

An Empirical Study of Rock Art in Karnataka State

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INTRODUCTION

Rock art is a subject being studied for the last 150 years or more. The first rock art site was noticed by Archibald Carlyle, an Assistant of the Archaeological Dept. a little before 1867-68. It was located in the area of Sohaghat of the northern escarpment of the Vindhyan mountain bordering the lowlands of the Gangetic plains in Madhya Pradesh. A little later he could collect microliths from the same area. Around this time, there were discoveries and systematic survey of rock-art sites in Mirzapur region, south of Varanasi by John Cockburn, who was the first perhaps to publish a paper on his findings with the tracings of the pictures. Possibly, T. J. Newbold' was the first to notice rock engravings that would not have escaped his attention when he examined the ash-mounds in Kapgal-Sanganakal area in 1842 and published a note on the mounds. In the early decades of the 20th century, mostly officers of the Geology, Archaeology Depts. and even common people during their work would incidentally come across by chance such rock art sites, and they would report them in their departmental journals. It is only with the incomparably extensive work from late 1950s and onwards done by VS. Wakankar that the subject of rock art came prominently to limelight as a branch of study worth pursuing for better understanding of the art and society of the Pre and Proto-historic communities. He worked intensively in the Bhimbetka area near Bhopal and discovered around 700 caves with paintings. His Ph. D thesis from the Deccan College was on these investigations. And since then every part of the country is found to have similar art treasure explored and recorded by many scholars of the respective regions. Whether it is Rajasthan or Jammu or even Kashmir, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Madhya Pradesh or South India, every part of our nation is found to have numerous such rock art sites. Today more than 5000 rock art sites are known in this country. In the initial stages of the research on the subject, India occupied the last place in this field of the study It appears now that it occupies the first place.

In Karnataka it was undoubtedly Hubert Knox who first located many rock pictures in Kapgal-Sanganakal area near Bellary in 1880s. Laterly, L. Munn, an

English officer, Hyderabad state, department of Archaeology, discovered in 1915 amidst an extensive megalithic burial site dotted with about three hundred port-hole chambers, three painted rock art shelters in the terraces of an extensive granite hill ranges With countless natural caves and rock shelters near Hire Benkl in Gangavati taluk, Raichur, now Koppal district. It is about 30 km. north of Hampi, the celebrated capital of the medieval Vijayangara kingdom. The Dept noticed an interesting bruising of two buffaloes along with three antennae copper swords and a late Neolithic site in Kallur (Raichur dt.) in 1942. Geologists of the State used to report about the existence of rock art sites here and there incidentally noticed by them during their geological surveys, as for e.g. Balachakra with long shelter full of paintings in Yadgir taluk, Gulbarga dist; painting of a deer shot with an arrow at the back in Aatanoor in Raichur dist. M. H. Krishna Director of Archaeology of the former Mysore State, recorded an engraving of a tiger in Chandravalli in his explorations in 1928. In early 1950s R and B Allchins during their field study of the Prehistoric and Proto historic remains in the region of the Krishna-Tungabhadra doab, discovered some rock shelters with fine red ochre paintings of deer and peacocks in Piklihal area. Wakankar brought to light a few paintings in Badami. Similarly, M. S. Nagaraja Rao, noticed paintings Of a row of humans together engaged in folk dance in Tekkalkota (Bellary dt.) area in 1964. Gururaj Bhat and Vasanta Shett were probably the first to report the existence of rock engravings in Dakshina Kannada at Gavali. Erwin New Mayor traced rock shelters with paintings of importance in Badami-Kutakan area.. Since 1961 Sundara has been reporting Painted caves and shelters, especially in Anegondi-Hire Benkal area, Badami - Aihole area; Bellary - Hospet area, Billama Rayanagua area (Lingsugur taluk, Koppal dt.), Chitradurga-Chandravalli - Jettinga Rameswara area near Brahmagiri well-known for their Asokan Minor rock edicts, Ankola area and studied the already known sites during his frequent field explorations for varied purposes in North Karnataka. Within the last two decades State and Central Depts of Archaeology, scholars, school teachers, young and old especially Lakshman Telagavi have been noticing some rock art

sites here and there as for instance in Hampi, Chandravalli, Holaluru (Shivamogga district) in southern Karnataka and reporting them in *Itihasa Dariana* of the Karnāmaka Itihasa Academy, Bengaluru. Mention should be made of an important discovery of a rock engraving panel in Sonda by Raghunath Bhat. Wakankar (along with R. R. Brooks) and Erwin Neu mayer have included their findings in their books on *Rock Art: Prehistoric Indian rock Paintings* (1983) and *Lines on Rocks* (1993) respectively. Sundara's introductory account of the Prehistoric Art in Karnataka including most of the Rock Art sites in North Karnataka and the Coastal belt is published in Kannada in *Karnāmaka: Pragitihasa Kalada Kale* (1994) (Prehistoric art in Karnataka). Many more sites are being discovered since then. Particular mention should be made about the discovery of an extensive rock engraving site in Karkunje at Buddana jini Udipi district in 2009 by Murugeshi and his team. And in January 2011, they have discovered isolated engravings at Mandarti and Subrhmnya.

ROCK ART

Well, what is rock art? Any picture of the nature, mostly animals, birds, humans etc. or any design, mentally conceived symbolising abstract thought, and executed in the remote past or later, with mineral paints such as red, white, green, ochre, rarely in two colours or stone tool readily available in the surroundings or metal tool directly on the bare, natural rock surface without dressing of the walls of natural caves or shelters or on the surface of isolated boulders in the open field, is classified as rock art. They look rather elementary. The pictures are occasionally elaborate: a simple home with a few belongings, or death ritual or hunting ritual or seasonal dances, etc. Such pictures are depicted in paintings but not usually in bruising or engravings. The paintings are in silhouette or in outline. Very rarely the physical features particularly of humans and animals, such as eyes, fingers, and feet are portrayed as in Badami rock shelter and Hampi rock shelter located a little away from behind the Virupaksha temple. And the style is individualistic not governed by certain commonly or traditionally accepted principles. It is not like our Ajanta traditional paintings for which a base is prepared on the prepared flat surface of the walls of the excavated caves, and the subject matter is historically thematic taken from religious or popular texts. Some three or four mineral colours are prepared; line drawings usually in red, are made on the prepared surface when wet and there after the appropriate paints are applied to the pictures of humans etc. that are true to the natural forms. The style and techniques were

developed over years and crystallised. Incidentally, provision of a base on the natural rock surface for drawing the picture was not totally unknown to the prehistoric people engaged in such creative art

Whatever may be the purpose of executing such rock pictures in varieties; mostly animals that were in the environs of the prehistoric settlements, are dominant in the art of the early stages. They go back to a very remote past. In India one site with cupules of the Early Palaeolithic stage in Daraki Chattan (M. P.) as known from the excavations is the oldest. As I have mentioned above all the pictures in a given site are not executed at one time.

The rock art sites are usually located in places geographically not of easy access. One has to make strenuous but careful efforts to reach them. Why the Prehistoric people preferred of course infrequently to have such activities in remote places not easily accessible is difficult to explain. Probably some rituals were carried on soon after the execution of the pictures. And these pictures perhaps were connected with some rituals that could be witnessed by the concerned participants only for specific purposes such as fertility etc. This is one of the explanations given by experts for their difficult access.

Topographically North Karnataka comprises of two distinct zones from the point of rock formations. The eastern part is essentially traversed by the granite hills of peninsular gneissic complex. These granite hills are found to have countless natural shelters and caves. Those who visit Hampi would have experienced or can experience visiting such caves many of which are deep. Many of such caves, rarely shelters naturally formed by the resultant loose gigantic boulders of grotesque forms owing to exfoliation, contain paintings, bruising and engravings datable generally from the Protohistoric to the Recent. The western part is traversed by the sedimentary sandstone hill ranges of geologically Kaladgi Series. Most of the painted pictures in this region are found in the rock shelters located in the sandstone ranges, as in the region of Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh. Caves are not as frequently found as in the granite regions. There are three distinct categories in the rock art from the point of the pictures depicted and their styles. They are found respectively in Badami-Aihole-Kutankankeri Of the sand stone region; the eastern part of the granitic region, and Coastal-ghat region. And from the points of forms and techniques, the rock art specimens can be

classified into three categories; 1 Bruising 2 Engraving and 3. Painting

Bruising is created with a piece of stone as hammer that can be conveniently held in the hand. And with it the rock surface is systematically beaten to cause the intended picture. There thus appears the picture. This practice is even today in vogue. For instance, it is common that a couple just married on their honeymoon trip to a hilly area usually try to leave their names on the rock surface by beating with a convenient stone piece readily available nearby. Engraving is achieved with a pointed tool: such as hard stone like flint or a metal tool with which outlines of the mentally conceived picture are caused. This is more difficult, laborious and time consuming. Occasionally both the techniques are employed in creating a single picture. In a picture of animal the legs are caused by bruising; the remaining part, by outline only with a pointed tool. One such instance is found in Billamarayan gua among the numerous pictures found there on individual boulders. The pictures in a site may be one as for instance at Belagallu, Jattiinga Rameswara, Hire Benkal, Chandravalli or two as at Kullolli, Emmigudda or many.

The paintings mostly are monochrome in slightly varying shades of red ochre ; infrequently in white ochre of the historical period and lime of the Late historical and the Recent. Occasionally they are bi-chrome. Only two sites with bi-chrome paintings are so far known : one in Badami in white and black and another in Kutakankeri in red and green. In many sites are several pictures hap-hazardly scattered all over the area as in cave no. 4 in Hire Benkal and cave no I in Chik Rampur, Balachakra (Yadgir tk). It doesn't mean that all of them were executed at one stretch. In such instances the pictures vary in size, style and form. Also, they are varied: animals, humans, birds, and geometrical designs.

PERIOD OF THE ROCK ART

The date range of the sites in the eastern part generally vary from the Neolithic to the Early-Late Historical (i.e. from 2000 BCE to 700 CE). The sites in Badami - Aihole - Kutakankeri area in view of the types of the animals and of the style of the humans depicted, may be of the Upper Palaeolithic - Mesolithic (20,000-7,000 BC). But the dating of these rock art specimens is very difficult. Various methods and techniques are employed for determining the relative dating of the pictures such as depiction of the animals of certain

species extinct, dominance of wild animals, forms, style, overlapping, weathering, type of domestic life, characteristic types of weapons held by humans, circumstantial evidences, proximity of habitation sites etc. are some of the factors critically examined for dating. In the recent years scientific techniques such as C14 of the paint used carefully scraped in the most minimum quantity required for dating. For instance, the world famous rock-paintings in Altamira (Spain) and Lascaux (France) are dated by this technique 32,410 to 11,600. In India too attempts are being made to date the rock art as for instance the rock cupules in Darki Chattan (Madhya Pradesh) are being dated.

In Karnataka, one can easily discern the spatial distribution of a particular pattern of rock art in Karnataka. Sites with exclusively engravings are located in the Western part of Northern Karnataka whereas paintings, engravings and bruising, in the eastern part of northern Karnataka. This pattern of distribution is readily difficult to explain. Probably the topography might be responsible for this. In the Western ghat-coastal region there are granite outcrops here and there surrounded by laterite plateau, but no regular hill ranges. There are hardly any caves or shelters. And these pictures are engraved on granite boulders in the open as at Gavali (Kundapur taluk, Udipi dt.) as well as laterite flatbed as at Bole near Ankola (Uttara Kannada dt.). But in the innumerable hill ranges of eastern part of Karnataka are thousands of caves suitable for executing pictures by Prehistoric communities. The natural environs may be the reason as to why we do not find paintings in the coastal-ghat region of Karnataka and since the pictures were intended to remain long they were engraved on the boulders in the open field.

Furthermore, although the paintings were drawn in silhouette or just in outline with a particular purpose, the sense of beauty was not lost sight of though not invariably. Let me give an example. In Chitradurga on the northern side of the city there is a large water tank known as Timmannanayakana kere by the side of a granite hill, are numerous boulders loosely lying at the foot and on one of the boulders is engraved a bison just in the outline but majestic and powerful true to the nature of the animal. Anyone coming from the other end would be surprised to see the bison as if charging towards the person. It is so effective. And the location is so suitable and the shape of the boulder is appropriate for the contour of the animal. Similarly in Hampi, behind the Virupaksha temple there is a rock shelter with paintings. The area is thickly scattered

with boulders. However, it seems a particular shelter is selected having a shallow concave vertical surface with an open place in the front. On the concave surface are paintings of human dancers: men and women (in the side profile displaying prominently the breasts) nude with their body painted with geometrical designs. An on-looker in front of it, would feel as if in an auditorium and the dance performance is in progress on the stage in the front. Similarly in Brahmagiri, with a Minor Rock Edict of Asoka there is an isolated blackish boulder huge and oval shaped. On it is a picture Of an elephant drawn in outline on its vertical surface. All these indicate the person was not simply drawing a picture like a child in any place. There is an aesthetic sense governing the creation. The person creating such pictures was very particular about the location and the form Of the base for pictures with a desire that the picture should be effective in its purpose howsoever simple it may be. He/She was capable of perceiving the distinctive features and mood of animals and could portray forcefully in the pictures. This indeed is an important aspect of the rock art.

Sometimes we attribute many of the developments in techniques and styles in the history of the art of painting as the distinct and singular contributions Of our medieval and modern artists. But it is not so in some cases. I have mentioned Chauvet cave above. Among the paintings in the cave are horses one behind the other and the second horse behind the first in the fore-ground, is projected a little forward. The third horse comes a little more forward. The on-looker can see all the horses in perspective and the paintings are dated to 32,000 years. In Bhimbetka in one of the painted caves is depicted a hunting scene probably of the Mesolithic stage (10,000-7,000 BCE). In it are eight hunters in a row at the background and the animal, in the fore- ground. We find many of highly skilful techniques already developed by those indulged in such art work even in the earlier stage of human history and of Early Palaeolithic period. For example some stone tools described as hand-axes are so symmetrical from the sides as well as the margins. If a vertical central line is drawn On the side of the tool the right half is found to be surprisingly almost similar to the left half. The most well-known tool of this type is from Kaarga (Africa). There are quite a few tools of this type from the Malaprabha basin and Kibbanahalli (Karnataka). Why should the prehistoric people struggle so much to prepare a tool that is wholly utilitarian with such care to achieve symmetry? From its utilitarian point of view making a tool symmetrical is unnecessary. The implication is that a sense of

beauty was already developed among the Prehistoric communities in their creations of even utilitarian character as early as ten lakh years ago, a date known from scientific techniques for the animal fossils of wild elephant, horse and deer found along with the hand-axes in the excavations at Isampur-Hunasgi in Gulbarga dt. Since then this aesthetic tradition was being developed. In Badami, about a km. away north eastwards, beyond Tatakoti, a suburb of the locality in the wide deep valley on the slopes of a hill range is a natural shelter having paintings of unusually traditional kind and classical in style. They are similar in style, form, technique to the 6th or early 7th cent paintings in cave number 3 in Badami proper. This indicates the continuation of the prehistoric cave art tradition had survived even to the historical time. Even today people do execute such pictures in villages wherever such caves are found in hill ranges. I have seen this activity in a place called Mulgunda in Gadag dt. And every year the picture is retouched and worship is offered to it. From what appears to be a folk art of the prehistoric times is developed the classic art. This indeed is a singular contribution of the prehistoric artists made to the classical art domain of the historical period. The Prehistoric art therefore cannot be disconnected from the classic art and treated as a separate category as if each has nothing to do with the other. If classical art has to be understood rightly and holistically knowledge of the prehistoric art is necessary. What may be thought to be new is already developed by our ancestors long ago and the classical art rich and refined has its roots in the simple and naive prehistoric art. This universal truth makes us humble and we will be able to appreciate our long art tradition.

The last point to be considered is certain historically significant art specimens. For example there are today in our everyday life certain practices that have come down from a remote past which we do not know. There is a particular geometrical design that is even today drawn in the art of rangavalli(rangoli) in our country. It is an endless four knot design. The antiquity of this particular symbol goes back to the Proto-historic Harappan times. Two copper tablets found in Mohenjo-daro excavations have each having endless four-knot design on the obverse and an inscription in Harappan script on the reverse. Designs of this type are infrequently found in the early and late historical monuments as late as Keladi (Shivamogga dt.) period, as for instance the depiction of the design on the ceiling of the front chajja of the Basavanna temple in Bidanur (the present Hale Nagara Shivamogga dt.). Similarly there is another design comprising two

squares intersecting obliquely each other each with loops at the comers There are thus 8 loops on the outside squares and the centre forms one more loop. Today in our religious performances known as Nandi, the priest draws this design and offers worship to it. This design also occurs in the Harappan seals. There are many traditions associated with these pictures that have come down to us of course with many ramifications added on to the significance of these designs.

What is interestingly pertinent is that these two geometrical designs are found in the Prehistoric paintings. In Chik Rampur 5 kms. North-west of Anegondi-Hampi. in cave 1 are two such designs and in Hire Benkal cave no 4. It implies that such geometrical designs having some ritual significance employed by people of the prehistoric times are gradually integrated probably with refined significance into the classical religious traditions of the advanced societies. Another noteworthy picture in this context is again from Chik Rampur. In cave 1, on the ceiling of the shelter there is a picture of Megalithic burial Of stone circle type. 13 small circles indicating field boulders just aposed into circle indicate the megalithic stone circle. Inside it is divided into two parts by a ladder like design in the middle. In one part a dead body is shown in extended posture along with burial furniture, i.e. pots etc. The Other part is filled With a series of parallel zig zag lines perhaps indicating a river. Number 13 is very significant in Hindu death ritual. In Kaladgi (Bagalkot dt.) there are about 30 megaliths and most of the megaliths have circles and these circles have exactly 13 stones. 13th is the last day of the death ritual. We have to work out to extricate its significance. Now reverting to the picture from Chik Rampur, the Garuda purana gives an elaborate account of the path to be traversed by the soul of the dead to the abode of Yama, the god of death. On the way the soul has to cross through a river called Vaitharagi, the filthiest and the most foul river. If a person is a sinner the undying soul thereof has to cross the river often drowning and floating with the unspeakably ugliest experience. If the person is good, a cow/bull will come and take him/her safely from the worst experience across the river. The ladder like design may imply the path over the river to the death world. In view of this account does the Chik Rampur picture signify a prototype of a belief prevalent among the Megalith builders of particular group that is later on endorsed, elaborated and associated with the rituals in the Garuda purana. Further study of both the

relevant literary references and archaeological remains is necessary to answer the question. Anyway if one knows the Uranic account in question, one will suspect the germ of this account in the picture. Similarly at Gavali in Kundapura there on a large boulder is an engraving of two bulls facing each other and to the legs of one bull the horns of which are decorated with ribbon like strips, the design of obliquely intersecting double squares with loops at the comers is attached. There is a similar picture in Sonda in Sirsi taluk, North Kanara district. In it three bulls in a row are with similar attached the legs Of the first and the last bull. Similarly behind this row bulls is another row of three bulls With endless six knot design attached to their legs. It was wondering about the association of the design to the bulls' legs. Everyone in the locality treats it with due respect. This ritual is performed for the welfare of the soul. Does this picture represent placement of a bull on a manala during the performance of the ritual vicotsarga.

India is very rich in literature. Early Literature goes back to about 4000 BCE and many Of these pictures belong to proto historic period. It may therefore be possible to correlate some of these pictures to some relevant accounts of our early literature. Such attempt may or may not be always be correct. However, with an open mind, there is nothing wrong to find correlation between the literary account and archaeological relics. If the attempt is right, we shall be able to appreciate better and interpret more meaningfully and interestingly such graphic pictures. On the whole it appears that the Prehistoric art has some relevance even to our present day life about which we are ignorant.

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