



Tracing the Symbols: An Ethno-Rock Art Study of the North-Eastern Chhotanagpur Plateau with special reference to Jamui region, India

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Introduction

Rock art is the creative articulation of human cognition, emotions and their past experiences. It corresponds to glimpses of the indigenous world view, aspirations and narratives on their own explained identities during the past (Chakraverty 2009). Our ancestors expressed it in the form of Pictographs and Petroglyphs, while sitting in the lap of nature. The material required for its creation was also procured from the mother nature itself. The rock art is found throughout the length and breadth of India from Zaskar Valley, Laddakh in the north to Kerala in the south and Tak Tsang and Zemithang in the north-east to Gujarat in the west (Sonawane 2008).

Rock Art is the documentary evidence of the human past which carries a slice of time and space in the form of paintings and engravings created on the rock surface. Its antiquity goes back to the Palaeolithic period (Bednarik 2005) and is continued to the historical period and still practiced in some parts of India in other art forms among the ethnic population (Tiwarly 2013).

Study area

The study area lies in the Jamui Hill Ranges (24.834245 N, 86.065004 E) located in the Jamui district of Bihar

(Fig.1). This hill range is distributed in the eastern part of Nawada and south-western part of Jamui districts of southern Bihar. Its length is 34 km in the east-west direction and spread between Khaira block of Jamui and Kauwakol block of Nawada district. The hill range lies in the toposheet number 72 L/1 of the Survey of India map. The discovered rock shelters are located near Garhi dam and Tetariya Tanr village between the Deosthan Pahar and Giddheshwar Pahar. The sites are randomly distributed among the hill ranges varying in elevation from about 240 to 354 metres.

This region lies under the northern-eastern extension of Chhotanagpur plateau. The hilly areas of the district contains crystalline rocks such as Sandstone, Mica, Schist, Granite gneiss, Quartzite & Quartz schist, Hornblende schist and Mica (District Survey Report 2016). Here the extension of Vindhya ranges meet with Chhotanagpur plateau. Apart from regular hills, big boulders of granite can be seen in the area. River Kiul flows near the hill ranges.

The climate in Jamui district is mild, and generally warm and temperate in nature. The temperature in summer rises up to 42°C, while in the winter it drops to 9°C. Jamui has an annual average temperature of 25.1°C. May is the hottest and January is the coldest month of the year. In Jamui Summer season receives

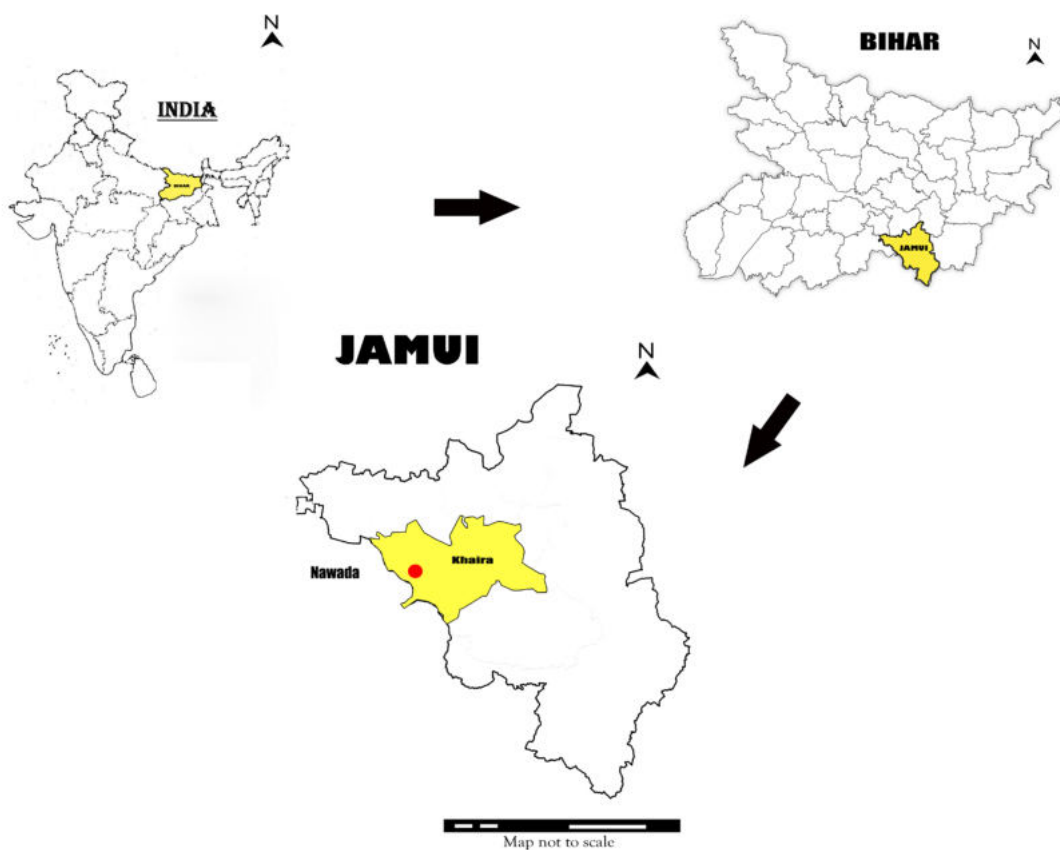


Figure 1. Location map of the study area.



more rainfall than winters. The average annual rainfall of district is 1145 mm. About 80% of the rainfall is received during June to September by south-west monsoon (Jamui District Gazetteer).

The area is hilly and densely forested. A large variety of herbs, shrubs and trees are found in the region. Some of the main varieties are ber (*Indian jujube*), sal (*Shorea robusta*), bel (*Aegle marmelos*), tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), Khair (*Senegalia catechu*), Bamboo (*Bambusa tulda*), Khirni (*Mimusops hexandra*), jamun (*Eugenia jambolana*), aonla (*Emblca officinalis*), bahera (*Terminalia bellirica*), semal (*Bambaz malaberieum*), kari (*Holharrena antidysenteria*), palas (*Butea frondosa*), mahua (*Bassia latifolia*), gular (*Ficus glomeratha*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), piyar, kalonda, kaj, ken, amsahari, paisar, gamhar, ghurkunj, anjan, dhab, tarmi, shakhua, aitha, makarken, kanola, bithor, dhodhki, chhagar, ledi, bahet, khonta, ghunt, karia, karam, pampreth, kanola, behaach, kukur bhooja, wild variety of bargad etc. In addition to the wild fruits, various edible tubers, roots, seeds, leaves, flowers and wild vegetables are also available throughout the year.

Earlier, a large variety of wild animals were present in the area. With the advent of modernisation their number has tremendously decreased but still they are found in the forested areas, especially the foothills. These include wild boar, black buck (*Antelope cervicapra*), swamp deer (*Cervus duvaucelii*), jackal (*Canis aureus*), nilgai (*Boselampus tragocamelus*), langur (*Presbytis entellus*), monkey (*Macaca fascicularis*), hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*), wild Dog (*Cuon alpinus*), rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*), mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*), porcupine (*Hystrix indica*) etc. A variety of birds found in the forested region include peacock (*Pavo cristatus*), owl (*Bubo bengalensis*), parrot (*Bubo bubo*), fowl (*Gallus gallus*), eagle, falcon, partridge, hawk, vulture, dove, myna, harial, sparrow etc. This area is also infested with deadly cobras, karaits, vipers, pythons and many other varieties of poisonous and non-poisonous snakes as well as scorpions.

This area has a rich archaeological history as the stone tools, microliths and debitas can be seen lying on the surface in the forest. Along with the painted rock shelters megaliths have also been reported by Col. A. K. Prasad (Prasad 2003-04). Santhals are the prominent tribe who live in the vicinity of the rock shelters.

Antecedents

The region of Chhotanagpur plateau comprising of modern states of Odisha, Jharkhand, some parts of West Bengal & Chhatisgarh and Southern part of Bihar is highly rich in natural resources and mineral wealth. The first rock art was discovered in Odisha by C. W. Anderson, a railway engineer in 1911. The site of Singhanpur, located near railway station of Nahapalli, contains paintings made in red and white (Neumayer 2016). The rock paintings of Shinghanpur were later documented by Percy Brown and published in his book *Indian Paintings* (Brown 1918) and Manoranjan Ghosh in his book *Rock Paintings and Other Antiquities of Prehistoric and Later Times* (1932). The rock art sites of Kabra Pahar and Karmagarh were discovered later, containing outlines, monochrome and polychrome designs of anionic nature. The zoomorphic figures, fishes, birds and few anthropomorphic figures were painted in red, white and bright yellow colour (Sonawane 2008).

The Vikramkhol rock shelters in Sambhalpur district were discovered by K P Jayaswal in 1933 (Jayaswal 1933). The shelters of Hemgiri-Chenga, Hemgiri-Chichiriyakhhol, Hemgiri- Lakhmara and Hemgiri- Phuldungri Pahar contains abstract designs, squares and triangles shaped figures, figures filled with wavy or criss-cross designs as well as naturalistic figures of lizards, antelopes, birds and bovid (Neumayer 2016).

In Jharkhand, rock paintings have been discovered from Gonda, Satpahar, Tirtangi and Isko rock shelters. These rock shelters have been studied by Somnath Chakravarty (2009) and Bulu Imam (2011, 2014). The subject of paintings here includes naturalistic animal figures, abstract designs, patterns of squares and triangles, simple outlines and geometrical designs.

Although a lot of work has been done on the rock art studies in India and of Chhotanagpur plateau region, South Bihar has been an exception because of its inaccessible terrain and forests inhibited by large variety of ferocious animals and reptiles. Naxalite insurgencies have been a major hindrance for the systematic exploration. Erwin Neumayer (1983, 2016) among the very few scholars who have worked on the rock art of this region. Dr (Col.) A K Prasad has discovered the painted rock shelters in the districts of Nawada & Jamui in Bihar and Giridih & Kodarma in Jharkhand. Col. Prasad explored the region between 1993 to 1998, when he was deployed in the counter Naxalite insurgency squad of the Indian Army (Prasad 2003-04). He discovered eighty-six rock shelters containing rock paintings & petroglyphs along with microlithic tools, bone fragments and potsherds in some of them. Ten petroglyph sites have been discovered by him on open boulders in Kodarma district of Jharkhand. Apart from the documentation of the rock paintings and associated artefacts, he gives the information about the subject matter, colour scheme & techniques, superimposition and encrustation over the rock art (Prasad 2003-04, 2005-06, 2006, 2007, 2017, 2019). He has also attempted to interpret some of the paintings and ascertain their chronology (Prasad 2005-06, 2007). However, the rock paintings of this region have not been studied intensively. They must be studied along with ethnographic parallels to understand the hidden meaning. In this article, authors have tried to decode the rock paintings by comparing it with the ritualistic and totem symbols of the Santhals. Only those symbols are compared which is presently practised by the ethnic population in the study area.

Nature of the paintings

The rock paintings in the study area mainly comprise of the symbols and intricate designs. There are a small number of naturalistic paintings. The designs include combination of circles, squares, rectangles, wheel, cross, spirals, rhomboids, meandering lines, concentric circles, grids, zigzag lines, dots, combination of triangles and squares.

The stick like human figures, rectangular box with double outline with abstract designs, outline of birds like owl and duck, reticulate figures, labyrinth with seven concentric circles (Fig. 2), rider on horse, Sun symbol, floral motifs, rider on caparisoned horse holding a weapon in one hand and bridle in the other (Fig. 3), Sun with an unidentified figure (Fig. 4), hunting scene with a human holding a bow and arrow, human figure wearing a

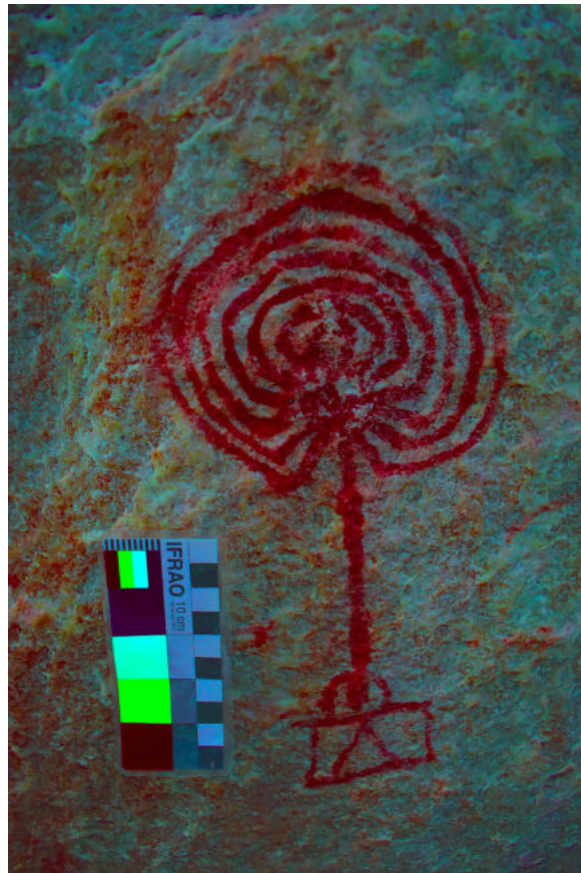


Figure 2. Labyrinth with seven concentric circles.

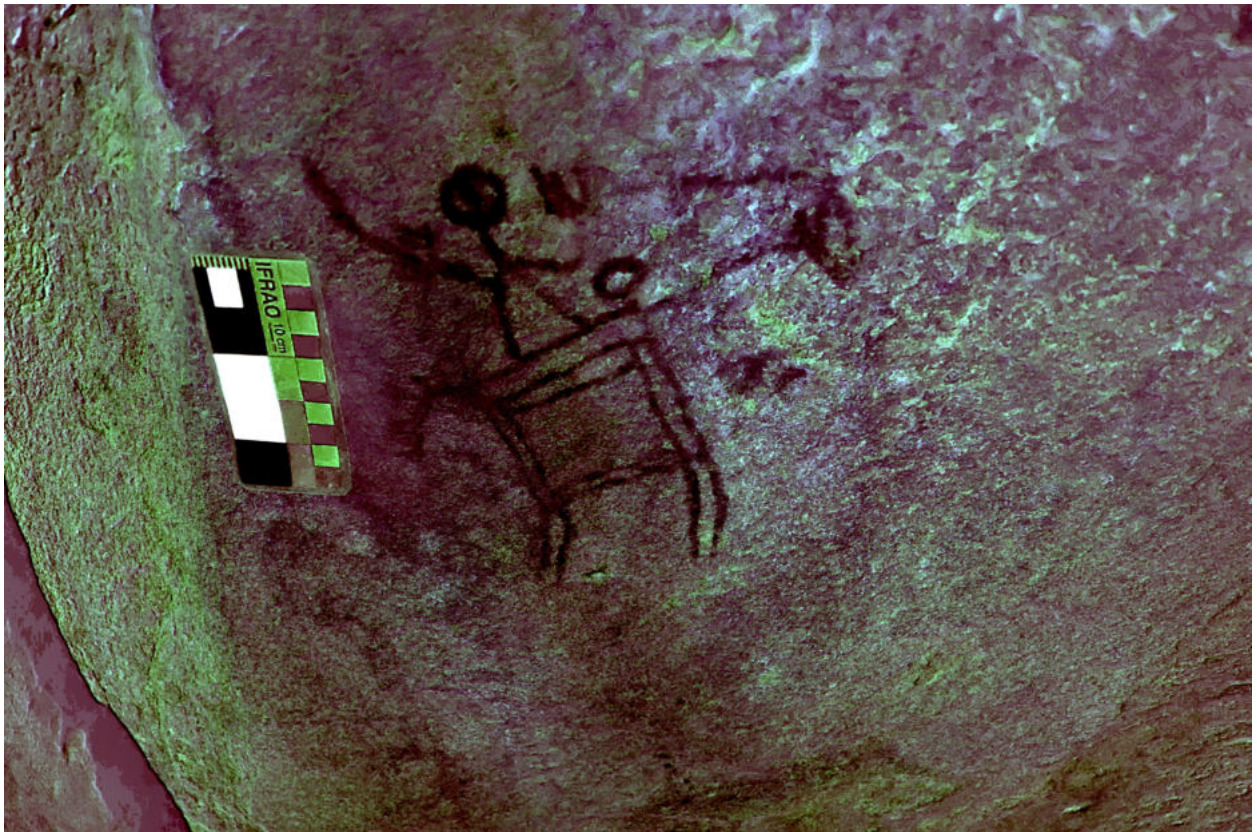


Figure 3. Rider on caparisoned horse.

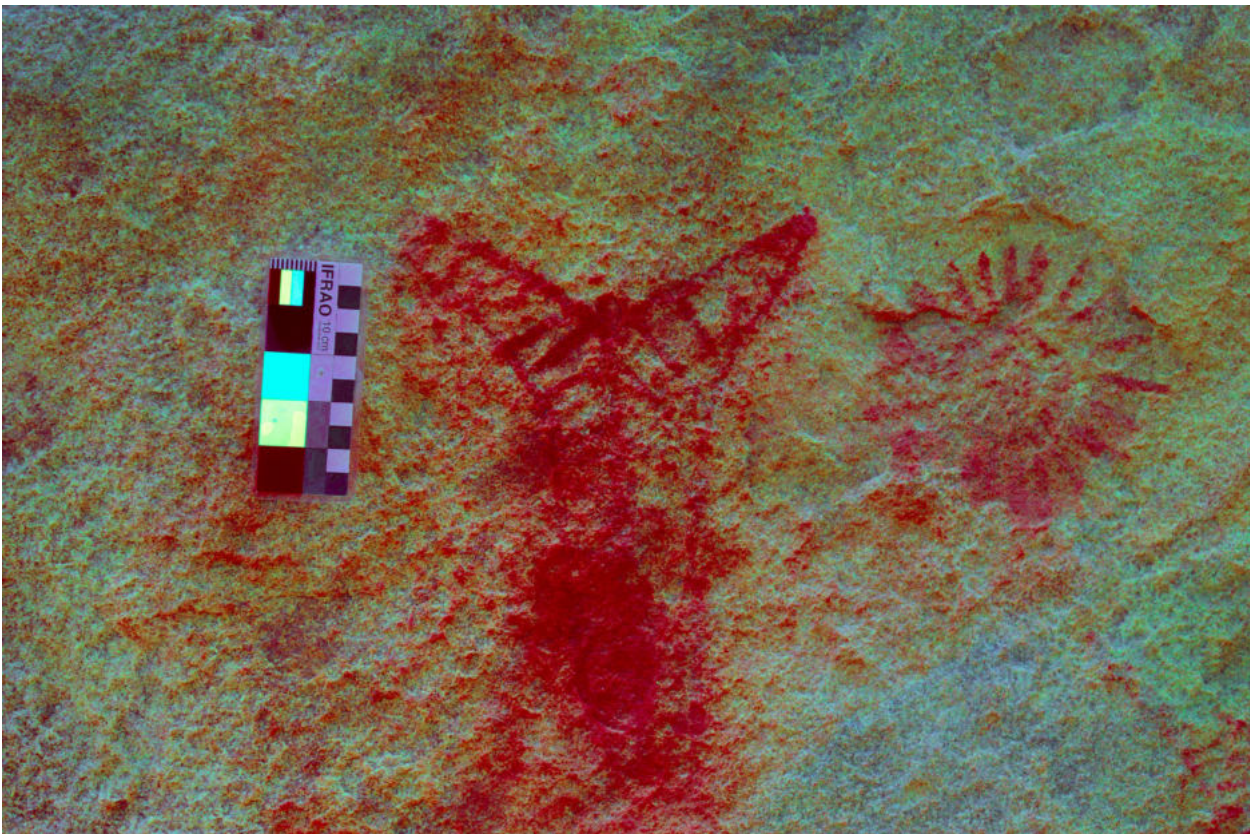


Figure 3. Sun with an unidentified figure.

unique head-dress, complex figures with interconnected geometric intricate patterns, pipette figures with a combination of geometric motifs (Fig. 5), abstract figures with chevrons, lines and dashes inside it, grid patterns (Fig. 6), snake and lizards, rectangle and circle with human figure inside it, I shaped figures, plant motifs, woman figure (Fig. 7), cross in a circle, antelope figure are the prominent motifs here.

Ethnographic Interpretation

Art has always been an integral part of the human society. It is related with the festivities and has been a medium of expression of joy and prosperity among the ethnic population. This tradition is prevalent among them in the form of wall paintings, ritualistic drawings, tattoos, handicrafts etc.

The study area located in the Jamui hill ranges is surrounded prominently by Santhals and seldom Yadava (Ahir) population. The ethnic groups practicing paintings are studied to trace back the rock art tradition of the region. A survey was carried in the Santhal villages near the rock shelters. The villages explored during the study are Sakdari, Tara Tanr, Bardon, Birgodda, Ahradih, Rorodih, Harni, Khalari, Jathar, Tumkiya, Titihya and Kerwatanri. The Santhals in the study area do not continue the practice of painting their houses currently. The traditional mud walled houses have been replaced by modern cemented constructions. Hence, a survey of the Santhal villages in Dumka district of Jharkhand was also conducted. The villages studied are Bara Tanr, Navadih, Taljhari, Baghmaari, Dumariya and Kherwa. During the survey, Tattoos on the hand of Santhal women (Fig. 8 a &

b), comprising of zig-zag lines, floral motif, Sun symbol, box like pattern, a large rhomboid or a combination of triangles, large dots and leaf-like figures have been found. Sohrai and godhani paintings (Fig. 9 a & b, Fig. 10) on ground and the mud-walls of the house have been documented. Before painting, the wall is prepared by plastering it with fine clay mixed with grass & cow dung. Then it is painted with white colour, prepared from chuna (lime) or rice flour and water.

There are a large population of Yadavas (Ahirs) who resides in the village Tetariya Tanr, located near the rock shelters and still practice the tradition of painting their houses during Deepawali festival. The locals call these rock shelters as 'Kohbar'. They relate the rock paintings with their mythical hero Veer Lorik (Kesri: 2006) to whom they trace their ancestry. The figures painted by them on their mud-house walls resemble the pictographs of the rock shelters (Fig. 11, Fig. 12).

According to the Santhal legend, the first couple on this earth were Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi. From their offsprings, the twelve clans (*Pari*) of Santhal emerged. Each clan has their own totemic symbol. Hansda is the elder one, named after goose (Hansa). The second one is Murmu named after murum enga, the nilgai antelope. The third clan is Marandi, named after a weed of paddy field (*Ischaemum ramosum*). Fourth one is Kisku, named after the bird kingfisher. Fifth clan is Soren who took their name from Krittika Nakshatra. There is also a myth prevalent among Santhals that Ayang Soren originated from snake (cobra). The Tudus originated from the Owl. (Schulte-Droesch 2016)

The five junior clans include Baskey, whose totem is Baske daka (stale rice), the Besra with totem falcon



Figure 4. Pipette figure.

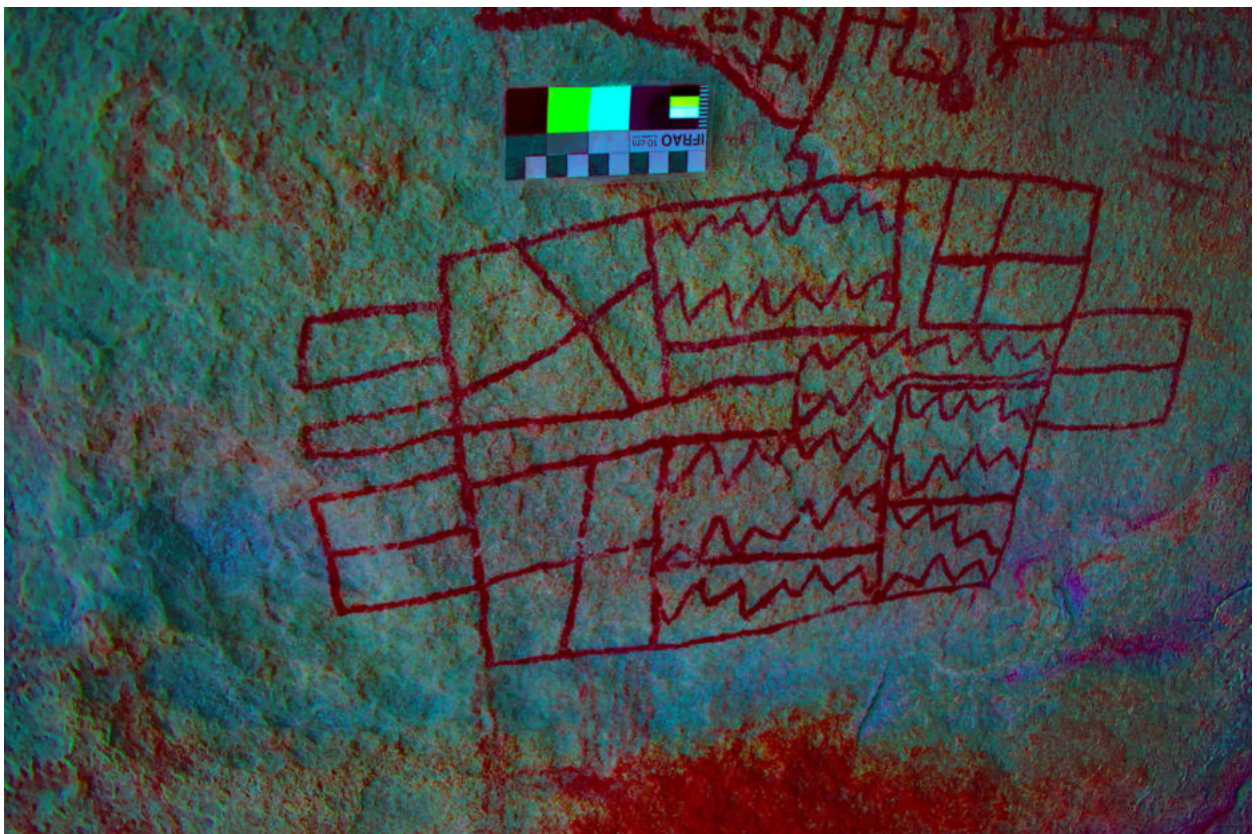


Figure 6. Grid Pattern.

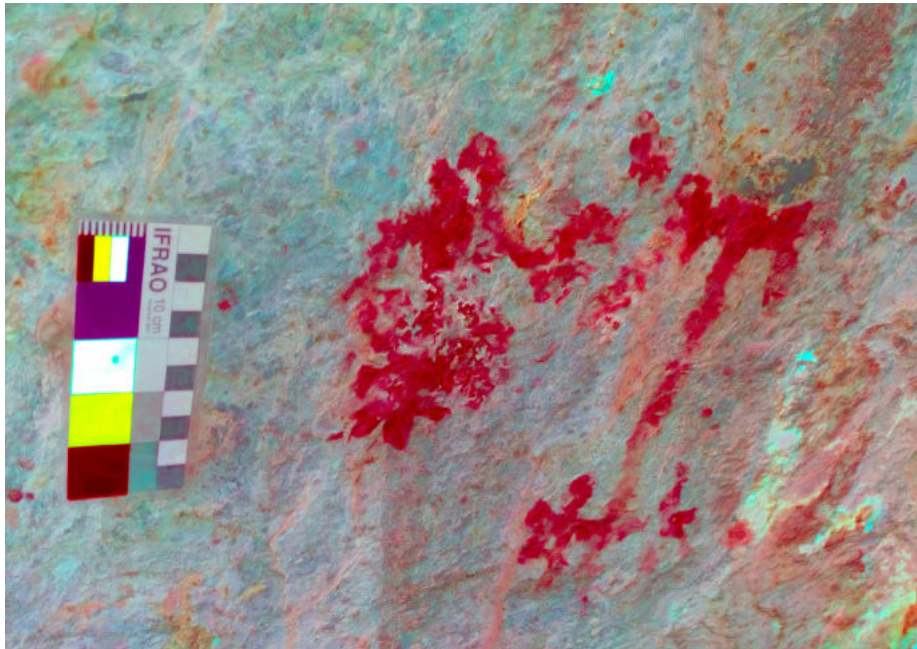


Figure 7. Woman figure.



Figure 8 a & b. Tattoos on the hand of Santhal women.



Figure 9a. A man holding stick/sword near a geometric design. 9b. Box with arch shaped design and cattle hoof marks.



Figure 10. A Santhal girl besides the godhani symbol drawn by her.



Figure 11. A Complex box patterns and circular designs painted on the mud walls.



Figure 12. Anthropomorphs and floral images painted on the walls.

(baaz), the Caure (lizard), the Pauria (pigeon), which is a peace making clan among the Santhals. The fifth one is Donker clan. Each clan protects their totem. They believe that if someone from the clan kill these totem animals, the whole clan will suffer from ill fate. The upper seven clans consider themselves higher in status and do not marry to the lower five clans. There are also marriage restrictions between the upper clans like Hansda and Murmu clan, Marandi and Kisku clan. No other clan marries with Besra and Chaure clan because they are considered lower in status. Incest relationship between members of a sub-clan is a serious offence. (Somers 1985).

There is depiction of the totem symbols in the rock art of the region. The totem of Hansda clan (goose or Hansa) is depicted in the rock shelter XVI.A.1. (Fig. 13 a). Nilgai or antelope which is the totem of Murmu clan is depicted in Basariya Kol rock shelter. (Fig. 13 b). The totem of Ayang Soren, snake is painted in the shelter XVI.A.5. (Fig. 13 c). A pictograph of owl, totem of Todus is depicted in shelter XI.B.1 (Fig. 13 d). Four lizard figures are depicted in rock shelter XVI.A.1. (Fig. 13 e). Lizards are the totem of the Caure clan. The figures are in very faded state. It is tough for a normal person to see them with necked eyes. The images are enhanced with the help of D-stretch software.

Threats and preservation status

The pictographs are generally painted on the slightly slant rock shelters. Shelters are small in dimension and are prone to weather conditions. The sunlight, seepage of rain water and wind neffects is the most common cause of deterioration. One can find a layer of silica encrustation over the paintings in shelter XI.A.3, XI.B.1, XVI.A.1, XVI.A.2, XVI.A.4, and XVI.A.5. At some places trees and shrubs have grown near the shelter, causing damage to it (shelter XI.A.3, XVI.A.4). The growth of lichen over the paintings also poses a catastrophic effect. There are the nests of mud-wasps and termite in shelter XI.A.3. The quality of the sandstone over which the paintings have been executed is very poor in nature. The cracks and stone flakes are frequent in all the rock shelters. Many of the paintings have faded or destroyed due to rock peeling off the shelters.

Apart from the natural factors, human vandalism is also playing a great role in the deterioration. There are soot marks on the ceiling and wall of the shelter XI.A.3 and XVI.A.4. Someone has vandalised the paintings with black paint or coal tar in shelter XVI.A.4. There is an urgent need to conserve this cultural heritage otherwise we will lose them for sure.

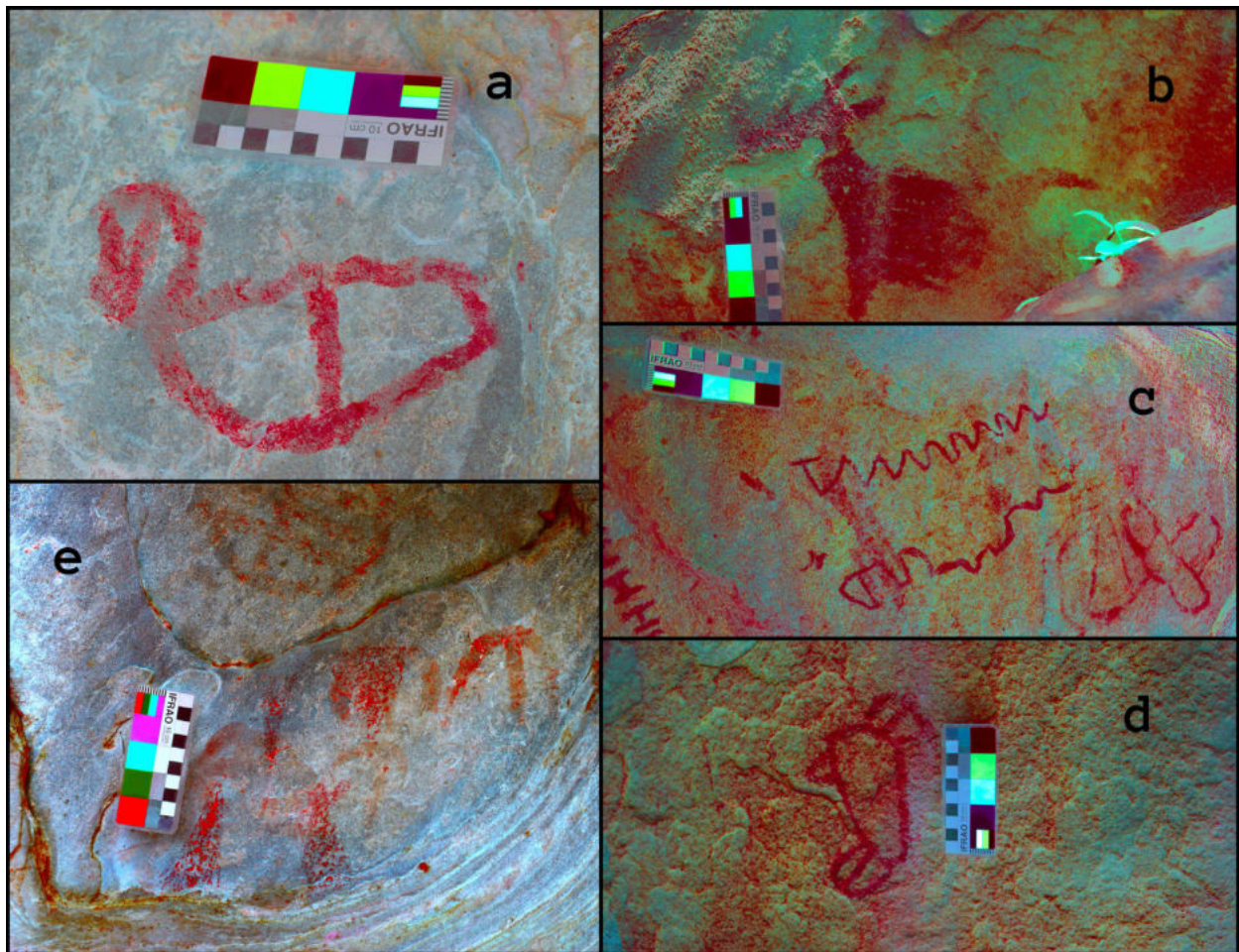


Figure 13. Totem symbols of the Santhal clans depicted in the rock shelters



Conclusion

The rock art of the north-eastern Chhotanagpur plateau region is ritualistic in nature. Simple natural designs are less in this region while the complex designs are frequent. The complex designs of circles, squares, chevron patterns, Cross in circle, zigzag lines, dots, pipettes are abundant in nature. Some similar paintings executed in the rock shelters are still painted on the mud-house walls in this area.

With the advent of modernisation, the mud houses are getting replaced by cement houses and the tradition of painting is vanishing. Their zeal and excitement of celebrating their festivals are also decreasing, causing an irreparable damage to their rituals and their understanding of the symbols. There is an urgent need to explore the whole Chhotanagpur plateau and document the daily lives and rituals of the ethnic population to understand the meanings of the symbols depicted in the rock art.

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