



The Petroglyphs of Ratnagiri

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Different sites with petroglyphs in Ratnagiri and Rajapur districts have been found over the last two or three years.

The way the petroglyphs have been drawn, and their similarity to those found in other parts of the world, have led experts to believe that they were created in prehistoric times and are possibly among the oldest ever discovered.

Petroglyph

- A petroglyph is usually a prehistoric carving in a rock. Prehistory refers to the period of time before civilization and writing. There are only archeological sources available for prehistoric period which includes stone and bone tools, rock arts etc.
- The term rock art includes pictographs (paintings on rocks) and petroglyphs which are carved into the flat, open rock surface gives them a scale and look that is unique.

Features of these Petroglyphs

- The working theory around these petroglyphs is that they date back to about 10,000 BCE, placing them in the Mesolithic Period, which comes between the Old Stone Age or Paleolithic period, characterised by chipped stone tools, and the New Stone Age or Neolithic period, associated with smaller, more polished tools.
- The variety of the rock carvings are stunning as animals, birds, human figures and geometrical designs are all depicted.
- The images appear to have been created by hunter-gatherer communities as they depict hunted animals and detailing of animal forms.
- Prominent petroglyph and rock art sites in India that could be contemporary to this period are the Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh, rock carvings in Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, petroglyphs from the Tindivanam and Villupuram districts in Tamil Nadu and Unakoti in Tripura.
- The carvings on laterite stone make the petroglyphs in Ratnagiri region unique, as the carvings discovered in other sites around India are on granite and sandstone.

Significance

- In the medieval age, the Konkan coast was lined with important port towns. It has been reconstructed from epigraphs and contemporaneous records that it has a history of trade and contact with Europe, and even with the Roman Empire. But there was a big void regarding what went on here in prehistoric times. The findings of these petroglyphs can fill a huge gap in the history of the Konkan region.
- Petroglyphs in Ratnagiri region are not yet the evidence of a civilisation, as there is no evidence of writing, agricultural or economic activity, or of living arrangements or settlements which are the essential attributes of a civilization.
- In Maharashtra's cultural records, there is no evidence of any art being practised until about 3,000 BCE, which is when the first mention of painted pots and clay figurines are found. That's why these petroglyphs are a significant find for a better understanding of the history of this region and its artistic traditions.
- Some of the carvings depict rhinoceroses and hippos, two species that were never thought to be prevalent in this part of India. These carvings, however, suggest that the Konkan may have once been a lot like the rainforests where these animals are typically found.
- Most of the art from the later medieval period is religious in nature it is quite likely that such a significant investment in art points to some form of religious belief or religious system.
- Some of the more complex reliefs, etched deep into the ground, may have been done using metal tools rather than stone. If his theory is proven right, then as in sites like Bhimbetka, where art has been dated from prehistoric times right down to the medieval period could point to a continuous habitation of this region, across millennia, possibly by various nomadic tribes.
- The discovery of these sites marks the commencement of a long project as there's still need to look for more evidence of stone tools and evidence of settlements around these sites so that more accurate dating can be obtained.
- Maharashtra tourism department has shown interest in developing some of these sites and incorporating them into the tourist circuit of a region that attracts lot of travellers, drawn to it by the beaches and temples.