



Case Study of Rock-Cut Caves at Nanij, Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra

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Abstract: Not many rock cut caves have been discovered from the District of Ratnagiri compared to those found in Deccan uplands. This may be due to the unavailability of suitable material, despite that fact, substantial number of rock-cut caves have been identified by various scholars. These rock-cut architecture is either in the form of Monolithic shrines or caves. One such rock-cut cave has been discovered in the Ratnagiri taluka of the Ratnagiri district. Not only that few memorial stones and fascinatingly terracotta figurines have been reported. The paper will discuss about the presence of these rock-cut cave along with other archaeological remains and their scope for further research.

Keywords: Konkan, Memorial Stones, Ratnagiri, Rock-Cut Caves, Terracotta Figurines

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INTRODUCTION

Konkan is a strip of land located between the Sahyadri mountain range and the Arabian Sea. The Konkan region comprises today's Mumbai, Palghar, Thane, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts. Districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg are considered as the South Konkan. For this paper, we will be focusing on this region. Geomorphologically region of South Konkan consists of low-lying lateritic plateaus. Thus, laterite rock has large spread and can be found almost everywhere in this region. Laterite is not much suitable for excavation and sculpting due to the porosity of the rock. Still, rock-cut caves can be seen in many districts across the Konkan region. Leaving aside the notable exception of Panhale Kaji caves where cluster of twenty-nine caves have been identified. (Deshpande, 1986). Caves at Katalgaon-Jawade can be considered as another exception. "These caves at Katalgaon-Jawade are immensely significant with regard to understand Śaivait and Vaiṣṇavite activities in the Deccan in general and Konkan in particular" (Joge, et al., 2018).

Number of rock-cut caves have been identified and documented across the Ratnagiri district. Many of the caves in this region are concentrated around the southern talukas of Ratnagiri district, this

includes Ratnagiri, Rajapur and Lanja taluka. For this paper we will be focusing on the rock-cut cave reported from the village of Nanij. (Fig. 1)

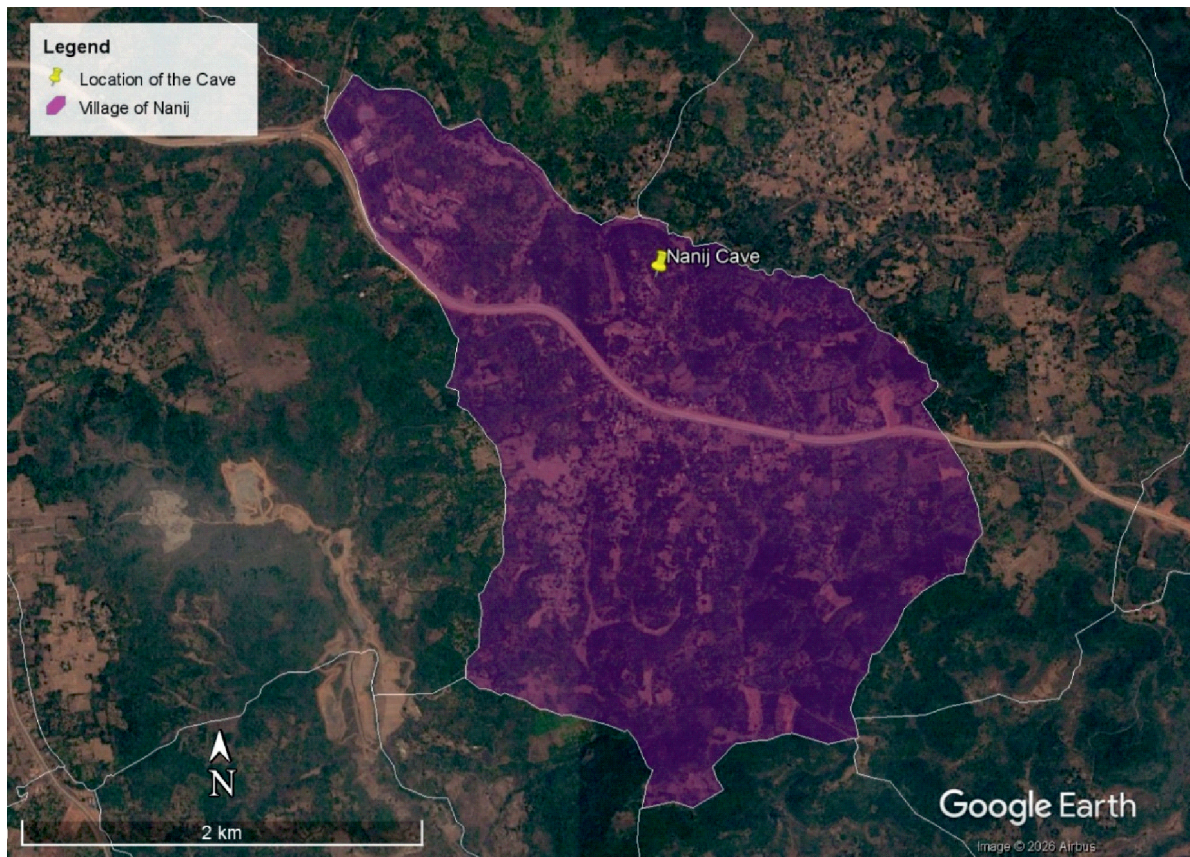


Figure 1: Location of Nanij Cave

METHODOLOGY

Initially, after learning about these caves from the locals, field survey was undertaken. The caves were visited, and photographs were taken, measurements were recorded, along with the layout of the cave was created. Terracotta figurines have also been identified and documented. Memorial stone have been documented. The digital sketches were created. Additionally, for easy understanding and to create repository each of the memorial stone has been given a code. The coding is as follows:

No.	Attribute	Coding	Coding Abbreviation
1	Country	India	Ind
2	State	Maharashtra	Mh
3	District	Ratnagiri	Rtg
4	Taluka / Tehsil	Ratnagiri	Rtg
5	Village	Nanij	Nnj
6	Location	L1	
7	Serial No.	1	

NANIJ CAVE

Village of Nanij is located approximately 35 kilometres away from the city centre of Ratnagiri. The village is located in the Ratnagiri taluka and shares the border with the Lanja taluka, both located in

the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. One cave has been identified from the village. Additionally, terracotta figurines have also been reported along with memorial stones.

Cave (Fig. 2)

Cave ($16^{\circ}58'38.59''\text{N}$ $73^{\circ}32'3.62''\text{E}$) is excavated into the lateritic hill. It is located approximately 210 meters above sea level. Villagers consider this cave as sacred. A square shaped door has been carved into the hill; there is no carving inside of the cave. One theory is that the cavity already existed, door was later carved out of the hill to make it easily accessible. Cave measures around 12 by 8 feet and its approximate area is 97 sq. ft. (Fig. 3) Door measures around 6.8 by 5.3 feet, and thickness is about 1.4 feet. (Fig. 4) No other element of rock-cut cave is observed near or even the inside of the cave. Inside of the cave seems to be the naturally occurring cavity.



Figure 2: Rock-Cut Cave

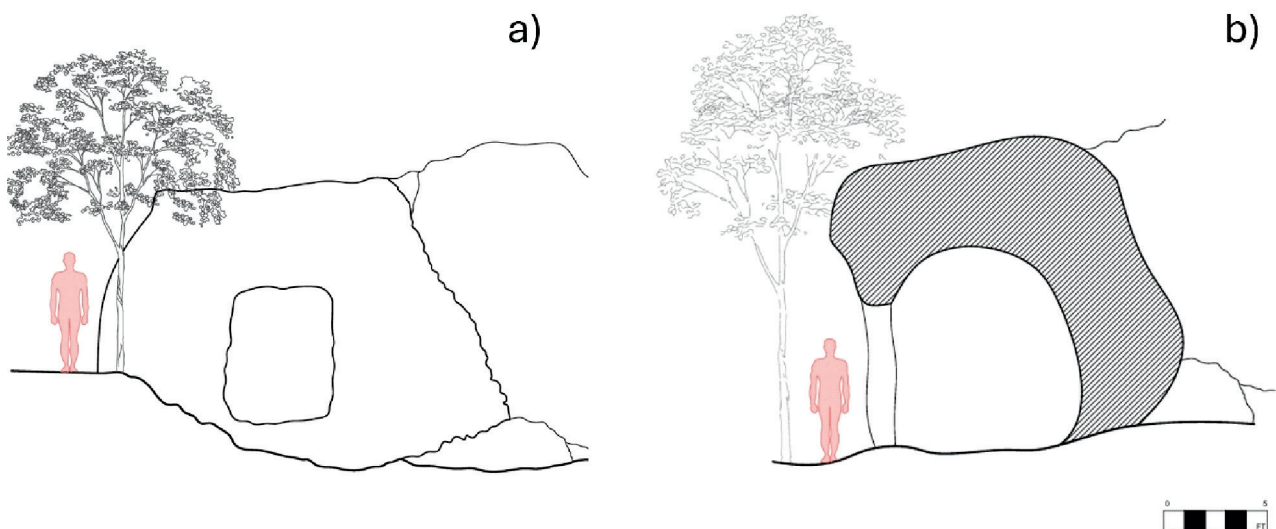


Figure 3: a) Elevation Profile b) Section Drawing

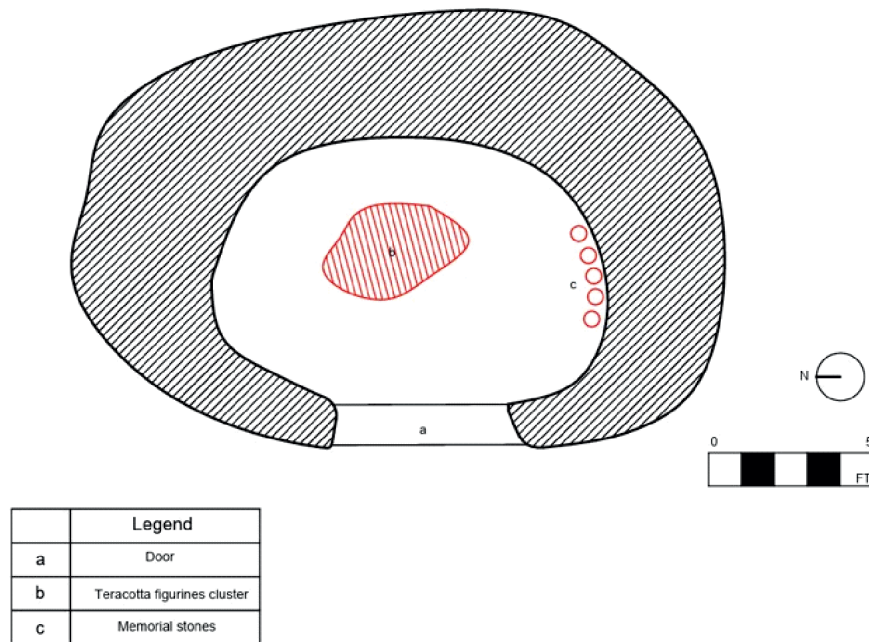


Figure 4: Layout of the Rock-Cut Cave

MEMORIAL STONES

Fascinatingly, the cave is considered as sacred, and the memorial stones are worshipped as gods, other than two broken basaltic stones are also worshipped. (Fig. 5) It should be noted that, nearly all the memorial stones found in this region are usually placed in the vicinity of the *Grāmadevatā* temple (Temple of Village Guardian Deity / Deities). Although no memorial stone has been found from the *Dhāvajīśvara – Jākādevī* Temple which is the guardian deity of the village. Total of 3 memorial stones have been identified, out of which two are Herostones and one is *Satī*. All of the stones have been deteriorated and eroded. But based on the carvings memorial stones can be identified.

No.	Code	Type of Memorial Stone	Measurements (in feet)
1	Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/1	Satistone	1.3 x 0.8
2	Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/2	Herostone	2 x 0.9
3	Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/2	Herostone	2 x 0.10

(a) Memorial Stone No. 1 - Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/1

Memorial Stone No. 1 is an *Satī*, this memorial stone is broken and highly eroded. Despite that it can be identified based on the partial depiction of hand and couple itself. On the bottom two people can be seen seated with their legs folded and hands are depicted in *Aṃjalīmudrā*. Based on the partial depiction available, it can be speculated that on the left side of the memorial stone there was depiction of hand of *Satī*.

(a) Memorial Stone No. 2 - Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/2

This memorial stone is an Herostone and it contain three panels. Bottom panel (0.8 x 0.8) depicts the dual between the hero and enemy combatant. Hero is depicted on the left with Sword and Shield in his hand, whereas enemy combatant is depicted with raised hand holding the sword. Hero is depicted

slightly taller than the opposing person. Middle panel (0.5 x 0.8) consists of depiction of hero being carried to heaven by two *Apsarās*. Hero is depicted in the middle with both of his hands on the shoulders of *Apsarās* as he is being carried to heaven and *Apsarās* are shown flanking him on both sides. Top panel (0.5 x 0.7) is extremely deteriorated, but based on previous two panels, it could be speculated that this panel shows Hero worshipping a *Śivaliṃga* in heaven. Even though depicting is quite eroded it, outline of two figures can be seen on both sides of the panel. This could be hero himself and *Purohita*.

(a) Memorial Stone No. 3 - Ind/Mh/Rtg/Rtg/Nnj/L1/3

Memorial Stone No. 3 can be an Herostone, but it only contains two panels. Bottom panel (0.8 x 0.7) depicts the battle scene between hero and his rival. Only difference being that here hero can be seen battling with two enemy combatants. Hero can be seen brandishing the sword and holding a shield, whereas the first enemy combatant is also shown raised sword. One more enemy combatant can be seen right behind the first one. (0.5 x 0.6) Here only hero's descent into heaven is shown, top panel which usually consists of the scene where on the left side hero is depicted worshipping the *Śivaliṃga* while on the right-side *Purohita* can be seen performing the ritual, as his hand is raised above is completely missing. Middle of them there is a depiction of *Śivaliṃga*. *Kalaśa* can be observed on top of the topmost panel; this could mean that omission of the topmost panel depicting worship is deliberate not an mistake.

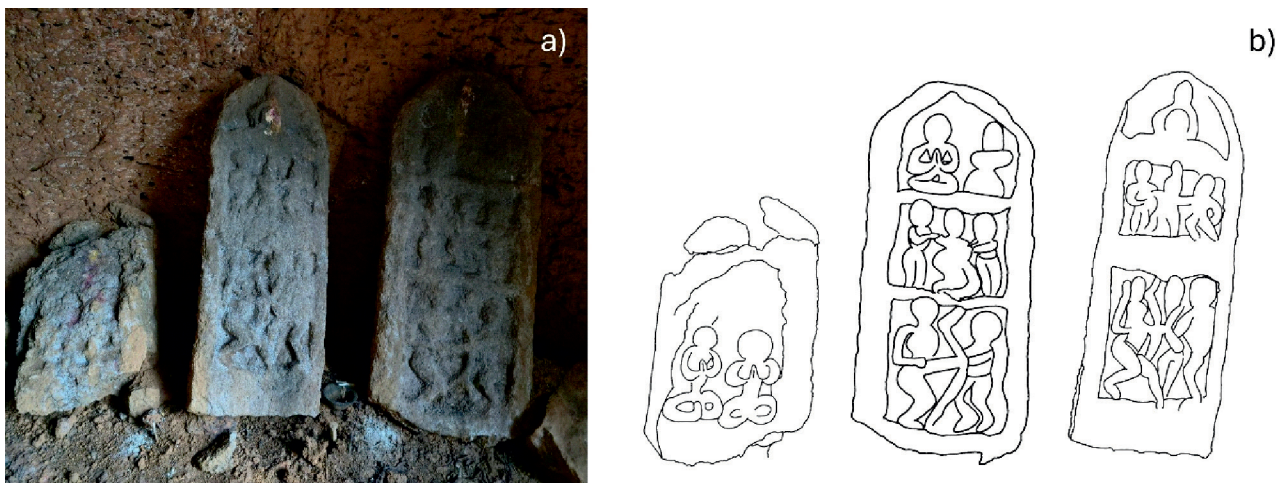


Figure 5: a) Memorial Stones b) Digital Sketches (Left to Right)

TERRACOTTA FIGURINES

In the middle of the cave terracotta figurines have been found kept on the ground. As of now terracotta figurines have not been reported from the Ratnagiri district, except the sole discovery of Terracotta figurines from Tervan in the Rajapur Taluka of Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. (Hadap, 2015). Large numbers of terracotta figurines have been reported from the site of Buimpal in the Sattari Taluka of North Goa District in the state of Goa. There total of 182 figurines of different animals, birds and human figures have been discovered. (Apte, et al., 2025) These figures are also considered as sacred by the locals.

More than hundred such terracotta figurines can be observed in the cave at Nanij. These figures approximately measure around 9 cm in height, 15 cm in length and 6 cm in width. These terracotta

figurines are exclusively those of the Horses and Bulls, out of which bulls dominated in numerical value compared to the horses. Bulls have been depicted with humps on their back. There is no uniform shape for these figurines, all of them are somewhat cylindrical and puffy. Some of them are also in vessel-like shape. All of the figures have comparatively larger holes on their backside which is also shaped properly like a rim.



Figure 6: Terracotta Figurines

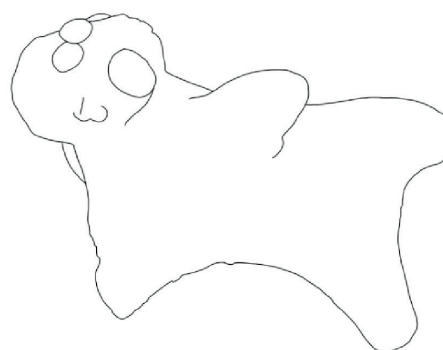
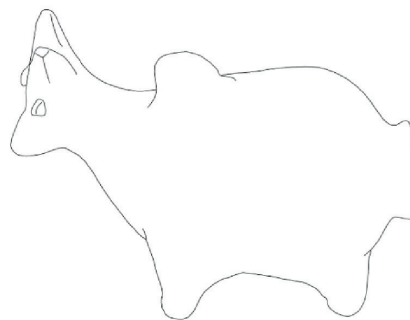


Figure 7: Bull Figurines

One thing remains unclear is the purpose of these figurines. Unlike their counterparts in Goa which were crafted during the times of Kumeri cultivation (Slash and Burn Agriculture). Terracotta figurines from Nanij do not show any affinity to Kumeri cultivation, as no traces of such practice is known to the villagers. Cultural surveys must be conducted in order to come to any conclusion. Intriguingly, terracotta figurines from Nanij and Buimpal share a common aspect. In both of these villages' terracotta figurines are supposed to be offered during the Navratri and subsequent Dasara festival. As previously mentioned, cultural surveys need to be undertaken to get more clarity in this matter.

OBSERVATIONS

This solitary cave seems to be unfinished, except the door portion not a single piece of rock was excavated, including roof and even the floor. Not only rock-cut caves but also number of memorial stones have been found in the neighbouring villages. But all of those are perfectly cut with square or rectangular chambers unlike this one. It is difficult to ascertain its religious affiliation, due to absence of plinth or any architectural element. Although, the presence of terracotta figurines and the memorial stones indicates that it could be associated with the ancestral worship and is somehow connected to the agricultural practices in one way or another. Even though the depiction on these memorial stones is highly eroded, they can be identified. Digital sketches also bring out some of the details which could not be clearly identified in the photographs. Stylistically the memorial stones can be dated back to the medieval period. and it is also difficult to ascertain the timeframe for the terracotta figurines; it can be speculated that this tradition can be traced back to at least couple of hundred years. Some of the figurines are relatively new.

CONCLUSIONS

The rock-cut cave at Nanij is one of the most important find as it hosts number of memorial stones as well as large numbers of terracotta figurines. All of this could help us in tracing the antiquity of the cave. Rock-Cut Cave, Terracotta figurines and Memorial Stones cannot be assigned the same timeframe. It could be speculated that earliest development on this site could be the excavation of the cave, terracotta figurines and subsequent worship could have come later. The last phase of development could be the memorial stones. As the cave was already established as a sacred place, people may have brought memorial stone to the cave and kept it inside. Further cultural and archaeological surveys need to be undertaken in this region to get better understanding.

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