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A Note on Rock Art Site of Bharamtoli hills near Ranchi City of Jharkhand

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Abstract: This paper is a small note on the occurrence of rock art inside a rock shelter located at one of the two granite hills located behind Bharamtoli basti in outskirts of Ranchi city in Jharkhand. The site was discovered by the author during his school days as it is very close to his resident. It is a small rock site with occurrence of few geometric designs, hand stencils, faded abstract figures and an animal figure painted over two different portions of the wall in a shelter. Geometric designs are comparable from other rock art sites of Jharkhand. The paper also shows a concerned to the human vandalism and threat to the site due to various anthropogenic activities, such as writing names in the shelter by local inhabitants and stone quarrying activities.

Keywords: Bharamtoli hills, rock art, pictographs, geometric patterns, abstract designs, animal figure, hand stencils, microliths, human vandalism, etc.

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Introduction and Archaeological Background of Surrounding Area

The region of Morabadi and Chiroundi are recently developed area in last 20 years and has been outskirts region of Ranchi city, which use to connect the city to the suburb of Boreya and other part of outskirts, closely located to the rivulets and streams of Subarnarekha river. The area seems to be archaeologically and historically sound, since various sites from historical phase to medieval period have been reported earlier by S.C. Roy (Roy 1920: 422) and A.K. Ghosh (Ghosh 1944, cited in Patil 1963). Even, the author has traced the evidence of mound of historical period with association of plain Red Ware and sculptural remains along the right bank of Boreya river, which remained unpublished. Even occurrence of megalithic monuments at different localities were reported by the author in the extent of around 10 kms of area of the region. An evidence of stone temple in Boreya suburb is also mentioned by B. Virottam, which is now quite modernized but traces of stone columns can be still observe around it, belong to 18th century C.E. (Virottam 2006).

The rock art of Bharamtoli hills was first witnessed by the author during his school days when the area was quite deserted and the villagers mentioned about the rock art as ‘hand stencils made on the doorway of a cave’. Over the period of time, the area slowly developed and became more accessible to the modern world. After 2011-12, some of the members of department of Ranchi University, perhaps visited the sites but their study remained unpublished. A former geologist from Ranchi University have visited the site with the author of this paper in 2014-15, and mentioned about the rock art in his personal blog by mentioning the rock art as a map of some ancient route and hand stencils as apart of some ritual. No other published literature is been found regarding the site after that.

Rock Art Site and Geological Setting

The site is located on the western slope of northern hill of two hills behind Bharamtoli *basti*. It is almost at the height of 45 meters from foot of the hill. Bharamtoli hills are a pair of granite hills of Archean formation, which is a dominant rock form of the Jharkhand state. It is around 500 meters east to a small stream which further met in north in Borreya, a rivulet of Jumar river, which is one of the small tributaries of Subarnarekha River (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: General view of Bharamtoli hills indicating the location of rock shelter © Google Earth

Paintings are depicted below the roof and middle portion of the wall of a small rock shelter, roughly measured $10.2 \times 12 \times 5.3$ meters. Shelter is oriented from east to west, facing towards the west. A considerable soil deposit can be observed in the floor which could have certain archaeological remains, can be recovered after excavation only.

Methodology Adopted to Document the Rock Art

The basic methodology to document and study the rock art of the site is based on photographic documentation and use of scientific apparatus and softwares, such as Garmin etrex 10 GPS device

to map the site and D-Stretch and adobe illustrator 10 to enhance and trace the rock paintings for the better understanding of their interpretation. Side view photography of the shelter is been done to draw a rough drawing of the shelter with proper measurements of all the dimensions. Ethnographic analogy is been used to compare the rock art from other reported rock art sites in Jharkhand and with the presently available ethnographic data in form of tribal murals of Jharkhand.

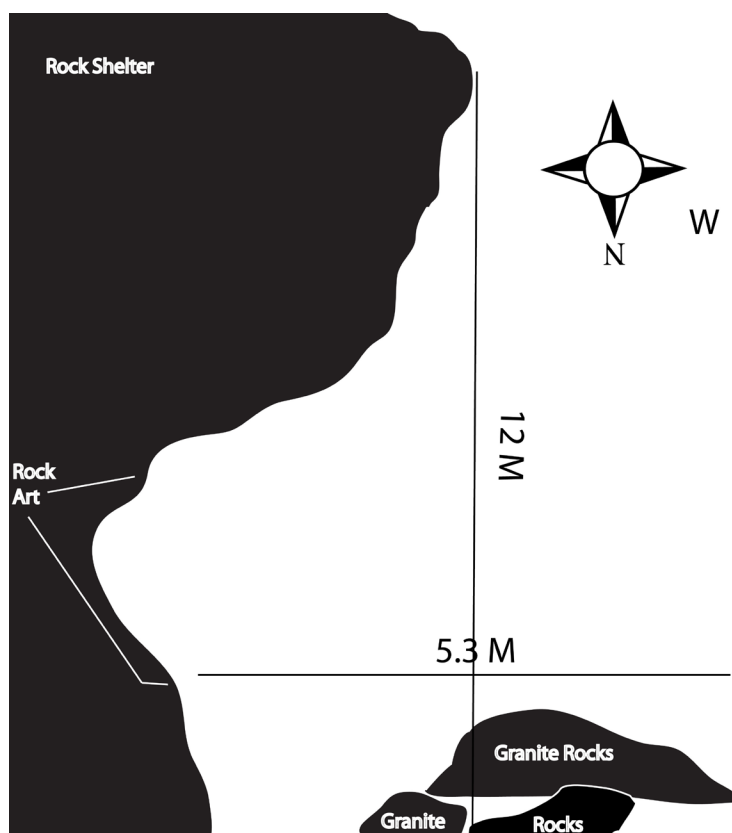


Figure 2: Cross Sectional Profile of the rock shelter with its dimensions (Shelter facing east to west)

Description of Rock Art

The rock paintings in the shelter can be divided into geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and abstract figures. Anthropomorphic depiction is represented by positive hand stencils on the upper portion of the wall, whereas zoomorphic painting is represented by an unidentified animal surrounded by hand stencils and a pair of abstract designs. A cluster of faded hand stencils superimposed a rectangular geometric figure similar to Godhani symbol, a common geometric design found in rock art and mural art of central and eastern India. Both left and right hands are used; probably different individuals (Fig. 3).

Geometric depiction is represented by eight different rectangular and square designs clustered together on the wall at chest height of an average adult (Fig 4). Apart from paintings a pair of oblong geoglyphs is also located a little away, right to the geometric cluster (Fig 5). Paintings are depicted in green and red colors, probably extract and precured by plants and locally available chunks of iron ore nodules and mixed with water and a sort of fatty material.

Style of the Rock Art

There are two basic style were adopted by artists; 1) Outlines in green color, using brush of thin stroke, probably made of thin branch of any plant. Geometric patterns, animal figure and abstract designs are

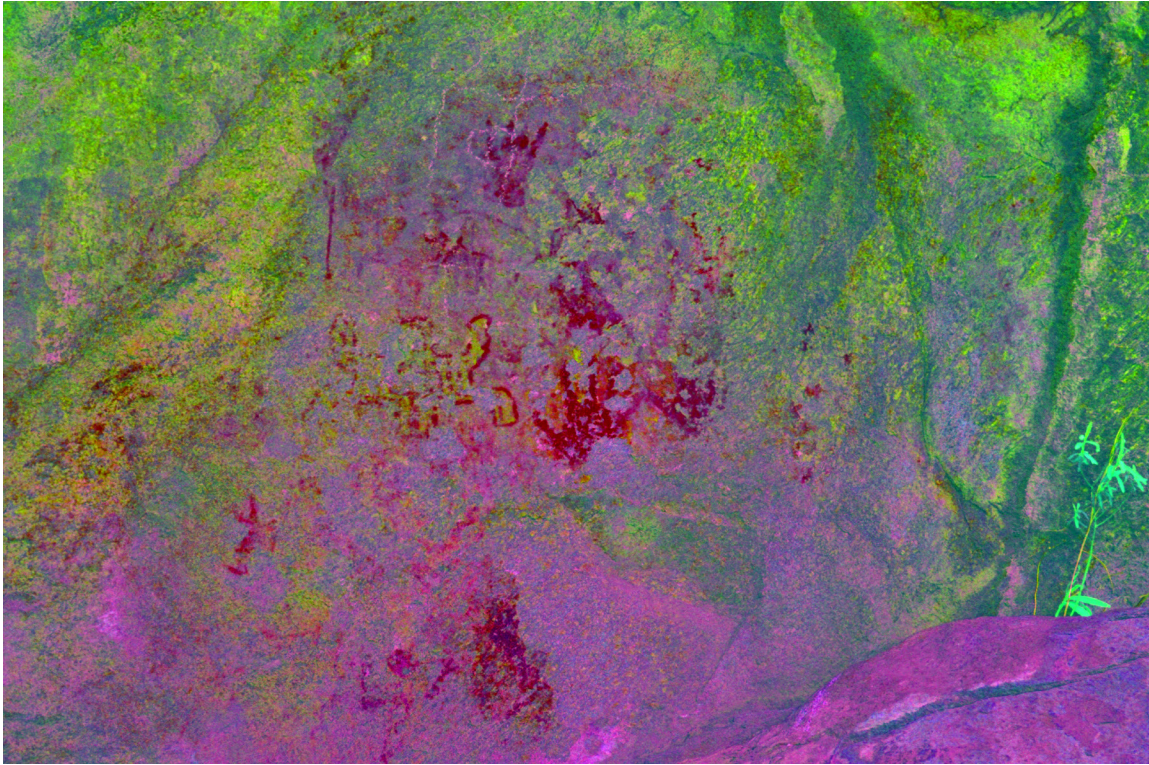


Figure 3: Group of hand prints superimposing a rectangular geometric motif and animal figure, and abstract designs on the upper portion of the wall of rock shelter (Photograph enhanced using D- Stretch (crgb) software)

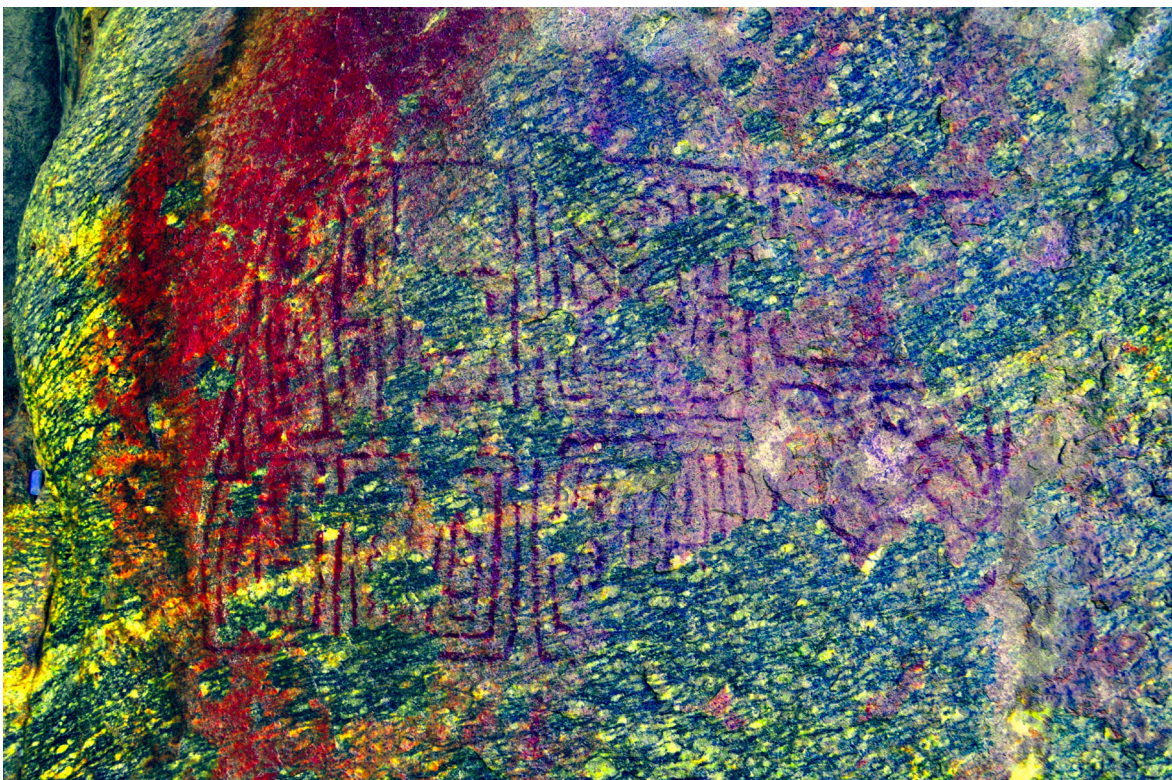


Figure 4: Different geometric designs clustered to each other (Photograph enhance using D-Stretch(ids) software)

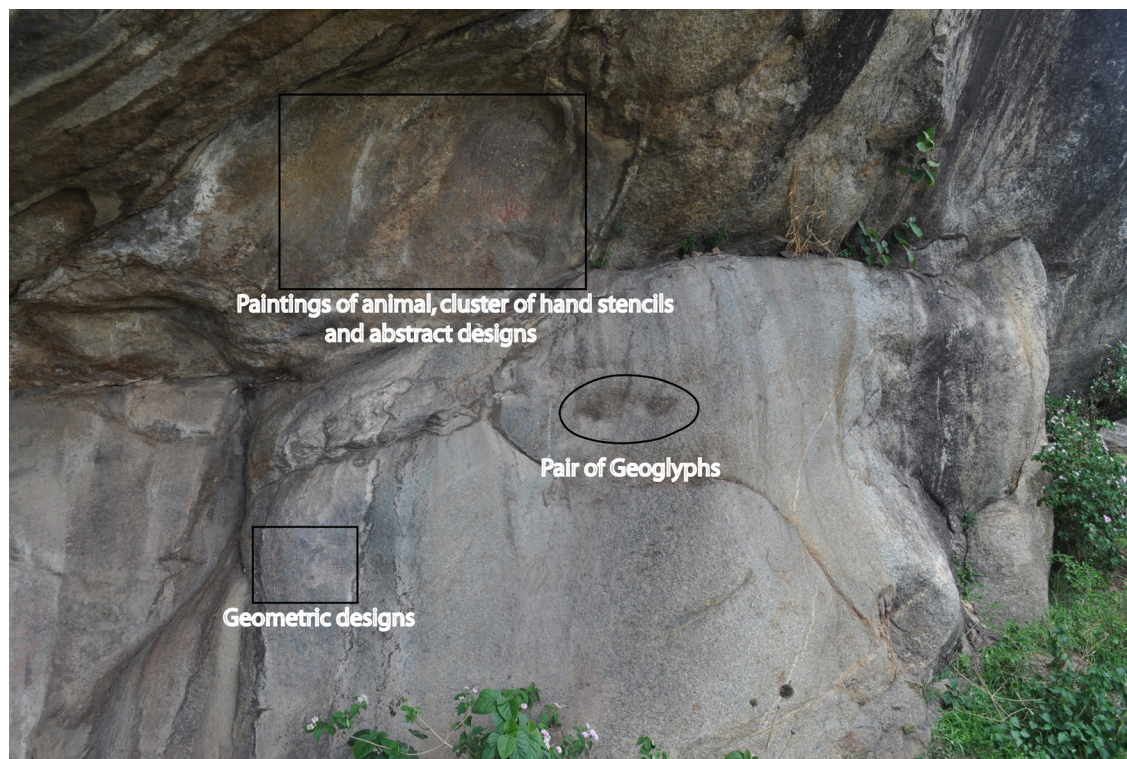


Figure 5: Rectangles and oblong circle indicate locations of different rock art clusters and occurrence of natural pair of geoglyphs on the wall of rock shelter

made using this technique. A pair of abstract design is filled with yellow color at the inner profile. On the lower panel, a cluster of geometric patterns with intersecting lines and circles are clubbed together inside a rectangular enclosure. 2) On the other hand, hand stencils and other faded paintings made of red ochre are completely filled from inside, i.e., a silhouette style. Hand stencils may have made by pouring the hand in color and stamped over the rock surface.

Tracing of Rock art using Adobe Illustrator

After enhancing the paintings through D-stretch software, figures are traced using adobe illustrator 10, which produce clearer picture of nature of rock art (Fig. 6).

Estate of Preservation

Condition of the paintings on the lower portion of the wall seems to be very good and damages are only done by modern people reside near by the site. Hand stencils, animal figure and a pair of unidentified designs are quite damaged due to exfoliation of the rock surface and water seepage to that portion.

Microliths

Scatters of microlithic debitage, flakes and blade cores are found on the slope, around 25 meters down to the rock shelters. Artifacts were recovered from black silt deposit exposed on the slope due to erosion of the soil caused by rain. They are made on quartzite, crystal quartz, smoky quartz, agate and chert. Few finished tools, as scrapers, side scrapers, parallel side blades, retouched blades, notched blades, microblade are also present as a part of an assemblage. Apart from microliths, one bigger flake of quartzitic sandstone and one broken pebble made of quartzite with coarse grain with weathered surface was also recovered from the site. (Fig. 7).

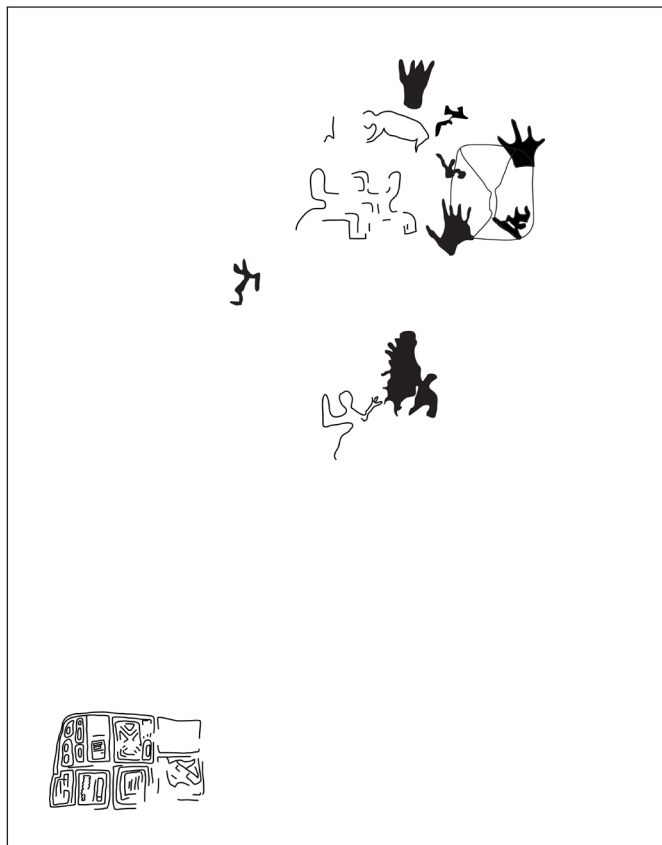


Figure 6: Rock paintings traced on the wall of rock shelter using adobe photoshop illustrator 10



1- 10 microlithic cores, 11- Side scraper, 12- Parallel side blade, 13- Notched blade, 14, 15- Retouched blades, 16, 17- Scrapers, 18- 23- flakes of quartzitic Sandstone, 25- Broken Hammer stone.

Figure 7: Microliths and stone tools recovered from the site

Threat to the Site

Various anthropogenic activities like, use of shelter by the locals for drinking liquor is a threat to the paintings as modern names and traces of black color markings are found to appear near close to the paintings and nearby it on the wall, which could lead the destruction of painted geometric designs. Apart from this, stone quarry activities on the hill is another threat to the site. Encroachment of surrounding area of the hill is another threat to the site indirectly, as people have occupied the portion of the foothill, which has traces of historical brick remains, and now it is completely transformed into modern toilets and small quarters. Apart from all these, amateur researchers have tried to highlight the painting through the use of water and chalk, damaged the paintings of geometric designs, which began to fade now.

Other Archaeological and Historical Sites Near the Site

Traces of brick remains of historical period with sporadic occurrence of plain Red Ware just down to the hill close to the foot of it have been noticed by the author, which is been rapidly destroying be modern encroachment. Apart from this, traces of few red ware around 100 meters west to the hill indicate some sort of small ancient settlement as well.

Local Believes towards the Rock Art

The locals of Bharamtoli village have different believes towards the rock art. Some of the informants mentions the occurrence of geometric designs clustered together as a code to open the door of the cave. Few of them mentioned about hand stencil as devils hand stencil and some of them consider the pair of geoglyphs as eyes of Goddess Durga. Since the village seems to be later settlement, the association of paintings with villagers or their ancestors cannot be possible.

Ethnographic and Archaeological Comparison

Rock paintings depicted at the site has a few parallel in rock art of northern Jharkhand, particularly, Chatra, Hazaribagh and Ramgarh (Neumayor 1994: 80- 84; Chakrabarty 1996: 74- 99; Jha 2014: 92- 96; Shekhar and Kim 2014: 297- 304). Hand stencil is also reported from the site of Satpahar in Chatra district (Imam 2007). Geometric designs are very common in sites of Isko of Hazaribagh, Banpur, Thetangi, Sidpa and Raham of Chatra and Lekhani gupha of Ramgarh districts, respectively. Such paintings are also common in Southern part of Bihar (Prasad 2012: 61- 68), Odisha (Pradhan 1995: 5- 16), Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and adjoining region of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (Pawar *et al.* 2013: 55- 63). Few of such symbols are also found in Jhinhari in Uttar Pradesh (Gupta and Banerjee 1984: 79- 83).

Various geometric designs are part of *Sohrai* and *Kohvar* art of the ethnic communities, such as, Mundas, Oraons, Santhal and so on. They are considered as auspicious symbols mostly related to fertility. The symbol of Godhani are most common geometric symbols in mural art among Gonds of central India and Mundas and Oraons of eastern India, mainly depicted in the house walls and even some times in the caves and rock shelters by these group of people during agricultural festivals (Pathak 2013: 48; Pawar *et al.* 2013: 55- 63; Shekhar and Kim 2014: 300 & 302; Shekhar *et. al.* 2019; 615). Hand stencils of white color, made of rice paste are very common ritualistic procedure, performed by the tribals in the region during the festive occasions. The symbol of Godhani, superimposed by hand stencils indicate the spiritual believe of the authors of rock art towards the symbol at the site of Bharamtoli hills.

Such Godhani symbols are still made at the site of *Bhimgupha* in Chatra district over the ancient ones during the festive occasion of Sohrai by the Oraon community of the area. In fact, they are worshipped by Oraon and Tana Bhagat community of North Jharkhand at *Bhimgupha* (Shekhar *et al.* 2019: 619) and Thetangi Rock art site (Imam 2013). This symbol is universally reported from different archaeological site, right from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic phase and continued to be popular as auspicious symbol among the agro-pastoral communities of eastern and central India.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, it can be argued that cluster of geometric design found at lower portion of rock shelter are very common painting found in rock art of Jharkhand. Such paintings are commonly found in most of the rock art sites of northern Jharkhand. They are probably belonging to certain rituals associated with the local ethnic groups, i.e., Mundas and Oraon, who have a sort of parallel of depicting such geometric designs in their mural art. Even the hand stencils in red ochre at the upper portion of the shelter has ethnographic parallel in the mural art of these ethnic groups.

The region is occupied by the tribal communities from long time and they believe in concept of worshipping hill god “*Buru bongra*”, (spirit resides in hills and mountains) as they believe in nature worship. By the time, they have been converted into Christian and do not show any sort of worshipping the shelters or paintings, but tradition of worshipping the rock art and caves in neighboring districts and even drawing rock art in few caves shows that affinity of rock art with such geometric designs can be given to the tribal community of the region.

Antiquity of geometric designs in rock art at the site belong to the late; probably historical period, even though, very simple form of such geometric figures can belong to the earlier phase, as they are found right from Neolithic phase in different archaeological context at many sites, and gradual developed forms appear late on during chalcolithic, early historic and historic period and even in contemporary mural art of eastern and central India. Since, such geometric symbols are found from the region of Jharkhand with continuity of tradition, it is difficult to date these paintings, besides any scientific analysis. The red ochre paintings seem to be superimposed over the green paintings in upper panel and it is obvious that they belong to the later phase, with probably closer relation to contemporary tribal rituals and art.

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