Rock art represents thousands of years of history and human creativity, and Indian rocks too form a rich archive of this art. The challenge now is to understand and interpret their meaning, writes JAY KHANNA.

Rock art is the world's first visual artist. The rock artist faced unimaginable hardships and daily struggles for survival in a largely hostile environment. Yet he found the strength and motivation to create 'works of art' by scratching hard surfaces and coloring them with available pigments thousands of years ago.

As one looks at the images of rock paintings made in different time periods and different countries, one wonders about the tools employed by the rock artists. What were his impulses, concerns and circumstances? What did he want to represent and why? How did he manage to convey the many challenges in creating his images? Outstanding questions that have mystified and triggered the imagination of archaeologists, historians, scholars, researchers, art historians, and philosophers alike.

"Rock art represents the most important love that humanity has on its paws," says archaeological scholar and archaeologist Hamani Anisi. "The study of rock art has started long ago, but with every generation, there are new insights. Now we are not just describing and dating but understanding."

Anisi emphasizes that rock art is part of our history and adds a new dimension and deeper understanding of culture acquired by awareness of thousands of years of human creativity. "Rock art is a heritage of human beings and provides a kind of knowledge of human societies and cultures. Study of rock art gives clues about seafaring, trade, spiritual beliefs of man in his historical productions."

According to Anisi, rock art was not created merely to entertain or to please the gods or to gain the spirits that are believed to live in the rocks. What we want to do is understand, read and to decipher the meaning of rock art. This process is opening up a new age for human history. Until now, we were talking of history from the beginning of written words, but rock art is written before writing was ever written. So, until now, human history was covering the last 5,000 years, but studying rock art we may have a human history covering the last 50,000 years."

ANISHA (Clockwise from top left): Shannon's places of worship, dåñi (dancing ground), Chauvet Cave (France, and Argentina).

WHAT WERE A ROCK ARTIST'S IMPULSES, CONCERNS AND CIRCUMSTANCES? WHAT DID HE WANT TO REPRESENT?

He took to rock art the view that rock art served different purposes. "We are very lucky that in rock art and not paper art, or art made on some perishable material (like cloth), each rock is a tree or even on human bodies), which did not last long," says an anthropologist. "It is a record of a human being, but it is a small part of human history and creativity in the past."

"We have to rock art, the importance of looking at rock art has been acknowledged by various countries and nations from the very beginning. There is also a growing concern about rock art archives that are fading and being damaged by natural causes and vandalism. The biggest threat for rock art, unfortunately, but predictably, comes from the modern human. The next multidisciplinary research, management, and decision-making has been made possible by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other international agencies. Many prehistoric rock art sites have been declared as World Heritage sites by UNESCO."

New and newer rock art sites are being discovered across the world. Archaeologist and long-time rock art researcher Dr. Lawrence L. Lucchard feels that a newly discovered rock art site should receive careful attention and in fact, be treated like a crime scene. "It has been recommended that only access to the site be prohibited until archaeologists have had the opportunity to meticulously examine the site for clues that might be relevant to an understanding of the rock art."

Another aspect of rock art is that it is notoriously difficult to date, unlike horses and tools dug up from the ground. It was commonly held that Chauvet cave paintings in France with images of bears, lions and horses were the world's oldest paintings; they were believed to be at least 37,000 years old. But in June 2012, National Geographic News and other agencies reported that a study team had considered eleven subterranean sites along northern Spain's Cantabrian Sea coast, and concluded that the cave called El Castillo had the oldest paintings, which were more than 40,800 years old.

There is a fair amount of controversy about these assertions, but most disputes that the rock artist did not leave his ineradicable marks of creativity many thousands of years ago.

Indian rock art

India, with its variety of civilizations, is among the richest countries of rock art. It is estimated that the country has the third largest concentration of rock art in the world, after Australia and Africa. The recognition of Indian rock art as an archaeological site is said to date back to 1868, but it was the discovery of himmla, the spectacularly rich rock art site in Madhya Pradesh, in 1868 that generated wider interest. Today there are many rock art sites in remote places of the country hidden beneath dense woods or inaccessible mountainous terrain. According to cultural anthropologists, the whole India in carrying the heritage of rock art that are a rare book of knowledge of the days of antiquity."

An interesting exhibition currently on at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bangalore, provides a glimpse of rock art of India and abroad. Organised by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and Archaeological Survey of India, "The World of Rock Art" exhibition unloads images of a representative collection of important traditions of rock art. The five-day travelling exhibition (Varanasi, Ganganagar, Khajuraho, Gwalior and Bangalore) is part of the IGNCA's efforts to create awareness about the first creative art of mankind. The show concludes on January 3, 2014.
The Hindu, Saturday, January 4, 2014

A chip from the past

The rock art exhibition that concludes today in the city generated a lot of interest.

ROCK ART, which dates back to the neolithic period, is the oldest form of visual documentation of human activities. It has been found in various parts of the world, including India. In India, rock art is mostly associated with the prehistoric period and has been found in various regions, including the Deccan Plateau, the Ganges Plain, and the Himalayas.

Rock art forms a special component of the Amritha Foundation’s 12th Udupi Rock Art Project, which aims to promote and preserve this ancient art form. The project, which is a collaboration between the foundation and the University of Madras, includes rock art surveys, exhibitions, and workshops. The project has been funded by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Department of Culture, Government of India.

What is the significance of rock art in Indian history?

Rock art plays a significant role in understanding the history and culture of ancient India. It provides insights into the daily life of people from the prehistoric period, their beliefs, and their interactions with the environment. Rock art also serves as a visual record of their artistic and cultural achievements.

How can one see rock art in India?

Rock art can be seen in various parts of India, including the Deccan Plateau, the Ganges Plain, and the Himalayas. Some of the most famous rock art sites in India include the Bhimbetka Rock Shelters in Madhya Pradesh, the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra, and the Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh.

What are the challenges in preserving rock art?

Preserving rock art is a challenging task, as it requires careful management and control of the environment to prevent damage from natural and human activities. Additionally, the restoration of damaged rock art requires skilled professionals and specialized techniques.

Where can one learn more about rock art?

Rock art is an important aspect of Indian history and culture. Interested individuals can learn more about rock art through books, documentaries, and websites. Museums and art centers also have resources and exhibits dedicated to rock art. Educational programs, workshops, and cultural events also provide opportunities to learn about rock art.

What is the future of rock art in India?

The future of rock art in India is promising, with ongoing efforts to promote and preserve this ancient art form. The Udupi Rock Art Project is one such initiative, which aims to raise awareness and interest in rock art. It is hoped that this project and others like it will contribute to the continued protection and study of rock art in India.