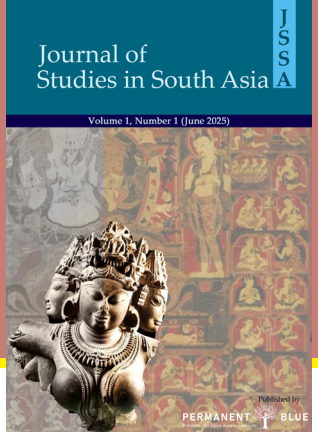
Journal of Studies in South Asia (JSSA)
ISSN: 3107-8451, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025, pp. 17-24

URL: http://www.pbjournals.com/jssa
Publisher of Open Access Journals
Peer Reviewed Journal



Newly Discovered Rock-Cut Caves from the Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra

RAGHUNATH BOKIL[1] AND RIYA KAMBLE[2]
[1]*Lecturer, PTVA's Sathaye College (Autonomous), Dixit Road, Vile Parle (E), Mumbai and Visiting Faculty, Department of Archaeology, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India*
E-mail address: bokilraghunath@gmail.com
[2]*Post-Graduate Student, Department of Archaeology, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India*
E-mail address: kreeya11@gmail.com

Abstract: Due to the unavailability of suitable material, rock-cut architecture in the region of southern Konkan is limited. Despite that fact, substantial number of caves have been identified by various scholars over the last century. These rock-cut architecture is either in the form of Monolithic shrines or caves. Two such rock-cut caves were discovered in the Sangameshwar taluka and one from the Ratnagiri taluka of the Ratnagiri district. The paper will discuss about the presence of these rock-cut caves and their scope for further research. This could be an opportunity for further research on the rock cut caves in the South Konkan region.

Keywords*:* Architecture, Konkan, Maharashtra, Ratnagiri, Rock-Cut Caves

Received : 19 February 2025
Revised : 18 March 2025
Accepted : 23 March 2025
Published : 30 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Raghunath Bokil & Riya Kamble (2025). Newly Discovered Rock-Cut Caves from the Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra. *Journal of Studies in South Asia,* 1: 1, pp. 17-24.

Introduction

Konkan is a strip of land located between the Sahyadri mountain range and the Arabian Sea. The Konkan region comprises today's Mumbai, Palghar, Thane, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts. This region can also be divided into two distinct sub-regions. First is North Konkan, consisting of the Mumbai, Palghar, Thane and Raigad districts. Whereas the second division is South Konkan, which consists of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts. For this paper, we will be focusing on the Ratnagiri district of the South Konkan region.

The topography of the South Konkan region is quite different from the rest of the coastal regions across the Indian peninsula. Topography is dominated by low-lying lateritic plateaus. The most prominent form of rock in this region is lateritic rock. This material is not suitable for excavation and sculpting due to the porosity of the rock. Still, rock-cut caves can be seen in many districts across the Konkan region.

Many eminent scholars have worked on the rock-cut architecture of this region, although scarce, this region does have rock-cut architecture. With notable exception of Panhale Kaji caves.

"*Panhale caves are thus of singular importance for they throw light on the development of rock-cut architecture in the Konkan area from the 3rd to the 14th cent A.D.*" (Deshpande 1986: 11).

Caves at Katalgaon-Jawade can be considered as another exception. "*These caves at Katalgaon-Jawade are immensely significant with regard to understand Śaivait and Vaiṣṇavite activities in the Deccan in general and Konkan in particular*" (Joge, et al., 2018: 57)

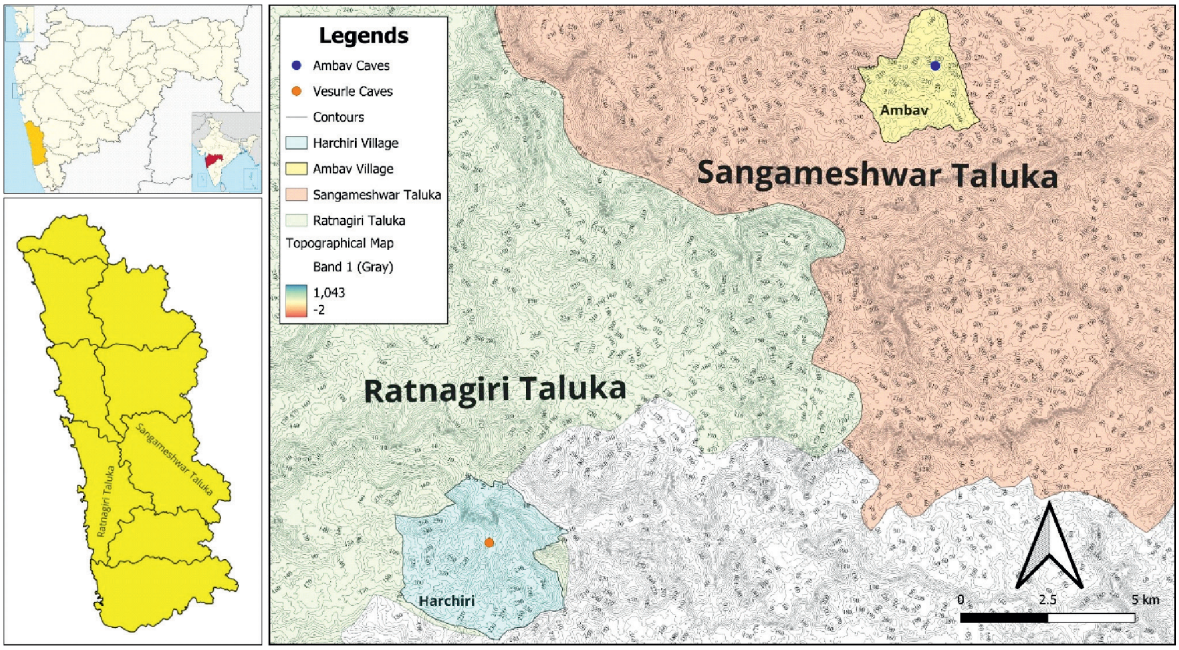
In the Ratnagiri district, we do not have many older monumental structures, which can be dated back to the medieval period. Except the cluster of temples at Kasba Sangmeshwar, which can be dated back to the 12th Century CE. (Bapat 2023: 5) This was due to the myriads of factors. Thus, the history of this region can only be traced back to this period. But recent discoveries have altered this opinion altogether.

Many of the caves in this region are concentrated around the Ratnagiri and Lanja taluka of the district. One more cave was identified in the Ratnagiri taluka, adjacent to the Lanja taluka. This might provide us with the clues that could be utilised to trace out the commercial and trading activities in this region.

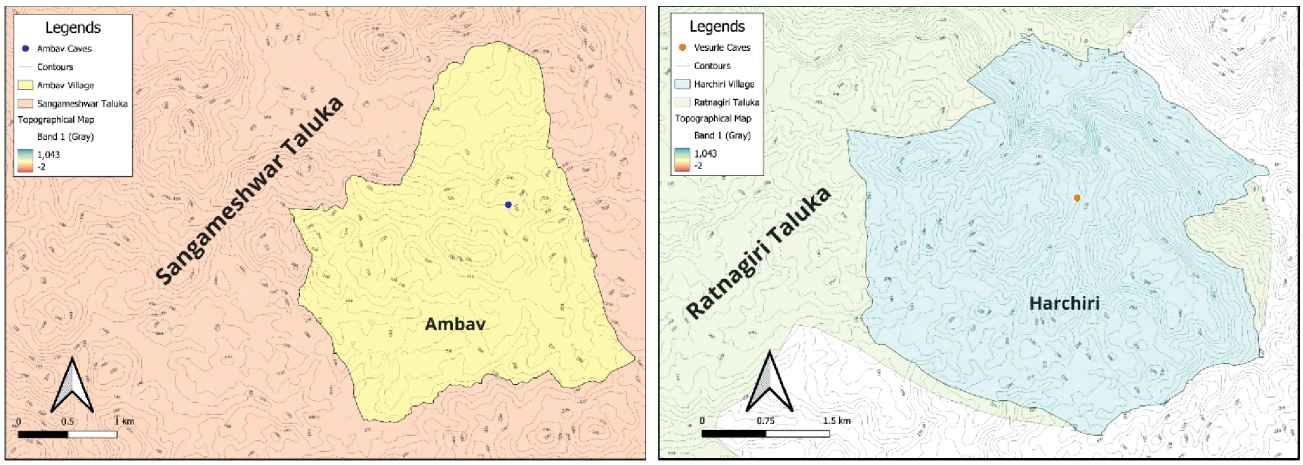
"*Rock-cut architectural tradition in this region makes its appearance from the 4th Century CE onwards*" (Nagaraju 1977: 110). As of now, most of these caves are affiliated with the Brahmanical traditions. Two such rock-cut caves have been identified from the village of Ambav in the Sangameshwar taluka and one from the village of Harchiri in the Ratnagiri taluka.

Previous Works

Many scholars have worked on the rock-cut caves of this region. S Nagaraju has documented rock-cut caves in Konkan and the western Deccan in his doctoral thesis. Former director general of Archaeological Survey of India M.N. Deshpande has worked on the rock-cut cave complex of Panhalekaji. Later on, scholars such as Anjay Dhanawade, Gopal Joge, Abhijit Dandekar, Sachin Joshi, Hemant Dalvi and Suken Shah have worked on the caves of Katalgaon– Jawade



Map 1: Contour Map

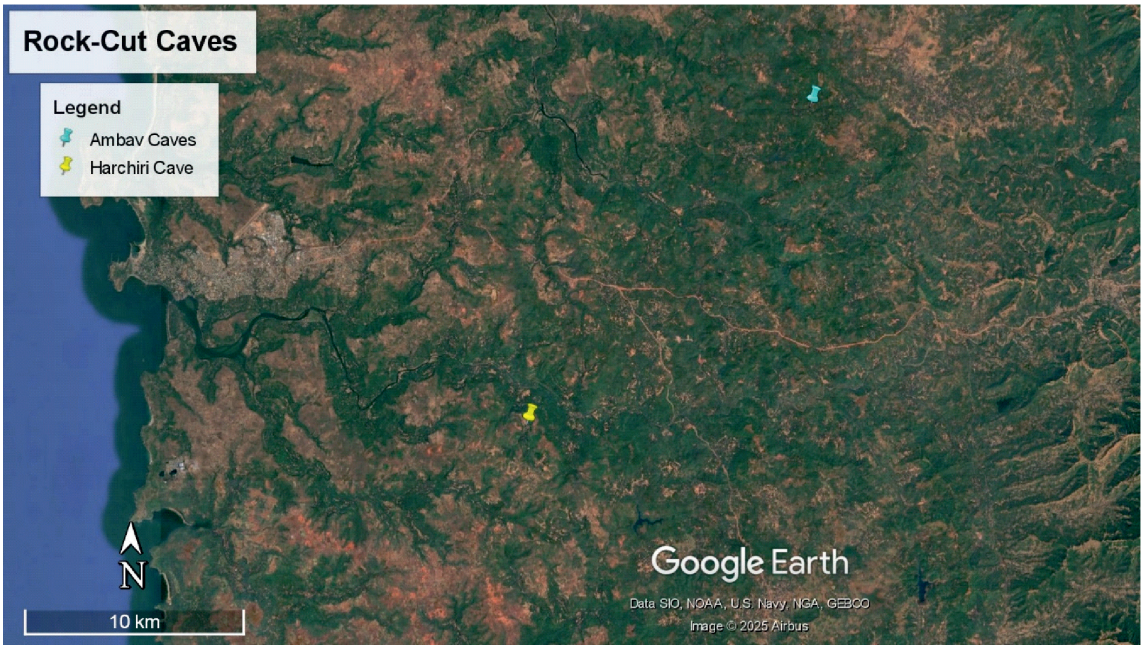


Map 2: Contour Map of Villages (On Left - Ambav Village, On Right - Harchiri Village)

and monolithic caves at Vangule. Caves at Ainari were also identified and documented by Anjay Dhanawade. Recently few more monolithic caves were identified by Anil Dudhane in the Rajapur taluka.

Methodology

Initially, after learning about these caves from the locals, field surveys were undertaken. The caves were visited, and photographs were taken. Measurements were recorded, along with the layout of the cave, which was prepared. Line drawings of the caves were also created. Limited Geospatial analysis was undertaken. Various software, such as Google Earth Pro and QGIS, were employed in the process, which aided in the understanding of the location of caves with reference to the elevation of the landscape. Shutter Radar Topography Mission (SRTM's) Digital Elevation Models (DEM) were used to obtain the above-mentioned results. This helped in the generation of the contours.



Map 3: Find Spot of the Caves

Caves at Ambav

Ambav Village is located in the Sangameshwar Taluka of the Ratnagiri district. It is located approximately 10 km away from the city centre of Sangameshwar. Caves are situated near the *Shri Kalishri* Temple. *Shri Kalishri* is the village deity of the Ambav village. Caves are located a few meters away on the back side of the *Shri Kalishri* Temple. There are two separate caves.

Cave 1

Cave No. 1 (17°3'37.01"N 73°33'59.59"E) is excavated into the lateritic hill. It has now transformed into a full-fledged temple by the villagers. The cave consists of *Garbhagṛha*, *Aṃtarāḷa* and *Maṃḍapa*. The *Maṃḍapa* of the cave is connected with the recently constructed *Sabhāmaṃḍapa*. The cave is located on a slightly higher elevation compared to Cave no. 2. The total area of the cave is approximately 247.5 sq. ft. (Plate 1) A small staircase is constructed to reach the *Sabhāmaṃḍapa*. This newly constructed *Sabhāmaṃḍapa* measures (24 x 24 ft). The entrance to the cave measures (2.6 x 5.2 ft). *Maṃḍapa* has a squarish plan which measures around (13 x 10 x 6 ft), and its area is approximately 130 sq. ft. There are four square-shaped pilasters embedded into the cave measuring (0.9 ft on each three sides). (Plate 1)

Aṃtarāḷa is constructed on a slightly higher plinth and is rectangular in shape. It measures (13 x 5 x 5 ft), measuring around 65 sq. ft. There are two pilasters and two pillars measuring around (0.9 ft) and (6 x 1.7 ft) respectively. *Aṃtarāḷa*'s floor is entirely reconstructed with tiles. Two pillars have been carved out of the laterite. Pillar is designed in such a way that its top and base parts are square, its middle part is ornamented with a circular disc, which could be reminiscent of an *Āmalaka*. Two bands are located on either side of the *Āmalaka*. (Figure 1b) Door to the *Garbhagṛha* measures (3 x 5 ft). *Garbhagṛha* measures (7 x 7.5 x 3 ft) with an area of 52.2 sq. ft. *Garbhagṛha* has a plinth on which the *Śivaliṃga* is placed. The plinth is recently reconstructed with concrete and mortar, and it measures (3.3 x 4 x 2 ft). *Śivaliṃga* has been covered with copper and measures around 3.7 ft. (Figure 1c)

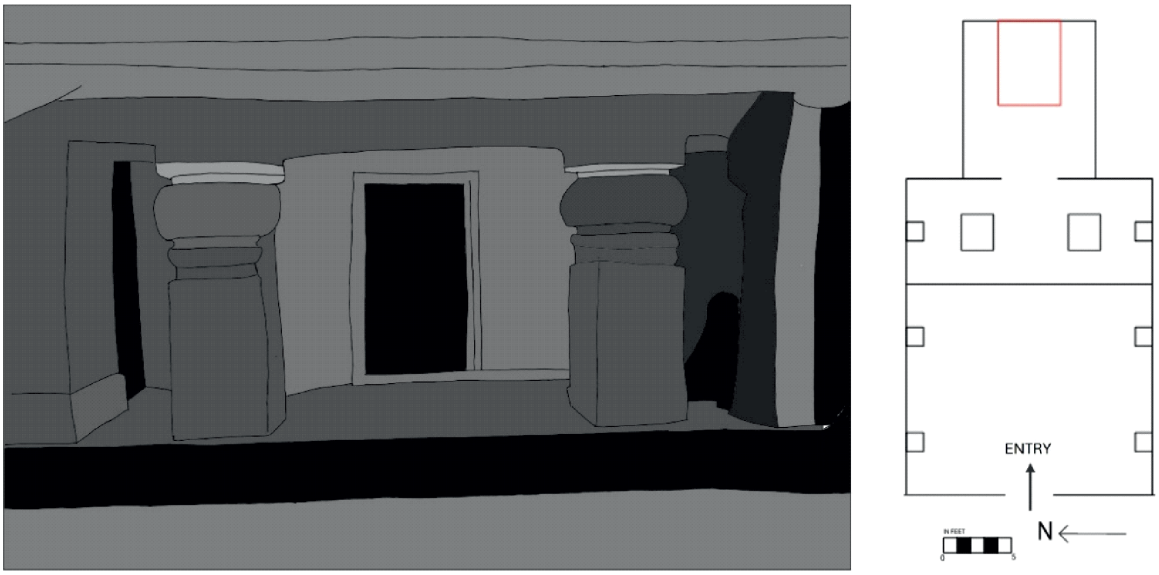


Plate 1: Ambav Cave No. 1 (On Left - Illustration, On Right – Layout)

Figure 1: Ambav Cave No. 1 a) Outside b) Maṃḍapa c) Garbhagṛha

Cave 2

Cave no. 2 (17°3'37.57"N 73°33'59.68"E) is also excavated into a lateritic hill. It consists of a *Maṃḍapa* and a *Garbhagṛha*. *Maṃḍapa* is rectangular, whereas *Garbhagṛha* has a squarish plan (Plate 2). *Maṃḍapa* measures (12 x 10 x 6 ft) and *Garbhagṛha* measures (6 x 5 x 5 ft). Whereas the area of the *Maṃḍapa* and *Garbhagṛha* measures 120 and 14.13 sq. ft respectively. (Plate 2)

There is a step constructed between *Maṃḍapa* and *Garbhagṛha*. (Figure 2b) Step is also measured (5 x 1 x 1 ft). Door to the *Garbhagṛha* measures around (2 x 5 ft) respectively. The total area of the cave is approximately 134.13 sq. ft. *Garbhagṛha* consists of an irregularly shaped *Pīṭha* carved out of the lateritic surface. Also, the *Śivaliṃga* is made up of laterite. (Figure 2c) Tree roots have penetrated from the *Garbhagṛha*, which has damaged the ceiling.

There has been a clear-cut time difference between cave no. 1 and cave no. 2. Cave no. 1 seems to be the older one based on its features and characteristics. Cave no. 1 is a single-chambered cave with a *Garbhagṛha*; it has a small *Sabhāmaṃḍapa*. On the other hand, cave no. 2 seems to be the refined version of cave no. 1. Cave no. 2 has a larger *Sabhāmaṃḍapa* along with a small *Aṃtarāḷa*. Also, the pillars in the *Sabhāmaṃḍapa* are slightly more decorated, as it has an *Āmalaka*-type pillar. This could mean that both of these caves can be dated to at least the sixth to seventh Century CE.

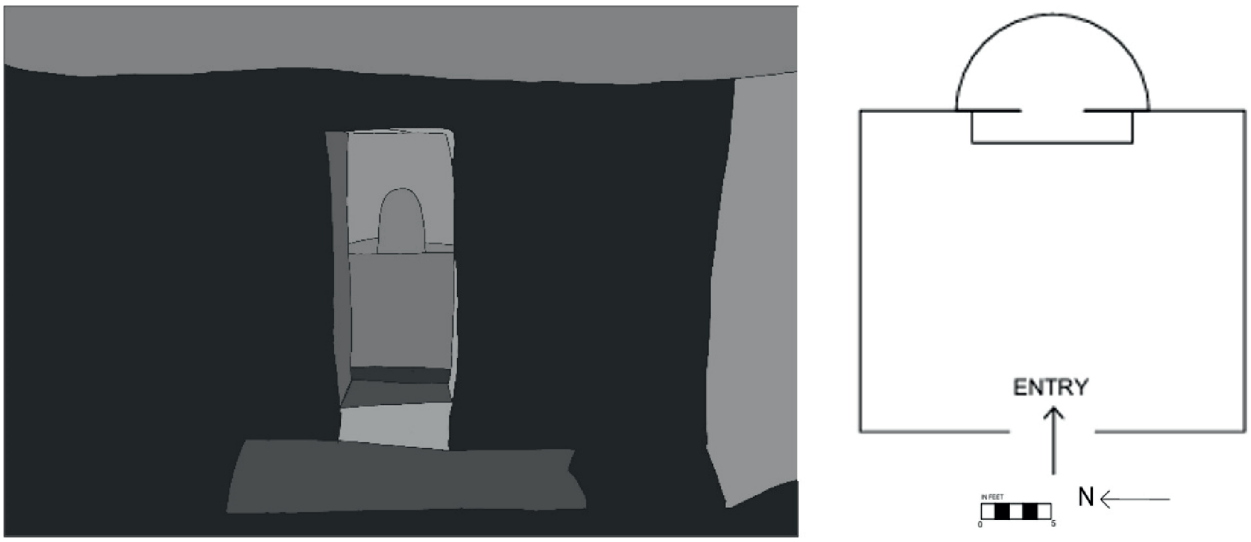


Plate 2: Ambav Cave No. 2 (On Left - Illustration, On Right – Layout)

Figure 2: Ambav Cave No. 2 a) Outside b) Maṃḍapa c) Garbhagṛha

Cave at Harchiri

The cave (16°55'53.54"N 73°26'46.85"E) is located in the village of Harchiri, adjacent to the *Mahakali* Mandir in Varchiwadi, approximately 25 kilometres from the town of Lanja. It is situated on a sloping lateritic hillock, necessitating a descent from the main road of the village to access both the cave and the temple.

The cave itself is positioned at a slightly elevated level compared to the temple, which is constructed on a flat area at a lower elevation. Recent enhancements, including newly constructed steps and boundary walls, have improved entry to the cave. The cave faces north, while the temple is oriented towards the east. From the entrance of the cave, visitors can observe a side view of the temple. (Figure 3a)

The entrance of the cave measures (14.6 x 5.5ft). Internally, the cave comprises two chambers. The first chamber, measuring (16 x 5.8 x 5.5 ft), serves as a *Maṃḍapa* and features two pillars at its entrance, designed in the shape of decreasing steps. These pillars measure (5.5 x 1.3ft). The gap between the two entrance pillars is 8 ft, with an additional 2-foot space between each pillar and the wall. Adjacent to the entrance of the second chamber, designated as the *Garbhagṛha*, has an *Āmalaka* on pillars. (Plate 3)

Each of these pillar's measures (5.7 x 1.11 ft), with a spacing of 2.10 feet from the wall. It is noteworthy that the two groups of pillars are not parallel. The distance between these groups from the entrance pillars measures 7.10 feet, and the *Garbhagṛha* door pillar group is angled slightly inward from the entrance group of pillars. (Figure 3c)

The door to the *Garbhagṛha* measures (6.8 x 2.2 ft) and is a compact chamber, accommodating one person at a time, with dimensions (5.3 x 5.8 ft). Within this space, there is a *Śivaliṃga* intricately carved from lateritic rock, which measures (3.8 x 4 ft) and has a diameter of 3.10 feet.

Caves at Vesurle seem to be much more refined than the caves from Ambav cave no. 1 and less than Ambav cave no. 2. This can be corroborated by the *Āmalaka*-type pilasters located in the *Aṃtarāḷa* section. Because the *Āmalaka*-topped pillar can be clearly seen in the Ambav cave no. 2. But there is one more pattern that needs to be discussed. Outside pillars of the cave have a specific inverted pyramidal pattern of the pillar tops. (Figure 3b)

Observations and Conclusions

It was widely speculated that there was an absence of rock-cut caves in the Ratnagiri and Sangameshwar taluka. But, with this discovery, that fact has changed. Now, the historicity of these

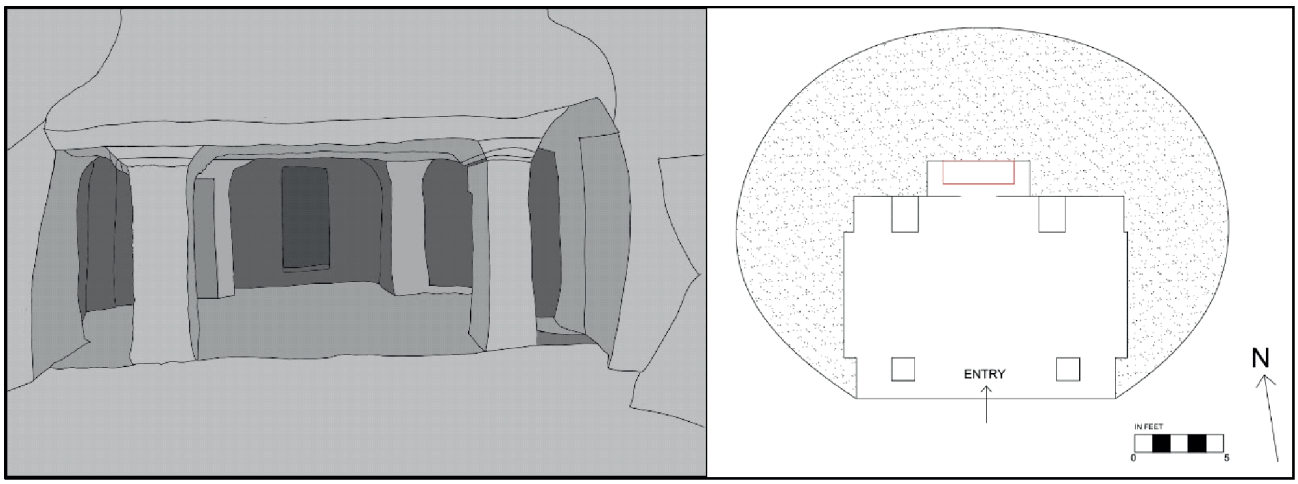


Plate 3: Harchiri Cave (On Left - Illustration, On Right – Layout)

Figure 3: Harchiri Cave a) Outside b) Maṃḍapa c) Garbhagṛha

Figure 4: Documentation Process

areas can be taken back to a minimum of thousand to a thousand five hundred years. Harchiri village borders the Ratnagiri and Lanja taluka. This could be one of the important finds in this region as well. All of these caves are located between 180 and 220 meters above sea level. Further field surveys need to be conducted, and data needs to be compiled in order to come to any conclusion.

These caves have remarkable similarities with each other. All three caves do not bear any decorative motifs, which could be used during the comparative analysis of the caves in order to determine their time period. The caves can be affiliated with the Shaivite sect as all of them have a pedestal in a shrine, and in the centre of the pedestal, a *Śivaliṃga* made up of laterite is placed. All these pedestals are square-shaped.

These caves are devoid of any sculptures and panels. Additionally, these are constructed out of the lateritic rock itself. *Śivaliṃga* is not made up of some other material. Unlike Caves from Katalgaon Jawade and Panhale-Kaji, the caves from Ambav and Harcheri does not show any other religious affiliation. Unlike caves from Panderi where "*A few red ware and buff ware potshereds, and glass bangles were seen scattered on the surface near caves.*" (Dhanawade, et al., 2011-12: 183) we also do not have any archaeological remains or artefacts in and around the caves.

Due to a lack of corroborative epigraphical and other archaeological evidence, it is difficult to ascertain its chronology. But, based on the caves that has been found from this region, it could be speculated that these caves can be dated back to sixth to eighth century CE.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to my friend Govind Jog for his help during the documentation process. I want to thank my friends Janhavi Ambulkar, Rutuparna Apte, Renuka Joshi and Dhanashri Nikam for their tremendous help and support. I would also like to thank my Guru, Dr. Prachi Moghe, and Dr. Prof. Suraj Pandit. Lastly, I would like to thank my uncle Benny Kurian for his support.

Bibliography

Bapat, A. (2023). *Shilpakatha Karneshwarachi.* Pune: Snehal Prakashan.

Deshpande, M. (1986). *Caves at Panhale-Kaji (Ancient Pranalaka)* (Vol. MASI 84). New Delhi, New Delhi, India: Archaeological Survey of India.

Dhanawade, A., Joglekar, P. P., & Kale, A. (2011-12). Discovery of Rock-Cut Caves at Panderi, District Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology*(7 and 8), 179-184.

Joge, G., Dandekar, A., Dhanawade, A., Ganvir, S., Dalavi, H., & Shah, S. (2018). Furthur Observations at the Early Brahmanical Caves at Katalgaon-Javade, District Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, 78*, 57-67.

Nagaraju, S. (1977). *A Study of Rock Cut Architecture of Konkan and Western Deccan (C. 250 B.C. - 300 A.D.) These (PhD).* Dharwad, Karnataka, India: Karnatak University, Dharwad.