

Historical Significance of Jharkhand's Sacred Landscapes in the Development of Indian Religions

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical significance of Jharkhand's sacred landscapes as active agents in the development of Indian religious traditions, rather than peripheral spaces absorbing pan-Indian influences. Drawing on landscape archaeology, religious geography, and ethnohistorical scholarship, the study argues that the forested plateaus, sacred groves, megalithic sites, and hill shrines of the Chotanagpur region constitute a palimpsest of ritual practice in which indigenous Adivasi cosmologies, Jaina asceticism, Buddhist monasticism, and Brahmanical temple traditions have coexisted, competed, and interpenetrated for over two millennia. Through case studies of Parasnath Hill (Sammet Shikhar), the Sarna sacred groves of the Munda, Santhal, and Oraon communities, the megalithic ritual complexes of the Chotanagpur plateau, and the Baidyanath Dham jyotirlinga at Deoghar, the paper demonstrates how Jharkhand's geography generated specific religious forms that subsequently shaped broader Indian traditions, including Jaina tirtha conceptions, Shaiva pilgrimage networks, and tribal-Hindu syncretism. The analysis further engages with contemporary contestations, particularly the Jain-Adivasi dispute over Marang Buru/Parasnath, to show how sacred landscapes remain sites of political negotiation. The study concludes that Jharkhand's religious geography illustrates the dialectical rather than unidirectional nature of Indian religious history.

Keywords: Sacred landscape, Jharkhand, Sarna, Parasnath, Adivasi religion, religious geography, Chotanagpur, syncretism

1. Introduction

The historiography of Indian religions has long privileged textual traditions emanating from the Gangetic heartland, treating forest regions such as Jharkhand as recipients rather than producers of religious meaning. Yet the Chotanagpur plateau with its lateritic uplands, sal forests, perennial springs, and granite outcrops has functioned as a living theatre of sacred practice since at least the Neolithic. This paper argues that Jharkhand's sacred landscapes are not merely local expressions of nature worship but constitute a formative substratum within which several pan-Indian religious traditions crystallized, negotiated their doctrinal boundaries, and acquired spatial legitimacy. The central thesis is threefold. First, the region's geography hills, groves, and megalithic clusters produced distinctive ritual idioms that predate and partly shaped later textual religions. Second, the encounter between Adivasi cosmologies and the institutionalized traditions of Jainism, Buddhism, and Brahmanical Hinduism was neither unidirectional nor purely assimilative; it involved mutual borrowing, contestation, and occasional rupture. Third, these landscapes continue to function as sites where religious identity, indigeneity, and state power are actively negotiated, as the ongoing dispute over Parasnath Hill demonstrates. The

paper thus positions Jharkhand not at the margins of Indian religious history but as a constitutive zone of its making.

2. Historiographical Context and Literature Review

Scholarship on Jharkhand's religious landscape has passed through three broad phases. Colonial ethnography, represented by E.T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) and S.C. Roy's monographs on the Mundas (1912) and Oraons (1915), produced rich but evolutionist accounts that classified tribal religion as "primitive animism." While empirically valuable, this literature embedded a developmental hierarchy in which Adivasi traditions appeared as survivals awaiting absorption by higher religions. A second phase, shaped by post-independence anthropology, sought to rehabilitate tribal religious systems. K.S. Singh's extensive work on the Birsa Munda movement (1966, 1983) and L.P. Vidyarthi's concept of the "sacred complex" (1961) developed originally at Gaya but applied to Chotanagpur offered analytical frameworks for understanding how sacred centres integrated ecology, ritual, and social structure. Vidyarthi's tripartite model of sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred specialists remains foundational. The third and current phase, influenced by landscape archaeology and the spatial turn in religious studies, treats place as an active constituent of religious meaning. Works by Heinrich von Stietencron (2005) on Hindu sacred geography, Diana Eck's *India: A Sacred Geography* (2012), and John Cort's studies of Jaina pilgrimage (2001, 2010) provide comparative frameworks. For Jharkhand specifically, the archaeological reports of the Archaeological Survey of India on sites such as Itkhori and Benusagar, and recent work by Virginius Xaxa (2008) on Adivasi identity, have expanded the analytical horizon. Nonetheless, a synthetic treatment that integrates the region's prehistoric, indigenous, Jaina, Buddhist, and Brahmanical strata remains underdeveloped a gap this paper partly addresses.

3. Conceptual Framework: Sacred Landscape and Religious Geography

The analytical vocabulary of "sacred landscape" derives from the convergence of cultural geography (Tuan 1977), phenomenology of religion (Eliade 1959), and landscape archaeology (Tilley 1994; Bradley 2000). A sacred landscape is understood here not as a static inventory of holy sites but as a dynamic system in which topographical features, ritual practices, mythic narratives, and social institutions mutually constitute one another. Christopher Tilley's argument that landscapes are "read" through embodied movement is particularly apt for Chotanagpur, where pilgrimage circuits, hunting trails, and grove-centred rituals inscribe meaning through repeated bodily practice. Complementing this is the concept of "religious geography" developed by Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj (1973) in his classic study of Hindu pilgrimage places, and elaborated by Anne Feldhaus (2003) in relation to Maharashtra. Bhardwaj's insight that pilgrimage networks produce scalar integration linking local, regional, and pan-Indian sacred sites helps explain how a hill such as Parasnath can simultaneously be a Munda *marang buru* (great mountain) and a Jaina *siddhakshetra* (place of liberation). Two further concepts are operative in this paper. The first is "cultural syncretism," understood not as mechanical fusion but, following Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (1994), as a contested process of meaning-making. The second is "indigenous knowledge systems," following Xaxa (2008) and Sundar (2007), which recognizes Adivasi ritual-ecological practices as epistemically coherent rather than merely residual.

4. Historical Evolution of Jharkhand's Sacred Landscapes

The earliest evidence of ritual landscape in Jharkhand is prehistoric. Microlithic assemblages and rock paintings at Isko (Hazaribagh) and the rock shelters of Satpahar and Thethangi, documented by Bulu Imam (2014) and the

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, suggest continuous human habitation and symbolic activity from the Mesolithic. Motifs of concentric circles, anthropomorphs, and bovines indicate proto-religious engagement with place that predates Vedic settlement by several millennia. The second stratum is megalithic. Chotanagpur contains one of eastern India's densest concentrations of menhirs, dolmens, and stone circles, particularly in the Ranchi, Khunti, and Singhbhum districts. Excavations at Benusagar and Barudih, reported by the Archaeological Survey of India, have yielded iron-age material culture dated broadly to the first millennium BCE. These megalithic sites remain living ritual spaces: the Munda *sasandiri* (ancestral burial stones) continue to be erected today, demonstrating an extraordinary continuity of mortuary and commemorative practice (Roy 1912; Imam 2014).

The third stratum is the Vedic-epic period. Although Jharkhand is not explicitly named in Vedic *samhitas*, the *Mahabharata* and later Puranic geography refer to the eastern forests variously as Jharkhanda or Kikata as regions inhabited by non-Aryan peoples and ascetic communities. These textual references, while fragmentary, suggest that the region entered pan-Indian religious imagination as a liminal zone of forest and ascetic practice. The fourth stratum is the period of organized religions. From the sixth century BCE onward, the plateau became a corridor for Jaina and Buddhist asceticism. Parasnath Hill emerged as a major Jaina *tirtha*, and Buddhist remains at Itkhor (Chatra district) attest to a monastic presence, possibly linked to the broader Magadhan network (Asher 1980). The medieval period saw the consolidation of Shakta and Shaiva temple traditions, particularly around Baidyanath Dham at Deoghar, integrated into the *jiyotirlinga* network by at least the early second millennium CE (Eck 2012). The fifth stratum is colonial and postcolonial. British land settlement policies, missionary activity, and the Birsa Munda movement of 1895–1900 transformed sacred landscapes into arenas of political resistance (Singh 1966). The post-2000 formation of Jharkhand state has further politicized questions of sacred geography, as contemporary disputes over Parasnath illustrate.

5. Case Studies

5.1 Parasnath Hill / Sammet Shikhar / Marang Buru

Rising to 1,365 metres, Parasnath Hill is the highest peak in Jharkhand and arguably the most contested sacred site in the state. For the Jaina tradition, it is *Sammet Shikhar*, the place where twenty of the twenty-four *tirthankaras*, including Parshvanatha, attained *moksha*. The *Jnatadharmakatha* and later Jaina pilgrimage literature, examined by Cort (2001, 2010) and Dundas (2002), establish its centrality within the pan-Jaina pilgrimage network from at least the early medieval period. The *tonks* (small shrines) along the twenty-seven kilometre *parikrama* encode *tirthankara* biographies into the landscape itself, making the hill a three-dimensional hagiography. For the Santhal, Munda, and Ho communities, the same hill is *Marang Buru* the Great Mountain the abode of the supreme deity and ancestral spirits. Santhal cosmology, documented by Bodding (1925–1940) and Archer (1974), places Marang Buru at the apex of a tiered pantheon, and the hill remains central to seasonal hunting rituals such as the *Disom Sendra*.

The socio-political implications of this dual sacrality have become acute in recent decades. The 2022 central government notification declaring Parasnath an eco-sensitive zone, and subsequent Jaina demands for exclusive religious status, provoked sustained Adivasi protest asserting prior claim to Marang Buru (Xaxa 2008). The dispute reveals how landscape archaeology and religious geography intersect with constitutional questions of indigenous rights under the Fifth Schedule. Parasnath's broader contribution to Indian religious traditions lies in

its role as a paradigmatic *siddhakshetra*. The very concept of a mountain as a liberation-site, so central to Jaina soteriology, is arguably inseparable from the specific topography of this hill, which in turn drew upon pre-existing tribal sacralization of high places.

5.2 Sarna Sacred Groves

The *sarna* a grove of sal (*Shorea robusta*) trees left uncut at the edge of villages is the principal ritual site of the Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Santhal communities. S.C. Roy's (1915, 1928) detailed ethnographies document the *sarna* as the residence of village deities (*bongas*), the site of the annual *Sarhul* festival celebrating the flowering of the sal, and the institutional centre of the *pahan* (village priest). Recent ecological studies (Malhotra et al. 2001; Khan 2010) confirm that sacred groves have functioned as in-situ biodiversity reserves for centuries, harbouring plant species lost elsewhere. The religious significance of the *sarna* extends beyond local animism. The Sarna tradition now formally articulated as *Sarna Dharma* and the subject of an ongoing demand for separate census recognition represents a coherent theological system centred on a supreme creator (variously Singbonga, Dharmes, or Marang Buru), ancestral spirits, and the sanctity of specific ecological sites (Xaxa 2008; Munda 2000). Its contribution to Indian religious development is substantial: the widespread Hindu practice of venerating sacred trees (*vrikshapuja*), the tradition of *gramadevatas* (village deities), and certain elements of Shakta tree-goddess worship show structural affinities with *sarna* practice, suggesting long-standing substratum influence (Kosambi 1962; Sontheimer 1989). The *sarna* also functions as a site of resistance. The nineteenth-century Kol (1831) and Santhal Hul (1855) insurrections, and the Birsa Munda movement (1895–1900), mobilized religious geography against colonial land alienation (Singh 1966, 1983). The grove thus becomes simultaneously a theological, ecological, and political institution.

5.3 Megalithic Ritual Sites of the Chotanagpur Plateau

The megalithic complexes of Chokahatu, Diuri, and the Barudih-Benusagar cluster constitute one of the most remarkable ritual landscapes in eastern India. Chokahatu alone, documented since Dalton (1872), contains an estimated 7,000–8,000 standing stones, representing continuous Munda mortuary practice over many generations. Roy's (1912) ethnography and subsequent archaeological surveys have demonstrated that *sasandiri* (memorial stones) are erected to mark the incorporation of the deceased into the ancestral collective. The religious significance of these sites lies in their articulation of a specific theology of ancestry. The stone is not merely a marker but a seat (*gaddi*) into which the ancestor's essence is installed. This practice provides an indigenous Indian analogue to the broader megalithic traditions of peninsular India studied by Allchin and Allchin (1982) and Moorti (1994), and raises important questions about the religious unity of the South Asian megalithic horizon. The socio-political implications are contemporary as well as historical. Mining expansion, highway construction, and the displacement of Adivasi communities have endangered many megalithic sites. The Jharkhand Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act notwithstanding, enforcement has been inconsistent (Sundar 2007). The megalithic landscape therefore exemplifies how religious geography and developmental politics intersect. Their contribution to broader Indian traditions is twofold. First, they demonstrate that ancestor veneration a feature widely assumed to be imported via Brahmanical *shraddha* rites has deep indigenous roots in the subcontinent's forest regions. Second, the stone-as-deity principle resonates with later Hindu practices of *svayambhu* lingams and aniconic *bongas*, suggesting long-term conceptual continuity.

5.4 Baidyanath Dham, Deoghar

Baidyanath Dham at Deoghar is one of the twelve *vyotirlingas* of the Shaiva tradition, though its precise identification has been historically contested with Parli Vajinath in Maharashtra (Eck 2012). The shrine's integration into the *vyotirlinga* network is attested from at least the early second millennium CE, and the annual *Shravani Mela* draws millions of *kanwariyas* who carry Ganga water from Sultanganj on foot a distance of approximately 105 kilometres to consecrate the linga. Historically, Deoghar illustrates the processes by which regional shrines were incorporated into pan-Indian pilgrimage networks. Kunal Chakrabarti's (2001) work on the Bengal Puranas demonstrates how local goddesses and shrines in eastern India were textually absorbed into Brahmanical geography between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, and Baidyanath's *vyotirlinga* status reflects a comparable process for Shaiva sites. The shrine's Santhal Parganas location, however, meant that this Brahmanization occurred in close proximity to vigorous Adivasi traditions, producing distinctive syncretic forms including the worship of Shiva as a forest deity and the integration of tribal ritual calendars with the *Shravani Mela*.

The socio-political significance of Baidyanath today includes its role as a major economic engine for Deoghar, its function as a node of Hindu identity politics, and its uneasy relationship with the surrounding Santhal population whose ritual landscape predates the temple complex. Baidyanath's contribution to broader Indian religious traditions is its exemplification of scalar pilgrimage. It demonstrates how a shrine becomes simultaneously local (for its surrounding villages), regional (for Bihar, Bengal, and Jharkhand), and pan-Indian (as a *vyotirlinga*) a scalar integration that Bhardwaj (1973) identifies as central to Hindu religious geography.

6. Intersections with Major Indian Religions

The four case studies collectively illuminate how Jharkhand's sacred landscape has mediated encounters among India's major religious traditions. With **Jainism**, the relationship has centred on Parasnath and secondary sites such as Itkhori and Lugu Pahar, integrating eastern ascetic geography into a pilgrimage network otherwise dominated by western sites like Shatrunjaya and Girnar (Cort 2010; Dundas 2002). With **Buddhism**, archaeological remains at Itkhori, Sitagarha, and along the ancient routes connecting Magadha to Kalinga indicate monastic activity, though the tradition declined sharply after the twelfth century (Asher 1980). With **Brahmanical Hinduism**, the encounter has been most complex. The Puranic absorption of local deities, the temple consolidation at Baidyanath and Rajrappa (Chhinmasta), and the incorporation of tribal festivals into Hindu calendars illustrate what Chakrabarti (2001) terms "religious-cultural integration." Yet this process has not erased Adivasi specificity. The Chhinmasta shrine at Rajrappa, for instance, retains clear substratal links to tribal blood-sacrifice traditions even as it is textually integrated into the pan-Indian Shakta pitha network (Kinsley 1997). With **indigenous traditions**, the interaction is bidirectional. While Adivasi practices have absorbed Hindu elements the use of vermilion, certain deity names, and temple-style shrines Hindu practice has equally absorbed tribal elements, from sacred-grove veneration to specific ritual foods and the worship of aniconic stones. Kosambi's (1962) argument that much of village Hinduism is essentially tribal religion reorganized under Brahmanical terminology finds strong support in the Jharkhand material.

7. Socio-cultural and Political Significance

Sacred landscapes in Jharkhand have historically functioned as sites of political mobilization. The Kol insurrection of 1831, the Santhal Hul of 1855, and the Birsa Munda *ulgulan* of 1895–1900 each invoked the sanctity of land against colonial and zamindari encroachment (Singh 1966, 1983; Guha 1983). Birsa's theological innovations

combining Munda cosmology, Vaishnava elements, and millenarian expectation illustrate how sacred geography can generate novel religious forms under pressure. In the postcolonial period, the Jharkhand movement for statehood (achieved in 2000) drew heavily on sacred-landscape arguments, asserting the inseparability of Adivasi identity from specific territorial sanctities. Contemporary disputes over Parasnath, over mining on sacred hills such as those in Saranda, and over the census recognition of Sarna Dharma extend this political-religious entanglement. These conflicts indicate that sacred landscapes are not inert heritage but active constitutional and political subjects.

8. Critical Analysis

Three analytical observations emerge from the preceding material.

- First, the dichotomy between "nature worship" and "organized religion," inherited from colonial ethnography, obscures more than it clarifies. Jharkhand's evidence shows that Adivasi religious systems possess theological coherence, institutional specialization (pahan, naike, laya), and complex cosmologies; calling them "nature worship" misrepresents their sophistication. Simultaneously, the "organized religions" of Jainism and Hinduism on the plateau display deep continuities with the ritual landscapes they ostensibly superseded.
- Second, sacred landscapes function as both sites of resistance and sites of assimilation, often simultaneously. Parasnath is a Jaina *tirtha* and a Munda *marang buru*; Baidyanath is a jyotirlinga and a zone of Santhal ritual presence. Rather than viewing these as contradictions to be resolved, the analysis here treats them as productive tensions that generate religious meaning.
- Third, the transformation from nature worship to organized religion often presented as a linear evolutionary sequence is better understood as a series of recursive negotiations. Jharkhand's sacred grove did not "become" a Hindu temple; rather, groves and temples coexist, borrow, and contest, producing the layered religious geography observable today.

These arguments have implications beyond Jharkhand. They suggest that the forest regions of central and eastern India, long marginalized in religious historiography, are better understood as generative zones within which Indian religious traditions have been repeatedly reconstituted.

9. Conclusion

Jharkhand's sacred landscapes from prehistoric rock shelters to megalithic stone circles, from sarna groves to Jaina and Shaiva hill shrines constitute a historically layered and analytically rich domain within the history of Indian religions. This paper has argued that these landscapes are not peripheral but formative: they have shaped Jaina soteriology at Parasnath, Shaiva pilgrimage geography at Baidyanath, and pan-Indian conceptions of ancestor veneration and tree sanctity through the diffusion of megalithic and grove-based practices. The ongoing contestations over Parasnath and the political mobilization of Sarna Dharma demonstrate that these landscapes remain active historical agents. Future research would benefit from sustained collaboration between landscape archaeology, Adivasi studies, and the history of organized religions, moving beyond the textual bias that has long structured the field. Jharkhand's plateaus, in this sense, are not merely a regional case study but a methodological provocation: they require that Indian religious history be written, at least in part, from the ground up from the grove, the stone, and the hill.

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