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New Approaches to Rock Art Research

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ABSTRACT

The study of rock art has a great relevance in the context of re-definitions for the study of all arts. So far, we have mechanistic, analytical approaches which assume that the underlying significance of this kind of creativity cannot be inferred by statistical counts of frequency of figures, etc. Nothing could undermine the complexity and richness of this tradition more. At the moment, there is not much available in India by way of interpretive treatment of prehistoric art. Recently, the IGNCA has initiated a multidisciplinary approach for the study of rock art. The new multidisciplinary approach aims at a global view of culture and of the very essence of the spirit of our species (Homo sapiens sapiens). Usually the psycho-analytical and ethnographical approaches are being followed for the study of rock art. In the cultures like Indian where there is a continuity of the artistic traditions the interpretations of the rock art are explored through ethnographical study of the communities living adjacent to the rock art areas. In the cultures where there is no continuity of traditions mainly due to industrialization, etc., the interpretations are mainly sought through the psycho-analytical approaches.

THE BACKDROP

The present concern of all rock art researchers is to explore the 'future of the past' and to look beyond the duty of discovering, protecting, and educating about archaeological treasures. Everybody is curious to know in which direction the discipline of archaeology is going, because the philosophy of research and technology/science is fast changing.

The concern for exploring new ways and means for rock art research and for deciphering rock art opened a new chapter in the history of research in prehistoric and tribal art, with new scope for the collaboration of archaeology with anthropology, art history, philosophy, semiotics, psychology, psychiatry, history of religion and cultural history. The new multidisciplinary approach aims at a global view of culture and of the very essence of the spirit of our species (*Homo sapiens sapiens*).

In the past, the rock art research has coupled archaeology and anthropology with aesthetics and art history. By this approach, a common research ground has been established between prehistoric art and the history of religion. In this direction, investigations have been

made on the signs of myths and shamanism, logical and cognitive functions as revealed by art, and paradigms of semiotic and graphic art, etc. But the present challenge is to widen the scope of multidisciplinary involvement, and to look beyond the context and read the messages. Because prehistoric art narrates a piece of life, a thought or an emotion which has been a part of our tradition, it reveals changes in people's way of thinking, feeling, and sentiments.

PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Under this method of research, psychiatrists are exploring the minds of the prehistoric artists. While starting from the concept of sublimation in relation to creativeness and artistic production, the scholars follow a psychiatrist's, micro-psychoanalyst's point of view and take into consideration some common elements between art and psychosis, psychosis and infantile thought, infantile thought and art.

Some scholars believe that inside the human mind (preconscious, conscious, and unconscious) we could find, metaphorically speaking, traces similar to those of the prehistoric incisions engraved on rocks. It is not the formal similarity among such traces but the fact; they try to represent the inner affect which animates them. It has been observed that the affect linked to at least four variables – nourishment, sex, territory and death – does not change. It is the pattern of representations, which changes into stages of psycho-sexual development with the passage time (Anati 2004).

Besides, the images, which appear in myths as well as in the rock art motifs, may contain the echo of the process that generated them and it may give us a sign about their construction. The representation of the cosmos seems to be constructed through several condensations and displacements, which form similar but not identical images: the course of the sun, the journey of dead spirits and the dream sojourns.

Some considerations have also been made from the analogies between tribal rituals and ceremonies. They assume that during ontogenesis, a human being passes through phylogenetic development stages and in particular that the child in evolutive age uses the design and gestures to express his/her psychic life, since he/she is still unable to use a linguistic code. This phenomenon is similar to what happened to our ancestors of the prehistoric era in rituals and in their graphic representations.

In conditions of obsessional neurosis, rituals and ceremonies have an important function, in relation to the need to lessening of the tensions. Through the gesture that the neurotic compulsive repeats during his ceremonials, he tries to find a system, which can express at the same time the wish and the need for self-punishment. Such need allows to reduce the sense of guilt, by using an expressive means which can be compared to the one used by primitive man in ritual and by the child in concrete logic stage.

It seems that there is an immediate need to study further psychology of iconicity, and to make distinction between 'mental and artistic representations'. It is believed that the 'abstract art' comes from the mind but 'representational art' comes from the natural forms.

It is clear from the above discourse that the need of the hour is to study palaeo art in a holistic perspective while applying the multi-disciplinary approach. It is to be investigated as one of the greatest bio-cultural experiments of humanity. We have to develop a formal grammar and unified theory for palaeo art studies.

ETHNOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

Another important avenue for the interpretation of rock art is the ethnographical approach. It is suggested to find out the temporal spectrum of both rock art and tribal art. By this exercise, the upper and lower limits of both the sets of art may be identified. Both the specific points on the respective sets of art are to be compared in detail. The processes are to be carried out (carefully/logically/scientifically) for understanding the genesis of rock art and the development of tribal art, and to determine the spectrum of continuum.

In the ethnographical study of rock art, two main facets emerge. One is direct relationship between native tribal groups and the rock art in their habitat and another is the inference, which can be extracted from the cognition of the natives about this art. It does not matter if they did not do it or if it belongs to another age which is not connected to them. The first addresses/undertakes ethnic and ethnological studies of the techniques of conservation (facing tourism and the cultural changes). This is an urgent task. But the approximation to the problem must be synchronic and phenomenological (Malla 2000, 2004, 2005 & 2006).

At the same time, archaeology claiming to be cognitive, aiming at how a culture is understood needs tautegoric ethnography to plan its interfaces. The true understanding cannot come by imposing the pre-conceived, uni-dimensional models of the cognitive development of the human language or through artificial order or data. We have to understand the circular movement of our past and present, regional and global, part and the whole, self and the other, surface and the context in the rock art traditions of the world. It could help in making clear the meaning of rock art depictions; why only some and not all are ruled by the fixed laws, why is it not possible to generalise when dealing with different people. The native of today, as that of yesterday, is a free being, who select the motives that his cosmology dictated or by imperative shamanism. The other factors, which could be investigated by ethno-archaeology, includes abrogation, meaning or reason behind superimposed drawings, destruction, and changing of sites.

IGNCA PROJECT ON ROCK ART: CONCEPT AND STRUCTURE

One of the major academic programmes of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) relates to exploring the artistic manifestations emanating from man's primary sensory perceptions. The classification of arts in Indian tradition is based on different aesthetic senses. Amongst the senses that lead to aesthetic experience are vision (*Drshya*) and hearing (*Shroya*). Architecture, sculpture and painting originate from vision, and music and poetry originate from hearing, and theatre emerges from both of them together. Hence, Indian aesthetics is a well-experimented psychoanalytical process of judgment. 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 Drshya* and *Adi Shroya*. The rock art forms a crucial component of the *Adi Drshya* programme. Rock art research will contribute greatly to the establishment of the *Adi Drshya* gallery, while exposition of primary sense of sound (ear), music and musical instruments will form the *Adi Shroya* gallery (Malla 2004).

The prehistoric 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 evolution and emergence of language – ‘scientific’ claims are made for the ‘origins of art’. But we should not ignore the fact that in the Old World, the cosmo centric view dominated the lifestyle. Even the authors of rock art and sages of the *Upanishadic* philosophy reveal the same experience of the cosmos and man’s place in it: Both look at the universe and its sacred artefacts. Interestingly, the text of the classical Indian theory of art is consistent with the context of what is known today as aboriginal art. The fundamental intuition, motifs and styles of rock art persist in their art.

Many traditional societies have no formal term for art, no separate word for artist. Majority of them can paint and carve. It is an integral part of their lifestyle. The priest may have the privilege of producing paintings and songs in ceremonies. Or, some members of a clan may hold such a status. The Saora icon is the drawing on the walls and is locally called *ITTALAN* (ID = to write; *KITALAN* = a wall). The term varies from one area to the other. The 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*. In Indian classical (textual) tradition also, the aesthetics or the science of art appreciation uses the word ‘art’ in a wide and all-inclusive sense. The essential hallmark of art is to make, create or fashion a form or *rupa*, sensible or intelligible (Malla 2004 & 2005).

Rock art is one of the richest cultural resources in the world, which depicts the earliest expressions of humankind. This prehistoric art perhaps comes to signify the underlying philosophies and the world-view of the ancient people, and tells us about the soul of a community, its thoughts, beliefs and emotions. It is associated with the cultural values, particularly in countries like India and Australia, where this art is a part of the living cultural heritage of its native population. The rock art images could be treated as a source for cultural communication with the past, present and the future. The past to celebrate remembrance, memory and legacy; the present to confirm and legitimise the culture; and the future as an expression for the cultural and human fear of death. India has one of the world’s six major prehistoric rock art concentrations of Stone Age era, and is the first country in the world to discover the same (in AD 1867 at Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh). The other places of the globe are South-Western Europe, Russia, North Africa, South Africa and Australia. The term ‘Rock Art’ is generally used for all types of artistic activities found on rocks and is classified into two main forms; ‘pictographs’ and ‘petroglyphs’. The pictographs refer to painted figures and are also termed as rock paintings, while and petroglyphs include engravings, carvings, brushing, dotting and cup marking. The pictographs are found on rock shelters, while petroglyphs are usually confined to open rocks and boulders.

It is necessary to mention here that the fundamental approach of the IGNCA in its academic endeavours is multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, multi-directional, multi-layering, and multi-meaning within the systemic cultural whole. Its conceptual plan aims to open the doors to the realisation that rock art is pure and absolute and, hence, capable of dispensing great experience beyond its original culture and time. The IGNCA’s concern with prehistoric rock art is not restricted to the archaeologists’ concern with establishing a linear chronological order, nor is it restricted to the identification of style and school as a criterion for establishing chronology. Instead, it is a concern for man’s creativity across time and space and civilizations and cultures through the perception of the sight.

The Sanskrit term *Adi Drshya* is an indicator of multiple levels of interpretations of the world *Adi* (Primeval). The IGNCA has envisaged one *Adi Drshya* gallery which will create for the viewer, a degree of experiential contact with prehistoric art restricted to rock art caves. 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 kinds of world-view 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 universals amongst 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. In fact, it will be endeavour to create among Indians a 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 is essential.

On the same line, the IGNCA has taken up an ambitious project of the rock art survey and documentation, and also the ethno-archaeological study of the rock art. The purpose of the project is: (i) to make textual, contextual video and photo documentation, (ii) to communicate with people in the hinterland for archaeological research, and to build up a bio cultural map, a mental and ecological atlas of the rock art landscape, on the basis of documentation of related folklore and natural and man-made features, (iii) to make suggestions for structural, ecological, and, in rare cases, direct conservation, preferably using local materials and techniques (iv) to develop a video, photo and digital archive, (v) to make documentaries on the basis of the video documentations in the field, (vi) to organize displays (permanent, mobile, temporary), and (vii) to bring out publications, both in print and electronic media. A multidisciplinary approach is being adopted for this project. The field documentation is being done in collaboration with the local experts and institutions of the areas/zones concerned.

Briefly, the goal to be set is not merely the development of a multimedia gallery but also to establish *Adi Drshya* into a school of thought and research on alternate means of understanding prehistoric art. So far, we have mechanistic, analytical approaches which assume that the underlying significance of this kind of creativity cannot be inferred by statistical counts of frequency of figures, etc. Nothing could undermine the complexity and richness of this tradition more. At the moment, there is not much available in India by way of interpretive treatment of prehistoric art. The interpretive research and gallery display must go hand in hand.

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