



CONTEMPORARY TANA BHAGAT PUJA TO A MESO-CHALCOLITHIC ROCKART SITE AT THETHANGI, CHATRA DISTRICT, NORTH JHARKHAND, EAST CENTRAL INDIA

*Justin Imam **

ABSTRACT - This article focuses on The Tana Bhagats group who lives in Eastern central India, in the districts of Chatra, Ranchi and Palamau. The community of the Tana Bhagats has a distinctive identity and it is known for their rituals related to the purefactory rites and exorcism of devils.

Among these rituals, the most famous, is its animistic worship which takes place in the Thethangi Rockart, a shelter with meso-chalcolithic rock paintings. A ritual in which it is clear how the Tanas modern community have been maintained connections with the ancestral rites.

RIASSUNTO - Questo articolo si concentra sulla comunità di "Tana Bhagats", che vive in India Centro orientale, nel distretto di Chatra, Ranchi e Palamau. La comunità di Tana Bhagats ha un'identità distintiva ed è conosciuta per i suoi riti propiziatori ed esorcismi. Tra i rituali, il più famoso è il culto animista che è praticato a "Thethangi Rockart", un rifugio con pitture su rocce di età mesolitica. In questo rituale è chiaro come la comunità moderna di Tana abbia mantenuto la connessione con i riti ancestrali.

TANA BHAGATS OF HAZARIBAGH

The Tana Bhagats are an Oraon (North Dravidian group) of Brahui speakers (Kurrukh) who converted six centuries back to Vaishnavism in the Ranchi district. Today they are found largely in the districts of Chatra, Ranchi and Palamau. Their physical type is Oraon, but their body language is distinctly different from the average Oraons, and so is their distinctive white apparel for both men and women. The Oraons in particular because they are drawn towards the saint, call themselves Tana, which means 'to pull'. They call themselves Bhagats which simply means devotees.

According to Asko Parpola (*Deciphering the Indus Script*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, Chapter 9), it is clear that the people of the Harappan civilization spoke the Oraon language Kurrukh, which is a Brahui language of the North Dravidian group, akin to Malto of the Rajmahal hills. The Kurrukh - and Malto - speaking Oraons of Jharkhand and West Bengal are the last living remains of Harappan language speakers.

In view of Parpola's finding it is quite certain that Chotanagpur has an important status in regard to its ancient connection with the Indus. The tribal art of the Hazaribagh region was brought to light alongwith the discovery of prehistoric rock art of the region by Shri Bulu Imam and family and friends nearly two decades back, after which both have been the subject of wide academic interest both in India and abroad. Thirteen rock art sites having proto-Indus signs have been discovered by Shri Imam and his colleagues in the upper Damodar valley. These bear indelible evidence of the protozoic forms that eventually became the Indus pictographs and script. It is also certain that the traditional marriage art of Khovala, a glyptic comb-cut art of the tribals of the Hazaribagh region, and the harvest art of Sohrai which is both painted and comb-cut are the existing living remains of a contemporary Harappan culture. These artforms have forms exactly similar to the Indus pictograms found on seals, etc. They are the work of artisan tribes like the Prajapati or Kumhar who are potters, Ranas who are carpenters, Telis who are oil extractors, Turis who are basket makers, etc. They are also found among the Ganju and Kurmi forest dwellers who are principally agriculturists, and among the Oraon and Munda. The artisan tribes are found in the company of the agrarian tribes like the Oraon, who according to S.C.Roy, the father

* 'Sanskriti' Dipugarha, Jharkhand, India
Email: justinimam@yahoo.com; Website: www.tichazaribagh.in



of Indian ethnology, have the status of landlord around whom the potter, carpenter, weaver, grazier, etc. gather. The status of the Oraon, observed as far back as 1912 by Roy, is commensurate with the privilege expected by the Oraon as the carrier of the remains of the Harappan culture and the oldest civilization in the world. According to J. H. Elfenbein in *'The Baluchi Language: a dialectology with texts'*, Royal Asiatic Society Monographs, 27, London 1966, the Oraons are indigenous in India and were originally settled in the Narmada valley, a region also rich in paleoarcheology and rock art, in Bhimbetka, from where they moved to Sindh on the western side and Chotanagpur. The Brahui of Baluchistan, the Kurrukh - speaking Oraon of Chotanagpur and the Malto - speaking Oraon of the Rajmahal Hills are the remaining central and central-south Dravidian branches to be found in the early Chalcolithic cultures of Malwa and the Chotanagpur plateau. Hazaribagh is rich in Oraon heritage and songs sung by Oraon elders tell of the migrations through the jungles of the Satpuras to Hardiban and Rohtas, from where one branch migrated to Rajmahal, the other south to Hazaribagh and Ranchi.

Such a rich picture of ancient indigenous Harappan culture native to Chotanagpur must be heart-warming for the newly forged identity of this new state of Jharkhand which is actually older than any other. This indigenous picture of Harappan culture in Chotanagpur is backed by Sir John Marshall's observation that the Harappan culture was but an outpost of central Indian civilization. Sir Aurel Stein had pointed out in 1931 that the Harappan people spoke a Brahui language. The entire Narmada-Sone-Damodar complex with Amarkantak as its centre is rich in both protozoic and paleoarchaeological deposits on the 24th latitude. Father Henry Heras, SJ, had studied the rise of man in the Sone river valley where he found traces of Harappan bricks and clay building cones. The Narmada valley has a hoary antiquity like the Sone and Damodar and in 1935 the great Jesuit paleontologist Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin visited it and noted 'The Narmada ranks as the classic Pleistocene of India' (*Teilhard de Chardin*, by Claude Cenot, Burns & Oates, London, 1958, p.188). In Shri Bulu Imam's pioneering work in Hazaribagh, specifically the upper valley of the River Damodar and its environs, the same Pleistocene level, was brought to light, with continuous evidence of paleo-, meso-, chalco- and neolithic periods set among a rich megalithic backdrop and the emergence of the Iron Age. Ninety-five characters of the Indus script were brought to light in the rock art of Isco in the valley in a meso-chalco-neolithic floor sediment yielding microliths, corestones, hammerstones and a polished axe-head or celt. The lexicon of the Khovar-Sohrai tribal art of the region was shown to be forms directly connected with the Indus. The region's earliest rock art begins with the close of the Paleolithic (10000BP), which shows prehistoric prototypes of Harappan forms. Mention may be made of human anthropomorphic forms with animal attributes like horns, claws, etc, having comb tassels denoting brightness and glitter as in the Indus pictograms, the presence of the fish as a symbol for star (*min*), and the presence of fish in an upright pictographic fashion. A prototype of a proto-Elamite seal was found in the rock art of Sidpa, which is also found in the Oraon back tattoo mark design. In addition there are to be found the Khovar form of the bull and feeding trough, elephant and feeding trough, trefoil pattern, animal with bird on back, flowery trident, horse and rider (*ghoda*), etc. These all point to a proto-Harappan tradition and give a new status to the Oraon of Hazaribagh and Ranchi as the symbol of the Harappan culture and their artisan neighbours, who carry in them these great artistic traditions of the Indus valley still.

The Tanas still pray at rock art sites of Jharkhand in the cave shelters in annual rituals, and these sessions see the womenfolk as the real medium with rock art signifying the ancestors (Purkha). The Tanas are famous for their pure factory rites and exorcism of devils. They have their own martyrs and memorials.

ANIMISTIC WORSHIP BY TANA BHAGATS AT THETHANGI ROCK ART SITE

Over 100 men and about 40 women of the Tana Bhagat sect all dressed in white clothes had assembled in the Thethangi rock art shelter high in the Satpahar range. The women wore their hair unveiled and the men wore their traditional white khadi Gandhi caps. Some of the men had come to the shelter the previous night. The rest came up at 9 a.m. The puja began around 11 a.m. The women and men assembled in the large open area in front of the painted shelter with its great overhang. The women were in front surrounded in a semi-circle by the men. The women's hair flew around as they were immersed themselves in trances, sitting forward on their knees and swaying from side to side like dervishes, shaking their heads and shaking their hair up and down, back and forth, their arms outstretched toward the rock art as they cried out prayers and appeals to it, asking their own special favors. Some of the older women were on their knees shaking their heads and hair, rolling or crawling towards the painted shelter muttering incomprehensible sounds, others stood with their arms stretched out to the rock art crying out appeals as they gently swayed, shaking their heads from side to side, their long hair flying. This was a ceaseless crying and shamanic trance we were witnessing, the like of which is disappearing from the tribal world. Some of the women suddenly got up and ran blindly as if possessed by a spirit, falling down and rolling over on the hard stone, or running wildly out of the shelter. After about an hour and a half some of the women started to give their offerings of fruit and other food to the rock art. Meanwhile

the men looked on, some seated in rows on the rocks, others standing with folded hands praying to the rock art. A continuous chanting accompanied by the beating of brass gongs by the men accompanied the entire duration of the puja. A small group of Tana Bhagats dressed in their traditional white clothes and Gandhi caps stood near the rock art holding aloft on sticks small tricolor national flags.

The Tana Bhagats carry on an old Oraon tradition related to the rock art of Jharkhand, which Christianity was successful in stamping out but which continued in their semi-Hinduized animist worship, and for this we are fortunate. Among the Christianized Oraons these and other ancient practices have long since been lost. According to my observations in my book *Rock art of North Jharkhand* written last year for the Department of Culture, Government of Jharkhand, I had held to the thesis that the prehistoric rock art of Hazaribagh and Chatra districts had been painted by the ancestors of the Oraons, and this puja to the rock art by the Tana Bhagats proves it. The prayers and appeals made by them to the rock art, especially those made by the women, show the close relationship between the tribal women and the wall paintings.

The Bhagats are a small sect of the Oraon tribe, founded in 1914 by a 20-year-old Jatra Tana Bhagat, who later received the patronage of Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian freedom struggle. Tana Bhagats in Jharkhand are a small number of some 10,000 only and are found in Ranchi, Gumla, Bishunpur, Ghagra, Lohardaga, Kuru, Mandar, Sisai, Palamau, Latehar, Chatra, Tandwa, Sidpa, Khandar and Thethangi. The community has a distinctive identity and is known for its conservatism, being vegetarian and non-alcohol consuming, and above all its worship of the rock art and original sites like springs Puja takes place at Satbohia, the spring source of that stream in the Satpahar range opposite Mandair village; puja also takes place at Raham rock art site and Sidpa rock art site in the north-east Satpahar ranges. This worship of the rock art is altogether a major claim for the identity of what may be called the longest continuing rock art tradition in the world.

THETHANGI ROCK ART

The rock art shelter of Thethangi lies halfway up the south face of the Satpahar range in the Tandwa block of Chatra district. To the west and slightly above it is the small painted shelter of Saraiya on its high eagle's nest eyrie. Further to the west is Khandar. Below the rock art shelter of Thethangi is the little village of Thethangi where the railway line to the Mangardahawashery has been held up by the Adivasi villagers who mainly comprise Oraons and Mundas. Here is the house of Bandey Bhagat, an Oraon of the Tana Bhagat sect: which people have memories of their ancestors taking shelter in the caves during the tribal uprisings during the second half of the 19th century. Above Bandey Bhagat's house is the Thethangi rock shelter with the painted art.

The Thethangi shelter is a large overhang of rock typical of central Indian rock shelter art. It faces east, and overlooks a wide ravine. The paintings are along the inner sandstone wall of this shelter; in the rocky strata above it is another rocky formation or gallery in which some paintings of deer are found, though badly weathered and in poor condition. There is some existence of exfoliation on the left side of the large sandstone painted wall, and in the middle the rock art has been affected by rainwater erosion, and silicon drip-lines and overhead drainage are urgently required. The cause of the exfoliation is climatic destabilization, particularly fluctuating humidity accelerating the formation of mineral salts in the rock, leading to structural weakening, fungal growth and insect infection leading to flaking.

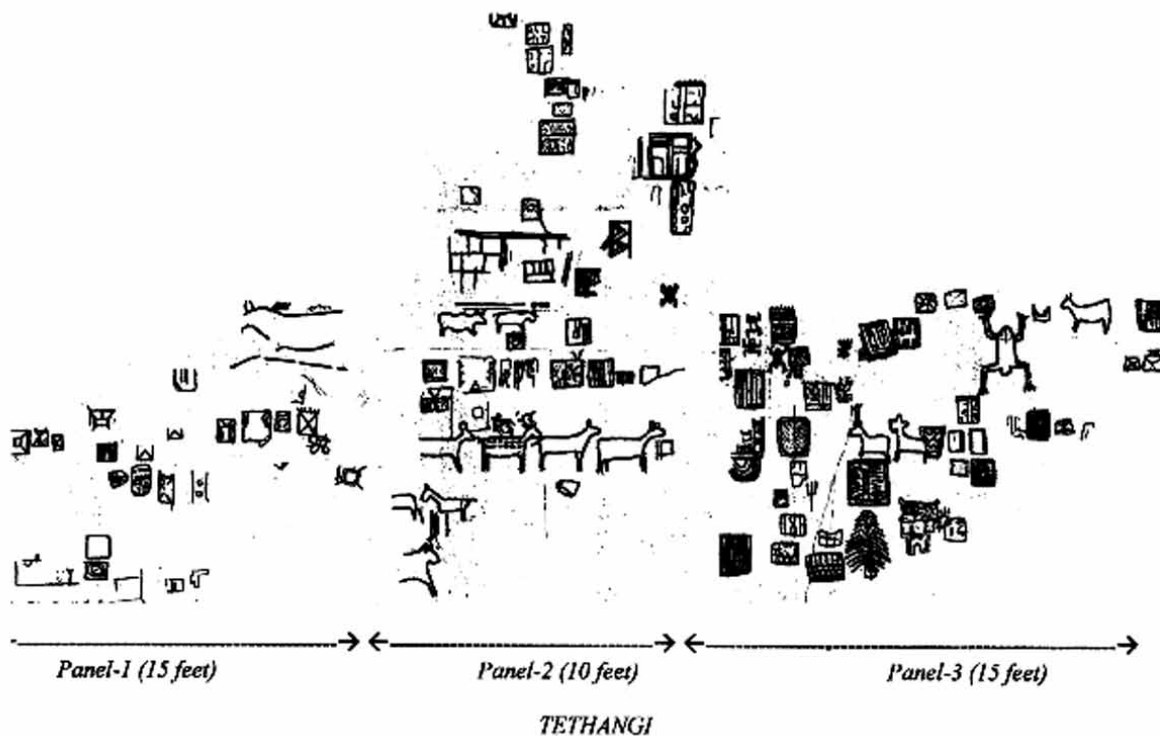
The Thethangi rock art shelter has three separate chambers with paintings superimposed one on top of the other, comprising independent galleries painted in red hematite with geometric script, designs, drawings of wild deer, frogs, etc. There is an upper gallery which contains some washed-out paintings. It is a Meso-Chalcolithic rock art site with geometrical and animal forms painted with hematite (iron oxide). The motifs found in the rock art are also in evidence in the contemporary vernacular art of the region. There is Paleolithic habitation evidence in the area. Microliths have been found in the shelter. It is in good condition in general. Rock insects were attacking the art, as well as erosion from overhead rainwater. It is a Meso-chalcolithic rock art site certified by the Archeological Survey of India. The Thethangi rock art panel no.1 dimensions are: length 15 ft x height 20 ft; panel no.2: length 10 ft x height 20 ft; and panel no.3: length 15 ft x height 20 ft. The motifs painted are: the trident which is the Tree of Life, which is found only here in the rock art of Hazaribagh. Immediately to the left of the tree of life is the honeycomb. At the top of panel no. 3 is a common motif of sun worshippers – the concentric oval with hexagonal divisions, similar to an Indus motif. The hexagonal motif represents the 'immortal native' which is bound in the oval, and is a magical motif. Just to the right of the tree of life is an owl. Next to it we find the motif of the sun over painted by a square mandala. Above the owl are two deer (another is at top right) one of which is superimposed on an earlier mandala, and so this deer may have been painted later. This is interesting since the geometric figures are generally considered Chalcolithic and wild animals comprise the art of the Mesolithic hunters. To the right side of the panel we find a human figure in a box similar to the one at the top of the central panel, Isco. It is a sacred figure as seen by the ithyphallic



extension between the legs. Perhaps the chief objects of interest are the numerous images of frogs. Hazaribagh is famous for numerous stone frogs, some of large size, which have sacred cupule markings and point to the south. These images have been found throughout Hazaribagh and Chatra district in many places and their sacred significance is understood by the locals. Perhaps they are a totem of the Bengs (frog tribe). Immediately above the horns of the first of the pair of deer in the third panel is the form deciphered by Erwin Neumayer as *Ma* or *Om*, set in a 'W'-shaped decorative form. In the central panel we observe many animal forms. The middle row depicts a stag and three does of spotted deer (*axis axis*). At the bottom is a tiger and at the top is a pair of wild cattle, the small humped wild cattle (*Bosprimagenus*) variety. In panel no. 2 of Thethangi we find above the line of deer in the middle of a panel a square with a triangle at the bottom and vertical rows of triangles on either side. In the upper gallery we have a few interesting figures, one of which is a small running figure in outline and a running spotted deer (*Axisaxis*).

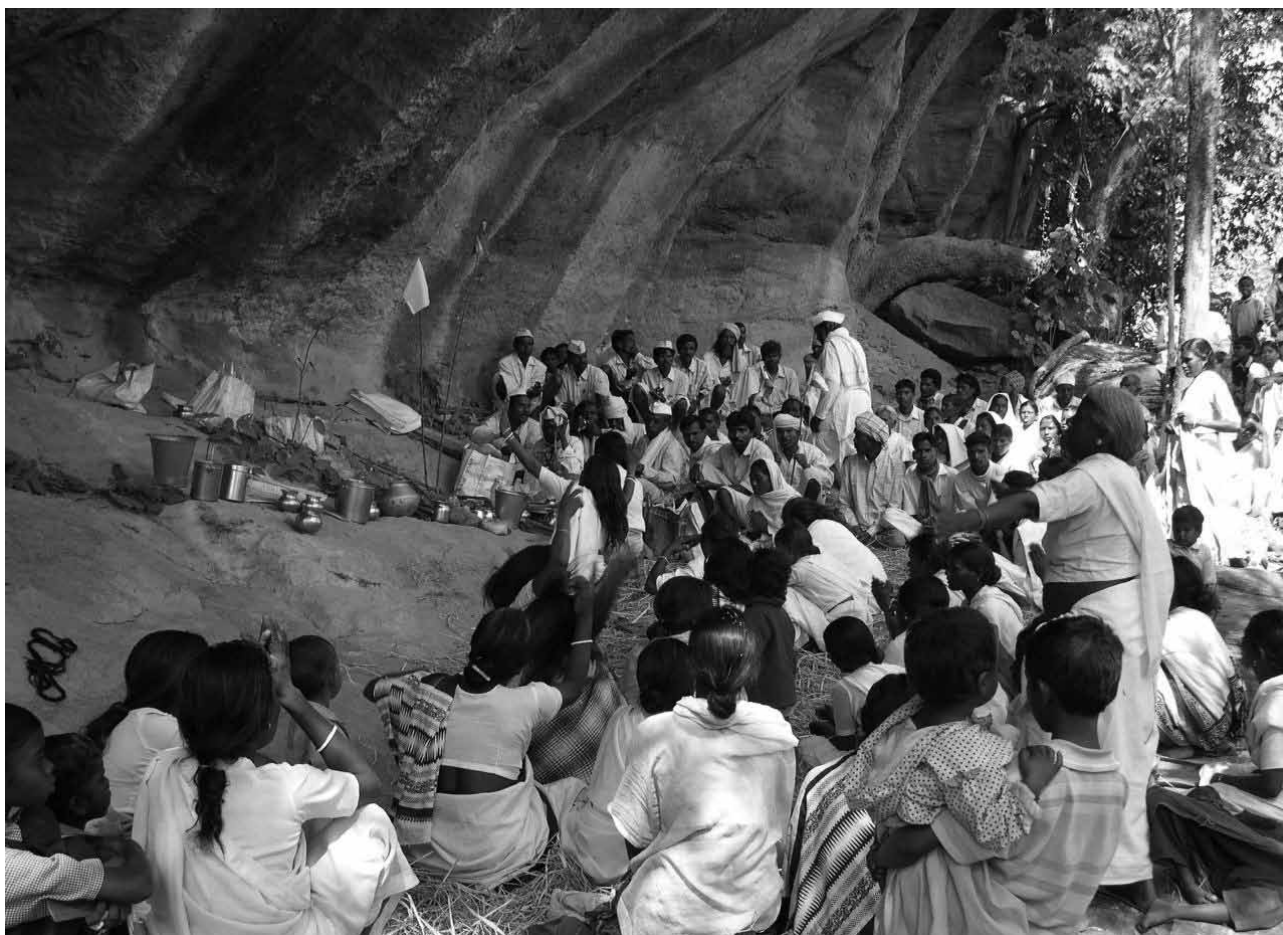
This site was very precious as we found not only the large bricks and artifacts of the Kushan occupation, but also many stone tools from the Middle and Late Stone Ages. Thethangi has yielded a wide variety of upper Paleolithic stone tools, including microliths and blades. At the foot of the hill are quantities of iron slag and old bricks.

The local population of the South Satpahar region is mainly Oraon: Saonsar animists, Tana Bhagats and Roman Catholics.

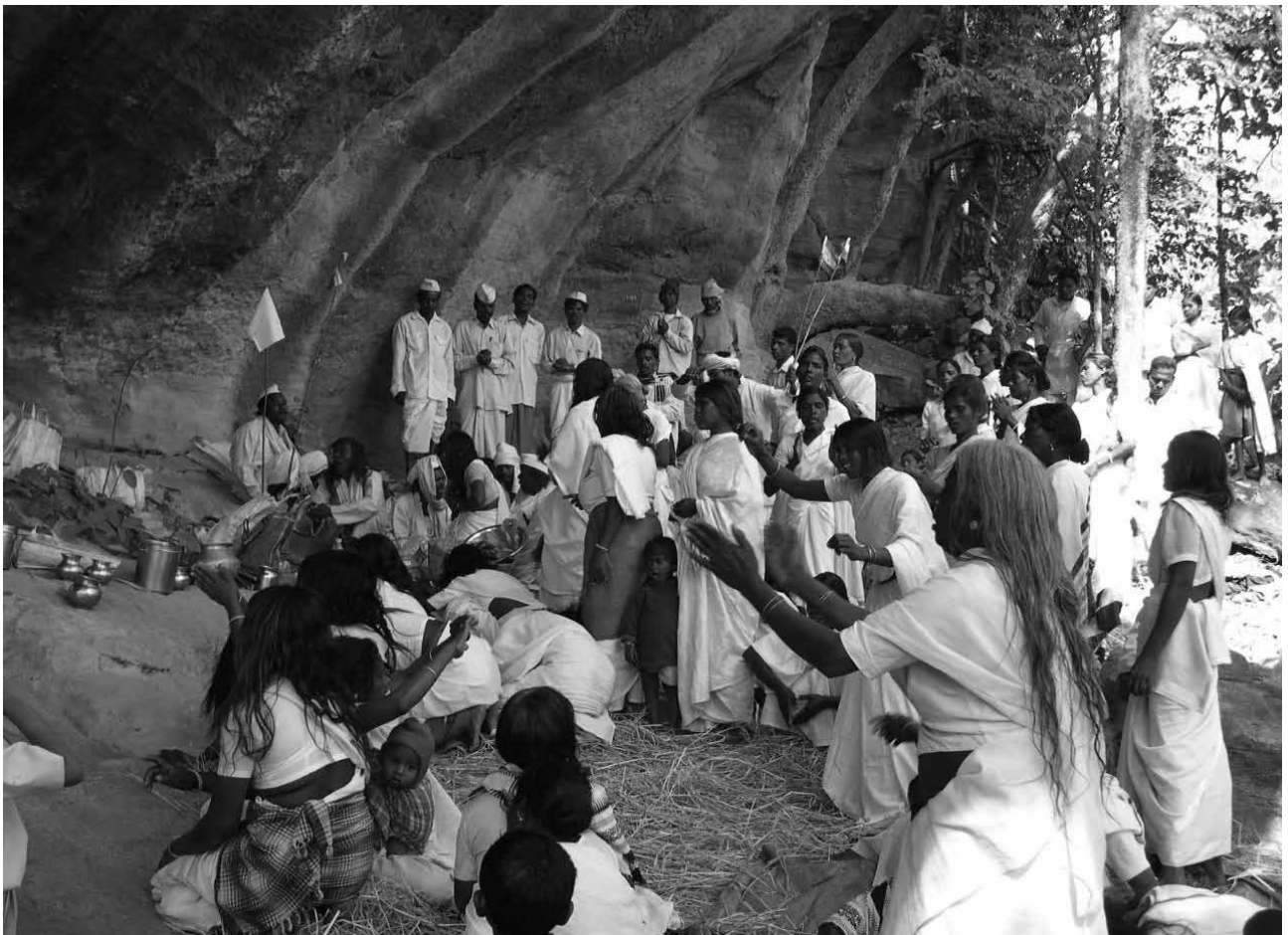


THREATS

This site is one of a complex of prehistoric rock art sites distributed throughout the hill ranges of the North Karanpura Valley. The site is threatened by Ashoka-I/II Opencast Coal Project (OCP) mine and Mangaldaha Loop Railway blasting from the construction from the railway line being built below the rock art site, which have started causing flaking in the rock art site. Thethangi rock art and megaliths are on the ICOPMOS Heritage at Risk, World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger 2001/2, 2002/3, and the Sacred Sites International, USA, Most Endangered Sacred Sites List 2005.



Puja at Thethangi Rockart by Tana Bhagats, 24th Feb.2013



Puja at Thethangi Rockart by Tana Bhagats, 24th Feb.2013