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Introduction

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Art and human life are inseparable. Indian thought currents, values and ethics have always had reverence for all that existed in nature, so much so that it evolved a concept that all that is alive, from plants to animals and human species, belong to a single family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). They have all originated from a common source and are interdependent. The same worldview has found its reflection in Indian art, both in vernacular and classical traditions.

Rock art, being the earliest expression of human aesthetic desire and an important cultural marker having multifaceted dimensions, together with its allied subjects like rock sculptures, rock-cut monuments, megalithic structures and tribal arts, has always intrigued scholars. The archaeological repositories of rock art, with its ethnographical context reported from different territories across the country, have enhanced the academic significance of this unique indigenous heritage. Rock art being an intricate and complex domain covering material and cognitive aspects of culture, a multidisciplinary approach is advocated to decode and understand it in all its dimensions. While disciplines like geology, geography and other branches of natural sciences take care of the materialistic and scientific basis of the subject, the humanities and social sciences can well be utilised to decipher the aesthetic, cultural and historical aspects. To study the prehistory of the North-East in this context becomes equally important.

North-East India is a lesser-known area for archaeological research. The archaeological evidences from this enormous, and one of the most strategic regions of India, are still so meagre that any attempt to trace the course of human history, especially of the vast unrecorded prehistoric past becomes a difficult task.

North-East India, being a contact zone of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asian countries, has a great diversity of cultural material dating from prehistoric times. Comparatively well-documented Neolithic cultural material is still described in a classificatory manner, which makes it almost impossible to explain the basic terminological issue of Neolithic culture, which was a new way of life in the Prehistoric times. A fresh approach with archaeological, linguistic and ethnographic evidence is to be adapted and applied in order to understand the relevance of North-East India, commonly known as the “Seven Sisters”, to the early origins of pottery and agriculture in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.

The occurrence of abundant Neolithic tools on the surface of the present-day shifting cultivation fields in the regions of North-East India, especially in the Garo Hills, indicates the site formation process and the possible use of associated tools. However, the formation process of the Neolithic sites of North-East India have undergone different kinds of



disturbance activities, particularly, the cultural disturbance process. The region under discussion also had a rich presence of megaliths occurring in the form of raised upright monoliths or menhirs and horizontally laid table stones. The tradition of erecting megaliths still continues in many parts of the region among the Naga, Khasi, Jaintia and Karbi tribes. As far as historical archaeology is concerned, very few sites have been found excavated in this region as yet.

Rock art research in North-East India is in the formative stage. To have a better understanding of the existence of rock art tradition in this part of the country, it is necessary to view it in the broader context of the Indian subcontinent and southern territories on the whole. With this background, a National Seminar on Prehistory and Ethno-archaeological Context of Rock Art was organised by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi in collaboration with Tripura Central University and Gauhati University at Agartala, Tripura on 26th-27th November, 2015. The seminar was jointly inaugurated by Professor Mridul Hazarika, Vice Chancellor, Gauhati University and Professor A.K. Mukherjee, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Tripura University. Some of the senior scholars from the North-East and other parts of India participated in the two day seminar, including Professor A. Sundara, Professor V.H. Sonawane, Dr. G.L. Badam, Professor S. Pradhan, Dr. B.L. Malla, Dr. Jonali Devi, Dr. P.B. Devi, Dr. R. Handique, Dr. S. Phukan, Dr. T. Thakuria, Professor S. Poddar, Dr. Dwipen Bezbaruah, Dr. S. Debbarma and Dr. R. Mohana. The participation of renowned scholars, researchers and students enriched the deliberations of the seminar.

The objective of the seminar was to delve deep into the recent prehistoric and historic investigations carried out by various eminent scholars in this region. Infact, it was an explanatory attempt to broadly trace the origin and antiquity of prehistory and rock art of North-East India. The seminar helped scholars to interact and share their valued opinions, views and theories, which may help them in the long run in establishing a well designed chronological framework pertaining to the prehistoric and historical times that prevailed in the bygone era in this region. A proper survey, documentation and study of rock art of the area may also greatly contribute to this effort. The technical issues related to rock art and its allied subjects in the context of North-East India will be dealt in detail in another seminar. Some of the important recommendations made at the end of the seminar included:

1. In the first place, a thorough understanding of the geology and minerals as well as flora and fauna, drainage systems to recognize/locate caves and shelters in the hill ranges as well as to trace pre- and proto-historic sites especially in the valleys of Brahmaputra and her major tributaries is required.
2. A close contact has to be developed with the shepherds, hunters, forest department guards, and honey-collectors etc. of the region, who generally move about in hills and can provide information on rock art sites.
3. To sensitize villagers, high school and college students through TV, periodicals, social media etc. about rock art sites. Local people should be addressed in a language they understand. They should be made more aware regarding the



necessity of preservation/conservation of rock art sites. Marking rock art sites as 'endangered' or 'critically endangered', as is done for the fauna and flora species, should be considered.

4. After getting all the information about sites from the sources mentioned above, a systematic and multidisciplinary study can be taken up by IGNCA for exploration/field documentation in the different states of the North-East following a pilot survey. In this way, mapping of the rock art sites of North-East India in a comprehensive manner is necessary.
5. More attention can be given to discover the varied unattended archaeological materials which lie in different parts of North-East India so as to include them in the rock art map of India.
6. Enumerate and contextualize the available rock art ecology, history, geography and belief systems of the area/region. Efforts should be made to explore potential areas bearing granite outcrops to look for rock art in the form of either engravings or bruising.
7. Extend academic collaboration with scholars and institutions in the Southeast Asian region to understand the context of rock art in a much better way for a comprehensive study of the rock art in the region. We may explore the possibility of organizing an International Conference on 'Prehistory and Rock Art of North-East India and Southeast Asian region'.
8. There is need to organize more such seminars in different parts of North-East India. A seminar and workshop can be organized at the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong covering the art and engravings from archaeological and anthropological perspectives for proper understanding and preservation of the rich heritage.
9. Seminars may also be organized in schools and colleges by inviting resource persons and the local populace for spreading awareness among the school children and youth regarding rock art sites for better preservation, protection and projection of these sites. Such initiatives will also promote rock art tourism in the long run.
10. Inclusion of a paper with emphasis on rock art in the History syllabus (at least in the Ancient History group) of colleges. Also, attempts should be made to include lessons on rock art in school textbooks. There is a need to bring out publications on North-East India's prehistory and rock art.
11. Use of social media for wider dissemination of knowledge.

Here, it would be worthwhile to mention that IGNCA has conceived a major academic programme which relates to exploring artistic manifestations from man's primary sense perceptions. Rock Art forms its crucial component. A huge database has been compiled in the process of documentation and study related to rock art and its allied subjects since its inception.

IGNCA has, so far, produced 14 well received publications under its Rock Art Series, viz., *Rock Art in the Old World* (ed. Michel Lorblanchet), *Deer in Rock Art of India and*



Europe (ed. G. Camuri, A. Fossati, Y. Mathpal), *Rock Art in Kumaon Himalaya* (Yashodhar Mathpal), *Rock Art in Kerala* (Yashodhar Mathpal), *Conservation of Rock Art* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Global Rock Art* (ed. B. L. Malla & V. H. Sonawane), *Rock Art of Andhra Pradesh: A New Synthesis* (N. Chandramouli, General Editor B. L. Malla), *The World of Rock Art: An Overview of Five Continents* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art: A Catalogue* (ed. S. S. Biswas), *Rock Art Studies: Concept, Methodology, Context, Documentation and Conservation*, Volume I (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art Studies: Interpretation through Multidisciplinary Approaches*, Volume II (ed. B. L. Malla). *Rock Art of India: Suitable Dating Techniques* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Glimpses of India China Rock Art* (B. L. Malla) and *Silent Rock's An Eloquent Testimony: Rock Art Heritage of Odisha* (S. Pradhan, General Editor B. L. Malla). We have great pleasure in bringing out the 15th publication in the series – *Cultural Ecology: Prehistory and Ethno-Archaeological Context of Indian Rock Art*.

Prehistoric and archaeological research has been a key issue of the North-Eastern states and continues to encounter difficulties about its methodology and misinterpretation of its findings. In this volume, it is intended to understand at least some of these findings holistically, in its proper context and cultural ecology. Archaeological research is generally based on the material remains of past human society. The material remains or the archaeological records are carefully examined and studied to obtain a possible scenario of the past ways of life of human beings. If the archaeological record is insufficient for the reconstruction of past human society, other sources such as ecological, geographical, and ethnographical sources become very helpful for archaeological interpretation.

The present volume is divided into two sections. The first section talks about the cultural dimensions of ecology and rock art of the North-Eastern states and the second section mainly talks about the cultural context and rock art of the rest of India.

The first paper in this volume “An Interface of Ecology and Culture: Indigenous Perceptions of Environment” by B. L. Malla has given a bird’s eye view of the thought process of the indigenous people of North-East India. It covers their worldview towards cosmic harmony and human order, topography and settlement patterns, belief systems, traditional arts and crafts, etc.

Jonali Devi in her paper on the “Archaeological Research in North-East India: Historical Development and Current Status” has made an attempt to scrutinize the nature of studies done so far on North-East Indian archaeology and assesses the development together with the recent theoretical advances in the discipline.

Dwipen Bezbaruah in his paper on the “Prehistoric Context and Occurrence of Rock Art in North-East India” has given a prehistoric perspective of Assam and adjoining states, with special reference to rock art sites.

Sarat Phukan in his paper on the “Geological Background of Rock Art Sites of Assam with Evidences of Engravings and Related Archaeological Evidences” has given his observations on the geology of the area and selection of the rock art sites for making engravings and construction of temples.

Tilok Thakuria in his paper “Recent Discovery of Petroglyphs in Dima-Hasao District, Assam” has given the distribution of petroglyphs in Dima Hasao, their patterns, cultural associations and techniques.



Rajib Handique in his paper “Historical significance of Uma Tumoni and Its Rock Art” has highlighted the historical significance of this site in Assam and its rock art.

P. Binodini Devi in her paper “Rock Art of Tharon Area, Manipur” has given an account of the different art forms of the area and their aesthetic sense which is reflected in their rock art.

A. Sundara in his paper “Some Comparable Rock Art Pictures from Assam Region and Karnataka: A Preliminary Investigation” has made an attempt to make a comparative study of the pictures, period-wise as far as possible.

In the first paper of the rest of India section, “Art Heritage: A Mirror of Nature-Human Relationship”, B. L. Malla has attempted to discuss the nature of the art of both the vernacular and classical traditions in India, which is enshrined in a cosmocentric worldview.

Sadasiba Pradhan in his paper “Rock art of Odisha: An Ethno-archaeological Perspective” has given an account of the universally accepted method for interpretation of rock art to show how ethnographic data drawn from primitive tribal societies may serve as a useful tool for interpreting the rock art of bygone days.

V. H. Sonawane in his paper “Chadravati Engraved Core and Rock Art: An Ethno-archaeological Case Study” assesses the plausible interpretation of the design engraved on the fluted chert core.

G. L. Badam in his paper “Some Aspects of Rock Art Research” has given an account of the geological and palaeontological aspects of India with special reference to the North-East.

R. Mohana in his paper “A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Study of Rock Art: A Case Study of Karnataka” has followed the approach for rock art research in Karnataka.

The papers included in the volume highlight the immense potential that rock art possesses in unraveling the mysteries of the past. The data and the interpretations put forward by various scholars are comprehensive and analytical. Most of their views are appropriate and hold good promise in terms of recent trends in rock art research. This illustrated volume aims to boost and promote the importance of the rock art research, particularly in North-East India.

Lastly, I would like to state that the views expressed by the scholars in their papers may not be taken as those of the editors as well.

