

Original article

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE ROCK ART MOTIFS WITH TEXTILE DESIGN AND TRIBAL ART OF DONGRIA KONDH, ODISHA

Shrestha Jana¹ and Avick Biswas^{2*}

ABSTRACT

Rock art is an intricate and complex domain covering cognitive aspects of humanity. In this paper, a multidisciplinary approach is advocated to decode and understand the meaning in its all dimensions. India boasts a rich artistic heritage, with rock paintings offering a window into the lives of its prehistoric inhabitants. In line with this, the hypothesis proposed in this paper tries to explore the intriguing connection between the rock art motifs of Odisha with textile design of the Dongria Kondh tribe, resides within the Niyamgiri hill range situated in the district of Kalahandi district in the south west of Odisha. Specifically, it explores the enduring tradition of vibrant textile designs woven by the Kond tribe, shedding light on the interconnectedness of their cultural elements.

However, there is a lacuna in the research field regarding exploring the relationship between rock art motifs and textile designs. To strengthen the hypothesis, the authors closely examine the repeating themes depicted in the Odisha's rock art, paying special attention to geometric patterns. Additionally, the authors investigate the influence of these artistic expressions depicted in rock art, whether directly or indirectly, their persistence through continuous practice, and their existence paralleled even within the modern fashion industries.

KEY WORDS: Rock art, symbols, tribal art, textile designs

INTRODUCTION:

Nature serves as a boundless spark of thoughts, an inspiration for creativity, and contemplate its very existence. Whether it's through scientific exploration, artistic inspiration or just mere pondering, nature always leaves us with more to discover and expand our understanding of the world. The natural reaction of human senses is often influenced by cultural conditioning shaping how we perceive and respond to stimuli (Giedion, 1962).

During a transitional phase of human evolution, marked by advancements such as high intellect and bipedalism, they began to outnumber other primates. Concurrently, prehistoric humans were also refining what we now recognize as 'Fine Motor Skill development'. This theory proposed by a Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, explains the intellectual functioning of adults, and the theory rests on the notion of various developmental phases of a child. Fine motor skill represents a set of skills connected to a set of similar structures, such as hand-eye coordination, transformation of a visually perceived object into motor output, skills involved in painting, writing, etc. (Bart *et al.*, 2007 and Sinan Akin, 2019).

¹Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University

²Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University

*Corresponding author: avickbiswas@gmail.com

Initially, early humans likely developed rock art depicting simple geometric patterns such as criss-cross and zigzag, leading to the creation of basic shapes and symbols in their art. This aligns with cognitive development theories suggesting that the human brain initially honed fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination (sensory abilities) through repetitive, simple shapes and over time, character development and refinement were observed. Consequently, this resulted in the creation of what we now study as pictographs and petroglyphs. Similarly, the advancement of fine motor skills is fundamental for effective embroidery work. Studies in developmental psychology highlight that fine motor skills are critical for creating intricate designs such as embroideries in textiles work.

At the time of the cognitive developmental phase of human evolution, another basic need of human was to cover and protect the body from varying weather conditions. The early humans relied on natural materials for clothing such as leaf, animal skin and tree bark. This necessity intern led to the invention of clothing, marking the beginning of textile production. Over time, this process evolved into sophisticated methods of making garments that we see today.

According to Chandra and Gupta (1973), the earliest known textiles were found at the site of Harappa, evidenced by the numerous spindle whorls from the houses of Mohenjodaro, this conclusively proves that spinning was practiced by the rich and poor alike. Gradually, early humans started to develop the idea of using natural fibers, which led to the weaving of clothes. Eventually, they added variation in the form of embroidery and adding patterns to their textiles. This internship reflects a community identity, culture and skillfulness. For which embroidery is to be considered as natural as water and air, the sun and the earth (Vatsyayan 2010). Embroidery is one among such arts today

called crafts, and there is no country in the world, ancient or contemporary which does not pride itself on the distinctive skills of embroidery. Embroidered cloth is considered a powerful multi-meaning instrument of communication (Vatsyayan 2010).

India is thus renowned for its rich tapestry of cultures, each contributing its unique flavour to the nation's diverse heritage. Among these cultural treasures are the distinct tribal art forms and textile designs, embodying the essence of India's tribal communities. Many isolated tribal communities in India continue to practice art forms that bear striking resemblance to prehistoric rock art (Sonawane, 2013).

In the context of rock art of Odisha, as this paper aims to discuss a comparative study of Odisha's rock art with the textile and tribal art designs of Dongria Kondh tribe. To achieve this, interpreting symbols in rock art through the lens of ethnographic communities can be an effective way to understand the cultural and symbolic meanings of these ancient artworks.

METHODOLOGY

Studying the Dongria Kondh tribe from anethno-archaeological perspective requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach. Ethno-archaeology is the study of culture, beliefs, practices of present society to understand the past culture. In order to establish a connection between rock art of Odisha and tribal art of the Dongria Kondh tribe was studied using the following methodology:

Research Design and Ethical Considerations:

Ethical Clearance: Begin by obtaining ethical clearance for our research, ensuring that our study respects the rights and privacy of the Dongria Kondh tribe members and adheres to ethical guidelines.
Informed Consent: Seek informed consent from individuals and communities intend to study, explaining the purpose and potential impact of our research.

Literature Review:

Conduct an extensive review of existing literature on the Dongria Kondh tribe, including academic studies, ethnographies, and historical records. It was providing context and help identify gaps in our knowledge. In addition, we also gathered some information regarding rock art sites of Odisha.

Fieldwork Planning:

Consider factors like accessibility, remote area and the diversity within the tribe, collaborate with local experts and organizations to build trust within the community.

Data Collection:

Examine historical records, documents related to tribal art, crafts and textiles that provide insights into the Dongria Kondh tribe's symbolic past. Acquainted ourselves in the community by living with and observing the daily lives, rituals, and practices of the Dongria Kondh tribe. It was help us to understand their social dynamics, traditions, symbolic behaviour and values. Conduct semi-structured interviews with tribe members, elders, leaders, and other key informants. Use open-ended questions to gather information about their history, social organization, beliefs, and experiences.

Data Analysis:

After attempting to understand the ethnographic symbolic behavior of the Dongria Kondh tribe, we tried to compare it with rock art. Interpret the data in the context of existing anthropological knowledge and frameworks.

Rock Art of Odisha

Odisha emerges as one such state located in the eastern part of the Indian peninsula. The state of Odisha found its place in the rock art map of India in 1933 by K.P. Jayaswal (1935). He documented one of the earliest types of evidence of rock

engravings found in the rock shelters of Vikramkhol, presently in Jharsuguda district (erstwhile Sambalpur district) cited in (Pradhan 2017, Acharya and Sharma 2018). Out of thirty districts in Odisha, the rock art sites are scattered across the districts of Bargarh, Cuttack, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Khurda, Mayurbanj, Nuapada, Sambalpur, Sundargarh and Suvarnapur.

The rock art of Odisha holds a distinct position for its regional characteristics, featuring a large assemblage of non-thematic and non-figurative abstract symbols, both geometric and non-geometric symbols, with no definite meanings can be ascribed to such forms (Pradhan 2017). The symbols include criss-cross, zig-zags, curves, triangles, spirals, concentric circles, and honeycombs, besides subjects such as human and animal figures, weapons etc. Odisha also boasts a culturally rich repository of indigenous art forms and is home to numerous aboriginal tribal communities who follow a traditional way of livelihood, forming the backbone of their existence (Sahoo, 2014).

However, while considering rock art, it's common to approach it from the lenses of archaeology and anthropology, focusing on its historical and cultural significance. Besides, there are other fascinating dimensions to explore. In our contemporary world textiles have emerged as a prominent form of artistic expression and cultural representation. Just as rock art eloquently speaks volumes about prehistoric humans, textiles communicate narratives and cultural identities through intricate designs woven onto fabrics.

On the south-western portion of Odisha lies a district named Kalahandi, the area is bordered to the north by Nuapada and Balangir districts, to the south by

Nawarangpur district and east by Kandhamal and Rayagada district. Kalahandi district is home to numerous tribes such as Banjara, Bhatra, Bhunjia, Binjhal, Dal, Gond, Kandha, Mirdha, Munda, Paraja, Saora and Savar etc. (Rath 2010). In this article, an attempt has been made to study the rock art of Odisha and its cultural continuity which can be seen in their tribal art. The influence extends to the adaptation of symbols, in the textile art and design of the existing tribes.

Kandha tribe

Within the sixty-two existing tribes of Odisha, the Dongria Kandha (Khond or Kond) stands out as a prominent tribal group, representing a primitive segment (sub-tribe) of Kandha community. The tribe resides within the Niyamgiri hill range situated in the district of Kalahandi and Rayagada district in the south west of Odisha. The Dongria tribe holds numerical significance, being the largest among the other tribes of Odisha (Ota and Mohanty, 2007). Dongria tribe are usually divided into two logistic groups Kui and Kuvi. Kui is the language spoken by the Kandhas, which comes under the central Dravidian language group and is still used by the tribe in oral form (Rath 2010).

Dongria tribe is distinguished by their renowned **Meria** festival, expertise in horticulture, their language spoken is **Kuvi** and their vibrant dress, ornaments and lifestyle (Ota and Mohanty, 2007). The Dongria Kondh tribe is recognized for their potential as skilled weavers. One of the distinguished features of Dongria Kondh men and women is their traditional attire called **Kapada Gandha** resembling a shawl that is draped around the body. Women also wear a long cloth draped like a *saree* called **Gandire Gandha** and men wear white loin cloth with embroidered ends called **Drill**. The *Kapada Gandha* is a

richly embroidered shawl which is about 6ft, 4 inch length and 3ft in breadth and is worn as a shawl by both sexes (Fig. 1 & 2) (Patnaik and DasPatnaik2006).



Figure 1: Group of Dongria Kondh women



Figure 2: Dongria Kondh women wearing Kapaganda shaw

The Dongria girls create embroidered shawls with intricate needle work, predominantly using red, yellow and green. Upon examining the patterns woven into the textiles of Dongria Kondh tribe, featuring a sequence of pointed pyramid rows followed by zigzag pattern. The patterns and colour choices extend beyond mere aesthetics, they rather hold deeper cultural and symbolic values. There has been an extensive research work conducted by the Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, Bhubaneswar in *Tribal Textiles of Odisha*(2016). In addition, there is a documentary movie about the Dongria Kondha Tribes headed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. These cited research work states that the deliberate selection of patterns and colours in the embroider shawls of Kond bears significant socio-cultural meaning. The Green colour in the design symbolises *Niyamgirihills and the surrounding landscape*, Yellow colour symbolises *peace, family, lineages, Mutha* (an administrative- territorial boundaries), Red colour symbolises *deities, their god, blood sacrifices, spirits and ancestors*.

A more detailed approach about the embroidered designs in Kapaganda shawl has also been stated in ‘*Kapdaganda*’ by MAP Academy Encyclopaedia of Art (2022).The *Kapagandha* shawls consistently incorporate specific design and color combinations. The *akka*, which symbolizes leaves, is embroidered in yellow to represent the importance of turmeric growing as a major source of income for the Kond people. The *Linga*, a red and brown triangle, represents the Niyam Raja/Niyamgiri hill. The *krali*, a red triangle, symbolizes an axe, which is a ceremonial object used in the Meriyaparba buffalo sacrifice ceremony for Niyam Raja. The *kairi*, consisting of green, red, and yellow diagonal lines, represents the Dongria Kondh agricultural practice. Lastly, the *kanaka*, a green circle filled in with red, symbolizes vitality and strength, representing an eye. The little circles placed in between the triangular pyramidal shape rows represent the deity that the embroiderer's family worships (Fig. 3).

These symbolic motifs adorning the shawl also echo within the Dongria Kondh tribal houses. The design in both the textiles and tribal art, suggest that these symbolic

designs are crucial in defining the identity of Dongria Kondh tribe.



Figure 3: Kapagandha Shawl
(Courtesy: MAP Academy)



Figure 4: Dongria Kondh Tribal Art
(Courtesy: OB Bureau)

Socio-Cultural Values of Kapaganda Shawl

The embroidery in Kapaganda shawl not only holds subjective values but also significant socio-cultural value, serving as a representation of their cultural identity. In reference to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, Bhubaneswar in *Tribal Textiles of Odisha* (2016) and a documentary of Dongria Kondh tribe by Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2018), the Kapaganda Shawl once completed is typically offered as a gift by the women to her father, brother or their partner as a symbol of love.

This shawl is also traditionally present to daughters during wedding and is a part of a compulsory ritual. In Dongria Kondh belonging to the same village established a bond akin to being brothers and sisters. During leisure time and especially during the *Meria Festival*, village boys visit neighbouring villages to court girls. A significant aspect of this ritual involves gifting of Kapadaganda shawl, provided by his sister, to the girl of his choice. The girl is free to accept or refuse the gift. However, if the boy lacks a suitable shawl, he may attempt to snatch one from the girl instead and allowing him to do so can also be interpreted as a sign of acceptance. Such tradition surrounding the Kapaganda shawl of Dongria Kondh tribe reflects deep socio-cultural values and contributes significantly to the tribe's pride and identity.

Economical aspects of Dongria Kondh

Recently, the Kapaganda shawl has undergone commercialization and has been received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. The appreciation not only enhances the value of their embroidery work but also developed new opportunities for growth in their economy. However, the Dongria Kondh women have now started to diversify their work of embroidery into different mediums such as hand bags and pouch. This economic growth is crucial for the long-term sustainability of the Dongria Kondh tribe, especially in the face of environmental and socio-economic challenges.

Interpretation of Rock Art Symbols

Signs are modest measurable things; nevertheless, interpretations are different ways (Williams and Dowson 1988). Further, Iain Davidson (2012) states that a big distinction can be made in rock art when the marks stand for something more than the repeated pattern of activity.

Nevertheless, there is no standard or universally accepted method for decoding rock art symbols (Pradhan 2017). But an attempt to ensure a comprehensive understanding, here we present different views of scholars as an example of how symbols can be interpreted.

Writers especially those of earlier decades, invoked ethnographic analogies stating that signs were traps inhabited by the spirits (Breuil 1952) as cited in (Williams and Dowson 1988). In this similar paper by Williams and Dowson (1988), they suggest that the geometric patterns likely represent an 'Entoptic phenomenon' which means visual sensation derived from the structure of the optic system anywhere from the eyeball to the cortex. This includes entoptic forms such as basic grid patterns, zigzag lines, sets of parallel lines, dots etc. According to Leroi-Gourhan cited in (Parkington 1969) that the ovals, triangles and rectangles represents abstract variation of vulvas and dots strokes represent male forms and are all related to ritual performances. The theory of fertility and procreation as a chief motif of primaeval symbolism is also supported by S. Giedion cited in (Pradhan 2017).

Therefore, all the above-mentioned interpretations reveal that symbols do not have a single constant meaning, they transform the subject into an object and change a natural appearance into an artistic expression by abstracting and simplifying elements of nature into a form that conveys meaning beyond the immediate and literal.

Rock Art and Kapagandha Design: A Comparison

Acknowledging, the patterns and design of the Kapagandha shawl of the Dongria tribe, the similarity of such patterns can also be depicted in different rock art sites of Odisha. However, the Lekhamoda

group of rock shelters comprises 14 rock shelters situated in the reserve forest of Chhengapahad and Garjanpahad in Hemgir tehsil of Sundargarh district. This group has the richest repository of rock paintings in Odisha (Pradhan, 2017).

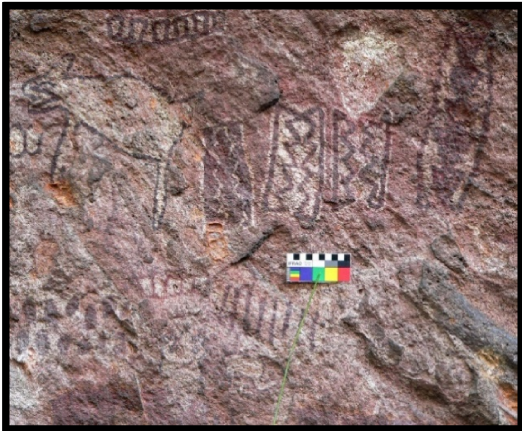


Figure 5: Paintings at Lekhamoda IV



Figure 6: Paintings at Lekhamoda-IV

Figure 5 and 6 are rock art depictions of Lekhamoda, shelter number IV. The shelter preserves 132 specimens of paintings executed in red, white and yellow shades (Pradhan 2017). The subject matter here mainly focuses on the double row of triangular shape patterns facing each other. The panel is also accompanied by various other figures such as animals, line

patterns and oval shapes. A similar flow of pattern could be witnessed in the overall rock art of Lekhamoda.



Figure 7: Paintings at Lekhamoda

Figure 7 represents paintings at Lekhamoda shelter number XI also locally known as Peruamoda. The subject matter depicts long vertical row of triangular shaped pattern facing opposite to each other. These patterns somewhat resemble with that of the Kapaganda shawl pattern of Dongria tribe which is said to represent Niyamgiri hill.



Figure 8: Paintings at Lekhamoda

pattern as mentioned in the above Lekhamoda figures. The rock panel depicts random placements of patterns

representing rows of triangular shaped facing each other in a horizontal manner. Figure 9 represents Lekhamoda shelter number X situated at the top of hillock Phuldunguri in Garjan pahad. Besides, the row of triangular patterns the rock panel also depicts cattle, palm print, rhombic patterns along with the superimposed geometric pattern with white colour depicting a zigzag pattern and diamond chain pattern (Pradhan 2017). Another important representation in the rock art of Odisha is the triangular engravings which is found both in paintings as well as engravings. A similar form of representation, a triangle with a dot motif is also featured in Kapaganda shawl of Dongria Kondh.

motifs remain a hallmark of all representations and such symbols are said to represent the fertility cult and the productive and creative power of Mother Earth. Such types of vulva motifs are also found Gawilgarh rock Art sites in Nagpur region.



Figure 9: Paintings at Lekhamoda X



Figure 10: Engravings at Rajbahal - Ushakuthi IV

However, Dongria Kondh signifies such triangle designs as represented in their shawl as Niyam Raja / Niyamgiri hill, and a green circle filled in with red, representing an eye, a symbol of vitality and strength. The small circles made between rows of triangular pyramidal shapes signify the deity worshipped by the embroiderer's family (figure 12).

Figure 10 falls under Rajbahal Ushakuthi group of rock shelters in Sundargarh district of Odisha. This rock shelter is number IV locally known as Laxmanpa. Referring to Padhan (2014), initially these different forms of triangular engravings found in Odisha's rock art was mentioned by Behera from Sundergarh district and his observations possibly state female genitals and represent the fertility cult (1991-92). According to Pradhan (2017), these triangular motifs also represent the *Vulva*, the grooves forming a triangle shape are filled with dark ochre colour. Such triangle



Figure 11: Triangle with dot

DISCUSSION

Therefore, the depictions of rock art in Odisha are mainly dominated by geometric figures, animals, plants and birds. These depictions suggest that the art belongs to the hunter-gatherer or forest dwellers and not settled communities. As such, no household activity or social activity finds representation in any of the rock shelters (Padhan 2014).



Figure 12: Woman making Kapaganda shaw

Rock art is a static placement of motifs with rock surfaces as its panel is placed within the rock shelters and boulders. The movement of people from one location to another acts as a medium for cultural transmission, carrying with it traditions, beliefs and artistic expressions. While these geometric patterns and symbols may appear consistently across the rock art sites of Odisha, but the interpretation of the symbols in rock art is highly influenced by their existence in its cultural context.

Certain recurrent symbols such as - bisected triangles, pairs of short parallel lines, and sets of wavy lines are found across the world and can be interpreted by taking into account the basic human needs and perceptions in a given environment (Pradhan, 2017). Therefore, the prehistoric humans gradually began to depict elements

of nature in the form of symbolic representation on rocks serving as the earliest medium for visual expression. This indicates that every work of art has a conceptual background and is a source for understanding the primary roots of thinking, knowing, imagining, seeing and believing (Editorial 2022).

Therefore, the similarities of patterns and designs between Kapaganda shawl of Dongria Kondh and rock art motifs suggest a cultural continuity, as these motifs have been adopted and integrated into both tribal art and textile designs. This further can be stated that rock art serves as the origin of all artistic expressions, with its patterns and designs being contemporarily preserved and perpetuated through various mediums such as textiles and tribal arts.

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