



THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PREHISTORY THROUGH A STUDY OF MESO-CHALCOLITHIC ROCK ART AND CONTEMPORARY TRIBAL MURAL PAINTINGS IN JARKHAND, EASTERN NORTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT - Mankind as a species limited by binary intelligence has come to the peculiar conclusion as a literate society that history is limited to written knowledge. But in fact history is much more; it is the knowledge, information and experience which has been passed down by past generations of humans through non-literate sources of information such as genetic, oral, traditional and other means in which the visual motifs in rock art are important messages from the past (on the basis of accumulated information in traditional societies still with us as well as the cognitive interpretation of these visual images from the past left by the ancestors and the archeological remains which accompany them). In my experience rock art and paleo-archaeology along with the traditions of tribal societies preserve the messages of antiquity and prehistory. There is a wide field for research to understand the past through the visual remains in the rock art, as well as the living expressions before us in the sacred art of these people. The sacred is merely the honoring of what has been considered important by them as relics from the past or messages from the ancestors incorporated and preserved in their contemporary living traditions. Over the past 30 years I have made the subject of my research the motifs of prehistoric rock art sites in the Hazaribagh region, and the continuing traditions of Khovar and Sohrai contemporary sacred mural painting practised in the region by over a dozen tribes on the walls of their mud houses. I will present my findings before the 25th Valcamonica Symposium, so that I may reconstruct the history of prehistory.

RIASSUNTO - L'umanità, in quanto specie limitata da un'intelligenza binaria e in un contesto di società alfabetizzate, è pervenuta alla conclusione incompleta che la storia sia confinata alla conoscenza/informazione/esperienza contenuta nella scrittura. Tuttavia la storia è molto di più, essa è la conoscenza/informazione/esperienza trasmessa da generazioni di uomini del passato, sulle quali non abbiamo narrazioni, attraverso fonti di informazione non scritte, come ad esempio quelle genetiche, orali, tradizionali, e attraverso altri mezzi. Tra questi ultimi, i motivi visivi dell'arte rupestre sono importanti messaggi dal passato, basati su informazioni accumulate nelle società tradizionali che esistono ancora oggi tra noi, così come importanti sono l'interpretazione cognitiva di tali messaggi visivi lasciati dagli antenati nel passato e i reperti archeologici che li accompagnano. La mia esperienza con l'arte rupestre, la paleo-archeologia di tali regioni e le società tradizionali che vivono negli stessi luoghi i messaggi dell'antichità e della preistoria, mi ha portato a pensare che ci sia un vasto campo di ricerca per capire il passato attraverso i resti visivi dell'arte rupestre e le espressioni vive di fronte ai nostri occhi dell'arte sacra di tali popoli. Il sacro infatti non è altro che la venerazione di ciò che è stato considerato importante da loro in quanto resto del passato o insieme di messaggi degli antenati racchiusi e conservati nelle loro tradizioni viventi contemporanee. Tale è da oltre trent'anni il mio soggetto di studio che ho condotto non solo sui motivi dei 15 siti di arte rupestre del Medio Calcolitico che riportai alla luce nella regione di Hazaribagh, ma anche analizzando le tradizioni ancora esistenti delle pitture sacre murali Khovar e Sohrai, praticate nella regione da una dozzina di tribù sulle pareti in fango delle loro abitazioni. I risultati di tali ricerche sono oggi largamente diffusi in seminari e simposi a livello internazionale, e sono supportati da miei articoli in modo da ricostruire la storia della preistoria.

*Written for Jason and his passing
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INTRODUCTION

Many of the ritual sites we see today are more ancient and holy than their now presiding deities. There is a gulf between the deity and the rituals supposed to be held in its honour. This is the case with the Jagannatha sun temple at Puri in East India. The supposed deity is a representation of Vishnu but in fact the idols are primitive and unconnected with the Hindu sun-god. The Jagannatha idols are three small foetus-like stumps with round eyes and may have mother goddess significance but certainly have no connection with the Hindu deity Vishnu. Moreover the mithuna sculptures on the temple walls have nothing to do with Vishnu. The religious significance goes back to pre-Hindu Saora tribal worship of this Orissan region. (*D.K.Bedekar, Primitive Societies and Yajna, Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, vol.xxx, 1950, p.99*). (see figures 1-2-3)



Another example may be the prehistoric bull-leaping frescoes of Piklihal rock-art in central India which are proto forms found thousands of years later in Crete and the Indus valley. There may no doubt be connections but vast gulfs of unknown events in time connect them. These events may not be possible to reconstruct. What I am therefore saying is that there is no cut and dried formula for making history of prehistory over long spans of time and the best is conjectures. In the more recent past we may have an easier task such as in the road-ways along the upper Indus and the adjoining river valleys which brought trade as well as invasions as branches of the old Silk Road from China to Europe and left over thirty thousand figural drawings and five thousand inscriptions (*The Indus: Cradle and Crossroads of Civilization. Pakistan-German Archaeological Research, Ed. Harold Hauptmann, Rock-Art in the Upper Indus Valley, p.32*). Obviously these are only examples but they present us with data. From Shatial to Chilas in the upper Indus prehistoric rock art constitutes only five percent of the markings and consists of local animals like ibex, markhor and bhurrel or Blue Sheep. Animals have characteristic large rumps. Some male anthropomorphic figures show shamanic influences and this is perhaps related with hunting.

Representations of masks relating to the Okunev culture in South Siberia allow other links with the upper Indus and central Asia during the third millennium B.C. In the central Indian region the Mesolithic rock art goes back as far as ten thousand years and may be found in an environment hardly far removed from that time even until the present day when similar murals found in the rock paintings in caves are to be found painted on mud walls of houses of local tribes. India has very ancient prehistoric migratory links with Africa and Southeast Asia on the one hand and with West Asia and central Europe on the other. Moreover the high Tibetan plateau across the Himalayas has seen migrations from the Tien Shan and Karakorum to the Bering Strait.

The rock-art of South Asia is younger than Europe but yet older than what Europe offers because of still living artistic traditions of the region . I believe the lactate cultures of South Asia during the Neolithic period were the source of the earliest Danubian Linear Band Culture and those of the Rhine, Elbe, Neckar etc. South Asian migrations from India to Burma and Yunan over the China hills go back thirty thousand years and the proto-Australoid art of Australia is connected with India. It is this broad region which presents the field for presenting a historical perspective of the region's prehistory.

FROM PREHISTORY TO PRESENT: A SWEEPING VIEW

Obviously history begins with the period when food surplus allowed men the luxury of developing systems of written communication, and when archaeologists and historians speak of the prehistoric stages in man's evolution they refer to a period when humans were primarily occupied with food-gathering and were in the early stages of sedentarization, and for which obviously no written records are available for us to know much about their lives and thoughts . However, this does not mean that we cannot know about them and their lives and thoughts because they left behind a copious lithic library and records in rock-art. Their food disposal sites tell us what they ate, and their place of living gives a fair idea of how they passed their time. Their life was wholly dependent upon their changing seasonal environment, the availability of natural resources, and their living adjustments determined the type of tools and artifacts which they used, in the selection of their habitat and organization of social life which led to the formation of their beliefs and religious practices. The remains of early man are mostly in the stone tools which they fashioned and also their markings of the stone walls of caves. For the present paper I think a detailed study of their lithic markings and their interpretation will take too much time and is a 'scientific' examination I would here prefer to avoid. I will like to have a quiet glimpse into the life of the early cave dwellers and hunters whose daily life was not much removed from the simple village societies of forest India even today and I think I might make a much more valid- if less 'scientific' contribution by attempting this.

Though the general chronology sequence of the evolution of early man's culture in India was in the order of Early Stone Age to Late Stone Age through Middle Stone Age, yet it is necessary to remember that there has always been a considerable cultural overlap in India. This necessarily means that the chronology of a culture in one region may not be the chronology of a culture - howsoever seemingly similar - in another region. Besides, even in the Stone Age past the cultures displayed distinct regional variations. The rock paintings will be equally subject to these observations in the lithic culture.

The rock paintings of India have long been the subject of detailed study in the hands of both Indian and foreign experts and have already given us a fair body of 'history'. General characteristics of the Indian Stone Age culture have been realized. We will in this paper like to go beyond this. For the Early Stone Age the principal stone tools are the hand axe or the hafted stone axe, the cleavers, and core tools of the discoidal and elliptical outline made in a similar manner to the hand axes, chopping tools of various types and flakes well described by Bridget and Raymond Allchin in *The Birth of Indian Civilization* (Hamondsworth 1968, p.53). then there are

the stone tools of the Early Stone Age, the Middle Stone Age industries which include flake tools, cores, and various kinds of scrapers. The characteristic tools of the Late Stone Age are microliths or small tools with wide degree variation of types both locally and regionally (*A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization, Orient Longman, 2002: Eds. N.Ray, B.D.Chattopadhyay, V.R.Mani, R.Chakravarti, p.135*). (see figures 4-5)

Even today a similar atmosphere and environment is found in the mud village houses that have long since replaced those early cave dwellings in which early societies lived and created the motifs on the stone walls. To enter a room in the village house where the marriage-room decorations are being created by the women is to enter another world in the deep past. This culture in village India is traceable to a settled neo-chalcolithic tradition when the first smelting of copper and bronze was being practiced along with the use of polished stone tools and when the metal tools were still only a luxury. The main source of food was gathering from the forests and some hunting which though far less productive was an ancient practice which slowly gave way to the practice of tillage farming as the usage of seed grains to raise crops was developed into a science. The time frame is placed as far back as the fourth millennium BC for the first settled food producing societies in central India. The practice of wheel turned pottery began roughly between the fourth and third millennium. This was a time of sublime change in the village society. It was in the production of crops and domestication of animals, the use of the wheel for transport vehicles such as the cart, and the potter's wheel, and the lever for the well-pole which revolutionized irrigation and gave rise to a distinctive culture, and this pattern was developing simultaneously over a vast area from south Baluchistan and southern Indus basin to northern Rajasthan where the proto-tribal neo-chalcolithic beginnings led to the earliest expressions of the Harappan Civilization during the fourth millennium BC.

At this time tribes from the north (Makran- Indus Bactria) had already begun migrations through Central India via the Satpuras and Narmada Valley to the far eastern regions of north -central India. These were the first waves of Dravidian speakers whom linguists like Asko Parpola believe were the proto-Harappan Dravidians, a wild goat-rearing pastoral people from the Baluchi hills overlooking the south valley of the Indus, the fabled Oritae recorded by Arrian who were met by Alexander along the Makran coast during his invasion of India in 326 B.C. These peoples were speaker of Kurukh, a Dravidian language, and the purveyors of a written script which has been the great mystery called the Indus script, and which appears in fragments throughout the rock art of Central India, especially in Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Bengal and Orissa, where it became the visual vocabulary of craft traditions like dokra metal casting and pottery. On one side in northern India we find the flowering of the Harappan civilization and on the other- in the east of India we find the flowering traditions of tribal India which responded in its own way with the influences coming from southeast Asia and Polynesia and westward across India from far away Egypt and Mesopotamia via Persia, and even from as far off as the Phoenician coast and Aegean from whence it drew the traditions of Crete, Mycenae, and the cultures of central Europe and the Balkans which are linked to the Indo-Aryan languages. This is what I have called the Danube to Damodar culture, the cultural conduit that fashioned the lactate cultures of central Europe in the Danube, Rhine, Elbe, and Neckar during the Linear Band Culture. Not only the rock art but the pottery of these regions, the great wall paintings of Catal Hoyuk and the relics of Hacilar in Turkey tempered influences felt throughout the artistic genius flowing from the Auregnacian art founts of France and Spain between India and Europe. This great lateral migration that fertilized the Fertile Crescent created the beginnings of human civilization during the first fruitful period since the end of the last glaciation in Europe ending 10,000 B.C and began that almost mystic fertilization of western man called the Indo-Aryan.

It would be a mistake to regard the Harappan Civilization as providing the first source of Indian civilization, and overlooking its cultural roots in proto-tribal cultural patterns of India in this period which may rightly be called the first indo-Aryan contact phase with the sowing of the first Indian seeds of what would eventually become the culture of Europe, the Middle Ages and Reformation, the High Renaissance in Italy, the Age of Colonialism, and eventually the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment and the rape by England and Europe of foreign lands and finally the pressures which led to devastation through wars of the 20th Century, and now heralds the doom of the planet through climate change. This is the history created through prehistory in less than ten millennia which I believe derived its sources in South and Southeast Asia as far back as eight or ten thousand years ago.

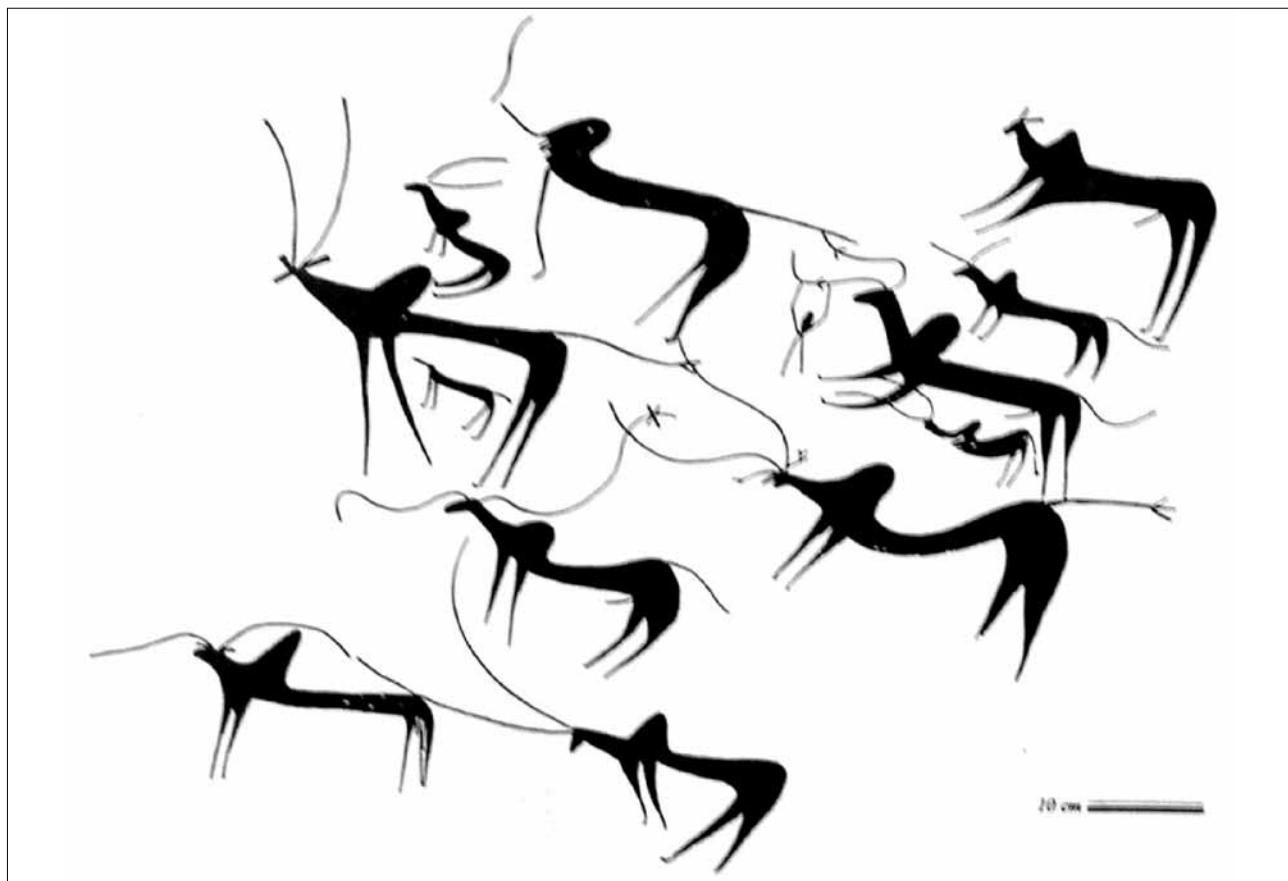


Fig. 1 Bull leaping Piklihal



Fig. 2 Bull leaping Crete



Fig. 3 Bull leaping Indus



Fig. 4 Painted Mudden Houses



Fig. 5 Painted rock art Shelter