
Prehistoric Art of Braj Region: Based on Study of Rock Shelters Near Fatehpur Sikri

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Abstract: *In the entire Braj region, the area surrounding Fatehpur Sikri presents a unique archaeological scenario. The Fatehpur Sikri hill in spite of having as early cultural sequence as OCP culture is most famous for the medieval city, the only site with such an elaborate settlement of old town. The Fatehpur Sikri ridge alignment is running from near Khanua in the west up to Santha in the east in an almost straight alignment. Almost parallel to it is another ridge alignment which starts from near Jajauli in the west up to Churyari in the east. This latter ridge alignment is smaller in size and is not as regular as the former. In between the two ridges, there was a huge depression which served as a lake during the ancient times. This lake got water supplied from small rivulet Khari Nadi which later joins Utangan/ Gambhiri (a river of Chambal-Yamuna system). This lake and the hills attracted early men since the prehistoric times. During the Mesolithic period, the area provided better pastures for hunting and the rock caves easy shelters. Due to this, men used the caves at Jajauli, Bandrauli, Patsal, Madanpura, Rasulpur and Churyari as shelters during the Mesolithic period. The study of these painted rock shelters is surely going to add a new dimension to the archaeology of the entire region.*

Keywords: Fatehpur Sikri, Rock Shelters, Paintings, Microliths, OCP, PGW, Motif

Introduction

The wider area situated around Mathura is known as Braj region which in archaeological terms is very important for proto-historic to early historic advancements and later on for the cult of *bhakti*. But being situated in the Yamuna plains, the area has not been very significant for prehistoric findings, though, from Govardhan hills which are an outcrop of Aravalli, few Paleolithic tools comprising choppers, flakes and handaxes were reported (IAR 1974-75:48). The findings are similar to the paleoliths found from the outcrops of Aravalli near Delhi at Anangpur (Sharma 1993) and Alipur in Weir tehsil, Bharatpur (IAR 1985-86: 69). The author had himself collected various lower paleolithic tools like handaxes and cleavers from deposits at Anangpur. However, besides these lower Paleolithic findings no other Paleolithic findings were known in the entire Braj region. The hills nearest to Mathura are situated at Barsana, Nandgaon and Fatehpur Sikri besides the Govardhan hills. There are hilly outcrops in various parts of Bhatapur district too. Except for the area situated near Fatehpur Sikri,

Akbar's second capital city, findings of prehistoric period have not been reported from other hilly outcrops. Fatehpur Sikri (and also nearby Santha) and Tantpur (both in district Agra) along with Rupwas (Bharatpur district) were rich sources for procuring red sandstone for ancient art works as well as structural edifices.

In 1958, S.C. Chandra for the first time reported the discovery of a microlithic site at Khera near Fatehpur Sikri (IAR 1958-59: 74). This site yielded blades, points etc. of carnelian, agate and other varieties of quartz. Prior to it, seven megalithic cairns varying in diameter between 1 and 3 m were discovered on the ridge of a hill, apart from several others nearby by ACL Carlleyle way back in 1871-73 (1878: 13). These cairns, composed of small boulders and rubble, were roughly four sided in shape, with generally sloping sides, and surmounted at the top either by slabs of stone or by remains or fragments of slabs. The two round-topped cairns that were examined covered 'a shallow, oblong or trough shaped cavity' excavated in the solid rock of the hill. Remains of ashes of calcined bones mixed with earth and fragments of charred wood were found inside these hollow chambers. At present, it seems that the site has been lost due to heavy mining activities as the author could not locate any remains near Khera during explorations in around 2006.

The discovery of rock shelters by J.P. Gupta near Fatehpur Sikri in 1959-60 added a new dimension to the prehistoric archaeology of this region (IAR 1959-60: 75). Gupta followed it with discovery of rock shelters with paintings at sites like Bandrauli, Jajauli, Patsal and Rasulpur all located within 4-5 km (*sic*) from Fatehpur Sikri (IAR 1963-64: 91). Two more rock shelters with paintings were later discovered by him at Jharauti in tehsil Kiraoli (IAR 1964-65: 76). C.B. Trivedi in 1976-77 claimed the discovery of three rock shelters at Bandrauli and two at Madanpura (IAR 1976-77: 48). Paintings belonging to many periods were noticed in these shelters. According to Trivedi, the earliest paintings, executed in dark chocolate pigment, consist of linear human figures and elongated bull like animals, reminiscent of those on chalcolithic pottery of Navdatoli. The later paintings include hunting scenes, with boar, stags, bull, horse riders, sword and shield bearing human figures and *Ramayana* themes. An inscription, written in Brahmi script of Kushan period was also noticed in one of the shelters. A stray microlithic flake was collected by Trivedi from one of the shelters. During the same field season of 1976-77, J.P. Srivastava claimed the discovery of twelve rock shelters in the hillock of Rasulpur (IAR 1976-77: 48). Some of the shelters were found to bear paintings and the site also yielded microlithic tools. He also claimed discovery of a small rock shelter in village Churyari, towards north-east of Fatehpur Sikri. In 1993, Giriraj Kumar and his colleagues published some analysis of these rock paintings at the first Congress of Rock Art Society of India (1993: 27-29). In the beginning of 21st century, when there were media reports about the destruction of rock shelters at Rasulpur, a team of ASI visited the site and published a short write-up on Rasulpur rock shelter (Pradhan *et al* 2002: 87-92). In 2006 and again in 2008, the author for his PhD field work explored the entire area around Fatehpur Sikri and in the process photo-documented all the rock shelters in the area. At that time the author did not

know that these were already reported and subsequently, when came to know of this fact, did not publish it for long believing that everything was already known and probably published. But it was only in 2015 that a detailed paper on the rock shelters with photographs was published by Arakhita Pradhan (2015: 125-136).



Figure 1: Map of Study Area

In the entire Braj region, the area surrounding Fatehpur Sikri (Figure 1) presents a unique archaeological scenario. The Fatehpur Sikri hill in spite of having as early cultural sequence as OCP culture is most famous for the medieval city, the only site with such an elaborate settlement of old town. The Fatehpur Sikri ridge alignment is running from near Khanua in the west up to Santha in the east in an almost straight alignment. Almost parallel to it is another ridge alignment which starts from near Jajauli in the west up to Churyari in the east. This latter ridge alignment is smaller in size and is not as regular as the former. In between the two ridges, there was a huge depression which served as a lake during the ancient times. This lake got water supplied from small rivulet Khari Nadi which later joins Utangan/ Gambhiri (a river of Chambal-Yamuna system). This lake and the hills attracted early men since the prehistoric times. During the Mesolithic period, the area provided better pastures for hunting and the rock caves easy shelters. Due to this, men used the caves at Jajauli, Bandrauli, Patsal, Madanpura, Rasulpur and Churyari as shelters during the Mesolithic period. All such caves throughout the world are also known for Mesolithic paintings, so is the case with these shelters which provide a unique archaeological experience unlike any other site in the entire Braj region. The nearby plains are full of archaeological settlements as are observed in the entire region. Sonothi, Daulatpur, Aghapur, Bhanera, Chichana, Churyari, Mahadau, Chauma Shahpur, Barhkhaul, Nagla Uncha, Undera etc. are some of such settlements (Gupta 2013: 91, 103-04). The rock art at Jajauli is lost because of weathering. There was a very deep cave in the hills to the right of road when coming from Daulatgarh side, but it could not be visited. The description of important rock art sites of Fatehpur Sikri region is given in following paragraphs.

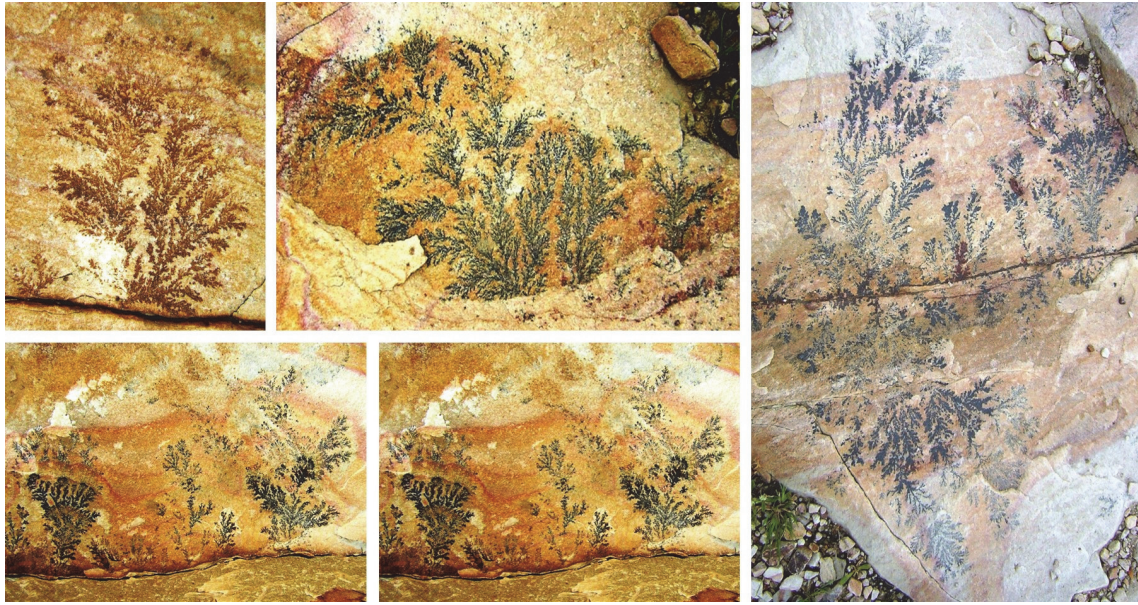


Figure 2: Dendritic crystal structures in rock, Churyari village



Figure 3: General view of rock shelter, Rasulpur

Churyari

This ancient village is situated about 5 km to the north-east of Fatehpur Sikri, about 1.8 km away from the road to Bharatpur (NH 11). In the fields near this village, there are two baradaris of Akbar's reign, possibly built by some influential nobles. J.P. Srivastava had claimed the discovery of a small rock shelter in village Churyari (IAR 1976-77: 48). Though during explorations, this rock shelter was found missing, some important dendritic crystals (or pseudofossils) were observed (Figure 2). Due to heavy mining activities, these became visible on the rock surface.

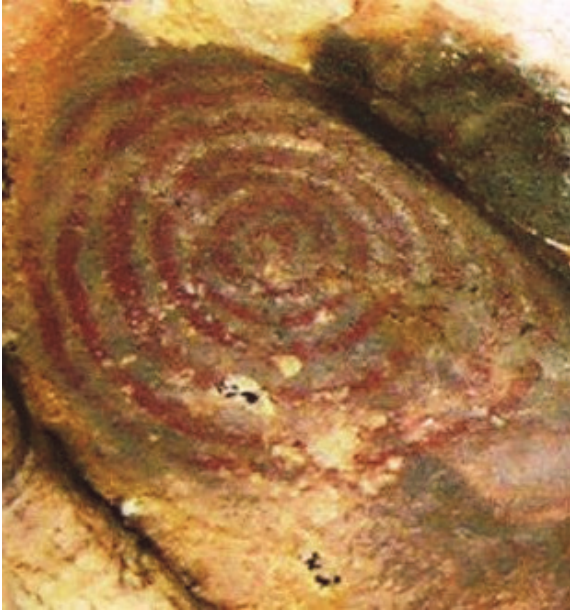


Figure 4: Concentric circle motif, Rasulpur



Figure 5: An engraving, Rasulpur



Figure 6: Hunting scene, Rasulpur

Rasulpur

Rasulpur is situated about 3 km to the north of Fatehpur Sikri. The village also has a Mughal era tomb built of red sandstone. Outside the village, the ridge is situated on top of which there were 12 shelters at some point. But all the shelters were destroyed due to mining activities except one (Figure 3). This shelter like all the shelters in

Fatehpur Sikri group faces west and measures roughly 8 x 5 x 2 m. At the base of the ridge, the soil was also dug out due to mining activities. In that soil, potsherds of red ochre colour were observed in abundance and these left ochre colour on palms on rubbing. This is a typical feature of Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) and considering the finding of OCP from some nearby sites including Hada Mahal at Fatehpur Sikri (Sharma 2008: 7-8), this pottery can also be considered OCP. The only surviving rock shelter at Rasulpur has a number of painted motifs which belong to many cultural periods, one of them can easily be considered as OCP period belonging to chalcolithic culture. People of OCP (also termed as OCP-Copper hoard) culture were masters in copper metallurgy and produced a number of copper implements of varying shapes. Keeping that in mind, the absence of such implements in the drawn paintings is surprising. Few microlithic tools like lunate, blade, few flakes and discarded cores were earlier reported from the foothill near this rock shelter (Pradhan *et al* 2002: 90).



Figure 7: Geometric motif, Rasulpur



Figure 8: Painted motif, Rasulpur

All the paintings in the Rasulpur rock shelter are made by using red colour pigment except minor use of white pigment for filling in between circles in one painting of seven concentric circles (Figure 4). Few black colour paintings are also observed which are quite obliterated but are older than the red paintings. Cupules were not observed in this rock shelter, though in other groups these are occasionally found. One important feature of Rasulpur rock paintings is the presence of engravings which are not observed in other rock shelters of nearby groups. One engraving (Figure 5) has two concentric circular rings with a circular central point engraved. Similar design is still used in local wall paintings for rituals in Braj region. Just above this engraving, another small engraving is observed, which does not take a complete shape, though largely circular. In the lower side, it is having a curve like an inverted comma. Another engraving of 8 horizontal lines is published by Pradhan *et al* (2002: 90). The identifiable subject matter includes representation of concentric circles (as visible in Figs 9 and 10)

and another line drawing showing 6 circles published by Pradhan (2002: 90). Representation of concentric circles or labyrinths is not observed in other rock shelters of Fatehpur Sikri group. These concentric circles might be simple geometric designs or may be related to philosophical beliefs of the then people. Kumar has dealt the aspect of concentric circles in some detail (2015: 84-104). Srivastav (1993: 28) had proposed some Vedic and *yajna* related affinities of concentric circle designs at Rasulpur and Patsal, but it is difficult to concur with such proposition as the persons who were making these paintings in rock shelters might not have belonged to such advanced societies or beliefs.



Figure 9: Painted motif, Rasulpur

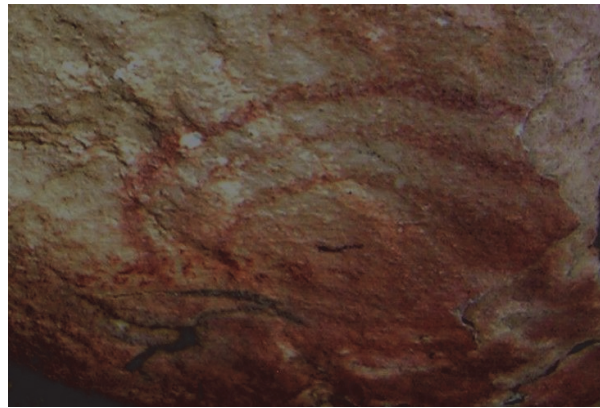


Figure 10: Geometric motif, Rasulpur



Figure 11: Painted motif, Rasulpur



Figure 12: General view of Patsal site

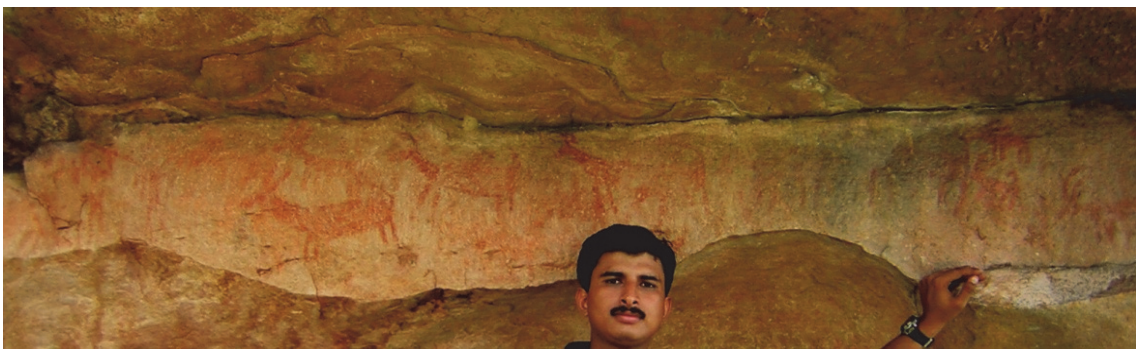


Figure 13: Herding scene, Patsal

In one painting, a human figure is shown hunting an animal, possibly an attacking tiger (Figure 6). He is possibly capturing the animal in a loop. In another painting (Figure 7), a quadrangle is shown with three lines jutting out on the lower side, two on the corners and one in the middle. The opposite side also has a line jutting out from its center, with possibility at either ends too. An arrow like object is shown (strangely bended sharply at the lower end) penetrating in the center of this quadrangle, possibly representing an animal's body. Another painting (Figure 8) depicts an interesting scene, possibly four snakes coming out from a structure or else it is unidentifiable. In another painting (Figure 9) within a frame formed by two circular rings stylized fish or human figure is shown. Another painting (Figure 10) depicts three parallel lines in

almost semi-circular shape, which on the left have two arc shaped ends, possibly representing long beak of a bird. In another painting (Figure 11), at the lower right end, an animal of cat family (possibly a fox) is depicted in red colour. In the same frame, to the left are visible some obliterated zig-zag lines in red, possibly depicting labyrinths or some speculative structure. In the same frame on the top left side is another stylized animal figure which is difficult to be identified. Kumar also reported the presence of snake and snake like paintings and a palm motif in Rasulpur rock shelters (Kumar 1993: 27-28).



Figure 14: Seven human figures (Saptamatrika?), Patsal



Figure 15: Painting of a cart, Patsal



Figure 16: Painting, Patsal



Figure 17: Painting, Patsal



Figure 18: Painting, Patsal

Patsal

Patsal is a small village situated about 5 km distant from Fatehpur Sikri (3 km as a crow flies). Major part of the village is situated at the foothills, but some houses have come up on hills as well (Figure 12). During explorations in the village, many early Gupta and later period sculptural pieces were observed at a temple shrine (Gupta 2013: 216,232 and Figs. 7.17 & 8.14). Kumar even mentioned the presence of a Kushan period temple at this village (1993: 28). At this village, the author observed a number of

shelters, out of which two are prominent. One of these is known as Nai ki Gupha and the other as Sita ki Rasoi. Debitas of microlithic tools were observed scattered at the base of Nai ki Gupha. Kumar also reported finding of fluted cores, microliths, OCP and grey ware at the base of Nai ki Gupha and the surrounding fields (1993: 28).



Figure 19: Arrow with snake motif, Patsal

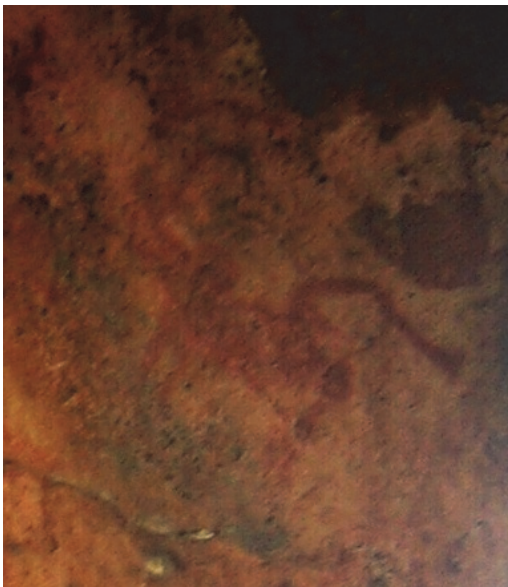


Figure 20: Charged up bull, Patsal



Figure 21: Painted motif, Patsal

The paintings at Patsal are made by using red and black colour pigments. Black colour pigment at Patsal is used more than other rock shelter groups in the region. Depiction of herbivorous animals like deer and antler is quite common in this painting group in comparison to others. Depiction of arrows aiming upwards (or sideways in upward direction) and a unique motif (with three circular rings shown side by side and from

the middle ring comes out a long handle with 2/4/6/8 tangs), is quite common at these shelter groups. At Nai ki Gupha, Patsal an interesting herding scene is painted in which to the left two human figures with sticks in their upraised hands are shown along with a herd comprising deer and stags to their right (Figure 13). A fish like animal is also visible at the lower side of this painting. All the figures in this group have a complete body (not only outlines) filled up with red colour. In a painting (Figure 14), seven human figures are shown together possibly looking to their left. Six of the figures are wearing similar headgear but the first from the left is wearing a two-horned crown. There is a possibility that at least four of them have a protruding animal like mouths. This may be one of the earliest representations of Seven Divine Mothers (*Sapta-matrikas*). In the same cave, another painting (Figure 15) appears to depict a cart having two round wheels and an axle, being driven by an animal (possibly a donkey). Other figures in the same painting are quite obliterated but may have consisted of some human figures. Some unidentifiable figure is superimposing it on top. In another painting which is quite obliterated (Figure 16), a human figure, possibly holding a stick in his upraised right hand, is shown fighting an animal with an upraised posture. Near the human figure, there are other figures: to his left possibly a dog, above him a human figure and a bull figure with uplifted tail. In a nearby painting (Figure 17), a horned quadruped, few human figures and an animal figure are identifiable, though the method of persecution of human figures is slight different.



Figure 22: Painted stag, Patsal



Figure 23: Painting with pipal leaf, Patsal



Figure 24: Chakra motif in painted scene, Patsal



Figure 25: Painting with serpentine design, Patsal



Figure 26: Animals climbing a tree, Patsal



Figure 27: Unique motif, Patsal



Figure 28: Animals, Patsal

In another painting of the Patsal group (Figure 18), black colour designs are superimposing the obliterated red ones. One arrow symbol in upward direction and the unique motif (possibly related to some religious belief) are identifiable. In another painting (Figure 19) two arrows in black colour are identifiable. The arrow to the left has a snake hanging from it in the lower side. Another painting (Figure 20) depicts a charged up humped bull with upraised tail in red colour. Some circular design (possibly representing an animal) is visible above the head of the bull. Another representation of the unique motif of Fatehpur Sikri group is visible in black colour (Figure 21). In another painted scene, an arrow and the unique motif painted in black are visible, these are superimposing earlier painting in red. In another design (Figure 22) a stag is painted in red colour but here the animal is shown with outlines only.



Figure 29: Approach to the caves, Bandrauli

In Sita ki Rasoi shelter, a big painted scene in red (Figure 23) comprises a *pipal* (Sanskrit *asvaththa*) leaf confirming the religious association of the rock art. The leaf is surmounted by another motif which is not identifiable. To the left of the *pipal* leaf another motif appears to be a tree in railing. In the middle of this whole composition a fish is visible. Few animals are also visible in the scene. One of them is an antler; one seems to be an elephant. Due to deterioration of the rock, paintings are much damaged. There are few geometric motifs in this cave, two are rectangular in shape; one is in dark red pigment while the other one is ochre red. One of these has some intricate design inside, possibly ritualistic in nature. *Chakra* (Figure 24) is a popular motif in this cave;

few of the *chakras* have four spokes and some six. The unique motif of these caves is again represented in this frame, an arrow is coming out from it and hitting a quadruped animal on head. In another frame (Figure 25), among various motifs, a serpentine design in dark red colour is visible (to the left) slightly similar to Rasulpur. It is not forming any identifiable shape. A slightly similar serpentine design is observed in a painting at Mungsadev cave in Gawligarh hills (Sahu and Sahu 2015: Figure 20). In the same frame, to the right is the depiction of a structure possibly. In the top middle is another interesting design almost semi-circular in shape which in the inner side has some markers. The only black painting in the frame is superimposing the red ones and is again the representation of the unique motif of these caves.

In another painting (Figure 26), three leopard like animals are shown possibly climbing a tree. Two of the animals are drawn facing each other. In another frame (Figure 27), there is very interesting depiction of the unique motifs of these cave groups. A quadruped animal is shown as being hunted between two such peculiar motifs whereas the third motif in the frame is seen behind to the left. This scene opens the possibility of this motif as being representation of a human being with some unique bow like instrument in hand. A cart cannot have so many projections in the wooden frame as in some cases these are reaching nine. Or else these motifs have to be considered purely ritualistic. In another depiction (Figure 28) two animals painted in red are visible but their identification is not possible.



Figure 30: Doli like motif, Bandrauli

Bandrauli

This rock shelter group is situated about 6 km to the north-west of Fatehpur Sikri. Bandrauli village is situated slightly to the south-west of the shelters and Sonothi village to the north. Sonothi is quite an extensive PGW culture onwards site with every possibility of the presence of OCP. In fact PGW sherds are scattered from Sonothi village up to the base of rock shelters, that's why the author during his first exploratory visit considered these rock shelters as belonging to Sonothi village. There are three rock shelters on the top of hill at its eastern end but only Rani ka Chhajja or Rani ka Khatola has extensive paintings. It measures about 8 x 2.5 m. The approach to the caves (Figure 29) is very difficult and the author hardly could get out from it. The majority of the paintings in this shelter are in red pigment and only few in black. The shelter derives its local name from the larger painting in the shelter (Figure 30) which looks like a *doli* or *udankhatola* (spaceship) in first appearance. On closer examination, it appears to be a religious structure either a *stupa* or a temple. An *ankusa* like *ayudha* is depicted above this figure to the left. Below this structure like figure are shown two or three human figures. To the left of this figure is shown the peculiar cart like motif of this whole group. It has three circular discs, each having two intersecting lines cutting at right angles. Towards the down side is the projection with two smaller projections. Various arrows are shown hitting in different directions; one is coming out of a bow like object shown near the structure.



Figure 31: Human figures, Bandrauli



Figure 32: Unique motif, Bandrauli



Figure 33: Cupules, Bandrauli



Figure 34: Painting, Madanpura

In a scene (Figure 31) many human figures painted in red as line drawings are visible in a posture of momentum (either running or dancing). Few quadrupeds are also seen in the middle. To the right is seen the unique motif in black colour. It has nine tentacles in the outward frame. Few arrows in red colour are also visible in the scene. In the lower side are some Brahmi letters, *ma* is only legible in that. In another scene (Figure

32), the unique motif is visible but interesting here it only has a pear shaped central part without the two circular discs on either side. The projecting frame has seven or nine tentacles. This again eliminates the possibility of its identification as a cart. Above this motif are shown few arrows. Another important finding from this rock shelter is the presence of two cupules which are deep significantly (Figure 33a & b). There are the only cupules observed in the entire Fatehpur Sikri rock shelter group. Pradhan has also published a triangle petroglyph and a humpless bull in white colour from this cave (2015: 130, Figures 5 and 6). The petroglyph and the bull in white are not found in any of the rock shelters of the entire group.



Figure 35: Animals, Madanpura

Madanpura

This site is situated about 7 km to the west of Fatehpur Sikri. There are few rock shelters out of which two are prominent for the paintings on the rock surface. These shelters are heavily disturbed by the seepage of water. In an open representation (Figure 34), a number of arrows in red colour are seen. Above the arrows is seen the unique motif, possibly a weapon. An antler like animal is seen on the top. In the middle something is painted which looks like an animal but is not identifiable. In another painting in black colour (Figure 35), two animals are seen standing back to back, one is a humped cattle and the other possibly its calf. The tail of the humped cattle is extraordinarily thick and long. Another similar painting in black colour of a humped and humpless cattle standing back to back is reported by Pradhan (2015: 132, Figure 10). In another depiction (Figure 36), on the left, a square geometric design in

red colour with a dividing line is seen. On the right a quadruped animal with a long tail in red colour is seen. In the middle, few obliterated figures are seen along with the unique motif of this entire group. Here, interestingly, the motif in black colour is superimposed by the same motif in red colour. Two lines in black colour are also seen merging with the circular disc of the motif. A black colour arrow is hitting the motif. In another frame (Figure 37), a number of arrows in red colour are seen. To the left, a yogi like figure is seen seated cross legged, holding a snake or rosary like object in his right hand. Pradhan (2015: 133) has wrongly identified it as a boat like motif. Other subjects in the frame are quite obliterated, though in the lower side, a humped bull can be identified.



Figure 36: Painting, Madanpura



Figure 37: A seated *yogi*, Madanpura

Conclusions

By overall observation of the paintings, it can be said that maximum paintings of these rock shelters belong to Mesolithic and Chalcolithic phase. There is not much evidence available from the paintings which can prove them to be belonging to the historical phase. Many of the themes appear to be related to ritualistic beliefs. The depiction of arrows and the unique motif is typical to these rock shelters. In spite of being associated with OCP and PGW cultures, it is quite surprising to not observe depiction of weapons and implements of those cultures, particularly anthropomorphs, harpoons, swords etc. Even no depiction related to Vrishni viras or Bhagavata cult is observed. C.B. Trivedi (IAR 1976-77: 48) had mentioned about the presence of the *Ramayana* scenes in these caves, but no such scene is observed. Possibly on the basis of the popular nomenclature of rock shelters like Sita ki Rasoi, he had proposed so. The presence of 'arrow' motif in abundance cannot be related to the *Ramayana* directly. Among the animals, maximum are herbivorous animals like cattle, deer, antler etc. Wild non-herbivorous animals are depicted only occasionally. Except for Nai ki Gupha at Patsal, the depiction of arrows and the unique motif steals the shine of other depicted motifs. Only animal and few human motifs are easily comparable to other rock art groups in India, other motifs are quite peculiar to these shelters. The shelters are not big in size but are heavily painted with lot of successive superimpositions. Many times, variation in colour of same painting is observed because of deterioration of the rock surface. Maximum paintings are persecuted in red ochre colour, some in dark red colour, few in black and only two instances in white colour. There is a need to declare all these painted rock shelters as monuments of National importance by the Archaeological Survey of India and to preserve and protect them. These may be developed as an important tourist attraction center too.

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