

# THE *RAJ SABHA* AT SILCHANG: DOLMENS AS ADMINISTRATIVE SEATS OF THE ANCIENT KHOLA KINGDOM IN ASSAM, INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Northeast India is well known for the widespread megalithic structures found in different geographical and cultural contexts. Construction of megaliths is also a living tradition among many of the ethnic communities of this region. The dolmen, a megalithic structure made with a large undressed or roughly shaped stone slab supported by several upright stones at the base, is invariably found in all the megalithic cultural traditions across India. In the northeastern parts of India, dolmens are often constructed as resting and meeting places of a community. This paper presents the association of such dolmens with a traditional Raj Sabha (royal assembly) of the Khola king of the Tiwa community of Assam. The Raj Sabha, even today held annually at the Silchang megalithic site, is*

*a unique tradition of a royal assembly functioning symbolically on a cluster of dolmens, and is significant to understanding the functional variability of the megaliths and the use of megaliths as a seat of power in an archaic society.*

## INTRODUCTION

The dolmen is a megalithic structure made with a large undressed or roughly shaped stone slab supported by several upright stones at the base. It is invariably found in all the megalithic cultural traditions across India. Since the Neolithic period, these stone structures have often been constructed for covering buried dead bodies, and sometimes they could be memorial too. Many times, grave goods have also been offered while burying the dead, hence, study of the dolmens is important for understanding the

symbolic behavior and material culture of the ancient groups of people who constructed such megaliths. In the northeastern parts of India, dolmens and other megalithic structures are mostly commemorative in nature and a living practice among many ethnic communities. Dolmens are often constructed as resting and meeting places of a community. This paper reports the association of such dolmens with a traditional *Raj Sabha*, or royal assembly of the Khola king, which was a part of the ancient Gobha kingdom of the Tiwa community living in northeastern India. The *Raj Sabha* is held annually at the Silchang megalithic site (26° 07' 19" N and 92° 21' 02" E) in the Morigaon district of Assam. Silchang is a protected archaeological site under the authority of the Directorate of Archaeology, Govt. of Assam. The term Silchang is derived from two Assamese words, *Sil* meaning stone and *chang* meaning table or bed. Its unique tradition of a royal assembly functioning as a cluster of dolmens is significant to understanding the functional variability of the megaliths in Assam and other parts of Northeast India. There were 17 dolmens constructed at a certain distance in an oval shape and each of these stone seats is specific to the administrative posts of the archaic Khola society.

#### MEGALITHS IN ASSAM AND OTHER PART OF NORTHEAST INDIA

Megaliths are common in most parts of India with a major concentration in southern India (Moorty 1994; Rajan 2002). Deo (1985:449) recognized three regional complexes of Indian megaliths sharing certain common elements, i.e., (i) South Indian or Peninsular, (ii) Northern and Northwestern and (iii) Northeastern. Although the present-day megalithic builders reside in an area extending from Northeast India to the Chota Nagpur and Andhra Pradesh, they are a highly heterogeneous set of populations (Kennedy and Levisky 1985:458). Moreover, they do not share an identical cultural background. The prehistoric megalithic tradition of India is associated with Neolithic (Morrison 2005), Chalcolithic (Singh 1985:475) and Iron Age sites (Nagaraja Rao 1985:470).

The megaliths are commonly found in various cultural and geographical contexts of Northeast India. Since the 1870s, when Godwin-Austen (1872) reported megalithic remains throughout the Khasi Hills for the first time, investigations into the tradition of erecting megalithic structures have been one of the core areas of archaeological and anthropological researches in Northeast India. Perhaps it is the most popular and preferred research topic for doctoral and master dissertations in Northeast Indian archaeology, and, as a result, there are several well-documented accounts of megalithic sites and traditions prevalent among different Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic groups from ethnographic as well as ethno-archaeological points of view.

In northeastern parts of India, megalithic remains of different shapes and sizes are found in a belt extending from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills through Karbi Anglong up to the Naga Hills besides Manipur, Mizoram and certain areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The greatest concentration of megaliths is observed in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, where large scatterings occur at Cherrapunjee, Mawphlang, Laitlyngkot, Laitkor, Jowai and Nartiang (also spelt as Nartiyang) (Bareh 1981; Mawlong 1996, 2004; Marak 2012a, 2019; Mitri 2016). In Assam, megaliths are mostly concentrated in the Morigaon, Kamrup, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts (Medhi 1999; Bezbaruah 2003; Choudhury 2004; Sarma 2011; Thakuria *et al.* 2016). In Manipur, megaliths are found spread over the Naga-dominated areas of the districts of Chandel, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati, and Churachandpur (Singh 1985; Binodini Devi 2011). Megaliths are found extensively in the Kohima and Phek districts populated by Angami and others in Nagaland (W. Jamir 1997, 1998; T. Jamir 2004, 2005, 2019; Venuh 2005; Devi and Neog 2014). A large number of megaliths are also seen in Vangchhia, Ralven Puk Tlang, Lung Ropui, Sazep, and the Maullum Hills in Mizoram (Malsawmliama 2019). In Arunachal Pradesh, only at a few sites such as Jamiri are megaliths reported (Thakur 2004).

This part of India is one of the few areas of the world where the erection of megaliths persists as a living practice in the form of memorial stones commemorating important events or the disposal of the dead in accordance with old customs and beliefs (Rao 1979). After cremating the dead, the ashes and decalcified bones are deposited in a stone chamber and a memorial stone is erected, as practiced by several communities in Northeast India. This living practice is closely associated with the people's socio-cultural traditions, social merit and religious beliefs associated with the dead (Sen 2004; Mawlong 2004). Several British administrators and Indian scholars contributed with valuable writings in their observations on the rituals related to the megalithic structures (for recent reviews, see Mitri 2016, Marak 2019).

Roy (1963) described the funeral rites of erecting megaliths amongst the Khasis of Meghalaya. Rao (1991) concludes that the social and ideological aspects of different megalithic cultures must be taken into consideration before suggesting affinities or common origin. There are attempts to seek the relationship between the megaliths of Northeast India and Southeast Asia (Rao 1991), but any relationship will have to be confirmed more precisely with absolute dates. Bezbaruah (2003) extensively studied the living practice of erecting megaliths among the Karbi community as a post-cremation rite and drew parallels for the prehistoric megalithic remains found in the Karbi Anglong in Assam. In some instances, menhirs also function as a boundary marker of an individual or a community.

The work of Binodini Devi (1993, 2011) in documenting the megalithic traditions among different tribal groups of Manipur is significant in this regard. Manipur is dotted with megalithic sites, and the erection of megaliths is still practiced by several communities such as the Anal, Chakhesang, Kabui (Rongmei), Kharam, Koireng, Liangmai, Mao (Ememai) Maram, Poumai, Tangkhul, Thangal and Vaiphei residing in the Bishnupur, Chandel, Churachandpur, Imphal, Senapati and Ukhrul districts (Binodini Devi 2011). The megalithic remains of Manipur

can be divided into seven groups: (i) flat stone or capstones; (ii) menhirs, alignments and avenues; (iii) cairns (with or without stone circles) which are further subdivided into six subtypes; (iv) stone circles; (v) dolmens; (vi) stone seats; and (vii) a miscellaneous group, again functionally divided into eight subtypes, i.e. (a) memorial or commemorative stones, (b) stone seats or resting stones, (c) watch towers, (d) religious stones, (e) grave stones, (f) witness or judiciary stones, (g) village foundation stones, and (h) village gates. On the basis of their social and religious significance, Binodini Devi (1993) categorizes the present-day megaliths of Manipur into (a) memorial and commemoratives or menhirs of social status and (b) funerary and ritualistic megaliths. The first group of megaliths are erected by the performers either in their own names, whilst they are still alive, or in loving memory of their parents or any deceased member of the family or even distant relatives. Different kinds of feasts of merit are performed by megalith builders to attain a higher social status. The megaliths of the second category are funerary in nature and are ritualistically tied to the practice of disposing the mortal remains of dead ancestors.

Although the tradition of erecting stone for commemorative, funerary and functional purposes is widely studied, the origin and chronology of this tradition are poorly understood in the region (Sarma and Hazarika 2014; Marak 2019). There is hardly any absolutely dated excavation conducted at a megalithic site in the region. Lack of datable materials associated with the megaliths is another limiting factor. The clusters of menhirs are the results of frequent use of the same area for erecting the menhirs by a village or the clan. Differentiating the recently constructed megaliths from the ancient ones is also difficult due to fast weathering of the stones and overgrowth in the area. This makes all the structures look alike and differentiation is possible only with local help. People's memories and oral traditions are extremely important sources. Hence, in-depth studies are required for establishing a chronology of the living tradition among various groups as well as the megalithic

structures made by the ancient communities having varied cultural background.

#### DOLMENS: AN INTEGRAL PART OF MEGALITHS

Dolmens are commonly found in the areas occupied by Karbis, Tiwas, Nagas, Maos, Poumais and Khasi-Jaintias. These are known as *mawkynthei* (female stone) and *mawshongthait* (resting stone) in the Khasi hills (Marak 2019:xix–xx). Based on ethnographic use and function, Marak (2019:xxiv) categorizes several menhirs and cairns with resting stones or raised platform or enclosure as resting stones for taking rest and refreshment in the different parts of Northeast India. In the Khasi-Jaintia areas, menhirs are considered as male stones (*mawshynrang*) and dolmens as female stones (*mawkynthei*), which form the cluster of clan stones (Marak 2019:xxvii). Mitri (2019:5–6) groups the Khasi dolmens into three types based on structural and functional variations. Type 1 refers to table stones observed in association with standing stones (menhirs); Type 2, known as *mawshongthait* are the resting stones for the travelers in the sides of footpaths leading to farms or market places; and Type 3, referred as *mawshieng* (bone stones) are for placement of bones, hence funerary in nature. Some of the important megalithic sites having clusters of dolmens in the Khasi-Jaintia hills are Nartiang, Moopat (Sutnga), Nongbah, Raliang, Nongtalang, Lamin, Law Nongthroh, Mawpdang, Mawpat, Rongseh Rim, Myllem Mawiong, Laitlyngkot, Lumdiengiei, Nongshyrngam, Nongspung, Sohra, and Marngar (Mitri 2016:51–65). These are interpreted as either burials or associated with market places, administrative and some socio-religious practices of the ancient Jaintia and Khasi societies. Megalithic monuments of Laitlyngkot village in the East Khasi Hills and Nongtalang in the south Jaintia Hills are known to be erected by the village elders to hold assembly (Mitri 2016:73). Besides these functions, dolmens are a part of the mortuary behavior of the Jaintias and have wide structural variations (Meitei and Marak 2015; Meitei 2019).

Among the Poumai communities of Manipur, the dolmens, known as *raikhubu*, occasionally associated with cairns or raised platforms or stone circles, serve as seats (Binodini Devi 2019:20–21). The supporting pillars are made with a number of small slabs along with upright stones. The resting stones constructed by the Naga people of Manipur are single or composite flat stones seen by the side of an intra-village lane leading to the terrace fields, water sources or neighboring villages (ManiBabu 2019:99).

Raised stone platforms surmounted by blocks of stones linked with the highest stage of feasts of merit are used for holding clan meetings in Nagaland. The table stones serve as pronouncement platforms for the village priests or as altars for ritual ceremony, set up by the spouse of a feast-giver (T. Jamir 2019:123–124). The small raised rectangular or semi-circular platforms arranged with stone seats are known as *badze*. These are ideal resting points outside the villages on the way to the terrace fields. The ones within the villages, known as *kwehou*, literally meaning “a place for discussion” (Venuh 2000) are the meeting places of the village and *khel* members (T. Jamir 2019:135–136). Marak (2012b:44) considers the stone seats found in Naga villagers as one of the morphological types of the megaliths of Northeast India. These are made of flattish boulders placed at regular intervals in rectangular or roughly circular or oval shape. Many of these have a center stone or a larger slab within or around the roughly circular or rectangular structure to serve as a special seat for the head of the clan or the village chief. These stone seats are either placed on the ground or on some supporting stones.

Flat stones are used as stone seats during the *Sikpui Roui* thanksgiving festival, observed by the Hmar clans of Mizoram, which subsequently become a sacred place (Malsawmliama 2019:74–75). Similarly, stone seats are a kind of megalithic structure found in Sikkim. These large oblong boulders are placed horizontally in the jungles or near roads for resting (Lepcha 2019:84).

## MEGALITHS OF MORIGAON AND SURROUNDING AREAS

In Assam, a high concentration of megalithic structures is found at Topatoli, Nonjirang, Muput, Silchang, Kalangpur, Digaru, Nenglo, Bolosam, Kobak, Derebra, and Kartong. Megaliths are found widely in the Hamren subdivision of the Karbi-Anglong district in Assam (Bezbaruah 2003; Devi Bora and Bezbaruah 2018; Marak 2019). The Karbis residing in the Dimoria area of Kamrup district, west of Morigaon are well known for the construction of megaliths of varied nature. These menhirs and dolmens are classified as memorial or commemorative and funerary or ritualistic (Choudhury 2019:53–54). Murkata village in Khetri in Kamrup district has several dolmens or seating stones. These dolmens are presently not in use; however, the local people believe that these were used for administrative meeting in ancient times (Roy 2019). Some of the important localities of Kamrup adjacent to Morigaon are Marakdola, Barkasarang, Tegheria, Dandaral, Dakhinbam, Khamar Gaon, and Murkata. These sites have individual menhirs, cluster of menhirs, menhirs with a flat stone and dolmens (Figure 1). Sites such as Dakhinbam, which has a total of 337 menhirs forming a cluster, are due to repeated use of the same plot for erecting the megaliths by a community. Once the area is exhausted, a new plot is selected for the said purpose.

As a living practice, the Karbi community erects a menhir (*long-e* in local language) and a flat stone (*chang-e*) is placed in front of the menhir to offer a meal for the deceased soul on the day of the erection ritual. The Karbis residing in the Garbhanga Reserved Forest areas in Assam-Meghalaya border also have similar mortuary practices. The flat stone in front of the menhir (*long-e*) is known as *long-dang*. Although these are funerary and ritualistic in nature, there is no cremation of the dead or secondary bone burial associated with these megaliths (Hazarika 2016, 2017).

Among the Tiwa community too, erecting megaliths is a living practice (Patar 2016).

These megaliths are funerary (associated with ritual before or after cremation and bone collection) and non-funerary (associated with ancestor worship or constructed as a boundary marker) in nature. These are menhirs, dolmens and cists for depositing bones of clan members. The tradition of depositing bones in *kungri* or stone cists among the Malang clan is known to have been brought by the ancestors of the clan from the Nartiang area in Jaintia Hills (Patar 2016). The menhirs of Kutusi Mokoidharam area are known to be erected as a sign of the meeting point between the ancient Gobha and Jaintia kingdoms. The area acts as a resting place for the Jaintia traders who come to the Gobha area for taking part in the Joonbeel *Mela* (fair), held annually at the Dayang-Belguri area of Morigaon where marketing is still practiced through the barter systems, i.e., exchange of goods rather than use of money. The Tiwas call the dolmens *phidri tongkhra* (flat seating stones of the ancestors). They offer sacrifices on these table stones for religious ceremonies such as the Phidri Jongkhong and Yangli festivals (Patar 2016). These oral sources suggest close affinities of the Tiwa and Jaintia traditions of erecting megaliths.

## THE DOLMENS OF SILCHANG

Silchang is located at a distance of about 70 km from Guwahati city and lies next to the Guwahati–Nagaon 37 National Highway on the right (Figure 2). There are altogether 17 dolmens (Figure 3) constructed at certain distances in a nearly oval shape at the site of Silchang; however, one is presently missing and is replaced with a concrete platform. These dolmens are made of coarse-grained granitic rocks available in the nearby hills. These are used as seats of the members of the *Raj Sabha* or royal assembly of the Khola kingdom. The dolmen meant for the *Khola Deoraja* (the divine king of Khola) is towards the southern end of the site and the rest of the dolmens are spread in a systematic way according to the position of the person in the traditional royal assembly (Figure 4).



Figure 1. Megalithic structures of Kamrup and surrounding areas, (A) Cluster of menhirs at Barkasarang, (B) Individual large menhir at Tegheria, (C) Menhir with a slab (Long-e with Long-dang) at Dakhin Bam, Teteliguri and (D) Dolmens at Murkata. Photographs by Jayanta Roy.



Figure 2. Map showing the locations of Silchang megalithic site and some important locations mentioned in the text. Google Earth map created by the authors.



Figure 3. Dolmens at the Silchang megalithic site in Morigaon. The concrete platform next to the dolmen is inscribed with the corresponding position in the royal assembly. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.

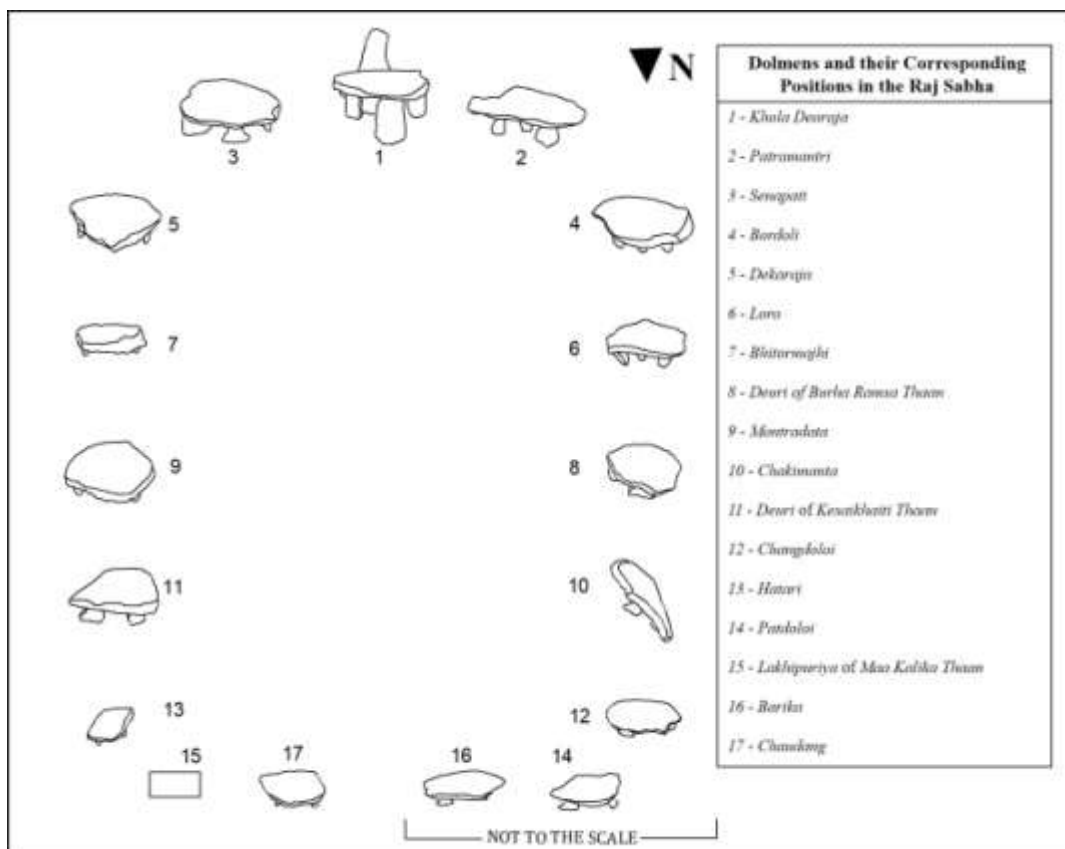


Figure 4. Plan of the dolmens and their corresponding positions in the Raj Sabha at the megalithic site of Silchang. Illustration by Sanathana, Y.S.

The hardly dressed stones are used to make the structures depending on the status of the royal person. The seat of the king is made of a flat stone supported by three vertical or upright stones of about 45 cm in height at the base, while a long stone of 105 cm provides support as the backrest. A smaller stone is also kept behind the backrest stone for the *Satidhora* or *Satradhar* who provides shade to the king with an umbrella made with a bamboo frame and a *sadar* (white cloth). All this conveys the superiority of the king over his subordinate officials. The rest of the dolmens are simpler ones about 30 to 45 cm above the ground, made of a slab and supported by three or four smaller stones. The slabs are circular, semi-circular, rectangular or squarish in form. The seats meant for the *Patramantri* and *Senapati* are made of broader

flat stones and comparatively well arranged vertical or upright stones.

This place has been used for performing royal administration on social, political and community life of the Tiwas for at least 12 generations of Khola Deoraja (<https://archaeology.assam.gov.in>, accessed on 10 June 2020). The royal assembly presently held annually at the site is more symbolic in nature. Local oral memory suggests a genealogy of the kingdom including descendent kings such as Rupsing Deoraja, Pengta Deoraja, Bheruwa Deoraja, Bhadra Deoraja, Lalsing Deoraja, Sukra Deoraja, Nokreng Deoraja, Bhema Deoraja, and Umongal Deoraja (Mahanta 2014:78). The local names of the traditional court members whose seats are specified at Silchang are given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Members of the Khola Royal Assembly with explanation in English.**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Local name of the members of the Khola Royal Assembly</b>	<b>Explanation in English</b>
1	<i>Khola Deoraja</i>	Divine king of Khola
2	<i>Patramantri</i>	Chief adviser to the king
3	<i>Senapati</i>	Chief security officer
4	<i>Bordoloi</i>	A supervisory, administrative and judicial officer
5	<i>Dekaraja</i>	Crown prince or young king
6	<i>Loro</i>	Head of Tiwa root village responsible for conducting all community level religious functions. He also heads the village elders' council called the <i>Pisai</i> .
7	<i>Bhitormajhi</i>	In charge of the royal household and <i>than</i> (shrine)
8	<i>Deuri of Burha Ramsa Thaan</i>	Person who presides over the worship of the <i>Burha Ramsa</i> shrine
9	<i>Montradata</i>	Adviser to the king
10	<i>Chakimanta</i>	Royal torch bearer
11	<i>Deuri of Kesaikhaiti Thaan</i>	Head priest of the Kesaikhaiti shrine
12	<i>Changdoloi</i>	Head of the <i>Samadi</i> (the bachelors dormitory of the Tiwas)
13	<i>Hatari</i>	Personal assistant of the <i>Loro</i>
14	<i>Patdoloi</i>	Assistant of the <i>Bordoloi</i>
15	<i>Lakhipuriya of Maa Kalika Thaan</i>	Caretaker of the Maa Kalika shrine
16	<i>Barika</i>	Messenger or the one who collects information of the kingdom and shares it with the king
17	<i>Chaudang</i>	In charge of internal security or the king's bodyguard



## THE TIWA COMMUNITY

The Tiwas (also known as Lalungs) are an ethnic community living mostly in a wide belt bordering Assam and Meghalaya in the districts of Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, Karbi-Anglong, Dhemaji, Titabor in Jorhat district, Sadiya subdivision of Tinsukia district of Assam, and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. The Tiwas have long been referred to as ‘Lalung’ or ‘Laloo’ by other neighboring groups such as the Khasi-Jaintia and Karbi. The *Buranjis* (chronicles written during the medieval Ahom kingdom) used terms like ‘Lalung’, ‘Garo’ and ‘Dantiyalias’ interchangeably to denote the Tiwa people. The people in question, however, refer to themselves as Tiwa. This Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic community belonging to the Bodo-Garo group (van Driem 2001) is divided into the Hill Tiwas and Plain Tiwas, depending on habitation. Depending on the topography of their habitation, they practice both shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation, locally known as *jhum*, and lowland valley cultivation of rice (Sarma Thakur 1985:114). Detailed ethnography of the Tiwas is recorded in several notable publications (Shyamchaudhury and Das 1973; Sarma Thakur 1985; Gogoi 1986, 1987; Barua 1989; Gohain 1993; Bordoloi 2002; Patar 2004; Deka Patar 2007; Baruah 2015).

The Tiwas had a traditional administration (Debnath 2018) under kingship having different states within them known as *Sato Rajya*, *Pancho Rajya*, *Datiyalia Rajya* and *Powali Rajya*, under the suzerainty of the Jaintia kingdom (Bhuyan 2001:105). Gobha was the largest state among them. The other kingdoms include Nellie, Khola, Topakuchi, Raha, Barapujia, Rani, Luki, Beltola (Nath 1948:112). These kingdoms were also known as *Sato Rajya* (seven kingdoms), ruling the western part and *Pacho Rajya* (five kingdoms) ruling the eastern part of the territory. The *Sato Rajya* includes Tetelia, Kumoi, Sukhanagug, Tarani Kalbari, Baghara, Ghagua and Kacharigaon whereas the *Pacho Rajya* includes Topakuchi, Barapujia, Mikirgaon, Saragaon (Phulaguri) and Khaigarh (Patar 2004). Each of these *Rajyas* would have a

*Deoraja* (divine king) along with other office bearers (Sarma Thakur 1985:73-74). The divine king is also regarded as the custodian of all the shrines, rituals, festivals, and fairs (Mahanta 2014:48).

Historical sources such as the *Buranjis* (Bhuyan 2012) and oral tradition suggest that the Tiwas resided in different places throughout history and came in touch with neighboring communities such as the Karbis, Kacharis, Ahoms, Jaintias, Khasis, and the caste-Hindu Assamese people of the Brahmaputra plain. Cultural contact, interaction and assimilation are obvious, and hence a lot of cultural similarities in customs, traditions and festivals are observed. The local people of Silchang trace their ancestry to the hills of Bor-Amni area in West Karbi Anglong of Assam. They descended from the root village called Bor-Amni, located approximately 20 km to the south of their present village. The people of Silchang in particular and Khola principality in general have maintained their cultural ties with their root village. It is worthwhile to mention that the Tiwa root villages are presided over by the village elders’ council known as the *Pisai*. The head of the *Pisai* is called the *Loro*, who is not only responsible for leading the community-level religious ceremonies but also acts as the head of the jury for settling family and social disputes within the village.

The megaliths at Silchang are considered to be as old as the establishment of the Tiwa village at the present location whose ancestors came down from the Bor-Amni area. According to the *Jaintia Buranji* (Bhuyan 2012:78–79), the Gobha, Khola and other minor Tiwa kingdoms had political associations with the Jaintia kingdom in the adjacent hills. The Raja of these three principalities played a significant role in maintaining diplomatic relations between Jaintiapur (the Jaintia capital) and Gargaon (the Ahom capital) in the pre-colonial era. Another chronicle, *Deodhai Asom Buranji* (Bhuyan 2001:96–98) records that the Gobha and Khola kingdoms were extensively used by the Ahoms to invade the Jaintia kingdom from the early 17th century onwards. Both chronicles verify that the Gobha and Khola were strategic areas

for the Ahoms. From the chronicles it can be inferred that these two kingdoms existed long before the Ahoms came into contact with them. According to the present incumbent of the Gobha principality, Deepsing Deoraja, his ancestors established the kingdom at Kova, its name later corrupted as Gobha, as early as the 13th century AD. It appears that the Khola kingdom was also established at the same time as a subordinate principality under the suzerainty of the Gobha king.

The Gobha king is considered as the first king of the Tiwas. According to Tiwa oral tradition, the Gobha king is believed to have been born out of a stone, at a place called Thini-moslong or Thinimaklang or Timowflong (Patar 2014:569). Interestingly the Tiwa legends also state that the *Jayatha Raja* (Jaintia king) was born from the earth and the *Khrem Raja* (Khasi king) was born from a tree hole. The Gobha kingdom was founded at Sodonga in the Jaintia Hills. Subsequently it shifted to Amsai in the West Karbi Anglong from where the Tiwa king ruled for several centuries. However, during the reign of Potsing Raja the seat of the kingdom was moved to the present Gobha area (Patar 2014:571). From the oral tradition it appears that the Tiwa, Jaintia and Khasi had a shared origin of kingship and they had similarities in belief system and administrative setups.

The Gobha king ruled some minor areas like smaller states under his administration. There are 18 sub-kingdoms under the entire Gobha kingdom. The Silchang area was historically under the Gobha administration. This area is known as *Khola Rajya* and the king is named as *Khola Deoraja*. The ancient name of the village is Kholagaon. The Khola kingdom is one of the important political powers ruled by the Tiwas in the Kolong-Kapili valley. According to *Jaintia Buranji* (Bhuyan 2012), the Khola kingdom was a tributary of the Jaintia state. The kingdom got its name after its founder king Kholasing (also known as Khola) who belonged to one of the founding clans known as Puma of the Tiwas (Gogoi 1987:68). The Khola kingdom roughly covered the area from Basundhari shrine near Raha in Nagaon district in the east, Nellie in the

west, Kolong River in the north and Bor-Amni in the south. The capital of the Khola kingdom was at Silchang. The Khola kingdom was surrounded by Nellie and Gobha kingdoms in the west and Sahari kingdom in the east.

The elderly locals of the Khola area believe that the kingdom of Khola was established in the 14th century AD by its founder king named Khola (Mahanta 2014:77). It is well known from archaeological evidence and historical data that after the fall of the Pala dynasty in the 12th century AD in the Brahmaputra valley, several petite kingdoms emerged and ruled various parts of the valley as well as the neighboring hills (Gait 1926) and the Tiwa kingdoms were some of them. The historical records show diplomatic relationships between the Gobha kingdoms including the Khola and the Jaintias with the Ahoms in the early decades of the 17th century (Devi 1992). According to local legends still current among the people of Silchang, these megaliths were vandalized during the invasion of the Burmese in Assam during AD 1817–1826.

There is an interesting oral story (Mahanta 2014:145–146) associated with the construction of these stone structures at Silchang. On a state visit to the Khola kingdom, the king of Jaintia accompanied by the Gobha king saw a large number of stones scattered in the area. The Jaintia king asked his subordinate Khola king to prepare seats with stones for the royal assembly and accordingly the Khola king ordered his subjects to construct the seats. This was not obeyed by his subjects, which became a matter of concern to the king. Later on, his two loyal servants known as Pun and Apun, after seeing the soreness in the face of their king, took up the work and collected and carried the large blocks of stones to the designated area and constructed the *sil chang* (stone platform).

The exact year of the establishment of the Khola kingdom is not known; however, from the above discussion it appears that the megaliths of Silchang are at least 500–700 years old. The oral stories and the historical records show the integral relationship of the Khola, Gobha and Jaintia kingdoms in the early days and the

establishment of the dolmens as stone seats for the royal assembly. As mentioned earlier, non-availability of datable materials associated with these megaliths in the region is a drawback in assigning an absolute date for the structures, which needs future attention and studies.

Like many other indigenous communities of Assam, the Tiwas do not have written history, hence oral tradition and folklores are important traditional sources for reconstructing their origin, migration and historical background. Moreover, the available archaeological sources are to be documented and studied for a better understanding of the past cultural tradition of the community as well as the region.

#### THE BHETIKARHA UTSAV OF THE KHOLA KINGDOM

There is an ancient custom among the Tiwas residing in the Khola area in which the subjects pay tax in terms of objects (kind) to the king and this tradition has continued till today. This custom has become an annual fair celebrating the occasion of collection of tax. The fair is held in the month of April, after the celebration of the Bohag Bihu festival (Sarma Thakur 1985:103). Also known as the Khola *mela* (fair), it is usually celebrated by the community at the Silchang area for two days on Sunday and Monday after the celebration of Bihu on the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag. Silchang has an open ground known as the *Bihutoli*. The Silchang *Bihutoli* (Figure 5) has an assembly hall of the king known as *Raj Chora*, a shrine known as Sri Sri Shiva-Jadav Devalaya and Deorajar Kirtan Ghar, a *toran* (gate) and the Silchang (stone seats). The surrounding area is known as Khola *gaon* (village). The celebration of Bihu festival at Silchang Bihutoli started in 1969; however, the exact year of beginning of the Bhetikarha Utsav and the *Raj Sabha* at the Silchang dolmens is not known. The entire *Silchang Rongali Bihu Udjyapan* takes place for eight days from the 1st to the 8th days of the Assamese month of Bohag (15th to 22nd April). The authors of the present paper attended the 60th year of celebration of *Silchang Rongali Bihu Udjyapan* in April 2019. The authors ob-

served and recorded the festival and the religious performances so as to understand the continuity of the ancient tradition of holding the *Raj Sabha* ceremony and its association with megalithic tradition. We have interviewed Shri Subhen Bordoloi (55 years old) and Khola Dekaraja Shri Kushal Konwor (30 years old) of Silchang to collect information on these traditions.

For the occasion of the Bhetikarha Utsav (Saikia 2018:96), the Tiwa people living in the hills (root village Bor-Amni) come down to the Silchang village one day ahead of the fair and stay with the locals. On that evening, a community fire is lit and is celebrated with joy by singing and dancing. They bring with them local agricultural and craft produce like rice, rice cakes, eggplants, gourds, chillies, bamboo shoots, turmeric, lac, cotton and fishes as *bheti* (tribute) in kind to the king in a bamboo basket known as *hora*. These items are then distributed among the *Deoraja*, *Dekaraja*, *Senapati* and other dignitaries. Along with the main *bheti* or *bhar*, a few other *bhars* with smaller quantities of the above-mentioned items including banana pseudo-stems or shoots are also brought. A feast is arranged with all the above items (Sarma Thakur 1985:103). The hill areas from where these people come down are traditionally under the jurisdiction of the Khola kingdom. This symbolizes continuity of tradition and inherent faith in customs of the ancient Tiwa society. After the celebration of the fair, they return back to their home in the hills (Borkakati 2013:141–142).

Regarding the Bhetikarha Utsav, the locals of Kholagaon have a myth that when, as a tributary or vassal of the Gobha kingdom, the Khola people went to Gobha via Nellie to pay the tax, the people of Nellie snatched away their valuables and offered the same as their own tribute to the Gobha king. This was initially not believed by the Khola king as explained by his subjects, and hence he asked the subjects to demonstrate the incident. This has become an important fair known as *Bheti karha* (*bheti* means tribute in money and kinds, and *karha* means to snatch). Hence, the Bhetikarha Utsav is symbolically

celebrated as a commemoration of that incident (Mahanta 2014:76-77).

Sacrifice of birds is a common tradition among the Tiwas. Before the beginning of a ritual, a fowl is sacrificed and a priest predicts or calculates the future through *mangal* (divination) by observing the heart and intestine of the sacrificed animal. In the Bhetikarha Utsav too, the elders sacrifice a fowl whose intestine is observed for an omen (bad or good) known as the *mangal sua*.

The celebration starts at the *Bihutoli* field. The traditional songs and music are a part of the entire festival. The *Khola Deorajar Raj Chora* becomes a holy place for the traditional *Gayon–Bayon* (singers and musicians) and devotional songs with instruments such as the *nagara* (drum), *taal* (cymbal) and *banhi* (flute). The *Khola Deoraja* and his subordinate officials and the folk singers dress in traditional attire such as white *dhoti*, orange-colored *gamosa*, a sleeveless waist coat known as *tagla*, which is usually black in color, and a *tangali* worn round the waist. The *Khola Deorajar Raj Chora* court building is prepared and decorated for the assembly of the *Bhetikorha Utsav*. Members of the *Raj Sabha*, and some elders of the *Khola gaon* prepare a temporary seat for the king. The seat is made of a bamboo mat, wrapped with a white *sadar* (a long and wide white cloth), and the mat is covered with a banana leaf. Behind the seat, a concrete pillar is placed as a backrest, wrapped in banana leaf.

The *Deoraja* (king) is escorted to the *Bihutoli* and the *Raj Chora* with dance, songs and music by his subjects. First off, the king and members of his *Raj Sabha* assemble at the *Sri Sri Shivayadav Devalaya* or *Deorajar Kirtan Ghar* community temple and offer prayers to the deity by chanting mantras and *kirtan*. After seeking the blessing of the deity and the priest, the king and his officials proceed to the *Khola Deorajar Raj Chora* in the midst of a huge cultural procession. After reaching the *Raj Chora*, all members welcome the king and request him to take his seat. A man (known as the *satidhora* or *satradhar*) with a *chatra* (umbrella kind of

structure) made of bamboo wrapped with a white cotton *sadar* stands right behind the king.

To honor the king, an earthen lamp, incense sticks and flowers are offered and placed in front of the seat. The locals show their extreme respect and gratitude towards the king and the members of the *Raj Sabha* by bowing down in front of them. The ritualistic offering to the king suggests that the king is considered equivalent to a deity and his subjects are his devotees. It clearly indicates the divinity of the kingship as perceived by the subjects of the *Khola* kingdom.

Another interesting ritual observed by the people of *Khola* kingdom is the selection/installation of the *Senapati* or chief security officer. This is symbolically observed and with the permission of the king, the members of the court proceed to the village for the custom of *Senapati* selection. The two *chaudangs* (body guards) with their *dhal* (shield) and *tarowal* (sword) lead the procession to the village, dancing with joy while other members and villagers follow them in queue. The procession enters the village, which has a bamboo-made entrance or *toran* decorated with different local flowers, and date-palm and banana-tree leaves. Young girls welcome the procession with folded hands in a *namaskara* gesture at the entrance of the house of the newly selected *Senapati*. Even the entrance of the house is decorated with flowers, and date-palm and banana-tree leaves. Men and women from the village gather, perform dances and sing devotional songs, and the family members of the *Senapati* serve them with areca nut and betel leaf (*tamul-paan*).

Eventually, the committee members and village elders take their seats on bamboo mats at the house of the *Senapati*. They are served with rice beer and *biri* (miniature cigars) made with dry bamboo leaf. After that, the new *Senapati* wears the new dress brought by the members of the *Raj Sabha*. During this time, other members of the village are not allowed to enter the house. Thereafter, along with all the members, the new *Senapati* offers prayer to the iron sword and shield (Figure 6). These are considered as auspicious objects by the locals. After completion of all the customs at the house of the *Senapati*,



Figure 5. (A) The entrance of the Silchang Bihutoli, (B) Sri Sri Shiva-Jadav Devalaya and Deorajar Kirtan Ghar and the toran (gate) in front, (C) A Samadi and (D) The Raj Chora. Photographs by Manjil Hazarika.



Figure 6. Prayer at the house of the Senapati. Senapati is seen along with Patramantri, Bordoloi, Chaudangs with traditional dhal (shield) and tarowal (sword) and other villagers. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.

everyone proceeds back to the *Raj Chora* with the new *Senapati*. This procession is extremely joyful as the young girls dance, men beat *khood* (traditional drums), the two *Chaudangs* dance with their shield and sword, and villagers clap with delight.

Upon reaching the *Raj Chora*, the newly selected *Senapati*, followed by all the members of the *Raj Chora*, bow down showing respect to the king and seek blessing. During this ceremony, only males are allowed to enter the *Raj Chora*. Thereafter all the members of the court move to the *sajghar* (dressing room) located beside the *Raj Chora* and wear headgear made of white *sadar* wrapped with flowers. From the *sajghor*, the king and the members move to a local sacred tree and offer prayer. The king is again paid tribute by the court members (Figure 7). Thereafter, they proceed to the temple for the ceremony of the *Gosai Ana Utsav*. On this occasion, the *Gosai* (symbolic deity) of the *Devalaya* is brought out and everyone takes an oath for the new royal court and seeks blessings. The *Gosai* is placed inside a *khat* (wooden frame) covered with a cloth and four peacock feathers knotted on the four corners. Two young men carry the *khat* on their shoulders, and proceed to the *Raj Chora*. The king and his court members along with the villagers follow the procession with the *khat* (Figure 8). On the way, the priests carry a bamboo basket in one hand and play a conch shell or *shankha*. After reaching the *Raj Chora*, they place the *khat* on two banana leaves laid on the hall while everyone present there offers prayer to the deity and the priest continues the rituals by chanting mantras and lighting earthen lamps, incense stick and offering flowers.

Now, there is another ritual performed, in which two young girls of the village are symbolically married with the deity. The faces of the girls are covered with cloths and two widows of the village help them to reach the hall. After this ritual, the procession again proceeds to the *Raj Sabha* at the Silchang megaliths, and places the *khat* in the middle of the area inside a shrine of apsidal dome-like shape, made of bamboo and decorated with garlands of flowers,

and banana and date-palm tree leaves. The shrine is set exactly in front of the stone seat of the *Khola Deoraja*. The flowers which are used for decoration of the shrine are *Joba* (*Hibiscusrosa sinensis*), *Karabi* (*Nerium oleander*), *Togor* (*Tabernaemontana dibricate*), and *Madhurilota* or Rangoon creeper (*Quisqalis indica*). Here, the divine king and officers are welcomed to the *Raj Sabha* by the elders of the Khola kingdom. The royal assembly members are requested to take their designated seats on the dolmens.

After the prayer, the king and other court members take their respective seats on the dolmens (Figures 9–10). The *satidhora* or *satradhar* stands behind the king with the *chatra*. Two attendants on his right and two *chaudangs* (body guards) with sword and shield on his left also take their seats, although there is no designated dolmen for them. In the Khola custom, the king is also the head of the judiciary, and the king dispenses the cases referred to his council. The council is referred to as *Charidham* which is comprised of three officials, i.e., the *Patramantri*, *Senapati*, *Bordoloi* as well as the *Deoraja* himself (Mahanta 2014:79). Interestingly, these three officials sit close to the king and have comparatively well-structured seats in the form of dolmens (Figure 11). They, along with the king, wear decorated headgear, showing their importance in the *Raj Sabha*. The rest of the members appear to be subordinate officials who are used to following the orders and decisions taken by the *Charidham* headed by the *Deoraja*. This also indicates that the king takes the final decisions of the community affairs in consultation with the other three members of the *Charidham*. *Charidham* means the four corners or pillars of a structure. It also signifies the oligarchic nature of the power structure in the Tiwa traditional administration. The same is also reflected in the position, structure and layout of the dolmens assigned to a particular seat of the *Raj Sabha*.

The *Raj Sabha* is symbolic in nature. The villagers greet the king with respect and kneel before him (Figure 12). Then the villagers take part in the devotional songs and music played by the *gayan-bayan* (groups of singers and mus-



*Figure 7. The Royal court members paying respect to the king at the Raj Chora. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*



*Figure 8. King and his court members along with the villagers during the procession with the khat on the way to the Silchang dolmen. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*



*Figure 9. The king after taking his seat at the Dolmen. The satidhora or satradhar with a chatra behind him and two attendants on his right and two army men with sword and shield on his left are also seen. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*



*Figure 10. The king and the court members after taking their respective seats at the dolmens. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*





Figure 11. The three important members of the Charidham after taking their seats: (A) Senapati, (B) Patramantri and (C) Bordoloi. Photographs by Manjil Hazarika.



Figure 12. Loyal paying respect to the Deoraja. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.



Figure 13. Villagers taking part in the devotional songs and music played by the *gayan-bayan*. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.

icians) (Figure 13). After the prayers, traditional warfare is symbolically performed by the assembly members including the king. This performance displays the war skills of the Tiwa community in bygone days.

The next day is celebrated as the *Khola Deorajar Gosai mela* which is also celebrated in other Tiwa areas, known as *Gosai Ana Utsav* or *Gosai Uliuwa Mela* (Sarma Thakur 1985:104). This is a common festival observed by most of the Tiwas residing in different places of Nagaon and Morigaon (Deka Patar 2007:127–130; Patar 2017) on different days and with local variance. On the next day the *khat* is again reinstalled at the prayer hall and finally kept at the ‘*Sri Sri Shivayadav Devalaya*’. A commercial fair with local products is also held in the Bihutoli field during these days.

## DISCUSSION

The dolmen site of Silchang is unique in terms of its arrangements and plan as a royal assembly. The customs and traditions attached to these structures provide some interesting clues about the Tiwa administration in bygone days. Moreover, it also indicates socio-political connections with their counterparts in the Jaintia hills. The Jaintias are well known for their rich tradition of megaliths, evident at the site of Nartiang (Figures 14–15), in Jowai in Meghalaya. As mentioned earlier, Nartiang has one of the largest concentrations of menhirs (*moo shynrang*) and dolmens (*moo kynthai*). There are hundreds of menhirs with table stones or dolmens in front (Rao 1991:113). The site is currently protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and a compound wall has been made with an entry gate.

According to Jaintia legends, these megaliths are known to be erected by the Mar Phalyngki in the 1500s to commemorate the glorious events of the Jaintia kingdom. Rousseleau (2019) has thoroughly discussed the interpretations of these megaliths at Nartiang right from the first reporting by western scholars. These were considered to be commemorative in nature and possibly linked with the fertility cult and human sacrifice. There are various legends associated with this site and the stone structures. The legend of the giant Mar Phalyngki who was entrusted by the Jaintia king to build road, bridges and a market in Nartiang area is important in this regard. This folklore indicates that a marketplace was started in the area and accordingly the Jaintia king sacrificed a goat to the Goddess in front of the stone slab. This was the beginning of the ‘market goddess ritual’ (*Ka Pam Blang Iew*) and the market was open for buying and selling of objects. The ritual was in vogue till the beginning of the 20th century. In this area, as proposed by the *Dolois* (heads of administrative areas, known as *elaka*) and local lineages, the king instructed the territorial council of Nartiang to beautify the market with monoliths and table stones. This in turn would provide space for the dignitaries and *durbar* (council) members to view the markets and stalls (Swier 1992:60, as mentioned in Rousseleau 2019:198–199). Tax was collected from the market and used for ritualistic purpose. Ramirez (2014) records that the *Doloi* of Nartiang *elaka* and his assistant *Pator* annually perform a rite at the foot of the monolith to worship the ‘the market god of Nartiang’ (*Ka Knia Blai Iaw Nartiang*) on the market days and perform a sacrifice. This has been reintroduced in 1997 after a gap of 41 years as a revival of the age-old tradition. The market for local vegetables, dried fish, betel nuts, chicken, and pork is presently held next to the megalithic site. Till today, the Nartiang megaliths are also a place for the locals to spend leisure time (Figure 15).

Holding a market on the occasion of the installation ceremony of the megaliths at Nartiang signifies the economic affairs of the ancient Jaintias. The ceremony provided space for ex-

change of goods among the subjects of the Jaintia kingdom and served as an important meeting place. It also symbolizes the power structure of the Jaintia kingdom where the divinity of the king is legitimized in the presence of a large gathering of subjects. According to Gurdon (1914), only the Jaintia king had the right to sit on the flat stone after it was erected. It is to be noted that even before the British annexation of Jaintia hills, the concept of a market for buying and selling of goods was practiced by the Jaintias (Gurdon 1914). For the Jaintias, procuring and selling of goods in the markets in Sylhet and Nowgong (Nagaon) were an important commercial activity. The Jaintias used to obtain beads and cattle and sell honey and lime in these markets (Gurdon 1914).

The Tiwas have been highly concentrated in the Nartiang area for ages (Bordoloi *et al.* 1987:84). An interesting oral story prevalent among the Tiwas describes their association with the erection of megaliths at Nartiang. According to oral narrative (Patar 2016), the Tiwas of Amsai were well-known for the erection of megaliths. On one occasion, the king of Jaintia wanted to erect a large flat stone at Nartiang, and could not do so due to its size. Hence, knowing about the expertise of the Tiwas, the Jaintia king sent a messenger and asked the Amsai *Loro* to help erect the stone. Initially the *Loro* did not show interest, but with further orders, the *Loro* sent some *Ojha* or priests for performing some rituals, and by playing drums and with the help of ropes made of bark of the *odal* tree (*Sterculia colorata*), the stone was erected. Interestingly, the Tiwas of Amsai used to visit Nartiang till 1952 every year and offer an *odal* tree-bark rope and some rice at a religious ceremony at Nartiang. The tradition discontinued when the Amsai area was separated from Khasi-Jaintia Hill district of Meghalaya and attached to the Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

The close political association of the Tiwas with the Jaintias is well known from chronicles like the *Jaintia Buranji* (Bhuyan 2012) and historical writings (Gait 1926). The Tiwas, Karbis, Jaintias and Khasis are known to be living in an area that shares their traditional administrative



*Figure 14. Dolmens and menhirs at Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*



*Figure 15. Locals spending leisure time at the megalithic site of Nartiang. Photograph by Manjil Hazarika.*

boundaries. This must have been the roots for their shared cultural practice and the megalithic tradition must have developed in this area in a collective manner. The above discussions on the megaliths at Nartiang and associated folklores linked with historical background and ethnology (Rousseleau 2019) suggest that the dolmens and table stones were closely connected with the economic affairs and socio-political structure of the ancient Jaintia community with whom the Tiwas has close geographical as well as cultural and political affinities. The official titles like *Doloi* and *Pator* are entrenched among the ancient as well as present-day Tiwas.

The celebration of Bihu, *Bheti Karha Utsav*, Gosai mela and the tradition of seating on the dolmens as *Raj Sabha* take place during the week of the *Silchang Rongali Bihu Udjyapan* celebration. However, these must have been separate events in the past. The construction of the Silchang dolmens and the tradition of paying tribute or tax to the Khola king by the subjects living in the Bor-Amni area must have been in vogue for a long time; indeed, since the time of the establishment of the Khola kingdom. Similarly as a subordinate or vassal kingdom, the Khola used to pay tax to the Gobha and the incident of *Bheti karha* (snatching of the tax) at the Nellie area must have happened in due course of time. Currently, along with Bihu, all these festivals are celebrated together.

## CONCLUSION

The oral story associated with the construction of the Silchang dolmens instructed by the Jaintia king also suggests that it was common to build megalithic structures in the manner of a *Raj Sabha* for functioning of the royal assembly in these areas in the past. Hence, documentation of such structures, along with other megaliths used for market areas, boundary demarcation, entry point to a particular place, commemoration of an important event, and burials, are to be done along with recording the local stories and folklore associated with them. This would provide a strong base for the reconstruction of history of

communities which are without much written history.

As there is no tradition of maintaining written records, it appears that the Tiwas in general and the Khola in particular have been recording all the important historical events through celebration at fairs and festivals. The *Bheti Karha Utsav* is a commemoration of a historical event. Considering the elaborate nature of the *Bheti Karha Utsav*, which is a traditional custom of collection of tax by the royal court and *Raj Sabha* held on the stone seats or dolmens at Silchang, this shows the continuity of a historical tradition and also a unique manner of the use of megaliths as a seat of power in an archaic society. Besides being a regular area for discussing certain village and community related issues, these stone seats or table stones or sitting stones have much to offer in our understanding of ancient administrative systems and economic affairs.

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