

## ‘Timeless aesthetics’? Rock art studies as ‘sites of contestation’ in the Southern Vindhyan landscapes



Prerana Srimaal\*

L. Lamminthang Simte\*\*

### Abstract

*Rock art research in the country is no stranger to comparative ethnographic data for interpreting rock art. There is a growing realisation among anthropologists/archaeologists of the constraints of reconstructing the past ‘scientifically’. This, it is noted, has persistently resulted in a gross, even wilful, neglect of local situations and has thus prevented a faithful perusal of the demand for appropriate models and theories that these unique trajectories arising out of the different spatio-temporal dynamics place on any inquiry so addressed. We attempt to underline these issues through a review of select rock art sites from Madhya Pradesh. We also examine if these rock paintings are really text-free interpretations/representations, as these images are, after all, ‘texts’ about economy, technology, cultural myths and socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, we stress the need to seriously reassess the reliability of the use of ethnographic analogy in seeking parallels, which, we contend, serves only to sustain the conventional idea of some cultures as un-changing and passive.*

**Keywords:** Rock Art, Southern Vindhyas, Landscape Studies, Socio-Cultural Contexts

### Introduction

With the first documented discovery of rock art in the winter of 1868-69 by Archibald Carlyle in a few shelters near Sohagi Ghat (present Mirzapur district, U.P.) on the northern scarps of the Vindhyas, India is generally credited as the country with the first reported find of rock art, much before what is usually considered as the first instance of rock art in Spain (Pandey 2001, p. 249; Tyagi 2001, p. 303; Wakankar 2001, p. 319). However, his findings and discovery were never published, but remained confined to his personal notes until published later by V.A. Smith in 1906 (Smith 1906, p. 185-195). However, it was in 1883 that the first systematic examination and publication of rock art in the country was undertaken by John Cockburn (Mathpal 2001, p. 207-208).

Other early instances of rock art discoveries in the Indian subcontinent - engravings in the Edakal caves (Wayanad District, Kerala) - were similarly reported by F.Fawcett in 1901. In 1916, Robert Bruce Foote – who is often credited with being the one person really responsible for bringing the Indian

---

\* Assistant Professor, Christ University, Bannerghatta Campus, Bangalore:  
[srimaal.prerana@gmail.com](mailto:srimaal.prerana@gmail.com)

\*\* ICHR-Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Mohali, Punjab: [laminsimte@gmail.com](mailto:laminsimte@gmail.com)

prehistory into the limelight – reported discoveries in the district of Bellary in Karnataka. Closer to the study area under consideration, it was Manoranjan Ghosh who discovered the paintings of Adamgarh in the year 1922, and undertook pioneering steps to make accurate artistic representations of the paintings at the site as well as those at Mirzapur and Raigarh. These were subsequently published in the form of a monograph in the year 1932. The 1930s were also marked by the significant contributions made by Gordon, who undertook explorations and systematic analysis of the rock art of the Mahadeo Hills and established the antiquity of the rock art in this region to be as old as the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE (Pandey 2001, p. 249). By far, the most prolific and authoritative figure on Indian rock art studies undoubtedly would be V.S. Wakankar, who, in the course of his doctoral work, undertook the task of cataloguing the rock art of Central India (Wakankar 2005).

Tracing the antecedents of rock art studies and research in India, Mathpal (2001, p. 213-214) identified three distinct phases/periods in the development of the field. The first period (1867-1931) he ascribes to be a period where most of the research was undertaken by “amateur enthusiasts”, by individuals who undertook the study of “well-preserved, prominent-looking and isolated figures”, who mainly employed tracings, free-hand copying and short notes, resulting in the publication of “very few articles”. At this stage of rock art studies, he asserts that there were still some doubts as to the antiquity of the Indian rock art. The second period (1932-1972) to him was a period of well-planned explorations, which resulted in several hundreds of yet undiscovered paintings being reported. They undertook ‘faithful copying’ and followed up with fairly detailed descriptions of the rock art. At this stage of its development, the doubts about the ‘stone-age antiquity’ of rock art in India were increasingly being questioned. The third and final period (1973-present) is characterised by the systematic excavations of rock shelters along with scientific reproductions of rock paintings. The method of research includes exhaustive regional studies, research publications, exhibitions, seminars and lectures on rock art. By this time, the antiquity of Indian rock art to the Mesolithic era and later was established.

The aim of the documentation of rock art has, until recently, been the documentation of the actual figures, where technique and motif has been the leading premise. Arguably, the overall standard of documentation has not changed much. Documentation of rock art most often set out to achieve the most accurate reproduction of the figures. Many researchers still apply the conventional documentation methods when dealing with rock art, with satisfactory results. Hence, foremost consideration must be and is always dependent on the research aims in rock art studies. Photography has always been an integral part the process; the advent of new and more manageable cameras made it easier to document rock art using photographs. It is a good documentation method that often brings out aspects not seen by other means of documentation.

In the course of our fieldwork, we tried to formulate new ways of observing and documenting the landscape of rock art. Priority was placed on spending time at the rock art site and in the surrounding area to get a better understanding of the landscape context and the location of the rock art sites. It has been evidently demonstrated that the natural features in the rock surface and the

elements might be part of the story told in rock art (See Helskog 2004). This has also meant that how we see, what we look for and how we document the rock art has changed. The most accurate documentation of a figure may not longer be of such importance for the rock art story.

During the survey and documentation at Saru Maru Buddhist Stupa and Monastic Complex, (Pangoraria Village, Budhni Tehsil, Sehore District), apart from the other material cultural remains, eight painted rock shelters with extensive rock art on them were documented. The purpose of the documentation carried out at the site was two-fold. Firstly, as the rock paintings at the site were found to be in various stage of degradation, it was necessary to record them systematically for posterity. Secondly, we decided to analyse the different range of motifs at the site and to look at the paintings in context of the landscape – a reflection of what the landscape evoked in the executors of these paintings – instead of looking at them as artistic expression for art's sake that cater to the 'presentist' aesthetic sensibilities.

With the ever burgeoning interest in comparative ethnographic data for interpreting rock art, we also observe the increasing awareness of anthropologists/archaeologists of the constraints of reconstructing the past 'scientifically', as they, like all other social scientists, are faced with not only the individual subjectivity of their own views and findings, but also the attendant cultural biases that more often than not colour their 'informed' opinions. Most pertinent here would be for instance, the charge of Eurocentrism with its attendant "classificatory chronological concepts" (Malik 2012:1) and formulations of a certain 'evolutionary' schema for past cultures beginning in the Palaeolithic. This, it is noted, has persistently resulted in a gross, even wilful, neglect of local situations and has thus prevented a faithful perusal of the demand for appropriate models and theories that these unique trajectories arising out of the different spatio-temporal dynamics place on any inquiry so addressed.

'Art' has a very limited and restricted connotation in terms of rock art studies. One has to bear in mind that the modern day aesthetics, with their attendant notions of form and beauty, are what they are: a culturally and aesthetically dictated modern day sensibility. Rock art, as art, necessitates the complete inversion of the artistic tropes to peruse these as an exercise of freedom of expression that exist to be appreciated as an act commissioned for its own sake. It has been argued, and widely accepted, that the notion of art as an expression of mere aesthetically pleasing form/beauty is a limited way of seeing.

There is a growing realisation that any philosophy and concomitant explanation of art cannot be complete without an adequate consideration of the aesthetic experience. Other cultural, especially non-industrial, communities locate art within many other aspects of life ranging from a sacredness of the world order to the supernatural or the noumenal dimension. Thus, ethnology, myths and beliefs, supplemented with the appropriate academic research vigor, provide an important - and indeed *the only* - sensible window into the world of rock art.

In the study of rock art, there are mainly two methods: the formal methods and the informed methods. Even if this can be recognised in earlier works it was

first put in concrete terms by Taçon & Chippindale (1998: 6) and further applied:

By informed methods we mean those that depend on some source of insight passed on directly or indirectly from those who made and used the rock-art – through ethnohistory, through the historical record, or through modern understanding known with good cause to perpetuate ancient knowledge; then, one can hope to explore the pictures from the inside, as it were. (Taçon & Chippindale 1998: 6).

... formal methods, those that depend on no inside knowledge, but which work when one comes to the stuff “cold”, as a prehistorian does. The information available is then restricted to that which is immanent in the images themselves, or which we can discern from their relations to each other and to the landscape, or by relation to whatever archaeological context is available.’ (Taçon & Chippindale 1998: 6).

The concept of formal and informed methods also must be borne in mind when studying both rock art and landscape. Informed methods are important for the interpretation of rock art and landscape. There are very few examples of rock art traditions that continue into the present. However, practically no rock art sites have a direct informed record based on continuity. Yet, the ethnographic record and informed methods need to be applied to get a richer understanding of rock art and landscape even though a direct link cannot be established. One of the crucial problems is, however, on the application of ethnographic record on rock art and landscape with no direct continuous link in ethnography. We need to walk along the fine line of analogy. Even if the informed methods seem to have the upper hand, the ethnographic record also constrains the interpretation of rock art by being part of ‘who’ and ‘when’ the information is gathered. We need to include formal methods when interpreting rock art and landscape.

Since ethnographic sources are also considered vital to the understanding of rock art and landscape of hunter-gatherers, we shall elaborate on the ethnography and analogies related to rock art and landscape. According to Buggery (1999),

An ethnographic landscape (or aboriginal landscape) is a place valued by an aboriginal group (or groups) because of their long and complex relationship with that land. It expresses their unity with the natural and the spiritual environment. It embodies their traditional knowledge of spirits, places, land uses, and ecology. Material remains of the association may be prominent, but will often be minimal or absent.

This has opened up studies that show that both the natural and cultural features within a landscape are interwoven and that the neglect of the natural environment cannot continue in archaeology. We need to look at the natural landscape as interrelated with the cultural landscape. Instead of renaming it, we have to look upon the landscape as a holistic definition as part of a whole in the world as we live it.

Frequently, the ethnographic record from South Africa and Australia are applied as ‘guidelines’ for rock art in vast parts of the world. Rightfully, the short time span between the ethnographic record and the rock art has favoured these

geographical areas. There has been a justified application of the ethnographic record on the San rock art (Lewis-Williams 1981). Of course, some of the links between the South African ethnography and the South African rock art is useful elsewhere. However, it has been all too often the case for studies to apply interpretations from here onto the rest of the world. Applying ethnography leaves the same objections as with analogy in general regarding time and space. Hence the need to justify the use of ethnographic parallels.

As early on as 1883, John Cockburn had mentioned that “the aborigines of the Kymores were in a stone age as late as the tenth century CE and thus had a very long artistic tradition” (Chakraverty 2003, p. 11). India is one of the rare countries in the world with a continuing ethnological tradition which has manifested itself in a vivid tribal life, even though, in the case of rock art, the memory of its purposes and meanings has long been gone. Though, nowadays, tribal and folk groups apparently do not ‘... associate themselves with such art in their areas (...), except to explain it as the work of evil spirits or epic heroes’ (Chakravarty & Bednarik 1997: 31).

A similar opinion has been expressed about the rock art in Orissa, where “the local people do not attach any special significance to these rock art sites. To them, the works of art in the shelters are the works of the heavenly bodies or that of the ghosts. They even often consider it a taboo to touch such works of art” (Pradhan 2001: 27). Similarly, another illustrative reflection of this specious tradition is that of the exposition on the Pachmarhi hill rock art by Pathak (n.d.) hosted on the web pages of the Bradshaw Foundation. She conceded, condescendingly, that “the compositional elements of these Mesolithic paintings are highly developed” which she posits was representative of “the creative spirit of the early people”. Sufficient proof of their “highly developed creative spirit” is visible in geometric designs and in paintings of the X-ray style. More problematic though, is her account of the depiction of a “urinating cow” which she believes “suggests the awareness of medicinal value of cow urine to the primitives (sic.)”. As we all know according to Indian Ayurved cow urine is a very good treatment for cancer patients and for other ailments”. Furthermore, she goes on to assert that,

The descendants of the original hunters and gatherers and artists of this region are the tribal Korku and Gond who still uphold some of the traditions of their ancestors. In the rock paintings their ancestors are depicted dancing in pairs or in rows and playing musical instruments. They hunted animals and collected honey from the hives of wild bees. Their mode of dress was quite simple. The women carried food and water and looked after the children. The forebearers of the present day tribal people had a variety of ways to express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos. The tribes living in these hills have wooden memorial boards on which the carved horse and its rider is similar to those painted by their predecessors in the past on the walls of their rock shelters. They also decorate the walls of their houses and this activity seems to have its roots in the cave dwelling traditions of their ancestors. Men and horses of geometric construction are randomly spaced across the walls.... and bear a close resemblance to those found in the painted shelters.... Presently, the wall paintings in their houses, as in the great majority of rock paintings, are executed in red and yellow pigments prepared from hematite or other iron oxides.

Some forms of tribal art, however, can be quite misleadingly reminiscent of

certain themes and techniques found in the rock art. For example, “in India, (the) tradition of printing hands on the gates of houses, temples, sacred sites at ritualistic ceremonies, auspicious occasions like the birth of a child, marriage ceremony etc., is still continuing” (Kumar 1992, p. 63). However, this does not entail that we unquestioningly and automatically conclude that the hand prints found on numerous sites, such as at Bhimbetka Auditorium Rock have a similar meaning, “because similar patterns may well be the results of different behavioural processes in the past and present”, so that “to read contemporary ethnographic rituals into ancient art may not be quite appropriate in spite of some common trait” (Chakravarty & Bednarik 1997: 87).

Another illustrative example is that of the stylized category of rock art which to Pandey (2001: 252) is representative of “rock art with its full fancy”, identified by him. This category is identified to be restricted to human figures and is further sub-divided into those with a linear stick-shaped form, or in ‘dynamic’ S-shaped twisting form, or the square-shaped intricately in-filled female figurines. The preceding forms which are assigned to the Mesolithic age are the ones executed in linear stick-shapes are identified by Pandey (2001: 252) who considers them to be “childish” attempts and lacking the “skill” observed as present and necessary in the animal representations. Consequently, the stick-form of painting which was “capable of depicting the different human activities of Mesolithic men” was later found to be insufficient and the S-form “evolved” to “represent the dancing activity.” Based on the encrustations observed on the paintings, he is of the opinion that they are not only reflective but definitive ‘confirmation’ of the slow process of change and switch from the ‘simple stick shapes to decorated forms’ in the ‘Stone Age’ which took ‘thousands of years.’

In the words of Malik (2012: 5), a million years ago, homo sapiens emerged from various ancestries, however, there is no evidence that intelligence evolved from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘modern’, in art at least; if not in its expression, perhaps in technology, language and economics. Creative impulse is non-hierarchical and non-linear; it is a manifestation and movement of archetypes of invisible realities. The language of art moves beyond conceptual, semantic and syntactic constraints, to cognize reality in silence. In this sense, art signifies a continuity of reality through different spatial and temporal levels.

The theoretical framework that has dictated the field of rock art studies in the country stand in need of a serious reappraisal. The conceptual and methodological issues that need urgent redress are the considerable and over-reaching emphasis on style and chronology; the continued reliance and exploitation of comparative ethnographic data in terms of interpretation; and the need for an increased sensitivity and awareness to the constraints of individual and collective cultural subjectivity. These pitfalls in the issue of Euro-centrism in archaeology, when applied to rock-art studies, are duplicated in non-European cultural zones as well. This is further evident when a cursory perusal of local (indigenous) live cultural traditions are seen to be tied into rock art: one can see a common cultural heritage of humankind to approach then projected as a universal creative act instinctive to Homo sapiens.

For these, we need to look at current concepts and definitions of art as

opposed to the modern ascription of ‘art for its own sake’ maybe even as something functional but which certainly does not look at art for its sacred context which most earlier societies are assumed to link it to. Rock art as an artistic activity is then intrinsically an act of creativity. This understanding requires an integral and holistic approach to creativity that is timeless in this sense as it is always present as intelligence which is inherent in the human species in a non-evolutionary sense. In this way, it is also non-hierarchical as it exists in all human societies, both of the past and the present.

Discussions of rock art and landscape have focused on why sites or panels are located at particular places in the landscape (Hood 1988) and on how landscapes and rock art are perceived (Bradley 1994). Location studies were rooted in topography, spatial studies and relations to other cultural remains, like graves and/or settlements etc. Within the perception of rock art and landscape, phenomenology was explored by Tilley (2004) in his perception of rock art and landscape studies. Lately, studies have shown how landscapes might be represented in the panels themselves – real and cosmological (Bradley et al. 2002) where natural features are part of the rock art, acting as the canvas, where the rock surface might even represent topographical features in a miniature landscapes (Helskog 2004). The above-described directions reflect the research history where landscape has moved from being nature to being regarded as culture where natural features are cultural features in the sense that they are embedded with meaning.

The rock art record, although selective, reflects local environment, i.e. there are no Whales depicted in Southern Vindhyan rock art, for example. In fact, one of the most salient records left by early societies is the rock art in rock shelters and rock faces. Spread across a wide temporal and spatial span, it is impossible to determine if rock art production occurred throughout the period or only in abrupt episodic events. Some of the possible shifts in the issues and approaches can be in the methodologies adopted, for example, stylistic approaches, which are often subjective or mere opinions and notions arising from present day ideas about art. We could also question for instance if these rock paintings are really text-free interpretations/representations of the distant past, as these pictorial images are, after all, texts about economics, sustenance, technology, cultural myths, astronomy or night sky, and about the socio-cultural contexts which one can deduce from fragmentary inferential evidence. One needs to seriously reassess the reliability of the use of ethnographic analogy in seeking parallels.

We need to consider if our interpretations are evolutionary when chronologies are concerned, and even if so, do these archaeological records reflect an evolutionary sequence for art also. What is our notion of indigenous people? Is it static like it is about ‘prehistoric’ people? Were those people less intelligent than us especially when one calls them ‘primitive’ from our techno-economic viewpoint, ignoring the fact that human intelligence is the same everywhere and beyond time. Did these groups not have better extra-sensory perceptions of other dimensions, which we may have lost in the midst of our so-called progress and onslaught of industrial urbanisation?

Whenever one comes into the world of art, there is an absence of ‘fact’ in the sense that they are transfigured forms that have been abstracted from their

materiality through transformation into art. In other words, any work of art has an existence and identity apart and independent of its own – a non-factual order of being – in a world beset with irreconcilable dichotomies and hierarchies. It is in the adoption of a non-utilitarian attitude to such artistic expression that an alternative insight to rock art can be attempted. This framework furthermore allows a departure from the objective versus subjective binaries like sacred or secular, literate or non-literate, structural or functional etc. This approach can further lead us on to such questions like one's relation with the works of art as an observer/ the artist, the nature of creative process, how the meaning and the ontological status of art is then to be determined with works of art. This framework provides us with a standpoint from which rock art can then be addressed independent of the stylistic and chronological concerns that beset rock art studies this far.

### References

Bradley, R., (1994), 'Symbols and signposts - understanding the prehistoric petroglyphs of the British Isles', in *The ancient mind: Elements of cognitive Archaeology*, Colin Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow, (eds.), pp. 95-106, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bradley, R., Chippindale, C. and Helsog, K., (2002). 'Post-Paleolithic Europe', in *Handbook of Rock Art Research*, D. S. Whitley, (ed.), pp. 482-530, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, California.

Buggey, S., (1999), *An Approach to Aboriginal Cultural Landscapes* Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, [http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/images/Aboriginal\\_Cultural\\_Landscapes\\_e.pdf](http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/images/Aboriginal_Cultural_Landscapes_e.pdf), (accessed January 07, 2014).

Chakravarty, K.K. *et.al.*, (1997). *Indian Rock Art and its Global Context*, Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sanghralaya, Motilal Banarasidass Publications, Delhi and Bhopal.

Chakraverty, S., (2003). *Rock Art Studies in India: A Historical Perspective*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata.

Helskog, K., (2004). 'Landscapes in rock-art: rock-carving and ritual in the old European North', in *The Figured Landscapes of Rock-Art: Looking at Pictures in Place*, C. Chippindale and G. Nash, (eds.), pp. 265-88, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Hood, B. C., (1988). 'Sacred Pictures, Sacred Rocks: Ideological and Social Space in the North Norwegian Stone Age.' *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 65-84.

Kumar, G., (1992). 'Rock Art of Upper Chambal Valley. Part II: Some Observations.' *Purakala*, Vol. 3, pp. 56-67.

Lewis-Williams, J. D., (1981). *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Art*, Academic Press, London.

Lorblanchet, M., (2001). (ed.), *IGNCA Rock Art Series I*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Malik, S.C., (2012). 'Rock Art: A Universal Creative Act.' in *Session Papers of the International Conference on Rock Art 'Understanding Rock Art in Context'*, pp. 1-5, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi.

Mathpal, Y., (2001). 'Rock Art Studies in India', in *Rock Art in the Old World, Papers presented in Symposium A of the AURA Congress, Darwin (Australia) 1988*, pp.207-214, Michel Lorblanchet, (ed.), *IGNCA Rock Art Series I*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Pathak, M.D., (n.d). *Indian Rock Art: Prehistoric Paintings of the Pachmarhi Hills*, <http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/india/pachmarhi/index.php> (accessed January 07, 2014).

Pandey, S. K., (2001). 'Central Indian Rock Art in *Rock Art in the Old World, Papers presented in Symposium A of the AURA Congress, Darwin (Australia) 1988*, pp.249-272

Pradhan, S., (2001). *Rock Art in Orissa*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Smith, V. A., (1906). 'Pygmy Flints.' in *The Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 35, pp. 185-195.

Taçon, P. C. and Chippindale, C., (1998). 'An Archaeology of Rock-art through informed methods and formal methods.' In *The Archaeology of Rock-Art*, C. Chippindale and P. C. Taçon, (eds.), pp. 1-10, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tilley, C., (2004). *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Berg, Oxford.

Tyagi, G. S., (2001). 'Decorative Intricate Patterns in Indian Rock Art.' in *Rock Art in the Old World, Papers presented in Symposium A of the AURA Congress, Darwin (Australia) 1988*, pp.207-214, Michel Lorblanchet, (ed.), pp. 303-318, *IGNCA Rock Art Series I*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Wakankar V.S., (2001). 'Rock Painting in India', in *Rock Art in the Old World, Papers presented in Symposium A of the AURA Congress, Darwin (Australia) 1988*, pp.207-214, Michel Lorblanchet, (ed.), pp. 319-336, *IGNCA Rock Art Series I*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Wakankar, V.S., (2005). *Painted Rock Shelters of India*, Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal