

Rock Art as an Indigenous Historical Tradition, Northern Vindhyas, India

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ABSTRACT

While the study of rock art has been conventionally the concern of prehistory, much of its content in the Northern Vindhyas, India, is in the historical period and requires a historical interrogation. While the early Holocene rock art here is contextually associated with non or semi-geometric microliths and can be regarded as Upper Palaeolithic, the more emphatic, extensive, and skilled rock art exposition is during the Mesolithic. Mesolithic North Vindhyan rock art also has more geometric microliths, large numbers of shelter-dwellings, prepared stone-floors, human and faunal remains, corded incised hand-made mesolithic pottery, grinding stones and occasional Iron Age tools. On the scarps, paintings of large antelopes, cattle, buffalo, elephants, rhinos, turtles, varanus, and smaller deer species dominate the Mesolithic, while neolithic-chalcolithic and Iron Age depictions contain more human figures, domesticated cattle, buffalo, sheep, goat, and greater dress, hair-style, self-images, palm-prints, iron-tools, three-dimensional perspectives, landscape simulations, superimpositions and narrative structure. Paintings show cognitively advanced choices in surface selection, the use of templates like three-dimensionality, perspective, and movement, in the selection and narrative rendering of historically oriented themes. Inter-group, identity-based differences between the several groups inhabiting the uplands and their conflicts are also represented. Historically structured materials like pastoral corrals, stelae, memorial stones, historical sculpture, and Brahmi inscriptions contextual to rock art, are found in the valleys and the foothills. Early historic trans-Indian trade routes occur in the Vindhyas and these routes are dotted with early historic inscriptions in the Brahmi script and its variants like Mauryan, Siddhamatrika, Shankha, proto-Nagari and Nagari. Their symbolic unity and continuity with upland symbolic traditions are many. Distinctly medieval rock art includes themes like soldiers, flag marches, hunting, and elephant capture by feudal lords. The final period of north Vindhyan rock art is colonial when paintings made by indigenes of the area depict the looting of colonial horse-carts and buggies after which rock art declines and disappears.

Keywords: North Vindhyan rock art, cognition, history, material culture, human and faunal drawings, designs and patterns, gender, age, childhood, early historic, medieval, modern

The value of a research technique which does not link the local area to the larger society in terms of historical and contemporary social processes is highly questionable. (Fox 1971)

INTRODUCTION

Following the generally accepted idea in India of archaeology being a subdiscipline of history and archaeological sources as being (pre-literate) source materials of a long-term history (Hodder 1987), the methodology followed in this paper is to analyze particularly the historical period Northern Vindhyan rock art, with reference to its combined archaeological, ethnographic, and historical contexts. In our estimate, the rock art of the Northern Vindhyan region, bordering upon the Ganges Valley (see Figure 1), although separated by several hundred miles from the central Indian rock painting reserves in Madhya Pradesh and the Narmada Valley, which is considerably older (Bednarik 2019), are archaeologically and historically unitary and connected (Clarkson 2020, Misra 2001, Sharma and Clark 1983). Several archaeologists have commented on the symbolic and archaeological material cultures in the Vindhyan ranges spanning the valleys of the Narmada and the Sone Rivers (Misra 2001). From Bhimbetka (Hoshangabad) to Morhana Pahar (in Mirzapur) rock shelters occur in sandstone hills, are chronologically usually mesolithic and onwards, and other than prehistoric art includes distinct multi-layered historical period iconic overlays made by forest-dwelling hunters and agro-pastoralists. Agro-pastoralism but not hunting survives even today in the Northern part of the Vindhyas (Banerjee et al., 2021, Pratap and Kumar 2009, Pratap 2011, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023). The archaeological evidence from excavations at some localities suggests a large population of pastoralist cum hunters inhabiting the North Vindhyan scarps, valleys, and foothills since at least the epi-palaeolithic (Sharma 1964, Sharma and Clark 1983). Later Iron Age intensification of production through settled farming and population pressure resulted in conflicts between incipient farmers and pastoral hunters over territory and resources. Subsistence pressure was probably caused by the drying up of palaeolakes too, next to which large prehistoric populations resided and painted on the escarps, leading to wholesale migrations to the plains, is perhaps insinuated by ring-stone burials and in paintings of such conflicts (Pratap and Kumar 2009).

The archaeological background

Although rock art was found in Mirzapur during the mid-19th century (Mathpal 1984, Neumayer 2004, Tewari 1988, 1990), steadily from the 1980s, related excavated evidence of cowdung, corrals, hoof-prints of domesticated animals, wild and domesticated millets, rice, wheat and barley, terracotta objects, pottery, bone and antler tools, copper and iron implements, memorial stones and ring-burials has been found at mesolithic, neolithic, chalcolithic and iron age sites associated with early Vindhyan communities practising rock art (Pal 1986, 2017, Pratap, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020, 2022, 2023, Sharma 1964, Sharma and Clark 1983). The archaeological data from the highlands, however, have been usually ascribed to the upper palaeolithic to mesolithic hunter-gatherers (Jayaswal 1983: 126-33), and then during the middle Holocene, to agro-pastoralists settled on the scarp lands and in the Vindhyan foothills existing coevally with rock art communities from prehistoric to early historic period and up to much later in medieval and contemporary times (Misra 2001, Pal 1986, Sharma and Clarke 1983).

The rise of Ganges Valley urban systems in and around the 6th century BCE, it has been argued, was fuelled by communities of the highlands acting as suppliers of plant and animal domesticates as also raw materials for trade and urbanization like resins, fibre, lac, silk cocoons, tobacco, medicinal plants, stone, wood, copper and iron ores and ingots, and other mineral resources to the Ganges Valley (Jha 2014, Tewari 2003, Tripathi 2008). This tripartite horizontal socio-economic variation from the forested to rural and the urban is found in Narmada Valley too where all three settlement types form

interrelated components of a regional settlement system since early history. Thus hill-based rock art data is juxtaposed with rural memorial stones and early historic inscriptions, forts and fortresses and form a necessary part of the discussion. These varied symbolic and iconic manifestations of the early history of the region, aided by digital enhancements, also add interpretive depth by offering the full texts of that which have been represented. The existence of a sense of the past is now no longer in the contest, even for early societies, whether prehistoric or historic (Bradley 2002, Thapar 2013).



Fig. 1 Field area, location, rock art landscapes and Vindhya-Ganges Valley (highland-lowland) juxtaposition Low-altitude rolling Meso-Proterozoic sandstone formations with underlying shale and limestones on the periphery of the Ganges Valley.



Fig. 2 a-f: Morhana Pahar near Adwa and Belan Valleys, in Mirzapur, Wyndham Falls (Barkachcha Forest Reserve along Khajuri River, in Mirzapur), Likhaniya Dari and Chuna Dari (Sukrit Forest Range along Garai River, in Mirzapur), Mukkha Dari (Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary along Belan River, in Sonbhadra). Photos by the author taken in 2011. Photos: Author.

Variations in site location, landscapes and rock art types are caused by geographically separated populations with possibly shared kinship and territorial networks (Laue 2021), but also age, gender and ethnicity are notable between scarplands, river valleys and foothill (watershed) area sites. Socialization of the landscape through kinship, marriage, trade and exchange between indigenous groups through prehistory is likely (Ingold 2000, Thomas 2001). Scarp sites are primary dwelling sites supporting larger populations, river valleys perhaps served as seasonal watering holes for cattle as well as fish and

turtle foraging and camping sites, and watershed areas were ranging locations accessed for hunting of fauna dispersed through the hills due to human presence and hunting (Mandal 2001). The core sites of our study Wyndham Falls, Likhaniya Dari and Chuna Dari, Panchmukhi, Kandakot, Mukkha Dari, Lekhahia and Morhana Pahar, and their satellite painting locations, among several other significant clusters, are characterized by mesolithic to iron age paintings dominant in wild animals, human figures, designs, and material culture.

In the same shelters, human bodies, domesticated animals, designs and material culture depictions increase towards the neolithic-chalcolithic and beyond, while wild fauna drawings decrease proportionately. Rock art at early Holocene sites like Mukkha Dari and Wyndham Falls are dominant in wild fauna representations like tortoises, wild cattle and buffalos, tragocamelus, swamp deer, spotted deer, the occasional rhino, wild pig, elephants, and many types of smaller deer all of which were locally extant (Banerjee et al. 2021, Joglekar 2015, Pratap 2016, 2022, 2023). The panels containing them seem ordered in vague but narratively charged compositions and sequences (Figures 3, 5 g, h and i and 7 a, b and c). Mukkha Dari on the Belan River is exceptional in having several extensive activity depictions of hunting and fishing, with horizontally extended panels made during repeated visits by young adults climbing to heights like 12-16 feet above the ground to paint. This panel's fresher right-hand side with women and men in association with bulls, elephants, and large deer seems more recent conveying as it does ideas of domestication.

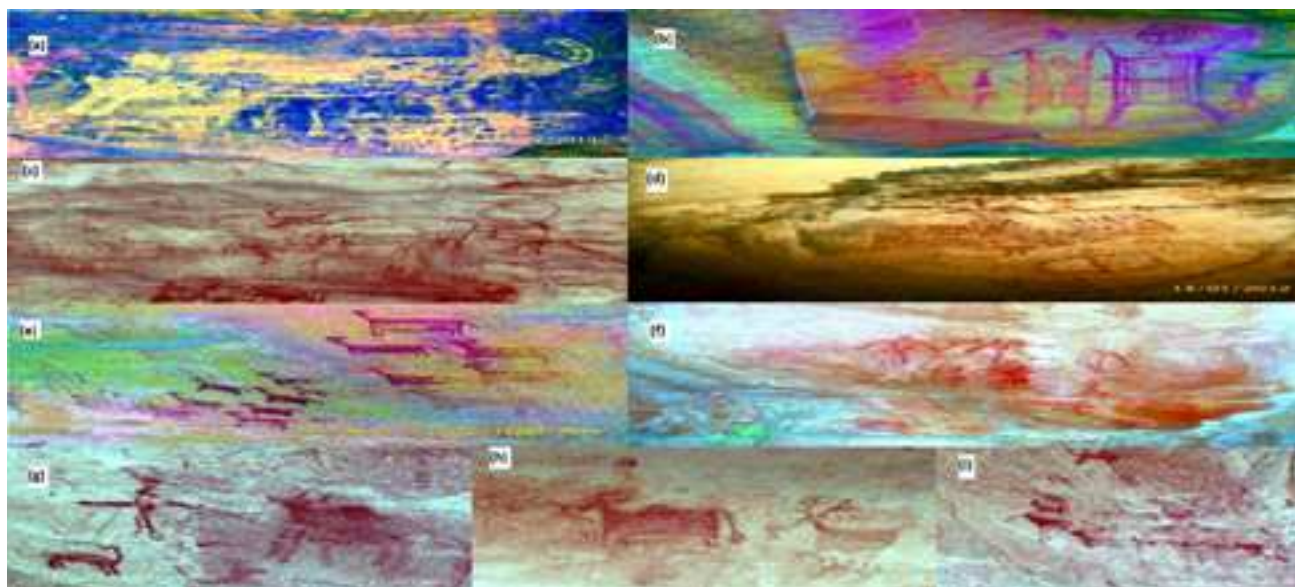


Fig. 3 a – i: Clockwise An elephant with a calf being hunted by several hunters with thrusting spears, decorated tortoise figures at Chhaan Pathari site, Ghorawal, Sonbhadra, Wild cattle drawings at Gopal Das Kandra (GDK), Morhana Pahar, a pastoral scene with a man riding a buffalo, CAR-10 Morhana Pahar, A herd of goats at CAR 10, Morhana Pahar, a man with a stick tending an Ox with diminutive figures of children in CAR 8, Morhana Pahar, a man with outstretched arms with a dog stopping a buffalo at CAR 1, Morhana Pahar, humped cattle and a stag at CAR 5, Morhana Pahar, and a row of different types of deer at CAR 1 shelter, Morhana Pahar. Photos and DStretch: Author.

The Ethnographic background

Ethnographic accounts of the Northwestern provinces of the late 19th century suggest a diversity of cultivating, pastoral and professional castes and tribes inhabiting the Vindhyan uplands, valleys, and plains, with central and eastern Indian linguistic and cultural affinities (Crooke 1896: cxlvii - clix). Some groups specialising in small craft activities ranging from stone-working to basketry, weaving and woodwork had evident use of designs for weaves and stone sculpture much in demand in rural and urban contexts. Notes Archer (1947: 17) “Within this region, each village has a form of stone or wooden sculpture. In places, stone and wooden images stand side by side. In others, wood alone is found, while in some the sole medium is stone. The latter marks the Sasaram, Dehri and Rohtas... while the wooden figures flourish in Palamau district and in southern Sasaram. Each figure is normally made for Kishnaut Ahirs, whose primary occupation is the tending of cows and buffalos and its subject is their cattle-god, Bir Kuar. The stone sculpture is made by Gonrs (*colloquial for Gonds, emphasis mine*), a sub-caste of stone-cutters, while the images in wood are carved by Barhis, the caste of carpenters.” In a first-ever comprehensive study of folk memorial stones of this pastorally rich region comprising Kaimur, Rohtas, and Bhabua in the Vindhyan foothills Archer (1947: 20) notes the use of geometric shapes in the carving of pastoral stelaes of their pastoral hero Bir Kuar, referred to above, reputed to slay and keep away tigers from getting at their buffalos if propitiated in a yearly cycle, “Firstly, the idioms or ways of representing the various human parts are given a geometric distortion. This is sometimes completely geometric and results in pure forms of the circle or the rectangle. The head for example is treated as a circle, the mouth, the eyebrows, the shoulders and the waist are straight horizontals. The club is a straight line, the eyes and ears are semi-circles, the nose, the torso, and the legs are rectangles.” Evidence of domesticated goat and sheep, and cattle and buffalo, are found from all excavations on Vindhyan promontories (Joglekar 2010-12, 2015, 2016, 2017), which confirms pastoral presence from the Neolithic/Chalcolithic. Not a surprise then that wild buffalo and wild cattle paintings often showing their hunt or coralling abound in the Mesolithic rock art, in which the use of geometric shapes seems to have been very popular on the Vindhyan escarpments. The use of such shapes in drawing human, faunal and material culture subjects, but also for nested and non-nested/repetitive/linear designs and decorative patterns in North Vindhyan rock paintings, is discussed below, and makes it likely original pastoralists painting cattle figures on the escarpments took these design heuristics with them to the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic, using them to carve stelae, in the foothills or in areas with no stones, as described above by Archer. In other contexts, such geometric shapes dating to the Mesolithic have been found in use in ‘nested’ renderings (Taçon et al. 2013) of which our field area provides many examples and variations (Pratap 2016, 2023).

Rock art in our field area is itself evidence that prehistoric pastoral groups occupied rock shelters on the escarpment fringes, next to drainage lines, and in continuity, contemporary pastoralists also use such niches provided particularly with water-supply. Thus such semi-arid terrain has long been in use for cattle, goat and sheep pastoralism where acacia jungles and bush forests that serve as pasture and rearing zones (see also Brandt et al. 1983: 205-239). These are usually next to water-sources like ponds, rivers, streams, and waterfalls. Subsistence types of the day consist of dry and wet agriculture involving millets, barley, linseed, mustard, sesame, peas and chickpea, wheat, rice, and wild rice. Pastoral corrals dot the Vindhyan promontory whereas traditional agro-pastoral corrals for breeding and rearing cattle are still much in evidence (Allchin 1963: 110). The contemporary Vindhyan agro-pastoral cattle camp is occupied for nine months a year, while the remainder is used for agriculture. Traditional corrals and cattle-pens near water sources usually have rock art sites next to them. We

have recorded several major traditional but contemporary corrals, probably existing here since early medieval times, near significant upland water sources. In ethnographic fieldwork since 2010, we have noted goat and sheep herders are ubiquitous in all upland settlement zones, in which with dry deciduous trees, acacia bush and shrub forests, provide excellent grazing, and most farmers consider sheep and goat a good source of sustenance (Pratap 2018b, 2019, 2020).



Fig. 4 a-d: Clockwise: The exterior of a pastoral camp at Chhato, Mirzapur, with a cowdung mound and interiors of cattle corralling areas fenced by acacia thorns. Photos: Author.

Rock art types at watering holes near pastoral stations (Chhato, Panchmukhi, Kanda Kot), but also inside deeper caves (Wyndham Falls, Chuna Dari, Lekhahia Pahar and Morhana Pahar), include practice drawings made to explain the drawing process to the young, and palm-imprints in multitudes which suggests the young and the old pastoralists drawing and painting conjointly.

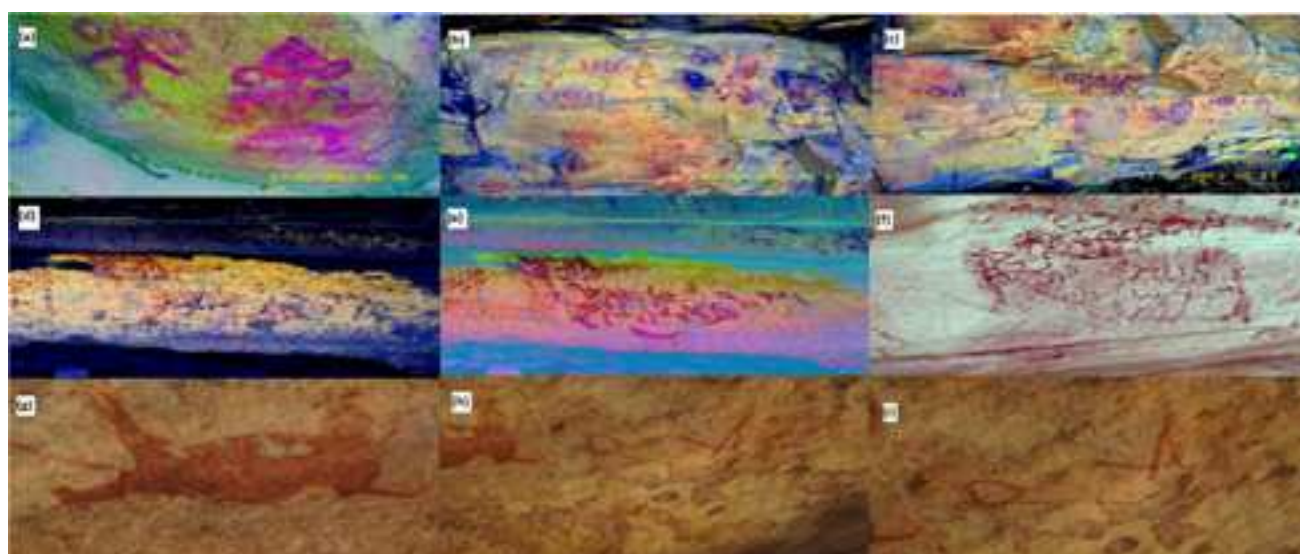


Fig. 5 a-i: Clockwise: Children's portraits (a) and child drawings and doodles (b and c) at Panchmukhi Hills, Children's drawings at Wyndham Falls (d to f), a speared tragocamelus painting with a practice sketch of the drawing by its side at Lekhahia Pahar (g, h and i) Photos and DStretch: Author.

The best of practice-figures shows a tragocamelus figure lying supine after being impaled by a spear with a practice sketch unusually drawn right next to it (Figure 5g, h and i). Panels at the early Holocene site Wyndham Falls (Pratap 2016, Banerjee et al. 2022: 612) have hand imprints of adults, minuscule paintings of humans, animals, and material culture by children. Presumed doodles attempting imagery, and figurative imagery by young children (Figure 5b, c, d, e and f), exist plentifully at Wyndham (WYN 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 4.1), Panchmukhi Hill Shelters (PCH - 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5), and Lekhahia (Localities KSW 3, BRL, and LKHPH), and Morhana (Shelters CAR 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 14, KHP 1, BHP-1). The inference that they are products of child's play rests on the fact they all occur less than a meter, often less, from the floor (at Panchmukhi and Wyndham 4.1), and that their content consisting of knots and crosses or simple geometric and non-geometric shapes, likely indicates play with colours. This is also a case of "children without toys" (Dozier 2016), since lateritic soils do not have the clays necessary for terracotta figurines (Pratap 2016) which have been used for manufacturing terracotta toys at most alluvial South Asian neolithic and later sites. At Wyndham Falls (WYN 3), and Morhana Pahar (CAR 8), there are many such figures including designs and patterns from zero to less than two meters high. In contrast, at heights above two meters, Morhana (CAR 6 and 10), young adolescents may have painted them; and for heights three meters and above, including those on higher cliffs (WYN 1, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari CHD -1, Mukkha Dari MKD - 1 and 2), we may assume young adults to have ascended sheer gorge and valley walls for honey-collection. Preliminary estimates of finger and palm widths, and sizes at sites like Morhana CAR -14 which has hundreds of palm-prints in black colour at a single site, give clear visual evidence that children and young adults, and the more mature congregated to make these.

At the same site, the figure of an elephant hunt has numerous minuscule figures drawn in white calcareous paint above it, suggesting drawings by children, inspired by and next to a perfect figure drawn by an adult. Finally, since they were all long-term camps, from five to twenty or more painted shelters in a cluster, a significantly large population may be assumed to have occupied them, therefore the presence of numerous children may also be assumed. These represent prehistoric sociality, apprenticeships and cognitive play (Davidson and Nowell 2021, Nowell 2015a and b, Nowell and van Gelder 2020) wherein entire communities of practice were involved. The involvement of children in rock art is also proved by the representation of children and women's bodies from Panchmukhi rock shelters near Sone Valley (Figure 5a), but also from Morhana Pahar and Lekhahia Pahar. It is not unlikely older women mainly provided symbolic pedagogy but there is evidence, such as at CAR -14, that older men did that too.

Basic shapes preferred by children learning drawing are points, lines, circles, squares, rectangles and others existing plentifully at Panchmukhi (Figures 5b and c). Both at Panchmukhi and Wyndham Falls these primary forms occur in tandem barely a meter from the floor at the rock shelters (Pratap 2023). Adolescents in their company preferred ceilings at low heights. The association of more mature and perfect forms with children's drawings suggest learning was probably imparted by relatives and kin while on visits to points distant by several kilometres from their home bases. Graphic depictions of women near children's drawings may be regarded as evidence of supervision during learning. This kinship is also brought out in similarities in body shapes, apparel, jewellery, hair-styles and activities engaged in the drawings. There is a clear link between paintings that are gendered and those that represent children (Laue 2021).

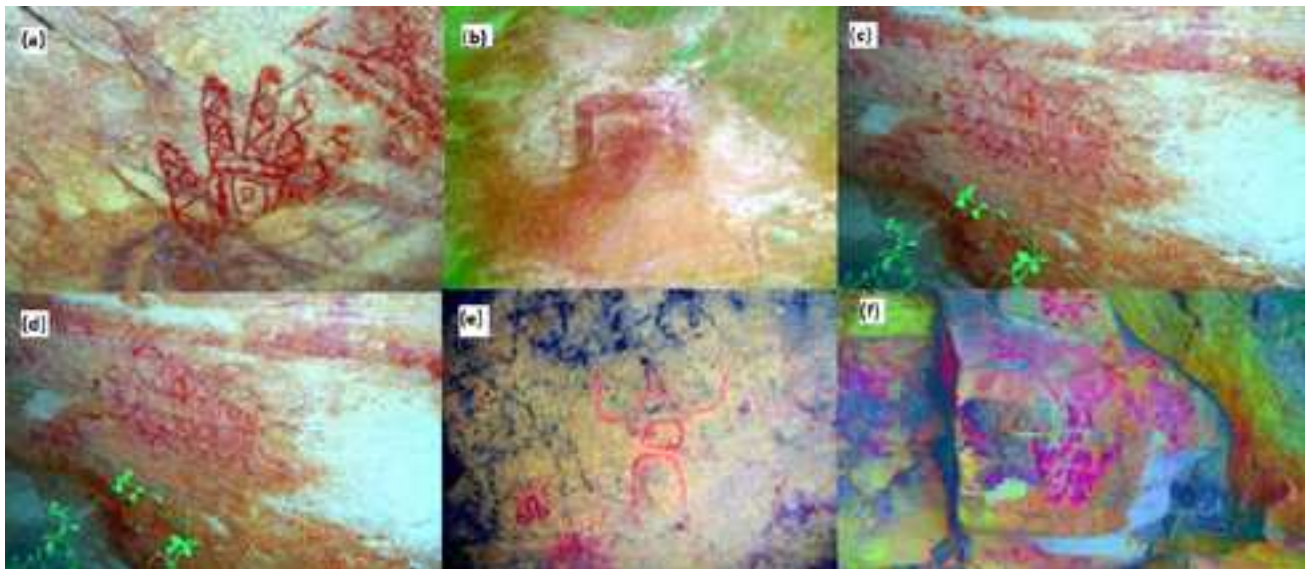


Fig. 6 a-f: Clockwise: Female hand-sketch with mehendi (henna) designs at Amila Nala stream site on the Morhana escarpment, a complicated cross-hatched gate-like design at CAR 9, Morhana Pahar, design drawings by children at CAR 8, Morhana Pahar, a male and a female figure at CAR 8, Morhana Pahar, a female figure petroglyph with inlaid red ochre paint at Likhaniya Dari, three female figures to the right-hand side of children's doodles and drawings at Panchmukhi Hill shelter PCM – 2. Photos and DStretch: Author.

Depictions of female figures are found at Wyndham Falls, Likhaniya Dari, Panchmukhi Hill shelters, and Morhana Pahar (KPH – 1, and CAR - 8). There are variations in body shapes, and often gender is expressed in proxy through designs and decorative patterns, but almost all relationships in rock art between feminine gender and children are often explicit (Baxter 2008, 2022). Some associations suggest elderly males too, perhaps kin, in teaching roles are present in community caves and drawings such as at CAR 14 at Morhana Pahar. Random drawings and sketches by juveniles are present at CAR Group I shelters facing the Deccan Road at Morhana Pahar, and at Lekhahia Pahar, on the opposite side. However, precise gender roles need to be investigated to arrive at an understanding of “the development of inequality and social complexity” (Shoocongdej 2001: 187), which is apparent from the less frequent depictions of women as compared to men. Women’s depictions are also often lacking in significant material culture associations as as in figures with males in them. Fully narrative paintings, and panels purporting to symbolise political relations with extraneous groups (as at WYN 4.2, Morhana CAR 10 and Likhaniya and Chuna Dari), are also likely to have been a male preserve.

Rock art and the historical transition in the Vindhya

Numerous narrative panels, which probably aided orality through formal representation, happened as a way of recording salient subjects for later reference (See Fig. 7, Pratap 2018). In Bradley's (2002) and Thapar's view (2013), such representations were predicated upon the idea of some occurrences having tangible but also social value. This is also in terms of historiography, a selection and classification of some memories as being of active importance. For this reason, perhaps, there is a noticeable increase in the depiction of material culture in rock art, which while adding a chronological sense to themes depicted; by their predominant male associations, may have served the purpose of creating a sense of 'property' and its male control.



Fig. 7 a – e: Several multi-period panels at Mukkha Dari Waterfall hunting/fishing camp, 12-16 feet above the base, were made probably by young adults climbing up. Fig 7a shows a school of fish and below that two women kneeling in front of a bullock, both figures submerged under calcites, and below that a row of swimmers with bows and arrows hunting tortoises. Fig 7b shows the rescued and re-painted calcite-covered panel in 7a with notable embellishments of colour and subject, Fig. 7c shows a deer followed by many fawns. Photos and DStretch: Author.

There are at least three historically verifiable rock art panels. The corroboration of a narrative panel depicting women hunting deer at the Likhaniya Dari rock art site is from a historical ethnographic source, the account of a colonial officer Mr. William Crooke (1896: 230) entrusted with drawing up statistical accounts of the predominant ethnic groups of Northwestern of the late 19th century, when such practices (Figures 8a and b) appear to have been common. Although made of organic substances and using decoys and firelight to stampede and catch the small deer, these traps used the same hunting technique as familiar from Central and West Asian contexts. The species hunted (*Gazella bennettii* and *Antilope cervicapra*) are also similar (Chahoud et al. 2015).

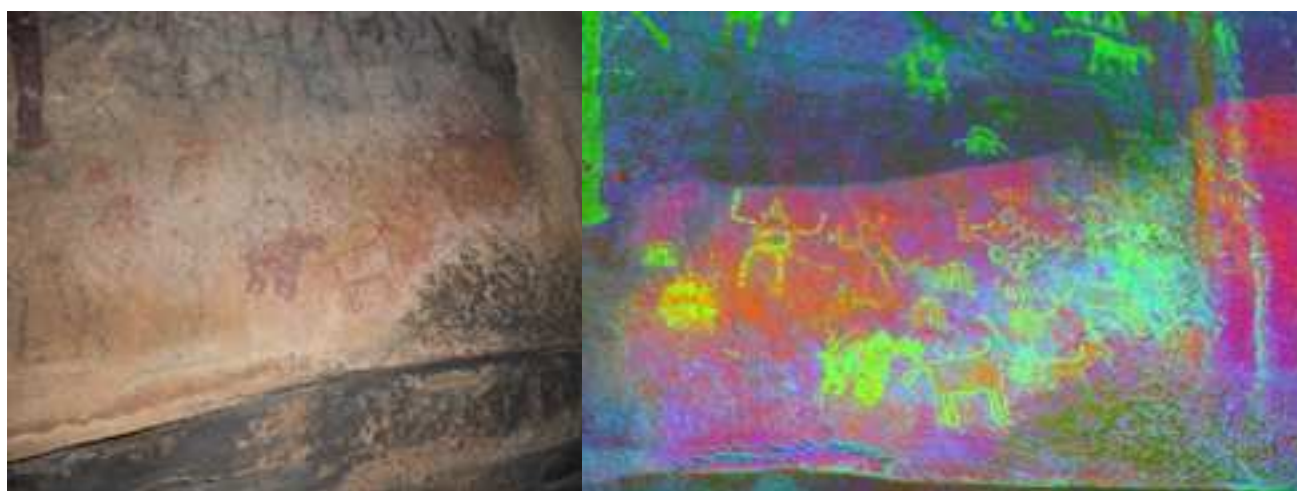


Fig. 8 a and b: Women stampeding blackbuck into an acacia thorn trap made at the exit of a V-shaped valley closed from the other side. Photos and aDStretch: Author.

The Likhaniya Dari panel (Figure 8) suggest spikey kites in an enclosed valley of the river Garai at the Likhaniya Dari rock art site. The kites were set during the night in the dry river bed, and the trap design and the “bogeys” described in Crooke’s account seem to fit these drawings. The traps were made near the mouth of the valley leading to a culvert with still more rocky crevasses holding water where other paintings exist. We also note blotches of paint at the bottom left where the intended figures did not come up to expectations, probably owing to the level of cognitive development of (young) painters attempting imagery on raised surfaces of the shelter (Karim et al. 2016). Finally, this panel simulates the landscape around the narrow exit of the valley.

“Again, a body of them, men, women, and children, go out into the prairie in search of game. When they have sighted a herd of antelope in the distance, they choose a favourable piece of ground and arrange their banwars, which are a series of many running nooses of raw hide tied together and fastened loosely to the ground by pegs; from the banwars, they rapidly make two lines of bogies by sticking bits of straw with black rags tied to them into the ground at distances of a foot or two apart. These lines widen away from the snares to enclose a V-shaped piece of ground with sides perhaps a mile in length, the unsuspecting herd of antelope being enclosed within the V at the pointed end of which are the snares. All this is arranged in a wonderfully short space of time, and when it is all ready, the main body of hunters, who have meanwhile gone round the herd of antelope and formed a line across the open mouth of the V, suddenly start up, and by unearthly yells drive the herd inwards towards the point. The first impulse of the antelopes is to rush directly away from their tormentors, but they soon come to the long lines of fluttering bits of rag, which forms one line of the V. They are thus directed into the place occupied by the snares. It is interesting as one of the methods by which an ignorant tribe with the simplest means can by their superior cunning circumvent the swift antelope on his native prairies.” (Crooke 1896: 230).

A second and chronologically more recent case (Pratap 2016, Banerjee et al. 2021) at Wyndham Falls (WYN 4.2 site), represents a transition to the historical period, but apparently important to the rock art community’s memory, is a unique panel of an inter-group fracas apparently between agriculturists and hunter-pastoralists (Figure 9). The attackers in this panel, of probably the historical period, outnumbering the defenders, are shown chastising a solitary hut-dwelling, with women and children inside, and some corn or millet suspended from the roof-pots while adult males and young adults of the family defend them by shooting arrows. The attacking party is supplied with spears, swords and shields while their leader wears a plumed head-dress denoting his status (Pratap and Kumar 2009).



Fig. 9 a and b: Late Holocene anger and affront were recorded in a symbolic recreation of an armed raid on an indigenous camp at Wyndham Falls. The more numerous intruding groups on the left wields swords, shields, and spears. The hunter-pastoralists defend their women, children, and the elderly (inside the hut at the extreme right), some corn or millet suspended from its posts. The conflagration, and the arrow crossfire, is probably over this resource spot rich in fish, deer, goat and smaller land fauna, and possibly the harvest. Wyndham Falls have pastoral populations still residing inside the Barkachcha Forest Reserve as the Khajuri River that flows through it makes cattle-keeping easier. Cowherds, similarly, are found on a regular basis tending cattle at other rock art sites like Panchmukhi, Bhaldaria Dari, Sukhdar Dari, Kanda Kot, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, Lekhahia and Morhana Pahar, and notably at Mukkha Dari site with scenes of domestication. Photos and DStretch: Author.

Early to late historic and early medieval stelae and boulder inscriptions stand testimony to the transition from prehistoric low-intensity hunting and herding to more intensive resource exploitation by larger-scale farms, forts, and finances. It would seem from the plethora of stone-based iconic, sculptural and inscriptional occurrences, such as at Maukalan village in Southern Chandauli (Pratap and Singh 2020), that entire villages of sculptors, masons, stone-workers, adept at constructing public architectures such as temples, tanks and forts, but also adept at carving inscriptions and memorial stones with a host of designs and texts in Brahmi that prehistoric skill-sets in iconicity found new expressions in a new order of patron-client relationships with large farms and early state establishments. Literacy and public architecture were used to assert imperial authority and for defining the state's territory in wildernesses, and these appear to be the context within which literacy percolates downwards (Ramaswamy 1991, 2004). Nothing underlines the presence of the state and urbanism, and its impact on the original inhabitants of the area, than temples and sculptural traditions of Mauryan (Mahavira, Buddha, and Hindu Gods and Goddesses) and later periods. Villages like Maukalan in the proximity of the Vijaigarh fort were no doubt the early sculpting and stone-crafting villages of these times. However, the links of prehistoric symbolism and iconic crafts, and abilities, widespread in the region, with early historical arts and crafts, must be examined. Is an evolutionary link between them it likely?

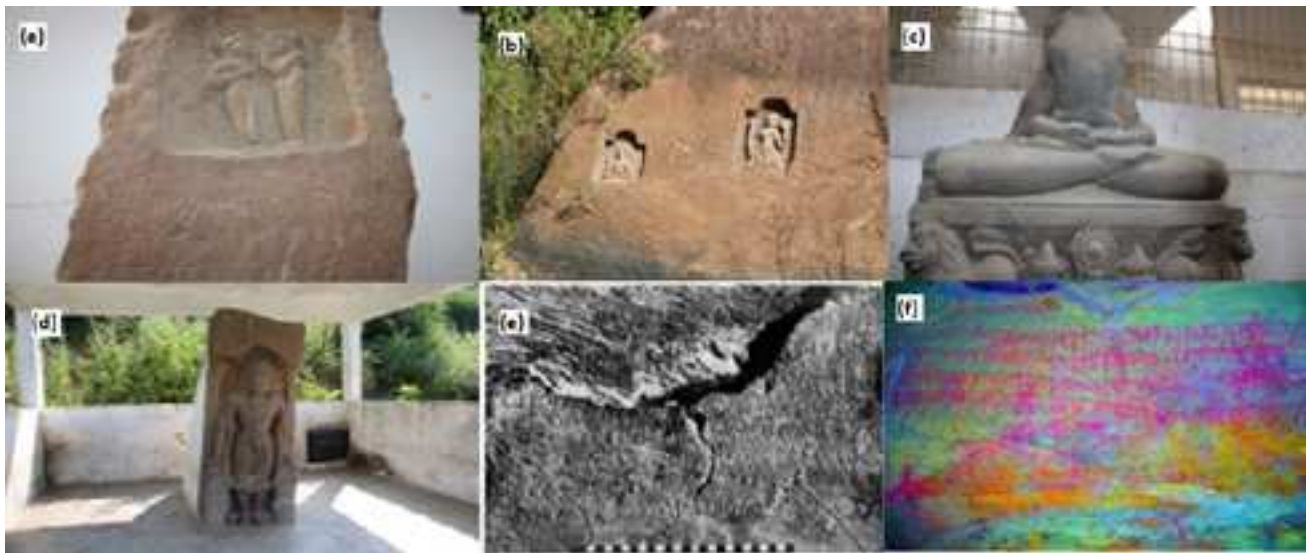


Fig. 10 a-f: Fig a and b Late historic (10-14th century CE) folk stelae and boulder inscriptions (with Hindu gods and goddesses) in the Brahmi script. Figs. c and d are statues of Mahavira and Vishnu at Maukalan village, South Chandauli, Fig e is Asoka's famous Minor Rock Edict-I, carved on the Bhandari Devi Hill at Ahraura (Image from URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahraura_inscription_of_Ashoka.jpg downloaded on 6-7-23), North Vindhyas, which is located along the *Uttarapatha* (the road of the north), an ancient trading route between Pataliputra, Varanasi and Sarnath. In the inscription, with sixteen copies around India, the king enjoins upon the people to follow the path of *dhamma*, and informs that he himself was on tour for 256 nights, to promote *dhamma*, after raising a memorial to the Buddha on a platform (at Sarnath). It appears Asoka himself, like the Buddha 300 years before him, walked this route to Varanasi, Sarnath and Kaushambi from Pataliputra. Fig. f is a lone 10th to 11th-century Malwa pilgrim's inscription written in rock art style with red ochre in Nagari script and corrupt Sanskrit on a surface with pre-existing rock paintings, inside the Lekhahia Pahar shelter (Pratap, 2016). The text, giving the approximate date of the inscription, invokes the gods for an auspicious visit to a nearby religious centre. Photos and DStretch: Author

There is further evidence for early urbanization at the fringes of the North Vindhyas by way of Mauryan establishments along the Ahraura-Varanasi highway, which is represented by fortifications at Magan Deewana, and the rock Inscriptions of Asoka at the Bhandari Devi Hill. Ahraura was an ancient clearing centre for goods brought from Malwa or acquired from Vindhyan forests to the Gangetic axis along this route from Pataliputra. That rock art symbolism from tens of thousands of years before the rise of urbanism could have inspired scripts for communication is likely, since both use symbols for linguistic expression (Sahoo 2014). Is it likely that the monks and hermits of all calling residing in stupas and other monastic establishments inside forests since early history were the ones who brought back some of this early symbology from rock art in the forests for designing scripts (Parshad and Kumar 2014, Tan and Taçon 2014)? In medieval times, the vast swathes of Vindhyan scarps, valleys and foothills appear settled predominantly by cattle keepers and there are records of big zamindars extracting rent from them (Drake-Brockman 1911: 261-262 or see below).



Fig. 11 a, b and c: Fig a The Latifpur Fort of Malik Farrukh, an 18th-century zamindar of the area. Fig. b A watchtower for guards of the fort. Fig. c A view of the hills and ruined fortification perimeter facing the Ahraura-Robertsganj route two kilometres from the Likhaniya and Chuna Dari rock art sites in Garai River Valley. Photos: Author.

Medieval soldiers, caparisoned elephants, arabian steed, hunting parties, flag marches, and heavy-duty armour of swords, spears and shields are depicted at Kandakot, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, and Lekhahia Pahar, in Mirzapur. These were soldiers of landowners with big farms living in various forts in the Vindhyan region, and are shown and remembered through such drawings. Elephant capture and bird trapping seemed very popular.

In this connection, the third historical thematic panel comes from two sites Likhaniya and Chuna Dari both separated by a kilometre in the same valley. Chuna Dari is upstream on the opposite side of Likhaniya Dari. While the panel at Likhaniya Dari (Figures 12a and b) depicts the coming of a hunting party of soldiers of Malik Farrukh, a local zamindar, the other related panel at Chuna Dari (Figure 12c) depicts their return with more elephants, elephant riders, foot-soldiers and a variety of other subalterns in attendance, elucidating medieval period *shikaars* and economic interactions. The existence of Malik Farrukh, the landlord of the area, and his establishment at the Latifpur Fort until the mid-18th while it is recorded in formal history (Drake-Brockman 1911) is also symbolized in rock art.

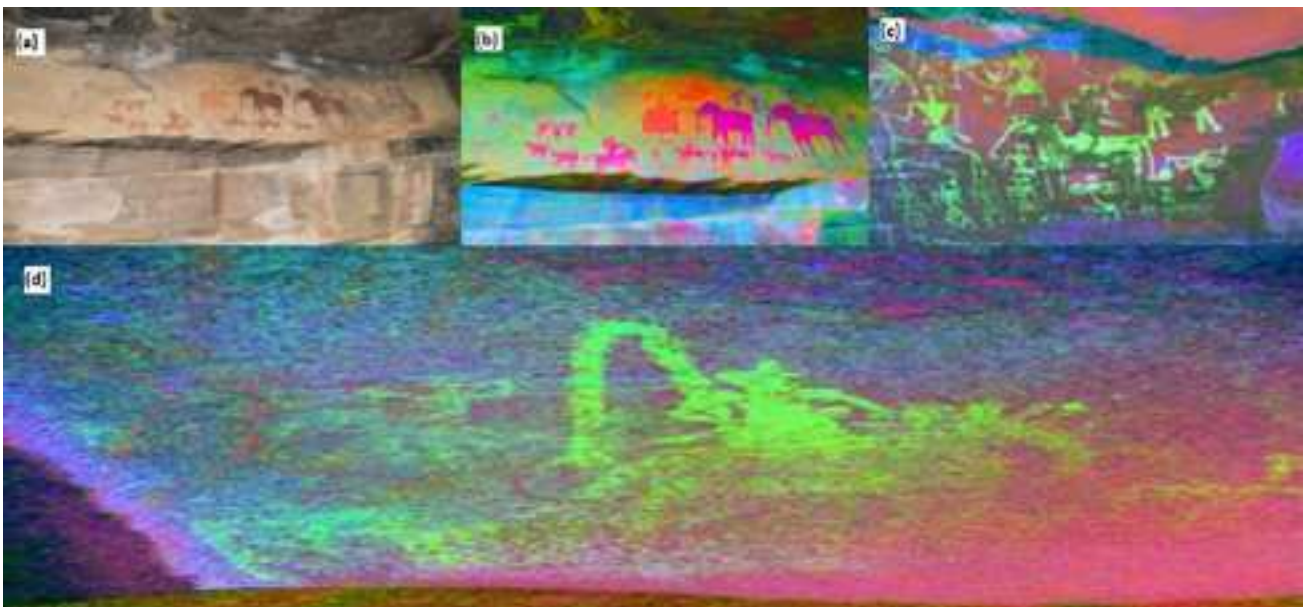


Fig. 12 a-d: Medieval Narratives Fig. a and b are depictions of a royal hunt at the Likhaniya Dari Shelter. Fig. c is the depiction of the return of the same entourage painted upstream a kilometre away in the Chuna Dari Cave on the opposite bank of the Garai River. Fig. d is a drawing probably of the local Zamindar Malik Farrukh found at an aquifer near Latifpur Fort in the watershed area of river Garai downstream from Likhaniya Dari. Fig. e is a depiction of another royal hunt on Mirzapur-Rewa or the Deccan Highway at Morhana Pahar – CAR 10 Shelter, Lalganj. Photos and DStretch: Author.

Medieval soldiers, caparisoned elephants, Arabian steed, hunting parties, flag-marches, heavy-duty armoury of swords, spears and shields are depicted at Kandakot, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, and Lekhahia Pahar, Mirzapur. These were soldiers of landowners with big farms living in various forts in the Vindhyan regions and are shown and remembered through drawings. Elephant capture and bird trapping seems very popular for supplying them to urban clientele.

“Ahraura is said to have been originally inhabited by Kols, who dwelt in the jungles and subsisted on the proceeds of the chase. But in the *Ain-i-Akbari* the pargana is called Ahirwara and is said to have been so called after the Ahirs who were the original zamindars. Ahirs are still numerous in the neighbourhoods of Sukrit and it appears probable that they were the people who were overcome by Malik Farrukh, though Kols no doubt abounded in the hilly portions of the pargana to the south. How or when Malik Farrukh came to the pargana is not known; but he is said to have advanced money to the zamindars and, when they became involved, to have usurped their proprietary rights. Malik Farrukh built the forts at Ahraura and Latifpur for the protection of his treasure, and died in 1752, after a life spent in continual hostility with the resident population. He was famed for his riches; but as the pargana is said to have at this time largely consisted of jungle these riches could not have been derived from the produce of the soil and must have been accumulated from the proceeds of the traffic who passed through his domain from the Deccan to the Ganges.” (Drake-Brockman 1911: 261-262).

This historical anecdote from a colonial District Gazetteer corroborates a hunt by soldiers painted at the rock art sites near the Latifpur fort. It also seems to corroborate that the local Zamindar Malik Farrukh’s fort existed in 1744 at Chhato, two kilometres from the Garai Valley and the elephants captured were probably obtained on his behalf. Drake-Brockman provides illumination on Malik Farrukh and the contemporary political economy in which hunters and pastoralists were confronted with fort-dwelling landlords but also presented with opportunities to trade deer and elephants with various parties on many trading routes (Pratap 2019, 2020).

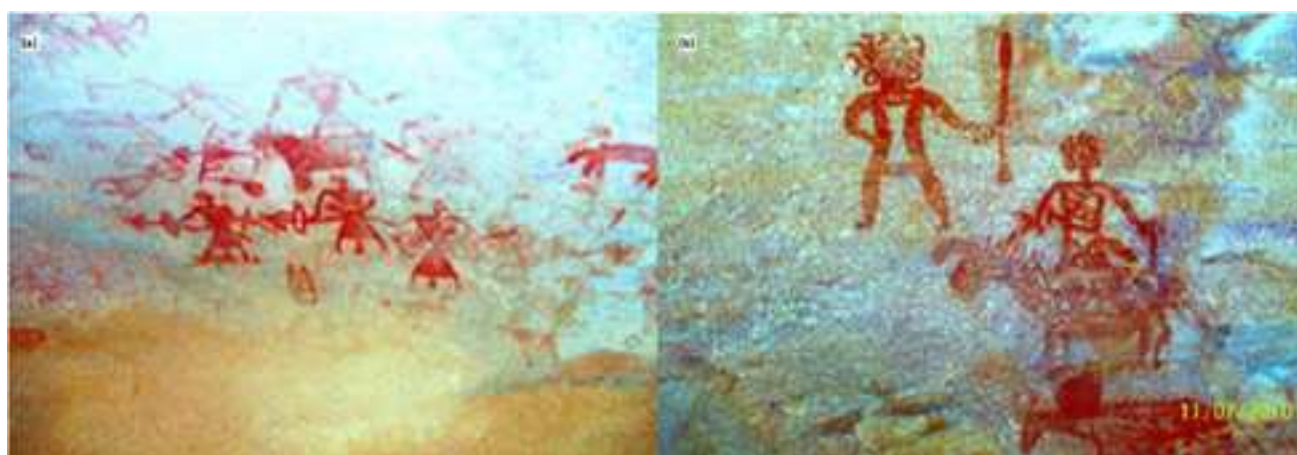


Fig. 13 a-b: Medieval Narratives: Royal hunts on Rewa or Deccan Highway (Morhana Pahar – CAR 10 Shelter). Photos and aDStretch: Author.

The material embellishments given (in Figure 12d) to the Zamindar's figure with a period head-dress of the elite, elephant riding, and a large sword tucked into a cummerbund suggests considerable authority. Several kilometres away, at the Morhana cluster, Medieval Narratives of soldiers marching past and on royal hunts on Rewa or Deccan Highway (Morhana Pahar – CAR 10 Shelter) are also available (Figure 13a). Thus, the rock art communities of the region were never probably so excluded as one might believe, nor was their symbolic expression immune to external stimuli. Finally, its efficacy and role in recording actual events seems to have been known and used.

Colonialism and rock art



Fig. 14 a and b: Representations of ‘protest’ in colonial period rock art mainly from Morhana Pahar CAR-10 Shelter. Figs a, b are contiguous panels in which hold-up and looting of colonial horse carts and buggies by indigenes, have been shown. Several spoke-wheeled horse-cart drawings also occur in shelters here as if carts were seized and brought to the rock shelters at Morhana Pahar and were then drawn. Photos and aDStretch: Author.

Rock art as a medium of folk memory, history and narrative probably declined with the indigenous populations of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra dispossessed of their land or being absorbed in lowland economies as landless peasants, or being sent as indentured labourers to various “sugar colonies” of the British Empire (Ghosh 1999, Kumar 2017). Thus, rock art representations of native hold-ups and looting of horse carts, and buggys, presumably of British revenue and other district officers, also suggest rock paintings evolved further from medieval to modern times (Figures 11-13, and 14), in recording events significant for cultural memory. However, there are not many such paintings of the colonial period suggesting there was a swift relocation of the population resident in the rock shelters and a re-assigning of their tasks in the structures of the colonial economy. This goes to show how such narratives were construed both as memory and history and that symbolic continuity may provide material for tracing histories where literary records may not (Duner and Ahlberger 2019, Bray 2002, Coimbra 2019, Renfrew and Scarre 1998, Ruuska 2016). Painted narratives in rock art also coalesced and matured through historical, medieval, and modern times as intermedial forms of cultural expression (Ceciu 2021) at the frontiers of Mundari, Bhili, Gondi, Kolarian and the sanskritised worlds. A possibility exists that designs, narrative and iconic forms and structures may have been exchanged, with craftspersons, across the forest-rural-urban continuum.

CONCLUSION

“Things, then, become what the human mind and language makes of them e.g. images, percepts, concepts or mental tokens.” (Malfouris and Renfrew 2010: 3). It would also be apposite to quote the historian Sahid Amin who suggests, “History writing requires evidence for its articulation. This evidence is largely expressed in language, either written or oral. The bits of evidence that we historians normally deploy in our narratives are a part of larger linguistic statements which constitute a discourse. A discourse provides a framework for inclusion or exclusion of representation, enumeration, and enunciation” (Amin 1994: 7). Amin’s view on what constitutes historical evidence seems to favour the seeing of rock art repertoires of the country as linguistic statements in a pictorial form which are both evidence and a discourse constitutive of historical sensibilities preceding the development of writing.

In this paper, based on a study of Vindhyan rock art, we argued that since narratives are germane to historicizing, symbolic representation of historical events, through rock paintings, was already an established pre-literate practice, a folk tradition of historicising starting well before the origin of the Brahmi script and subsequent historical writing resulting from it.. It remains therefore to ask if rock art is basically an overlooked, even excluded, folk narrative tradition in which generally all historical periods traversed by rock art communities have been remembered in some fashion. Was this a method perhaps better than orally transmitting collective memory through mythology and folklore alone? This deduction, in our view, is probably correct, since figures executed in ferric paints, more generally preferred, were not erasable and hence became the preferred medium for storing narratives considered re-tellable, worthwhile, and exemplary. Can truly prehistoric paintings also be considered narratively charged in this ‘historical’ sense of captured memory? Can rock art be judged prehistoric, historical, medieval or modern through the contemporaneity of the artefacts depicted, which can be externally corroborated?

In Vindhyan rock art, human figures, animals (wild and domestic), and ‘typical’ material culture representations certainly increase from the Mesolithic to the modern period. From wooden spears to horse buggies, from bows and arrows to Arabian horses, and bullock carts, the complexity of material culture representations shows a progressively self-aware and cognitively accomplished representational activity geared towards facticity that we do not usually grant. In the Vindhyan context can we interpret such nuances in rock art as constituting the rise of indigenous sensibilities answering to the rise of urbanism in and around the Vindhya with whom they maintained trade and exchange? Did upland paintings become factish as a response to literary and scripted memory practices current elsewhere? But clearly, from the archaeological to historical, and medieval to colonial contexts, rock was primarily a teaching-learning method for the young. It emphasized memory and memory-based design skills and techniques, that the elderly trained them in for future craft production.

The literature on children as craft producers and apprentices is extensive. The ability to conceive, plan and execute painted designs on ceramics is an indicator of levels of psychological development. Certain types of errors can be directly related to stages of cognitive development. Children of two age sets in craft communities usually 4 to 6 years and 9 to 12 years old were responsible for painting designs on ceramics (Crown 2001, Bagwell 2002, Finlay 1997, Kamp 2001, Greenfield 2000). Using this as a parallel to explain design and pattern drawings made by children at our sites is therefore tempting. Gender and age can be both approximately detected based on the widths of finger-flutings of children who make rock art (Nowell 2015a and b, Nowell and Gelder 2020). However, the central

point remains that communities construct the childhoods of their offspring culturally in which rock art played an important role.

Secondly, rock painting and rock art generally do precede pottery, terracotta and other graphic arts and must therefore in some sense remain the products of original hominid visual and narrative capabilities connected with the storage of ideas on external media which could be used for a variety of craft practices in the same milieu (Audouze 2002, Malfouris and Renfrew 2010). More advanced constructs use features of the rock surface to simulate landscapes as a means of building time in the paintings. This is also the aim of implanting directionality in event depictions, while undulations and striations of the rock surface were used for simulating landforms and their use, at precise loci of action. The use of movement in paintings is an excellent narrative device conveying the painting community's sensibilities involved in particular types of events. This is also a technique used, together with identity-defining material culture depictions, for better narrativizing, a technique followed in sculpture and other three-dimensional arts of the area of the early historic period. There is therefore a continuity in the evolution skills, techniques and aesthetic sensibilities which are chronologically consistent with various historical.

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