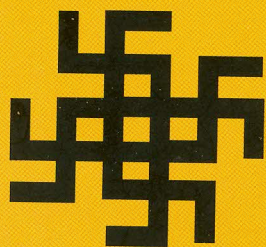




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# ROCK ART

## A CATALOGUE

**Editor  
S.S. BISWAS**

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# INTRODUCTION

Art represents the human endeavour to give a visibility to one's beliefs. Belief is non tangible and yet it plays a cardinal role in constructing human actions for successful survival. A belief when perpetuated through time gives rise to cultural traditions. A tradition which enables one to resolve his areas of agonies and ecstasies needs to be articulated frequently. One of the ways of this articulation in pre-literate societies is maintained through oral traditions and a complex series of rituals. No one can prove that such an urge to articulate one's belief was not present before history. The only doorway to man's world of feelings for this period is therefore the various types of rock art left behind by him. Consequently rock art for us is like foot prints of human mind on the passage of time.

One wonders why the urge to execute art is more often than not found only on rock surfaces. True, that any art which may have been executed on materials other than rock surface may not have always survived the pressure of time, still the available art panels seem to be always done on boulders under open area or on the walls of rock shelters or caves. Rock is a material which has always fascinated man from the days of his emergence and he started shaping it into tools from as early as 2000,000 years ago. Furthermore, the caves and rock surfaces always appeared to him as both eternal as also indestructible. These two fundamentals lent it an aura of being holy. Sound eco emanating from within such caves acts additionally to contribute to their being considered as the abode of living spirits.

The evidence of such an attraction to rocks generally and caves and rock shelters particularly can be best illustrated as a continuing tradition specially in India. Any big or small piece of rock without absolutely any iconic features can be seen being worshipped in the name of an array of folk gods and goddesses in rural/tribal India even today. Caves and rock shelters where prehistoric art has been found are also seen being used by various shades of hermit or Sadhus. Bhimbetka in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh is a cluster of more than 400 caves and rock shelters. One of these caves is occupied by such a sadhu who has converted this into a temple. It is believed that Wakankar was also guided to these 'treasure trove' of prehistoric rock art by this sadhu. In Pachmarhi, which offers another spread out cluster of rock art in caves and rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh, one can see almost all these caves having been used by sadhus for various length of time. Infact in a couple of these caves sadhus are conducting public worship of various deities even today. A similar situation has been observed in some cave art sites in Bolivia as well. This leads us to the query if human behaviour is, indeed, universal in at least the pre-literate societies all over the world.

The articulation of faith through rituals serves the dual function of providing an identity and also creates an organic solidarity. Palm prints are like the signature of an individual on the precincts of the eternal forces. Almost all rock art evidences from central, eastern and southern regions of India show



group dancing figures generally as a uniform phenomenon and this can be taken to indicate how organic solidarity may have been underlined in prehistoric society. It gives a kind of spiritual sanction when drawn in the hallowed precincts of the caves. It also shows the anxiety of surviving alone in the hunting – gathering economy. Ethnographic studies show how Birhors, a hunting-gathering community from Bihar, even today put utmost premium to sharing collection of every day within the members of a band. This prevents competition among the members and also equalizes unequal collection of individual members. In other words, seeking organic solidarity and re-emphasising this periodically is ultimately aimed at providing survival security.

Another more or less regular depiction is the drawing of palm prints or sometimes even the printing of hands. The rock shelters in Jharsuguda district of Odisha, for instance, shows palm prints with varieties of signs and symbols. The same is also observed in Bihar and Jharkhand region. In fact, in one cave named Gargas in south west France one finds more than 200 palm prints/stencil in a manner, as if one has to record the identity of all the members of a band or clan group within the hallowed precincts of the cave in the manner of a birth registration. In Argentina, at the World Heritage site of Cueva de las Manos, Patagonia 829 palm prints/stencils have been found in just one cave. Identity has to be sanctioned to members within bands through generations when a family like institution is still believed to have not been evolved.

The earliest empirical evidence of such a skill in mankind is recorded from as early as the late Lower Palaeolithic cultural stage – some 300,000 to 200,000 years ago. In deciding about this evidence we still have to make provision for the possibility of even an earlier antiquity for the emergence of art. In fact this may be extended to almost as early a date as the time of the entering of our ancestors into the genus Homo. This is primarily because of our inability to distinguish human skill from activities of the non-human kind surviving at that time. This comprises of series of scratched lines found on the cave floors or the walls. Although it is known that cave bears from Pleistocene period have inhabited these caves and they have the habit of sharpening their nails by periodic scratching on rock surfaces, it cannot be conclusively proved that human hand is not responsible for them.

Thus, to many art historians the series of scratched lines are the earliest evidence of human effort to create art, or his attempt of getting acquainted with his 'canvas'. Even if the latter probability is not true nobody can deny

that this habit of certain animals led man to see the possibility of himself repeating the process. In other words, whether these were man's first attempt to produce something for visual perception, or the animals 'inspired' man to produce, will remain a moot question for ever. In this regard birth of visual art remains as misty as the birth of litho-culture in human history. With the progression of time this skill of man soon starts becoming noticeable. These early attempts of man in trying to represent his environment or parts thereof show an incredible amount of maturity and knowledge of anatomical proportions. If these represent man's first attempt, one should expect a kind of result similar to that produced by a 5-8 year old school child. That this prehistoric rock art evidence is much better in kind, although crude in the technique of execution, leads us to believe that perhaps we are wrong in taking them as the earliest human attempt.

Many seek to explain this suddenness of maturity by hypothesising the possibility of man having long since perfected his ability by practising on wet sand or mud before taking up the 'hard canvas'. This would again indicate that Prehistoric art may be much older than what is determinable from the empirical records. Prehistoric art is executed by our ancestors either on stones or bones. At times, mud, charcoal, shells, teeth, ivory and antlers have also been used. Art work executed on such moveable objects is designated as Home art or Art mobilier (1<sup>st</sup> variety). Distinct from this is the art executed on cave walls, called cave art or Art Parietal (2<sup>nd</sup> variety). A third variety of rock art, which have emerged in the recent years are the petroglyphs that occur on boulders spread in the open by river sides. The discussion around the rich petroglyphs found along the Coa valley in Portugal examines the problems of dating art on the basis of comparison of styles with known and datable styles elsewhere (Bednarik, 1995). These petroglyphs are by no means restricted to Europe. In India as also in Australia and Africa petroglyphs are known to occur. Besides these forms of art, there are numerous examples of modelling done with simple mud, stone or bone ash mixed with mud. These latter examples throw significant light on the additional technological ability of the prehistoric artists. It is important to appreciate that the skill required to represent an object by modelling is not of the same kind required to either paint or engrave.

Most of the home art objects are either figures of animals or stylized anthropomorph in addition to a variety of engraved decoration. The romance of stone that man exhibit in the cave paintings is also seen in a series of interesting engravings found at Gönersdorf near Köln in Germany.



(Bosinski, 1968). This is an open air site in the flat land of Rhine valley. It is dated to a period of early Alleröd, i.e., between 13000 to 11,000 years BCE. Here one can see numerous slate pieces in which engravings have been done to depict female figures. Thus, one can see a hangover of love of stone occurring in the newly chosen environment away from the caves and rock shelters. Late Pleistocene climate enabled people from south-west France to move to the northern flat lands. Gönnersdorf rock art shows the nostalgia of our ancestors to use rock, even though these are in the shape of moveable pieces. One might consider this as a 4<sup>th</sup> variety of rock art. Lastly and finally we have a very few cases of human sculptures done on rock walls like in Laussel in south-west France. (Sonneville- Bordes 1972). This forms the 5<sup>th</sup> variety of rock art. It would, therefore, appear that the Palaeolithic men had a wide range of techniques of creating art and also they had reasonably mastered their techniques. They can rightly be called the 'Original Artists'.

Interest in cave art among scientists grew out of a layman's discovery of the famous cave site of Spain called Altamira in 1880. Don Marcelino de Sautuola discovered the site when he was searching for his toddler daughter, who because of her small size could manage to get through a narrow crevice into this cave and thus come face to face with the magnificent panels of rock art. At a later function, this lady then nearing her nineties, on being requested to retell her story of this spectacular discovery disappointed everybody as she could not remember anything.

It is significant to note, at this juncture, that almost 13 years before this in 1867 Archibald Carlleyle of Archaeological Survey of India not only recorded rock painting from a rock shelter in India (Sohagi ghat, Mirzapur) but also collected a large number of microliths from these rock shelters. Microliths as the material culture of a distinct archaeological stage of early Holocene was till then not generally recognised. Consequently he was extremely eager to demonstrate that these apparently insignificant looking tools are indeed of great antiquity. The rock painting showed a rhinoceros being hunted. Carlleyle had also recovered the hard evidence of a rhinoceros skull in a neighbouring deposit. It seems he was more eager to prove that the specific species of rhinoceros as shown in the rock painting as also as evidenced from the fossil discovered are extinct for more than 8000 years and hence the tools are really of such an antiquity. The paintings as subject of prehistoric cultural product were, however, not at all highlighted. In spite of this, such an important discovery as this was totally rejected by scholars. In other words, the fate of Indian rock art in the beginning was not the least

different from what poor Don Marcelino faced in Spain. Incidentally Mesolithic as a legitimate chrono-cultural stage between Palaeolithic and Neolithic was established in India after Carlleyle.

In European context Henry Breuil in 1952 put an end to all discussions and speculations on rock art when his book titled *Quatre cents siecles d'art parietal* (Four hundred centuries of cave art) was published. Subsequently a scheme of four stylistic period of cultural chronography for Franco-Cantabrian rock art was also suggested by him along with Cartailhac (1906).

It must be emphasized here that the various stylistic stages of rock art as enunciated by these scholars are neither uniform in the European region nor applicable in world rock art. Consequently using style as the principle method of dating rock art is not supported on any scientific basis. Besides, there are many countries in the Old World where no such cultural tradition exists in the Upper Palaeolithic which can be compared with Gravettian, Solutrean or Magdalenian of south-west France. In fact Bednarik (1995) titles one of his recent articles as "..... an obituary to the stylistic dating of Palaeolithic art". This article was written in connection with the petroglyphs discovered in the Coa valley of Portugal. Here stylistically the horses and aurochs are dated to Solutrean (18,000) period, while radio-carbon, chlorine 36 and AMS techniques produce a date between 2000 to 6000 BCE. The cultural stages described above were based on areas not very far from the Coa valley in Portugal and yet they seem to totally fail in dating beyond their specific region (south-west France). Consequently one must emphasize that most of the Old World rock art still remains dated on extremely fluid system which is entirely falsifiable.

Most of the rock art evidences from India was generally accepted more with wonder in the beginning. As such initially no attempt at ascribing a chronological status to these works of art was attempted. Further, all excavated sites till a very late date did not yield a typically Upper Palaeolithic archaeological character. It is important to note that even after Upper Palaeolithic culture was discovered we did not have any home art objects to provide a stylistic calibration. Wakankar had, as late as 1976, for the first time tried to create a chronography for Bhimbetka rock art on the basis of super imposition in some cases and also some understanding of simple to complex executions of lines basically as understood by an artist. This was not an exactly rigorously worked out methodology and neither was this applicable for all over India. Otherwise most of the analysis of rock art



in India was directed in understanding various socio-economic activities of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. In fact in this regard rock art studies in India has provided a much more and rich harvest of data about prehistoric life ways than rock art anywhere else.

Interpretation of rock art remains another area of continuous debate. Representing Totemistic animals, magic and fertility are the three major possible causes on which scholars have been debating. Every time anthropologists brought out the nitty gritty of the functioning of social institutions in their ethnographic studies one or the other of the rock art interpretations were proved wrong. For instance, totemic animals cannot be common to every group and yet one finds very few types of animals represented. Infact the majority of the representations are of horses, bison, aurochs and cervidae. Could these animals be mere symbols of the cognitive mosaic of the Artist?

Leroi-Gourhan, (1965) did try to ascribe certain depictions as representing male power and certain others as female power. However, all depictions cannot be explained with symbol i.e., motif. It would appear that interpretation of rock art becomes impossible unless we understand the way the mind of the people was operating. Interpretation of rock art, therefore, is as complex as the interpretation of mind of the early man. Ethnography provides a general insight into the various areas of concern for a simple hunter-gatherer community. Disregarding regional differences one can broadly itemize the following areas as of utter concern for hunter-gatherers.

- a) Anxiety for food: It translates into a wish that the animals one eats should multiply
- b) Anxiety of fury of nature: Attributed as punishment of the spirit world for transgressing nature. Again propitiation of nature is the method of mitigation.
- c) Anxiety of death: Again translated into the spirit world which requires propitiation with food – which means animal sacrifice.

Thus, fertility of the bio-diversity and a desire to form a sort of organic solidarity emerges as the two driving forces which engages the minds of individuals in simple societies. Most of the depiction of rock art including female genitals reflect the concern of fertility and the palm impression as also dancing figures possibly the attempts of registering solidarity.

The rock art evidences from India are not only varied in form and style but also show a continuing involvement with animals within one's immediate environment. Not only were these faithful representations as in Ladakh and Zaskar valleys, but also at times imaginary additions are known to have been added. The classic example of this is seen in Bhimbetka where in several instances a pig has been drawn with a pair of horns. It needs no over emphasizing, therefore, that the purpose of the rock art is more to represent a symbolic world from within the world of perception. The x-ray pattern, which by no-means is specific to only India, is another very interesting approach to portray the invisible within the area of visibility. This again goes to contradict the view generally believed that for simple societies what is not visible is never counted as the real world. It would, on the contrary, suggest that rock art is the media through which individuals in pre-literate societies tried to create a parallel world of belief. Of all the animals shown in Indian rock art one that shows rather a close association with man is a monkey. At Pachmarhi, in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, a long series of monkeys are shown over a length of almost 3 meters at Marodeo cave. These are neither shown in aggressive posture as other hunted animals are shown nor are they seen as pets. Yet there seem to be a general understanding of mutual tolerance. Interestingly even today monkeys are almost an infestation in the Pachmarhi cave sites.

Stone walls of Megalithic chambers in south India also produce several engravings. In their motif and style they represent a separate category. Since most of these Megalithic sites are dated between 1100 to 600 BCE and belong to Iron age, one can consider them as being almost in the threshold of history. Therefore, it will not be entirely wrong to suggest that the inner urge to paint one's own cognitive world is a continuing tradition in India. The social involvement and the strong customs and observances related to those who paint and to those for whom paintings are done shows how these are interwoven with the mores of social fabric of a community. It is, indeed, one of the most exciting features of folk art traditions of India where we can read the mind that produces the art and also appreciate intricate patterns and designs of their cognitive world. India, as such, provides an excellent opportunity to understand the process of continuity of the basic human urge that drives one to create visual art.