

KORKU MEMORIALS OF PACHMARHI

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Five rock cut temples known as Pandav Caves. These rock-cut caves have been made in low hills and in front of this exciting monument. Buddhist temples and caves have been hewn by Buddhist monks. Caves have been created even in 1st century AD. When looking at the architecture of the facades, one of the later times seems more credible. The facade of each cave is adorned with several columns and pilasters with simple adornments. Sometimes it is mentioned that Pandav Cave in Pachmarhi contains valuable paintings. Pandav Caves contained medieval paintings which unfortunately are lost now. Satpura ranges though contain many other, more ancient rock shelters. Some of these caves contain paintings left by Stone Age people.

During old stone (upper Paleolithic) age, man invented stone implements which helped him to develop cave and rock shelter sculpture and painting. He drew on the walls of the shelters in order to appease bad spirits, success in the hunt, combat, cure the sick and wounded. This practice might have led him to draw for the dead so that the deceased's spirits do not haunt them. In a Pachmarhi cave painting, of a burial ceremony, the disheartened family is effectively drawn. The burial practice of the period has a close resemblance to that of present-day tribals. The stone-age man used to bury the dead along with his worldly possessions, such as ornaments, snail shells and even his long-lost tooth. The skulls found in these Neolithic graves show a genetic relation to present-day Korku-tribes. This gives inkling that the custom of erecting memorials originated in the Paleolithic period.

Evolution

When these aboriginals acquired enough skill to hunt, fish, construct huts and grow food, they left the caves and rock shelters to live in plains and river beds. Absence of ritualistic art in this period indicates that for a while they had to forego it. In between, if they had developed one or other form of memorial art, such as wood carving, they are completely lost for the posterity.

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In the new environment the aboriginals might have employed boulder type a memorials and sacrificed some of domesticated animals to appease the dead. All other forms appear to have evolved from this basic form. Buddhists as early as 300 B.C. adapted this and developed into the stupa form. Phallic, pillar, tomb and temple types are also its derivatives.

The Tulsi-like memorials might have been specially evolved and dedicated to deceased priests and holy men.

At the dawn of history, specialized people with special tools became available for specific jobs. Thus dressing up of the granite boulder into a pillar and later carving it with elaborate motifs resulted into eighth century Hindu memorials. The granite slab seems to be the next logical step in the evolution. It is very significant that these are mostly restricted to Bastar from where this art might have percolated into Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Almost all the memorials of Karnataka seem to be derivative of this form. Even Nishidi and Sati memorials are in conformity with his hypothesis. Existence of this custom among people of Dravidian origin and almost its absence among Aryans indicated its tribal origin. When the aboriginals commenced their migration to the south, in order to avoid the foreign invasions, they might have brought this custom with them.



Figure: 1 Rock Shelter Painting Adamgad in Hoshangabad District

When the sculptors became scarce and sculpturing became expensive, people might have opted for carved wood memorials. In Bastar, they went in for the pillar type, whereas the eastern tribals preferred less expensive plank memorials. Korkus even today imitate their ancestral art which is at least six thousand years old. Some of the rock-shelter paintings resemble very closely the memorial art of Korkus. A man riding a horse with the servant following him with a decorated umbrella, as depicted in rock painting, indicates his higher status. Korkus do not rear any horses but their dead man always riders a horse. (Fig.1) This might be a vestige of their ancestral style that remained unchanged in the last six thousand years! The painted memorials might be just an offshoot of sculptured granite. Erecting the memorials among tribals might have been a borrowed custom from Hindus. On the contrary, the facts available indicate that Hindus might have inherited this practice from their tribal ancestors.



Figure: 2.The main theme is the dead man either accompanying or riding a horse and carrying weapons like a sword; two trees in the background lend picturesque effect to the panel.



Figure: 3 A



Figure: 3 B

Figure: 3A and 3B- At the foot of this tree there is a small shrine, consisting of an upright stone with crude vague tablets.

Korku Memorial Tablets.

Opposite to the Tahsil offices at Pachmarhi, in Madhyapradesh India, there is a large mango tree. At the foot of this tree there is a small shrine, consisting of an upright stone with crude vague carving, and a small platform. Grouped round this shrine are a considerable number of carved wooden tablets. (Fig.2) The origin and purpose of these tablets is not widely known, and, in view of the fact that there may possibly be some remote connection between these tablets and the local cave paintings, it will clear the air to place their true significanec and the identity of their makers on record.

These tablets are only made by and for various sub-clans of Korkus, of these I have details concerning the Bhopas, Darsamas and Dhikus. The first two deposit their tablets at the shrine at Pachmarhi, and the last-named at Pagara, some fifteen kilometer out on the main road to Pipariya, the railway station for Pachmarhi.

These are the most abundant of all the memorials in the state. At one spot in Pachmarhi, 50 to 60 of them could be observed. Nearby there stands a big granite column from a ruined temple. It has a row of ridges and furrows which has made the tribals to believe that it represents a king cobra which protects their memorials.

In general, they have a spindle format and are carved out from either sal or teak wood planks. Their spiked bottoms indicate that originally they erected in the ground. Their apexes are rounded off in a semi-circular fashion. A great many variations in size and shapes, derived from this basic form, could be observed. Each Gata consists of one to ten panels, on the top of which sun and moon are included. These are the only memorials in which man's name and date of his death are included. This information in Hindi may be inscribed in any of the panels. Sun, moon and inscriptions are usually eliminated from single-panel Gatas.

The art employed is extremely simple. But these shadow type figures are full of vitality, form and composition which gives a very pleasing visual effect. By employing triangles and circles, unbelievable compositions are attained. Men, horses, elephants and birds are indicated more by symbols than by details. Two triangles with a trunk and a tail makes an elephant; a circle with a pair of wings makes a bird! The main theme is the dead man either accompanying or riding a horse and carrying weapons like a sword; even a gun is an important item in the composition. One or two servants holding an umbrella and other equipments indicate the man's status. Offerings like combs and coins, one or two trees in the background lend picturesque effect to the panel. At times, human figures are replaced by a crocodile, singing bird, a lotus or a palm tree.

The multi-panel memorials are better-planned and executed. At the base there is a human figure which the tribals claim as representing their priest or god. In lower panels rows of human figures standing hand-in-hand, probably indication the dancer in a single row. In upper panel the dead man is shown riding a horse and accompanied by his people. In some memorials, a tiny human is carved in sun and moon panel suggesting that the dead man has gone to heaven.

The name of the deity of the shrine is *Guru Pitar Deo*, the Teacher, God the Father; and the tablets are called *Deo pitar ki gata*, the memorials of God the Father. For every member of these sub-elans who dies a tablet is supposed to be deposited by their relatives as a memorial. As a rule the tablets are carved in the months of Baisakh (April-May) and Pus (November-December). These months are chosen as the crops are just gathered and work is slack and there is a certain amount of money to hand to provide the necessary feast.(Fig.3A, Fig.3B)

The tablet is rough hewn from *sagwan* (teak) in the forest and is brought- to the village by about-mid-day. The relatives who are depositing the tablet make an arrangement for its preparation with anyone who has the art of carving them. This is not a hereditary family occupation; anyone feeling the call or urge to be a carver of tablets may acquire the art and carve them. The tablet is carved at the house of the folk who are having it prepared. All their *gunga bhai* (caste fellows) sit around and talk while the carving is in progress.

When the tablet is ready fairly late in the evening, it is ceremonially washed with water. Then it is set up and *puja* is done to it- by the sacrifice of a goat- and of coconuts. A small sum of monev is laid beside it as a token payment, but the carver gets nothing for his work. Lie takes up this money which is spent on gur (unrefined cane sugar) which is distributed to the *gunyt bkai*.



Figure: 4 Crops are just gathered and work is slack and there is a certain amount of money to hand to provide the feast.

A feast is then made ready which includes the sacrificed goat- and *kudai* or *kulthi* (a grain), and all 'the *gunga bhai* join in. This lasts until well into the night and culminates in *Khel tamasha*, consisting of taking the tablet and dancing with it, passing it- from one to another, carrying it on their shoulders. While doing this they sing the refrain '*Bhale mache Kure,*' to which they cannot assign any meaning. This sentence was submitted to a , one of the person who has good knowledge of Korku; he pronounced it to be composed of no Korku words known to him, but appeared to be of Hindi derivation. I can only hazard the suggestion that it may mean ' Misfortune! cried the young men,' but it is extremely unlikely that this is correct, and in any ease it is, to the singers, only a refrain like Hey nonny nonny no ! or with a down a down derry.'

After the ' *Khel tamasha* ' the tablet is taken outside the village and set against a tree. The next morning the immediate relatives of the deceased set off with the tablet for Pachmarhi or Pagara, and there deposit it at the shrine making an offering of coconuts to *Guru Pitar Deo*.



Figure: 5 Korku Memorial Tablets, Pachmarhi.



Figure: 6 Korku Memorial Tablets, Pachmarhi. Figure: 7 Korku Memorial Tablets. Pachmarhi

There are a great number of tablets at the Pachmarhi shrine, and, even allowing for the ravages of white ants, from the good condition of those that are moderately old, the oldest that are crumbling away must be of great age, and others have possibly crumbled to dust since even more remote times. My informants, who were Bhopas and Dhikus, held that their clans had always deposited tablets since time immemorial.

Without exception all the tablets have the sun and moon carved at the top. It is said that these are carved first before any other part of the design as being the foremost of the deities. The bulk of the tablets are about two and a half feet high, and two and a half inches thick. They have panels of horsemen, or of men dancing, and the sides are cut with a chevron pattern. The photographs show their style far better than any description (Fig. 5, 6, 7). I can find no tradition that explains the designs. The motifs are themselves traditional in that they are handed down without change from one generation of carvers to another. Women are supposed only to have the dancing men on foot and no horsemen, but there is hardly a single tablet without a horseman.

It would appear that there are at least four places where such tablets are deposited and there may well be more. The place at Pagara, which is only two hundred meter off the main road, has relatively



Figure: 8 Pillars are found under a tree at Tamia **Figure: 9 Pillars are found under a tree at Tamia**

few tablets, and those appear to have been deposited within recent years. I believe that the original place where the Dhikus placed their tablets was Harrakot, but this is relatively very difficult of access; large numbers of very old tablets are reported as lying there.

As to the origin of these tablets they appear in my mind to be connected with certain stone pillars. Seven of these pillars (Fig.8 and Fig.9) are to be found grouped under a tree at Tamia, a Korku village, twenty miles in a straight line from Pachmarhi. The shrine stone and two other fallen fragments at Pachmarhi appear to me to be of a similar character. These stone pillars bear medallions depicting either men with swords and shields, men with bows and arrows, men in pairs fighting or men on horseback. More important still, though it is a feature both of land grants, memorials, etc., all over India

these pillars nearly all bear the sign of the sun and moon. Nothing definite seems to be known about them locally, but they are very similar to the class of *Virgal'* or hero-stones. With, however, the remains of very similar stone pillars at Pachmarhi in conjunction with wooden tablets, I feel certain

that the latter are derived from the former. Further, many of the tablets at Pagara and a few at Pachmarhi are square and carved on all four faces.

The photographs show clearly the style of the carvings on the stone pillars, and they bear more than a passing resemblance to the rock paintings of the same subjects. Anything that will assist in clearing up the problem of the authorship of even a section of the rock paintings of the Mahadeo Hills is valuable, and these tablets and pillars, connected as they are with a local aboriginal people, the Korkus, cannot in consequence be neglected.
