

## Rock Art History of India and Its Importance in Indian Archaeology: An Empirical Study

**S. M. Gulam Hussain, Lecturer in History**

Department of History, Osmania College (A), Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

### **ABSTRACT:**

*Paintings and bruising on natural surfaces of caves, shelters and boulders is together termed as rock art. It is a global phenomenon and one of the earliest human artistic manifestations. It is fast emerging as a major field of study and research all over the world with a multidisciplinary approach. The spectrum of rock art available in India is vast and varied both in stylistic and thematic content. Its chronology can be traced from the Upper Palaeolithic continuing through different periods up to Historic times and probably even echoing in the artistic articulations of present day tribal and ethnic communities. Rock art in India is found distributed through the length and breadth of the entire country in a rather similar context but with regional variations. India is fortunate to be home to large concentrations of this art form, an important cultural heritage. Rock art characterized by the presence of writings in Brahmi, Kharoshti, Shankha and even Nagari scripts have been grouped as rock art of the Historic period in India. Introduction of religious icons and symbols of various prevailing faiths is seen in the paintings and engravings. This paper describes the Rock art history of India and its importance in Indian Archaeology.*

**Keywords:** *Paintings, Bruising, Natural Surfaces of Caves, Boulders, Rock Art*

### **1. INTRODUCTION:**

The "father" of India rock art studies was Vishnu Wakankar whose memory is universally revered. When he discovered the Bhimbetka shelters in 1957, he started working there, both on the art and on excavations, and he attributed some of the images to the Mesolithic and even to the late Palaeolithic, which undoubtedly spurred research on Indian rock art. Because of his untiring work he discovered and reported many different rock art sites. Rock art in India is found distributed through the length and breadth of the entire country in a rather similar context but with regional variations. Along with India some other zones rich with presence of rock art are South Africa, Australia, North and South America and Europe.

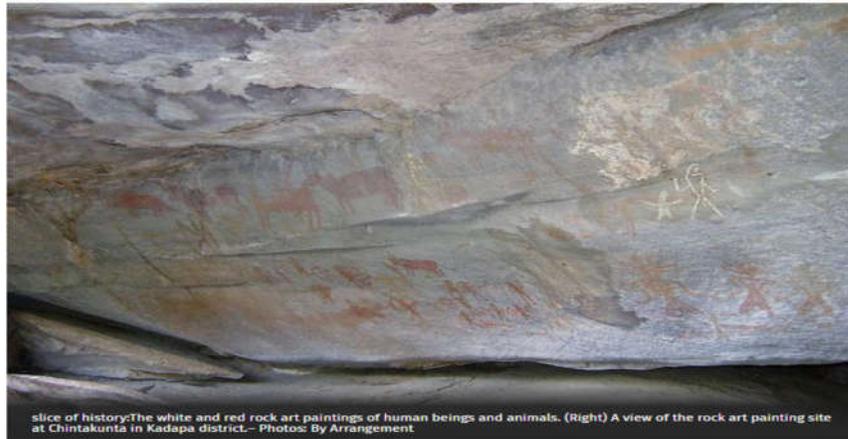
Yashodar Mathpal sees three broad periods in the history of rock art research in India. The first one, from 1867 to 1931, would be that of enthusiasts and explorers. During the

second one, from 1952 to 1972, "more attention was paid to faithful recording" while "during the third period which still prevails, the study of rock art has become a science and a subject of research" (Mathpal 1992: 213-14). Finally, one should recall the work done by the Rock Art Society of India (RASI) since it was founded in 1990.

The first discovery of rock art we know of was done in 1867 by Archibald Carlleyle, then First Assistant of the Archaeological Survey of India, in the sandstone hills of the Vindhya Mirzapur District (what is now Uttar Pradesh). This was twelve years before the discovery of Altamira. His discoveries were not published at the time, but long after, in 1906. In India, rock art sites have been reported from rocky landscapes comprised of sandstone or sedimentary rocks. This primarily refers to the Vindhya, Cuddapah, Kaladgi and Bhima basins, and Satpura and Aravalli ranges scattered over the states of Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Highest density of sites is found in Vindhyan ranges in Madhya Pradesh and its Kaimurean extensions into Uttar Pradesh. Considerable numbers of sites are also present in the granite hills of peninsular India. These areas include the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Datia district of Madhya Pradesh.

## 2. SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ROCK ART SITES:

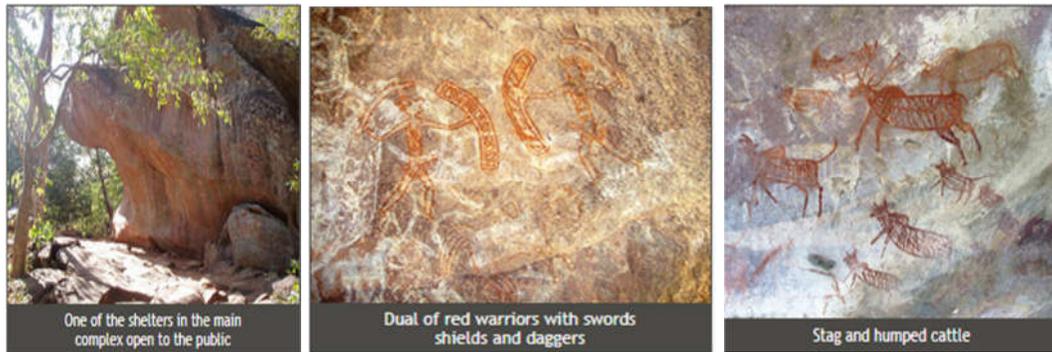
In south of India, some important rock art sites are Kupgal (Sanaganakallu), Badami, Maski, Piklihal, Tekkalakota in Karnataka, Budagavi, Chintakunta, Kethavaram, Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh, Alambadi, Padiyandal in Tamil Nadu and Edakkal and Ezuthupara rock shelters in Kerala.



*Fig.1. The white and red rock art paintings of human beings and animals. (Right) A view of the rock art painting site at Chintakunta in Kadapa district. [Source: www.thehindu.com]*

In North India, some important rock art sites are Dras, Kargil, Mulbekh, Nurla and Leh in Ladakh region. It needs mention that rock paintings are few here due to its high altitude, topography and climate. Many rock engravings were found along the upper reaches of the Indus and her tributaries in the Karakoram hills and also in Ladakh. These are probably of a later date. Rock engravings have also been reported from the vicinity of the city of Chilas on banks of river Indus as well as Zaskar Valley. Even in the foothills of the Himalayan range, close to the ancient city of Almora near Chamoli in Garhwal, several rock paintings have been reported. Sites containing paintings have also been found at Varanasi, Allahabad and Agra in the Ganga Yamuna valley in Uttar Pradesh. It was here that Archibald Carlyle had first noticed rock shelters with paintings in the Mirzapur district in the 1860s. In this area 115 rock art sites exist in a single district of 11,310 sq. km. Some important shelters of

Mirzapur region are called Bhaladharia, Bijayagarh, Likhunia, Kauva-Khoh, Hathvani, Lakhma and Mukhadari.



*Fig.2. Rock Art Site of Bhimbetka [Source:www.bradshawfoundation.com]*

Many rock shelters have been discovered mainly in the Vindhyan region and some from Satpura ranges. In the state of Madhya Pradesh most important rock art sites are found centering Bhopal, its capital city. The renowned Bhimbetka complex of rock shelters which has been inscribed as the World Heritage Site by the UNESCO in 2003 are located 40 kilometers south of Bhopal, in the Raisen district. The petroglyphs in Auditorium Cave (Bhimbetka III F-24) are thought to be of Acheulian age. They include ten cupules (or cup marks) and a long meandering line. These Acheulian petroglyphs are the oldest rock art currently known in the world.

### 3. NATURE OF ROCK ART IN INDIA:

Broadly rock art in India can be divided under two heads. They are Pictographs and Petroglyphs.

#### 3.1 Pictographs:

In India the pictographs are monochrome (majority), bichrome and polychrome in nature. Pictographs are primarily in the form of paintings that are found on the walls and ceilings of naturally formed caves and rock shelters. In India the pictographs show an affinity towards various shades of red colour, the shades varying from dark violet to yellowish brick red. Chemical analysis and microscopic examination of the pigments obtained from sites show presence of red haematite nodules, containing iron oxide. Besides red, the next most frequently used colour was white which was obtained either from calcium carbonate nodule or kaoline clayey deposits. Many pictographs have been executed both in red as well as white colours in which the white colour was generally used for filling up the figures and red as outline. In many of these paintings the colour white has faded out leaving the red outline. Some very early rock paintings were depicted in green and yellow (found in rock art sites of central India and Odisha) with the use of mineralized chalcedony of the respective colours.

#### 3.2 Petroglyphs:

These or rock bruising form the second most important type of rock art which were done either by rubbing, hammering, scooping or pecking of rough granite surface. Rarely are bruising found on quartzite rocks because of the extreme toughness of the stone. At times dots and cup-marks have been found in some shelters which have been made by hammering the surface gently, and some of the cup-marks are as deep as 50 cm with an equal diameter throughout its depth. These include shallow dots, small holes, conical and U-shaped cup-

marks and were probably done by a drilling technique with the help of metallic instruments. Cup marks are attracting the attention of rock art scholars and archaeologists now days. Another interesting feature of rock art not only in India but also other parts of the world is that both the paintings as well as bruising have been found in superimposed layers where a single surface has been used for several times. For rock art studies the term 'superimpositions' is used which means when one rock art motif is placed over another or an earlier motif.

#### 4. HISTORY OF ROCK ART RESEARCH:

Globally, presence of rock art was first reported by Spanish archaeologist Don Marcelino Santiago Tomas Sanz de Santuola in November 1879, when his 12 year old daughter Maria noticed animal pictures on the ceiling of Altamira caves in northern Spain. In India Archibald Carlyle an English officer in Archaeological Survey of India, noticed paintings on the walls of a few shelters, near Sohanghat, in the forested region of Kaimur ranges in Mirzapur District, in Uttar Pradesh in 1867-68. This was a remarkable and very interesting discovery as it was made twelve years before Marcelino De Santuola's discovery of Altamira caves in Spain. Carlyle's accounts of his discoveries were later published in Indian Antiquary by Vincent Smith in 1906. Noteworthy contributions made by Carlyle was that he related the microliths, pieces of charcoal and red haematite found on the floor of rock shelters with the prehistoric people who made stone implements, thereby concluding that the chronology of the paintings began in the Stone Ages. By analyzing the subject matter of the paintings he had also realized that all the paintings were not made in the same time and belonged to different ages. Following this remarkable beginning, John Cockburn, an officer of the Opium Department of British Government presented the first scientific paper on Indian rock paintings in 1883. The legacy of rock art research in India was further carried on by Francke, C.A Silberrand, C.W Anderson and Percy Brown. Apart from the English archaeologists who initiated rock art studies and made noteworthy contributions, indigenous efforts were put forward by many researchers.

In 1921, Manoranjan Ghosh, Curator of Patna Museum, studied the rock art complex of Mirzapur region as well as several sites at Raigarh and Adamgarh near Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh and produced a monograph of Indian rock art in 1932. Though engravings were already brought to light in South India, K.P. Jayaswal in 1933 mentioned rock engravings (petroglyph) in Vikramkhola in Sundargarh district of Odisha, now in Jharsuguda district.

Following this more engravings were later brought to light from several places like bank of river Indus, Kupgallu hill near Bellary and Gotgiribetta ridge near Bangalore. In the 1930s, G.R.Hunter and D.H Gordon noticed painted shelters of Mahadeo Hills in Panchmarhi in Madhya Pradesh. Mention needs to be made of another noteworthy contribution by A. H. Brodrick, who has tried to compare and place Indian paintings in a global perspective.

In southern India, petroglyphs or rock bruising were noticed quite early by Fred Fawcett in 1892 with the assistance of Hubert Knox and Robert Sewell on Kupgallu hill of Bellary District. Fawcett had examined the site of Kupgallu and had discovered some more rock carvings in the Edakkal caves in Kozikode District of Kerala in the 1890s though its explicit mention was first made in 1901. Noteworthy contributions towards early rock art studies in South India were also made by Leonard Munn.

A grand new chapter of rock art research in India was unfolded with V.S Wakankar adding an entirely new dimension to the field of study for which he is honoured with the title as 'Founder of modern rock art studies in India'. While traveling to Nagpur from Bhopal in a train, Wakankar had noticed dissected rocks, resembling archaeological monuments over a sandstone hill. This led to the discovery of Bhimbetka rock shelters in 1957 near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, one of the best-known sites in the world with large concentrations of rock paintings. Wakankar, together with R.R. Brooks had published Stone Age Paintings in India. Following V.S. Wakankar's discovery a number of researchers and explorers focused in and around central India. Some of the rock art specialists who worked during the 1970's were: Jagadish Gupta, Bridget Allchin, Nagaraja Rao and Malhotra, K. Paddayya, A. Sundara, K.Rajan, R.K Varma, V.N. Misra, J. Jacobson, later G.S. Tyagi and Yashodhar Mathpal.

During the twentieth century, a variety of methodological techniques were employed. Organisations like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has conceived and launched major academic programmes which are intended to explore artistic manifestations and analyse its global context. Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the premier organization for the archaeological research and protection of cultural heritage of India, under the Department of Culture, Government of India, has long been involved in promoting, conserving and preserving rock art of India. One of the major contributions of the ASI for the promotion of rock art research is that it has played a major role in getting Bhimbetka to be inscribed on the World Heritage list as a World Heritage site on 3rd July 2003 under the UNESCO sponsorship. The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) also known as National Museum of Mankind, at Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh is taking steps to popularize rock art. Along with these the National Research Laboratory, The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), aims to encourage and promote rock art research in the country.

## **5. CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF ROCK ART IN INDIA:**

### **5.1 Upper Palaeolithic Period:**

Unlike some of the rock paintings of Europe and Australia, which are securely dated by using AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometer) dating through pigment analysis, the chronology of Indian rock paintings has not been established by an absolute method of dating. Though attempts are being made, still it is in an experimental stage. Therefore researchers and scholars have primarily taken to the analysis of thematic content, superimpositions, and style of rock art along with other parameters to determine a tentative chronology.

Rock art in India probably had very early beginning. Two Acheulian petroglyphs excavated from Auditorium rock shelter (III-F 24) at Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh is considered to be the oldest known rock art in the world. These consisted of a large circular scooped out cupule and a pecked meandering line running to its periphery. Recently nearly 500 cupules from Daraki- Chattan near Bhanpura in the Chambal valley have been assigned to the Palaeolithic.

Interestingly, evidence of art like expression in India was found as early as in the Acheulean deposits of the Lower Paleolithic period in the form of haematite and quartz crystals. A particular haematite nodule from locality V at Hunsgi (Karnataka) bears striation marks on its worn out facet which is suggestive of the fact that it had been used as a crayon to colour or mark a rock surface. Moreover quartz crystals from the base of the

Lower Paleolithic deposit found from Singi Talav (Rajasthan) were also collected for their visual qualities and must have been used for body decoration or similar other purposes.

Early rock art in India has also been characterized by perfect 'S' shaped human figures depicting activities which look like as if they are hunting, dancing and running. These dynamic S-shaped human figures have been superimposed on the intricate designs of earlier paintings drawn in red ochre.

## **5.2 Mesolithic Period:**

Rock art of Mesolithic period is mostly in the form of pictographs. According to scholars the Mesolithic paintings essentially portray a hunting gathering population. It is uniform in style and content all over India. It is full of varied descriptive details with a very wide spectrum. Animal forms are naturalistic depictions while the human figures are static and abstract. Amongst human figures the male figures are stick like while the women are bulky box shaped with intricate body designs as infilling comprising of spiral or honey-comb design patterns. Mesolithic rock art in India is also characterised by X-ray depictions in which internal organs of the body of an animal or human being are shown.

The paintings depicting hunting like activity predominate the rock art of this period and provide a fair detail of variety of game animals, both big and small. These include animals like gaur, humped cattle, buffalo, rhinoceros, elephant, tiger, leopard, boar, sambar, chital, chinkara, nilgai, blackbuck, monkey, jackal, fox, dog, rat and porcupine. The weapons depicted in these paintings were spears and arrows, tipped and barbed with microliths. Apart from hunting some other types of activities depicted look similar to present day butchering, fruit and honey collection, fishing dancing, singing, playing with musical instruments, drinking and eating inside a roofed house. Most of the paintings have been done in shades of red scarlet, purple, chocolate, orange and white. On the basis of superimpositions many layers can be seen. Archaeologists have also categorized some depictions as religious or cultic that is portrayals which signify a deeper meaning in their creation. These include mythical stories depicting huge defied animals chasing diminutive human beings, medical treatment and burial like activity.

Mesolithic engravings are few compared to the rock paintings. Subject matter includes animal like figures, abstract patterns and sometimes mere scratches.

## **6. ROCK ART IN INDIA – NEOLITHIC CHALCOLITHIC PHASE:**

Neolithic Chalcolithic phase leaves behind the trails of Mesolithic hunting gathering society to a stage where man started domestication of cattle, sheep and goat. The most important advantage of dating the rock art belonging to this period is the availability of reliable stratified archaeological data in the form of contemporary protohistoric art forms. Depiction of bullock carts as well as horse drawn chariots is common. Processions, accompanied by acrobats, boxers, load carriers and musicians, suggestive of social stratification are seen in Chalcolithic period.

Agricultural activities are rarely shown in the paintings in spite being the economic foundation of this period. Chalcolithic pictures in India represent a man's world, in which women were depicted very peripherally both in Central and South India. Scenes depicting human population like activity are common. Rock paintings in south India is also characteristic of elegant long horned bull depiction and the bruising commonly depict large

implements. According to scholars the latter is suggestive of cultic weapons. In south India several rock art sites are situated in the vicinity of Megalithic burials and definitely some of the paintings and bruising can be related to burial practices. One such painting shows a dead person within the burial inventory of a stone circle in Benakal forest.

## **7. ROCK ART IN INDIA - HISTORIC PHASE:**

Depictions mostly in the form of petroglyphs have been found in north India in Ladakh and Chilas areas narrating Buddhist themes along with Kharoshti and Brahmi inscriptions. The paintings are dominated by portrayal of heavily caparisoned horses and elephants often with riders as if engaged in battle like activity, armored soldiers appear to be fighting with metal weapons resembling spears, swords, shields, daggers and occasionally bows and arrows.

## **8. UNDERSTANDING ROCK ART:**

In the Indian context, according to V.S. Wakankar the earlier paintings of large animals have religious association. Yashodhar Mathpal for example regards the majority of the art at Bhimbetka as a social and economic record. Similarly Erwin Neumayer and D.H. Gordon have assumed that paintings of armed men represent historic wars. In fact, various approaches employed towards rock art interpretation in India has been broadly classified as 'art pour l'art' (art for art's sake), economic, historical records, information transmission, worship, social solidarity, ritual symbolism and trance, diversified ritual communication, formation of iconographic units and as source of information.

## **9. ROCK ART AND ETHNOGRAPHY:**

Ethnographic analogy as a tool to assist rock art interpretation has been used by rock art researchers worldwide, though the validity of such analogy has also been challenged. In India no living tradition practices rock art anymore, unlike the Sans of South Africa or the Aboriginals of Australia. Therefore interpretation becomes challenging for the researchers. Rare examples of valid ethnographic rock art interpretation have been documented in India. Though the canvass may not be rocks, boulders or caverns, tribal communities like the Rathvas from Gujarat make the Pithora paintings, Savaras of Andhra Pradesh make Edising art and Sauras from Odisha make paintings on the walls of their houses. Interestingly all these art forms are ritual and generally executed by a shaman. Generally it has been noticed that practice of shamanism is associated with image making.

The art traditions that are practiced by several other tribes of India like Gonds, Murias, Garsias, Nagas, etc. are also symbolic and mostly intended towards appeasing ancestor souls or to guard off evil spirits. Study of tribal or indigenous arts may play some role in understanding rock art of India.

Though rock art is not made any more in India but tribal communities like the Rathwas of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh make the Pithora paintings, Sauras of Orissa make the Saura art and Savaras of Andhra Pradesh art. The only difference being that their canvass may not be rocks, boulders or caverns but the walls of their houses.

## 10.CONCLUSION:

Rock art studies in India are gradually emerging as an important subject for research for specialists from various disciplines. The vast corpus of rock art available in India was much more than a thing of beauty. It can be regarded as an influence of the mental as well as physical environment in which it was created. It is on the threshold of adopting wider perspective in various areas like suitable dating techniques, geological background of rock art, computer applications, taphonomy, ethnographic and cognitive studies. It is therefore important to carry forward rock art studies as it enriches our understanding of the way of life of the people of different cultural periods and nurtures an understanding for a valuable cultural resource.

## REFERENCES:

1. Bednarik, R.G., 2014. The Archaeological Interpretation of Rock Art, Purakala Vol. 24: 63-76
2. Neumayer, Erwin, 2013. Prehistoric Rock Art of India, Oxford University Press New Delhi.
3. Bednarik, R.G., 2012. Underrating the Ancients, Purakala Vol. 22-2012: 5-16.
4. Chandramouli, N., 2010-2011. Archaeology of rock art in Peninsular India. Keynote Address, RASI Congress, Goa-2011, Purakala Vol. 20-21.
5. Bednarik, R.G. 1993. 'Palaeolithic Art in India', Man and Environment 18(2): 33-40.
6. Neumayer, Erwin, 1993. Lines On Stone: The Prehistoric Rock Art of India, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi
7. Francfort, H. P., D. 'Klodzinski, and G. Mascle 1992. 'Archaic Petroglyphs of Ladakhand
8. Zanskar', in M. Lorblanchet (ed) , Rock Art in the Old World, pp.147-192. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.
9. Gordon, D.H., 1958. The Prehistoric Background of Indian Culture, Bombay.
10. [http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/india/central\\_india/](http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/india/central_india/)
11. <https://www.inflibnet.ac.in/>
12. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_art)
13. <http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/india/bhi1.html>
14. [http://www.arara.org/Understanding\\_Rock\\_Art.html](http://www.arara.org/Understanding_Rock_Art.html)
15. <http://www.rockart.org/>