

PRIMEVAL ROCK ART AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY IN INDIA

Somnath CHAKRAVERTY

The study of art in preliterate societies, is important for the reconstruction of prehistory and ethno-history of mankind. In the present study, an attempt has been made to understand the functional implication of early rock art through the analysis of its typology, content, form and theme with the support of the ethnographic analogy method. The study carried out in this work is based on the plateau region of Central India. This region has the maximum concentration of rock art sites in India; they are located in Pachmarhi of Mahadeo hills, Madhya Pradesh. Besides rock art, the traditional art of the korkus -a tribal society living in the same eco-cultural region and in a kind of proximity with the rock art, has been selected for ethnographic analogy.

The setting: Pachmarhi is a hill station in Madhya Pradesh (22° 28' NL and 28° 26' EL) located within the mountainous range of the Mahadeo hills of Satpuras and situated at the average height of 1000 m a.s.l. Pachmarhi is connected by road with Piparia, its nearest town and railway station, Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh is located 195 km north-west of Pachmarhi. Administratively Pachmarhi is included within Hoshangabad district and since the British period it was a cantonment township and now it is an education and training centre of Indian military. Being a popular hill resort in Central Indian plateau, the scenic beauty and the virgin forest of Mahadeo hills area attract tourists round the year. The name Pachmarhi has derived from the word "Panchmathi" or five huts. Near the township, a small hillock with artificial cave shelters is identified as "Pandava caves". As narrated in the local legend, five Pandava brothers i.e. principal characters of great Indian epic-Mahabharata, lived in these caves when they were in exile. But the hillock and its rock-cut caves were perhaps the shelters of Buddhist monks. Nothing more is known about the early historical details of Pachmarhi. In 1857 captain J. Forsyth, a lancer, first reported about the area. Afterwards, in 1862, Sir Richard Temple -the Chief Commissioner of Hoshangabad started various developmental activities in the region.

The topographic feature of Pachmarhi shows a marked difference from other parts of central Indian plateau. The major peaks of Mahadeo hills are respectively Dhupgarh (1350 m), Mahadeva hill (1328 m) and Chauragarh (1311 m). The peaks are the highest summits of Satpura range in the south of river Narmada. Denwa is the principal river system that flows near the extreme southern boundary of the township. There are numerous rivulets, hill streams, and waterfalls. Due to water action, steep gorges, ravines, escarpments, caves and rock shelters are abundant in this area.

The forest of Pachmarhi is a mixed type of vegetation consisting of a great variety of species, including rare medicinal plants. The common species are saj (*Terminalia tomeatosa*), tinsa (*Oligeinia dalbergioides*), tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), teak (*Tectona grandis*), salai (*Bosnillia serrala*), anjan (*Hardwickia binata*), sal (*Shorea*

robusta), mango (*Magnifera indica*), achar (*Buchanania latifolia*), mohua (*Bassia latifolia*), bel (*Aegla marmelos*) and several others.

The major fauna available in the Pachmarhi forest consists of: elephant (*Elephas maximus*), buffalo (*Bos bubalis*), bison (*Bos gaurus*), wild pig (*Sus cristatus*), Black-buck (*Antelope cervicapra*), swamp deer (*Cervus devançdi*), sambar (*Cervus unicolor*), chital (*Cervus axis*). Among carnivores, wolf (*Canis pallipes*), tiger (*Felis tigris*) and leopard (*Felis pardus*) are most frequent. Other mammals include Indian sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*), Indian squirrel (*Sciurus inducus*) etc. Varieties of birds are available in the forest of which the pea-fowl (*Povo cristatus*) is the most popular game bird (Corbett *et al.*, 1908).

The Korkus are considered as indigenous tribal inhabitants of Pachmarhi and they are numerically dominant. Caste hindus are not uncommon in those villages but they live in separate hamlets, keeping distance from the tribal households.

Presence of sandstone, in huge exposed forms, acts as one of the basic preconditions for the production and obviously in the occurrence of rock art.

Pachmarhi hills belong to the Mahadeo series of the upper Gondwanas. It is primarily composed of red and yellow sandstones. The Pachmarhi locality is formed of

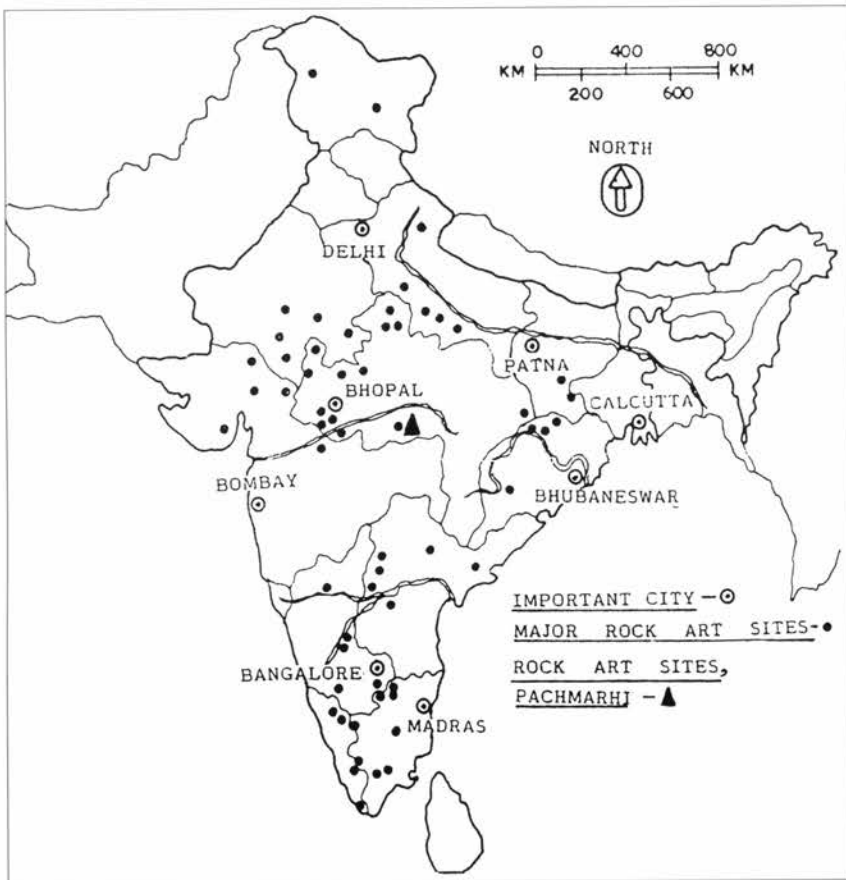


Fig. 114. Distribution of rock art sites in India.

massive sandstone, placed on a height of about 1150 m. The major part of the area constitutes an undulating plateau surrounded by a group of hills.

Primarily the rock shelters and the caves have been formed by weathering action. They are generally placed on the escarpment with or without a hanging roof. The artists used to select the site having a hanging roof but in certain cases they were compelled to carry out their works in the exposed and steep wall surface of the hill.

In connection with the geological features, the pigments with which the paintings were made cannot be excluded. The area itself has complicated geological features with varieties of rocks and minerals on the one hand, and the weathering and disintegration on the other. Iron, in the form of iron oxides is one of the components. This product has different shades as brown, red, buff with further micro-variations. These oxides are soluble in water and could easily be used as paint. In case of other shades, lime, also a derivative of limestone was used. It is surmised that charcoal might have served the purpose of black shade.

The Rock Art

In Pachmarhi, clusters of painted rock shelters are available in thirteen different sites. The major rock art sites are: Nimbu Khud; Hanuman mandir near jatashankar cave-temple; Jambudip; Dorothy Deep; Putli lane: Bazar shelter; Mount Rosa or Monte Rosa; Mahadeo group of painted rock shelters located above the cave shrine of Mahadeo; Bainganga rock shelters on the northern bank of Bainganga nala -a rivulet; Imli-Khoh; Maradeo group of rock shelters; Bania Bauri cave close to Maradeo area and Ghurnar group of rock shelters situated about 8 km north of Dhupgarh peak in the northern part of Pachmarhi.

The above mentioned sites were thoroughly studied and a total number of 1953 rock art motifs including 1896 (97.08%) paintings, 56 (2.87%) engravings and only one painted figure on engraving has been identified. Several painted rock shelters produce both geometric and non-geometric microliths, burnt charcoal and fragments of grey potteries. The lithic artifacts and other associated finds are mostly found on the surface layer of the rock shelters containing fallen rock debris and loose sandy soil. Fluted cores and debitage flakes indicate that the floors of the rock shelters were utilized as workshop.

The Dorothy Deep rock shelter situated in the northwestern corner of Pachmarhi town is about 2 km further north from Belle view. The rock paintings of this site were initially studied by Gordon & Gordon (1939). Thereafter Hunter excavated the floor of the rock shelter and successively published one interim report (Hunter, 1935) followed by a final report (Hunter, 1936). The lowest level of deposition in the Dorothy Deep rock shelter yielded plenty of microliths, mostly geometric in type including triangle, crescent, drill and scraper. Three human skeletons were recovered from the lower strata of deposition, two of which are children and one adult. The successive deposit overlying it, produced fragmented potteries. The skeletal remains have not been properly studied and so their racial identification is still unknown. According to Khare (1984) the racial feature of the skeletons are similar to those of the indigenous tribal population of the area.

The motif types in Pachmarhi have a total of 1953 samples of rock art. Within a number of 13 sites studied, most motifs are paintings (1896; 97.08%) whereas engraving and painting on engraving are few (56; 2.87% and 1; 0.05%). The major morphic types are: zoomorph (475; 24.32%), phytomorph (21; 1.08%), anthropomorph



Fig. 115. Scene of a battlefield with a horserider at the Centre. Rock art of Maradeo, Pachmarhi.

(231; 11.83%). In case of other motif, the major one is related to traits of material culture (96; 4.92%). There are also combinations of morphic types, as zoomorph and phytomorph (4; 0.20%), zoomorph and anthropomorph (9; 0.46), zoomorph and traits of material culture (4; 0.20%). Plants are not given adequate importance here in rock art.

Rock paintings have been executed in a number of ways: stick figure or line drawing, block or solid body, outline or contour, hollow or partly filled body, X-ray figure and/or filled with pattern. The above noted types of execution have been correlated with the morphic types in quantitative terms. It is observed that a great majority of the art forms (1556; 79.67%) have been executed in block or solid body. The next priority (283; 14.49%) belongs to stick figures or line drawings. The other styles of execution, as outline or contour (74; 3.79%); hollow and partly filled body (16; 0.82%) and X-ray figures (24; 1.23%) constitute a minimum quantity. A question arises: why block or solid-bodied figures are numerically dominant. The logical explanation points to the fact that such figures are more perceptible on the part of viewers, thereby the communication is both feasible and favourable.

The morpho-typological taxonomy is expressed in the form of typological execution of rock art with technical application. There are a number of major divisions as -stylized technicalities are found to be present with zoomorph, anthropomorph and material trait of culture. The metric variables of the dimension of figures have been classified in three major groups: large (above 50 cm), medium (15-50 cm) and small (below 15 cm). Such dimensional classification has been made on the basis of a test classification carried out on random samples. The dimension has been identified on the basis of the measurement along major axis without any consideration on length or breadth/height. It is interesting to note that the majority of samples (1339; 68.56%) belong to small category. In the medium category there is a shortfall (532; 27.24%), while figures of larger dimension are relatively few (82; 4.19%).



Fig. 116. Korku commemorative funeral pillars.

Superimposition of art motifs has been discussed in different ways. Many times this has been considered a parameter for the determination of chrono-cultural and stylistic succession.

Out of 1953 motifs, superimposition is (116; 5.94%), and within this percentage the greater occurrence is in zoomorph (39; 8.21%). However, the frequency of the occurrence of superimposition is too meagre, and no definite stylistic and thematic succession could be traced from it.

In rock paintings, colours and variations of shade are important in the region under consideration, there are two major classes -monochrome i.e. painting with single colour (1823; 93.34%) and bichrome, i.e. combination but not adding or mixing of two colours (74; 3.79%). The major colours are three -namely white, red and black. Their source may be lime or ash, red ocher, haematite and charcoal. These materials must have been treated in different ways for the purpose of bringing out shades, permanency of colours and brightness. In rock paintings, monochrome was most favoured and in majority of the cases, as high as about 96%, white colour was used.

In cases, the grey colour of the painting appears to be a chemical degeneration of the white pigments due to weathring effects and percolation of water on the painting. In case of the Present rock paintings, there are other major shades in the bichromatic rock art form: in all cases, white colour has been utilized, and three other colour are red, vermilion or maroon.

A total of 527 rock art motifs depict different species or types of animals. These include primarily invertebrates like arthropods as spiders and bees. Others include fowls, peacocks, vultures, porcupines, bovids, cows and bison. There are also deer, horses, elephants and bears. The carnivores include dogs, tigers and lions. Monkeys are also found to be depicted. Among all the species of animals, mentioned above, some of them have very low frequency as in case of spider, fish, fowl and porcupine. There are other species of very high incidence ranging from 11 to 149. These species are cow, ox, bison, deer, other quadrupeds, monkey etc. In addition to the same, a few other species have moderate numbers. There are birds, tigers, bears, dogs, lions etc. The varieties of

animals represented in the rock art clearly indicates man's knowledge and perception of the animals of the period. Except for the lion, shown in low frequency (4; 0.76%) the rest faunal species are still living in the geographical area under consideration.

85 scenes have been identified (fig. 117). The numerical dominance is found on battles (32; 37.65%), hunting scenes (24; 28.24%), animal husbandry (7, 8.24%), group dance and musicians (6; 7.05%). Household scenes are fewer (5; 5.90%). In very few cases, collection of honey (3; 3.52%) and use of carrying poles (2; 2.35%) are also represented. All these depictions indicate dynamic activities, including battles and hunting.

All the traits of material culture are observed: sword (428), bow and arrow (323), bow (106) arrow (35), quiver (24), shield (325), stick/club (39), axe (10) and spear (7). In rock art, the presence of spear and sword points out the state of developed technology, linked to the use of iron. Few motifs comprise musicians with musical instruments. Dresses and personal adornments, hair-style, traditional implements and weapons as well as some particular religious symbols have similarities with those of present-day tribal communities living in the Mahadeo hills region.

The Tribal Art

Korkus belong to Kolarian tribe and they have a close affinity with the Mundas of Chhotanagpur plateau. They speak a distinct dialect of mundari stock. "Karu" and "Ku" mean man and plural version, i.e. men. This group is more concentrated in the Satpura pleateau region of Madhya Pradesh with a greater density in the districts of Hoshangabad and Chindwara. According to 1981 census, the total Korku population in the state was 67,251 including the sub-tribes, viz. Korku, Bopchi and Mawasi. In Hoshangabad district the population enumerated in the 1981 census was 12, 107. The Korku tribe has several divisions according to the adoption of Hindu lifestyle and religion (Fuchs, 1988). The traditional forest dwelling section is known as Patharia Korkus.

An account of the Korku material culture is relevant to make a comparison with the objects of material traits delineated in the early work of rock art in Pachmarhi. The same area is inhabited by the Korkus. The type of shelters, household utensils, weapons, dresses and ornaments, musical instruments, dance forms and economic activities - such glimpses are documented in the rock art of Pachmarhi.

The Korku women dancers form a long row joining their hands together and such

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>%</i> |
|----------------------|------------------|----------|
| Battle Scenes | 32 | 37.65% |
| Hunting Scenes | 24 | 28.24% |
| Animal husbandry | 7 | 8.24% |
| Group dance | 6 | 7.05% |
| Musicians | 6 | 7.05% |
| Household scenes | 5 | 5.90% |
| Collection of honey | 3 | 3.52% |
| Use of carrying-pole | 2 | 2.55% |
| <i>Total</i> | 85 | 100.00% |

Fig. 117. Thematic analysis of principal compositions in rock art.

community dances have a similarity with analogous depictions in rock art. Some elements of Korku material culture are close to rock art motifs but such similarities do not necessarily mean that the rock art of Pachmarhi was created by the ancestral group of Korkus. The present day Korkus are largely shifting hill cultivators and settled cultivators, but scenes of cultivation or depiction of agricultural implements are absent in the rock art of Pachmarhi. The carving of the figurines of the sun and the moon on the top of the commemorative wooden tablets is essential because the celestial beings are considered as supreme deities. But similar figures or their symbolic abbreviations are never found in the rock art of Pachmarhi.

The collection of different varieties of roots, tubers and mushroom is common to korkus. A major food resource is the collection of honey from the forest. Scenes describing this kind of activity are common in the rock paintings in Pachmarhi.

A few earlier workers (Russel & Hiraal, 1975; Chattopadhyay, 1943; Gordon, 1936; 1940a; 1940b; 1958; Fuchs, 1988) have mentioned a possible analogy between rock art and the existing art tradition of the Korkus. This art tradition is characterised by socio-religious customs, such as the celebration of "sidoli" ceremony, during which a wooden or stone tablet is erected in memory of a deceased person. The commemorative tablets are carved with the figurative delineation of the deceased soul in activities representing his/her identity, and essentially with the figure of the sun and the moon, the supreme gods of Korkus. As explained by the majority of the Korku craftsmen, the deceased person is generally depicted in his/her own profession and this signify his/her social position and sex.

The wooden plaque is sometime divided into several parallel horizontal bands or segments, each of which has a distinct borderline. Such memorial tablets denote the inclusion of several deceased persons from the same family but located within separate enclosures.

The memorial posts, either made of stone or wood are identified by the Korkus as "gatha" or "manda". The carving on the memorial pillar is considered to be an indispensable part of the particular rite and ritual connected with the belief in transmigration of the soul. The manufacturing of the memorial tablet is marked by a series of rituals, strict taboos and other observances.

Axe, sharp-edged chisel, adze are usual iron tools that the tribal craftsmen utilize to manufacture the commemorative plaques.

In usual and conventional forms, the major morphic types carved in the Korku funerary pillars include zoomorph, phytomorph, anthropomorph, material trait and natural object. Quite a good number of depictions reveal the figures of sorcerer (ojha) at the bottom of the pillar.

Rock Art and Tribal Art: a comparative assessment

In rock art of Pachmarhi, the majority of the figurative representations are solid-bodied (79.67%), stick figure or line drawing (14.49%) and outline or contour (3.79%). The figurative motifs are mostly naturalistic (90.63%) with the exception of few (0.67%) figures of zoomorph and anthropomorph which have been identified as more stylized. Within naturalistic figures an anthropomorph is rarely shown with traces of projected nose, distinct eyes and in general all human and animal figures are devoid of such recognizable facial details. On the contrary, several human figures, mostly depicted within battle-scenes are provided with distinct dress, other forms of personal adornment including ornaments and hairstyle.

| Morphic Types | Frequency and Percentage of motif elements in each category | | | | Common Elements |
|---|---|----------|-------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| | <i>Rock Art Pachmarhi</i> | | <i>Korku Tribal Art</i> | | |
| | f | % | f | % | f/(%) |
| Zoomorph | 23 | (23.71%) | 5 | (10.20%) | 4 (12.90%) |
| Anthropomorph | 4 | (4.12%) | 2 | (4.08%) | 2 (6.45%) |
| Anthropomorph Zoomorph and material Culture | 4 | (4.12%) | 5 | (10.20%) | 3 (9.68%) |
| Anthropomorph and material Trait | 21 | (21.67%) | 17 | (34.69%) | 11 (35.48%) |
| Material Trait | 22 | (22.68%) | 13 | (26.53%) | 9 (29.03%) |
| Phytomorph | 1 | (1.03%) | 1 | (2.04%) | 1 (3.23%) |
| Non-figurative motif | 22 | (22.68%) | 5 | (10.20%) | 1 (3.23%) |
| Inscription | | | 1 | (2.04%) | |
| Frequency % | 97 | (100%) | 49 | (100%) | 31 (100%) |

Fig. 118. Common elements of morphic types found in rock art and tribal art of Pachmarhi.

In both sectors it is observed that the initial drawings of anthropomorph and zoomorphic figures, constitute arrangements of triangles to form the required figure.

In Korku society, horse-riding figures signify possession of wealth, power, prestige, higher status and overall dominance of the man in the society. Such figures as well as armed men in battle-scenes are frequent in Central Indian rock art sites. Such representations are quite common in Bhimbetka and other neighbouring rock art sites of Betwa source region and in Adamgarh hillock in the southern bank of Narmada river.

In both sectors of art, technique of figural representations are mostly standardized and idealized, and repetitive forms are frequent. In both categories of art, the artist's creative impulses have seldom been expressed. The activity and experience of the ethnic group have largely been represented rather than the expression of individual perception.

A total number of 31 common elements (fig. 118) of morphic types were found in both rock art and tribal art of Pachmarhi. It comprises 4 zoomorphs including depictions of unidentified quadruped mammals, deer, horse and cow. Within anthropomorphs, two morphic types are respectively group dance and man guiding horse rider. In the category of anthropomorph with zoomorph and material trait, a total number of three types of pictorial elements are common which are -horse rider holding artifact, hunting with bow and arrow and scene of animal husbandry. In the category of anthropomorph with material trait, a maximum number of 11 motif-types in both sectors are identical. Such

type of figures include: man holding knife or dagger, holding umbrella, drummer, holding stick or club, musicians playing flute or horn, holding bow and arrow, holding only arrow, holding only bow, and figurative drawing of man and woman shown under a shelter. In material trait, identical items are respectively -umbrella, sword, knife or dagger, pot or basket, rock shelter or taint for habitation, drum, bow and arrow, club or stick and flute or horn. One generalized figure of a plant in the category of phytomorph and one solitary motif of floral-like design under the category of non-figurative motif is identical in nature.

As the comparative study reveals, in both sectors, the pictorial glimpses on the pattern of life, activities and material culture are mostly indistinguishable.

31.96 % of the total motif-elements identified in rock art are thematically identical to those of tribal art. Therefore it is not unlikely that the Korku art has been influenced by the rock art persisting in the same eco-cultural region.

Among pre-literate tribal Communities, the oral tradition including myths and legends is the major source for reconstruction of ethno-history.

In order to understand the Cultural continuum, the comparison between rock art and ethnographic account of relevant tribal societies from the same region is necessary. In addition to the study of tribal art, different aspects of material culture could be an useful source to trace the ethnic background of rock art.

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Riassunto

Nel presente scritto si è tentato di capire le implicazioni funzionali dell'arte rupestre attraverso l'analisi della sua tipologia, contenuto, forma e tema, con il supporto del metodo di analogia etnografica. L'arte rupestre di Pachmarhi, in India, che include 1953 temi, è stata classificata e raffrontata con le pratiche artistiche dei Korkus, una comunità tribale che vive nella stessa zona. Da uno studio comparativo tra le due serie di dati emergono strette affinità; si nota inoltre una relazione tra le condizioni socio-economiche e i modelli artistici.

Summary

An attempt has been made to understand the functional implication of early rock art through the analysis of its typology, content, form and theme with the support of the ethnographic analogy method. The rock art of Pachmarhi, in the plateau region of India, which includes 1953 motifs, has been classified and compared with the art-practises of korkus- a tribal community living in the same eco-cultural region. From the comparative study between the two sets of data close affinities emerge. A relationship between patterns of art and socio-economic preconditions has been noticed.

Résumé

Dans ce texte on a cherché à comprendre les implications fonctionnelles de l'art rupestre à travers l'analyse de sa typologie, de son contenu, de sa forme et de son sujet, avec le support de la méthode d'analogie ethnographique. L'art rupestre de Pachmarhi, en Inde, qui comprend 1953 sujets, a été classifié et confronté avec les pratiques artistiques des Korkus, une communauté tribale qui vit dans la même zone. De l'étude comparative entre les deux séries de données émergent plusieurs affinités; on note aussi une relation entre les conditions socio-économiques et les modèles artistiques exécutés.