



# THEORETICAL AND COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF **ROCK ART**

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# Introduction

Rock art is a collection of diverse representations covering symbolic, artistic, magico-religious and socioeconomic components of human culture from the Prehistoric to the Modern age. Rock art is a form of historical record that helps us understand the development of artistic and cultural traditions and belief systems in various ecological niches in various chronological contexts. It cannot be studied in isolation as it is related to its cultural, ecological and chronological contexts so these also have to be studied to understand its meaning and significance. Rock art of India can be better understood through studies done from theoretical and cognitive perspectives. It represents the development of cognition and its reflection in different phenomena.

There is no universal method of interpreting rock art. Subjectivity always exists in studies of rock art, which leads to speculative identification and interpretations. Logical interpretations of the messages intended to be conveyed by the authors of rock art need to be done quite precisely without any preconceived ideas or biases. Rock art as an important cultural heritage and universal phenomenon has survived a long period of human history and forms an invaluable source for understanding the human mind and its evolution through time. To understand rock art in its context, it is necessary to use scientific and systematic documentation, descriptions and theoretical and cognitive approaches.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) is working on a major academic programme exploring artistic manifestations emanating from man's primary sense perceptions. Amongst the senses that lead to aesthetic experience are vision (*drishya*) and hearing (*shravya*). Rock art forms a crucial component of the *Adi Drishya* programme. It is concerned with man's creativity across time, space and civilizations and cultures through the perception of sight. Interestingly, the art forms created by the Prehistoric people are conceptually equivalent to those created in recent times indicating that human cognition and symbolizing activities as well as anatomy were called 'modern' by that time. Thus, the origin(s) of art would have been much more ancient that lie within Africa, before worldwide human dispersal.

IGNCA has been organizing both national and international seminars under its *Adi Drishya* programme to address different aspects related to rock art documentation, its conservation, dating and interpretation to remain updated with recent research trends in these fields. Under this series IGNCA organized a national seminar 'Theoretical and Cognitive Aspects of Rock Art', on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017. This two days national seminar was a huge success in which scholars from various parts of India participated. Students from various colleges and institutions from Delhi and other states also participated actively in the seminar along with rock art enthusiasts. The following recommendations were made in the seminar: (i) Seminars/workshops should be held in town/cities near rock art sites. Academic sessions should be followed by a visit to at least one rock art site;





(ii) Serious and earnest efforts should be made for the preservation of rock art in using scientific means and methodologies. It is imperative to spread awareness about the precious heritage of rock art amongst the general public and encouraging students and researchers in its study and significance; (iii) More publications on rock art should be published in Hindi and other regional languages; Efforts should be made to include rock art in school, college and university level syllabi to create awareness about this precious heritage among the younger generation; (iv) Steps need to be taken to protect rock art sites in consultation with various central and state agencies like Archaeological Survey of India, Forest Departments and other state government agencies; (v) Digital documentation of rock art sites and cultural traditions, views and interpretations of the local people and natives are important. They have to be documented without any delay as we are losing this precious art form rapidly due to both human and natural factors; (vi) Impetus to be given to the lesser known facts of rock art and its interpretations to be emphasized more; (vii) An online database of Indian rock art is needed (both English and Hindi); dating of rock art found across the country needs to be priority.

The present volume *Theoretical and Cognitive Aspects of Rock Art* is an outcome of this seminar and is the 21<sup>st</sup> publication under the IGNCA Rock Art Series. IGNCA has, so far, produced 20 well received publications in print media under its Rock Art Series - *Rock Art in the Old World* (ed. Michel Lorblanchet), *Deer in Rock Art of India and Europe* (eds. G. Camuri, A. Fossati and Y. Mathpal), *Rock Art in Kumaon Himalaya* (Yashodhar Mathpal), *Rock Art in Kerala* (Yashodhar Mathpal), *Conservation of Rock Art* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Global Rock Art* (eds B. L. Malla and V. H. Sonawane), *Rock Art of Andhra Pradesh: A New Synthesis* (N. Chandramouli, General Editor B. L. Malla), *The World of Rock Art: An Overview of Five Continents* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art: A Catalogue* (ed. S. S. Biswas), *Rock Art Studies: Concept, Methodology, Context, Documentation and Conservation*, Volume I (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art Studies: Interpretation through Multidisciplinary Approaches*, Volume II (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art of India: Suitable Dating Techniques* (ed. B. L. Malla), *Glimpses of India China Rock Art* (B. L. Malla), *Silent Rock's An Eloquent Testimony: Rock Art Heritage of Odisha* (S. Pradhan, General Editor B. L. Malla), *Cultural Ecology: Prehistoric and Ethno-archaeological Context of Rock Art in North-Eastern and Other Indian States* (ed. B. L. Malla and D. Bezberuah), *राजस्थान की शैलचित्र कला* (Murari Lal Sharma, General Editor B. L. Malla), *Glorious Bhimbetka: A Catalogue based on IGNCA's Dr Yashodhar Mathpal Collection* (B. L. Malla), *Understanding Rock Art of India-China: Rock Art of India*, Vol. I (ed. B. L. Malla) and *Understanding Rock Art of India-China: Rock Art of China*, Vol. II (ed. B. L. Malla), *Rock Art Heritage of Northeast India* (ed. B. L. Malla).

The first paper in the present volume titled 'Re-contextualizing Rock Art', Subhash Chandra Malik searches the original meaning of rock art. According to him, we have to move beyond the mechanistic, analytical and evolutionary approaches in the direction of an intuitive-aesthetic approach which may allow us to decode the total symbolic system within the framework of the universal nature of art.

V. H. Sonawane in his paper 'Decoding Rock Art' suggests that it is preferable to interpret rock art within the context of the host culture and not on the basis of visual similarities with other cultures across space and time, unless an unbroken link can be established.





Maheshwar P. Joshi's paper 'Cognition: Some Aspects of Symbolism in the Rock Drawings of Central Himalaya focuses on the symbolic use of pigments in ritual practices in the social milieu. It describes how the painters used various symbols to communicate the belief systems of their society in the absence of an adequate vocabulary. The study also draws on early literary sources, shamanistic interpretations and local ethnographic practices to explain the symbolic behaviour of the concerned communities in antiquity.

V. Selvakumar in his paper 'Illustrations, Symbols and Material Culture in the Cognitive Representations of the Iron Age-Early Historic South India' presents the nature of the visual representations of Iron Age to early Historic South India and their relationship with art traditions, identity, material culture and language based on archaeological and textual sources.

Ruman Banerjee and Somnath Chakraverty in their paper 'Cognitive Aspects of Rock Art from Mahadeo Hills, Pachmarhi, Central India' explain that the late Holocene rock art of Pachmarhi Biosphere in Central India provides an immense opportunity to study the Palaeo-neurological and Palaeo-psychological aspects of Central Indian rock art, which combined as a cognitive trend will help us unearth the ancient point of view for making and remaking rock art in a relatively eco-culturally isolated region.

Kantikumar A. Pawar in his paper 'A Behavioural Exercise to Understand the Rock Art Tradition through Ethno-Archaeological Perspective' focuses on understanding socio-behavioral patterns in the region by studying past and present cultural traditions related to rock art.

Bansi Lal Malla in his paper 'Understanding Rock Art in Context: An Appraisal of Astronomical Symbolism with Special Reference to Rock Art' explains how understanding archaeo-astronomical sites and astronomical symbols depicted in rock art in India is important for understanding something about Prehistoric times and the knowledge of astronomy that flourished in India.

Ruman Banerjee in his paper 'Animals in Indian Rock Art: An Appraisal of Relative Chronology and Deductive Methodology' identified time markers like elephants, deer and horses as they help us identify the nature of the panels in which they are used. The relative chronology of specific rock paintings, themes, motifs and collages might be ascertained by the presence and absence of specific animals and superimposition of other elements.

In his paper 'Tracing the Cultural Continuum from the Present to the Past: Rock Art, Mortuary Rites and Burial Practices in India', Somnath Chakraverty supports the hypothesis on burial art and establishes that the population in the past had physical affinities which are conspicuous among existing indigenous tribal populations inhabiting the same region.

In 'Understanding the Rock Art of Northeast India: Issues and Context' Dwipen Bezbaruah discusses the idea of Northeast India posing as a cultural corridor linking Southeast Asia and mainland India. His paper elaborates the issues for a better understanding of the rock art forms of Northeast India which is a very recent area of research in the country.





In 'Explaining Regional Patterns of the South Asian Symbolic Behaviour in the Global Context', Parth R. Chauhan addresses issues in the context of multiple dispersals of modern humans, which may have entered the Indian subcontinent with different technologies, cultures, worldviews and associated practices of symbolic behaviour.

In his paper titled 'Some Recent Discoveries of Petroglyphs in the Trans-Western Himalayan Region', Om Chand Handa shows that all the relics of the Prehistoric past should be discussed in a wider spatial area, for many of the symbols and devices found on the rock engravings of the western trans-Himalayan region have also been found in Mongolia towards the north and in Peninsular south in Goa.

Nandini Bhattacharya Sahu and Prabash Sahu in their paper 'Continuity of Art through the Ages and Some Regional Variations at Gawilgarh Hills, Madhya Pradesh' bring forth the treasure trove of art in Gawilgarh Hills, their apparent and significant variations vis-à-vis the usual rock art patterns in Central India and a very significant rock art type- Petroglyphs.

The present volume addresses important issues related to theoretical as well as cultural resources associated with rock art worldwide, including the evolution of perspectives and relative sizes in rock art. It addresses the technical aspects and recent methodologies adopted in interpreting rock art such as choice of colours, association with recovered tools and technological evidence like smelting. The former may address the jurisdiction and interpretation of rock art while the latter includes neuroscience data, cognitive mapping and evolution of complexity in rock art and a critical examination of the shamanistic function of rock art. Largely they account for a comprehensive understanding of the occurrence of rock art as a universal phenomenon.

The papers included in the volume highlight the immense potential that rock art possesses in unraveling the mysteries of the past. Most of the views expressed by the scholars are appropriate and hold good promise in terms of recent trends in rock art research. This illustrated volume aims to boost and promote the importance of rock art research. The volume will not only be of great interest to scholars but also to the public.

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

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