shaped posts with carvings of mithun heads on them seem to have been rooted in the religious belief of prosperity and production. The worship of Y-shaped posts as symbols of prosperity is also found to have been embedded in the sociocultural beliefs among the Mizos (Fig. 8). The Y-shaped wooden prototypes (of V-shaped columns) are found to have been erected according to the phallic concept by the Sema and Angami Naga and are revered by them as vehicles for fertilizing the soil and promoting good crops, men, stock and cereals to enable the population to thrive under better economic conditions (Hutton 1921, 82).

In Naga society, traditionally, the social status of a chieftain, rich man or a member of a noble family is determined not by his wealth, harvests or his huge livestock resources, but calculated in the way he utilizes those resources in organizing feasts for the whole village called "Feasts of Merit." By offering Feasts of Merit several times, a person earns higher social status, which is reflected in the design of his house, adorned with horn-like projections signifying higher social status, locally the *ceka* (Dutta/Ao 2018, 24) projections resembling a "symbol of libido." As such, the V- or Y-projections are associated with beliefs of production and economic prosperity and represent the "female principle." Tattoos ornamenting the body in a V-shape which had prevailed in Naga society corroborate such social reflections (Hutton 1929, 48–51).

Conclusion

The V-shaped Monolithic Columns in Dimapur, which are more or less similar to the *ceka* projections, also thus represent a revered sign or symbol of attained economic prosperity and social status. They could as such be "symbols of femininity" or might or power acquired through the social status that the deceased enjoyed during his lifetime. The erection of the columns was to retain the essence of the deceased and provide a deathless shape in monolithic form for veneration and recognition of the deceased's prosperity within society.



Fig. 8. *Seluphan* – the sacrificial Y-shaped fork posts of the Mizos in Mizoram.

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