
Rock Art of Bodinayakkanur Taluk, Teni District, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: Rock art is the term used to denote the artistic and aesthetic expression of the ancient mankind. Perhaps it is the readily available evidence in tracing the ancient culture in a perfect context. The present exploration conducted in Bodinayakkanur taluk of Teni district have yielded rock art at three different geographical places. This particular taluk has yielded different categories of rock art like Pictographs (paintings), Petroglyphs (rock engravings or incisions) and Cupules (cup-marks). It is pertinent to mention that, no other taluks of the district have yielded rock art of different types. Hence, the present area under study holds a unique place in rock art research as for Tamil Nadu is concerned. The present intensive archaeological exploration conducted by the present author as part of his Ph.D degree programme, has discovered about seven rock shelters in Bodinayakkanur taluk. Interestingly, all the rock shelters were noticed in the hilly terrain and some of them are not easily accessible. Most of the shelters were found in the hilly tract, while few at the foot and slopes of the hills. Of the seven rock shelters, two of the rock shelters had yielded rock art of both categories like Pictographs (paintings) and Petroglyphs (engravings). In addition to these findings, cupules or cup-marks was also noticed on a boulder in a hilly village called Ahamalai. The present article is dealt with these newly discovered rock arts in detail and the same is furnished in the paper with suitable photographs and proper information.

Keywords: Rock Shelter, Rock Art, Pictographs, Ahamalai, Bodinayakkanur, Cup Marks, Tamil Nadu

Introduction

Bodinayakkanur is a popular town located 15 km north-west of Teni town in Teni district exactly at the foot of the Western Ghats. It holds a special place in the archaeological map of Tamil Nadu for having archaeological vestiges since the Palaeolithic times to early historical period. For instance, the intensive field work conducted by the author at Palarpatty, a small and obscure village have revealed Palaeolithic tools in the hillock called 'Mallingarsamymalai'. The subsequent work made at the place have also unveiled many iron age sites and early historical sites. In addition, this particular taluk of Teni district have yielded rock art at three different places. No other taluks of the district have given rock art of different types viz. Pictographs (paintings), Petroglyphs (rock engravings or incisions) and Cupules (cup-

marks). Hence, the present study area holds a unique place as for archaeology of Tamil Nadu is concerned.

The present intensive archaeological exploration conducted by the author as part of his Ph.D degree programme, has discovered about seven rock shelters in the Bodinayakkanur taluk. Interestingly, all the rock shelters were noticed in the hilly terrain and some of them are not easily accessible. Most of the shelters were found in the hilly tract, while few at the foot of the hills. Rock shelters are considered to be the safe place for the settlements as they protect from natural hazardous and provide space for the gathering communities in different aspects. People of primordial communities learned to live at these shelters and the available evidences in the form of tools, rock paintings, rock engravings and potteries near the shelters attests this factor. Totally two of the rock shelters discovered in Bodinayakkanur taluk contains rock art of both categories of Pictographs(paintings) and Petroglyphs(engravings). In addition to these findings, cupules or cup-marks was also noticed in a hilly village called Ahamalai.

Rock Art

Rock Art are the human made marks created on walls and ceilings of rocks, huge boulders, caves, natural caverns etc., representing the earliest evidence of aesthetic taste and expression of our mankind. It compiles a valuable source of visual information on the lives, beliefs and pre-occupations of the primordial communities. At ancient time man could have stays either permanently or temporarily at the Rock Shelters for carrying out his day to day life by involving in hunting the animals, practicing rites and rituals, religious activities and various cultural performance. The paintings executed by our ancestors depicting such cultural actions could have been to expose their exceptional moments to other communities or they could have in some other intention in creating those paintings.

The artistic expressions made in the form of paintings, drawings, prints, daubings were called as Pictographs and in the form of engravings, incisions, peckings, symbolic grindings, etchings are called as Petroglyphs. This artistic way of expression made by ancient man provides concrete evidence for understanding the ancient traditions, materialistic life, ethnicity, rites and rituals, hunting activities and their communal life. Perhaps it is the readily available evidence to trace the cultural history of ancient peoples in a perfect context. Rock Art can able to show the ingenious and emotional life of our forefathers which no other available evidence of early civilisation could do.

Further, it represents a consecutive stage of development witnessed by human beings from stone age period to present day. As rock art are the symbolic representations of ancient man, it becomes simple to identify the cultural past of human's in many aspects. In general, Rock Art clearly displays hunting-gathering, pastoral and social life of the primitive man in a visualistic way. To know about the earliest life stages of mankind before the advent of writing, rock art could be considered as the principal evidence to uncover those social and cultural facts.

Palarpatty

Palarpatty is a small and obscure village in Bodinayakkanur Taluk of Teni District. It is located 10 km west of Teni the district Head Quarter and 10 km south-east of Bodinayakkanur the taluk head quarter. The village is connected by roadways leading from Teni to Kuchanur, a famous pilgrimage centre. At a distance of one km north-west of the village, a hillock called Mallingarsamy Malai is situated which is an off-shoot of the Western Ghats. The intensive exploration conducted at the hillock has brought to light a painted rock shelter. The rock shelter is commonly called as *Mallingar Kugai* (kugai means cave) or *Karuppusamy Koil* as the local people at present had erected stucco image of Karuppusamy at the front of the shelter for worship.

Paintings Noticed in the Rock Shelter: Rock paintings were observed at the entrance of the shelter (Figure 1) which was executed by the primordial communities using white ochre. One should crawl to enter the rock shelter and passage for exit is available at the other end. It is a huge shelter that measures 35 ft in length and 20 ft in breadth and about twenty persons can sit in this shelter. Here, the paintings were drawn at the wall portion of the shelter facing eastern direction. The continuous inhabitation of the shelter by ancient people was observed in the form of polished floor that spreads all over the shelter. Totally, eleven paintings were depicted on the wall and were classified as dancing images, a human alongwith an animal and an anthropomorphic figurine. Invariably, all the paintings were painted with white ochre and were depicted at different places of the shelter. The paintings that were encountered at the *Mallingar Kugai* of palarpatty village are quite similar to other rock paintings that were previously discovered at various parts of Tamil Nadu.

Dancing Images: In this shelter, totally four human figurines in dancing posture is depicted at two different places. The first two images turned towards their left are shown in dynamic form with upraised hands and out-stretched legs and at the opposite side, another two images with out-stretched hands and legs were shown in an energetic mode of dancing. Their details are as follows.

Bird Headed Images: It is interesting and noteworthy to mention here about the bird headed humans at the shelter. Invariably, all the four dancing images were depicted with bird's head. It is pertained to mention that, the rock art sites at Kilvalai and Settavarai of Vilupuram District in northern Tamil Nadu were already noticed with similar bird headed human images (Sridhar 2005) Scholars have different view about the bird headed images depicted on rock shelters. For performing some rites and rituals, ancient man could have sport bird's head.

For instance, human beings in those days could have believed that, after the death the soul raises upwards in the form of bird and for honoring those creatures they might have engaged in such activities. The exhaustive field work in Teni district conducted by the author has explored few other rock art sites depicting bird's head. For example, the places like Teppampatti and Erasakkanaickanur Hills yielded similar bird headed

images. Hence, the cultural fusion that was prevailed in ancient times with different regional peoples of ancient Tamilaham is came to limelight through this extensive field work.

Standing Human Images: Amidst the four dancing images one can notice the presence of two human like images standing erectly with their hands joined together. This particular painting is thin and narrow. Here, the left hand of the first image connected with the right hand of the second one is noticed. The close examination and the study taken by the author shows that, the two standing images resemble the Indus Symbol. For instance, in the work of Prof. Asko Parpola “Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions” numbering 7046 and 7082 to 7087, similar symbols were noticed (Madhivanan 2005). R.Madhivanan transliterated it into Tamil and pointed as ‘ayan’. Hence, it throws a new panorama in the study of rock art of Teni region and a proper assessment of the paintings in future is necessary.



Figure 1: Paintings in the Rock Shelter, Palarpatty

A Man and an Animal: At the bottom of the first set of dancing images, there is a painting of a man standing adjacent to an animal. In this painting, the human is shown by keeping his left hand on the waist and the out-stretched right hand is depicted by touching the head of the animal. The human and the animal is shown in moving posture and a shield or some other weapon is portrayed at the backside of the human. By a close analysis of the paintings, the man wearing a lower garment and his foot moving towards left side of the dancing images were noticed. Infact, the head of the animal faces left side with a tail at its back.

A Single Male: Little away from the entrance of the rock shelter a human figurine is depicted on the ceiling portion. It is shown with two hands stretching out with a bent at the body portion. It is to notify here that, above this image with a breakage another image was painted. As the image is unfinished, it is difficult to answer what the image could be.

Anthropomorphic Figurine: Interestingly, one of the paintings depicted in the shelter is an anthropomorphic figurine. In this image, head portion is noticed at the top with two hands at either side in stretching posture. At the lower part of the painting also similar hands with out-stretched pose is noticed. At the bottom of the image a vertical stroke similar to a tail from the body portion is found. It is a mysterious image and it is doubtful to declare whether the painting belongs to a human being or animal or some

other. Of the total paintings executed in the shelter this particular art is lengthier in size.

Solaiyur

Solaiyur is a small tribal village located 12 km north-west of Bodinayakkanur, in Teni district. The village at present is occupied by the tribal people who were called as '*Paliyar*'. The village is exactly located at the foot of the Western Ghats covered with thick green forests. The exhaustive field work carried out in this place had brought to light a huge rock shelter which is locally called by the name '*Kumalamparai*'. The shelter can be approached from Solaiyur village, after walking nearly 8 km through forest area. The shelter facing eastern direction measures about 40 feet in length, 15 feet in width and 10 feet in height. It is one of the massive shelters noticed in Teni district and about fifty persons can stay in this shelter. The rock shelter bears the animal figurines of an elephant and a wild boar.

Petroglyphs: At the entrance of the shelter, a huge boulder depicting Petroglyphs executed by ancient people were noticed. Petroglyphs are rock engraving or incising made on rocky surfaces and one of the methods followed by ancient man for portraying artistic representations. The engravings identified at the shelters bear the resemblance of wild animals like elephant and wild boar close to each other. Normally, motifs of animals were drawn on rocky surfaces by using red-ochre, white-ochre during the pre and proto-historic period. However, here at *Kumalamparai*, instead of painting, carving method was adopted by the primitive artists. In the carving method, lines were incised on rocky surface to outline the figures of the animals. This method of carving or incising on a rock is generally called as Petroglyph, in Greek. The engravings or incisions found in this shelter were similar to a line drawings and ancient man restrain himself from paintings and he just outlined the whole-body portion of the animals and deserves in his attempt by executing a talented artistic skill called petroglyph by incising on the boulder.



Figure 2: Elephant Figure, Solaiyur

Elephant: As far as the elephant figurine is concerned (Figure 2), it was created in a realistic way by the ancient people. Animal parts like head, trunk, tusk, body portion, legs and tail are projected well in the boulder and it shows the artistic skill of ancient man.



Figure 3: Wild Boar, Solaiyur

Wild Boar: The petroglyph discovered at Kumalamparai, which is identified as wild boar (Figure 2) seems to have lengthy face, facing down. It is a typical wild boar so far discovered in the Teni region. Similar wild boar executed with white ochre painting was found at the village called Kargur of Vellore district in Tamil Nadu, datable to Iron Age period (Kumar 2005). Hence, the animal having same features seems to exist at different geographical zones of ancient Tamil Nadu and could be assigned in this sense that, wild boar was present in Teni region during the ancient times. The face of the animal, legs, tail and body portion is clearly visible and was depicted in same method as that of elephant as mentioned earlier.



Figure 4: Cupules, Ahamalai

Ahamalai

Ahamalai, is an obscure hilly village present at Bodinayakkanur taluk of Teni district, in Tamil Nadu. It is exactly situated at a distance of 16 km from Bodinayakkanur, the taluk headquarters and 22 km from Periyakulam town connected by the hilly road via, Sothuparai Dam, and is present at an altitude of 345 meters above the sea level. The intensive exploration conducted in this village revealed the presence of Cupules or Cup-marks.

Cup Marks: The cup-marks or cupules, the oldest surviving rock art, similar to those showcased in the UNESCO world heritage site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh, were found in a huge boulder in Ahamalai (Figure 4). Cup marks are the earliest artistic and creative expression of pre-historic man. This discovery is the first of its kind in Teni district. These round depressions were obviously beaten into the tough quartzite rock surface by the help of hammer – stones and roundish pebbles (Neumayer 2013). The cup-marks have an exact finish and are 3 cm - 4 cm wide and almost 1 cm in deep. To fashion such a depression would have involved the work of a strong man nearly for four hours of activity, vividly battering the rock with a hammering stone (Neumayer 2013).

Above thirty cup-marks were found on the upper portion of the boulder and they were completely absent at the sides. These cup-marks were found close to each other and the average distance between each seems to be 3 cm and 5 cm respectively. In Tamil Nadu, the cup-marks were noticed in a cave present in a hillock at a remote village called Malayadipatti of Pudukottai district, also they were noticed on the capstone of the iron age cist burials at Karubayanahalli and Vedarthattakkal in Krishnagiri district (Rajan 2011) and also seen witnessed on the boulders of a stone circle entombing a cist burial at Velliripatti near Melur in Madurai district.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to mention that, Bodinayakkanur taluk was precisely inhabited by the primordial people and executed their artistic skill in the way of paintings, engravings and cup-markings. The important findings that have been emerged out by the present study, which was undertaken at this hilly range of Ahamalai, throws much light on the field of Rock Art in Teni district of Tamil Nadu. The archaeological discoveries made in this particular place tend to be a noteworthy one, and the peculiar cup-marks are the new vista in the study of pre-historic rock-art of India. None of the taluks in Teni district had yielded archaeological vestiges right from the pre-historic period down to early historical period. The ancient collections from this place provide a vivid picture of the past life of the humans who lived at Bodinayakkanur. At this juncture it is to be surmised that, Bodinayakkanur taluk was inhabited by the ancient man since the pre-historic time itself, and a proper archaeological excavation in this region would yield rich antiquities that would help to re-build the socio-cultural conditions of the taluk and its surroundings in a perfect context.

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