



KEYWORDS: *Rock art – Ethnography – Adivasi culture – Eastern India*

BEYOND PETROGLYPHS: SACRED MARKS, LIVING STORIES OF ROCK ART IN JHARKHAND, INDIA

Kumari Vibhuti Nayak

Abstract. This study interrogates archaeological interpretations of Jharkhand's pre-Historic rock art, which have historically marginalised Adivasi narratives. Through ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and community-based participatory research, the study argues that the region's rock art was not merely an archaeological artefact but a living testament to Adivasi cosmology, ecological stewardship and resistance. Focusing on the Adivasi perspectives, this study challenges extractive academic practices and advocates for decolonial methodologies that recognise Adivasi sovereignty over cultural heritage.

Introduction

In archaeological studies, the perception of Adivasi communities on rock art has often been overlooked. Looking through the lens of Adivasi people, as described by researchers, represents a comprehensive understanding of the world that integrates both physical and spiritual dimensions, guiding human behaviour and decision-making (Berkes 1999; Berkes et al. 2003; Ortega-Rincon 2024). This knowledge underpins cultural worldviews, which have been articulated symbolically—through artistic practices, for instance, to structure thought and interpret the environment (Solomon 2008.). In this way, art emerged not merely as a creative endeavour but as a cognitive reflection of deeply held worldview frameworks.

Further, rock art served as cognitive maps that reflected mindscapes shaped by culture-specific through the eyes of Adivasi people. Although often overlooked, rock art was deeply connected to cultural and spiritual notions of Adivasi people, incorporating elements such as environmental context, resource availability (for instance, sun, animal species, trees and water), territoriality, landscape management, land ownership and other cultural related themes, expressed through both physical and spiritual dimensions. Additionally, rock art embodied multiple layers of meaning, from outwardly visible imagery to deeper, culturally embedded symbolism (Morphy 1991; Taylor 2016). However, colonisation's disruption of Indigenous communities globally led to the decline of rock art traditions, resulting in significant cultural and ecological knowledge loss.

Rock art functioned as a cognitive map, encoding Adivasi peoples' relationships with their landscapes. If the symbolic codes, maps or texts fade or the

knowledge to interpret them has been lost, an entire universe of meaning vanishes. Protecting both tangible (i.e. rock art sites) and intangible heritage (i.e. cultural aspect of rock art according to Adivasi people) is thus essential. Unlike many colonised regions in Australia, there remains a critical opportunity to preserve and revitalise this interconnected heritage. Drawing on Faulstich's (2003) foundational work, the present study introduces a novel theoretical and methodological framework designed to systematically integrate cultural aspects into rock art studies. This innovative approach prioritised identifying how cultural aspects—encompassing ecological practices, spiritual beliefs and land stewardship—were embedded within rock art, offering a bridge between cultural knowledge and environmental understanding that has long been marginalised in archaeological research.

Background of study

Numerous studies have been conducted on rock art, a worldwide phenomenon that provides insights into past cultures and cosmologies (Layton 2000; Lewis-Williams 2002; Bahn 2010). Numerous topics, including motifs, interpretations and methodological approaches, have been the subject of studies (Bahn 2010). Despite being comparatively understudied, south Asian rock art has received more scholarly attention; the most prevalent anthropomorphs were red (Tan 2014). Diverse cultural, social and historical contexts have influenced animal motifs in rock art, making multidisciplinary and community-engaged study necessary for improved comprehension and preservation (Lerski 2025). The connection between skyscapes and rock art has been investigated, raising concerns about how celestial objects affect creative

depictions (Henty et al. 2024). Dating issues, faulty stylistic models, and a lack of knowledge of taphonomic impacts are some of the field's problems. Studies of Palaeolithic art were in crisis as a result of these problems, and more thorough evaluation and scientific approaches were needed (Bednarik 1996).

Contextualising India, there are more than 1000 recognised rock art locations, with a rich history spanning thousands of years (Sundstrom 2004). Cupules and petroglyphs discovered in locations such as Daraki-Chattan and Auditorium Cave might be the earliest examples of rock art in India, dating to the Lower Palaeolithic (Bednarik 2007, 2016). Indian rock art reflects the nation's cultural diversity using various styles and techniques, such as petroglyphs and paintings (Chakravarty and Bednarik 1997). From early 19th-century findings to more methodical investigations, research on Indian rock art has advanced recently, emphasising scientific methodologies, including microerosion analysis and replication tests (Bednarik 2016). The emergence of depictions of zebu cattle, which were linked to the era of cattle domestication, was one example of a chronological marker in Indian rock art. Frequent factors contribute to the destruction of these old artworks, making conservation measures essential (Chakravarty and Bednarik 1997). However, among Adivasi (also recognised as Indigenous globally and tribals in India), people were able to preserve rock art and worship it for ancestral blessings, as discussed in an upcoming section.

Adivasi people and rock art

Recent studies highlighted the evolving significance of rock art for Adivasi people across different geographies. According to Tilche (2022), modern Adivasi people have been redefining their relationship with rock art by asserting their identity and land ownership through it and claiming ancestral links. Beyond archaeological interest, rock art evokes deep cultural and emotional reactions influenced by social memory, ontological understandings and communal well-being (Brady et al. 2016). Sometimes contributing to cultural and environmental resistance, rock art in the southwestern United States acts as an animated link between locations, ancestors and modern communities (Horton 2024). Likewise, among the oldest and most intricate in the world, Australian Aboriginal rock art serves as a storehouse of memory and wisdom, upending conventional academic methods of historical interpretation (Jones 2019). These studies highlight the spiritual, cultural and socioeconomic aspects of rock art's current significance for Adivasi people. From 200 BCE until the nineteenth century, Southwest American culture, religion and society were understood mainly through rock art (Schaafsma 1986). In India, ethno-rock art studies were aided by comparative studies of rock art and folklore, such as those on the Oraons, which highlight the cultural parallelism and historical significance of oral traditions and visual

representations (Kumar et al. 2021). The Chotanagpur plateau has been widely recognised as one of eastern India's most affluent ancient cultural hubs for rock art.

Evidence of several ancient rock arts was found in the extremely isolated, heavily forested, and inaccessible slopes. According to Bain et al. (2022), since the twentieth century, when the rock art of Jharkhand (23°45' N, 85°30' E) was first documented by Mitra in 1961 and other rock art sites were discovered by Neumayer in 1994. It has been noted that Chotanagpur's residents have long preserved their cultural customs as a result of their seclusion. Among the many forms, village women continue to pursue the ancient heritage of painting on dwelling walls. The current study at the Chotanagpur plateau in the northeast has been based on rock art and its ongoing heritage in Adivasi communities' contemporary wall art.

According to recent studies, Adivasi viewpoints have been crucial for comprehending rock art and cultural heritage. The ecological diversity of Jharkhand, India, is reflected in traditional mural artworks like Sohrai and Khovar, which had been essential for conserving cultural history and strengthening Adivasi communities (Imam 2011). The requirement for methodological openness in ethnoarchaeological research was highlighted by the significant discrepancy between Adivasi and archaeological conceptions of rock art (Bhattacharya 2011). In order to bridge the gap between Adivasi landscape perspectives and rock art study, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have become an invaluable tool, providing multi-scalar analyses. Hence, the current study uncovers cultural traditions continuously from the past to the present and how far back this study could trace their origins.

Research context

Jharkhand, a state in eastern India (as shown in Fig. 1), is a cultural and historical epicentre, home to over 30 Indigenous communities (Census 2011) and south Asia's densest concentration of rock art, with some sites thought to date back over 10,000 years (Neumayer 1994). This review examines the evolution of scholarly perspectives on these rock art traditions, from colonial-era dismissals to contemporary efforts to centre Adivasi's voices. It highlights the disconnect between early academic interpretations and the living cultural practices of Adivasi communities, whose ancestral connections to these sites remain vital.

The late 20th century saw the discovery of rock art in Jharkhand, and researchers like Bulu Imam were instrumental in locating and cataloguing a number of these sites. Imam's (1993) substantial work in the areas of Hazaribagh and Chatra introduced these locations to the attention of scholars and environmentalists. In Jharkhand's rock art, petroglyphs, images produced by a reductive process, and pictograms or painted images were observed. Usually, sandstone surfaces, rockshelters and lone boulders are the locations of these works of art. Bain and colleagues (2022) divide

them into (i) ancient rock art; these are from the Mesolithic and Upper Palaeolithic periods and feature geometric patterns, anthropomorphs and hunting scenes; (ii) early historical rock art: linked to Iron Age societies, these represent ritualistic scenes, human warriors and elaborate animal themes; (iii) tribal & folk rock art: using natural pigments to create pictures of their cultural and religious beliefs, modern Indigenous societies, such as the Mundas and the Oraons, have helped to preserve rock art traditions.

Additionally, scholars contend that these works of art fulfilled a variety of functions, including social storytelling, territorial marks and religious rites (Taçon 2019). A continuity between ancient and modern tribal art is demonstrated by the resemblance of some themes in paintings from sites such as Isco (Hazaribagh) to those from Sohrai and Khovar (Bain et al. 2022). Numerous studies highlight how important rock art is to spiritual rituals. Some rockshelters may have served as hallowed places for ancestor worship and rites (Brown 1997). Also, shamanic traditions were suggested by the representation of creatures like bulls and elephants (Tiwary 2000). Moreover, similar traditions in eastern India (Odisha and West Bengal) and central India (Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh) have been compared to Jharkhand's rock art (Bain et al. 2022). While Bhimbetka depicts elaborate scenes with 'hunting', 'dancing' and social activities, Jharkhand's rock art is relatively more abstract and symbolically sophisticated, reflecting a distinct creative and cultural progression (Tiwary 2022).

Regarding conservation challenges, neglect, vandalism, and environmental deterioration affected Jharkhand's rock art preservation. These delicate locations are seriously threatened by anthropogenic activities such as urbanisation, mining and forestry (Tiwary 2022). Furthermore, many rock art sites have gradually eroded due to a lack of awareness and rigorous conservation programs (Plets et al. 2012). For sustainable preservation, however, more thorough documentation and community engagement are required.

Gap in research

Even though these sites have received scholarly attention, most of the research has only looked at them from an archaeological and art historical standpoint. Multidisciplinary strategies that take into account Indigenous viewpoints and anthropological insights are desperately needed. Rock art is still associated with symbolic meanings and oral traditions among Adivasi people, especially the Oraons. These ancient artworks are given a live context by their cultural narratives, folklore and ritual practices, which offer



Figure 1. Map of Chatra district in Jharkhand and location of Jharkhand within India.

interpretations that may not be present in traditional archaeological investigations. Interacting with these groups can help close the gap between the past and present by fostering a more complex understanding of rock art's ritualistic and symbolic meaning.

Even though there has been support for preserving Indigenous cultural heritage, including rock art locations, little is known about how successful these initiatives are—for example, how do contemporary Indigenous populations view and engage with rock art? How can Indigenous knowledge in archaeological practice be re-centred using decolonial frameworks? How does rock art fit into the current Indigenous movements' fight for cultural and land rights? Such questions remained unexplored; consequently, three main goals were established:

- To compile information on the Oraons current rock art customs and beliefs.
- To investigate the effects of contemporary events on the preservation of rock art traditions, including industrialisation, land alienation, and cultural changes.
- To investigate how gender, social identity and the rock art tradition intersect, with an emphasis on women's roles in the customs and oral legacy of rock art knowledge.

Methodology

The research methodology is based on a qualitative framework with an emphasis on ethnographic and participatory research methods. The present study approach was guided by van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology to comprehend subjective experiences. A phenomenological approach to analysing rock art through the Adivasi people focuses on understanding the lived experiences, cultural meanings and

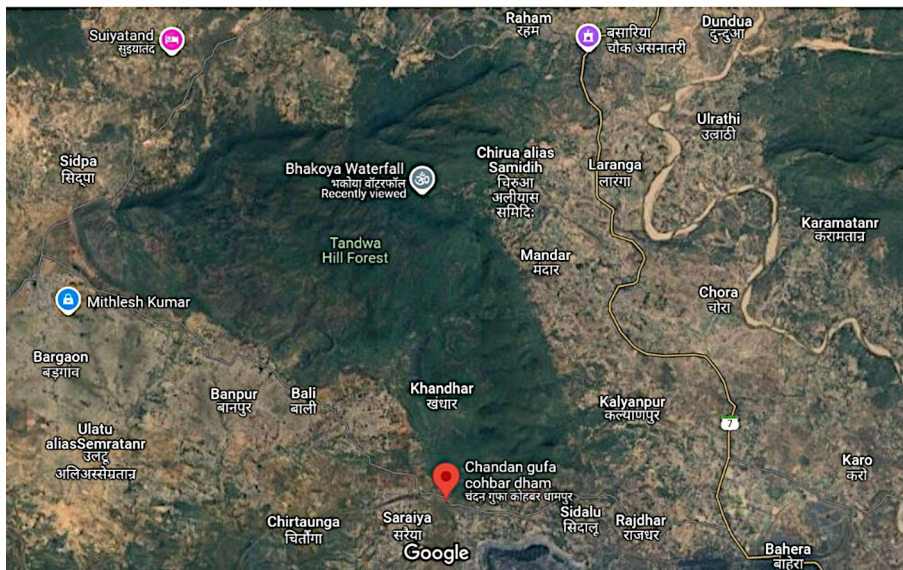


Figure 2. Tandwa Hill forest (Google Map view), locations of rock art sites.

spiritual connections associated with rock art rather than viewing it solely as archaeological artefacts. This approach prioritises Indigenous perspectives, oral traditions and the embodied relationship between people, landscapes and artistic expressions.

The key elements of a phenomenological approach to rock art were recording and examining embodied perception and lived experience. Rock art was a continuous experience rather than merely a depiction of the past. Indigenous groups may engage with the



Figure 3. View of the Thethangi site.

art through narrative, rituals and ancestry. Knowledge of how people see, utilise and interpret rock art places today can shed light on their original meaning. Also, to document oral traditions and Indigenous knowledge systems that provide details beyond what may be deduced from archaeological findings, the rock art's significance is further enhanced by Indigenous myths, stories and historical chronicles. Further, the knowledge that discloses the rock art's social purposes or sacredness may be shared by elders, shamans or community historians.

Additionally, place and landscape as living spaces that provide rock art locations are frequently incorporated into landscapes with territorial or spiritual importance. A phenomenological approach takes into account the ways in which Indigenous communities use the physical space, access the places and interpret them. The meaning of rock art is co-constructed through community dialogue. Researchers must engage with Indigenous perspectives, respecting their understandings rather than imposing outsider analytical frameworks. Collaborative methodologies, such as participatory research and ethnographic fieldwork, ensure that Indigenous voices shape the analysis. Many Indigenous communities continue to perform ceremonies or rituals at rock art sites. The phenomenological lens can explore how bodily movements, songs, dances or prayers interact with the visual symbols, reinforcing their cultural continuity.

Site selection

Rock sites were discovered in the Chatra district of Jharkhand (Fig. 1), which was the focus of the study. For this study, Thethangi and Saraiya (in Tandwa Hill Forest, Fig. 2) were chosen as rock art sites to understand how modernisation and urbanisation affect Indigenous people's rock art legacies and document temporal differences from the past to the present. The study was conducted from August 2024 to January 2025. Figure 3 provides a view of the Thethangi rock art site and Figures 4 and 5 present rock paintings from the Thethangi and Saraiya sites, respectively. Figure 6 shows the cliff above the Saraiya site as seen from the nearby road.

Participant selection

The Oraons, who are Indigenous to Chatra, were the research participants in this study. Their ages ranged from 25 to 70. This age range was selected in order to capture a wide range of experience and



Figure 4. Rock paintings at Thethagi: (a) bovid image, (b) 'ancestral' and frog-like motifs, (c) rectangular motifs.



Figure 5. Rock paintings at Saraiya: (a) close view, (b) 'grasshopper', (c) red arrow-like motif.

knowledge on culture, beliefs, tradition, oral history and their engagement and interactions with living rock art legacies. Following initial contact with friends and colleagues of academics working in Indigenous communities, the snowball technique was employed to identify potential research volunteers. Twenty-five individuals participated in this study to share their thoughts on live rock art legacies. All of the participants belonged to the Oraon community.

Data collection

The focal point of this study was ethnographic fieldwork, which involved close observation and involvement in the customs and everyday lives of the Indigenous people. Participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews and gathering oral histories were all components of the fieldwork. To guarantee cooperation with the Indigenous people, participatory techniques like participatory action research (PAR) were also included. This allowed the research to be guided by local perspectives and offered useful advantages. Women's involvement in rituals, oral traditions and the passing down of cultural information was investigated through focus groups and interviews, which provided a comprehensive understanding of the social aspects of cultural practices.

Data analysis

In this mainly qualitative data analysis method, thematic and narrative analysis were used to evaluate fieldwork data. Thematic analysis revealed recurrent themes or patterns about rock art's role in identity, its cultural and spiritual value and how modernity affected these traditions. Field notes, interview tran-

scripts, and oral narratives were systematically coded to uncover underlying meanings and relationships. The main goal of narrative analysis was to understand how stories were put together and what they tell about rock art and its values.

Ethical considerations

When conducting research with Indigenous communities, ethical considerations such as reciprocity, consent and respect were carefully considered. All participants gave verbal agreement after being fully educated about the study's goals, roles and rights, with the understanding that they could withdraw at any moment. Only with explicit consent was sensitive cultural information provided, and identities were safeguarded by confidentiality and pseudonyms. With cultural awareness, the researcher conducted fieldwork, seeking advice from elders and community leaders to honour rock art traditions.



Figure 6. Saraiya site as seen from the road.



Figure 7. From Thethangi rock art site.

Findings

The findings of this study on the Indigenous people's rock art heritage showed a complex interrelationship between the community, their ancestral terrain and the ancient stones they still hold in high regard. This section has been divided into a number of main themes, including the cultural importance of rock art, the rituals connected to them, their function in social cohesiveness and community identity, the gendered aspects of the tradition, and the effects of contemporary issues like industrialisation, land alienation and cultural deterioration, as shown below.

Rock art culturally significant for Indigenous people

The Indigenous community, the Oraons, mentioned rock art as culturally significant because it captures their spirituality, interaction with nature and historical histories. These native groups see rock art as a means of preserving and transmitting their history, identity and beliefs from one generation to the next. Their lives are deeply anchored in their relationship with the land and their ancestors.

Spiritual bond with ancestors

Rock art was more than just ornamental to the Oraons. It meant communication with their ancestors. Animals, people, and abstract patterns were frequently featured in the motifs and symbols, which were said to symbolise spirits or deities. These art pieces are designated hallowed areas or places of devotion and are occasionally connected to ceremonial activities. In an oral history interview, a village elder and Bhola Oraon (religious head from Saraiya rock site) stated,

"The spirits of our forefathers are preserved within the rockshelter walls, not just pictures. They lead us in our festivals, our rituals and our everyday lives. These sacred stones are not merely portals to our past but vessels of ancestral grace. When we gather to honour our traditions here, the guardians of our lineage awaken within these carvings. They walk beside us, shielding our paths and lighting our way, as they have since time beyond memory."

These ancient rock art sites served as revered ceremonial grounds, where the pulse of tradition beats strongest, as the Oraon community elder explained. Here, rituals were not mere acts—they were threads

weaving us into the areas of the unseen world. The petroglyphs were both map and mirror: guiding their prayers, reflecting the presence of those who came before, and anchoring their sacred communion with forces beyond sight, as Jatru Oraon (from Thethagi rock art site, Fig. 7) stated:

"When we look at the rock paintings, we see our past, present and future. These images bind us together. They are not just art; they are symbols of who we are. They remind us that we belong to the same land, the same ancestors and the same community."

Each drawing or petroglyph had a mystical force, and they view rock art as a living tradition that endures beyond time. The Tana Bhagats (a sub-community of the Oraons) mentioned in Thethagi that they see rock art as frequently connected to places of worship where ceremonies and rituals have been conducted. As gathering places for the Oraons to pray, make offerings, and ask the spirits portrayed in the rock art for guidance, Thethangi village had particular significance. The respondents hold the rocks in high regard as they serve as doors to our spiritual realm and are more than just works of art. When community members come together at rock art sites, they are reminded of their ancestors, wisdom and love for the land.

Preserving history and cultural legacy through rock art

The rock art served as a vibrant pictorial archive, capturing their ancestral heritage. Hunting, farming and communal life scenes reveal intimate details about their historical practices and relationship with the land. Certain motifs are believed to commemorate pivotal moments—triumphs in conflict or bountiful harvests—while others illustrate their spiritual bond with nature, reflecting a worldview rooted in ecological harmony. A young Oraon man, Mahendra Bhagat (from Saraiya village), reflected on the symbolic animal figures and ceremonial hunts adorning the rocks:

"Engraved into this rock art are the sagas of our past—the struggles, the hunts that sustained us, and the balance we cherished with the wilderness. Our children learn from the stories told at these sites. The rock art tells them about our ancestors, about how we lived and how we are supposed to live. It is not just history; it is a guide for the future."

For these Indigenous people, rock art transcends mere historical documentation; it has been a living testament to their resilience and identity. The images foster a shared legacy, anchoring present generations to their roots amid global shifts. As modernisation and external forces encroach, rock art stands as both a spiritual anchor and a defiant emblem against cultural assimilation. Respondents regarded these paintings as more than relics—they had been their heartbeat in a changing world. The rock art whispered their traditions endure, unbroken, immortalised in stone.

Safeguarding these ancient artworks was not merely about cultural conservation but about securing a living bridge between future generations, their heritage and the life-sustaining land they inhabit. Protecting

these symbols ensures continuity—a vital thread linking past wisdom, present identity and the stewardship of their ancestral territories.

Ritual significance of rock art in Indigenous traditions

Rock art was inseparable from its ceremonial traditions, serving as a cornerstone of spiritual and cultural existence for Indigenous people. Far from being ornamental, these ancient images are revered as living conduits to the divine, channelling cosmic energies and the wisdom of ancestral guardians. The motifs adorning the rocks were imbued with sacred power, believed to mediate between the physical and spiritual realms. During rituals and daily life alike, these symbols act as guides, anchoring the community's practices—from harvest ceremonies to rites of passage—to the enduring legacy of their forebears. This art has not been static. It pulses with the heartbeat of tradition, ensuring ancestral voices resonate across generations, shaping identity and sustaining harmony with the land held sacred.

Cycles of earth and spirit: rituals of harvest and renewal

According to the respondents, agriculture was not merely a livelihood but a sacred dialogue with the cosmos, mediated through ancient rock art. These sites transform into ceremonial theatres during planting and harvest seasons, where rituals pulse with the rhythm of the land. The petroglyphs—symbols of trees, animals and human forms—act as a symbolic language, narrating the eternal dance between nature and humanity. Here, communities gather to invoke ancestral guardians and earth spirits, seeking their favour for fertile soil, timely rains and abundant yields (Fig. 8). An Oraon farmer, Bandiya Bhagat (from Thethangi rock art site), gesturing to the weathered petroglyphs, stated:

"We do not plead with the land—we converse with it. These stones are not silent; they carry the whispers of our ancestors and the breath of the soil. The figures here teach us that we are threads in the earth's collages. Our rituals are not petitions—they are vows to honour the balance, to keep the energy of the land alive in our hands and hearts. The rock art is a declaration of our identity. It tells the world that we are still here, still connected to the land and our ancestors."

Such a notion elevates agriculture to a *sacred covenant*, frames rock art as an active participant in rituals, and emphasises reciprocity between humans and nature. The farmer's words were reimagined to underscore dialogue rather than supplication, aligning with the theme of interconnectedness.

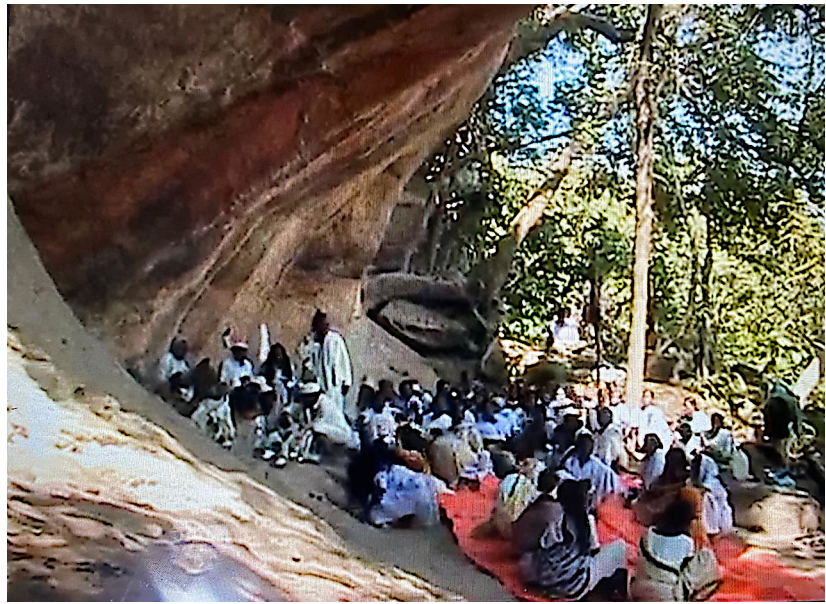


Figure 8. Thethangi rock art site worship place.

Guardians of the wild:

sacred bonds between hunters and spirit-animals

Within the rock art of the Indigenous people believed animals like elephants, tigers, and deer were not mere subjects—they pulse with ancestral wisdom and divine presence. These revered creatures, engraved into stone, embody the spirits of deities and ancestral guardians, forming a sacred bridge between the human and spiritual realms. During hunting rituals, rock art sites transform into altars of communion, where offerings and prayers rise like smoke to honour the animals' spirits. The images are not passive symbols but living conduits; hunters seek to appease the spirits by venerating them, ensuring both a fruitful hunt and ecological balance. The art acts as a pact—a reminder that survival hinges on reciprocity, not dominance, with the wild. An Oraon *Pahan* (priest), Sukra Oraon (from Saraiya rock site), tracing the outline of a weathered tiger, declared:

"The stone beasts are alive with spirit. When we chant before these carvings, we do not beg—we awaken. The tiger's strength flows into our spears, the stag's agility into our steps. These are not images; they are our silent allies, the unseen guides who walk with us into the forest's heart."

This connotation frames animals as active spiritual partners, elevates rituals to acts of awakening rather than supplication, and underscores the reciprocal relationship between hunter, hunted and the sacred art that binds them.

Thresholds of transformation: rituals of becoming

Indigenous people considered rock art as a map of becoming—a sacred script guiding youth through the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Initiation rites unfold at these storied sites, where elders shepherd the young into spiritual maturity. The engravings, alive with ancestral wisdom, are not



Figure 9. Thethangi rock art site.

merely observed but *embodied*; each symbol becomes a lesson in the tribe's cosmology, teaching initiates to see themselves as threads in the tapestry of earth, spirit and lineage. The art's abstract yet potent motifs mirror their metamorphosis, urging them to step into their roles as stewards of tradition and guardians of the sacred. Amrit Bhagat (an Oraon elder), fingertips grazing a millennia-old image, revealed that the rocks were their elders' voices made visible. In initiation, they don't just show the symbols—they awaken their spirits to the truths engraved here. Rock art gives a pathway to becoming an adult, seeing the forest in these lines, hearing the ancestors in these stones, and carrying their fire forward.

One of the key functions of rock art was its role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. The community members—especially the youth—learn about their customs, beliefs and the significance of certain rituals through their interactions with the art. This exchange of knowledge across generations fosters a deep sense of identity and a strong communal bond. Elders teach the younger generation how to interpret the symbols in the rock art, ensuring the continuity of the community's cultural practices (Fig. 9). Rudhan Bhagat (from Thethangi site) illustrates:

"The youth of today may not know the meanings of all

the symbols, but they are learning. The elders guide them, passing on the stories and the teachings that keep our community strong. The rock art is a link that connects the past to the present and the present to the future."

In essence, the rock art was their eternal covenant. A bridge between the tangible and the transcendent, ensuring that every ritual, prayer and offering renews the sacred balance at the core of their existence. For the Oraons, rock art is far more than ancient imagery—it is the bedrock of collective identity and the loom on which the fabric of community is woven. These symbols act as a dynamic archive, preserving ancestral wisdom while nurturing intergenerational dialogue, binding past, present and future into a continuum of shared purpose. Each symbol and scene engraved into stone serves as both a mirror and a map, reflecting the tribe's cosmological ethos and charting a path of unity through the storms of time.

Beyond mere preservation, the rock art activates social cohesion. It was a ritual compass for communal gatherings, a silent teacher for the young, and a rallying emblem that fortifies cultural sovereignty. Engaging with these sacred sites, the Adivasis reaffirm their vows to one another and the land, transforming individual stories into a chorus of belonging. The art does not merely document history—it breathes life

into it, ensuring that every generation inherits not just knowledge, but an unbroken lineage of resilience and reverence. In safeguarding these motifs, the Oraon do not cling to the past; they ignite a living legacy. The rock art becomes a covenant—a promise to honour the ancestors' footsteps while cultivating a future where cultural integrity and communal harmony flourish, rooted deeply in the soil of tradition.

Effects of contemporary issues on the tradition of rock art

In the present day, the Oraons' rock art tradition—a representation of their spiritual beliefs and cultural legacy—faces many difficulties. Rapid social, economic and technological advancements brought about by modernity have affected not just how these societies engage with their rock art but also how these antiquated symbols are preserved. The Oraon peoples' rock art traditions face a challenging environment due to the effects of urbanisation, environmental deterioration, loss of traditional knowledge and the commercialisation of Indigenous cultures.

Urbanisation and displacement

As a result of urbanisation, many Oraons and other communities were forced to leave their ancestral lands, including places with rock art sites. In pursuit

of improved living conditions, these Adivasis were frequently forced into metropolitan or semi-urban areas, severing their strong cultural and spiritual ties to the land and, consequently, to the rock art sites. It has been less likely that younger generations would understand the significance of rock art or even go to the places where their predecessors left these marks because they would have less opportunity to visit or interact with these hallowed sites. Vijay Bhagat (one of the Oraon males who works in Ranchi city and often visits his village Saraiya) stated:

"To visit the sacred rock locations where our forefathers had left their stories, we would walk for hours on end. However, many of us now reside in cities that are far from the land. The younger generation is no longer even aware of the locations of the rock art sites."

Environmental factors like mining, deforestation and climate change had seriously threatened the preservation of rock art. Many locations found beside rivers are becoming increasingly susceptible to industrial activity and human encroachment. Rock art locations are vulnerable to weathering, erosion and physical harm as a result of ongoing deforestation. The likelihood of losing these cultural treasures was further increased by the growth in vandalism, which includes the defacing of rock art by both outsiders and even local residents. Sonajhiri Tirkey (an Oraon community male from Thethangi village) bemoaned,

"The mining companies have arrived, and with them, the destruction of our forests. The holy places are being harmed. The weather has destroyed some of the artworks, while others are being vandalised by others who are unaware of their importance. For us, it is a catastrophe."

As a result, traditional knowledge transmission decreased in the Oraon tribes' quick changes in socioeconomic structure. The main keepers of rock art-related cultural activities, the elders, are getting older, and fewer young people are interested in learning about these customs. Many young people have been disengaged from their communities' traditional customs as a result of the growth of contemporary schooling and media. Further, respondents highlighted that this knowledge has been eroded in part by the prevalence of modern educational systems and the absence of formal training in traditional arts.

Commercialisation of Indigenous culture and integration of contemporary religious acts

The Oraon cultural activities, including rock art, have been increasingly commercialised as interest in Indigenous art has expanded. These cultural markers are exploited when Indigenous cultures receive international attention, even though they can also present economic benefits. Sometimes, rock art gets turned into a commodity by being copied onto crafts, textiles and trinkets for tourists, depriving it of its spiritual meaning. The tradition's authenticity is in danger due to its commercialisation, which may also cause its cultural environment to deteriorate. Aruna Tirkey

(an Oraon woman from Thethangi village) opined,

"People visit our sacred sites, take pictures of them, and occasionally create replicas to sell to tourists. These are tales of our ancestors, not merely paintings. They are not for sale. Our culture is not meant to be consumed. It is ours, holy, and deserving of respect."

Because of such acts, the Oraon people have begun to doubt or even give up their traditional spiritual beliefs, especially those related to rock art, as a result of the growing impact of Christianity and other contemporary religious activities. These tribes' nature-based spirituality and ancestral worship are closely linked to many of the ceremonies connected to rock art. However, many native customs have become marginalised as a result of the adoption of Christianity. Younger generations may consequently become even more estranged from their history if they perceive rock art as superstitious or useless.

Climate change and environmental impact resulted in increased disconnect from nature

The preservation of rock art was also at risk due to climate change and its related effects, which include erratic weather patterns and more rainfall. The integrity of the rock surfaces and the paintings themselves may erode when temperature swings and severe weather occurrences increase in frequency. These art forms are eroding and eventually disappearing as a result of flooding, erosion from severe rains, and the drying of rocks brought on by temperature changes. According to Sukra Oraom (an Oraon elder from Saraiya village),

"The rocks are gradually crumbling, and the rains are coming harder now. The rock art can no longer be preserved the way we once could. Our hallowed sites are getting harder to access as the weather changes."

The Oraons' worldviews place a high value on nature, but this connection has been weakened due to the move away from traditional agrarian lifestyles towards wage labour and urbanised living. Fewer people today recognise the holiness of the land and its meaning despite rock art's strong connection to the natural world and the surrounding landscape. Younger generations find it more difficult to comprehend or participate in these age-old customs as a result of this detachment from the natural world, which diminishes the spiritual and cultural significance of rock art.

Due to contemporary pressures like urbanisation, environmental degradation, loss of traditional knowledge, commercialisation and religious shifts, the Oraons' rock art traditions are confronting previously unheard-of difficulties. These issues jeopardise rock art's cultural and spiritual value within these communities and its physical preservation. The future of rock painting in these societies is dubious as the younger generations become increasingly disconnected from these hallowed practices. It was evident how urgent it is to solve these contemporary issues since protecting rock art is essential to maintaining the identity, history

and spiritual ties of the Oraon people.

Discussion

One remarkable illustration of how Adivasi people manage the demands of the present while preserving a vibrant bond with their ancestral past was the rock art culture of the Oraons. By placing the Oraons rock art cultural activities within the frameworks of Adivasi knowledge systems, spirituality, land rights, gender and cultural resilience, this study examined the results' wider ramifications. By looking at these linked topics, the discussion considers the value of rock art as living symbols that connect the Oraons to their identity, territory and ancestors rather than merely being tangible artefacts.

Indigenous knowledge systems and rock art's living tradition

A larger Adivasi knowledge system that ties together history, spirituality and the environment includes the Oraon's rock art tradition. As demonstrated by the oral histories and rituals surrounding rock art, Indigenous knowledge systems were frequently distinguished by their holistic approach to understanding the world, in which material culture, oral history and rituals were intricately intertwined, also noted by Bain et al. (2022). By serving as archives of collective memory, this rock art guarantees that information about history, historical occurrences and the land's spiritual value has been and still is passed down through the centuries.

The Oraons maintain an ongoing conversation with the past by taking part in ceremonies that reinforce their ties to the land and their ancestors (Bhattacharya 2011). However, these knowledge systems were noted to be in danger because of cultural assimilation, economic pressures and the intrusion of contemporary educational institutions (Kumar et al. 2021). A growing number of younger Oraons, particularly those who have had formal schooling, were losing touch with the rock art's traditional meaning. Important concerns regarding the preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems in a world growing more interconnected are brought up by this disconnect.

Respondents suggested that including traditional knowledge in formal education institutions was one possible remedy. Oral histories, the importance of rock art, and the Oraons' wider cosmic perspectives might all be taught in local schools. Even as they adjust to modern life, such programs would help guarantee that the next generation recognises the importance of their cultural legacy, as noted during the fieldwork.

The sacred land and spirituality

For the Oraons, rock art had a deep spiritual meaning. It was seen as living things that represent the spirits of the land and the presence of ancestors, not just stones. This view aligned with the larger Indigenous cosmology, which holds that nature, people and the

spiritual realm were all intertwined (Bain et al. 2022). The results indicated that mining, industrialisation and land alienation were posing a growing threat to this spiritual connection with the land. These causes cause the Oraons to lose their ancestral lands, which not only upends their material way of life but also breaks their spiritual ties to the land (Tiwary 2022). Rock art sites were frequently desecrated or destroyed as a result of land exploitation and commodification.

This degradation of the spiritual landscape seriously impacted the Oraons' cultural identity. Indigenous groups worldwide have long emphasised the significance of land as essential to their identity and spirituality. The rock art for the Oraons symbolised this spiritual connection to the earth, and its removal signifies a significant loss of culture. As a result, the fight for land rights becomes a spiritual as well as an economic and political problem. Preserving the community's spiritual equilibrium depends on protecting ancestral grounds where rock art was found. The sacredness of the soil was frequently cited as a significant defence by Indigenous land rights organisations, such those headed by the Oraons, against industrial invasion.

Rock art and land rights as signs of resistance

The results showed that rock art had acquired new significance in light of current land rights disputes. These art forms, which were once markers of customary territory and signs of ancestral presence, were now being utilised to challenge land alienation and assert Indigenous sovereignty (Bain et al. 2022). The rock art represents the Oraons' spiritual and cultural ties to the land, which serve as the foundation for their attempts to save their ancestral territories from industrialisation and state ownership. The political significance of Indigenous material culture was demonstrated using rock art in land rights struggles. Rock art has long been used for religious purposes but is now also used as a symbol of defiance against the forces of eviction. This has been part of a larger global tendency among Indigenous groups to embrace cultural legacy as a means of political resistance.

The Oraons were able to frame their battle in terms of both political sovereignty and cultural survival by referencing the land's sacredness and the presence of their ancestors. In this perspective, rock art represents the Oraon people's right to self-determination and their enduring link to their ancestral history, in addition to being tangible things (Neumayer 1994). This is an obvious reminder of how vulnerable Indigenous cultural heritage was to industrial capitalism and the destruction of rock art sites for mining or development projects. Therefore, the task at hand was to figure out how to preserve these locations while simultaneously meeting the Oraons' financial needs.

Rock art preservation and cultural resilience

The results show a growing chance that this cus-

tom will disappear, especially as younger generations lose interest in their cultural heritage. Many young Oraons now consider the rock art to be unimportant to their life due to the effects of urbanisation, modern education and economic pressures. The continuation of the rock art tradition and the significance of cultural legacy in modern Indigenous communities were significant issues brought up by this generational gap. The Oraons' shifting social and economic circumstances must thus be considered in efforts to maintain the rock art legacy. The rock art legacy must be preserved for future generations through initiatives like cultural heritage programs, oral history documentation and the promotion of customary rites as part of cultural tourism. The Oraons must be empowered to take charge of their cultural heritage through the design of these programs, which must be community-led. Rock art sites must be legally protected against destruction if they can be recognised as cultural heritage by national or international law.

Significance and limitations of the study

Because of its contributions to Indigenous studies, cultural heritage preservation and societal resilience, the Oraon rock art tradition is worth studying. In addition to offering insights into Indigenous cultural resistance and preservation, it deepens our understanding of Oraon cultural practices. By recording current ceremonies and the spiritual importance of rock art, the research contributes to preserving the Oraon cultural legacy, which is important in light of contemporary issues. It also examines the gender aspects of the custom, questioning gendered presumptions and highlighting the significance of treating cultural heritage with gender sensitivity. All things considered, the study is important since it helps preserve culture, comprehend Indigenous knowledge systems, analyse cultural resistance and resilience and identify gendered aspects of cultural activities.

The study, though insightful, has a number of shortcomings. It concentrates on a particular area in Thethangi and Saraiya, which could not accurately reflect the variety of customs found across Jharkhand or among other Indian Indigenous communities. Although using oral histories is essential, there are drawbacks, including subjectivity and the possibility of content variation or loss because of generational changes. Since tradition is dynamic, it is constantly changing due to factors such as urbanisation, modernisation and cultural assimilation. The study only looks at it at one particular moment in time, therefore it might not accurately represent current or emerging tendencies. Research involving Indigenous tribes also raises ethical questions. A more thorough understanding of Indigenous cultural activities may result from addressing these limitations through longitudinal investigations, rigorous recording techniques, greater geographic study and ethical considerations.

Conclusion

The study of rock art tradition reveals an intricate and dynamic cultural activity that is extremely significant to the Oraons of Jharkhand. As tangible representations of ancestry and spiritual ties, these works of rock art are essential to the Oraon's social and spiritual fabric. Reflecting the Oraon's tenacity and cultural identity, the tradition upholds cultural continuity, defends land rights and negotiates the difficulties of modernity. The cultural legacy endures as a representation of cultural tenacity in the face of modernisation and cultural assimilation. These locations' continuous rituals and preservation attempts show how tradition and modern issues interact dynamically. The rock art demonstrates the ability of the Oraon to adapt while maintaining essential elements of their cultural identity.

As representations of ancestral lands and spiritual value, the rock art tradition is also vital to the Oraon's fight for land rights and cultural sovereignty. The study emphasises rock art's effectiveness in defending Indigenous rights and opposing industrial expansion and land alienation. The study also reveals important new information about the gendered aspects of the rock art tradition. Although the actual process of creating rock art is frequently linked to men, women are essential to the tradition's ritualistic and spiritual elements. To sum up, the Oraon rock art tradition illustrates the complex relationships between material culture, spirituality, and social identity while providing a varied and diverse viewpoint on Indigenous cultural activities. By defending these customs, the Oraons demonstrate their adaptation and resiliency in the face of modern difficulties, in addition to preserving their cultural legacy. The knowledge gathered from this study advances our understanding of Indigenous cultural preservation and offers insightful guidance for comparable initiatives around the world.

Acknowledgments

The author wants to thank the study participants for their kind support in the successful completion of this study and the funding agencies for providing financial support. The author received financial support from the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, India, for conducting this research. Thanks to the anonymous RAR peer reviewers for their contribution to the final version of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Prof. Kumari Vibhuti Nayak
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
R-1, Baishnabghata Patuli Township
Kolkata - 700 094, India
Email: vibhuti.nayak@cssscal.org; vibhuti.nayak@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- BAHN, P. G. 2010. *Prehistoric rock art: polemics and progress*. Cambridge University Press.
- BAIN, W. K., S. BISWAS and P. DAS 2022. Rock art and its living tradition in the present-day wall art of north-eastern Chotanagpur Plateau, Jharkhand: an ethno-archaeological investigation. *Puravritta (Archeology): A Journal of the Directorate of Archaeology & Museums* 3: 173–190.
- BEDNARIK, R. G. 1996. Crisis in Palaeolithic art studies. *Anthropologie* 34(1): 123–130.
- BEDNARIK, R. G. 2007. *Lower Palaeolithic rock art of India and its global context*. http://www.ifrao.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Man_in_India_2007.pdf.
- BEDNARIK, R. G. 2016. Rock art of India. *Rock Art Research* 33(2): 242.
- BERKES, F. 1999. *Sacred ecology: traditional ecological knowledge and resource management*. Taylor & Francis, Philadelphia.
- BERKES, F., J. COLDING and C. FOLKE 2003. *Navigating social-ecological systems, building resilience for complexity and change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BHATTACHARYA, S. (ed.) 2011. *Approaches to history: essays in Indian historiography*. Primus Books.
- BRADY, L. M., J. J. BRADLEY and A. J. KEARNEY 2016. Negotiating Yanyuwa rock art: relational and affectual experiences in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia. *Current Anthropology* 57(1): 28–52.
- BROWN, J. A. 1997. The archaeology of ancient religion in the Eastern Woodlands. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26(1): 465–485.
- Census, Census of India 2011. A-11 Individual scheduled tribe primary census abstract data and its appendix. Retrieved from <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/ST.html>. Accessed on 12 March 2017.
- CHAKRAVARTY, K. K. and R. G. BEDNARIK 1997. *Indian rock art and its global context*. Motilal Banarsidass Publication, New Delhi.
- FAULSTICH, P. 2003. Dreaming the Country and burning the land: rock-art and ecological knowledge. *Before Farming* 3(3): 1–13.
- HENTY, L., F. SILVA and E. ELLINGSON 2024. Rock art and skylscapes. *Journal of Skyscape Archaeology* 9(2): 15.
- HORTON, J. L. 2024. *Earth diplomacy: Indigenous American art, ecological crisis, and the Cold War*. Duke University Press.
- IMAM, B. 2011. Comparative traditions in village painting and prehistoric rock art of Jharkhand. In *Art and communication in pre-literate societies, papers presented in the XXIV Valcamonica Symposium*, pp. 70–81.
- JONES, P. 2019. *Ochre and rust: artefacts and encounters on Australian frontiers*. Oxford University Press.
- KUMAR, T. S., P. DALAY and O. PRAKASH 2021. Folklore and ethno-rock art studies in the Kaimur Region of India: the story of the Oraon tribe. *Ancient Asia* 12: 1–21.
- LAYTON, R. 2000. Shamanism, totemism and rock art. Les chamanes de la préhistoire in the context of rock art research. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 10(1): 169–186.
- LERSKI, M. B. 2025. Identifying intangible and biocultural heritage elements toward Environmental understanding: engaging xstakeholders through art. *Ecology and Society*, 30(1): 1–21.
- LEWIS-WILLIAMS, J. D. 2002. *A cosmos in stone: interpreting religion and society through rock art* (Vol.1). Rowman Altamira.
- MORPHY, H. 1991. *Ancestral connections: art and an Aboriginal system of knowledge*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- NEUMAYER, E. 1994. Rock painting from Hazaribagh, Bihar. *Puratattva* 25: 80–83.
- ORTEGA-RINCON, M. 2024. Rock art as a mechanism for safeguarding traditional ecological knowledge. *Rock Art Research* 41(2): 194–207.
- PLETS, G., G. VERHOEVEN, D. CHEREMISIN, R. PLETS, J. BOURGEOIS, B. STICHELBAUT and J. DE REU 2012. The deteriorating preservation of the Altai rock art: assessing three-dimensional image-based modelling in rock art research and management. *Rock Art Research* 29(2): 139–156.
- SCHAAFSMA, P. 1986. *Indian rock art of the Southwest*. UNM Press.
- SOLOMON, A. 2008. Myths, making, and consciousness: differences and dynamics in San rock arts. *Current Anthropology* 49(1): 59–86.
- SUNDSTROM, L. 2004. *Storied stone: Indian rock art in the Black Hills country*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- TAÇON, P. S. 2019. Connecting to the ancestors: why rock art is important for Indigenous Australians and their well-being. *Rock Art Research* 36(1): 5–14.
- TAN, N. H. 2014. Rock art research in Southeast Asia: a synthesis. *Arts* 3(1): 73–104.
- TAYLOR, L. 2016. Recent art history in rock country, bark painters inspired by rock paintings. In L. Brady and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *Relating to rock art in the contemporary world: navigating symbolism, meaning, and significance*, pp. 307–335. University Press of Colorado, Boulder.
- TILCHE, A. 2022. *Adivasi art and activism: curation in a nationalist age*. University of Washington Press.
- TIWARY, S. K. 2000. *Riddles of Indian rockshelter paintings*. Sarup and Sons.
- TIWARY, S. K. 2022. Ethno-rock art. *Man in India* 102(1–2): 129–153.
- VAN MANEN, M. 1998. *Researching lived experience*. Althouse, London.