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COGNITIVE CONTENT OF INDIAN ROCK ART

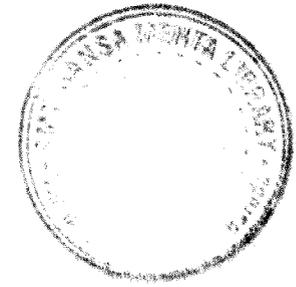
A **Summary** of the thesis submitted
To
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda
For The Degree Of
Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2007



Cognitive Content of Indian Rock Art

Painted and engraved walls of caverns, rocks and boulders, present us with a world of symbols/ images and an avenue to walk through archaic expressions of human societies as well as their culture and traditions. Together termed as 'rock art' it also puts before us an expression of immense technical skill, along with human ability to express their minds/societies, through use of line, form and colour.

Regarding the circumstances for which rock art occurs in India, various proposals have been made concerning its meaning and functions. Still a lot remains to be done regarding interpretation of rock art. India is one of the three countries having the richest treasure of rock art in the world. This study was aimed at interpreting rock art of India on the lines of recent scientific explanations propounded by western researchers as well as present ethnic culture of tribes in India and elsewhere in the world. Along with these one needs to also fall back on mythology in search of clues as and when necessary. Rock art is a global phenomenon which starts from Upper Palaeolithic, gradually continues in the hunting gathering societies to times when societies were based on agriculture and animal husbandry and then to Historic period. Different areas in the world have in common some general trends, but again they also have significant local characters. Fortunately, owing to the global presence of this art form which also exhibits thematic similarities, tentative conclusions as to the purpose behind rock art can be achieved by scrutinizing other indigenous cultures where there are traditions of rock art practice till date. There definitely lies a common thread to the practice of making rock art which exhibit plenty of similarities and at the same time occur in almost all geographical and temporal regions of human civilization.

The thesis begins with the history of rock art research carried out in India, followed by distribution pattern, relative chronology and characteristic features of Indian rock art. In India unfortunately rock art has not been made for a very long time and since none of the ethnic groups associate themselves with this art form therefore it's first hand meaning and purpose has long been gone. Infact at present there is no bridge that can afford access

to the meanings of rock art of India, starting from Upper Paleolithic to Historic period. However as already mentioned, certain forms and themes represented in rock art are common worldwide, for example geometric motifs. In recent years the field of psychology and neurology has been brought into rock art studies mainly by David Lewis Williams who has propounded a neuropsychological model to explain some signs that repeatedly occurred in rock art. His aim was to explain the more 'ritual' side to our forefathers. It was aimed to explore the thought processes that may have existed in the Upper Palaeolithic. Following the track of evolution of the human mind Lewis Williams argues that our ancestors possessed a more advanced neurological make-up, enabling them to undergo altered state of consciousness and experience **shamanistic trances** along with vivid **mental imagery** as part of their rituals (Lewis Williams 2002a). With such intense and vibrant neurological experiences these men felt it a necessity to paint these images on the cave walls. Infact this was a real chance to explore the minds of our antecedents. The neuropsychological model explains the forms of certain depictions very precisely, the meanings of which can be achieved from directly relevant ethnography. After going through this model which is based on **universality** of the **human nervous system** and the **hunter gatherer setting** (Lewis Williams 2002b, 240), I have felt it necessary to speculate, if this neuropsychological model can help us to understand some forms seen in Indian rock art. More so because certain aspects like the geometric forms represented in Indian rock art are very similar to the ones referred by David Lewis Williams in his study. Along with this, a thorough study on rock art from all corners of the world has revealed that, almost everywhere it was made to serve some purposes, be it as part of some fertility rite, for better hunt, as a totem or for curing the sick; all of which has been taken into consideration in this study. To further understand this, ethnographic case studies have been discussed.

Owing to the vast number of paintings and engravings available from India, a selected few has been grouped under different subject heads which are: Geometric Figures, Hunting Scenes, Animal Figures, Human Figures, Social groups: Gathering and Activities, Objects of transport and finally Plants and Flowers. In each section, few depictions have been briefly described followed by its interpretation. For example in case

of 'geometric figures', we have noticed that geometric forms are a very common feature of any rock art region, therefore some of it can be explained by the neuropsychological model which is a testable hypothesis, being used to interpret in a global context. Other common geometric signs are spirals, triangles, zigzags, concentric circles and hexagonal patterns. Each of these is mysterious in some way or the other, which has been supported by ethnographic evidences from India and elsewhere. Again, while exploring 'hunting' theme in rock art of India, it appears that some may have served ritualistic purposes, like capturing the essence or spirit of the animal. Infact a global vision on the topic opens up vistas of ideas before us. Out of the various ways that researchers have tried to interpret the purpose behind rock art, one prominent theory put forward was 'hunting magic' by Abbe Henri Breuil (Breuil 1952). He argued that the hunting images were intended to give powers to the hunter over their prey. He claimed that many pictures had spears or arrows sticking into them. Perhaps, he thought that the act of painting these weapons affected the death of a real animal. Again researchers like Meroc and Mazet (Meroc & Mazet 1977, 36) argue that the wounded animal depictions have been for conflict over territory in which the images having been made and ritually pierced prior to a real fight between competing communities. So, in this way we can infer the complex thought processes that may have worked behind making of the rock art images and in all most all the above mentioned sections it is seen that the images exhibit certain peculiarities which point to a mystic aura involved in its depiction. These features are at times very minute but are of profound significance in understanding rock art.

Therefore to conclude the study, the interpretive framework employed to the cognitive content of Indian rock art primarily revolves around three aspects, which are ancient rituals, fertility and mythology. Altogether this study wishes to take rock art interpretation in India, a step further.

Bibliography

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