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Hunting to Managing: A Theoretical Model for Gender in Post-Pleistocene Uttar Pradesh, Vindhya

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Abstract

This paper explores the uncharted territory of gender roles, and status, in Indian prehistory, by considering rock art data, from the Uttar Pradesh Vindhya. The Vindhyan region is extremely rich in rock paintings, some belonging possibly to well within the Pleistocene. Late Paleolithic, and Mesolithic settlements, technology, other items of material culture, in which rock art stands predominant, skeletal and faunal material, abound in the area, making it a suitable location for the study of early gender.

Since much of the rock art here is Holocene, dating to the Mesolithic, Neolithic, and surprisingly even later; do these really allow us to read something of the early Holocene social structure? Reading such rock art data requires developing a theory about tasks and roles performed by women, in agro-pastoralism and agriculture, which are predominant post-Pleistocene economic adaptations of the Vindhya.

At what seems to be the end of the golden age of limitless faunal resources, and of hunting sans frontier, the region being discussed has provided very rich archaeological materials, and occasionally stone, bone and antler tools, and in conjunction, Post-Pleistocene rock paintings, which is unique to the area's archaeological record.

As Post-Pleistocene big-game, like the rhino and elephant died-away, as they did in the Vindhya too, around or just after the end of the last ice-age, there was a dramatic shift from hunting to animal domestication, followed by pastoralism and agriculture. Some of the rock art from this region is most eloquent and a thorough study women's role in the production of such material culture, especially ideational" material culture like rock art, is the need of the hour (Pratap, 2016, Tiwari, 1990, Verma, 2010).

Introduction

Over the past two centuries, the Vindhyan region alone has yielded a rich harvest of Middle Pleistocene to Late Pleistocene and Holocene stone age sites, from the Sone Valley's earliest Lower to Middle Palaeolithic, to epi-Palaeolithic sites of the Pleistocene-Holocene cusp, found in both river



valleys and Vindhyan uplands, but mostly in the uplands west of the valley, to Holocene Mesolithic and Neolithic industries, and of the most recent Iron Age.

Most such finds of the later period, are at locations such as Likhaniya and Chuna Dari, Panchmukhi, Mukkha Dari, Wyndham Falls, Morhana and Lekhania Pahar, and have been reported in a steady stream from the 19th century to the present (Pratap, 2016).

These stone age and later industries, other items of material culture, as well as rock art which surfaces for the very first time and in great profusion all over the Vindhyan Plateau areas, together suggest that the area witnessed widespread hunting activities until middle Holocene, and then in dwindling proportions from the Mesolithic, when the bulk of rock art of the region emerges, to the Chalcolithic and the Iron Age, after which it begins to decline.

The emergence of rock art as a consequence of resource pressure from the decline of Pleistocene fauna is evident from a plethora of burials at rock art sites on the Vindhyan escarpment, which also suggests the emergence of complex social activity, as a ground for and a precursor to, the domestication of plants and animals, as the most final and successful Holocene adaptation.

This paper then suggests that in contradistinction to division of societal roles and tasks necessary for hunting which are different, social activities like burial and rock painting emerge as a consequence of, and in a society already reorganized for newer tasks related to animal and plant husbandry.

Pastoralism and agriculture are both systems requiring individual and group-related tasks, in a new alignment of total availability of labour, which serve to redefine social roles in regard to gender, but the nature of these tasks and time required for each also differ significantly from hunting.

In other words, if during the Pleistocene, and even the middle and end of Holocene, hunting was possible without women going out far-afield, and there is a case that they did perhaps do that (Waguespack), then this was certainly not the case with newly emergent lifestyles connected with animal and plant rearing as a source of food, which needed not only long-term home-bases, but also reduced drastically ranging as far as hunting requires.

Tasks and Roles in Pastoralism and Agriculture

In this section we present some typical labour roles and task specialization requirements within pastoralism and elementary agriculture. Speaking about the nature of families and family types necessary for mountain pastoralism elsewhere, anthropologists (Fassio, Luca, Battaglini and Viazzo, 2014: 336) hold that the family but more importantly its type does play an important role:



"A pioneering cross-cultural analysis by Nimkoff and Middleton (1960) was apparently the first study to detect an association between pastoral or agropastoral modes of agrarian production and a prevalence of extended or joint family households. Subsequent investigations have ascertained that **this association was especially visible in mountain areas, where animal husbandry and agriculture were most likely to be combined** and crop fields were usually separated from summer pastures by considerable distances. **Large, structurally complex households were better suited than nuclear families to working spatially separate resources** and meeting the conflicting demands on time and labor arising from the need to synchronize agricultural and pastoral work (Webster 1973; Vincze 1980)" (Emphasis mine).

Given the prevalence of simple goat and sheep, and even ducks, geese and partridge, pastoralism, as also agro-pastoralism, involving cattle, in the Vindhya, of which not only ethnographic parallels abound, but which are most likely, and very strongly, represented in the archaeological record (Sharma, Chopani Mando); it is very likely that the cluster of painted rock shelters on the Vindhyean escarpments, huddled together and painted profusely with animal and human imagery, not only represent early multi-purpose and wide-spectrum resource use behaviour, but necessarily family residences, to go with them. It is thus not surprising that style-wise, the rock art to be found in them, is a regular one through time. Any cleavages in style are only the chronological ones but none alien or invasive.

The sheer density of inhabited shelters, with painting activity in evidence, some 14 at Morhana Pahar, and 5 at Lekhania Pahar, suggests a largish extended family inhabited these and adopted explicit social rituals like burials to commemorate their dead, as to collaborate and cooperate in life while hunting, herding or cultivating marginally. The group, village and family nature of this congregation seems also reiterated by such symbols as dance sessions and complicated decorative imagery which are expressly 'social' or 'community' symbolisms.

In some cases the figures reveal a personal touch to the paintings that suggest that the same individuals moved across distinct spaces, like Lekhania Pahar to Morhana Pahar, to imprint their presence.

Finally, inter-group conflicts are also painted, that emphasize territories, co-extensive varieties of methods of subsistence, such that post Iron Age territorial conflicts become the subject of depictions.



The Material Evidence

Having established in the foregoing discussion, that we may embark upon a study of gender, through relevant hypotheses about division of labour, connected with animal and plant husbandry, among men, women and children; herewith a few points about what seems most feasible to posit about the distribution of labour, in an early Holocene community, camping on the Vindhyan escarpments, at such rock art sites at Lekhania and Morhana Pahar.

Morhana and Lekhania Pahar

Archaeologically it is most likely that the Morhana complex developed within the Mesolithic period, when shortages of game was widespread, and thus distinct long term residential activity becomes necessary to tend longer term food sources like plants and animals and is evident at five spatially distinct caves and rock shelters at Morhana Pahar.

The Morhana Complex of rock art sites may be divided into six or seven distinct residential units, which are chock-full of rock paintings and stone tools. These show not only long term residence here, in failing climate and natural resource regimes, and the attempts of families engaged in a rich social life, complete with prominent 'social' activities, like dancing, practice of burials, painting of designs and decorative figures, as functional and narrative signs and symbols, all requiring intensive labour inputs.

Economic life, involving hunting and pastoralism, and much later agriculture is also the subject of depictions. Almost all the caves on the Morhana site were inhabited as evidenced by paintings within and outside them. The entire set of paintings are almost all found are found on the inside walls of these dwellings, and exceptionally on the outside, and just a few on isolated boulders, in the proximity of dwellings. Most paintings are geru, orange, red, white and black.

Almost all are stylized depictions, with just a few that are 'realistic', and these paintings suggest these cave-dwellings to be 'homes' rather than 'camps', hence the presence or evidence of gender is to be assumed and interpreted in the subject, medium and style of paintings.

Most paintings in terms of subject matter of depictions refer to the forest and its resources. Almost all the interior walls of all dwellings are painted, and although done very aesthetically, these essentially point to economic resources, which would seem justify the investment of labour in them, both in theory and in practice.

There is evidence of inter-group visits were practiced, such as through a multiplicity of hand-imprints in, CAR 13-14, and paintings drawn by same individuals in more than one places. Scenes of dancing, herding, curing are in evidence. Rock art activity is itself a social and socializing activity



par-excellence, especially in a time of scarcity. Depicting animal species of economic importance, i.e. the forest resources, is the best 'social' means of maximizing return, from foraging and hunting

The Evidence of Burials

There are thirteen full burials at CAR 7-11 and two or three, at CAR 13-14 and sixteen partial burials recovered from LKH 1-15 (Mishra and Pal, 2002). Most of the burial space is taken-up, suggesting this to be a reason for site abandonment

No burials have been recorded anywhere in the Vindhyan Range, except on Morhana Pahar, Lekhania Pahar, and Bagahi Khor, suggesting that the practice was localized, and possibly developed here, as a response to sedentism and shortage of space for the disposal of the dead.

(Map of Morhana and Lekhania Pahar)

Dwelling spaces, which evolve here for the first time, led to houses and hearths in the Vindhyan foothills, when agriculture becomes the order of the day

Provisional Interpretation

Stasis in economic life leads to shared labour concerns in food collecting, herding and incipient agriculture. Women carry therefore an equal status and are buried with grave-goods. Domestic violence is in evidence possibly due to food-shortages. 'Free' time leads to plenty of rock paintings all possibly done by women and children.

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Fig. 01 : CAR-10



Fig. 02 : Ring Stone Burial



Fig. 03 : Deer Figures CAR-9

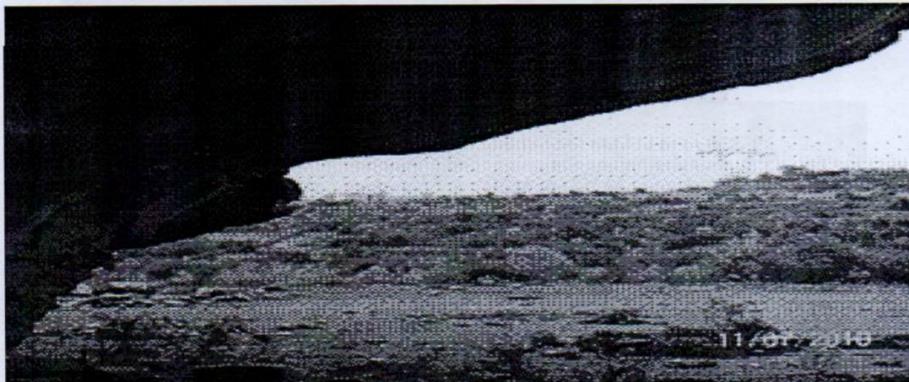


Fig. 04



Fig. 05 : Burials at Morhana Pahar



Fig. 06

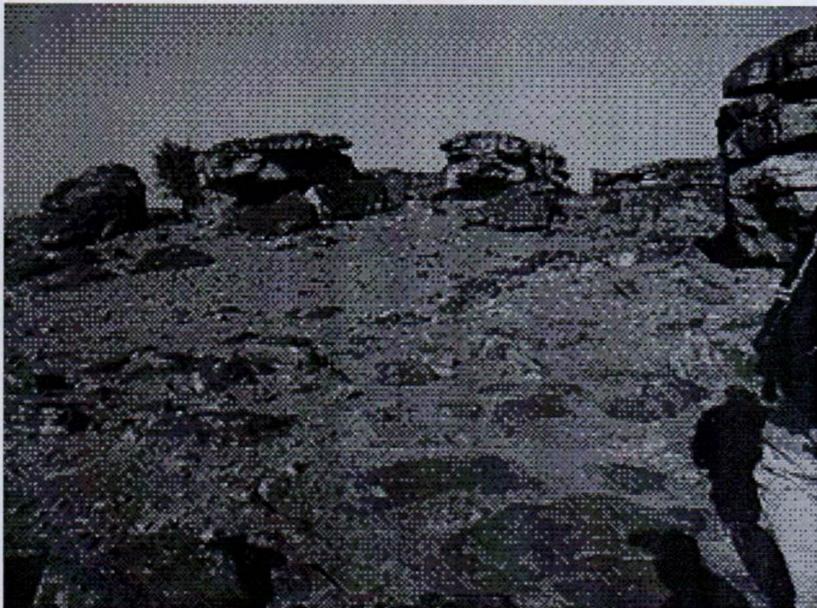


Fig. 07 : CAR- 2,3,4



Fig. 08

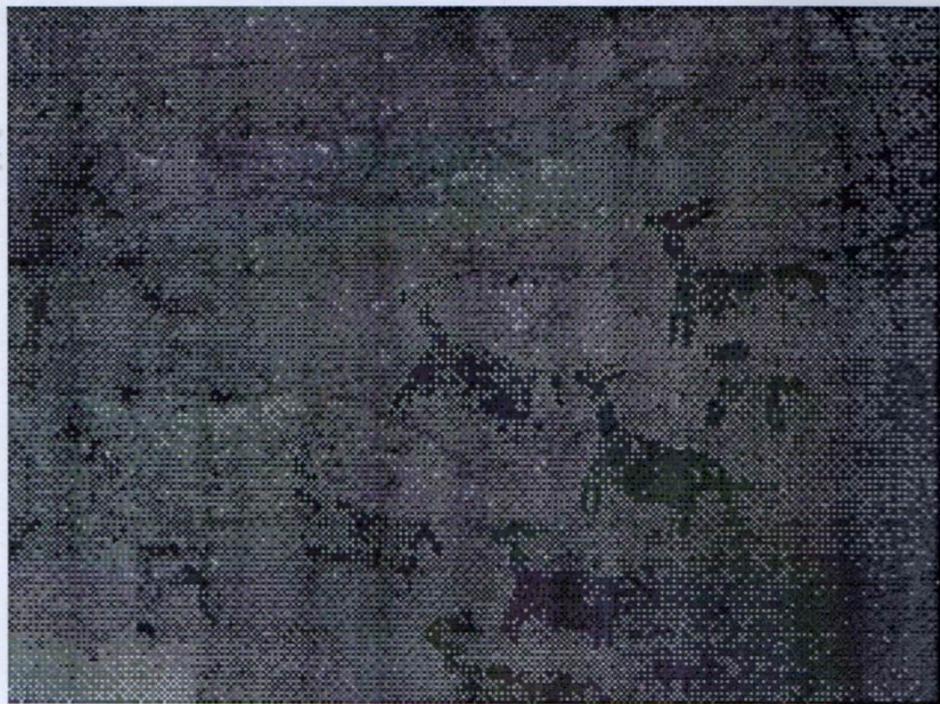


Fig. 09



Fig. 10 : CAR-11

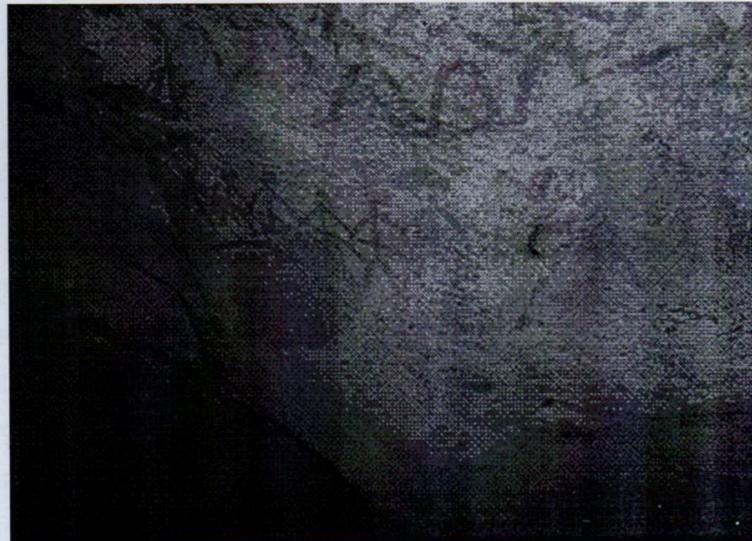


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

This figure also overrides an earlier wild cattle figure, in which much labour was invested, and may hence suggest valorising male activities, doubly over female as the earlier figure may have been painted by women and or children rather than men



Fig. 13

Stable residential shelters provide ideal location for enhanced socialization, public activities and social activities, like grave burials develop

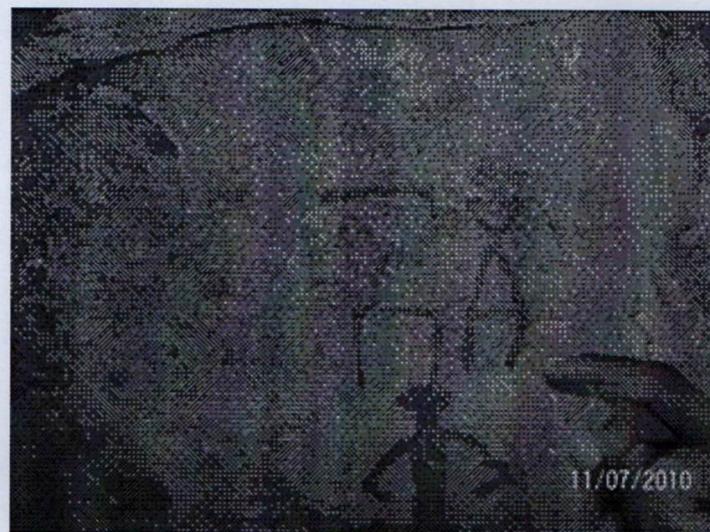


Fig. 14

Stability of residence provides much time for human body related social tasks like depiction of physical form of genders, and burials. but male figures dominate, commensurate with increased female labour deployment in collecting, rather than hunting, which still figures in a privileged form, valorising male labour and the male body in public depictions