

Newly Discovered Yesamba Megalithic Circles, Wardha District, Maharashtra and Memories of The Monument

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Abstract: Yesamba in Wardha District has yielded remains of a once thriving megalithic settlement. The site is under threat of being lost forever and this paper is an attempt to raise awareness for the protection of such heritages, scattered especially in the rural areas. Due mention of the local understanding and perception of the monument has been taken into consideration too. A preliminary documentation of the landscape, megalithic burials, habitation mound, oral history and memories of the locals has been attempted in this paper.

Keywords: Continuity, Megalithic, Memories, Pebbles on Top, Peripheral Boulders.

Received : 30 November 2022

Revised : 18 December 2022

Accepted : 21 December 2022

Published : 31 December 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bamb, O.P. 2022. Newly Discovered Yesamba Megalithic Circles, Wardha District, Maharashtra and Memories of the Monument. *Journal of History, Archaeology and Architecture*, 1: 2, pp. 211-222.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Maharashtra has been an important region for early settlers since palaeolithic period. The eastern part of Maharashtra, popularly known as Vidarbha, is a home to about a hundred early iron age sites or the megalithic sites. Vidarbha, especially at its eastern part, covering approximately today's Nagpur Division, is abundant with large reserves of natural resources, minerals, metal ores, rocks, diverse flora and fauna, water, etc. which made this region an ideal choice for settling down by the people of early iron age period. The region is drained by major rivers like Wainganga, Penganga, Wardha, Pranhita, Irai, etc. The Satpuda mountain ranges form the Northern boundary of Vidarbha and dense forests inhabited by various ethnic communities form the eastern boundary.

The early iron age is dated approximately around 1st millennium BCE upto the 1st century BCE, the same period abruptly coincides with the period of 'Second Urbanisation' in Northern part of India. Early iron age is characterized by the large-scale use of iron objects, tools, implements for day-to-day purposes and specifically in agricultural activities. Another striking feature of early iron age cultures is their burial tradition, whose sepultures are visible above ground even today. The megalithic ('*Megas*' meaning big and '*Lithos*' meaning stone, thus making it related to big stones) burials of various types were built by the early iron age communities to bury their dead members of the family and village with all due respect. Grave goods were also buried alongside

the dead, which most of the scholars believe, is related to their belief in life after death, rebirth and such similar concepts. Sometimes even their horse and other animals were buried along with them (Thomas, P.K. 1993). Early iron age people who were living a simple life in their huts built of wattle and daub, mud, etc. were burying the dead in such elaborate and huge megalithic burials, is a thing to be thought about, as building a single big megalithic burial takes up to many days and is a tiresome, time taking job and needs resources to be built (Mohanty, R.K. 2017). It shows that the kind of belief system regarding deaths was very strong, and the ritual was taken care of in a respectable way. The size of burials, the grave goods tell us about the social status commanded by the dead, is a general belief among scholars, although there can be few exceptions too.

WARDHA DISTRICT

The Wardha district like the other districts in Eastern Vidarbha is under human occupation since microlithic period. The district was brought to forefront during the lifetime of Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinoba Bhave during India's freedom struggle in 20th century. There are many megalithic sites in this district too, in fact Khairwada, one of the largest clusters of Megalithic circles of Central India, is in Wardha District, unfortunately not a single such site is mentioned in the district gazetteer. It thus becomes necessary to do a basic documentation of these sites to get a wider picture of the early iron age in the region.

During the ethnographic survey for his MA Dissertation on Khairwada, the author was informed about such similar structures at Yesamba, Taluka-District Wardha by a local resident and enthusiast named Panchsheel Thool. To verify if these are really megalithic circles, the author visited the site in the first week of March 2022 and again in June. Thus, the site was informed by Thool as mentioned earlier to the author and it is being reported to the academic world for the first time by the author.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Apart from the initial colonial explorations, diggings and varied explanations of the megalithism of Vidarbha, Rivett Carnac, Stephen Hislop, J.J. Carey and others, to name a few, various research have continuously been done on this subject. Dr. Reshma Sawant talks about the contribution of the colonial period to research in Vidarbha Megaliths (Sawant 2015). Dr. Tilok Thakuria gave a brief chronology of Vidarbha Megaliths and ascribed a timeframe to various major megalithic sites (Thakuria 2014). Prof. R. K. Mohanty, Dr. Shantanu Vaidya, Prof. J. S. Kharakwal, Dr. Virag Sontakke, Dr. Tilok Thakuria in their joint article gave a pragmatic perspective on early iron age Megalithic Cultures of Vidarbha, where they not only mentioned the basic 10 architectural types of cairn circle burials but also tried to give an interpretation to the megalithic society and its various aspects (Mohanty *et al.* 2017). Dr. S.B. Deo excavated and published various reports on sites like Khairwada, Takalghat and Khapa, Mahurjhari, Naikund and others; he also tried to give information about the culture, ecology, economy and other aspects of Megalithic settlers of Vidarbha. (Deo, S.B. *et al.* 1985).

Yesamba: 20° 38' 59.6" N; 78° 42' 55.8" E; 264 masl

Yesamba is a *Grampanchayat* in Wardha Taluka of Wardha District and has a population of 963 as per 2011 Census. The village is situated near a low rising plateau and lies in Vena River Valley, although no big

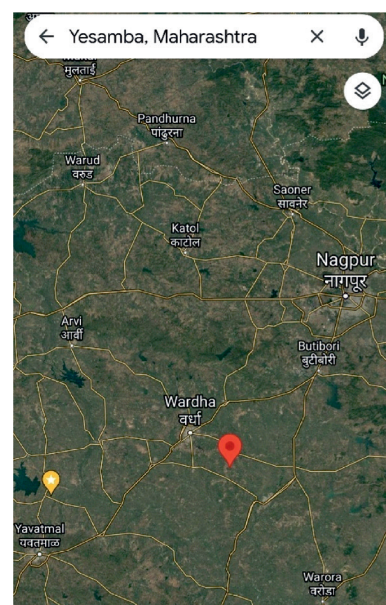


Figure 1: Google Image Showing Location of Yesamba

rivers are there in close vicinity of the village. Some small streams like Lendi Nala do flow during the rainy season. Two hills can be seen near the village, of which one was surveyed for the present research. While going towards Bhankheda from Yesamba, on the left side of the road there's a locally famous Bhawani Mata Temple, located on one of these low rising hills, locally called *Bhawani Chi Khor*. The hill is all covered with *Neem*, *Palas*, *Bhera*, *Hivar*, custard apple, etc. trees and some wild fauna like *Neelgai*, deer, wild boar, rabbit, peacock, Indian Owl, African Owl, *Bulbul*, *Bhordi*, *Bhardwaj*, *Cuckoo*, etc. can also be seen.

HABITATION



Figure 2: Potsherds embedded in the mud plaster on a hut

During the survey of the present village, an extensive habitation mound (now partly disturbed) was encountered. It approximately measures 75 x 100 metres, and 20 metres high, on top of which is the house of Bhoyar family. The mound has been flattened for agricultural purposes at most of the places. The soil at the mound is used by villagers for levelling (*saarvan*) of walls and floors of huts. This is how the potsherds of different periods can be seen stuck on the walls of Bhoyar family's house. Ceramic assemblage includes (needs more detailed analysis) different kinds of red ware, black ware, black ware with stamped designs, glossy variety of black ware, etc. The exact nature and period of the pottery can't be ascribed, which needs to be checked on stratigraphic grounds, but based on preliminary observation their antiquity appears to be going at least as early as the early historic period. A broken piece of saddle (of unspecified nature) was found very close to the habitation mound, from the agricultural land adjacent to it.



Figure 3: Potsherds and broken saddle found during exploration of habitation mound

THE MEGALITHS OF YESAMBA

On the way to Bhankheda from Yesamba, on the left side, behind the Bhawani Mata Temple hidden due to the fully grown shrubs, are a group of approximately forty megalithic circles, which stand testimony to the early iron age occupation here. The given count of around sixty megalithic circles near the Bhawani temple is approximate and few more additions may come up with a more detailed survey and if basic clearance of the dried leaves and shrubs can be done. The present paper aims at giving a brief record of the site and calls for further research, exploration and scientific excavation so that further insights can be taken about the site. More than half area of the hill has already been quarried and is still under process, so much so that if proper steps aren't taken by the authorities, we may lose this site forever.



Figure 4: A megalithic circle with peripheral boulders at Yesamba.

Yesamba megalithic site is also of the type which has some arable pastureland and some barren land (Vaidya, S. 2014 a & b). The present village seems to be settled upon the ancient habitation deposits. The extent of the hill over which the megalithic circles are spread in an approximate area of 2 kmsx0.5 km. The ecological setting of the site has been already briefed in the introduction part.

A very basic description of the megalithic stone circles is as follows:

Sr. No.	Longitude-Latitude	Remarks	Diameter (approximate)	State of Preservation
1.	-	Located near Sonagaon, this megalithic circle is behind the <i>Badalshah Dargah</i> . Interestingly, modern burial has been made exactly over the older megalithic circle.	18 feet	Partially destroyed
2.	-	Near the <i>Badalshah Dargah</i> .	16 feet	Partially Destroyed
3.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'57"E		20 feet	Partially Destroyed
4.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'58"E		17 feet	Partially Destroyed
5.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'58"E		20 feet	Partially Destroyed
6.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'57"E	Pebbles on top with filling	21 feet	Partially Destroyed
7.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'52"E	Pebbles on top with filling	18 feet	Disturbed
8.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'51"E	Partially visible	18 feet	Partially Destroyed
9.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'51"E	It is very large in size,	32 feet	Partially Destroyed
10.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'51"E	It is very large in size; pebble fill on top	33 feet	Intact
11.	20° 38' 47"N 78° 42'50"E	It is the largest in size, pebble fill on top, <i>Baba Fareed Samadhi</i> is over it built of bricks and cement.	47 feet	Intact
12.	20° 38'47"N 78° 42'49"E	Digging activities	20 feet	Partially Destroyed
13.	20° 38'47"N 78° 42'49"E	A <i>Palash</i> tree near this circle is offered with clothes by present populace, as a belief that it'll fulfil their wishes.	21 feet	Partially Destroyed
14.	20° 38'49"N 78° 42'48"E	Two <i>Palash</i> trees are on top of it.	23 feet	Partially Buried in ground
15.	20° 38'50"N 78° 42'48"E	Oval shaped	25-30 feet	Partially Destroyed
16.	20° 38'50"N 78° 42'46"E		24 feet	Partially Destroyed
17.	20° 38'50"N 78° 42'46"E		18 feet	Partially Buried in ground
18.	20° 38'49"N 78° 42'45"E	Big peripheral boulders	24 feet	Partially Destroyed

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Longitude-Latitude</i>	<i>Remarks</i>	<i>Diameter (approximate)</i>	<i>State of Preservation</i>
19.	20° 38'49"N 78° 42'44"E	Big peripheral boulders	27 feet	Partially Destroyed
20.	20° 38'49"N 78° 42'43"E	<i>Palash</i> tree is on top	26 feet	Partially Destroyed
21.	20° 38'49"N 78° 42'42"E	Digging activities	26 feet	Destroyed
22.	20° 38'48"N 78° 42'41"E		20 feet	Partially Buried in ground
23.	20° 38'48"N 78° 42'41"E	Small sized circle with big peripheral boulders	12 feet	Intact
24.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'42"E	Very big in size, has a mound like look, seven <i>Palash</i> and two <i>Neem</i> trees on it, oval shaped plan with big peripheral boulders	32 feet - 40 feet	Partly Preserved
25.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'43"E	Medium sized boulders	20 feet	Partially Buried in ground
26.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'43"E	<i>Palash</i> tree on top	25 feet	Partially Destroyed
27.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'44"E	Small in size, small peripheral boulders	12 feet	Partially Destroyed
28.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'44"E	Big mound like look, medium sized boulders	40 feet	Partially Destroyed
29.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'44"E	Mound like look, pebbles on top, <i>Neem</i> tree is close by	30 feet	Partially Destroyed
30.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'44"E	Boulders are eroded, medium sized boulders	34 feet	Partially Destroyed
31.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'44"E	Medium sized boulders	36 feet	Partially Buried in ground
32.	20° 38'42"N 78° 42'44"E	Pebbles on top	25 feet -16 feet	Partially Destroyed
33.	20° 38'42"N 78° 42'43"E		25 feet	Partially Destroyed
34.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'44"E		24 feet	Partially Destroyed
35.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'44"E		20 feet	Partially Destroyed
36.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'45"E		29 feet	Partially Destroyed
37.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'45"E	<i>Neem</i> tree on top, big in size	34 feet	Partially Destroyed
38.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'46"E	Medium sized	27 feet	Partially Destroyed
39.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'45"E	Pebbles on top	18 feet	Partially Destroyed

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Longitude-Latitude</i>	<i>Remarks</i>	<i>Diameter (approximate)</i>	<i>State of Preservation</i>
40.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'46"E	Small in size, pebbles on top	12 feet	Partially Destroyed
41.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'45"E	<i>Palash</i> tree on top	14 feet	Partially Destroyed
42.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'45"E		32 feet	Partially Destroyed
43.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'46"E	Big in size, <i>Neem</i> tree on top	34 feet	Partially Destroyed
44.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'47"E	<i>Palash</i> tree on top	20 feet	Partially Destroyed
45.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'47"E	Pebbles on top	27 feet	Partially Destroyed
46.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'47"E	Pebbles on top	28 feet	Partially Destroyed
47.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'48"E	Pebbles on top	12 feet	Partially Buried in ground
48.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'48"E	Pebbles on top	16 feet	Partially Destroyed
49.	20° 38'45"N 78° 42'48"E	Pebbles on top	15 feet	Partially Destroyed
50.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'48"E	Medium sized stone circle, pebbles on top	28 feet	Partially Destroyed
51.	20° 38'46"N 78° 42'48"E	Large in size, pebbles on top	34 feet	Partially Destroyed
52.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'49"E	Double ringed or two rounds of peripheral boulders?	36 feet	Partially Destroyed
53.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'48"E	Double ringed or two rounds of peripheral boulders?	36 feet	Partially Destroyed
54.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'48"E	Large in size	40 feet	Partially Destroyed
55.	20° 38'44"N 78° 42'48"E	<i>Palash</i> tree on top	23 feet	Partially Destroyed
56.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'48"E		13 feet	Partially Destroyed
57.	20° 38'43"N 78° 42'48"E		26 feet	Partially Destroyed
58.	20.645985°N 78.714035°E		28 feet	Partially Destroyed
59.	20.645726°N 78.71411°E		14 feet	Partially Destroyed
60.	20.645643°N 78.713916°E		14 feet	Partially Destroyed
61.	20.645622°N 78.713921°E		16 feet	Partially Destroyed
62.	20.645616°N 78.713984°E	Two big mound like elevations, Big in size, <i>Neem</i> , <i>Palash</i> , <i>Sitaphal</i> trees over it	40 feet	Partially Destroyed

Sr. No.	Longitude-Latitude	Remarks	Diameter (approximate)	State of Preservation
63.	20.645598°N 78.714°E	Big in size, Double rings or two circles of peripheral boulders?	38 feet	Partially Destroyed
64.	20.645622°N 78.714277°E		28 feet	Partially Destroyed
65.	20.645662°N 78.714313°E	Big in size	35 feet	Partially Destroyed
66.	20.645766°N 78.714306°E		29 feet	Partially Destroyed
67.	20.64573°N 78.714532°E		18 feet	Partially Destroyed
68.	20.645715°N 78.714566°E		23 feet	Partially Destroyed

However, in the front side close to the road, another cluster of 3 large sized stone circles were observed. Out of these, one has few shaped boulders, which is exceptional, as the site has not given any other evidence of shaped boulders. One of these stone circles has a *Majaar (Samadhi)* of early 20th century over it built in bricks.



Figure 5: Fared Baba Samadhi on top of a megalithic circle and the tree with offerings of clothes near the stone circle

As we can observe, some of the stone circles have been used for building modern monuments over them (*Majaar or Samaadhi* like structures), which represent a reuse or reoccupation of the megalithic burials. The idea of paying respect to the ancestors and revered ones, who are now considered holy,

remains the same in megalithic as well as these modern built ups. They belong to totally different time frames and the context may have changed, but still, there's a continuity regarding the thought of respecting the dead ones which people of both the time periods seem to believe in. In this way, the notion of a memorial space, a respectable abode for the dead and the objective behind building the monument remained the same, which brings us closer to believing that the past and present aren't really two separate water-tight compartments, but are indeed a continuing ongoing process, a dialectic which many scholars have tried to figure out.

DISCUSSION

Yesamba not only has a burial site, which is the most observed feature of a megalithic site, but also a habitation, although confirmed association of both of these with each other needs further verification by scholars. Appearance of around sixty stone circles tells us about the average population of the village during megalithic period. Megalithic circles are more or less of medium size (18 feet to 25 feet diameter) and have rough boulders used to make the outer periphery here. The habitation and burials are approximately a kilometer far, as observed at Khairwada too. For health & hygiene reasons or for other things, the burials weren't inside habitation, unlike what used to happen in chalcolithic period at Inamgaon, but still the burials aren't too far from the habitation either, so that the place is accessible to the family to pay reverence whenever needed. The geographical setting of the Megalithic sites in and around Wardha district, that is, a low rising hill and presence of a small stream of water is followed here too. The elaborate and well-trimmed boulders aren't present here, which may be either due to the early period or may be reflects the economic conditions or pattern of burials at the site specific Yesamba. Out of the many interpretations, a closer one can be reached when extensive and in-depth scientific study of this site is undertaken by further researchers, which then will help us to comment more on the nature of this site.

General Features of Yesamba Megalithic Circles

- The stone circles are located on a low rising hill and occur close to each other.
- The major type of stone circles found here is that of peripheral boulders. Some do have rubble, pebble filling on top too.
- The peripheral boulders aren't shaped to have five or six sides, except the circle found near the road.
- The stone circles here can be grouped into small, medium, large sizes.
- Most of them have already got destroyed and some more are under active threat of being disturbed due to quarrying activities.

Legends and Myths Amongst People of Yesamba

The villagers believe that the name Yesamba is derived from the terms Yash and Amba, to mean that the residents here get success in every work. Although for present discussion, this is not useful, but its important to document such popular beliefs as they also form a part of history of local memories. During informal personal communication with the villagers, few of them said that they found potsherds of red, black colours and some even had floral motifs, from the areas near present habitation. The people here have a belief regarding the dried-up river which existed near the hill, which forms an important part of our present discussion. It is said that the river here was big and perennial and thus

the surrounding region had a good dense flora and fauna. But one day a woman from washermen caste who was experiencing menstruation cycle, went to this river to wash clothes; her touch led to the drying up of river. Although the caste based and sex-based stereotyping and the taboo towards menstruation is clearly visible in this popular belief of the village (which is of course because of the social hierarchical structures of caste and patriarchy and the socialisation of people on the same lines), it is important for students of the past to see that this story tries to give explanation about the drying up of a perennial river which exists today as a mere seasonal nala called Lendi Nala. It shows that the people do sub-consciously have a collective memory of an abundant region which had a good history.

Another important popular belief, which seems to be widespread in the region, as was also experienced at Khairwada (Bamb, O.P. 2021), is that the megalithic circles are remains of the ancient settlement of the *Gaoli* community who used to be pastoralists. *Goddess Bhawani* was worshipped by *Gaolis* and they had established her symbolic image here, is also believed by the villagers and the priest of the temple (Personal Communication). The relation of *Gaoli* community with pastoralism and the belief of their association with the stone circles, tells us that the people do think that the megalithic people practiced pastoralism, which for a fact is true. The megalithic subsistence would have been a mix of agriculture, pastoralism, hunting, gathering, fishing, etc.

The explanations and beliefs may appear logically wrong to the eyes of a researcher, but they are unique in their own way since these are one of the ways in which the rural society addresses its own questions. These local beliefs aren't completely useful for the research and academics but need to be documented as they also form a part of the ascribed memories of the local monument itself and has some hidden information which is diluted into the local memories, as in the case of the second belief, which prove helpful in getting a wider picture of the heritage site and its history (Hodder, I. 1985).

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER SCOPE

The present exploration is of a preliminary level and thus doesn't give a much-detailed picture of the site. Explorations in nearby hills may result into finding of more megalithic circles too. The quarrying activities have reduced the scope of exploration already. Scientific techniques, detailed excavation of habitation as well as burial site, pottery analysis, skeletal analysis, scientific dating should be done in order to understand the site at a deeper level. Conservation of the site should be done by authorities of State Archaeology Department and ASI so that the upcoming generations can look back on their past roots and understand the trajectory of human social development, which has left its traces in the form of these monuments.

SUMMARY

Although many megalithic sites have been reported and excavated in Eastern Vidarbha, sites located in remote areas have received lesser attention. Except very few villagers, no one else is aware of the existence of such monument of historical importance in their vicinity. That's one of the reasons behind the destruction of large number of megalithic sites so much so that, within every few years we are losing these heritages which can narrate an history of over 2500 years to the researchers and to the common people as well. This documentation becomes more important especially when most of the sites are under threat of being destroyed due to large scale quarrying activities. The Department of Archaeology of various Universities, ASI, State Archaeology Departments may take the current situation under consideration and take necessary steps to preserve this heritage.

Yesamba, along with other nearby megalithic sites, presents a past human society which was interacting with each other and thrived for a considerable period. The traditions of megalithism survive

among few ethnic communities like *Gonds* and thus the notions of continuity and change could be understood through this. A monument isn't static and is continuously ascribing new memories, witnessing new events and going through alterations, reuse, rebuild, reoccupation and lastly destruction. Before the last stage happens, it is a researcher's prime duty to make the monument immortal through proper documentation, the first humble step in the same direction is this very research paper, which the author wishes to dedicate to the villagers of Yesamba.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would never have been a reality without the active support of Panchsheel Thool, a resident of Yesamba. The guidance from Dr. Shrikant Ganvir, Hemant Dalavi, Dr. Yogesh Prabhudesai, Akshay Matey and technical help from Tejal Khhar was of immense importance. Heartful thanks are due towards Ankit Jain for all his moral support and motivation.

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