

Cultural Analysis of Rock Art Sites in Chatra-Hazaribag Districts of Jharkhand

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During October-November, 1992 further exploration were carried out by the IGNCA, New Delhi jointly with Bulu Imam Dr. Hitendra Anupam, PG Department of History, VBU, Hazaribag and Dr.A. H. Ansari, PG Department of Anthropology, VBU, Hazaribag (I represented IGNCA as project officer along with Late Dr D. R. Malla, who led our multi-disciplinary team) when two more major rock art shelters were discovered in Satpahar hills near Mandair village adjacent to Garhi valley in the western borderland of Hazaribag district. It is located in further south-west of the ISCO site.

The method and the incorporated techniques used for the present study was generally of empirical in type. Tracing technique as well as photography have been the distinctive methods for recording of rock art. But in our personal experience, tracing technique has several limitations. For adopting tracing technique more time, fund, and equipments are required. For the present undertaking, photographic technique was adopted because it is more easy, reliable and more accurate than the other techniques. Free-hand sketches and tracing on large polythene sheets were avoided for justified reasons. Primarily, during documentation and recording of the rock art in the Isco site, “to-scale” photographs were taken on each sector separately as well as of the site as a whole along with the view of its neighborhood, all the existing paintings on the rock shelters were thus photographically recorded in minute detail.

From the large photo-prints, the required rock motif and figures were carefully eliminated from the scars, other natural fractures and visually illusive patches of micro floral imprint on rock. The technique of preparing a complete painted panel of each sector was first done manually. Then after application of manual technique, it was thoroughly checked and scrutinized electronically. The colour photographs of the rock art were placed in a colour scanner and by gradual elimination of unwanted colours and shades a more perfect and reliable image of only the painted area was built and printed. After completion of the photographic recording, each individual motif of the panel was identified carefully and counted by putting a number for each separate or independent motif of the rock art. Each motif was studied directly from the rock shelter and it is plotted on the scanned image separately. The number of motifs and its detailed accounts were incorporated on a separate schedule.

The technical data for morpho-metric analysis of the rock art covered the following aspects:-

1. Size
2. Typological category of art;
3. Form of art;
4. Style of execution;
5. View;

6. Technique involved;
7. Colour Scheme;
8. Location;
9. Superimposition;
10. State of preservation;
11. Cause for decay etc.

The vicinity, at certain outcrops, and the hills of course, provide the crucial raw material, like flint, quartzite, quartz, chert, animal bones etc. for Mesolithic implements in contexts of the Mesolithic and Neolithic culture. No well known source of copper lies in the immediate vicinity, but best and most abundant of them lies in the adjoining districts of Purbi Singhbhum and Giridih. Moreover, the pre-Industrial metal users, especially the prehistoric ones neither required, nor were equipped to exploit the best of the ore resources. Certain sites, such as Isco has some evidence of early use of copper. Hematite and Iron Shales are very common in the vicinity and there is overwhelming evidence of iron smelting from a number of rock art sites of which Isco, Thethangi and Sidpa deserve special mention. Exploitation of metal ores in this way proved crucial for the cultural evolution of the region. The use of copper would have been significant for the Chalcolithic culture, while that of iron must have triggered the development of a set of evolving cultures – Megalithic, Iron Age and Early Historic. The setting would provide a smooth and steady transition from the Mesolithic hunter-gatherer stage to one that of settled and socially well organized one, passing thorough the pastoralism, stock breeding and early farming, Neolithic and early metal works of Chalcolithic and Megalithic stages respectively. The rock paintings, as are very impressive in terms of styles and forms, bear stamps of the authors of all theses cultures, although many of them were probably migratory , transient and were perhaps constantly in the flux. Material vestiges that they might have left behind were found in a limited way. Laranga, an elevated patch of land overlooking river Garhi, is a classical factory site for manufacturing microliths, relevant to the contexts of as diverse cultural settings as Mesolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic. Isco, Sidpa and Thethangi have impressive Megalithic sites in their vicinities early historic sites are distinctly in minority, but very much noticeable at Thethangi. A vibrant Mesolithic culture and Neolithic culture and the remains of a great Iron-Age Asura civilisation lie scattered on the floor of the North Karanpura valley and its surrounding areas, now threatened by indiscriminate mining.

The geographical location of the site, topography, geology, flora and fauna etc. are essential part of the rock art study. The ethnic, archaeological and other cultural information related to the site in particular and the areas in general were other important subjects for recording. Such information is necessary to understand the rock art and the site in its proper eco cultural setting.

Each of the motif or unit of art is recognized and counted by putting a number against each to it. The record of the techno-typological attributes of each motif is then analysed systematically. The typological classifications and its interrelation with the technique, form and varied use of colour etc. were found out from analysed data on rock art.

In the rock shelters, in general, the paintings are located on walls above a minimum height of 1.5 metres from the floor. On the other hand the upper limit of painting on the wall of the rock shelter is about 5.5 metres in height from its floor. Possibly the painters had intentionally selected the middle and upper part of the rock wall for its better preservation. Standing on the present day level of the floor it is difficult for anyone to paint on the same height without using any platform, ladder, staircase or putting any big boulder to reach the required height of the paintings. It is true that the deposited rock and clay on the contiguous floor plain is being eroded relatively fast due to rain and other activities of nature. Thus day by day the floor plain of the rock shelter is becoming lower. The height of the paintings from the floor is gradually increasing. It is also interesting to note that the paintings in the lower level are more indistinct and have considerably faded than the paintings in the medium and upper level. After a thorough study it has been found that the paintings in the lower part are more damaged due to the shallowness of the rock shelters. The lower part is more exposed to sun and rain directly which have accelerated the process of decay of the painting more than other areas.

The rock art of Hazaribagh and Chatra districts represent the early Mesolithic period. It manifested wonderfully alive drawings of wild animals including rhinoceros, elephant, spotted deer, sambar, boar, nilgai, tiger, leopard, wild ox, cow, bison or gaur, peacock, fowl, etc. The various geometric figures, mandalas and stick figures are also found in abundance.

The Isco rock art with its maze of geometric and mandala designs occupies a strategic place in the corner of the union of the Sati Range with the Hazaribagh plateau. It is about 100 feet above the village in a natural gorge formed in a large expanse of rock. The eye-catching feature of the rock art is the wealth of geometric designs, with some animal drawings including wild cattle, rhinoceros, deer, concentric circle, zigzag, ponds or concentric rectangle, human figure, betel leaf, fish, marriage chouks, temple-form, kamaldhara, river, arcs, reticulated triangles, yoni triangle, hieroglyphic script, sun, scorpion, betel, compound and enigmatic symbols, anthropomorphs and zoomorphs, spotted wheeled animal, lajja- gauri, triangle with arms, yakshi, etc.

It is interesting to note that in this sector, several shallow circular holes or cup marks are on the rock walls which are possibly natural in origin. The painters intentionally drew several parallel in red and white along its outer border of the circular marks. At least in one such circular mark, the design was painted in the border line centering the circle forming a floral motif.

The total number of paintings traced so far at Isco village in the rock shelters are 423. Each individual drawing or composition was counted separately. The maximum number of 392 paintings (92.6%) are non-figurative linear designs, floral motifs and signs. A few (1.42%) represent natural objects like motif of sun and only 4.49% of the total number of paintings represent confirmed anthropomorphs and animal figures. It is interesting to note that a few anthropomorphs are more schematic in form whereas all the animal figures are more naturalistic in type. The representations of mammal figures are all shown in profile. The left side of the animal bodies is being barely visible. The figures are painted in sharp body contour lines and the space within the outline is left empty. The animal body contours are painted either in white outline, or both dark red and white colours are arranged side by side.

The represented animals in the rock painting are all wild mammals like sambar or deer, Indian bison, one rhinoceros and few tortoises. The anthropomorphs are mostly filled in red and contour or border lines are drawn in sharp contrasting white pigments. The human figures are all very simple and show front views. The hands, legs and the heads are simply depicted in the painting without any further details. The paintings of wild animals are evidences to show that the painters were very skilled. So they had intentionally made very simple types of human forms. The human figures are without any artifacts in hand. All the figures of tortoises are schematic in form and the figures are filled in with colour.

All the paintings are quite old and in several areas the colours have become indistinct, fade or obliterated due to erosion by rain-water. Lichens and other microflora have already damaged parts of the paintings. The brittle sandstone walls have also become loose in places. At least in two places the roof had earlier collapsed along with the paintings. The paintings on fragmented rocks could be traced from the floor under debris. Systematic digging in the floor of the painted rock shelter is necessary for determining the chronology of the site.

At least two such paintings within rectangular frame represent human figures, rudimentary in form. Similar figures are sometimes painted by Munda, Santal and other tribals and indigenous caste groups in Chhotanagpur during their marriage ceremony. The rectangular boxes represent a house and rooms are within it for newly wedded couples. Among Lanjhia Saoras of Ganjam and Koraput district of Orissa, such painted rectangular thematic boxes are icons and it represents abodes or seats of their propitiating deities that bring fortune and cured diseases (Elwin, 1955).

The pigments used in the paintings are mostly dark red ochres, white and a few are in vermilion. The pigments were mostly collected from minerals. Even now the villagers collect the same pigments for their use. The Oraon and Mundas of that area celebrate their 'Bandna' or 'Sohorai' festival in the month of "Kartik" (October-November). During this annual festival they paint their household walls afresh. The tribal villagers in Isco identify and mention the rock paintings as 'Kohbar' or drawings during marriage ceremony. The stream nearby the painted rock shelter is locally known as 'Ranidaha nala'. The tribal villagers relate both the place to a mythical folk legend. The king of Ramgarh fort had married a woman, and they stayed there near the rock shelter. But afterwards the newly married queen drowned in the hill stream.

The majority of the non-figurative motifs (Table No. 3) are designs closed within rectangles or in a squares (47.52% of the total). The other non-figurative motifs that frequent this rock-art site are chain-like shapes (3.31%); long 'U'-shaped linear forms (3.07%); irregular linear graffiti (3.07%); interconnected petal shapes arranged in a row (2.84%); triangular shapes (2.60%); two wavy lines juxtaposed (2.60%); fingerprint like whorls (2.36%) and concentric squares (2.36%) etc. The maximum number of non-figurative motifs available in this site are closely identical to the motifs found in Ulap rock art site near Belpahar, Sambalpur district of Orissa.

In Isco rock-art site, presence of a rhinoceros figure provides us a clue for its chronological determination. At present, Indian rhinoceros population is concentrated only in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and in some parts of Assam. The single horn rhinoceros species was not reported in Chhotanagpur plateau in the

recent past. The accuracy of the rhinoceros figure drawn in naturalistic style indicates that possibly the painter had clearly observed that animal and had drawn from the influence of his own experience.

Rock art concentration in the Jharkhand is found in the districts of Hazaribagh, Chatra, Koderma, and Giridih. The rock shelters with paintings are marked mostly in clusters but sometimes also in isolation. These are situated in the upper Damodar Valley which is more commonly known as Karanpura. The landscape is marked by the overwhelming presence of two hill ranges – Satpahari (2081 feet above MSL), lying close to Palamu towards the western edge of the Plateau, and Mahadi (2389 feet above MSL) stretching eastwards with upper reaches having bold scarps. The hills are made up predominantly of sandstone, sometimes containing pebble–conglomerate and almost invariably having lime, shale and kaolin in substantial amount. While over a dozen of rock art sites have been discovered in these hills, there are strong indications that scores of them are still lying unnoticed. Many of the rock art sites in north Jharkhand, with particular reference to Hazaribagh and Chatra, are in the hollow shelters formed in the gorges which had at one time been the campsites of the early men who were Mesolithic hunters, who left on these sandstone walls vivid drawings in red hematite and yellow lignite of the animals and birds which they hunted over nine/ten thousand years ago or more. We during our exploration in this area had discovered megalithic burial sites with pottery, little implements and evidences of early metal industry in Panki Barwadih village, about 6 kilometres west of the rock-art site. More lithic tools were collected from new sites – in terraces of the Badamahi river and Ranidah Nala. From the debris present on the floor of the painted rock shelters, one polished Celt with evidence of grinding and polishing technique has been recovered. The entire north Karanpura valley is of archaeological importance. The area includes painted rock shelters, iron-age factory sites and mounds, megalithic burials and successive river terraces containing lithic tools.

The rock art site of Sidpa is situated on the north side of Satpahar range, about seventy-five feet above the plain. The site has very good panel of rock paintings and the paintings shown the motifs of concentric square, temple, square with zigzag, reticulated triangles, monkey in box, zigzag pattern, river with trees, striding bull, wavy lines with cupules similar to present harvest paintings, chouks of different types, stick figures, elephant, deer, enigmatic arches, figure in box, etc. Here, the IGNCA team has discovered two new painted rock shelters.

The rock art site of Gonda located in the Satpahar range of Jharkhand and has one painted rock shelter on the top of the hill. The shelter contains the paintings of deer, boar, tiger, elephant, backward-glancing deer, etc. Gonda has a beautiful view to the north.

The rock art site of Nutangwa has perhaps the most interesting panels and in the four mandalas with conspicuous features, crescents appear within with doorways at top and bottom indicating a sacred space, crescents and cupules are associated with the mandalas, in this panel are a deer with chouk in x-ray in belly, woman holding crescent with arms up-raised, frogs, pregnant female forms, rectangles, figure holding butterfly, figure holding crescent superimposed by deer; various human anthropomorphs with crescents in rectangles, stick figures holding crescents, Indian Bison (*Bos gaurus*) and deer with X-ray mandalas, many interesting chouks, woman chasing child, hunter with bow and arrow shooting deer, hunters with bow and arrow shooting wild boar, large animal forms, concentric rectangles, spotted

rectangles, palm prints, etc. Two new painted rock shelters were discovered by the IGNCA team at this site.

The rock art site of Tethangi is about 300 feet above the plain. This site is on the southern face of the Satpahar range. Below the rock art site, was the remains of an old fort which recently was destroyed by laying a new railway line for the coalfields. The shelter is typical of central Indian sites with a wide overhang, and it overlooks a ravine on a steep slope of the hill-side. The site has the motifs of chouks, tree of life, trident, honey comb, sun in oval, owl, deer, marriage chouk, reticulated triangle, human figure, frogs in numbers, animal forms, cupules concentric circle in square, concentric rectangles, vertical lines in square, square with triangle, triangle with arms, enigmatic motifs and symbols in squares.

The rock art site of Raham consists of a single large panel. It presents the best example of elaborate squares or chouks painted in red hematite. It seem that there is a message being conveyed by these chouks and would be a subject of further study.

The rock art site of Mander is located in the Satpahar range of Jharkhand. The site has three painted rock shelters, having the rectangular motifs, reticulated triangles, line of large running animals including deer, bison or gaur having x-ray in stomach area, a large panel depicting hunters with bows, hunting wild bison /wild cattle, rhinoceros, tiger, tigress, wild boar, a group of wild animals including two wild bison, nilgai (male & female) and the line of running spotted deer are the most beautiful paintings at this site. The site is one of the best wild animal drawings of the area.

The rock art site of Khandar is a site set between gorges in the southern flank of Satpahar range. The butterfly painted in red hematite and white ochre is the most attracting features of this site. The site has various motifs of the box with human figures, other motifs include concentric circles, chouks and oval with cross, boxes with zig-zag lines, deer, strings of circles, circles in square boxes, vertical rows of circles, human figure, etc.

Rock art study of the Jharkhand state has been sporadically delt with so far, although it attracted attention of a few scholars earlier also. Basically, it requires a multi-disciplinary approach so that coherent and integral information is obtained on the subject, which had so far been treated as graffiti on rock rather than symbology of Cosmic representations as understood by the primordial beings. It symbolises the human consciousness from the earliest times to the present day and provides a holistic viewpoint on physical and metaphysical phenomena. In Indian thought and art, both vernacular and classical traditions, one finds variously images of an apparently metaphysical world. Indian art is struck by an extraordinary feat of traditional thought - currents which are both simple and complex. At one level, simple words are used so that everybody can understand the nature of art and art of nature. But at higher level it becomes 'cosmology' instead of simple explanation. Interestingly, many traditional societies have no formal term for art, no separate word for artist.