

THE ART ON ROCKS

How old is the human race?

Well, it is really hard to tell because even learned men of science have been searching for an answer for centuries, and still cannot give you an accurate answer. It is that difficult.

Opinions of these men of great learning differ. Some say man existed even 500,000 years ago. Some say they have proof of man's presence on our earth some 40,000 years ago.

Not only the scientists but archaeologists, zoologists, anthropologists and many others have been trying to search and find links to the man's past. How do these people go about tracing the history of mankind? There were no books or written documents, because there was no paper or language or the written word. Let's first peep into the past and try to visualise our ancestor's behaviour and lifestyle.

Perhaps the oldest need of man after food and water, clothing, shelter and procreation was to express himself. Before language was born he either made guttural sounds from his throat to communicate or used signs and symbols. But it was not enough.

Nature was the first teacher of man. It created for him fear, respect and love for it and taught him how to advance in life, to become what he is today—good or bad, wise or foolish.

The noise of thunder, the flash of lightning, the soothing sound of the waterfalls and the banshee music of the wind blowing through the woods, all influenced man's mind. He not only saw and observed his creator but also wanted to play along with and be a part of it. Like nature he too was both creative and destructive.

For timing, he turned his ear to nature and stomped his feet and moved his limbs to create dance. By modulating sounds from his throat or by beating of two objects and later, strumming strings, made from the guts of animals that he killed, he created music, but he still wanted to find ways of expression, so he also drew and painted.

Painting and drawing are the oldest arts practised by human beings. The pre-historic man used the cave walls as his canvas.

He also drew and painted perhaps to depict his surroundings or to keep a visual record of the important events in his life perhaps his effort to paint his history on cave walls was like our writing a daily diary.

Scientists believe that the man of stone age (the time when he used stone weapons) lived in caves using these rock shelters to protect them from rain, thunder, cold and scorching heat. They also believe, and have discovered evidences to prove that these cave dwellers were tall, strong and possessed brains larger than those of many savage to fight the natural dangers and also run a race for his life with an angry mammoth, a woolly rhinoceros, a dinosaur or a pack of wild boars. While hunting the reindeer, the wild horse, bull or a bison he was himself hunted in turn by the cave-bear, lions and other wild beasts inhabiting the surroundings.

Yes, these early men found time to draw and paint some excellent pictures. The walls of many caves around the world are full of pictures of finely carved and painted pictures of animals which the cave dwellers hunted. They also drew human figures, other human activities, geometric designs and symbols.

Scientists have learnt a lot about the early history of man by exploring old cave shelters. They dig into the

buried by the mud of ancient floods and sand from the damp walls. They dig farther to find another layer of bones and weapons telling of a still more ancient people. In these layers they also find remains (bones) of strange animals which have now disappeared from the face of this Earth. And out of these remains and what man drew on the cave walls, the story of the men of those ages is woven together bit by bit by the patient scientists who bring these relics to light.

The early man has left many a traces of his art on rock, be it figures drawn with charcoal or paintings made from colours prepared from a stone called haemetite, from the colours extracted from plants or engravings carved on stone. The paintings made with charcoal or colours are called 'pictographs' while abraded paintings (The early man was clever enough to draw an outline of figures and rub the unpainted area with another stone for the figures to stand out on stone used as background for his paintings) are known as 'petroglyphs'.

These pictographs and petroglyphs help us to understand about the early man, his life style, his food habits, his daily work and activities and above all it helps us understand his mind-the way he thought.

It seems that apart from his needs, these men living in caves certainly had a sense of beauty and hence of art. After the discovery of these paintings and drawings their discoverers called, them 'Rock paintings and 'cave carvings'.

Thankfully today it is accepted and known as rock art. It is also included in the study of the arts.

It is indeed surprising that this rock art of the early man was still practised by some cultures a couple of decades back and continues to be practised even today in certain remote places in the world.

It is even more surprising that the first discovery of the stone age rock paintings was made in India itself in 1867-68.

An archaeologist, Archibald Carlleyle found some paintings in Uttar Pradesh. He had earlier dug up the physical and cultural remains of these men from many such rock shelters. Thus, not only the first pre-historic paintings were discovered in India but the idea of their prehistoric nature was also born.

Although first specimens of rock art dating back to the stone age also called the Mesolithic stage, were found in India, yet the earliest record of rock art was discovered in India, yet the earliest record of rock art was discovered in Australia in 1796-97 but they were found to be made only in 1803. Despite the initial discovery of rock art in India, for some reason it's study did not make enough progress for a almost a century and quarter. Many experts on Rock art around the world did not even know till recently of the rich treasure of Indian rock art.

It is said that there is a purpose, a reason behind whatever man does. Of course it is not always possible for people around to make sense of it immediately. It sometimes has taken ages for mankind to understand, to solve the riddle as to why man acted in a certain manner, Why did he draw these pictures?

It is not as if rock art had not been noticed by people before. It only received a passing glance. In fact, people did not understand the importance of the early man's work. In due course of time, man today has himself taken the lid off from a great ancient art.

Rock art has inspired us to use this invaluable data for our own research and learning about so many areas of knowledge both of the arts and the sciences.

There is a small story about how men later learnt to use these paintings for records and learning. There is a rock art site in the Garhwal region of Northern Uttaranchal which is known as Gwarkhiya-Udyar which means 'The cave of the Gurkhas'. Now Gurkhas are a martial race of Nepal some of whom migrated and

settled in the kumaon-Garwhal region.

There is no 'Udyar' of cave here as such, but only a rocky recess. In fact the recess in the rock hangs from eight meters height linked to a massive boulder. Scholars and scientists have wondered why the early man chose to paint on a rock at such an uncomfortable position. It was much later, in the 19th century that the Gurkhas-who had then begun to set up their own domain in the kumaon hills had seen these cave paintings. They then painted similar figures to serve as their sign posts or markings for the future wondering Gurkha soliders.

The paintings of the early man at Gwarkhyaudyar were perhaps made at these elevated position for people to be able to notice them from a distance.

There is another legend about the way people used caves to paint and record events. 'Lakhu Udyar' near Almora in Utrakhand is another famous rock art site. The name means 'Hundred Thousand caves'. It was here that two marriage parties had once crossed their paths. There is a local superstition that a marriage procession should never meet another particularly of the bride's or groom's on the way. If it does, then bad luck befalls on both. In the above case, members of the two processions got into an argument and it led to a fierce battle. After the fight was over and a lot of blood was shed, both the parties decided to paint the walls of the surrounding cave with their blood. They did so to mark the event and let others know of the bloody out come of such meetings.

The Indian rock art, unlike the European rock art has more human figures whereas in Europe it seems the early man chose to draw and paint more animal figures than his own species.

With the passage of time, some of these paintings and carvings got faded and some were hidden beneath the different layers of sand, and mud, which kept on despositing over the walls of caves and hardened with time and changing climatic conditions. When researchers began to study this art they realised that what they were seeing was not one picture painted at one periods of many pictures drawn and painted at different periods of time. Even today many artistes paint one picture on their canvas and after some time, if they are not satisfied or happy with it, they apply another layer of paint to 'rub' out the first painting and re-use the canvas for a new idea. Actually, the first painting is never erased. It stays under another layer of paints. This way a single painted frame can have several pictures hidden underneath the different layers of paints. The only difference in the early man's rock art paintings was, that he did not rub away the paintings done by him or his ancestors, he simply drew over them. It therefore becomes both interesting and difficult to study these paintings.

Most of the paintings and carvings on rock that you have seen today are from Bhimbetka caves near Bhopal and from Lakhu Udyar in the Kumaon hills.

These paintings made by the early man by charcoal, burnt bones, haemetite (giving red colour), limestone and juice of plants have inspired modern painters and sculptures.

It is unfortunate that many of these rock art paintings are getting faded or washed away due to sun rays, rain and erosion of the rock layers but thankfully these processes of nature are slow. It is man himself who is the main destructor of this prehistoric art. Many of these caves and shelters are being used by hermits as their dwelling. They have unknowingly spoilt these priceless paintings with the grease and grime of cooking,, smoke etc.

It is important for us to keep and preserve this art to understand ourselves and to learn about our ancestors and the messages they left behind for us.

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