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Ethnographical approach to study rock art in the context of India

Bansi Lal MALLA

Summary
The study of rock art in India and Europe began late in the nineteenth century. So far rock art has been interpreted with different theoretical orientations, generally based on vague and misguided notions of 'primitive mentality'. Primitive man is denied of having "deeper aesthetic feelings" and being capable *of* "the highest moral and intellectual speculations". Following the evolutionary approach – i. e. accepting the propositions about human cognitive development and the process of evolutioning emergence of language – "scientific" claims have been made for the "origin of art". But 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 revealed the same experience of the cosmos and man's place in it. Both traditions look at the universe through sacred artifacts. Interestingly, 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.
The art of mural paintings may have existed in the civilisation of the Indus Valley, but we do not have any concrete example of this type. However, a variety of such decorative paintings are noticed on the pottery discovered from that area. The excavation of chalcolithic sites yielded a large number and variety of painted pottery with geometric designs, similar to those in evidence in prehistoric rock paintings or in contemporary tribal mural art. The tradition of wall paintings seems to have continued but for lack of evidence we have no examples until the beginning of the historical period. Paintings emerge in this period as a very distinct and cultivated art among royalty and elite sections of society and a very popular tradition among the rural and tribal population of India. In the different regions of the world where traditions have best been preserved and where Rock art has persisted until recent times, its interpretation has often been sought in current popular beliefs. It is a general belief that traditions never die but simply change as time passes. The forebears of contemporary tribal people had a variety of ways to express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos. Current myths and traditions can offer us tools for analysis, elements for thought, but not, of course, ready-made answers. They can provide an approach to the study of rock art, which is complementary with that of archaeology, even though it often holds certain dangers.

1. Backdrop

The artistic tradition of India is one of the oldest and richest in the world. Beginning with prehistoric rock paintings, and finding expression in a vigorous school of modern art, the tradition spans more than 10,000 years with the production of art treasures. It comprises of masterpieces in all major artistic media such as painting, architecture, sculpture, terracotta, metal work, textiles and ceramics.
Rock art is one of the richest cultural resources in the world and depicts the earliest expressions of humankind. This prehistoric art perhaps comes to signify the underlying philosophies and the world-view of ancient people, and tells us about the soul of a community, its thoughts, beliefs and emotions. It is associated with cultural values, particularly in countries like India and Australia, where this art is a part of the living cultural heritage of its native population. Fortunately, India (Fig. 1) has one of the world's six major repositories of prehistoric rock art, and is the first country in the world to discover it in 1867 A.D. at Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh. The other places of the globe are South-Western Europe, Russia, North Africa, South Africa and Australia.
The origin and antiquity of Indian paintings may be traced in prehistoric rock paintings. The art of mural paintings may have existed in the civilisation of the Indus Valley, but we do not have any concrete example of this type. However, a variety of these decorative paintings are noticed on the pottery discovered from that area (Fig. 2). The excavation of chalcolithic sites yielded a large number and variety of painted pottery

with geometric designs, similar to those in evidence in prehistoric rock paintings or in modern tribal mural art. The tradition of wall paintings seems to have continued but we have no examples until the beginning of the historical period. Paintings emerge in this period as a very distinct and cultivated art among royalty and elite sections of society and a very popular tradition among the rural and tribal population of India. In the different regions of the world where traditions have best been preserved and where rock art has persisted until recent times, its interpretation has often been sought in current popular beliefs. It is a general belief that traditions never die but change as time passes. The forebears of the present day tribal people have a variety of ways to express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos. Current myths and traditions can offer us tools for analysis, elements for thought, but not, of course, ready-made answers. They can provide an approach to rock art, which is complementary with that of Archaeology, even though it often holds certain dangers.

1.1 Indian Art: A Conceptual Framework

The study of rock art in India and Europe began late in the nineteenth century (1867) with the discovery of rock paintings from the Kaimur ranges of Mirzapur (India), Altamira in Spain 12 years later, and caves of Southern France. So far rock art has been interpreted with different theoretical orientations - generally based on vague and misguided notions of "primitive mentality". Primitive man is denied of having "deeper aesthetic feelings" and "highest moral and intellectual speculations". Following the evolutionary approach - addressing the propositions about human cognitive development and the process of emergence of language - "scientific" claims are made for the "origin of art". But 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 traditions look at the universe through sacred artifacts. Interestingly, 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. 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.

Indian art is believed to have two streams of expressions from the earliest historical period i.e. *'Margi'* (classical) and the *'Desi'* (vernacular), both of them forming two banks of the river of the arts. The *'Margi'* or monumental tradition, rooted in ancient *Shilpa* texts was influenced by the sensibilities of changing patron and environment. Many great schools of hereditary craftsmen flourished under the patronage of the royal courts within this tradition. But the arts and skills of village societies operated through the vernacular form of artisan guilds. Fairs, festivals and pilgrimage provided the catalyst, the generating force for creative expression in rural societies. In fact, the solar and lunar calendars in the Indian sub-continent mark the rituals, ceremonies and festivities. These ceremonies and festivals re-evoke the perennial interrelationship of the five primal elements – water, earth, air, fire and ether. In each festival there is the rhythm of creation, consecration, worship and either throwing away, or burning, or immersion. In the temple an icon is permanent and the worship is in a set routine.

All world religions view the universe as God's artefact. God is the supreme Artist, God's work is the natural world, visible to the human eye. The *Upanisadic* sages described it as the Cosmic tree. At the symbolic level, "This tree is the great world mother, the Goddess of Nature who nourishes all life with the milk of her breast". The metaphor of Cosmic tree shows that the sacred is the proper context of both art and nature. Man is inseparable from nature. Man as a part of nature imitates God's primordial works of art. What he does, as an artist, is "cosmography", a kairological art on which all types of arts are based.

The Indian theory of aesthetics is deeply rooted in the triple principle of *satyam* (Truth), *shivam* (Goodness/ auspiciousness) and *sundaram* (Beauty). *Satyam* (Truth) is paired with *rtam*[*] (Cosmic Order) in the famous passage of *Rgveda* (X.90.1), which says that both of these were born of kindled *tapas*. *Tapas* is the basic effort and form of the manifestation of existence, creation and bliss from the basic cause. This relates to the primary analysis of creation, where Reality is seen in two forms i.e. *rtam*, the kinetic aspect of order and *satyam*, the potential aspect of Truth. Thus *rtam* is the framework in which the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution operates. Its most important meanings include Cosmic Order, Truth, Nature (*Dharma*), Beauty and Continuous Flow. It regulates the cosmos into a systematic whole.

The true aim of the artist is not to extract Beauty from nature, but to reveal life within life, the Noumenon within phenomenon, the Reality within unreality and Soul within matter. When that is revealed, Beauty reveals itself. So all the nature is beautiful for us if only we can realise the divine ideas within it. To express the Truth is the virtue of the artist. In it he is not bound either by subjective inclinations or by objects or

facts in themselves; he is free, what is true is beautiful. What is beautiful is delighting. The freedom of man lies thus in delight. To live this life of Truth is the way of man's being. The works of art thus enables a man to move from quantity to quality, from fact to Truth and from utility to Beauty.

Beauty is not embodied in matter but it belongs to the spirit and can only be apprehended by spiritual vision. It is subjective and not objective. There is no Beauty in natural phenomena, every object is properly fitted to fulfil its parts in cosmos, yet the Beauty does not lie in the fitness itself but in the divine idea, which is impressed upon those human minds which are turned to receive it. Indian artists always insisted upon spiritual Beauty.

The Indian art is struck by an extraordinary feat of traditional thought – streams of thoughts, which are both simple and complex. At one level, simple words are used so that everybody can understand the nature of art and art of nature. But at a higher level it becomes 'cosmology' instead of simple explanations. Religion plays an important role in Indian art. Perhaps nowhere else has there been a richer and more varied spiritual heritage than in India. The icons play an important part in religious worship in India. It is only with the help of images that the gods and goddesses can be visualised. Although little is known about the religious beliefs of prehistoric India and the Indus civilisation, it can safely be assumed that this art too served religious purposes. The art for purely aesthetic purposes came into being in the modern times under European influences and was alien to traditional Indian society. The classic Indian architecture and sculpture are inescapable from Indian religion. Similarly, traditional Indian paintings are dedicated to the belief system. The purpose was to create a bridge between the human and the divine.

When viewed at the level of perception and experience, Indian expression of art are held together by an integral vision that generates life an art, part and parcel of a single totality where life functions and creative art are inseparable from myths, rituals, festivals and ceremonies. No dichotomy between the sacred and profane, life and art is found. The human and the divine form a continuum, in a constant movement of interpretation and transformation.

1.2 Village Paintings

In all ancient cultures belief and ritual occupy an important place. Often they are unable to discern the proximate or remote cause of natural calamities by reasoning, therefore they attributed to the wrath of malevolent spirits who were annoyed or angered for one reason or another. An attempt is then made to appease the malevolent spirits or god. It is not only for the negative purpose of warding off diseases and disaster but also to invoke their blessings for peace, prosperity, abundant crops, health, cattle and numerous happy children. Different cultures have different ways to do so. For instance, in the Saora (tribe) invocation, the chanting words are less important as compared to the Santal (tribe) invocation. It is the production of icons, which are in focus. For Saoras the icon becomes the 'symbol of will and realisation of dream or goal, both negatively and positively'. The worship of gods and spirits takes many forms and a vast complex of ritual – religious ceremonies may be associated with it. But quite often they are a combination of (1) ritual chanting, invocations or incantations (2) certain purification rites involving a person or persons offering the worship and the physical space where it is being sanctified (3) physical objects such as food or drinks, flowers, incense, etc. and (4) accompanying plastic *visual* or performing arts, such as specially designed paintings, icons, murals and songs and dances. All these activities have a ritualistic significance. The performer could either be a priest (Pl. 1) or the head of the household. The drawings on the mud walls of Saora (Pl. 2), Warli (Pl. 3) and Rathwa (Pls. 4,5,6,7) houses are part of the world-wide phenomenon of traditional cultures finding its expression in mural paintings of mud walls.

In Orissa the art of icon making is found only among the Saoras. It is confined to the hill settlements of the Saora tribe that lives in the Pottasinghi area of Gunupur sub-division of Koraput district and in the Parlakamedi and Chandragiri areas of Ganjam district. Saora icon making is primarily related to matters of health and death, epidemic and disease and childbirth. The Saora icon drawn on the walls and is locally called *ITTALAN (ID* = to write; *KITALAN* = a wall). The term varies from one area to the other. Saoras living around Chandragiri refer to it as *ANITAL (KINTAL* = wall, the drawings on the walls are called *ANITAL)*. Similarly, the Pithora painters of western India call painting, "writing" *LIKHANA* and painter, *"writer" LAKHERA* . Infact many traditional societies have no formal term for art, no separate word for artist. The majority of their people can paint and carve. The priest may have the privilege for producing paintings and songs in ceremonies. Sometimes other members of a clan may hold such a status.

Most tribal communities like Rathwas, Saoras and Santals believe that health and continuity of life are natural whereas disease, sickness and death are unnatural, and that these natural *unnatural* phenomena are the work of malevolent spirits who need to be won over with offerings and worships. The icons thus follow

the first act of ritual divination. Before drawing the icon the priest *(kudan)* worships the village gods and other important deities including the ancestors installed within the village boundary.

The major icon is drawn on the wall close to the entrance of the house (Pls. 3,4) or on the wall facing front door of the house. The icons include drawings of men, women, animals, flowers, fruits, line designs, heavenly bodies, means of transport including bicycles, jeeps, aeroplanes; one can also find furniture, food grains, agricultural implements, weapons and any other conceivable thing in the house. The icons of ancestors are generally drawn on the inner side of the wall in some inconvenient place away from light so that they are not easily seen by visitors. The icons are generally drawn by the priest *(kudan)* or the sorcerer of the village or any male member who knows the technique of drawing the icons. The icons are always made in the morning. The first preference is however the priest. The housewife prepares some powder of white rice, adds water to obtain the density of a white paint, and gives it to the priest *(kudan)* to start the drawing of the icon. The woman prepares this paint after her bath and on empty stomach. The day before the portion of the wall to be used was given a clean wash with a diluted mixture of local red earth and water. The icon drawn on the wall is kept as such until it is repeated the following year.

There is a prescribed season to draw these icons, but no specific dates. The icons are generally drawn in September/October *(Ashvina)*. The appropriate time also varies from place to place. The Saoras of Guma area of Parlakimedi subdivision draw the icon in the month of Margasir during any eating ceremony of new food. The date of observance largely depends upon the availability of a priest, the consensus of the people observing it, and the economic viability of the household. Nowadays, the core of the ritual generally coincides with the worship of the Goddess Durga by non-tribal society.

The Saora paintings evidently combine both magic and religious rituals. It operates through words as spells and also a series of rites and that too through the media of spirits. It is also an attempt to directly acquire power over supernatural forces, as in all forms of magic.

In Savara (Saora) settlements of Seetampeta Mandal of Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh one can find three types of icons. A first one is connected with '*chukkalapanduga*' and is performed to please the dead woman by a widower who remarries, as it is believed that the spirit of the dead woman may harass her husband for remarrying another woman. The second type of icon is usually called '*Konda Loddalu*' (crops cultivated on hill slopes) and is performed to please the hill goddess as well as evil spirits in order to have a good yield of crop. The household offers bits of cooked food in front of this type of icon. One can also find a third type, the paintings of the Mother Goddesses. This goddess is propitiated by the entire village for protecting it from evil spirits coming from different settlements. In the Savara religious system there are three functionaries i.e. '*Yajjodu*', '*Jannodu*', and '*Disari*'. The '*Jannodu*', the central figure of religions functions, goes into trance and directs the household to perform *'Chukkalapanduga'* to please the spirits. On the instruction of '*Jannodu*', *Yajjodu* prepares the icon. If there is any shortfall in the content, '*Jannodu*' goes into trance again and directs the artist to rectify it. Once the icon is ready the *'disari'* fixes the auspicious day and time to perform the ritual. On this specified occasion and under the direction of *'Jannodu'* an elaborate ritual is performed in which a male buffalo, or a pig or a goat, is sacrificed and the feast in the village is subsequently arranged.

The making of *Osakothi* (*osa* = penance *kothi* = sacred space) ritual paintings in Orissa is also an echo of an Pan-Indian tradition. The *Osakothi* ritual complex is one of India's finest living traditions centring around annually - produced folk murals of goddesses and gods. Its close parallel is seen in the ritual relating to Rathwa mural paintings in Gujarat. In both the cases there is transformation and re-enactment of the visual image. The act of painting is associated with being possessed by divine spirits, singing, dancing and invocation. The Pithora painters of western India execute the creation story, which is said to have originally been "written" by the God Pithora. The priest identifies the painted figures. He goes into trance and, taking up the sword, moves from one end of the painting to the other. He accounts for each form, and identifies them one by one. Animal sacrifice follows the painting ceremony. Once the ritual is completed, it is believed, God Pithora stays on the walls of the house where he has been installed, and its inhabitants live with him forever.

The tradition of *avahani* (invocation) and *visarjan* (bidding farewell) to the paintings are intrinsic to the ritual art. In the case of *Ayyappan* worship in Kerala, as also the making of an image of Kali, the subsequent performance of Mudiyettu, and the obliterate action of the image in trance, the spirit of the painted deity is transferred to the body of the actor as Kali. The Kerala performance has close connection with the trance dances of Kumaon.

The Pithora is believed to be a ritual wall painting *Mandali* rendered to propitiate the fertility deity Pithora by the Rathwa, the Bhil and Bhilala *Adivasis* (tribes) in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The main myth

is painted with a sacred enclosure *(cok)* which is a rectangular space. The minor deities, ancestors and ghosts as well as some features of life of the present world are depicted outside the sacred enclosure, on the same wall and on other walls. The anthropomorphic guardian deity Ganeh is installed at the right in the beginning of the entrance of the enclosure. The sacred enclosure symbolises the ritual reduction of the entire worldview of this earth as such. There are no formal separation of the earthly or mythological spaces. There hardly exists a dividing line between the myth and the reality. The paintings are an iconographical and pictorial conceptualisation of mythological ideas of the Rathwas.

The Pithora ritual is performed generally during the month of August (on or around *Rakhi* festival), either after the fulfilment of a wish or alternately for wish fulfilment, for plentiful harvests, material prosperity and propagation of the lineage.

With regard to representations and their interpretation there are variations from region to region and community to community. It is interesting to note that among the Bhil of Dhar and Jhabua, and Bhilala of (Jhiri) Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh, the later paintings of Pithora lack elaborated decorations, which is instead to be found in the Pithora of Rathwa. Apart from decorative embellishments, horses and figures are more realistically conceived in Rathwa paintings. In the Bhil and Bhilala Pithora, horse processions are never shown moving from left to right as in the Rathwa Pithora, but horses, held by grooms, are drawn coming from both directions and meeting in the middle. In the Bhil and Bhilala paintings no deities are rendered and they are represented by horses. Whereas in the Rathwa version from Gujarat (with exception of Baba Ind), other deities are figuratively represented as riding the horse. The horse is seen by many communities as a supreme symbol of virility and vigour, fertility and power. A ubiquitous figure in Warli paintings of Maharastra is the horse carrying humans. The horses in Warli paintings do not walk on ground, but soar through space. Warlis believe that the horse carries the dead ancestor on his back. This is almost always so in Warli paintings except when the bride and the groom are carried on its back. The *Kathia Ghoda* (painted black horse) of Pithora paintings is believed to reach anywhere with its supernatural power. The horse seems to have a central significance in Bhil life also. The main figures in Pithora are that of horses. Clay and terracotta horses are the main votive offerings in almost all magical, religious and festive occasions and their broken remains can be seen scattered under trees and in front of deities all over the Bhil land. The *Gatha,* memorial pillar for the dead, must have a horse on it. The carved wooden prayer boards depicting warriors and horsemen are used by the Korku tribe too in the funeral ceremonies.

Warli paintings can be compared to the Saoras of Orissa who paint to satisfy a god or an ancestor who is causing trouble. There is an over crowding of events which take place in a jumbled space, though there is a robust vitality about them as well. But the Warli sense of space is quite different. In fact they are not intent on warding off the ghosts of the underground, but rather on regulating the order of the universe which is their own order as well. In Warli paintings we find humans, trees and animals etc., which seem to be rising from a bottomless depths. As in Rathwa paintings, in Warli paintings there is no single line of vision, but a multiplicity of events take place simultaneously (Pl. 8,9). The evenness of space allows for a comprehensive belief in the unity of all creation. All the figures can be seen at the same time, as if seen from an aerial view. All the figures are interrelated to each other in a way that makes them form a true whole. And yet each movement or gesture can only be described in its own terms and not in a hierarchical manner. Everything exists simultaneously in the present. Time in its essence is eternal, seen as a process rather than as something irreversible. The boundless space reflects the relationship of the Warlis with their environment.

Before setting about to paint, the Warlis plaster the mud wall with cow dung and then coat it with *geru* (red mud). While installing Pithora paintings the Rathwas apply the plaster of mud and cow dung on the wall for nine days. According to local songs, the *Naghnya (Naghnya* is perhaps the plural of the Gujarati word *Naghni*, meaning small and therefore small, unmarried girls) observe the ritual fast for all these nine days. And on the night of the ninth day, which is Tuesday (*Panduria)*, one applies the final coating consisting of a water based solution of white clay. On the early morning of the next day the wall is ready for painting. For making the ritual paintings the sacred rectangular enclosures are drawn in both the cases.

The main colours used in the paintings are red, green, blue, yellow and orange. The oxide colours are bought nowadays from the market and mixed with milk and sometimes with *mahuda* alcohol, to prepare liquid pigments. The other materials used for the painting are the wooden stencils or those cut out from sheet iron, brushes made out of pieces of tender stems of bamboo, arrowheads or kitchen knives for incised drawings, and cotton string for measuring areas and drawing straight.

2. Rock Art and Ethnographical Parallels: An analysis

The significance of rock art forms, designs, colours and concepts perhaps reinforces and confirms the validity of the traditional way. These elements, most probably basic to all forms of art, allow the artist to visualise concepts in his/her tribal traditions, along with traditional philosophy, expresses the vitality of the emerging contemporary art. The wall paintings perhaps have their roots in the ancient tradition of rock art. At this stage, the search for diachronic comparison between the present day tribal paintings with those depicted by the early man in rock shelters becomes particularly important. Rock art material along with ethnographical evidence suggests a close dynamic relationship between man and nature. The style of drawings with plants, animals and abstract motifs is an indication of this relationship. Its study may involve three successive phases: an initial entering into the contemporary context of traditional art forms, then moving backward in time to different rock art stages, and ultimately constructing a conceptual framework by juxtaposing the visual and cultural text.

In order to move back to the prehistoric rock art in India a brief comparison of the contents of the art may be in order. For instance, in Central India several rock art motifs, such as mating couple, dancing scenes, medicine men, ritual performers, riding horses and elephants, hand prints, which are mostly of the Mesolithic and Chalcolithic periods, are also found in the tribal art. The same applies to wild animals. Ancient and contemporary paintings resemble in colours, style and technique.

By drawing an analogy from the themes of tribal art, we can safely suggest that people in the prehistoric, or epipalaeolithic, period might have conceptualised nature into art form and worshipped the presiding deities and spirits for a better life style. The basic urge that had prompted people to perform artwork in the first place was utilitarian, to invoke sympathetic magic and ensure a constant food supply. The principal source of food of the shelter dwellers was hunting. By portraying animals the shelter-dwellers perhaps believed it would give them success in hunting, and there would be a plentiful supply of wild animals that fell prey of their weapons. Thus the prehistoric rock art probably acquired a status of magic-religious practice.

2.1 Hunting and Community Dance

Judging from rock art, beliefs and rituals occupied an important place in the socio-religious life of all the primitive communities. Themes such as community dance and hunting indicate perhaps some sort of magic-religious significance. Deer hunting is very frequently depicted in Indian rock paintings. It is found at Jhiri site in Madhya Pradesh in Central India also. Some scholars suggest that shelter paintings of antelopes pierced by spears may also have served as magic invocations of success, because several tribal groups still make images personifying evil and ceremonially decapitate them. The priests and artists who could perform the rituals and create the paintings would have earned prestige and other rewards from the group. In this connection, a reference may also be made of a contemporary semi-hunting tribe of Karnataka where the tradition still persists among the local tribals such as Boyas. They are supposed to go on a ceremonial hunt at least twice a year and after the hunt they have a community dance before partaking the community meal by feasting on hunted animal. A painting on either sides of the main entrance of their huts, with stylised human figures in red ochre colour having, would have had some magical significance. These stylised depictions are similar to the human figures painted in the several prehistoric rock shelter sites from Karnataka i.e. Tekkalakota, Sagana Kallu, Hampi, Piklihal, Benakal, Kurugodu, Chitradurga, Anegondi, etc. Community dance (Pls. 10,11,12) is frequently depicted in Warli paintings, and also in some other rock art sites of India. At Jhiri (Pl. 13) and Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh) too dancers with drums are depicted in early historical period. Drum is the main musical instrument in contemporary day tribal communities. During the Indal Baba (Indra) and Pithora Baba worship by the present day Bhil, Bhilala and Barela communities, group dance is performed today following the beats of the drum (Pls. 14,15,16). We were fortunate enough to record a live performance of such a dance at Thaveer Singh's house in Jhiri. The dancing human figures are also found at Jhiri rock shelters no. 5, 10 and 11. In shelter no. 7, six human figures divided in two rows are seen dancing, most probably in front of the fire. It is said that in the Gond tribe the bison horn dance is still prevalent although pictures are not painted.

The tradition of dances and other performing arts at the folk level still exists in Kerala and their origin can perhaps be traced in the prehistoric paintings. Some of their dance forms are very basic and primary without being governed by textual prescription or instructions by the Sastra. A number of rock paintings record the movement and rhythm of dance in realistic format. These primeval performances have continued and survived and can be seen in many parts of India. In most of the cases the dancers are seen wearing masks. The prehistoric and tribal people probably attributed a deep metaphoric meaning to their traditional masks. By wearing a mask perhaps they became themselves spirits and acquired the nature, power, and magic skills

of spirits. As noticed in Teyyam, the tradition of painting body and face seems to have its roots in prehistoric paintings as illustrated in the caves of Ezuthu. Contemporary floor decorations (Kolam) of Kerala have realistic and geometric representations and some motifs that are comparable to ancient the rock engravings and paintings.

2.2 Animal and Tree Adoration

The tradition of worshiping animal and tree continued in different forest tribes of India. Many tribes worship the cow (*Gow Puja*) as an incarnation of Lakshmi on Dipawali festival for prosperity and wealth. They also colour her body and horns on that day, and even put their coloured hand impressions on the doors of their huts (Pls. 17,18,19; see also Pl. 20). The cow is believed to be one of the earliest domesticated animals (Pls. 21,22), as one finds her depiction in early Indian rock art too. In Rajasthan the hand print is found in *Sati* memorial stones also. It is said that Gond, Korku and Worli tribes worship (Bagan Deo), a tiger deity (Fig. 3; Pls. 23,24). Its depiction is found in many rock art sites i.e. Jhiri, Bhimbetka. Kota Kerar, Pachmarhi, etc in Central India.

At Bhimbetka, an important mythological painting showing an animal carrying the appearance of a boar is shown chasing a crab. Mathpal holds that the boar that ate the excreta of the demon is worshipped by the Korkus, a local tribe which probably also drew rock paintings. But the Gonds who sacrifice a boar and eat pork on their annual *Bari Puja* day, are strongly criticised by the Korkus, for whom these practices are taboo. The depiction of boars is found at Jhiri rock art site too. These figures are also found in contemporary village paintings and such a depiction is made alongside other paintings at Bavariakhal in the hut of Banga on his son's marriage ceremony. The different ways in which present day tribal Indians express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos is really noteworthy.

Similarly, trees and plants like *pipal, neem, bel, tulsi, kalam,* etc. are believed to be the abodes of certain deities. S.K. Pandey has reported the depiction of trees in close proximity of a decorative cross design in the Marodeo rock shelter (Fig. 4) located 11 km from Pachmarhi hills (east). Such symbols most probably were worshipped for their own value or represented deities. There is a sacred spiritual reality that the symbols represent, an understanding that it is proper and just that we all being in this space at this time and place.

A relationship between art on the furniture and the wall of the house of contemporary tribes and old rock art in Pachmarhi shelters can also be traced. The carved teak-wood/Sagoun prayer boards used in funeral ceremonies by the Korku tribe depict warriors and horsemen, identical to the rock paintings in the same region (Fig. 5). These boards are placed under a sacred tree within ten years of somebody's death in memory of the deceased during a religious ceremony that lasts for seven or eight hours. An example of such a tree is the Korku or Gond Baba Udhyoyana (Gond Deity Garden) located in the town of Pachmarhi, which is still visited by tribal people. The women play a tribal dance, holding hands in a circle around this sacred tree. Almost the same type of dance can be seen in many rock paintings of central India. Later, the boards are venerated and wept over and a goat is sacrificed and eaten, while a local liquor, made from the flowers of *mahua* tree (*Bassia latifolia*) is consumed. It is said that for making memorial pillars (*Shadoli Munda*) the relatives of the departed first go to the selected tree in the morning and invoke it by placing a little grain near its trunk and tying a string around it. The next day at sunrise the family of the deceased go with other villagers to the same tree and sacrifice a fowl and offer prayers. After it, a branch of the tree is cut and is kept on a piece of cloth without letting it fall on the ground, as such happening is considered inauspicious. The wood is brought home and the village carpenter is asked to carve a pillar. Similarly, Warlis also pay their respect to wooden deities through memorial pillars (Pl. 26).

There is ample evidence to suggest an impact of Indian rock art on tribal rural paintings, both in subject and technique. The stylistic similarities of these two distant forms of art are quite intriguing. The motifs, colour style and painting technique of some of the drawings at Bhimbetka and Jhiri, for example, resemble to some extent the drawings of Bhils, Gonds and Saoras, and the carvings of the Korkus. The rock paintings too resemble in subject matter and colour style those of village paintings. Among the paintings depicted at Bakhriya the Alpana, wild animals such as deer (Pl. 27) are almost similar in style to those found in rock shelters. Animals portrayed at Bavariakhal also have some similarity with rock paintings. Similarly, the Pithora paintings at Jhiri village depicting a row of monkeys and soldiers have some resemblance with rock shelter paintings. On the wall of a house in the Kajari village situated 35 km from Pachmarhi the figures of peacocks are very similar to the rock paintings found in Hamium-Khadd and Swen Aam shelters (Fig. 6 a&b). A peacock of almost similar type is also found in Jhiri rock shelters.

A general similarity also exists between the paintings of Warlis and those in Central India rock paintings, which show triangular humans and animals with geometrical designs. In a Warli painting a deer, whose body

is covered with diagonals, bears a striking resemblance to the deer of the rock paintings (Fig. 7 a&b).
There are some common styles in Bhimbetka rock art and tribal art; it concerns geometric human figures formed by two triangles, animal silhouettes in profile, compositions of unrelated figures and objects, decorative designs with human figures in the centre. The other common features of these traditions are simplicity, directness, unbounded nature of execution, limited colours and use of natural drawing material. The fact that these distant traditions share the same roots can also be seen in the common subject matter. As in the case of Bhimbetka, the tribal paintings found around Jhiri rock shelters are almost of the same nature and have many features in common. In both cases the paintings are normally executed with local colours, such as the dark or Indian red, white, yellow and blue. But most of the paintings are seen in red or white colours in both cases. Originally the pigments for colours were collected from the earth itself; now the colours are purchased from the market.
People's opinions about rock art vary from person to person, within the community, and between communities. Some believe it to be the creation of evil spirits (*Bhuta, Chudial,* etc.), while a few consider it a creation of *Apsaras, Devatas,* etc. Somebody also consider rock art a creation of shepherds or British. Many people living adjacent to these shelters at times show their ignorance towards its existence. The opinion about who made these rock paintings, and why and when, still varies among specialists, but it is clear that there are ethnographical connections with at least a few rock art sites. At this stage, a few questions can come up. Is there any impact of rock paintings on contemporary *Adivasi* paintings? Is there any stylistic and functional continuity? Is it a cultural continuity of tradition, or is it the evidence of universality in human mind?

2.3 Other Socio-Cultural Conventions

Rock art seems to be influenced by other socio-cultural conventions also. While making comparative study of few rock paintings with the life style of people living in adjacent areas, one could perhaps add some observations to the thesis of continuity of tradition, may be with some modifications that occurred with time.
1) Interestingly, some of the rock shelters from the very earlier days are regarded sacred, magical and enchanted places. During my field study in Central India I was able to locate and document many such rock shelters which are/were still worshipped. In this context, one could mention shelters at Jhiri (Pl. 28), Bhimbetka, Kota Kerar (Pl. 29), Gufa Maser and in Pachmarhi area.
2) In Central India, many edible flowers, fruits and tubers available in the forests are still used as food by the aboriginal population that live in prehistoric condition; they use tools and implements as prehistoric man did. They also worship and paint their tools and implements, animals and plants, pebbles and hills. These tribes by and large have preserved their animistic culture.
The reflection of a so-called food gathering stage of man is clearly reflected in their lifestyle.
3) In North- western India, at Ladakh the tradition continues of painting/engraving on small stones called *mani* stones (Pl. 30).
4) The dancers in rock art of Lakhu Udyar and Pestal rock paintings of the Kumaon Himalayan region wear long aprons and head gears with protruding objects. These are similar to those of the dancers seen today during festivals and fairs in the interior parts of the same region.
5) Drummers in the Kumaon Himalayan region still hang bowl-shaped huge drums with the help of ropes through their necks while performing. An image of such a drummer easily resembles that of a rock drawing in Pestal.
6) The mark on the waist of some human figure of the Mesolithic period as '*Langoti*' (strip of male cloth garments) is commonly used in contemporary rural India.
7) The cup marks on rock art sites perhaps refer to a community pounding festival, like the modern Bagwal of the folk Kumaon, in which many people use mortars.
8) Most probably, the geometrical mazes in Mesolithic rock art in India have evolved into the traditional tribal tattooing patterns that are prevalent throughout the North Karampura valley, South Bihar.
9) Usually the motifs of the Indian rock paintings include human and animal figures, hunting and battle scenes, handprints, inscriptions and symbols. A few illustrations connected with other activities of the contemporary tribal life as fruit gathering, rowing, mother with child etc. are also found. Some scholars have attempted to correlate these paintings with the local folklore. A reference about Mirzapur (U.P.) rock paintings is worth mention here. There is a warrior with raised hands, an elephant in each of them and both his feet trampling an elephant under them. The illustration in question, may be linked to the 'Lorikayan' popular tradition – Lorik, the hero of the love tale, single-handedly threw elephants in the war. While describing X-ray paintings of cow and *neelgai* (antelope) with an elephant embryo in their womb (Fig. 8),

Wakankar remarks that such stories are still told in the same way by the Korku tribe in Pachmarhi hills. This may perhaps have some sort of connection with the theory of reincarnation of Hindus.
10) In present day dance performances of Kerala the exotic apparels, headgears, masquerade re-enact the very environment of prehistoric time. From the very style and execution of visual texts, as seen in various rock art sites, it appears that the contextual background has hardly undergone changes over the centuries.

3. Conclusion

The answer to the question, whether today's tribal paintings represent a continuity of tradition or a result of universality of human mind perhaps lies in the above discussions. The human mind is, of course, responsible for the similar type of creations at different places and different periods of time. There is also a close relationship between the social structure and the paintings of the rock shelters. This obviously suggests that there is both stylistic and functional continuity. Many instances bear evidence to a continuing tradition, from prehistoric rock paintings to contemporary tribal art, although the canvas has changed: the Pithora paintings of animals, sun and moon in superimposed triangles or rectangles; the sanja paintings creating *kilakot* (fort) with cow dung, flowers, coloured paper strips, mundane design on the walls of the room of a pregnant girl; the *Saunra* designs on walls of the houses enshrining the dead hero or Gond. Probably, the purpose was/is – then as now – to promote abundance of crops, children and cattle, to avert evil, and attract success. It seems that the tribal art today, as in prehistoric rock art, is perceptual, dealing, however with outline rather than shadow dominated by magic and myth. Besides, we should not ignore the fact of universality of human mind in many cases, as it is also responsible for the similar type of creations at different places at a time or at different periods of time.

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II

IGNCA's Concern for Rock Art Studies

One of the major academic programmes of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) relates to exploring artistic manifestations emanating from man's primary sense perceptions. 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 Drsya* and *Adi Srvya.* The rock art forms a crucial component of the *Adi Drsya* programme. The rock art research will contribute greatly to the establishment of the *Adi Drsya* gallery, while exposition of primary sense of sound (ear), music and musical instruments will form the *Adi Srvya* gallery.

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 realization 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 it is 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.

The Sanskrit term *'Adi Drsya'* is an indicator of multiple levels of interpretations of the world *Adi* (Primeval). The IGNCA has envisaged an *Adi Drsya* gallery, which will create for the viewer, a degree of experiential contact with prehistoric art, restricted to rock art cave. It would provide the basis for entering into the changing aspects of the living arts of man. It is believed that man's awareness of the world around came through his primeval sense of sight and sound. These two scenes have stimulated artists' expressions, visual and aural, in the prehistoric past as also in the contemporary cultures. Exploring through the faculty of sight, we can construct the kind of worldview that have nearly ceased to exist, and try to infer from that the articulation of lifestyle that continue to the present only in radically altered ways. Besides, the emphasis will be given to create in the viewer both a perception of time as well as the unchanging material and non-material needs in the physical and environmental setting common to all of humankind without linking the past and the present in an evolutionary framework. While considering the diversity of form and manifold concept of time there is no good reason to restrict the understanding of rock art in terms of linear time, making it out fixed points of time in history. On the conceptual side the gallery will attempt to bring out the universalities amongst the world cultures that existed in the pre-historic times. It is intended that by placing side-by-side cross-cultural products, it can be demonstrated that there are universals in this system of visualisation, holding great relevance today. Infact it will be endeavour to create among Indian's greater appreciation of the global past. With a view to prepare for the eventual display in the rock art gallery, a great deal of research and gradual built up of permanent collections has been started by the IGNCA.

This is the modest beginning and much more needs to be done in the coming years to accelerate the work. Briefly, the goal to be set is not merely the development of a gallery but also to establish *Adi Drsya* 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 can not be inferred by statistical counts of frequency of figures etc. Nothing could undermine the complexity and richness of this traditions more. At the moment there is not much available in India by way of interpretive treatment of prehistoric art. The interpretive research and gallery display must go hand in hand. Many other Institutions and Researchers have undertaken very valuable programmes in the rock art field. These Institutions can establish a network so as to complement each others work at different levels of excavation, research, documentation and interpretation.

List of Illustrations

Figures

3) **Map of India,** indicating rock art concentration areas.

4. **Painted Pottery**, Dangwada, Ujjain, Chalcolithic period, Madhya Pradesh.

5. **Tiger (deity)**, Marodeo Shelter, Pachmarhi hills, Madhya Pradesh.

6. **Tree and Cross Worship**, Marodeo Shelter, Pachmarhi hills, Madhya Pradesh.

7. **(a) Korku men worshipping the wooden board under a sacred Tree,** Pachmarhi , Madhya Pradesh.

(b) A wooden sacred board.

4) **(a) Red paintings on the walls of the house** made by Korku Women, Kajari village, Pachmarhi , Madhya Pradesh.

(b) White painting of a peacock and another bird, Hamium Khadd shelter, Pachmarhi , Madhya Pradesh.

5. **(a) A deer in warli painting** at Dambipada, Ganjad, Maharashtra.

(b) Deer with geometrical pattern, Raisen caves, Madhya Pradesh.

6. **Drawings of pregnant cattle**, Jaora and Pachmarhi shelters, Madhya Pradesh.

Plates

1. **Tribal Shaman**, Orissa.
2. **Mural painting** , Orissa.
3. **Warli house with paintings,** Maharashtra.
4. **Pithora- the painted myth of Creation,** Bhil painting, Jhiri village, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
5. Close up of **Pithora painting.**
6. Close up of **Pithora painting.**
7. Close up of **Pithora painting.**
8. **Traditional occupations (Blacksmiths, Potters, Carpenters),** Warli painting, Maharashtra.
9. **Farming seasons,** Warli painting, Maharashtra.
10. **Dancing figures,** Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
11. **Masked dancing figures,** Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
12. **Tarpa dance,** Warli painting, Maharashtra.
13. **Dancers with drums,** Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
14. **Dancers with drums (*Dhol*) during Indal puja,** Jhiri village, Madhya Pradesh.
15. **Offering sacrifice to Indal (Tribal deity),** Jhiri village, Madhya Pradesh.
16. **Preparing for community feast,** Jhiri village, Madhya Pradesh.
17. **Hand prints in red colour**, Bakhriya village, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
18. **Hand prints in red colour,** Baghwani shelter, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
19. **Hand prints in white colour,** Bakhriya village, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
20. **Sati memorial stone under worship,** Nador village, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
21. **Domestic scene**, Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
22. **Domestication of cow,** Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
23. **Tiger God shrine (*Waghya Deva*),** Warli, Maharashtra.
24. **Men honoring Tiger,** Warli painting, Maharashtra.
25. **Boar chasing a crab,** Bhimbetka shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
26. **Wooden deities,** Warli, Maharashtra.
27. **Mural paintings depicting symbols (*alpana*), human and human figures etc.,** Bakhriya village, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
28. **Rock shelter under worship,** Jhiri shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
29. **Rock shelter under worship,** Kota Kerar shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.
30. **Depiction of rock art on small stones (*Mani* stones),** Ladakh, Nabora valley, Jammu and Kashmir.

Footnotes

**Rta* (order) and *samkshobha* (chaos) are mutually antilogous poles; synonymous with negative and positive entrophy, their increase- means organization and order in life, - disorder and death respectively.

Figures

Fig. 1

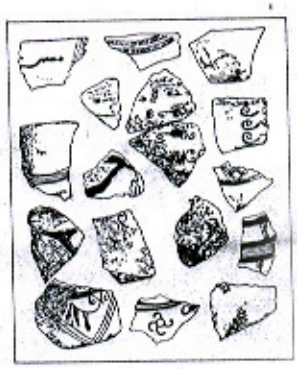

Fig. 2

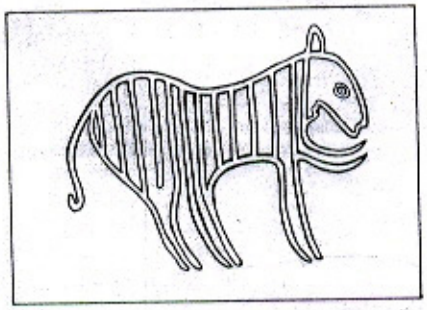

Fig. 3

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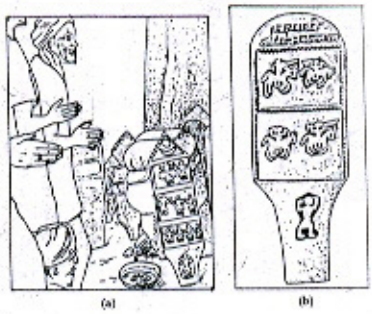

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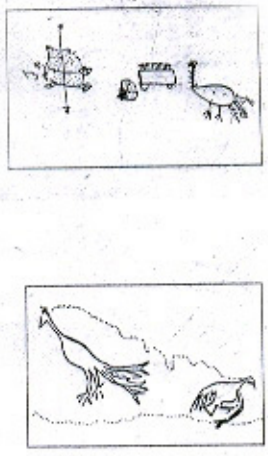

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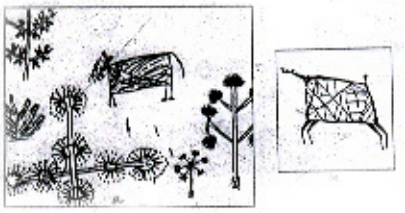

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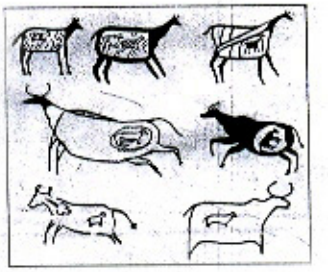

Fig. 8

Plates

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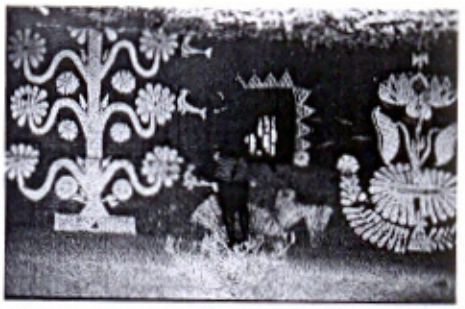

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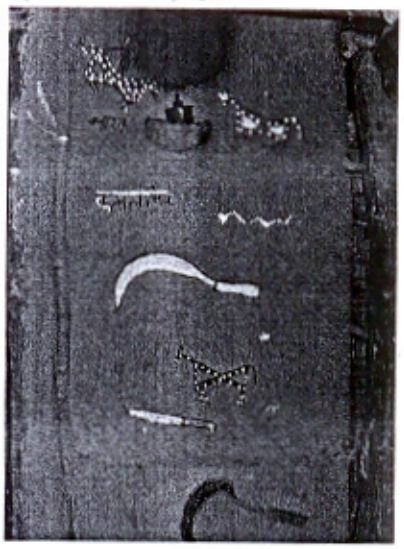

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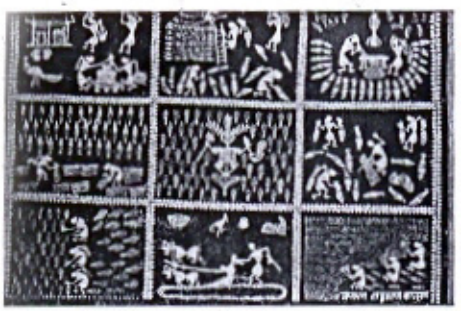

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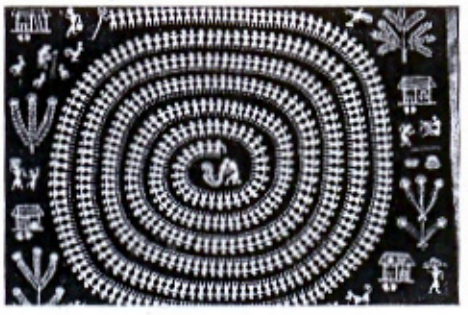

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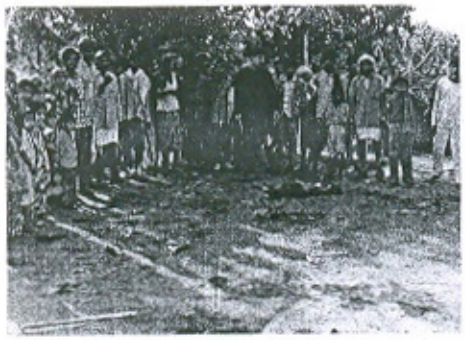

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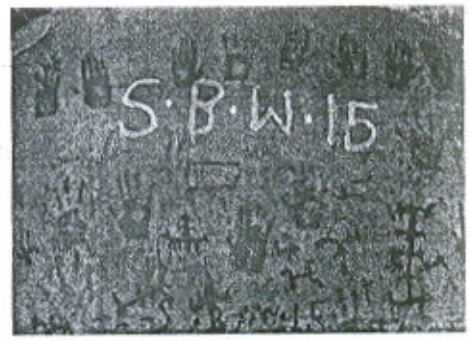

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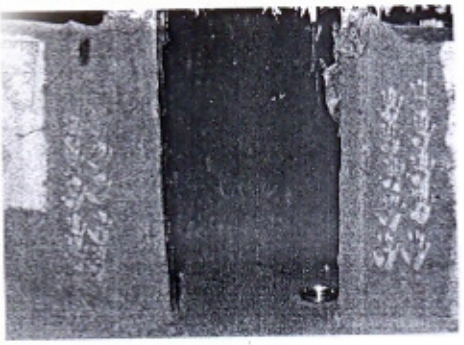

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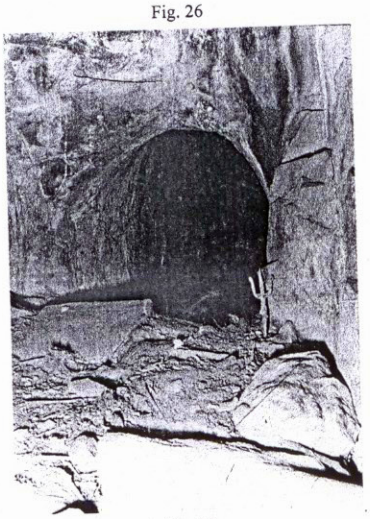

Fig. 28

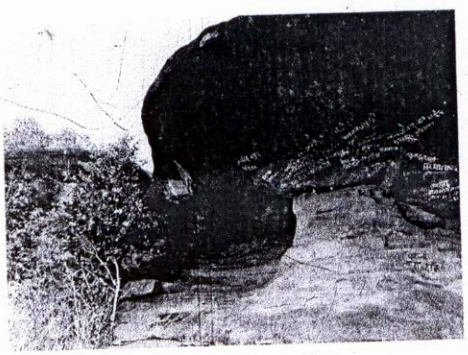

Fig. 29

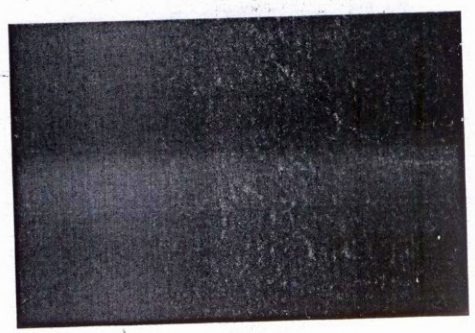

Fig. 30