

# Hands in Chhattisgarh Rock Art

## Abstract

*The long persistence of ancient traditions in India, with the continuance of ritual practices in painted shelters, including handprints, enables us to better understand some of the reasons that may have prompted the authors of handprints in the rock art of the region under study.*

*Among the sixty-four rock art sites known in the State of Chhattisgarh (India), 750 handprints can be seen on their walls. In seven cases the hands are negative (stencils).*

*Handprints may also be found in villages on the walls of houses. They are thought to establish a direct relationship between this world and the next. They are perceived by local people as a protection, not as a signature or a casual gesture. Footprints on rock art walls, occasionally associated with handprints, are more rare and have different meanings according to the places where they were made.*

*If handprint representations are common the world over, in India, and particularly in the region under study, age-old traditions of handprint making are still alive in many places. In certain parts of the State, auspicious prints made on the walls at the house entrance and sometimes on the wall inside the house represent the hands of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth.*

## Introduction

In India, the tradition of hand printing for various purposes has never stopped and it is still very much alive. We shall concentrate here on Chhattisgarh State in Central India where we found many sites of handprints and where we could collect direct information about this on-going cultural practice.

Just south-east of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh (Fig. 1), a State in Central India, with 28 million inhabitants, used to be part of Madhya Pradesh (capital Bhopal) until 2000. The capital city of Chhattisgarh is Raipur. A major part of the south of the state was known in ancient times as Dandakaranya, while the north was called Dakshina Koshal. It was mentioned in the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics.

In the past few years we have tried to see as many rock art sites in Chhattisgarh as we could. In the course of our numerous trips we visited and documented sixty-four painted shelters, most of them

in deep jungles and forests, which cover over 44% of the surface of the State. We were guided and accompanied to the sites by local Forest officers and by tribal men from the nearest villages. As could be expected, we saw traces of modern sanctuaries and ceremonies in a number of painted sites. We also noticed recent modest deposits that seemed to be in direct relation to the paintings.

The northern and southern parts of the state are hilly, and that is where we found most of the rock art, while the centre mostly consists of a fertile plain. In addition to the sites in the north and the south, we saw two painted shelters about 120kms south-west of Raipur.

In the southern part of Chhattisgarh, we have seen twenty painted sites. Among the most important we visited we can quote Jogdadeo, Shitlamba, Balarao and Singarpathar. One of their characteristics is the frequency and abundance of hand-

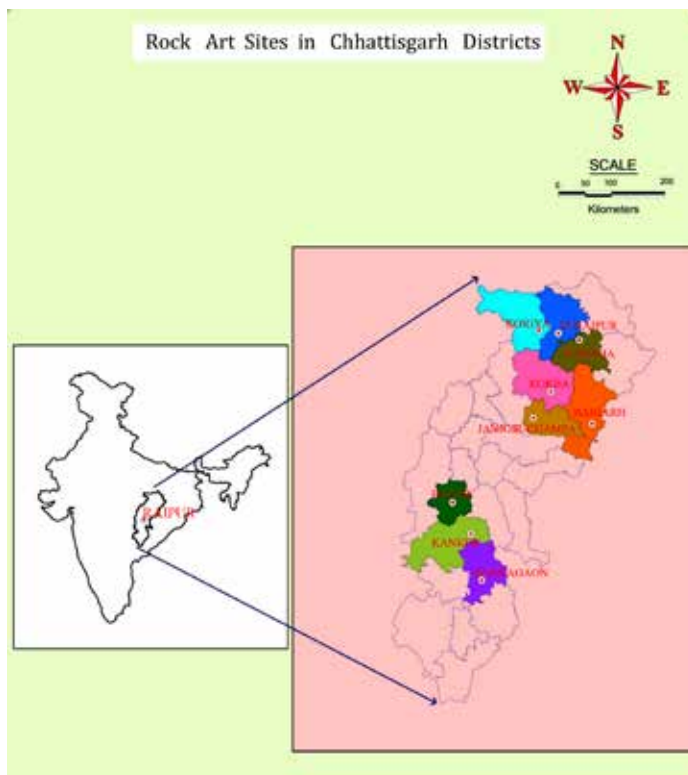


Fig. 1. Map of India showing Chhattisgarh State.

prints, mostly red but with some yellow ones. We found them in about half the shelters we saw.

As to the northern part of the state, we have visited forty-four painted sites. It is not a surprise that a majority of the sites should be in the north as we note that they belong to a vast region of rock art, which also includes many painted sites with handprints. Especially, Hamta rock art site in the Raigarh area is well decorated with hand stencils and hand drawings. This important site is totally dedicated to hands. In the Korba district, recently discovered rock art sites are also known for their hand stencils.

Local tribes make offerings to the gods and they may touch the walls and add a few fingerprints or handprints without doing any great harm.

## Descriptions

Hamtha Site (Panchbhaya, in the Sikhmuda Village). This site (Fig. 2) is the first where, in 2017, we noticed hand stencils in the Chhattisgarh State.

Red hands were drawn and stencilled on the roof and ceiling of a 4m high cavity (Fig. 3). Out of at least eleven negative hands, six were left and one right. Five hands were drawn: two left and three right. A horizontal line is drawn on a right hand. Another right hand was drawn with an amputated thumb.

Below the ground of the cavity, on the right side of its vertical wall, a dozen big cupules have been dug perpendicularly to the wall. Below is a panel of hand stencils up to 2.20m from the ground. Most hand stencils were printed on this wall (Fig. 4). A small group of hands on the upper side of the same wall includes eight negative



*Fig. 2. Hamtha site with negative hands.*

hands, six left and two right. One left hand in the centre lacks its middle finger.

In the lower group nineteen hands are well-defined. Twelve are left hands and seven are right. One left hand lacks its thumb and little finger. Two right hands are also incomplete: in one hand only the little finger is missing. In the other hand, it is the thumb and the little finger. On the same wall a pair of hands near the triangles have different sizes. At least thirty-two hands were not well defined enough because of superimpositions.

On the right side of a natural hole on the left of the lower panel with the hand stencils, one hand has just two fingers, the middle and the ring fingers. Its inside seems to be decorated. The three missing fingers (index, little and thumb) look folded. Next to it on the right side, on the upper side of another natural hole, are five negative hands, four right and one left.



*Fig. 3. Red hands were drawn and stencilled on the roof and wall of a 4m high cavity, at Hamtha.*

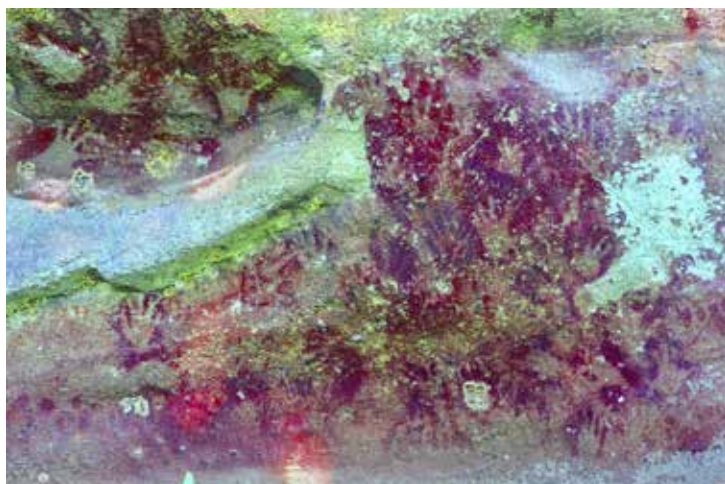


Fig. 4. Hamtha. Most hand stencils were printed on the lower wall of the shelter. Enhanced with DStretch (\_lre/\_yrd).

On the ceiling, sixteen well defined hand stencils and drawings can be seen. Most stencils on the lower wall are red and many are grouped in a big cluster. Out of the total hand stencils (forty-six), all in red, twenty-six are left hands and twenty are right. Nine hand stencils were incomplete: four left hands and five right hands.

Out of a total of six hand drawings, three left and three right, two right hands were amputated.

Thirty-two hand stencils are not well defined because of their overlapping.

Surprisingly, we have not found any handprints at the site. We noticed traces of worship: a small earthen lamp, coconut deposits and pebbles put into some holes of the wall. But we have not found any recent handprint at all.

Last year in December, Hari Singh, a local person from Korba district, informed me about many shelters with negative hands. He showed us a couple of sites in the same district in 2014. As per his information [PKO1] there are some shelters containing red hand stencils. I recorded all those sites, located in the dense and remote forest with wild life. On the invitation and support of the forest department, I was able to visit those sites. *Phutka* hills contain all the rock art sites with hand stencils, in their surrounding areas. These

stencils are probably more than 10,000 years old! I have not seen a stencil in the Mesolithic time or later period. These hands are drawn on the sandstone rocks (not easy to date). These sacred sites were well known to the local villagers (*Pahari Korba* tribes) who are residing in the forest area. From time to time these tribes worship these sites with offerings. According to them their local gods and goddesses reside there. Giving a brief summary of recently visited sites.

Most of the sites in Korba district are decorated with geometric signs (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2017a).

**Chhatibahar** village has two sites:

A river flowing in the forest is known as *Barahjhariya* (wild boar's river). We crossed this river to reach the shelter *Likhamara*. It is a 28 meter long shelter, it has at least sixty-six visible hand stencils, thirty-seven red hands painted in a long vertical group on the upper wall: nineteen left, ten right, children and adult hands. The rest were not well defined but they overlapped with hundreds of stencils.

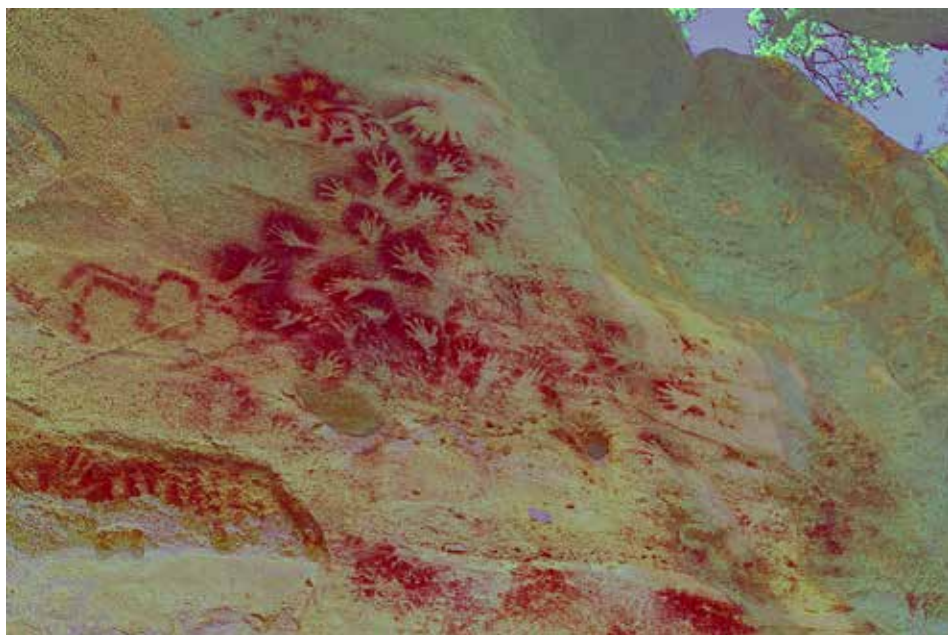
Some hand stencils are superimposed with red geometric signs and bird like figures. All the red and black hand stencils (Fig. 5) are shown with the wrist and a lit-





*Fig. 5. At Barahjhariya, Likhamara, red hand stencils are shown with the wrist and a little part of the arm, like some hand stencils in Argentina.*

*Fig.5. At Barahjhariya, Likhamara, red hand stencils are shown with the wrist and a little part of the arm, like some hand stencils in Argentina. DStretch(-Ire).*



tle part of the arm, like some hand stencils in Argentina. A couple of them are missing fingers (Fig. 5a).

*Chhatipath*. This shelter is two kms from Likhamara. Some recent handprints are superimposed on white and red figures. Most of the images are a bit crude and seem more ceremonial. Birds, animals, trees, symbols, horse riders, dancers and hand prints are the main themes of this site. Interestingly, all these visible images were painted on the early images.

**Aretera** village has two sites: *Ramel Pahar*. It has stencils and some geometric signs. At least ten stencils are visible. One negative left hand without its thumb but the arm is shown. It is not far from a small group of red negative hands. Most are damaged due to weathering effects.

*Hathamada*. It has many stencils mostly superimposed and eroded due to directly facing sun and wind. Still more than a dozen hand stencils are visible. There are adults and children hand stencils in red. A Couple of them are shown with the wrist



Fig.5a. At Barahjariya, Likhamara A couple of them are missing fingers. DStretch(-Ire).

Fig.5b. At Sonari, Hatha Jodi Mada, two left hands in pairs and one right.



and some part of the arm. These stencils were superimposed with late period hand prints in red and white.

#### **Sonori village:**

*Hatha Jodi Mada.* This site is also worshipped by the local tribes (Pando). More than fifty hand stencils are visible in the different groups on the wall and not the very higher side. We saw two left hands in pairs and an isolated right hand with an arm and a few more negative hands just below the arm. A couple of them with missing fingers (Fig. 5b).

#### **Hardi Mahua village:**

The shelter is known as *Rani Pahad*. To reach this site we crossed the *Sarai-jhiriya river*. Many hand stencils are printed on the right, left and middle part of the wall. Most of them are superimposed. One full hand stencil is clearly visible on the top cavity's wall (Fig. 5c).

Site is dedicated to only hands. Local tribes (Gonds and Pahari korba) are still

Fig. 5c. At Hardi Mahua, Rani Pahad, One full hand stencil is clearly visible on the top cavity's wall.



worshipping this site and believe their local goddess Rani Dai lives here and all the stencils belong to her. If they don't give offerings, their crop will get damaged by the animals or nature.

#### **Nakiya village:**

*Raksamara* site with a few not very visible hand stencils.

#### **Satrenga village:**

*Babamandil.* A red negative hand lacking its thumb and ring finger, printed up to the wrist.

#### **Jogdadeo Shelter (Gotitola Village)**

Jogdadeo is the name of a local god. The shelter is about 10m long and 8m wide, with a high (5m) overhang. The slightly inclined painted wall shows one central panel and many traces of running water that must have erased ancient paintings. Its width (taken at the waist of the central figures) is 1.85m. In the Jogdadeo Shelter we found thirty-six handprints, including six yellow ones, two left and two right handprints; two lack their little finger and thumb (Fig. 6). Out of the red handprints, eighteen are left and fourteen are right; five lack fingers, sometimes one, two or three. Due to overlapping some of the hands are not clear.

Just above the big humans are thirty-six whole handprints, including two yellow ones. At least two belong to young children (13x7cm). The adults' are  $\pm 18 \times 15$ cm; one is 20cmx16cm. So, they were printed by different persons. The highest is 1.85m from the ground.

Seven big humans more or less the same size (the second one from the left is 1.25m) are represented frontwise standing close to each other. Their heads are at the same level. First a big human was painted red, then it was lavishly painted in yellow, but leaving his red arms and legs visible. Then the contours of his head and the extremities of his headgear were painted red. Most of the handprints were made above the human heads. Three phases of painting can thus be determined. The ones at each extremity of the group are far less





Fig. 6. Just above the big humans are thirty-six whole handprints, including yellow ones. Jogdadeo.

visible because running water has damaged them.

Between big humans 3-4 and 4-5 (from left to right) are smaller yellow humans each holding a kind of more or less horizontal spear (from tip to tip of the sticks: 1.00m). These yellow figures are superimposed on the red handprints and also red handprints are superimposed on them. On the left of these two figures, few small circles are drawn and a yellow hand is shown without its index and little finger. Another incomplete hand in red, without its little finger, is just above the second yellow figure.

Three more red incomplete hands are shown on the higher side and without any superimpositions.

At the right extremity and a bit higher, other yellow paintings show six dancers (stick figures) with long headgear, quite close to each other even if not holding hands. Three have big bellies (females?)

and are facing right. The red handprints are below and on top of the figures.

A certain number of long red lines, probably made during ceremonies, cover the wall. One can also see a red handprint between the two bigger humans.

Some hands are between the figures and some are below the humans. Jogdadeo site has only human figures and handprints.

Villagers are still performing rituals at this sacred site. At the foot of the panel, a heap of flat stones and fragments of coconuts testify to recent ceremonies. The local people link the images to the Ramayana and do have ceremonies for each festival, offering coconuts and incense sticks.

#### **Balarao Site**

Balarao is the name of a local god. The village is Khaikheda. There, on the side of the valley, an enormous rock, slightly inclined, has created an overhang





Fig. 7. Balarao site, mainly of handprints and footprints. Enhanced with DStretch (\_yrd).

( $\pm 15\text{m} \times 5\text{m}$ ) with two painted panels, mainly of handprints (Fig. 7).

On the first panel (3.20m high) are sixty-four handprints (including eight yellow ones and one of a very young child) and ten footprints of a very young child who must have been borne up in order to make them. At this site human figures are also surrounded and sometimes superimposed with handprints. A yellow "couple" is shown frontwise (0.79m and 0.59m tall), with a handprint superimposed upon it, and just above it seven red hands were painted in a semi-circle. Out of those seven hands, four lack one, two or three fingers.

In all we noticed eleven incomplete hands, twenty-six right and twenty-two left red ones and eight yellow left hands. The yellow hands seem to have been made with turmeric paste and they look like recent handprints. Eleven handprints

are not well defined because of superimpositions.

Our local guide told us that the two human figures are Balarao and protect the village, the people, the animals and the crops. This is thus a very sacred site. The second panel (2.50m), on the left, includes a few not very visible handprints and paintings. In 2017, people told us that they go to this site for ceremonies and offerings (coconuts) in order to be protected.

### Jogi Gufa 1

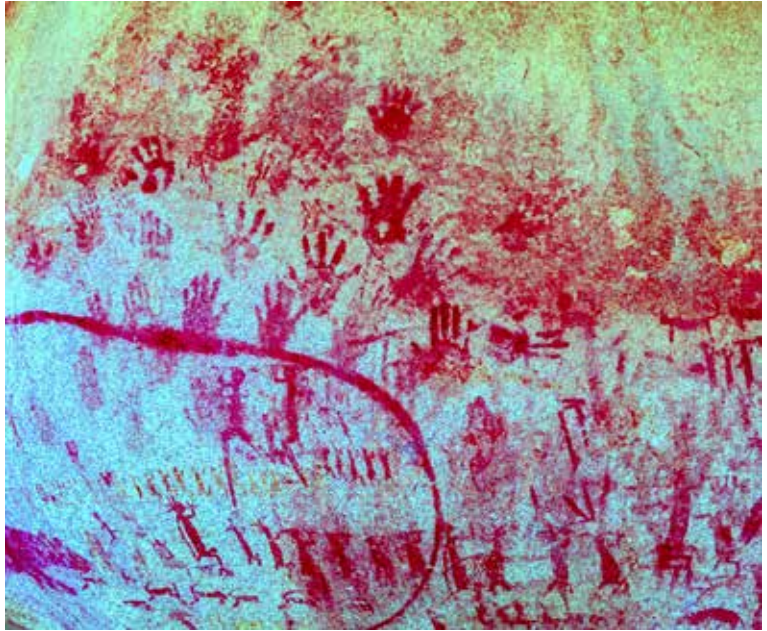
(meaning Hermit's Cave), of the Udkuda village, is a big shelter where a hermit used to live, hence its name. Then, in 2000, the shelter was transformed into a real temple for Kali. A few traces of the former red paintings remaining in the entrance are mostly covered with recent handprints.

### Jogi Gufa 2

The shelter used to be entirely painted. There remain lots of red traces everywhere (on the ceiling and on the walls of the three blocks), but the paintings are very eroded due to their exposure. One can barely distinguish numerous handprints. With the help of DStretch, we have tried to work out the maximum handprints on the ceiling. At least seventy-six were complete hands. Forty-four were left and thirty-two right hands. Fifty-seven hands were not well defined. Recent offerings lying all over testify to the place being still sacred and visited for its power.

**Singar Pathar (Painted Rock).** Kulgaon Village. For half an hour we climbed a steep path in the jungle before reaching the high rocks (about 50/60m above the valley). One of the overhangs ( $\pm 5\text{m}$  long and 3.50m high) was painted with mostly red motifs and a few yellow ones (a row of humans). The wall is almost covered (Fig. 8) with many early images, which include a great number of humans in various positions: most of them follow each other and seem to be dancing with arms half-raised and bent knees. The whole wall bears many handprints. In some cases hands

Fig. 8. At Singar Pathar the wall is almost covered with many early images, which include a number of handprints. Enhanced with DStretch (\_Ire).

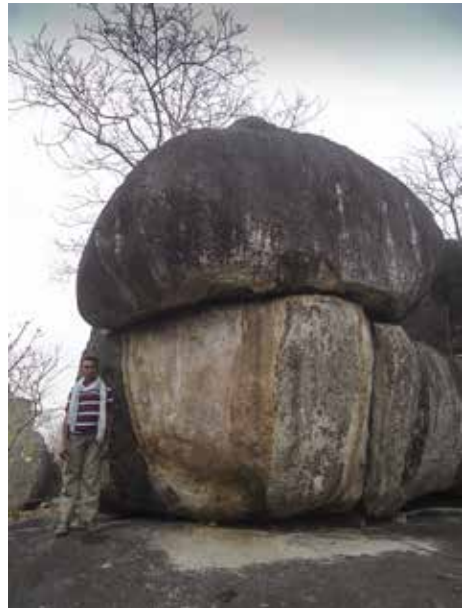


are below earlier images, but mostly they overlap them. We saw a pair of adult footprints superimposed by handprints. Most hands are in red rather than yellow. Their size is big and medium. They must be due to men and women. At least eight pairs of hands (left and right) were printed together. Thirty-one hands were right and twenty-two left. Almost sixty-two hands are not well defined because of superimpositions on earlier hands. Some yellow and white handprints are very faded, probably because they were recently made with rice powder and turmeric paste.

**Patai Dongri** (Mohpur village) is on a small hill or rounded rock (Fig. 9), 12kms from Kanker. It mainly contains handprints and some irregular red lines. The total painted area (3.50x2.50m) is totally covered with handprints. Sixty-two hands were not well defined, eighteen were right and fifteen were left.

Next to the site, 100m away, a small sanctuary is dedicated to local Gond gods like Mawali Mata, Gadhiya Mata and

Fig. 9. Small hill or rounded rock. The total painted area (3.50x2.50m) is totally covered with handprints and some are overlapped with recent ones. Patai Dongri.



Baba Dokra. A shaman used to perform a ceremony during local festivals such as Navakhai (first new crop), Hareli, Holi etc. People would offer terracotta animals after their *manta* or wish had been fulfilled.

**Thakurpara** (Udkuda village). On a small rock not far from the main road we saw handprints, two small footprints and other faint traces.

**Limdarha** (Mari village) The site is located next to a waterfall. Its painted wall, facing east, is a part of a cliff in the Keshkal Valley. A small Shiva sanctuary was built just in front of the painted wall. Because of the wonderful location and presence of the waterfall, it must have been an important place for ceremonies and rituals.

The painted surface almost extends over 100m from north to south with red images scattered all along. On the main panels we can see many dancing scenes in a row in different styles, geometric symbols, a hunting scene, many handprints, finger marks, dots and small-size animals. Handprints were superimposed on the images. The hands total forty-eight: twenty-one are right and ten left, while seventeen hands were not well defined. Most are red with a few in white.

Mostly handprints were painted in a pair or alone with right hands more than

Fig. 10. Finger marks including all five fingers at Limdarha.



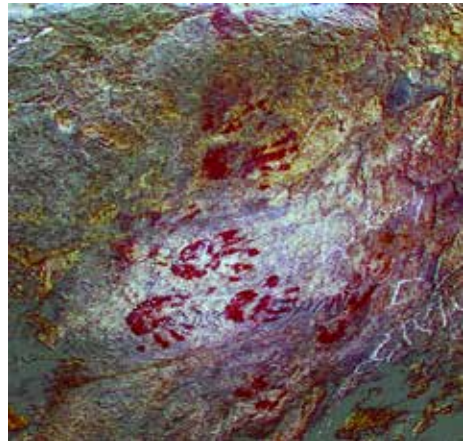
left. Finger marks were also painted. Finger marks including all five fingers were made at least 47 times (Fig. 10). Sometimes small marks, occasionally with finger tips, were also painted.

**Mankeshari** (Mankeshari village) is a small shelter. It faces north and is 5m long, 5m wide and 3.2m deep. It has many handprints and some images of local gods/goddesses. Two hands (Fig. 11) linked by a line are 20x33cms. Interestingly all twenty-seven hands are right hands.



Fig. 11. Ten hands including two linked with a line at Mankeshari.

Fig. 12. Hands made with human blood, still known as Lahoo hatha ("Hands with blood"). Majhingarh 1.





**Majhingarh 1.** Vishrampuri of the Kondagaon district. Majhingarh is a big plateau on the top of the Keshkal Range and its sites are located in the Keshkal Valley cliffs. The plateau is 8km from the Kharali village. The painted sites are all around the cliffs. The first site, the most accessible, has been totally vandalized and spoilt with smoke. Just a few red handprints are visible (Fig. 12).

According to local villagers and their shaman, those handprints and all the paintings of the Majhingarh area were made with human blood by the *Uke* (man eaters who used to live in the Keshkal valley). This is why the Majhingarh 1 site is still known as *Lahoo hatha* ("Hands with blood").

**Majhingarh 2,** 600m west from Majhingarh 1, is a very big shelter with well preserved art, the best in the area. The paintings are red and yellow. Drawings are rather high on the wall, seven or eight feet from ground level and almost up to the top. They are not well preserved. The entire wall was painted unevenly. Most of the images belong to Mesolithic times. We found some handprints superimposed on the early images on the lower wall.

**Majhingarh 3,** a 30m long, 20m wide shelter with a 10m overhang, has more than one hundred images with handprints, hunting scenes, a deer next to a few humans, dancing scenes with four to five panels of dancers in red, and animals. In many cases handprints overlap other images. One long panel is engraved and filled with colour. A few paintings are Mesolithic.

The **Benipat** site is 2km from the Bhensgarhi village in the north/east of the Raigarh area, 32km from Raigarh itself. The small shelter has been turned into an active Durga Goddess sanctuary, with all sorts of rituals carried out by devout local villagers. The site is on its way to becoming a modern temple. All this has been very detrimental to the original rock art.

A few red geometric patterns escaped modern inscriptions in the upper part of the wall. Neither animals nor humans are represented.

The wall is mainly covered with modern religious paintings of different colours (yellow dominant, white and red). They include tridents, swastikas, a kind of eight-pointed star and a number of very conspicuous vermilion handprints overlapping white hands (Fig. 13). At least twenty-



Fig. 13. Vermilion handprints on top of white hands at Benipat.

three right hands are painted. Below the main panel of hands, in a natural cavity of the wall, a beautiful flat small stone statue of the Goddess is surrounded with all sorts of offerings.

The **Nawagarhi** shelter (Ghargodha village), 46km northwest from Raipur and 9km from the village, is at the foot of a 20m high cliff. It is 19m long but not very deep. Three visible figures are: a double circle with inside crisscrossing; (a big handprint (17cm); a rectangle with an inside geometric pattern, painted dark-brown with an off-white outlining of its outside lines and inside patterns.

**Lekhamada 1** (Ongna village). A big shelter. Only the left half has remained well preserved. The art consists of small red figures, with a number of sketchy humans, sometimes dancing, sometimes with a complex headgear, in one case with a musician playing a harp, superimposed with red handprints. We saw undetermined animals in a row, humped bulls,

geometrics, and several recent handprints (Fig. 14) superimposed on the images.

**Lekhamada 2.** A few meters to the left of the preceding one is another shelter with a few not very visible red figures, including several sketchy humans, one handprint and two recent ten-headed Rawan depictions. Also votive offerings.

**Siroli Dongri 1** is 1km east of Siroli village. The red paintings that remain visible are mostly on the ceiling. They mainly consist of two pairs of different quite small infant footprints and one pair of adult footprints. That pair and other footprints seem to have been made by applying colour on the soles of the feet before printing them onto the rock surface, the person lying on the rocky ground or perhaps using somebody's help. The other representations are those of humans, including a very big man, animals (deer) and geometrics, such as a number of small squares or rectangles with a vertical bar inside, big zigzags, dots or religious symbols.

*Fig. 14. Several recent handprints are superimposed on ancient images at Lekhamada 1.*

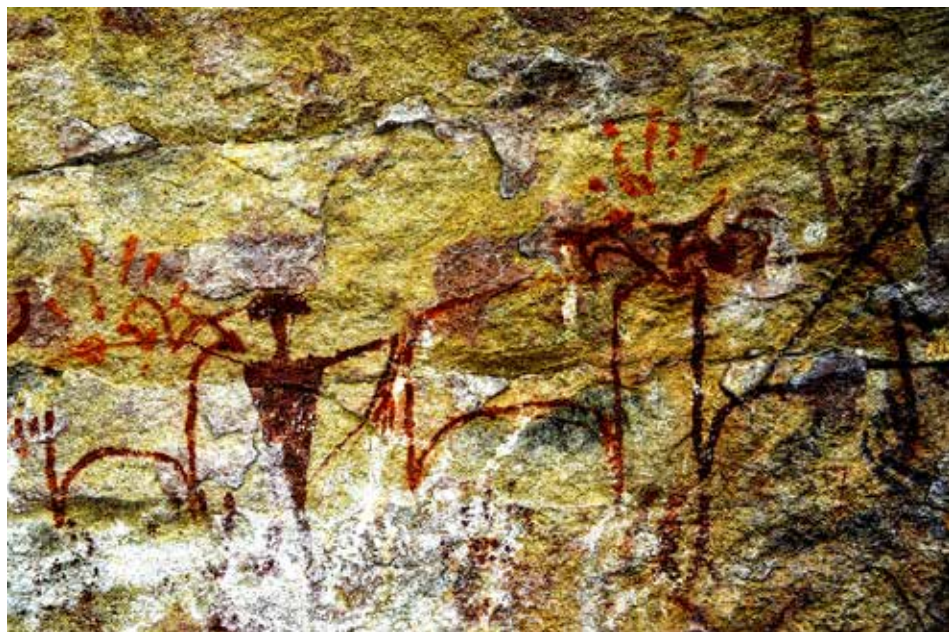


Fig. 15. Drawings of two hands, one of them decorated with dots. Kohbar.



**Siroli Dongri 4** (or Angnai 1= *Courtyard*), about 1km away from the preceding one, faces east. The shelter has been converted into a modern sanctuary for Kali and Shiva by painting Kali's face (vermilion, red and black) onto a rock close to the ground, together with two tridents and various vermilion marks above one of them. Traditional handprints made with turmeric paste are present but not very visible. We noticed offerings of incense sticks and coconuts.

The more than sixty representations include humans, many footprints in pairs, hand representations (with four, five or seven fingers), finger marks, intricate big religious patterns with swastikas and *chakras*/circles.

**Siroli Dongri 6** (or **Deveta Pathar 1**= "Stone off/for God"), opposite the preceding one. The numerous red figures are spread out all over the site. Many finger marks range from short traces to parallel lines. Geometric patterns are present, as well as an eight-toed long foot, a strange motif with eight finger-like bars and several elongated ovals or circles with a criss-crossing motif inside. We also saw two

representations of footprints and four of handprints.

**Siroli Dongri 7** (or **Deveta Pathar 2**) is about 30m in front of the preceding one (facing west). We counted thirty-eight red figures, including ten geometric patterns of different sizes (the biggest being 40cmx15cm) and forms, dots, two pairs of adult footprints, handprints, and long vertical finger marks such as are still being made during *dhan pujas* (ceremonies for the first rice crop). Strangely enough, we could not make out any distinct animal.

**Kohbar.** We have noticed hand drawings. The outlines of two hands are made with dots (Fig. 15) and the palms are decorated with designs.

**Chitwa Dongri** (Fig. 16) and **Basnajhar** sites have many finger marks and dots.

## Discussion

Representations of hands are thus frequent. Different techniques were and are used. The easiest and most common is covering the palm of the hand with wet colour, generally red or red-brown but





Fig. 16. Many finger marks. Chitwa Dongri. Enhanced with DStretch (Jre).

sometimes yellow, and applying it against the wall, creating what is called a positive handprint. Sometimes the outlines of the hand touching the wall are drawn in addition.

We have also seen hand stencils. The hand is then applied against the wall and paint is blown onto it. When the hand is removed, it appears in negative. Negative hands are not very common in Indian rock art. We have found some in just two sites in Madhya Pradesh (Kumalwa in Umariya district (fig.17) and Gaimukh in Betul district). Mirzapur in Uttarpradesh also has a few hand stencils. Chhattisgarh State has many. Positive hands are quite common in the rock art sites in India.

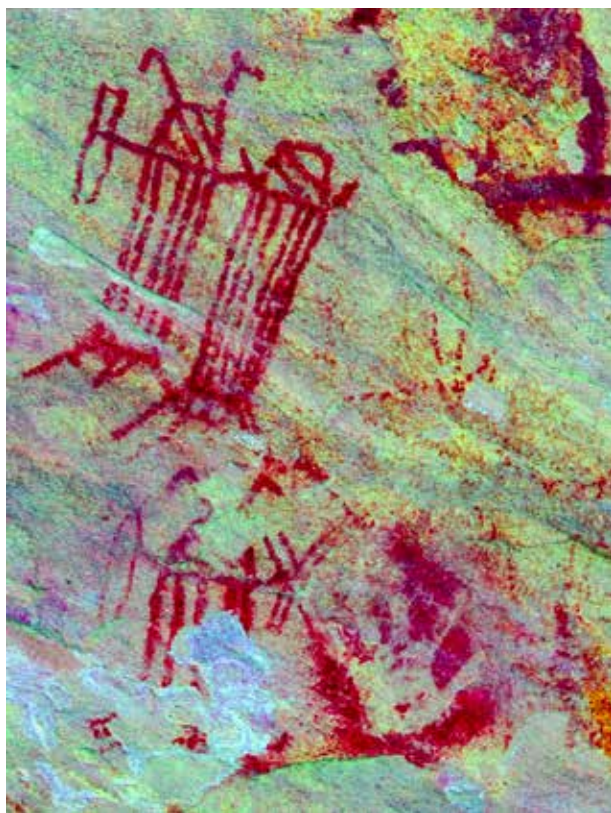
Stencils and handprints may be found on the same site. This is the case at Hamtha.

Hands may be isolated, in pairs or in groups or even arranged in patterns, such as a semi-circle of seven positive hands at Balarao. In one case a hand was drawn with dots and another one was decorated inside at Kohbar. A number of other sites, in the south of Chhattisgarh, have red handprints. We have seen hand stencils and handprints in many sites in the State (28 out of 64).

### Why are some hands incomplete?

Finding incomplete hands is not rare. People have left imprints of their hands in the walls of caves and rock shelters at all times all over the world, and numerous hands are missing fingers.

Fig. 17. Hand stencil at Kumalwa site in Madhya Pradesh. Enhanced with DStretch (Jre).



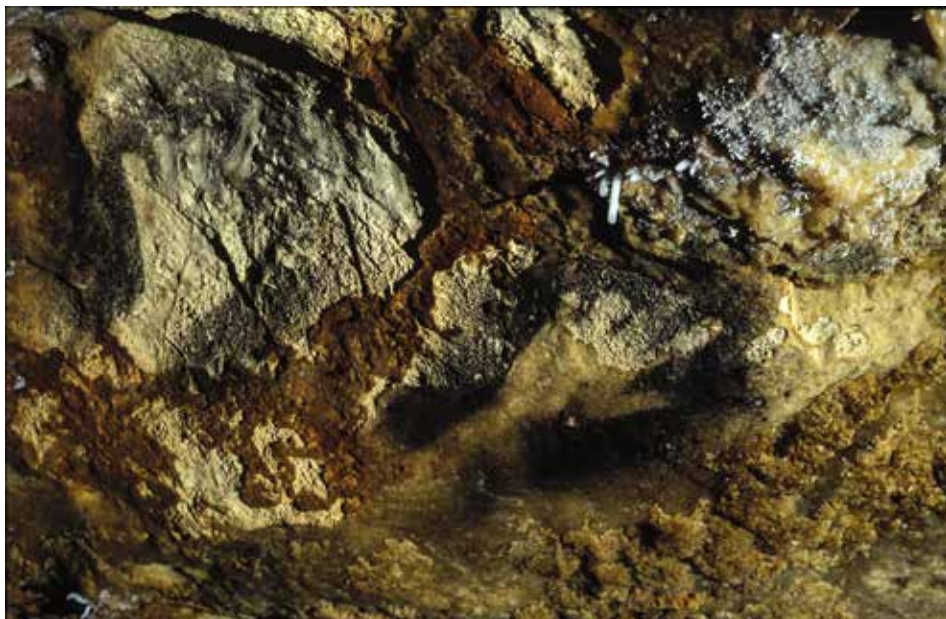


Fig.18. Cosquer (France). Hands with incomplete fingers.

Some researchers found 121 cultures that have such lacks (cf. Bradshaw Foundation site). Are hands with missing fingers in caves always the result of deliberate amputation practices and what are their reasons?

**Pathology: Raynaud disease?**

An archaeologist who was also a medical doctor, Dr Ali Sahly, argued that some diseases, like the Raynaud disease, could entail the loss of fingers and explain the incomplete hands at Gargas (Sahly 1966). The discovery of the Cosquer cave with a number of such hands (fig.18) put a stop to that hypothesis (Clottes & Courtin 1994). The Gargas cave with more than two hundred hand stencils (fig.19) and quite a number of



Fig. 19. Gargas Palaeolithic hand stencils in different colours (France). Gargas is the European cave with most hand stencils with incomplete fingers.

incomplete hands is more than 400kms away from Cosquer. It is impossible to believe that roughly at the same period (the Gravettian) people so far away would get the same rare disease and then react in the same complex way by stencilling their mutilated hands on the walls of deep caves.

### ***Amputations?***

The most famous researcher on European Palaeolithic art, the Abbé Henri Breuil, postulated that if fingers were missing at Gargas this was an actual fact and that the hands must then have been deliberately mutilated for some reason or other (Breuil 1952: 246-257).

This hypothesis has recently been taken over and developed, mostly with ethnological examples from all over the world (McCauley et al. 2018).

As an example, the Dani tribes in New Guinea used to offer their fingers for ritual purposes. "A woman will cut off the top of her finger if she loses her family member or a child". This ritual has been banned but the practice can still be seen with some of the older women of the community, who have mutilated fingertips (Sumitra 2011).

### ***Folded?***

Folding particular fingers may be a kind of language, particularly for hunters (Luquet 1926, Leroi-Gourhan 1967). That language or another like it may also be used to get in touch with the gods. Experiments have shown that such folding was quite possible for the incomplete hands known in Palaeolithic art (Groenen 1986-1987).

## **Modern hand representations and their reasons**

In Chhattisgarh and more generally in Central India, where we not only have quite a number of handprints and hand representations in the rock art but also examples of their use during distinct ceremonies and cultural events among local populations, we have testimonies and explanations about some of their uses.

It is quite different elsewhere. Perhaps because of their remoteness and of the prevalence in Chhattisgarh of tribes that have kept their age-old traditions, the number of painted sites where we found undisputable traces of recent ceremonies, offerings and religious practices has proved to be unexpectedly high (19 out of the 64 we visited). This contrasts with the rest of the world where nowadays such practices have either entirely vanished or have become exceptional as in Aboriginal Australia.

The offerings made by local visitors are nearly always the same (coconut, incense, glass bangles, sometimes ceramic statuettes), identical to the ones one can see in Hindu temples, as well as the vermilion colour that has kept its symbolical and powerful meaning of establishing a relationship between humans and gods.

Even if many images remain mysterious to us, India in general – and Chhattisgarh in particular – is one of the few places in the world where the persistence of traditions permits us to understand the meaning or some of the meanings of diverse motifs, even if what is most striking is their complexity. There cannot be any doubt that all sorts of different intricate stories applied to the painted shelters and to their numerous images. With the passage of time most have been lost and we can only get some inkling about them from the beliefs and ceremonies still alive in the tribes.

For example, handprints are found both in the shelters with rock art and on the walls of houses. They are very common in the tribes. They may be made on different occasions such as marriages, new crops, and any festival. For the protection from ghosts, Murias will print hands in a row all around the walls of their houses (Fig. 20). Among the Gonds, when somebody dies, family members will make a paste of rice flour – which stands for the colour white – and of turmeric (for yellow) to which they add vermilion powder for red. They will then make handprints inside (Fig. 21) and outside their homes and also in the shrines of their local gods. The aim





Fig.20. For a protection from ghosts Muria Gonds print hands in a row all around the walls of their houses. Dantewara.



Fig. 21. Among Gonds, when somebody dies they make handprints inside and outside their house. Narayanpur.

of such ceremonies and handprint making is to ensure that the soul of the dead person will rest in peace.

Handprints thus establish a direct relationship between this world and the next. They are perceived as protection. They do not just symbolize it, they create it. In this context, making handprints in a painted shelter is not a signature or a casual gesture. Through the sacred paint, which may on occasion be made with blood from a sacrifice, the hand in a way penetrates the wall where it leaves its mark.

#### **A few examples**

From what the Shaman/*gayta* of Kalari village in Keshkal valley told us, his grandparents used to go to the jungle to make handprints on the shelter walls during particular festivals. They still make them in the rainy season during *Kanhaiya Antho/Janmastami*, God Krishna's birthday. Men, women and children make eight handprints in the forest sanctuaries or at home. Sometimes parents do *manta* for their sick children and, after their wish has been fulfilled, they make eight more handprints and offerings of coconuts. According to the Hindu calendar, *Antho/Ashtami* is the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the month and God Krishna was born on the 8th day of the month of August. That is why they make eight handprints with soaked rice paste. To make the paste, they soak rice overnight, then next day they grind it on a stone to make a thin paste. They put the paste in a big dish so

that both hands can come together in it and be printed on the wall at a time.

At a Majhingarh site not far from the village, known as *Lahoo Hatha* ("Hands made with blood"), a long time back, people known as *Ukey Rakshas* used to sacrifice humans and out of their blood they made handprints (Fig. 12) on the walls. *Kshtri Manjhi*, an ancestor of the Kalari villagers, killed those *ukeys*. This folklore is quite popular among the locals. Since then they are having a *Jatra* festival in the same valley.

According to the locals of Antagarh, Dhaniliyaji, every year they make handprints or *Hatha* on the outside wall of the house during Hareli festival, in July. For Diwali festival in November, after having a new crop, they soak new rice to make a paste. They print both hands on the walls of their house and on the grain bins or baskets known as *Dholi* made with bamboo, so that their rice will be safe for the coming year.

During *Khichrahi* festival in the rainy season, women collect cow dung from the cowshed and make handprints and fingerprints all around their house out of that cow dung to protect their house from the bad eye or evil spirit.

In Chhattisgarh, during the wedding ceremony, women from the bride side make handprints with turmeric paste on the back of the people from the bridegroom's side.

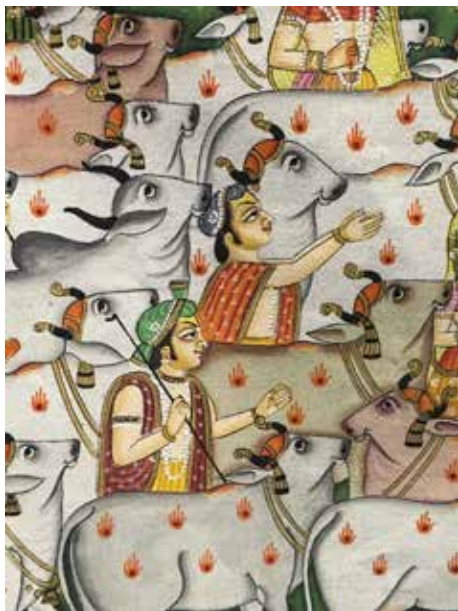


Fig. 22. Hands painted on cows. Pichhwai traditional art from Nathdwara (Rajasthan).

Fig. 23. Chauvet (France). Hand stencils.



After the wedding ceremony, when the bride first gets into her husband's house, she will dip her bare feet into a plate full of red liquid placed at the entrance. So she will leave a trail of red footprints in her "new" house. She will also dip both palms into turmeric and rice mixed paste and make handprints on both sides of the entrance and near the sanctuary inside the house. Footprints and handprints are thus closely linked and are symbols of prosperity.

Polā, a festival for cows and bulls, comes in September. The cattle owners make *chhapalhatha* or handprints on the bodies of their bulls or cows, for their safety and prosperity. Such handprinting on cattle is frequent in India among local tribes as well as in traditional paintings (Pichhwai traditional art) (Fig. 22) (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes 2013).

Finger marks and dots, as well as lines unrelated to any naturalistic motif are frequent in the rock art. They may have meanings similar or close to those of handprints. For example, in the north of the State, on every Thursday of *Kartik* (one month between November and December), when the main rice crop is due, the woman of the house will make seven vertical lines with a rice paste onto her grain vat. She will also make dots all around the entrance to the house. Dots, lines and handprints may be painted next to an image of their Goddess inside the house and circles, squares, rectangles and floral motifs on the ground. All this is meant to ensure prosperity and safety for the family.

## Conclusion: elsewhere in the world

We have mentioned hand stencils and handprints in European Palaeolithic caves (Gargas, Cosquer, El Castillo, etc.). The most ancient are probably at Chauvet (Fig. 23) (Aurignacian, 35,000 BP).

Europe and India, though, are far from unique as regards handprints and hand stencils. They can be found on all continents.



*Fig. 24. Cueva de las Manos, in Argentina, with hundreds of hand stencils.*



The most famous site is no doubt the well-named Cueva de las Manos, in Argentina, with nearly one thousand hand stencils (Fig. 24) in a small cave situated in a beautiful landscape, on a bank of the Rio Pinturas. It was put on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1999.

In Borneo, Kalimantan is another place best known for its numerous caves with hundreds of negative hands, discovered in 1998. Some of them are decorated inside with geometric motifs. Most of them are located in fairly inaccessible places and reaching them was quite a perilous adventure (Fage & Chazine 2009).

In the many sites of Australia negative hands occur in their basic forms (fig 25). Some sites have family hands in different sizes from the adults to kids.

In Egypt various caves have many hand stencils. The Wadi Sora cave, called Cave of Beasts, has lots of them close together. In Gilf Kebir, a very remote plateau in the

*Fig. 25. Mitchell Falls in the Kimberley (Australia). Hand stencils next to Gwion Gwion images.*





Fig. 26. Gifl Kebir, a very remote plateau in the southwestern corner of Egypt. A hand stencil with a missing small finger.

southwestern corner of Egypt, among other hand stencils we shall choose one with a missing small finger (Fig. 26).

These few examples – we could have chosen many more on all continents – show that hand stencils are present all over the world. They testify to an ancient way of thinking and behaving: the hand gets into the wall, for whatever purpose beneficial to its maker.

**Dr Meenakshi Dubey- Pathak**  
309, Sector C, Raksha Vihar, 3 EME Center  
Bhopal bypass Rd, Bhopal Bhopal (M.P.)  
462031 INDIA  
meenakshividushi@gmail.com

**Dr Jean Clottes,**  
11, rue du Fourcat,  
09000, Foix, France,  
j.clottes@wanadoo.fr

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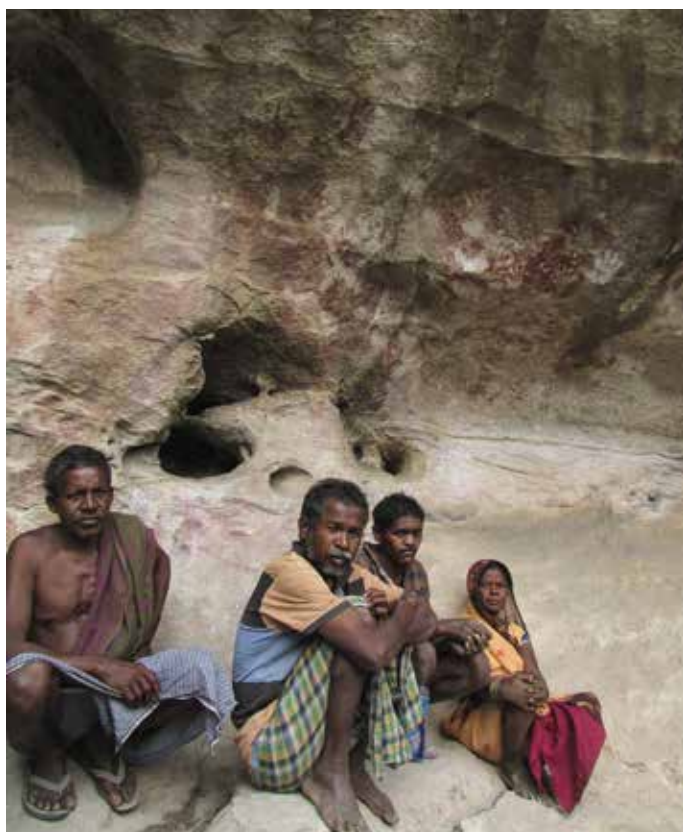
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Pahari Korba (local tribes) at Hathamadha rock art site, Aretara Village.