

Ethno-Archaeological Study of Chutki Village, Janakpur Region, District Manendragarh–Chirmiri–Bharatpur (MCB), Chhattisgarh

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Abstract: Chutki Village is situated in a hilly terrain through which several rivers flow Gopath, Banas, Khalaldhar, Rudki Jhariya, Chhoti Banas, Chutki, Badwar, and Nyur serving as the lifelines of the region. Evidence of agriculture, settlements, and religious activities has been found along these river banks. The natural surroundings of the area are enriched with dense forests, waterfalls, and rock cut caves. This study presents an analysis of the archaeological and cultural landscape of Chutki Village and its surrounding regions, Janakpur, Bharatpur, Sonhat, Bareli, Majhatoli, and Murelgadh. The discovery of rock paintings, rock-cut caves, temple remains, warrior sculptures, stone tools, and pottery fragments confirms that this region has been a center of human civilization since prehistoric times. The study primarily seeks to understand the interrelationship between the ethnographic life, traditions, religious practices, and the archaeological heritage of the Baiga and Gond tribes inhabiting the area.

Keywords: Ethnography, Archaeology, Chutki, Murelgadh, Gond, Baiga, Principality, Tradition, Rock Art, Culture, MCB Manendragarh–Chirmiri–Bharatpur

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Introduction

Chutki Village is located at latitude 23°34'33.8"N and longitude 81°56'47.5"E, under the Janakpur development blocks in the district of Manendragarh–Chirmiri–Bharatpur (MCB). It lies in the northwestern part of the Indian state of Chhattisgarh and was historically a part of the royal state of Korea, which during the British period came under the Baghelkhand Agency. Later, it became part of Madhya Pradesh (Vindhya Pradesh) and now falls within the newly formed district of MCB, which was officially established as the 28th district of Chhattisgarh. The district headquarters at Manendragarh is located approximately 85 kilometers from Chutki Village, which lies to the north along the right side of the Kelhari–Janakpur road on the bank of the Banas River. The region is notable for the Murelgadh hill, which holds archaeological and historical significance. The eastern plateau of Baghelkhand, composed of Gondwana rock formations, includes areas such as Janakpur, Bharatpur, Sonhat, Bareil, Majhatoli, and Murelgadh. This area forms part of the lower Ganga and upper Mahanadi basins, characterized

by heavy monsoon rains, cold winters, and hot, dry summers. It is also affected by natural phenomena like floods, lightning, and seasonal diseases, and is home to wildlife such as elephants, tigers, and leopards. The region's tribal population, natural landscape, and rich biodiversity have contributed to the development of its unique socio-cultural and historical identity. The rivers Gopath, Banas, Khalladhar, Rudki Jharia, Chhoti Banas, Douki Jhiria, Chutki, Badwar, and Neur flow through this area, with the Banas River forming a striking waterfall that plunges nearly 100 feet, adding to the scenic beauty. The boundary between Shahdol (Madhya Pradesh) and MCB (Chhattisgarh) marks the division between the two states. Since ancient times, the reverie and forested terrain of this region has provided a favorable environment for early human habitation. The indigenous people contributed significantly to the evolution of social, economic, and cultural elements of this land. Within this region, Chutki Village has emerged as an important ethno-archaeological site. The hilly terrain and river valleys of the area preserve clear evidence of ancient human activities, including stone tools, blades, cores, pottery, sculptures, rock paintings, rock-cut caves, and remnants of defensive walls. These findings reflect human settlements, hunting practices, and religious rituals. The Baiga and Gond tribal communities, in particular, continue to preserve the traditional knowledge, beliefs, agricultural systems, and artistic expressions, thereby maintaining the cultural continuity of this historically rich region.

The Korea Principality (Korea State) is believed to have been established around the 17th century CE. King Jay Singh Dev is considered the founder of the state. He made Koriagarh its capital and organized the local Gond, Baiga, and Korwa tribes into an administrative framework. King Prem Singh Dev is credited with expanding the boundaries of the state to some extent. The reign of King Mani Singh Dev approximately 1740–1780 CE, marked a period of territorial expansion and military success for the Korea Principality. Under his policy of expansion, the state grew in three major directions. Northward, towards the Manendragarh–Chirimiri plateau, where he unified local Korwa and Baiga chiefs and brought several small forts under the principality's control. He also established fortifications along the forest routes of the Manendragarh plateau, such as Dudhigarh and Bharrigarh. Eastward, towards the Janakpur–Murelgarh region, where King Mani Singh Dev, considered part of the military leadership class, settled permanent villages after victorious campaigns. The rulers of this state belonged to the Rajgond dynasty, a branch of the Gondwana Empire. The initial capital was Koriagarh, later administrative affairs were conducted from Baigapara, and subsequently from the Bharrhi-Basania region. During British rule, the Korea Principality functioned as an autonomous native state, and it was merged into the Indian Union in 1948.

Tribal Tradition

The major tribes of this region are the Gond, Baiga, Pahadi Korwa, and Oraon. In the local culture, Gondi traditions, folk songs, and dances hold a prominent place. During the princely state period, tribal customs had a deep influence on administrative and social life. The Gond traditions of the Janakpur–Murelgarh region are among the oldest and most significant oral and cultural heritages of the MCB district in Chhattisgarh. In prehistoric times, when humans lived in forests, nature was their main source of livelihood. They depended on nature for hunting and food gathering. To protect themselves from cold, rain, and sunlight, early humans made caves their homes. On the walls of these caves, they created the first artworks. This marked the beginning and evolution of rock art, which later became an important form of folk art among tribal communities. Since prehistoric times, this artistic and cultural tradition has been passed down from generation to generation, evolving with

civilizations. The Baiga and Gond tribes living in the surrounding areas still preserve the elements of ancient civilization through their traditional culture, dances, songs, rituals, and crafts. Their deep connection with nature, reverence for hills and rivers, and references to stones and caves in their folklore align with archaeological evidence. Even today, on the occasion of Diwali, all nearby tribal communities gather at Murelgarh Hill to light lamps and worship their ancestral deities. A traditional fair is organized on this occasion, continuing an age-old cultural practice.

In tribal communities, the social structure is based on clans (gotra) and family deities (kuldevta). Tribal villages are mainly found in hilly regions, forests, and plains. These tribes sustain their livelihood by collecting fruits, flowers, tubers, and roots from the forests and by hunting wild animals. People living in the plains practice settled agriculture. Their houses in the hilly areas are small and usually made of grass, thatch, and stones. Common household items include axes, knives, bamboo baskets, brooms, mats, sickles, wooden cots, and stools. Agricultural tools mainly consist of plows, spades, and pickaxes. Hunting weapons include bows and arrows, slings, bamboo slings, and spears. Traditional musical instruments include the mandar (drum), dholki, and flute (murli). The Gond tribe consumes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, and hunting is one of their favorite activities. Gond women are fond of ornaments; they wear jewelry on their hands, nose, neck, and toes. They also use wild seeds, shells, and conch for making ornaments. Tattoo (godna) is a common practice among tribal women. Many tribal communities believe in their own deities, and each clan (gotra) has its own god or goddess.

The tradition of creating “Chauk” (ritual floor designs) has existed among tribal communities since ancient times. Primarily, the Chauk is made during special rituals such as marriage and death ceremonies. The art of making Chauk is mainly used among tribes for purification, rituals, and to ward off evil spirits or natural influences. This art form is known by different names across India. In the present day, Chauk designs are drawn during festivals, fasts, worship, and auspicious occasions like marriages, using dry and natural colors. During weddings, the Chauk is usually drawn inside the mandap (wedding pavilion), and the people participating in the ceremony are seated on it. Thus, before performing any sacred activity, the place is marked and sanctified by making a Chauk. Each tribe has its distinct style and pattern of Chauk design. Evidence of this art can be found in the Kohbarur caves, where sun, moon, circular symbols, geometric figures, wavy lines, squares, palm motifs, ritual scenes, and intricate line drawings appear in red ochre, yellow, and blue colors. These include ritual patterns, wavy lines, circles, squares, and imaginative designs, representing the ancient tradition of Chauk making. Furthermore, depictions of dancing human groups, human and animal figures, hunting scenes (with bows and arrows, wild animals) found in rock art indicate a cultural continuity from prehistoric times. In the Gond community, similar motifs and group dance patterns can still be seen in karma dance, reena songs, and madai worship, showing a living link to those prehistoric artistic traditions.

Oral Tradition and Folklore

Mureldev and Janakdev were two brothers who established the first forts in the mountains, believed to be the origin of the names Murelgarh and Janakpur. It is said that King Mani Singh Dev later settled permanent villages in this region after a great battle. Madai Dev, Budha Dev, and Pat Dev are regarded as the guardian deities of the fort who sacrificed their lives for its protection. In their honor, an annual festival is still celebrated on the day of Diwali at Murelgarh Hill, where devotees light lamps (Deepdan).

It is believed that the ancient kings hid immense treasures somewhere between Ramdaha Waterfall and Dhobatal amidst the dense forests, so vast that it could feed the entire world for three days. During Diwali, tribal communities from nearby areas, including children, elders, and women, visit Siddh Baba Murelgarh Hill to offer prayers, light lamps, and seek blessings. It is believed that their wishes are fulfilled. A local fair is organized during this time, attracting visitors from far and wide who come to experience the natural beauty and spiritual gust of the region.

The War of Mani Raja and Rewa

This narrative describes the bravery of King Mani Singh Dev and the strategic warfare led by tribal warriors. Song lines, “Mani Raja chale van path, Gond sang Baiga dal...” (King Mani set out through the forest path, accompanied by Gond and Baiga troops...). It is believed that the figures carved on pillars, depicting warriors on horseback, commemorate soldiers who attained evidence in battle, serving as memorial pillars (vir-stambhas).

This region was ruled by a brave and farsighted ruler named King Chando. His queen, Rani Chando, was renowned for her wisdom and devotion. During this period, the Gond and Baiga tribes primarily inhabited the hilly regions, and it became essential to defend the territory from rival kingdoms. Therefore, caves and protective stone walls were constructed as part of the defense system.

Devkund Water Legend: At a sacred pond called Devkund, it is believed that Queen of King Mani Singh performed deep penance. This site remains a place of worship to this day.

Religious and Cultural Rituals

- **Madai Festival:** A fair held in memory of the local Gond king.
- **Harka Worship:** A ritual dedicated to the village deities for the protection of crops and livestock.
- **Devgudi:** In every village, a sacred tree or stone is established as a shrine representing the local deity.
- **Local Gond and Baiga Communities:** The rock art tradition of Murelgadh has been preserved both religiously and culturally. The Gond and Baiga people regard these petroglyphs as “Deva-Lipi” (divine script) or “Purkha Chihn” (ancestral symbols). They collectively maintain the sanctity of these sites through cleaning, worship, and conservation. Worship of Mureldev and Budha Dev, believed to be ancestral deities, takes place near these rock shelters.
- **Archaeological Remains:** In Chutki and the surrounding hills, rock paintings made in red ochre depict humans, animals, and scenes of dance. These paintings reflect the lifestyle, beliefs, and celebrations of early hunter-gatherer societies. Stone tools were used to carve and create these images. The rock art represents different artistic styles such as representational, decorative, naturalistic, and geometric. In some paintings, the figures are drawn in single-line outlines, while others show shaded or filled forms. Some depictions combine human and animal figures with geometric patterns for decoration. A remarkable feature of these paintings is their durability, despite being thousands of years old, they have not completely faded. However, due to rain, heat, and erosion, the images have become somewhat blurred over time.

To the north of Murelgarh Hill, there is a small lake near which a cave measuring about 6×4 feet has been carved. Several other caves show evidence of human-made structures, though many are

difficult to access. These caves were likely used for religious or residential purposes. Artifacts such as tools, scrapers, pestles, and fragments of earthenware found in the area not only provide glimpses of the prehistoric period but also indicate the continuity of the region's local craft traditions.

Stone-built defensive walls, approximately 15 feet in height and 8 feet in width, have been constructed across the entire Murailgarh hill range. The walls are divided into several sections, and at the corners, well-like structures have been made, possibly used as hiding spots for hunting. According to the villagers, there is also a site known as "Pakhna," where the Gond rulers, King Chando and Queen Chando, once lived and used to hunt. On the western side of the hill, along the banks of the Banas River, numerous sculptures, Shiva lingas, and temple remains have been found, which likely examples of medieval architecture are.

On the right bank of the Banas River, remains of temples such as amalaka, kalasha, and stone slabs are scattered. Some of these remains have been used to reconstruct temples, including two Shiva temples and one Vishnu temple. In the Vishnu temple, a stone slab measuring $135 \times 20 \times 16$ cm depicts Balarama, Mahishasura Mardini, Surya, and Vishnu, all adorned with detailed ornaments, garments, and iconographic features. Among the two Shiva temples, one enshrines a Shivalinga measuring $112 \times 60 \times 38$ cm, which has been installed using the remains of an earlier ruined temple and faces east. The second Shiva temple contains a Jalhari (base) measuring $190 \times 20 \times 28$ cm. Above its doorway is an image of Lord Ganesha, and on either side of the entrance are figures believed to represent Ganga and Yamuna, each holding a water pot (kalasha). Additionally, four memorial pillars dedicated to fallen warriors are arranged in sequence, measuring $100 \times 30 \times 15$ cm, $90 \times 30 \times 15$ cm, $80 \times 30 \times 15$ cm, and $60 \times 30 \times 15$ cm. These pillars depict warriors holding swords and shields, with waistbands tied tightly around their waists and extending down to their knees, while horses in galloping posture are carved beneath them. Two other pillars show male or female figures walking together or holding objects, though the details are partially unclear. Another pillar depicts a woman worshipping a Shivalinga, measuring $140 \times 30 \times 15$ cm and $135 \times 30 \times 15$ cm respectively. The local tribal community continues to worship and perform rituals at these ancient remains.

Conclusion

The study clearly reveals that Chutki Village and its surrounding areas have been among the ancient human settlements of Chhattisgarh. The rock paintings and stone tools found here are evidence that this region has been a center of human activity since the Stone Age. The continuity of tribal culture demonstrates that ancient traditions are still alive in modern society. This region is not only archaeologically significant but also highly valuable for cultural studies. The ancient caves, sculptures, temple remains, and tribal traditions present a bright example of Chhattisgarh's ancient culture and the evolution of human civilization. There are immense possibilities for systematic excavation, preservation, and further research in this area, which will help to make the ancient history of Chhattisgarh clearer in the future. The prehistoric rock art, tribal traditions, and the cultural continuity of the present Baiga and Gond communities in the Janakpur–Murelgadh region show that the tradition of ancient cave painting still lives on through their religious beliefs, folklore, and rituals. The Murelgadh rock art tradition is one of the most valuable cultural heritages of the MCB district, preserved by the local Gond and Baiga people who have kept this art alive for generations as a form of worship, tradition, and storytelling.



Fig. I: MCB District map



Fig. II: Vishnu Temple stone slab



Fig. III: Shivaling



Fig. IV: Jalahri



Fig. V: Youdha



Fig. VI: Youdha



Fig. VII: Ritual Floor Designs (Chauk)



Fig. VIII: Ritual Floor Designs

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