

## **A TRANSITION OF ROCK-CUT RELIEF SCULPTURE IN THE FORM OF RELIEF MURAL IN PLAIN AREAS: A REFERENCE OF ROCK ART AND ROADSIDE MURAL PRACTICES IN TRIPURA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Rock art is an evolutionary creative activity of human being from the inception of the civilization. Rock art plays a pivotal role in every aspects of art heritage which simultaneously have been transited human's artistic ability and cultural activities in the society. The term engravings, inscriptions, reliefs, drawing and paintings are exist in rock art and these terminologies may be classified into two categories as pictographs and petroglyphs. A best example of relief work was found on the steep wall of Kalajhari hill at Chhabimura (Devtamura), Unokoti (Kailasahar), Pilak (Jolaibari) in Tripura which may proclaim as examples of petroglyphs. Now-a-days, these type of visual are using too in plain areas using different mediums and surfaces. The walls of a building became durable support and cement plaster, cement concrete, plaster of Paris, terracotta plates and fiber, became a new medium for relief mural representation in the society. The practices of relief works among the North-Eastern states are the reflections of early rock art traditions and it can be shown as a transition of tradition from hill to plain areas. The objective of the paper is to show a transition of rock art in plain areas where it's aesthetic senses have been developed through the visualization in public places in the form of mural which creates an awareness program too in the society.*

*In this paper, a discussion has been made on the rock-cut relief mural art of Chhabimura, Unokoti and Pilak and its influences in the plain regions.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Art in transition, petroglyphs, rock art of Tripura, tradition of relief sculpture, relief mural.*

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Tripura (23.84<sup>0</sup> N, 91.28<sup>0</sup> E) is a state of art and archaeology surrounded by Bangladesh from three sides (north, west, and south) and only connected through Assam and Mizoram with India on its east side. Being a third smallest state in India, the state is retaining a rich cultural tradition and art heritage for many centuries. The various art heritages such as rock art, bamboo and cane crafting, wood and metal crafts and folk culture of ethnic and non-ethnic communities are the excellences to heighten the state in the country. There are two rock-cut sites – *Unokoti*, Kailasahar (fig. 2, Unokoti District) and *Devtamura*, Amarpur (fig. 1, Gomati District) and one site of stone and terracotta sculptures at Pilak, Jolaibari (South Tripura) in Tripura. These archaeological sites are representing the *Shaiva*, *Sakti*, *Vishnu* and few *Buddhist* cults. The relief sculptures of *Unokoti* and *Devtamura* are mainly carved out in hilly areas surrounding by lush greeneries. The aesthetical domains of these visual narratives have been reflected in the plain areas of Tripura especially in urban development areas. It is seen that the plain areas have been decorated with the replicas of these sculptures and many other secular themes on the boundary walls, inside and outside buildings of public, private and government sectors. In Tripura, the influences and reflections of these artistic activities has gradually grown up day by day.

## 1.2. ROCK ART:

Rock art is an evolutionary creative activity which was made by human being from the inception of the civilization. Rock art is now one of our most valuable surviving art heritages in the world. Simultaneously rock art transited human's artistic ability and cultural activities in the society. Scholars have given so many definitions of rock art on their points of view which are well known to us. The rock carvings, rock engravings, rock inscriptions, rock drawings, and rock paintings are generally called rock art. Experts and art historians have divided rock art into two categories – a) *Pictographs* – means drawing and paintings on rock shelters, b) *Petroglyphs* – means rock carvings, engravings, and relief sculptures on rock shelters. The *petroglyphs* of Bhimbetka are considered to be the oldest *petroglyphs* in the world dating C. 290,000 – 700,000 BCE (discovered in 1990). According to renowned archaeologist Bednarik that this rock art belonging to the Acheulean culture of the Lower Paleolithic (Bednarik, 1997). Accordingly, the newly discovered relief sculptures from the steep wall of *Devtamura* or *Chhabimura*-amazing relief sculpture on sandstone (approximately 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.), *Unokoti*-the colossal rock art (9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) and *Pilak*-stone and terracotta plaque (8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) of Tripura are also may categorized as '*Petroglyphs*'. Rock-cut relief sculptures are found mainly in hilly region almost all over the world. In this sense the rock cut relief sculptures of *Unokoti*, and *Devtamura* is a suitable example of rock cut art in hill areas.

Evidently, the history shows that whoever created these marvelous art works they sowed the seed of artistic ability of mankind through the ages. They used to live in hilly areas where this art tradition took birth. However, the earliest people were left hilly areas and settled down in plain areas. But the artistic ability could not left from their gene. They borrowed this tradition with them and practiced in plain areas.

According to Narayan Vyas -“After the Medieval period, people gradually settled in the villages in areas surrounding the rock shelters. However, the tradition of rock art has continued to the modern times and can be seen on the mud walls of the houses in the area.”(Vyas, 2012)

Gradually, the mediums, style and technique, and the selection of the suitable surface for *petroglyphs* are also changed. As we know that relief has been divided into three parts that is high, low, and sunken relief. This character of relief presentation may interpret with the relief mural works of plain areas.

If we think about the style, presentation, selections of the surface, early artist have chosen hill areas for their carvings. It might be depend on the availability of rock in the particular hill areas and also it might be possible that the ancient artist and the patronages were aware of the longevity of the natural medium or substances for their works. In this sense, the relief art works in plain areas are also depend on selection of the surface and applied on the durable support, e.g. - as cement plaster wall. The presentation of the subject in such a way that they can generalize their appearances for the upcoming generations, as today we are trying to understand past activity and the sources of the relief carving tradition that's flowing in the society in different forms using variety in medium or surfaces. This rock cut sculptures are the evidence of the earlier generations, symbolizing ancient culture, civilization, and religion developed in the particular area or around the hill areas. We are the follower of that tradition and socializing by practicing this carving and relief technique with the presentation of art works or sculptures in the society.

### **2.1. TRANSITION OF RELIEF SCULPTURES FROM HILLS TO PLAINS:**

As earlier mentioned, most of the relief sculptures in the hilly areas were carved during the stone ages. From the Neolithic period, humans adopted many survival techniques like agriculture, architecture and different types of tools which helped them to settled their life in plain areas. Agricultural life bound them to come in the plain regions. The transitions of these settlements were reflected on their artistic ability. Progressively, they introduced relief work in their houses, temples, palaces and burial areas as a part of rituals, religious beliefs, and decorations etc. They applied first on the walls of temples, made temples by carving stones and carved out relief images on these surfaces. Accordingly, they started to carved images, designs and motifs on the walls, beams, gates and other architectural surfaces of palaces and buildings. In the plain areas, the mural approaches of relief sculpture have been changed where mediums, supports, ideas and new thoughts have introduced.

This style of rock carving has been developed in the form of relief mural in the plain areas. In earlier days, human being introduced different subjects related to religion, rituals, beliefs, hunting scenes on the rocks. Generally we can find this relief approaches in the form of mural on the walls of religious buildings or temples, in front of museum, parks, and in public areas respectively for the beautification and the transformation of knowledge among the society. Now, the artists are introducing not only those subjects also we are assembling cultural activities, replica of monuments, rock art, temples, illustrated scenes and awareness program initiated by government and non-government organizations etc. These relief sculptures are mostly done in the form of mural which shows the different artistic approach, beautification of particular area, knowledge gathering scope for new generation as well as awareness program in the society. Earlier the presentation was on rock surfaces in hill areas and now with the same visualization of relief technique it's in between the public, means in plain areas in the form of relief mural. Now it is clear that rock was the only available support which has the durability and considered to be a protected site as early people used to live in rock shelter sites. Compare to earlier mode of using rocks for relief sculpture now a day's its changes in different mediums as terracotta relief mural,

cement plaster or concrete and using fiber, metal, wood etc. which has brought new dimension to make a relief art work. So, this long transition of this art tradition from hills to plains shows that both the regions have been cultivated art during passing of time.

## 2.2 SOME VISUAL REFERENCES:

A good numbers of colour palates of the relief murals placed in different public and religious places in Tripura have been included in this paper as a visual reference of the transition of ancient rock art of Tripura. The style and representation of these relief murals visualizes a close similarity between the ancient tradition of rock-cut art and modern style of relief murals. The following relief murals were decorated in various walls and buildings in Tripura: Laxminarayan Temple (fig. 3), Gate Durga mandir (fig. 6), Heritage park (fig. 4, 5), Decorated pillar (fig. 7) etc.

## 3.1. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS:

- All the relief sculptures not considered to be a mural art, whether in plain regions most relief sculptures are found in the form of mural art.
- Though these relief process was started in the hilly areas. Gradually, it has transited in plain areas on temples, royal houses, and public places with the introduction of different mediums and surfaces.
- In hilly areas, the only support is rock shelter and in plain regions there are lots of supports like the plain walls, beams, columns and gates of a house or park etc.
- In hilly regions, the subjects are mostly based on rituals, beliefs, and myths etc. where in plain areas based on contemporary life, cultural activities, illustrated scenes, replica or model of monuments, rock art, and some awareness images as well as myths, rituals and other subjects.
- The artists might make these art works according to mythological views or from their own imaginative world or from daily activities with all experiences and proper planning where time and particular space was not a factor. In plain regions, they may have to follow different aspects which are instructed, commercialized with minimum easy process and technique within a limited period and in a space.
- Most of the works in both regions are highly rich, attractive, and have aesthetic values. But in some cases, those characteristics are becoming low in plain regions.
- In both regions, the functional and non-functional values have been changed as presentation, description, depiction, ideas, and thoughts are different e.g. creative image of *Durga*, folk stories.
- In a comparison, the artists are applying different mediums like cement, plaster of paris, terracotta plates, and fibers etc. in plain areas where as in hilly areas the artists used to carved or engraved on rock surfaces.

## 4.1. CONCLUSION:

This paper may help the reader to understand the interpretations between the rock arts exist in the hill areas with the relief murals practiced in plane areas. It can be understandable that, today's art of relief murals is the influence of the age-old art practices. It can be assumed that, the artists of plain areas and their works of art were just maintaining a sequence or a part of age old discovery of relief rock-cut art forms. In the other way, the relief mural art practice on the walls and gates, inside and outside buildings creates an awareness program to the society and it becomes a part of

decoration to beautify a city or town. In this connection it is also opened a source of earning for the artists who are getting these commissioned work. Therefore, the government and non-government sectors should take more initiatives to focus these art practice and artists in the society. Through the transformation of human behavior from hill to plain causes the alteration in the mediums of relief art from natural to artificial aesthetics. Through the writings of this paper, the rock cut art of Tripura may be generalized as a source of relief mural art practices in Tripura.

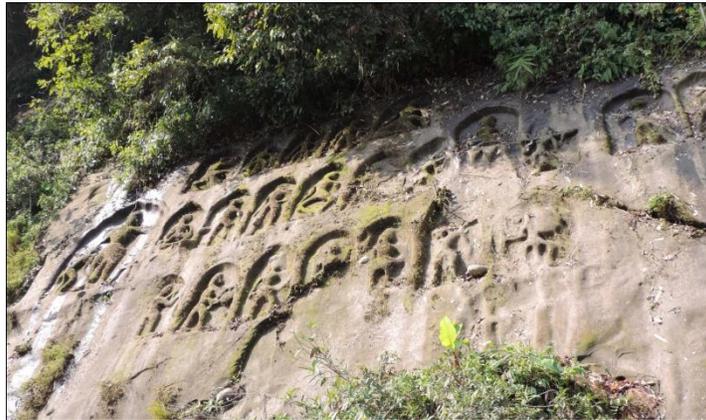


Fig.1, Chhabimura, Amarapur, Tripura  
Photography by Palash Debnath



Fig. 2, Unokoti, Kailasahar, Tripura  
Photography by Palash Debnath



Fig. 3, local cultural scene on roadside wall, LaxmiNarayan Temple  
cement casting, Agartala  
Photography by Palash Debnath



Fig.4, Replica of Chhabimura at Heritage Park, cement casting, Agartala  
Photography by Palash Debnath



Fig. 5, Decorative motifs and designs on the wall. Cement  
casting, Heritage Park, Agartala  
Photography by Palash Debnath



Fig. 6, Form of *Durga* on the Durgabari gate, terracotta plates, Agartala  
Photography by Palash debnath



Fig. 7, Decorated pillar,  
Hotel Overseas, Agartala



Fig. 8, Replica of Unokoti, Heritage  
park, Agartala  
Photography by Palash Debnath

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