



COMPARATIVE TRADITIONS IN VILLAGE PAINTING AND PREHISTORIC ROCK ART OF JHARKHAND

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Abstract - Comparative traditions in village painting and prehistoric rock art of Jharkhand

In certain unspoiled parts of India such as Jharkhand in eastern India the continuing artistic traditions from the Mesolithic to the present are evidenced in Meso-Chalcolithic rock art and continued in the contemporary ritual tribal village murals of non-literate societies painted by the tribal (Adivasi) women during certain seasons such as the marriage season and harvest season (Khovar and Sohrai), showing a unique cultural continuity. They bear the stamp of the dependence of human cognition on the natural environment and communication between the human and natural worlds. They remain an unbelievably rare example of the Paleolithic perception of the natural environment which, inevitably, in the culturally more developed tribal societies shows the first signs of evolving into folk art, while in the less developed tribal groups it retains the flavour of the prehistoric rock paintings of the region. This paper examines the contemporary tribal harvest and marriage wall murals and a dozen painted rock art sites in the watershed of the upper Damodar river in North Karanpura, Jharkhand, and examines its cultural and paleo-archeological background going back over 100,000 years. The paper examines in detail the ritual mural art forms of the region today of several ethnic groups with different forms of artistic, symbolic and material expression, visibly connected with the prehistoric rock paintings and folklore of the region first made by the ancestors of these Dravidian and proto-Australoid tribes. Art and communication in this world are still between a non-literate people and the tribal world of nature around them.

Riassunto - Confronto fra la tradizione dei villaggi dipinti e l'arte rupestre preistorica di Jharkhand

In alcune zone incontaminate dell'India, come Jharkhand, nell'est del paese, le tradizioni artistiche di matrice mesolitica documentate dall'arte rupestre si sono conservate fino ad oggi nelle pitture murarie rituali e tribali delle società non letterate, eseguite dalle donne della tribù Adivasi, in occasione di particolari ricorrenze come i matrimoni e il periodo del raccolto (chiamate Khovar e Sohrai). Esse testimoniano una continuità culturale unica e la « relazione fra l'intellettualità dell'uomo e l'ambiente naturale », ossia la comunicazione fra l'umano e il mondo naturale. Questo rimane un raro esempio della percezione paleolitica dell'ambiente naturale che inevitabilmente, nelle società più sviluppate da un punto di vista culturale, mostra i primi segni di evoluzione in arte popolare, mentre nei gruppi tribali, conserva il profumo delle pitture rupestri preistoriche della regione. Questo articolo confronta le pitture tribali contemporanee, realizzate nella periodo dei matrimoni e del raccolto, e una decina di siti di pitture rupestri del bacino superiore del fiume Damodar, a Karanpura nel Jharkhand, ed esamina il suo background culturale e paleo-archeologico che risale a 100.000 anni fa. L'articolo esamina inoltre in dettaglio le forme di decorazione parietale contemporanee realizzate da diversi gruppi etnici, con diverse forme di espressione artistica, simbolica e materiale visibilmente correlato alle pitture rupestri e al folklore regionale, realizzato in origine per gli antenati di queste tribù dravidiche e proto-australoidi. Pur nel mondo moderno, un popolo pre-letterato utilizza l'arte come comunicazione con la natura.

Résumé - Traditions comparées : les peintures des villages et l'art rupestre préhistorique de Jharkhand

Dans certains endroits préservés de l'Inde, tels que le Jharkhand, dans l'Est du pays, les traditions artistiques ne se sont pas perdues du Mésolithique jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Elles sont présentes dans l'art rupestre méso-chalcolithique et persistent aujourd'hui dans les peintures murales rituelles tribales des sociétés non lettrées, que produisent les femmes des tribus (Adivasi) durant certaines saisons, comme la saison des mariages et celle des moissons (appelées Khovar et Sohrai). Elles témoignent d'une continuité culturelle unique et de la « dépendance de la cognition humaine par rapport à l'environnement naturel », c'est-à-dire de la communication entre l'humain et les mondes naturels. Ceci demeure un des rares exemples de la perception paléolithique de l'environnement naturel, qui, inévitablement, dans les sociétés tribales plus développées d'un point de vue culturel, présente les premiers signes d'une évolution vers l'art populaire alors que, dans les groupes tribaux moins développés, il conserve le parfum des peintures rupestres préhistoriques de la région. Cet article examine les peintures pariétales tribales contemporaines réalisées à la saison des mariages ou des moissons et une dizaine de sites de peintures rupestres dans le bassin de la haute Damodar à Karanpura Nord, dans le Jharkhand. Nous parcourons quelque 100 000 ans de l'histoire pour découvrir le contexte culturel et paléo-archéologique de la région. Cet article examine aussi en détails les formes d'art pariétal rituel réalisées aujourd'hui par différents groupes ethniques ayant différentes formes d'expressions artistiques, symboliques et matérielles visiblement liées aux peintures rupestres préhistoriques et au folklore de la région, réalisées à l'origine par les ancêtres de ces tribus dravidiennes et proto-australoides. Dans ce monde, l'art et la communication sont encore, entre un peuple non lettré et le monde tribal de la nature qui l'entoure, une façon pour l'homme de reprendre sa forme animale, et vice-versa.

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PALEO-ARCHEOLOGY OF JHARKHAND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LIVING TRADITION

The area in question is the North Karanpura valley (40 km south of Hazaribagh town), being in an upper trap between the plateaux of Hazaribagh to the north and Ranchi to the south in the valley of the upper Damodar river in North Jharkhand, in east India. In 1992 the author brought to light at Isco at the eastern end of the valley a 30 metres deep painted shelter dated to the Meso-Chalcolithic. Subsequently in some hills along what seems to be the shoreline of an ancient lake around the valley a dozen painted shelters were found. In the region of the rock art a variety of stone tools (hand axes, microliths, borers, strippers, cleavers, leaf blades, core stones, etc) have been found dated from the Middle to Upper Paleolithic), as well as more recent tools from around the time when the paintings were made. On the scarps of the Hazaribagh plateau large early pebble stone tools have been found, along with finely finished and deeply patinated horsehoof hammer-stones which have been dated by S.B. Otta, the director of the Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) Prehistory Department, to the Lower Paleolithic (250,000 BP). A small stone goddess was dated to 20,000 BP by B.K. Thapar, former director of the ASI who excavated Mohenjodaro under Wheeler. The upper reaches of the Damodar valley are known archeologically as a Paleolithic region. It is also known for its scores of megalithic sites. Paleolithic chipped stone flakes from megalith sites tested by spectrometry at the Paleolithic Institute in Dresden showed rechipping at 3500 BC. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage convener of the Hazaribagh Chapter, Bulu Imam, has made a collection of these stone tools at the Sanskriti Museum in Hazaribagh.

The cave paintings show motifs and animal art similar to those still being produced in the community art of the villages in the valley. The village people believe the art was painted by their ancestors. The two major artistic traditions are the painting of house walls during the Sohrai harvest festival during the autumn, and the comb-cut painting of the marriage or bridal rooms, called Khovar (*Kho* = cave; *var* = bridal couple), during the spring. It must also be noted that the painted rock shelters are also called Khovar and believed by the villagers to be ancient marriage rooms. The entire North Karanpura valley 40 km south of Hazaribagh town is going to be destroyed by opencast coal mining and 31 new coal mines have been given clearance to go ahead. Nearly 200 villages and about 1 million tribal people will be displaced and 3,000 sq km of agricultural lands and forests will be affected in the upper catchment or watershed of the Damodar river (see www.karanpuracampaign.com).

THE ROCK ART

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, is 23.25' and 24.48' north latitude and 84.29' and 86.38' east longitude in the North Karanpura valley (upper Damodar valley). The rock art of Hazaribagh was brought to light for the first time in 1991 following information about the Isco rock art given to me by Tony Herbert. I visited it for the first time in 1991 and informed the Bihar Archaeology Department, who confirmed its antiquity. Subsequently over a dozen rock art sites were brought to light through the efforts of the *Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage* in Hazaribagh. The rock art was studied in 1993-95 by Erwin Neumayer of Vienna, a renowned authority on Indian rock art, and S.B. Otta, Head of the Prehistory Department of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Nagpur. Both authorities dated the rock art to the Meso-Chalcolithic period. There is evidence of an older layer of rock art touching the Paleolithic. Several microliths and polished stone axe-heads were found in the painted shelters with evidence of Paleolithic habitation sites and heavy hand-axes and stone tools in the hilly region above and alongside the rock art, with black and red ware pottery and remains of an iron industry below. The rock art of the Mesolithic period contains drawings of wild and domestic animals and the Chalcolithic *mandala* designs and geometric forms in keeping with the chronology of Wakankar and Brooks (1976) in Central India. The oldest level of rock art I have found to be in Saraiya in the Satpahar range discovered in 1994 by Erwin Neumayer and Justin Imam. This rock art has a shamanistic series of drawings painted in red haematite which I believe is of the Paleolithic period, and is the most priceless rock art of Hazaribagh.

This rock art is on an eyrie on the south face of the Satpahar range overlooking the Piperwar and Ashoka opencast coal mines, and endangered by blasting from a railway being built 65 metres below it. The rock art of Hazaribagh has demonstrated a consistent connection and continuity with incised pottery, painted pottery, tattoos (also known as Godna), and with the contemporary marriage and harvest paintings on the walls of the village houses. The Khovar designs were compared by me to the La-pita pottery of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and New Caledonia and in 2000 I had an opportunity of presenting Khovar art in a working mural exhibition alongside the pottery collection



from PNG from the Australian Museum collection of Margaret Tucson and Patricia May in Sydney. The art has shown consistent similarities with the painted pottery of the Indus noted also by Sudha Satyawadi (1994).

The rock art motifs found in Hazaribagh belong to a transitional phase between the Mesolithic and the Chalcolithic, having motifs common to both periods. The oldest forms in the contemporary tribal paintings of the Hazaribagh villages are similar to the earlier period and are practised by our most primitive tribes such as the nomadic hunting and gathering Birhor tribe who live in leaf houses, trap small animals, gather honey, and make string nets and ropes. In their sand paintings they commonly depict honey bags and monkeys in trees and draw nets and traps of different kinds, and some of the oldest motifs such as the circle in the cross and the tree of life, the concentric circle, yam figures and other motifs less often found in our rock art. Similar types of art but not so primitive are made by the Bhuiya tribe who finger-paint the mud walls of their houses. Among the old motifs such as the zigzag and lines of circles appear in the metal-casters' art of the Malhars. It has been noted that many forms common to rock art appear in the wall paintings and also that many forms may be found in the rock art of the Vindhias as well as other areas of west India. Many of these forms find their way into the paintings of the tribal people of Hazaribagh on their village houses, as mentioned above.

THE ART OF THE HAZARIBAGH VILLAGES

The wild and wonderful art of the hill country to the south of Hazaribagh overlooks from the southern extremity of the Hazaribagh plateau, the North Karanpura valley as it is now called after an infamous coalmine project started there. This valley is in fact part of the continuation of the Vindhyan hill chain forming a rift valley in an upper trap or basin, through which the Damodar river flows. The eastern flank divides the valley by a hill range called the Sati range. On this beautiful and isolated range stand a series of Ganju and Kurmi villages still secluded from the world below and the harrowing life and experience of the coalmines that have eaten like leprosy into the beautiful forested hill country in which the tribal people still live lives of secluded isolation and peace, and in which they can practise their country crafts and arts, the forms of the designs used in their paintings being illustrated in this paper.

I have in this short paper endeavoured to select and illustrate only certain forms, according to the definitions of bird, animal, fish, plant and decorative motifs.

Some of the forms are playful and naively drawn, painted with great felicity and imagination, and evidence of a rich experience and vivid memory of these village artists of the wild forms of animal, bird and plant life, and decorative motifs. My name has now become inextricably linked with this form of folk art, which I first brought to public notice in 1992, which I have since popularised both in India and abroad through a series of exhibitions and lectures. I have drawn attention to the similarity of these forms painted in large murals on the village house walls, and the seals and painted pottery of the Indus valley starting from the pre-Harappan level and thereafter continuing unchanged through the period of Harappan and post-Harappan occupation, when the art form finally came to an end, although the pottery and ceramics on which it was painted continued into present times and may still be seen in the contemporary pottery of the Punjab in Ropar and Chandigarh, where it is found being sold at big stalls. The same kind of pottery and painted forms have been found in the Chalcolithic Jorwe and Malwa cultures in Daimabad, Inamgaon, Prakash in the Deccan in the Narmada-Tapti valleys, which I will deal with later. It is of interest that similar forms appear in the prehistoric painted pottery of Iran (Susa, NevaHAND, Slaik-II, Jemdet Nasr, Deh-bid (Fars), Tal-is-kav (Fars) Halaf.

We can say that the grid pattern upon which some of the floral motifs of Iran appear (Halaf) are found in Harappan motifs too, and are a sign of the civilisation period when a new sense of urban and mechanistic order emerges. I would say that the Khovar and Sohrai wall painting tradition in Hazaribagh is in a pre-urban village phase and does not employ the developed grid formation, which is a sign of modern urbanization, the result of the destruction of the old village culture which is a mark of the springtime of the human race. I would like to make it clear to the reader that Khovar and Sohrai are living art forms compared with the dead ones of Egypt, Crete or Harappa.

The most interesting aspect of the Hazaribagh animal and bird forms and the most striking quality they possess are the relationships between the forms themselves, and the relationships between the birds and animals with their young, a trait found in the Indus painted forms. This relationship is of a

purely matriarchal nature, such as deer and goats feeding their young, or birds feeding their chicks with fish and insects. There are interesting relationships between the animals themselves, such as a peacock or mongoose fighting with a snake, or snakes fighting among themselves, or the mother peacock with a young chick on its back, peacocks fighting, or a peahen breaking an egg. The knowledge of plant life is extensive, as would be expected of jungle-dwellers. These murals are of a matriarchal tradition and the art painted on the houses is done by the village women and young girls, whom they apprentice in a handed down *parampara* tradition, when the young girls learn the art forms and convert them to memory. They take them to their husband's home, which possesses other art forms of its own. One can see a range of stylistic differences in a village home, in which various sisters-in-laws and the old mother-in-law herself have brought stylistic trends from another village.

The first art form group may be said to be of the tribal or autochthonous group; the second is artisanal groups, the village overall stylistic genre, and third is the individual artistic expressions of the artist herself.

Apart from opening up a very interesting discussion on the nature of the connections between Hazaribagh and the Indus valley or the Deccan or other central and eastern cultures of India, the art also opens up a dialogue with the depiction of local belief traditions which find local forms for their illustrations, for example the fabled man-bird or the four-legged bird Chibba, believed to live in these forests. This denotes a purely local folk tradition which finds expression in the paintings.

When we move from the animal and bird forms in the hill villages of the Kurmis and Ganjus in South Hazaribagh in villages like Jorakath, Chapri and Saheda, to the valley plains of Barkagaon and villages such as Kharati, Napo, Barhmaniya, and Bhaduli Pipradih, a noticeable stylistic change as well as observation in drawing of forms appears. Whereas the art of the hill villages shows an accurate observation of the wild animals and birds in the hill ranges, which are densely forested, when we move down into the Barkagaon valley the village women draw much more prosaic, stylised, floral and less vibrant animal and bird forms. The valley artists are heavier in their handling of forms and line. The strong living line which we observe in the hill villages is less apparent. However, we do sometimes find the converse true when women from the hill villages marry and come down to the plains, and vice versa. That the women living in the forest environment should draw and paint wild animals and birds naturally and in a lively way is of course quite natural. It may also be noted that the Kurmi women of the hill villages paint zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms depicting the first god (Siva) in much of their art, which shows a sacred significance. The closest forms to the rock art of Hazaribagh are drawn by the Harijans, the Bhuiyas and the nomadic Birhor tribe, who claim that it was their ancestors who painted the rock art.

The village women take great pride in their art, which is a part of their regular repair and decoration of their homes, and an inspirational occupation and ritual sacred tradition which city dwelling women lack. These forms are evolved from a long process in which mystery and imagination have been working in the minds of simple village women since time immemorial, and they have to be considered as a national heritage. Unfortunately, the entire region has been the subject of the most vicious kind of destructive development for the past five decades and more, and more villages are threatened with even more destruction to make way for the opencast coalmines, thermal power stations and other industrial enterprises. In even those villages which are not being destroyed, the money the coalmines bring into the area, and new lifestyles, are causing the mud homes with their handmade tiled roofs to be replaced by cement ones with concrete roofs. Mud plaster has been replaced by cement and the need for annual repair which occasions the paintings primarily is gone. The ceremonial nature of the art is seen during the marriage season which is in the summer, when the houses are repainted, especially in the marriage room or Khovar, a tradition that is slowly dying out in the new cement houses. Even the painted murals of Sohrai done on the walls during the harvest season with the onset of winter are disappearing with the coming of the cement culture. This is called development. The religion of the villagers is a vernacular animist worship in which animals play the role of simple objects of respect. For example, the elephant and tiger are deities of the forest, and the forest god depicted as a tree is Siva. With the onset of modernisation and Sanskritisation these old meanings die out and new forms appear, including those of Hindu gods and goddesses, and the objects portrayed in the school drawing books are, for example, roses, vases, fruit forms and other such trivia drawn according to Western art rules based upon realistic portrayal in prescribed artistic forms.

There is an urgent need to move away from the artificial mechanical drawing and painting first brought to India over a century and a half ago on the lines of which arts and crafts are presently being



taught in all Indian schools. The need of the hour is to return to the natural two-dimensional perspective of traditional Indian *pata* painting, such as Khovar and Sohrai and the earlier Kali Ghat *pata* tradition, using the indigenous materials such as natural earth and stone colours, lamp black and so on.

When we study the art of the Indus and central and eastern India one thing becomes abundantly clear, and this is the excellence of the individual motifs. This means that over long years of experience and training in the very best forms timeless motifs have emerged which could speak for that civilisation to unborn generations many thousands of years away. Great art is the symbol of a great culture. Our present culture in modern India has no greatness of artistic expression to leave to unborn generations, apart from the artistic traditions which we have inherited from the past, and which continue as living traditions among the depressed classes. Artistic heritage has to be recreated from generation to generation. It is a living expression, not a dead one. I propose that the art of Hazaribagh and its forested environs is set to represent to future generations the greatness of our civilisation.

The painted pottery of the Indus valley is a repetition of motifs of uniform excellence. Each individual motif is an extremely powerful statement of the civilisation, culture and historical eminence of the people who made it. The initial forms were pre-Harappan. The icons of our contemporary culture of today are unfortunately of mechanical and scientific rather than artistic nature, and are hand-downs from the West. The quality of art forms in the villages of Hazaribagh are of such a high quality that they could fire the imagination of Picasso, Matisse or Braque. Their force is in a unique visceral quality of abstraction and expressionism at its best. These forms inspired the art of Jamini Roy, Nandlal Bose, Ramkinkar and Binode Behari Mukherjee.

I have divided the art into two forms: Khovar (*sgraffito*) and Sohrai (painted), and further classified it under 11 stylistic modes. The painted form of mural done with earth colours I have called Sohrai for its prominent use of colours as a visual expression, practised during the harvest festival of Sohrai with the onset of winter. It is also painted during the marriage season. Its main practitioners are the Kurmis of East Hazaribagh, the Ghatwals of the same region, the Ganjus of South Hazaribagh and the Oraon of West Hazaribagh. The women use chewed toothsticks (*datwan*) instead of brushes. They make a liquid pigment of three or four shades (red, white, black, yellow) in which they dip the *kuchi* or *datwan* and make the painting, applying the liquid earth colours directly on the clay walls which immediately soak up the paint like a sponge. Sometimes cloth pieces are dipped in the colour as a brush. These are indigenous techniques. They do not mix up any binding agents such as lac, acacia glue or rice water (*marh*). For this reason, after a heavy shower of rain, sometimes the painting washes off. The white is plain kaolin; yellow is a natural earth ochre; the black is a kind of manganese earth; the red is the natural red earth colour or ground haematite stone (where found), the latter being popular among the Ganjus. All the colours are found close to the village except the white, which is dug out of a tunnel in the earth wherever it is found; frequently a tunnel collapses and is the cause of deaths when women are crushed under the falling cave ceiling. These sites are called *chuna-khaan*, *chuna* being the local name for white lime and *khaan* being a mine. The black manganese earth is dug up around the edges of fields bordering the jungles. The yellow earth is a common earth called *nagri* used by potters, and it is also commonly used for hair-washing by village women. The red earth is *gerua* which is very common and sometimes is found in a beautiful pink shade or lavender. The deep purplish red colour which also appears in the paintings of Ganju women is haematite, which is made by grinding the stone of the same colour with water. This then is the simple palette of the Hazaribagh village women artist. I am sure that the houses in the villages and the towns of the Indus were similarly painted, proof of which comes to us from the painted pottery. The same can be said about the Chalcolithic farming cultures of central India and the Deccan. Hazaribagh also has a rich pottery painting and comb decorating tradition which is practised especially during the marriage season on the ceremonial pots (*kalsa*) which hold water and mango leaves for blessing.

The next form of mural technique is in *sgraffito*, in which a coat of white or yellow earth is applied over the black manganese ground, and before it has fully dried is scratched or scraped with a comb so that the black undercoat is revealed, creating a brilliant and powerful motif. Those who have read my books *Bridal Caves* and *Painted Houses of Hazaribagh* will find detailed information about the art in its ritual context there so I will not dwell on it too much here. This comb-cut art I have designated Khovar as it is widely used among all the different artisanal castes and tribal groups for the decoration of the marriage house or bridal room. Comb-cutting art is also characteristic of artisanal societies for decorating their houses during the harvest season, (Sohrai) but they are then decorated with red (vermilion) and white (rice) spots either stamped or sprayed on the walls.

One of the most compelling things about the Khovar and Sohrai murals is their initial appearance of being full of ornamentation, which is soon dispelled when one realises that the objects themselves are quite simple, and that the appearance of ornamentation arises from the filling of every available space with some form or another, and that is why at a distance the entire space seems covered with art forms and hence gives the appearance of ornamentation. Due to lack of ornamentation the individual forms are hence purer and more powerful, and the overall impression conveyed by the heavily painted space is one of power and vivid imaginative display, which are the two most significant achievements of the art. By comparison the petty pretty forms taught in the art classes of our schools today in imitation of Western mechanical artistic trends is inauthentic when compared with the indigenous Indian tradition.

A NOTE ON SOME KHOVAR AND SOHRAI MOTIFS

It is not my purpose in this paper to enter into a detailed examination of the meanings of the motifs, which I am undertaking in a separate book devoted to the subject (*Motifs from the Past – a Comparative Study of the Iconography of the Khovar and Sohrai art of Hazaribagh*), which seeks to unlock the deepest meanings of these motifs' religious and cultural artistic traditions. Here I will give some examples of the more common motifs which appear in the painting of the Ganju, Oraon, Kurmi, Prajapati, Birhor, Bhuiya, etc which can stand comparison with the prehistoric art of the rock shelters of Hazaribagh which the author brought to light in 1992. It is of interest that these motifs, further, bear a strong resemblance to similar motifs found in both prehistoric and indigenous artistic expressions of ethnic societies around the world. The similarity between the motifs of Jharkhand and the Indus was revealed by me in 1992, and I further drew attention to the connection with the painted pottery of Iran. In fact it was my son Justin who first showed me the connection between the Isco rock art motifs and the characters on the Indus valley seals. The fact that the Kurmis still paint their spotted wheeled animals during the harvest on the walls of their mud homes is of great interest, because similar figures are found in the Chalcolithic period of the Isco rock art in Hazaribagh. This is evidence of a continuous tradition. Further, hundreds of motifs found in Isco, Nautangwa Pahar (Salga), Hazaribagh and several shelters in the Satpahar range (formerly in Hazaribagh, but now in Chatra district, i.e. Thethangi, Raham, Sidpa, etc) carry rock paintings with motifs found in the Khovar and Sohrai paintings of Hazaribagh. The Sariya rock art in the same area has anthropomorphs and zoomorphs believed to be the region's oldest rock art, dating to the Paleolithic. In the Satpahar range we also find vivid paintings of wild animals which represent the art of the Mesolithic hunters (7000 BC). That these figures and motifs are similar to the contemporary Khovar and Sohrai painting of Hazaribagh is not surprising; what is surprising is that these same motifs appear in the Indus seals and painted pottery, as well as in the painted pottery of Iran and Mesopotamia (Susa, Amri, Samarra, Chagar-bazar, Sialk, Giyan, Fars, etc), Mehargarh (Baluchistan hills, 5000 BC) and Ahar (Rajasthan Aravallis, 3500 BC). They may not therefore be coincidental, but speak of migrations from the east. So we may find similarities between Hazaribagh's Khovar and Sohrai motifs and those of Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, Kalibangan and Harappa from a period as far back as 5,000 years ago. We find striking similarities between these motifs and Gond motifs from central India, the Aboriginal art of Australia, both prehistoric and contemporary, as well as from Mali in West Africa, Namibia, British Columbia and the native American Indians. Here is evidence of a universal visual language which is found repeated from the bushmen of South Africa in the Drakensberg ranges, in the rock art of France, particularly the Dordogne, Corrèze, Ariège, Haute Garonne, Gard, Niaux and Ardèche, and in the famous Trois Frères, a cave in the Pyrenees. In northern Spain this art manifested itself in the provinces of Altamira, Cantabria and Asturias (near Bilbao). These early artistic impulses of Magdalenian and Aurignacian man, like the similar stone tool culture, was common to early man in both west and east, at a time when our human race manifested similar instincts.

One of the great understandings which primitive art has taught us is that peoples at a similar stage or level of consciousness manifest a similar art, and that this is not necessarily a sign of psychological immaturity, but of being close to original principles which lie at the heart of change; that the work of one child, for example, can stand as a representative for all children, and the work of one indigenous artist can stand for the art of all indigenous peoples, is a sign of the strength and homogeneity of their art. It is a mark of sovereign identity. The so-called primitive art of Khovar and Sohrai is timeless. Here we may find symbols found in the court of Queen Cleopatra in Alexandria, or symbols, especially geometrical motifs, similar to the writing of Ancient Egypt. Motifs identical with



Dogon rock art motifs from Mali in western Africa appear. Immediate similarity can be seen with markings on the prehistoric pottery of the Danube (33000-27000 BC) and with material from Sumerian, Egyptian Pre-Dynastic and First Dynasty, and Aegean Bronze Age cultures. We realize that these motifs are not children's playthings but manifestations of human intelligence not so far back: royal emblems and sacred signs, whimsical forms, the shamanistic, totemic, and earliest tantric; the biological vocabulary of form in their primary impulsive, voluntary expression. These motifs take their proper place as symbols of authority on the world's (and India's) earliest coinage. Babylonian motifs and the prehistoric signs sacred to the marsh Arabs of the reed-beds in the Tigris Euphrates delta, who were among the earliest formal worshippers of the mother goddess, appear before us from the mists of time. The sacred *mandalas* and *chouks* so sacred to Indian mysticism come before us. The numerous motifs from prehistoric rock art startle us with their continuity in our villages as a living memory in the hands of our women Khovar and Sohrai painters. Forms which appear in Teutonic, Byzantine, Celtic and Carolingian art in medieval Europe honour their roots in the Far East and India. Archaic Sumerian symbols suddenly appear in a Hazaribagh jungle. Forms which have been locked by time in sandstone rock art suddenly come to life through living traditions in which they have been absorbed. The wild animal forms include Indian bison or gaur (*Bos gaurus*), humped cattle (*Bos nomadicus*), tiger (*Panthera tigris*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), cheetah (*Axis axis*), Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), sambhur elk (*Cervus unicolor*), elephant (*Elephas maximus*), hog deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), langur (*Presbytis entellus*) and wild buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). The cattle and wild animal forms have shamanistic influences seen also in the rock art of Kazakhstan and western Norway, and researchers have shown a similar set of influences in the art of the San bushmen of South Africa in the Kalahari desert in Namibia. These would perhaps be Neolithic influences whose roots would go much further back in time.

It is relevant for us to consider when casually observing these motifs that they have lasted in some instances for over 5,000 years, and constitute the largest historical material testimony of man's unknown past over a period going as far back as 50,000 years or more. For this reason alone it is a legacy worth preserving. The motifs are more than ordinary historical records, as we can see. They constitute the only record of the forgotten human past, which is irretrievable. Where they exist as living traditions among contemporary cultural manifestations they constitute an increasingly endangered heritage. They may be considered the most precious gift from the past to the present in modern India, and a possession not only of India, but of the world. For this reason it is in the interest of UNESCO to protect them from being destroyed for ever. This work itself is dedicated towards that goal: to deliver to the future what we have inherited from the past. The art students of our times are indeed fortunate that they come from these living cultures in our midst in a country and a culture which has inherited from the past an incredibly wonderful living heritage, a prehistoric cultural tradition which lives in the genes of even many of those who will read this book, the teachers and students who will handle these pages, and I hope continue to perpetuate the artistic traditions which I place before them, from the jungle villages of Hazaribagh.

THE KHOVAR PAINTING OF HAZARIBAGH

The Khovar art depicts the socio-religious tradition of preparing a marriage room. The *khovar* is, strictly speaking the bridal room, and the decorated nuptial room is a tribal tradition. The decoration is done in this room in the bride's house by the bride's mother and aunts, because in the tribal system bride-price is paid, and the bridegroom spends the nuptial night in his wife's house, which is the influence of the original matriarchal system. Since the tribal woman is revered as Devi, the mother goddess, the woman is a very special person. Upon marriage she becomes Devi and anything made by her hands is considered the gift of the mother goddess. The Devi is the sole person allowed to draw or embroider ritual sacred icons relating to marriage and harvest seasons, and it is an ancient tradition. Bride-price is still paid in the tribal villages of Hazaribagh. The marriage season runs from January till the onset of the monsoons in June and overlaps the summer months when the great annual spring and summer hunts take place.

The custom of Khovar decoration is carried out by the local village societies among the agriculturists, the Ganju and Kurmi, but also among various artisan groups such as the Rana (carpenters), Teli (oil-extractors and -sellers), Ghatwar (originally the guards of mountain passes), the Prajapati (originally creators in earth, clay-modellers) and the Kumhar (potters, workers in clay). However, it is found in its most original and significant forms among the tribal groups of Oraon, Santal and

Munda in Hazaribagh (Figure 1). The Khovar art is full of jungle plants and animals. Even today the forest is considered by nomadic tribes the place where a couple have to go to consummate the marriage (Figure 2). The Khovar art is done by scraping the upper coat of white or yellow liquid earth ochre which reveals the black or red undercoat when it is scraped off with a comb. Similar methods are also seen in Greek vase paintings in the middle of the first millennium BC and similar artistic comb decoration traditions have been found in tribal pottery of the northwestern South Asian subcontinent, but even in the Pacific region (Lapita) to the east. Such art as that of the Ganjus and forest dwelling Kurmi reveal the highest naturalistic art in the Hazaribagh Khovar and Sohrai palette among our tribes.

The actual technique of comb-cutting is as follows. The wall is completely repaired and plastered with mud, after which it is in some instances only, as in the case of Bhuiya art, given a coat of cow dung and mud mixture. Then it is covered with a coat of black earth, so called *kali mati*, applied in a circular half-moon stroke called the *basera* (*bas*=bamboo, *era*=goddess). After the black-earth coating has dried (or in some instances when it is still only half dried) the Devi covers it over with a coating of either brilliant white earth (*charak*) or subdued cream-coloured mud (*dudhi*) or plain yellow earth (*pila*). *Pila* means child, *mati* means earth. Before the white, cream or yellow earth has a chance to dry, it is immediately "cut" by a sgraffito technique, or modern scraper board style, with a piece of broken comb. The Munda painting is often done with the fingers instead of with the comb, and the Bhuiya comb painting is also often done with the fingers only, a style also practised by some Oraon. The Prajapatis or potters like the Kumhars also use their fingers instead of combs sometimes, but generally Prajapati art is always comb-cut and small fine bamboo combs are made by the women specifically for the purpose. The Oraon sometimes use the curving *basera* motif, like the Bhuiya. This design is a series of semi-circles, and has a sacred significance as a mountain (Mesopotamia) and bamboo (India), and is always drawn along the top of walls on which the Khovar art is painted. The cutting reveals the black ground beneath the overcoat, in a striking design pattern. The Khovar is a highly symbolic art filled with aniconic forms and *mandalas* which are ritually connected with marriage.

In the contemporary Tribal Art Project to produce mobile pictures for sale, manganese black is dissolved overnight in office glue and tap water (or well water, or stream water, polluted or unpolluted). It is thereafter spread by hand, cloth or brush over a surface, which is generally handmade high rag content watercolour art paper, and then allowed to dry in a cool place. After this a similar mixture of kaolin white or yellow ochre is applied over it in the same process, and then with a broken comb (or a finely tooled special, quarter-inch bit of bamboo comb), a design is cut, quickly, sharply, taking in the ends swiftly, as in the case of a bird's beak, or a feather tip end. Sharp-snouted snake-headed plant limbs, arching trellises with curved lotus petals and equally curved fishes float up in sgraffito from the dark undercoat, bringing to light a new monotone. Yellow ochre of various shades is used depending upon the locality where the art occurs. In Isco a beautiful lavender earth colour is found, in Kharati a brilliant white, in Jorakath a beautiful natural earth colour. It has the two-dimensional folk magic with the primitive simplicity which can be found also in such art forms known from the Warli, from Madhubani women, *Kalighat-patas* as well as from the pata paintings of the coastal Orissa. (see Figures 1-5).

THE SOHRAI ART

After the monsoon rains the village houses again require repair while the paddy has to be harvested. Sohrai is the festival celebrating plough agriculture done by cattle as well as the domestication of the cow. The art on the walls painted by the Devis marks a distinct change from Khovar in that it celebrates a male god, Pashupati, the lord of animals. The name *pashu* means animals, and *pati* is the father of animals, or image maker of animals, creator of animals. It is celebrated the day after Divali and is connected with the return of Lord Ram. In the murals in the village Prajapati is shown standing on the back of the bull, very Sumerian in design, thus suggesting a link with West Asia and the Sohrai art of the Nile valley as well as Warli art. This is a Hinduised iconic art. The body of Prajapati is in a shape akin to Shiva's drum (*damru*) and around him is a wheel of six lotuses representing the six senses, and we are reminded of the enigmatic yogi An from the Mohenjodaro seal, who was obviously the chief deity of the Indus valley. Shiva as the forest god is shown in the form of a tree called bhelwa (*aegle marmelos*, ROXB; a similar form is the flowery trident, as I call the vertical lotus-headed form sprouting five or six triangular horned triangles like the animal wheel.

Sohrai is the harvest festival art. The name itself comes from an ancient word, *soro*, meaning literally to drive with a stick. It is the festival of the early winter months when the paddy has ripened



and is about to be harvested. Thus it is connected with the origin of agriculture (Figure 4). Among the Kurmi people in the Bhelwara area the cattle have been taken out to the jungles very early in the morning, and washed after grazing in the forest ponds. Then they are brought back ceremonially to the village where they are welcomed with special painted carpets called *aripan*. The welcome of the cattle on Sohrai day is the mark of domestication of wild cattle, and the origin of this event is attributed to Ram, the great ancient king of the tribes, probably a pre-Aryan tribal king who has been seen in the Ramayana, as Parshu-Rama of the Indus king lists, and sometimes also associated by these simple people with the creator and lord of the animals, Pashupati. The day after the Sohrai is a mock bull-fight in which sacred cattle, both bulls and buffaloes, gaily anointed with coloured spots and oiled horns, are taken to posts in the crossroads of the village where three wise men sing to them. They are tied to a stake or *khuta*, so the festival is called, simply, *Khuta-bandhan*, *bandhan* meaning to tie. The women anoint and colour the animals before they are brought to the sacred post.

Here is a Pashupati song verse.

When the oil lamps of Divali are over

Then the lord of the animals, Pashupati, Comes with the animals from the forest.

The song of the three wise men is like this:

Where have I seen such a beautiful horse? Where have I seen such a beautiful cow? Where have I seen such a beautiful family? You are the beautiful sacrificial cow,

Such a beautiful horse, such a beautiful cow! Such a beautiful family, such a beautiful cow, Such a beautiful horse, such a beautiful cow, Such a beautiful family cow.

The *mandalas* to welcome the cattle back from the jungle are made from rice flour and milk in a kind of gruel which when dried on the sparse brown earth is brilliant white. The *mandalas* are in the form of hoofprints, and sacred dots of vermilion (*bindu*) are put at line junctions (Figure 16).

The inference of these songs and these paintings, here on the southern branch of the Asian Highway, the great Grand Trunk Road, which cuts right across the Chotanagpur plateau in Hazaribagh, the thoroughfare of ancient trading caravans, a region that saw the earliest thrust of cavalry and horses from northwestern India with the Aryans, is that the cow is being confused with the horse. This is natural in an art form which has steadily been evolving in the context of cultural contacts on this sensitive high road between northwest and southeast Asia.

The women's role in the festival, as we have seen, is crucial, and points back to an ancient matriarchal society.

The Oraon have three distinctive artistic styles. One is very similar to the Khoovar of the agrarian Hinduised Kurmis and may be seen in a way as an ancient progenitor of the style now in danger of being lost among the Oraon themselves. They only paint these anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms indoors (see Figures 12-14). The second great art form of the Oraon are totem poles or *khuta* for the ancestors. The third is a delicate realistic flowery style with a freshness of insect, bird and animal life not found elsewhere in Sohrai art.

Near the villages of the Kurmis painting their harvest art are the Santals, who celebrate the cattle in the spring months with simple floral and bird designs. During marriages Santal bridegrooms paint their courtyard with these designs. Down in the valley of the Damodar we have the delicate floral art of the Prajapatis and the dark, heavy forms of the Ranas, both comb-cut. Another heavy style is that of the Telis. The basket-making Turis have a light painted art. The Ganjus are a farming tribe who depend on the jungles for subsistence. Their densely forested environment in the southern part of the Hazaribagh plateau has enabled them to make close observations of the wild flora and fauna. This is reflected in their paintings. Their art is most vividly depicted in painted murals done during the Khoovar marriage season from February to April.

The Sohrai art of Hazaribagh for me is the grand painted *ghodas*, horses, and the animal wheels, the intertwining anthropomorphic floral Shiva, the almost unbelievable creative originality of leafy forms, painted in Bhelwara during the Sohrai festival (Figure 12). It is as creative as the Khoovar art and evokes a highly individual charm different in many ways from the marriage art with its fertility symbols taken as auspicious ritual symbols. Fresh and highly spontaneous in its original outline made with a nail (which the Ganju artists sometimes use in making the first line of a stupendous animal form), this is a long trailing line later gone over in a more studied if not less whimsical line. In the Kurmi art of Sohrai in Bhelwara village a running red line is later outlined with a running white line; or sometimes a black line is outlined with a red and then a white line. Vast whimsy at its

natural best is the irrepressible quality of Sohrai art. The huge glyptic spaces made with black and red ochre on the floors are sometimes echoed in red and white glyptic geometrical designs on the walls (Figure 5).

Meaning is the last important aspect of a picture, and yet paradoxically it is the most important. This is an eternal value transcending mythology and art aesthetics. The painted houses of Hazaribagh carry meanings for the tribal concepts of fertility and fecundity, of abundance and prosperity, from familiar forms less than a few dozen in number. Unavoidably, Hindu icons have entered here and there, but very few. Popular motifs are plants, fishes, birds and animals, as we have seen, and some familiar icons of the mother goddess. The need to tell a story, as in the sense the Aboriginal art of Australia has been portrayed in recent times, is alien to our most original tribal art. The Western viewer, ever keen to read strange tales from foreign lands, will be disappointed in our art. When the Australian art critic Adam Geczy wrote about the Khovar and Sohrai art that he hoped that "the murals in Bihar be only effaced by the monsoons", I think he hit a vital chord, for the natural death of all the village art as a result of the seasons (i.e. monsoons) does not mean the end of the art in the fatal manner of the destructive development which is destroying tribal homelands and ecosystems in India. Literate education in non-tribal literate traditions brings with it new cultural history, religious and social significances, and new value systems are destroying oral education. The tribal tradition continues strictly according to its own foundations. Similarly, when our tribals cut trees from the forest for building their homes or for firewood the forest does not die, it replenishes itself. The threat is from modern development, with its need to remodel everything according to exclusive needs, speaking of conservation while clear-felling forests, and of putting artefacts in museums while it destroys the roots of culture from one valley to another through big dams or mines or senseless industrialisation. This has been the price which tribal India has had to pay in the past five decades for the cost of development in rural India.

At this juncture the novelty and naivety of tribal art is surpassed by a wider reality, where the curiosities and thin wedges of excitement from encountering something new are overcome by a greater reality. In countries like Australia there is a fight to preserve cultures *in situ* rather than put them in museums. The actual nature of indigenous art is a far remove from an art form that has become mercantile and already in some way shaped by the effects of art aesthetics and merchandise. The original images left on the walls for a few short months before they are worn away by sun or rain are the real strengths of Khovar and Sohrai mural painting in the villages of Hazaribagh. In the traditional house paintings of the painted houses of Hazaribagh we may mark small slight changes by the younger women, but the web of tradition is so thorough in rural India that the ancient forms continue with majestic continuity. The art in the village houses is not to be compared with what passes as tribal art in the shops of Delhi or Bombay, with but few exceptions.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

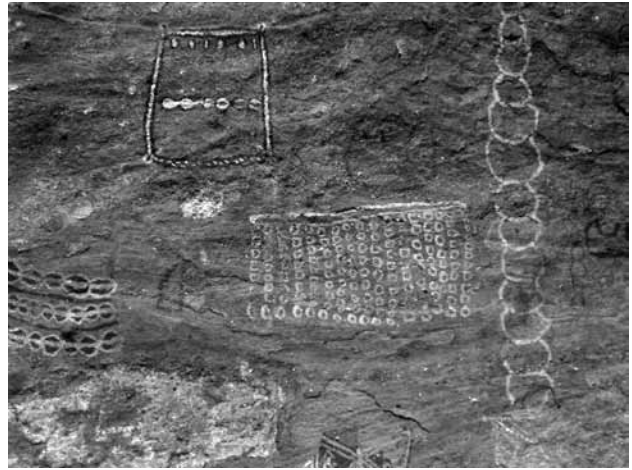


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14