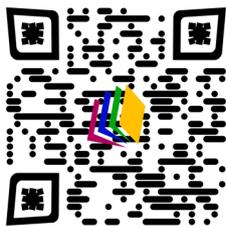


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Art in India: Evidence, Methods and Problems

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ABSTRACT:

This paper believes that rock paintings executed by prehistoric humans form one segment, though rather complex, of the archaeological record. Just like other forms of archaeological data the paintings carry a gamut of meanings and become illuminating only when related to specific interests or supposition. It offers here a very introductory comment on the distributions of some motifs in India and also talks about some of the archaeological issues to which they can relate to. The variability in style of Indian rock art production points towards numerous influences that have shaped its formation. This diversity is a result of various factors, that includes a long period of production and interactivity between groups with different social organizations. Few case studies from different regions within the domestic boundary are used to embellish the diversity of the subcontinent's rock art and describe its relationship to landscape. The long term vision is to help produce methods for looking at paintings as qualified records of prehistoric settlement.

KEY WORDS: Heritage, Distribution, Representation, Symbol, Community.

Introduction

The various branches of creative activity concerned with the production of imaginative designs, sounds or ideas e.g. paintings, music, writing, considered collectively is art. It is the creation of works of beauty.⁸⁰ Art is also a form of social expression, and it inevitably exists along with culture. As an individual is always a creation of society and the child of a culture, art by itself serves social as well as individual needs, interests and demands.

World's greatest works of art, aesthetically strong and spiritually effective imagery are embedded in cultural landscapes and are found at rock art sites. It consists of paintings, drawings, engravings, stencils, prints, bas-relief carvings and figures in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and platforms. Rock art gave a glimpse of mankind's affluent

spiritual and cultural heritage (intangible), it holds great importance for its creators and their descendants. Its charm, its symbolism, and its diverse narrative meant that it is widely admired and treasured internationally, locally and regionally. Its continued presence is important for the global communities to recognize and know about the varied cultural traditions, their primordial origins and association to the landscapes they have occupied.

Vishnu Wakankar is usually declared as the father of Rock art studies in India. He discovered Bhimbetka shelters in 1957. The first known discovery of Rock art was done in 1867 by Archibald Carlleyle, it was discovered in the sandstone hills of the Vindhyas in Mirzapur (Uttar Pradesh). This was the beginning with discoveries and studies which got sophisticated and recognized with the passage of time. Apart from Bhimbetka rock shelters (UNESCO world heritage site, 2003), Dras, Kargil, Kurnool (Andhra Pradesh), Padiyandal (Tamil Nadu) etc. are well known sites in case of India.

Distribution and Description of Rock Art:

If we look at the global distribution of Rock Art we find that it is distributed throughout the world and the list is getting longer day by day. Focusing on concentration and antiquity we can divide the world into six major regions : Southwestern Europe, North Africa, South Africa, Australia, India and Russia. More than 20 countries reported the presence of Rock Art only from Africa, areas of Sahara report the high concentration. The oldest Rock Art is considered to be found from Australia with more than 1,00,000 sites found presently. If we look in the case of South America, we found that Rock Art of very late historic period is also reported from Costa Rica, Lesser Antilles,

Venezuela, Guianas, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Equator and Colombia.⁸¹ After having a glimpse of Rock Art distribution worldwide, it is important to have a glimpse of the Rock Art distribution in the context of India.

The major part of rock art sites in India are found from the central part i.e from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Most of the research in the subcontinent is focused on this area. The interest beyond central India has recently begun and it illustrated a wider distribution of rock art sites all over the subcontinent, and greater levels of diverseness than had previously been recognized. If we look particularly in respect to Central India we found that there are at least two thousand known decorated rock - shelters clustered in three major ranges, the Vindhyas, Satpura, and the Aravallis.⁸² A large number of the rock art sites are painted, with a clear proclivity for red pigments, even though white, black, yellow, and green were also in use. As the major art found are focused on wild fauna, hunting and gathering scenes, and comparatively less representation of domesticated animals in much of the imagery, a major portion of the rock art from the region is considered to have been produced by Upper Paleolithic or Mesolithic communities. A stylistic shift from the fluid imagery of hunter-gatherers to the more static figures of agro-pastoralists during the Chalcolithic period was accompanied by a change in motif focus to frequent representations of domesticates, chariots, and weaponry.⁸³ Rock art that is associated with inscriptions, are also remarkable and the time period varies between mid to late first millennium BC.

Moving forward towards the North we see that a large number of early rock art was discovered during the 19th century in the Himalayan region of

India. The best known rock art is from two areas, Ladakh and the Kumaon Himalayan region. Only in the Kumaon Himalayan region 68 sites are discovered. Owing to the present political condition and demographic shifts that are going on, the case of Ladakh is interesting to look at as it can act as a source to boost the tourism industry of the region. Under periodical research programmes in the region, an elaborate programme for recording the engraved figures in Ladakh has been conducted.⁸⁴ Based on the results, the authors identified the influence of ibex in the Ladakhi imagery, that are present in line drawings, filled images, in bi-triangular and bi-curvaceous forms, and stylistic S-shaped forms. Non-native forms, that are stylistically different from the major imagery identified, are also reported, typically they are associated with the traditional routes of travel and river valleys. It shows similarities with imagery known from central Asia. On some occasions, the content of the imagery is highly useful in attributing tentative chronology, it is done by analyzing the presence of particular forms of material culture or traditional symbols that are important. After this other important sites are found in the region of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

An early discovery in India was the site of Edakkal, and it still remains an important site in the far south. Seven sites (Tenmalai, Edakkal Guha, Ezhuthu Guha, Kovil Kadavu, Ancode, Attala, and Toberimala) out of which Edakkal contains the highest number of figures, but no systematic survey has been undertaken till now. In total there are 762 motifs in rock art so far discovered in Kerala. Out of these seven sites, four contains petroglyphs, while the other three contain pictographs. Basically geometric figures dominate the imagery, with few humans and animals imageries as well.⁸⁵ The animal figures found both in engravings and

paintings are deer, god, elephant, tahr, peacock, lizard, horse, fish, cow, humped bull, fox etc. A unique stylistic sequence has been discovered from the sites, Mesolithic painted sites occurred before Neolithic, Megalithic, and historic period petroglyphs and pictographs. K.V.Raman discovered the first rock paintings in Tamil Nadu (1978) at a place called Mallapadi in Dharmapuri district. This was followed by several scholars and presently more than 75 sites are discovered. It is even suggested that Mesolithic and Megalithic period styles are the most common one, and it shares similarities with Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.⁸⁶ Tamil Nadu rock art has vast subject matter that includes human form, deer, Buffalo, rhinoceros, goat, man riding horse & cattle, bird, wild boar, tiger, horse, fish, cow and calf, human figure with weapons, star, hand prints, elephants, fowl, an archer, ladder, monkeys and mongoose, bird headed and many more geometric designs etc.⁸⁷ Following this it is important to understand the Rock art sites of Andhra Pradesh as it is claimed to have connections with Tamil Nadu by some scholars.

Twenty nine rock art sites have been recorded in Andhra Pradesh, it includes a complex of 20 painted sites among 30 rock shelters. Majorly Pictograph dominates the rock art in Andhra Pradesh, the majority of which are either in red or white, although a number of petroglyph sites are also known.⁸⁸ Two phases of Mesolithic art production are recognized, it is drawn primarily on evidence drawn from the site of Kethavaram. The first phase comprises large, flat-washed figures in red paint, the second phase comprises smaller flat-wash and outline figures. More thematic uniformity is noted in the Neolithic rock imagery, it can be differentiated partly on the basis of the presence of cattle figures, as well as an increased incidence of

rock bruising over painting. Chandramouli identifies a remarkable change in the composition of rock art panels of prehistoric and historic sites, it often includes a white lime wash to prepare a rock surface for bichrome imagery.⁸⁹ The most astonishing rock art site which probably belongs to the megalithic period is the Ramachandrapuram site, petro-pictographs (painted engravings) are found here. At Kethavaram, some religious symbols and painted inscriptions like Swastika and eternal knot indicate their early historical antiquity. At Ramachandrapuram the engravings of monkey god “Hanuman” belonging to the historical period are found. After discussing the far South it is important to look at the Rock Art sites present in West i.e Gujarat.

Gujarat remained Terra Incognita in the field of rock art studies until 1970. To fill this gap V.H.Sonawane discovered a group of rock shelters with paintings it was discovered around Tarsang village in the Panchmahal district (1971) while he was working on the “Archaeology of Panchmahals”. The Gujarat rock paintings, to a large extent, are found to be drawn on the shelter walls or projected ceiling hoods and invariably in the niches developed naturally by natural weathering of the granite boulders. The majority of rock paintings shows mixture of red colour in several shades that ranges from a rather dark violet to a yellowish brick-red colour. The red pigments used in most of the cases are secured from red hematite nodules containing iron oxide that are found in laterite deposit. We do find paintings depicted in white colour, it might have been obtained either from calcium carbonate nodules or kaolin clay deposits. The unique factor that differentiates rock art of Gujarat from rest of the Indian subcontinent is the absence of the superimposed paintings. For getting an overall

picture it is important to look at the Orissa and the eastern region as well.

Fifty five sites, which are distinct stylistically from rest of India, are known from the state of Orissa. Thirty one sites contain engravings, 15 have paintings, while the rest nine contain both media.⁹⁰ The majority of this rock art is non-figurative, it is occurring as a variety of geometric images, in which some simple, highly abstracted anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. With archaeological work chronology has been informed at many sites, which has shown that almost 65 percent of sites contain surface microlithic deposits, as compared to 12 percent with ceramic deposits. The excavations at Lekhamoda VI have led to the conclusion that the earliest rock art is of Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic date, and radiocarbon dates from the site of Golbai Sasan indicate the emergence of Neolithic groups and appearance of ceramics in Orissa occurred during the second millennium BC.⁹¹ A few rock art sites are also found from Manipur, West Bengal, Meghalaya, and Bihar, but they have received only limited recording.⁹²

Majorly in context of India this is the basic distribution of Rock Art sites, discovery alone does not suffice in further understanding of India’s rock art heritage, better contextualisation of art within its archaeological, ethnographic and physical landscape is necessary. Many research programmes are going on, to improve the capacity to incorporate aspects of archaeological and ethnographic data into interpretations of the Rock Art.

Interpretation and problems in Rock Art research

In her autobiography Mary Leakey (archaeologist) had written, *Disclosing the Past*, about the remarkable stone age paintings made by hunter-gatherers (Tanzania) “No amounts of stone and bone could yield the kinds of information that the

paintings gave so freely.”

Contextually, rock art is a unique form of evidence which gave a glimpse of the indigenous world view and aspirations. It also encompasses narratives on their own explained identities during the past. These practices may be viewed as an evidence of self expression, representing the social norms and values rather than just the natural ability of the individual artist or performers. The overall basic repetition and uniformity of forms and themes in a site or within a locality disclose that the individuals design and creativity was influenced by the selection and inspiration of the group, both regionally or in entirety. The presence of regional commonness in the theme of art also hints towards the tradition of practicing it by a particular group or similar ethnic groups of a particular period having the same identity. Often, the realism in rock art is a probable source for describing the prehistoric and early societies, their life opportunities and cycle through orderly interpretations of the rock art imagery. A combination of rock art imagery with other collected antiquities from excavating the site may be considered as a unique source for reassembling the past. The successive chrono cultural order in rock art imagery could be associated with archaeological strata when an entire view on the society and culture could be emerged. Throughout the world, the genuine history of indigenous people is extremely limited and restricted. Most of the indigenous societies did not even have their own script or text, which is important for understanding their recorded past. The early records of indigenous people, what so ever is stored and left in the rock art imagery needs to be recorded immediately and effectively, for its indigenous cognitive interpretation.

In Indian context, in the Central Indian plateau

region, sequence of narratives in the rock art imagery imply several clear stages of culture such as: forest based hunting- gathering and foraging nomads in the earliest level that is being succeeded by pastoralists. Later stages include rural communities using wheels and animal power for the sake of transportation. That too in the final era during early historic phase, the most usual visual imagery evidence intricate elements that also depict the conflict between the two groups. In such encounter and battle, use of horses, metal weapons, and elephants are most common. But such battle scenes were not frequent in Deccan plateau or in southern peninsular India. In southern India, most rock art sites are related to megalithic burial practices and its illustrative account was found recently. Now, recent explorations have also shown visual materials on ethnic conflict in Nilgiri Hills, Tamil Nadu. In Jharkhand, rock art is closely associated with the folklore and myth of ‘Kohbar’ or marriage booth of a legendary royal bridal couple. The archaeological backdrop of rock art in the same plateau region is in some way associated with the megalithic burial pattern and system. Similar burial system is still being followed among major tribal communities in the same area. In comparison to archaeological evidence rock art imagery is relatively more direct, dependable and simple evidence of the past which has the potential to reveal the life-opportunities, norms, belief pattern, world view and ambitions of the society. The visual narrative may spell out both overt and covert aspects, natural and supernatural means of their livelihood. Such explanations revealing their society and culture are comparatively uncomplicated.

There are few aspects of rock art research that require critical evaluation in the Indian context. The identification of styles and subject matter is normally the beginning point for deriving a comparative chronological sequence. In India, a stylistic sequence has been developed for the central region and some

studies have attempted to relate this to other areas of the country.⁹³ However, as research interests have swelled beyond the central region, it is evident that the use of this schema is often unsuitable, and may hamper understandings of both rock art chronology and the stylistic variance of Indian rock art. Preferably, an assessment of the factors that affect stylistic variability, such as the role of demography and information exchange should be made clear, and comparisons with other forms of material culture may be beneficial. Chronological schemes for understanding the production of rock art in India, which lacks the application of chronometric techniques, remain fairly fundamental. Researchers usually split rock art into three broad temporal phases: Upper Paleolithic/Mesolithic; Neolithic/Chalcolithic/Megalithic; and historical (e.g., Neumayer). However, the extent to which these can be considered chronological classifications is dubious and is derived mostly from evaluation of subject matter. Some figures can provide a restricted chronological benchmark for constructing a chronological sequence, such as depictions of cattle or metal objects, although a simplistic assumption of these images as chronological markers may shine over not only stylistic variety but also social variance and flexibility in subsistence practices.

Another important aspect that needs to be looked upon is archaeology, Rock art has rarely been assimilated into broader archaeological studies in India. If done critically excavations at Rock art sites have the potential to assist in Rock Art dating. The characteristics of archaeological deposits at rock art sites may also act as a source of information for understanding whether the creation of imagery happened in isolated, rarely visited locations, or in regularly inhabited spaces. Stylistic comparison between rock art and other forms of decorated

material culture found from archaeological excavations can also provide us with important insights. The identification of equidistant forms of new material culture in the archaeological and rock art accounts provides a potential means of throwing light on the chronology of rock art, and also helps tie it in to broader social changes.

Conclusion:

We can say that such kinds of studies remain rare in India, despite the potential to radically modify our understanding of the rock art record of the subcontinent, through both the further analysis of well known, densely painted regions, and the identification of variability in the minimally surveyed areas of the country. By using the new research methods and applying novel theoretical approaches to rock art studies in the subcontinent, the significant scope for future studies in India has been mentioned. The setting up of new chronometric dating programs across India have the potential to provide new temporal insights into varied forms of rock art and should be seen as a future preference and priority.

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