

Exploring Rock Art Traditions of Udupi District: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

The rock art traditions of Udupi District hold immense significance in understanding the cultural and artistic expressions of early human societies in coastal Karnataka. These sites, scattered across the district, provide valuable insights into the life, beliefs, and socio-economic conditions of prehistoric communities. This study aims to compare and analyze various rock art sites in Udupi District, highlighting their unique features, thematic representations, stylistic variations, and cultural implications. By situating Udupi's rock art within the broader framework of Indian rock art traditions, this article seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on prehistoric art and archaeology.

Keywords: Rock Art Traditions, Udupi District, Prehistoric Communities, Thematic Representations, Cultural Implications.

Introduction

Rock art is one of the oldest forms of human expression, serving as a window into the prehistoric world. It includes paintings, engravings, and carvings created on rock surfaces, often in shelters or caves. In India, rock art spans from the Upper Paleolithic period to the early historical era, showcasing a wide range of themes such as hunting, rituals, and daily life. Udupi District, located on the southwestern coast of Karnataka, is home to several significant rock art sites that

reflect the region's rich prehistoric and protohistoric heritage.

This study examines the rock art traditions of Udupi District, comparing various sites to uncover commonalities and differences in artistic styles, motifs, and cultural contexts. By exploring these aspects, we aim to understand the region's prehistoric cultural landscape and its connections to broader South Indian rock art traditions.

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Objectives of the Study

- To Analyze and Compare Rock Art Sites in Udupi District
- To Contextualize Udupi's Rock Art within Broader Indian Traditions

Methodology

This research relies on field surveys, documentation, and secondary literature to analyze the rock art sites of Udupi District. Fieldwork involved photographing and sketching rock art panels, noting their physical settings, techniques, and preservation status. Comparative analysis was conducted by examining thematic and stylistic elements across sites within Udupi and juxtaposing them with other rock art traditions in Karnataka and India.

Overview of Rock Art Sites in Udupi District

Gavali

Gavali, an important archaeological site situated 38 km southeast of Kundapur in Udupi district, was first identified and documented by B. Vasanth Shetty in 1983.¹ Renowned for its scattered granite boulders across an open field, the site offers a captivating window into the region's ancient cultural and artistic heritage.

The centerpiece of Gavali is a remarkable life-sized carving of a standing bull on a boulder positioned within a small stream. Oriented eastward, the bull radiates an aura of sanctity and reverence. Complementing this figure is a

smaller bull carved nearby, facing westward, creating an intriguing visual and symbolic dialogue with its larger counterpart. The larger bull is rendered with meticulous attention to detail, featuring bold outlines that enhance its divine aura. Its horns, shaped elliptically with the tips forming an enclosed oval, encase a distinctive design of intersecting vertical and horizontal lines. This pattern is interpreted as a representation of a yoni, an ancient symbol associated with fertility and creation. Additional features, including a prominent hump, a slightly raised tail, and an anatomically detailed depiction of its genitalia, further reflect the artistic skill and cultural significance of the engraving. In contrast, the smaller bull is more understated in detail. Its hump is less pronounced, and its forelegs and hind legs merge into an intricate design that echoes patterns observed at the Sonda site. This shared motif suggests a cultural or religious connection between these locations. Adding to the site's allure is a partially buried boulder, with its exposed surface showcasing another life-sized bull engraving akin to the primary figure in style and detail. Nearby, a double row of cup marks is etched into the rock, resembling the layout of *chennemane*, a traditional wooden board game imbued with deep religious and cultural significance.

The artistic and symbolic features of Gavali indicate that it served as more than a mere megalithic site. Its carvings and motifs suggest a sacred space intertwined

with ritualistic practices and cultural traditions, reflecting a harmonious blend of the spiritual and the quotidian in the lives of its ancient inhabitants.

Figure 1: Buddhanajeddu Petroglyph Site



Buddhanajeddu Petroglyph Site

Discovery and Revisit

The Buddhanajeddu petroglyph site, initially discovered by Murugeshi T.² As a participant in the original survey, this study aimed to document and analyze the petroglyphs in this historically significant site located in Karkunje Village, within the Mookambika Reserved Forest.

Environmental Setting

Buddhanajeddu is situated in a lush environment, enveloped by the evergreen beauty of the Mookambika Reserved Forest. A rivulet, a tributary of the Chakra River, flows about one kilometer away from the site. The entire area is characterized by the presence of laterite formations, contributing to the unique geological context of the site.

Petroglyphs

The petroglyphs at Buddhanajeddu showcase an intriguing array of human, animal, and bird engravings, including distinctive human footprints. Local lore associates these footprints with the epic hero Bhima, leading to the site being colloquially named Bhimana Pare.

Human Figures

The petroglyphs feature three human figures in standing postures, oriented towards northeast, northwest, and southeast. The robust and proportionate depictions, with side-profile faces, suggest deliberate craftsmanship. One figure is captured in dynamic action, standing on one foot and seemingly engaged in a throwing motion, possibly indicative of hunting activities.

Geometrical Designs

Unique geometrical designs, such as spirals, a square with 56 sub-squares, and eight lines intersecting at a single point, adorn the site. One notable spiral design incorporates a vertical line with four spirals on each side, a rarity in Indian prehistoric rock art. Spirals hold significance in the broader context of prehistoric art.

Animal Engravings:

Two bison are depicted, one in a static posture with horns and another in forward movement without horns. A humped bull

in a standing posture, standing on a line with a triangular spiral design below, adds a distinctive touch to the site. This particular engraving is reminiscent of Neolithic art found in Kupgal hills and is associated with fertility cult practices of that period.

Additional engravings include representations of peacocks, deer, and carts. The site also boasts nearly 16 pairs of footprints and cupules, contributing to the richness and diversity of the petroglyphs.

Figure 2: Avalakkipare Rock Art Site



Avalakkipare Rock Art Site

Location and Environmental Setting

The Avalakkipare Rock Art Site, situated at 13°47'12.97"N and 74°47'31.41"E, is located in the Idurukunjnadi village of Kundapura Taluk, within the Kolluru Makkambika Reserved Forest in the Udupi district. The site is characterized by a vast plateau of laterite formation, with small substreams of the Varahi River meandering through the rich forest resources. This environmental richness likely played a crucial role in the subsistence patterns of prehistoric communities in the region.

Study History

First studied by Prof. Murugeshi in February 2019, his observations were published in the *Itihasa Darpana Journal*, providing an initial description of the visible rock art pictures³. Subsequently, the site was revisited in October 2019 and November 2022 by the current researcher, who engaged in discussions with Prof. Murugeshi to build on the initial findings.

Site Characteristics

Avalakkipare stands out as a peculiar and prominent prehistoric site in coastal Karnataka due to several factors. The large plateau of laterite formation, the environmental setup, themes depicted in the art, the abundance of pictures, and the discovery of tools contribute to its uniqueness in the region.

Rock Art Figures-Human Figures:

A total of eleven life-sized human figures have been identified at the site, portraying various actions. Notably, one female figure features intricate decorative lines, suggesting potential abstract or religious significance.

Animal Figures

The rock art at Avalakkipare includes engravings of pigs, deer, dogs, elephants, and two bull figures. These depictions provide insights into the fauna that may have been significant to the prehistoric inhabitants.

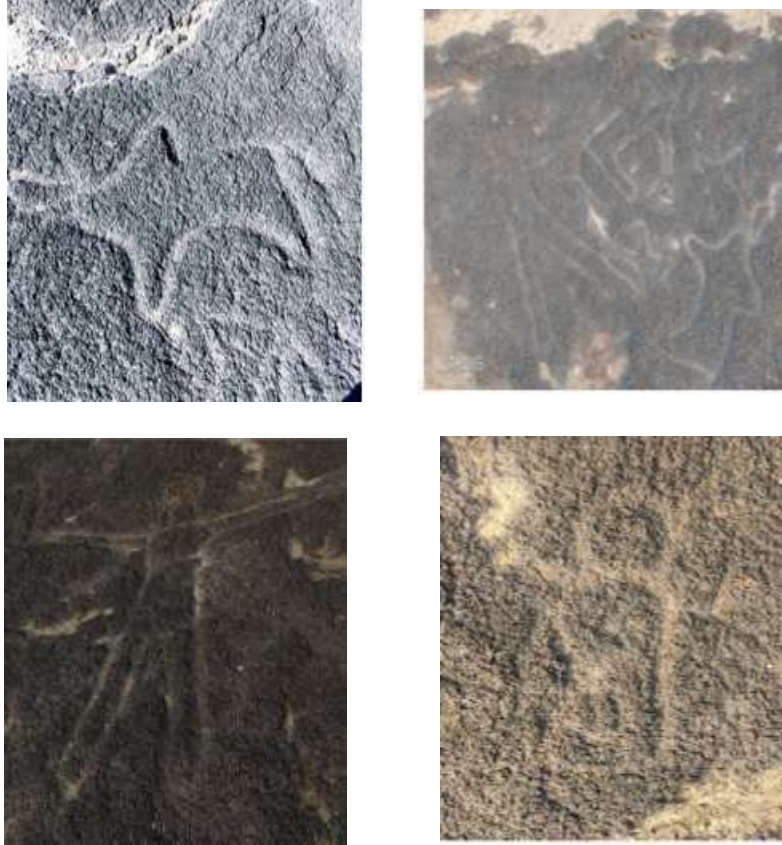
Additional Features

In addition to human and animal figures, numerous cupules, geometric designs, and several unidentified figures adorn the site. The presence of such diverse elements contributes to the complexity and richness of Avalakkipare's rock art.

Comparative Analysis

Avalakkipare's rock art exhibits distinctive characteristics when compared to nearby sites like Buddhanajeddu and Gavali. Unlike the dominant representation of settled lifestyle and bull figures in the other two sites, Avalakkipare prominently features a hunting-gathering lifestyle. The similarities observed between Avalakkipare's figures and those from Ratnagiri district suggest potential cultural connections or influences.

Figure 3: Rock Art Features of Coastal Karnataka-Udupi and Dakshinakannnda District



Rock Art Features of Coastal Karnataka-Udupi and Dakshinakannnda District

The exposed lateritic rock surface on the west coast consist many complex assemblages of engravings depicting human figures, foot prints, animal forms, evil eye, spiral-loop, bow and arrow, etc. They are all deeply incised. The rock, being laterite, though soft, the execution of engravings could not have been achieved without the use of an iron implement. At the out set it is possible to discern complexity of the assemblage,

representing both prehistoric and historic periods, and also suspect the presence of a hunting-gathering community in the area during prehistoric period.

Human Figures

There are in all 8 complete human figures of which three are found at buddhanajeddu are males whose representation shown prominently. The heads are featureless in one figure. At Avalakkipare engravings depict male figures with outstretched legs. Hands are also outstretched pointing upwards above the shoulders or at the level of shoulders.

A linear incision between the neck and the pelvis perhaps represents the back bone. The other human figure stands in a flexed posture with the left hand akimbo and the right hand raised above the shoulder pointing to something. One of the figures has a series of lines radiating from the head, perhaps suggestive of a deity. These figures also suggest a posture of worship.

Foot prints

Foot prints are uncommon in the known prehistoric art sites in India. But Buddhanajeddu perhaps the prominent site with foot print engravings. There are nearly 30 sets of foot prints. They don't resemble the padukas of historical period. The earliest representations of foot prints in India are those of the Buddha going back to ca. 2nd century B.C. These foot prints can be related to early historical period or megalithic Neolithic period. These can also have served the purpose of polishing grove.

Animals

There is a large number of motifs representing animals which include bulls, elephant, dog and deer. Next to human figures the bull figures prominently in the assemblage of engravings. Bulls are very commonly depicted in prehistoric art not only in India but also in other parts of the world. All these animals are shown in outline. Bull, being a very useful animal for man, came to be associated with the religious beliefs of the people.

The bull depictions are complete figures, both large and small. At Gavali bull figures are represented in dominant form. The body part is not further engraved and further decorated. In the Buddhanajeddu engraving bull is shown as having an elongated body, slender legs, a huge hump and projecting horns. In one instance at Avalakkipare bull horns are shown in such an angle as though the bull is charging ahead. In Gavali two bull horns are interjoined with design. At Avalakkipare the animal engravings also reveal a little more attempt at decorating the body or revealing the internal skeletal features. These are typical of the late Neolithic of south India. Stylistically, they resemble those of the Neolithic rock engravings in north Karnataka and Goa which are assigned to the Neolithic period. But there is no major evidence of Neolithic habitation in Coastal Karnataka as yet except Kunjargiri. The sporadic occurrence of Neolithic tools in different parts of Coastal Karnataka right from the upland to sub-Ghat zone and also in the central parts is a clear indication of the presence of Neolithic communities in Coastal Karnataka. The nearest Neolithic rock art and habitation sites are in north Karnataka. The evidence of a Neolithic stone axe at Anmod (Karnataka) is on the Ghat route linking Goa, Coastal Karnataka and mainland Karnataka. This is a clear indication of the movement of people between the coast and the plateau ever, during prehistory. And the known Neolithic occurrences, though sporadic,

are clear pointer to the presence of habitations of the itinerant Neolithic communities who frequented this region in search of resources.

Some of the engravings may also be Megalithic as a Megalithic dolmens, cave burials and urn burials are found in large number in the area. The Megalithic burials abound in the adjoining north Karnataka region as well. The Megalithic people, who led a semi-nomadic existence, may have been carrying out hunting expeditions into coastal Karnataka continuously. Dog assisted man in hunting and hence its presence at Avalakkipare. Representations of deer, which are many, may have been executed during hunting expeditions as found at Buddhanajeddu and Avalakkipare. It may be questioned as to what is the connection between hunting and engravings. Such scenes have generally been interpreted as being used for sympathetic magic to control the game, to make the game prolific and secure the hunter's success. It is also highly likely that the pictures of deer were engraved to mark the symbolic offering to the god. It may be recalled that the poor people who cannot afford to slaughter a live bull to the god, make token offerings of wooden bulls. Similarly, the drawings of animals were done as symbolic offerings to the god.

Engravings of dogs and deers are also common at the site. They are depicted in outline. They are schematic representations, while the retaining the outline the major part of the rock surface

within the outline is worked out to achieve the impression of flash-painting, but seems to be abandoned half way through.

Functions of the Engravings

An important problem is the function of these engravings. As already observed, some of them, like the foot prints and human figures, are associated with the religious beliefs of the people. Bull figurines may have been executed for fulfilling vow. Presently, people offer wooden bull figurines to village gods. This they do because they cannot afford to sacrifice a live bull.. Spiral was probably a fertility symbol. Other symbols may have been the handiwork of shepherds and cowherds who did it as a pass time.

Age

The age of the engravings is difficult to estimate. They are certainly as old as the Mesolithic period (between 4000 to 10000 years before present), or those in Karnataka which are about three to four thousand year old. The engravings of the bulls and deer may be of Neolithic-megalithic date and as such may be assigned to the centuries around the Christian era. The male human figures can be placed in the historical period, particularly that which is shown with a flexed posture at Buddhanajeddu and may be at the most a thousand year old. The foot prints too are not very old; they may have been carved some 2000 years ago.

Significance of Udupi's Rock Art Traditions

The rock art of Udupi District offers a valuable glimpse into the cultural and artistic heritage of prehistoric coastal Karnataka. These sites not only reflect the creativity and ingenuity of early humans but also provide crucial information about their environment, subsistence strategies, and social structures. Moreover, the thematic and stylistic diversity of Udupi's rock art highlights the dynamic interplay between local traditions and broader cultural influences.

Conclusion

The rock art traditions of Udupi District stand as a testament to the region's rich prehistoric heritage. By comparing and analyzing various sites, this study underscores the artistic, cultural, and historical significance of Udupi's rock art within the broader framework of South Indian rock art traditions. However, preserving these invaluable cultural assets requires concerted efforts from researchers, policymakers, and local communities. With appropriate measures, the rock art of Udupi can continue to inspire and educate future generations about the creativity and resilience of early human societies.

Endnotes

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