


Global Rock Art

Edited by
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This volume is the outcome of the Global Rock Art Conference held under the auspices of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi. The volume comprises valuable contributions from several scholars from all over the world such as Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bolivia, Canada, China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, USA and India. The interest of this publication lies not only in the greatest number of subjects treated but in the diversity of approaches. Almost all stages of research are represented. The major interlocking and overlapping themes have been grouped under the following eight sections: (1) Understanding rock art in a universal frame; (2) Country reports from China, India, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; (3) Cross-cultural comparison; (4) Environment, management, conservation and documentation; (5) Classification, chronology and standardisation; (6) Consideration of context; (7) Form, content and interpretation including language of symbols, religious themes and musical subjects; and (8) Artificial intelligence and rock art research.

The present illustrated volume will not only interest the scholars but also the public at large. It will certainly contribute to rectify our vision of rock art. It is also an important step in the journey of exploring together, globally, the source of creative energies and modes of expressions of our ancestors.

INTRODUCTION

Bansi Lal Malla

This much-awaited volume is the outcome of the Global Rock Art Conference held under the auspices of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi from November 29 to December 7, 1993. The thought-provoking inaugural address in the Congress by Dr. (Mrs.) Kapila Vatsyayan, Founder Member Secretary and present Trustee of the IGNCA, was an eye opener, which set the foundation for the further deliberations. It was a well conceived and fruitful event, first-of-its-kind in Asia, organised under the aegis of UNESCO. It left an indelible impression on the minds of its participants, both for the quantity and quality of the exchanges and debates made possible, and for the beauty of the various ceremonies and displays held. An exhibition on the 'Deer in the Indo-European Rock Art Tradition' was also held at this occasion.

It would be worthwhile to mention here that the IGNCA has conceived a major academic programme, which relates to exploring artistic manifestations emanating from man's primary sense perceptions. The classification of arts in Indian tradition is based on different primary senses. Amongst the senses that lead to aesthetic experience are vision (*Drishya*) and hearing (*Shravya*). Architecture, sculpture and painting originate from vision, music and poetry originate from hearing, and theatre from the two together. Hence, Indian aesthetics is a well-experimented psychoanalytical process of judgement. Most probably, man's first awareness of the world around came through his primeval sense of sight and ability to hear. Under this programme, the Centre is thinking for the establishment of the twin galleries of *Adi Drishya* (primeval vision) and *Adi Shravya* (primeval sound). The rock art forms a crucial component of the *Adi Drishya* programme.

It is necessary to mention here that the fundamental approach of the IGNCA in all its works is multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, multi-directional, multi-layering, and multi-meaning within the systematic cultural whole. Its conceptual plan aims to open the doors to the realisation that rock art is pure and absolute and hence capable of dispensing great experience beyond its original culture and time. The IGNCA's

concern with prehistoric rock art is not restricted to the archaeologists' and the prehistorians' concern with establishing a linear chronological order of prehistoric rock art, nor is it restricted to the identification of style and school as criterion for establishing chronology. Instead, it is a concern for man's creativity across time and space and civilisations and cultures through the perception of the sight. Briefly, the goal to be set is not merely the development of a multimedia gallery but also to establish *Adi Drishya* into a school of thought and research on alternate means of understanding prehistoric art. So far, we have mechanistic, analytical approaches which assume that the underlying significance of this kind of creativity cannot be inferred by statistical counts of frequency of figures, etc. Nothing could undermine the complexity and richness of this tradition more. At the moment, there is not much available in India by way of interpretative treatment of prehistoric art.

The purpose of the present project is to address all the above concerns. Its main objectives are as follows: (i) to make textual, contextual video and photo documentation; (ii) to communicate with people in the hinterland for archaeological research, and to build up a bio-cultural map, a mental and ecological atlas of the rock art landscape, on the basis of documentation of related folklore and natural and man made features; (iii) to make suggestions for structural, ecological, and, in rare cases, direct conservation, preferably using local materials and techniques; (iv) to develop a video, photo and digital archive; (v) to make documentaries on the basis of the video documentations in the field; (vi) to organise displays (permanent, mobile, temporary); and (vii) to bring out publications, both in print and electronic media. A multidisciplinary approach is being adopted for this project. The field documentation is being done in collaboration with the local experts and institutions of the areas/zones concerned. The data is being collected in a uniform format at the national level. A huge database has been compiled in this process.

The IGNCA has, so far, produced five well received publications under **IGNCA Rock Art Series**, viz., *Rock Art in the Old World* (Michel Lorblanchet, ed.), *Deer in Rock Art of India and Europe* (G. Camuri, A. Fossati, Y. Mathpal, eds.), *Rock Art in Kumaon Himalaya* (Yashodhar Mathpal), *Rock Art in Kerala* (Yashodhar Mathpal) and *Conservation of Rock Art* (B.L. Malla, ed.), and a CD ROM. We have great pleasure in bringing out this sixth much-awaited publication. The present volume contains selected articles representing rock art from all over the world. These articles contain vividness of the subjects/themes which are important while keeping in view the future development of the conceptual academic programmes designed to encapsulate Primeval Vision or *Adi Drishya* of human beings in universal and cross-cultural perspectives. It gives an insight to explore artistic manifestations emanating from man's primary sense perceptions. In magnitude, vividness and richness, it is outstanding and in some respect unique in the world. Because its spectrum is large, both in thematic and stylistic contents, rock art forms an important cultural heritage of humanity. In spite of the immense potential that rock art possesses in unravelling the mysteries of the past, the scholars by and large neglect it. Therefore, this publication aims to enhance and promote rock art research, especially in India.

The vast corpus of rock art that occurs in most of the countries of the world serves as an almost universal expression and communication of human thought since the dawn of humanity. It is one of our greatest surviving art treasures. The intrinsic efficacy of rock art lies in its universality of appeal and to endure and sustain in a manner in which all can discern it. Until recent past, the content of rock art has been much commented on as an indicator of the stage of development of the makers of the rock art. But now, for quite some time, the attempts are being made by many scholars to explore the possibility of the proximity of rock art with the art of many living communities of the world, such as the indigenous people, the aboriginals, the tribals and the nomads. Rock art possesses the largest body of evidence of human artistic, cognitive and cultural beginnings. India is fortunate in possessing one of the three largest concentrations of this world heritage, the other two being Australia and South Africa, where rock art is still a living pursuit. Therefore, it was a proud privilege for India to host such a global conference of academic merit with an urge to analyse where we stand in the global context.

In this venture, valuable contributions have been received from several scholars from all over the world such as Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bolivia, Canada, China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, USA and India. The interest of this publication lies not only in the greatest number of subjects treated but in the diversity of approaches. Almost all stages of research are represented. The major interlocking and overlapping themes have been grouped under the following eight sections: (1) Understanding rock art in a universal frame; (2) Country reports from China, India, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; (3) Cross-cultural comparison; (4) Environment, management, conservation and documentation; (5) Classification, chronology and standardisation; (6) Consideration of context; (7) Form, content and interpretation including language of symbols, religious themes and musical subjects; and (8) Artificial intelligence and rock art research. The articles included in this IGNCA Rock Art Series-6 are contributions from reputed scholars in their respective field of specialisation and the quality of presentation is of high merit having direct link with the themes. The data and the interpretations put forward in this volume by various scholars are comprehensive and analytical. Most of their views are still appropriate and hold good promise in terms of recent trends in rock art research. A couple of contributors of the volume have studied the rock art in a universal framework. In some contributions, the focus of investigation has been the criteria adopted for dating, which establish chronologies of different rock art sites, based on pigment analysis to direct dating to stylistic features. An endeavour has been made by some scholars to approach rock art with a view to reconstruct the lifestyle and environment of the people who created this art. Rock art also incorporates man's inherent sense of movement, the symmetry and rhythm, music and musical instruments, which is reflected in quite a few papers. Some of the scholars shared their views on the physical preservation, conservation of rock art sites, the conservation of the geological and environmental atmosphere of these sites, management systems, documentation, storage through image data base, and finally the application and artificial intelligence to this field. The papers presented are convincing proofs of the importance of rock art, both for archaeology as also ethnology and lifestyle studies.

The significance of prehistoric rock art forms, designs, colours and concepts perhaps reinforces and continues to emphasise the vitality of the traditional way. These elements, most probably, basic to all arts, allow the artists to visualise their concepts and traditions. Traditional philosophy expresses the vitality of the emerging contemporary art. Drawing analogy from the theme of tribal art, we can safely state that people in the prehistoric period might have conceptualised the nature into art form and worshipped the presiding deities and spirits for better living. The basic urge, which had compelled and prompted the people to manifest art, was utilitarian, invoking sympathetic magic to ensure a constant food supply. The principal food of the shelter-dwellers was games hunted so regularly. By portraying animals, the shelter-dwellers perhaps believed that it would give them success in hunting, and there would be a plentiful supply of wild animals that made them fall prey to their weapons, when they went on hunting. Thus, the prehistoric rock art acquires status of magico-religious nature. Some scholars suggest that rock shelter paintings of antelopes pierced with spears may also have served as magic invocations of success, because several tribal groups still make images personifying evil and ceremonially decapitate them.

The main stream of discussions in the conference followed two seminal issues: 'Universality' and 'Chronology'. It was observed that for the first time, the fact of universality of rock art has been highlighted quite legitimately and fruitfully. The question of chronology also came up repeatedly. While agreeing that chronology is crucial for rock art, it was admitted that, as yet, there is no absolute dating, or definite chronological order established so far. Doubts were raised on constructing a universal standard for dating in this field.

Among the other important questions raised, there was acute concern for evolving a more appropriate critical terminology for rock art research. Other problems highlighted were those of conservation and preservation of rock art sites, the safeguard of the natural environment and protection of the rights of the indigenous people inhabiting in the proximity of rock art sites.

The role of scholars for the scientific study and documentation of rock art was highlighted in the conference. The following recommendations were addressed to the scholars:

- To re-consider concepts like art, being, time, reality, existence, etc. in the interpretation of rock art, as used within the epistemic tradition.
- To discard pejorative terms such as 'primitive art', 'historic art', 'prehistory', 'natives', 'primitive cultures', 'tribal art', etc. Instead, use such terms as 'ethnic groups', 'small scale societies', 'local people', 'ethnographic art' and other value free terms.
- To assess the development of civilisation on the basis of writing would be a partial exercise. Cognisance has to be taken of the systems of oral communications which pre-date writing and have continued for millennia.
- To re-assess the acceptance of chronology as the sole criterion of rock art studies. To seriously reconsider art studies within a linear time frame and an evolutionary framework. Because, we should not ignore the fact that in the old world, the cosmocentric view dominated the lifestyle. Even the authors of rock

art and sages of the *Upanisadic* philosophy reveal the same experience of the cosmos and man's place in it. Both look at the universe as sacred artefacts. Interestingly, the text of the classical Indian theory of art is consistent with the context of what is known today as aboriginal art. The fundamental intuition, motifs and styles of rock art persist in their art.

- To improve, in every way, the database, both at the specific and local as also universal level.
- To strike a balance between universal aspects (regardless of date, location, culture) and the ever increasing and steadily improving techniques of dating, identification, etc.
- To obtain photographic evidences for the rock art drawing.
- To improve recording method for complete documentation.
- To take in view the context of rock art for accurate interpretation.
- To adopt both scientific and humanistic methodologies in view of the fact that rock art studies involve both the disciplines.
- To examine further the phenomenon of continuity between the so-called palaeo art and contemporary rock art of small communities.
- To pay more attention to the cultural fabric of small communities who have been and continue to be the creators of rock art, especially in the Third World. This is an urgent need as many such cultures are inescapably endangered on account of rapid modernisation.
- To identify the studies of the people living around the rock art sites and their (people's) use and interpretation of rock art.
- To establish the nature of relationship between the art of the collective communities or cohesive cultures and the modern urban paintings and other aspects of the arts.
- To study the underlying unity of time and space and the artistic creation, as highlighted at this conference, using many different philosophies and ways of viewing the past and the present.

The role of the institutions dealing with the rock art studies came also under discussion. The recommendations addressed to such institutions are as follows:

- To lay down the ethical practices of rock art research and to safeguard the priceless rock art heritage.
- To build up a world electronic reference bank for rock art information.
- To allow access to genuine scholars to rock art materials collected by different rock art societies and institutions.
- To invent low-cost techniques for rock art research, especially keeping in view the scholars of the Third World.
- To give top priority to protection of rock art sites which are subject to vandalism.

The validity of the above suggestions could be proved only when it is possible to make their application in the area of rock art by the concerned agencies and individuals.

It is clear from the vast spectrum covered by the *Global Rock Art* publication that although there has been a history of research on rock art, as a young discipline it is exploring various avenues of growth. The present concern of all the rock art researchers is to explore the 'future of the past' and to look beyond the duty of discovering, protecting, and educating about archaeological treasures. To decipher rock art, mainly three methods, i.e., archaeological, psycho-analytical and ethnographical are being followed. In the countries where there is no continuity of traditions due to industrialisation, etc., the archaeological and psycho-analytical approaches are being mainly adopted. But in the countries like India, where there is continuity of traditions, the ethno-archaeological and archaeological approaches are mainly being followed. The concern for exploring new ways and means for rock art research and for deciphering rock art has opened a new chapter in the history of research in prehistoric and tribal art, with new scope from the collaboration of archaeology with anthropology, art history, philosophy, semiotics, psychology, psychiatry, history of religion, cultural history, etc.

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