

Memorial Stone Cultural Heritage of Himachal Pradesh: The Universe of Murra

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Abstract:Memorial stone are a part of the social, spiritual and philosophical memory of the society. As the earlier research in the world mainly discusses hero memorial stone, but lack study pertaining to memorial stone of individuals other than heroes. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to give in-depth investigation of the vernacular memorial stones, known as Murra, which are associated with individuals other than heroes. These Murra stones which are located in the villages of Malahu and Bhoura in Himachal Pradesh, India have been carefully analysed. The methodology used for this paper is based on the extensive field visits, ethnographic interviews, photographic documentation, and semiotic analysis. As a result Murra's are situated within a multifaceted framework of anthropology, archaeology, history, and ecology. Apart from this the paper explores how these stones concretize existentialist's issues of life, death, memory, and communal identity within the socio-cultural and environmental milieu of the Himalayas. It is important to note that Murra are not only the archaeological artefacts but are the part of dynamic cultural texts which reflects the interplay of vernacularism, ritualism, cosmology, and social stratification. The study of Murra's highlights a nexus of collective memory, kinship, and sacred geography based on phenomenology, semiotic, and postcolonial approaches.

Keywords: Archaeology, Anthropology, Cultural Heritage, Memorial Stones, Semiotics etc.

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Introduction

Memorial stones are an omnipresent feature of human societies, which serves as a tangible link between an alive and the dead across diverse cultural and historical contexts. While historical records often highlight grandiose memorials dedicated to kings, queens, chieftains, and saints, vernacular memorial stones, such as the *Murra* of Himachal Pradesh, occupy a unique anthropological and cultural space. Known locally by terms like *Marhi* or *Murra*, these stones differ fundamentally from funerary markers, as they are deeply embedded in the rituals, beliefs, and cosmologies surrounding death, the afterlife, and ancestral reverence. Unlike elite memorials, which often serve political or dynastic purposes, *Murra* are rooted in what Burke (2009) describes as *populares traditiunculae* the "little traditions" of folk culture that encapsulate the lived experiences, aspirations, and existential realities of ordinary people.

The *Murra* are significant not only as archaeological artefacts but also as cultural texts that encode complex meanings related to life, death, memory, and community identity. As Diamond Oberoi Vahali (2021) argues, vernacular memorials are semiotic constructs that weave together identity, memory, and community through their symbolic and ritualistic roles. This paper examines how *Murra* in the villages of *Malahu* and *Bhoura* articulate fundamental existential issues within the socio-cultural, ecological, and historical fabric of Himachal Pradesh. By integrating anthropological, archaeological, semiotic, and postcolonial perspectives, it underscores the *Murra's* role as a vibrant symbol of cultural heritage that bridges the tangible and intangible, the living and the dead, and the past, present, and future. This study focuses on the extensive context of Himalayan cultural studies, which highlights the role of environment, culture, religion, and social stratification to shape the vernacular traditions. Based on Levi-Strauss's (1977) structural anthropology, this study explores how *Murra* i.e. memorial stones, reflects the binary oppositions of life and death, sacred and secular, or individual and community. Moreover, it go in for phenomenological approaches of Holbraad (2012), with an aim to highlight the recursive nature of *Murra* as a cultural artefact which are shaped by the existential realities of the community. Also from the post-colonial perspective, this study examines how *Murra* resists the homogenizing forces of modernity by preserving indigenous knowledge systems in the face of global influences.

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Geographical and Ecological Context

The sites taken up for the study are two villages *Malahu* (32°00'41"N 76°30'29"E) and *Bhoura* (32°00'34"N 76°31'54"E), located in Palampur tehsil of Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh. These villages are surrounded by the Dhauladhar Range also known as Lesser Himalayas with the rugged terrain, green vegetation, and tea gardens. This range forms a natural boundary which in return shapes the cultural, spiritual and ecological identity. These villages are fed by the river streams *Mol* and *Mandh*, which are the tributaries of the Beas River which in the local folklore is often revered as the "redeemer".

The climate of the region is temperate which plays a very crucial role in tea cultivation. The villages of Malahu and Bhoura are surrounded by dense forests of pine and deodar, which exude a serene yet sacred ambiance that is integral to the cultural practices of the inhabitants. On the other hand the Beas River, which is also known as Vipāśā is a purāṇically famous river provides a significant waterway that reinforces the region's cosmological importance. The cosmological interplay of rivers in Himalayan traditions are often seen as conduits of divine energy (Singh, 2023). To reach both these places the nearest railway station is Maranda which is close to tehsil Palampur. Although the city and towns are in close vicinity to these villages still their rural character remains intact. Thus, preserving the authenticity of their vernacular traditions.

Ecologically, the Lesser Himalayas including the Dhauladhar range are a critical component of the Himalayan ecosystem which not only supports diverse flora and fauna but also influences the local livelihoods and cultural practices. According to Atrey (2018), "the vernacular architecture and cultural heritage of Himachal Pradesh are deeply intertwined with the region's ecology, with natural features like rivers, trees, and mountains serving as sacred markers". The *Murra* sites are usually located under the *pipal* tree and near a water reservoir locally known as a *baan* (Fig 1.) reflects a symbiotic relationship of human and its environment. The *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*), revered across South Asia as a symbol of life and divinity and is a microcosm of the cosmos. As its roots, trunk, and branches represents the underworld, earth, and heavens whereas the *baan* a source of water, symbolizes purity and fertility and complementing the *pipal's* vitality.

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Fig.1. Murra Site

The materiality of *Murra* is also shaped by its ecology as these stones on which sculptures are drawn are often sourced from local quarries of sandstone or granite which are abundant in the Himalayan region. These stones are durable due to which they have a long life even after an exposure to environmental factors like moisture from nearby *baan* or seasonal rains. The stones which are old have algae and lichens grown on them but still are intact (Fig. 1.). This interplay of ecology and materiality underscores the *Murra's* role as a living artefact, embedded in both the natural and cultural landscapes of Himachal Pradesh.

Historical Evolution of Memorial Stones in Himachal Pradesh

The historical evolution of *Murra* can be understood by looking into the history of memorial stones in South Asia, particularly in the Himalayas. In India memorial stones have a long history which dates back to the megalithic period (circa 1000 BCE), where stone structures like menhirs etc. were used to mark burials. However, in the case of Himachal Pradesh the tradition of memorial stones likely emerged during the period of 6th–12th centuries CE. This spread was mainly influenced by the establishment of Rajput kingdoms in the region. The Katoch and other local dynasties played a very significant role in shaping the region's cultural landscape including the development of vernacular memorial practices.

It is important to understand that *Murra* practises is different from earlier megalithic structures, because it integrates Hindu cosmological beliefs with local folk practices. Also

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they are different from the hero stones (*veergal*) of South India or the sati stones of Rajasthan where both mark either heroism or self-immolation of widows. *Murra*'s are chiefly ancestral memorials which are honoring a broader spectrum of community members irrespective of the gender or age of the dead. This inclusivity reflects the egalitarian ethos of a society where community identity supersedes individual heroism.

The reason for this inclusivity can be seen in the migration of Rajputs from Rajasthan to Himachal Pradesh in the 19th century, as documented in the study, introduced new cultural elements to the *Murra* tradition. The *Phatayarchs*, a Rajput clan, brought with them their deities which are Baasi Aala Baba and Chamunda Mata whose worship became integral to *Murra* rituals. This migration, guided by the Katoch dynasty, illustrates the dynamic interplay of regional and trans-regional influences in shaping vernacular practices. As Bedi (1994) notes, the cultural landscape of Himachal Pradesh is a palimpsest of indigenous and migratory traditions, with *Murra* serving as a testament to this syncretism.

Colonial rule (1858–1947) and postcolonial modernization posed challenges to the *Murra* tradition. British policies, which prioritized urban development and Western education, marginalized rural cultural practices, including the maintenance of *Murra* sites. Post-independence, the rise of nuclear families and urban migration further eroded traditional kinship structures, impacting the ritualistic significance of *Murra*. However, the resilience of vernacular traditions, as evidenced by the adoption of *Murra* practices by lower castes, demonstrates their adaptability to changing socio-economic realities.

A Sacred Space

The place where the *Murra* are placed is sacred for the people, as they strategically placed under a *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) which is also known as the abode of the Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. As discussed earlier when pipal tree is paired with a *baan* (water reservoir) it creates a sacred triad that symbolizes the dialectic of life and death. This spatial arrangement reflects a structural logic, continuity, vitality, and divine presence. On the other hand the *Murra* signifies mortality and memory, creating a dynamic interconnection of opposites.

The *baan* (water tank or reservoir) can be seen commonly in Himalayan villages where it serves to both practical and ritualistic purposes of the locals. So, Sohinder Singh Wanjara Bedi (1994) says that “water and trees are recurring metaphors in Punjabi and Himalayan folklore where they symbolizes both life and fertility in contrast to the

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permanence of stone”. On basis of this it can be said that the *Murra* is both a singular memorial stone and a collective site which represents the deceased of a specific caste, clan, or community. It is important to note that these sites are located on the village periphery, marking a phantasm between the living and the dead which is a common concept echoed in studies of South Asian stones.

The iconography of *Murra*’s is varying where the deceased is shown either standing, seated, or bust forms with folded hands or legs which reflects humility or reverence (Fig.2). Some stones are more elaborative which indicates the artisan’s skill and the community’s imagination.



Fig. 2. Murra of a Female seated on a platform

Field Methodology

The study have adopted a phenomenological and ethnographical approach with interviews, photographic documentation, archival research and semiotic analysis. The field visits were made to Malahu and Bhoura, during which 55 community members i.e. village elders, priests, artisans, women, and youth were thoroughly interviewed. The aim of these interviews were to explore the local beliefs, rituals, oral narratives, and the social importance of *Murra*. The interview questions were focused on the carving, sculpting, maintenance, and ritualistic use of *Murra* and its sites. Apart from this questions were asked to understand their role in shaping the community identity and overcoming modernization.

In case of photographic documentation the iconography, layout, and environmental context of *Murra* sites were captured. Many photographs were taken to document the variations in *Murra*, stone conditions, and site arrangements. The semiotic analysis were done to decode the symbolic meanings embedded in the stones’ carvings, placement, and rituals. The archival research which included the colonial records and regional folklore

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collections provided historical context for the *Murra* tradition. This methodology aligns with recursive anthropology (Holbraad2012) which emphasizes the co-constitution of cultural artefacts and human experience.

Site and Semiotics

Based on phenomenological study this paper posits that *Murra* are not merely peripheral markers but are an active participants in the community's cultural narratives. To semantically transformation of a *Murra* from a tangible stone to a "semiotic being" requires contextualization beyond empirical observation. According to Vahali (2021) "the sanctity of vernacular memorials lies in their intangible meanings, which are embedded in the collective memory and ritual practices of the community".

The visible structure of a *Murra* i.e. a carved stone of the deceased can easily deceive an outsider because the true sacredness of the *Murra* is in its interior or foundational character which is sublime and encapsulates the cosmological and ancestral ties. As this foundation survives in the mental image of the community to which the *Murra* belongs. This characteristic can be seen in the Tamil Nadu's hero stones that highlights the fact about the role of oral traditions in preserving the sanctity of such memorials. On the other hand exterior of the *Murra*'s is communitarian which serve as a site for rituals, offerings, and communal gatherings.

The semiological layers of *Murra* combining iconography, mythology, ritual, and spatial arrangement create a nostalgic universe where life, death, and memory are integrated. This universe, as Levi-Strauss (1969) suggests, is structured by the interplay of oppositions (life/death, sacred/profane, individual/community) that give cultural artefacts their meaning. The *Murra*'s placement on the village periphery reinforces its liminal status, marking the boundary between the mundane and the sacred. This spatial logic, as Saul (2019) argues, is a common feature of Himalayan sacred landscapes, where pilgrimage sites and memorials serve as thresholds between the physical and metaphysical. The *Murra* site, with its *pipal* tree and *baan*, constitutes a microcosm of the community's cosmological order, where the living and the dead coexist in a reciprocal relationship.

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Discussion

A *Murra* is a vehicle of memory, crystallizing the past within the sacred traditions of the community. Derived from the Latin *monēre* (to remind), the term "monument" aptly describes the *Murra*'s role as a reminder of lineage, heritage, and kinship. As a sacred site, it serves as a focal point for excavating the anthropological universe of a family, caste, or clan. Unlike historical monuments with inscribed dates and names, *Murra* rely on oral traditions transmitted across generations, making memory the primary chronicle.

The *Murra* facilitates a dialogue between the living and the dead, ensuring that the deceased remain integral to the community. Offerings made at *Murra* sites such as flowers, food, incense, or cloth are believed to elicit blessings of prosperity, protection, and fertility, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between ancestors and descendants. This dynamic aligns with Schieffelin's (1985) concept of the "cultural construction of reality," where rituals create a shared existential framework. In the *Murra* universe, past, present, and future fuse, blurring generational boundaries and creating a timeless continuum.

Archaeological knowledge, as distinct from historical knowledge, is critical to understanding *Murra*. While historical time is linear and chronological, anthropological time is cyclical, marked by festivals, rituals, and communal events. As Burke (2009) notes, traditional societies live "in remembrance of one festival and in expectation of the next," a pattern evident in the ritual calendar of Malahu and Bhoura. The *Murra*'s spatial configuration reflects this socio-religious life, constituting a "sociometry" that maps kinship and community identity.

The social structure of Malahu and Bhoura comprises Rajputs, Baniyas, Brahmans, and scheduled castes, with Rajputs dominating in Malahu. The *Murra* of both villages exhibit striking similarities, suggesting either a shared sculptor or a standardized design. Petroglyphs depict men, women, and children, mirroring the diversity of the living community. Older *Murra*, dating back 100–150 years, shows environmental wear, with algae and lichens indicating their age, while newer stones are more refined, reflecting improved sculpting techniques.

The Rajputs, particularly the Phatayarchs in Malahu, migrated from Rajasthan about 150 years ago under the patronage of the Katoch dynasty. Their migration was guided by

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Chamunda Mata, a fierce incarnation of Durga, whose temple at Aadi Himani Chamunda near Nagrota Bagwan remains a spiritual anchor. The Phatayarchs' male deity, Baasi Aala Baba, and female deity, Chamunda Mata, underscore the gendered dimensions of their religious universe. Other Rajput clans, such as Pathania, Samkaria, Padhiaar, and Dadwal, share Chamunda Mata as their village deity but maintain distinct ancestral deities (*Kul Devi*). The *Murra* culture is deeply ingrained among the Rajputs, who view their ancestors (*pittr*) as protectors against evil. The installation of *Murra* follows rituals prescribed in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a sacred text, under the guidance of a clan priest (*Kul Prohit*). These rituals, as described by Bedi (1994), reinforce the sacred bond between the living and the dead. Elders in Malahu emphasized, "Our ancestors are associated with us through the Murra, safeguarding us from evil and bad omens," highlighting the stones' protective role.

Caste Dynamics and Sanskritization

Historically, lower castes such as *lohars* (ironsmiths), *tarkhans* (carpenters), and *harijans* were excluded from erecting *Murra* due to the hegemony of higher castes. However, the dispersal of Rajput families into nuclear units weakened their dominance, enabling lower castes to adopt *Murra* practices through Sanskritization—a process where lower castes emulate higher-caste rituals to elevate their status. At present the caste of *lohars*, *tarkhans*, and *harijans* have their own *Murra* sites which is locally known as *loharaan di baan* and *harijana di baan* which is totally different from *rajputaan di baan*.

The reason for this shift is broader social changes where vernacular traditions have adapted to the modern socio-economic realities. The other reason given by Atrey (2018) is transformations in the vernacular architecture and cultural practices of Himachal due to modernization. The impact of this modernization have led to acceptance of new ideas but the basic character is still intact. Moreover, the presence of the *Murra* culture among the lower castes illustrates resilience and help the marginalized communities to assert their identity in this sacred space through ritual and material culture. These caste-specific *Murra* sites also underscores the denominational character of these memorials and reflects the existential reality of the prevalent caste hierarchies.

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Anthropological and Sociological Contexts

The universe of *Murra* mirrors the anthropological cosmos of the living which encompasses not only men but also women and children across different castes. The stones iconography reflects the imagination of the community which is shaped through artisanal skill and existing cultural norms. The Himalayan pilgrimage studies clearly states the role of tree and water as a mediator for life and death which can be seen in the case of *Murra* as well. Moreover, the simultaneous settlement of the living and the "living dead" i.e. ancestors enshrined in *Murra* reflects the continuity of kinship across both physical and metaphysical realms. Also stated by Saul (2019) that Himalayan sacred landscapes are imbued with memory, where pilgrimage and ritual reinforce communal ties supports this argument.

The *Murra's* reflects the existential reality of the caste with communitarian nature underscoring social hierarchies. The reason for this is that cultural artefacts are always the expressions of underlying social structures (Levi Strauss 1977). Thus, it is the *Murra's* ability to integrate universal and particularistic elements which makes it a powerful symbol of cultural heritage.

Gender Dynamics in Murra Practices

The gendered dimensions can also be understood through *Murra's* because both male and female ancestors are commemorated. But their representations and ritual roles differ as women are often depicted in seated postures with folded hands, symbolizing piety and domesticity (Fig 2.) whereas male figures are shown standing with attributes of authority such as weapons or ritual objects (Fig.3).



Fig.3. Murra of a Male with standard in the left hand

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Such gendered representations reflect the patriarchal structure the society where men are usually associated with the public roles and women with the private spheres.

Apart from this women are not allowed to touch these memorial stones but they play a significant role in maintenance of the sites. It is during the festivals the women prepare food for offerings which reinforces their role as a custodians of memory.

The exclusion of lower-caste women from higher-caste *Murra* sites highlights the intersection of gender and caste hierarchies which is pointed out by Chatterjee (2013) where he says that “gender dynamics in South Asian ritual practices are shaped by both cosmological beliefs and social structures, a pattern evident in the *Murra* tradition”.

Ritual Practices and Cosmology

The rituals associated with these memorial stones are culturally significant because the installation ceremony of a *Murra* is a complex process. The ceremony is based on the mantras guided by the *Shatapatha Brahmana* and performed only by a *Kul Purohit*. This process involves selection of stone its carving and then placing it in the consecrated site with mantras, offerings, and circumambulation.

After this during every festival or auspicious days, such as *Pitru Paksha* “the fortnight dedicated to ancestors” the offerings of food, water, and incense are made to the *Murra*. It is believed that these offerings are done to nourish the ancestors and seek their blessings. This reciprocity between the living and the dead was described in detail by the elders in village Bhoura which points out the bigger role of *Murra*’s as a conduit of spiritual exchange.

According to Singh (2023) “Himalayan landscapes shows intersection of natural elements with the divine presence” a similar cosmology underlies in the rituals of *Murra*’s which is rooted in Hindu and folk traditions.

Comparative Perspectives

There is a need to contextualize the *Murra* within broader South Asian and global traditions to understand the variations and differences in the practises. When we compare *Murra*’s with other vernacular memorial stones like *veeragal* or *viragal* (hero stones) of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Ramabrahmam and Challa 2016), the *paliya* of Gujarat (Thakuria 2008-09), and the *sati* stones of Rajasthan (Singh 2014) we have observed difference in them. As *Murra*’s focuses only on the collective memory rather than individual heroism or sacrifice. Where

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veergal depicts battle scenes, *paliya* explains lineage but none of these prioritize kinship and ancestral reverence as in the case of Murra which reflects community over individualism.

If we take into consideration the Tibetan *chorten* and Bhutanese memorial stupas which are the repositories of memory and sacred relics but are totally different from *Murra's* as the memory of these stones are rooted in Hindu Vedic cosmology and folk traditions i.e. association with *pipal* trees and water reservoirs. Apart from these the comparative studies on South Indian hero stones done by Settar (1982) highlight the regional diversity of memorial practices, yet underscore their shared role as cultural texts that encode existential realities.

At global level the Celtic standing memorial stones in Europe also serve as ritual sites, or even the *ahu* platforms of Easter Island, which were raised to commemorate the ancestors. The scholars like Van Tilburg (1994) have suggested in their work that memorial stones are a universal human response to mortality but their forms and meanings are usually shaped by local cosmologies and social structures.

Ecological and Cosmological Dimensions

The integration of *Murra's* with its surroundings which includes the natural environment like pipal trees, water reservoirs, and the Himalayan landscape highlights the ecological aspects of Himachal's cultural heritage. The hill ranges of Dhauladhar Range, with its snow clad peaks and perennial rivers also shapes the cosmological imagination of the villages of *Malahu* and *Bhoura*. According to Singh (2023) "Himalayan landscapes are not mere backdrops but active participants in cultural practices, imbued with divine presence". The *Murra* sites which are situated on the peripheries of the villages clearly reflects there sacred geography which serves as a threshold between the human and divine realms. This ecological and cosmological integration underscores the *Murra's* role as a cultural heritage artefact that transcends its material form.

Postcolonial Perspectives

If we look into the history of these stones these are 200 years old and even at present these are being installed after the death of the family member. Therefore, the *Murra* site represent a form of indigenous resistance to the homogenizing forces of colonial and global modernity. As during the colonial rule the vernacular practices were marginalised by associating them to shamanism or by prioritizing Western education, urban development. Even the Christian

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missionaries tried their level best to deviate the locals from these activities as conveyed by a 95 year old woman. When we see the written records or monumental architecture in this region the tradition of Murra was side-lined in colonial narratives. But it still remained in the oral narratives of the locals who placed them in water tanks deep in the jungle. It is after the independence they placed it near the village periphery. The rise of globalization and urbanization have also threatened these vernacular traditions due to the migration of the younger generations to cities and adoption of modern lifestyles but the impact of this is not much till date.

The positive impact of postcolonial period is adoption of *Murra's* of lower castes within the higher caste communities which is argued by Spivak (1988) as “subaltern communities use cultural practices to assert their agency against dominant narratives”. Overall the emphasis is on preserving the oral memory and communities’ identity in the face of external pressures.

Challenges and Preservation

The major challenges faced by the *Murra's* is rapid modernization, urbanization, and environmental degradation. As traditional structures are replaced by the concrete structures around the space of *Murra's*. Also there is decline in traditional artisanal skills as at present only few artisans are left who carves *Murra* because no one in their family is now carving these memorial stones. This decline has a direct threat on the continuity of *Murra* practices in the region. The other factor is the urban migration of the youth for better lifestyle and opportunities is eroding these folk practises. The large scale deforestation and water pollution or low water levels in the reservoirs has also impacted the ecological integrity of *Murra* sites particularly the *pipal* trees and *baan*.

There is an urgent requirement for the preservation which can only be done through multi-pronged approach like documenting, community engagement, and policy support from the government stakeholders. Apart from this UNESCO’s initiative i.e. Memory of the World Programme can help in preserving the iconography and oral histories associated with *Murra*. Community-led initiatives and government policies related to the promotion of intangible cultural heritage can be used to fund the local governing bodies to take care of the *Murra's* sites which in return will ensure their survival as living artefacts.

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Conclusion

To conclude it is important to understand that the *Murra* is more than a memorial stones; it is a vibrant cultural text which encodes the anthropological, archaeological and historical universe of the Himachal Pradesh's rural communities. Based on its placement, iconography, rituals, and ecological integration, *Murra* reflects the interplay and cosmos of life, death, memory, and community identity. They also serve as a vehicles of kinship and cultural heritage for the existing community. Moreover, the semiotic and phenomenological significance of *Murra* transcends their physicality and transforms them into a sacred sites where all three *Kaal* i.e. past, present, and future converge.

This paper also highlights the resilience of vernacular traditions in the face of change as discussed in the case of lower castes who adopted *Murra* practices through Sanskritization and also communities resisting the homogenizing forces of modernity. Therefore, by integrating archaeological, anthropological, semiotic, and postcolonial perspectives, it dicusses the *Murra*'s role as an artefact of cultural heritage which bridges both the tangible and intangible. The universal and regional significance of the *Murra*'s is clearly understood with the comparative analyses of other South Asian and global memorial stones, ecological considerations, and gendered dimensions. In future the researchers can explore the *Murra*'s connections to Himalayan pilgrimage networks. Also, comparative studies with other Himalayan memorial traditions in other Himalayan regions of India could provide deeper insights into regional variations. Thus, studying *Murra* not only deepens our understanding of vernacular traditions but also helps in navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity.

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