



SACRED IMPRINTS AND EPIC MEMORY: ROCK ART AND MAHABHARATA TRADITIONS IN THE DACHHAN, JAMMU & KASHMIR

Dr. Anoop Singh

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Ph.D. Scholar,
Ancient Indian History, Culture, and
Archaeology, India

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Anoop Singh

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402035>

Abstract

The Dachhan Valley of Kishtwar, nestled in the Greater Himalayas of Jammu & Kashmir, preserves a unique confluence of prehistoric symbolism, mythological tradition, and sacred geography. This paper explores the rock art site of Kount Majain Hathai in Suid village, where red-ochre handprints, footprints, animal figures, anthropomorphic, and geometric symbols are engraved on a prominent boulder amidst a sacred grove. Local oral traditions associate these pictographs with Kunti Mata, mother of the Pandavas, thereby grounding the Mahabharata memory in a tangible landscape. Alongside this site, other culturally resonant locations, such as Pandav Daijan (Panjdihara), Bheem Ka Jharna, and Bhuman Dound of Hanzal, reinforce the living presence of epic narratives in the regional consciousness. Drawing from field observations, iconographic analysis, and ethnohistorical sources, this study argues that Dachhan constitutes a mytho-ritual landscape where preliterate symbolic forms and oral epics converge in a localized sacred cartography. The study situates the Dachhan rock art within broader South Asian prehistoric traditions, while emphasizing its unique Himalayan articulation through Mahabharata-linked toponyms and pilgrimage practices. This research examines the intersection of prehistoric rock art and Mahabharata-based oral traditions in the Dachhan Valley of Kishtwar, with a special focus on Kount Majain Hathai and associated sacred sites. It argues that these sites are not merely remnants of ancient art but are living cultural landscapes where material symbols, mythic memory, and local devotion converge. The study emphasizes the urgent need for heritage recognition and preservation, proposing that these symbolic imprints serve as mnemonic palimpsest testimonies of cultural continuity and sacred geography embedded in the Himalayan terrain.

Keywords: *Rock art, Mahabharata, Kunti Mata, Handprint, Red ochre, Prehistoric art*

Introduction

Rock art constitutes one of the earliest manifestations of human creativity, encoding within its forms a rich tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and symbolic communication. Spanning the Upper Palaeolithic to the Iron Age and beyond, the tradition of rock art in India includes both petroglyphs (engravings) and pictographs (paintings). While iconic sites such as Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh have been widely researched. (Chakravarty, 1984, pp. 44-45) The rock art of the northern Himalayan belt, particularly in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, has remained largely underexplored, despite its significant cultural and archaeological value.

In the Jammu region, petroglyphic traditions have been documented at several sites. In the Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir, within the rugged terrain shaped by the Chenab River, a cluster of rock carvings has long remained undocumented in formal archaeological studies. Locally known as Panch Pandavas, these carvings have endured centuries of natural weathering but suffered from scholarly neglect. Their recent recognition highlights the need for systematic academic investigation to understand their cultural, historical, and iconographic significance within the Himalayan rock art tradition. At Ladda and Babour (Udhampur district), several marks, spirals, and grid patterns suggest early ritualistic or calendrical use. In the Kashmir Valley, although rock paintings are less abundant than in central India, evidence of prehistoric pictographs is present. Sites such as Harwan, Bumzuva near Mattan, and Zewan hills reveal faint traces of ochre-colored paintings on rock surfaces and cave walls. These paintings feature geometric patterns, concentric circles, and stylized human and animal figures, suggesting ritualistic or shamanistic traditions. The use of red and white pigments, often associated with fertility and protection, is consistent with early Indian painting traditions. Although these rock paintings have suffered from erosion and neglect, they represent a significant yet overlooked component of Kashmir's prehistoric heritage. (Dar, 2009) In Ladakh, the rock art tradition is widespread and

remarkably preserved due to the arid climate. Sites along the Indus, Zanskar, and Suru rivers, including Domkhar, Tangtse, and Alchi, house thousands of petroglyphs. These images portray ibex, yaks, solar signs, hunting scenes, and Buddhist symbols, and include inscriptions in Brahmi, Kharosthi, Sogdian, and Tibetan, revealing Ladakh's historical role as a cultural and trade conduit between India, Central Asia, and Tibet. (Thsangspa, 2004, pp. 34-35) (Mani, 1993)

Amidst this broader regional panorama, the Kount Majain Hathai rock art site in Suid village, Dachhan tehsil, Kishtwar district, is an important yet virtually unknown site of potential archaeological, mythological, and unique cultural significance. Engraved on a large, naturally elevated boulder nestled in a sacred grove, the site features visible impressions of a human hand, human feet, animal figures, anthropomorphic, and geometric symbols. These motifs, executed with care and spatial intent, appear to serve symbolic, possibly ritualistic purposes, ranging from ancestral memory and territorial demarcation to sacred offerings or mythic storytelling.

Local oral traditions associate this site with Mahabharata-era legends, particularly linking the handprint to Kunti Mata, the mother of the Pandavas, whose spiritual legacy is revered in the Dachhan Valley. (Singh, August 2025, p. 9) The presence of arrow-like symbols may signify hunting rituals, martial traditions, or protective emblems, while animal motifs could relate to local totems or deities. Located in a region rich with Shaivite shrines, sacred caves, and Vedic toponyms, Kount Majain Hathai stands at the intersection of archaeology, mythology, and living tradition. Its motifs bear the imprint not only of early human expression but of a continuity of sacred geography and cultural memory that persists to this day.

Geography of the Dachhan Region: Sacred Rivers and Cultural Landscape

The Dachhan region of Kishtwar district, situated in the western Himalayas of Jammu and Kashmir, is geographically characterized by its complex terrain, glaciated origins, and riverine networks. The region's defining hydrological feature is the Marusudar River, one of the most significant tributaries of the Chenab River, and referred to in the Nadi Sukta hymn of the Rig Veda as 'Vridh Maru', denoting its ancient and sacred connotation. (Bakshi, 2008) The Marusudar not only contributes to the ecological vitality of the region but also plays a pivotal role in shaping the historical, cultural, and religious narratives of Dachhan and the adjoining Marwah valley. The Marusudar River flows through the core of the Dachhan Valley and joins the Chenab at Bhandarkut, a confluence site that has historically functioned as a religious and cultural landmark. This riverine system has been instrumental in sustaining agricultural activity, facilitating trade and connectivity, and promoting pilgrimage mobility in the region. Numerous perennial tributaries, locally known as "nallas", feed into the Marusudar, forming a network of streams that influence both ecological diversity and settlement patterns. Among the major tributaries are:

- Kiyar Nala – Known for its agrarian importance and nearby sacred groves.
- Anant Nala – Revered for its sacred springs and associated pilgrimage practices.
- Kibber Nala – Flowing through forested terrains and alpine meadows, linked to oral traditions and folklore.

These tributaries collectively shape the region's sacred geography. Their banks are dotted with temples, sacred stones (shilas), and ritual bathing spots (snana sthalas), indicating the deep entwinement of landscape and belief.

Of particular cultural and religious significance is a site located along a small stream known as the Dhonagrad Nadi, a tributary of the Anant Nala. At latitude 33.489702° N and longitude 75.854241° E, a large rock bearing engraved impressions locally revered as the "Handprints of Kunti Maa" (Kunt Majun Hatha) is situated. According to local oral tradition, this site is associated with Kunti Mata, the mother of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata, who is believed to have traversed this region during her exile. The hand and foot impressions on the rock are viewed not merely as physical imprints but as sacred markers, anchoring mythological narratives in the physical landscape.

The Dhonagrad Nadi, though limited in its physical extent, represents a significant example of the integration of natural water systems with ritualized cultural landscapes in the Dachhan region. The stream lies along the traditional pilgrimage route to the Hudh Mata Shakti Peetha and Kaikut temple (Singh, May-June 2025) in the Anant Nala valley, thereby acquiring religious and cultural significance beyond its hydrological function. The Anant Nala serves as a major sacred watershed, into which several ritually important streams converge, including the Hudh Kund Stream, Trisandhaya Stream, Doodh Ganga, and the outflow from Bhramsar Lake, (Singh, pp. 76-77) and numerous other locally revered watercourses. In this context, the Dhonagrad Nadi functions not only as a physical tributary of the Anant Nala but also as a component of the valley's intangible cultural heritage. Its sacralization through pilgrimage practices and oral tradition illustrates the manner in which natural features are symbolically integrated into collective memory. Collectively, these hydrological networks render the Dachhan region a living cultural landscape, where rivers and streams operate as carriers of religious symbolism, ecological interdependence, and long-standing mythological continuity.

Historic and Epic Context

The region of Kishtwar has ancient historical and religious significance, with references dating back to the Vedas and the Mahabharata. In the Rigveda, particularly in the Nadi Sukta, mention is made of the river and valley known as Virdh Maru, which corresponds to the present-day Marwah valley in Kishtwar. (Kaul, 2001, p. 4). The Virdh Maru River originates from the Nunkun glacier and joins the Anant Nallah River at Pohar, eventually merging with the Chenab River at Bhandarkot. Furthermore, in Sabha Parva, Chapter 27 of the Mahabharata (Part I), there is a mention of Lohit Mandala. The term "Lohit" in Sanskrit translates to "saffron," while "Mandal" refers to a canton or territory. Among the eleven regions listed under Divigrit,

Kishtwar stands out as the only region historically known for saffron cultivation. Therefore, scholars such as Sharma argue convincingly that Lohit Mandal is, in fact, a reference to Kishtwar. (Sharma, 1995, pp. 22-23)

According to R.C. Kak, near the entrance of the Bathistal Cave, a red-ochre handprint with long, slender fingers is believed to represent the hand of Kunti, mother of the Pandavas. (Kak, 1924) However, upon detailed field observation, such a symbol is no longer visible at the cave's entrance. Interestingly, about half a kilometer from Bathistal Cave, Anoop Singh observed a striking set of rock art engravings on a large boulder in an area locally known as "Kount Majain Hathai", which translates to "Handprints of Kunti Maa." The site features several pictographs, some faded with time, while others remain distinctly visible. Among the surviving images are a handprint, footprints, a figure resembling a goat, and an unidentified symbol carved near the base of the rock. (Singh, 2021, p. 20)

Discovery and Description of the Site

The sacred terrain of Dachhan, particularly the Bathistal Cave and the nearby rock art site of Kount Majain Hathai, represents a remarkable confluence of mythology, memory, and landscape. In his early 20th-century exploration, R.C. Kak documented ancient Brahmi inscriptions on the ceiling and adjacent rocks of Bathistal Cave and recognized the presence of a red-ochre handprint with long, slender fingers, traditionally attributed to Kunti Mata, the mother of the Pandavas. However, more recent fieldwork conducted by Anoop Singh in 2021 did not locate any such handprint at the cave entrance. Instead, a preserved set of pictographs, including a red-ochre handprint, footprints, animal figures, anthropomorphic, and geometric symbols, was identified approximately half a kilometre away at a boulder site known locally as Kount Majain Hathai.



The motifs include:

- A clear red-ochre handprint with elongated fingers
- Footprints etched alongside the handprint
- A figure resembling a goat/deer
- An unidentified symbol carved near the base of the rock (Singh, 2021)

These pictographs suggest a ritualistic or commemorative function, possibly linked to ancient pilgrimage routes or mythological memory.

The oral tradition of the region reinforces the sanctity of the site through a vivid narrative linking these symbols to the marriage of Kunti Mata. R.C. Kak records local expressions such as "Gonnunaji-hand-lag" and "Goontami-hand-lag", which combine Gonnunaji (a respectful reference to Kunti Mata) with lag, a Kashmiri term derived from Sanskrit lagna, meaning an auspicious time, often for marriage. According to local belief, the site marks the moment or locale of Kunti's sacred union, deeply embedding the rock art within the ritual memory of the community. Additionally, Kak noted inscriptions inside Bathistal Cave, including the phrase Sachasamaya, which may allude to a sacred or ceremonial time, possibly linked to this very tradition.

Near the Bathistal Cave and the celebrated Kunti Mata handprints lies the Rishis Kouth cave, which features a long tunnel believed by villagers to connect Dachhan to the distant region of Zanskar in Kargil. According to folklore, a dog once disappeared into the tunnel and reappeared in Zanskar, lending weight to the belief in an ancient subterranean route. Explorers have reportedly traversed up to half a kilometre within this tunnel before turning back due to the difficult terrain. Today, a natural watercourse flowing through the tunnel serves as a vital source of drinking water for Suid village.

Together, Bathisthal Cave and Kount Majain Hathai form a pair of complementary heritage sites, one preserving epigraphic records and sacred space associated with sages, and the other offering visual evidence of mythic episodes through rock art. Their shared association with Kunti Mata and their proximity enhance a ritual geography in which the Mahabharata's epic narrative is not only remembered but materialized in stone. In this unique cultural landscape, myth and memory do not merely coexist; they are physically inscribed and actively sustained by community tradition.

Iconographic Analysis: Hand, Footprints, Animal Figures, Anthropomorphic, Geometric, and Faded Symbol at Kount Majain Hathai

The rock art assemblage at Kount Majain Hathai comprises a cluster of pictographs rendered in red ochre and shallow engravings, each carrying symbolic depth within the cultural and ritual framework of the Dachhan Valley. These symbols, though seemingly simple, can be read as visual narratives embedded in the local Mahabharata-based oral tradition and possibly linked to wider patterns of prehistoric or protohistoric art.

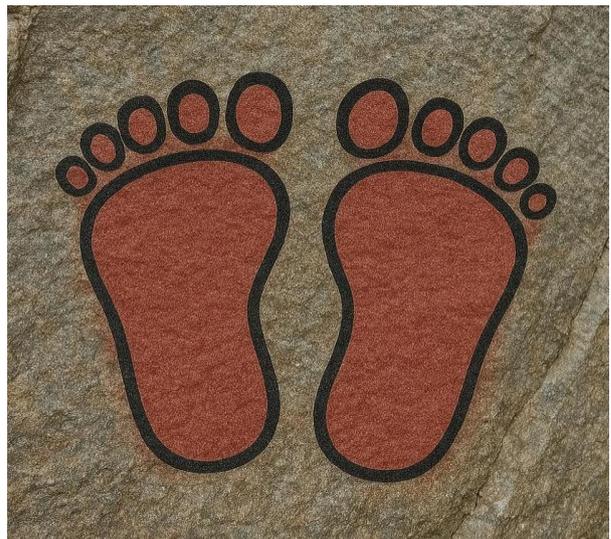
1. The Handprint: Symbol of Presence and Sanctity

The red-ochre handprint, centrally positioned on the boulder, is the most prominent motif at the site. Handprints in rock art globally are often interpreted as acts of self-identification, divine invocation, or spiritual imprinting. In the context of Kount Majain Hathai, the handprint is traditionally believed to be that of Kunti Mata, signifying her divine presence and sanctification of the site. The elongation of the fingers, as also noted in Kak's description of the (now faded) Bathisthal imprint, may suggest stylistic emphasis, intended either to signify grace or to elevate the image beyond the human realm, into the symbolic.



2. Footprints: Traces of Passage or Pilgrimage

Located near the handprint, the footprints reinforce the idea of divine visitation or ritual movement. In Hindu iconography, footprints (such as Vishnupada or Buddhapada) frequently mark holy ground or commemorative spots. In this case, the juxtaposition of Kunti Mata's hand and footprints may reflect a ritual reenactment of her arrival, presence, or ceremonial role, especially when read in light of the marriage tradition associated with the site (Gnnunaji-hand-lag).



3. Deer or Goat-Like Figure: Symbol of Purity, Fertility, or Sacrifice

A nearby quadruped figure, likely representing a deer or goat, adds a layer of symbolic ambiguity. In Indic traditions, deer are often associated with forest dwelling, asceticism, and gentle purity, while goats may allude to sacrificial offerings (bali) or

agrarian fertility rites. Given the marriage narrative tied to this site, the figure could represent either a symbolic witness to the sacred act or a ritual animal linked to ancient matrimonial or domestic rites.



4. Anthropomorphic Figure

The anthropomorphic figure at the Kount Majain Hathai rock art site depicts a stylized human-like form with outstretched arms and slightly bent legs, rendered in red ochre pigment. Its simplified, abstract proportions suggest symbolic or ritual significance rather than a realistic portrayal. Such figures in prehistoric art often represent shamans, deities, or revered ancestors, serving as mediators between the human and spiritual realms. The posture may indicate invocation, dance, or a ceremonial gesture. Positioned alongside handprints, footprints, and zoomorphic motifs, this anthropomorphic form reflects an integrated visual language that embodies the community's cosmology, beliefs, and connection to the sacred landscape of Dachhan.



5. Geometric Symbols

The geometric symbols at the Kount Majain Hathai site, including square or rectilinear motifs, exhibit deliberate and precise design, suggesting intentional symbolic meaning. Such shapes are common in prehistoric rock art worldwide and often serve as abstract representations of concepts such as territory, ritual boundaries, or cosmological frameworks. The rectilinear form may symbolize enclosure, order, or sacred space, distinguishing it from the organic curves of natural imagery. Its proximity to handprints and footprints indicates an integrated narrative, possibly linking human presence with spiritual or territorial claims. These symbols reflect early cognitive abstraction and the encoding of cultural memory into the rock surface.

6. Faded Symbols

The faded symbols at the Kount Majain Hathai site are barely discernible due to centuries of weathering, mineral deposition, and surface erosion. Their indistinct outlines make precise identification difficult, but traces suggest that they may include linear marks, abstract patterns, or stylized figures that were once integral to the overall composition. The fading itself is an important archaeological clue indicating the site's considerable antiquity and long exposure to environmental forces. Such weathered motifs may represent earlier occupation phases or different ritual episodes, layered over time.

These symbols form an interwoven iconographic portrayal, one that conveys presence, passage, fertility, and mythic authority. While stylistically modest, their placement, material (red ochre), and alignment with oral tradition imbue them with layered meaning. Far from isolated symbols, the hand, footprints, animal figures, anthropomorphic, and geometric symbols and glyph-

like motifs at Kount Majain Hathai operate as mnemonic and devotional signifiers, testifying to a sacred memoryscape that continues to shape the religious consciousness of the Dachhan Valley.

Myth, Memory, and Materiality: Linking Rock Art to The Mahabharata Tradition

The Kount Majain Hathai site in Suid, Dachhan, exemplifies the profound intersection of myth, memory, and materiality within the sacred landscapes of the Western Himalayas. The presence of red-ochre handprints, footprints, and symbolic imagery interpreted locally as connected to Kunti Mata, the mother of the Pandavas, transforms this rock surface into more than a prehistoric artistic remnant. It becomes a material expression of epic memory, where visual symbols encode oral traditions passed down across generations.

This convergence is not unique to Dachhan. As Romila Thapar (Thapar, Nov. 1989) has emphasized, the Mahabharata and other Puranic traditions were not just texts but “cosmic maps” that extended their presence through the identification of real-world locations with epic events. In this process of sacralizing space, regions like Dachhan become embedded in the geography of the epic, where local narratives and mythic identifications give continuity to place-based worship. Kunti’s presence, through the term Gonnunaji-hand-lag, locally interpreted as the site of her lagna (marriage), is one such example where oral tradition links a mythological episode to a specific physical marker.

The material traces at Kount Majain Hathai, the hand and foot motifs, alongside deer-like and abstract symbols, are not random; they echo what D.D. Kosambi (Kosambi, 1965) called “ritual survivals”: the residual material forms of ancient belief systems preserved through long-term cultural continuity. For Kosambi, early Indian art, especially rock engravings and votive markers, carried social and ritual functions, often unrelated to aesthetics but crucial in organizing community memory and sanctity.

What makes the Dachhan example particularly compelling is the coexistence of pre-literate symbolic forms with highly developed oral narratives based on classical Sanskrit epics. This overlay of prehistoric visual culture and epic narrative memory, still alive among the local population, confirms what anthropologist David Shulman (David, 1980) described as “layered traditions,” where a single site may bear the memory of multiple temporalities: prehistoric, Vedic, and Puranic.

Moreover, the proximity of Kount Majain Hathai to Bathisthal Cave, with its Brahmi inscriptions dated by R.C. Kak to as early as the 3rd century CE, strengthens the case for Dachhan as a long-inhabited sacred zone, where memory is not only transmitted orally but also inscribed in stone. Kak’s recording of the phrase Sachasamaya within the cave and the legend of Kunti’s presence further align with this pattern of epigraphic and pictorial reinforcement of myth. (Kak, 1924)

In essence, the Kount Majain Hathai rock art is not just an archaeological curiosity; it is a living archive of Hindu mythopoetic consciousness. It materializes a ritual geography where Mahabharata traditions are not simply remembered but visualized, spatialized, and sanctified. As Thapar writes, “Myth is remembered because it is embedded in the landscape. It becomes the landscape.”

Thus, Kount Majain Hathai stands as a testament to the enduring synergy between oral tradition, mythic symbolism, and sacred material culture, making it a vital node in the sacred geography of not just Dachhan but the broader Himalayan epic zone.

Pandava Memories and Sacred Imprints in Dachhan: A Cultural and Mythological Exploration

The Dachhan Valley of Kishtwar is home to several culturally significant sites that local communities associate with the Mahabharata exile of the Pandavas. Among these, Pandav Daijan (Panjdhara) features prominently; here, sacred stones called Daijan are believed to have been used by the Pandavas to clean their hands after working the terraced fields, linking agricultural heritage with epic lore. Similarly, Bheem Ka Jharna, a powerful waterfall along the Anantnalla River, is revered as Bhima’s bathing site, with its waters believed to possess purificatory and healing powers. Further enriching the sacred geography is Bhuman Dound in Hanzal, a large stone marked with what locals believe is the impression of Bhima’s back. These sites, embedded in oral tradition and ritual practice, serve as physical manifestations of mythological memory, blending sacred belief with natural features to form a unique landscape of spiritual significance in Dachhan.

1) Pandav Daijan: A Mytho-Geographic Site of Mahabharata Memory in Dachhan

The region of Dachhan in Kishtwar, Jammu & Kashmir, preserves a compelling strand of folk memory and mytho-historical association with the Mahabharata, particularly the exilic journeys of the Pandavas. A key site associated with this tradition is Pandav Daijan, locally referred to as Panjdhara, which is revered by the inhabitants as a place once inhabited by the Pandava brothers during their vanavasa (forest exile). According to local oral traditions, the Pandavas are said to have cultivated the land with their own hands, shaping the terraced rice fields that continue to define the agricultural topography of the area. After engaging in this work, they reportedly cleaned the soil from beneath their fingernails using flat stones. These stones are still preserved and known in the local dialect as “Daijan”, a term carrying connotations of respect and sanctity. These stones have since acquired a sacred status, working as tangible material markers of epic memory and continuing to be objects of local reverence.

The agricultural landscape surrounding Pandav Daijan remains productive and culturally significant, with many fields in the area still bearing traditional names and associations linked to the Pandava legacy. These geo-cultural associations not only emphasize the integration of myth into the lived environment but also demonstrate how epic narratives become rooted in local topographies. Of particular etymological interest is the belief among local communities that the name “Dachhan” may derive from the Sanskrit “Dakṣiṇ”, meaning “south.” This nomenclature is believed to reflect the geographic position of Dachhan as lying to the south of

Anantnag, a historically significant region in Kashmir. Such a derivation reinforces the possibility that the mythic migration of the Pandavas could be aligned with real or imagined southward movements in collective memory.

The site of Pandav Daijan thus embodies a unique fusion of mythology, geography, and cultural continuity, offering valuable insight into how Itihasa (epic history) intersects with regional identity and sacred landscape. Further interdisciplinary research, combining archaeology, oral history, and cultural geography, could yield important revelations about the deep temporal layers encoded within such Himalayan folk traditions.

2) Bheem Ka Jharna (Bhim Waterfall): Mythic Waters in the Sacred Landscape of Dachhan

Among the culturally resonant sites embedded in the sacred topography of the Dachhan Valley is Bheem Ka Jharna, locally referred to as Bhuman Chhon. This majestic waterfall, situated along the Anantnalla River, a tranquil tributary of the Marusudar (revered as Vridh Maru in the Nadi Sukta of the Rig Veda), occupies a significant position in local oral traditions associated with the Mahabharata. According to folk narratives, this site served as the preferred bathing place of Bhima, the mighty second Pandava, during the years of vanavasa (exile), thereby transforming a natural feature into a sanctified landmark. The waterfall, fed by glacial runoff and encircled by densely forested ridges, is not only a striking geological formation but also a locus of spiritual energy. As per local belief, its waters are imbued with purificatory and healing properties, inherited from their connection to Bhima's presence and use. The interplay of natural majesty and epic memory imbues the site with both aesthetic and religious significance, echoing a pattern seen across other sacred geographies of the Indian Himalayas.

Furthermore, the mytho-historical layering of the site is reinforced by its proximity to other associated relics and sacred imprints. Just over a kilometer from Suid, near Dhunagrad, lie what are locally believed to be the hand and foot impressions of Mata Kunti, mother of the Pandavas. These marks, etched into rock surfaces and preserved without formal archaeological intervention, are deeply venerated by the local population. They are interpreted as divine remnants of the Pandavas' sojourn in the region and form part of a broader ritual geography, encompassing nearby sites such as Bathisthal Cave, Rishis Kouth, and Pandav Daijan. Although Bheem Ka Jharna and its surrounding features have not yet been formally recognized by heritage authorities or included in archaeological inventories, they represent a rich reservoir of mythic memory and folk religiosity. The site holds immense potential not only for the endorsement of heritage-based pilgrimage and eco-tourism but also for archaeological and ethnographic research exploring the continuity of Mahabharata traditions within the cultural landscapes of the Western Himalayas.

As with many sacred sites across India, the interweaving of Vedic references, epic narratives, natural geography, and local oral traditions at Bheem Ka Jharna offers an illuminating case of how ancient memory continues to shape contemporary cultural identity. Documenting and conserving such locations is crucial for preserving the intangible heritage and environmental sanctity of the Dachhan Valley.

3) Bhuman Dound (Bhim Back) of Hanzal: A Sacred Impression of Bhima in the Dachhan

In the tranquil environs of Hanzal village, nestled within the Dachhan Valley of Kishtwar district (Jammu & Kashmir), lies a culturally significant site known locally as Bhuman Dound. Etymologically derived from the local dialect, Bhuman refers to Bhima, the Pandava of Mahabharata fame, while Dound translates to "back," thus rendering the site's name as "Bhima's Back." According to regional oral tradition, the Pandavas are believed to have traversed the Kashmir Himalayas during their exile (vanavasa), with their journey extending into the Dachhan region. At this site in Hanzal, it is said that Bhima paused to rest upon a large rock, leaving behind a distinct impression of his back. Whether interpreted as a natural depression or a mark formed through divine agency, the rock has become an enduring symbol of Bhima's presence, infused with mythological and spiritual significance.

The veneration of Bhuman Dound is deeply embedded in the local cultural consciousness. For generations, residents of Hanzal and neighbouring settlements have revered the site as a sacred landmark, commemorating the heroic legacy of the Pandavas and reinforcing the connection between epic mythology and regional identity. Though the site has not yet been the subject of formal archaeological examination, its prominence in folk narratives and its status as a pilgrimage-like destination underline its importance within the cultural and spiritual landscape of Dachhan.

Like other sites across the Dachhan Valley, such as Pandav Daijan, Bheem Ka Jharna, and the hand and foot imprints attributed to Kunti Mata Bhuman Dound exemplifies the localization of Mahabharata memory into specific topographic features. These sites form an interlinked network of mytho-historic geography, demonstrating how pan-Indian epic traditions are assimilated, adapted, and sacralized within distinct Himalayan micro-regions.

In the absence of tangible archaeological data, the value of Bhuman Dound lies in its intangible heritage, carried through generational storytelling, ritual observances, and place-based devotion. As such, the site warrants further interdisciplinary study, particularly in the fields of ethnohistory, folklore studies, and landscape archaeology, to better understand how sacred memory is materialized and maintained within the cultural fabric of regions like Dachhan.

Challenges in Preserving Kount Majain Hathai Rock Art

The Kount Majain Hathai site, while rich in cultural and mythological significance, faces a range of preservation challenges that threaten its survival and scholarly visibility. These challenges stem from environmental, social, institutional, and academic factors:

1. Environmental Exposure

The site is located on an exposed rock surface in a high-altitude Himalayan zone, subject to weathering from rain, snow, and seasonal freeze-thaw cycles. These natural elements contribute to the gradual fading of red ochre pictographs, surface erosion, and the disintegration of rock edges. The growth of moss, lichens, and plant roots further accelerates deterioration by chemically interacting with the rock surface.

2. Absence of Official Recognition

Despite its importance, the site lacks formal recognition by heritage institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) or the State Department of Archaeology. This leaves the site unprotected by law, without technical support for conservation, and excluded from national heritage management frameworks.

3. Limited Documentation

No systematic archaeological documentation or scientific study has yet been undertaken at the site. The absence of high-resolution photographs, 3D scans, pigment analysis, or stratigraphic context leaves the art vulnerable to both physical loss and scholarly neglect.

4. Threats from Human Activity

Although revered locally, the site is frequently visited during festivals or community gatherings, with no protective fencing, signage, or visitor management. Touching, climbing on, or lighting fires near the rock can lead to accidental damage or contamination of the motifs.

5. Lack of Public Awareness

There is insufficient awareness among local and regional communities regarding the site's broader archaeological and cultural value. While the site holds religious reverence due to its association with Kunti Mata, its significance as an example of prehistoric symbolic expression remains unrecognized.

6. Policy and Governance Gaps

Jammu and Kashmir currently lacks specific heritage policies for prehistoric rock art or sacred cultural landscapes in remote tribal regions like Dachhan. In the absence of a targeted conservation framework, such sites fall into a grey area between archaeology, religion, and rural development.

Conclusion

The Dachhan Valley of Kishtwar presents a unique intersection of prehistoric symbolism and epic mythology, where rock art, sacred topography, and local oral traditions coalesce to form a rich and layered cultural heritage. The central focus of this study, Kount Majain Hathai, is not only a site of prehistoric artistic expression but also a sacred landscape that continues to hold spiritual meaning for the local population. The red-ochre handprint, footprints, animal figure, and abstract glyphs found here are interpreted not as isolated markings but as part of a living tradition, believed to reflect the presence of Kunti Mata and the Pandavas during their exile.

When examined alongside nearby mythologically associated sites, Pandav Daijan, where the Pandavas are believed to have cultivated fields; Bheem Ka Jharna, where Bhima is said to have bathed; and Bhuman Dound, the rock bearing the impression of Bhima's back, the significance of Dachhan as a mytho-historic geography becomes evident. These sites are not simply remembered in local folklore; they are materially embedded in the land, ritualized in community practices, and revisited in seasonal pilgrimages and storytelling.

This continuity between epic narrative and physical geography suggests that Dachhan is more than a remote Himalayan valley; it is a mnemonic palimpsest, a repository of collective memory where prehistoric iconography, Vedic River hymns, and Mahabharata traditions coexist and reinforce one another. The symbols engraved on rock surfaces act as anchors of identity, tools of remembrance, and markers of a sacred journey that spans millennia.

However, the survival of this heritage is under serious threat. The absence of formal archaeological documentation, coupled with environmental degradation, increasing human activity, and a lack of policy protection, places sites like Kount Majain Hathai at considerable risk. Despite their immense value, these cultural markers remain outside the purview of official conservation bodies and are largely sustained by local oral tradition and community reverence.

This study thus calls for urgent interdisciplinary intervention. There is a critical need to document, analyze, and preserve these rock art sites and their associated sacred landscapes using a framework that integrates archaeology, folklore studies, cultural geography, environmental management, and public policy. Such efforts would not only safeguard physical heritage but also honor the intangible cultural wisdom that continues to animate these spaces.

Kount Majain Hathai and the surrounding sacred sites in Dachhan exemplify the layered nature of Indian cultural memory, where the prehistoric, the epic, and the contemporary converge. Protecting these sites is not merely an academic or conservationist imperative—it is an act of cultural justice, ensuring that the voices of the past continue to speak meaningfully to the present and future generations.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: *Dr. Anoop Singh:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Bakshi, G. D. (2008). Footprint in the snow on the trials of Zorwar Singh. Lancer Publishers.
2. Chakravarty, K. K. (1984). Rock Art of India. Arnold Heinemann.
3. Dar, S. R. (2009). Kashmir's Prehistoric Rock Art: An Overview. Indian Archaeology – A Review. New Delhi: ASI.
4. David, S. (1980). Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition. Princeton University Press.
5. Ghosh, A. (1989). An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology Vol. I & II. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
6. Kak, R. C. (1924). Memories of the Archeological Survey of Kashmir, No. 1 Antiquities of Marev Wadwan. Kashmir: The Archaeology of Kashmir.
7. Kaul, P. K. (2001). Antiquities of the Chenab Valley in Jammu. Eastern Book Linkers.
8. Kosambi, D. D. (1965). Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture. Popular Prakashan.
9. Mani, B. R. (1993). Rock Art of Ladakh. In B. Allchin & F. R. Allchin (Eds.). South Asian Archaeology, 441-450.
10. Sharma, D. C. (1995). History and culture of Kishtwar. Kishtwar. J & K.: Chandrabhaga Publishers.
11. Singh, A. (2021). Exploring New Findings At Bathistal Cave. International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS), Vol. 6, No.1, 13-22.
12. Singh, A. (August 2025). Sacred Relics Of Hangpath: A Study Of The Shivalinga And Yoni-Peetha In Sounder, Dachhan. International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS), Vol. 10, No.3, 1-19.
13. Singh, A. (June 2025). Hudh Mata: The Unidentified Shakti Peetha of Dachhan. International Journal of Research Culture Society, Volume-9, Issue 6, 67-80.
14. Singh, A. (May-June 2025). Kaikut Temple in Kath-Kuni Style - A Unique Architectural Treasure of Dachhan, Jammu and Kashmir. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR), Volume 7, Issue 3, 1-18.
15. Thapar, R. (Nov. 1989). Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India. Past & Present vol. 12, 3-26.
16. Thsangspa, T. L. (2004). Ancient Petroglyphs of Ladakh: New Discoveries and Documentation. leiden: Koninklijke Brill nv.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>