



PRIMITIVE ART: PAINTED ROCK WALLS IN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

Geo-morphologically western Odisha is an extension of the Chhotnagpur plateau and the Chhatisgarh basin. The western uplands comprising the districts of Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Sambalpur, Balangir and Kalahandi share in common the history and culture of Central India. This region along with the eastern districts of Madhya Pradesh once formed a single political unit under the name Mahakantara and DaksinaKosala during the early historic and early medieval periods. It is full of detached peaks and small range of mountains gradually becoming more sparse and scattered towards the eastern part and is thickly forested with boundary outcrops of a sand stone one which is of great significance for studying the rock art in Odisha. Paintings and engraving drawn by the man on the bare rocks surfaces in the naturally formed caves and rock shelters are the earliest written and visual documents and beliefs. In the absence of any authentic and written record they are of great help to us in determining the contemporary environment and the mode of man nature relationship. They provide us clues to their society religion, rituals, customs, implements and other material cultures. Realizing the significance of the antiquity of rock-art in the recent years the scholars have brought to lime light hundreds of such painted rock shelters all over the country. Central India alone because of its favorable geomorphology has about more than two- thirds of the country's rock art sites. However, in Odisha such a study has not yet gained importance among the scholars. Though only about half a dozen of such sites have been reported, so far no systematic documentation has been done on any single site. Hence the author in this small paper makes an attempt to survey the painted rock- shelters of Odisha.

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INTRODUCTION

Right from the dawn of the civilization human beings had a feeling of protection for their survival from external dangers. This feeling initiated the need of shelters by raising barriers around dwellings. This must have been an earliest thought of human mind to construct the ramparts, fortification around his residence. In ancient India traces of fortification goes back to Harappan cities (Indus Valley Civilization). Archaeological excavations have unearthed many defensive structures like ramparts, mud brick walls and revetments of strategic importance. Archaeologically speaking long before the preparation of Sanskrit treatises on fortification of township and villages, they were in vogue in many sites like Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Kalibangan of Chalcolithic period.

Prehistoric Era: Cradle of Civilization: The finding of plant fossil in the southwest basin of the Tel River in Kalahandi pushes back the antiquity of primeval shrub on this landmass to at least 0.1 million years before the present.

Stone Age Culture (15th Millennium B.C. to 2nd Millennium B.C.): Archaeological record of Tel valley reveals the presence of the primates in its various zones during the Pleistocene phase. Paleolithic is being documented in Kalahandi, like Mother river basin in Dharamgarh region. The prehistoric painting in Gudahandi in Kalahandi shows a well advanced human settlement in the region. World's largest size Celt (axe) of late Stone Age culture has been recovered from Chandrasagarnala in Kalahandi. This is the largest stone Axe of the world measuring 47 cm and weighing 2.5 kg, which shows very sophisticated workmanship. Similarly Mesolithic and Neolithic historical records are evident in Bijadongar, Koradongar (Junagarh), Gudahandi, Bicchakhama, Budigarh, Chandrasagarnala, Karlapada, Bhaludongar, Chilpa, Habaspur, Belkhandi, Jamugudapadar, Dongargarh, Asurgarh, Phurlijharan, Ghanamal, Kuttrukhamar, Jampadar, Pipalnala, Godang, Budipadar, Mahimapadia, Nehena, Penjorani, Yogimath etc. in Kalahandi. The findings include hand axe, cleaver, pebble tools (chopper-chopping), core, blade, flake,

point, Celt, ring stones, microlithic, coarse pottery, grooving marks, cave art (painting & carving) etc.

Copper – Bronze Age (1600 B.C. to 1000 B.C.): The provenances in this period are Jamugudapadar, Chandrasagarnala, Urukupagarh, Budigarh (M. Rampur), Bhimkela– Asurgarh, Kholigarh (Belkhandi) etc. in Kalahandi and the findings include Celt, ring stone, microlithic, colourful and sophisticated ceramic, graffiti / sign / alphabet (Harappan & Megalithic), copper items, gold article, high tin bronze objects, precious and semi – precious stone beads, terracotta figurines, house foundation, spindle – whorl, weight stone, and mud brick.

Iron Age / Megalithic (1000 B.C. to 700 B.C.): The largest Megalithic Cemetery found in the river bank of the Tel River Bileikani, Kalahandi, Menhir, and stone circles of megalithic Iron Age at Bhairavapada (Junagarh), Ruppangudi, Sagada, Bileikani, Themra, Bhawanipatna etc. Iron smelting zone and cemetery Juxtaposed to the settlement is discerned in some of the above sites, which reveal iron tools of war and peace, slags, ceramics, Terra-cottas, fire baked brick, furnace, semi-precious stone beads and micro beads. Beginning of early Iron Age Kalahandi may be placed in the first millennium B.C. in which black and red ware was the diagnostic pottery type. Next phase of Iron Age represents to early history that was concomitants with state formation and urbanization and technological breakthrough besides voluminous trade, agriculture surplus and heterogeneous social complex in ancient Kalahandi. The material culture of Iron Age found in Kalahandi included semi-precious beads, terracotta figurines, iron implements of war and peace, decorated and plain ceramic, burnt brick, hopscotch (gaming items), spindle whorl, weight stone etc.

Painted Rock Walls and Shelters: On the Jharsuguda-Lakhanpur Road at about 25km from Jharsuguda there is a village known as Banjari. In the vicinity of the village the ancient cave of Bikramkhol is located. In this inaccessible dense forest ancient people lived surviving on fruits, roots and animal meat. During 4000 BC there was evolution of human civilization in the region and a script was developed by them. There are some ancient script engraved in the wall of Bikramkhol and also paintings of animals. Circular holes have been dug in the wall where weapons, dress and other articles of use were being kept suspended. Even on the floors circular holes have been dug to pound the grains. Bikramkhol has been declared a tourist spot by the Central Government and tourists, historians and researchers from all over the country and abroad. The first example of rock-engraving in India was discovered from Odisha by K. P. Jayswal in 1933 a rock – shelter at Vikramkhol in Sambalpur district. In an overhanging coarse grained sand stone rock-shelter there are traces of engraving the paintings in deep red ochre. The greater portion of the overhanging rock- shelter from the top has collapsed from the top due to the ravages of the streams of rain water. Again because of the water streaming down the surface of the rock the paintings and the engraving have been eroded beyond recognition. The rock-shelter faces to the east commanding a seasonal stream flowing below. The size of the rock – shelter is 37 meters in length, 8 meters in height with a space of 5.65 meters. The engravings extend over an area of 10 meters on the backwall of the rock- shelter in two rows covering a space of about 1.25 meters from the top to the bottom. It may be noted here that in

1933 K. P. Jayswal had recorded that the rock surface over a length of 11 meters and width of 2.10 meters has preserved a pictographic inscription, partially incised and partially painted. Thus it shows that within a short span of 55 years the antique engraving has been lost one meter by one meter indicating a progressive deterioration of the rock – shelter. Each row of the engraving measures approximately 0.40 mt. and the depth of the engraving measures 3 cm to 2 cm and the width being 4 cm to 3 cm. The lines are not very straight, because of the undulating rough surface of the rock. The first line slopes down ward. K. P. Jayswal remarked that the writing was from right to left and the writing was certainly earlier than the earliest specimen of Brahmi. His conviction was that the script of Vikramkhol is an admixture of Brahmi with a developed type of Mohenjo-Daro script. He also had remarked, “The characters in Vikramkhol inscription belong to a period intermediary between the script of Mahenjo-Daro and Brahmi. Some letters still retain their original or proto- Brahmi forms. This proves the origin of Brahmi to be Indian, and throws a flood of light on the history of writing, as from Brahmi the Phoenician and European scripts are derived.” It seems that all the engravings were originally filled in with a thick layer of ochre. It also lends possibility that the early letters were first painted and then engraved. However, the script still remains deciphered.



Figure 1. Pre Historic rock art, Bikramkhol, Odisha



Figure 2. Pre Historic rock art, Bikramkhol, Odisha

Besides engraving, the remainder of the surface of the rock-shelter might have been originally painted with different figures and designs, as evident from a still surviving design on the right side of the engraving. The design measures 9 cm by 8 cm. In view of the aforesaid facts and the pictographic feature of the scripts, the writings of Vikramkhol may be provisionally dated to the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. Sundargarh region has a rich cultural heritage.



Figure 3. Rock Painting, Nuapada, Odisha



Figure 4. Rock Painting, Nuapada, Odisha

There are evidences of man living in this region, since the Old Stone Age, in the form of stone tools used by them for hunting. However man used Rock shelters in this region during the New Stone Age. Such rock-shelters are to be found at Lekhamoda, Manikmoda, Ushakothi, Tonga in Hemgir, Lephripara region. *AkhandaParvata* near Belsara at Tangarpali Block and MahavirParvat in Bargaon Block. A significant discovery in the field of prehistoric archaeology is popularly known as Rock Arts which is a Global phenomenon dating back to 30,000 years. Paintings, engraving and brushing found executed on bare rock faces in the naturally formed caves and rock shelters are the earliest written and visual documents of the prehistoric man. Those are to be found, Manikmoda, Ushakothi, Tonga and Lekhamoda signifying the development of human culture in this region. Sundargarh district has almost 2/3rd of the Rock Art so far discovered in Odisha.

Jogimatah: The painted rock-shelter site of Jogimatah was first reported by Jitamitra P. Singh Deo (1976). The site is located at a distance of about 9 K. M. to the east of Khariar near Sargadi village in Kalahandi district. The site is so named because it was the abode of the *risis* and accordingly a nearby village is also known as Risigaon. Paintings are found in two rock-shelters. The rocks are of a crude variety of sand stone. Though the rock-shelters and the painted rock-surface have been greatly disfigured by human vandalism, the original figures and patterns drawn in dark red ochre are visible on a closer scrutiny. Paintings are found both on the ceiling and the back wall of the rock-shelter. The paintings are those of the

figures of human being, humped bull with and without horns, circles one upon the other, circle within circle and floral designs etc. The other paintings presumably feature instruments or obscure patterns of the symbols of astronomy, patterns like bowl like shapes one upon the other. All the painted figures and objects have their movement towards the left. Significantly there is no depiction of any hunting scene. Singh Deo dated these paintings to the later part of Neolithic age because "the painting" he says, shows the main occupation of the people in agriculture and the painting was in red tinned colour of that time. At this stage it is difficult to accept the view of Singh Deo since the scene of a calf following a cow being dragged by a man may not be regarded as an original one. And the depiction of bull cannot be intended to mean agriculture or domestication either, as existing condition of the then life, because bull is found depicted in very clearly painting alongwith bison, elephant and deer. Further exploration of the site and the nearby areas and a comparative study with the other painted sites will perhaps help in determining a more acceptable date of the paintings. However, the depiction of *dambarutilak*, and metallic objects like *trisul* etc. to be taken note of while dating the paintings. In 1950 S.N. Rajguru reported the discovery of another rock-painting in Kalahandi district of Gudahandi. The paintings are seen in one rock-shelter depicting scenes like hunting where a man is shown hunting a deer with the help of a stone implement. Geometric patterns like squares, rectangular either empty or filled in with straight and diagonal lines, circles, wheel with spokes, apsidal patterns, dots, floral designs etc. They have all been painted in dark red colour and in some cases black has also been used along with red. The paintings are fast disappearing due to complete exposure to the nature agencies.

Ushakothi: Ushakothi is situated near Rajbahal in LephriparaTahsil. Paintings found in three rock-shelters, whereas engraving is found in only two of them i.e. Rishikunda and Sitakund. The engraving of Rishikund executed over a well demarcated rubbed surface on the back wall on one line is very interesting. The engraving is finally smeared with a layer of red ochre. The other forms of engravings are human palm, foot and triangular patterns resembling female genitals. To the right of the engraved panel is a space of 1m X 0.60m executed with an excellent specimen of intricate wavy decorative painting in dark red and yellow pigments. Except a few specimens of palm prints and triangular patterns, the entire wall of the rock shelters is randomly decorated with a host of broom / beaten brush or rod patterns in dark. The pattern are consists of three to five lines diverging from a point with an average length of 0.20m and very enigmatic in their depiction, two grinding holes on the floor of the rock shelter and the collection of microliths from the adjoining slope amply at least to the archaeological significance of the rock shelters of Ushakothi.

Lekhamoda: Lekhamoda is a generic name of painted and engraved rock-shelters in Kanika region. A group of twelve rock-shelters adorned with antique paintings and engravings are situated in the reserve forests of Chhengapahar and Garjanpahar within a radius of about 6 K.M. from Kanika in HemgirTahasil of Sundargarh district of Odisha. The twelve rock-shelters are adorned with about five hundred paintings and more than one hundred specimens of engravings in Kendukhol, Gangakhhol, Sukhamankar, SargikhholGirigumpha and phuldunguri in Garjanpahar. The paintings are executed in mineral colours like, ochre, red, white, and yellow in

monochrome as well as in polychrome. The paintings include a variety of decorative, geometric, and intricate patterns, human figures and animal figures. The intricate decorative patterns of Lekhamoda are without any parallel in India. Unlike the central Indian style of filling the body of animals and human forms, in Lekhamode they are all independent forms for wall decorations. The Rock-art site of Ushakothi is situated on a hill range within the jurisdiction of Lefripara Tahasil of Sundargarh district. The site is so named because of its association with the Ramayana episode. According to the local beliefs this was the place where Rama worshipped Lord Siva. Here paintings are seen in three Rock-shelters of rugged sandstone. They are Rishi Kund, SitaKund, and Sarpagumpha. In both RisiKunda and SitaKund we find paintings as well as engravings. The engravings in their style of execution may well be compared with the engravings of Vikramkhol. In RisiKund the engraving though not very prominent is found to be executed on a well leveled background of rock-surface measuring 5.5 meter X 0.75 meter. The writing is in one row unlike the two rows of Vikramkhol. The total surface of the engraving is covered with a layer of ochre colour. To the right of the engraving is a space of 60 cm. by one meter showing an excellent specimen of decorative paintings, colour used is yellow and red ochre. They appear like textile embroidery with lines and lines intersecting one another, dots, squares and triangles etc. The only other pattern observable in all the three rock-shelters is a host of figures resembling either a broom or a brush each with 3 to 5 lines diverging from bottom having an average length of 20cms. The figures are irregularly painted all over the rock-surface. In SitaKund palm impression of red ochre are also visible with an average size of 17 cms. X 9 cms. The popular carving depicted in SitaKund was on inverted triangle with a vertical line intersecting the base at the top. Here also we find two specimens of grinding holes in front of the RisiKund which has a close similarity in features and size with those of Manikmoda.

Manikmoda: The painted rock-shelter of Manikmoda is situated inside a reserve forest, at a distance of about 8 K.Ms. from Hemgiri in Sundargarh district. The site can be approached from Hemgiri by Hemgiri- Kanika road. After covering a distance of about 2 KM. one has to turn to the right to reach the small village of Sukhabandha via the Microwave station of the S.E. Railway, located on the top of a hillock. After approaching the Siva temple, located at a distance of about one KM. from the village Sukhabandh, one has to take the road branching off to the right upto a distance of about 5 KM. to reach the extensive rock-shelter of grant antiquarian interest. The rock-shelter measures 98.5 meters in length, 7.32 meters in height from the ground level with a living space of 11.50 meters from the backwall of the rock shelter. It is the largest painted rock-shelter so far discovered in Odisha. The rock-shelter is oriented in the east-west direction facing to the south with a seasonal stream flowing below which meets the *NallKeunti* after a distance of half a kilometer. Keunti is a tributary of Ghoghor. The rock-shelter is gifted with a perennial source of water streaming from its deep recess in the eastern end. It is interesting to observe that the supply of water is more during the summer. The water is stored throughout the year in the naturally formed deep cavities on the bed rock. The rugged sand stone rock shelter has preserved the traces of painting on its back wall at seven places and the evidence of engraving at one place near the source of water.

Tongo: Tongo is situated near the village Giripur in Hemgir Tehsil. The rock shelter is oriented east west and facing to the south. It got 190 specimen of engravings randomly executed on its back wall in an area of 35m of the total length of 50m. Triangular shapes resembling female genitals pre-dominate the engraved forms. The other forms are palm and foot prints, rhombic and honeycomb patterns, serpentine and a host of forms resembling Roman Character like X, Y, T and H. The rhombic pattern is marked decorative motif of Tongo. Serpentine at places take the shapes of female genitals. All these engravings were originally filled in with a paste of Ochre in their grooves. Though there is no discernible painting at Tongo, in one case the shape of a scooped out female genital has been exquisite embroidered in yellow over red. The decorative pattern has been achieved through an urge for sophistication in simplicity.

Chandalipat: PoojaDunguri complex is a cluster of granite rocks surrounded by bushy forest spreading over 250 acres of '*PaharKishan*' of land. It is located in the meeting place of Binka and Rampur Tahasil in the district of Subarnapur, Odisha. Taken together there are 27 '*Dunguris*' or rocky hills small and big as well. Prominent among them are '*PoojaDunguri*', Ushakothi, KabatTalei, BaghDunguri etc. While PoojaDunguri and KabatTalei are bigger in size and circumference, and are associated with the cult of goddess '*Chandlipat*', the small-sized Ushakothi and BaghRock Painting of ChandalipatDunguri contain rock-paintings in ochre colour. Even the miniature painting of an animal is found on a rock over PoojaDunguri. The site is linked with the legend of "*Gondmaru*" (Gond Menace) of the second decade of 19th century. According to popular belief the Binjhal Zamindar of Rampur was defeated and driven out by the GondZamindar of Bheden. The defeated Zamindar took shelter at PoojaDunguri, the cult spot of mother Goddess Chandlipat. He was blessed by the deity and in a subsequent encounter regained his zamindari by defeating the intruder. An annual festival of "*DangarYatra*" is celebrated by the locals to commemorate this victory. The human representatives (Baruas) of the Goddesses Chandlipat, Patmesri and Jharkhandien are taken in procession with traditional weapons and umbrellas to PoojaDunguri on the occasion of ChaitraPurnima and scarifies are offered at various places of the complex. The cult of chandlipat is well-spread in surrounding villages like Chanabeda, ChandliAdakasa, Sialinali etc. alongwith the *ex-zamindari* region of Sukha and Sohela. Most of the inhabitants of the areas are Binjhals, Saharas and Kuda-Mirdhas, still leading the life of hunter gatherers besides being wage-earners. Tribal of villages surrounding the Dunguri-complex largely depend upon the forest-products until now.

Puja Dunfuri: The surface exploration revealed that the granite rocks of the entire complex are profusely engraved. There are cup-marks, foot-prints, Sun symbols, Ovals, Geometrical and non-geometrical lines and above all the Yoni mark symbols the prevalence of the primeval mother-cult. Besides the natural rock shelter of Ushakothi contains a panel of paintings in ochre colour. Some of them are now lost due to the vagaries of nature like water torrent and pigmentation while some other are disfigured and on the verge of extinction. But an animal figure the first one of the panel on the rock wall is still 'in situ' condition. The size of this painting of a deer-like animal is 2.5'x1.5'. Pegs over the body of the animal proves that it was meant for commemorative purpose.

Probably the pre-historic man the inhabitant of the place used to take psychological strength from such a picture before going out in hunting expedition. Two other paintings next to this one in the panel are faded beyond recognition now. In the initial stage of the exploration it seemed like the figure probably of a lizard in vertical posture and a pig with pegs on the body. Overall, the painting of Ushakothi was used by the pre-historic man for hunting purpose. Another painting of an enigmatic nature is drawn on a triangle, vertical rock at Bagh 'Dunguri' beside a *nalla* (water stream). It contains zigzag lines, circles, curves etc. symbolic human figure might be hinted from this painting. It is difficult to make a meaning out of this picture. The picture of animal figure paint in ochre on the vertical rock on PoojaDunguri, it seems like a jackal or a horse in static position. This might be associated with the religious belief that Goddess Chandlipat treads through the village at the dead of the night, riding over a white horse. On the other hand the figure of a jackal would symbolize that the herdsmen of this region wanted to propitiate it so that no damage is done to their calf or kids. Associated artifacts found from the complex prove that it was the resort of the pre-historic man. The fire includes microliths perforated stones, hand stone, varieties of pottery, cord impressed burnt clay, charred bones, bangles (glass and bronze), hematite nouddles etc. these, along with the rock painting and engravings especially of female genital marks execute on the rock surface of PoojaDunguri and KabatTalei clearly prove that the place was the habitat of the pre-historic man of the Mesolithic age believing in a primeval mother cult. The phenomena of rock art by the pre-historic man meant to express his feelings and might range from 30,000 B.C. to 800 A.D. covering the stone ages and metal ages till the introduction of iron. In India we find rock art in upland hilly regions. Most of them are found at Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. Due to the prevalence of a similar climatic and geomorphologic situation rock art is found in many places of Western Odisha.

Prominent among them are Manikmada and Ushakothi in Sundergarh, Ulapgarh and Vikramkhol in Sambalpur, Gudahandi and Yogimath in Kalahandi. Out of the 66 painted rock shelters discovered in the western belt of Odisha so far, the newly constituted district of Sambalpur has the maximum with 32. There are 28 in Sundergarh while 2 in Jharsuguda; while the districts of Mayurbhanj, Subarnapur, Nuapada and Kalahandi contain one each. The only rockart site in the district of Subarnapur is at Ushakothi in PoojaDunguri complex. It is called 'Putlalekha' by the locals. This rock art heritage needs to be protected from the vagaries of nature and human vandalism.

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