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Michel Lorblanchet



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Rock Paintings of Pachmarhi Hills

Meenakshi Dubey

The Pachmarhi Hills form one of the most beautiful parts of the Satpura Range (fig. 3 bottom). The region is rich in rock shelters which have been occupied and decorated by the ancestors of the inhabitants for a long period of time. The shelters are found all over the hills and the surrounding forests, although favoured sites were located along the foothills and river banks. However, many shelters are found deep in the dark, densely-forested gorges, where today sunlight merely filters through the trees to the ground. The walls and the ceilings of the shelters are covered with paintings depicting a wide range of subjects expressed in a variety of styles. This body of art forms an important part of the great heritage left to us by the early inhabitants of this region.

The Pachmarhi Hills are situated in the geographical centre of the Indian sub-continent in the State of Madhya Pradesh. The hills are, as is the bulk of the Satpura Range, formed of the Gondwana sandstone belonging to the Gondwana series of the Talcher Group formations. The sandstone sequence is of the upper Gondwana formation. The sandstone is relatively friable and, on weathering, forms the sandy soil found at the foot of the hills. The town of Pachmarhi is located on 22°29' north and 78°30' east and situated at an elevation of 3717 ft above sea level.

The area covered by the present study is quite large and access to it is difficult. The hills are thickly vegetated with rich floristic and faunal biota. The natural species represented in the rock art were of great economical importance to the shelter-dwellers. Rock paintings found within shelters here are the major source of our understanding of how their creators related to their physical, biological and cultural environments. These people, as do their descendants at the present time, held beliefs and practices which expressed a direct or indirect relationship between their environment and themselves. Within this body of expression, art plays an important and a multifaceted role.

The painted rock shelters of Pachmarhi Hills were brought to the notice of D.H. Gordon (1958) by G.R. Hunter. Hunter had excavated here in 1932 and again in 1934-35. The 1935 excavation revealed that the cultural sequence within this region commenced during the Mesolithic, confirming that the Pachmarhi Hills were not occupied during the Palaeolithic. Thus, the rock paintings of this region are of the Mesolithic and later periods (Khare 1984).

The Mesolithic paintings clearly depict a society of hunters and gatherers. In the main they portray man and his relationship with animals. The subject matter of this period is quite varied, although game animals are most frequently represented. Bulls, bisons, elephants, wild boars, deer, tigers, buffaloes, dogs, monkeys and crocodiles appear alongside smaller species such as rats, lizards and fish. Some of the birds are identified as peacocks and others resemble jungle fowl. Arthropods, such as scorpions and wild bees were also depicted. The hunters are portrayed using spears, axes, sticks and bows and arrows.

Female figures are occasionally shown. Sexual life does have a place in Mesolithic art, but is not very prominent and male and female union is rarely shown.

It seems that dances were important for ceremonial or entertainment purposes during this period. For these dances headdresses and animal masks representing donkeys, rhinoceroses, bulls or monkeys were worn.

The compositional elements of these Mesolithic paintings are highly developed. They represent an element of the creative spirit of the early people. That their aesthetic sense had developed to a high degree can be seen in geometric designs and in paintings of the X-ray style.

The importance of the rock art of this region lies in its documentation of the lifestyles and technical progress of the societies in central India, a sequence that extends from the Stone Age to the early and medieval historic periods.

In Pachmarhi Hills most of the paintings are from the historical period. Conflict is one of the main themes depicted during this time. War scenes are common but reasons for conflict are not indicated. Horsemen armed with swords and shields overlie the earlier paintings portraying the life of hunters and gatherers. They bear elaborate military equipment consisting of spears, axes, swords, shields, daggers and bows and arrows. Other individuals carry drums and trumpets, and foot soldiers as well as men riding caparisoned horses and elephants are depicted. Goats, dogs, oxen, donkeys and performing monkeys accompany the troops.

The descendants of the original hunters and gatherers and artists of this region are the tribal Korkus and Gonds who still uphold some of the traditions of their ancestors. In the rock paintings their ancestors are depicted dancing in pairs or in rows and playing musical instruments. They hunted animals and collected honey from the hives of wild bees. Their mode of dress was quite simple. The women carried food and water and looked after the children. The forebears of the present-day tribal people had a variety of ways to express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos.

The tribal people living in these hills have wooden memorial boards on which the carved horse and its rider is similar to those painted by their predecessors in the past on the walls of their rock shelters (figs 2 top and 7). They also decorate the walls of their houses and this activity seems to have its roots in the cave-

dwelling traditions of their ancestors. Men and horses of geometric construction are randomly spaced across the walls. Such paintings are done during the rainy season and on festive occasions, and bear a close resemblance to those found in the painted shelters (fig. 7).

The wall paintings of the houses, as the great majority of rock paintings, are executed in red and yellow pigments prepared from haematite or other iron oxides. The white pigment was made from limestone or kaolin, while mixtures of pigments that produce pinks are also found used in paintings.

The rock paintings were executed in a number of stylistic conventions. Some are only sketches or constructs of lines, while others are silhouettes infilled with colours and embellished with decorative designs. In this paper I analyze a number of important paintings found in this region.

Marodeo Rock Shelters

MI Shelter

These sites are located some 11 km from Pachmarhi in densely-forested hills. They can be reached by taking a right turn 2 km on the Pachmarhi-Piparia road, then following a track for 1 km and finally going due east for some 8 km.

There is a large shelter, 48 m long, 35 m high with a 7 m deep overhang. The paintings are found some 2.5 m above ground level and extend across the length of the shelter. The subjects depicted can be classified into five groups: animal species, human figures, war scenes, hunting exploits and geometric figures.

Representations of animals are very common in the rock art of this region. In this shelter there is a long series of monkeys extending over 3 m and executed as full white silhouettes. Another painting depicts a large, aggressive rhinoceros associated with a smaller hunter figure carrying a bow and arrows. An elephant painting at this site is depicted with some X-ray features and illustrates the hunter's detailed knowledge of his prey.

Many of these animals continue to be worshipped by the different forest tribes of India. In this area, the Gond and Korku tribes worship Bagan Deo, a tiger deity. A painting of this animal, with its body decorated by parallel red and white lines, is found in this shelter (fig. 1 e).

Human figures are portrayed in two stylistic variations: as naturalistic representations, and as schematized geometric forms with the body constructed of straight lines and with a square or rectangular head (fig. 1 a). Conflict is represented by human figures holding swords and shield. The mode of combat indicates that the people would form groups which sought to dominate each other.



Figure 1 Paintings from Marodeo shelters I and II. Red figures (*a,e*), geometric motifs, trees and cross worship (*b*) from Marodeo shelter I. White paintings from Marodeo shelter II (*b,c,d,f*).

walls are coated with clay covered with white ash. The tradition of painting continues as the Korku women decorate their house walls with paintings and sketches. They use local colours such as the dark or Indian red, yellow ochre, blue and white. The paintings are executed during the slack rainy season or, occasionally, during festive events (fig. 7c).

In the Korku society women carry out all domestic work and look after the children, while the men cultivate fields, and gather fruits and honey.

The depiction of a peacock on the wall of a house in the Kajari village situated 35 km from Pachmarhi is very similar to a rock painting found recently by the author in the Hamium Khadd shelter. A symbol painted on the same prepared wall closely resembles a rock painting of the Swem Aam shelter that has only been recently explored (fig. 7 d-e). That the two traditions share the same roots can be seen in the common subject matter and the continuing stylistic conventions displayed by the contemporary tribal artists. However, the rock art images are far more complex and symbolic than the tribal paintings.

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