

Modern Religious Practices and the Preservation of Rock Art in India

Abstract

Except for Australia and a few other places, local people in the world no longer revere rock art. This is not so in India where beliefs in the supernatural power attached to painted sites are still strong. Those beliefs entail different types of behaviour, some respecting and protecting the sites and others detrimental to them.

For example, near Bhilani in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh, members of the Banjara Tribe told us that their grandparents revealed to them that on full moon nights and on no moon nights they would hear sounds of music and dances from the nearby Putli Karar painted shelters: the images would then dance. As a consequence, still now, people do not often visit those powerful sites that keep protected and intact.

When ceremonies take place in or around painted sites they may take three different forms which will differently impact the art. The first one is the least harmful, when people from local tribes, often under the leadership of a local “priest” or “shaman”, go to the sites to worship for various festivals. They will make offerings to the gods and they may touch the walls and add a few fingerprints or handprints without doing any great harm.

The second case, quite frequent, is having a sort of altar or sanctuary built for one of the Hindu divinities in one corner of the shelter. This may be –and too often is– accompanied by religious scribbles or paintings on the painted walls and it may become more and more invasive.

The third case is often the conclusion of the second one, when the shelter has been entirely taken over either to serve as a habitation for a hermit or because it was turned into a temple. Then, most or all of the paintings get erased or covered with modern paint and religious motifs. The rock art site is then dead.

We shall see examples from three important states in the centre of India: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.

Continuation of age-old practices

During our field work in the Pachmarhi region (south of Madhya Pradesh), we discovered that several tribes close to rock art sites still carried out traditional ceremonies in them (Clottes & Dubey-Pathak 2013a: 134-137). In addition to depositing offerings like coconuts, incense sticks, bangles etc., they made small fires at the foot of the painted panels. The fires may cause the painted walls to be more or less covered with soot which masks the images, as we

saw in a very important shelter, Bhimlat 2, in the Bundi region of Rajasthan. In that part of the shelter, traces on the ground of small ceremonial fires (called *yagnas*) were visible, as well as many recent offerings (pots, coconuts, several sacred white threads (*janeu*), including two around a triangular stone on the ground, incense sticks) (fig. 1). We were told locally that the villagers and their shaman used that isolated sacred place for shamanic rituals (Dubey-Pathak M. & Clottes J., 2016).



Fig. 1. Traces on the ground of small ceremonial fires and deposits. Bundi region of Rajasthan

In Chhattisgarh, we also found quite a number of traces of fires in various recently used shelters: the usual offerings were still visible and well preserved, as at Jogi Gufa 2, where we were told that the place was still sacred, or at Lekhamada 1 (Ongna Village) where we could also get local testimonies. During the ceremonies, according to our informers, the paintings seem to be

more numerous and much more apparent to the participants. The site being particularly powerful, a priest goes to it every day, morning and evening. But the site's power is such that no hermit could stay there for long. During the ceremonies, some people leave red dots on the walls by applying red paint to their fingertips and applying them on the wall surface (fig. 2) (Dubey-Pathak M. & Clottes J., 2017).

We saw such recent red dots in many other painted sites, in various places of the three states where we worked, such as at Urden, about 60km from Bhopal (Site 33). In the same village, where we visited more than 40 rock art sites, Site 25 is a big shelter high up on the hill right in front of two modern Hindu sanctuaries in the valley. A series of white figures in a



Fig. 2. Sacred Rock art site, at Lekhamada. Chhattisgarh.



Fig. 3. Wall decorated with an inscription Jay Mnaa ("Great Mother"). Urden Madhya Pradesh.

row are ancient and could even be Mesolithic. The shelter is now indicated by a red flag and recent offerings were made. The wall has got a line of 9 red dots and a kind of bell-like drawing representing the Durga Goddess, with an inscription *Jay Mnaa* ("Great Mother"). Red is the colour of the goddess. In this case, the ancient sacred place has been taken over by a more recent religion, but without too much damage (fig. 3).

Fig. 4. Dharkundi Ashram. That temple was built in a big open shelter with an extensive overhang. Dharkundi, Madhya Pradesh.



Modern sanctuaries and Hindu practices in rock art sites

Still in Urden (M.P.), Site 7 is an 8 to 10m long painted shelter. A small sanctuary for Shiva was built on one side. The older people from the village told us that they respected the ancient art there. Each year, the Shiva sanctuary was repainted white before the Diwali ceremonies. In 2014, a youth who had been commissioned to do the usual repainting did not stop at that. As he had some paint left –and for no other reason- he repainted the whole shelter, thus destroying the prehistoric paintings, to the dismay of the village elders.

We have recorded a similar story in the Dharkundi Ashram. That temple was built in a big open shelter with an extensive overhang, next to a waterfall and a pool. If there had once been any rock art there, which is quite probable due to its location and the size of the shelter, it was not preserved (fig. 4). On questioning the head Sadhu about any rock art in the vicinity, he said that he and his companions knew of a few sites and they had been wondering



Fig. 5. Offerings all along the wall whose lower part was covered with graffiti. Kabra Pahar. Raigarh, Chhattisgarh.

about their purpose. They also told me that out of curiosity about the colours they had tried to rub and wash the paintings with coconut bark and water, but to their surprise the colours had remained intact! (Dubey-Pathak 2013).

In the State of Chhattisgarh, the Kabra Pahar Site (meaning "Spotted Mountain"), at Bhojpalli Village, is at the foot of a very impressive cliff in the jungle. The overhang stretches over 100m or so. On one side is a small altar for Shiva with offerings. One of our tribal guides started praying there. We saw offerings all along the wall whose lower part was covered with graffiti (fig. 5). The Shitlma Shelter of the same State, in a huge heap of rocks, bears the name of a local goddess whose sanctuary is less than 100m away. One of the painted panels is covered with soot from fires and the paintings have become hardly visible. The modern sanctuary includes two buildings. A local Gond told us that they worship all big animals (tiger, elephant, horse, bull) and

Fig. 6. Locals are still having ceremonies at the site and at the sanctuaries). Shitala Mata. Bastar, Chhattisgarh.



that they still have ceremonies there (at the site and at the sanctuaries) (fig. 6).

In Rajasthan, we saw several examples of modern Hindu practices that damaged or destroyed ancient rock paintings. The site of Gararda 1 (Bundi region), about 20m on the left bank of a small river called Dungri Nala, consists of a few painted panels on several huge rocks, generally in slight concavities, that contrast sharply with the eroded black surfaces surrounding them. The main panel in such a concavity at the top left of a big boulder is covered with signs in three different colours, white, pink and vermillion, the latter being more recent and often on top of the others. No animal or human was represented. Those signs are made up of swastikas, tridents and finger marks (dots or short bars). They are quite recent and testify to Hindu rituals which take place every year and sometimes twice a year (on Full Moon Night and No Moon Night) according to local testimonies. This is confirmed by the deposits below the panel and even on top of it. They were fresh and most probably made

for Diwali and the following festivals just a couple of weeks before our visit.

Gararda 6 is a major shelter, 5 or 6m wide with a big overhang. It was taken over by Hindu priests who had the ground levelled, paved and cemented. The walls were partly painted green and two representations of the elephant god Ganesha were set up against the wall: a classical sculpture of the god was put on a cemented pedestal and next to it some natural reliefs were used to evoke another image of the divinity whose centre was covered with vermillion painting and an orange glossy paper. Between the two were two terracotta pots used as a receptacle, one for incense sticks and the other for *yagna*. They were accompanied by two small earthenware lamps. Above them and to their left, various recent white inscriptions included short lines, a trident and a left swastika. Other very modern marks had been made in red: handprints, several swastikas of both kinds, a number of handprints (fig. 7). Our guide had removed some of the green paint in

Fig. 7. Those signs are made up of swastikas, tridents and handprints. Garada, Boondi, Rajasthan





Fig. 8. The sanctuary is still in use with religious symbols. Golpur, Boondi, Rajasthan.

places and found religious images below it. They appear in a faded red and may be Buddhist or Hindu. Among them, we saw a lotus, a floral pattern locally known as *mandana* and a *kalash* or two (earthen pot with water and a coconut on top). In very ancient times, perhaps in the Mesolithic, some images had been made, like a big animal (bison?) only partly preserved. Behind it was another bovid with huge horns done in flat tint. One of the most ancient ones was a complex symbol of curved lines in a darkish colour. The modern additions, mostly in bright red, were far more numerous. This fairly spectacular shelter had thus been in ritual/ceremonial use for many millenia and the recent additions nearly entirely superseded the images of former cults.

Golpur 1, in the same area of Rajasthan, is also an important painted site. To the left and 3.80m from the painted panels, a kind of low shelter built with stones and cement is still used as a sanctuary to Shiva. Two stone *lingams* are standing on a small cemented platform. This altar was created by some local Bhils ten or so years ago, after

the man who had wanted it died from an accident. Right to the left of the small altar are recent white and vermillion inscriptions with five vertical small bars followed by a short trident in the middle and then by five dots (fig. 8) all in a line. The sanctuary is still in use with a fire full of recent ash in front of the altar. The problem, as with all such recent religious additions, is: will they go on, extend and destroy the ancient art? This is not an idle question, because, as we shall see now, many examples exist of such a drastic evolution.

Complete destruction by new religious practices

We saw two examples at Kharwai (Madhya-Pradesh), one fairly common (appropriation of a painted site by a hermit), the other quite strange.

Approaching Kharwai, a tower of rock perhaps 25m high stands next to a river.

With binoculars we spotted a few faded red paintings in a narrow recess about 7 or 8m high, in a place only reachable with



Fig. 9. The hermit who selected this site made various drawings on top of the white surface, including a black cobra. Kharwai 1. Madhya Pradesh.

artificial means. We went around the rock to a natural shelter, fully expecting to find far more rock art there. From what local people told us, this was in fact the case before a hermit selected the place for his own use and entirely whitewashed the walls. He made various drawings on top of the white surface, including a black cobra (fig. 9). Five red dots were left in a line near the entrance and on both sides of a hole, as well as next to another. Several other series of five red dots – a most auspicious sign- can also be seen.

About 600m up a neighbouring hill, we were led to another shelter at one extremity of which we immediately spotted a modern Hindu shrine devoted to the worship of Shiva, with the sacred lingam symbolic of the god, on which were painted various signs (tridents, and His local name), and the usual metal trident next to it. The vast and impressive shelter (about 20m long, with an

overhang of about 4 or 5m) had once been full of red paintings. We spotted faint traces of art, here and there, (fig. 10). but the wall was entirely covered over with long lines of script in Hindi that had destroyed most of the ancient art as they had been deeply carved on the wall in big letters. At the left extremity of the text, a globe and an elephant bearing a swastika had also been carefully engraved (fig. 11).

The texts painstakingly carved on the anciently painted wall, were the seven Principles of the United Nations Organization! The last paragraph revealed that, under official orders, all this got inscribed to popularise the UNO principles, to maintain peace, harmony, brotherhood, humanity and equality. This was in the 1970s when a dozen people or so had come to the village for two weeks, each day going to the shelter to carry on their carving. The villagers, who could not read, thought that the script

Fig. 10. Rock art (enhanced with dstrech). Kharwai. Madhya Pradesh.

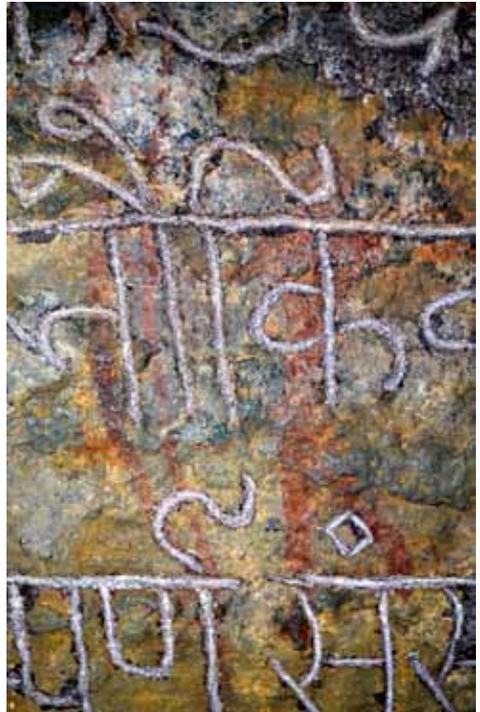




Fig. 11. An elephant bearing a swastika was also carefully engraved with a script in Hindi. Kharwai. Madhya Pradesh.

was religious. For them it was a kind of spiritual renewal of the painted site and thus acceptable.

One may wonder about the real purpose of this vandalism by obviously educated people who wanted to glorify the United Nations, its purposes and its work. It could not have been to pass on knowledge to local folk, as they could not read it. It was not for eventual ceremonies as nothing ever happened there since its completion. The only reason was that the people who ordered the carving wanted to inscribe the UNO principles into stone so that they would survive forever. If they chose to do so in that particular shelter it was because they felt that it was an auspicious place that would help the principles of the UNO to flourish (Clottes & Dubey-Pathak 2013b).

In 2014 we went back to the site. At the entrance, a wall had been built all around and a horrid small brick building erected on the left, as well as a superb marble staircase. A new big Shiva sanctuary had been set up on the left of the shelter, with other gods. The

shelter had thus been transformed into a real temple, completing its three “religious” lives: first as a painted shelter, then as a UNO testimony, and finally as a Hindu temple (Fig.12).

We saw many other examples of painted sites taken over by hermits and destroyed: Jogi Gufa (“Hermit’s Cave”) at Udkuda in Chhattisgarh, then transformed into a real temple for Kali, in 2000. Also, in the same State, Rabkoh Cave (Kanwar Tribe), for Lord Vishnu. In Madhya Pradesh, all the top of the hill of the famous Bhimbetka site was taken over by a big modern temple and hardly any ancient art is left at a series of spectacular shelters and rocks there (Dubey-Pathak 2014). In Bhopal, there used to be a number of rock art sites at the top of a hill now occupied by a magnificent Jain temple and Gupha Mandir or Cave temple (fig.12), while the rock art is gone.

Conclusion

We see a big difference of approach between different religions. In Europe, when

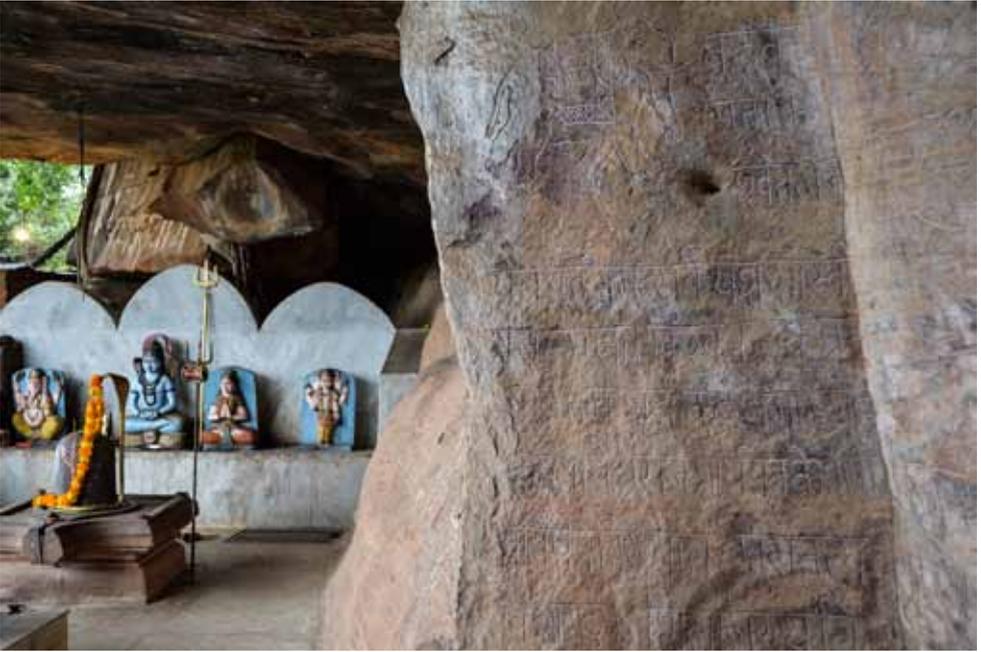


Fig.12. The UNO site (see script to the right) has been transformed into a Hindu temple. Kharwai. Madhya Pradesh.

people christianized menhirs by putting crosses on them or more often pulled them down, it was to get rid of the ancient religion. In India –the country of religions– painted sites keep being sacred places, full of supernatural power, that people continue to venerate either in the same manner or by transforming them, i.e. the process, even if destructive, is more a kind of ritual continuity.

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