

## EARLY MAN AT BHIMBETKA

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Rock art is the precious cultural heritage of mankind. The study of rock art in India and Europe began late in the 19th century with the discovery of rock paintings from the Kaimur ranges of Mirzapur (India), Altamira (Spain) and the caves of southern France. In fact, the prehistoric paintings of Mirzapur were discovered in AD 1876, i.e., 12 years before the discovery of the famous cave of Altamira.

The galleries of rock paintings at Bhimbetka (22° 55' - 22° 56' N - 77° 36' - 77° 37' E) in the Raisen district of central India were discovered by V.S. Wakankar in the year 1957. Its area is extended over 10 km and is easily accessible through the recently constructed link road from Bhiyanpur. In the writings of Kincaid (1888: 351), Bhimbetka finds its name as 'Bhimbet'.

The present article does not address itself to periodisation of rock paintings, which is sunk in a maze of controversies. It is an attempt to focus on social patterns and lifestyle of the prehistoric man at Bhimbetka and the contemporary tribes of central India. The subject under review is placed under the following headings:

1. Hunting and food gathering
2. Domestication of animals
3. Family life
4. Ritual and dance

### HUNTING AND FOOD GATHERING

There are varied schools of thought apropos evolutionary growth of rock art in prehistoric times. As per a considerable number of scholars, food gathering stage is supposed to have followed the hunting stage. But the existence of hunting and food gathering being carried on side by side in contemporary tribal societies appears to militate against the presumptions.

The artists with a fuller grasp of surrounding realities recorded and vivified some of the hunting and food gathering scenes in prehistoric rock-shelters at Bhimbetka.



**Fig. 30.1** A hunting scene with two hunters on top, another hunter chasing a buffalo in the middle and one man being chased by a boar at the bottom.

In the rock-shelter on the western side close to the entrance of the northern slope of the main hill at Bhimbetka are depicted scenes of two hunters at top left, a buffalo and a hunter on the right side and a man and a boar below in the middle (Fig. 30.1). In this hunting scene, both the hunters on the top left are exhibited as marching with bow and arrows. One of the two hunters is shown as wearing a bracelet on his right arm, a hook-shaped pendant and loin-cloth and the other is depicted as wearing an armband on his right arm and also a waist-band perhaps woven with leaves. An archer with a large bow and a barbed arrow is depicted as chasing the buffalo on the right side. Most probably the arrow is barbed with microliths and the string of the bow is depicted by a row of dots. Above the hunter, a partially distorted figure is visible. The significance of dots between his legs and below the buffalo does not appear to be clear. A man with three armbands and a decorated loin-cloth is depicted as being chased by a boar bearing two tusks and with its bristles raised in the lower section of the painting. The painting is executed in light red colour (Mathpal, 1984: 59-60).

The next figure depicts a hunting scene where the hunter is shown holding a long serrated spear with his two hands raised up (Fig. 30.2). He appears to be on the verge of casting the spear in an inclined position towards the back of the grazing

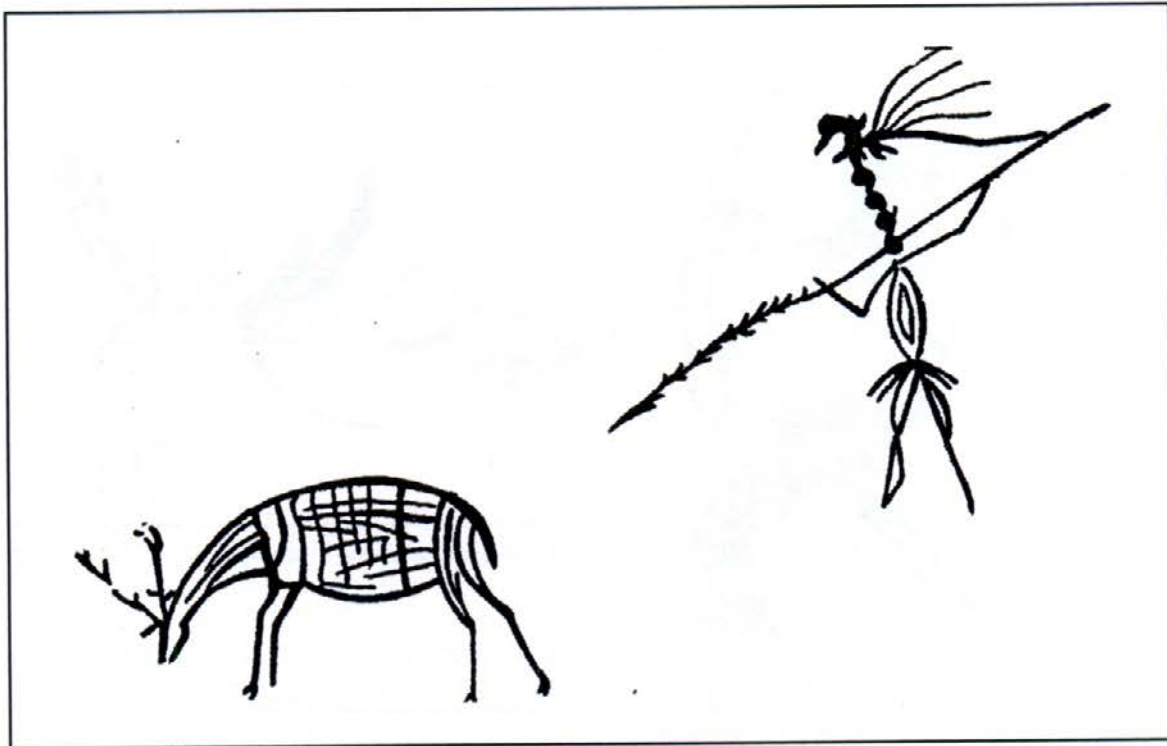


Fig. 30.2 A hunter aiming a long serrated spear at a grazing deer.

deer, which becomes amply clear by the mouth of the deer which stands depicted as touching the ground. The position of the deer patently shows that the animal is oblivious of the impending danger of getting hunted. The hunter has quietly managed to reach quite close to the deer without causing any fray. The scene is an exemplary testimony to the extreme concentration on the part of the hunter (*ibid.*, Fig. iv A-9).

In yet another hunting scene, a faded picture of a stag and a hunter drawn in light red is depicted in the middle of the ceiling of the shelter on the east-west oriented high ridge located north of Bhonrawali hill (*ibid.*, 42-43). Here, the torso of the hunter is depicted as being a thin line and the arms are painted as being very bulky. The body of the stag is damaged except for its head, right ear and neck (Fig. 30.3). In this interesting scene, the hunter is shown chasing the stag running off in the right direction. The left hand of the hunter holding a bow is raised up to the shoulder, while a big arrow in the right hand seems to be ready for action. The dynamism of the figure is brought alive by the posture of the two legs.

The rock-shelters of Group IIIE are situated on the north-western, western and south-western slopes of Bhimbetka. In shelter 12 of the above-mentioned shelters on the left portion of its wall fragment, a design with concentric triangles and three figures in dark crimson are depicted (*ibid.*, 73-74). On the right are two human figures, one design fragment and a natural drawing of a cow. The cow is overlapped by two designs and an archer. Below the cow, five more drawings of archers are drawn; one among them is accompanied by a dog. In the same composition, a cow is painted facing a hunter armed with bow and arrow. Above it an elegant drawing of a deer chasing another animal is brilliantly delineated (Fig. 30.4).

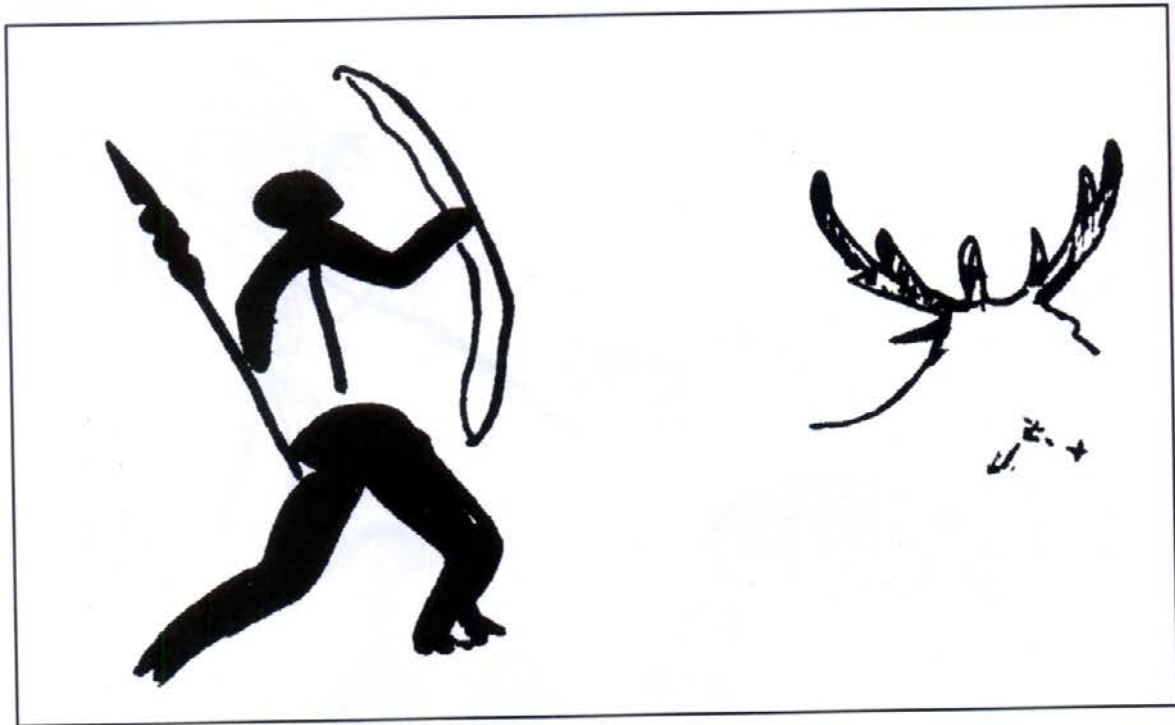


Fig. 30.3 A hunter chasing a stag with bow and arrow.

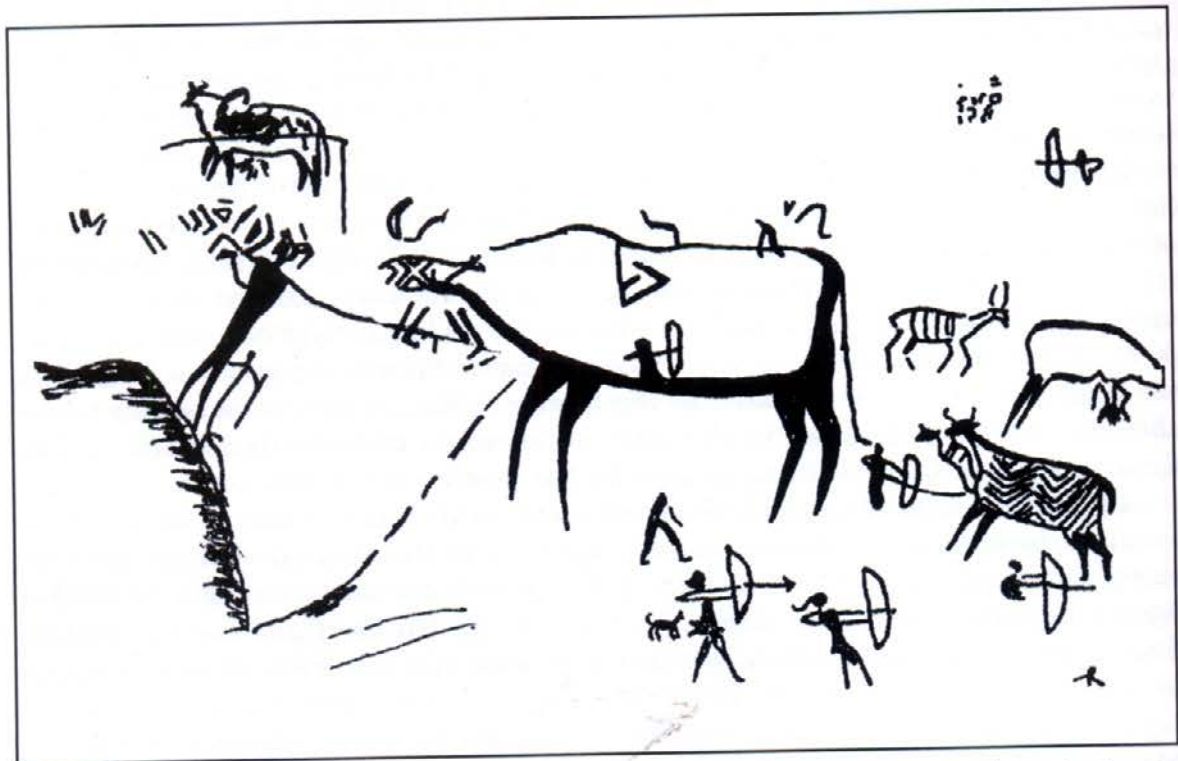
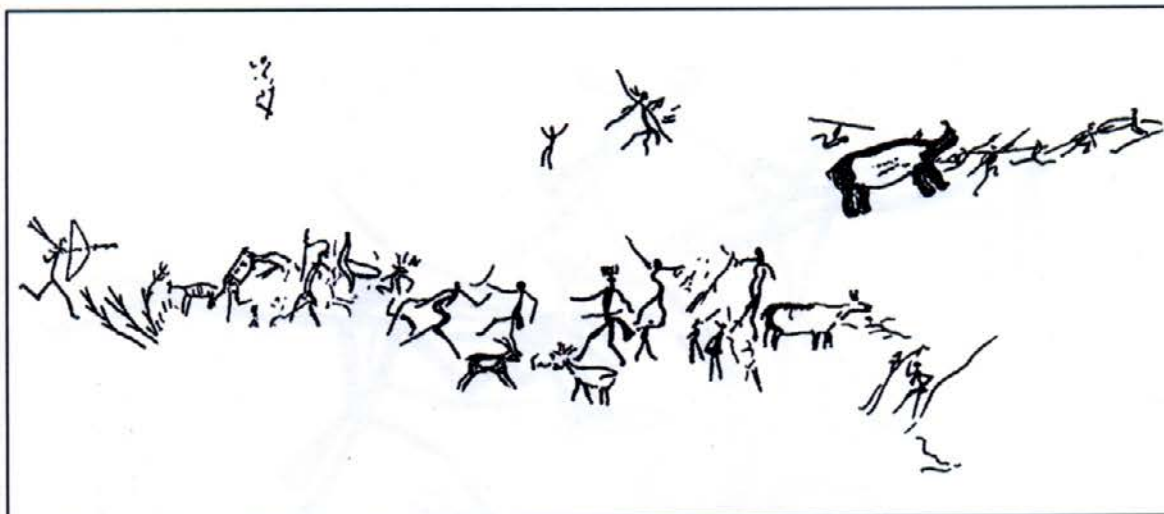


Fig. 30.4 A scene depicting a group of archers along with two cows, a deer chasing another animal and a dog at the bottom.



**Fig. 30.5** A group of hunters wearing masks and headdresses hunting two *chitals* and a rhinoceros with various weapons.

An interesting panoramic view of a hunt is depicted on the southern face of the Bhimbetka hill standing in a straight line from north-west to south-west (*ibid.*, 87). On the extreme left, a hunter is shown as aiming at two grazing animals (*chitals*) with an arrow barbed and tipped with crescent heads. Two hunters with masks and headdresses are shown approaching the game on the right side. To the right above, six hunters are shown as confronting a giant rhinoceros depicted with a massive body, sharp horns, raised ears and gaping mouth, while the human figures are shown stick-shaped (Fig. 30.5). Just above the rhinoceros, a human figure is depicted as tossed up, holding the spear in his hand. Frightened by the ferocious look of the animal, two hunters with spears are running away, whereas the other two are shooting at the animal with arrows.

A scene of excited hunters is depicted on one of the rock-shelters of the east-west oriented high ridge located north of Bhonrawali hill and west of the main Bhimbetka hill. On the western opening, eight hunters are painted in burnt umber (*ibid.*, 42). These figures are mostly executed in drawings and appear to be excited by the sudden appearance of an animal not visible. Here, most of the figures depicted appear as running towards the entrance of the rock-shelter, evident from the triangular loin flappings of the hunters. A man holding two sticks in his right hand is shown squatting near the feet of the second man. Out of the total number of eight hunters, two are adorned with horned masks (Fig. 30.6).

The excavations conducted at Bhimbetka and the theme of rock paintings reveal that the main food of the shelter dweller was big game like bison, deer, antelope, tiger and rhinoceros. The smaller animals like lizards and mongoose were also used as food. The main material objects of prehistoric hunters were tools, weapons, traps, masks, clothing and ornaments. Among the weapons depicted are sticks, bows and arrows, spears and slings.

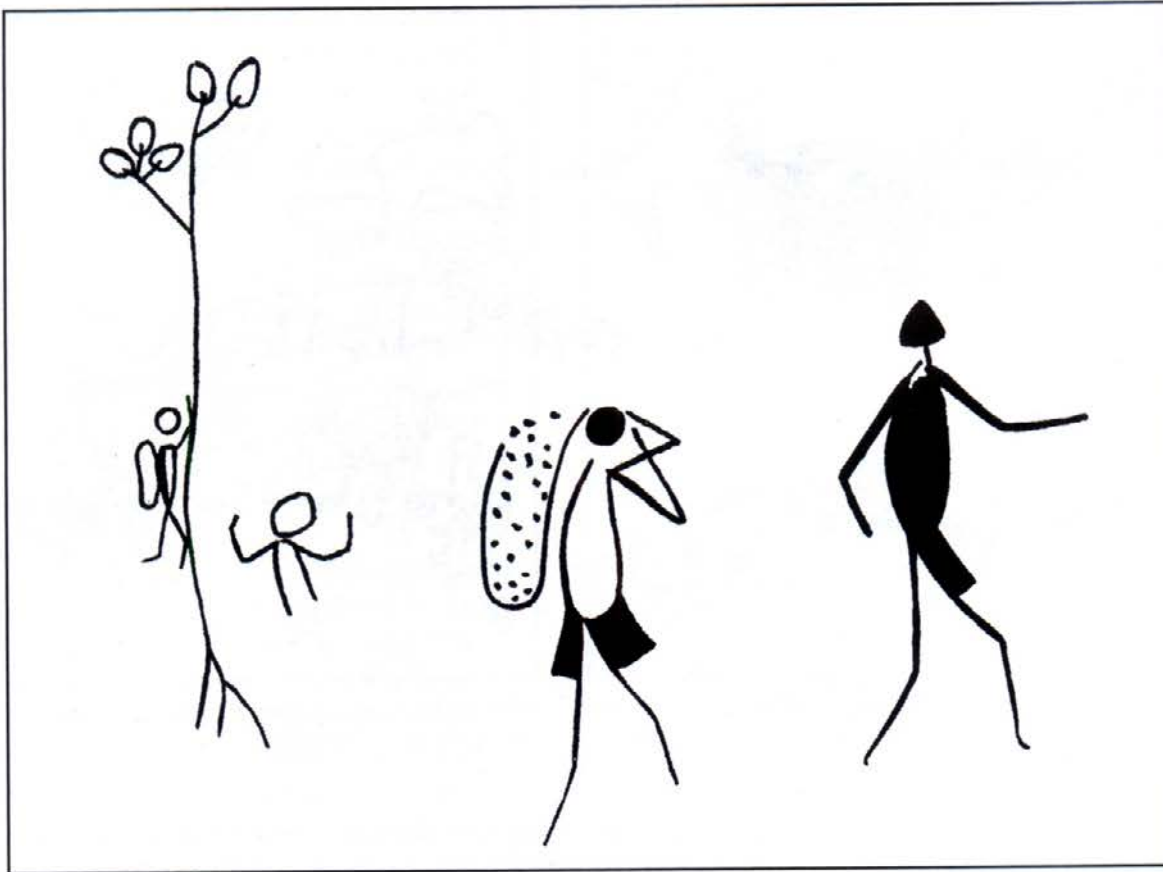
As is amply clear, the prehistoric man had abundant of food available in the areas he jaunted about, thereby providing him sufficient leisure for fishing, fruit



Fig. 30.6 A scene of excited eight hunters painted in burnt umber.



Fig. 30.7 Honey gatherers collecting honey from honeycombs.



**Fig. 30.8** A scene depicting food gathering activity. A figure climbing a fruit tree, a person waiting below the tree and another woman carrying a filled basket.

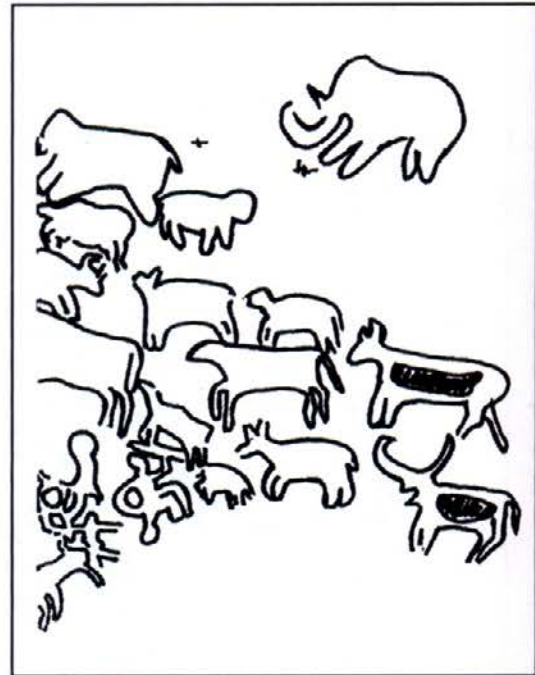
and honey gathering. This finally led to the emergence of an organised life with family as the focal point. Such presumption is amply substantiated by the scenes depicted at Bhimbetka. A ravishing scene of honey collection is depicted in a shelter situated on the southern face of Bhimbetka hill (*ibid.*, 87). On its left hand corner, four honey gatherers are shown collecting honey from honeycombs (Fig. 30.7). It appears that the prehistoric man was augmenting his food by collecting other nutrients like honey, tubers, roots, fruits etc. Many edible flowers, fruits and tubers available in plenty in forests are still used as items of food by aboriginal populations in central India. These people by and large have preserved their pastoral and animistic culture.

It is apt to make a reference to the Rangmahal shelter at Bhimbetka where one person is exhibited as climbing a tree with a basket on his or her back; one person to the right (a woman) carries a filled basket (Fig. 30.8). The stylised tree has only a few fruits resembling the shape of mangoes (Neumayer, 1983: Fig. 41). The natural assumption as can be drawn from the above scenes is that the prehistoric man undertook food gathering activities, which included honey and fruit.

It appears safe to say that the life at hunting-and-food gathering stage went on almost undisturbed in the remote hills, jungles, swamps and deserts. With the passage of time, in the Indo-Gangetic plains, cities came up and flourished as a result of



**Fig. 30.9** On top are two wild antlers and below are two human figures supervising sheep, goat and cattle grazing.



**Fig. 30.10** A grazer seated, holding a stick and surrounded by animals.

advancement of technology and fine arts. But the shelter dwellers seem to have adopted from the so-called superior culture only a few basic elements, which include pottery and metal tips for their arrows (Wakankar and Brooks, 1976: 14-15). Besides, some of the tribal groups in central India still live in prehistoric conditions, using tools and implements as were employed by the prehistoric man. They also worship and paint their tools and implements, animals, plants, pebbles and hills.

#### DOMESTICATION OF ANIMALS

It is well known that man had interaction with his natural habitat, including fauna and flora, right from his evolution on the globe. The elements proving sufficient for his succour drew his utmost attention and animals in the surrounding ecology could not but rivet his attention. In fact, domestication of animals as a matter of their utility unto man commenced after certain stages in man's sociological evolution. The themes as depicted in rock art are universally the same and the Bhimbetka man, as a result of his brush with the natural ecology, has depicted the same themes in his characteristic style. The reference to an interesting painting of wild and domesticated animals in a rock-shelter on the northern slope of the main hill at Bhimbetka is highly illustrative (Fig. 30.9). On top wild antlers are depicted, while below two human figures with sticks in their hands, supervising the grazing animals like sheep, goat, cattle, etc., are delineated. The depiction of such a type of theme is perhaps the result of the domestication of animals pointing to the introduction of novel developments in the domain of paintings at Bhimbetka.



In next scene of domestication of animals, a grazer is depicted seated with a stick in his left hand surrounded by the animals (Fig. 30.10). The scene is depicted in a rock-shelter located on the northern slope of the main hill at Bhimbetka. It contains drawings of nature and animals (Mathpal, 1984: 67-68). The animals are depicted in varied moods and postures, such as grazing, moving or just standing. Most of them are executed in profile and different shades of white.

Yet another beautiful scene of grazing animals is depicted in the above rock-shelter group. The animals include cow, bull, calf, buffalo and deer. Here, the cattle delineated in a relaxed mood appear ready to return to the habitation after the day's graze. One animal is shown as just rising from the ground (Fig. 30.11).

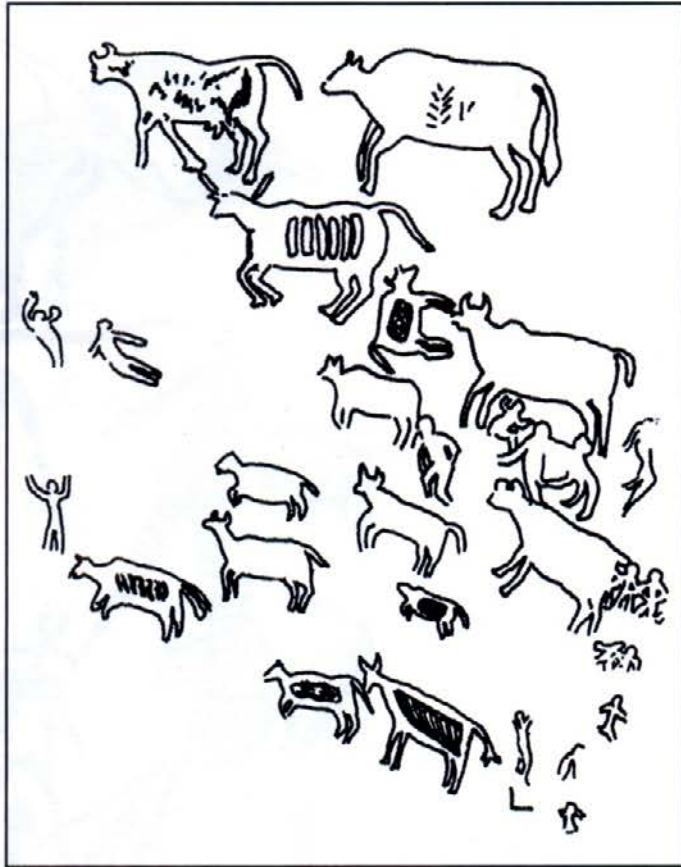


Fig. 30.11 A grazing scene depicting cow, bull, calf, buffalo and a deer.

#### FAMILY LIFE

The paintings available at Bhimbetka are clear indications of man marching ahead from the hunting and food gathering stages to still higher stages of organised life as pinpointed by the family. A family scene from one of the rock-shelters on the northern slope of the main hill at Bhimbetka is described (*ibid.*, 56). Here, a pregnant woman is in the centre; an aged woman, a small child playing with a stick slightly above her, an old woman donning a rhinoceros mask and probably playing with a baby, a man walking to the left with a stick on his shoulder and a boy below him are shown outside a cave (Fig. 30.12). The boy is shown in a playful mood. The entire composition of the figures drawn here looks naturalistic in execution. In shelter A 15, four masked boys chased by an old woman are depicted and also three boys at play and a man in kneeling posture before a boy are shown in shelter F 2 (*ibid.*, Figs. 3, 39).

The artists at Bhimbetka did not restrict themselves to game animals and hunters, but also portrayed several aspects of the daily life of their social set-up. A large number of prints of hand, fist and fingers, symbols and signs, mythical creatures, trees, bushes, flowers, decorative designs and inscriptions are also the subject matter of Bhimbetka paintings. In one interesting example, a man is drinking from a vessel (*ibid.*, 153). The domestic scenes of the later periods typically point to the beginning of family life and plenty of leisure and merry-making.



**Fig. 30.12** A family scene with a pregnant woman, and aged woman, a small child, etc.

#### RITUALS AND DANCE

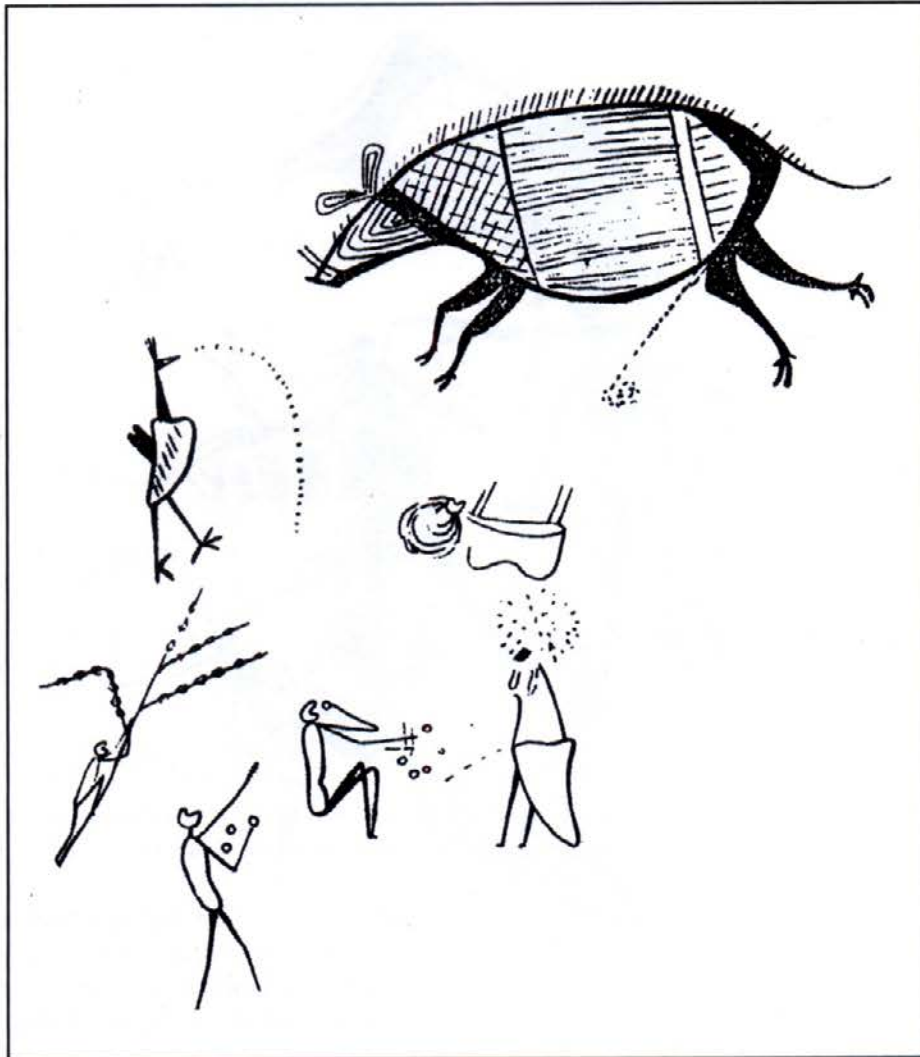
Ritual had an important place in the socio-religious life of all the primitive communities. The themes, such as community dance and hunting, perhaps indicate some sort of magico-religious significance. It is generally held that man was awestruck at the sight of some strong and wild animals seen in his natural habitat. He must have felt a sense of wonder and also felt reverence for them as a result of their size and potency. The tiger, bison, leopard, and elephant could not but arouse his sense of awe and wonder. In the opinion of Wakankar and Brooks (1976: 62-63), animals in the rock paintings appear to have formed a pantheon of gods in which the bison, because of its enormous size, power and number, is considered equivalent to Zeus. To propitiate them before or after the kill, hunting clans may have felt the need for an act of worship and the painting would have focused on the worship while the ceremonies connected with the kill may have transformed fear into the



**Fig. 30.13** Wild boars and a stag running away, terrified by approaching hunters.

peace of mind (*ibid.*). Gordon (1958: 109) also believes that a few Indian rock paintings had a religious significance. If an inference can be drawn from reports of comparatively recent primitive societies, the pictures may represent ceremonial magic before the hunt, involving a successful outcome.<sup>1</sup> Even some of the shelters from prehistoric days to the present times are regarded sacred,<sup>2</sup> magical and enchanted places. One such shelter is located adjacent to the painted caves of Bhimbetka. The shelter is still under worship. Some scholars suggest that 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 then ceremonially decapitate them (Wakankar and Brooks 1976: 17). It probably indicates that present tribal practices have some sort of direct relationship with the cave-painting tradition. Besides, the priests and artists who could perform the rituals and create the paintings would have earned prestige and other rewards from the group (*ibid.*, 62).

Neumayer has reported an interesting example of deified and fabulous animals in a painting from Bhimbetka, depicting a whole array of masked or dressed-up dancers, wizards and fabulous animals. To him, the painting shows the subject which may be termed as 'religious, and 'cultist' (Neumayer, 1983: 77). But in absence of the verbal legend from the authors of the pictures, these may remain purely speculative. The animals depicted here are wild boars along with one stag, which is shown running away terrified by the approaching hunters (Fig. 30.13).



**Fig. 30.14** Fruit gathering scenes drawn in close proximity to a painting of a deified animal.

Interestingly, in some cases the fruit gathering scenes are drawn in close proximity to depictions of deified animals (Fig. 30.14). As per Neumayer, this closeness in space also indicates the possibility of a spiritual closeness between them. There is a fruit-laden tree below the figure of a boar on the mushroom-shaped rock at Bhimbetka (*ibid.*, 27). Here a person is seen climbing up the tree, another is seen eating a fruit while sitting, the third one holds a few fruits in his arms and the fourth is standing near-by with a basket. The deified boar is shown as spilling his semen on the earth.

Two drawings of spider-shaped women on shelter C-12 and C-7/a on the rock-shelters of the northern slope of the main hill at Bhimbetka have been identified as the Mother Goddess (Mathpal, 1984: 154, Fig. 23). In the first case, the woman is portrayed with a newly born infant below her genitals and surrounded by the figures of a man and a woman. The other figure of the Mother Goddess is drawn partially in geometric style.

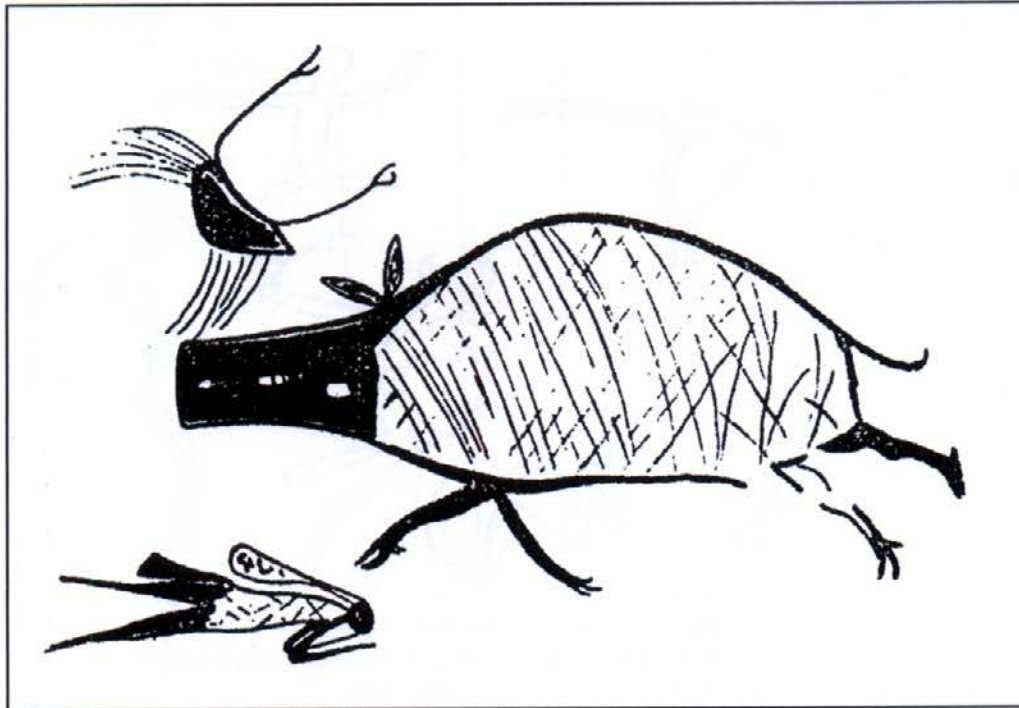
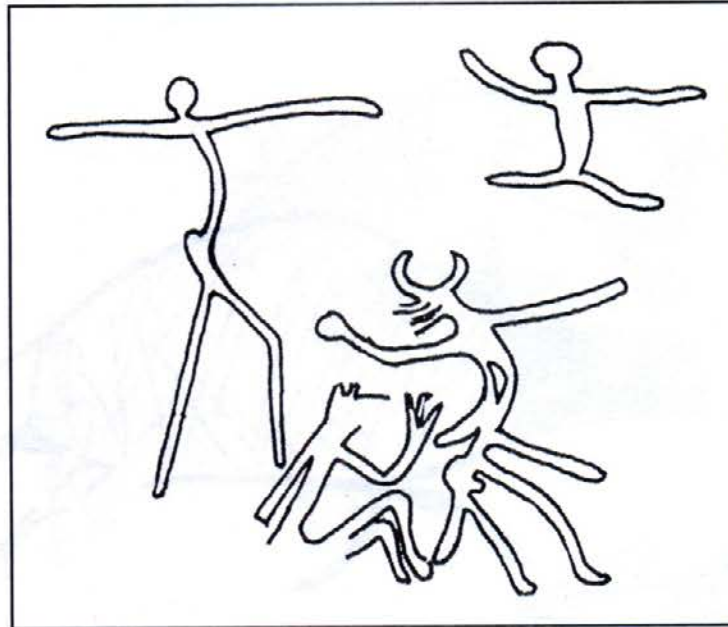


Fig. 30.15 A boar chasing a crab.

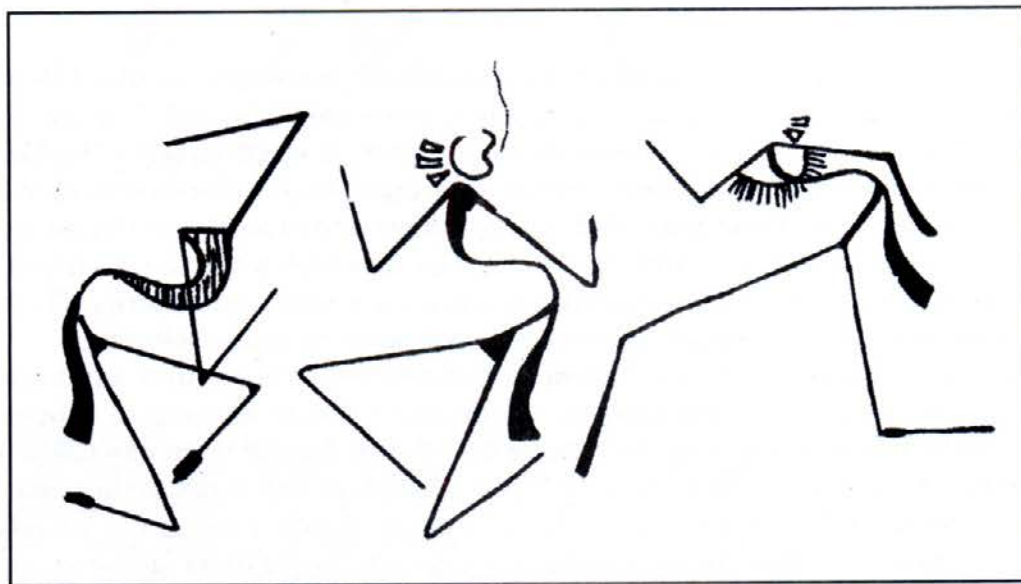
Mathpal has referred to an important mythological painting in shelter C-9 where an animal having the appearance of a boar is shown chasing a crab (Fig. 30.15). He holds that the boar, which ate the excreta of the demon, is worshipped by the Korkus, a local tribe which probably created the rock paintings. But the Gonds who sacrifice a boar and eat pork on their annual *Bari Puja* days are strongly criticised by the Korkus, for whom these practices are taboo. The different ways in which present-day tribals express their beliefs, rituals and taboos are really noteworthy. There are some more depictions of mythical boar in the Bhimbetka rock-shelters.

Rituals and dance are closely linked in the rock-shelters creative expression is rightly established. The *illustration no. 16* depicts wizards dancing in a beautiful manner. In this figure, four dancing figures are shown. Among them one has a bison horn mask; one a feathered headdress; a wolf's head mask and claws to third one; and the fourth seems to be taking off towards outer space. Another picture at Bhimbetka is done in green pigment displaying three dancing men, two of them facing each other symmetrically (Fig. 30.17). According to Neumayer (1983:19), these three human figures are from the earliest style of rock art. In this style, the human body is reduced to an S-shaped form. The men are engaged in dances executing rather acrobatic steps and the loin clothes are depicted very prominently. Unfortunately, the heads of the figures on the left and right have withered away, while the person in the middle has some decoration on the head. The figure in the right wears a ray-like necklace.

The dancers with drums are also depicted in Early Historic period at Bhimbetka.<sup>3</sup> Even among the present-day Gonds, the bison horn dance is still prevalent although pictures are no longer painted (Wakankar and Brooks, 1976: 89).



**Fig. 30.16** Four wizards with two of them wearing a bison horn mask, feathered headdress dancing beautifully.



**Fig. 30.17** Three dancing men with one wearing a headdress and another a ray-like necklace.

Some early dance depictions dwell lavishly on mask adornments and perhaps also body paint, neglecting the human form altogether. An example of such a type is depicted in shelter no. 67 at Bhimbetka where a masked dancer holds a trident profusely decorated (Fig. 30.18). Wakankar has named this wizard as 'Nataraja,' the Lord of the Dance (cf. Neumayer, 1983: 104). Another figure of almost similar type is also found in the same shelter (Fig. 30.19). In some cases, men and women are shown dancing together either arm in arm or as a group (Mathpal, 1984: 151).

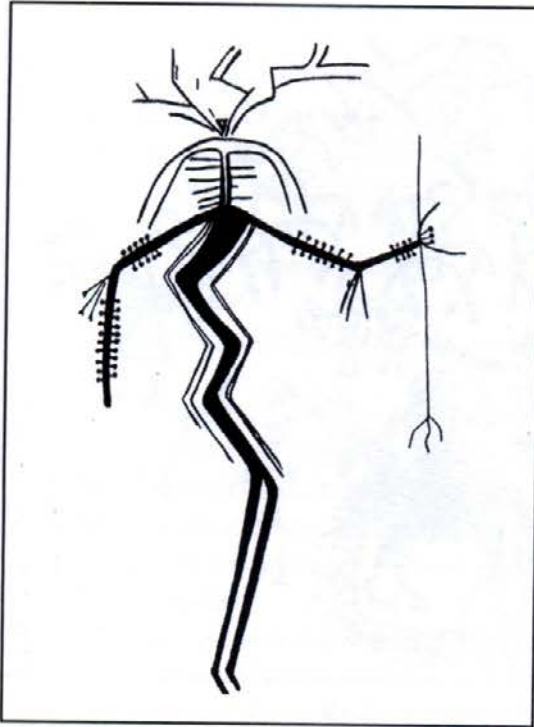


Fig. 30.18 A masked dancer holding a trident.

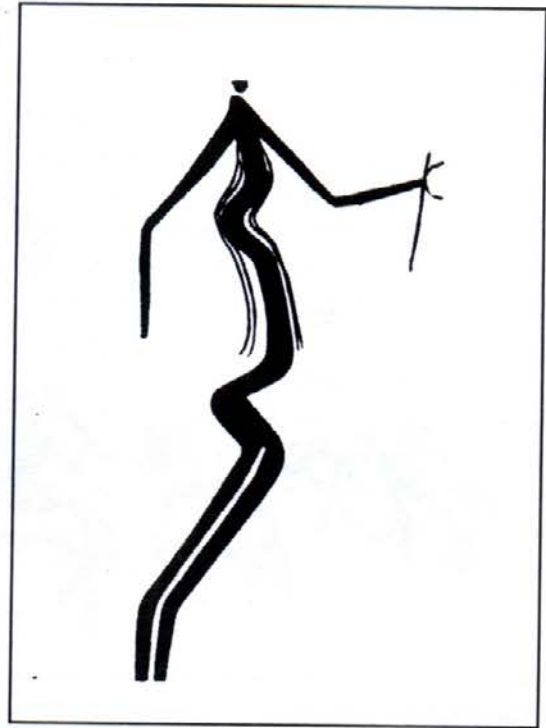
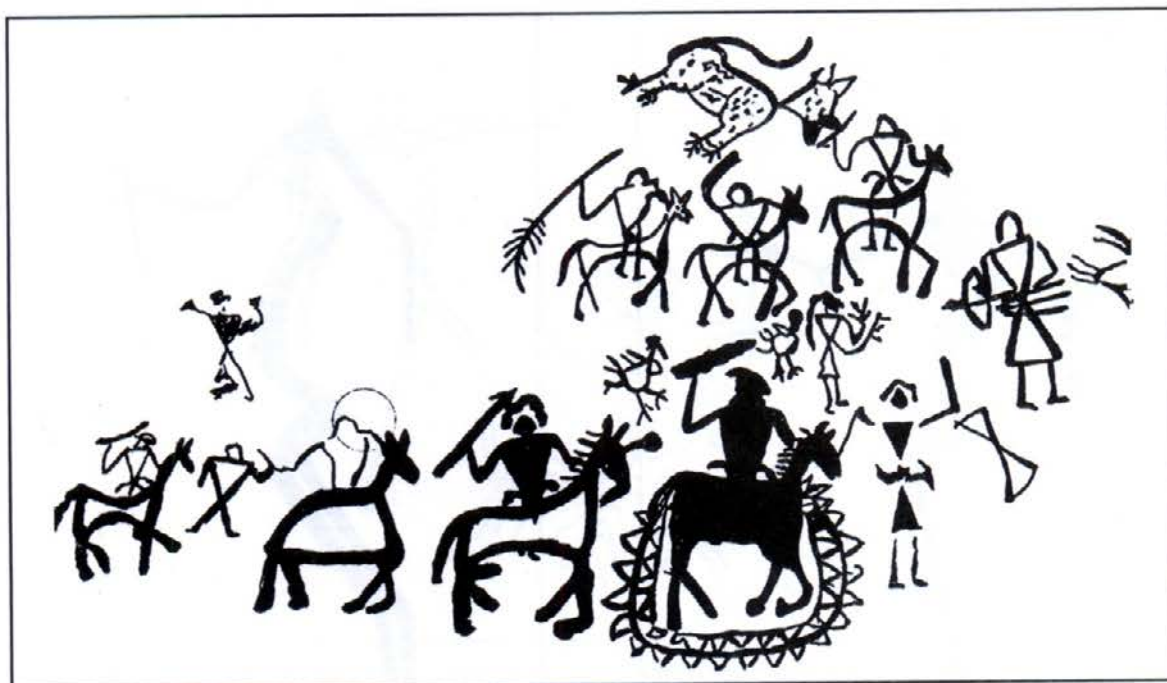


Fig. 30.19 Another dancing figure.

At Bhimbetka, different stages of human activities right from prehistoric to historic times are vividly depicted. From prehistoric times, the scenes pass on to historical times where some old traditions like food gathering continued. But by this time they were sufficiently advanced to harness the use of elephants and horses to achieve their ends. As such, caparisoned elephants and horses are depicted as being used in battle scenes (Fig. 30.20).

Aesthetically speaking, the style of figures from Bhimbetka ranges from very naturalistic to very abstract. The prehistoric painters belong to different periods. They have vividly executed the scenes from day-to-day life. Interestingly, the paintings of the earlier periods are more naturalistic than those of the later period characterised by the stylised depiction, at times leading to exaggeration of various scenes. The paintings lack in proper perspective and foreshortenings. There is no foreground or background in the human and animal figures. Most of the figures are drawn in outlines. In both animal and human figures, eyes, nostrils and other organs are missing. Some figures are also depicted in X-ray style. In some paintings, human bodies are decorated with masks and ornaments like necklace, pendants, bracelets, elbow bands, wristbands, bangles, knee bands and anklets. At some places, men are shown having long loose hair and women are shown putting on braids. Men are depicted either wearing loin-cloth or naked. The animal figures range in size from micrographic to full-size. Most of them are shown in profile and in motion, and the bodies decorated with geometric or linear designs. Generally, the outlines of animal figures look natural. In some cases animals in herds are drawn horizontally one above the other.



**Fig. 30.20** A battle scene with caparisoned elephants and men riding horses.

Many of the present-day Indian tribal communities decorate the walls of their wattle and daub huts beautifully with paintings depicting hunting and farming activities, birds and floral patterns, and scenes of religious functions, whilst others appear to be symbolic or of ritual importance. Some of the subjects of worship are done yearly on a particular day. The significance of rock art designs, colours and concepts perhaps reinforces and continues to emphasise the validity of the traditional way. These elements, most probably, basic to all art allowing 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 rock art tradition. 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. Regarding this, a reference may be made to a small village of Bhiyanpur at the foot of Bhimbetka mountain where the front wall of the headman's hut is white-washed and on special festival days, the women of the village decorate it with paintings, a few of which at least distantly resemble the late-period shelter paintings (Wakankar and Brooks, 1976: 16). Similarly, some of the drawings at Bhimbetka to some extent resemble in subject matter, colour style and technique to the drawings of the Gonds and Saoras and the carvings of the Korkus. According to Mathpal (1984: 218), there are some common styles in Bhimbetka rock art and tribal art which include geometric human figures formed by two triangles, animal silhouettes in profiles, composition of unrelated figures and objects, and decorative designs with human figures at the centre. The other common feature in both the traditions are simplicity, directness, unbounded nature of execution, limited colours and use of natural drawing material.





## NOTES

1. In this connection, a reference may 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 the hunted animal and paint either side of the main entrance of their huts with stylised human figures in red ochre having 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, Sangana Kallu, Hampi, Pikhhal, Benakal Kurngodu, Chitradurga, Anegondi, etc.
2. It is said that this shelter was previously worshipped by the Gond community of nearby village only. Recently, a modern temple has been constructed within the shelter area and the images of Bajrang, Vaisnavi Mata (locally familiar with the name of Deva sena Mata), Shiva linga, etc. are under worship there. The temple is now visited and worshipped by all the Hindu communities without any discrimination. There are no earlier paintings visible in this shelter.
3. Drum is the main musical instrument among most of the present-day tribal communities. During the Indal Baba (Indra) and Pothora Baba worship by the Bhil, Bhilala and Barela communities, group dance accompanied by the beats of drums is performed.
4. The figures have been drawn after Mathpal (1984), Neumayer (1983), and Wakankar (1976).

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