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## Relations between rock art and ritual practice: a case study from eastern India



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### ABSTRACT

The ability of making art or artistic objects is one of the most important features of human being. The earliest evidence of artistic objects can be dated back to the Acheulian tradition of lower Paleolithic culture. Ethnographic evidences on the present day communities suggest that hunting, magic or ritual practices are the major causes behind the production of prehistoric arts. The present work attempts to find out relations between ritual practices and rock art production in a recently discovered prehistoric rock art site of eastern India. The supportive ethnographic data for the analysis of this rock art assemblage were largely unavailable. Due to this reason this study solely concentrates upon the arrangement, composition and context of the archeological assemblages and rock art itself to find out interrelations in between rock art and ritual structure. The outcome of the present work, with all its limitations, reveals that archaeological assemblages and context of a rock art site can give necessary information regarding the motives behind production of rock art.

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### 1. Introduction

Appearance of art or artistic objects in human cultural history is often considered to be one of the most important features of hominid cognitive development, because it's an important step in the appearance of visual communication (Bednarik, 2004; Anati, 2004, 2009). The earliest available evidence of artistic objects came from the Acheulian tradition of lower Paleolithic culture, dating back to 200,000 to 400,000 years B.P. (Bednarik, 2004: 35). The reasons behind making these earliest artistic objects explicitly or implicitly invoked ritual as an activity related to the production of these various art forms (Ross and Davidson, 2006: 305).

With the help of rich ethnographic data, rock art researchers over the years have formulated a number of hypothetical models which relate palaeo-art/rock art with ritual practices. Nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographic works of Spencer and Gillen (1899) and Frazer (1901, 1974) are the prime examples, which had heavy influence upon upper Paleolithic rock art researchers of Europe (Ross and Davidson, 2006). Breuil (1952) was one of those researchers, who considered magical performance before the hunting practices was one of the reasons which gave rise to upper Paleolithic rock arts of Europe. After that, work of Conkey (1980) was strongly influenced by ethnographic observations of Yellen (1977) and Lee (1979) of the! Kung San of southern

Africa. She examined the relationship between the form and structure of art assemblages and the aggregation of people in the past. The most widely adopted explanation about the source of the subject matter of rock art has been developed from the observation of shamanic performance during ritual practices in South Africa, which involved shamans and their altered 'neuropsychological' states of consciousness experienced during ritual activities (Ross and Davidson, 2006).

Recently two more hypotheses came up for explaining rock art and ritual practices in Australia. The first hypothesis explains rock art as a form of communication, which was used as an adaptive strategy during mediation of social relations through exchange of information (Ross and Davidson, 2006: 308–309). The second concept is known as 'intensification' where increase in the rock art sites and greater regional diversity in art form and style in the late Holocene period were attributed to the growing socio-cultural and technological complexity (Ross and Davidson, 2006: 309). Rappaport's (1999) recent work on ritual has changed the concepts of studying ritual and rock art a lot. Besides, the counter arguments, which have also been developed from ethnographic understanding of ritual practices of indigenous people, advocate about production of rock art and ritual in a secular context. Rappaport (1999: 26) developed the idea of 'unique structure of ritual', which is universal to ritual practiced by human beings. He identified certain meanings and forms or 'structure' within ritual practices containing a number of common elements none of which is unique to ritual except their interrelationship within the 'structure'. Ross and Davidson (2006) quite successfully applied Rappaport's model for identifying the ritualistic aspect of rock art assemblages in central Australia. They argued that, although rock art studies throughout the world explains

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the interrelationship between ritual performance and production of rock art, but often the context in which the rock art objects were often found and the structure of the rock art assemblages is not clearly understood and interpreted (Ross and Davidson, 2006: 305). The basic aim of Ross and Davidson (2006) was to understand “the articulation between the structure of rock art assemblages and ritual behavior”. Their argument centered on the evident ritualistic features within rock art assemblages, specifically emphasizing the importance of understanding the embodied canonical message of individual rock art motifs within a particular cultural convention.

India contains a vast number of rock art sites, some of them are the earliest in date (Bednarik, 2004: 35) and some are world renowned also (Chakravarty and Bednarik, 1997; Blinkhorn et al, 2012). India has a rich tradition in rock art study which started in the middle of the nineteenth century by the studies of Henwood, Carllyle and Cockburn (Chakravarty, 1984: 12; Blinkhorn et al, 2012: 180) and continued later on up to the middle of the twentieth century by several workers like Anderson, P. Mitra, M. Ghosh, R. Allchin and B. Allchin, and S K Pandey (Chakravarty, 1984; Mathpal, 1984; Chakravarty and Bednarik, 1997; Blinkhorn et al, 2012). In the middle of the twentieth century Indian rock art research got a rapid impetus after the discovery of Bhimbetka rock art complex of central India by V. S. Wakankar. This discovery not only placed Indian rock art sites in a distinguished position among those around the world but also made a shift towards formal documentation of rock arts and study of stylistic diversities of paintings and rock carvings (Blinkhorn et al, 2012; Neumayer, 2013). During the later half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century Indian rock art research have become enriched with discovery of new rock art sites around the subcontinent and also application of more sophisticated techniques in the documentation and dating of rock art (Brooks and Wakankar, 1976; Neumayer, 1983, 1992, 1993; Chakravarty, 1984; Mathpal, 1984; Pandey, 1992; Ghosh, 1998; Pradhan, 2001; Bednarik, 2002; Chakravarty, 2003; Boivin, 2004; Clarkson et al., 2009; Tacon et al, 2010, 2013).

Despite the recent developments in the field of rock art research in India, interpretations of rock art images or understanding their meanings still remain a major challenge to the archeologists of this country. Few attempts have been made to find out why the rock art was produced or what role it played in the life of ancient people but in most of the cases interpretations were not supported by proper theoretical understandings (Blinkhorn et al., 2012:181). Some of these attempts have tried to make a direct interpretation of the rock art images by studying faunas, floras, scenes of various activities like hunting, food production activities, communal dancing, and war (Tiwari, 2000, cited in Blinkhorn, 2012:181). Some other attempts have used ethnographic analogies of present day tribal people of India to interpret rock arts (Ghosh, 1984; Pradhan, 2001; Tribhuvan and Finkenauer, 2003; Malla, 2004). Use of ethnographic analogies in the explanation is based on the preconceived notion that present day tribal population of India have experienced a little change over the time, due to this an uncritical parallel can be drawn between tribal culture and art with that of the prehistoric one (Ghosh, 1984; David and Kramer, 2001; Mohanty and Mishra, 2002; Malla, 2004). From various ethnographic evidences of the tribal population of India, it is observed that traditional tribal art of India is connected with the respective ecosystem and in many cases the co-relationship has been transformed into a form of religion. The nature of art is also connected with ancestral worship to promote or preserve the fertility of the crops and to rituals, observed to get relief from diseases, childbirth, marriage and death. So parallels can be taken from the living tradition to understand the prehistoric art and to trace the route of religious belief and ideological determinants (Mohanty and Mishra, 2002:178). However, this approach of rock art interpretation has also received various depth of appreciation from the rock art researchers of India (Blinkhorn et al., 2012) and sometimes has been criticized for making “patchy and unrecognizable” reconstruction of past culture (Heider, 1967, cited in David and Kramer, 2001:2).

In the abovementioned context of rock art study in India, the present work attempts to understand underlying meanings and motives behind the production of petroglyphs in a rock art site of eastern India. We have tried to utilize Ross and Davidson's model (2006) of ritual structure to find out elements and forms of rituals practiced in the rock art site moreover we have tried to understand the relations between context and structure of rock art assemblages and ritual structure. Ross and Davidson (2006) developed their model on the basis of Rappaport's (1999) study of universal ritual structure and fruitfully applied for analyzing the evidences of ritual practices in the rock art site in Australia. The only difference that exists between the application of this model in central Australia and in the present context is the number of rock art sites. Unlike the case of Australia, where this model was tested nearly on a hundred rock art sites, we have tried to test this model on a single site. Our arguments behind application of this model lies in the fact that presence of extensive pigments, tools and engraved petroglyphs found in this site provides an ideal database for application of this model in eastern India. Besides this, occurrence of a number of Paleolithic and Mesolithic sites (Polley and Ray, 2010) and even Megalithic burial sites around the rock art site also provides a perfect surrounding to apply this model. Apart from all these unavailability of first hand ethnographic parallels to understand the underlying meanings and motives of rock art creation is another reason because of which we opted for Ross and Davidson's model (2006).

The study area is inhabited by the ‘Munda’ tribe for a very long time. However, when we attempted to draw ethnographic resemblance from the present day cultural practices of Munda's with the practice of rock art in the region, we became unsuccessful. It was further observed that even the local people did not have any knowledge regarding the existence of rock carvings or petroglyphs in the region. The reason behind this may be acculturation of these people or may be the effect of “revival of meaning of the rock art motifs” (for detail see Ross and Davidson, 2006:326–327) due to modernization.

The current study with all its limitations is an attempt at studying such rock art sites and its associated information like ritual only with the data regarding rock art assemblages without the direct application of ethnographic data. However, a number of factors like taphonomic process associated with rock art and its assemblages can hide or even alter the information present in a rock art site, but still it is always useful in those sites where no direct ethnographic information is present. And here the usefulness of present study lies.

## 2. The rock art site and its surroundings

The rock art site is situated on the top of a small flat hillock, known as ‘Kurshiburu’ (Lat 230 3'43.0704"N; Long 850 23'8.2860"E). In local Mundari language the term ‘Kurshiburu’ means ‘Chair Shaped Hill’. Kurshiburu is situated about 3 km south of the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) field office of Patratoli village (Fig. 1). It is a flat topped granitic hillock, very common in the region. Height of this hillock is about 600 masl. Eastern part of this hillock is covered by shrubs and bushes. Western side is lichen and grass covered rock surface. A particular type of rock art is found on Kurshiburu hill top, which is a form of petroglyph, known as cupule or cup marks (Bednarik, 2008). Cupules are made on a rock slab, measuring 12,650 sq cm, found on the western side of the hillock. Cupule marked rock slab is situated about 58 ft away from the east of the survey pillar erected by the Land and Revenue Department of the Government of India.

The rock art site is situated about 12 km east of the town Khunti and near the village of Patratoli. The town Khunti is the head quarter of Khunti district of Jharkhand and it is situated about 37 km south of Ranchi, the capital of the state of Jharkhand, India. Khunti region is well known in Indian history. Birsā Munda, the famous leader of Munda tribal revolt, was born in this region and fought against the British rulers.

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