

An account of the Herbivorous Population in the Ramchhajja Rock-Shelters in Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract - The geophysical history of the Indian peninsula shows how physical features of the earth, forming and developing for over billions of years are a part of our daily lives. The changing physical features and consequent climatic conditions are, and always have been one of the most significant factors that directed the introduction and evolution of the early primates and hominins in the subcontinent. It is a traditional concept that the early nomad hunter-gatherers were always striving for temporary shelters and exploitative sources of food and game, which often lead them to seek refuge in the natural shelters of the rocky outcrops which were present for millions of years. Such shelters always provided shelters during the monsoon and sometimes raw material for making tools. Sometimes, they were situated near areas with good game and food, making these rock shelters some of the most preferred shelters in distant antiquity. Gradual adaptation of the early hominins with the changing preferences for shelter or food sources or even raw materials for knapping did not persuade them to abandon the rock-shelters completely. Instead, these sturdy shelters became something more than a tool of utility; it became a mirror of the socio-cultural outlook of the ancient hominins that tread the area. These evidences were best found in the form of widespread rock art which depicted numerous activities and beliefs of the early humans. As such, the rock art found in different shelters give some of the earliest evidences of cognitive development in the homo sapiens, who are exclusively associated with rock art in the Indian subcontinent. Some of the best examples of such rock art from the Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic period are found in Central India, like, Bhimbetka, Adamgarh, Pachmarhi and the hills of the Chambal Valley. These are just the very few sites among the hundreds that are found all over Central India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Madhya Pradesh is infamously known to be one of those regions in the entire subcontinent that gives a continuous and unbroken insight into the geological and historical evolution of the planet. In a tropical country like India, where highly conserved hominin remains from antiquity are unlikely, Madhya Pradesh became the first state from where remains of the homo sapiens 'Narmada Man' was recovered from Hathnora (Chauhan, 2009).

The find in the Narmada valley opened the foundation for the decades long research on the numerous rock shelters in the entire length of the valley and the state. Scholars like Wakankar, Mathpal, Neumayer among others researched sites like Bhimbetka, Adamgarh, Pachmarhi, Nanduram among others all over the state of Madhya Pradesh. Evidences of hominin habitation in rock shelters across the region were found dated between the upper Palaeolithic up until the modern times. Among these hundreds and thousands of rock shelters, the early humans, mainly *homo sapiens*, used a large number of the rock surfaces on these shelters to carve out their imagination. Rock art, as such, became an important piece of evidence that allowed researchers an insight into understanding the past. Rock art in different parts of the world became a prime source of evidence to understand the symbiotic relationship between man and his environment depending on space and time.

Such an amazing array of rock art evidences can be found across shelters in the entire Central Indian region. Such creative expressions of the everyday life, subsistence patterns, supernatural beliefs and everyday scenery of the habitat of the ancient humans give a primary insight into the prehistoric life of the people in the region. Often, such shelters have been repurposed over time and been utilized by communities for different reasons over centuries. One of such rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh is the Ramchhajja group of rock shelters in Raisen district. The paper is dedicated to re-assess the rock art found from the site and use it to understand the paleo-fauna distribution of the region and how it can be contextualized in the study of rock art and prehistoric life of the region.

II. STUDY AREA

The Ramchhajja rock shelters (Fig. 1) are found in the Raisen block of the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. The site lies on the right bank of the Richan nullah, a small tributary of the Betwa, about 3-4 kilometres from the district headquarters, Raisen, on the Raisen-Bhopal Road (Shrivastava, 1979). The site contains an array of rock shelters, with a wide range of well-preserved rock art scenes.

The site was first discovered by the group from the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Saugor University in the early part of 1960s (IAR, 1963-64). The rock shelters occur around a long stretch of sandstone hill, on which is built the famous, Raisen Fort (Shrivastava, 1979). The modern population is settled at the foot of the hills. Local belief aligns the historicity of these rock shelters with Ramayana, telling that these caves were occupied by Rama and his companions during his exile of fourteen years. However, there are no substantial evidences to back the claim archaeologically. Instead, what a panoramic view of the setting of the rock shelters of Ramachhajja might offer, is a long chronology of evolution and growth in a single frame.

The Raisen district, especially the region in the Raisen block is largely drained by the Betwa river, and is lined by the very prominent upper Vindhyan rock formation, mainly consisting of the Kaimur, Rewa and Bhander groups. The Vindhyan supergroup can be dated roughly to about 1.6 bya, and has been forming over time. The rock formations in the supergroup that lay exposed in the Raisen region is from the upper Vindhyan rock formation, dating to about 800 mya. The larger composition of Vindhyan rocks exposed on the surface can be traced to the Upper Vindhyan Kaimur sandstone conglomerate, the Rewa sandstone series and the Bhander series of sandstone. The sandstone series of these formations are found all along the Vindhyan exposure along the Raisen block, capped in parts with the relatively younger Deccan Traps, Lameta beds and Laterite formations. The most recent depositions in the region are the alluvial depositions found along the river valleys of the Betwa, Bina and Narmada and their tributaries that drain the region (Shrivastava, 1929) (CGWB, 2013). The Raisen Block of the district where the chosen site area is located is comprised mostly of the Vindhyan series of Rock formation, whose composition make them unfavourable for much retention of water (CGWB, 2013).



Fig. 1. A general view of the rock shelters of Ramachhajja



Map showing the location of Ramachhajja rock shelters in Raisen district, Madhya Pradesh

III. STUDY OF THE ROCK ART IN THE SHELTERS OF RAMACHHAJJA OR RAMAJHAROKHA

The Ramachhajja rock shelters are found on the terrace like formations of the Vindhyan series at Karabad, on the adjacent face of the hill that is topped by the historical Raisen Fort. Among the several rock shelters that have been discovered, Ramachhajja gives rich evidence of the ancient palaeo fauna which existed at the time when the etched rock art was done in the shelters. Scholars like Yashodhar Mathpal (1984) studied that there were numerous depictions of animals in the shelters of Ramachhajja. Among them, mention has been made of deer, bisons, chitals, vulture-like birds, rhinoceros, peacock and bear are done (Pathak & Clottes, 2021). Mathpal (1984) also talks about depictions of human figures, dancing hand-in-hand, hunting and seated on animal backs. Explorations to the shelters report the presence of animals like leopard, tiger, boar, stag, elephant and cattle among other human figures drawn across the rock surface in the fifteen shelters (IAR, (1963-64), (1982-93)).

A study of the rock paintings found in the shelters of the site of Ramachhajja show a wide array of scenes, as discussed, of animals and human figures. However, a large number of the rock art have been damaged severely due to the negligence and lack of conservative efforts. But records of the rock art from earlier documents and recent field visits have shown that the depiction of animals occur in larger frequency than human figures. The faunal depictions mostly show them as part of a group or herd, as one can see large groups of deers, bisons, bulls and even chital. In this case, one might notice that separate groups (in horizontal lines) of deers, chitals and bisons can be found in different shelters at the site. In herds, the animal figures drawn are stationary, with no impression of movement. Most of the deer and chital figures are drawn with lines arranged in patterns in the broad rectangular body (Fig. 2(a) & b). But it is interesting to notice that the artist might have recorded the presence of more than two or three types of deer, based on the certain anatomical differences. Some have antlers, with multiple branches, while some are devoid of antlers. Some have prominent furry bodies while others have furry tails only. Early researchers like Mathpal (1984) tells that there are depictions of pregnant deers, with sometimes one or two baby deers drawn inside their abdomen. The chital in the deer family is a species that gets prominently recorded in the rock art of Ramachhajja.

One of the other major paintings of animals that can be found on the Ramachhajja shelters belong to the bovine group, where all the bovine animals (Fig. 3(a-d)) are characteristically herbivores by nature. The drawings show evidences of nilgai, bisons, gaurs and water buffaloes, all of which are mainly seen in herds, as per their natural behaviour. The bovine animals are mainly drawn in red, with thick, rectangular bodies filled with lines and solid faces and hooves. Other than the water buffalo, other bovines are shown with thick fur layers either on their entire body or just near their faces. The bovines are mostly shown as either standing or in a subtle stance of running forward.





Fig. 2(a), (b)&(c). A stylistic variation in the depiction of deer in the shelters of Ramachhajja



Fig. 3 (c). A drawing of a nilgai in the rock shelters



Fig. 3(a) A drawing of a water buffalo in the shelters



Fig. 3 (d). Possible depiction of gaur in the rock shelters



Fig. 3(b) Depiction of bisons in the rock shelters

Besides, there are some rare depictions of a boar (Fig. 4(a)). Their anatomical representations are different from other rock art images in other shelters. These drawings are marked in red ochre, with attempt at making a solid figure by scribbling within the lined outline.

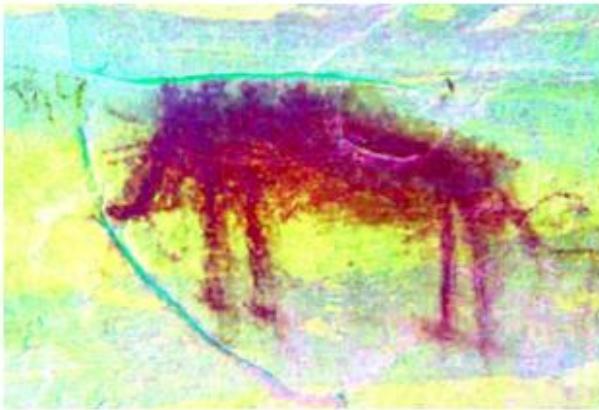


Fig. 4(a). Depiction of a wild boar

Among other faunal representations, one can trace drawings of birds (Fig. 5) and elephants (Fig. 6) in groups. They are line drawings which have designs similar to the ones seen in deer and chital images in the site. Both white and red ochre pigments have been used to highlight the anatomy of the animals.



Fig. 5. A group of birds drawn in the rock shelters



Fig. 6. Drawing of an elephant in the shelters



Fig. 7(a). Scene showing tigers and deers



Fig. 7(b). Scene depicting leopards and group of deer running around

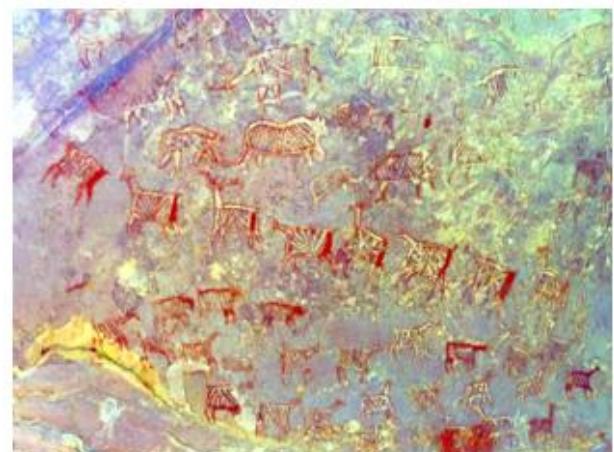


Fig. 7 (c). Group of animals in the rock shelters

Besides the representation of a variety of paleo-fauna in the rock shelters of Ramachhajja, there are some narrative scenes that can be found on the rock surface of the shelters.



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All of them are scenes which look like the typical 'Zoo Rock' of the Bhimbetka rock shelters where a group of different animals are made in a composite scene, although there is no direct representation of hunting or attacks. The group of herbivores and carnivore animals are shown in unison, sometimes in linear lines, uniformly drawn. One scene shows a herd of deers, and amazing them, two very prominent and large tigers (Fig. 7(a)). Surprisingly, the deers seem to be in a frenzy, with the artworks showing haphazard pictures and spread out facing away from the tigers; a typical behavioural pattern seen between a predator and their prey. However, other than this, there is another scene where tigers or leopards can be seen along with deer and elephants. The scene shows deer and elephant drawings slightly overlapping and in close proximity, with a considerable difference between them and the leopard drawings (Fig. 7(b)). It might have been a probable indication at the strategic approach of the carnivores to their prey before they could be sensed, hence the lack of frenzy among the animals. The largest concentration of animals drawn together come from a scene where a large number of animals, in red and white, are drawn together – including barasingha, chital, small (barking) deer, tigers, bear and even possibly a boar (Fig. 7(c)). The animals are made in lines, with a subtle indication of their motion in one direction or the other.

IV. DISCUSSION

In the midst of the modern settlement, the rock shelters of Ramachhajja on an exposed cliff area brings to notice, the variety of fauna that inhabited the land along with the early human population, which gives a significant idea about the environmental and cultural context of the region during that time. However, one might notice that the rock paintings in the shelters of Ramachhajja show a variety of scenes involving a variety of cervids and bovines along with other animals.

For decades, animal depictions have been utilised to project a possible understanding of the region's paleo climate based on the behavioural patterns of the animals depicted on the rock surface. In Ramachhajja as well, the artists among early humans paid definitive attention to the anatomical and behavioural patterns of the animals they came across in the course of their survival. It is to be noted that the animal figures drawn show a stylistic similarity in patterns used for fill-up and even in outlining the anatomical representations of different animals. The frequent occurrences of the herbivore animals in rock art of the region show their relative preference or abundance in nature of the contemporary period. Moreover, based on the type of herbivores animals depicted on rock art in the Ramachhajja rock shelters most of which are predominantly either browsers feeding on higher ground vegetation or grazers feeding on low lying vegetation, it can be understood that the region comprised of a mixed closed forest and grassland habitat.

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