

Myths and Ethno Rock Art: In the light of Kaimur inhabitants, India

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Introduction:

Modern day tribal and folk groups apparently do not ‘associate themselves with such art in their areas, except to explain it as the work of evil spirits or epic heroes.’ A similar opinion has been expressed about the rock art in Odisha, India, where ‘the local people do not attach any special significance to these rock art sites. To them, the works of art in the shelters are the works of the heavenly bodies or that of the ghosts. They often consider it a taboo to touch such works of art.’ Sometimes the art is defined by the oral traditions or folklores and myths. Myths acts as a body of community knowledge and a mode of communication contribute much towards creating a culturally responsive curriculum for children in different socio-cultural contexts. Local knowledge as a socio-cultural system offers the schools with the verities of pre-school knowledge which the school is unable to explore due to its monoculture curriculum. Near Bhimbetka, the local belief is that witches paint on these rocks during the dark nights of *Kanhaiya Art (Shri Krishna Janamashthami)* every year.

Since prehistoric times, people orally transmitted their experiences, beliefs and important events in the form of stories or legends from generation to generation. Although there are significant cultural differences throughout history, many of these oral traditions appear to be more or less similar and they help in better understanding of the antiquarian remains. The present study is based on the author’s personal survey from 2009 to 2016 in the region of Kaimur, Bihar state, India. He documented several folktales related to the rock art sites in the said region. The present condition of the tribes of Kaimur and the people of the adjoining plain region, their customs, dress, habitations, rituals, mode of worship, behavior and methods of herding and cultivation reminds us of the characteristics features of the proto-historic people, and there is enough archaeological evidence to prove this. This speculation

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need not take us far from the reality and one may hope that in future it will prove to be authentic.

The Kaimur plateau and foothills are predominantly inhabited even now, as before, by aboriginals i.e., tribes and semi-tribes (such as the *Oraons*, *Cheros*, *Kharwars*, *Bhuiyans*, *Karias*, etc.) who now reside in the village, mostly in mud-built houses. The region of Kaimur shows a pre-historic base to the religious practices widely prevalent in the region, as evident in the paintings depicted in the caves and rock-shelters. The local people refer to these caves as *Khoh*, which means shelter in the regional language of Kaimur. Significantly, the tradition of painting on the wall of their houses still continues, sometimes with the same kind of symbols and patterns seen in the rock paintings, besides some modified ones. Curiously enough, the tradition of colour preparation with the powdered geru, oil, *sindur* (vermillion), juice of the bark trees and of beans and other vegetation etc., is prevalent even now amongst the tribal folks of this region. It may thus be surmised that this tradition of colour preparation and using them for painting various figures and patterns on the walls may have had been certainly handed down from generations, since the earliest rock painters devised them.

Rock Art Sites of Kaimur

The rock art of Kaimur is already known to the¹ academic forum. The region is located in the state of Bihar, India. The viewpoint highlighted in the present research paper is

¹ Tiwary, S.K. 2010. Management of Rock Art Sites, *Pragya-Bharati* Vol. XV, K.P.Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, pp. 38-44, *see also* Tiwary, S.K. 2011. South Asian arts: Continuity of Nari-Uttana-hastapada/Aditiuttanapada and Charkhopadaine: An Ethno-archaeological study, *A Online Journal of Cultural expression in South Asia*, *South Asian Arts*; Tiwary, S.K. 2011-12. Rock art by Early Man: Origin, Purpose and Variety, *Kala-Vaibhava*, Joint Volume-XX, Khiragarh, pp. 201-212; Tiwary, S.K. 2012-13. Comparative Study Kaimur and Central Indian Rock Art, *Bharati*-37, Dept. of AIHC & Archaeology, Varanasi; Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Decoding death: Connotation of the Cross in the Circle in Indian Rock Art, *International Rock Art Symposium*, XXV Valcamonica Symposium, Italy, Europe, pp.381-388; Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Newly Discovered Rock Art Heritage in the Kaimur Range of Bihar, India, (Edi.) Gori Tumi Echevarría López, *Bulletin APAR* Vol. 5 (17-18). Peru, South America, pp.821-827; Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Newly discovered Rock Art Sites in the Kaimur Range of Bihar, India, *Ancient Planet* 6, pp. 1-16; Tiwary, S.K. 2015. Petroglyphs in the Kaimur Range of Eastern India, *Pleistocene Coalition News* 7(3), pp.8-9; Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Ethnic Roots of Cultural Tradition Illustrated in Kaimur Rock Art, *Ancient Asia*, 4: 2, *Ancient Asia* is the Official Annual Journal of the Society of South Asian Archaeology (SOSAA), a peer-reviewed open access journal, London, United Kingdom, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/aa.12308>.

not earlier noticed nor even hinted by the author or any rock art researcher of this region. Rock art of Kaimur² is well known from Chand³, Rampur, Bhagwanpur⁴, Chainpur and Adhaura blocks⁵ of the Kaimur district and Rohtas district⁶. But the most important and the old pictographs are mainly reported from Adhaura range which is close to Mesolithic sites and has distinct geographical setting from rest of the blocks. The region Adhaura is close to Jharkhand and the chain of rock shelters along the river Son is unique. The landscape of this particular region is quite different. Whereas the rock art of this region and other regional rock art are very much similar in the context of landscape, their content varied⁷.

Ethno Rock Art

After thoughtful reflection, the author came out with a new term propounded the “*ETHNO ROCK ART*”⁸. Though it was coined in the context of Kaimur rock art while the author was engaged in field work from 2009 to 2016, it was eventually understood that the term can be used to all such rock arts in global context as well. This justifies the universal application of the newly devised term. In short we can say that, “*Ethno-rock art is a concept involving study of ethnic groups that practice rock art or similar art forms on various media during various occasions, for better interpretation and understanding of rock art*’.

Myths of the local inhabitants:

² Tiwary, S.K. 2015. Rock Art of Kaimur Region, Bihar, (Ed.) Ajit Kumar, Rock Art:Recent Researches and New Perspectives (Festschrift to Padma Shri. Dr.Yashodhar Mathpal) (Vol. I & II), New Bharatiya Book Corporation, New Delhi, pp.275-286; Tiwary, S.K. 2013. A Note on the Recently Discovered Gouging Art in Kaimur Region of Uttar Pradesh, District Chandauli, Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society 104 (3), Bangalore, pp. 99-102.

³ Tiwary, S.K. 2015. Discovery of Rock Art in the Khaniya Hill of Kaimur Range, Chand Block, Kaimur, Bihar, (Edi.) Vinay Kumar & Brijesh Rawat, Mani-Sushma: Archaeology and Heritage (Dr. B.R.Mani Felicitation Volume) Vol-II, B.R.Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, pp.535-538.

⁴ Tiwary, S.K. 2014. Newly Discovered Rock Art Heritage from Bhagwanpur, Block of Kaimur District, Bihar, Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 2, pp.810-829.

⁵ Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Rock Art Heritage of Adhaura block of Kaimur district, Bihar, Pragya-Bharati XVI, K.P.Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, pp. 9-23; *see also* Tiwary, S.K. 2014. Newly Discovered Rock Art Sites in Adhaura Block of Kaimur Region, Bihar, History Today 15, New Delhi, pp. 144-146

⁶ Tiwary, S.K., 2013, Rock art discoveries in Rohtas plateau region, Rohtas district, Bihar, Man and Environment XXXVIII (2), Pune, pp. 86-91.

⁷ Tiwary, S.K. 2012. A study of rock shelters from Nagauri hill, Madhya Pradesh, Man and Environment Vol. XXXVII (1), Pune, pp. 64-69.

⁸ Tiwary, S.K. 2013. Ethnic Roots of Cultural Tradition Illustrated in Kaimur Rock Art, Ancient Asia, 4: 2, Ancient Asia is the Official Annual Journal of the Society of South Asian Archaeology (SOSAA), a peer-reviewed open access journal, London, United Kingdom, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/aa.12308>.

Mythology of the local inhabitants has been a long overlooked source of information for interpreting the meaning and function of the rock art. It is fortunate that Kaimur region has extensive collection of myths that can shed light on these art depictions. Mythic narrations not only provide additional information for particular art work and symbols, but may also help to define the ferocious, ritualistic and the games structure in which they functioned⁹. In essence, it appears as if mythical narratives harbor the logic that underpins the structure of shamanic and magical rituals. In order to pursue this idea further, I have undertaken an effort to study a combination of ethnographic information and myths and use this information to suggest interpretations for selected Kaimur rock art forms. The following details are the indirect and direct evidence of local inhabitants providing descriptions of the practice of painting or art on the various household items and on the walls of their houses during special occasions and ritual practices. The following descriptions are the narrations of local inhabitants mostly related to witches and ghost and things happened that are fearful and ferocious. It is very difficult to say whether the stories are created by themselves recently or transmitted through generations.

1. Belief about *Rakat Ke Putaria* (figures of blood): According to the folk tradition, the rock paintings have been executed with the colours mixed with the blood of tiger and other animals. Names like ‘Rakat ke Putri’ (figures of blood) have been coined due to these beliefs. It is interesting to note that ‘*Chitrasutram*’ of the ‘*Vishnudharmottara Purana*, also states that decoctions of *tulsi*, *bhumimba*, *champa*, *kusha* and *maulshri* plants, milk and *sindur* provide permanency to the colours¹⁰. Besides, other ancient Indian texts such as *Brihatsamhita*, *Samarangana sutradhara*, *Aprajitaprishha*, *silparatana*, *Mansollasa* etc have described several kinds of binders known as *kalka*, *vajralepa*, *vajratala lepa*, *vajrasanghata*, *ashtabhandha*, *bandhodaka*, etc.¹¹, which were prepared with the fruits of *tendu*, *aonla*,

⁹ David, Robert J., 2010, The Archaeology of Myth: Rock Art, Ritual Objects, and Mythical Landscapes of the Klamath Basin, *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, Volume 6 Number 2 August 2010, DOI 10.1007/s11759-009-9108-x, p.384.

¹⁰ Mathapal, Y., 1984, *Prehistoric Rock Paintings of Bhimbetka Central India*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, p. 189.

¹¹ Singh, Tahsildar, 1983, *Vajralepa: Sahityik Sandarbhon ka Vivechan* (In Hindi), Dhyanam No. 2, Lucknow, pp. 53-58.

nagbala, *kaitha*, *mahua* etc., flowers of *semal*, seeds of *salai*, bark of *dhanvaja* and *vach* trees, *mayetha*, *sainj*, resins of *srivasaka*, *devdaru*, *bel*, etc. All these fruits, seeds, flowers, resin and other materials were abundantly available in the forests and mountains of this area and the literary and folk-traditions support their use to make colours.

2. The *Mahamanava*: According to the inhabitants of Kharwar and Bind, the depiction of an iconic form of large size human a representation of a *Mahamanava* (large human figure). It is called as *Mahamanava* by them because of its huge size¹². The depictions of this class of figures are always noticed along with other human and animal depiction on the wall of the cave and shelter. The evidence of this kind of portrayal are noticed from *Dewane Mokwa* (size- 92x36 cm), *Chanain Maan*, etc., in the Kaimur region. This is sometimes found engaged in different actions having tall and stout features, hence called '*mahamanava*', with heavy head gear having long and straight hair or resembling the wings of a bird (Fig.1) as discussed above affirm, in all its detail and particularity. It is hardly surprising that the Kaimur tribes have so much fear of these gigantic men, whom they believe live amongst them, invisible to the naked eye and have both positive and negative effects on the welfare of their society. Thus, it can be suggested, that contemporary ethnographical traditions, such as painting, folklore, myth and folktale, carry much cultural knowledge and show the continuity of the local belief system as reflected in the *mahamanava* figures painted on rock surfaces.

3. Local belief about *Khuni-rang* paintings, cupules and post-holes: The rock art site at Patesar in Chand Block of Kaimur district is quite interesting as the shelters have some pictographs and naturally made cup marks, post holes and cupules on the ceiling of the shelter. Villagers in this region have many views about these pictographs (Fig.2) and the naturally formed petroglyphs (Fig.3).

¹² Prasad P. C., 2001, Kaimur archaeological district gazetteer, (Edi.). Sinha, A.K., Anand, K., Dept. of Archaeology, Government of Bihar, Patna, p.3.

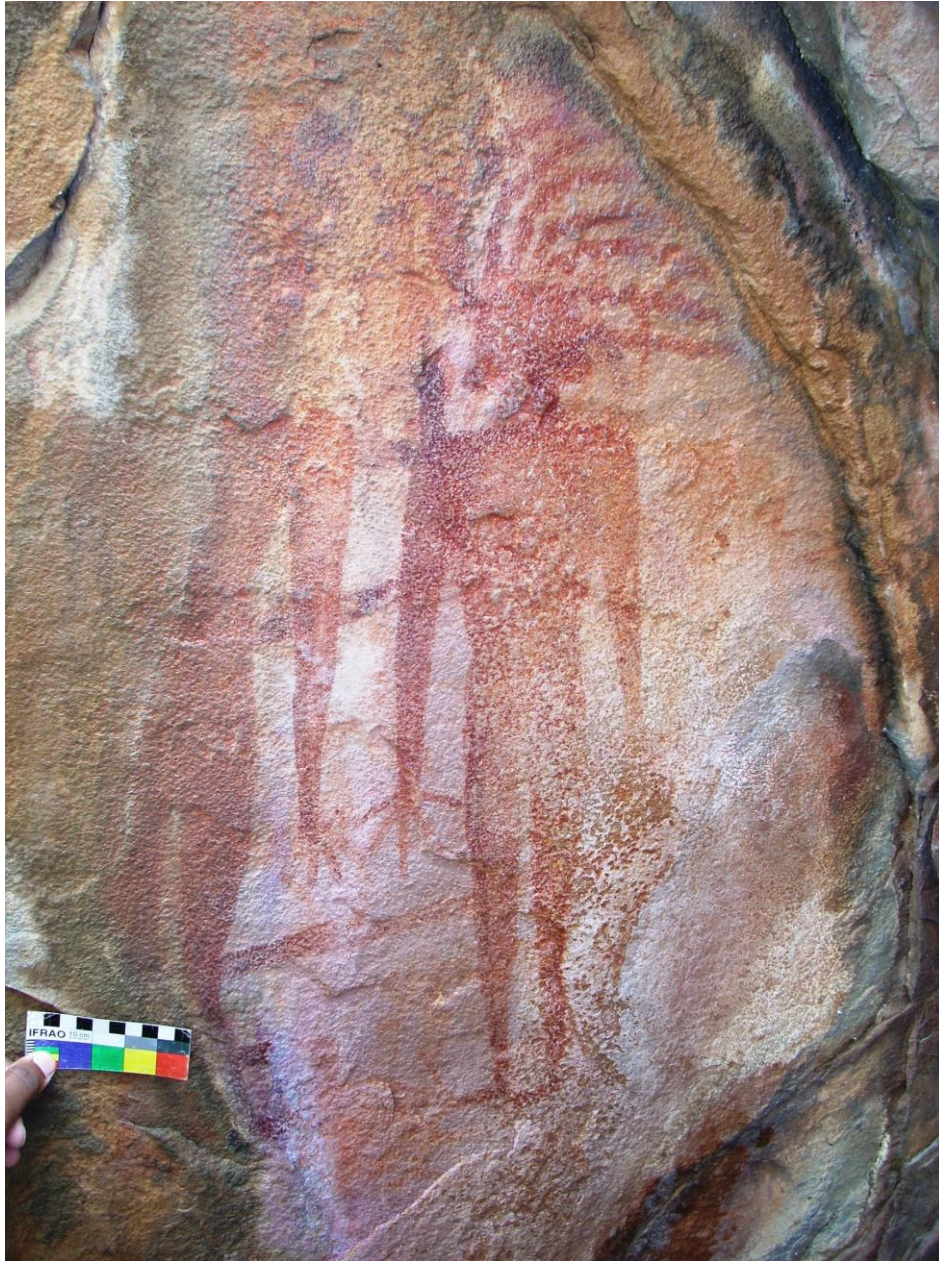


Fig.1: An iconic from of *Mahamanava* executed on the wall of Dewane Mokwa, Kaimur, Bihar, India

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Fig.2: Pictographs of human scene from Patesar, Kaimur, Bihar, India.

One such view is that *“There was a Jogi (priest), very talented and educated, living in the shelter along with his family. One day he murdered all his family members and drew this pictograph with their blood”*. Thus it received the name *Khuni rang*, which means blood-colored. The locals believe that *“these are not only figurative and iconic forms, but some are written in a mysterious script which is very difficult to decipher.”* It is interesting that the locals are curious to know why and how that *Jogi* murdered his family and what was written on the shelter wall.

Their beliefs about the post-holes and cup-marks are also interesting. According to local informants: *“The bigger holes are the result of the gigantic man’s head impressed on this rock, the smaller hole shows the place where his elbow was pushed into the rock surface and the smallest cupule-like indentations are the giant’s thumb prints on the rock surface.”*

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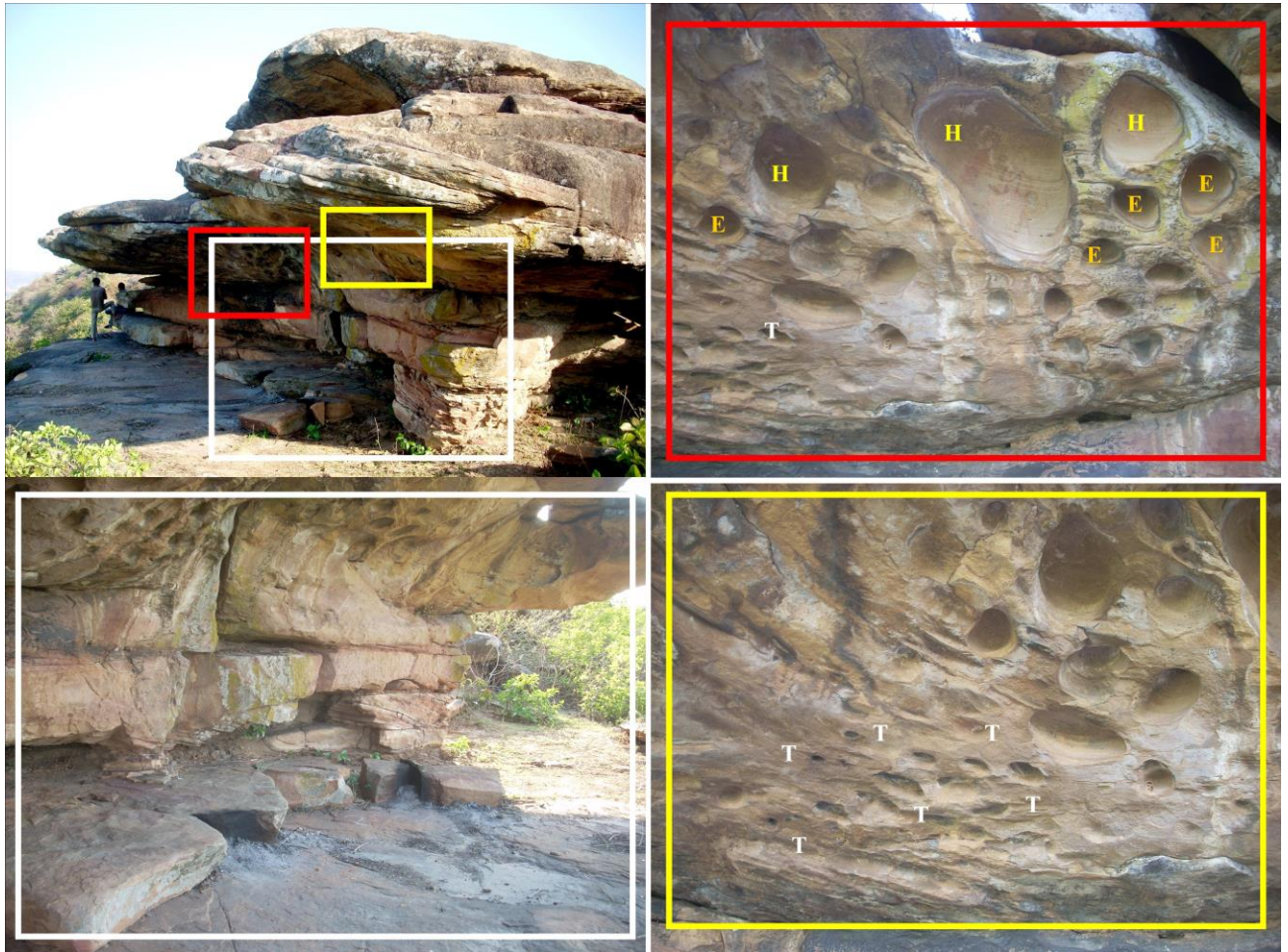
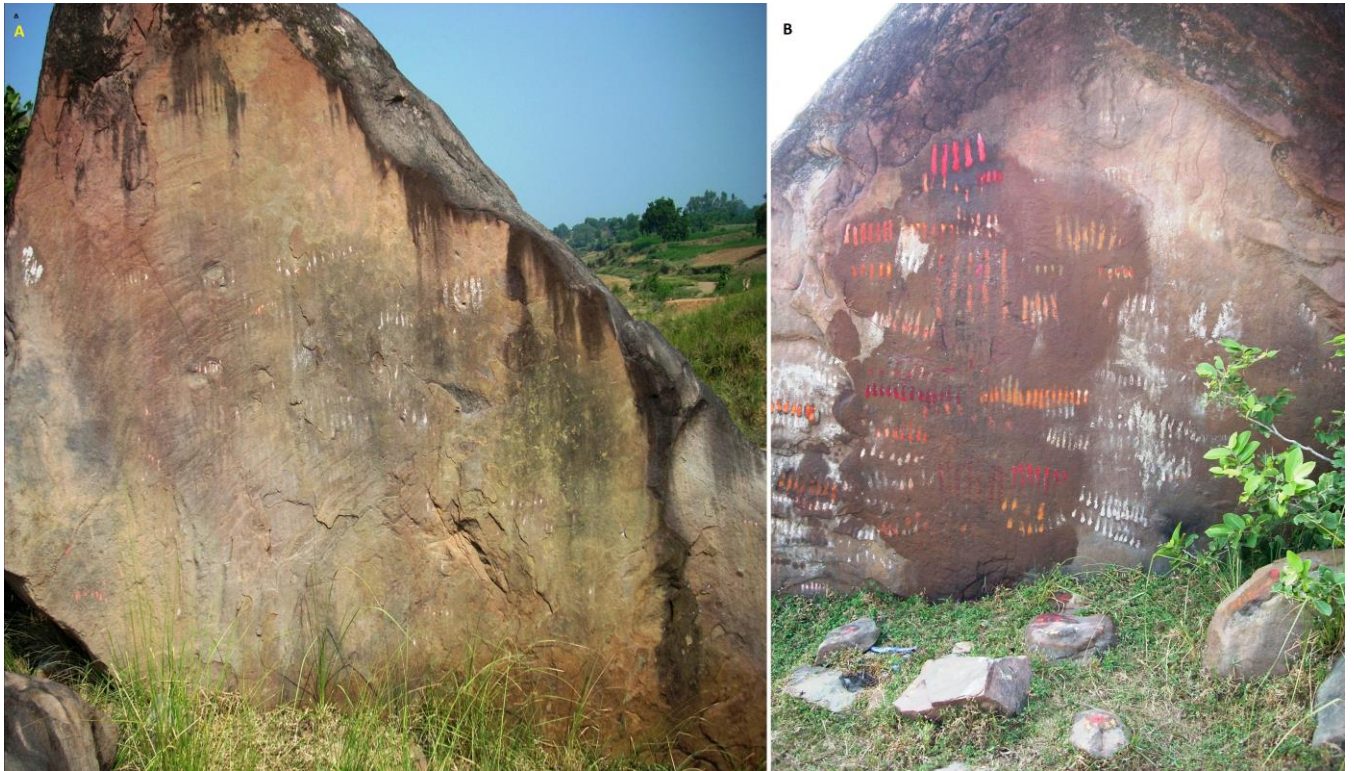


Fig.3: General view of the shelter in which on the ceiling and wall of the shelter some of the impression are naturally made, like H- Head impression, E- Elbow Impression and T-Thumb impression, Patesar, Kaimur, Bihar, India.

4. *Bhuinya Maei*: This tradition of *Bhuini Maei* can be seen in a site located on a bank of the river *Suara* at Badki Goria, Bhagwanpur block of Kaimur district. At the foothills of *Badki Goriya* on the left bank there is a big triangular stone (Fig.4), which may be natural or manmade. It is located near the rock-art site and shows evidence of regular habitation in the area. Similar art appears in rock shelters located elsewhere in the Makarikhoh hills. According to local tradition, this feature is known as *Bhuinya maei*¹³, and was erected for the good of society. This folk memory seems continuous since early times.

¹³ Kumar, Ajit, Tiwary, S.K. 2014. Two Interesting Labyrinth Depiction from Bihar, *Puratattva* 44, New Delhi, pp.276-280.



**Fig.4: Triangular stone (A) known as *Bhuini Mai* having *tika* (B) over it,
Bhagwanpur block, Kaimur, Bihar, India.**

Bhuinya maei is the presiding non-iconic deity of the area. The stone is smeared with crimson in ghee. The goddess is worshipped on occasions of social success, such as birth and marriage, and during the Hindu festivals. It is believed when she is pleased, she protects the village from calamity and brings life-long prosperity to each family. In adoring this deity, the villagers, male and female, young and old, gather to perform acts of worship, offering her flowers, fruits, and sweets and singing devotional songs. Her praise is chanted in loud voices. The worship-ceremony is followed by a procession in which the effigy of the deity is carried around and drawn by 30-50 pairs of bullocks from the village. The environment is filled with joy, enthusiasm, energy and divinity. This is similar to celebrations of the Hazaribagh deity '*Lohsingna*', the only difference being that in Kaimur the ritual practice is continued without any help of a priest or other ritual expert, or, in his absence, by the priest's son, irrespective of age.

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In this connection, note that many scholars have reported analogous pictographs and petroglyphs on some of the burial grounds belonging, not only to Neolithic sites, but also on the megaliths of south India, as well as in the funereal remains of historical and more recent times. Some researchers have called it Megalithic Rock Art. The present author, however, on the evidence he has examined, which shows that this is only a symbolic stone, prefers it to be known as *Bhuinya maei*, as it is among the villagers and according to the local traditions of *tika* over the stone. Those who visit the place without knowing these local traditions and beliefs may call it as variously as menhir, hero-stone, or memorial stone and certain casual visitors have assumed it to be a stone that rolled from the top of the hill giving these peculiar shapes. In my view, the associated extant tradition, which is emotionally direct and rooted in the heart of every local worshipper, bespeaks of the stone as a memorial erected in honor of *Bhuinya Maei*, the deity who protects the local people in time of natural disaster or other crisis.

5. Guasgir Baba Ka Ashram: The site (Fig.5) is located in the Bhagwanpur Block of the Kaimur district. The nomenclature of the site is derived from the words *Gausgir* (the name of a priest), *Baba* (a respectful term for holy persons) and *ashram* (a monastery). The continuous flow of visitors to the shelter and the performance of rituals, such as firing, application of oil and ghee on the wall and ceiling, pasting of decorative papers during special occasions, all these acts over time, have badly affected the pictographs. The locals strongly believe that “*the so called Gausgir Baba is still living inside the cracks of this shelter and perform yoga there. Normally nobody can see him and if, whenever anybody worships Gausgir Baba, they will have all their wishes fulfilled*”. According to local legend, the pictographs covering the wall show scenes of dancing and of a priest performing as the musician.



Fig.5: General view of the *Guasgir Baba Ka Ashra*, pasted colour papers on the occasion of his worship and the drummers and musician and the narrator narrating the mythology about the priest to the author, Kaimur, Bihar, India.

6. Ghost Writing: In the village Khaniya near the hill known by the same name in Chand Block¹⁴, Kaimur range of Bihar, there are four rock shelters and an open air flat boulder with petroglyphs on them. According to villagers these depictions were done by a mad man who, after losing his wife, made them with the help of iron tools and a stone hammer (Fig.6). The locals believe that these writings are the ‘script of invisible power’ that has power to revive her wife from death. They also believe that ‘*When these writings are deciphered and read, only then will the wife wake up*’.

¹⁴ Tiwary, S.K. 2017. Discovery of an Engravings and inscription in the Khaniya hill of Kaimur range, Chand Block, Kaimur, Bihar, *Art, Architecture and Archaeology of India*, Mohan Lal Chadhar (Edi.) Avon Publication, New Delhi, pp.79-84.



Fig.6: General view of the execution inside the shelter-A, the ghost writing and the open air boulder with engravings of 'ghost writing'-B, Kaimur, Bihar, India.

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7. Karma festival and Dance: This folk dance *Karma* is performed during the worship of the god of fate known as *Karam Devta*. The *Karma* dance is a tribal ritual performed by the *Binjahal*, *Kharia*, *Kol*, *Kisan* and specially *Oraon* tribes and known throughout this part of Kaimur region. With this background information in mind, it is important to note that some of the nearby rock shelters have paintings depicting such a group dance. We can not only compare the mode of dance to current folk rites, we can also understand the purpose behind the depiction or execution of the dance scene and its function in the festivals carried out in the shelters or caves¹⁵. *Karma* dance is a tribal performance profusely painted (Fig.7) in all the rock shelters of Central and Eastern India.



Fig.7 A. & B.: Group dance in front of a tree is depicted in the wall of the Raghubirgarh shelter. **C & D.** Oraon people are dancing in front of the Karma tree on the occasion of Karma festival, Badalgarh/Rohtas fort, Rohtas, Bihar, India.

¹⁵ Tiwary, S.K. 2016. An Archaeological as well as Social Anthropological Expedition at Bandha-II, Kaimur Range, Bihar, Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 4, On line publication of Archaeology Department of Kerala University, Trivendrum, www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/JournalPDF/Volume4/45.pdf, pp. 793-805

Conclusion:

To ensure a better understanding of the rock-art, the legends associated with them, amongst the local inhabitants of the region should be noted without any further interpretation. The rock art appears similar throughout the area. The paintings are presumably related to the folk rituals that still occur in these same places. We suggest that these relics contain drawings of the main plants and animals native to the area, at the time when the deities identified as present in the pictures on the rock surface were worshipped by the mythical ancestors of the same individuals who still participate in these ceremonies.

It is possible that the pictographs have astronomical significance and the ritual was related to the solstice or another celestial event. As noted, all the abstract painting could represent constellations, but because the tribes also highly valued dreams, they could also be images from their imagination. Perhaps the artist had a dream that he or she believed had significance for others and wanted to share it. In this connection it is important to mention the three studies: first, D. D. Kosamb, 'Myths and Reality', in which there are many illustrations and descriptions of the myth and folklore, narratives and their contingent reality; and second, R. G. Bednarik, 'Myths about Rock Art', in which the author describes both fake and created stories concerning rock art and mythology, and is thus a work which is harmful because based on the author's private assumptions and not local legends. The third study is by J. D. Lewis-Williams¹⁶, who debates how and by what kind of description of rock art, these myths are created.

Thus the above descriptions of Kaimur rock art based on the oral testimony of local inhabitants, especially as told by the older generation, can be regarded as nearer to the truth. However, these stories which are passed from generation to generation are difficult to validate as there is always a possibility of significant modification over time. Whatever the factual story—if such thing may even exist, given the dynamic of history and the many

¹⁶ Williams, Lewis, J. D., 2006, Debating Rock Art: Myth and Ritual, Theories and Facts, The South African Archaeological Bulletin, Vol. 61, No. 183 (Jun., 2006), South African Archaeological Society, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3888913>, pp. 105-114

human motivations inherent in ritual performances and associated narratives and images—behind these rock-art forms be, the author of this essay feels that it is his duty to share with the scholars of rock-art his personal observations and the discussions he had with the local people of the respective sites and offers his conclusions for debate with other scholars of rock-art.

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