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PAINTED ROCK SHELTERS
of
THE NORTH VINDHYAS
Rock art is the earliest attempt by human beings to depict their natural world symbolically. This art is found all over the world, they have not only attracted scholars but also tourists in large numbers.

India’s first painted rock shelters were discovered in Uttar Pradesh in the Sahaya Hills, Mirzapur near Varanasi in 1867-68 by A.C.L. Carlyle. These were the first rock paintings found anywhere else in the world. Since then hundreds of painted rock shelters have been found in the Districts of Chandauli, Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Allahabad, Maun, Bhado and Agra, in fact everywhere in Uttar Pradesh except the Ganges Plains.

Rock art in Uttar Pradesh covers a wide span in time from circa 7,000 B.C. to the early medieval ages. The early rock art depicts mainly hunting scenes besides giving a glimpse of ancient beliefs, rituals and stories portraying other normal activities such as dancing. They are simple outline figures filled in with colours. The brushwork is sophisticated for its time, and numerous techniques have been used to enhance the paintings. Koharu, Lorkhayam scenes and auspicious handprints are still a living tradition.

The painted rock shelters are generally located in narrow gorges of waterfalls or hill ranges. They present breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape with its grassed and twisted trees, boulders and rocks in fantastic shades of colours and streams flowing through the land. These areas teeming with wild flocks and animals are ideal for picnics and camping for a long get away or a quick visit while in Varanasi.

Sites of Rock Art in Chandauli, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra districts have lovely waterfalls, lush jungles, fossil forests and rich wildlife. These sites are easily approachable from Varanasi, Allahabad, Jhansi and Agra.

Further advice and information regarding the transport and other tourist facilities available in the area may be obtained from the Regional Tourist offices at Varanasi and Allahabad.

The text and illustrations for this publication have been procured from the Directorate of the U.P. State Archaeology, since it is aimed to give basic information to the tourist we have taken care to use simple language. Those interested in more academic information may contact the Directorate of Archaeology.

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Rock shelters and caves provide surfaces on their walls and ceilings for art. The shelters and caves containing such paintings are generally located in hilly and plateau regions, at commanding positions within the steep cliffs or at the top of a hillock or near a cascading waterfall. Even today, most of these locales abound with greenery and wild life. On the way to ancient sites the alert traveller can spot leopards, bears or a herd of black bucks. Bird song, untouched landscapes, cascading waterfalls, lush green flora and the serene surroundings make these areas ideal for hiking, nature walks, and camping.
Indian Rock Paintings

In India, painted rock shelters are located in all the hilly terrains from the Himalayan regions in the north to the southern hills of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and Rajasthan-Gujarat in the west to Jharkhand in the east. Since ages these paintings are very well-known to the local populace with specific appellations, such as Brahminikas-painting (figures depicted in blood), Lamba-Laddu (image of the lord), Kebhar (a particular tribal motif depicted in a residential room during the Hindu marriage). Harthik-Viharan (depiction of celestial), Sialka-Kothar (nude paintings of both Sialka marriage), Lahanu (the place with writings) and so on. East of a local deity, his devotee are seen in another Lamba-Laddu at a large area of eastern India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar-Bhagalpur, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. Sialka is the most worshipped deity, the wife of Rama, famous Ikshavaku king of Ayodhya. It may be noted here that Chitrakonda is well-known and sacred site, where, according to ancient literature, Rama stayed for some time during his exile, meant - a hill (dant) of figures (titli). The antiquity of the related literature goes back to early centuries AD. Though this literature does not describe the paintings of this hillrock, apparently, its name appears to have been derived from them.

A.C.L. Catalogue, first assistant in the Archaeological Survey of India, discovered India’s first recorded rock shelter in Saharan Hills in district Mirzapur (Uttar Pradesh) during the year 1886. It was much before the reporting of rock paintings anywhere else in the world. Thereafter, J. Cockburn, an officer of the Orissa Department discovered a large number of painted rock shelters in district Mirzapur (including the newly carved district of Subhadrav) during 1881 onwards and published their details in research journals. Since then, the archeologists of the Gaug and Singh, Europeans and Indians have all over India, have reported existence of hundreds of painted rock shelters. Correspondingly India is now known as one of the prime centers of painted rock shelters.

Considering their significance the rock painting of Mirzapur-Madhya Pradesh, discovered by the famous explorer and socked in the Indian Site 1919, have been included in the World Heritage List.
The colours used for petroglyphs are mostly different shades of ochre. Sometimes they are red or faded and are seen only with the help of light. Others are bright shades of blood red, ochre, brown and black. The material used to prepare the various colours is haematite, which is easily available all over the hilly regions of India. Some of the earlier rock paintings are executed in black colour. Outlines of certain pictorial figures are drawn in black or dark ochre colours. Use of white colour for painting is also evident. Scientific analysis of the colour used in these paintings by Lieverse and others has shown that colour were obtained from the oxides of the iron like haematite, black iron magnetite oxides and white from kaolin or limestone. These minerals would have been ground to obtain powder and mixed with water to prepare the colour.

The traditions for the preparation of mineral colours in tribal and rural areas of India and other countries suggest that besides water some other binding material like glue, resin or animal fat and the juice of certain plants might have been used in preparation of the colours. The use of powdered haematite or gunjol, jindari, juice of the bark or beans and other local flora to prepare colours is still prevalent amongst the tribal people of Mirzapur and other areas. According to folk beliefs, blood of tiger, elephant and other animals was also used in the preparation of these colours. Ancient literature such as Vishnupuran, Puran and Yoga Vijnana also states that colours were obtained from Tulsi, Bhoomi, Champak, Khus and Mulluhaurs plant, milk and jindari provide permanency to the colours.

The use of egg and juice of mixed hulls in the preparation of colours by the Australian aboriginal artists is well known. For blood and albumen are supposed to be used in the colours in the Ice Age Europe. The colours prepared with the mixture of animal blood, milk, honey, albumen or vegetable juice is suggested regarding the rock paintings of Levant. The use of marrow fat for jindari to prepare the colours for rock carvings is suggested in context of South Africa.

Considering the ethnographic traditions and circumstantial evidence it is probable that the brushes used for painting were made of oxhide, conch shell, or thin bamboo shoots, animal hair, feathers and porcupine quills, etc. The thin outlines and finer details might have been depicted with fingers. The pan used for painting was filled with different colours and might have been used to both smear the view of bamboo bows, leaf-cups and natural pits of the rocks must have been used in colour pots.

Rock Paintings
In Uttar Pradesh

Apart from Carthame and Cochrane, number of people contributed to the discovery and study of rock art in Uttar Pradesh. Among them are Manojprajan Ghosh and Sivaram (Archaeological Survey of India), Ruda Kam间距, Jagdish Gupta and V.D. Mishra (University of Allahabad), P.C. Rast (Banaras Hindu University), Vishwamitri Mathpal (Bhitai Tal), Ervin Neumeyer (Australia), Giriraj Kumar (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Agra), Vijay Kumar (Indian Police Service) and explorers from the Directorate of the U.P. State Archaeology. Some amateur enthusiasts have also made significant additions to these studies.

Due to their consistent efforts painted rock shelters and their details are known from districts Chandauli, Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Allahabad, Chandauli and Banda in northern Vindhyas and around Fatehpur Sikri, district Agra in the Aravalli ranges.
The rock paintings of Uttar Pradesh are mostly portrayed on the smooth surface of small to large sized rock shelters. Some of them are as long as 100 cm in length, 30 cm in breadth and 15 cm high. Smaller ones may measure as 2 m in length and breadth and higher. A 3 m high barad from Khajur rock shelter at Bhopal, and in the district Sonbhadra is one of the largest and most of them, which comprise hundreds of rock paintings of successive periods.

The location of rock shelters are difficult to access. Most of them are located on the steep sides of a hillock with an overhanging natural rock shelf. Many of them are found in the narrow gorge of a waterfall. One may have a panoramic view of the surrounding landscape containing mountains, forests, hills and rivers. In a few cases, like Muni Moon at Vijaygarh (district Sonbhadra), caves are also used for painting.

Mostly the same surface is used repeatedly without erasing the earlier ones. Consequently the later paintings are found superimposed on the earlier ones. Sometimes there are 4-7 or even more superimposed layers of painted compositions. Obviously they represent different periods with different styles and order from the bottom layer to the top.

Some of the paintings are high up on walls and ceilings, which indicates that there must have been a rock in between, or at the time when these paintings were made. The use of bamboo ladders and scaffolding to approach the locations is also possible. Selection of similarly located shelters and caves might have served the purpose of keeping their location a secret.
Some of the rock-art, particularly the dance, hunting and battle scenes are mutually exclusive. Dancers in a group, dancing independently, holding each other’s hand or waving in a circle, or in an indistinct file, dual or single may be seen in many rock shelters in different regions. Sometimes they are shown dancing with weapons in hand. Simple graceful lines show the agility of legs, body and arms in rhythm of dance.

A dance scene of Ghoramara rock shelter of district South 24 Parganas in west Bengal of the Frog Dance is a ritual art dance performed during periods of drought.

Another scene of dancers, dancing hand-in-hand is the tribal dance form ‘Karma’ very popular in the Vindhya and Chhota Nagpur hills in southeastern Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

At Kuza Khui rock shelter (district South 24 Parganas) the dance scenes show a high degree of expression and skill. Every dancer is shown in a distinctive dancing pose. Those holding barbed arrows, lances or javelins. The main dancer, in a tribalized and decorated long headdress, is in the centre.

The upper rock surface served the purpose of canvas for ancient painters. Mostly the paintings are portrayed directly on the surface of the rock without any ground preparation. These paintings comprise depictions of animals, on rare occasions, a human figure. The earliest shown represented by those in line, later superimposed by the later ones show hunting, fighting, and battle and dance scenes. These paintings are portrayed with dark to light shade colored pigments.

The depiction of archers, spear and harpoon holding hunters and animals resemble thin shadows. Harpoons, spears and barbed arrows form a large proportion of weapons. Deer shapes indicate that they would have been made of bone, wood and stone artifacts. These themes indicate hunting and way of life.

The animals, which are shown hunted, include deer, bantinha, nilgai, boar, rhino, etc. The most popular amongst them is the theme of deer hunting. Deer is quite often shown being hunted or by archer shooting barbed arrows from all directions. The wounded deer finds no way to run away and is glancing back with wide-open eyes filled with deep agony and terror. The depictions of charging hunters and warriors, strung bows, wounded and fainted animals testify a hunter in the air with their horns, are powerful and full of expression.
At present, we do not have any scientific method of dating to fix the precise chronology of the Indian rock-paintings. There is, however, a certain amount of evidence which allows us to fix the chronological context for dating. These evidences for the earliest rock-paintings include mammoth, reindeer and faunal remains, beaded necklaces and artifacts such as arrowheads. The earliest possible land carbon dates for the organic material, collected from these deposits, ranges from 6900.0-7000.0 BC (c. 8000-8000 BC: Rough approx.). On the basis of these data, rubbed faience bowls and subject matter of the paintings of the earliest phase rock art are placed at least in that time-period. The developed and expressionist art forms and style of depictions of the paintings however, suggest that their evolutionary phase and antiquity might be even earlier than this estimate.

The subject matter of the subsequent phases of rock paintings show more naturalistic scenes such as groups of men and women, standing or moving, engaged in food gathering, tree climber, holding the tree of consecrated animals, hunting activities and, of course, hunting and fishing and so on.

Handprints painted, stampeded, depicted by very technique in mother pearl and bone shell, generally, the paintings are monochrome. Some times, bi-chrome painting are also seen, mainly with white or yellowish outline. Varied headgear of hunters and dancers look very attractive. X-ray style of paintings showing human figures and features within the images are the most distinctive feature.

Lion heads are seen, and were depicted in triangular form in a group, by denoting hoors, head bands, batwings, human figures, with sexual ornaments, cattle including tusks painted on the characteristic horns of tribal men, in the subsequent compositions. The sharp and angular shape of the armbands and spear-handles shown in the paintings of running scenes decrease and those showing animals in herd become more in number. Paintings of furnens holding hands and certain human figures are comparable with those found in chalcolithic pottery.

Painted compositions showing cattle and chariots and cattle with large horns mark another stage in paintings superimposed on earlier paintings. Further, some of the painted motifs represent symbols comparable with those on certain coins known as punch marked coins of the early historical period preceding the beginning of the Christian era.

Painted rock inscriptions in Brahmi script are easily datable to 2nd century BC. They include personal names and sometimes royal inscriptions. A recent discovery of painted minor rock edict of the great Mauryan king Ashoka in the Kanche, Chhathrapati, Kadh - Bhar district is an example of this genre. The rock paintings art inscription of Guru Dass, and was inscribed in 12th century, which represent a time-span of 500-700 AD (C. 1000 - 1300 yrs old from today). Crushed lines generally show the figures of this period. Alpaca design still popular in the present day folk art are often seen along with these inscriptions. The presence of some of the human figures resembles the long spiral type crow marked in the Indian sculptural art of the early centuries of the Christian era.

Subsequent rock paintings may be distinguished by the depictions of dates and inscribed Buddhist inscriptions. Some times, medical and magical armaments are also included in the artifacts shown in the painted compositions. Human figures are depicted with simple forms and repetitive gestures along with various domestic and wild animals. The peacock is the most popular rock amongst the folk. Through the hard palm tree painting and deity and the rock surface mostly makes handprints of this period.
The paintings of the hunt scenes have many similarities. They are shown the prey being attacked from all the directions by the hunters and archers with multicolored spears, arrows, lances, and spears. The prey is shown wounded by arrows and spears embedded into his body. Some scenes a hunter forced by the animal is shown suspended to the side. Blood drops streaming from the wounds of the prey are also shown in a few paintings.
Some of the human figures and other motifs depicted in the rock paintings are comparable to the motifs being portrayed during certain rituals even today. For example, human figures, hand prints and animal patterns comparable to those depicted in the rock paintings may be seen portrayed in the Khao Kho, which are depicted on the walls of a room of the temple house during the marriage rituals.

Hand prints, usually in pairs, or three columns, stamped or sprayed on the outer walls on either side of the entrance door of the village houses and in the manner of some of the temples show the continuity of a tradition evidenced in the rock paintings thousands of years. This motif is considered auspicious, which prevents evil spirits from entering the dwellings. This activity is also corroborated by the ritual of stamping hand prints on the back of groom in the Indian marriage ceremonies.

Varnish patterns of hair do (kohk push) of the human figures depicted in the rock paintings are comparable with the buns and head gears of those shown in the sculptures shaped in the subsequent period. Many of them may also be compared with the modern hair-do.

Paintings showing domestic animals like lemurs, geese, birds, fish, monkeys, lizards, collection, fishing, rowing, agriculture and other day-to-day activities provide a glimpse of the life of the early people.

One of the earliest and rarest battle scenes depicted in the Khao Kho rock shelter comprises rows of multiple figures of marching and shooting arrows as an encoded. Some of the later battle scenes seem to be mirroring popular folk stories of the region.

A large composition from the Khao Kho rock shelter depicts a large warrior that might be associated with the goddess Sarasvati, a common theme in Indian art. The warrior is shown with a sword and a bow, a weapon typically associated with the goddess. The scene is richly decorated, and the warrior is depicted in a dynamic pose, suggesting motion and action.

The depiction of Lorka episode of Khao Kho may be placed well before the 14th century AD, therefore it seems to be the earliest portrayal of this story. The credit for the same goes to the artisans who inhabited the Vindhyan region.

Mulla Daula, a medieval writer, penned his famous work Chandayan with the tale of Lorka and Chanda in the 14th century AD. For manuscripts comprising illustrations on this theme are in the collection of different museums in India and abroad, such as Lalit Kala Chetana (Yamuna), Chandigarh Museum and Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay in India, Central Museum, Lahore and National Museum Karachi (in Pakistan), John Rylands Library, Manchester (in U.K.) and Staatliche, Berlin (in Germany).

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Purpose Of The Paintings

There is no consensus about the reasons why these rock paintings were made. Various theories have been advanced to explain expressions, priestly images, animal symbolism, appearance of strict cultural division, many details in style of painting, or even a sacred place for initiates to express their inner feelings.

Left

Source: Coon at Phys.org. Photos: Sumiliar

Right

Source: australianpolice. Archives.
Gurupur rock shelters are about 60 km to the west of Chakia on the northern scarp of the Kalmar hills on the border of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. A steep climb leads to the rock shelters. Inside the shelters are the ancient paintings and inscriptions painted on their walls and ceilings. Some of them are related with Buddhist motifs.

Further east, on another hill in one of the rock shelters, an inscription identified as minor rock edict of the Maurya Emperor, i.e. Ashoka the Great, has been discovered recently. Between this shelter and Nandhar is a circular structure made of stone slabs which is supposed to be representing an ancient Buddhist stupa.

In Chakia are the painted rock shelters of the Nandhar (waterfall). Close by are Mahali and Phalakoda Baoli on the right bank of the Kalmar River, a major visitor attraction for tourists. In the Kalmar River crocodiles abound in its green waters. On a lucky day, several species are seen swimming and can be spotted. Near Khandamal and the celebrated waterfalls of Leldeo, Bhadrak and Chandrakantia are not far away from Chakia.

Tourist Destinations

Some of the rock art sites in Chhardulli, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra districts in Uttar Pradesh are attractive tourist destinations. These sites are ideally located close to some of the most popular tourist destinations in India—Varanasi and Allahabad.

The district headquarters of Robertsganj in Sonbhadra district 90 km from Varanasi is an ideal place to visit these cave and rock shelters as well as the Fossil Park in Salkhun and the Kalmar wildlife Sanctuary.
The Vindhya and the Kaimur ranges have at least 250 rock art sites spread across them. The Rock paintings range from the Mesolithic to the chalcolithic ages. Among important rock painting sites found in the region are the Panchchuri Rock Shelters (8 km from Robertsganj), Kaisra Khob Rock Shelters (near Churki), Lakhania Rock Shelters (22 km from Robertsganj) & Lakhana caves (near Boghara).

Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary

Thirteen kilometers from Robertsganj, spread over an area of 500 sq. km, the sanctuary has a variety of wildlife. The Mukha waterfall is a tourist attraction. Other excursions include Jaunpur (58 km), Allahabad (130 km) and the Vindhyan and Churka falls.

Fossil Park Salkhan, Sonbhadra

13 km from Robertsganj on Chhapur Road this is the oldest botanical fossil found in the world. The tree fossils, which are covering 25 hectares of park, date back to Mesoproterozoic period. They are said to be about 1,000 million years old. The types of fossils found in the area are algae and Stromatolites. The park is three times larger than the Yellow Stone Park of America.
About two-three km to the south of Mani Kalan is the famous fort of Navagadh or Vijaygarh. This fort is built on the top of a cone-shaped hillock. Painted inscriptions in the Mani and Manjumati temples located in the western end of the fort are probably the personal names of pilgrims who visited the place from time to time for religious purposes. These names also mark the intensity of human activity in the vicinity. An inscription on a stone in Navagadh is also found in the larger cave which refers to a saint who visited this place in the month of Vashikhar in Samvat 1494. There is a natural source of water inside the fort in a central position which has been converted into an artificial reservoir. It is known as Ram Sagar Talab and is considered very sacred amongst the local people. An inscribed slab placed in a wall of the northern gate which mentions the names of King Naravarana and Jattapal (in-charge of the fort) Dumodhar Bhatt attest that

Navagadh fort (about 40 km south to Chakia). It is situated on the left bank of the Karamasa... Presently, it houses a government rest house. The remains scattered around it attest to the 2000 years of history of the site. As at GaurBanwar Pahar, the area to its north and north-west abound with the sag and furnace remains on either side of a small stream which meets the Karamasa, which forms a beautiful waterfall flowing further downstream to the northeast of Navagadh.

Ahura (about 40 km south to Varanasi) is situated on the ancient cross-road leading in the aligment of Nandini-Poondi in the east, Varanasi and beyond in the north, Son Valley in the south, and Chunar onwards in the west. A minor rock edict is inscribed on a rock on the adjoining hillock of Bhadra Deo Pahar in its north. The surrounding lush green paddy fields, irrigated by water stretches is enchanting, especially in the rainy season. A small mound to the south-west of this hillock, represents the ancient feeder settlement. A stone pillar standing to the south of Ahura bears an inscription which narrates the brave deeds of a king named Rekhabhuteshwar of Lokika-ka-dvara, Sham devi-ka-pahar, Libana dhar and Libana dhar are located in the hillocks to the south of Ahura.

Passing the Gauri River Bridge (5 km from Ahura) on the way to Robbringan, are the ancient rock-paintings exposed on the rock surfaces along the left cliff of the Libana water fall. These paintings showing deities, horses and horse riders in dark and light shades of ochre colour belong to the medieval period.

Further south is Bhaidwara on the road leading south to Robringan. These paintings were discovered by Cockburn along the right cliff of this water fall in 1883. The depiction of a wounded wild boar and a deer (Sambar) being tamed with a yoke in this rock shelter, along with a row of seated birds, have become hall mark of the rock paintings of Mirzapur.
About 40 km to the west of Robertsagar is the Mukha dari water-fall on the Belan River, which is located within a Reserve Forest. The best place for camping to enjoy this area is the Shivdadvar, famous for its Shiva temple and its beautiful black stone Uma-Mahesvar image installed in the sanctuary. The architectural and sculptural remains scattered here and there in the villages of this area and collected in a newly constructed site museum in Shivdadvar are worth seeing for their superb craftsmanship. Some of the panels displayed in the site museum show Ramayana themes such as Rahi-Sugriva yuddha and a scene from Ashok varta. Rams holding an arha in the charging position and Ravana seated on a throne are notable in the respective scenes. Another panel related to the Mahabharata epic story comprises the depiction of Shalan and Krishna standing together, arm resting on each other's shoulder.

On the Mukha Dari Falls about 50 meters or so, within a shallow rock shelter projected from the left cliff are paintings of elephants with raised trunks, human figures in dancing posture, rows of large fishes etc.
this fort was in existence during the 7th-8th century AD (about 1200-1300 years before present).

To the southeast and southwest of the Bijargarh fort are located the painted rock shelters of Hamir Harra and Mafhra. Famous rhino hunt scene published by Cockburn in the nineteenth century is depicted in an umbrella like rounded rock shelter located on a hill called Ghora-Mangar. This name was coined, because this hill looks like a horse from a distance and a near by pool was inhabited by crocodiles. This rock shelter can be approached by foot on a path way which branches off from the forest road leading to the Chandi Madari village on the top of Khodwa Pahar. Several other rock painting sites, Kerwa or Kriwa, Lakhandi, Gokhara, Kalna Khoh and Hathwada, etc are located around these villages.
Balinchar is located to the south of Mirzapur at a distance of about 65 km from the district headquarters at Mirzapur on Rewa road near the borders of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. It is on the north Vindhyan hills, which extend to the south of Drummondganj, locally known as Madhuban. Haranasa is the nearest town in Madhya Pradesh which would be Bisahua. Accompanied to the other rock structures, the surrounding area is partially very dry. Water resources are few. In summer drinking water is difficult to procure. A number of painted rock shelters have been found in the surrounding hills. Most important among these are Lakshadheer, Nainardhana, Mahdi, Sani Daras, Madahab, Thari Pahadi, Dagon, Dahan Udyog and Mara. The nearest guest house available around Balinchar is at Drummondganj. Reservations can be done from Mirzapur district headquarters.
The trekkers on the heritage trails in Vindhyas Hills can have a feel of Painted Rock Shelters and immense archaeological wealth in the vicinity. They may camp at Almora, Chakia, Nagrihi and Robertganj. Government guest houses and a few hotels are available at these places. However, at Man, Shivdung and Bhainsor camping gear, food, water, first aid kit, some medicines, an axe, walking sticks, and above all a mosquito net are required. Local arrangements for safety are also necessary.

Some visitors may prefer to camp closer to the rock art sites. The large projected rocks have good depth and height to accommodate dozens of people at a time, and they are attractive to shelter inside. Care should be taken that the shelters having rock paintings should never be touched, for that Nature has preserved them for millennia and human intervention is the biggest threat to them.