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Understanding the Socio-Political Reformation Process through the Practice of Worshipping Bravery: A Case Study of the Interior Purulia

*¹ Madhurima Bagchi

*¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India.

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Abstract

From the very early stages of human society, people developed rituals and beliefs about death. This shows the psychological growth of humans alongside their physical and intellectual development and this development largely acted as a catalyst in the process of social change. Purulia has always been a meeting ground of different cultures, communities and traditions, and has a large concentration of hero stones. The study area lies on the southern part of Purulia, considered as forested tribal zones that became blurred under the suppression of feudal kings of the central power (Pala-Sena empire). At the time of exploration in this area a term 'Khasriya' was highlighted in the folklore repeatedly associated with the burial practices. The present study tries to throw light on the contexts to understand the socio-political factors.

*Corresponding Author

Madhurima Bagchi

PhD Scholar, Department of
Archaeology, University of Calcutta,
West Bengal, India.

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Introduction

Belief in the after-death destiny of the soul is an inherent sentiment of humans since their emergence as social beings. For honouring the spirit or probably due to fear these early communities expressed their sentiment by disposing of the dead carefully. As civilizations evolved, burial practices and death rituals became interestingly complex. The Megalithic culture in India, spanning the Neolithic to Iron Age, is characterized by burial centric elaborate stone structures, showcasing the complex evolution process of the civilization. So many burial customs were practiced in ancient India. In the belief of protecting from evil, some primitive tribals buried the dead in their own hut (Patil 1982: 47). Another tradition was to offer grave goods. The burials were marked by earthen mound of pebbles that are commonly noticed even present days. Cremation was another ritual practiced by the Vedic people. Some tribal groups also followed this practice and after cremation they filled a jar with the remains of ash and charred bone. This jar was then fixed on the ground and the spot was marked exclusively for planting stones. The marking stone structures are known as megaliths. Menhir is such a type of megalith, posted vertically like stone slabs

(Setter et.al. 1982). Several tribal groups ruled several areas, confided to their own strategies. To rise to dominance, plundering of cattle, or protecting property from robbers, these groups were in constant conflict with each other. Hero stones from Saurashtra region showcasing these sacrifices (). In Andhra, Karnataka, Maharashtra the hero stones were erected for numerous legendary warriors, who immortalized their lives for the glorification and the protection of their land. Dr. Rajan describes perfectly –

"The emotions behind the heroic act are firstly, integrity, loyalty to a cause or to mother earth, self-sacrifice and daring, all these to an emotional and spectacular degree" (1982: 59-76).

The heroism of these legends is proclaimed by ballads and folklores. Esteeming for sacrificing life of these dues was a respected cult organised by society. People memorised the noble personality and observed some rituals to commemorate perfectly. The observation of commemoration day was conducted in various ways as believed most appropriate. Erection of a memorial is such a part of this ritual.

The practice of building hero stones, likely influenced by the widespread presence of installation of menhirs, a sepulchral

member of the megalith family, as the after-death rituals among the aboriginal communities. However, practising installation of menhirs vary with 'Hero stones', specifically commemorating warriors who sacrificed their lives to protect society. It is also known as *Veera-Stambha*. Other additional names are *Veera-Kallu*, *Veera-Sthana*, *Nishidhi* etc (Setter et.al 1982). *Veera-Stambha* is derived from Sanskrit literature. '*Veera*' means famous warrior; '*Stambha*' symbolises the stone slab. Patil tried to understand the origin of this primordial monument in his article (Patil 1982, 47-58). According to him erection of herostone or such memorial stone was derived from the Buddhist practice which was followed from the funerary ritual of the easterner or so called '*Asuras*'. But it is not confirmed whether the practice of erecting memorials in Eastern India also originated in this way.

But why the sepulchral practice transformed into the form of commemoration and installation of hero stones became a popular ritual is a big question for researchers. The origin of hero stones and their introduction as a form of reform in society mark a chapter in the evolution of society. The interesting fact is, Purulia, the southeastern extension of Chhotanagpur plateau has a good collection of hero stones. This research tries to focus on an interior region to understand the changing perspective of the after-death ritual, throwing light on the reformation of the socio-political structure through this case study. Before discussing this in detail, a brief outline of the study area is required.

Relevant Discoveries and Present Study

So many exploration programmes had been arranged by the researchers in the colonial period. Geologist Ball gave an outline of the geography and geological structure of this area in 1864-65(1867: 143-9). In 1827- 73 Beglar organised a thorough survey and published his report (Beglar 1878). Bloch discovered a number of historic sites in Manbhum district. Walsh had also described the features of archaeological findings (1937: 429-43). But no one mentioned this area.

A few research papers have mentioned this area after the colonial period (Chattapadhyay et.al. 2010: 9-31 & Majumdar

2017). The present study is an attempt to establish the opinion based on the data collected through extensive exploration, village to village survey and the comparative analysis of the secondary data (archival study).

Understanding the Land and Society Relation

The district of Purulia is bounded on the north by Hazaribag and Santhal Pargana. Bardhaman, Bankura and Midnapur covered the east. In the south there is Singhbhum district. It is surrounded on the west by Ranchi. The main streams are Damodar, Barakar, Dwarakeswar, Kasai and Subarnarekha. Damodar and Barakar separate this zone from Bankura and Bardhaman. In the south Subarnarekha maintains a distance as a boundary from Singhbhum. Dwarakeswar and Kasai are flowing through the middle of this district.

This study focuses on the region along the northern basin of the Kumari River, primarily within the Manbazar and Barabazar administrative areas. Although the region is part of the Chota Nagpur Plateau—characterized by occasional rocky outcrops and a few elevated mounds—southeast-flowing rivers originating from the Chota Nagpur highlands have created extensive floodplains through heavy monsoon discharge; these areas are flatter and more fertile than the barren, forested uplands. The study area encompasses several sites situated within the Kasai-Kumari valley, specifically Rani Pukur, Mahara, Kurmashal, Bandwan, Basudebpur, Chandanpur, Shmashandi, Udla, and Dhaka Kendu. It has been observed that the majority of these sites are concentrated along the valley of the Kumari River or the valleys of its tributaries.

The area is rich in cultivated vegetation due to the flood plain of Kumari and Kasai, the result of long natural courses of extensive erosion and deposition of these rivers. Agriculture is the main economy here. A number of water reservoirs have been noticed which are probably constructed to supply sufficient water in summer. Ethnologically this area has a rich collection of many tribal groups and sub-caste communities, specifically Munda, Bhumij, Majhi, Kurmi, Bauris, Bhuiyas, Doms. Other important ethnic populations are Santhal, Ho, Bhil, Nishad.

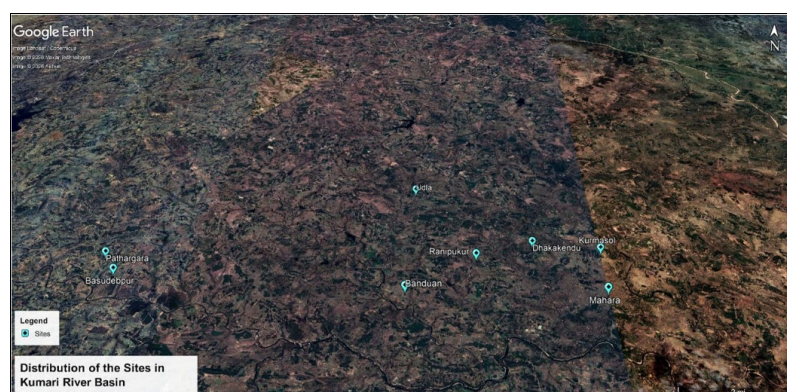


Fig 1: Distribution of the Sites in Kumari Basin

Political History

The concept of "*country*" or "*nationality*" has been introduced recently. But in the far distance of decades the society was unaware about the centralized power, rather it was divided into too many clan dominated regions. Mahabharata introduced us to these clans, Ray denoted them with the term '*Kouma*' (Ray 1949: 317), who were prominent for their so-called '*Aryan*' origin, as the five princes of Sage Dirghatamas and Sudesna, ruled different areas of Eastern India (Acharya

1945: 453). According to this literature, the 24th Jain Tirthankara, Mahavira, came to the Rarh region, in Subbabhumi and Vajjbhumi, for the purpose of propagating Jainism. The inhabitants of this forest land behaved very rudely with him and even set dogs upon him (Roy 1949: 117). The gradual and developed, organized form of this clan-based governance through the emergence of janapadas and the development of administrative machinery. Sushunia inscription must be mentioned first among the archaeological

sources. According to the inscription, *Sri Chandravarma*, son of Singhavarma, the ruler of Pushkarana and a devotee of the discus-bearing god, i.e. Vishnu, dedicated a village or transferred some revenue to Chakraswami (Sircar 1965: 350). Scholars identify Chandravarma as a ruler of the 'Aranya' kingdom who was defeated by Samudragupta, though there are differences of opinion on this matter (Sarkar 2023: 301). The Brahmanical religious practices of this ruler of Pushkarana, and his use of Sanskrit language and Brahmi script, indicate the influence of Brahmanical culture in this forest-covered region. Alongside this, the grant of land by the king for religious purposes certainly points to the existence of a complex administrative organization, though no such organized form is known.

Along with this, separate mentions of *Dandabhukti*, Orissa, and Utkal are found, from which it is known that *Dandabhukti* comprised present-day southwestern Midnapore and a part of Balasore (Bhattacharya 1977: 82). Evidence of Shura dominance in the Rarh region is also found. Firstly, in the Tirumalai inscription Rajendra Chola defeated Ranapura, a

regional chieftain of Dakshin Radh. Secondly, in the *Ramacharitam* mention is made of the feudatory ruler of Mandara who helped Ramapala in the war against Bhima (Roy 1949: 407).

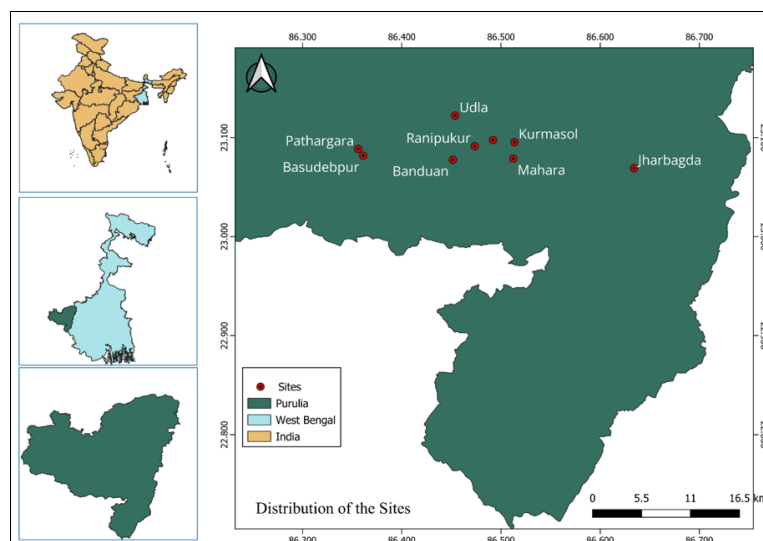
In the 12th century *Ramacharitam* of Sandhyakara Nandi, mention is found of the existence of seven kingdoms in the forested area of the southwest (Roy 1949: 317). The existence of these Bhum kingdoms is further substantiated by multiple British records.

According to historians, the influence of feudalism during the Gupta period spread to different regions of Bengal, which led to the beginning of decentralization of the state system (Majumdar 1971: 235-45). The influence of the strong monarchies of the Mauryan and Gupta periods, and the patronage of Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain religions by kings, made possible the formation of unified republics. But the important question is whether the present study area was included within this administrative system, i.e., the strong monarchy.

Table 1: Sites and Assemblages

Site	Block	Herostone	Other Findings
Ranipukur	Barabazar	Hero with sword-shield in fighting stance with <i>chatradhar</i> behind him	Sculptural and architectural remains, structural mound, sculpture of Surya
Mahara	Barabazar	Carvings are fully damaged	Habitational mound, several stone pillars, ancient temple foundation, a Jain <i>Tirthankara</i> idol of <i>Rishabhanatha</i>
Jharbagda	Manbazar I	-	Fragment of a hero stone, a warrior mounted on a running animal, likely an elephant. Another slab, depicting a man in fighting posture, wearing a crown, with four arms holding various weapons.
Sasandih	Barabazar	A large number of menhirs arranged in rows, architectural fragments, including stone blocks, lintels, arches, <i>amalaka</i> , and an idol of <i>Vishnu</i>	-
Chandanpur	Jhalda II	-	A sculpture of <i>Rishabhanatha</i>
Basudebpur	Jhalda II	Hero with Bow-Arrow in fighting stance in front of torana gateway	-
Dhakakendu	Manbazar I	-	Jain <i>ashtapadatirtha</i>
Chakolta	Manbazar I	-	Architectural fragments, such as door jambs, stone blocks, and <i>amlaka</i>
Banduan	Bandwan CD	-	Jain <i>Tirthankara</i> idol identified as Parshvanatha
Kurmasol	Manbazar I	-	Sculptural specimens
Udla	Manbazar I	-	A Jain <i>Tirthankara</i> idol named Duar Sini is worshipped. The origin of the word Duar Sini is aboriginal.

Contextual Study



Map 1: Study Area, Focusing on the Sites

There are eleven primary sites along the Kumari River; data was collected directly from seven of them, while information regarding the others is based on reports. First, the Sasandih site, located northwest of Barabazar; it houses a burial ground featuring numerous menhirs (a type of megalith) arranged in rows. Villagers refer to this location as the cremation or burial ground of the 'Singh Sardars.' It is worth noting that such megalithic burial sites are frequently observed across the plateau regions of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The site is situated on open, fallow land at some distance from the village, with the current cremation ground located nearby. A fascinating feature is the presence of a dilapidated stone temple approximately 350 meters from the burial ground; several architectural fragments, including stone blocks, lintels, arches, an *amalaka*, and an idol of *Vishnu*, have been documented there. During explorations in the Manbhum region, references to the 'Singh Sardars' surfaced repeatedly. Villagers describe them as 'Rajput commanders' or '*Kshatriyas*'. According to local accounts, a royal ruler held

sway over the region even before the 'Man' kings; while villagers refer to this earlier ruler as a 'Bhumij King,' they are unable to specify a particular name or lineage. Those bearing the title 'Sardar' are recognized as belonging to a high-status community. It should be noted that both the Singh Sardar and Bhumij communities are regional subgroups of the Munda tribal population. The Munda community has long been recognized as an indigenous group inhabiting the plateaus of Central India and the Chota Nagpur plateau of Eastern India. Consequently, the context raises a natural question: what motivated this indigenous group to claim a lineage identifying them as *Kshatriyas* or *Rajputs*, categories within the '*Chaturvarna*' (four-fold social order) system of Brahmanical or mainstream Hinduism across generations? Under what historical circumstances did the need to adopt this identity arise? Furthermore, the presence of an ancient stone temple in close proximity to the burial ground is a matter of considerable intrigue.



Plate I
Burial Ground, Menhir, Shasandih



Plate II
Vishnu image, Shasandih



Plate III
Dilapidated temple, Shasandih

A menhir stands on the outskirts of Basudebpur village, a site located 12 km away from Shmashandih. The context here differs slightly; although the menhir is situated amidst a settlement, the site is not part of Basudebpur's main inhabited area but rather a smaller settlement on the village periphery. Villagers refer to this spot as 'Pathargarhya', an indigenous term denoting a location where a pillar or stone slab is planted or embedded. Thus, the place derives its name from the presence of the menhir. Notably, the area is inhabited primarily by the Kurmi, Tanti, and Bauri communities, groups considered lower in the social hierarchy compared to the Brahmin, Bhumij, Mahato, Sardar (identified as *Kshatriya*), and Baidya communities in the region. An interesting detail is the discovery of a Jain *Tirthankara* statue in the nearby village of Chandanpur. At the entrance to the village of Basudebpur, there are two large water reservoirs. The village road passes between these reservoirs along a raised

embankment, known locally as the Nakti Bandh, which provides access to the village. On the sloping side of this embankment, a hero stone can be observed, although most of it remains embedded beneath the soil. The hero stone does not seem to be in its original location and was likely relocated from elsewhere. Earlier research recorded the presence of cultural fragments at this site, but currently, no such findings are visible. Local villagers report that the two reservoirs at the entrance of the village are very ancient. In 1980, when the embankment was raised and converted into a road, the hero stone was discovered buried beneath the soil. According to earlier scholarly observations, an ancient Jain temple may have once existed here (Chattopadhyay 2010: pp. 09–31). Overall, the analysis suggests that the Pathargarhya area represents an extension of an ancient settlement. It is likely that a burial ground existed nearby, and as the population grew, new habitation expanded into this area.



Plate IV
Hero stone on the edge of Water reservoir,
Basudebpur



Plate V
Upper part of the Surya sculpture,
Ranipukur

Ranipukur is an important site situated 23 km west of Manbazar, within the jurisdiction of the Manbazar II Block. This site is 17.6 km away from Basudebpur. This site is significant for its archaeological value due to the presence of various sculptural and architectural remains. At Majhipara, a structural mound has been identified, along with a broken idol of *Surya* and several architectural fragments include structural elements such as lintels, door jambs, stone blocks, and a *kalasha*. A hero stone has been discovered in its in-situ position within an agricultural field beside the structural mound previously discussed. The remains are scattered across

two distinct areas of the site. Local inhabitants report that there were once several mounds in the region. However, due to the expansion of agricultural activities, many of these mounds have been excavated. During the cultivation and digging processes, bricks, stone slabs, and sculptural fragments were recovered from these mounds. Many of these artefacts were subsequently taken to nearby villages. This part of the village is inhabited by Tantubai, Sardar, Bauri, Majhi communities. They don't follow any kind of worshipping practice associated with the hero stone.



Plate VI
Structural mound, Ranipukur



Plate VII
Hero stone, showcasing royalty
Ranipukur



Plate VIII
Hero stone within the agricultural
field, Ranipukur

Approximately 3 km north of Ranipukur lies the village of North Bandowan, where a Jain Tirthankara idol identified as *Parshvanatha* has been discovered. In the village of Udla, 7 km north of Bandowan, on the south bank of the Kumari River, a Jain *Tirthankara* idol named Dwar Sini is worshipped. The origin of the word Dwar Sini is aboriginal. Most of the people of the village belong to the Bauri, Bagdi, and Kurmi communities. This idol was apparently brought from elsewhere and installed. Mahara is another site to the east of Ranipukur, where a mound can be observed in an area locally known as Upardanga. Adjacent to this mound lies a pond, and nearby, the remains of the foundation of an ancient temple are visible. During the excavation of the pond, several stone pillars were unearthed beneath the soil. A stone pillar recognised as a hero stone was unearthed, and has been placed on top of the surviving temple foundation. Earlier accounts mention that a considerable number of memorial

stones were once present in this area. However, today, most of these stones are no longer visible. Additionally, a Jain *Tirthankara* idol of *Rishabhanatha* has been discovered and is currently preserved within the Durga temple of the village. The term 'Upardanga' literally means a higher or elevated ground. This area represents the highest point and is situated on what appears to be a habitational mound. A dilapidated temple is found in the village of Chakolta, near Ranipukur. A large number of architectural fragments, such as door jambs, stone blocks, and *amlaka* can be seen here. A Jain *ashtapadatirtha* was found at Dakakendu, situated 1 km away from Chakolta. This sculpture was probably brought from Chakolta. Several sculptural specimens are found in the Shiva temple of Kurmasol, located on the north of Chakolta, although they could not be identified. They are probably brought from Ranipukur or Chakolta.



Plate I
Hero on elephant back, Jharbagda



Plate VIII
Hero stone inside the bushes, Jharbagda



Plate IX
Chaturbahu hero stone, Jharbagda

The worship of the forest goddess (*Ban-devi*) is also prevalent among indigenous communities; this particular form of worship can be observed in Jharbagda, another important site in the Manbazar II Block, located about 3.9 km from Manbazar, along the right bank of the Kangshabati. This site features a group of hero stones set amidst a dense forest, enhancing its secluded and historically significant context. Fragments of two stone-carved slabs, resting on a cement slab, probably part of another memorial sculpture, were discovered behind this hero stone. One fragment depicts a warrior mounted on a running animal, likely an elephant. Behind it stands another slab, depicting a man in fighting posture, wearing a crown, with four arms holding various weapons. Clearly, neither figure represents a deity from the Brahmanical pantheon; instead, the posture resembles warriors in fighting instances. The four-arm carving indicates the imposition of divinity. They are worshipped by different communities within the village. The slab depicting the elephant-mounted warrior is worshipped as '*Ban Bhairabi*' by the Brahmin families during the month of Magh. Meanwhile, the four-armed figure is worshipped as '*Hatikheda*' by the Kurmi, Kamar, and Bauri communities (sub-caste) on the last day of the month of Ashar (Ashar Sankranti). The hero stone itself is not subjected to any form of worship. Both the goddess *Ban Bhairabi* and the deity *Hatikheda* (which are fragmented parts of memorial stone) represent forms of nature worship, akin to village deity cults, traditionally practised by the indigenous peoples of the Rarh region. These deities are worshipped to invoke fertility. Given the region's dense forest cover, elephant attacks are frequent; the folk deity *Hatikheda* emerged as a protective figure against such threats. Although neither is a Brahmanical deity, the worship of the goddess is exclusively conducted by a Brahmin family in the village, which holds significant local influence. The presence of a hero stone at such an indigenous cult site is a noteworthy feature.

In the present study area, at most sites, the worship of village deities or tutelary deities commonly involves making vows and offering donations. In most cases, the practice of offering water to the deity (often a natural object) or of washing the site is also observed. Therefore, it is debatable whether these practices represent the assimilation of regional aboriginal traditions into Brahmanical religion, or whether the adoption of Brahmanical practices by local communities took place. From an archaeological perspective, it is evident that a detailed and systematic survey of the surrounding area could uncover habitation aspects linked to this early mediaeval religious site.

Interpretation of Possible Historical Contexts through the Analysis of Various Phenomena and Draw the Conclusion

Some observations are unriddled from the study of contextual diversity of the hero stones including other findings from this small-scale research. Tribal groups, primarily the Santhals, Hos, and Mundas, along with their various sub-clans, are the indigenous inhabitants of this land. Initially, these communities were hunter-gatherers inhabiting the Chota Nagpur highlands; however, the subsequent establishment of permanent, agriculture-based settlements by these very people is evident from the concentration of sites along the fertile valleys of the Kumari River. The transition from a nomadic lifestyle to settled livelihoods, and the emergence of a complex social structure driven by agricultural surplus, is further corroborated by evidence of administrative centres like Dandabhukti, Kankagram-bhukti, and others in the

vicinity. Furthermore, the presence of numerous Jain and Brahmanical sculptures and dilapidated temples scattered across the region indicates that an elite class had already emerged here by the early medieval period. They ruled over the entire territory under the leadership of various tribal chieftains, who likely identified as 'Sing Sardars,' and vied with one another to expand their domains. The artist carved the figure of a lion to symbolize the hero's power. Sengupta noted—"*At one end stand the simple, unadorned megaliths and associated stones in the southwestern district of Purulia... often linked to the region's tribal groups...*" (1999: 71-83). Erecting memorials was a traditional ritual within the Munda community, a practice observed to this day. Consequently, it is believed that this ritual originated among tribal warriors who sacrificed their lives to protect their society, though it later evolved into a more orthodox ritual. Along with the increase in the economic power of tribal chiefs, their claim to be 'Rajput', that is, high-caste Hindus, marked the process of forming a small kingdom or state. Tribal chiefs, with the help of Brahmanical priests, established themselves as *Kshatriyas* in order to gain state authority (Sinha 1962: 35-80).

Beyond this, the memorial sparks curiosity regarding its original location, a matter that remains a subject of debate. The presence of the 'Hero Stone' (memorial stone) belonging to the Singh Sardars near the cremation ground, ancient tank and ancient temple at Basudebpur, alongside a water reservoir constructed by the local lineage, suggests a desire among these esteemed regional commanders (or local chieftains) to gain legitimacy within the Brahmanical faith, into which they had likely transitioned from Jainism. Similarly, at sites like Udla, Mahara and Jharbagda, Hero Stones are worshipped within village temples (Garam than). However, given the intrinsic link between the erection of memorial stones and funerary rites, it is worth noting that these slabs may have been relocated from their original location, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for their displacement. Nevertheless, this clearly demonstrates the gradual integration of nature worship and ancestor worship into the Brahmanical fold. The depiction of the warrior with four arms on the hero stone at Jharbagda further reinforces the validity of this hypothesis.

According to Sengupta there are so many internal causes to grow the 'culture' of hero stone (1999: 71-83). Majumder described the evidence of this region that signifies the domination of locally formed tribal groups or organisations all over this forest land. In the time of Pala-Sena period from 9th to 12th Cen AD, the rulers tried to protect the centralised power into a state. Santra observed that hero-stone occurrences are predominantly found along the lateritic upland of Medinipur. He also highlighted the local beliefs and practices surrounding these monuments, including the development of cults and the performance of associated rituals (Santra 1987: 24-8). Sengupta also discussed potential political connections between South India and this region during the early medieval era, suggesting these links played a role in erection of memorial stones, highlighting the complex process of state formation (Sengupta 1999: 71-83).

Maybe they didn't occupy the forest land but to protect the boundary they needed the help of the local powers who were fearless in nature on the battlefield. To protect the central power a violent confrontation was led between the local rulers that transformed them as vassal states. Thapar has shown how, in the process of transition to an agrarian state, the hero stone became a secular social marker. The earliest stones did not have any images of complex religious deities; instead,

they recorded events like border defence and cattle raids, and they defined the territorial limits of a community's political authority. Thapar has shown that the shift from pastoral, mobile life to an agrarian state system brought about a major change in the character of hero stones. The monuments of the early period were records of real events. They were usually planted on the boundaries of settlements or at road junctions. As a result, they functioned like legal documents that indicated to outsiders the extent to which the political and administrative authority of the community extended (Thapar 1981: 293-315).

Hero stones are such a living symbol of this state formation in Bengal. Memorial stones were planted to commemorate those who had lost their lives on the battlefield. Hero stone was built to requite them the destiny of heaven. They were honoured with the crown of praise. Probably the fulfilment of the need of soldiers who raised their swords to protect the king (the Pala-Sena empire) became the crucial factor that's why paying honour as a heavenly character was so crucial. Simultaneously the chieftains needed a strong hold, which led them to spread the culture of worshipping bravery and to legitimize their community inside the large umbrella of Hindu ideology.

Considering all aspects, it is inferring that the plantation or the erection of hero stone was primarily secular in character. The practice only unfurled the purpose of commemoration. But it also signifies the socio-cultural interaction between all denominations is brought to light through this practice. Maybe somehow it is linked with the state formation process of Manbhoom. The absence of any readable epigraphic evidence can't establish this confidently. But definitely hero stone is important evidence that speaks about the political oscillation of power. Further research needed to solve these problems associated with the hero stones of Purulia.

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